

“If You Must, Die in Spring”: a novel and exegesis

by

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Statement of Originality

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Rubik Roy

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Summary

This doctoral thesis is comprised of a creative component and a related exegesis. The exegesis examines how the two novels, *The Eternal Husband* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *A Hero of Our Time* by Mikhail Lermontov, that have influenced my creative work, have used (and subverted) the love triangle. I have analysed these texts using René Girard's theory of triangular desire which creates the roles of subject, object, and mediator in trying to explain the nature of human relationships. As a result of my analysis, I find aspects of Girard's theory (especially his conception of the mediator and the object) limiting and at times unable to capture the nuances of human relationships as set out by Dostoevsky and Lermontov. Therefore, I offer an alternative view of the love triangle based on Girard's theory, certain texts by Dostoevsky and Lermontov, and my own creative work.

My novel, "If You Must, Die in Spring", subverts the love triangle by conflating two of its members. By subverting the love triangle, I have tried to stretch the boundaries of triangular desire. In writing my creative work, I have found that the collapse of a love triangle leads to the creation of a new one, and in this way seems to affirm Girard's contention that desire is eternally triangular in nature. While I find Girard's theory to be thought provoking and very useful for creative writers in structuring their works, I suggest a number of changes to make it more flexible and to bring it up to date with twenty-first century concerns.

Introduction

This project consists of a creative work (*If You Must, Die in Spring*) and a related exegesis. Both parts of the project reflect in distinct but related ways on the device of the love triangle. The topic of this thesis is the love triangle as it has been used in the two novels, *The Eternal Husband* (1870) by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) by Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), and one work of literary criticism, René Girard's (1923-2015) theory of triangular desire as outlined in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965), that have influenced my creative work. The love triangle is of interest as it is repeatedly found in stories and texts across the world and over generations, from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC) to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008). The universality and prevalence of this theme suggests that people have always been drawn to or cannot escape from triangular relationships. Some writers, such as Dostoevsky, time and time again return to the theme, and more than one critic has offered an autobiographical explanation for it.¹ By my estimate, there are clear love triangles in the following novels and short stories by Dostoevsky: *Poor Folk* (1846), *The Landlady* (1847), "Another Man's Wife and a Husband Under the Bed" (1848), "White Nights" (1848), Netochka Nezvanova (1849), *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (1859), *The Insulted and Humiliated* (1861), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Gambler* (1867), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Eternal Husband* (1870), *Devils* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875), "The Meek One" (1876), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). No doubt there are other texts I have missed where Dostoevsky has employed the device. Therefore, given the frequency of love triangles in Dostoevsky's works, and its prominence in Lermontov's most famous novel, there are three questions that will drive my thesis. Firstly, how do certain texts by Dostoevsky and Lermontov use the love triangle as a device to explore human connections and what do these love triangles say about society itself and the expectations of love? Secondly, since the love triangle promises despair for at least one party, how is the love triangle transformed to allow resolution and closure in these texts? Thirdly, if desire is indeed "triangular" and imitative as René Girard claims, then what happens to the love triangle when it is subverted, as I plan to do in my creative piece?

I have focused on the nineteenth-century Russian novelist Dostoevsky, and to a lesser extent his precursor Lermontov, because the love triangle in their hands becomes more than a plot device: each author uses it to investigate human relationships and the inner workings of the human mind. While these aims are not exclusive to these two writers, it is the intensity they bring to their pursuits

¹ Both Frank (1994) and Branwen E.B. Pratt (1972, p.31) claim *The Eternal Husband* was autobiographical.

that have marked their works and, over time, influenced the development of the Russian novel. John Garrard (cited in Randall 2009, p.xvi) claims that “Lermontov had a more lasting impact on the shape and contours of the Russian novel than either Pushkin or Gogol”; Lewis Bagby (2002, p.3) reports that *A Hero of Our Time* “has been praised as the first novel of ‘psychological realism’ in Russian prose”, and Janko Lavrin (1959, p.91) states the novel has “even been admired by some critics as the greatest Russian novel”. As for Dostoevsky, he has been hailed by his readers and listeners (of his public speeches) as a prophet in Russia, a “spiritual leader of the Russian people”, and of unifying Russian culture (Frank, 2010, p.932, p.xviii). He is also regarded as one of the forerunners of existentialism and psychoanalysis, with Alfred Adler (cited in Fueleop-Miller 1950, p.89-90) even claiming: “‘Everyone who sees how Dostoevsky completely grasped the tendency to despotism which is inborn in the human psyche...must acknowledge him as our teacher to this day.’” According to the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Dostoevsky’s works “reveal rich portrayals of psychiatric cases, including epilepsy, hysteria, dementia and psychopathy...[and his] characterization of unconscious psychological motivation prefigures terms later described by the psychoanalytic movement” (Pavlovic & Pavlovic, 2012, p.181). Since Lermontov and Dostoevsky lived in similar cultural and geographical environments, and similar times, (albeit in different socio-economic conditions), the wider society their love triangles were reflecting would, in my opinion, be comparable in many respects. Given their pioneering work in psychological prose, their subversion of the love triangle, and their East European settings,² I believe they serve as inspirational comparisons/markers for my own work. Differences in time, culture, and society aside, I believe that there are parallels in human psychology between nineteenth-century Russia and twentieth-century Poland (where most of my novel takes place), Australia, or anywhere else for that matter. The works of Lermontov and Dostoevsky do not feel dated or confined to specifically Russian concerns since their themes are universal, hence their widespread influence and appeal to this day.

The creative component of this project is a novel, *If You Must, Die in Spring*, that aims to subvert the convention of the love triangle. By collapsing the love triangle on itself I try to offer a different perspective of this convention. My original intention had been to conflate the hero and the villain into one, and see if it is possible to be one’s own rival, and the implications of such a circumstance. In other words, the hero of my novel eventually learns that he is his own rival, that he had been competing all along with himself, thus allowing me to explore whether it is possible to be one’s own worst enemy. The initial idea for my novel had been quite abstract: a love triangle that would

² Admittedly, *A Hero of Our Time* is set in the Caucasus (within and on the borders of the then Russian Empire).

take place across parallel universes where the members of the love triangle communicate with each other via music. But I felt this would draw too deeply from science fiction and music – two areas I was not very well versed in. I decided to keep the idea of a love triangle across parallel universes, only I would have each of the three members live in their own respective private worlds within a greater universe. The greater universe itself would resemble but would not and in fact could not represent reality. My idea was to show that there wasn't a single reality that we all experienced equally. Of course, this idea developed over time and I did not have a clear conception of this when starting my novel. Similar to many other creative practitioners, the idea for my novel formed from a combination of personal experiences, anecdotes, abstract ideas about art, life and love, and the books, movies, and music to which I had been exposed.

Analysing Girard's theory of triangular desire has helped me gain insight into my own work and I found new ways of thinking about the love triangle. Although I do not agree with some of Girard's beliefs, I do find his theory of mimetic/triangular desire useful in exploring the ways that fictional writers, including myself, have used the love triangle. Applying Girard's analysis to the love triangle suggests that there is a far greater connection between the protagonist and the antagonist (in certain texts) than previously thought. In fact, Girard contends that in a relationship of subject, mediator³, and object (or protagonist, antagonist, and love interest), it is actually the mediator that the subject seeks, and the object is used to draw closer to the mediator. In the context of the love triangle, it would seem that the protagonist/hero⁴ is drawn to their love interest because of an antagonist/villain/rival, and in seeking to emulate the rival.⁵ While writing my novel, I did suspect there was much dramatic potential in conflating my hero and rival, and thus collapsing the love triangle on itself. What Girard considers to be a rule of human behaviour, I understood and continue to understand to be an exception. What I personally found to be his most interesting and valuable contribution is his uncovering of the bonds between the protagonist and antagonist. I propose to take his work to what I consider to be its logical conclusion and will try to show that often the protagonist and antagonist are doubles (using texts by Lermontov and Dostoevsky as examples), and moreover, can be the one and same person (using my creative work as an example). While Girard indicates that the subject-mediator relationship is akin to the disciple-guru relationship, and that the subject always searches for someone they believe is superior to themselves to emulate, I will argue that it is possible (and often necessary) to emulate one's inferior and also one's equal. Therefore, I believe it is not always accurate to see the relationship between the protagonist and

³ Girard sometimes refers to the mediator as the model.

⁴ I understand "hero" to mean someone of any gender.

⁵ It should be noted that the subject, object and mediator are gender neutral and can all switch places in the love triangle.

antagonist through a devotional lens: one does not have to worship someone in order to copy them. Instead, I find it more accurate to view the protagonist and antagonist as mirroring each other in ways that raise questions about the nature of identity and reality (for instance, to what extent we are unique individuals, and whether we all experience reality in the same way). Girard's theory reflects his Catholicism⁶ and male-centric view of literature. His theory of triangular desire is underpinned by the idea that we emulate each other because we no longer believe in God and have a spiritual vacuum in our lives. Additionally, feminist critics have observed that he devotes attention almost exclusively to male writers and characters. Despite fundamentally disagreeing with Girard on these matters, I think there are aspects of his work that are still relevant and thought provoking today.

Girard's theory of triangular desire and my conception of the love triangle are distinct yet do overlap with each other. Triangular desire is a broad theory which covers all kinds of aspirations. For example, a person could desire a certain position, an object, a person, or a certain way of living their life. The love triangle, in contrast, is mainly about the personal relationships between characters, and desire is usually of the romantic kind. While I will chart the similarities and differences of each paradigm through the course of this exegesis, I will construct a thesis for the love triangle and explore how it can be subverted and the consequences of that subversion. It is my contention that subverting the love triangle not only leads to the psychological fragmentation of characters and the collapse of the love triangle itself, but subsequently the creation of another love triangle. I will also argue that the love triangle, while hinting at forbidden pleasures and dangerous liaisons, primarily works to consolidate the customs and norms of the social order; however, subverting the love triangle not only allows a critique of the social order but also creates uncertainty over whether reality is intelligible. The love triangle is a microcosm of the world and when the love triangle collapses, the very nature of reality is put into doubt (at least in the minds of the relevant characters).

In examining the love triangle, I think it is important to note that any model that tries to put some order or structure on the often chaotic nature of human relations assumes that human reality can be defined and is understandable (Girard 1965, p.3). This project makes the same assumption as I believe it is a useful one to make in so far as to analyse texts. Human reality, I believe, cannot be neatly contained in any model, yet models are a practical way of exploring the possibilities of human reality. A model can allow us a glimpse of human reality; it allows us to draw conclusions from certain patterns in people, behaviour, and society. Ultimately, a model is a metaphor: it

⁶ "Since...*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, all of my books have been more or less explicit apologies of Christianity" (*Battling to the End*, Rene Girard, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 2010, p.xv).

represents, but is no substitute for, human reality (Girard, pp. 2-3). However, for a writer, metaphors are useful for conveying ideas that are difficult to grasp or explain. In the hands of an accomplished writer such as Dostoevsky, the love triangle can be used to explore not only the social mores of a society, but the very nature of existence. We often look to fiction to teach us things about reality that we either cannot experience at first hand or cannot draw conclusions from the myriad conflicting events of everyday life.⁷ Of all the species on Earth, we are the only ones who have the capacity of recreating reality firstly in our minds and then in the physical world. Our ability to imagine and then communicate things that cannot be seen, heard, touched, or smelled is unique (Harari 2015, p.24). The love triangle is one such fiction which helps us make sense of reality. I will analyse Girard's theory of triangular desire, especially in respect to his interpretation of Dostoevsky's works, and my creative work in order to suggest an alternative theory of the love triangle for creative practitioners.

In this section, I will provide context for my investigation and indicate where my work sits among the other studies of *The Eternal Husband* and *A Hero of Our Time* respectively. While *The Eternal Husband* is one of Dostoevsky's lesser known works and has received attention from only a handful of critics, *A Hero of Our Time* is one of the most famous works of Russian literature and there is no shortage of criticism on it. I will focus my review of the literature on those aspects of both novels which have most relevance to my novel and my investigation of the love triangle, namely structure and characterisation. I also try to explain Girard's theory of triangular desire in some detail, and lay the groundwork for using his theory to analyse the texts by Dostoevsky and Lermontov, and my own creative work.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the greats of Russian and world literature, and whose contribution to the fields of philosophy and psychology were hailed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud respectively. He achieved literary fame in his early twenties, only to be arrested for belonging to a group demanding democratic reforms, tried and then sentenced to death by firing squad. The sentence was commuted at the last second to prison time, and Dostoevsky spent the next ten years of his life exiled in Siberia. Politically, he shifted from being a liberal to a reactionary as a result of his exile but his literary work only seems to have benefitted from rubbing shoulders with rapists and murderers.

⁷ Fiction, in the shape of myths, is also used to create a sense of national identity and helps to create a common cause that brings strangers together (*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harari, p.25-27).

The Eternal Husband (1870) is about a love triangle between Velchaninov, Trusotsky, and Natalia Vassilievna, the latter of which is already dead at the beginning of the narrative. Most critics who have analysed the novel in some depth – such as Konstantin Mochulsky (1967); Joseph Frank (1994, 1995, and 2010); Susanne Fusso (2015); Lyudmila Parts (2006); Rene Girard (1965); Malcolm Jones (1995); and Branwen E. B. Pratt (1972) – have focused on the relationship between the two men at the expense of Natalia Vassilievna. Both Frank (1995) and Fusso (2015) claim that the two men exchange roles throughout the text only to revert to their original and “eternal” roles at the conclusion of the narrative. Girard (1965) claims that the third member of the triangle, Natalia Vassilievna, is removed so as to bring focus to the metaphysical connection between Velchaninov and Trusotsky. Only Pratt (1972, p.33) claims that the two men consummate their desire for one another “through sexual involvement with the same woman”. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), while criticising Girard, notes a tendency of love triangles to consist of two men competing over the body of a woman, and how consummating their relationship with the woman brings the two men closer together. While Fusso (2015, p.77) sees Velchaninov and Trusotsky of exchanging roles, Mochulsky (1967, p.392) finds that the two main characters reflect each other and in fact “are joined by mysterious threads”. According to Fusso (2015, p.77), the story ends with the two men reverting to their original and conventional roles as eternal lover and eternal husband respectively in a manner reminiscent of vaudeville. But for Mochulsky (1967, p.393), the ending contains a more metaphysical lesson and reveals that the two characters “are alike in a fatal manner. In each of them, the monstrous image of the other is reflected, as in a mirror”. Mochulsky sees the characters as illustrating the dualistic nature of human beings, and how within each of us lurks our opposites. Fusso sees the two men as actors in a comedy. While I too will explore the relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky, I will also examine the role of Natalia Vassilievna, and how the third member of the love triangle (“the object” as Girard defines her), plays a crucial and even controlling role in this story. Furthermore, I will try to show, using my creative work as an example, how a person may not even have to physically exist in order to influence others (in the context of the love triangle).

Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) is often described as the greatest Russian poet after Alexander Pushkin and his novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) is perhaps the very first Russian novel. His personal life was often conflated with his fiction given his history of upsetting the authorities, repeatedly being exiled to the Caucasus (where Russia was expanding its empire), proving his valour in combat, and finally perishing in a duel in circumstances eerily similar to that of his most famous character Pechorin (not to mention like his literary idol Alexander Pushkin). Lermontov has influenced writers such as Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and has been read by

generations of Russian school children. Vladimir Nabokov (1941, p.32, 38) recalls having to commit Lermontov's verse to memory and comparing Lermontov's Pechorin with Pushkin's Eugene Onegin as a common classroom exercise.

Given its reputation and hallowed place in Russian literature, there is a vast amount of criticism on *A Hero of Our Time*. I have decided to focus on critics' appraisal of the novel's structure and depiction of character as I feel those aspects have influenced my own creative work the most as well as being most relevant in analysing the love triangle. Given the plot of the novel is so entwined with its structure, I will briefly summarise the story to help contextualise the criticism. *A Hero of Our Time* is narrated by three different narrators and is divided into two parts and five chapters or sections (with a foreword by Lermontov and a foreword by an unnamed traveller). The first chapter, entitled "Bela", begins with the first person account of an unnamed traveller who is exploring the Caucasus in the 1830s and taking notes along the way with a view of writing something like a travelogue. During a storm, he takes shelter with a fifty-year old army captain called Maxim Maximych whom he encourages to share some local stories that will add colour to his (the traveller's) travelogue. Maximych (now the second narrator) tells the story of a twenty-five year old Russian officer named Pechorin who abducts a sixteen year old Muslim girl called Bela. The story finishes and so does the storm. The traveller resumes his role as the narrator, and he and Maximych part ways. The second chapter, "Maxim Maximych", narrated by the traveller, is about how the traveller meets Maximych again a few days after they had parted ways. They both see and meet Pechorin who is on his way to Persia. Pechorin treats Maximych rather coldly and then leaves. Maximych, who has Pechorin's diaries, gives them to the traveller. Maximych and the traveller part ways. Pechorin's diaries constitute the remaining three chapters of the novel, but they are prefaced by a foreword by the traveller who notes that Pechorin has died after returning from Persia and therefore it is acceptable to publish his diaries. The last three chapters of the book (which compose more than half of the book's pages) are narrated by Pechorin (who is already dead). The first section of the diaries, "Taman", relates the story of how Pechorin is almost killed by an unnamed young woman who had pretended to be in love with him. The second (and longest) section, "Princess Mary", is about a love triangle between Pechorin, Princess Mary and a young soldier named Grushnitsky. Princess Mary is initially attracted to Grushnitsky, but is then seduced by Pechorin. There is a duel between Pechorin and Grushnitsky where the latter dies. Pechorin then rejects Princess Mary. During this episode, Pechorin's former lover Vera emerges and there are a few scenes where both Princess Mary and Vera appear to be vying for Pechorin's attention. After killing Grushnitsky, Pechorin had run after Vera with a view to rekindling their relationship, but he arrives too late and Vera has already left town with her husband. The final section, "The Fatalist", takes

place in a large Cossack village where Pechorin's battalion is stationed. A Serbian officer called Vulic plays Russian roulette and survives. However, he is later killed by a Cossack. Pechorin then risks his life to help capture the Cossack.

Chronologically, the last three sections of the novel composing of Pechorin's diaries ("Taman", "Princess Mary" and "The Fatalist") occur before the first two sections ("Bela" and "Maxim Maximych"). Critics such as John Mersereau Jr. (1962) have noted that this non-chronological structure allows the reader to gradually come closer to Pechorin: they learn about him (along with the traveller) from Maximych, then they see him through the traveller's eyes (when the traveller and Maximych meet him), and finally they get to hear directly from Pechorin in his diaries. But William J. Gavin (1987, p.261) claims that such a view of the text ignores the two forewords in the novel, one by the traveller and one by Lermontov, "and thereby assumes that what will appear at the end of the phenomenological procedure is a neat and tidy picture of Pechorin". Robin Aizlewood (2003, p.1300) agrees with Mersereau Jr. that the novel's structure allows the reader to get closer to Pechorin but the "inadequacies of the narrators, the gaps and discontinuities, and the incompleteness of the picture (it is hard to speak of any development of character) work strongly against any authoritative interpretation of Pechorin". It appears that the structure of the novel both reveals and obscures Pechorin's character. Mersereau Jr. (1992, p.187) has written elsewhere that although the structure of the novel gradually brings the reader closer to Pechorin, the more the reader learns about Pechorin, the more muddled their feelings for him become. For Mersereau Jr., the reader is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by Pechorin. Therefore, not only is there a duality in Pechorin's character, but he also causes a duality in readers who struggle to reconcile his positive and negative attributes.

Critics have suggested that Lermontov's novel is a battleground between fate and free will and have found Pechorin to be a standard-bearer for one or the other. Vladimir N. Porus (2016), for example, sees Pechorin's actions as a struggle to impose his will over fate. According to Porus, Pechorin believes in neither God, devil, or morality. In fact, Pechorin wants to exercise his "free will without the guidance of faith and morality" (Porus, 2016, p.8). Nil Korkut Nayki (2017) sees Pechorin as an ineffectual hero (and perhaps not a hero at all) and of belonging to the trope of the superfluous man who is almost resigned to their fate. Pechorin is further described as a descendant of Eugene Onegin and a precursor of the Existentialist heroes of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Nayki (2017, p.187) points out that despite having heroic qualities, Pechorin's contradictory or dual nature leads to his cynicism and to torturing others and himself. Nayki (2017, p.187) also believes that despite his intelligence, Pechorin is capable of self-deception. Similarly, Mersereau Jr. (1960, p.144) sees

Pechorin as deceiving himself: Pechorin does not believe in fate but blames fate for his immoral behaviour. Mersereau Jr. (1960, p.144-145) explains how Pechorin, in fact, believes in free will but refuses to take responsibility for his actions (as free will entails). Lewis Bagby (1978, p.274), similarly, sees Pechorin avoiding responsibility for his actions while simultaneously trying to analyse his actions objectively, and this kind of duality “is a mechanism on which his emotional survival depends.” Bagby (1978, p.283) also claims that Pechorin believes in fate but he cannot admit it openly as that would undermine his Romantic pretensions. For R. A. Peace (1967, p.15), Pechorin’s actions can be explained by the concept of “volya”, meaning either freedom or will. Pechorin seeks both physical and emotional freedom as a way of ensuring his independence. Regarding will, not only does Pechorin get pleasure from imposing his will on others but he also “exercises [it] over himself, too, particularly in respect to his emotion” (Peace, 1967, p.15). For example, he stops himself from crying over Bela’s death and even laughs when his friend Maksim Maksimych tries to console him. Peace (1967, p.15) believes it is “the pursuit of volya [that] leads Pechorin into ruthlessness and cynicism in personal relationships.” For Peace (1967, p.16), Pechorin’s “pose of cynical indifference” is a result of the misfortunes he has faced in life. But it is a pose after all, and Peace (1967, p.17) notes that “[h]uman happiness and misery do in fact affect Pechorin.”

Critics have variously seen Pechorin as a hero, a villain, a symbol of the duality of human nature, or simply an enigma as Lermontov does not provide enough information to help us come to a definitive decision. While Mersereau Jr. finds Pechorin to be capable of self-deception and perhaps even choosing to deceive himself in order to avoid facing the consequences of his actions, Peace (1967, p.28) sees Pechorin as “blind” or unaware of his true nature. Bagby (1978, p.273) too finds that Pechorin is unaware of some of the things he is revealing about himself in his journal, and that his journal reveals a conflict “between his conscious mind and his repressed conscience.” This is in contrast to Marilyn Koenick Yalom (1962, p.145) who finds that “Pechorin is scrupulously honest with himself, play-acting only before others.” Gavin (1987, p.264) claims that Pechorin’s self-deception “is occasionally revealed in his [Pechorin’s] wondering why people hate him.” Gary D. Cox (1982, pp.168-169) believes that Pechorin sometimes drops his ironic pose and reveals his true self; for example, when he is with Vera. Cox appears to agree with Nayki that Pechorin is contemptuous of the world and himself, but Cox (1982, p.169) adds that Pechorin is fearful of others’ contempt. According to Andrea Lesic-Thomas (2008), Pechorin is not a hero but an ordinary man or even a psychopath. Moreover, she notes that the reader does not know enough about Pechorin because of the novel’s various unreliable narrators including Pechorin himself. Gavin (1987, p.257) sees Pechorin as a reflection of Lermontov himself. For Yalom (1962, p.145),

“Pechorin belongs to that brand of sinners who have actively chosen evil and who would find their just deserts in one circle of hell or the other.” However, Yalom (1962, p.141) also claims that Pechorin is “revolt[ing] against conventional moral standards” and that he observes “a more personal, if more diabolic truth.” Nayki (2017, p.187) believes that Pechorin has at least two contradictory impulses: Pechorin is fond of life (he appreciates the beauty of his surroundings and his descriptions of nature “are highly emotional and poetic”) but he also appears to have a death wish and often puts his life in needless danger. For Nayki (2017, p.186), Pechorin is dissatisfied about humankind and the state of the world but does not try to remedy the situation or offer any solutions; instead, he tortures himself and others as “an escape mechanism”. Therefore, she finds it difficult to describe Pechorin as a hero. Vladimir Nabokov (1941, p.38), on the other hand, detects an “immense store of tenderness, kindness, and heroism behind [Pechorin’s] cynical and arrogant appearance” and claims he is a “deeper personality” than Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin.

Victor Ripp (1977, p.972) seems to believe that Pechorin senses the randomness of life and seeks to impose some order to his life by trying to conform to a Byronic stereotype. Ripp (1977, p.969-970) claims that “the disjunctive formal structure of *A Hero of Our Time*...makes visible an issue that pervades the book at every level: the need to make fragmentary experience coherently meaningful, in both a social and personal sense.” Pechorin’s character, and how the reader understands his character, is tied up in how his character is presented over time. In other words, the revelation of character is dependent on the novel’s structure. Aizlewood (2003, p.1299) agrees with this view, claiming that “the manner of narration [in *A Hero of Our Time*]...is so central that our perception of character can only arise out of, or through, a consideration of narration and narrative structure, which can easily come to occupy the foreground itself.”

Bagby (2002, p.5-6) notes that a number of critics, such as Ivan Turgenev and John Garrard, have conflated Lermontov’s life with his fiction. For Bagby (2002, p.13), Lermontov himself “was only beginning to understand himself when he died” and Lermontov “could only have depicted Pechorin as clearly as he did through having gained an objective, critical perspective on his hero’s behaviour, patterns of thought, and beliefs.” In other words, Lermontov would have had the self-awareness to realise any parallels between himself and his creation and would have had a specific purpose (irony, for example) in attributing to Pechorin any of his own biographical details and physical attributes. But crucially, Lermontov, “like many a romantic hero once closely examined, remains as open and unfinished an individual as his persona seems closed and fixed. Much the same can be said of his novel” (Bagby, 2002, p.13). Similarly, critics such as Frank (1994) and Pratt (1972) believe that *The Eternal Husband* was based on the love lives of Dostoevsky and his friend Baron Vrangeli. Girard

(1965) even claims that *The Eternal Husband* reveals much about Dostoevsky's life and psychology. While comparing writers' lives with their characters is interesting, this line of enquiry is beyond the scope of this exegesis and I will not be able to add anything more to what critics have already said.

Cox (1982, p.170) finds the structure of *A Hero of Our Time* to be lacking unity and claims that the chapters "Taman" and "The Fatalist" "...shed little new light on Pechorin's character" and were "simply tossed in for good measure". However, Mersereau Jr. (1960) describes "The Fatalist" as the keystone to *A Hero of Our Time*, and Peace devotes an entire journal article to exploring the importance of "Taman" to the novel's structure. Bagby (2002) and Mersereau Jr. (1962) reveal the painstaking care Lermontov must have taken in structuring his novel. For example, Bagby (2002, p.16) detects at least three different forms that time takes in the novel. Firstly, there is the time according to which "Bela", "Taman" and "The Fatalist" were published before *A Hero of Our Time* was written. Secondly, he notes the temporal sequence in which the reader progresses through the text, starting with "Bela" and finishing with "The Fatalist". Thirdly, there is the chronological time in which the story had actually unfolded: Taman, Princess Mary, Bela / The Fatalist / Bela, and Maxim Maximych. However, the foreword to Pechorin's journal complicates the element of time further. According to Mersereau Jr. (1962, p.79), this foreword is the last part of the book and he contends that:

The arrangement of the novel's various parts might at first seem capriciously complex, but a sound logic underlies it. The parts are ordered not with regard to chronology but so that the reader, proceeding from one story to the next, is presented with an increasingly intimate view of the hero.

Mersereau Jr. notes how the reader's perception of Pechorin develops from an "hearsay figure" in "Bela" to an "eyewitness" account in "Maxim Maximych", to finally a first-person subjective point of view in Pechorin's journal. This allows the reader to be led gradually from an external view of Pechorin to an internal one. Mersereau Jr (1962, p.79). also points out how the temporal sequence and the chronological sequence share the same opening story in "Bela" and the same concluding story in "The Fatalist". According to Mersereau Jr., this overlapping of temporal and chronological frames allowed Lermontov to bring back the character of Maxim Maximych who serves as the connective thread between the opening and closing chapters of the book.

The structure of *A Hero of Our Time* has influenced my creative work, “If You Must, Die in Spring”, which has multiple narrators offering different perspectives into a love triangle, and the opening narrator returns to close the final chapter of the book. The reader’s perception of Zayn (the main character of my creative work) does not develop from an external view of him to an internal one; rather, it alternates between external and internal perspectives. The alternating perspectives contrast how Zayn sees himself with how others see him, and explores the duality of human nature and how we all possess contradictory views and characteristics. In fact, contradiction may be our most distinctive feature.

The duality of human nature is also investigated in *The Eternal Husband*, and the structure of the novel assists in that exploration. Critics such as Mochulsky (1967, p.388) and Pratt (1972, p.29) have praised *The Eternal Husband*’s structure, with the former claiming that “[i]n respect to form this is perhaps Dostoevsky’s most accomplished work”, and the latter finding the novel to be “so balanced in form as to be almost musical”. Bagby (2002, p.16) too shares their enthusiasm, drawing attention to the novel’s “ingenious design”. Girard (1965, p.45) praises *The Eternal Husband* for revealing the true nature of triangular desire by obscuring the third member of the triangle, “the object”, Natalia Vassilievna. For Girard, the structure of the novel allows the desires of Velchaninov and Trusotsky to become clearer: Trusotsky can only desire what Velchaninov desires. Thus, Girard claims that the novel expresses a fundamental truth of human behaviour: we all copy others’ desires. Girard sees “the object” of triangular desire (in this case Natalia Vassilievna) as concealing the true nature of desire. In contrast, Frank (1994, p.239) views Natalia Vassilievna as a “domineering female deity” and considers Velchaninov and Trusotsky as her victims. Similarly, Mochulsky (1967, p.392) believes that a dead woman (Natalia Vassilievna) holds the two men captive, and their antagonism arises from being “slave[s] of passion”. According to Mochulsky (1967, p.392), Velchaninov, the womaniser, fears becoming an eternal husband like Trusotsky, while the latter is “an unsuccessful Don Juan: he envies the lover as an ideal he cannot attain.” While I agree that Velchaninov finds Trusotsky’s behaviour degrading, Velchaninov would have happily traded places with Trusotsky while Natalia Vassilievna had been alive: “he suggested to Natalia Vassilievna that he carry her off, take her away from her husband, drop everything, and go abroad with him forever” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.100). In fact, it is possible that Velchaninov becomes a philanderer after being jilted by Natalia Vassilievna whom he had been in love with for an entire year. Indeed, after their parting, Velchaninov “was in some sort of frenzy and was unlikely to notice any woman, though he at once took up with his former society and had occasion to see hundreds of women” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.101). Therefore, I believe that Velchaninov envies Trusotsky just as the latter envies him. Velchaninov had been a “slave of Natalia Vassilievna”

(Dostoevsky, p.100) and it is possible he had degraded himself just as the eternal husband Trusotsky had, and had been “discarded ‘like a useless old shoe’” as a result and a young artillery officer took his place (Dostoevsky, p.106). In this way, *The Eternal Husband* reveals the duality of human nature and suggests that a Don Juan is simply a jilted lover. There is some evidence that Pechorin too, in *A Hero of Our Time*, becomes cynical in his relationships with women after experiencing disappointment in love.

Parts (2006, p.609) states that the third person limited narrator in *The Eternal Husband* sticks closely to Velchaninov’s thoughts and views the world through his eyes only, and this has the effect of creating doubt in the reader’s mind as to what actually occurs. The narrator makes no claims of objectivity or omniscience and the reader has no additional knowledge to the characters. The story is told in a highly subjective fashion and I believe that the effect on the reader’s understanding is similar to that created by the multiple narrators in Lermontov’s novel. On the one hand, readers would struggle to say definitively what has occurred in the respective texts, but on the other hand, they would be intimately involved with the characters as they gain the same information as the characters and at the same time. According to Parts (2006, p.611), Dostoevsky’s works do not follow traditional narrative structure; instead, they have multiple climaxes and the reader is not given enough information to decide how important a certain event is (beyond what a character says or feels about that event). Yet, Mochulsky (1967, p.388) believes that *The Eternal Husband* “satisfies all the rules of classical poetics (exposition, complication, rising action, culmination, catastrophe, denouement, epilogue)”. I believe that both Parts and Mochulsky are correct. On the surface, and to some readers, *The Eternal Husband* may give the impression of a haphazard collection of events (which adds to the realism of the story) but closer inspection reveals a careful pattern of repetitions, recurring motifs, and a symmetrical design. Instead of a traditional narrative structure, both Parts and Bakhtin (1984) observe that there is a polyphonic structure in Dostoevsky’s works that allows characters to speak and act independently of the author’s control. Bakhtin (1984, p.6) describes Dostoevsky’s novels of possessing:

[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses....What unfolds in his [Dostoevsky’s] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.

For Parts (2006, p.619), it is this polyphonic structure of Dostoevsky's works that lends a haphazard or chaotic atmosphere but results in the reader identifying so closely with the characters that they are unable to pass an independent or objective judgment on the events of the story or the actions of the characters, and this is how Dostoevsky morally implicates his readers with his characters. Parts and Bakhtin, in stressing the polyphonic structure in Dostoevsky's works, are by no means suggesting it is inferior to classical narrative structure. Rather, they believe it is an equally valid alternative. However, Mochulsky (1967, p.388) seems to believe that the structure of *The Eternal Husband* is different from and perhaps even superior to Dostoevsky's other works mainly because it observes classical narrative structure. It is to the novel's credit that its structure can be interpreted in different ways. I should point out here that while Parts describes *The Eternal Husband's* structure as polyphonic, Bakhtin's analysis focuses on Dostoevsky's better known novels and does not discuss *The Eternal Husband* at all but only refers to it in a footnote in a different context (Bakhtin, 1984, p.153). I agree with Parts that *The Eternal Husband* has a polyphonic structure but I also think that this novel was composed in a more traditional manner than Dostoevsky's other works. It has fewer digressions and is told from the exclusive perspective of one character. Fusso (2015, p.81) also notes that *The Eternal Husband* differs from the rest of Dostoevsky's oeuvre by having very little to say about God. Moreover, it seems to me that Velchaninov does not have the kind of political or social goals that Dostoevsky's other characters (such as Raskolnikov, Prince Myshkin, or Ivan Karamazov) have, and therefore the novel focuses purely on his relationships.

While critics have analysed the relationships between characters in both *The Eternal Husband* and *A Hero of Our Time*, I will be doing so through the lens of Girard's theory of triangular desire. I will examine how the love triangles in both texts emanate from characters' needs and desires as well as from fate. In *A Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin's love triangles arise from an inability to form relationships with men or women, and he blames the world, society at large, and even fate for his actions. In *The Eternal Husband*, the love triangle comes into existence due to Velchaninov's love for Natalia Vassilievna (if not for Trusotsky). Both novels subvert the love triangle primarily by their treatment of character and structure. While Dostoevsky removes the physical presence of the third member of the triangle entirely, their absence haunts the remaining characters and has a great impact on their lives. In order to characterise some of the features of the love triangle, I will analyse the connections and differences between my creative work, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband*. My creative work shares Dostoevsky's idea of eliminating the third member of the love triangle, but I eliminate "the mediator" instead of "the object" as Dostoevsky does. By eliminating one of the members of the triangle, I hope to subvert the

convention of the love triangle. I also employ multiple narrators as Lermontov does in *A Hero of Our Time* in order to question the nature of reality and explore the duality of human nature.

While there have been countless fictional works containing love triangles, there have been few theories concerning the love triangle as well-known as René Girard's theory of mimetic or triangular desire. As my creative work is a response of sorts to Girard's theory, I will focus primarily on Girard, his criticism of Dostoevsky, and how Girard's triangular desire can also be used to analyse other works such as Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. There have been a number of anthologies and critical editions dedicated to discussing Girard's various theories, such as Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb's *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel* (2015), and *The Girard Reader* (1996), edited by James G. Williams, so I will focus my attention specifically on Girard's theory of triangular desire and his analysis of Dostoevsky. Analysing Girard and writing my own novel has helped me create a slightly different model of the love triangle (but still based on triangular desire), which I will discuss in Chapters One and Two of my exegesis.

The French-American literary and cultural theorist, René Girard (1923-2015), is known for his work on mimetic or triangular desire, the "scapegoat mechanism", the relationship between violence and religion, and his analysis of Judeo-Christian scripture. He saw his own conversion to Christianity as a turning point in his life, and his criticism is influenced by his religiosity. Similar to Dostoevsky (who admittedly had always been a Christian), Girard transformed from being an agnostic progressive to a Christian conservative. While Dostoevsky's transformation was caused by his exile to Siberia, for Girard, it was a form of skin cancer (which he later learned was benign) that caused his change (Palaver, 2013, p.6-7).

Girard claimed that triangular desire is discernible only in the works of those great writers who themselves have undergone a conversion process from believing that their desires are spontaneous and original to renouncing their pride and realising their desires are mimetic. He terms those works that occur before such a conversion as "romantic", and those works that come afterwards as "novelistic". In stressing this conversion process, Girard "challenged fundamentally the thesis that the work of an author has nothing to do with his or her life" (Palaver, 2015, p.74). However, Girard sometimes claims an understanding of novelists' inner lives which seems derived more from their fictional works than from biographical evidence. His criticism seems based on authorial intention even though it is difficult to know what an author actually intended or even if they themselves know what they intended. In contrast, a critic like Roland Barthes (1977, p.146) claims:

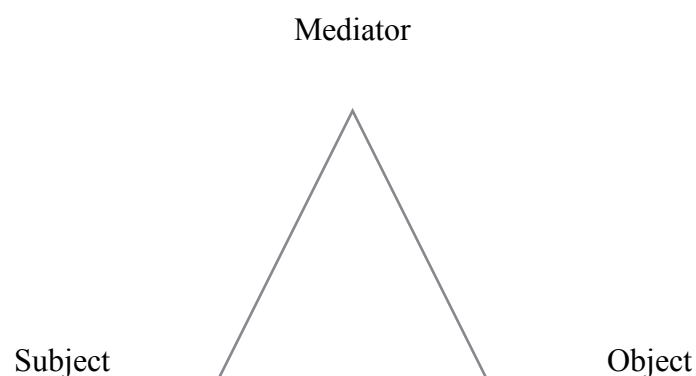
...a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture....the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them.

For Barthes, writers stand on the shoulders of other writers and therefore it is a culture (or a mix of cultures) that produces a text rather than a single person. Moreover, "[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing", and the critic reserves the role of high priest who explains the word of the Author-God to the masses (Barthes, p.147). Girard constructs an entire theory around the mimesis of desire, and claims that romantic writers are unaware of the extent of their unoriginality but great writers undergo a conversion process where they become aware of their own mimetic desire and deal with it and only then can they describe their characters' renunciation of mimetic desire (Palaver, 2011, p.144). Where Barthes sees "a tissue of quotations", Girard sees unwitting mimesis. In a triangular relationship of reader, writer and text, Barthes seems to find the reader at the apex whereas Girard identifies the writer (who can recognise and thus overcome their mimetic desire) as the final authority. Girard's work seems in stark contrast to the view gaining currency in his time, and certainly one of the more widespread positions among many literary critics of the twenty-first century, that "focus, instead, on the reader; on the ideological, rhetorical, or aesthetic structure of the text, or on the culture in which the text was produced, usually without reference to the author" (Tyson, 2006, p.2).

While he did not come from a literary criticism background, Girard's influence on the field was extensive and often divisive. His supporters argue that he has succeeded where Freud has failed in discovering the true nature of desire (Williams, 2000, p.227), and that his theories are canonical but are unfairly attacked due to "the currents of political correctness that have washed over American education" (Williams, 2000, p.4-5). His detractors find some of his work, including mimetic theory, to be androcentric or patriarchal (Williams, 2000, p.226-227), and reductionist (Girard, 2012, p.75). I personally find much in Girard that is useful in analysing love triangles, but some of his theories need to be updated (or even overturned) in order to remain relevant in a world that no longer condones the literary neglect or subjugation of half of humanity. Critics around the world from various fields continue to engage with Girard's works, and the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, an international association founded at Stanford University in 1990, publish a journal

(*Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*) dedicated to exploring and critiquing his theories (Antonello & Webb 2015, p.ii).

Girard's theory of triangular desire, as set out in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1961; 1965), is based on the idea that desire is mimetic. When a person desires someone or something, instead of being a spontaneous desire, it is actually a result of imitating the desire of another person. Girard terms the person who desires as "the subject", the person or thing being desired as "the object", and the person whose desire is being imitated as "the mediator".



According to Girard, the subject imitates the mediator's desire because they attach a particular significance or "prestige" to the mediator (which is often undeserved). By imitating the mediator's desire, the subject is able to come closer to the mediator and acquire some of their prestige. Girard's main argument is that when a subject desires an object, it is not due to any special quality inherent in the object itself, but it is because of an aspiration residing in the subject themselves: an aspiration to emulate the mediator and hence acquire some special quality that the mediator supposedly possesses. The subject, consciously or otherwise, uses the object and through the object gets closer to the mediator. In other words, the subject must possess the object in order to acquire the same status as the mediator. It is this relationship between subject, object, and mediator, that Girard terms as triangular or mimetic desire.

The subject can never acquire the same status as the mediator or if they do then that would cause the mediator to lose their prestige and then the subject must look for another mediator. The point is that the subject is always searching for something or someone out of their reach. According to Girard, mimetic desire is a universal law and it especially applies to vain people. Girard seems to believe that most people are vain and only the greatest of writers are able to recognise and then reveal the mimetic nature of human desire.

External Mediation

If the distance between subject and mediator is too vast, and indeed insurmountable, then there is less direct competition between the two actors. Girard describes this circumstance as “external mediation”, and uses the example of Don Quixote, who imitates the fictional knight Amadis, to illustrate a subject aspiring to a chivalrous life. Don Quixote makes no secret of his admiration and imitation of Amadis, and Girard compares his devotion to the Christians who try to imitate Christ. In this instance, Amadis is Don Quixote’s role model, and the fact that Amadis is fictional prevents any actual competition between them. Where the subject and mediator inhabit different worlds, the relationship is akin to that of a believer to their god.

Internal Mediation

Girard claims that “internal mediation” occurs when the subject and mediator are within the same world and their rivalry is palpable. The examples Girard uses are from the works of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Proust: the five novelists “who guided me through hell” (Girard 2015, p.282). While the subject in external mediation is proud of being influenced by the mediator, and openly pays homage to the mediator, the subject in internal mediation tries to hide the influence of the mediator (Girard 1965, p.10). In fact, Girard describes the relationship between the subject and the mediator as one where there is an “anxiety of influence”, the same term that Harold Bloom would later use in his book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), to describe the relationships between writers. The reason for hiding the mediator’s influence seems to come from the mediator’s double role of both instigating desire for the object and preventing the subject from attaining the object. This double role causes the subject to waver between “the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice” for the mediator (Girard 1965, p.10). Knowing that the mediator will not tolerate competition for the object, the subject tries to convince themselves that their desire for the object predates the mediation. Since the subject denies the mediation, and sees their desire for the object to exist before the mediator’s, the subject blames the mediator for the rivalry (Girard 1965, p.11). In other words, the subject sees themselves as the victim, but also perhaps, the deserving victim, as they feel inferior to the mediator. Girard claims that this inferiority is evident in the fact that the subject chooses to imitate the mediator’s desire in the first place.

Crucially, the subject will never be able to attain the object of their desire as the mediator will always be able to prevent such an occurrence. Attaining the object would mean the subject has defeated (or is on a level with) the mediator, resulting in a loss of prestige for the mediator followed by a search for a new mediator. Hence, the object must be impossible to possess. The subject, convinced of their inferiority, seeks out a messiah figure to help them deal with the pain and loneliness inherent in the human condition. For Girard, the age of religion has been replaced by the age of humankind, and instead of worshipping God, we seek divinity among mortals. Therefore, given that the mediator remains constant and the object can never be attained, or that the object is attained and mediators must be constantly changed, it seems that our desires are unrealistic and impossible to satisfy. This view of humankind appears quite pessimistic and suggests that we are trapped by our desires. It does not entertain the possibility that our desires may help us grow or to make us better human beings. Since Girard's conception of desire is based on the premise that we lack a sense of spirituality in our lives and have grown too proud, he seems to see desire in purely negative terms: as a means of filling a gap in our existence. But isn't the opposite also possible? That desire can stretch us beyond our limits and help us put the impossible within reach? Isn't desire for a better life a catalyst for human progress and perhaps even a result of evolution? Isn't the desire to live the strongest of all impulses? Admittedly, I don't have answers to these questions but my point is that our worldview plays an important part in formulating any theory that seeks to explain human behaviour.

As the love triangle is a popular device used by countless writers over the ages, I decided to frame my investigation through the lens of Girard's triangular desire and to confine my investigation to one particular era and two particular writers. Both these writers had a significant impact on the development of the psychological novel. I chose to focus on Dostoevsky not only because Girard sees his works as exemplars of triangular desire but also because the love triangle appears to be a recurring motif in his works. I also chose Lermontov as I was impressed by the structure of his novel and considered him as Dostoevsky's precursor. In order to draw out the features of the love triangle in *A Hero of Our Time* and *The Eternal Husband*, texts that explore the psychological complexity of the love triangle in a common cultural and geographic space, and to explore Girard's theory of triangular desire, it will be necessary to appraise other texts by Dostoevsky such as *The Double* (1846), *Notes from Underground* (1864), and the short story "A Gentle Creature" (1876). Using Girard, Dostoevsky, and Lermontov, I hope to explore how the dynamics of the love triangle play out over time. In other words, to explore if and how the boundaries of the love triangle shift, what role each member of the triangle performs, and how the members of a triangle interact with each other and with the members of other triangles. I will use Girard's theory of triangular desire to

underpin my research and to help in formulating a theory or set of principles regarding the dynamics of the love triangle.

The creative component of this project is an 82,000-word novel, but I will be only presenting approximately 70,000 words to accommodate the word limit. The story contains a love triangle composed of two people and one non-existent person, and it is structured in three parts so the love triangle can be explored from three different perspectives:

Part I: The Hero (Subject)

Part II: The Heroine (Object)

Part III: The Rival (Model/Mediator)

When I decided to write a story about a love triangle, I soon decided to write from every side of the triangle. This was not to stress the symmetry of the triangle, but to explore how the world looked like from three different perspectives and how the same events were interpreted by different people. To that end, I had a plan to divide the novel into three parts. Each part would be written in the first person by a different narrator, constituting the hero, the heroine, and the rival. Multiple narrators would suggest the existence of multiple truths which may conflict with and/or overlap each other. This would undermine the idea of one true representation of events and encourage the reader to decide for themselves what was happening, thus encouraging further reader participation in the text. Having multiple narrators would also allow the reader to share the perspectives of Zayn and Aleksandra (the main characters of the novel), and the unnamed rival, and thus observe how these roles shift within this triangle and between other triangles. In other words, it would be a way of exploring the dynamics of the love triangle from inside the triangle.

The three parts of the novel, while each going chronologically forwards in time, would often overlap with events from other parts (through flashbacks and flash-forwards). Thus, the same events could be seen from different perspectives, and each perspective would at times contradict the others. So the reader would be in a position to view the triangle from three sides, and allow them to see how people can misread situations or even delude themselves. The reliability of each narrator would be called into question, and the reader would have to decide whom to believe and why. The reader would know things that the narrators, individually, would not, and hopefully this knowledge could lead to a deeper understanding of the story, the characters' psychology, and the device of the love triangle itself. I decided to subvert the convention of the love triangle by conflating the hero and the rival/villain, and thus try to learn what would happen, in the paradigm of triangular desire, when the

subject and mediator grow so close to each other that they become the one and same person. That is, the subject will ultimately learn that there is no mediator, that the subject himself created the mediator in a desperate act of self-deception, and that the greatest obstacle to our desires resides within us.

Why Poland?

I decided to set my novel in Poland given the prominence of the Catholic church in that society and the religiosity of its people. I suspected that the obligations of living a life in accordance with the Catholic church would create a duality in people's lives. For example, people may be made to feel guilty or ashamed for following their natural instincts and having sexual relationships outside of a church sanctioned marriage. Therefore, there would be a clear conflict between following those instincts that make us human and submitting to the strict rules of a religion. It also seemed to me that given the patriarchal system of the Catholic church, religiosity would be more onerous for women. I undertook a research trip there for four weeks in July/August 2017 which helped me test some of my suppositions. I kept a journal for my observations and interviews that I conducted there, and this hopefully has lent greater depth and authenticity to the characters, their psychology, and the background of my story. Some of the characters in my novel are partly based or inspired by my interviews with the inhabitants of Głubczyce (a town of about 12,500 people near the Czech border) and the neighbouring village of Głubczyce Sady (approximately 550 inhabitants), including priests, nurses, a number of factory workers, university students, and schoolchildren. I attended mass in a number of churches in Warsaw, Krakow, and Głubczyce, and although I did not understand what was being said, I began to understand the importance of the Catholic Church in Polish society. Crucifixes and posters of Pope John Paul II adorned every single house I visited, and I tried to recreate this pious atmosphere in my work. One high school student told me that her priest called her a sinner who would go to hell after she confessed to being sexually active. I used certain details of this episode in my work and especially in relation to the main female character, Aleksandra. Interviewing this student helped me understand how growing up in a religious and patriarchal community could influence one's worldview, and I tried to impart some of her backstory to Aleksandra.

While I had visited Poland twice before, my third trip was with the specific purpose of conducting research for my creative work. I wanted details that would give my novel some verisimilitude but desired a style that lent more towards expressionism than realism. From the start, I wanted to prioritise capturing feelings and experience than accurately describing the world. In fact, I wanted

to create a sort of timeless atmosphere where it is not clear when the story takes place, or even if it takes place in a parallel universe. Therefore, I wanted to select those details that would root the story in a certain setting, but avoid any particulars of fashion, technology, slang, or popular culture that would date the story to a specific time period. I included references to two contrasting historical periods (i.e. Napoleonic and post-Communist) in an attempt to not only reveal the intoxicated and confused mindset of the main character and narrator but also create a sense of ambiguity about the time (especially since no one contradicts the narrator's observations). References to the statues on Warsaw's streets served at least two purposes. Firstly, to chart Zayn's progress through Warsaw, and to locate the setting along the Royal Route in Warsaw. Mentioning these well-known figures from Polish and European history also seems to add to the narrator's authority and indicates his place (or aspiring place) within the flow of history.

I will briefly summarise my novel to help me explain what I did and how I did it. When Zayn, an eccentric American exchange student studying in Paris, goes to the Gare de l'Est to drop off his friend, Alexander, he briefly exchanges glances with a beautiful stranger, Aleksandra. On the spur of the moment, and against his better judgment, Zayn stows away on the train. By the time he gathers the courage to speak to her, Aleksandra, along with two of her friends, are disembarking in Warsaw. Zayn jumps off the train and rushes over to meet his beloved. Although Aleksandra is attracted to Zayn, she explains that she has a boyfriend and their respective families expect them to marry one day. Zayn is crushed and prepares to return to Paris. But when Aleksandra kisses him he quickly changes his plans and begins wooing her. Zayn reveals his previous relationship with a seventeen-year old girl in Paris, and how they had a child together. But circumstances beyond their control had forced them apart. Aleksandra takes Zayn to her home town, where he learns about her past: her mother is dead, and her father is in jail. As Zayn and Aleksandra's relationship grows, he proposes to her and she accepts.

The day before their wedding, Aleksandra tells Zayn that she has been unfaithful to him, and that she cannot leave her boyfriend of three years. After much tears and promises, Zayn forgives her. But by now, Aleksandra, as a pious Catholic, no longer thinks she is the ideal person for him. She reveals that her father is in jail for sexually abusing her when she was a child. This abuse resulted in a child whose whereabouts are unknown. Aleksandra begs Zayn to delay the wedding for a few days, but he insists that it would not be practical.

When Zayn returns from his bachelor party, he finds Aleksandra in her wedding dress dead in a bathtub. Aleksandra's suicide note forms the second part of the book. Her note blames both her

father and Zayn for her death. It also suggests that her boyfriend was a figment of her imagination, created as a coping mechanism for her childhood trauma. If he wasn't mad before, Zayn now goes completely to pieces, even imagining himself to be Aleksandra's mysterious boyfriend for a while. He continues talking to her in his head for the rest of his days, comforting her that no matter what happens to them at least they have both left children behind somewhere in this world, and they will live on through them.

Many years later, Vince, Zayn's son with the girl in Paris, meets Zayn in a bar on an island in the South Pacific where an old and alcoholic Zayn is writing his memoirs. Vince reveals that Zayn is his father. Zayn, overjoyed at having met his long-lost son, drops dead and a gust of wind blows his memoirs (that comprise this story) out a window.

Given thesis restrictions, approximately 12,000 words, including the opening and closing sections (prologue and epilogue) of my novel, which were written from the perspective of Zayn's son, are not being submitted for examination. Since Zayn is an unreliable, highly emotional, and often intoxicated narrator, I had planned for another character (who would be more cold and calculating) to frame the story and thus help guide the reader and offer them some sort of key to the text. Without the opening and closing sections, the reader is confronted with Zayn's character straightaway and may feel slightly confused by Zayn's drunken narration and his peculiar worldview. While the story is clearly set in Poland, I tried to achieve a sort of timeless feeling where the reader is unsure what year it is or even if this is an alternative universe. I wanted to root the story in reality by giving a lot of physical details of Warsaw and emphasising the importance of the Catholic Church on Polish society (and especially on Aleksandra), but at the same time wanted to create an unsettling feeling by limiting references to technology and making no mention of dates (although the characters speak passingly and drunkenly of Napoleon and glasnost). The contrast between Zayn's highly romantic prose style with his less-romantic surroundings (including his practical minded friend Alexander) were intended to be a playful homage to the past (especially to Dostoevsky's earlier works such as "White Nights", published in 1848) as well as to continue that unsettling feeling. Moreover, by taking the story across continents, through different perspectives and narrators, and following Zayn into old age, I wanted the reader to experience a dreamlike love story that unfolds across time and space. The parallels between "White Nights" and my work are fairly straightforward, I think. Both Zayn and the unnamed young narrator ("the Dreamer") of Dostoevsky's short story lead a solitary life, spending most of their time daydreaming. They fall in love with women, Aleksandra and Nastenka respectively, who are already in a relationship (the difference being that the former's boyfriend does not actually exist and the latter's is away for a

year). In creating Zayn, I was influenced by and wanted to poke gentle fun at the romantic worldview as represented by the Dreamer. While the Dreamer is a perfect gentleman who makes way for his rival after he returns and makes no protest when the rival marries Nastenka, Zayn's behaviour brings shame to his family: he is arrested for public drunkenness and is itching to fight his (invisible) rival over Aleksandra. Both see love in spiritual terms and see themselves as gallant knights, but while the Dreamer seems to be a twenty-six-year-old virgin, Zayn was already a father at nineteen. There are also stylistic similarities in the way the Dreamer talks to various houses on his walks through St. Petersburg and Zayn talks to the statues and trees dotting Warsaw's streets, as well as dead people from his past. Both stories are written by older men looking back on their youths, and I have tried to capture the sense of nostalgic romanticism that pervades Dostoevsky's earlier work.

I wanted readers to be drawn into Zayn's obsessions and to empathise with him while at the same time (especially when the story changes to Aleksandra's perspective) allow them to see past his obsessions. Writing in the first person allows a more intimate style and helps the reader get closer to Zayn. However, it also means that apart from a few allusions, I wasn't able to fully reveal Zayn's backstory and upbringing as I felt he was not the sort of person to discuss it. Switching to Aleksandra's perspective in Part 2 of the novel not only helps us understand her better but also offers the reader an opportunity to contextualise Zayn's actions. Moreover, given Zayn's eccentric nature and questionable actions, it was important to see him from another perspective.

External events such as the #MeToo movement made me rethink certain aspects of the story. I grew conscious of the fact that some of Zayn's actions could be considered as stalking Aleksandra, obsessing over her and trying to control her, and I wondered whether I had portrayed these as romantic actions. While writing my novel, I had never intended Zayn's character to be misogynistic. I had wanted to show how both Zayn and Aleksandra were attracted to one another and how Zayn tries to court her. The fact that Zayn, on a sudden whim, jumps on the same train as Aleksandra and follows her (and her friends) across Europe, was done for dramatic reasons and to indicate Zayn's madness/stupidity. However, I can see how this can be interpreted as stalking. Zayn's only saving grace (if I can call it that) is that Aleksandra is just as thrilled to see him and is equally smitten with him. As the story continues, the reader will hopefully see her attraction for Zayn, and in Part 2 of the novel, Aleksandra writes fondly of the incident on the train. In subsequent drafts of my novel, I have made Zayn conscious of the fact that his actions may be construed as stalking, and he is remorseful and ashamed as a result.

There are also a few instances where Zayn is pursuing Aleksandra, and Aleksandra, due to her conflicting feelings for Zayn and her boyfriend, is asking to be left alone. While Zayn submits to her request, he cannot stop thinking of her and sensing that she loves him too, pursues her again later. The reasons for this are mainly dramatic. If Aleksandra had not had a boyfriend and had rushed into a relationship with Zayn, then that would have been the end of the story. Similarly, if Zayn, on being asked to leave her alone, had immediately left the country, the story would be over. Zayn, by virtue of being the protagonist of the story, and the initiator of this relationship, must tread a fine line between being importunate and being passive. Hopefully, I have managed to convey Zayn as a harmless (but slightly stupid) person who has no ill intentions towards Aleksandra (certainly, Aleksandra never feels threatened by him). As a result of writing this novel, I have come to see writers as having some sense of moral responsibility. Even in *A Hero of Our Time*, which features an immoral or amoral character such as Pechorin, and Lermontov (in his foreword) seemingly shirks a moral purpose behind his work, it appears that mistreating others rarely gives everlasting pleasure. Pechorin gets everything he longs for: seducing Princess Mary, testing himself against an adversary, and defeating said adversary, but achieving his desires do not make him any happier. Lermontov's novel seems to suggest that once we get what we want, we don't enjoy it as much as we thought we would. This is similar to Girard's theory that once the obstacle (for example, a mediator) that prevents you from acquiring the object of your desire is removed, your desire for that object evaporates. The obstacle is a condition for desiring the object. In my novel, after a whirlwind romance and once Zayn and Aleksandra are living in the same house (and after Aleksandra claims to have broken up with her boyfriend), they are not sure what to do. They both feel a sadness they are unable to explain. It is as if the journey is more pleasurable than the destination. Through the experience of writing my novel, I discovered (as Girard suggests) the importance of the obstacle in the love triangle, and that the obstacle both creates the desire and prevents the desire being satisfied or achieved. Without the obstacle, the subject gets the object of their desire, but no longer enjoys it.

Chapter One: *The Eternal Husband* (1870)

In this chapter, I will discuss what I have learned from my investigation into the love triangle. I will be focusing on *The Eternal Husband* instead of *A Hero of Our Time* as some of the experimental features of the love triangle in the former can also be found in the latter. In relation to Lermontov's novel (which I will analyse in more detail in Chapter Two), I will be mainly covering how it has influenced the love triangles in my own work. I believe that Girard's theory of triangular desire is

too rigid to capture the complexities and nuances of human desire. For instance, in his analysis of *The Eternal Husband*, Girard seems overly confident in defining Velchaninov as the mediator when there is evidence that Trusostsky and Natalia Vassilievna also act as mediators. Moreover, it seems that mediation works both ways (subject and mediator influence one another) and not in one direction as Girard claims. I also try to demonstrate how the role of the object needs further clarification, and how the mediator is the true object in triangular desire. Given the similarities between the subject and the mediator, and their ability to influence one another, I suggest that the mediator is the subject's double. The theme of the double not only suggests the duality of human nature but also raises the question of whether there is a single reality experienced equally by everyone. Further, an antagonism arises between the subject and their double from each trying to control or destroy the other. This conflict leads to the destruction of the love triangle. The love triangle that was created to introduce conflict in a story, must be destroyed to resolve that conflict.

I have tried to offer an alternative and more flexible theory of the love triangle based on my analysis of Girard's theory of triangular desire, and how his theory applies to a number of texts including Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband*, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and my own novel *If You Must, Die in Spring*. The roles of subject, object, and mediator seem to be applicable to my three main characters: Zayn, Aleksandra, and the unnamed rival ("the Rival") respectively. However, the roles seem to be fluid with Zayn and Aleksandra switching between subject and object or inhabiting both roles simultaneously.

In my novel, the mediation is both external and internal. The mediator only exists in the imagination of the two main characters (external), but they are convinced he is real (internal) and Zayn experiences an active rivalry with him. I will be exploring the similarities and differences between Girard's theory of triangular desire and my theory of the love triangle throughout this section. I note that according to Girard, his theory only applies to works of genius and this may explain some of the differences between his theory and my novel. Moreover, he "use[s] the term *romantic* for the works which reflect the presence of a mediator without ever revealing it and the term *novelistic* for the works which reveal this presence", and that *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* is "primarily devoted" to *novelistic* works (Girard, 1965, p.17). Given that my novel eliminates the mediator entirely, it could be described as romantic according to Girard's definition. However, the fact that both Zayn and Aleksandra are convinced of the mediator's existence and act as if he is real, and therefore the mediator exerts a real force on the other characters, the novel could also be termed *novelistic*. My point is not that my novel is unique but that Girard's definitions may be a little inflexible. I think different readers could find the same novel to be variously romantic, novelistic or both according to

their taste and often in spite of the author's intentions. The idea of a mediator who influences a subject in their desires, while enlightening and perhaps true in many cases, seems to focus on only one aspect of mediation and could even be overstating its importance. It does not consider the fact that two people may influence one another consciously or unconsciously. Also, Girard's singular focus on mediation neglects the role of the third member of triangular desire. The object seems to have as much autonomy as its name implies and its sole function is to act as a conduit between the subject and the mediator. I disagree with Girard's characterization of the object as it underestimates the importance of this third member. For instance, in *The Eternal Husband*, the third member of the triangle (the object), Natalia Vassilievna, is already dead before the story begins but her absence haunts the other two members of the triangle, Trusotsky and Velchaninov, and indeed brings them together. While both Trusotsky and Velchaninov were in love with Natalia Vassilievna, it is only after she dies that the two men form a homoerotic relationship. An argument could be made that it is Natalia Vassilievna who mediates between Trusotsky and Velchaninov and these two men imitate her desire for both of them. This reading is completely at odds with Girard's interpretation of Dostoevsky's novel and raises questions about the structure of triangular desire as Girard envisions it. I will discuss this in more depth later in this chapter after offering a summary of *The Eternal Husband*.

Before discussing the plot of *The Eternal Husband*, I think it's important to note a number of mistakes or oversights in Girard's analysis of the novel, and Dostoevsky's development as a writer, that raise questions about his theory of triangular desire. Girard (1965, p.45) briefly compares *The Eternal Husband* (1870) with *A Raw Youth* (1875), two works where Girard claims Dostoevsky had given the mediator the most prominent role:

Dostoyevsky [sic] by a stroke of genius places the mediator in the foreground and relegates the object to the background. At last novelistic composition reflects the real hierarchy of desire...But, from our point of view, *A Raw Youth* is not the most daring of Dostoyevsky's works. It is a compromise between several solutions. The transfer of the novelistic center [sic] of gravity is best and most spectacularly illustrated by *The Eternal Husband*.

Girard does not mention what the "compromise between several solutions" is, but the passage gives the impression that Dostoevsky takes the lessons learned from writing *A Raw Youth* and implements them in *The Eternal Husband*, and this seems to be the justification for focusing on the latter novel for the next seven pages. However, *The Eternal Husband* was published five years before *A Raw Youth*. Girard seems to be claiming a gradual progression in Dostoevsky's grasp of triangular

desire, and yet, the actual chronology of his works suggests either a regression in Dostoevsky's thinking or an attempt at reworking an idea that he felt could be improved. In fact, after sending *The Eternal Husband* to publication, Dostoevsky wrote to his niece that he had "hated this story from the very start" (Frank, 2010, p.595). Despite the critical acclaim which it received, Dostoevsky was clearly unhappy with this work which had been born amongst a backdrop of poverty, mourning (his first child, a three-month-old girl, had died the year before), and fears for his wife's health who was then expecting their second child. His hatred of the novel, for artistic or personal reasons, contrasts sharply with Girard's celebration of it being emblematic of triangular desire. I think Dostoevsky may have been dissatisfied with his novel because while its structure is admirably symmetrical, it lacks the emotional power and resonance of his other works. I will discuss the novel's plot to try to illustrate what I mean.

Summary of *The Eternal Husband*

The Eternal Husband is a novel about a wealthy government official and widower, Pavel Pavlovich Trusotsky, who after his wife (Natalia Vassilievna) dies reads her personal correspondence and learns of her multiple affairs. He then seeks to avenge himself on the various men who have cuckolded him, including the upper-class bachelor and perpetual womanizer, Alexei Ivanovich Velchaninov. The story begins (and remains) from Velchaninov's perspective who lives in St. Petersburg and is suffering from insomnia. After seeing a mysterious man with crape on his hat (to signify mourning) in the street, Velchaninov continues seeing him in his dreams. For several days Velchaninov alternates between seeing this man during the day in the street and at night during his dreams. Finally, after one such dream, he gets out of bed in the middle of the night, wanders over to the window and spots the mystery man across the road. The man enters Velchaninov's building and after a brief unspoken duel at the threshold of Velchaninov's apartment during which time each man tugs silently at his respective door handle, Velchaninov suddenly whips the door open and immediately recognises him. It is Trusotsky, an old friend of his. Trusotsky informs him that his (Trusotsky's) wife, Natalia Vassilievna, has died, and that Trusotsky is in St. Petersburg on business. During his visit, Trusotsky behaves very strangely, hinting so obliquely at a relationship between Velchaninov and Natalia Vassilievna that Velchaninov remains confused as to what Trusotsky may know. But Trusotsky cuts a ridiculous figure in both manner and speech, and Velchaninov struggles to treat him seriously. After Trusotsky leaves, Velchaninov recalls his affair with Natalia Vassilievna that had occurred about nine years ago. Velchaninov had been madly in love with her and had even asked her to run away with him. But Natalia Vassilievna had claimed to have fallen pregnant and had asked Velchaninov to leave town in order to avoid arousing her

husband's (Trusotsky's) suspicions. Later, she had written to Velchaninov that she was not pregnant but confirmed that their (Natalia Vassilievna and Velchaninov's) relationship was over. Velchaninov had then suspected that she had acquired a new lover.

Not long after his nocturnal meeting with Trusotsky, Velchaninov meets Trusotsky's eight year old daughter Liza. Velchaninov suspects she is in fact his daughter and is shocked at how badly Trusotsky treats her. Velchaninov arranges for some friends to look after Liza but her condition only deteriorates. Trusotsky comes to visit Velchaninov one night and hints that a mutual friend (Bagautov) who died recently had had an affair with Natalia Vassilievna. Trusotsky behaves like a mad man, veering between anger and abject humility, while continually hinting (without even mentioning it) at some relationship between Velchaninov and Natalia Vassilievna. Trusotsky forces Velchaninov to drink and then asks for a kiss. Velchaninov obliges him, and soon after that Trusotsky leaves. The next day Velchaninov learns that Liza is seriously ill, and not long afterwards, she dies. Sometime after Liza's death, Trusotsky visits Velchaninov to inform him that he plans to marry a fifteen year old girl, Nadezhda Fedoseevna. Trusotsky asks Velchaninov to accompany him during his visit to his fiancée. The two men go to Nadezhda Fedoseevna's house during which time Trusotsky manages to make a fool of himself and it is clear he is despised by the girl. Velchaninov on the other hand is admired by all the members of the family for his polished manners and charm. Velchaninov and Trusotsky return to Velchaninov's house where they start drinking. A young man named Alexander Lobov, who claims to be Nadezhda Fedoseevna's beloved, arrives and warns Trusotsky to stay away from her. After Lobov leaves, the weather outside turns ugly and Trusotsky claims he is unable to return home. After Trusotsky falls asleep, Velchaninov has an unspecified attack with sharp pains in his chest. His loud moaning awakens Trusotsky who jumps into action, administering poultices and making Velchaninov drink boiling hot tea. Velchaninov thanks Trusotsky for saving his life and the two men eventually fall asleep. Early in the morning, Trusotsky attacks Velchaninov with a razor but the latter manages to overbear the former during a long, wordless struggle. Velchaninov ties up Trusotsky for a couple of hours and then releases him without asking him the reason behind his attack. Sometime after this incident, Velchaninov meets Lobov in the street. Lobov informs him that Trusotsky has left St. Petersburg and has asked him (Lobov) to deliver a letter to Velchaninov. Velchaninov opens the letter to discover it had been written by Natalia Vassilievna about ten years ago and addressed to him, only it had never been sent. In the letter, Natalia Vassilievna confirmed the end of their relationship, confessed her love for another man, revealed she really was pregnant, and promised to send the child to Velchaninov in future. After reading the letter, Velchaninov realises that Trusotsky had known about the relationship the entire time he had been in St. Petersburg.

Two years later, Velchaninov is at a train station, journeying to meet a friend through whom he hopes to make the acquaintance of a certain woman, when he runs into Trusotsky, his new wife, Olympiada Semyonovna, and Trusotsky's distant relative "Mitenka" Golubchikov. Velchaninov realises that Trusotsky has once again resumed his role of "eternal husband" and the younger and handsome officer Mitenka is now the "eternal lover". Nevertheless, Velchaninov wastes no time in charming Olympiada Semyonovna who invites him to visit them at their country estate.

Velchaninov accepts but then perhaps feeling sorry for Trusotsky, declines the invitation. When they are about to part ways at the station, Velchaninov offers to shake Trusotsky's hand but the latter refuses, pointedly recalling Liza's memory. The experience jars him so much, Velchaninov changes his plans and decides not to visit his friend and the woman he had been interested in. The narrator concludes the story by reporting how Velchaninov would later regret that decision.

From a conventional story-telling perspective, it should have been Trusotsky and not Velchaninov at the centre of the story. Trusotsky has the greatest want: to avenge himself on Velchaninov who cuckolded him and even fathered his only daughter (Liza). Instead, the story is told from Velchaninov's perspective and the reader discovers Trusotsky's motivations when Velchaninov discovers them. Dostoevsky's skill lies in making the reader sympathize with someone who is clearly in the moral wrong, at the expense of someone who wishes retribution for his suffering. In this case, Dostoevsky has made Velchaninov the main character of the novel and I would have expected Girard to describe him as the subject of the novel. However, while Girard does not state this outright, I assume there is a difference between being the subject of a book and being the subject of triangular desire. This difference would explain why Girard chooses to describe Trusotsky as the subject and Velchaninov as the mediator. In a sense, Trusotsky, who has the most to gain or lose, is an apt subject, but Dostoevsky subverts convention by making him the villain or antagonist of the story who physically and psychologically tortures his eight year old daughter, who eventually dies from her father's abuse and neglect. Girard (1965, p.46, 50-51), for reasons of his own, refers to Trusotsky as "the hero" of the story multiple times. I assume by hero, Girard means the subject because not only is Trusotsky not the protagonist of the story, he exhibits far from heroic traits. Perhaps Girard suspects that the novel should have been told from Trusotsky's perspective and not Velchaninov's. Changing the perspective would have a significant effect on the tone and theme of the story. A first-person account of Trusotsky's story could have offered a very intense experience but given the limited viewpoint, it may have been hard to sustain the reader's interest. In telling the story from Velchaninov's perspective, I think *The Eternal Husband* misses out on capturing the most emotional perspective – Trusotsky's perspective. I believe that *The Eternal*

Husband was an experiment with a passive protagonist that did not quite work out. In fact, Velchaninov takes so little initiative himself, it is even possible that the events in the novel are all a part of Velchaninov's dream (Parts 2006, p.608). Another possibility, of course, is that the novel experiments not so much with a passive protagonist as a protagonist who comes face to face with his double or a manifestation of his own subconscious and I will discuss this further below.

For Girard (1965, p.45-46), Velchaninov "makes an ideal narrator since he is the center [sic] of the action and yet scarcely participates in it. He describes events all the more carefully since he does not always succeed in interpreting them and is afraid of neglecting some important detail." But Velchaninov is not the narrator and he does not describe events. The story is written in the third person and usually limited to Velchaninov's perspective but by no means knows everything about him. For example, in describing Velchaninov, the narrator states that he is "about thirty-eight or even thirty-nine" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.68). This uncertainty suggests that the narrator of *The Eternal Husband* is a character in their own right. Moreover, there are hints throughout the text, which may admittedly be one of Dostoevsky's (and other nineteenth century writers') stylistic quirks that the story sometimes slips into the first person: "Almost exactly two years went by after the adventure *we* have described. *We* meet Mr. Velchaninov one beautiful summer day in a car of one of *our* newly opened railways (italics added)" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.234). Then a little later, the narrator expresses a wish not to tax the reader's attention by unnecessary backstory: "Without going into details, *we* shall limit ourselves to pointing out that he [Velchaninov] had regenerated...(italics added)" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.234). I believe these switches to the first person are deliberate as they usually occur at the very beginning or after a break in many of Dostoevsky's novels and are a way to utilise both third person and first person narration when required. His narrators, far from claiming omniscience, actually admit to not knowing certain facts about characters or the plot itself, and this serves to complicate the truth and even raises questions about the nature of reality. While the use of a third person narration suggests an objective truth, slipping into a first-person mode can undercut that objectivity, but also make the story more personable and mysterious. Switching from the third person to the first person may make the reader wonder who the narrator is, how much they know, and what their role is in the story. Clearly, *Notes from Underground* (1864), *The Gambler* (1866), and *A Raw Youth* are written in the first person, but novels such as *The Idiot* (1868-69),⁸ *Devils* (1871-72),⁹ and *The Karamazov Brothers* (1879-80)¹⁰ start off in the first person as well. *Crime and Punishment* (1866) begins in the third person but at the very end confirms that "our present [tale] is

⁸ "I have seen learned men..." (Dostoevsky 2010a, p.6).

⁹ "In undertaking to describe the recent and strange incidents...I find myself forced..." (Dostoevsky 2010b, p.5)

¹⁰ "Alexey Fyodorovitch Karamazov was the third son of...a landowner well known in our district...which I will describe in its proper place." (Dostoevsky 2009, p.3).

ended” (Dostoevsky 1998, p.527). Indeed, Dostoevsky had actually started writing *Crime and Punishment* in the first person (Frank 1995, p.60), and then decided to rewrite it from a more omniscient perspective and this perhaps accounts for it being his most focused and technically accomplished. *The Double*, similarly, is written in the third person but draws attention to the narrator on the very last page: “*Our hero* shrieked and clutched his head (italics added)” (Dostoevsky 2003a, p.287). To return to my point: Dostoevsky’s narrators rarely give the impression of omniscience, and this makes it harder to state what happens in his novels with certainty. Therefore, Girard’s confidence in interpreting the events of *The Eternal Husband*, and judging Dostoevsky’s intentions regarding the novel, seem misplaced. In fact, critics such as Joseph Frank (2010, p.752) have noted that Dostoevsky’s skill at playing devil’s advocate was so powerful and psychologically complex that he was often “accused of supporting what he was striving to combat.”

In *A Raw Youth* (a.k.a. *The Adolescent*), a text Girard considers less daring and making more compromises than *The Eternal Husband*, the story is told from the perspective of the subject and not the mediator. It could be argued that the mediator’s (Versilov’s) character slowly grows in importance and overshadows the subject’s (Arkady Dolgoruky’s) character. However, the novel is written in the first person by Dolgoruky and the perspective remains of a youth trying to learn from and remaining in awe of the father (Versilov) who had abandoned him. Crucially, Dolgoruky is a far more active character than Velchaninov in *The Eternal Husband* ever was. If anything, it seems that Dostoevsky learned from his experience of writing *The Eternal Husband*, and returned to a more traditional storytelling technique of making the most active character the protagonist of the book.

Making Velchaninov the main character of *The Eternal Husband* adds to the mystery of who Trusotsky is, but Trusotsky’s ridiculous behaviour often undercuts the suspense that is building up between the two of them. I think it would have been more powerful if the story was told from the perspective of the widower who was tracking down the men who had affairs with his wife and fathered his only child. This is a hero’s journey the reader could follow and empathise with. Instead, as the novel currently stands, the reader must wait to see what Trusotsky does through/from Velchaninov’s perspective, and Velchaninov is not as sympathetic or interesting a character as Trusotsky. At the end of the novel, although both characters are briefly reminded of what happened to Trusotsky’s or rather Velchaninov’s daughter, Liza, they seem to remain in their respective roles as eternal husband and eternal lover. If Velchaninov learns anything or changes at all from his experiences, it is perhaps best illustrated in his foregoing the pleasure of pursuing an affair with

Trusotsky's new wife (Olympiada Semyonovna), and the fact that he does so out of sympathy for Trusotsky. (It should be noted that once again, Velchaninov, the so called mediator, is tempted to imitate the desire of his subject, Trusotsky.) If Velchaninov had not known the husband, he may well have pursued the affair, and there is evidence that his philandering ways do not change at all in the way he regrets not taking up the offer of a friend in Odessa who was willing to introduce him to an "extremely interesting woman, with whom he had long wished to become acquainted" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.234). It is true that Velchaninov passes over the opportunity of meeting the extremely interesting woman because he was feeling "much too out of sorts" after his encounter with Trusotsky, but the last line of the story strongly conveys his regret: "And how sorry he was later!" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.234). The touch of humour perhaps even suggests that Velchaninov would not be making that mistake again in the future. As far as endings go, Trusotsky himself hardly fares better. He is married to a woman who does not seem to love or respect him, and who may already be having an affair with his cousin Mitenka. Therefore, it appears that despite Velchaninov and Trusotsky exhibiting traits associated with the other throughout the novel, by its end they both return to their respective roles. It is as if they are destined to play the roles of eternal husband and eternal lover, and nothing can change their fates. At the same time, it is not possible to pin either Trusotsky's or Velchaninov's character down. Contrary to Girard's contention of the subject imitating the mediator, Velchaninov (the mediator) imitates Trusotsky (the subject) constantly. From having an affair with Trusotsky's first wife, Natalia Vassilievna, to following Trusotsky to the house of a fifteen-year-old girl (Nadezhda Fedoseevna or Nadya) whose parents are negotiating her marriage, to being "already much too interested in Nadya" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.183), and later flirting with Trusotsky's second wife Olympiada Semyonovna, contemplating a liaison with her and accepting an invitation to visit her, Velchaninov can't help but pursue Trusotsky's loves. It is true that Girard states that after the initial mediation where the subject imitates the mediator, the rivalry between the pair results in the mediator imitating the subject as well. But in the case of *The Eternal Husband*, the initial mediation (the initial act of imitating) appears to be the mediator's (Velchaninov's) affair with the subject's (Trusotsky's) wife (Natalia Vassilievna). In light of the evidence, I believe that the relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky is as much a mediator – subject relationship as a relationship between the protagonist and their double. Moreover, I believe Girard is overlooking the possibility of Velchaninov being the subject and of Trusotsky being his mediator.

There appear to be certain similarities (and notable differences) between Girard's conception of the Mediator and the Mentor figure in mythology. Christopher Vogler (2007, p.xiii), a Hollywood story consultant, in his study of novels, movies, and myths from around the world, observes a "set of

concepts known as ‘The Hero’s Journey,’ drawn from the depth psychology of Carl G. Jung and the mythic studies of Joseph Campbell.” Vogler draws from the work of Jung and Campbell to find that many myths and stories share a pattern where a hero embarks upon a journey. He identifies twelve stages of the hero’s journey, the most relevant ones for our discussion being the following: the story begins with the Hero in their “Ordinary World”, where they receive a “Call to Adventure” but the Hero is reluctant or even “Refuses the Call”. It falls upon a Mentor to encourage the Hero and perhaps guide them across the “First Threshold” where they encounter “Tests, Allies, and Enemies” (Vogler 2007, p.8-9). This hero’s journey, or versions of it, is found in countless novels, plays, movies, and myths across time and place. Vogler describes how there are certain archetypes in literature around the world, and the Mentor is one of them. The Mentor offers solace and encouragement to the hero to overcome an obstacle, but on occasion they may also give wrong advice and/or see the hero as a competitor. According to Vogler (2007, p.121), “[s]ometimes a Mentor turns villain or betrays the hero”, and he uses the examples of the dwarf Regin in Nordic mythology who helps Sigurd the Dragonslayer mend his sword but later plans to kill him over competition for treasure. The other example Vogler uses is from the fairy-tale *Rumpelstiltskin* where Rumpelstiltskin helps the heroine turn straw to gold but later demands her firstborn child in return (Vogler 2007, p.121). Traditionally, there appear to be more instances of the Mentor as villain than Mentor-driven stories (Vogler 2007, p.122), and this is perhaps due to dramatic necessity. Vogler (2007, p.122) notes there is a trope of the Mentor who had once been a hero but as they grew wiser and older decided to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. The archetype of the Mentor is often represented by a “Wise Old Man or Wise Old Woman” and “is expressed in all those characters who teach and protect heroes and give them gifts” (Vogler 2007, p.39). Vogler’s (2007, p.39) examples of mentor figures include “God walking with Adam in the Garden of Eden, Merlin guiding King Arthur, the Fairy Godmother helping Cinderella, or a veteran sergeant giving advice to a rookie cop”. He notes that the word “Mentor” originates from *The Odyssey* where a “character named Mentor guides the young hero, Telemachus, on his Hero’s Journey” (Vogler 2007, p.39). Morality, wisdom, discipline, and maturity seem to be a common thread amongst these examples. I find it difficult to fit Velchaninov in this company. He is not yet middle-aged: “about thirty-eight or even thirty-nine” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.68), but suffers from an “obvious loss of memory” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.71). He has been humiliated, slandered, and publicly offended but does not challenge his offender to a duel (Dostoevsky 1997, p.72) which indicates he would be considered a coward by his contemporaries. He not only owes people money, but also talks about them behind their backs (Dostoevsky 1997, p.72). He has squandered two considerable fortunes, insulted an official, who had been defending his daughter, “publicly and with impunity and solely from braggadocio, and slandered the wife of a schoolteacher but left town before he could face the

consequences of his slander (Dostoevsky 1997, p.72-73). But worst of all was his treatment of “a certain girl, from simple tradespeople, whom he did not even like and of whom, he had to confess, he was ashamed, but whom, not knowing why himself, he got pregnant, and then abandoned along with the child, without even saying goodbye...” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.73). These are not the hallmarks of a Mentor, and it suggests that the mediator is a much more nuanced and psychologically complex figure. I assume that in many myths and legends the hero was traditionally a young male, and the role of the Mentor was usually assigned to more experienced characters (typically male). However, in Girard’s conception, the mediator can be a person (of any gender), a thing, or even a culture. While the Mentor figure can often be clearly identified, a mediator can be elusive and the impact on their disciple may be at a subconscious level.

The greatest similarity between the Mentor and the mediator appears to be that they both dominate or at least have higher status than the Hero or the subject. Both the Mentor and the mediator have some knowledge or lesson to impart. However, if Trusotsky admires Velchaninov and sees him as a role model, as Girard claims, then he (Velchaninov) is a most unworthy one. In fact, Girard claims that Trusotsky admires Velchaninov for his “social ability” (Girard 1965, p.46) and his “immense sexual prestige” (Girard 1965, p.50). This prestige arises from Velchaninov’s ability to seduce women including Trusotsky’s wife Natalia Vassilievna. But there is little evidence in the text of Trusotsky aspiring to be a womanizer. I believe that Trusotsky wants to punish Velchaninov partly for the affair he had with his wife, and partly for his wife’s death which he has no other way of redressing. Moreover, Trusotsky wants to punish Velchaninov with kindness, to embarrass him, and to make him feel guilty about his affair while simultaneously appearing to be his friend. Trusotsky achieves this by constantly dropping hints of the affair but professing ignorance of the matter. Therefore, Velchaninov cannot decide at times whether Trusotsky is genuinely drunk or is playing drunk, whether he is genuinely a fool, or is simply playing the fool, and this contributes to Velchaninov’s torture (Dostoevsky 1997, p.95-96). In fact, it is possible that Trusotsky, the older of the two, is a Mentor or mediator figure as he wants to teach Velchaninov a lesson, and is able to make Velchaninov do what he wants and often against his (Velchaninov’s) wishes. For example, after Trusotsky asks Velchaninov for a kiss, Velchaninov gives in to his request and kisses him on the lips (Dostoevsky 1997, p.139). Girard is mistaken when he writes that Trusotsky kisses Velchaninov on the lips (Girard 1965, p.45). The entire exchange is reproduced below. Note that Velchaninov’s full name is Alexei Ivanovich Velchaninov and Trusotsky’s is Pavel Pavlovich Trusotsky.

‘Kiss me, Alexei Ivanovich,’ he [Trusotsky] suddenly offered.

“Are you drunk?” the man [Velchaninov] cried, and drew back.

“I am, sir, but kiss me anyway, Alexei Ivanovich, eh, kiss me! I did kiss your hand just now!”

Alexei Ivanovich was silent for a few moments, as if hit on the head with a club. But suddenly he bent down to Pavel Pavlovich, who came up to his shoulder, and kissed him on the lips, which smelled very strongly of wine. He was not entirely sure, incidentally, that he had kissed him (Dostoevsky 1997, p.139).

The last line suggests that Velchaninov was not totally conscious or in control of his actions even though he is sober and it is Trusotsky who is drunk. Also, Trusotsky does not specify where he should be kissed, but Velchaninov chooses his lips. Is it possible that Trusotsky has cast a spell on Velchaninov? Velchaninov seems stunned into silence “as if hit on the head with a club”, which implies that Trusotsky’s words, behaviour and personality are as forceful as physical blows. Two pages earlier, Trusotsky literally forces him to drink:

‘Eh, let’s drink, Alexei Ivanovich, eh, don’t refuse!’ Pavel Pavlovich went on, gripping him firmly by the arm and looking strangely into his face. Obviously, this was not just a matter of drinking (Dostoevsky 1997, p.137).

Trusotsky’s behaviour is at odds with Girard’s description of him as the subject/hero. In fact, Girard (1965, p.46, 50, 51) refers to Trusotsky as “the hero” multiple times. As I mentioned earlier, according to Girard, the subject or hero imitates the mediator’s desire because they attach a particular significance or “prestige” to the mediator (which is often undeserved). By imitating the mediator’s desire, the subject is able to come closer to the mediator and acquire some of their prestige. Girard’s main argument is that when a subject desires an object, it is not due to any special quality inherent in the object itself, but it is because of an aspiration residing in the subject themselves; an aspiration to emulate the mediator and hence acquire some special quality that the mediator supposedly possesses. The subject, consciously or otherwise, uses the object and through the object gets closer to the mediator. In other words, the subject must possess the object in order to acquire the same status as the mediator. But in this case the object, Natalia Vassilievna is dead. What object does Trusotsky desire? If anything, Trusotsky is not imitating Velchaninov’s desire for his dead wife, rather it is Velchaninov who imitated Trusotsky’s desire for his own wife by having an affair with her while she was alive. In fact, Velchaninov had been so infatuated by Natalia Vassilievna that he had proposed “running away to Paris or America, [but] he left alone for Petersburg, ‘no doubt just for a brief moment’—that is, for no more than three months, otherwise he

would not have left for anything, despite any reasons or arguments” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.107). Therefore, we see Velchaninov imitating Trusotsky, and Trusotsky strong-arming Velchaninov into drinking and later kissing him – effectively controlling his actions. In light of this, I believe that the relationship between the two men is more complex than a straightforward master-disciple relationship as it is not clear who is the master and who is the disciple (indeed, the examples above seem to suggest the exact opposite of what Girard is contending). I think it is possible that mediation works both ways, and people can switch between high and low status in a relationship and this is what Dostoevsky was trying to illustrate in *The Eternal Husband*. Comparing the subject-mediator relationship with the Hero-Mentor relationship in traditional mythology suggests an evolution of the Mentor figure over time. But as I have tried to show above, perhaps the subject-mediator relationship is essentially a sign of the duality of human nature.

One of Girard’s main points is that a subject’s rivalry with their mediator (over an object) hides a secret admiration for the mediator. In analysing *The Eternal Husband*, Girard (1965, p.50) states that “[t]he hatred of the betrayed husband [Trusotsky] is obvious; we gradually guess at the admiration which this hatred hides.” But the opposite is perhaps also accurate: Trusotsky pretends to be friendly with Velchaninov so as to get better access to him and thus allow him (Trusotsky) to take his revenge. Therefore, Trusotsky’s admiration hides his hatred. Furthermore, since Velchaninov kisses Trusotsky, there must clearly be admiration or attraction on both sides, and it is quite obvious. The fact that chapter seven of *The Eternal Husband* is entitled “Husband and Lover Kiss” is surely meant to emphasise and draw attention to the kiss between the pair. In chapter fifteen, Velchaninov even invites Trusotsky to spend the night at his place, and when Velchaninov experiences severe pains in his chest later that night, Trusotsky takes off his host’s clothes, puts him to bed, gives him tea and applies poultices to relieve the inflammation in his chest. Trusotsky is “almost beside himself, as if it were a matter of saving his own son” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.218). His paternal care saves the sick man and earns his gratitude: “you—are better than I! I understand everything, everything...thank you”, and he twice more asks Trusotsky to spend the night (Dostoevsky 1997, p.219). If Girard’s designation of Velchaninov as the mediator and Trusotsky as the subject is correct, then this is an instance of a mediator/mentor figure confessing to their disciple that they (the disciple) are the superior person. As the narrative continues, there are more mixed signals between the pair. Early next morning, sensing that Velchaninov is now indebted to him, Trusotsky attacks Velchaninov with a razor – a phallic symbol perhaps. While “Velchaninov was perhaps three times stronger than Pavel Pavlovich...their struggle continued for a long time, some three minutes” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.221). Is it possible that Velchaninov, who could have easily dispatched his smaller and older opponent, was enjoying tumbling around with Trusotsky on the

floor? During those “three minutes neither of them said a word; one could hear only their heavy breathing and the muffled sounds of the struggle” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.221). Why were they lost for words? And if Velchaninov actually felt threatened, wouldn’t he have called out for help? Velchaninov finally comes out on top, “ben[ds] him [Trusotsky] down to the floor and twist[s] his arms behind his back,” and ties them with a torn curtain cord (Dostoevsky 1997, p.221). Velchaninov locks Trusotsky in a room for two hours, and instead of asking for an explanation or calling the police, he lets him go. Trusotsky, for his part, seems reluctant to leave but eventually does. In light of the evidence, both characters are obviously attracted to one another but are unable to express their feelings. Despite the fact that it is Velchaninov who kisses Trusotsky, asks him to spend the night, unnecessarily prolongs their fight, ties him up in a manner reminiscent of bondage, and then releases his attempted murderer without asking any questions, Girard states that “[s]ome critics would like to see in Pavel Pavlovitch [Trusotsky] a ‘latent homosexual’” (Girard 1965, p.47). Moreover, Girard claims that “homosexuality, whether it is latent or not does not explain the structure of desire. It puts a distance between Pavel Pavlovitch and the so-called normal man. Nothing is gained by reducing triangular desire to a homosexuality which is necessarily opaque to the heterosexual” (Girard 1965, p.47). Girard’s theory of triangular desire is marred by his prejudice. His belief that the “normal” person and their desire is always heterosexual limits his otherwise thought-provoking theory. His analysis raises the following question: if Dostoevsky, for the sake of Girard’s argument, wanted to avoid alienating the “normal” person, why did he include not just the kiss, but also draw further attention to that fact by entitling the relevant chapter “Husband and Lover Kiss”, and imbue the two men’s relationship with homoerotic overtones throughout the course of the text? Girard claims that Velchaninov and Trusotsky kiss each other not because they may be genuinely attracted to each other but to prove an existential point about mimetic desire. Their kiss illustrates how the “erotic value” which resides in the object is transferred to the mediator (Girard 1965, p.47). Instead of genuine love or attraction between the two men, Girard (1965, p.47) sees “an erotic deviation toward the fascinating rival.” According to Girard, Dostoevsky uses the men’s relationship as a device to reveal a law of human nature. But this is hard to prove without relevant biographical evidence or personal statements Dostoevsky may have made regarding his craft. I believe that the attraction between Velchaninov and Trusotsky is not based on one person’s desire to emulate the other and may even precede the involvement of the object. Moreover, I believe *The Eternal Husband* illustrates the similarities between these two overtly disparate characters, the subconscious attraction they have for one another, and thus reflects the nature of our divided selves.

Velchaninov’s repressed love for Trusotsky

The duality of our inner selves is perhaps represented by Velchaninov's repressed love for Trusotsky. At the beginning of *The Eternal Husband*, Velchaninov is shown to be struggling with his conscience. He suffers from insomnia and is haunted by various memories of his shameful past. One day, on the third of July, while having his dinner at a certain dubious restaurant on Nevsky prospect, he "suddenly understood fully the cause of his anguish, his special, particular anguish, which had already tormented him for several days in a row" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.77). He attributes his anguish to a series of encounters in the street with a man with crape on his hat, who is later revealed to be Trusotsky. Trusotsky clearly recognized Velchaninov, but Velchaninov, although sensing something familiar in the man, could not positively identify him. That same night Velchaninov dreams that he is put on trial by a crowd that had gathered in his room for some secret crime he had committed:

But all interest finally concentrated on one strange man, someone very closely acquainted with him at some time, who had since died, and now for some reason also suddenly came into his room. The most tormenting thing was that Velchaninov did not know who the man was, had forgotten his name and simply could not remember it; he knew only that he had once loved him very much (Dostoevsky 1997, p.84).

Firstly, it seems odd that Velchaninov cannot recall the identity of a person he either loved or was loved by him; it is not clear from the passage who loved whom in the past. It is possible that Velchaninov loved Trusotsky or that Trusotsky loved Velchaninov. It is also possible that Velchaninov feels guilty for (and hence thinks he is being judged for) having an affair with Natalia Vassilievna. The rest of the story suggests this is the case. But could the "crime he had supposedly committed and kept secret" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.84) be an even deeper one and kept secret even from himself? Velchaninov then dreams of striking the "strange man" repeatedly in circumstances which suggests he is trying to repress his feelings towards him:

...suddenly Velchaninov, in a rage, struck the man, because he refused to speak, and felt a strange pleasure in it. His heart sank with horror and suffering at his action, yet it was in this sinking that the pleasure consisted. Completely frenzied, he struck a second and a third time, and in some sort of intoxication from fury and fear, which reached the point of madness, but also contained in itself an infinite pleasure, he no longer counted the blows, but struck without stopping. He wanted to destroy all, all of *it* (Dostoevsky 1997, p.84).

Velchaninov strikes the man because he refuses to express himself, and perhaps refuses to acknowledge or return Velchaninov's affections. His blows try to destroy all memory of the man, and perhaps all memory of being attracted to him. Velchaninov is successful to the extent that he is unable to recall the man's name. The sound of the doorbell wakes Velchaninov from his dream, but when he checks the front door, there is no one there. He cannot go back to sleep because of the impression made by his dream of the strange man. Instead, he thinks about his encounters with Trusotsky, and considers whether those too were a dream. While thinking about this man with crape in his hat, Velchaninov looks out of his window and spots him across the street. Velchaninov is at first terrified, and hides himself "behind the corner of the window niche" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.87). The "stranger" crosses the street, enters the gate of Velchaninov's apartments, and starts coming up the stairs. Velchaninov, normally a brave man, now waits breathlessly, a "[n]ervous, inaudible laughter was bursting from behind his breast" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.87-88). When the "stranger" reaches Velchaninov's apartment, he starts tugging at the door handle, gently trying to open the door. But Velchaninov, "with a sort of ecstasy", flings open the door and almost bumps into the man with crape in his hat (Dostoevsky 1997, p.88). After several moments of "look[ing] fixedly into each other's eyes", Velchaninov finally recognizes the man as Trusotsky, who is mourning the death of his wife (Dostoevsky 1997, p.88). Velchaninov invites him in and Trusotsky, like the man in Velchaninov's dream, is reluctant to speak. His reticence sends Velchaninov into a fury, he stamps his foot and he demands an explanation. During their conversation, Velchaninov confirms that even after nine years, Trusotsky "ha[s]n't changed in appearance," (Dostoevsky 1997, p.94) which lends support to the theory that Velchaninov had not recognized him earlier because he had been repressing the memory of a failed love. Is it possible that Velchaninov was attracted to Trusotsky but unable to pursue a relationship with a man shifted his affections to Trusotsky's wife? Incidentally, Velchaninov never dreams of Natalia Vassilievna, a person he had been madly in love with. It is likely that the "strange man" he dreams of and the man with crape in his hat are both Trusotsky; one from the past (nine years ago) and one in the present. Therefore, Velchaninov was aware, perhaps subconsciously, that at least one of them loved the other: "he knew only that he had once loved him very much" (Dostoevsky 1997, p.84). If it had been a fraternal love then arguably he would not have blocked all memory of the person's identity.

The idea that Velchaninov had loved Trusotsky and had repressed all memory of that love affects their respective roles in triangular desire. Their first encounter, ten years ago, had also begun with an argument. Trusotsky relates the first time Velchaninov had met him and his wife:

And our first acquaintance with you, when you came to me one morning to get information about your lawsuit, and even started shouting, sir, and suddenly Natalia Vassilievna came out and ten minutes later you were already a true friend of our house, for precisely one whole year, sir... (Dostoevsky 1997, p.96).

At one level, it seems Velchaninov disliked Trusotsky from the start but was won over by Natalia Vassilievna's charms and fell in love with her. Another possible reading is that Velchaninov, realising his attraction to Trusotsky would not be returned and/or considered unacceptable by society, gets into an argument with him, and upon meeting Trusotsky's wife, transfers his affections to a more socially acceptable recipient (an act which also serves to punish the man who had rebuffed his advances). This reading is supported by the fact that ten years later, after Natalia Vassilievna is dead, Velchaninov finally kisses Trusotsky, has a prolonged tussle with him with sexual overtones, and interferes with Trusotsky's love life by trying to seduce each woman he marries or considers marrying (i.e. Nadya and Olympiada Semyonovna). In that case, *The Eternal Husband* is the story of a repressed love which briefly rises to the surface with the death of the third member of the triangle. While Girard claims there is "an erotic deviation" from the object (Natalia Vassilievna) to the mediator (Velchaninov) (Girard 1965 p.47), this interpretation suggests there is a transference of affection from Trusotsky to the object. In Girard's analysis, Trusotsky is the desiring subject. In this interpretation, Velchaninov fulfils that role. In other words, Velchaninov is the subject, Trusotsky is the mediator, and Natalia Vassilievna is the object. But even this does not quite capture the nuances of the relationship between the three characters, and I believe that triangular desire, as Girard proposes it, is too rigid a structure to account for the complexities in human nature.

My creative work, "If You Must, Die in Spring", suggests three instances of repression along the lines of *The Eternal Husband*. One of the main characters, Aleksandra, represses the memory of her childhood abuse. But in order to successfully repress that trauma, she creates an imaginary friend and lover. When Aleksandra falls in love with Zayn, she is tormented with guilt for cheating on her imaginary boyfriend. In order to fully accept her feelings for Zayn, she has to come to terms with the fact that her boyfriend does not exist, but in doing so she remembers her childhood abuse. The rush of childhood memories (which almost seems to her as a present-day experience instead of something that happened in the past), as well as growing up in a strict Catholic society where female sexuality is strictly policed, consumes her. She blames herself for what has happened to her and believes there is no redemption. The challenge was to reveal this repression in a subtle and believable way. As the story is primarily told from Zayn's perspective, the reader (like Zayn) would

be unable to understand the reasons behind Aleksandra's ostensibly mysterious behaviour. When Aleksandra speaks of her boyfriend, the reader (and Zayn) would have no reason for disbelieving her. But Zayn senses Aleksandra is attracted to him and realises that she must have conflicting feelings. The reader sees glimpses of Aleksandra's struggle with her feelings for Zayn and her loyalty to her boyfriend and may suspect the fictitious nature of the latter as no one (apart from Aleksandra) appears to have seen him. Even though Aleksandra at first hints at and later tells Zayn of her childhood abuse, she does not reveal that her boyfriend was a figment of her imagination. Aleksandra's reticence stems from two reasons: firstly, the memories of her boyfriend seem so real that they are hard to accept as being fictional, and secondly, she does not want Zayn to think she possibly has mental health issues. In Part 2 of my novel, which contains her letter to Zayn, Aleksandra throws doubt over the existence of her boyfriend but does so in a manner which suggests that she herself is not entirely sure. Believing in the boyfriend allows her to repress her past abuse, but makes her feel guilty for having a relationship with Zayn. Not believing in the boyfriend allows her to continue a relationship with Zayn, but also allows her childhood memories to come rushing back. For Aleksandra, the imaginary boyfriend is a necessary fantasy, an ideal man who is later personified in Zayn. Jacques Lacan's famous saying that "[l]ove is giving something you don't have to someone who doesn't want it" (Rivera 2020, p.154) is perhaps relevant here. In this case, both Aleksandra and Zayn believe the other will provide what they lack and hence make them whole, but they cannot accept anything less or different from the ideals in their heads. Their tragedy is that they struggle to reconcile their Romantic worldviews with an imperfect love. In *The Eternal Husband*, Velchaninov represses his love for Trusotsky because society finds it unacceptable and perhaps because it was not reciprocated as long as Natalia Vassilievna was alive. In my work, Aleksandra's repression is due to both social and psychological reasons. Both Velchaninov's and Aleksandra's repression of past events affect their roles in triangular desire and suggest they are the desiring subjects. While Velchaninov's repression denies the existence of a mediator, Aleksandra's repression leads to the creation of a mediator.

The second instance of repression in my novel occurs in Part 3 when the reader learns that Zayn has repressed his own identity and imagines himself to be Aleksandra's boyfriend. This section was my attempt to explore the duality of human nature. It differs from Velchaninov's repression in that Dostoevsky's protagonist never doubted his own identity (although there were times he doubted his own sanity). In *The Eternal Husband*, Velchaninov struggles to remember why someone he sees on the street seems familiar to him, and even has dreams about this person. Later, Velchaninov and Trusotsky seem to reflect each other personalities, and each takes turns in dominating the other. In my creative work, Zayn not only sees Aleksandra's boyfriend as his double, but in Part 3 believes

he is the double. As the double, he has conversations with himself (Zayn), and even threatens to fight himself. Then, as Zayn's double, he starts a relationship with a woman, Ola,¹¹ who appears to be Aleksandra's double. During all this, the original Aleksandra appears in his dreams and he speaks to her at times as Zayn's double and at times as Zayn. It is only after he wakes up from one of these dreams, and finds a memento of her that he recalls his true identity. Zayn's trip into his subconscious helps him reconstruct Aleksandra's past. It is only after assuming the identity of someone who does not exist (his double) that he is able to come to terms with reality. My intention throughout Part 3 (and even through the presentation of multiple narrators) was to suggest that in order to understand one's reality, one has to step outside of it and see it from another side. Zayn's experience as his double gives him some clarity about who he (Zayn) is, and thus he is able to come to terms with his life. As Zayn realises there is no double/boyfriend, the reader realises that there is no love triangle, and therefore the obstacle/mediator is removed. As this triangular relationship breaks down, another takes its place: Zayn continues dreaming of Aleksandra and talking to her, and in the meantime finds someone who looks eerily like her. It seems as if all these relationships are triangular in nature but that the third member of the triangle does not necessarily have to exist. Perhaps the third member of these relationships is time. In other words, since we carry the past with us (be it past relationships, past experiences, or simply our upbringing), it always affects our present relationships. For example, Zayn's relationship with the girl in Paris affected the way he approached his relationship with Aleksandra. Aleksandra's relationship with her boyfriend determined the nature of her relationship with Zayn. Velchaninov's relationship with Trusotsky in *The Eternal Husband* was shaped by Natalia Vassilievna. Even in the love triangle of Pechorin, Grushnitsky, and Princess Mary in *A Hero of Our Time*, Grushnitsky reflects a younger, more naïve version of Pechorin, and Pechorin is not fighting Grushnitsky as much as he is fighting his younger (past) self. Thus, as an alternative to Girard's formulation of subject, mediator, and object, I would suggest the elements: subject, object, and time (which stands for some defining experience in the past). However, the role of the object in triangular desire needs further clarification. Neither Natalia Vassilievna nor Aleksandra behave as passive objects, and indeed, as I have hopefully demonstrated, act variously as the mediator and the subject.

Alexander's repressed love for Zayn is the third act of repression in my novel. Alexander discourages Zayn's courting of Aleksandra throughout the novel and often gives him dubious advice. In the epilogue (which is not being presented for examination due to the word limit), it was revealed that Alexander eventually marries Marta, a girl who had experienced a brief but bitterly

¹¹ "Ola" is a diminutive of Aleksandra.

disappointing relationship with Zayn. Knowing his love would not be reciprocated, Alexander shifts his affections to someone who is in a similar position to him. They both desire Zayn but since they cannot have him, they settle for one another. This creates a love triangle between Alexander, Zayn, and Marta. Alexander's repression suggests that he is the desiring subject, and that Zayn is both the object of his desire as well as his mediator (since Alexander imitates Zayn's relationship with Marta). This is further evidence, I believe, that the roles of triangular desire are not stable. Characters cannot be categorically defined as the subject, object, or mediator. Not only do they change roles within one love triangle but they can do so over multiple (and sometimes overlapping) love triangles. Whenever a character desires someone's affection and they receive it, they are both the desiring subject as well as the desired object.

Alexander's imitation of Zayn is not very different from Pechorin's imitation of Grushnitsky in *A Hero of Our Time*, and Velchaninov and Trusotsky's imitation of each other in *The Eternal Husband*. The similarity of these characters and their mirroring of each other's behaviour leads me to believe that they are doubles. Regarding Velchaninov and Trusotsky, it will be necessary to compare *The Eternal Husband* with other texts by Dostoevsky in order to demonstrate the dynamics of their particular relationship. Six years after *The Eternal Husband* was published, Dostoevsky wrote the short story, "A Gentle Creature" (1876). It is written in the first person from the perspective of a widower, similar to Trusotsky, whose wife is dead (having committed suicide just before the story begins). Once more, there is a love triangle between a husband, a wife, and a rival. The narrator of "A Gentle Creature" is an unnamed forty-one-year-old pawnbroker who is discharged (according to his version he resigned) from his regiment for a failure to defend the regiment's honour (in other words he refused to fight a duel). In this way, he is similar to Velchaninov who also refused to fight a duel. The pawnbroker marries an unnamed sixteen-year-old girl whose parents had died and was being brought up by aunts who treated her like a servant, beating her, making her scrub floors, repair clothes, and only reluctantly giving her food (Dostoevsky 2001, p.223-224). The third member of this triangle is a lieutenant and former regimental colleague of the narrator's called Yefimovich who reveals the narrator's cowardice to his young wife and then tries to seduce her. The heroine had agreed to meet the rival in order to humiliate her husband, but never had any intention of betraying him. The real subject of this short story is not the rivalry between the husband and Yefimovich, but between the husband and wife; what had caused her to seek his humiliation in the first place and what led to her suicide.

"A Gentle Creature" is narrated by "a retired first lieutenant of a famous regiment, a nobleman by birth, independent..." and "tall, well-built, educated and...not bad-looking, either" (Dostoevsky

2001, p.223, 226). He seems attracted to the heroine precisely because she is “good and gentle” (Dostoevsky 2001, p.219), comes from a humble background, and he can mould her the way that he wants. Unfortunately for him, she turns out to be much more rebellious than he had anticipated, and it is their struggle for the upper hand in their relationship that this story is concerned with. In a way, they are exact opposites. He is old(er), educated, of independent means, and egotistical. She is young, has passed her school exams “by hook or by crook” (Dostoevsky 2001, p.223), forced to pawn her belongings to survive, and unlike the pawnbroker, appears to be virtuous and honourable. Just as Velchaninov and Trusotsky undertook the roles of protagonist and antagonist in *The Eternal Husband*, and their rivalry formed the basis of that book, in this case the unnamed husband and wife fulfil similar roles. The husband wants to subjugate his wife and be worshipped as a sort of god. The wife resists being subjugated and seeks to humiliate her husband in turn.

Although they are different characters, the narrator of *Notes from Underground* (1864) seems to share a philosophy of love with the narrator of “A Gentle Creature”:

To begin with, I could no longer fall in love, because, I repeat, with me to love meant to tyrannize and hold the upper hand morally. All my life I have been unable to conceive of any other love, and I have reached the stage when I sometimes think now that the whole of love consists in the right, freely given to the lover, to tyrannize over the beloved. Even in my underground dreams I did not picture love otherwise than as a struggle, always beginning with hatred and ending with moral subjugation, and after that could not even imagine what to do with the conquered victim (Dostoevsky 2003a, p.119).

For both narrators, love is egotistical and could even be described as self-love. Both narrators have been dominated to such an extent by society that they seek to dominate in return, and the only people they have sufficient power to dominate are the people closest to them. This isn't a case of imitating one another's desires, but rather a contest to prove who has the upper hand in a relationship. I believe that just as Velchaninov and Trusotsky in *The Eternal Husband* are doubles, the husband and wife in “A Gentle Creature” are doubles too. In the former, according to Girard's formulation, the object is removed. In the latter, there does not seem to be a mediator. The pawnbroker is attracted to the girl (and she to him) due to certain qualities inherent in her and not due to a rival (the pawnbroker later finds out that a fat old shopkeeper is also keen on marrying her but the pawnbroker is clearly the superior suitor). The pawnbroker desires the girl not only because he is physically attracted to the girl, but because of the power imbalance between them: “...I was forty-one and she was only sixteen. That fascinated me – that feeling of inequality. Yes, it's

delightful, very delightful!” (Dostoevsky 2001, p.227). He desires someone he can exercise his power over (“the will to power” as Nietzsche would term it). The pawnbroker claims that he desperately wants to make his wife his only true friend in the world and to win her respect and prove to her that he is not a coward. But since there is no equality in their relationship, it is not a friend that the pawnbroker seeks but someone who will openly admire and worship him. Moreover, in trying to control her, and remaining aloof from her deliberately so she remains respectful of him, he further stresses the inequality between them. He humiliates her (in a number of ways including by rebuffing her attempts at intimacy and learning more about him) and she seeks to humiliate him in return, and that sends her on a path to the third member of the triangle. Yefimovich insults both her and the pawnbroker, and even challenges him to a duel. The pawnbroker does not accept the offer, although he hears it perfectly well, not because he is afraid of dying but because he is afraid of cutting a ridiculous figure. Instead, it is with the girl, his double, that he duels with. In both *The Eternal Husband* and “A Gentle Creature”, the third member of the love triangle hovers at the edges. The main antagonism is between the two remaining characters. While Girard sees an adversarial relationship between subject and mediator, I see it as a contest between the subject and their double. Both Velchaninov and Trusotsky, and the pawnbroker and the girl, are attracted to each other, but their relationships are defined by a struggle of wills, to see who will dominate. It is true that the girl, at the outset, only seeks equality with the pawnbroker, but she later wants to avenge her humiliation by humiliating in return.

According to Girard, the mediator appears to be a superior version of the subject that the latter would like to become but cannot. For example, Girard claims that in *The Eternal Husband*, Trusotsky, a wealthy provincial, chooses Velchaninov, an upper class gentleman and lady-killer as a mediator. But Velchaninov’s superiority seems to lie solely in his ability to seduce women, and even in that respect, it seems that Natalia Vassilievna had done the seducing and Velchaninov had fallen head over heels for her. In any case, I believe that we not only imitate our superiors but also our equals and inferiors. In Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, the hero, Pechorin, imitates Grushnitsky, a younger, more naive, and idealistic version of himself. In status, military rank, and popularity, Pechorin is clearly Grushnitsky’s superior, and it bothers him that Princess Mary, one of the more eligible women at a spa town in the Russian occupied Caucasus, favours Grushnitsky over him. Pechorin makes it clear that he wants to seduce Princess Mary because she had shown Grushnitsky her favours. But Pechorin’s motives in copying Grushnitsky’s desire is very different from the reasons Girard typically offers. Pechorin wants to imitate Grushnitsky not because he wishes to emulate the younger man and become closer to him but to actually punish him for his naivety and braggadocio which reminds Pechorin of his own younger self. In seeking to punish

Grushnitsky by stealing the affections of Princess Mary, Pechorin is seeking to purge the mistakes of his youth (idealism in love is one of them). When Pechorin kills Grushnitsky in a duel, he rides around aimlessly in a desert as if he had lost a part of his soul. Once Grushnitsky is out of the picture, Pechorin loses all interest in Princess Mary. One possibility is that he believes he is no longer worthy of her. But it is perhaps more likely that he was never in love with her in the first place, and only showed an interest in her because of his rivalry with Grushnitsky. While Velchaninov was supposedly Trusotsky's superior, and someone Trusotsky thought was worth emulating, Grushnitsky is a pale imitation of Pechorin, and (according to Pechorin) someone who must be destroyed. The relationship of subject and mediator in *A Hero of Our Time* appears to be different to what Girard had conceived (in this case the mediator appears to be the subject's inferior). It is clear that we can also imitate the desires of our so-called inferiors, not because we want to be like them (in fact they already seem uncomfortably similar to us) but because we want to punish them for being so similar to us. It seems that one way of getting rid of a double is by imitating them in return.

As I have tried to show in my analysis of "A Gentle Creature", the antagonism between the subject and their double arises from each of them trying to dominate and control the other. But this antagonism leads to a crisis which results in the double's destruction (the unnamed sixteen year old girl commits suicide in "A Gentle Creature"). In *A Hero of Our Time*, domination and control is not possible, so the double must be killed. In contrast, the antagonism between the subject and their double in Dostoevsky's second novel *The Double* (1846), leads to the subject's destruction/madness and/or makes him question reality itself. Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, a government clerk, starts seeing his double everywhere but it is not clear whether he is actually going mad or if he really has a doppelgänger. His fear is twofold: firstly, he feels his identity is being threatened, and secondly, he realises that he will be to blame for his double's actions. At one level, seeing his own double symbolises Golyadkin's psychological fragmentation. But given that the existence of Golyadkin's double cannot be ruled out, the story also seems to question the very nature of reality itself. Some characters attest to the double's existence, while others undermine his existence. Golyadkin himself seems to be in two minds. The fact that no one can say for certain whether Golyadkin's double exists suggests that there is no objective reality.

At the end of the novel when Golyadkin is bundled into a carriage to be taken away to a madhouse, his "double, in his usual blackguardly way, assist[s] from behind" (Dostoevsky 1966, p.252). As the carriage draws away, the double follows, peering through the windows and hopping from one side of the vehicle to the other, even blowing kisses at Golyadkin. But the double soon tires, and

disappears from sight. Now that Golyadkin's double has gone, the reader might expect a return to some semblance of normality. Perhaps Golyadkin had been imagining the double after all. He falls unconscious after all this emotional turmoil. When he regains consciousness, he realises he has been delivered to the care of a doctor who is the double of his usual doctor, Dr Rutenspitz. While both doctors look alike, their personalities are completely different. The first one is usually astonished by Golyadkin's behaviour, says very little, and does even less to help Golyadkin. He mumbles about how valuable his time is yet allows Golyadkin to talk interminably. The second doctor has a diabolical aspect, with "eyes burning with evil and infernal glee" (Dostoevsky 1966, p.253) and a German accent to boot.¹² The impression he gives is that he is less doctor than devil. Golyadkin, it seems, has arrived in hell. The multiple doubles highlight the strangeness of this world and it leaves the reader wondering whether it is all a fantasy or if reality itself is twisted and we all have a double within ourselves that can manifest itself physically in other people. The reader's inability to decide whether Golyadkin actually has a double is a testament to Dostoevsky's craft, and raises the question of whether there is a single reality experienced equally by everyone.

Girard does not mention *The Double* in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, perhaps because there is no instance of triangular desire. But I think there is a link between the concept of the double and the concept of the mediator. According to Girard, triangular desire consists of subject, object, and mediator, where the subject seeks the object to bring themselves closer to the mediator. The subject aspires to become the mediator or to become like the mediator. Therefore, I would argue that in triangular desire, it is the mediator that is the true object. It is the mediator or the mediator's status that the subject actually desires. So triangular desire can be essentially reduced to two figures: the subject and their mediator. Moreover, given the adversarial relationship between the subject and the mediator, their similarities and especially their diametrically opposite characteristics, I believe it is more accurate to see them as the subject and their double. For Girard, the mediator has (or seems to have) all those qualities that the subject lacks. The choice of mediator is no accident. The subject considers the mediator to be their superior, and someone worth emulating. As I have tried to demonstrate with regard to *A Hero of Our Time*, the mediator can also be the subject's inferior or someone who holds up a mirror to the subject just as Grushnitsky does to Pechorin. In *The Double*, I believe Dostoevsky was trying to show how each of us possess contradictions in our personalities. Sometimes we act like our own worst enemies. Dostoevsky develops this idea further in *Notes from Underground*, but the kernel of the divided self first arises in *The Double*. According to

¹² Golyadkin shows a prejudice towards Germans in the novel. He describes Karolina Ivanovna, for example, as "a disreputable German woman", and as "A German, a vile beastly brazen German woman" (Dostoevsky 1966, p.36).

Dostoevsky, we are not rational beings who always act in our best interests. Sometimes we act unconsciously or are unaware of the reasons for our actions. In fact, sometimes we must act against our best interests if only to prove our independence. And it is this independence, this sense of each of us being unique individuals, that is one of the pillars of our identities. The idea that we act against our best interests is in keeping with the idea of a split in our personalities. It is as though each of us has a subconscious self that is partly responsible for our thoughts and actions. The concept of the double symbolises our fractured identities: one part longs to find acceptance in society, while the other part strives to distinguish itself from others.

According to Richard Pevear (2007, p.43-44), the double indicates the split between the conscious self and the unconscious self, and he even claims that “Mr. Goliadkin is the precursor of the man from underground, [and] of Velchaninov in *The Eternal Husband*”.¹³ Moreover, Richard J Rosenthal’s description of the double appears to have parallels with Girard’s conception of the mediator:

...sometimes, like Golyadkin, we try to clothe ourselves in an omnipotent other self, a self we could have been or secretly believe we someday still will be, a self who is free of the painful awareness of just those limitations which define our boundaries and make us who we are (Rosenthal 1989, p.83).

While Girard believes that the subject imitates a mediator who they believe is superior to them, Rosenthal sees the double as a projection of one’s ideal self onto another person. Rosenthal (1989 p.61) explains how one can in fact project one’s shortcomings *and* one’s strengths onto another person. Both kinds of projection help the creation of one’s identity; the former allows the “unacceptable aspects of the self [to be] disavowed and attributed to some person or group or some other part of the external world” while the latter helps to reinforce “highly valued aspects of the self...or to bolster one’s regard for the person into whom they are projected” (Rosenthal 1989, p.61). It seems that for both Girard and Rosenthal, the subject creates (in their head) the mediator’s prestige or the qualities associated with the double, and the subject does this in order to fix or reaffirm their identity.

¹³ Pevear also claims that Golyadkin [or Goliadkin as he calls him] is a forerunner of other characters in Dostoevsky’s canon such as Stavrogin (*Demons*), Versilov (*The Adolescent*), and Ivan Karamazov (*The Brothers Karamazov*).

Returning to *The Eternal Husband*, Trusotsky appears to be Velchaninov's double, and just as the former is fascinated with the latter, the upper-class gentleman is also obsessed with the emotionally wrought widower. It is Velchaninov who starts seeing Trusotsky everywhere: in his dreams, on the street, and outside his door. One critic, Alfred Bem (cited in Parts, 2006, p.608), has even claimed that the entire novel, given Velchaninov's state of mind at the beginning of the story, is a dream. Velchaninov has numerous opportunities to get rid of Trusotsky yet he does not or cannot do so. While Girard sees Velchaninov as the mediator and Trusotsky as the subject, I believe their roles are not so well defined. Velchaninov sees something of himself in the ridiculous Trusotsky, and may even be secretly in love with him. For Velchaninov (just like the pawnbroker in "A Gentle Creature"), his greatest fear is of looking ridiculous. As for Trusotsky, he seems to get pleasure from looking ridiculous and being humiliated (by repeatedly finding/putting himself in situations where his wife cheats on him). At one level, Velchaninov and Trusotsky are complete opposites. But at times, as I have discussed previously, they switch roles and Trusotsky plays the aggressive and dominant male, while Velchaninov is the submissive partner in the relationship. This exchanging of roles is psychologically credible as Trusotsky, being both cuckold and widow who discovers his daughter is not biologically his, has the necessary motivation to seek revenge and turn the tables on Velchaninov. Since they each possess traits that the other one does not have (to avoid humiliation and to seek humiliation), and the fact that they switch personalities on occasion, Velchaninov and Trusotsky, similar to Golyadkin and his double, could be the same person split in two. In that case, *The Eternal Husband* could be seen as a more nuanced retelling of *The Double* with the added complication of a love triangle thrown in.

In my creative work, *If You Must, Die in Spring*, the subject speaks to the (imaginary) mediator in his head and for a period of time imagines himself to be the mediator. In fact, the entirety of Part 3 of the novel takes place from the perspective of the mediator; it is later revealed to be from the point of view of the subject imagining himself to be the mediator. Given that the mediator has no physical existence, and the object does not provide many details of the mediator, the subject is free to imagine the mediator any way he wants. The subject, for his part, imagines the mediator to be a superior version of himself. Moreover, he imagines the mediator to be talking in his head to him (the subject). In other words, he imagines that the mediator has a mediator which is himself. Eventually, it dawns on him that there is no mediator, and that he had been his own mediator all along. This personal crisis tears the love triangle apart as he realises that the object never had a love interest apart from him. He realises that his jealousy and his feverish desire for revenge (on the mediator) had no basis in fact.

Given the particular actions and beliefs of my novel's protagonists, Girard's designation of subject, object, and mediator do not seem a natural fit. The three main characters: Zayn, Aleksandra, and the Rival, switch roles throughout the novel and one of them only exists in the minds of the other two. Therefore, I believe that the very concept of the love triangle must be reconsidered (at least for the purposes of my novel). In fact, the necessity of having a triangular structure could be questioned. A geometric structure suggests a symmetry in the relations between characters and even a fixed role for each character. I propose that the often mysterious alchemy of character relations, combined with the exigencies of plot, transcends most attempts (especially my own) to reduce it to a geometric structure or mathematical formula. While I find the idea of subject, object, and mediator useful and thought provoking, I think Girard overstates the importance or role of the mediator. Although my novel demonstrates (or tries to demonstrate) that in the absence of a mediator people can create a mediator, I would not go so far as to make it a rule of human behaviour. Both Zayn and Aleksandra suffer from mental issues and certain delusions about life, and this has created fertile grounds for a mediator figure. Both characters try to deal with the human condition of finding themselves in a cruel, random, and alien world by hoping to find an ideal love. The search for an ideal love is perhaps a fiction, but a necessary one in order to deal with the world we find ourselves thrown into. I disagree with Girard that people are searching for a messiah. I believe we are simply looking for someone to share the pain of being human. Someone to help us, as the philosopher Simon May (2013, p.6) states, "feel at home in the world: to root our life in the here and now; to give our existence solidity and validity". The search is not on a vertical plane, but rather on the horizontal. It is the search for an equal, not a superior being. Zayn searches for an ideal love, and Aleksandra seems closest to his ideal. But when he realises that there is no such ideal, he is no way disillusioned and his love for Aleksandra does not diminish. I propose that we all carry some idea of an ideal love within us, but this ideal evolves over time and adapts to (or jars with) the people we fall in love with. While there may be mediators that influence our idea of an ideal love, our mediators may change and our conception of ideal love evolves (often independently to our mediators) over time. Often we ourselves do not know what our ideal love consists of, and as Dostoevsky's novels suggest, we may even desire something or someone that falls far short of our ideal if only to prove our independence.

According to Girard, the subject chooses a mediator who best embodies those qualities they feel themselves to be lacking (Girard 1965, p.54). The need to have a mediator in the first place is because the subject is unable to deal with a spiritual vacuum in their life; an emptiness, Girard suggests, that arises from no longer believing in God. According to Girard, with the advent of modernity and the "death" of God, the subject looks to emulate (or worship) fallible mortal beings.

The subject thinks their faults or problems are unique when they are in fact common to many people (including the mediator as well). This imitation or emulation is in the form of seeking an object that is desired by a mediator. There is nothing special about this object apart from the fact that it is desired by the mediator. Thus, it is not actually the object that the subject seeks, but the mediator. However, this imitation leads to masochism. The subject, feeling a hole in their spiritual selves, seeks to imitate a mediator they think is superior to themselves. But the mediator will cease to be superior to them if they are able to imitate them perfectly. Therein lies the contradiction at the heart of metaphysical desire. Essentially, the subject is searching for divinity in a mortal being. This search will inevitably cause “shame, humiliation, and suffering” but the subject willingly undergoes these in the hope of filling the spiritual void inside of them (Girard 1965, p.182).

While I agree with Girard that a mediator may often determine the object that the subject seeks, I believe that there might be more than one mediator for each object, and that the mediation may occur at a subconscious level far more often than Girard gives credit. In my novel, there is no physical mediator. To be precise, the mediator is firstly a figment of the object’s imagination, and then, because the subject has no reason to doubt the object (and indeed is besotted with the object), the idea of the mediator takes root in the subject’s imagination. The subject’s love for the object precedes any knowledge of the mediator. However, it is possible that an even earlier mediator (prior to the beginning of the story) influenced the subject in their choice of object.

While Girard contends that the object of one’s affection disappears the closer one comes to the mediator (1965, p.45), in my novel I have tried to show that the mediator disappears the closer one comes to the object of one’s affection. By creating a mediator (external mediation in Girard’s parlance), Aleksandra had blocked the memory of her childhood abuse. When she meets Zayn, she has to choose between the mediator and him, and she finally faces the fact that her mediator is a fiction. The disappearance of the mediator, however, comes with a price, and her traumatic childhood memories come rushing back. The love triangle, it seems, is not a stable structure and must collapse if there is to be a resolution to the problem it (the love triangle) creates. The love triangle in my novel is resolved by the disappearance or death of the characters. I believe that the love triangle is one way of creating conflict, of adding an obstacle that prevents a protagonist from getting what they want. And if a protagonist is to achieve their goal, they must remove that obstacle. By declaring his love for her, and showing the extent to which he cares for her, Zayn forces Aleksandra to decide, and she chooses reality over fiction. But reality, as Aleksandra finds out, is much more painful than fiction.

The Object

Aleksandra may be described as the object in Girard's formulation of triangular desire, but she is also, like Natalia Vassilievna in *The Eternal Husband*, the controlling figure in my novel. In fact, in Dostoevsky's novel, the object appears to play the dominant role in the love triangle and could even be described as the master while all her admirers are her "slaves":

[Velchaninov] had spent a whole year in T——, though the business itself had not called for such long-term presence; the real reason had been this liaison. This liaison and love had possessed him so strongly that he had been as if the slave of Natalia Vassilievna and, indeed, would have ventured at once upon anything even of the most monstrous and senseless sort if it had been demanded by the merest caprice of this woman (Dostoevsky 1997, p.100).

It seems that Velchaninov was genuinely in love with Natalia Vassilievna, and their relationship was no mere sexual conquest. However, it appears the love was one-sided, and Natalia Vassilievna broke off their affair by claiming to be pregnant and asking Velchaninov to leave town. Girard's theory does not entertain the possibility of a mediator feeling enslaved by the object. If all desire, as Girard claims, is an imitation then surely Velchaninov must have copied Trusotsky's desire for his own wife? According to the narrator of *The Eternal Husband*, there is both something unusual about this woman and at the same time nothing out of the ordinary:

So there was something extraordinary in this woman—a gift of attraction, enslavement, domination! And yet it would seem that she had no means of attracting and enslaving: 'she wasn't even so beautiful, and perhaps simply wasn't beautiful at all.' Velchaninov had met her when she was already twenty-eight years old. Her not very handsome face was able sometimes to be pleasantly animated; but her eyes were not nice: there was some unnecessary hardness in her look. She was very thin. Her intellectual education was weak; her intelligence was unquestionable and penetrating, but nearly always one-sided. The manners of a provincial society lady, but, true, one with considerable tact; elegant taste, but mainly just in knowing how to dress herself (Dostoevsky 1997, p.102).

Contradictions abound in Natalia Vassilievna's character. She is not beautiful but her face may at times be "pleasantly animated". She is not highly educated but she is intelligent. She is provincial but tactful and elegant (and only as far as her costume goes). Perhaps it is precisely due to these

contradictions that Velchaninov falls in love with her? Or perhaps there is really no reason to fall in love with her and it is only Trusotsky's love for her that makes her seem desirable in Velchaninov's eyes? Natalia Vassilievna had numerous lovers and each of them no doubt had reasons of their own. The text reveals even further contradictions in Natalia Vassilievna's character and an underlying suggestion that perhaps what attracts all these men to her is their willingness or need to be dominated:

A resolute and domineering character; there could be no halfway compromise with her in anything: 'either all, or nothing.' A surprising firmness and steadfastness in difficult matters. A gift of magnanimity and nearly always right beside it—a boundless unfairness. It was impossible to argue with this lady: two times two never meant anything to her. She never considered herself unfair or guilty in anything. Her constant and countless betrayals of her husband did not weigh on her conscience in the least. In Velchaninov's own comparison, she was like 'a flagellant's Mother of God,' who believes in the highest degree that she is indeed the Mother of God—so did Natalia Vassilievna believe in the highest degree in each of her actions. She was faithful to her lovers—though only until she got tired of them. She liked to torment a lover, but also liked to reward him. She was of a passionate, cruel, and sensual type. She hated depravity, condemned it with unbelievable violence, and—was depraved herself. No facts could ever have brought her to an awareness of her own depravity (Dostoevsky 1997, p.102-103).

Natalia Vassilievna appears to be both Madonna and dominatrix, judgmental of others but forgiving of herself. She seems firmly above logic and reason, and there can also be no logical reason for why men throw themselves at her feet. In light of the quotation above, we can ask once more: are these men imitating each other's desire for her? Are they imitating Trusotsky's desire for her? Or is the very nature of desire inexplicable? A few pages later, the narrator seems to offer an answer:

It might have been that Pavel Pavlovich [Trusotsky] loved Natalia Vassilievna to distraction; but no one was able to notice it, and it was even impossible—also probably following the domestic orders of Natalia Vassilievna herself (Dostoevsky 1997, p.105).

Trusotsky is forbidden from talking too much and from mocking others, and if he chooses to regale an audience with a story, he is closely supervised. Even drinking with friends was “exterminated at the root” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.105). Despite evidence to the contrary, the narrator of the story

indicates that an outside observer could never guess that Trusotsky “was a husband under the heel” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.105). But clearly that was the nature of their relationship and it would be surprising if anyone in their right minds would desire something similar. This, I think, illustrates the complexity of desire. Readers of Dostoevsky would immediately recognize the phrase I quoted earlier: “two times two never meant anything to her.” The words “twice two is four”, or variations of it, occur again and again (at least eight times according to my count) in *Notes from Underground*, and represents not only an irrefutable law of mathematics but in this case the conventional wisdom that humans will always act in their best interests. The essence of *Notes from Underground* is that humans frequently *do* act against their best interests and in fact, at times, *must* do so. The following passage not only illustrates human caprice, but the nature of our desires, and the impossibility of creating a model or system to explain human desire:

...a man, whoever he is, always and everywhere likes to act as he chooses, and not at all according to the dictates of reason and self-interest; it is indeed possible, and sometimes *positively imperative* (in my view), to act directly contrary to one’s own best interests. One’s own free and unfettered volition, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all systems and theories to the devil. Where did all the sages get the idea that a man’s desires must be normal and virtuous? Why did they imagine that he must inevitably will what is reasonable and profitable? What a man needs is simply and solely *independent* volition, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead (italics in the original) (Dostoevsky 2003a, p.33-34).

Natalia Vassilievna and her lovers know these affairs are against their best interests, but they still persist in them. The human need for independence is paramount. Humans must feel they have free will or they lose their reason for existence. Desire, as Girard states, can be imitative, but it also strives for freedom from imitation. Our need for “independent volition” results in action that may seem inexplicable to others and even to ourselves. It is ironic, however, that in striving to achieve independence, Natalia Vassilievna’s lovers end up copying each other. Hence, the difficulties of reducing the complexities of human desire to a model consisting of subject, mediator, and object.

As I mentioned earlier, in triangular desire, the subject will never be able to attain the object of their desire as the mediator will always be able to prevent such an occurrence. Attaining the object would mean the subject has defeated (or is on a level with) the mediator, resulting in a loss of prestige for

the mediator followed by a search for a new mediator. Hence, the object must be impossible to possess. In the case of Natalia Vassilievna in *The Eternal Husband*, she does not seem to be the typical object. On the one hand, a number of men “possess” her, but on the other hand, it is she who chooses each man and then drops them (usually against their will) when she tires of them. After she dies, she is impossible to possess physically but that does not stop a rivalry erupting between Trusotsky and Velchaninov. In fact, before her death, Trusotsky may have been unaware of the relations between her and Velchaninov, and therefore the rivalry would have begun only after her death (when Trusotsky learns of her extramarital affairs from her private letters). For Girard (1965, p.45), “[t]here is no longer an object but the mediator, Velchaninov [sic], still exerts an irresistible attraction.” I believe that although the object no longer exists in the physical world, she still exerts significant influence on Velchaninov and Trusotsky.

Another possibility that Girard does not countenance is that Velchaninov and Trusotsky imitate Natalia Vassilievna’s desire for each of them. Therefore, Velchaninov falls in love with Trusotsky after he sees Natalia Vassilievna’s desire for her husband, and Trusotsky falls in love with Velchaninov after he sees Natalia Vassilievna’s desire for the younger and more handsome man. Textually, there is little evidence that Natalia Vassilievna showed any desire for her husband (especially since she had affairs with numerous men), but the fact she was married to him may, from the point of view of a lover, have added a forbidden and exciting aspect to a romance with her. Moreover, despite her affairs, “she never laughed at Pavel Pavlovich, and found him neither ridiculous nor very bad in anything, and would even intercede for him very much if anyone dared to show him any sort of discourtesy” (Dostoevsky 1997, p.105). Also, despite Velchaninov’s suggestion “to Natalia Vassilievna that he carry her off, take her away from her husband, drop everything, and go abroad with him forever”, she chooses to remain with her husband (Dostoevsky 1997, p.100). Although she has affairs with many men, none manage to take her away from her husband.

Apart from overlooking the importance of the object, and especially Natalia Vassilievna’s role, in triangular desire, some of Girard’s analyses suggest that he was a product of his time, and he admits his criticism was influenced by his religious beliefs (Williams 2000, p.287). Girard’s greatest oversight regarding *The Eternal Husband* seems to be his failure to recognise the obviously homoerotic relationship between Trusotsky and Velchaninov. For Girard, stressing the sexuality of the two characters obscures the metaphysical and mimetic aspects of the relationship. Girard believes that the typical person is heterosexual, and seems to suggest that Dostoevsky would not have wanted to alienate most of his readers by writing about a homoerotic relationship. In contrast,

Steven J. Rosen (1993) detects a latent homosexuality in almost every relationship between men in Dostoevsky's fiction, and perhaps within Dostoevsky himself. Rosen (1993, p.406) defines homoeroticism as "a relatively unconscious, romantically sublimated homosexuality". But Rosen applies this definition not only to Dostoevsky's characters but to Dostoevsky himself, which may underestimate his self-awareness both as a person and an artist. Rosen also seems to equate every instance of physical contact between men, including handshaking, embracing, and kissing on the cheek, as covert signs of homosexuality. As such, he declares a number of Dostoevsky's characters, such as the unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground*, to be "functionally homosexual" (Rosen 1993, p.409). According to Rosen (1993, p.410), the narrator's homosexuality "gives a more specific resonance to the pleasure he claims to take in degradation". The degradation, Rosen (p.410) clarifies, refers to "the postures and gestures of passive homosexuality", and he claims, without evidence, that "'Passive' homosexuals are subject to contempt, even by the men they service". Linking degradation with homosexuality is, on the face of it, both offensive and problematic. It is possible that Rosen was trying to indicate how the narrator of *Notes from Underground* was made to feel degraded by society because of his homosexuality, but this could have been made clearer from the outset. Rosen (p.410) goes on to state:

I realise that the Underground Man explicitly attributes this capacity for enjoying degradation not to homosexuals but to alienated intellectuals. Nonetheless, the "spite" that Dostoevsky's Underground Man posits as a human universal — the compulsion to self-destructively assert one's freedom — might both derive from and rationalize his conflicted homoeroticism.

I agree that a homophobic society can make homosexuals feel spiteful towards the world and loathsome to themselves, and if that was Rosen's argument he could have contextualised his argument by providing some research into attitudes to homosexuality in Russia during Dostoevsky's time. Unlike Girard, I find it hard to see how sexuality obfuscates metaphysics. In fact, it is possible, as Rosen claims, that there is a connection between metaphysics and sexuality.

Feminist critics have argued that the triangular structure of desire, as outlined by Girard, hides the reality of power relations between the sexes. Phyllis Susan Dee (1999, p.391) claims that Girard's triangulation of desire is hierarchical, and that "[t]he triangles Girard describes are generally those in which two active males are rivals for an unspecified and apparently passive female." Dee's (p.391) claim is based on the contention by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that sexual relations are not symmetrical, and "that a dialectic of power ignoring the male/female dichotomy fails to represent

the asymmetrical power relations that fuel triangular desire.” Dee (p.392) goes further to suggest that “not only [is] female sexuality [...] an organizing theme but also that it actually founds triangular desire.” This seems to add to and complicate Girard’s theory, which although it does not fix the gender of the subject, object, or mediator in triangular desire, assumes that the general reader of a text is masculine. This assumption perhaps reveals the way Girard sees the world, and if the general reader is assumed to be male, then male desire, more often than not, would lie at the heart of triangular desire. While Girard’s (1965, p.5, 8, 10, 63-64) analysis of Emma Bovary as the subject of triangular desire in Flaubert’s novel may seem to dissuade the interpretation of a passive female hero, Bovary is arguably an exception to the role women have often been designated in classical fiction. So while triangular desire, as envisaged by Girard, is gender-neutral, Girard does not acknowledge the legacy of patriarchy, and thus overlooks the inferior role that women are relegated to in most societies. While there are numerous novels in classical fiction, for example by Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Sand, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and so on, where women are the active subjects, this is arguably not the norm. To take an example from Girard, he describes the process of mediation between the subject and the mediator to occur “between men”. In this instance, and from the passage alone, it is not clear to me whether he means this literally, or whether he means between two people. Taken in context, however, it would seem that he means between two people, otherwise it would contradict his idea that the roles in triangular desire are not fixed according to gender. But once again, using the word “men” to represent people of either sex, while common in the past, is less acceptable (and confusing) today. For Sedgwick, the phrase “between men” is no accident since Girard spends most of his time analysing triangular structures between two men and a woman. Moreover, by emphasizing the symmetry of the triangular structure, Girard seems to obscure the asymmetry of power relations between the sexes. In fact, Patricia Yaeger (1985, p.1144), influenced by Monique Wittig, asks why desire needs to be triangular at all, and why it cannot be circular. This idea has influenced my own thinking about the love triangle and I have wondered if instead of a triangular structure, the relationships between characters could be represented by Borromean rings for example.

There is some evidence from Dostoevsky’s own life and circumstances that he found himself in triangular relationships and befriended men who ought to have been his rivals. This duality of feeling, of loving the person you have grounds to dislike, finds its way into Dostoevsky’s fiction and reveals how the theme of the double appears at the heart of the love triangle. Critics such as Branwen E.B. Pratt (1972, p.31) claim that Dostoevsky based *The Eternal Husband* on an episode from his own life where he was in love with a married woman, Marya Dmitrievna Issayeva. But once her husband (Issayev) died, instead of returning Dostoevsky’s love, she pursued a younger

school teacher called Vergunov. Apparently, Dostoevsky treated both Issayev and Vergunov “dearer than a brother” and “[f]rom these beginnings Dostoevsky created the story of the long, mysterious, inexplicable bond between two men...” (Pratt, p.31). Marya Issayeva would later become Dostoevsky’s first wife. It is always difficult to substantiate such claims and while titillating, it is not clear to me how these alleged connections with the author’s life help to understand the story. Is Velchaninov meant to be a stand in for Dostoevsky? Or is Trusotsky? *The Eternal Husband* was published in 1870, about six years after his first wife’s death and thirteen years after they were married. It is possible that Dostoevsky, like many creative practitioners, was influenced by circumstances in his life but to draw inferences about his personal life from his fiction, as both Girard and Rosen seem to do, is not credible. Nonetheless, the fact that critics such as Frank (1994) and Pratt find a personal dimension to Dostoevsky’s fictional love triangles, and love triangles feature prominently in almost all his works, indicates how important Dostoevsky considered this theme and how inescapable or attractive are its bounds in reality.

The Eternal Husband reveals a nuanced understanding of human duality, and indeed, Frank (2010, p.595) claims that the novel “may be seen as his [Dostoevsky’s] first artistic answer to Tolstoy’s increasing fame.” According to Frank (2010, p.595), Dostoevsky’s novel was a response to literary critic Apollon Grigoryev’s theory of Russian culture struggling between “predatory” and “peaceable” types of personalities. While the former were associated with Western European culture: “masterful, heroic, brilliant, often glamorously Byronic”, the latter were evocative of the Russian national character, and this duality of personalities was being fought over “within the Russian national psyche” (Frank 2010, p.596). Frank (2010, p.596) seems to believe that Dostoevsky, unlike Tolstoy, did not accept that people were either one or the other but could take on elements of both during moments of stress. I agree with Frank, but I think that this duality plays out in Dostoevsky’s characters not only during crises; it is the essence of what makes them human. Hence, Velchaninov and Trusotsky display characteristics of each other and often act against their own best interests. In trying to stress their independence and assert their identities by dominating one another, they paradoxically end up behaving like one another and act as each other’s mediators.

Given the complexity of human desire, especially how Dostoevsky portrays it in his fiction, I believe Girard’s theory is too rigid in capturing its nuances. Regarding *The Eternal Husband*, it is not clear, as Girard claims, that Velchaninov is the mediator, Trusotsky the subject, and Natalia Vassilievna the object. Furthermore, hopefully I have demonstrated that mediation works both ways, and that the object, especially in *The Eternal Husband*, may be the mediator. I have also tried to show how the theme of the double seems to be embedded in the love triangle. In the next chapter,

I will offer a different conception of the love triangle based on my analysis of Dostoevsky, Lermontov, and my own novel.

Chapter Two: *A Hero of Our Time* (1840)

In this chapter, I will be discussing *A Hero of Our Time* and the ways in which it has influenced my novel. I will also compare the characters in love triangles in my novel with those in Lermontov's novel. In terms of gender relations, Pechorin's treatment of women was abysmal even for its day and it made me reconsider my protagonist's relationship with women. Structurally, I have been inspired by Lermontov's use of multiple narrators to gradually draw the reader into a closer relationship with Pechorin but no closer to understanding his motives. I will also discuss how Pechorin's death in the middle of *A Hero of Our Time* and that novel's unconventional ending encouraged me to seek alternative structures in my work. Finally, I compare Lermontov's subversion of the love triangle with Dostoevsky's in *The Eternal Husband*, and analyse their combined influence on my own efforts at subverting readers' expectations.

Vladimir Nabokov (1941, p.37) notes "how authors of fiction in all countries have kept prefacing romantic stories with the explanation that the originals were given them or, still worse, discovered by them in an old chest of drawers." However, Lermontov's tale differs from many others by virtue of its non-chronological order and the way that its prefaces allow the reader to gradually come closer to Pechorin. The story is told in the order that the unnamed narrator discovers Pechorin's adventures. It begins with the narrator learning about Pechorin at second hand, that is, from a friend of his, Maxim Maximych, and then at first hand, from observing Pechorin himself, and finally from Pechorin's diary. The novel's three narrators (the unnamed narrator, Maximych, and Pechorin) allow us to learn about the hero from three different perspectives (while learning about each narrator's state of mind), and slowly, over time, draw us closer to the hero himself (Bagby 2002, p.15, 17-19). This drawing closer to Pechorin does not necessarily lead us closer to the truth, since Pechorin has a "penchant to fool himself" (Bagby 2002, p.19). Furthermore, not all of Pechorin's notebooks are available to the reader since the unnamed narrator decides not to publish all of them, but reserves the right to do so at a future date.

In addition to the prefaces to Pechorin's notes, there is an author's foreword, by Lermontov himself, where he laughs at any suggestion that the book is a portrait of himself and his acquaintances. He further notes that the climate in his country is such that "[t]he most magical of our fairy tales can

barely escape the reproach that it is an attempt at insulting certain people!” (Lermontov 2009, p.1-2). However, Lermontov (p.2) then goes on to state that the novel “...is indeed a portrait, but not of one person: it is a portrait composed of the flaws of our whole generation in their fullest development.” According to Lewis Bagby (2002, p.20), the sarcasm in the foreword:

...suggests that there indeed is a lesson contained within the novel, and a moral one at that. For Lermontov that lesson requires readers to receive “caustic truths” about themselves and their society, truths he claims, by inference, to have delivered up in *A Hero of Our Time*.

These truths, presumably, are lessons about human reality. Many fictional works, and especially those that contain a moral, offer lessons on understanding and navigating reality, and even go so far as to prescribe how reality should be. In the latter instances, novelists not only wish to represent reality, but to recreate it. I believe that any attempt at creating a fictional work is an attempt to recreate reality to some extent, as it is not possible to represent reality verbatim. Moreover, in setting out to create a fictional work, writers are not aiming to document reality (like non-fiction writers) as much as to increase our understanding of reality.

The ending of *A Hero of Our Time* departs from many romances by having the protagonist die midway through the novel. In fact, the reader is not even shown the death or enlightened about the circumstances surrounding the incident. Instead, the unnamed narrator briefly mentions learning about Pechorin’s death while he (Pechorin) was returning from Persia. The reader is surprised not only by the suddenness of the news but also by the casualness with which Lermontov kills off his hero. Yet, his death, paradoxically, allows us to grow more familiar with Pechorin as we now have access to his diaries. Far from commiserating, the narrator even states that he is “glad” that Pechorin is dead as it allows him the opportunity to publish the diaries in his (the narrator’s) own name — a name we never find out. Also, by having Pechorin die at the midpoint of the story, Lermontov avoids the ending typical of many stories: with the tragic death of the hero. Instead of a tragic ending, Lermontov finishes his tale with an incident of Pechorin’s heroism. The main theme of this final chapter is fate; indeed, the chapter is entitled “The Fatalist”, and Pechorin and the reader are left wondering how close he had brushed with death (“the bullet tore my epaulet”) during his act of heroism. Therefore, the ending looks forwards, rather than backwards, with the reader left wondering what fate has in store for us. At the conclusion of the book, we are in possession of some knowledge that Pechorin, at the point of writing this diary entry, did not: the time and place of his death. So, while the ending is happy, in so far as Pechorin is congratulated by his peers for his bravery, it also has a sort of haunting aspect hovering over it. He knows he will die one day — it is

inevitable — but he knows nothing of the circumstances. Just like us. An ending that appeals both to the emotions and to the intellect is hard to achieve, but Lermontov seems to have accomplished it, and it is something worth aspiring to.

The original ending of my creative work was more conventional as it concluded with the main character's (Zayn's) death seen from the perspective of Zayn's son. The version of my novel I am submitting for examination ends with Zayn sighting a woman in the distance (on a boat) who resembles his beloved (Aleksandra), and swimming off in her direction while knowing it is unlikely to be her but feeling compelled to investigate nonetheless. With this ending I hoped to capture some sense of both the futility and necessity of hope. The story does not end with the protagonist's death but with a feeling that this is how the protagonist will spend the rest of his days. It may even raise the question whether it is more satisfying to chase a dream than to realise it. This ending does not show Zayn in the best light as the reader may recall a time when Zayn had been with Aleksandra but had failed to appreciate their time together. Zayn is similar to Pechorin in the respect that he tries to dominate his relationships with women. While Pechorin manipulates women by affecting a romantic pose, Zayn puts Aleksandra on a pedestal and thus tries to control her behaviour. Zayn's worshipful attitude towards Aleksandra reflects genuine affection and respect, but it also serves as a ball and chain, setting out his expectations of her and limiting what she can do and say.

The ending of *A Hero of Our Time* is also notable for the fact that the man who throughout the text acts selfishly, finally behaves in a manner befitting the title of the book. Only, we should remember that his heroism is at the conclusion of the book's narrative time, and not its chronological time. The two temporal threads running through the book force the reader to go back and forth, in order to establish the emotional arc of the hero. Chronologically, "The Fatalist" occurs at the middle of the story's timeline. Presenting his story in this fragmented manner, Lermontov never allows the reader to fully understand Pechorin, and he remains a mystery. This arguably increases the reader's interest in him, leaving us to ponder his character: a character who has heroic qualities in him, but for some reason, acts atrociously a lot of the time. Yet, behaving badly does not seem to give him any pleasure — in fact, it seems to hurt him too. These are the contradictions in his character which make him so fascinating. If he is indeed the hero of a particular time, then that time must be deficient in many things, particularly morality. And this, perhaps, is the lesson Lermontov may have wanted to leave with his readers.

The structure of the love triangle in *A Hero of Our Time* allows Lermontov to pit competing ideologies against each other in an artistic manner.¹⁴ In pitting the cynical Pechorin against the romantic Grushnitsky for Princess Mary's hand, Lermontov is able to reveal the weaknesses of the suitors' respective worldviews. While Pechorin's cynical brand of realism overcomes Grushnitsky's "romantic fanaticism" (Lermontov 2009, p.78), neither is able to achieve true happiness or build a lasting relationship with the princess. In other words, the love triangle collapses and there is no happy ending for any of its members. This subversive triangular relationship in Lermontov's text suggests that romance is a fiction (literally, as both Grushnitsky and Princess Mary have fashioned their worldviews after reading romantic novels), but that cynical realism and ironic distance offer scant relief as well.

The novel's structure also seems to raise questions about Russian imperialism. The triangular relationship between the "civilized" Russian Pechorin, the "savage" Chechen Kazbich, and the "wild" princess Bela, seems to undermine any claim to cultural superiority that many nineteenth century Russians had over their Caucasian neighbours whose lands they had colonised. Critics such as Susan Layton (2002, p.68) have identified a subversive element in the relationship between Pechorin and Kazbich. Given Pechorin's appalling behaviour, Layton (p.69) asks how "[h]as Europeanization really made him a better man than Kazbich? And if the fruits of civilization do *not* noticeably improve people, then what moral justification can Russia's subjugation of the Caucasus have?" While other critics over the ages seem to have been divided over whether Lermontov was for or against colonialism (Layton, p.65), for Layton (p.68), Lermontov's text:

...expresses the author's resistance to colonialist beliefs about Russia's cultural superiority to the Caucasian mountaineers — a resistance in harmony with Lermontov's poetic theme of family attachment to the mountain borderland, his denunciation of the Russian empire as a slave-state sustained by a bestial army, and his desire to quit the service.

According to Layton (p.69), the story of Pechorin, Bela, and Kazbich is a parody of popular Russian literature about the Caucasus, where Russian, Christian, soldiers would frequently save beautiful Caucasian tribeswoman from the clutches of their brutal Muslim menfolk. Lermontov's story, especially the love triangle between the three characters, certainly complicates this stereotype. Essentially, the love triangle, at least in *A Hero of Our Time*, can reveal tacit assumptions about nineteenth century Russian society, and Russia's imperial ambitions in the Caucasus. I believe that

¹⁴ I am indebted to Sjavik 1992, *Triangular Structures in Pan*, for the idea that the triangular structure of a text often reflects an author's desire to control the interpretation of the text.

Lermontov's novel illustrates how the stultifying effects of society creates individuals like Pechorin who need to dominate others to feel important or even to feel alive (but Lermontov also reveals how the need to dominate, even if satisfied, does not bring everlasting happiness). Even though Pechorin is miles from Moscow or St. Petersburg, he is still a creature of those societies and he carries their beliefs and expectations wherever he goes. Living and travelling through the Caucasus, Pechorin is free to violate those values that so called civilised society holds dear. It is his form of rebellion. But his particular brand of rebellion reveals the nature of the society whose rules he is so eager to break. The title "*A Hero of Our Time*" is deeply ironic as it indicates the kind of "heroes" this society creates.

One of the ways that Lermontov's novel subverts the love triangle is by challenging our expectations of heroism. In many popular romances, the reader can expect the male hero to be brave, dashing, kind, and willing to sacrifice himself for a good cause. Pechorin, in contrast, while brave and dashing, is beset by ennui. He kidnaps a sixteen-year-old girl, Bela, imprisons her in his house, and gives her various presents so she will fall in love with him. In many ways, Pechorin acts like a perfect villain. In fact, the supposed villain of this part of the text, Kazbich, who has designs on Bela himself, and the opportunity to kidnap her, refuses to do so. Later, Kazbich imitates Pechorin's act by kidnapping Bela, but it seems that the hero has led the way. In other words, it is the hero who proves to be the mediator for the rival. The very title of the novel, coupled with the text itself, and the author's foreword, suggest that "hero" is used ironically. In fact, the text seems to suggest that there are no heroes, and when the characters pursue those values society considers to be heroic, they depart even further from heroism.

A Hero of Our Time further subverts typical romances by telling a story where the object of the hero's affections changes over time, from Vera, to Princess Mary, to Bela. Each of Pechorin's love interests have an alternate suitor whom he must defeat. Vera is married to an unnamed gentleman (her second husband — the first one had been cuckolded by Pechorin as well), Princess Mary has Grushnitsky, and Bela has Kazbich. So it seems that Pechorin is involved in at least three love triangles (arguably four: at one point both Princess Mary and Vera are competing for him), and in each case he is arguably not the "hero" but the rival. Winning the affections of these women does not seem to satisfy Pechorin. Once he gains their love they seem to bore him, and so he abandons them (in the case of Vera and Princess Mary), or neglects them (in the case of Bela). Indeed, would Pechorin have been attracted to any of these women if they had not been desired by someone else? Perhaps not. Instead of a subversion of typical romances, Lermontov's novel could be seen as an

investigation of desire and how even the most intelligent of us (Pechorin is so intelligent he is bored by his superiority over others) lack understanding of our own desires.

Similar to Pechorin, Zayn too seems to lack self-knowledge. Both have suffered heartbreaks in the past which shaped their identities. There is a suggestion in *A Hero Of Our Time* that Pechorin has become the cold and aloof person that he is due to a woman spurning his love. The experience leaves him unconcerned with his safety and life, and unable to commit to a relationship or of ever falling in love with another person again. Wounded once, Pechorin can no longer make himself vulnerable. For Zayn, his heartbreak of being left by his girlfriend lasts about a year during which time he feels similarly to Pechorin. It is a period to which I allude to in the novel but do not go into much detail as it is part of the backstory. I would have liked to have explored this part of Zayn's past in more detail but I could not find the right moment to introduce this narrative in the story without digressing too much from the main plot. I have dropped hints now and then, but did not go further as I wanted his prior relationship to appear as a sort of revelation. The difference with Pechorin is that after meeting his beloved, Zayn is willing and able to make himself vulnerable again. But Zayn, who feels abandoned by his previous girlfriend, and had been abandoned by his mother as a child, is unable to accept reality after learning of Aleksandra's suicide. There is a case to be made that he had always lived in an alternative reality prior to meeting Aleksandra, but falling in love with her, and then losing her, pushes him to a breaking point. Although he becomes suicidal himself, he stops himself in time because he realises that it will not bring back his love or reunite him with his love. He tries to accept this loss and his new reality by writing about it, and by confessing his role in Aleksandra's death. Ideologically, Zayn is closer to Grushnitsky's bookish romanticism than Pechorin's cynicism gained through a lifetime of adversity. In fact, even after Aleksandra's death, Zayn continues to see the world through a romantic lens and convinces himself that he will one day meet his beloved again.

Both Zayn's and Aleksandra's (the two protagonists of my creative work) romantic outlook and critical inner voices lead them to their destruction/delusion. Zayn believes that Aleksandra is his soul mate and has certain expectations of her that are impossible to live up to. Zayn's critical inner voice leads to the creation of a Rival: someone better looking than him, more intelligent, stronger, faster, more talented, more deserving of Aleksandra, and so on. The creation of the Rival not only emanates from Zayn's critical inner voice (influenced by his past and romantic world view), but is also necessary for Zayn to make sense of the world around him, and especially to understand the woman that he loves. Aleksandra's critical voice leads her to doubt Zayn and the possibility of his love for her. Both Zayn and Aleksandra love the projections (or shadows) of each other rather than

the people themselves. It is the incongruity/gap between the projection and the person that causes most of the strife. They both have certain expectations of their ideal lover. When he or she falls short, or simply confounds expectations, they find it difficult to adapt, or to accept divergences between their idealised partner and the person in front of them. In fact, Zayn needs the Rival to be real in order to explain the divergence between Aleksandra and his ideal heroine. Zayn's idealised and warped sense of the "heroine" is slowly destroyed the more he learns about Aleksandra and her past. But the destruction of his idealised heroine leaves him, if anything, more in love with the real Aleksandra: a person of flesh and blood (and perhaps destined to hell) rather than some angel descended from heaven.

For Aleksandra, belief in an idealised partner provided an escape and a salvation from the horrors of her childhood. It was a way for her to keep her sanity. When Zayn arrives in her life, and starts to take the place of the rival, it brings back memories of her past buried inside of her. Live or die, she feels that she is a sinner. Yet, Aleksandra would not have killed herself if she had known the rival was a figment of her imagination (the imaginative device that saves her in the past, later causes her irreparable harm). She kills herself because she thinks she has sinned and that there is no redemption. She feels guilty for living. Firstly, she feels she has sinned with her father. Then she sinned by letting them take away her child. After that, she sinned by cheating on her boyfriend, and then cheating on Zayn. When she confesses her thoughts and feelings to the country priest, he is horrified. By calling her "a whore", the priest confirms Aleksandra's suspicion that she, and Zayn, would be better off if she were dead. She had been having some vague feelings previously (she had even harmed herself before), but the conversation with the priest crystallises it. Repulsed by Eros (in addition to all the guilt she already had, she then felt guilty for being attracted to Zayn, especially in Church), she rushes towards her death. By taking her own life, Aleksandra goes against her faith which forbids suicide (and yet condemns the life she lives). Feeling herself to be irremediable, unworthy of being Zayn's wife, and damned to hell, she decides to put an end to her life.

Since there is instant attraction between Aleksandra and Zayn, there is no clear mediator for either of them, at least in the beginning. Later, it is possible that Marta becomes the mediator for Aleksandra. Perhaps poetry and literature had initially been the mediator for Zayn. Girard would probably say that every instance of love or attraction at first sight has a predecessor or a model. Perhaps Girard would even agree with La Rochefoucauld who claimed that "People would never fall in love if they hadn't heard love talked about." As for Zayn, he is in love with an idealised composite of various heroines from poetry and literature. He has certain romantic ideals that are

challenged along the course of his journey. By the end of the story, he no longer sees himself as a hero, and starts to believe in an afterlife to help him deal with a world without Aleksandra. While Aleksandra's journey ends with a loss of (or challenge to her) faith, Zayn's journey ends with signs of a nascent faith.

According to Girard, it is the mediator, and the mediator's love for the object, that stirs the subject's desire. The subject then imitates the mediator's desire for the same object, or a similar object (depending on the distance between subject and object). In my creative piece, Zayn had already been in love with Aleksandra before he knew of the rival (Aleksandra's imagined boyfriend). However, when he learns of the rival, he is unwilling or unable to change his feelings for Aleksandra. In fact, knowledge of the rival makes him more competitive, aggressive, and desperate, in his pursuit. There are times when Zayn is alone with Aleksandra, and seems to have won her love. But he persists in dragging the rival back, either in his imagination or in conversation. The idea of fighting off a competitor seems to motivate him, and to fill the void between his projection of Aleksandra and Aleksandra herself. The idea of the rival is the only way for Zayn to rationalise Aleksandra's behaviour. Indeed, Zayn believes so firmly in the rival's existence that he is able to literally put himself in the rival's shoes, and for a time in Part 3 of the novel, believe that *he* is the rival. To question or doubt Aleksandra's story (about the rival's existence) is to put more space between his projection of Aleksandra and Aleksandra herself. In other words, Zayn cannot accept that the object of his love may be as flawed as himself. The more he idealises Aleksandra, the harder it is for him to come to terms with her reality. The further she drifts from his idea of a heroine, the more his imagination must struggle to make allowances, to fill in the gaps. Even when Aleksandra is dead, Zayn needs to confront the rival, and to seek his help in orienting his projection of Aleksandra with Aleksandra herself (it is only after she dies that Zayn realises he has failed to understand her). As Girard (1965, p.4) claims: "From the moment the mediator's influence is felt, the sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed." By the time Zayn's imagination comes closest to the truth he is emotionally and psychologically drained from the various physical and creative challenges he has had to undergo, and is unable to accept the absurdity and cruelty at the heart of the matter.

My story begins with an "internal mediation" where the rival/mediator is within the same universe as Zayn, however, the story then changes to an "external mediation" when it seems that the rival does not exist — at least not in reality. But there is no evidence to disprove the rival's existence definitively. This raises the question that if two people are convinced that someone or something exists, then does it make it real? At least vis-a-vis one another? According to both Aleksandra and

Zayn, the rival exists, and they think and act accordingly. If it was only Aleksandra who believed in the rival, and no one else did, then the rival would be merely a figment of her imagination. But as soon as Zayn joins her in believing in the rival, and they both begin to think and act based on this shared belief, then could it be said that the rival became real? While God's existence cannot be proved, many people believe in God and the very fact of being believed in makes God real to its believers. Therefore, it is possible, on a social and psychological level, that the rival exerts significant influence and power over Aleksandra and Zayn. Belief in the rival allows both Aleksandra and Zayn to make sense of their lives and help explain the mysteries of the universe. In other words, they need to believe in a fiction to make sense of their reality.

In conflating the subject and mediator (or simply removing the mediator), I have found that it leads to the psychological fragmentation of the subject, who must then invent a mediator to stimulate their desire in the object, prevent achieving their goal too easily, and make sense of the unknowable aspects of the universe (including our relationships with one another). In other words, subverting the love triangle leads to its collapse, but then results in the creation of another love triangle (where Zayn seeks a woman who reminds him of Aleksandra). My novel seems to suggest that given the nature of human society, we are destined to seek (or find ourselves in) triangular relationships. We want our choices in love to be validated by other people's desires. Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband* seems to indicate a similar understanding of desire whereas Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* suggests that we remain ignorant of our desires and that in any case our desires are liable to change over time.

While Lermontov's novel subverts the love triangle in order to comment on the nature of heroism (and perhaps masculinity), and the nature of Russian colonialism, Dostoevsky's novel subverts the love triangle to create conflict and emphasise the contradictions inherent in humans. *The Eternal Husband* seems to get rid of one of the members of the love triangle in order to develop the relationship between two of its main characters: Trusotsky (the eternal husband) and Velchaninov (the eternal lover). However, closer examination reveals that the presence of the third member is always hanging, spectre like, over the surviving duo, and forms the very basis of their relationship as well as determines their future conduct towards one another. The fact that the late Natalia Vassilievna has left behind a daughter (Liza) whose paternity is uncertain, further complicates the relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky. I believe, contrary to Rene Girard, that though Natalia Vassilievna is not physically present in the story, her influence is keenly felt in the thoughts and actions of the two men. They are haunted by her absence and their very characters seem to have been re-forged by her untimely death. According to Girard, removing the third member of the

triangle allows the true relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky to flourish. However, this view seems to overlook the fact that there would not have been any relationship between the two men had it not been for Natalia Vassilievna, and her relationships with the two men. For Girard, the relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky occur through Natalia Vassilievna. In other words, she is used as a vessel to bring the two men together, and is merely the object of attraction for the two men. However, Natalia Vassilievna's physical absence is palpable throughout the text, and Velchaninov and Trusotsky define themselves in relation to their ties with her. Moreover, the presence of Liza is a constant and visible reminder of Natalia Vassilievna, and the daughter's death echoes the mother's own premature demise. The novel clearly lays the blame for Liza's death (and by extension perhaps Natalia Vassilievna's death as well) on Velchaninov and Trusotsky's actions; the latter for torturing her both physically and psychologically, and the former for not admitting his paternity and adopting her. In other words, Velchaninov and Trusotsky are two sides of the same coin.

However, Natalia Vassilievna is no mere object, but the catalyst for the men's suffering, and their eventual penitence. True, by the end of the novel both Velchaninov and Trusotsky seem to return to their respective roles of eternal husband and eternal lover. But it is important to note that despite the opportunity of having an affair with Trusotsky's new wife, Velchaninov decides not to pursue that course of action. The reasons for stepping outside his character are unclear, but his jocular mood when he meets Trusotsky after many years seems upended when Trusotsky mentions Liza's name. Despite their friendly banter (mainly on Velchaninov's side), Liza, and by extension Natalia Vassilievna, will forever remain the chasm between them. While Natalia Vassilievna brought them together with her death, she will also make it impossible for the two men to become friends no matter how much time passes. Perhaps Velchaninov feels responsible for Liza's death just as he is responsible for her birth. Their final encounter at the end of the novel, especially when Liza's memory is evoked, reveals how the two men momentarily switch roles, and Velchaninov seems to be intimidated by Trusotsky. Moreover, it is possible that the memory of his illegitimate daughter will make Velchaninov change his womanising ways in future.

Instead of seeing Natalia Vassilievna's character as being killed off even before *The Eternal Husband* begins, it is possible that Dostoevsky created a character whose past existence cast such a long shadow over two men that their beliefs and behaviour were effectively controlled by her. Dostoevsky's subversion was not so much in simply removing the third member of the love triangle, but in creating a character through the memories of other characters. It is almost as if time (or certain moments of time in the past) is the third member of the love triangle. While Natalia

Vassilievna exists in the memories of her lovers, in my novel, the third member of the love triangle is shown to have only existed in Aleksandra's imagination in order to come to terms with a childhood trauma. Yet Aleksandra is convinced of the reality of this imaginary boyfriend, and makes decisions and takes action based on his existence. Indeed, she would have responded differently to Zayn's overtures had she not been under the impression that she was already in a relationship. In fact, she is tortured by guilt when she enters a relationship with Zayn as she feels she is betraying her boyfriend. Moreover, her relationship with Zayn seems to be defined by her three year relationship with her imaginary boyfriend. Before meeting Zayn, Aleksandra's experience of love is solely based on her relationship with her imaginary boyfriend, and this strongly influences the way she interacts with Zayn and the expectations she has of him. Given Aleksandra's behaviour, it is natural that Zayn too believes in the existence of this imaginary character and acts accordingly. Zayn, convinced of Aleksandra's perfection and therefore blind to her needs, creates an image of a rival who does not exist. Therefore, the non-existent third member of this love triangle, similar in some respects to Natalia Vassilievna, throws a dark shadow over the lives of Aleksandra and Zayn. By collapsing the love triangle in this way, reducing it to two protagonists, and tapping into the idea that belief in something cannot always be shaken by empirical evidence or the lack thereof, I have hopefully offered some insight into the ways that romantic relationships may develop and disintegrate. Moreover, I believe that the love triangle illustrates some of the choices that we may have during our search for love and the consequences of those choices. The search for love and the need to be in a romantic relationship is the search for acceptance into this often unfathomable, cruel, and random world. Love, according to the philosopher Simon May (2013, p.9-10), helps us put down roots and makes us feel at home in "an uncontrollable and alien world". Stories with love triangles can offer moral dilemmas, and highlight the importance of communication in relationships. Novels that offer multiple perspectives into a love triangle can hopefully reveal how misunderstandings can arise between people due to miscommunication and the emotional baggage we carry with us.

For my novel, I adopted the idea of a frame narrative from *A Hero of Our Time*, which helps put the main story into context, and offers multiple perspectives of unfolding events. While Lermontov's novel allowed a gradual "closing in" of Pechorin's life, starting from hearsay, to eye witness accounts, to Pechorin's own diaries, I wanted to reveal a love triangle from the point of view of all the participants (real or imagined). My first instincts were that the story must be told in the first person, and should be told from the perspectives of the hero, heroine, and rival. I wanted to explore a love triangle from all sides, but without trying to give each side equal "airtime". Ultimately, the story was about the main character, Zayn, and the change, or lack thereof, in his character. In this

respect, my protagonist is closer to Lermontov's hero than to Dostoevsky's as neither Zayn nor Pechorin seem capable of changing their characters despite being aware of their respective flaws and defects.

Lermontov's novel appears to have at least two frame narrators: one of them is a former friend of Pechorin's and the other is a traveller in the Caucasus who becomes intrigued by the stories he hears about Pechorin. For my own work, I decided to make the frame narrator Zayn's son (Vince) from a previous failed relationship.¹⁵ I thought that a son, who believes he (along with his mother) was abandoned by his father, who sees and reports on his father's great love with another woman (an infidelity in the son's eyes) would offer a number of interesting parallels and contradictions. The son wants to trace his origins and find out more about his absent father, and yet the more he learns about him, the more he resents him. Despite having repeated opportunities for doing so, the son is unable to reveal his identity to his father. While there is some evidence that Zayn and Vince's mother's relationship dissolved due to parental pressure, Vince chooses not to pursue that train of thought. It suits his identity to believe he has been abandoned from birth by his father and has had to fend for himself all these years. It suits his philosophical outlook to think that he was born alone, and he will die alone, and that he will never truly know anyone else. Vince's pessimism will hopefully throw Zayn's optimism into sharp relief and suggest that there was more to Zayn's life than his son could appreciate (or admit appreciating). Since Vince takes the trouble of stealing Zayn's notes, putting them in some order, possibly even editing them, and offering them to the public, he is in a way composing his father's obituary. He would not have taken such pains unless he had thought there was some significance to his father's life or some lesson to be learned from it. In fact, Vince's motivations have led me to start writing a sequel to my novel where he plays the role of the protagonist.

After studying *A Hero of Our Time*, I found that my own work could benefit from a preface by a narrator who meets a number of the characters before the story begins. This hopefully allows a degree of verisimilitude, justifies the division of the novel according to "Hero", "Heroine", and "Rival", and makes the themes of the book to become clearer. Since my protagonist, Zayn, is a rather unreliable narrator and easily misunderstood, I felt some context and backstory should be provided.

¹⁵ Not presented for examination due to the limitations on the word limit.

The original structure of my novel (before accommodating for the word limit) could be outlined in the following manner:

- 1) Prologue (from the perspective of Zayn's son)
- 2) Part 1 (from Zayn's perspective)
- 3) Part 2: Aleksandra's Letter (from Aleksandra's perspective)
- 4) Part 3: The Rival (from the Rival / Zayn's perspective)
- 5) Epilogue (from the perspective of Zayn's son)

The prologue and the epilogue are narrated by Zayn's son, Vince, and forms the frame narrative. Vince's role therefore is somewhat similar to that of the first unnamed narrator in Lermontov's novel. However, in making Vince directly related to Zayn, I tried to make the frame narrative more plausible and emotionally involving than a passing stranger's account would have been. While Dostoevsky often uses free indirect discourse to draw readers to Velchaninov's perspective, Lermontov uses a variety of first person reports and diaries to convey Pechorin's thoughts and actions. As these first person reports may not always be accurate, and Pechorin himself does not reveal everything about himself, it has the effect of making Pechorin a more mysterious character than Velchaninov. In terms of storytelling perspective and technique, I felt that Lermontov's strategy of using a combination of narrators would be more suitable for my novel. Multiple narrators would emphasise how the same event could be interpreted variously by different characters and thus undermine the idea of one single reality experienced equally by everyone.

In this chapter, I have tried to offer a different conception of the love triangle where time, or a particular moment in time, could be one of the constituting elements. I learned from and drew inspiration from the way both Lermontov and Dostoevsky treat the third member of the love triangle and thus structure their respective works. For example, whereas the structure of Lermontov's novel keeps Pechorin's motives a mystery, I wanted the structure of my novel to question the idea of a stable, knowable reality. The structure of my novel would also complement my intention of subverting the love triangle. I learned how the works of Dostoevsky and Lermontov treated in this exegesis highlight the importance of contradictions or duality in characters. These contradictions reflect our inability to truly know ourselves and reveal the divided nature of our beings. Lermontov's novel also made me reflect on how the themes of stalking, obsession and control are often portrayed as romantic actions, and made me rethink how I was portraying my protagonist, Zayn (who is strongly under the influence of certain romantic beliefs).

Conclusion

In conflating the subject and mediator (or simply removing the mediator), I have found that it leads to the psychological fragmentation of the subject, who must then invent a mediator to stimulate their desire in the object, prevent achieving their goal too easily, and make sense of the unknowable aspects of the universe (including our relationships with one another). In my novel, the protagonist always has his love (or an idealised version of his love) in mind, even when he is in the company of other women. For him she is an obsession he cannot relinquish. This is perhaps more in keeping with typical romances. Furthermore, the protagonist's friend, Alexander, who is a realist, tests Zayn's love for Aleksandra throughout the story, and continues testing it to the point that their friendship is destroyed. The protagonist's critical inner voice, a product of his past, childhood and upbringing, also tests his worthiness for Aleksandra's affections. In fact, there is a constant battle within Zayn's mind, between his passion and his intellect, and it is from the midst of this conflict that the rival emerges.

For Dostoevsky, it seems that there are two kinds of love. Firstly, a kind of self-love that demands others' attention and admiration and tries to dominate the object of one's affection. This is illustrated by the pawnbroker's relationship with the girl in "A Gentle Creature", and somewhat less obviously by the relationship between Velchaninov and Trusotsky. Then there is a Christian self-less love exemplified by Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* who loves everyone and everything. The love triangles in Dostoevsky contain both kinds of love, but it is clear that instances of self-love are at the root of the problems in characters' relationships.

While acknowledging Girard's inspired interpretation of *The Eternal Husband* and his impressive theory of triangular desire, I believe the relationships between Dostoevsky's characters are more complex than Girard gives credit. Attributing particular roles to Dostoevsky's characters is difficult because they are liable to change over time. The mutability of his characters is one of Dostoevsky's most distinctive features, and sets him apart from Tolstoy's "pure personality types" (Frank 2010, p.596). In *The Eternal Husband*, I have argued that it is not clear who the subject, object, and mediator are, and Velchaninov, Trusotsky, and Natalia Vassilievna can claim each of these roles, seem to switch between these roles, and inhabit more than one role simultaneously. Drawing on my analysis of Dostoevsky, Lermontov, Girard, and my own novel, I have tried to find an alternative way of looking at the love triangle where characters' roles are more flexible. I believe that within the love triangle, as used by Dostoevsky and Lermontov, the mediator can serve as the protagonist's

double as well as signify something deeper such as a defining moment in the subject's past that has led to their particular worldview.

The love triangle seems to have contradictory impulses. On the one hand, it introduces, at least temporarily, some disorder into a story, and creates tension by challenging the existing social order. On the other hand, it helps to focus and clarify the relationships between certain characters. In other words, the love triangle both complicates the plot of the story *and* helps to unravel the intertwined threads of human relationships; it creates mystery and helps to dispel mystery. These contradictory impulses hint at the complexity of life. Even the happiest of endings cannot erase the fact that the existing social order had been challenged, and that other possibilities, at least momentarily, had threatened to surface. According to Lynne Pearce (2004, p.536), these "internal contradictions" allow the reader to "read[...] against the grain", offering glimpses of alternative worlds which can linger in the reader's mind long after the ending.

The love triangle is just one model that is used to help structure reality. Simply subverting one model will not prove that reality is unintelligible. However, subverting (or stretching the bounds of) this model can suggest that reality cannot be neatly contained in any model, and is often beyond the realms of human understanding. Indeed, it is possible that reality does not require or even resists intelligibility. Moreover, there are evolutionary reasons for humans to have a distorted understanding of reality. Therefore, the love triangle is a tacit acknowledgment that no single model can aptly capture or explain the intricacies of human existence. Ultimately, the love triangle is a two-dimensional model of a three-dimensional reality. However, love triangles can allow the reader to imagine many realities, as it can tell a story from several perspectives, and therefore they (love triangles) can highlight how we all experience reality differently from one another, suggesting that there is not just one singular reality.

I had set out to investigate what happens when a love triangle that is organised along the lines of Girard's triangular desire is subverted in the way that Dostoevsky, Lermontov, and my own creative work attempts to do. I had initially expected the subversion to cause the love triangle to collapse and cause the psychological fragmentation of the subject. While this was indeed one of the results of the subversion, I find that it then leads to the birth of another love triangle, and as Girard suggests, many relationships have a third presence hovering over them. While Girard situates the third and controlling member of triangular desire in a person or place (a mediator or mentor figure), I think that the third member of the love triangle resides in a particular moment (or a series of moments) of time. I agree with Girard that the third member of the triangle can be, and often is, a

person, but I believe that this person represents some moment(s) in the subject's past that has shaped their outlook on love and the nature of their desire. Even if this person dies (Natalia Vassilievna in *The Eternal Husband*) or had never existed in the first place (the imaginary boyfriend in "If You Must, Die in Spring"), they continue to exert a real force on the subject. Therefore, I believe that their power to influence the subject does not reside in their physical bodies but in the subject's memories of them and specifically in what they represent. In *The Eternal Husband*, there is nothing particularly remarkable about Natalia Vassilievna, and yet she is able to make numerous men her slaves. Ironically, given the way she treats him, what Natalia Vassilievna represents to Velchaninov is freedom, and specifically the freedom to harm oneself if need be. One of Dostoevsky's core messages is that we long for freedom, to express our individuality, even at the cost of harming ourselves and our best interests. This striving for independence, ironically, can lead to imitating others' desires, but is perhaps a part of the human condition.

Both *A Hero of Our Time* and *The Eternal Husband* illustrate how certain characters need to dominate others. But Dostoevsky also shows the human need to be dominated. While Lermontov's novel shows the futility of dominating others, Dostoevsky's novel suggests its universality. Lermontov seems to blame society for creating individuals that need to submit others to their will. For Dostoevsky, to dominate and to be dominated are two sides of the same coin and each needs the other.

Girard claims that the roles within triangular desire consist of subject, object, and mediator. But as I have tried to show, the roles of the mediator and object need revising. It is also important to keep a more open mind regarding who plays what role in the love triangle and to consider the possibility that the roles are actually quite fluid. My proposal to think of the love triangle in terms of subject, object and time may help creative practitioners structure their works and offer a way of exploring the complexity of human nature. I also offer an alternative way of thinking about the roles of Velchaninov, Trusotsky and Natalia Vassilievna from what Girard does. Girard's conception of triangular desire offers a fascinating insight into the psychology of characters but I think it can be improved upon, especially by making it more relevant to twenty-first century concerns. In future, I believe it would be fruitful to compare Girard's theory of triangular desire with Lacan's idea of transference. The idea of transference could be explored in greater detail in the context of the mediator and the subject, and thus help in illuminating some of the nuances of human relationships.

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If You Must, Die in Spring

PART I: A Woman Passing By

CHAPTER 1

When you're young, dumb, and madly in love, you're liable to do, say and think anything. Often the first thing that appears in your head. I write this not as an excuse but a heartfelt apology. An apology to whom, you might ask. True, no one is left now from those days, and the person who was most deserving of one will never receive it. Perhaps then, it is an apology to posterity. A plea for forgiveness from strangers since the one who should really be reading these words will never read them. Of all those nights and days that my misspent youth burned through, like a brush fire across bone dry woods, one night in particular sticks out. It was a memorable night though full of shame and ignominy. It was a beautiful night, it was a terrible night. It was a night full of laughter, and a night full of tears. In short, it was one of those nights that can only happen when you're young, dumb, and madly in love.

I knew she loved me when she slapped me in the face. Most people won't tell you how they really feel. They make you read between the lines. And between the lines on her palm that squashed my face, I read plenty.

I have never been able to penetrate the complexities of the human mind, but in this instance every one of my senses was tingling with anticipation. It may have something to do with the icy wind that sweeps across the Vistula in December. But the sting on my left cheek was definitely something the weather could not account for. It was the only warm part of my body.

It had been snowing that night, and Łazienki Park was deserted. Snow had trickled into my boots, had melted, and drenched my feet with ice water. Someone once said that Warsaw is not so cold in winter. I have never met this person but I wish I had that night. The dew would not have rusted our swords. Oh yes, now I remember who it was: Alexander, the ingrate, who was now snoring away on a nearby bench, wearing my jacket.

But it was her eyes! Those dark pools of light brimming with anger that pulled me in and held me under. And there I remained, drowning slowly, willingly, happily, finding great pleasure in pain. There was a faint rustling in the trees, and a creaking of branches, and a gust of wind lovingly brushed a lock of hair across her face. My hands leapt out as if released by the touch of a hidden spring.

“No!” she cried. This time the cup of her hand caught me hotly across an ear. My body was warming up nicely.

The policeman who saw us must have got the wrong idea. It is easy to make a mistake in the dark. I would have laughed if it wasn't so cold. He had been walking along the pebbled path, near Chopin's statue, minding his own business when the sight of her caused him to take his office more seriously. Men always took themselves more seriously once they saw her.

“Is the foreigner disturbing you, *Pani*?”

“No, it's alright. He is just a little drunk.”

“Drunk? Me? Impossible! I only had some cognac, and I threw up that stuff half an hour ago.”

“Right. You leave the young lady alone.”

“I assure you, officer, my intentions are most honorable.”

“NO, they are not! You were taking certain liberties with the young lady that were neither encouraged nor appreciated. Be so kind as to shove off to wherever you came from.”

Listening to the liquid notes of a Warsaw policeman is a privilege granted to few, and I drank it in greedily. I had never met a policeman such as this before. He seemed the understanding type. I felt that I could trust him. Perhaps he had some cognac hidden away in his long-coat. I decided to explain my position to him. He seemed a man of the world. He would no doubt sympathize. Despite my many encounters with the law before — none of them painless — nothing could diminish my regard for its custodians.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is—”

“I don't care what your name is! But if you do not leave right this instant, then I will have to arrest you!”

“...and I am a landowner. My friend, who is sleeping on that park bench, and I, are guests in your country and—”

“Are you listening to me? Are you completely mad?”

“...I met Napoleon myself once. It was during the Italian campaign and Dąbrowski was with us...”

CHAPTER 2

I chanted her name all night. I squeezed pleasure out of every syllable. Hearing my midnight complaints, some of the others fell in with me.

“A-lek-san-dra...A-lek-san-dra...Alek-san-dra...Alek-sandra...”

One of them said it as if he were going to be hanged in the morning and she was his only hope for clemency. His wails kept the guards up all night. Another dragged out the syllables in a low and vengeful voice, perhaps counting the seconds before he could get his hands around her neck. A third said it searchingly, as if half expecting her to emerge at any moment from under the bed.

This simple single worded hymn ran along the arched roofs of our cells and echoed down the long empty corridor. Until every stone tile, every lock and chain, every mote of dust suspended in the moonbeams that fell on the cold stone floor knew her name. By the time the red skirted dawn slid past the barred windows, it was still on our lips: proud and unwavering.

The Polish correctional system has received its fair share of criticism over the years but what often goes unnoticed by its detractors are the person to person relationships that it fosters. My cell mate, for example, within hours became my boon companion. And he wouldn't let me leave even when a representative from the Embassy came to negotiate my release.

“Stay, stay. Where are you going? Americanski best friend.”

“I'm sorry my friend, but I will be back. I promise.”

But the bonds of friendship in Slavic countries are stronger and run deeper than in other nations, and it took two policemen to beat him with clubs before he would let go of my arm.

The gentleman who had arranged my release was called Spielman. “I'm actually from the Canadian embassy,” he apologized. “Your people often outsource these minor mishaps to our staff. It gives us something to do. You're the seventh person this month. Usually I just have a desk job. It gets tiresome, you know...but aren't you cold? Where's your jacket? Here, take this blanket. I'm sure they won't mind. The police are very friendly over here.”

I thanked him for his kindness. But that only encouraged him.

“So you're from Jersey? Wonderful place. I've never been but my wife has. Of course, it's much better than New York.”

He must have sensed I was staring at him as he seemed to choke on his words. “What I mean is...at least the people are better. That's what counts.”

I wondered why he had come at all. They usually let my kind loose after they have sobered up somewhat. He made me sign some forms which I didn't bother to read, probably indemnifying the governments of half a dozen nations, and then let me go.

I took a taxi back to my hotel.

CHAPTER 3

“Hey!” was the first thing Alexander said when he saw me climbing the four marble steps that led to the lobby. In my weakened, sleep-deprived condition, it felt like someone had beaten my head on a gong. A series of “hey!”s shuttled back and forth in my head and set my teeth on edge.

“Where were you? When I woke up, you were gone. I was about to call the police.” He was sitting at two tables having two cups of coffee. I somehow sat down next to him.

“Her gloves had holes in them. She doesn’t take care of herself. Even her hat...it’s a cheap sort of wool. I don’t know how much protection it gives.”

“But where were you? I looked for you for hours!” Both his mouths were working. It was hard to decide which one to focus on.

“We were barely a few steps away from you when...let’s go to my room. The lobby is for losers.” I had noticed a couple of bellhops with far too much time on their hands watching us closely.

“You look like you haven’t slept all night.”

We got to the elevator. The doors opened and we climbed in. Two elderly couples followed us inside.

“It’s not possible to sleep at a time like this.”

“Well? Did you ask her?”

I didn’t say anything. My head was throbbing and the elderly couples kept glancing at me. Their faces kept changing shape, until they turned into some kind of Rorschach test: bats and bears, scorpions and monkeys, mushroomed all over the mirrors on the walls. The hum of the elevator also seemed to rise in pitch with every floor that we passed.

“Did you say anything at all?” Disgust came over Alexander’s face. I was falling in his esteem quickly.

“I did.”

“What?”

The elevator stopped and both couples got out.

“We discussed the weather.”

This was true. I had remarked how summer was shy of showing its splendor in her presence.

“The weather! God, you’re pathetic!” Alexander ran his fingers through his hair with the despair of a man whose favorite horse had been in front but tripped at the finish line and came last. All that was left was to shoot the beast and put it out of its misery. “I knew you wouldn’t say anything.”

We finally reached my floor and we stumbled out. I started breathing again in the corridor.

“Wait!” Alexander suddenly grabbed my arm. “I have some vodka in my room.”

I could see the logic behind this statement and we adjourned to his room instead.

“Here’s your jacket. It smells a little strange. You should get it cleaned. How long are we going to stay in Poland? My father is going to kill me.”

Among his many flaws (and body odor was one of them), Alexander was wont to exaggerate. I had met his father a few times and not a more docile and amiable gentleman could be found between Brussels and Bruges. Their ancestors had Sicilian blood but having settled in Belgium for over half a century it had been cooled by the North Sea. If murder was on the agenda, it was my father who would be most capable of it. He was already threatening to cancel my credit card unless I returned to university. How he managed to find out that I had left Paris was beyond me. I supposed he had spies in every city.

“Remind me, Alexander, why are we in Poland?”

“Because you said that Italy is full of thieves, the French are ugly, and Germans are fat.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes, you can be rather hurtful when you’re sober.”

“What was wrong with England?”

“You wanted to avoid English speakers. You said they made you nauseous.”

“Ah, so I did.” It was all returning to me.

“Also, you’re in love with that girl.”

I took a swill of the vodka. It burned a hole through my chest. It is incredible how a little vodka in the morning can oil the rusty gears. Granted, it tastes like unrefined petroleum, but its effect on the senses is second to none, perhaps comparable only to skinny-dipping in the Baltic in winter. Or being smitten on the cheek. I held the glass in my hand, turning it in the half light of the room: an edge sparkled with a dozen starbursts; the brightest lasting for the shortest time. I set the glass on the table and spun it. The tumbler whirled on its toes like a ballerina, light catching its sides like stars which glowed and died and glowed again. Then the tumbler began to sway, to totter, and finally fell with a clatter on the table and rolled away, spilling vodka out of its side. Just then there was a flutter and the shadow of her dress flew across the ceiling...the swish of her long dark hair...as she brushed past I looked up and caught a glitter of dark eyes, and moonlit cheek. As the proud swan glides across a silver lake, and a stricken leaf rolls in its wake, I too almost drowned. My mind’s eye took over, hanging on desperately. But the more I tried, the less I saw. Her soft boots caressed a marble stairway. A row of pillars seemed to sweat as her fingers skimmed over them. She was soon joined by two others, equally graceful, equally rushed, only a few steps behind her in speed, beauty, and charm. The trio sailed down the stairs as if on wings, wearing their baggage lightly; passersby seemed to melt away. My spirit felt weak and powerless to help...until I

realized my arms were loaded with Alexander's things: two suitcases, a backpack, and an umbrella. I even thought of tossing them aside and rushing to her aid. But such boldness was far from second nature to me. We were running late and all I could do was look over my shoulder and watch till they vanished behind the throng.

She had smiled at me. The smallest of smiles – it could even be mistaken for politeness – but who smiles these days? And at a complete stranger? The smallest of smiles pierce the deepest when it's from someone unknown. At first I had felt someone's eyes on me. I had looked up and a sharp pain struck me, as if a knife had stuck in my chest. I had never seen her before in my life, and neither, I was sure, had she ever seen me. But our eyes had struggled to break free. It must have been no more than a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. If it weren't for the thousand other people in the station that day, perhaps our eyes would have never parted. On another day, at another place, where neither of us had been in such a rush, perhaps I would have spoken to her. Maybe I would have asked her the time, or made small talk about the weather. Perhaps we could have gone for a coffee. In another life, another world, perhaps she would have approached me. Possibly even talked to me. But at that moment, during those crucial few seconds, neither of us did anything. What could we have done? There was nothing to do. It was not in our destiny.

We arrived at our platform, found the right carriage and got in line. Two men in Russian hats broke off their conversation and stared at us. An elderly lady gave us a nervous glance and clutched the stole of her fur coat. The young couple beside us lowered their voices but carried on talking and stealing kisses. It was a 37-hour journey to Moscow and the air was thick with Russian commonplaces. My neck was sore from craning but I refused to give up.

We boarded and I helped Alexander put his suitcases on the luggage rack. He was a meticulous packer, ensuring that no article of clothing, book, or equipment took up more than its fair share of space. Even then, each of his three suitcases weighed almost twenty kilos a piece.

He came over and we shook hands. "See you in a month's time."

Just then, three shadows swept past our window, disappearing as swiftly as they had appeared. I pressed my face to the chilled glass and saw the three girls breathlessly board the carriage next door. My heart kicked in my chest. The glass misted up from heavy breaths. When I wiped the pane with the back of my hand a phantom face emerged and stared at me with haunted eyes. I considered Alexander's good fortune. Yes, the gods were most kind to him. As for me...

Alexander must have heard me sigh. He laughed. "Don't worry! I'll be back soon!"

I turned away from the window. A terrible feeling of loss came over me, as if I had lost a rib or two. My knees felt weak and unable to take the strain of my body. Gravity's pull seemed more crushing on the train.

“Have you taken everything?” I said. “Do you need shampoo? Have you taken your passport? They say it’s cold in Russia. Especially in winter.”

He looked at me strangely but didn’t say a thing. He followed me out into the corridor where I stopped to tell him a Russian proverb I had picked up somewhere.

“The church is near but the road is icy; the bar is far away but I’ll walk carefully.”

He looked at his watch. “The train will leave in exactly two minutes. If you don’t go now...”

“Yes, you’re right. But there is always time for a few lines from Pushkin...” I looked over his shoulder. The girls in the next carriage were walking along the corridor. They found their compartment, slid open the glass door and entered. My heart kicked again. This time it was a desperate, lunging kick, like a wrong-footed goalkeeper flinging out a leg to stave the ball off the goal line. The time for Pushkin was gone, something more drastic was needed.

“Have you heard about Max?” I said.

“Max?”

“Yes, he’s engaged.”

“Max, engaged?” He couldn’t have been more incredulous if I had told him the earth was flat and the sun revolved around the moon. “To whom?”

“To a rich, blind widow who lives in a boathouse on the Seine.”

“Ok, enough jokes,” he patted my shoulder. “Time to go.”

I cursed myself for my stupidity. I had overstepped the bounds of rumor mongering, one of whose cardinal rules is to retain a semblance, however remote, of reality. Max, being a three-legged dog belonging to one of the lecturers at the Sorbonne, could not in reality be engaged to anyone. Not legally. Not in France anyway.

I got off the train, wanting to kick the first thing I saw. And the first thing I saw was a uniformed guard coming down the platform checking that all the train doors were closed. I walked over to the carriage the girls had entered and peered casually through the first window. A dark-haired girl, with her back to me, was taking off her jacket and as she slipped her arms out she swung around and locked eyes with me. We both sprang back as if scorched by fire. She was about an arm’s length away and had the window been open could have easily reached out and plucked my ear. I spun around on my heel and buried my face in the lapels of my jacket, thrusting my hands as far as my pockets would allow.

The guard all of a sudden was beside me. “Going on board, sir?” he said.

“No, no.” I said, and began to drift away. It was only when the door to the carriage was sliding shut, that I drew a quick breath, hunched my shoulders and slipped through.

I was standing in the corridor, still considering what I had done, and what I would do, when a whistle blew, the train gave a little lurch, steadied itself, and then slowly and almost noiselessly

began to draw out of the Gare de l'Est. With just the clothes on my back and no passport, ticket or luggage, let alone a toothbrush, I was headed to Moscow. I glanced at my watch. It was seven o'clock.

If it was true that those the gods wished to destroy are made mad first, then surely this was a sign. I, who the others had mocked for my long silences and petrified stone routine, who would rather take a long and dangerous detour than amble along the low valleys of earthy pursuits, had leaped head first into the fray. Never in my life had I felt this compunction before: to offer my neck for a woman. The train picked up speed and the dark countryside flashed past. I went down the lonely corridor, fear eating my insides, strange voices whispering in my ears: "What will you do?" "What will you say?" "What if she only speaks Russian?" "There are three of them, have you noticed that?" "They will eat you alive!" "Worse, they will laugh at you or ignore you! And cast you into utter darkness!"

I stopped outside the compartment I thought to be hers. "You're doomed!" "Admit it." "You're not ready for this." I saw them through the glass, talking amongst themselves. A peal of sweet laughter reached my ears. There was a couchette free, almost winking at me. My hand shook violently as I reached for the sliding door. No! I should knock first. How rude of me! But my hand shook too much. I couldn't bring it to tap on the glass.

"Courage! Fortune favors the brave!"

My knuckles patted the pane. Once, twice, thrice. But it was too soft to be heard over the noise of the train. Panic flared inside of me. "Quick! Before they look up! Get out!"

I turned and my feet ran. By the time I caught up I had locked myself in the lavatory. The water splashed against my face and opened my eyes. I stared at the phantom in the mirror for some time. Back I went to the girls for another fly-by. But a middle-aged man with a Stalinesque moustache had by now decided to take his evening walk up and down the aisle, stopping now and then to vigorously twist and stretch his spine. His stomping down the corridor, with arms swinging wildly, accompanied by sudden outbursts of Russian, evidently to pep himself up and keep him focused on his regime, threw me completely off; like a shell shock victim in Ypres. If this wasn't enough, he was soon followed by a woman in a tracksuit attempting yoga in the aisle. Back I headed to the lavatory for another spray of holy water. It was too much! Too soon! I couldn't take it anymore. A life time of restraint couldn't be overturned in an hour. Feeling ashamed of my cowardice I retreated to the dining car, hoping some nutrients could sustain me through this ordeal. I sat down and ordered a mug of Russian tea. As I blew on the tea, cleaving its dark depths, the door to the dining car opened.

Truly, a man's worst nightmare is that his dreams will come true. For a second I wanted to dive under the table or at least hide my face with the edge of the tablecloth. Instead, I could only sit

frozen, shivering and pouring sweat. So proudly did she walk in with her head held high and a dignity and bearing worthy of the angels that I immediately realized my mistake. She was not for me. Immediately I realized the folly of my actions, and that a great tempest was in store for whoever dared to win her heart. The waiters, who had been so lethargic in taking my order, and who looked like the descendants of horse thieves, now fought amongst themselves for the privilege of serving her. A lithe young man with slicked back hair and the profile of a kulak was the victor. He scooped up a menu from the counter, unfurled a serviette with a snap of his wrist and the flourish of a matador, draped the cloth over his left arm, and led her smoothly to a table. The whole effect would have been more impressive had he not stubbed his toe on my chair as he passed.

The girl smiled as she gave me the briefest glance, and all of a sudden the air was full of perfume and soft music, and stars danced in front of my eyes. "So sorry," I said as I edged closer to my table to give them more room to pass. The waiter gave me a look that prepared me to expect surprises in my dinner. He hobbled over to the other side of the room and seated her as far as possible from me.

She looked at me again after she had placed her order. I tried my best not to fall out of my chair. Death is not the greatest fear of man. For me, at least, I would have preferred for the ground to open up and swallow me whole than take the twenty odd steps to reach her. Despite her glances, her entire aspect was so forbidding, so austere. Her legs were crossed, and her face was turned away towards the window, even though it was too dark to see anything outside. Deep thought furrowed her brows; she was lost in another world. Her fingers ran absently along the edge of a knife, as if to test its sharpness.

I shuddered silently. There were only the two of us in the entire dining car. What could be more natural than to strike up a conversation? My chair slid back and I prepared to rise. But what would I say? Philosophy came to my aid and whispered: "Start with hello. And then say your name."

It was good advice. There had been nothing from her for a long time. Last I had heard she was helping my cousin in Orleans.

"A conventional and forthright opening is always best."

Why?

"It shows your good manners, and that you have no greater motive than to amuse yourself and her for quarter of an hour."

But do Russians suffer amusement gladly? They seem more inclined to regicide and revolution than digress to the weather.

"Yes, for they are wise. Even a mad dog is humored lest he bites."

And after I introduce myself? What then? What if she says nothing, but stares at me like a cockroach that has crawled out of a drain?

“She will introduce herself, and then you will ask her permission to join her table.”

My tea, I noticed, was beginning to get cold. I swallowed it desperately. The task would require at least double my daily energy requirements. But what if she doesn’t say anything? What if I open my mouth but no sound comes out? What if...

“Oh, stop being such a cankerous worm! Weren’t your ancestors on the battlefield at Plassey?”

Yes, but they lost. They hadn’t slept well the night before. Neither have I for that matter.

“You coward!”

I am not! Just watch me! And I sprang to my feet as if there was a fire lit beneath me. Almost instantly, a hand slapped my shoulder and it took all my resolve not to let out a shriek.

“Zayn! What’re you doing here?” Then a series of French curses stung my ears. I whirled around. Alexander stood stunned staring at me.

“Not so loud!” I said, secretly relieved to see him. “Sit down. Sit down!”

Alexander sat down across from me, not taking his eyes off me for a second. The girl, for her part, hadn’t taken her eyes off the window. Perhaps she was admiring her own reflection.

I explained my predicament as succinctly as possible, hoping deep down to enlist his help. His smile widened with every second of my story. He interrupted me: “But you have no passport! No ticket! Where will you go? Where will you stay? You’re mad! Completely insane!”

I did not deny it.

“When the conductor comes, what will you do? He’ll throw you out in Strasbourg. And there will be a fine to pay.”

“He will understand. I will explain myself.”

“Good luck!” Already he was leaning away from me, as if to keep as much distance between ourselves.

“Or I can hide in your compartment.”

“For 37 hours? Besides, there isn’t room.”

Time? Space? It was typical of Alexander to think of such trivialities when more important things were at stake.

“Alexander, do me a favor. Introduce me to her.”

“Where is she?”

“Behind you.”

Alexander turned to look. He looked long and he looked hard.

“Hey, that’s enough!” I kicked him under the table. “Well?”

“I don’t know her.”

“Clearly. But what do you think?”

“Will you tell her you jumped on the train for her? I’m sure she’ll find that very romantic. Who wouldn’t love a stalker?”

“I’m not stalking her. I just...I didn’t have time to talk to her before. Everything was going so fast. It’s like I don’t know myself. I’ve never done anything like this. I tried talking to her but...”

“And the longer you take to talk to her the creepier you’ll seem.”

“I don’t know what to say! What should I do?”

“Try cutting your ear off and sending it to her. That’s how they did it in the old days. That always works.”

“I know what I’d like to cut off....But I know she likes me. She keeps looking at me. And she smiled at me twice.”

“Twice? Are you mad? Maybe she’s shortsighted. Maybe she thought you were someone else. Maybe she’s just being polite. Or maybe she’s mad. Yes, she looks dangerous. I mean, she isn’t dangerous herself. But she would be dangerous for you.”

“Meaning?”

He shook his head slowly and regarded me with great pity in his eyes. “There are many kinds of people in the world. There are those that cause happiness and laughter, those that cause sadness and pain, and a few that can only bring sheer ecstasy. She will only cause you grief.”

“I’m not asking for your advice — God knows who you think you are — I’m asking for an introduction.”

“If you can’t be man enough to introduce yourself, then you don’t deserve her.”

“I’m too far gone, can’t you see? I’ve lost my nerve.”

“You never had any!”

“A great friend you are. When the chips are down and a comrade is struggling...when the yoke of capitalism is clenching our throats...when the bourgeoisie are hunting us like dogs...”

“Ok, ok. That’s enough. Besides, she’s too well dressed for a communist.”

“Do you think she knows we’re talking about her?”

“Of course. What woman wouldn’t?”

A cold hand clasped my heart. My throat tightened, but it wasn’t from the yoke of capitalism. “But she hasn’t taken her eyes off the window!”

“Regard the gazelle in the savannah; without turning her head she sees both the lion and the cheetah lurking in the reeds, and also the crocodile half-submerged in the swamp.”

He looked up at the ceiling and scratched under his chin, presumably to aid his memory.

““Women see little, but notice everything. Men see all, but notice nothing.””

“Virgil?”

“Horace,” he said flatly. “Do you think you’re the first man to lay eyes on her? Do you think you’re the first to have lost his nerve? Women are raised in the shadow of our stares, among the echo of our catcalls. Someone as beautiful as her would have been drowned by our raptures if she hadn’t learned how to swim against the tide.”

“Damned men! Swine and beasts, the lot of ‘em!”

“Unless...”

“Unless she were a communist!”

Alexander smiled sympathetically, as if he were dealing with a child. “Can you see the cross around her neck? It’s not an Orthodox one.”

“It’s fashionable to wear a cross. Even the Pope wears one. I too once considered it, but quickly saw the light.”

The waiter arrived and we ordered our dinner. I didn’t touch mine when it finally came. Even if there hadn’t been something suspicious floating in my borscht, I had completely lost my appetite.

The dining car slowly filled. Her two friends soon joined her. Russian with smatterings of French drifted from table to table. I strained my ears to hear her speak but her voice got lost midway through its journey.

“So all is lost then? She thinks I’m a predator.”

“The blonde one likes you.”

“Rubbish. How do you know?”

“She keeps looking at you.”

“That’s her prerogative. I only wish her friend would learn from her.”

“Too bad you don’t like blondes.”

“I never said I don’t like them. All I said was that I could never marry one.”

“Ah! Then that’s perfect. Have some fun tonight, and then get off at Berlin tomorrow.” This was Alexander’s specialty. It was the simple biological necessities of life that was the topic of his leisure hours, and his PhD. But my field was quite different.

“Oh God! Now the redhead is looking at you. Why? You’re not that funny.”

I quietly thanked God for answering my prayer, but gently reminded Him that I meant the other friend.

Alexander proceeded to examine my features closely; perhaps there was something he had missed. His own profile was quite distinct and he had reason to feel wronged.

The girls finished their dinner and prepared to leave. She looked up as she rose, a parting salvo no cannon could match: a flash of black eyes. I felt a spasm of my facial muscles and a

violent twitch of my upper body, like a cockroach on its back, convulsing in its death throes. I dropped my eyes and contemplated my soup while I waited for the roaring in my ears to subside. By the time I looked back, they were gone.

Off I set like a rocket to her table. A drop of tea still hung from the lip of her cup. I pressed my lips to its cold brim. But the carriage trembled at such profanity: the tables shook, the china clattered, even the engine shrieked. Distant voices echoed and grew more distinct. I jumped back. The glass fell from the table and smashed to pieces on the floor.

“Zayn! Zayn!”

Alexander was standing over me, shaking me roughly. All the stars had died. Darkness was everywhere. A single shaft of light fell across his shoulder. Motes of dust hovered lazily in the air.

“Zayn! Are you okay? You need to sleep.”

“Then why did you wake me?”

“Go to your room and sleep. What’s that stain on the couch?”

“It’s nothing. It’s only water.”

But he didn’t believe me and had to bend down to sniff it. “Where did water come from? We were having vodka.”

“Are we still going to the party tomorrow?”

“Of course. She will be there, you know.”

“We don’t know for sure.”

“All the science students will be there. There is a good chance she will too.”

Tomorrow! Could I make it that far without seeing her? I turned to go. “Maybe I’ll see you for dinner?”

“Yes, maybe,” he said, as he took another whiff of the upholstery.

CHAPTER 4

My room was on the fourth floor with a double bed and a ceiling that sloped sharply towards your head the further you intruded into the room. By the time you reached the window you were forced to bow to the crooked lamppost across the street.

I showered and shaved, cutting myself now and then as my mind wandered and hand shook. Finally, I was ready for sleep — it was not yet noon. I collapsed on my bed and stared out the window. Snow fell softly against the panes, melted, and rolled down like thick tears. The sound of cars swishing past on the wet street was monotonous and oppressive. Any one of them could be carrying her away and I had no way of finding out.

Twenty-four hours! I wouldn't last twenty-four seconds without seeing her. Oh love is pure torture! Love is misery! I got out of bed and began to pace the room, smacking my head on the ceiling each time I wandered too close to the window.

The first time we had spoken, it had been snowing too; the first snowfall of the season. White flakes fell like confetti. And there had been music playing too. But I'm getting ahead of myself. When strangers meet the first to speak is the most alone. He must find some pressing need, some cause or good reason to breach the peace. Luckily, looks speak louder than speech. An enticing smile, twinkling eyes, a careless grace in the way she tosses her hair, are suggestive even to the blind. Otherwise, no one would take the leap. But when the art is more subtle, it takes a true expert to read the signs. It was on the train to Moscow when the scales fell from my eyes. We had passed Strasbourg in the night and I had yet to be cast out. It was around midnight and I was standing in the dark aisle outside Alexander's compartment. Everyone was asleep. Alexander included. Alexander especially. I could hear him snoring over the din of the train.

A ghostly moon half-hidden by clouds, threw shadows of trees and telegraph poles along the corridor walls. I had been standing at the window for an hour, maybe two, dreamily watching the German countryside rush by: the ruins of a church at the top of a hill, sleepy fields dotted with white fences, houses with Christmas lights on their roofs. My eyes traced her face in the air, her delicious voice, unheard, echoed in my ears. Just as sleep was slowly stealing over me, the hush of a compartment door was heard, and a breath of wind stirred the shadows. It was a girl. I could tell by the long hair and the cut of her figure. But there was something else, some quality of bearing, gait, posture, some inexpressible trait, that even in the darkness I was sure it was her.

The windows drew her gaze. The scattered shadows of hills and trees, and flickering lights from nearby houses, played over the delicate curve of her cheek. She turned her head and moon beams alighted on a few locks of hair, a naked earlobe, and illumed those tips of nose, lips, and chin that mean so little but move so much. I held my breath, wondering if she would look my way.

Young love's wishes are always granted, but never in the way expected. For when she suddenly turned in my direction, her lovely face flashed for half a second before plunging into darkness. An electric charge seemed to spark between our carriage doors. The down on my neck bristled. Time's wings dragged as if through a stream of running water while our eyes groped desperately in the dark. Neither of us, I was sure, could see the other. But we sensed each other's presence amidst the gloom. Two moving shadows rocking gently with the train. No need for sun, moon, or star to show us where we stood. The seconds slipped away...ten...twenty...thirty...maybe less than five. Her head turned once again and her shadow vanished as mysteriously as it had arrived.

Only then did it occur to me that I should have made some sign, some gesture; a wave of the hand, a few steps in her direction, even a whistle or a cough of solidarity in the dark. Perhaps I could have asked her the time.

Restless dreams disturbed my sleep that night. I saw my heart fall through cracks in clouds and snow and crash to earth, down a deep pit where a host of fallen angels hacked it with spears. It split into a thousand pieces and was carried off by the wind. And I roamed among other lost souls, picking up pieces here and there from under the heel of men and wrenching others from the jaws of wild dogs.

At daybreak, I awoke, slouched against the wall that had rocked me to sleep. It was time to wake Alexander. This time, he was ready with some advice. We discussed the issue over breakfast, like two rational adults.

"Give the impression you're here on business," he said. "That you're here to fix some problem. Like the hot water."

"The hot water?"

"Yes, tell them it's not working. Fiddle under the sink for a while and the conversation will start itself. Maybe they'll offer you a drink for your hard work."

It was brilliant. Why hadn't I thought of it before? I stared with admiration at my friend, blessing his parents in my head.

"Yes, women respect working men much more than students. Don't mention anything about poetry. They'll think you're soft in the head...and when you've fixed the problem, they're bound to see you in a good light. And then...maybe you can put in a good word for me as well."

"Of course. I'll introduce you, shall I? You can be my assistant."

"No, no," he said quickly. "I'll stay here. When the time comes, you can say that I'm your supervisor...and how generous I am. Oh, and don't forget to mention that I'm kind to kids."

"You hate kids."

"Not all kids. Remember that blind one in the American Hospital? The one with cancer?"

"The one you stole chocolate from?"

“Yes, he was alright.”

“I suppose chocolate isn’t good for milk teeth.”

“Spoils it rotten.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s about it. Don’t forget to smile. Try to make a dimple on your cheek when you smile. Women love dimples.”

“I don’t think my cheeks can dimple.”

“Oh,” he said and stared thoughtfully at the floor. “A few jokes maybe. Nothing too risqué, of course. But something to make them smile.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“No jokes about Russians. They might take it the wrong way.”

“Ok.”

“And look at her in the eyes when you talk. Strong eye contact is important.”

“Good point.”

“But don’t look for too long, or she’ll think you’re creepy.”

“Ah, yes.” I turned to leave.

“One second!”

I should have known he wouldn’t let it go that easily.

“Are you sure she’s the one? Not that it matters...you’ve only broken half a dozen laws for her. For someone you barely know.”

“I don’t know her at all.”

“Remember that girl in Paris you said you were ready to die for? What was her name?”

“Pah!” I wanted to spit but the only place I could think of was in his face. I shouldn’t have mentioned the chocolate. I left him without a word.

At the threshold of her compartment, my legs failed me. Even before I knew her name, or exchanged a single word with her, I knew my heart would beat for no other. Looking back now, I can see it for the madness that it clearly was. But isn’t that what love is? A madness. An impulse that can’t be defined or defeated by logic. A paralysis of one’s reasoning and mental faculties. A blindness to all other senses and sensations. The triumph of the idealistic over the materialistic. What is love but standing at the abyss and only seeing the stars dancing above.

A long painful shiver racked my body. I had jumped on the train without thinking...what had pushed me aboard? It was all a mystery to me. That word – love – had not yet formed in my mind but its emissaries had already fanned out far and wide. Time was what I needed. Some more time. I leant on a wall, waiting for a sign. Perhaps even a guide.

“Wretched, faithless man!” a voice rose out of the depths. “Haven’t you received enough signs? Haven’t you felt the hammering of your heart? The sweat cascading off your brow, the pins and needles in your feet, the shortness of breath? What else are you waiting for? A kiss on the cheek?”

“Well, no.” And I almost stumbled and fell from the thought. But the roof caught me cruelly on the side of the head and knocked some sense into me. I quickly dressed and went out into the street.

CHAPTER 5

London, Paris, New York... finally Warsaw! I took the street guide, paid for it, and left the store. I thought of going to the police. But I didn't have a photograph of her. Before I knew it, I was passing Łazienki Park. How many hours had I spent in that fallen garden? Wandering its winding paths and drinking in the cold lashes of its banks that stung my cheek and could have flattened a thousand sails, yet was no match for a glance of her hand. My ears rung from the thought, and my steps quickened. At least on the train I knew my place, and the only thing that separated us was my cowardice. Then, as courage gained, knowledge lost. Before I knew it, I was at Three Crosses Square, with no time to pity St. Alexander's Church; a ghost of its prewar glory. The faster I walked, the slower I seemed to move. The doors of the buildings were firmly closed to me — in my haste I tried two or three — only the windows seemed to wink mischievously and the occasional face peered out.

The straight path led me to de Gaulle's monument, who seemed to be smiling at me, as if to say, "Good morning, Zayn! How are you? I'm fine, thank you. Yes, I always walk like this, ever since I saw Michael Jackson in 'Beat It'. No, Varsovians are quite nice actually. They haven't mentioned it. That palm tree over there, doesn't it look a little odd?"

I tore myself away from the General although we could have talked all day. I went up Nowy Świat and didn't talk to a soul until I got to the Copernicus monument.

"Zayn, my dear boy, how are you? Come and sit beside me. In a rush? Aren't we all! No, Alexandria is not at the center of the universe. Let me prove it to you...Fine then, begone! For your impertinence I am extending winter by two months."

By the time I reached Old Town, I had exchanged pleasantries with Stefan Wyszyński, Bolesław Prus, Józef Poniatowski, and Adam Mickiewicz. While I was flattered by all their attention, I was really in no state to be conversing with them.

It had been the same on the train. Hannover, Berlin, and Poznań passed without comment since my heart had been set on Moscow. And when Warsaw spread out before us in the darkness of high noon, I hardly gave it a second thought. Wrapped in grey clouds the skies looked set to fall on our heads. And then they did. We arrived at Warsaw Station.

A speck of blue caught my attention out the window. A cloth, a scarf or a handkerchief, plucked in the slipstream of a passing train was tossed lightly from pillar to pillar, until it blurred from view. Round I cast my brooding gaze till it lit upon her fleeting figure. She had gained the platform with her friends and now headed towards an escalator. Round she threw a long last look, straight at my window, and then quickly lowered her eyes. She let the escalator slowly take her to

an upper floor, heedless of passersby. Only when one of her friends took her by the arm did she wake from her reverie.

And so did I. In her glance I had glimpsed a whole new world. And it split me in two. I sprang out in opposite directions; climbing walls and scaling the ceiling. With every moment lost, panic choked my breath. Passengers, suitcases, and conductors all conspired to trip me. By the time I was on the platform, she was at the top of the escalator, getting off in the Main Hall. And when I reached the Main Hall, she was halfway to the taxi rank.

A voice in my head said: "Who will go? Who is the hero?"

Then said I: "Go will I. Here comes me." And so, ignoring the numbness in my lips, squarely I went forth.

The first snowflakes of the season fell from the sky, crowning her head with a spray of white. I took a deep breath. The ground shook beneath my feet. A choir sang somewhere. The innocent voices of children floated in from a distance. I unclenched my shivering teeth and a strange giddiness struck me. First impressions are indelible, and I composed myself accordingly.

"Excuse me," said I. "Do you speak Polish?"

It takes some time to register the fact that you are being addressed in a foreign tongue. The girl turned languidly in my direction and then realized I was speaking to her. Mild surprise, mixed with recognition perhaps, tinged her dark eyes. Eyes so dark and deep that one could drown in their depths, rolling endlessly in a midnight sea, and yet they dazzled like the flash of a lighthouse, leaving stars in your eyes.

"Yes."

It was the most beautiful word in the world. I wished she had said it a dozen times instead of stopping at once so cruelly. No more than a hiss of air slipping down the tongue towards the teeth, yet it burned in my dreams and the prophetic ring of that word tolls to this day. Beginners, take note, you can spark a conversation with anyone by making them agree with you. Far easier to begin with closed questions than open ones. (I learned this from an attorney who always cross-examined witnesses in this way.)

"So you are Polish?"

"Yes."

Twice I was rewarded! And I felt how Moses must have felt when he was allowed a glimpse of the promised land.

"My friend and I are visiting Poland...this is our first time. Can you recommend what to see...where to stay...to eat..."

The girl replied with a smile that glowed, and turned to her friends. They conferred rapidly in Polish and at the end all three of them were radiant.

I felt like dancing myself. How easy it was! Like a child I had been scratching at my wounds, turning in my mind every mischance, every disaster.

She spoke on behalf of the trinity. “It depends what you’re interested in. Why did you come to Poland?”

“Why?”

“Yes, you must have some reason to visit us.”

And again! Could there be a luckier man in the whole wide world than me? But then I heard a panting beside me, like a wild dog or a wolf in heat.

“We’re in transit. We’re...our train leaves in five minutes.” Alexander was bent over, sucking in large gulps of air. The poor fool! He must have followed me.

“My friend is a little...” and I tapped the side of my head with a forefinger, shaking my head with infinite regret.

“What? No!” But Alexander did not have enough oxygen to protest.

“We’re here to taste your local produce,” I said. “That is to say, the vodka. And, of course, to learn about your rich history.”

“You should see this museum—”

But by then Alexander had regained his breath and began a most humiliating spectacle. He grabbed my arm and started to pull me away.

“Three minutes! There’s less than three minutes left! Please!”

“He thinks the world will end in three minutes,” I explained to the girls as I tried my best to keep my dignity, a hard thing to do when one is being dragged away like a sack of potatoes.

“I’ve told you many times. The world will not end today!”

“No, no! The train! Moscow...two minutes!”

I wrapped my arms around a sturdy looking lamp post. “You mentioned a museum?”

“...Yes...the Chopin Museum...”

“Sounds wonderful. I love museums. Anything else? Ahhhhhh!”

The indignity of having one’s hair pulled in public is granted to few; it interferes with any chance of vindicating those qualities that each man sets secretly for himself. Having cultivated over a brief lifetime a reputation for moderation, maturity beyond my years, and equanimity, I acquitted myself most shamefully.

Letting go of the lamp post, I turned around and unleashed a right hook not caring particularly where it landed. It landed on Alexander’s nose and promptly broke it. I knew it was broken as I heard a crisp snap, and Alexander plunged to his knees cupping his face with his hands.

CHAPTER 6

It was a bad start. It was a terrible start. For one thing, the museum was closed that day. I knew it was closed after I had asked three different people. All three of the girls assured me it was closed on a Monday.

“What else is there? Isn’t there a museum for Copernicus or Marie Curie...or the Pope?”

But women do not take kindly to strangers who express themselves with their fists. They did however, take us to a hospital which was open, and where they set Alexander’s nose straight.

Up to that point, I had never hit anyone in my life. No one asked me how my hand was feeling. And I did not bother to tell them again.

“I would like to apologize for my friend.”

“Maybe you would like to apologize *to* him, first?”

“Of course. It was a very rash thing to do. I acted instinctively. I had no intention of hurting him. I’m sorry, Alexander.”

“It’s ok,” he said with difficulty, a large bandage swathed over his nose. “But you have to call Moscow. They will be expecting me.”

“Did I mention that children simply adore him? I think it’s his sense of humor, a weakness for the slapstick; they sense a kindred soul perhaps.”

The girls fussed over him and treated him as if he were a young Nijinsky. For me they reserved their coldest stares and never spoke beyond a simple “yes” or “no”. Even open questions were met with disdain.

“How long are you staying in Poland for?”

“That depends on when the next train leaves for Moscow.”

“My friend is still delirious from the painkillers. We’re here for a week.”

“A week!”

“Yes, a week. Don’t you remember? Are you getting a fever?”

“Let go of me! You’re hurting me!”

“I don’t think that’s the way to take his temperature.”

“Nurse!”

“It’s nothing, it’s nothing. He always acts like this. He loves the attention. Don’t you, Alexander?”

“Go away!” he said. Then a strange gleam appeared in his eyes. “He’s in love with you! He’s been following you since Paris. But he didn’t have the guts to talk to you.”

This time my left hand caught him flush on the cheek.

CHAPTER 7

I had been pacing up and down outside the hospital for what felt like an hour when they finally came out. Her friends glared at me, while she approached with downcast eyes. Only once, when they had almost passed, did she glance at me: a dart of the eyes and then back to examining the sidewalk. A quick glance is sometimes more intense than a prolonged stare, just as sunlight can seem somehow brighter and more focused after filtering through a veil of woods. Something less than hope trickled in my heart, and that was enough to keep me going. I followed them from a distance. They took him to a hotel and said their goodbyes in the lobby.

The revolving door at the hotel proved to be a friend. After their farewells and wishes of good health, the girls went out one by one. She went last, and the hem of her blue dress caught on the revolving door. I rushed to unfasten it. Our hands met at the task, trembled from the sudden touch and withdrew, and then seeing the other retreat reached forward again; only to clash once more.

“I can do it myself,” she said. “Thank you.”

In her hurry to detach herself, she ripped a piece of wool on the door. A cloth no bigger than her thumbnail. I didn’t dare to look at her until she was gone, and then all I caught was a glimpse of her flowing hair as she turned a corner.

“Yes,” I said to no one in particular, thrilled at my good fortune: my head jarred as if it had come between the crash of cymbals.

Another glance at the revolving doors, now spinning emptily, and I knew that nothing was impossible. Yes, I would have to work for my redemption. Barely an hour ago I would not have dared to dream of such a thing. After only my second strike (even in baseball you get three) I was cast into utter darkness. There had been a collective gasp and the shock of the blow seemed to echo around the observation room. Then a cry and a shout went up. They all rushed to his aid. Once I had realized that Alexander was getting the necessary care and treatment, I had showed myself out.

We checked in: Alexander for three nights, myself for a week. When the concierge discovered I did not have my passport, he recommended I try a different hotel. After much begging and baiting and threatening to inform the police, he agreed to give me a room, provided I produce my passport within 24 hours. Until then, I would have to pay for my room up front.

I called my flatmate in Paris, and he promised to send my passport by courier later that afternoon. I felt as if there was no argument I could not win, no struggle that I could not triumph in, no matter the opponent or the circumstances. Warsaw’s winds were at my back, carrying me over every trial and tribulation.

Only a friend could bring me back to earth. I went to Alexander's room to see if I could smooth things over with him.

"She is too beautiful for you," he said as he poured himself a cup of tea. "Think of all the boys who've kissed her. Do you think you're the first to have lost his head?"

"How does your nose feel?"

"It still hurts," he touched it gingerly. "But it's getting better, I think. You should really forget this nonsense. What would your father say?"

"Nothing. Because he knows nothing."

"But what if he asks me? I can't lie to him."

I eyed his mouth speculatively. My foot itched.

"And now that she knows you're in love with her, you can forget it! She knows she's got you wrapped around her little finger. You'll be her little lap dog, and do as she pleases. You always wanted someone to worship, didn't you? Well, here's your chance. Worship away! And see what comes of it. But don't tell me that I didn't warn you!"

"I never asked you to follow me. Kindly remember that."

"If a friend, even a stranger, were to fall in front of a train, wouldn't you tug at his sleeve?"

"Depends why he fell. If he tripped, of course; if he jumped, then I would let him be."

"I've never seen you like this, Zayn. You have to be smart. Women don't respect love-sick puppies. They want confidence...they want a man!"

He beat his chest with a clenched fist as he said this, as presumably a real man would. The pain in his nose must have been shooting up into his brain.

"You're wasting your time and your father's money. His hard-earned money."

Since it burns more calories to smile than frown, I smiled. I was constantly reminded from all corners that my studies in Paris were enabled by two jobs, including shifts over weekends.

"Yes, you're right," I said. "For too long I've been looking for someone to put on a pedestal...and now I've found her. As the saying goes: 'It's easy to die for a woman, but it's hard to find a woman worth dying for.'"

"Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Only the truth. Every man searches for some ideal, some form of perfection. For me, she is it. And I'm willing to spend my life, and anyone else's, in this pursuit. I can't compromise like you and take on every tramp I see in a club or on the side of the road."

"But you barely know her!"

"I know enough."

"What do you know? How could you possibly know anything about her? Do you know her name?"

“No.”

“Do you know where she’s from, or where she lives?”

“No. Somewhere in Poland.”

“Do you know if she already has a boyfriend? Or even if she’s married?”

“No.”

“Do you know what she does? Does she work or study—”

“She’s studying chemistry at Warsaw University.”

Alexander blinked. But he recovered quickly. “So maybe you exchanged a few trivialities, made some small talk while they were treating me...”

“And she goes to church often, perhaps every Sunday. I never spoke to her beyond—”

“Of course! Her crucifix!”

“I saw her cross herself on the train. She was praying last night. At least I think it was a prayer. It was too dark to be sure.”

Alexander shrugged. “It’s possible. So what?”

“And she lost someone in her life recently. A relative or a friend.”

“How did you learn that? Did you see her crying over a photograph and counting rosaries? Or was it too dark to see that?”

“She seems very distracted most of the time. As if she’s remembering someone.”

“Probably thinking of her boyfriend. She’s too symmetrical to be single.”

“She was travelling with her friends, but there were times when she preferred to be alone. She came to the dining car by herself...to the aisle outside her compartment in the middle of the night...”

“She probably wanted to jump off the train. Who in their right mind would want to go to Moscow? I should have my head examined.”

“There’s a sadness in her eyes...if only I had one more chance, I would make her happier than she could ever imagine...”

“Oh God!” Alexander stood up and walked over to the window, his back to me. “I know of many cases like yours, where men have thrown away their lives for nothing. For nothing!”

I couldn’t see his face, but I heard the tremor in his voice. “We’ve all had our weaknesses from time to time. Even me. But life teaches us. I’m only trying to help you. It’s easier to learn from a friend than to learn from our mistakes.”

He stood leaning against the windowsill, his weight on one foot. Four-fifths of his view was blocked by a steep wall, with stone eagles guarding the roof. The remaining fifth was composed of Warsaw’s skyline and here and there a thin line where heaven kissed the earth. He watched the dark clouds above us with a bitter eye.

“Even black widows love and sigh.”

For once, I felt sorry for him. What could he know about love? He was a scientist after all, or at least studying to be one. He thought in amperes and kilowatts, not in sighs or stolen looks, or the flying sparks from fingers skirmishing in a doorway. For him, love was nothing more than a surge of dopamine in the nucleus accumbens.

“When are you leaving?” I asked, condescending to materialism for his benefit.

“The next train is on Thursday.”

“That gives us three days.”

Alexander spun around. “You’re leaving too?”

“I give myself three days to...I know she likes me. I want to find out if she can feel as strongly about me as I do about her.”

“But how will you find her? And what if she doesn’t like you?”

I didn’t say anything for the excellent reason that I did not have an answer. All I had was a piece of cloth smaller than my thumb, which I teased between my fingers. It smelled mysteriously like the sea.

CHAPTER 8

We stood across the street, waiting and watching the students come and go. How long we had to be there we did not know. The Chemistry Faculty of the University of Warsaw was, and possibly still is, on Ludwika Pasteura Street. Wrapped in snow and ivy, it tried its best not to look like a pillbox on the Maginot Line.

“What about her?”

“No.”

“And her?”

“Of course not!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not her!”

“But she’s just as beautiful. Maybe more so!”

“Impossible!”

“Then what about that one on the bicycle? I suppose she’s not good enough for you?”

“I never said that.”

“So what’s wrong with her?”

“There’s nothing wrong with her.”

“Then? What’s the problem? Just take a look at her. You’re not even looking!”

“Let’s go inside. We look like a pair of drug dealers loitering outside.”

It was warm inside the faculty building. The fumes of students’ sighs made it even more cozy, if a little stifling. We passed classroom after classroom, peering through windows and half-open doors, observing the cream of Polish youth. What exactly we were hoping to find I could not say. Alexander’s intentions, however, were clear.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Where’s the canteen?”

“I’ll feed you soon enough,” I said. “To the lions,” I added under my breath.

Room after room we peered in and glanced around. Lost, anxious, and disheartened faces stared back. Time after time I left empty-handed, my heart beating a little quicker than before. Door after door I opened and found nothing inside but lost souls. Panic-stricken I fumbled a speech in my mind that would assure her of my honorable designs. Should I tell her how I felt about her and hope for the best, putting my life in her hands? Or was a casual approach more wise? For instance, while lost in the building I happened to pass by her door and blindly entered seeking a guide. But such happy twists of fate rarely occur in life, and if they do they always lead to strife. Even divine intervention spells death. No, trembling hearts must make their own luck and I would have to suffer a little longer, perhaps forever. Even if I knew then what I know now, I would not have changed a

thing. Every misstep, every promise, act, word or thought — nothing would I take back. Rarely do people look back and think: I was too brave. Knowing this then I kept going forth, but did not find her anywhere. The longer I went without seeing her, the more desperate I became. It would only be a matter of time before someone noticed a stranger wandering the halls, testing every door as if trapped in a maze. Soon I began to call out her name. In every room that I entered my voice ran ahead of me. But no one answered my call. Silence and ill will were the only fruits of my labor. Alexander was growing restless. I could hear his complaints from an ever-increasing distance: “This is insane! You can’t keep opening doors and shouting her name! What will people say?”

I too felt as if something would give. Either I would collapse from an excess of nerves, or I would be led away in a straitjacket after a blow to the head. As a last resort I decided to leave her a message. My mind was far from clear but I had a sudden faith in my abilities and the memory of youth.

One of the classrooms had no teacher. The class was gathered, sitting patiently, but the teacher’s desk was empty. Since the door was open I strolled inside.

“Hello,” I said to everyone and no one in particular.

Twenty pairs of eyes looked back at me. A fat boy in front said “Hi!”. The others chose for the moment to say nothing.

“Zayn!” Alexander hissed from the doorway.

“Be right back.”

I scanned the students carefully. They seemed a studious lot, with pens poised over pages, and textbooks spread out. Some of the low chatter in the back of the room died. I smiled. It had never been my strongest suit but I wanted to try it out.

No one smiled back.

“Studying hard?” I addressed the fat boy in front.

“Tak...yes.”

“Good.” I cleared my throat and began. My address to Polish youth went unrecorded that day, but not a few of them would have committed it to memory. I like to think that it would be passed on by mouth from class to class, from generation to generation. “Like some kind of sexually transmitted disease,” Alexander would no doubt claim. But naysayers did not carry the day at Thermopylae — something Alexander, like his namesake, should have learned in school.

“I’m from America,” I said, and then paused briefly in case there was a spontaneous burst of applause. But the room remained strangely silent. I repeated my origins in case the acoustics in the room were below par.

“Some of you may have heard of us. Who hasn’t heard of America? Quick show of hands. Just as I thought. Well...actually I’m here on behalf of the Miss Universe pageant. No, I’m not

competing myself. That would be silly. But I'm looking for...new contestants. Now, I saw a very promising young girl recently. Aleksandra is her name. Raven black hair...bewitching eyes...wait, let me draw her for you."

I did a quick sketch on the whiteboard. Unfortunately, my debt to the expressionists is too apparent in my brushwork and tends to overwhelm any sense of realism or artistic unity in my oeuvre. In fact, one of the young men in the back of the class shouted out that his pet dog, Bruno, was the spitting image of my drawing and that if the Miss Universe pageant wanted him I need only name a time and place.

Dry laughter broke out across the room but before I could reply, the fat boy in front spoke up: "My mother is called Aleksandra."

"And I'm sure she's stunning—"

"No!" someone yelled out. "She is ugly. She is a whore!"

The fat boy understandably took exception to this remark. He leapt to his feet. "She's not! You are the whore."

"Your mother was a whore for Hitler's army."

"Your mother...your mother was raped by Gypsies."

So far the exchange had been in English, presumably for my benefit. But all of a sudden it slipped into brute force and I had a hard time following what was going on. A textbook flew over the fat boy's head, missing him by a few inches, and then a wild cry broke out and a swarm of bodies clashed at the front of the room.

I decided to make myself scarce and hastily concluded my speech. "Stay in school!" were my parting words, and if several of my listeners went on to collect Nobel Prizes for Chemistry, if not Peace, I would not be surprised. I escaped without a scratch, but something told me that my efforts had largely gone to waste. They were still brawling when Alexander caught me outside. His fevered tones and wild gestures suggested he did not want to linger or place bets on the winner. While I have always been the sporting type, in this instance I agreed with Alexander: natural selection would doom the stupid and reward the wise.

As we rushed past a row of sepia-toned photographs on the faculty walls of aged and venerable professors, perhaps dead by now, our eyes caught a message board in the corridor. On it were affixed various posters and advertisements for used textbooks, bicycles, flats to share, and lecture notes on chemistry. At one corner was a poster that stood out from the rest. Not only was it larger and its text bolder and more colorful than its peers, but it also contained pictures of young men and women in various attitudes of insobriety. The words were in Polish, but the message was quite clear. It was an event of some magnitude, with people dressed as cowboys and pirates, nurses

and witches, and everything else in between. Alcohol was being passed freely, and if faces are anything to go by, then a very good time was being had by all.

“You think she’ll be there?”

“She’s been abroad for God knows how long. It will be the perfect opportunity to catch up with friends.”

“You know, you’re much smarter than you look.” I jotted down the details of the event on the palm of my hand. “Finally, some luck.”

We left the university in a festive mood; a variety of costumes seized our imagination and appealed to our latent artistic selves. I didn’t dare hope for any more good fortune from a day that had already given me so much.

CHAPTER 9

But there was even more good luck in store for me that day. For someone abandoned by Fortune so long ago, I was pleased to see her smiling down finally. Of course, I should have known better. Of all the places in all of Warsaw we ended up on the same small bridge at the very same time. What were the chances? Was it a coincidence? Or destiny? Or the hour of my reckoning? A city of almost two million souls...how I ever found her that day remains a mystery. We had turned left and right almost at random, letting our feet wander and our eyes roam. Verily, good things happen when you don't light out after them. Many times I would try to return to that bridge overlooking a frozen canal but I never found it again. Not on a map, and never on foot. Sometimes I feel it never existed, and that the whole episode had never taken place at all. Alexander is my only witness, and while he saw all, he heard little, and understood even less. But now that I had found her, I could not let this opportunity go to waste.

It was late afternoon and the sun was dying to her left. She was leaning on the railing, her back to us. If ever there was a back more exquisite and expressive than hers then I have not seen it. Her coat was wrapped tightly around her and clung to her for dear life; it was difficult to see how it would part from her without brute force. The same went for her jeans.

I asked Alexander to wait for me at the end of the bridge. He seemed a little taken aback but he finally rallied to the cause. The ice had melted a bit on the opposite bank and a family of ducks now floated along in single file, their beady little eyes watching me with horror.

Walking up to her was the easy part. Many brave men had gone before me, but how many had returned on their shields? I cleared my throat. But the cruel wind robbed it of its pitch and timbre. She did not stir. I would have to speak. The fact that I had done it before was of no help to me now. I moved closer since my voice would not carry beyond a strangled whisper. It must have been my footsteps that gave me away. She turned a little, and then some more, until her profile was etched in the dying sunlight. Suddenly her head turned and her eyes glittered in the dark.

"Oh it's you! You won't believe it, but I was just thinking of you!" She said this so spontaneously and joyfully that for a moment my heart almost stopped.

"R-Really?"

"Yes," she said, and then she laughed. "How is your friend?"

"My friend?" I said. The idea that she could have been thinking of me was so shocking and remote that my brain simply limped and my throat dried up. It took a few seconds for my head to stop spinning, and then I burst out like a long slumbering volcano awakened by the tectonics of the heart's crust.

“Oh, right. Yes, he’s much better now. Much better. See, he’s waving at us from over there. Alexander! You’re better now, aren’t you? Yes, he’s fabulous.”

A nervous moment passed as she examined Alexander at the far end of the bridge. The air between us trembled. The remains of my words scattered like an ash cloud around her and made her frown.

“Why is he standing all the way over there?”

“Who knows? Kids these days...they have such strange ideas. Yes...they’re just full of life...always exaggerating...you can’t believe anything they say.”

“No?” she looked surprised.

“No, no. Alexander, for example, is liable to say the first thing that pops into his head. He’s a great friend, truly he is. But he likes to trifle with the truth.”

“So in the hospital...when he said that you were—”

“No, no!” I said in alarm, the acid rain of my heart gushing out. “He’s always joking. Always having a laugh. And that’s why children simply love him. Love him to bits.”

“He doesn’t look very happy.”

I looked at Alexander. It was true. Even at that distance he cut a miserable figure. His hands in his pockets, his head hanging down, he stared at us from under his hooded jacket with an expression that suggested we had discovered the meaning of life and now refused to share it with him.

“It’s his stomach. I’m afraid Polish food doesn’t agree with him.”

“Where have you been eating?”

“Oh here and there. Do you know of any good places? We would be much obliged if...”

She recommended a number of places, and despite the fact that I was listening carefully, my mind thought of many things at once. Her eyes, for instance, smoking softly through the dusk. Her lips, pink as pearls pursed and parted sweet music from her tongue. Slowly, so starstruck was I with her face, I forgot all else. Beauty tears the heart in two: one from love, the other from fear. Alexander had cautioned me about being a slave to symmetry: “Symmetry is simply an indication of reproductive health,” he had said. “At our most primitive state we will always resort to symmetry.”

“But I’m not at my most primitive state now.”

“Yes, you are. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“My eyes are open, and my mind is clear.”

“Your stomach is brimming with cognac.”

“Nonsense. I haven’t had a drop since Paris. I also take into account grace, bearing, intelligence, voice, and compassion.”

“Compassion?”

“Yes. Our choice of partner reveals something about our deepest selves.”

“Proust?”

“Zayn. Zayn, will you remember all that?” she looked at me doubtfully.

“Hmm?” It took me a moment to snap out of my reverie. “Oh yes. I have a fantastic memory. Nothing gets away from me. Phone numbers, license plates, portentous dates in history...I still remember birth dates of friends from junior high.”

“Impressive,” she rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“Yes, for example, if you tell me your phone number I will remember it all my life. I won’t even have to try.”

She smiled politely. Perhaps it wasn’t as original as I had hoped. “There’s a place in Łazienki Park I’ve always wanted to go. I mean, if you want to.”

“We would love to,” Alexander suddenly spoke up before I could get in a word. Obviously, he didn’t have the good manners of keeping his ears closed.

“The three of us?” she said. “Y-yes. Why not? It’s a bit expensive, though.”

“The more expensive, the better!”

CHAPTER 10

As I look back on that evening it feels as if it were only yesterday. Barely a few hours ago. A few minutes even. Perhaps the moment hasn't even passed. Perhaps it will happen very soon. Just around the corner...a burning shame creeps over me when I look back. My head throbs and my cheeks run aflame. Even today. And yet, what I would give to live that night again! And again. And again. Something happens to me when I am in her presence. My mind cannot grasp her at once, but only in degrees, for to look at the sun is to go blind. The evening started slowly, but once our drinks arrived it sped up rapidly. At first, I couldn't look at her in the eye, and barely spoke two words to her throughout the appetizer and midway into the main course. I don't remember exactly at what point my inhibitions were shed, but the rest of the night went spectacularly. 'Judge a man when he is not afraid,' is my motto. The night was romantic, the food was exquisite, the music enchanting, and Aleksandra simply divine. I had so much to tell her, so much to ask her, but time never seemed to be on my side. The more I grasped for it the further it slipped away. The service too, was not up to the mark, but I let it pass. And insisting on calling the waiter "Max", no matter how expensive looking the restaurant, is no guarantee of better service. This I learned the hard way.

"Max! Another bottle of wine, my good man."

"My name is Piotr, sir."

"Piotr, indeed! Bravo! Very original. Always good to have service with a smile. Helps with digestion. Keep this up and you'll get a fat tip at the end of the night."

Alexander by contrast was more formal with the working classes. "Garçon! Another plate of fugu and make it snappy, will you. The service is shocking in this place. Wait till my father hears about this."

"Your father?" Aleksandra asked. So far she had been strangely quiet as well.

"His father owns half of Namur."

"The better half," Alexander said.

"Quite right," I said. "Do you have any idea who this gentleman's father is, Max?"

"No, sir."

"He's the Duke of Namur."

"The Count of Namur."

"But 'Duke' is higher."

"Really? Ok. The Duke of Namur!"

"And he won't stand for any of this—"

"No, he won't!" Alexander slammed the table with his hand.

"This...inertia. Energy is what's needed. Vim and vigor! Young blood!"

“Quite right!”

“Tell me, Max, have you ever seen a more beautiful woman than her in all your life?”

“No, sir.”

“Another bottle of wine, Max. God, these bottles are so small! And they’re full of air, mostly.”

“He won’t stand for it! And you better believe it! For your own sake!”

“Aleksandra, darling...you don’t mind if I call you ‘darling’, do you? Of course not. Do you mind sitting a bit more still? I mean, you’re a perfect vision of beauty, but even beauty needs to be still if it’s to be appreciated. If idols moved, how would they be worshipped? Max! Do you have any cognac by any chance? Very good. And it wouldn’t kill you to smile once in a while. The Germans have lost, you know. The war ended a long time ago. Look at this young lady sitting across from me. Look how beautiful her smile is.”

“She’s not smiling,” Alexander whispered.

“She’s not?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think she’s enjoying herself.”

“Isn’t she? Aren’t you having fun, darling? Having a good time, eh?”

“Do you think she can hear us?”

“Darling! Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.”

“No, madam. Not you. I was speaking to my girlfriend.”

“I’m not your girlfriend.”

“Well, not yet. Give me some time. What? Are you leaving already, honey? But you haven’t had desert!”

“I don’t want any desert. Excuse me.”

“No, I can’t let you go without trying the soufflé. It would be a crime to let you go without a spoonful! Please!”

“There’s no need to shout.”

“Here! Try some!”

“Keep your voice down. People are staring.”

“I will if you have a seat. There you go, sweetie. Delicious, isn’t it? What did I tell you?”

“Will you behave?”

“She doesn’t look happy.”

“Don’t go, dearest. Yes, yes. I will behave. I promise. I promise. Please sit down. What happened to the band? Why did they stop playing?”

“What band?”

“Where the music was coming from.”

“There was no music.”

“No music?”

“He won’t stand for it.”

“No, he won’t!”

“What is this? You call this a brioche! Take it back. Tell the chef it’s not fit for a dog.”

“That’s a fork, sir.”

“Whatever it is, take it away. Damn near cracked my teeth on it.”

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Don’t mind me. I’ll just sit on the ground for a while. It looks fun down here. Hey! What’s this?”

“Ouch! That’s my leg! How dare you!”

“Forgive me, madam. I had some awful brioche recently and my teeth have been itching for something soft to numb the pain. I didn’t realize—”

“Outrageous! This man bit my wife!”

“It was an accident. No harm done. Just a little nibble on the leg.”

“Look! Teeth marks!”

“It’s nothing...a love bite...”

“Someone call the police!”

“No, don’t do that. They’re busy this time of the night.”

“What was your leg doing under the table anyway?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. It’s entrapment.”

“Police!”

“I’m sorry about my friend. He’s new here, and unfamiliar with the customs. Allow me, madam. Here, take my hand. No, that’s not my hand. But you can hold on to that if you like. As you wish. It would’ve grown on you if you’d given it a chance.”

“Good God!”

“I should never have come. What was I thinking?”

“Do you know who my father is?”

“I have some idea.”

“Hup! This is some view! Come on up, darling.”

“Please, sir. Get down from the table.”

“I can see everyone from up here...”

“If you see my father, tell him to come home before the milkman comes.”

“And you’re the most beautiful of them all! Wheeeeeeeee!”

“Max! How much are they paying you? I’ll double it. All you have to do is stand on your head and drink this bottle of champagne. Do you know who my father is? Here, take a sip.”

“The whole world’s spinning...all the pretty lights! The colors! Have you ever been in love, Max? Which way is it to the men’s room? Quickly, now! Max! Which way is the...before it’s too late!...Where is...oh never mind...it’s too late.”

“Police!”

CHAPTER 11

The next thing I remember was waking face down in the wet snow of Łazienki Park. I couldn't have passed out longer than a few minutes, for when I opened my eyes I saw Aleksandra's boots churning the snow barely a foot from my face. I sprang to my feet, stumbled a few times from an attack of dizziness and the general unevenness of the ground, and then ran headlong to catch up with her. It was a lovely night. Moonbeams danced on the half-frozen river. The wind gently shook the branches of the trees and a light spray of snow scattered all over us. A crown of fine white powder glistened on her head. Snow was strewn around her like garlands tossed at the feet of a goddess.

"Wait!" I said. "You're leaving? Just like that? Don't I at least get a goodnight kiss?"

Instead of slowing down, she only quickened her step. "Leave me alone. Please. You're the rudest, most arrogant man I've ever met in my life."

"Rude? Me? But how?" I had always considered myself the paragon of gentility. Indeed, many people had commented on my refinement, and I took pride in making others, especially those beneath me, feel at ease.

"I never want to see you again!"

"But why, darling? What did I do?"

"I don't like your type. The sneering, arrogant type who thinks they're better than everyone else because they have money or connections...or whatever you think you have that others don't."

A type? Me have a type? The very idea was repulsive. I always thought I was an original...sui generis.

"You didn't have to treat the waiter like that!"

"Max?"

"His name was Piotr!"

"He was kidding...a real character, he was. Anyway, do you know how much I tipped him? Well, I used my dad's card so technically he tipped him, but still. If you had any idea—"

"He was old enough to be your father! And you treated him like a servant!"

I was taken aback by this. It had never even crossed my mind. "You know, you might be right! He looks incredible for his age. I should find out his secret. He didn't look half as wrinkly as my old man."

"And you called me your 'girlfriend'! In public!"

"Did you prefer I call you that in private first, to let you grow accustomed—"

"I have a boyfriend!"

She might as well have plunged a burning-hot poker into my chest. A boyfriend! All along I didn't dare dwell on such thoughts. Deep down I must have known it was possible, especially after Alexander's constant taunts. But for some reason I had brushed it aside. For some reason I had thought she was only meant for me. Her words sucked the air out of my lungs. They lifted me off my feet and when I fell I felt something hard and sharp sticking in my ribs. My insides weighed down as if I were made of lead, and my feet slowly sank beneath me. Everywhere I turned, darkness closed in. No! Deep down I knew she was too good for any of us. Dragged down a deep pit I struck out blindly, clutching at whatever came to hand: a rock, a pebble, a grain of sand.

"That's okay," I said. "I like a bit of competition."

At first I didn't know what had happened. There was just the blur of a hand and the buzzing sound of a dozen bees dive-bombing past my ear and then my head spun on its axis. I reeled back and had to brace myself by sticking out my hands. From the blaze of her black eyes I realized that my Lady had just slapped me. Blood rushed to my cheek and then surged in waves to my heart. What was this? What was this strange music playing in my head? The stars in the sky began to dance. "Keep still, Zayn," I told myself. "Keep still. Keep your eyes level with the horizon."

Her eyes flickered for a moment, like a flame stirred by the wind, and then quickly lowered. People often don't speak their minds for various reasons: fear of being judged, fear of following their hearts, but most of all, fear of being hurt. The heavens sighed and a sudden wind swooped down from the treetops and swept her hair across her face. I reached forward to brush it out of her eyes. But she mistook my intentions.

"No!" she cried. And again there was a blitz of bees around my head, a stunning blow, and my whole body did an about-face from the force.

To be honest I would have preferred a kiss, but women think differently nowadays. A hundred years ago a wet kiss in the snow would have been quite romantic. But modern times demand modern measures, and this was no less a thrill. It warmed me up much more than a kiss ever could.

CHAPTER 12

But that was twenty-four hours earlier and its effects were slowly wearing off. How I yearned for another tryst with her hand! Even then, as the street guide led me along Old Town, the previous night's memories made me check my stride, scattering a host of pigeons who soared high above the main square. Their supernatural grace made me stare at the sky. Not a drop of cognac sullied the arc of their flight. I wished I could join them. Raising my arms in the air I called for them to take me away.

It was bad luck after all to have met her on the bridge. My chances were dashed and she would think I was nothing more than a common drunk. Never before had I behaved so badly. Never before had I strayed so close to dishonor. And yet, I had felt something hidden from the eyes or ears. Some mystery of the universe had opened before me, something so fragile, so brief, I may have even imagined it. Only a monster or a madman would think they are loved when they are spurned. And yet, I was neither.

I admit, I thought of returning to Paris. But the idea of never seeing her again brought me to my knees, and I found myself bowing to Zygmunt's Column. A passerby, a young man, perhaps even a student, tossed five groszy at my feet. The smug twist of his face brought me cruelly to my senses. Too bad the practice of dueling had fallen out of favor. I briefly wondered if my rival would help me revive it. Like a madman I was pursuing someone who was already taken. Trying to steal someone else's girl. What had he done to deserve this? And yet Aleksandra would have to choose between us. I had no choice in the matter anymore. It was far, far too late to back away now. "Damn his stupid soul!" I cursed his luck for coming before me. What kind of man was he? A student, no doubt. Or perhaps he was an older man...a sugar daddy. No! I couldn't bear to think of her in another's arms. Pure misery! I must have been banging my head on the stone steps leading up to the Column when there was a sudden gasp and a frenzy of action beside me.

A mother was trying to protect her two little boys from a painful spectacle. She quickly drew the children into her arms, covering their eyes with her hands, and scurried them away from my vicinity. She didn't say a word but I heard her thinking: "What sort of example are you setting for our children? You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"I am!" I shouted after her. "I'm a monster! Forgive me!"

The woman picked up her boys and broke into a run, only daring to look back at me once she had reached the relative safety of a café. She shot me another glance at the threshold before ushering her children inside.

Unable to find sympathy from my kind, I lifted my voice towards the heavens. “Light-winged warblers of Warsaw! Help this poor man from going astray! What should he do? Leave or stay? Please, give me a sign!”

And they did. Luckily my mouth was closed when they replied and I didn’t swallow any of it. I wiped my eye and my cheek, and ran my fingers through my sticky hair before I got back to my feet.

Realizing that miracles did not happen every day in Warsaw, I decided to head back to my hotel.

CHAPTER 13

Perhaps it was an omen. Perhaps I should have left for Paris the same day. But I tried to be reasonable: pigeons did not have ulterior motives. Still a voice haunted my head: “The universe works in mysterious ways. Do not ignore the signs.”

To hell with signs! I shook my fist at the sky out the window, daring Heaven to do its worst. If I was going to fail, then so be it! But enough superstitions and silly nonsense. I opened a bottle of vodka from the minibar and poured myself a shot. There was a party to attend.

I have often found myself the center of attention at parties. Typically after I’ve had a few drinks. When sober, my presence or lack thereof is usually unnoticed by friends and classmates. Jekyll is far less fun than Hyde. When one of our lecturers was admitted to hospital and everyone had signed a get-well card, no one invited me to write a few words as well. I only found out about it when I went to see the old man in hospital myself and saw the card on his bedside table. It was lying open on its side and I saw every name in my class. Except mine. The comments were stupid as usual. ‘Best wishes’ and ‘Speedy recovery’ and ‘See you in class soon’ were the sentiments of the day. The usual stuff. Someone had quoted a passage from the bible. Too bad the old man was an atheist. He saw me staring at it. He reached out and picked it up. Perhaps in an attempt to spare me the embarrassment of asking, he started to propose it himself:

“Would you like to...”

I shrank back in horror, raising a hand up instinctively as if to ward off an evil spirit. “No!” I almost shouted, not knowing what I was saying.

“Well...” he looked away, clearly embarrassed, and tried to change the subject, putting the card back as gently as he could, as if it were some rare Rembrandt.

I didn’t stay for long after that. How could I? I promised to see him again after my exams and then left. My eyes never left the ground until I got home. I consoled myself with the thought that the card, given his condition, was pointless. Less than a month later I was proved right. But pointing this out to my peers ensured I made little progress socially.

Given this awkward history, I have always been wary of parties. Worried that I will do or say the wrong thing I usually end up in a corner of the room with a soft drink in my hand, making strong eye contact with the carpet. As a rule I was rarely invited to parties back in Paris; as for open invitations I liked to think I was sparing everyone the discomfort of my acquaintance by not turning up.

But I was new here and they had yet to reach this inevitable conclusion. I still had a few more days grace. So I took care with my costume; I did not want to stand out. The devil is not so original a figure as to draw unnecessary attention, nor is it inconspicuous enough to be a bore.

Alexander, being something of a history buff, and inspired by the many posters of Pope John Paul II on Warsaw's streets, assumed the mantle of the Holy See.

We made a fine pair. We took some rum to fortify ourselves and raise the spirits. I had washed my hands several times over the last twenty-four hours so the address I had jotted down was a little blurred. But the taxi driver, an elderly man in a beret and sunglasses, had no trouble reading it.

Everyone was dressed very soberly. That's what I like about the Poles. Even at a fancy-dress party, where you would expect people to be dressed as goblins and wizards, vampires and superheroes...but not the Poles. They were very discrete and elegant. Black seemed to be the color of the day. The men stuck to suits and the women generally wore knee-length skirts. I pointed this out to Alexander who usually misses these finer details.

"Lookie!" I said. "Some of these students look rather long in the tooth."

"Must be postgraduates."

"Hmm. I've heard that Europeans don't age very well."

"No, you're thinking of Australians."

"What's the difference?"

The foresight of having a few drinks before coming to the party was now paying off. We had no inhibitions in joining the melee. If we had any impediments to social intercourse, it was our costume. Alexander's miter was a tad too big for his head and kept falling over his eyes, and my false beard was a little itchy. But he used his papal ferula wisely; sometimes as a walking stick, and sometimes to playfully lift the skirts of any female he took more than a paternal liking to.

"God bless you," he said solemnly whenever the object of his playfulness took offence.

It was not an easy task to restrain him. Every minute he threatened to run off toward some unsuspecting and unaccompanied young woman.

"Keep still!" I whispered fiercely. "Your holiness forgets his place. Show some dignity, for God's sake!"

"You're hurting me!" he almost shouted, drawing the glances of passersby. But I did not want to let him loose on some hapless debutante, so I ignored his protests and dragged him across the room. It wasn't that long since glasnost so the sight of the Pope and the Devil jostling each other drew comment. I hustled him over to the refreshments table, hoping that some food would distract him. But the catering was rudimentary. Apart from a bottle of white wine and some wafers there was nothing else to be seen.

"Psst..." Alexander tried to make small talk with a woman in a black veil. "Want to know a secret? I'm the Pope. Don't tell anyone."

The woman gave a short cry of surprise, turned abruptly and bolted.

"She was probably a lesbian anyway. Next time I'll try in Polish. Do you speak any Polish?"

"Not a word. How about you?"

"I picked some up from a Russian on the train."

"Really? That was clever of you. Let's hear it."

"Chcę ożenić się z pana córką."

"Finish your food first. I can't understand a single word when your mouth is full."

"My mouth isn't full. That's how they talk."

"What rot. Well, what does it mean?"

"I don't remember."

"What was the point in learning that?"

"I intend on trying it out on the natives."

"You'll get yourself killed, that's what you'll do."

"Besides, ninety percent of all communication is non-verbal. Try these biscuits. They're delicious. And the wine. Honestly, I would have thought there would be more food. But the economy is still developing, as they say." He sighed and then filled his mouth with half a dozen wafers.

There was a stiffness about the guests that we could not quite place. There was an organ player on a balcony and either our Polish was at fault or her English was, but she absolutely refused to entertain requests. She was a wrinkled old lady and her eyes seemed rather animated behind her thick glasses.

"Do you notice something unusual about this fancy-dress party?"

"There's a distinct lack of music."

"That is true. I have noticed that myself. But also, it seems, that we are the only guests who have taken trouble over their costumes."

"Hmm. I think you're right. And the belly dancers have yet to arrive. Oh, there's someone in a priest's robe. Hello, Father! I like your hat!"

"It's a stupid hat. Yours is much better. Do we have any more rum?"

Alexander slipped out a flask from his mozzetta. He was about to pass it to me when he changed his mind and decided to take a sip. It turned out to be a rather large sip and I could see he would finish the entire contents if I did not intervene.

"Don't finish it all, you pig!"

Luckily he broke my fall, and I wasn't the least bit hurt. But Alexander moaned awfully and limped for the rest of the night.

"Hi!" said a voice behind us. We turned to see a young girl with blonde braids dressed from top to toe in black. "Are you lost? You're Americans, aren't you?"

“We’re citizens of the world. The entire world is our country.”

“Hey, I saw her first!”

“She’s underage,” I whispered.

“This is my last night in Warsaw. Don’t try to stop me!”

“She looks like she’s fourteen!”

“I’m sixteen.”

“See? She can take care of herself.” Alexander pried open my fingers and liberated his arm.

“What’s your name, pussycat?”

The girl looked at the gold band on his finger that Alexander had so kindly offered to be kissed. It was a plastic replica of the Fisherman’s Ring. I slapped his hand away before the girl could test its authenticity.

“Roksana,” she said.

“That’s a lovely name.”

The two chatted harmlessly for a while; Alexander offering his hand to the girl from time to time and I firmly deflecting it.

“When’s the magician coming?” he asked.

“Magician?”

“Yes, that old man has been waiting very patiently in the box.”

Roksana stared at him blankly. Maybe they didn’t have magicians in Poland.

“You know! So he can cut the box up or drive swords through him or whatever.”

“That’s Mr. Nowak. He had cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Had? Ah, the miracles of modern science! I must meet him. He will be an excellent specimen. Please introduce me. I will be right back, Zayn. Let’s go. Lead the way.”

I saw that Alexander’s intentions were pedagogical after all and they left with my blessings. Only to return a few moments later.

“Not very talkative, Mr. Nowak. Even after I sprinkled holy water over him.”

“Poles, in general, are a quiet lot. Not very communicative, so I’ve noticed.” I turned to the girl. “Do you know an ‘Aleksandra’ by any chance?”

“I know...at least three. It’s a common name.”

“This one is quite uncommon. She has dark hair...dark eyes...very beautiful. She’s studying chemistry at Warsaw University.”

“I know an Aleksandra who’s studying pharmacy at the Medical University.”

“No, no. It can’t be her.”

“She has dark hair and dark eyes. Very beautiful too.”

"I knew it! Only you could mistake chemistry for pharmacy. They're not the same, you know. How did you get that idea anyway?"

"Never mind. Are you sure it's her?"

"Yes, my brother was in her class... Why? Do you like her as well?"

"He's crazy about her. Followed her all the way from Paris."

"I know where she lives."

"Where?"

"What do I get in return?"

"What do you want?"

She looked at each of us in turn, and then bit her thumb. "Can I have...anything?"

"Well, within reason."

"I want...no, I shouldn't tell you."

"Go on."

"No."

"For God's sake! Just tell us!"

"Ok...I'm having some bad ideas...about the three of us."

"Three of us?"

"Yes. You...me...and him."

"I don't understand. What bad ideas?"

CHAPTER 14

“Yes, what bad ideas?” said a voice in a strong Slavic accent. It was a young man in a suit, suddenly standing beside me. With his head shaved to the bone, thick neck covered in tattoos and muscles that his collar could not hide, he looked the sort to whom bad ideas were second nature, and now wanted to be in on the latest scheme.

“This is my brother, Jakub,” the girl said.

I offered to shake his hand. But he declined the invitation. Perhaps he did no commerce with the Devil.

“He likes Aleksandra.”

“You?” Jakub said, turning an appraising eye over me. He himself was worthy of appraisal. He had a broad, hardened face that appeared to have hit many obstacles in its relatively brief life. His large and powerful looking hands suggested he had posed one or two obstacles in others’ lives as well.

“‘Like’ is not the right word. ‘Love’ is much closer, but even that falls short of how I feel about her.”

“You are a very brave man. Or maybe you are a very stupid man.”

“Well, at least I’m a man.”

“For now.”

“I love living in the moment. Don’t you?”

“Yes. Sometimes I break people’s legs. Sometimes I just break their nose.”

“You must have lots of friends.”

“Quiet! Mrs. Nowak is speaking.”

The lady in the veil had stood up in the front of the room and began to address the party in Polish. She hadn’t seemed to be the sentimental type when she had brushed off Alexander earlier in the night, yet now she stopped from time to time to apply a handkerchief to the corner of her eyes. After she finished, the man in the priest’s robe came and sat her down on a bench.

“What are you doing here?” Jakub said.

“We were hoping to find Aleksandra.”

“You will not find her here. Her family does not know Nowak.”

“How well do you know her?”

“Mrs. Nowak?”

“Aleksandra.”

"I know her since we were kids, since she could walk. I have been to her birthdays, school plays...concerts...every time she was happy or sad I was there. I watch her grow from a child to a young woman."

"You grew up together?"

"Yes...no. She is from a small town near Czech border. Hmm...she is actually from a small village near this town." He cracked his knuckles casually. "You will stay away from her."

"Why?"

"Because it will be good for your health."

"What's wrong with her? Is she sick?"

"No. I don't want you to see her."

Perhaps it wasn't my health he was concerned about. "Are you her father?"

He moved closer to me until our noses were almost touching. "You are lucky there is a priest here."

"That's just Alexander. Don't mind him. He wasn't even baptized."

A vein on his forehead bulged. It was as if there was a green monster trapped inside desperate to burst out.

"There is an old man in jail. He walks with a limp. He will always walk with a limp. It is because of me he walks like that. He will come out of jail one day, and I will be waiting for him. He is lucky he is alive."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know why he has a limp?"

"I don't understand why *he's* in jail."

"You don't believe me? You think I'm lying, yes?"

"Are you her boyfriend?"

"No. I protect her."

"From what?"

"From people like you."

"Rest assured, there's no one else like me. I wouldn't allow it. By the way, do you know Aleksandra?"

"Are you stupid? I told you I grew up with her."

"Oh, that was you! I thought it was someone else. Finally, some music! A bit somber though, don't you think? Where have I heard it before? DUM...DUM...Da-DUM, DUM...Da DUM...Da DUM...Da DUM....Have you ever been slapped by a woman before? No, I didn't think so. Then you would know what it feels like to be loved by a woman. But not just any woman, mind

you. *The* woman. Till then you're just dreaming, hoping, wishing...to love is to suffer. Who said that?"

"You did."

"Did I? I don't remember. It sounds too good to have been mine. Maybe there's a cure to this madness. I can die for her."

"Maybe you will."

The next thing I knew I was on all fours, trying desperately to hold back tears. He had rapped me in the nether-lands with the back of his hand. A casual flick of the wrist. An old football trick.

"Next time I break your legs. If I see you with her then there will be a problem." After giving me a long, hard stare, he finally turned and walked away.

I stayed on the ground for about a minute, taking in deep breaths. The pain was excruciating.

"I'm sorry about my brother," Roksana said. "He's very protective. Also, he doesn't like foreigners very much."

"Put some ice on it," Alexander suggested. "It'll reduce the swelling."

"No, he should lie down and elevate his legs. Let the blood flow to the groin."

"Shouldn't he massage the area to help increase circulation?"

"Zayn, can you hear me? Do you want some ice? Or would you like a massage?....She lives on Wilcza Street. I can show you if you like."

"You two go ahead," Alexander said. "I think the lady in the veil just winked at me."

CHAPTER 15

The first thing I did when I woke up the next morning was to go to her – I had to apologize for my behavior, even if she could never forgive me. Breakfast was far from my mind since I had been vomiting steadily throughout the night. After a quick shower and changing into clothes that Alexander had lent me, I took the elevator down to the lobby. As I went down a strange thought struck me. For some reason I felt she was in the lobby waiting for me.

But the only people doddering around were a few elderly people heading towards the breakfast buffet. I wrapped myself up tightly and approached the revolving doors. Something made me slow down. The idea that she might enter the doors the same time as myself moved me deeply. But no. No one else got in the doors besides me. Perhaps she would be on the footpath outside, under the hotel canopy, waiting for me. She would drop her eyes shyly as soon as she saw me, but then would be the first to speak.

“How long did they lock you up for?”

“Oh, just overnight.”

A long pause. She would tug at one of the buttons on her coat. “I’m sorry about what happened.”

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry. I behaved terribly.”

“You must think I’m an awful person. I wasn’t feeling myself that day. I hadn’t expected the night to turn out that way.”

Here was the girl whose feet I should have been groveling at, apologizing to me.

“It was the best night of my life.”

She would look up sharply. Her eyes pouring over my face, trying to detect any sarcasm behind my words. She would not find any.

“It’s not every day that a man is slapped by a beautiful woman. Twice!”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have.”

“I hope there will be a third time.”

“There won’t.” The finality in her voice was disappointing. But I wouldn’t dare argue with her.

Her eyes would be fixed on the ground, and I would be staring at the button on her coat she would be fiddling with. The spell would finally be broken by an elderly couple passing between us to enter the hotel.

“Have you had lunch? Maybe you’d like to...”

“The last time we ate together you ended up in jail.”

“If that’s the price to pay, so be it.”

Her laughter always reminded me of a summer spring; water running over smooth pebbles, the green flash of a dragonfly, the sun hitting the stream as it falls over a precipice, a rainbow rising from the mist...but when her laughter froze, the spring dried up.

“Did they mistreat you? I’m sure it wasn’t fun. And all because of me.”

“Oh, it was too much fun...a riot.”

“How long are you in Warsaw for?”

“I’m not sure. There’s a train that leaves this afternoon.”

A sudden pang of disappointment would flit across her face.

“Alexander is taking it. I will be here for longer. Maybe a few more days.”

“Look,” she would say, tearing herself away from the button on her coat. “Can we just be friends? Just friends?”

It was a theory of Alexander’s that friendship between men and women was impossible. Naturally, I would not mention it then.

“Yes. Of course.”

Having held her breath so far, only then would she breathe easily again.

The porter who stopped the revolving doors stared at me. “This way, sir. Please.” He helped me out. The cold air outside filled my lungs. I caught a few snowflakes on my tongue. That would do for breakfast. And lunch. Dinner too.

When I arrived at the corner of Wilcza Street, I saw Aleksandra leaving her apartment. I called out her name but my voice was drowned by the traffic. Ah, the pleasure of seeing her again, even in a crowd, across the street, between passing cars, after raising my eyes from the cold ground. She seemed to be in a rush. She darted off towards a bus stop and caught a waiting bus. I too ran to catch it. It was crowded on board and for a while I couldn’t see her anywhere. Finally, I saw her getting off at the Złote Tarasy complex.

Once again, I lost her among the crowd near the entrance, and after five minutes of mad searching spotted her halfway up an escalator to the second floor. There she met a group of her friends. One of them I recognized from the train. I reached the second floor soon myself and headed straight for them. She held a certain sway over her friends, and they seemed anxious to impress her. All of them wanted to speak to her at once. They went from shop to shop, looking at dresses and shoes and winter hats.

One of the other girls saw me first. She went over and whispered something to Aleksandra. She turned casually and caught me out of the corner of her eye but pretended not to see me. The rest of the girls joined them and they began whispering among themselves. They were obviously talking about me. The debate ended and they went back to browsing clothes. They had decided to ignore me.

Not one of them deigned to acknowledge my presence. A simple nod of the head would have sufficed, but even that was not forthcoming. Hoisting my eyebrows and tilting back my head (a habitual greeting from my childhood days) were wasted on them. They continued shopping as if I were just another mannequin in a store window. And when they passed me not even a glance was spared. She looked at some point six inches above my head and a thousand miles into the distance.

“I’m...I’m sorry...”

But she gave no sign of hearing me.

The coldness of her manner shook me. I had not planned to encounter this. A burning sensation lit up my cheeks. I felt feverish and began to sweat. I walked away quickly without looking back. Every turn I made my path seemed to be blocked by couples holding hands. Warsaw seemed to be full of them. They hurled me headlong to the men’s room, where I burst into a cubicle and locked myself inside. There I stood still vanquished. As far removed from her and the light of Heaven, my mind rolled in endless thoughts of shame and lost paradise. Oh a thousand slaps were better than this single act of disdain! The events of the past few days finally took their toll. It was too much to handle. Blank walls on all sides blurred my vision, and drew tears from my eyes. At last, in one corner, I found where love’s hope had left its mark: a heart pierced by Cupid’s passing shot. And at its core were two names carved in the wood by a daring hand. (Love’s stirrings can strike us in the unlikeliest of places). Did Staś smile or sigh his work to see? And did Izabela know and return his love? Was their ending tragic, or happy? I wished them luck, something all lovers need, and taking a deep breath left my cell. I washed my face, and marched back into the mall. What was I doing in Warsaw? A foreign land, a foreign tongue...not a friendly face in sight.

As I entered the atrium I saw one of her friends from the train, Marta, walking past. She had obviously just arrived and was now looking for the rest of the gang. I took her arm and pulled her to one side.

“Oh, it’s you. What do you want?”

“Only the pleasure of your company.”

That confused her. “Me?” she looked genuinely surprised. “Why me?”

“Your hair!” I said. “You’ve changed it!”

Her hand shot up to her ponytail. She tried to suppress a smile but couldn’t quite manage it.

After that things got much easier. I invited her to have coffee with me. She said she couldn’t, and that Aleksandra and the others were probably waiting for her. I offered to help her find them. Then I made a casual remark that revealed my impatience of speaking to her from the first time we had met. She looked away quickly but not before I saw her cheeks redden under her strawberry blonde hair. By the time we passed her friends on the concourse she was so absorbed in my stories

that she didn't even see them. I bought her a soda and we walked as she drank since she didn't want to stay in one place.

My jokes grew sillier and her laughter grew louder. One particular joke about the tensile strength of a carrot left her helpless. Her face went red and tears streamed down uncontrollably as she convulsed with laughter. People turned to see what the commotion was about.

I knew she was watching us. I could feel my ears burning and my cheek on fire. Moving closer to Marta I leaned over her and took a sip of her drink. A reflection in a store window revealed that Aleksandra was not far behind us.

I casually put my arm around Marta's waist and led her away from the food court. We were hot from walking around, so we took off our coats. I convinced her to go to the movies with me. It was the longest and most boring film I had ever seen. I talked the whole way through. She laughed the whole way through. Twice the usher had to come and remind us that we were disturbing the other patrons. When the movie ended and we came out we had to brush the popcorn out of our hair: the people sitting behind us hadn't appreciated my humor.

There was a video arcade outside the movie theatre and we made our way towards it. I noticed Aleksandra by herself at a pinball machine. I kept picking out pieces of popcorn from Marta's hair. She kept finding specks of dust on my sleeve. After passing several games, I picked one which was directly behind the pinball machine. It was a game where we had to shoot aliens for some reason. We were both terrible at it. Aleksandra had her back to us but I made sure she heard every word we said.

"Come to Rome with me."

Marta laughed. "Why Rome?"

"You're right. Rome's terrible this time of year. What about Rio? The weather will be perfect. You'll come back with a tan."

"When do we leave?"

"Right now!"

"What about my studies? I guess they're not important."

"Education is overrated. What will you do with a degree? Work? Work is for slaves. I've promised to never work for a single day in my life."

"Not everyone can afford to be lazy."

"Between laziness and slavery, I choose laziness."

"I would choose slavery...for the right ruler." Something crawled behind her face. She shook her head abruptly as if to toss the hair out of her eyes.

I felt my skin tingling under my clothes. A live current seemed to pass down my arms and legs.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Cuba,” she said finally.

“Fine. Rio, then Havana.”

“Will you teach me to swim?”

“You can’t swim?”

“I can. But not very well.”

“It’s ok. I know CPR.”

“I don’t believe you. Prove it.”

“You want me to show you? Fine. It’s like this. First of all, you have to press down on the chest. Like this. Then you have to blow into the mouth...”

“No! Stop it!” She giggled.

“I haven’t even started!”

“Zayn! People are watching...”

“Let them.”

Aleksandra suddenly turned and half ran, half walked out of the arcade. A few seconds later I followed.

“Aleksandra!”

Hearing her name made her go even faster. I finally caught up with her near the escalator. When I took her arm she shook herself free. She took a few more steps and then swayed dangerously, as if attacked by a sudden spell of dizziness. I quickly took her in my arms. When she looked at me her black eyes were blazing with anger and tears. She didn’t say a word. The sound of our heavy breathing seemed to grow louder and louder. I drew closer and closer until our lips brushed. Then I felt her pressing against me and her lips opened under mine.

When I pulled away from her, her eyes were closed. Her long black lashes rested on her cheek. They flickered and then opened. Her eyes were burning feverishly and her hands felt like ice.

“I...I have to go,” she said. She turned around and I let her go. I followed her with my gaze, watching her brown jacket sail down the escalator until it disappeared behind a fountain.

When I turned around, I saw Marta standing there. Her eyes fell, then she turned and went back into the garish lights of the arcade.

CHAPTER 16

Alexander's train was scheduled to leave at 1:40 pm. We got there with enough time to talk about the events of the previous night. It turned out that Ms. Nowak, although recently single, had not been receptive to Alexander's overtures. In fact, she had brained him with her handbag. And then he had been thrown out of the party by several drunk revelers. I tried to comfort him by recounting my own adventure from that morning.

"You kissed her!" Alexander said in disbelief.

"I kissed her or she kissed me...I'm not sure what happened."

"Maybe it was an accident?"

"No, I don't think so. It was too long and deep."

"Well, that changes everything," he stroked his chin thoughtfully, aiming his gaze out the window of his carriage. "Did you tell her that you love her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I...I don't know. I didn't have time."

"You fool! You stupid fool! You shouldn't have let her go without telling her how you feel!" He jumped up and began to pace his compartment with his hands behind his back. "I have to teach you everything!" he glared at me. "And what will you do now? When will you see her again?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me one thing, Zayn. What exactly do you know?"

"I know that I love her."

"Well, it's a bit too late for that! Now she thinks you're some kind of Casanova...a Don Juan!"

"Don't make me sick!"

"You've brought this on your own head. You have nothing to complain."

"What should I do?"

"Take my advice. Buy a ticket back to Paris. Forget about her. Forget about the whole thing. It was never meant to be. You managed to steal a kiss. Wonderful! A great memory! Some story to tell posterity." He glanced at his watch. "Now, unless you'd like to spend winter in Moscow, I suggest you detrain most nimbly."

We shook hands and I was off the train in two seconds. I didn't even wait for his train to leave.

CHAPTER 17

Finally! My father had gone ahead and cancelled my credit card! I found out at a jeweler's in Nowy Świat. The salesgirl shook her head and coldly announced to everyone in the store that the card was cancelled. Very well. I opened my wallet to see if I could pay in cash.

An older woman, a supervisor perhaps, came out from a back room and addressed the salesgirl in Polish. I didn't understand a word but I knew exactly what they were saying.

"Does the gentleman have an alternative method of payment?"

"He is looking for it right now."

"Well, serve another customer while he looks."

"Next please," the salesgirl said; a phrase even I could understand with my limited grasp of Polish.

I realized then I was holding up the line and stepped aside for a couple behind me. After emptying out my wallet, I found that I did not have enough cash for the ring. I remembered passing a pawnbroker's a few blocks back so I asked the salesgirl to hold the item for me and then rushed off. My grandfather's watch had been in the family for more than fifty years and I tried to haggle the price as much as his memory would allow me. I felt cheated though as I thought it would be worth much more. Anyway, it was enough. When I came back to the jeweler's I had to wait in line again like a schoolboy. My turn came, and I put the notes and a few coins on the counter, and tried to appear bored by the whole situation.

On my way to Wilcza Street, I passed a travel agency. There were posters of the Colosseum, the Eiffel Tower, Copacabana Beach, the Taj Mahal, and other landmarks on the window. The entire world danced in front of my eyes. Even the people passing by seemed to be readying themselves to fly away somewhere. It was true, I knew nothing about her. But it was enough. I had a lifetime to find out the rest.

When I knocked on her door a middle-aged woman opened it. This must be her aunt, I thought. Roksana had told me about her. A handsome woman in her forties, with dark shiny eyes. She welcomed me warmly. She led me to the drawing room and asked me to take a seat while she fetched Aleksandra. It was a small apartment, tidy and furnished in good taste.

She returned a few minutes later, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry," she said. "She's not feeling well."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope it's not serious." I stood up and made my way to go, feeling a stabbing sensation in my chest.

As I was leaving, faint notes of music floated into the drawing room. Neither of us could help hearing it. It was from a piano. Her aunt smiled meekly and asked me to visit them again.

When I got outside, I walked around the building and tried to find her window. The curtains were drawn and nothing could be seen inside. Across the street, there was a tall tree, against which I decided to lean and wait. In less than a minute, the curtain opened a crack, and I thought I saw her face. But the curtains quickly fell in place again. Instead of freezing to death outside, I thought I would risk my fate from a third-floor window. There was a steel pipe running along the side of the building, which I dragged myself up. The work did me good and I could feel my blood moving again. Once I was on the third floor, I had to go past two windows before I got to hers. In the second window I noticed a large, potbellied man sitting on a sofa without a shirt on, as if it were the height of summer, watching TV with a can of beer in his hand. He saw me cross his window but if he was at all interested he did not show it. He just took another sip of his beer and continued to watch a game of darts.

Aleksandra's window, luckily, was open. A gentle nudge is all it took to swing open, and I slipped in feet first. The next thing I felt was a thunderous crash about the ears and my head felt woozy from a terrific blow. I have taken many hits to the head over the years, from fists and boots and even hardcover textbooks, but nothing compared to the assault I suffered then. Everything went black for a few seconds and when I could see again I found myself on my knees.

"Aleksandra!" a voice cried from the distance, followed by a string of syllables that my sixth sense and limited Polish grasped as: "Is everything alright?" or words to that effect.

"Tak, ciocia," a voice very close to me replied. "I'm fine."

"What was that noise?"

"It was just my lamp. I dropped it on the ground and it broke."

Whatever excuse was made, it must have satisfied the faraway voice, since we didn't hear from it again.

"And out popped your genie," I said, in English, pulling myself to a sitting position. "I will grant you three wishes."

"For a start, you can get out of my room. What the hell are you doing here anyway? I thought you were a burglar! I should be calling the police!"

"You're not still mad at me, are you?"

"Please, get out."

"Sure, sure. Just as soon as my head feels better. I think I'll need a few stitches. Five or six at least."

"You're not bleeding anywhere."

"It's the mental trauma I'm more worried about."

A long pause ensued. She watched me wince and rub my head vigorously. I looked up at her.

"So you like me, huh?"

“What a question!”

“Admit it, you like me.”

“You’re the person who likes me! Climbing through my window in the middle of the night!”

“The sun hasn’t even set. I met a friend of yours...Roksana. She says you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“She’s just a kid. What does she know?”

“Surprisingly, a lot.”

“He lives overseas. That’s why she hasn’t seen him.”

I shook my head sadly. “Long distance relationships don’t work.”

“How would you know? I guess you’re an expert in relationships...it didn’t take you very long before you had your hands all over Marta.”

“Aha! So it worked. Yes, jealousy is a beautiful thing.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I wasn’t jealous. Why are men always so vain?”

“You’re blushing.”

“No...I have a pink undertone.”

I reached for my pocket. “Marry me,” I said as I offered her the ring.

She stared at me for so long I thought she hadn’t heard me. So I asked her again. She burst out laughing. “Is this a joke?”

“Never, lady, have I been so serious.”

“I think I hit you too hard over the head. I really am sorry.”

“Not at all...I’ve wanted to...ever since—”

“You’ll have a large bruise in the morning.”

“All the better to remember you by.”

“Put some ice on it. I would give you some myself but my aunt is asleep. I don’t want to wake her.”

“I heard her just a minute ago.”

“I have class in the morning so if you don’t mind...”

“So...so...you’re not...”

“You need to rest your poor head.” She helped me to my feet and led me gently to her front door. “Go home and sleep.”

“When can I see you again?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “What for?”

“Well...I...It’s important! I must see you again! There’s so much I have to tell you.”

“Sure. When you’re feeling better.”

“But I feel better now!”

“Zayn,” she said as she reached out and briefly touched my arm. “Please take care of yourself. And don’t drink so much.” Then she shut the door in my face.

CHAPTER 18

Ever since I could remember, people did not take me very seriously...until it was too late. Perhaps I wasn't aggressive enough. Maybe I lacked those powers of persuasion that make most mortals swoon.

It was a long walk through the dark night back to my hotel. My heart was still hammering in my chest when I got back to my room. Maybe it was the ring she didn't like. A solitaire diamond ring in eighteen carat white gold...what was not to like? Sure, there were even more expensive ones on the market (I remember one the size of a pigeon's egg) but this one was the most beautiful I could find.

I began to pace my room. Back and forth, back and forth, with all the monotony of a pendulum. My already bruised head took a knock now and then from the sloped ceiling. But the real pain was elsewhere.

"What for?" I asked aloud. But no one replied. So I tried again. Louder this time. "What for? What the hell do you mean, 'what for'? Did you kiss me, or did I just imagine it? Ok, so you need more time. I admit, it was a surprise. But why take it so lightly? Why turn it into a joke? So time is what you need! Fine! Take as much time as you want. There's no rush. It was just an idea. A spur of the moment thought. I wasn't thinking things through...I haven't been myself lately. Somehow, I'm never myself in your presence. Maybe you've noticed already? Don't answer. There's no need. It's not for you to answer. Everything's fine. And I was proposing Rio just as friends. Yes, I know I asked Marta, but it was meant for you...it's quite common for friends to travel together. You went to Paris with friends recently. It would have been no different. Of course, you've known them for longer...but what of it? Time is such a relative concept. A year on earth can be five minutes in space. There's no need to get stuck on time. It's overrated. So what remains? Nothing! Free will! That's all it is. You're free to decide any time you want. Come. Go. Stay for a whole week or return after two days. Nothing's impossible. It's only our imagination that limits us."

A knock at the door interrupted me.

"Yes?" I said. But there was no answer. I went over and opened the door, but there was no one there. The corridor was empty. I shut the door and returned to my pacing around the room. I wished it were Alexander. He would know what to do. Well, no, he wouldn't. But still.

She had barely glanced at the ring. Yet, she had stopped breathing. I could feel it. And there had been something in her eyes. Something I couldn't explain. Fear perhaps. Or maybe shame. Yes, I wasn't worthy of her. Not worth the nail on her little finger. Why did I think crawling through her bedroom window would be a good idea? Was I thinking at all? What idiocy! A grown man acting like he was fourteen! She should have hit me even harder, to knock some sense into me.

Again there was a knock at the door. This time I almost ripped the handle off so fiercely did I open it.

A small figure in a woolen hat peered back at me.

“You! What are you doing here?”

“The train was cancelled. They say there might be a war.” Alexander brushed past me and came into my room.

“Who says? What war? With whom?”

“Haven’t you been reading the papers? With Russia, of course!”

“They’ve been saying that for years. It’ll never amount to anything.”

“They cancelled the train, didn’t they?”

“So you say.”

He went on in some detail about the build-up of Russian troops along the Baltic nations and in the Kaliningrad exclave.

“The Iskanders will have Warsaw and Berlin easily within range.”

“Well, if there is a war, there is no place in Europe that will be safe.”

“It’s better to be in Paris than Warsaw.”

“It’s better to be in Rio than Paris.”

“Will you come with me? I’m leaving for Paris in the morning.”

“I asked her to marry me.”

“You what?” he almost screamed. “And then? And then what happened? What did she say?” He couldn’t suppress a smile. A slight, sarcastic twinge at the corner of his mouth. That was enough for me.

“She agreed.”

“No! Really? But...but...so quick? How is that possible? You’re kidding.”

I shook my head. And perhaps it was a trick of the light but for a moment I thought he was disappointed.

“But is that wise? You barely know her...you don’t know her at all. You said so yourself. You must be mad! The both of you! Have you thought things through? Do you know what this means? It’s for life! For the rest of your life! Tell me I’m dreaming. Tell me this is your idea of a joke. What were you thinking? You’re a fool. Yes, nothing but a fool!”

Then, all of a sudden, as if remembering something long forgotten, his face lit up. He marched over and shook my hand. “I knew it! I always knew she liked you! I just didn’t think it would be...so soon! The way she would look at you...it would make any man jealous. I’m happy for you, my friend.”

“Do you mean it? I mean, you always thought she liked me?”

“Of course! You’d be blind not to notice a thing like that.”

“Ever since the train?”

“I remember in the dining car...there were some kind of...I don’t know...electric sparks bouncing off you two.”

“You said she would cause me great unhappiness and pain.”

“I meant after your wedding,” he patted me on the shoulder. “You’re not single any more...a family man! When is your wedding, by the way?”

“Hmm? The wedding?...We haven’t decided yet.”

“You know I’ve always been there for you. Came to Poland for you. Taken blows for you. Gone to hospital because of you. All without a single complaint.”

“Yes, yes. You’ll be my best man.”

“Excellent! I’ll get a chance to wear my new tuxedo. I wonder who her bridesmaid will be.”

“Probably not Marta.”

“Eh?”

“It will probably be the redhead.”

“Ah yes! She’s a stunner. I actually preferred her friend, you know, the blonde one...but not bad. Not bad at all. You know what they say about the best man and the bridesmaid, don’t you?...Have you told your parents?”

“No, not yet. I wanted to surprise them later on. You’re the only one who knows. So keep it to yourself.”

He looked pleased. “Ah, young love! I remember when I was your age—”

“I’m four months older than you.”

“I was too busy to settle down...you’re planning to have kids, aren’t you?” Then a sly look crept over him. He rubbed his hands together and threw me a sidelong glance. “Ah! Now I know the rush in getting married! Was it only a kiss, or something else as well?”

“What! Of course, it was only a kiss!”

“Come now. We’re old friends. I’m your best man...we’re probably even best friends. You can tell me.”

“She’s not the sort to...not before marriage.”

“Well, mistakes have known to happen. Even in the best of people.”

I assured him there had been no mistake and showed him the door.

“Calm down! I was joking! You’ll make the perfect couple. A white wedding...a marriage of true minds...before you know it there will be a bunch of little Zayns, about this high, running around, turning your world upside down.”

I thanked him and he left. I started thinking of children myself. Even the snatches of a fire truck wailing outside sounded a lot like a newborn's cry.

Then the door slammed.

CHAPTER 19

Alexander left for Paris the next morning, but I didn't see him off. He had knocked on my door to say goodbye. I saw the shadows of his feet under the door and heard his restless breathing. After knocking a few more times he finally turned away. His footsteps died down the long, empty corridor. Then there was silence. I went back to bed and lay there all day. Too tired to sleep, too weak to get up.

But I must have dozed off since I woke with a start. My heart was thumping like the bass at the Rex Club in Paris. Falling! I had dreamt that I was falling from a high window. The ledge was only a few inches wide and I had slipped. I would have broken my neck for sure. What idiocy had made me climb up three floors? I hadn't given it a second thought then. But now I lay paralyzed with fear. All it would have taken was a single slip...and then a long fall. My shirt was damp with sweat so I got up and opened the window. How long I stared into the night, straining my eyes till they filled with tears, a single wish burning on my lips. The same wish I had on the train only then I had not dared to speak of it. How many other fools must have been staring into the distance, making the same wish as me? There is no shortage of horizons to scan; no shortage of fools either. There was no moon that night so I brought my eyes down to earth and on the sidewalk across the road. An old man pushed a shopping cart along. It was full of bags and carpets and glass bottles that clinked in the crisp night air. A streetlight threw his crooked shadow against a wall. Cold and shivering, his chin tucked into his chest, battling the fierce wind that hit his exposed head, he fought on. Till he turned a corner and disappeared from sight. His shadow lingered for a while, and then it too vanished into the night.

Persevere and you shall be rewarded! The revelation blinded me. Within the hour, within a second, in my mind's eye I was outside her window. A faint yellow light came from behind the curtain. She was inside! A corner of the curtain had been pulled back carelessly, some would say deliberately, and now gave the slightest view — a barest glimpse — of the room (and a portion of the beamed ceiling). But it was enough. People have gone to heaven for less. There are some things, some gestures in life for which one cannot thank in words, but simply close one's eyes and bask in the warm gush flooding through the heart. Even today its memory stirs the dying embers of my love. How much that single, silent, act of charity meant to me no one can ever know. Least of all her. But even for that I am grateful. She never had any need to know. Does the moon know what hope it holds for the prisoner in his cell? Can the rain know how sweet it tastes to the fading flower in the desert? It had been a long time since someone sent such a kindness my way. I saw her hand behind it. Whose else could it have been? After waiting for what felt like a lifetime my patience was finally rewarded. Her shadow crossed the window.

“No,” I said to myself. “She doesn’t love me. She can’t.”

A strong breeze picked up and rustled the branches of the tree behind me. “How can you say that?” the wind appeared to say. “Have you told her that you love her?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Then how can you possibly know how she feels? Be a man. Tell her, and then observe her closely. A woman has her dignity. She may not say what she thinks, but her gestures will never lie.”

“Yes, after all, she did kiss me.”

“I’ve kissed many girls in my time, whispered my dreams in their ears. But no one returned my love. You’re lucky.”

I remembered the first time I had spoken to her. It had been at Warsaw Station and my mind had been in a spin. And when she passed by, our gloves touched briefly and left me in such a rapture that I almost sank to my knees. Then there was our kiss. It was near the escalator, and a fountain had been bubbling somewhere. The winter sun poured through the glass roof, gilding her face here and there: a cheekbone, a temple, a lock of hair. But her dark eyes burned feverishly from the shadows. Yes, I was lucky. Just as I was about to turn away, the curtains were suddenly flung back. She stood at the window staring straight at me. Even from that distance I could see the anger and pride in her eyes. How dare I litter her sidewalk with my presence! Couldn’t I see that she was too good for me? What did I want? Hadn’t she said “no” already? Then, with a vicious flick of her wrists she drew the curtains, and a few moments later turned off her light.

Even though I knew none of this had happened and I had never left my room that night, I believed my dream as if it were the gospel truth. Yes, she liked me. But she did not love me.

The next morning I went down to the lobby to settle the bill. My cousin had sent me enough so I could return to Paris. As the receptionist was completing the formalities, a hand touched my arm.

“Zayn, where are you off to? I came to see you.”

The shock of seeing her was too great. I reeled away and bumped into an elderly woman who stood beside me. I stammered an apology but it was not well received.

“You’re here,” I said once I had gathered my bearings.

“I wanted to see how you were. Your head...is it better? I’m sorry—”

“It’s fine. Hardly a scratch. Barely notice the difference.”

“Are you checking out? Going back to Paris? I was hoping you’d have time for a coffee.”

“No, no. Yes, I mean. I was just extending my stay for another few days.”

“Your bill, sir,” a voice rang out behind me.

I smiled at Aleksandra, muttered something about the zeal of youth, and then turned towards the receptionist. He was a smart looking young man, well dressed and groomed with as much care

as if he expected his in-laws at any moment. I leaned in towards him and informed him of a change in plans. He looked at me, then glanced over my shoulder at Aleksandra, and then back at me, and with a twinkle in his eye arrived at a swift and deeper understanding. He booked my room for the rest of the week.

We left the hotel behind and gained a boulevard lined with trees. The branches were heavy with snow and each time we passed they seemed to toss some flakes over us like confetti. We walked for a long time without speaking. It is beneath my dignity to open a conversation with the weather. Besides, what could Nature offer that could compete with her? So I spoke my mind. I had nothing to lose and at least she should know how much one person in this world cared about her.

“No one can love you as much as I do. No one in the whole world. And please believe me when I say that I’m not drunk.”

Her face animated with a strange light, and she quickly turned away. “Have you had breakfast? I didn’t have time this morning.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten. So we went to a cafe called Charlotte’s. We had to share a table with eight other people so the atmosphere was far from ideal. Still, I could not complain. Last night in my dream she had seen me outside her window and had whipped her curtains in my face. The night before, she had hit me with her lamp. This morning she was having breakfast with me in the flesh. Truly, the universe was beyond my understanding. But I wouldn’t give up trying. I decided to pay closer attention to the signs. If indeed Alexander was right and ninety percent of communication was non-verbal, then much could be inferred simply through observation. I tried to gain some insight from the way she enjoyed her croissant with coffee, from the way she licked her fingertips clean of jam, from the streak of milk froth poised on her upper lip, from the way she played with a sugar cube between forefinger and thumb (her nails were unpainted, short and clean). Resigned to the fact I would make a poor detective, I leaned back in my chair and sighed deeply. They say that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, but even if I were blind, this beauty would be truth to me. No matter the hour or hemisphere I would find myself in, I would always remember the day we had first dined together. Drunk with wine, with her, and the slipping time, I had behaved woefully. I had always thought passivity was my crime, being too quiet and shy. So I set off compensating earnestly: paradise cannot be found unless one exceeds one’s bounds. But I did my task too well and overshot my station. Now I had a second chance...so I begged her forgiveness knowing full well she held my life in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “For behaving so badly. At the restaurant. I was...I wasn’t myself. I was just trying to impress you. But in the park...I wasn’t trying to kiss you! Your hair had blown over your eyes and I was just trying to help you. I swear on my parents’ lives.”

“I’m sorry I slapped you. Twice.”

“I’m sure I deserved it.”

“Can we start from scratch? As if we’re meeting for the first time?”

“Please, let’s do that. I won’t mention the past again if you promise to do the same.”

“I can’t believe you bit that woman in the leg.”

“That was Alexander!”

“That was you!”

“I swear...on my parent’s lives.”

“I know what I saw. And *I* wasn’t drunk.”

“But that’s impossible! I...I...”

“Do your parents know you like the taste of human flesh?”

“Now, look. Alexander bit that lady’s leg, and now here you’re pulling my leg. I may have been drunk, but I would never resort to cannibalism.”

She burst out laughing. “And Alexander would? Some friend you are! You could’ve defended him at least.”

“He’s quite capable of looking after himself. Sometimes I wonder why we’re friends. We have hardly anything in common.”

“You’re both spoilt rich kids on a drunken orgy.”

“Alexander’s the rich one. My parents are middle class at best. I appreciate the sacrifices they make for me, but they always hold it against me...do you have any idea how much your tennis lessons cost? Do you know how expensive it is to learn the piano? After we feed you, clothe you, raise you, this is the thanks we get? Do you have any idea how much it costs to send you to Paris? Of course, these questions are never rhetorical. The exact figures are always itemized and committed to memory – firstly theirs, then mine. So I know exactly how much they love me. Naturally, not everything they do for me can be quantified or explained. But they try their best. They are always very dedicated to educating me....But I’m sorry for going on like that. My mother’s fond of saying: ‘If you spit upwards, it’ll be sure to land on you.’ Really, I’ve said too much. I sound like I hate my parents, which isn’t true at all. Can you forget everything I’ve said?”

“Forget what? That you jumped on a table and started whirling around until you vomited all over one of the fanciest restaurants in Warsaw?”

“Thanks.”

“Or that you were arrested for public drunkenness?”

“I’m starting to think it would’ve been best if we’d never met.”

“What makes you say that? It was kind of you to give Alexander your jacket. You must have been freezing.”

"I'd rather freeze than listen to his moaning. Besides, you don't feel a thing when you're in love."

"I'm sure his jacket will turn up somewhere. The waiter would never have stolen it. He's not the type."

"Alexander is planning to report him to the police. He's already asked the concierge at our hotel to keep an eye out for it, even though he has a dozen more like it."

"Your hotel is very nice."

"It's alright. I've stayed at better." But I immediately regretted saying that. After all, they had chosen the hotel.

She seemed to read my mind. She laughed. "Marta chose it." Then she quickly changed the subject. "Do you have a pool?"

"Yes, an indoor one. Would you like to go for a swim?"

"I'd love to."

"Today?"

"Why not?"

We didn't talk much after that. We concentrated on our coffee and croissants and listened to the conversation around the table, most of which was about the possibility of war. After brunch we went back to her place so she could get her swimmers. I bought a pair for myself on our way back to the hotel.

There was a message waiting for me at reception. It came in a neat little envelope. Fortunately, Aleksandra wasn't looking when I opened it. My parents had called to ask about my engagement and wondered why I was keeping good news from them. I quickly destroyed the message when Aleksandra wasn't looking.

We spent the afternoon at the pool. It was in the shape of a collapsed lung. Men and women of all ages flocked to its warm waters. Nearby was a spa, and a row of deckchairs where guests were being treated to Swedish massages. The pool itself was alive with children and the elderly who were engaged in various subaqueous calisthenics.

Everyone stared at her: the women with envy and admiration; the men with greed. I tried my best to avert my eyes but they frequently strayed from the straight and narrow. If she was at all disturbed by the attention she did not show it.

An obese child with a mid-western accent kept dive-bombing near us, sending a tidal wave of water in our direction every few minutes. Then he would holler at his parents who were at the other end of the pool, asking their opinion of his water skills.

"What do you think of children?"

"I like them. It's important to give them space to grow."

“Yes, you’re right,” I said as I eyed the obese child ruefully. “But discipline is very important.”

“You would never hurt your child though, would you?”

“Of course not. Just a pinch on the cheek or a slap on the bottom.”

“Never!”

“No? Not even a cuff on the back of the head, or a twist of the ears?”

“No! They have their own feelings. They’ll remember it for the rest of their lives.”

“But what if they don’t listen?”

“It wasn’t their choice to be born. It’s the parents who should be listening to them. I would let my children do anything they wanted.”

The obese child chose that moment to plunge into the pool, splashing us with a torrent of water. I could see Aleksandra’s resolve wilting. I briefly considered wringing the boy’s ear or giving him a swift kick in the seat of his pants when his parents weren’t looking but abandoned the plan when I thought of Aleksandra’s reaction. In her eyes I would probably be a sadist.

“Is it true you followed me from Paris?” she said.

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“You bought a ticket all the way to—”

“I didn’t have time to buy a ticket.”

She paused to ponder, knitting her dark eyebrows. “So the first time you saw me...was at the Gare de l’Est?”

“Yes.”

“And that was enough to...”

“Yes.”

“But we were running late. We were barely at the station for two minutes. Maybe less.”

“I know. It’s crazy. I can hardly believe it myself. I still don’t know what I was thinking. Or if I was thinking at all. It’s as if I were kidnapped and I had no choice in the matter. It’s as if I had lived underground all my life among the rats and the sewers and the filth and one day I saw a ray of sunshine and I followed the light. But I would’ve never had the courage to follow the light unless I knew it was lit for me. Tell me the truth. Did you like me the first time you saw me?”

She laughed and looked away, taking care to choose her words carefully. “You’re good-looking, so naturally a girl’s eyes may stray in your direction and linger a little longer than strictly necessary. But to say that I liked you even before I met you...maybe.”

“Maybe means yes. Oh, I’m not a complete idiot. Half an idiot, I grant you. But not a complete one.”

Neither of us spoke after that – I already felt as if I were flying and didn't want to risk another word that might spoil the mood. We were content to watch the obese child splash us with water until he tired from his efforts.

She asked me what an idiot like me, or rather half an idiot, was planning to do on New Year's Eve. I told her I hadn't thought that far ahead and had no plans for the day. "There's a party for students on New Year's Eve. You should come along."

I didn't have to be asked twice. The next few days were among the happiest of my life. Thrice I visited her house. Twice I was admitted. The first time I was allowed to listen to her play the pianola.

"When I'm at the piano, no one is allowed to speak to me."

"Of course!" I said and held my breath.

She was absolutely dreadful. For hours she tortured my ears, but it was a small price to pay for the pleasure given to my other senses. She played the scales again and again and again, with a few subtle variations now and then. Her fingers wandered idly over the keys, now playful, now curious, always searching for harmony, never quite finding it. Then she pulled a lever and waited for the pianola to play some piece, equally dreadful, and took notes frantically. This is what happens when you learn an art from a machine.

"Have you thought of getting a tutor?"

"For what?"

"For the piano."

"No."

"Well, if you like, I can teach you a few numbers." I cracked my fingers and rose swiftly to my feet, the opening of Wagner's Bridal Chorus humming in my head.

"That won't be necessary. Please don't come closer."

I sat back down again. The thought of smashing the pianola to pieces crossed my mind several times. I looked around her room. Apart from a number of Jane Austen books on her shelf, there were no obvious signs of mental instability. Yet she was clearly moved by the music. Many times she closed her eyes and turned her face towards the ceiling while her fingers ran riot over the keys. When she finally finished, she sighed and rested her head on the fall-board as if it were someone's shoulder. Dark ringlets of hair fell over her face. Beads of perspiration ran down her nose and she panted softly. What piano teacher could dare upset such symmetry?

The second time I was offered some cake and a cup of tea. Her aunt had baked the cake and Aleksandra herself poured the tea. I took mine without sugar. Normally I don't drink tea but ever since I got on the train to Warsaw my taste buds seemed to have acquired a certain finish. It was the

best tea I had in my life. I had four cups and would have had another if it hadn't all run out. Her aunt offered to make some more but I begged her not to bother.

There was a black and white photograph of a bride and groom on a bookshelf. It was in an old silver frame blackened by time, and half hidden by a row of crystal cups. The cups were polished and shone brilliantly. The photograph was collecting dust.

"Is that your mother?"

"Yes."

"She's stunning."

"She died when I was ten."

"Ah...I'm sorry...really, your father looks like a movie star."

"He's in jail."

"I see...the composition is excellent. Notice how it leads the eye subtly to the flowers in her hands. And how the trees in the background frame the couple so naturally."

She glanced at the picture. "Yes. My uncle took it. He shot himself the day after the wedding."

Her aunt gathered up all our cups and saucers on a tray, stood up a little unsteadily and went into the kitchen, swaying once near the door.

Aleksandra hung her head for a moment, and kicked the coffee table hard enough to make all the wood complain and knock a pile of magazines to the floor. She then rose suddenly and without excusing herself rushed out of the room.

A low murmuring came from the kitchen. I went down on my knees to pick up the magazines and tidy the mess. Aleksandra appeared soon enough, thanked me for coming and said she would see me again at the New Year's party. I applied the finishing touches to the stack of magazines, making sure they were aligned neatly without any edges sticking out, then stood up and was led to the front door. I asked her how she was going to spend Christmas.

"With my family. Like everyone else."

This time she waited till I had gone down a few stairs before closing the door behind me.

CHAPTER 20

There were half a dozen messages waiting for me back at the hotel. I read them all and then threw them into the wastebasket. Idiot! Not half an idiot, or even a complete idiot, but an idiot two times over! There I had been complaining about my parents when she didn't have any to speak of. And complaining about what? That they spent money on me? She must have been sick to her guts listening to me. She was right all along. I was a spoilt rich kid after all. Most of the messages were from my parents. They couldn't get in touch because I had left my phone off the hook. "What about your studies?" they asked. "And the wedding? When is it? Your cousin will be the best man, won't he? Please ask him. It will mean the world to him." One of the messages was actually from my cousin who said he might be passing through Warsaw soon.

On Christmas eve I found myself wandering the streets. The cold only bothered me if I kept still. So I moved. The whole day I spent in aimless roaming among the parks and gardens that lined the Vistula, until by nightfall I came across a building known to me if not by sight then at least by day dream. At the trembling of its bells a light shiver ran across my heart. But why? What hope was there for me? The ringing continued and I felt a hollowness in the pit of my stomach — even today I can feel it — as if I hadn't eaten anything for days. A thick crowd, like an army of ants, had gathered outside the church. My street guide said Chopin's heart was buried in one of its walls. After two days of speaking to no one but the birds and ducks who had stayed for winter, I was pleased to see a familiar face (by that time I would have been happy to see the devil). Roksana was standing on the curbside amongst the crowd. She had her back to me. As I walked towards her I saw her brother there as well. After a moment's hesitation, I began to walk away. Then Roksana turned around and joy leapt to her face.

"Zayn!" she said. "Over here!"

I had no more say in the matter. Duty bound me to wave back and make my way over to her. She hugged me warmly and all this Christmas spirit must have rubbed off on her brother since he nodded vaguely in my direction and barely even glanced at my legs. She introduced me to her parents. Charming people who shook my hand and looked at me as if I were a long lost son.

"Will Aleksandra be here?"

"I don't know," Roksana said. "Maybe. Yes."

We sat down together near the aisle. Her parents and Jakub sat in front of us. I kept turning in my seat, trying to see if Aleksandra was in the crowd. My foot beat restlessly on the floor, and my teeth chattered uncontrollably. Roksana put a hand on my knee to stop my shivering. The muscles in my leg clenched and my foot froze. She kept one hand there while her other hand held the litany. Soon there was singing and she joined in. Her voice was as sweet as a wind blown from

heaven. Slowly, with no noticeable change in her voice, her hand moved. Up my leg. I looked at her sharply, but her eyes never left the psalm. I tried moving my leg away but that made her grip more fiercely. When she got to my upper thigh I clamped down on her hand and tried to pull away her fingers. But she stuck fast, her nails digging into my jeans, like the devil's trident. Desperately, I looked around for help. In front of me was the priest with his steely glare and solemn voice, his every syllable squeezing me closer to damnation. Above him was a tall cross where He stands groaning, watching me with weary eyes and bloodied lips, hands tied for the moment or He would've surely saved me. Finally, I found Aleksandra sitting several rows behind me and across the aisle. Her eyes too were buried in the litany. For some time, I managed to keep Roksana's hand still, not moving up nor coming off. Then the singing stopped. The priest said something, and the entire congregation rose to their feet. The trident slipped away and for a moment I was free. Of course, I had no idea when to rise or kneel, and simply followed the crowd. When we sat down once more, her hand shot out and again clasped my thigh. How much could one endure? I was tempted to leave but didn't want to create a scene. We were sitting in the fourth row and I could feel a hundred eyes on our backs. Not to mention the priest's narrow gaze from the pulpit.

Another hymn began. And Roksana's hand began wandering again. I kept pulling her away, but she persevered. I turned in my seat and this time Aleksandra's eyes rose from the pages of her hymns and met mine. She almost smiled. Amongst the herd of voices hers alone seemed to rise above the worshippers' heads. It rose to the vaulted ceiling and filled the nave, gliding over the pillar containing Chopin's heart. Her voice was neither loud nor high pitched. Yet I heard it as clearly as if she were next to me. Her lips moved and pink wreaths seemed to curl in the air. "I love you, Zayn," she seemed to say. "Please wait for me."

"I will," I said under my breath. "All my life."

Then her voice seemed to rejoin the others: "I wait with longing for the Lord, my soul waits for his word. My soul looks for the Lord more than sentinels for daybreak."

A gnarled old lady sitting behind me, with glasses and a tuft of hair on her chin, was studying me. I turned away quickly. Finally, I had enough and flung Roksana's hand aside as hard as I could without hurting her. A wicked smile twisted the corners of her lips but had no effect on her singing. She tried again. This tug of war continued for about an hour. It was freezing inside the church but I was pouring sweat. Any moment I expected the priest to come down and drag me away by the ear.

After mass ended, I fled. But there were others even more impatient than myself and I lost Aleksandra in the crowd.

Christmas day I spent in my room, writing her a letter. It was a long letter, full of rhyme and pastoral imagery. Ovid appeared, and so did Dante. After reading it I tore it up and scattered the pieces to the four corners of my room.

The next six days would be the hardest. I decided not to see her till the New Year's party. It would be a test of my nerves and will. And I wouldn't drink. Not a drop. Many times I was tempted to visit her, but I resisted the urge. Often I would wake up in the middle of the night lost and disoriented, trying desperately to think where I was. A strange room, a strange light coming in through the window...this wasn't home. Where was I? It took a few moments before everything would come back to me. Then with a deep sigh and her name on my lips I would fall back in bed and drift slowly back to sleep. What else remains of those vanished happy days? How many years has it been? Even now I lie awake at night, watching the folds of her blue curtains, watching them ripple with a gust of wind or the brush of her hand, or see her rounding the corner of ul. Wilcza, her velvet hair flying in the wind, or hear her laughter coming through the window of her father's house. That house now lies in ruins, its broken walls staring out from mounds of ashes and dust. And every year it sinks further in my dreams. Another layer of dust, another flurry of memories slips further into the distance. But I'm jumping ahead. We have yet to arrive at her father's house — impatience will be the death of me — and must now return, not reluctantly, to Warsaw. That city where all my dreams were first founded, and later buried.

On New Year's Eve, I was ready. One of my suitcases had arrived from Paris carrying my jacket and tie, and my shoes which I polished until I could see my reflection in them. The entire city, it seemed, was lit by the white moon. On every terrace and window, every roof and railing, the silver light gleamed. The streets shone under my feet as if I were walking on black ice.

I was early. The music had barely started. The DJ, who had installed himself near the cloak room where he could dispatch his music largely unseen, had started playing hits from the eighties. People trickled in ones and twos, the men in tuxedos, the women in long elegant dresses. I swam about the rooms, getting my bearings in the thick air. The students had booked the top floor of a nineteenth century villa almost an hour from Warsaw and for 100 zloty you were given a three-course meal and unlimited drinks.

There was a long L-shaped table at one end of the room where dinner would be served. Wine glasses stuffed with blood-red napkins dotted the white tablecloth. The dance floor was near a row of windows overlooking the courtyard below. Marta was the first person I recognized. We both pretended not to notice each other. She disappeared among the shadows with a young man who looked barely past his puberty. "You can do better," I resolved to tell her the next time we happened to meet.

A small crowd had gathered near the entrance, where light bulbs were hidden in alcoves along the wall creating a chiaroscuro effect. Then came a girl in a green backless dress, her long neck hidden with wanton tresses. She paused for a moment on the threshold as her eyes swept the room. As she wound her way through the crowd, she stopped here and there for a hug, a peck on the cheek, or a few words in passing. With every step the air snatched at her dress, and silk stockings peeped out. She was halfway across the room when her dark eyes met mine, but almost immediately someone came between us and she was lost from sight. I craned my neck but a long line of couples chose that moment to pass by, further obscuring my field of view. Through the gaps I could make out a flash of green, a bronzed shoulder, a long silver earring, rosy lips, the flutter of black eyelashes. And after the human chain had passed, she was gone. Like a figure vanishing from a platform after a train storms past.

We sat down for the appetizers and I couldn't see her from where I was sitting; a distant corner. I smiled at my neighbors and they smiled back too. Dinner finished uneventfully, and I hadn't spoken to a soul. Afterwards, when we had all had a few drinks and the lights were dimmed, couples started heading to the dance floor. There, where the crowd was thickest, between a forest of limbs, she emerged. A line of boys stood to one side, waiting patiently for their turn. I walked around the dance floor and took a seat against the far wall. My drink gave me company; my first for a week.

One by one they whirled her away. Their hands on her bare shoulder, on her glistening back, around her waist...breaths mingling, glances stealing...I couldn't watch anymore. But neither could I look away.

One of Aleksandra's friends, a girl with a lovely overbite, offered her hand. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. "Przepraszam," I said. What else could I do? Disappointment crept over her face, but a young man came to the rescue. He plunged forth and offered his arm. They bounced away to the Slavic tunes.

I studied the dancers. It didn't seem too hard. Half a turn clockwise; two turns counter-clockwise. A shuffle to the right, a shimmy to the left...wrap your arm around your partner's waist and bring her in toward you, then spin her out like a top or a flying dervish. Dark hair whirling, earrings glittering, the green hem of her dress fluttering madly...pull her back in once she's reached half your arm span. Then repeat. For variety, take her to one side and lean over her, making her arch her back till her hair is perpendicular to the floor.

Finally, confident that I had learned the intricacies of ballroom dance, I was about to jump to the fore when Aleksandra broke away from the dancers and headed straight for me. Somehow she had seen me from the dance floor through the darkness of the room. She dropped herself in the seat

beside me, breathless, breasts rising and falling under her dress, a quizzical half smile flitting over her lips.

“Aren’t you dancing?”

I shrugged, feigning disinterest. “Why should I?”

“Well, it’s New Year’s Eve. Don’t you like dancing? Or maybe you’re scared?”

“Me? Please. A little respect. The whole world stops when I dance.”

She stared at me. Was I being serious, or just smart? She decided on the latter and laughed.

“I don’t believe you. I don’t think you can dance.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“C’mon!” she gently pulled my arm. “Show me!”

I took her by the hand and without another word led her to the dance floor. The others made it look so easy. If they could do it then so could I. Her eyes were laughing as I pulled her close to me. I swayed from side to side, copying the couple beside me.

“Very good,” she said, as if I were a child taking his first step.

Stung by her remark, I decided to improvise. “Watch this!”

“No, don’t! What’re you doing!”

I had picked her up in my arms, and now began to spin. Lights danced in our eyes like shooting stars and the music throbbed all around us.

“Zaaaaaeeee! Ssttooooooop!”

I could feel the blood rushing to my head and the bass thudding in my chest. It seemed that any moment we would fall on the ceiling. I heard her scream in delight as the room began to race faster and faster. Her eyes shone like black opals amongst the blur of the dance floor. Just before I thought I would pass out, I stopped. But the room still spun. I let her down as gently as I could. She clung to me, dizzy and laughing. We swayed in each other’s arms like a pair of drunks. The music slowed, and I could feel her warm breath on my cheek. The smell of pine cones wafted from her hair.

“My head hurts,” she said.

“It must be love.”

Just then there was a great whizzing sound and a series of booms from the windows, and an explosion of color lit up the room. It was midnight. The sky had turned green and gold. Red stars blazed in the night before burning up and leaving a trail of pink dust across the heavens.

She let go of me and went over to the windows where there was already a crowd clamoring for a view. Somehow a space opened for her and she took her place at the head of the queue. Her profile illumined with fiery sparks and though the windows were closed the smell of gunpowder

tickled my nose. One by one they hugged and wished each other a happy new year. The fireworks continued for almost half an hour but I had left the party long before then.

CHAPTER 21

The road to the main gate curved behind a row of willows swaying in the wind, as if shaking their heads in disbelief. Their dark shadows fell on my face and I heard snatches of conversation between them.

“He’s afraid.”

“Of course, he is. Who wouldn’t be?”

“But I never thought he would be a coward!”

“The first sign of trouble and he leaves. He’s always been like this.”

“What trouble? No one asked him to leave. And the party was just beginning.”

“I suppose he’ll just go home and have a good cry under his sheets.”

“He’s a child. So immature.”

“Just what is he looking for?”

“I doubt even he knows.”

“A fairy tale, most likely.”

“Well, good luck to him. The world simply eats up his kind.”

“Perhaps, he too would like to be worshipped and adored.”

“Ah young love! So much pride...so much anger...even I was a sapling once...”

Even the full moon was blotted out and its rays only now and then crept along the gravel path under my feet. Behind me I heard fireworks popping away in the distance. As I reached the gate I turned to take one last glance at the villa behind me. In the dark windows a rainbow of sparks glittered and died and glittered again. I swung the gate shut and it groaned noisily as if a dragon had awoken from deep sleep. I headed down the steep hill. The path corkscrewed around the villa and the windows could often be seen through the trembling willows. On the other side, the city lay below me bursting with color and twinkling with bright lights. Did I know then we would never dance again? Perhaps I had an inkling. Perhaps, deep down, I knew just how all this would end. Perhaps the gods were keeping an eye out for me and had blown my ship off course by design. How long and tortuous our journeys must be before we finally realize our dreams!

Midway down the hill I heard someone calling my name. I turned to look. From the shadows a figure came running. She stepped lightly over the grass, almost gliding through the air. I took a deep breath and felt my whole body tingling. Pins and needles broke out across my arms and legs. She must have seen me crossing the courtyard.

Seeing me standing there she too stood still. All I could see was the outline of her figure and the glitter of moonlight in her eyes. It reminded me of that night on the train...in the dark, deserted passage only two souls remained. And after about a full minute she moved. Then away from me;

now towards me. By the time she reached me she was breathing heavily. “Where are you going? Why did you leave?” Her voice was soft and low, and musical to my ears.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye. It was...rude...but I couldn’t stay any longer.”

“Why?” she said, taking a step closer.

I shrugged and gestured vaguely toward the villa.

“Yes?” she took another step.

But I couldn’t think of a suitable excuse. Even the moon was embarrassed and hid behind some thick clouds, throwing everything into darkness. A volley of fireworks blew up behind us and we turned to look. I took my hand out of my pocket and held it to my side. Her quick soft breathing rose above the distant claps and bangs.

“I can’t dance.”

“I know,” she said. “It makes no difference—”

A rocket shot up toward the moon, missed, and exploded in a fireball of red and gold. Her hand grazed mine in the dark, there was a sudden intake of breath, and our hands bounced away from each other.

“I was going to walk back. Would you like to join me? If we leave now we can reach Warsaw by morning.”

“I don’t think I could walk that far.”

We didn’t notice it then, but our feet were already moving of their own accord. “That’s okay. I can carry you the rest of the way.”

CHAPTER 22

It was too dark to see if she had blushed. But she was silent for a long time after that, and had clearly decided to ignore my last remark.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I haven't spoken to anyone for almost a week. But that's nothing. Back home there were times when I wouldn't speak a word to anyone for months on end. And then, when I finally did speak to someone, the words would come out jumbled somehow, in the wrong order, as if I were a foreigner. Or a child learning to speak."

"Why didn't you talk to anyone?"

"It wasn't from choice. Yes, I avoided people. Don't ask me why. Perhaps I couldn't stomach others' views. Maybe I made enemies too easily. I even liked being disliked. I hated people. I still do. Most people. Not you. Besides, they simply misunderstand things, and look for hidden meanings in everything you say."

"I don't believe you. What about Alexander? Despite everything, he seems quite fond of you."

"He finds me amusing. A cure for his boredom. Nothing else. He's more a friend to my parents than me."

"I hardly know anything about you. Tell me about your family. Do they know you're in Poland?"

"Yes...yes. There's so much I wanted to ask you. Now it's all gone. You have a terrible effect on my memory."

"I make you forget? So maybe in a few days you won't even remember me."

"Even if I never saw you again I would remember you all my life."

"Thank you. I don't think I would easily forget you either."

"You've...you've thought of me?"

She looked away and took her time to consider. "You...and him...you're so different from one another. From two different worlds. He's a romantic...and you...who knows what you are! You're impossible!"

"I'm your guide for New Year's Day. To the left are some dark woods...Warsaw lies on the right...above is the moon. Beside you is your knight in shining armor."

"Hmm...for some reason I feel safe with you. I don't know why. You seem half-mad most of the time. Always ready to do something stupid."

"Only to impress you."

She laughed. "You think being stupid will make an impression on me?"

"Well, no...maybe you think I'm childish or stupid. But I take myself very seriously."

“Really?”

“What about him? What’s he like? I bet he’s a great dancer.”

“How did you know? Yes, and he’s gentle and kind...mature...he plays the piano amazingly...he travels a lot. For business. Warsaw, Berlin, Paris...”

“He must be a lot older than you.”

“Yes, he’s almost thirty.”

“And he’s good looking?”

“Like a dream.”

“Better looking than me?”

“Yes.”

“Impossible!”

“You may find it difficult to believe but there are men in this world who are more handsome than you.”

“No!”

“Well, you’re funnier. I’ll give you that.”

“Then what else do you need?”

“Let’s not talk about this anymore.”

“Fine.”

Neither of us spoke for some time. Perhaps she had nothing further to say. Perhaps she had grown tired of my company. My feet felt as if they were slowly sinking into the ground. I opened my mouth to say something but the wind chose that moment to howl at us from all sides.

“Why don’t you say something funny?” she said finally.

“Let’s see...he always listens to you, and never makes you cry, and surprises you with flowers every now and then, and kisses you in the moonlight, and promises you that one day you’ll be his bride.”

“And much more.”

“He’s a fool.”

She took a moment before replying, as if she couldn’t quite believe what she had heard.

“He’s not a fool,” there was an edge to her voice that hadn’t been there before.

“He’s a fool for leaving you alone for even a second. He’s a fool for letting me walk you home in the night...in the middle of nowhere. He’s a fool for not running away with you to some remote corner of the world...some deserted island somewhere...far from anyone else...if you were my—”

“He trusts me. I’ve always been faithful to him. If I were your what?”

“If you were my girl—”

“Don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Then try harder. On someone else.”

“Don’t worry. One day you’ll be my girlfriend.”

A shadow passed over her face. “So confident,” she said under her breath. “Is that the main road? We should take it. There might be a taxi going by.”

Everything had been going so well, and with a single word, at a single stroke, I had ruined everything. Her pace quickened. There was a coldness in her eyes and a tilt in her chin that wasn’t there before. I had overreached; it was natural to me. I didn’t have the good taste to know when to stop. Almost a week without seeing her had made me lose my head. A yellow light on the horizon pricked the darkness. It was probably the headlights of a car.

“Know this,” she said suddenly. “There can never be anything between us. I shouldn’t even be here. Why did I come?”

“Maybe deep down in your heart, there was a voice...”

“You think life is an opera? And you’re the star? You think your quick and easy words, your charm, your grand gestures, can win any woman over? Maybe Marta. But not me.”

“I never said that. I never even thought—”

“Life isn’t so easy. A real man doesn’t sing arias under a balcony. He agrees with you even when you’re wrong. He’s willing to break with his family and friends, habits and customs...he wouldn’t think twice about breaking any laws — human or divine — for your sake.”

“I’m not good enough? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m taken. That’s all. Here’s a taxi. Goodbye.”

“But wait! I don’t understand...”

“Just let me go, please!” She closed the door and the taxi sped off into the night. I watched the gleam of its red tail-lights flicker amongst some trees and then disappear around a hill.

CHAPTER 23

May the gods grant me more nights as these. What else did I want? What more could I need? Oh it was enough for a lifetime! With so many memories one could live happily for the rest of one's life, even in a prison with high walls where no sound could reach. Be happy with your lot. It was your destiny to end up like this. I remember very little about the walk back. Like a moth to a flame I just followed the lights to the city. It was almost daybreak when I arrived at my hotel. A great ball of fire seemed to be rising in the east. I threw myself in bed and watched the sun crawl slowly across my room.

How we had spun like a wheeling circle of fire! Round and round we went till black was white and up was down and night was day and clusters of stars burst every which way. Time's winged chariot broke down mid-air. Then we stopped and the world was a fog, misty to the eyes, thundering in the ears...I should have kissed her then. But she was too dizzy — it would have been unfair. I was dizzy too, and I might have made a mess of things. A real man is willing to break all laws — human or divine....Oh I spit on all laws human or divine! What difference does it make now? Now that she is gone and I am alone, what difference does it make? If only she knew what I could have done for her! I'll die alone too. But with my memories. That's enough for me.

And yet, I couldn't keep still. I tossed and turned all day and never left my room. Of course it wasn't enough! Alexander would have known what to do. If he knew the truth. Well, if he knew the truth he would have laughed in my face. Then after wiping the tears of joy from his eyes he would have warned me about "the modern woman".

"Things are done differently now," he would say. "They even have the vote. You can't just go and claim her as if she were your own. She has to choose."

"Don't you think I know that? Why do I bother talking to you?"

"Who else can you turn to?"

"I know she loves me but I have no proof!"

"What makes you so certain?"

"She kissed me, didn't she?"

"So you claim...maybe she wasn't feeling well. Maybe she mistook you for someone else."

"Like who? Her boyfriend? She's not insane!"

"What about him? What's his name?"

"Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, of course! But why should there be sides?"

"I don't know his name. I never asked. But you're right! I have to make her choose."

"I didn't mean that. But hasn't she already? What did she say? 'I'm taken. Just let me go, please.' Wasn't that enough for you?"

"Nine times out of ten, yes. But this is different. I can't explain. Call it intuition."

"I call it idiocy. She said she was taken."

"Don't remind me."

"I don't have to. You're doing it yourself."

"She also kissed me. And she looked into my eyes as if...as if..."

"Just let me go," she said. "Please."

"As if I meant something to her. As if she needed something from me. She came to my hotel..."

"To check up on you. She felt bad for hitting you."

"She spent the whole day with me. And invited me to the New Year's party."

"Most likely, she felt sorry for you. But don't be too hard on yourself. It wouldn't be the first time someone mistook pity for love."

"My sixth sense—"

"Ah yes! What does it say?"

"That she loves me."

"How original!"

"You don't believe me."

"Do you believe yourself?"

"It's true, I've had some doubts. But like faith, you have to take the plunge."

"But at what cost? No one likes an importunate suitor. Besides, if I recall, you don't have any faith."

"She asked me to dance with her."

"She was being polite. A mere formality. You're a visitor to her country, and she was playing the host."

"She said she felt safe with me. She chose to walk with me on New Year's Day. She left the party for me."

"She slapped you once. Have you forgotten?"

"Twice! How can I forget? What a night that was! And she broke a lamp over my head too. If that isn't love, then I don't know what is!"

"Do whatever you want, Zayn. Only, don't ask for my help again."

"You can go to hell for all I care!"

"I'll see you there."

With a single bound I was there. To her house, her room, her bed. True, she wasn't there when I arrived, but her aunt let me in. I waited patiently for her. Where could she be? I ran my fingers across her pianola. Touching those same places her fingers had been, her wrist, her neck, shoulders and hair.

"Aleksandra," I whispered to the black and white keys. "Did I tell you that I can read the future?"

"No, you didn't. Tell me something about the future."

"In the future...one day...you're going to be my girlfriend."

"In your dreams?"

"Haha. In your dreams too, I think."

I slammed my fist on the keys causing a paroxysm of disharmony. Something in the air made me turn around. How long she had been at the door I couldn't tell. There had been no noise, no movement, nothing at all.

She stormed into the room. Her eyes flashed and her words dropped like thunderbolts in my ears.

"How did you come into my life? Where did you fall from? You don't know what you've done...the damage you've caused. Well? Don't just sit there staring like an idiot! Say something!"

But I didn't know what to say. All I could do was stare. After a while I said: "What damage?"

She sneered and her pitch-black eyes seared my soul. She could barely restrain herself.

"What damage? Three years of memories, of love...all gone! Yes, I loved him. More than anyone else in the world. And then you had to show up — with your easy manners and...stupid face. Sometimes I just want to punch you in that stupid face of yours!"

"Go ahead."

"Oh hell!" she bent down and bit my lip with a fury that almost drew blood. And grabbing a handful of my hair she pulled so hard I screamed.

"Aleksandra!" her aunt's voice sounded from the drawing room. "Is everything alright?"

Aleksandra pulled away from me. "Yes, ciocia. It was Zayn. He was just leaving."

I straightened my hair as best I could and then walked out, nodding to the aunt on my way.

CHAPTER 24

The next day we took the midday train to Opole. The four hours on board were the closest thing to bliss I've felt in my life. She even let me carry her bags for a while.

"What's the name of your village?"

"Głubczyce Sady."

"Gube-jit-zah Sa-dé?"

"Close enough."

"Thief! I'm a thief!" flashed through my heart as we arrived at the station. "Ah, so be it! We can't all be moralists and luck is shuffled imperfectly at birth."

The village itself was pretty enough: even Paris was once a village too. I could imagine the snow melting and the trees and endless miles of golden wheat fields coming to life. Even in winter when a white shroud wraps the landscape and neat rows of red and brown roofs peek out, it is quite charming.

"Over there is our garden. We used to have rabbits and chickens too."

"And what's that?"

"A satellite dish."

"Looks like you could reach the moon with it. Ah, so you have electricity? Wonderful. And running water too?"

She stopped to glare at me. "Did you know that Napoleon went through this village on his way to Russia?"

"Did he? Did he stop for long? Is this the only way? Have things changed much since then?"

"You can see our church there...in the town. It was built in the fourteenth century. The outside is still the same. It's the tallest building in the district. There used to be a synagogue across the street but then the Germans came."

Głubczyce Sady, like many villages in Poland, is dominated by a church. Only in this case, the church was in the neighboring town of Głubczyce, but still loomed over everything in sight: village, town, and nearby forest. Its two towers at the front gave it the impression of a fortress, a sort of bulkhead against invasions real and imagined. Seeing the church for the first time I wondered if this would be the one.

We had just turned a corner when she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. There was a young man on the other side of the street. He too had seen us and had frozen in mid-stride.

"Jerzy!" she said.

He walked over briskly, with a broad smile on his face, picked her up and spun her around in the air. She gave a little cry and when he put her down again they were both breathless with excitement, panting for air.

“This is Jerzy,” she said. “We went to school together. I haven’t seen him in years!”

The boy muttered some greeting in my direction and then looked at her as if a dozen Trojan wars wouldn’t be too high a price for her hand.

I hadn’t said anything at all when she turned to me and whispered ominously: “I hate jealous men.”

We went for a pizza, the three of us, in the only restaurant in town. Most of the time they spoke; I was happy to listen.

“Sorry, but some things are easier to say in Polish.”

“Please, go ahead. I can entertain myself.”

In this way an hour passed. I saw her laugh like I had never seen her laugh before. She tossed her head back and laughed without a care in the world. There was something delightful about her laughter. He laughed too, teeth bared like a jackal. I couldn’t find anything remotely interesting about him. He waved his arms around a lot when he spoke, for no apparent reason, and leaned back in his chair and generally behaved as if his father owned the pizzeria.

I thought of all the things I could do to him if only Aleksandra weren’t there. When she would go to the ladies’ room I would have my chance.

“Jerzy,” I would say, dropping my voice mysteriously and indicating he should come closer. Curious, he would lean toward me. In a flash my hand would grab his ear.

“Listen up, amigo. I don’t like you.”

“Owww...”

“Don’t interrupt me. Now you better clear out of here before I break both of your legs. Understand?”

“...Yes...”

“Good. Now go.”

I would release his ear and he would scramble out the restaurant with a look of terror on his face, not daring to look back until he had crossed the road and was almost a block away.

When Aleksandra did excuse herself and left the table for a moment, I finally had my chance. But before I could say anything he turned to me and smiled.

“She can’t stop talking about you.”

“Huh?”

“All she says is how great you are, and all the funny things that you’ve done. You’ve made half the town extremely jealous.”

“What else has she been saying?”

“Oh that you’re a crazy guy. There’s no one like you. You’re the funniest and the best, blah blah blah. Makes me sick. Anyway, tell her I said goodbye.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. I’m running late. I have to go...somewhere. Nice to meet you. Take care of her.”

We shook hands and he left. I never saw him again in my life.

CHAPTER 25

There wasn't a moment to waste. All night I worked on a poem. In the morning I slipped it under her door. After breakfast we went for a walk through the village. It was a bright, sunny, winter's day without a cloud in the sky or a breath of wind in the air.

"You didn't like it?"

"I was just shocked."

"At what?"

"Everything...the poem...you telling me about the future. Everything was so unexpected."

"Well, the poem is true. As for the future...only a fool can claim to predict it."

"I like your poem. No one has ever written one about me before."

"I've never written a poem about anyone before."

"There aren't any pretty girls in America?"

"None as pretty as you."

"I think there are plenty of beautiful girls. You just have to look."

"Are you trying to get rid of me now?"

"Not really...I just want you to know that I'm only an ordinary Polish girl...there is nothing special in me."

"That's not true."

"I see you have your own truth."

"If you were ordinary, I wouldn't have come all this way...I wouldn't have written all those things about you. I'm not completely stupid."

"I didn't say you were stupid. You're special."

"How?"

"You know what to do and what to say to make a girl feel...you know, just like I feel now."

"How do you feel now?"

"You wrote a poem about me...but then I realize that I have a boyfriend and I feel that I'm doing something wrong because I'm a really loyal person. But then I kissed you...everything's going so fast. Do you understand?"

"I think so....Anyway, I'm very happy today."

"Why?"

"Because you like my poem. Oh, I think I show off too much when I'm with you."

"Yes. And you definitely talk too much and say things which you should keep to yourself."

"Really? Usually I'm more quiet...what things should I have kept to myself?"

"First of all that you want to kiss me. That I will be your girlfriend in the future. I know it was a joke but still. Don't laugh, it's not funny."

"Sometimes the truth is the funniest thing of all."

"Anyway, don't you see that you are too perfect to be real? What girl can dare dream of the things you've done for me?...Vomit in public. Get arrested. Stalk me all the way from Paris."

"I suppose you'll remind me for the rest of my life. Some story to tell our kids."

"Son, I married my stalker. Why don't you stalk the girl you love too? It worked for your father. I'm sure it'll work for you too."

"I wasn't stalking you! You beckoned me with your eyes."

"All I did was undress you with my eyes. There was no beckoning of any kind."

"So you thought of me naked?"

"Of course not. You were wearing a G-string."

"Is that all?"

"And leather boots. And a belt. And a cowboy hat. And you had a choker with a little bell around your neck. And a little feather sticking out of your butt."

I must have looked stunned since she burst out laughing.

"You should have seen your face," she said. "I thought you were going to pass out."

"I can see you have a strange sense of humor. Here I am pouring out my heart and you're making fun of me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were so sensitive."

"I'm also very shy."

"Ha! I don't believe it!"

"It's true. I find it hard to make friends sometimes."

"That's actually very cute. I don't have many friends either."

"You! Every other person we run into seems to be a fan."

"They're acquaintances. Not friends."

"You don't need many friends. Just a few close ones will do."

"You see? The same advice I can give you."

"I spent many years with no friends at all. And I didn't talk to anyone."

"But why? I don't understand. You're so full of life."

I could feel her eyes on me. She was studying me. I always made the mistake of speaking too much. Especially after not speaking at all for a long time. But if I couldn't tell her, then who else could I turn to? Still, I had no intention of scaring her off. She looked away for a moment, and then quickly turned back towards me, as if something had suddenly occurred to her. "I'm sure you had plenty of female friends. You're a ladykiller, aren't you?"

“No...of course, not. It just turned out that I didn’t have the time to make friends. I had my studies...then I was travelling constantly...”

“Why?”

“My parents moved. They kept changing towns, cities...countries. And after I left home it sort of infected me. I can’t stay in the same place too long. It bothers me.”

“It must be wonderful to be able to travel so much.”

“Everywhere’s the same. But different. What I mean is that after a while, the differences between places don’t really amount to much. That’s why I like places that I’ve never been before. Everything seems new. At least for a while.”

“So it’s novelty you’re after? You get bored easily?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. People are essentially the same everywhere you go. Selfish, cruel, stupid, bad-mannered...”

“What do you think of Poland?”

“It’s wonderful. I love it. I’m even glad people don’t smile much...they don’t pretend to be nice. It’s so different in...speaking of ladykillers, if only you knew...can I tell you a story? It won’t take long. It’s...it’s about Alexander. I don’t know if I should tell you. It’s a secret.”

“You can tell me anything.”

“But I’ve promised not to say.”

“So don’t.”

“It won’t make sense unless I start at the beginning.”

“Really, you don’t have to tell me.”

“In those days he used to walk the streets of Paris alone. Aimlessly. Tirelessly. Expecting her at any moment.”

“Expecting who?”

“His beloved. His sweetheart. His ideal. Whatever you want to call her.”

“Does she have a name?”

“Not yet. Anyway, she was supposed to send word the instant she arrived. That much was clear and there were no ambiguities on that point. It was what would happen afterwards that was still up in the air, so to speak. Every morning he asked his landlady if there were any letters for him. Every morning she scowled and spoke of petty things such as the rent. She was the sort to open the mail, read it, and then hold on to it for weeks on end, just to spite him: he didn’t receive any letters from the university until his fees were long overdue. The only reason he stayed at her lodgings was the price: there was no place closer to the university that was more affordable. Also, she didn’t seem to mind if he fell behind in his payments now and then. She would simply stop making breakfast or cut off the power supply until he made amends. But he didn’t need bread or light on

most days so it suited him just fine. A kind word goes a long way and he had some old letters that he could always feast on in the moonlight. The stomach is never empty when you're in love.

He couldn't sleep at night so that is when he went for his walks. He would go out the window so as not to wake the landlady by going down the stairs and along the hall. There was a plaza he would often pass through. You could always count on there being a few carousers no matter the hour: a few drunks, the odd prostitute, perhaps even a lost tourist or two. But mainly there would be some vagrants sleeping rough on the bench until the police chased them away. For some time, every now and then, for as long as he could remember, he would feel someone watching him. But when he turned to see who it was there would usually be no one there, or a shadow would disappear down an alley. On this particular night, there were a number of off-duty soldiers milling about. As he walked past he heard them talking amongst themselves.

"...The ugliest one I've seen!"

"Nasty!"

"...Maybe not the ugliest. But certainly, she's up there."

"...Should come with a warning..."

Before long he saw the object of their ridicule. It was a woman with dried out, yellow hair, like old noodles, in a raincoat, and black boots. Even though she had her back to him, and he couldn't see her face, he knew it was her. Then she turned around, and seeing him, made a movement as if to ask him something, but then stopped. There were scars on her face that suggested someone had wanted to leave their mark on her. Then she asked so meekly, so pathetically for a light that he almost forgot her looks. But he didn't smoke so he could only shake his head apologetically.

"The moment I saw you," she said. "I knew you were a gentleman."

This flattery made him pause. He was always susceptible to a kind word, so he thanked her. Casually, almost effortlessly, she fell in beside him as he strolled across the plaza.

"You're waiting for someone?" she asked.

"Aren't we all?"

"I'm not," she said. And he believed her. He was about to apologize when he stopped himself. But she seemed to notice his discomfort.

"It's fine. I know very well how I look."

"Looks aren't everything. Besides, it isn't as bad as you may think. A friend of mine is fond of saying: 'Men overestimate their looks; that is their tragedy. Women do the opposite; that's theirs.'"

"Your friend sounds very wise."

"He's not. He must have picked it up from somewhere."

“Are you waiting for him?”

“If anything, I’m trying to avoid him. No, I’m waiting for someone else.”

“A female friend, perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

“Ah, lucky girl.”

“If only she shared your opinion. She’s kept me waiting for almost a week.”

“For the right one you may have to wait your whole life.”

“That’s funny. Coming from you.”

“Oh, there was a time when I too used to wait.”

“What happened?”

“I needed to eat...I stopped believing in God.”

“That’s nothing. I know someone who stopped believing in the tooth fairy.”

She smiled, revealing a beautiful set of teeth which was totally incongruous with the rest of her face.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” she said. “Or desire, at least? Most people do.”

“Sure.”

“The only way someone could ever fall in love with me was if they got to know me. If they spent time with me. If they could look past...this. But who could do that? You’d have to be blind. Or a saint. And saints don’t walk the earth.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any money to spare. I’m a student, you see.”

“And I thought you were a gentleman. Who said anything about money? Why is this girl keeping you waiting?”

“I sent her a letter. Last week. Telling her everything. I said I would be here, at this plaza, at midnight, if she wanted to meet.”

“Why midnight?”

“Why not?...I thought it would be romantic.”

“Hmm...maybe it’s too late for her.”

“No! She’s a night owl too. She told me herself that she can’t sleep at night.”

“It’s one thing not being able to sleep at night, it’s a completely different thing for a girl to go making rendezvous with strangers at midnight.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you. And it’s quite safe. Besides, we’re not strangers. I’ve spoken to her many times. She’s even written to me now and then.”

“Ah, well...I imagine she’s very different from me.”

“I guess so...maybe she’s sick. Maybe she didn’t have time to reply.”

“If a woman doesn’t reply, it doesn’t necessarily mean she’s sick.”

“You’re right. Maybe she’s been kidnapped. Or her family had to flee the country...her father often gets death threats. I remember writing a few myself.”

“Why? Who is he?”

“He’s a councilor...on the Council of Paris.”

“I see.”

“I wrote him that if the Eiffel Tower wasn’t moved by Spring, then he would get it. That was six months ago. And was there any change? Of course not! It’s all politics.”

“Where do you want it to be moved?”

“Anywhere! Lyon. Marseille. Japan. I don’t care. But not in the heart of Paris!”

“You’re worried about the view?”

“The view, the smell, the tourists...everything! It even interrupts the migratory habits of the birds. Upsets their sense of the Earth’s magnetic field.”

“There’s a bar up ahead. Would you like to stop for a drink?”

“I don’t drink. Maybe just a drop. All this talk is making me thirsty.”

“Now sit right here and tell me all about it. You’re such a wonderful speaker. I could listen to you for hours. By the way, I seem to have left my purse at home...”

“Allow me. Two vodka martinis, please. What will you have?”

“The same.”

“I first met her in the Luxembourg Gardens. She was sitting on a bench, reading a book. I sat down next to her and asked her what she was reading. At first she ignored me. Or pretended to. I glanced at the title. The Second Sex. By Beauvoir. Great! A lesbian, I thought. I was just about to leave when she lowered the book and gave me a look.

‘I hate men,’ she said.

‘Me too!’ I said. ‘We must be soul mates!’

She went back to her book, but I could see that her mind was elsewhere. After all, what were the chances of meeting someone else who hated mankind as much as you did? We started talking after that. Mostly about the worst instincts of our species and how rape was rife in the suburbs. I explained to her my long-held belief that rapists should be castrated in public, preferably at the Place de la Concorde, accompanied with drums and an artillery salute. Chop, chop. Boom! Boom! She liked my idea very much, and even promised to mention it to her father. That’s when I learned about her old man. Of course, I didn’t mention anything about my correspondence with him, which was — to be fair — quite one-sided. With women it’s often like that: once you find a mutual interest, you’re in. Then you have to praise them a little bit — not too much — let them know that you’re interested. See how they take it. If they look hungry for more then let them have it. And so I did. Soon we were going to the movies together, taking walks in the park together, feeding the

ducks together, gatecrashing art exhibits together (she loved Van Gogh), holding hands, kissing, and all the other usual stuff — I won't bore you with the details. One day, about two weeks ago, she came running to me looking like she'd seen a ghost. She said she was pregnant. I did the honorable thing, went down on one knee and asked her to marry me. This was near the fountain at Place Saint-Michel, and I looked like an absolute fool in the midst of a thousand people. But never mind. Love comes first. People started taking photographs and cheering. The idiots. The worst part was that she said she would think about it. What's there to think about? I'm the father, aren't I? Of course, she said. But just let me think about it. So I waited. And the crowd waited too. We decided to get the hell out of there. A couple of hippies followed us for a while, wishing us the best of luck but politely reminding us that marriage was an institution that tyrannized women. I shooed them off by taking off a shoe and threatening to beat them with it. Hippies hate shoes. Finally, she spoke. My father doesn't like you, she said. He knows about me? He knows you exist. Why doesn't he like me? Well, first of all, no father likes her daughter's boyfriend, especially when she's not eighteen yet. Secondly, he remembered you from some of the letters you sent him. Death threats apparently. You're on a government blacklist. You shouldn't have signed your real name. I have nothing to hide. What ever happened to freedom of speech? Freedom of political communication? My dad's never going to agree to it. He would rather die than give his daughter away to a lunatic. He called me a lunatic? Worse. He said you should be castrated. Really? At the Place de la Concorde? Did you tell him about my plan? Wait, does he know about the baby? No, no. Of course, not. Are you mad? He'd kill you first, and then he'd kill me. This is worse than I thought. Much, much worse. Well, what're you going to do? Do you want to run away with me? You can stay at my place. My parents will disown me. They'll never talk to me again. They'll never even look at me. It's their loss. I don't know if I'm ready for this. Sure, you are. Let's go to a cafe and talk things over. So we did. Gradually, I managed to convince her. She was going to pack a bag, just the one bag, and move into my place. She could go for the rest later. With me. What if he calls the cops? Ah, perhaps it's better if you go by yourself. Do you really need all your stuff? I'll buy you everything you need. Promise? Promise. You're everything I need. You too.

She was supposed to come that night. But she didn't. I waited all night. I even called her at home but her father picked up. Without a word I hung up. Every day, since that day, I've been calling her. For the first few days, her father kept answering the phone. And I kept hanging up. Eventually, he stopped answering. In fact, no one picked up. I even went over to her place and rang the bell. Again, nothing. Last week I sent her a letter. Whatever she decided was fine with me. To keep the baby or not. To marry me or not. As long as we could still see each other. That was the most important thing. To this day, I'm still waiting.

"She knows you love her?" the lady with the scars asked.

“Of course. How could she not?”

“You’re right,” she sighed. “I’m sure her father had something to do with it.”

“The fascist!...but if she really loved me, she would have found a way. Wouldn’t she?”

“Maybe. She’s not yet eighteen, did you say? She’s still a child! She needs time. I’m sure in another week or two you’ll hear from her. I have two children of my own. I know what they’re like. If only they knew the sacrifices we make. Still, it’s some comfort to think that after we’re dead, we’ll live on through them.”

Alexander waited a whole year. Sometimes I think he’s still waiting. Although he’ll deny it.

“That’s awful,” Aleksandra said, and her eyes seemed to have a faraway look to them, as if she were peering into the past. She shuddered. And almost stumbled in her tracks, as though she had missed a step.

“Are you alright?” I reached out and held onto her arm.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said.

That was the first time she lied to me. But that was fine. She had every right to. After all, I hadn’t been exactly truthful either. The story I told her had never happened to Alexander. It had happened to me.

CHAPTER 26

Aleksandra grew thoughtful and didn't speak much after that. She made me repeat parts of the story she didn't understand.

"What happened to the woman with the scars? She was a prostitute?"

"Yes. Who knows? She actually bought him breakfast after they spent the whole night talking. I guess she found some money somehow. She must have felt bad for him. Anyway, she's probably still working the streets. Probably not getting many customers either...I guess I shouldn't have told you. Can you keep it a secret?"

"I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?"

"Never in my life."

Perhaps she had seen right through me. But I would never know for sure.

"Poor Alexander," she said. "And he never saw this girl again?"

"Never."

"And did he ever fall in love again?"

"Not for a long time."

"And then?"

"Then nothing. You've seen him. Now he chases anything that moves."

The winter sun burned gold in the deep blue sky. We stopped under an enormous oak tree.

"I have a proposition for you," she said. "Choose one, two, or three."

"Three," I said quickly.

"Three means kiss me."

I never found out what one and two meant.

CHAPTER 27

We went to mass later that day. Half the town seemed to be there. They were praying for peace. Aleksandra said it had all started back in November when half a dozen people died during the Independence Day protests. Then the Russians used that as a pretext to send more troops to the Kaliningrad exclave. That led to more protests, and in turn, more troops, and so on.

The first ten minutes I sat listening to the priest, in purple and gold, carrying on in authoritative tones. I got nowhere of course, and it led me to thinking: “Where has shyness got you? Nowhere. Fear, modesty, courtesy, and culture were all useless. A few moments of inexplicable daring, bravery, all madness perhaps, has brought you untold happiness. Why hold back now? See how far the rabbit hole goes. Who knows — there may even be another tryst with her hand!”

I leaned over to Aleksandra and whispered in her ear. “I can’t sleep at night. Sometimes I think I’m a vampire.”

She gave me a quick glance but said nothing, then she looked straight ahead. No one else heard me; the flock were under the spell of divine counsel. But I was past caring by that point.

“Sometimes I think I’d like to fly in through your bedroom window, and drink your blood.”

“Don’t forget where you are.”

“In your room of course. You’re sitting at your desk. In your pajamas. Or perhaps t-shirt and jeans.”

“Zayn! Stop it!”

“Should I take the blood from your neck? Or your wrist? Yes, I think I’ll brush your hair to one side and bite your neck.”

She looked around to see if anyone had heard us. “If this is one of your jokes...you’re going too far!”

“No joke. Not at all. Try not to scream. I’ll do it gently so it doesn’t hurt. How soft and delicious!”

She shuddered. “Quiet, please!”

I lowered my voice a few more decibels. “And after I bite your neck, I’ll bite your ear. Right along the cartilage until I reach the earlobe. Hopefully it won’t hurt you too much. Then I’ll start with your shoulders—”

“Zayn!... This isn’t the time or the place. Show some respect!”

“All the way to your wrists. I don’t want you to be weak...so I won’t drink much. Just enough. And then on to your hips. Those ravishing hips. We’ll have to move those jeans down a little bit.”

“It’s good no one can understand you. I’d never be able to show my face in here again.”

“So you agree?”

“With what?”

“That your jeans will have to come down. Just a little.”

“But then you’ll see my underwear.”

“Just the waistband. Is that a problem? Or are you a prude?”

“I don’t know...what do you think?”

“No, I don’t think it’s a problem. As long as we are very careful and discreet.”

“You should know that my skin is very sensitive.”

“I am very responsible. I will take extra care of your sensitive skin.”

All this time she didn’t look at me but stared straight ahead; her cheeks flushed a delicate red. And the priest’s voice seemed to grow louder and louder.

“And then I will nibble your waist. Ok so far? Good. Then I’ll graze over your stomach. Are you ticklish?”

She breathed in sharply. “Yes, I’m very ticklish.”

“Oh ok. So I’ve got to be careful. Then slowly up to your ribs. We’ll have to move your shirt a bit more.”

“There is a problem...I’m not wearing a bra under my shirt. So it won’t work...unless...”

“Unless?”

“...You are very, very careful.”

“I give you my word. I’ll proceed with the utmost caution.”

“What will you do next?”

“So just along the ribs.”

“Kissing me there?”

“Yes.”

“I just remembered something. I don’t usually wear a t-shirt and jeans at night.”

“So what are you wearing?”

“A short sleeveless dress, to the knees. White with a black pattern.”

“Yes, that’s perfect! I’ll just pick you up in my arms and carry you to bed.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose I would get tired of sitting at my desk for so long.”

“It’s not good for your back. Not one bit. So I’ve got one hand under your knees and the other under your back. And then I’ll gently put you down on the bed.”

“What’s next? I can’t take this anymore.”

“We’ve got to take it slowly. It’s more fun that way. Ok, we’ll start with one knee.”

“Left or right?”

“Left. I’ll bite it softly.”

“Oh ok.”

“And then kiss it better.”

“Just that one knee?”

“Yes, for now. Next, I’ll bite your thigh. Is that ok?”

“Yes.”

“So, I guess we have to lift the dress a little bit. Not too much.”

“Just a bit. I know.”

“Then I’ll bite your inner thigh. So we’ve got to move your dress another few inches.”

“Again?”

“Does it bother you?”

“No...a little. But don’t stop.”

“And then I will kiss it better. And I’ll jump to your right thigh.”

“And will you kiss it?”

“Yes. Very gently. Up and down. How does that feel?”

“Ticklish.”

“Maybe you should spread your legs a little bit. You’ll be more comfortable that way.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You have beautiful legs.”

“Do you like them?”

“I do. They taste lovely. Sweeter than honey. And just as smooth.”

“Thank you. Your tongue is even smoother.”

“And then I’ll kiss your upper thigh. So we’ll have to lift your dress a bit more again.”

“Once again? I don’t mind.”

“That’s good...like the bee sips nectar from a wild flower...and then the upper thigh of your left leg.”

“I hope you won’t stop kissing me there quickly.”

“No, I’ll take my time. Savor the taste...it’s delicious.”

“Really? Maybe you should do that more often.”

“I will. And then I’ll go to the side and kiss your hips.”

“Under my dress?”

“Yes.”

“But if you want to see my hips then you’ll have to move my underwear.”

“Good point. Well, just a little bit.”

“Sure. Just a little bit.”

“So I can reach your hips.”

“Of course.”

“And then your waist.”

“So now I’m lying in bed with you, almost half naked.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” she said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Her temple glistened with beads of sweat.

“I guess not.”

“...So I’m kissing your waist. Your hip bone. Just above the line of your underwear. Ok?”

“That’s ok. Do you like it?”

“It’s exquisite.”

“Don’t stop. I don’t go to sleep till late.”

“Thanks.”

“But you should be very gentle.”

“I will be. My lips will just glide over your skin. And now we can take your waistband down a little bit. Just a little.”

“You want to kiss me under my underwear?”

“Well...just under the waistband.”

“Oh, I see. Is it tasty?”

“Very. And very soft. How does it feel?”

“So just don’t stop.”

“I won’t.”

“Amazing. Your tongue...”

“So, I’m kissing you all along the length of your waist.

“And I’m just lying in bed letting you do that.”

“Should I go lower?”

“Do you want to?”

“Only if you let me.”

“I guess you will like it. I really want to.”

“Ok.”

“So where are you now?”

“Uh...good question. Well if I take your underwear down a bit more then I will be at your pelvis.”

“That’s really low.”

“Yes.”

“I like it.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve never felt that way.”

“Like what?”

“Like I feel now. In bed, with you....And what do you feel?”

“Like Adam when he first saw Eve.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in that.”

“Can I continue?”

“Oh please.”

“Ok. So, I go even lower.”

“Lower? Am I wearing my underwear still or not?”

“It’s almost gone.”

“Ok. So you will see everything.”

“Yes.”

“Almost everything.”

“Yes. Almost.”

“And what do you want to do now?”

“I want to take it off completely.”

“And I want you to do that. So finally you see everything.”

“Yes. And I keep kissing you.”

“Kissing me there?”

“If you let me.”

“Just be gentle.”

“Ok. Do you like it?”

“And what about my legs? Are they spread? I like it so much. What about you?”

“Yes. I love it.”

“And where is your tongue now?”

“Between your legs.”

“Oh.”

The priest stopped abruptly; I thought he must have heard me. He came down from his pulpit and all the worshippers stood up. “This is it!” I thought. “They heard everything and now they were going to tear me limb from limb.” But it was only for communion that the crowd was lining up. We were sitting near the aisle, so we stood up to let them pass. My pants all of a sudden felt a couple of sizes too small for me.

“Should I stop?”

“No, continue.”

“Ok.”

“If you want to.”

“I do.”

“What does ‘between your legs’ mean exactly?”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I’ll let you use your imagination.”

“Ok then. Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“And you really want to do that?”

“Of course.”

“I mean in real life.”

“Yes.”

“But it’s not fair. I don’t have my underwear now. What about yours?”

“I usually wear shorts at night...aren’t you going for communion?”

“I can’t. I’ve sinned.”

She slipped past me and started to head out of the church. I followed a few paces behind.

CHAPTER 28

She avoided me for a whole day. The next time I saw her it was already quite late in the afternoon; she had just returned home.

“I was wrong about you,” she said. “I thought you loved me. But you’re only playing games.”

“What games?”

“You’re a devil! Go away!”

“I don’t understand. What did I do wrong?”

“You poisoned my thoughts. I had to go to confession. And the priest...he called me a whore.”

“The priest!”

“If I go to hell it will be because of you.”

“There is no hell!”

“Yes, there is. It’s what I believe.”

“I swear to you, on my life, there is no such thing as hell.”

“How do you know? Have you been there?”

“I could ask you the same question...and if there is a hell, I’ll go there with you.”

“It’s so easy to say.”

“I mean it. If you go to hell, then I will do everything possible...every imaginable sin to make sure I’ll join you.”

“You don’t believe in God. Nothing matters. It’s all a joke to you.”

“I believe in you. You’re the most wonderful, the most beautiful person I know.”

“I’m a whore, and I’m going to hell.”

“I’m going to kill that priest. I’m going to strangle him with his cassock. And gouge out his eyes with my fingers.”

“How can you say something like that? How can you....Oh, I don’t know you! You’re an animal! Go away!”

She rushed into the bathroom and locked the door. I went over and knocked a few times but there was no answer.

“Every word I told you is true. Every word!”

Still nothing.

“Aleksandra! Open the door! I want to say something to you.”

All this silence was doing my head in. Just then there was the sound of glass breaking on the other side of the door. I didn't wait a second longer. The wood splintered under my foot and the door flew open with a terrific clash.

A bottle lay smashed on the floor. Red and blue capsules lay strewn everywhere. She was in a towel, preparing for a bath.

"Do you mind? Get out!"

Stunned and ashamed, I stammered an apology and left her house as quickly as I could.

CHAPTER 29

I walked in circles for a long time. Głubczyce Sady is a pretty village, but there aren't many lights at night. As I walked in the darkness, for some reason I thought I was back in Warsaw. The same landmarks passed again and again. The same blue curtained window — always drawn shut — met me every hour or so. Once I thought it quivered slightly. Immediately I was transfixed. Was she standing behind? Was it her breath on the curtain that made it move? Was it the hem of her skirt that made the cloth stir? I waited for ten, twenty, thirty minutes. Nothing! I went back to walking. This time I took a different route. We were back in church, walking down the aisle.

“Well?” she said as we walked toward the priest hand in hand. “Is it over?”

“No, it's just the beginning.”

“Beginning of what?”

“What do you think?”

“I don't know,” she said. “I've never been there.”

“Never been where?”

“In that kind of situation. I don't know what's next.”

“Really?”

“Are you asking me if I'm a virgin?”

“No, I'm not asking you that.”

“Go ahead. The priest won't mind. He knows everything.”

“I want to know but I'm too scared to ask.”

“Why? Is it something wrong for you?”

“No, never mind.”

“You don't have to be scared.”

“I'm not scared of anything....Ok, are you a virgin?”

“Yes.”

A salvo of Carpathian wind hit me. My eyes watered as I felt an icy hand wrap around my face and dig into my cheeks. If that wasn't bad enough, it began to snow and cut visibility down to a few feet. A few minutes of trudging through that and I wondered if I should turn back. I couldn't see where I was going and the wind threatened to hurl me off my feet. A few times I keeled over and was sent flying headlong into the night, as helpless and adrift as a message in a bottle in the middle of the sea. A slave to chance wandering helplessly through the unending night. No light to guide me, no compass or landmark to lead the way, only a vague feeling of hope rising and falling contrary to the wind. I could hear her voice, random snatches of her lovely voice above the blizzard. And in the impenetrable white expanse ahead, I thought I even saw her receding figure. My efforts

redoubled, from an energy unknown to me, and I drove on into the night. Blind, numb, hands and lips frozen, I went on against the tide. As long as there was a spark of her in my mind, nothing was impossible. There! I must have wandered into town. The church bells were ringing. A dark figure scurried around the wall. Speak of the devil!

“Hey!” I shouted at the top of my lungs and made a mad dash for the priest. He took one look at me and fled for his life. I don’t know who or what he thought was chasing him in the dark, but he had enough good sense to not tarry to find out. We ran down the main street of the town...both of us screaming like men possessed...past the statue of Saint Mary crushing a snake, past the little row of shops and houses and the town square, past the Christmas decorations, the red and green lit stars and reindeers...

“Stop! I won’t hurt you! I just want to see what’s inside your head!”

But he pretended not to understand me and kept running for his life, his cries for help waking up the neighborhood, and the windows in the houses began lighting up one by one. We went past the town hall and the library, through the front lawn of someone’s house...if I hadn’t tripped over a branch hidden under the snow who knows what might have happened. By the time I got back to my feet I saw him disappear down a side street, swallowed by the shadows. I spat out the snow in my mouth.

When I retraced my steps to head home, I found groups of people scattered along the streets, curious no doubt about all the noise. It seemed that she was attracted to crowds. Wherever they may be, I was sure to find her.

“Roksana! Why are you here?”

“We have some relatives in town.”

“Your brother’s here too?”

“Yes...he can’t wait to see you again.” Then a coy smile spread over her face. “What does ‘between your legs’ mean exactly?”

A bolt of lightning stabbed my heart. I tried my best to keep my voice calm. “So you were listening?”

“Well, it’s not something you hear in church every day.”

“It was a private conversation. You had no business eavesdropping.”

“Eavesdropping? Everyone in my aisle could hear you. Okay, not everyone. A few of them were quite old and deaf. And the others didn’t speak much English...but they kept asking who you were and what you were saying.”

“What did you say?”

She shrugged. “Well, I had to translate.”

“Quick! No games please. What did you tell them?”

“The truth of course. We were in church after all.”

“But why? I don’t understand...who were you speaking to? Do they know Aleksandra?”

“Oh, everyone knows her in this town.”

“Can’t you see what you’ve done, you silly girl? You’ve exposed her to—why couldn’t you say something else?”

“But I never lie. That’s part of my charm. Of course, I could tell everyone it was a bad joke and I’d made those things up. But where’s the fun in that? You know what small towns are like. Old ladies have nothing better to do. No one will ever speak to her again. And they’ll spit at the very sound of her name.”

“But she did nothing! It was all my fault!”

“She could have stopped you.”

“She tried! Oh God!”

“God has nothing to do with it.”

“Tell me...why is her father in jail?”

“You mean you don’t know? She didn’t tell you? Well, of course, she wouldn’t. Why would she?”

“Be a good girl and tell me. I’ll give you a kiss.”

“Ha! What do you think I am? A child?”

“A very naughty child.”

“Yes, someone who has to be punished. Won’t you punish me?”

“I might have to....If her father’s in jail, then the family name can’t be in high esteem.”

She had no answer to that. “Yes, but...now no one will want her. No boy will ever look at her, let alone want to marry her.”

“That’s fine with me,” I patted her on the head. “Run along now. You tried your best. You still have a long way to growing up.”

She wrenched my arm away. Her eyes flashed like a demon’s. “You love her? But you’ll let her name be dragged in the mud?”

“Why not?” I turned around and walked back home. Deep down I knew she was lying, only I didn’t know how much. She had heard me, that much was true. But what else had she done? What more could she do?

CHAPTER 30

There was a blue handkerchief with a white border tied around her wrist. It looked fashionable enough but for some reason I thought there was something unusual behind it. I said nothing over supper but kept stealing glances at it. I realized I had never seen her bare arm before. She always had a watch or bangles on or wore full sleeves. Even at the pool she had several bracelets on her arms. After our meal I decided to give in to my curiosity.

“What’s that?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Can I have a look?”

“There’s nothing to see,” she flung my hand away.

But I wouldn’t give up so easily. During our brief struggle the handkerchief came off. A red wound winked at me. Beside it were a series of scars of various lengths, some a few months old, others maybe years. All done with a knife or a blade. She pushed me suddenly with a ferocity that sent me staggering.

“Aleksandra!”

“It’s nothing. Just a scratch.”

“You did this? But why? I don’t understand...” Lost for words and feeling tears rushing to my eyes, my only thought was to throw myself at her feet and shower them with kisses. But I couldn’t move. Paralyzed and mute, all I could do was stare. All along, this beautiful girl, the archangel of my heart, the reason for all existence, for whom anything was possible, was being torn apart by fiends. “Why did you do it?” the words spilt out of my mouth like stones. My tongue felt heavy and dry, my head feverish.

“I don’t know,” she said, turning away from me.

I took a step toward her. Shafts of red lightning flashed before my eyes, and I could hear the hiss of blood from an open wound. Her graceful arm, so slender and delicate, ran ragged with scars.

“I think everything is my fault,” she picked up the handkerchief and started to wrap it around her arm.

“Aleksandra, how can you say that? You haven’t done anything! Nothing is more important than your life...than your happiness...think of your aunt. If something happens to you, who will look after her? She has no one.”

“Please! I don’t want to talk about it. And if you have any respect for me...if you want to remain friends...you’ll never mention it again.”

The sound of silk being crushed into a knot made my head whirl. What vandal dared desecrate the statue of a God! I took another step, wrapped her in my arms and tried to kiss her.

She gently pushed me away. "Please...don't." Her voice was so soft, so kind...I felt a catch in my throat. Tears streamed unashamedly down my face.

"There's so much I don't know about you. You have to tell me everything."

"I'm trying to forget everything."

A whole minute passed in silence. She started to move toward her room, and then stopped.

"You know something? I memorized the poem you wrote for me."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's something special for me."

"I just want you to know that everything will be alright. I'll always be there for you. I don't know what happened in the past, and I don't care."

"And you know what else? I sleep with your poem under my pillow...I read it when I can't sleep."

I wiped my face with my shirt sleeve and reached into my pocket. "I wanted to slip this under your door tonight."

"Another poem? Again? I don't deserve this..." She unfolded the paper and began to read.

My heart beat violently in my chest. How I gazed at her while her black eyes swept the page. When she finished she looked away for a moment, and then looked up at me.

"Thank you. I love it...but I don't think I am this girl in the poem. You have a picture of me that doesn't exist."

"Everything I wrote is true. Every single word."

"Do you want to know the truth? I'm not good enough for you."

"You're insane. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. All along my life had no meaning, until I met you."

"You don't have to say those nice things to make me feel better. But I love your poem. It's beautiful. Once again, thank you."

"I'm not trying to make you feel better! Can't you see that I'm just crazy about you?"

"You're idealizing me too much! You don't know me...we don't have to talk about it."

So we didn't. She went to bed and I went to my sofa. I didn't sleep at all that night. The dark ravines on her silk smooth skin haunted me. What if she was sitting in her room right now, cutting away? I leapt to my feet, dizzy and shaking with fear. What if she's at it now? All those scars! The blood! I tiptoed to her door, not daring to breathe, and listened carefully. Nothing. Not a sound. Ever so gently I tried opening her door. It was unlocked. It didn't make a single squeal. I opened it a crack. The room was in darkness. Her bed was against the far wall near a window that was slightly ajar. I opened the door further and crept inside like a thief.

Her eyes were closed, her breathing light and steady. She was asleep, thank God! A few strands of hair fell over her cheek. I gently brushed them aside. I stood there gazing at her for a long time. Moonlight swam through the open window, washing over the curve of her neck, the tip of her nose, her slightly parted mouth. Then, before I knew what I was doing, something came over me and pulled me towards her: I bent down and almost pressed her virgin lips to mine. Our lips touched not, but hovered on the brink; a kiss dangling in midair. I could taste her warm breath; the selfsame breath for which a dozen sultans would gladly risk their necks. She stirred lightly but did not wake. I wanted to kiss her forehead, those black eyebrows, those cheeks. Instead, I kissed her hand that lay outside the sheets. A still small voice said: "Let her pain be mine." And my kisses spread their balm along her wounds.

"Tato," she said suddenly. "Nie." And I froze. After some time I realized she had been talking in her sleep. It was a little girl that had spoken, a child's voice.

When my heart started beating again, I quietly left the room, and closed the door softly behind me.

CHAPTER 31

The next morning she took me around town. Three thousand people called it home, but most of them seemed to prefer the indoors. I didn't blame them: it was twenty-three degrees below zero. We passed the bank, the post office, even the mayor's house. The mayor was supposed to be a distant relative of hers but she didn't know exactly how. As we passed, an elderly man in a beret crossed the lawn and headed towards the house. Aleksandra waved at him.

"Look! That's the mayor. Dzień dobry, panie Belka."

The old man glanced at her, then at me, and without a word carried on walking towards his front door.

"I guess he didn't hear you."

"I guess so," she laughed uneasily. "He probably didn't see me either."

We bought a scarf for her aunt and later went to the post office to mail it. Aleksandra said the people working there were acting quite strangely.

"Strange? How?"

"Well, I only come to Głubczyce once a year, and they usually talk a lot more, ask me about my aunt and so on. But they don't want to anymore."

"Maybe they're still recovering from New Year's. Or they've just not well. It's hard to be friendly in this climate."

But the sight of passersby snubbing her was too much to take. Would it kill them to say hello? As if they were all saints who never picked their noses. I wanted to knock the heads off every single last one of them. Small towns can be so brutal.

"There's something you should know," I said. "But I'm not sure how to tell you. Roksana heard us talking in the church. She may have told a few people...it's all my fault. I'm sorry."

"How do you know that? Did she tell you? The little...just wait till I see her again. She's always hated me. Her brother used to follow me around and it used to drive her insane."

"I don't understand. Why would she care if her brother..."

"I don't know. She's always been very strange. She loves spreading rumors. It's a way of getting attention. That's why Pan Belka wouldn't even look at me today. I don't care. I hate this place anyway. They should never have believed her in the first place. And they didn't even care to ask me if it were true. How can they believe her – basically a child – before me?"

"So her brother's in love with you?"

"He always said he's considered himself my older brother. Some sort of bodyguard. I guess he knew I would never go for someone like him."

"Not your type?"

“I’d rather love a monkey. Or a frog.”

“So it’s animal magnetism you’re after?”

“It’s hard to take ugly people seriously.”

“I agree.”

“And you have to have a sense of humor. An interesting personality. And be brave.”

“Money?”

“I don’t care about money. But fat men don’t work for me.”

“Is that all?”

“Pretty much. I guess it doesn’t really matter since you can’t control who you fall in love with.”

“I once read that we copy our loves from others. Our ideal love is someone we’ve seen somewhere, like a collage of ideal partners from movies, books, or even from life. We love those that others do.”

“That’s not true. I’ve never seen anyone like you. I never even knew someone like you existed.”

“I’m weird, it’s true.”

“Well, you’re certainly not normal.”

I never mentioned Warsaw once. She brought it up. She asked me if I wanted to go back. I pointed out that I had nowhere to live in Warsaw — I couldn’t stay in a hotel forever.

“I’m sorry, I would invite you to stay at my aunt’s place but there’s no room. It’s different in Głubczyce Sady... we have the place to ourselves. You don’t want to go back to Paris?”

“Never! It stinks!”

“Then you have no choice but to continue exploring Poland. You should start learning some Polish.”

“I only know one phrase in Polish.”

“Tell me.”

“Kocham cie.”

“Ja tez cie kocham,” she smiled.

“I love you too?”

“Yes. You see, now you know two phrases.”

“I’ve doubled my Polish in one stroke. But I’ll probably forget by tomorrow.”

“That’s ok. I will remind you again some other time.”

“Maybe if you remind me often enough I will be able to remember it.”

“Maybe I should remind you every day.”

“Maybe.”

"I wish we had met before...when you were a kid."

"I wish so too. But I didn't talk to girls when I was growing up. So you would've had to come and talk to me."

"Why didn't you talk to girls? I looked like a boy in the past. With short hair."

"Haha. Then I guess it would've been easier to talk to you. I bet you look great in short hair."

"You didn't say why you didn't talk to girls."

"I don't know. They were so different. They seemed so different."

"And now?"

"Oh, now they're an even greater mystery. I don't understand them at all. One minute they like you, the next they can't stand to look at your face. Now, I guess I'm just too old to care."

"How old are you?"

"There are three things a gentleman never reveals about himself: his age, his income, and the number of women he's slept with...incidentally, my income is zero."

"Can I ask you a stupid and really personal question?"

"Sure."

"Think about it, because it's stupid. And personal."

"Yes, go ahead."

"Ok. With how many girls did you sleep?"

"Didn't you hear? A gentleman never reveals that kind of thing!...But ok, take a guess."

"You don't have to answer it."

"I don't mind."

"I don't want to guess."

"Why not?"

"Because I think there were lots of girls in your life."

The wind had been steadily growing all this time, biting our noses and cheeks, and now it forced us to take shelter for a moment in a recess of the town hall. I wasn't sure how to respond. Should I tell her about Paris? How would I start? Could she ever love me if she knew the truth?

"I can tell you one thing. I've never been in love before. Crushes? Sure. In love? Never."

"How do you know if you're in love?"

"That's easy. It gives you a reason to live. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"Everything is so unbelievable with you. You surprise me all the time."

We left the town hall and were walking along a small bridge that spanned the Psina when she suddenly stopped.

“Now I know why you never spoke with girls! You were thinking of sex all the time and were scared they would read your mind.”

“What? No!”

“It’s not your fault. Men think about it every 52 seconds. Women about once a day, or once every three or four hours during their most fertile days. We studied it in class.”

“I guess I’m an exception.”

“It’s evolution — for the survival of the species. You can’t fight it. All your testosterone killed your communication cells and made you anti-social.”

“And all your estrogen made you want to talk to people and make friends?”

“Something like that.”

“That’s it? All men are the same? And all women are alike?”

“Biologically, yes. And there’s nothing we can do to change it.”

“I feel sorry for priests and monks.”

“I feel sorry for you. All by yourself. No girls to talk to. What did you do? You must have been going crazy!”

“I entertained myself.”

“Eww.”

“I mean I read books...watched movies...”

“Sure.”

“If I had only known you, you could have entertained me.”

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at me with exaggerated shock and disbelief. She playfully slapped my face and made a break for it before I could react. I chased her into a snow-covered field where children were making snowmen between bare branched trees and sliding down an embankment on home-made sleighs. When I finally caught her I didn’t know what to do. I just wrapped my arms around her and pulled her to the soft ground. She was panting for breath, clouds of smoke burst from her lips, her cheeks had turned bright red. We stared at each other, the white clouds of our breaths mingling, touching, coiling....The wind had dropped. It began to snow again. Light flakes scattered all over us like confetti. We sat there looking at each other until our breathing calmed down, and we had enough air in our lungs to speak.

“I have to go to Zakopane tomorrow. I’ll be gone for a week. My boyfriend will be there.”

I didn’t say anything. What could I say?

“I’ll give you my keys. You can stay in my house. Or you can go to Kraków or Wrocław if you wish.”

“I didn’t come to Poland to go sightseeing. I’ll wait for you to come back.”

“A week isn’t a long time.”

“No, it isn’t.”

We dusted ourselves off and stood up. Her lips parted with a sigh and the soft vapor clouded my face for a while. Then everything cleared. We turned and slowly headed back home.

CHAPTER 32

I didn't have a cell phone, so she promised to call me at home. She wrote down her number but I tore the paper up and threw it away the second her back was turned.

"I wanted to show you around Poland. It's not right that I'm going with him. I'm sorry."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"It's ok. I'll wait for you to come back."

"You have to realize that it's not easy for me. Everybody thinks that we will get married someday. Our families will be disappointed."

"Well, surely you can't marry someone to make other people happy? But yes, I realize that it's hard for you."

"I should go now. I have to pack."

She left early next morning in a minivan. She had paused at the door, and turned to say something, but changed her mind at the last second. I too wanted to grab her hand and tell her not to go. But the van was waiting.

"I'll send you a postcard," was the last thing she said. And then she left.

She wasn't gone two minutes when I dived into the garbage can, desperately searching for the torn paper. I rummaged furiously past egg shells and banana skins, bread crusts and candy wrappers. There were a few scraps of paper here and there, and I tried putting them together on the kitchen floor. But I couldn't read the number since the ink had run from some juice or wine. Desperately I dialed a number but a man answered in Polish. I apologized and quickly hung up.

What a fool! What a fool I'd been! What now? I shouldn't have let her go. I should have begged her to stay. Not everyone gets a second chance. Or a third. And how many had I squandered? I beat my head against the wall and my howls of pain could be heard from the nearby town. A couple of neighborhood dogs took up my cry. Their solidarity was much appreciated, and I made a point of giving them my leftovers every night. They started following me around on my daily walks through the village. I called one Steve and the other one Bob. Neither responded to their names but I think we understood one another. I was the stranger in the village but they seemed protective of me, baring their teeth and yelping at teenage kids who passed by. They were a mangy looking duo, with fleas and torn ears. If it weren't for them I might have done something stupid.

The first time she called, our conversation lasted less than a minute.

"I have to break up with him. There is no way I can be with him...I was sleeping for an hour and I had a dream about you."

"I always dream about you."

"You told me in this dream that you didn't really care about me."

"Impossible! Sounds like a bad dream."

"Really bad dream. I hope it's not true."

"Of course not..."

"I have to go now, bye Zayn."

"Bye Aleksandra."

The line disconnected. A few hours later the phone rang again. I had been pacing back and forth the whole time and jumped at the sound.

"I told him I didn't want to be with him. I really need to talk to you."

"I'm always here for you."

"I broke up with him."

"If you want to know the truth...I'm glad...I'm sorry."

"I am glad too, but to be honest I didn't do it because of you...I'm just sad....Are you sure you want me?"

"What? Of course I do. I love you Aleksandra. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I've never felt toward anyone the way I feel about you."

"I have to go now. Bye, Zayn."

"I hope you'll call again. Please. Bye, Aleksandra."

I couldn't sleep all night. Finally, the phone rang again a few hours before dawn.

"Aleksandra! I can't imagine what you're going through now. But please know that I'm always here for you."

"Zayn...I love you!"

The line was faint, but I heard it clearly. My legs gave way and if I hadn't grabbed the curtains I would have cracked my skull on the wooden floor. As it was I ripped a few rings off the curtain rail. I clutched the blue curtain in my hands and held on for dear life.

"Hello? Zayn, can you hear me?"

"I love you too! Oh I only wish I could show you how much I love you."

"I know it. And don't worry, I'm ok."

"I will always worry about you."

"Everything is really hard now. He knows I am talking to someone. I don't want to hurt him anymore."

"Ok, then we will talk later?"

"I wish we could...you can finally kiss me, Zayn!"

"I will kiss you again and again and again and forever."

"Just a few more days and then....Bye, my love. Kiss me forever."

“Bye, my darling. Kisses forever.”

“I can’t go.”

“Neither can I.”

“Are you still there? There are so many things I want to tell you, but I can’t...I sent you a postcard. Some things can only be said in writing. You should get it tomorrow...today. This morning.”

Even the instant coffee tasted differently that day. And I no longer felt like strangling the cock that crowed at dawn. Steve and Bob ran around barking wildly, and I joined them, rolling in the snow with them. They left teeth marks all along my trousers and filled my gloves with holes. My heart soared to the treetops, to the clouds, and felt as if it would burst. I couldn’t keep still and had to take a circuit of the entire village, and the nearby town, shouting “Dzień dobry!” to strangers near and far. The dogs followed me, tongues lolling, without a question, without a word.

When I got back her letter was waiting for me. On one side there was a picture of a couple holding hands skiing down a mountain. The sun was either rising or setting behind them.

Zayn...I want to talk to you all the time. I want to see you and touch you and feel you next to me. It’s really hard to act that I’m not in love with anybody. But I have to...in front of him and in front of myself. Do you remember that black and white picture of me? That’s how I feel right now. And a little bit cold...I need somebody to hold me. To tell me that life can be better and that I’m not an awful person. He wants me back but I can think only about you. It’s hard to be here and watch him crying all the time. But it’s not the reason I’m writing to you. So many bad things happened in my life. I don’t want to be hurt again. So I hope your feelings are clear. I don’t know you, but I am in love with you. That’s something very strange. You are the only person who can hurt me...so if it’s a game for you or something please stop it. But if it’s not then I will wait until...I want to know you better. We don’t have to know about each other everything. We can start slowly. There are so many things you don’t know about me...

Love

Aleksandra.

I dashed off a reply to her return address:

Aleksandra, please know that I mean it when I say that I love you. Please come back. I want you to be mine forever.

Love

Zayn.

She called late that night. Most of the time we spoke about how much we missed one another and how I would never let her go once she was in my arms again.

“Yes, never let me go, Zayn. I have no one but you.”

“Come back now! Today!”

“I hope my heart will start functioning normally because I can’t stand it anymore.”

“My heart too. When I first sent you the poem, I remember I was shivering. Just shaking all over.”

“Really? You should’ve seen me.”

“Why?”

“I was just smiling but not normally...like a child. That moment...but do you know what’s the worst?”

“What?”

“I can’t eat.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t eat, sleep, focus on anything.”

“To be honest that’s exactly how I feel too.”

“I like you too much and that’s not good.”

“You have no idea how much I like you.”

“Tell me.”

“I could do anything for you. Absolutely anything. In fact, “like” is not strong enough a word for how I feel.”

“Anything? I think that you created in your head some kind of picture of me which isn’t real.”

“Of course not.”

“So which other word will you choose?”

“Come back now and I’ll whisper it in your ear.”

“It was a mistake coming here...I miss you.”

“I miss you too...what’s wrong?”

“Everything is falling apart, and I don’t know what to do...I know it’s not your problem, but I have only you.”

“What’s falling apart? Any problem of yours is my problem too. Tell me, please.”

“He...we have to be here for another five days. I am just so sick of all these emotions. He doesn’t want to leave me alone.”

“Is he bothering you? Can’t you leave earlier?”

“He tries things which I don’t want to do. I can’t. I was so stupid...I thought that this trip would be fun.”

"I don't understand...you can always change a ticket. But I guess everything else has already been paid for."

"You won't understand. How was your day? Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Yes, of course. Why can't you leave?"

"By what? I didn't pay for that trip. Everybody will be angry at me when I come back earlier. The connection is so bad, I can barely hear you."

"Ok, I don't want any trouble for you. But you should do whatever you want. And not have to worry about money."

"I'm sorry."

"I can send you the money."

"Don't get me wrong but I don't want your money. I just wanted you to know about my feelings...that's all."

"I can buy a ticket for you to come back. I don't want you to suffer there for five days."

"Please Zayn, you don't have to do that. I have money for a ticket...it's not so simple."

"I know...you want to avoid complications with your family. But I'm sure they'll want the best for you."

"You're so beautiful, I still can't believe in all this. By the way, I hate this phone!"

"I hate the fact that you've got to stay there another five days."

"I hate it too...what would you do if you were him? He just doesn't want to give up."

"If you really love someone...then you've got to let them choose."

"If you want to, I can tell you about our relationship and about this situation in the future. I don't want to scare you right now."

"Why will I be scared?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to talk about my ex with the man I love."

"If he's treating you badly then I want to know."

"I'm sorry. I'm so confused, I don't know what to do and what should I say to you."

"I don't want to force you to say anything. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. You can tell me when you're ready. Just remember, I'm always here for you."

"I started talking about this, not you. You can simply ask if there is something you want to know, ok?"

"Did he hurt or abuse you?"

"I'm scared of losing you."

"I told you I will always love you. But if it's too painful to talk about then you can tell me later....Please say something, Aleksandra...Aleksandra? Are you there? I'm really worried about you!"

There was complete silence from the other end. Then there were some faint rustling noises, as if the handset was muffled by a piece of cloth. At last she spoke again.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“You scared me...I was going crazy!”

“I will tell you later, Zayn.”

“That’s fine. I love you Aleksandra, and I’m scared of losing you. Do you want to talk now or are you busy?”

“You won’t lose me. I want to be yours forever. I love you too, Zayn.”

“I want to kiss you so much right now.”

“I’m not busy. It’s just that he gets very angry when I talk to you.”

“He knows about me?”

“I want to kiss you too. You can’t imagine how badly I want to do that. Yes, he found out. It’s obvious that I’m in love. I’m sorry...”

“Sorry for what? You shouldn’t be sorry for anything.”

“That I told him about us. I don’t know...maybe you didn’t want him to know.”

“I’m glad you told him. It’s always best to tell the truth.”

“Ok.”

“If it’s a problem to talk now...we can talk later.”

“You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“I’m in the bathroom right now, and it’s really hard to keep my voice down.”

“Haha. Well, we’ll talk later then.”

“Yes. We’ll talk another time.”

“Bye Aleksandra...”

“Sure. Bye. Have a nice night.”

CHAPTER 33

We spoke for hours each night and yet it always felt like a few frenzied minutes. Distance brought us together. Her voice had never sounded so intimate, so familiar. And I could feel her heart beat inside my chest. I closed my eyes when we spoke, and I tried to see her face, her dark eyes, those delicious lips. We said things we would have never dared face to face. The waves of her breathing were a delight to hear. And when she frowned or smiled I could see the slight wrinkling of her nose. The song of her voice caressed me in the darkness, and I lay all night long after we had finished speaking, thinking of her. Turning in my mind her every phrase, every word, every inflection. The pleasure of listening to her, replaying her words, her sweet laughter, shock or surprise, grew deeper each day. I could even hear her tears drip down her cheek and splash on the receiver.

One night, her voice was shaking.

“Zayn...I feel so bad, I don’t want to live. Sometimes I feel okay but after that I’m so sad...I will go to hell for what I did to him. I can’t leave him.”

“Aleksandra, you’re simply following your heart. You can’t force yourself to like someone. Please don’t say that. We have something special between us. I love you Aleksandra...I know you’re going through a hard time. Whenever you’re sad, just call me...I feel so useless stuck all the way over here. I wish I was there. Maybe I should...no, no. That won’t be right....You haven’t done anything wrong. You told him the truth and that’s always the right thing to do.”

“I love you too, Zayn. You’re the love of my life. Yes, you’re right. You always know what to say to make me feel better. I’m sorry for what I said. I was angry and sad. I won’t complain anymore. I have some problems with this phone...I can’t imagine what you feel when you hear me talking like this...but only you make me happy.”

“Aleksandra, you should always complain to me. You are everything to me.”

“If you can’t hear me, don’t worry. It’s because of this stupid phone.”

“Whenever you feel bad, just remember that there is one person in this world who will do anything for you. And yes, he is even prepared to go to hell for you.”

“And you are everything to me...I hope I won’t lose you because of my stupid behaviour.”

“Even if I go to hell, I can smile at the devil while thinking of you...and then nothing can touch me.”

“I have to go now.”

“Ok. Think of me sometimes.”

“It’s raining here. I have to go back to my room...I don’t know what to say. It’s true, I’m yours. I think of you all the time. Always.”

“Be strong Aleksandra...and wait for me. If we truly love each other then nothing can keep us apart.”

“I can wait for you forever just to see you for a minute.”

“Thank you. I miss you so much. Everything reminds me of you, the trees, the birds, the smell of pinecones everywhere...”

“Zayn, are we together? You have never asked about that.”

“I want us to be together. Do you?”

“Really? I’m glad. Bye my love. I miss you so much, you can’t even imagine what I feel for you.”

“Bye my princess. Call me when you have time. Then we’re together.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t go.”

“It’s impossible to leave you.”

“But I’ve always been scared of you...and I’ve never wanted to take anything for granted.”

“I wish I could taste your sweet lips.”

“I’m so happy right now. I wish I could kiss you forever.”

“I can’t believe what’s just happened.”

“What? Has it stopped raining?”

“Very funny...I have to go back cos he’s mad that I’m not in our room now.”

“I think he’s torturing you.”

“Oh, we’re so sweet together, don’t you think?”

“You have to be strong Aleksandra. Don’t be afraid of anything. Always know that I am with you forever. I think we’ll make an excellent couple.”

“Yes, I know that, but I’m blaming myself for what he feels right now.”

“It’s not your fault. The truth is the most important thing in the world. And you should never feel guilty about how your heart feels.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m afraid of meeting you again, after all this.”

“In a few months my Polish will be perfect! Try and see the good side. Life’s too short to worry about the problems.”

“And will you help me with my English?”

“There’s no room for improvement. But yes, I can be your teacher. When you’re good I’ll give you a kiss. And when you’re naughty I’ll have to bite you.”

“You’re so different than me. I love it. Bite me where?”

“Bad things will happen whether you want them to happen or not. So what’s the point in thinking about them? Bite you in the ass!”

“Haha. Oh, I’m scared now!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle. You better be a good student.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“And if you’re very good, then we’ll take a bath in champagne. And if you’re very bad—”

“Yes, I’ll be the best. I’m going to eat something. I’ll talk to you later. Bye Zayn.”

“Bye Aleksandra...”

“Are you still there? I have something to tell you. But I’m scared I might lose you.”

“What is it? You can tell me anything.”

“My father’s in jail...”

“I know. I don’t care.”

“He’s going to come out soon.”

“That’s great.”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t want him to get out.”

“Okay...”

“We can talk about this later. You must be tired. You should go to sleep.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever go to sleep.”

“Then just close your eyes and think of me.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Bye Zayn. Sweet dreams. I love you, remember. Think of me always! I’ll be thinking of you night and day, dreaming of your beautiful face.”

CHAPTER 34

Things were going so fast. Beyond my wildest dreams. I was the luckiest man in the world, no doubt about that. I felt like going out into the street and singing at the top of my voice. Climbing the church tower and madly ringing the bell. Painting her name on every house in the village and every house in town. And what about her father? What did he do? Rob a bank? Kill someone? Who cared? Hopefully it was a politician. Maybe he'll teach me how to shoot. If Aleksandra didn't want to see him again, that was fine too. The next time the phone rang, my head was still in the clouds.

"Sorry, Mr. President," I said. "You'll have to call back. I'm waiting for my girlfriend to call."

"I can't be your girlfriend. I don't want to lie to you. I'm not completely free...not until I come back. We have to wait. Maybe you're tired of waiting but I just can't...I've never been alone. I just need some time for myself and he doesn't make it easy...I don't want to hurt you but you told me that the truth is always better...I love you, I really do, and everything I said was true. But I want you to have all of me, not a piece of me...Zayn? I miss you. Say something."

Her voice was so faint, so distant. The phone almost fell from my hands and a sudden spell of dizziness struck me. I had to sit down to stop the walls from spinning. My eyes searched the room until they found a piece of paper on the kitchen table. I picked it up and it came apart in my hands, the pieces scattered to the ground.

"It's funny actually...I was so happy this morning that I was writing a poem about you..."

"I'm sorry, Zayn."

"You really hurt me, Aleksandra....But I will wait for you...I want you to be happy. That's all I want. And if you think you'll be happy with someone else then...I'll be happy for you. But I can never stop loving you. And deep in my heart I know that no one can ever make you as happy as I can."

"I want to be with you and only you. But if you want me as badly as I want you, please wait for me."

"You can't imagine how much I want you. Yes, I'll wait for you."

"I am yours, but I'm here with him. I have to go back home. Please, you need to understand."

"I understand...I've never asked anything from you, Aleksandra."

"I'm hurt too. I'm sorry, Zayn...what poem did you write?"

"It was about a girl who appears in my dreams every night...sorry, it's destroyed now."

"I want to go back home, be only with you, not him or anyone else. I don't want to hurt you anymore, but if I want to be only yours I have to finish with him."

"I trust you Aleksandra. I know that whatever you do will be for the best."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. It just scares me that every day you change your mind."

"I just wanted to be honest with you. My feelings for you didn't change."

"I know. I just wish you were honest yesterday as well."

"I don't know what to say. Maybe I should go."

"Wait! I didn't mean to—"

"I wish you were me for a while then you would understand everything...Zayn, all I can do is hurt people...I really don't want to live my life."

"Please don't say that. You've made me so happy. If anything bad happens to you..."

"I'm sorry...you know that I don't just want to be your girlfriend...I want to be something else for all my life and be with you until I die."

My heart thudded in my chest. I stopped breathing. "So please never think of hurting yourself. I want to live with you for the rest of my life too."

"We will be together but let me end my last relationship...because he still acts like my boyfriend."

"Okay."

"I won't hurt myself, don't worry."

"I trust you. You're the only person who's never let me down."

"I trust you too. Don't be sad. I mean it when I say that I can move to Paris for you. I can do anything just to make you happy. And don't worry, I won't change my mind."

"I'll pray every day that you don't change your mind."

"I have to go now. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, take care."

"Zayn, why don't you believe in God? You don't have to answer this question."

"I only believe in you. There is only enough room in my heart for one person."

"Me too. Oh, you can't imagine what I feel."

"Only three more days! I've been alone all my life...then I found you!"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have you ever kissed someone? Before me, I mean."

"Yes...I thought I was in love, but that was nothing compared to this."

"Only once?"

"It was a long time ago. I never saw her since."

"Who is she?"

“She left me. She didn’t want to see me again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m glad. Otherwise I would never have met you.”

“Zayn...that story you told me...about Alexander. That was you?”

“It was a long time ago...yes.”

“So somewhere in this world, she might still be waiting for you. Do you think of her?”

“Never. She’s not waiting for me. I was the one doing the waiting.”

“Maybe she was in hospital. Maybe she was giving birth. I would—”

“I looked everywhere. Please. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Sure...there’s so much we don’t know about each other.”

“We have the rest of our lives to find out.”

“There are things...some things I don’t want you to find out.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t love me anymore.”

“Impossible! What kind of things? Oh, you’re so silly!”

“Am I?”

“Yes, you are!”

“Oh, thank you!”

“There’s nothing you can say or do to change my mind.”

“I hope you’ll still think that way after I come back.”

“When you come back I’ll put you over my knee and spank you like a little child for being so silly.”

“I’d like to see you try! Oh, I’ll just smash you in your whole face.”

“So you want to be spanked? I will do it, you know!”

“But not too hard!”

“And then I’ll bite you real hard.”

“You turn me on! Stop it!”

“Ah! But you don’t really want me to stop. You see, I’ve got some ideas for you.”

“Maybe...do you want to stop?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll be back very late on Friday night.”

“I’ll be awake.”

“Ideas? What kind of ideas?...”

“You’ll be moaning with pleasure.”

“Oh...”

“Oh? Just wait and see. I won’t tell you my ideas now cos then it won’t be a surprise.”

There was a tiny sigh from the other end of the phone. It was impossible to know for sure what she was thinking, but I thought I could read her mind then.

“Okay...goodnight Zayn. Dream of me.”

“Goodnight Aleksandra.”

“And don’t be scared. You know that I will do anything for you. I won’t change my mind, please believe me...”

“I believe you.”

“Now I really have to go eat something. I’ll talk to you later. Goodnight, my love...I am only yours, nothing can change that.”

“Okay Aleksandra. Bye.”

“You should know that I broke up with him because of you...I don’t have time to talk now. Bye handsome.”

“Bye, my love. I know...thank you.”

“Zayn?”

“Yes?”

“I will give everything just to be with you.”

CHAPTER 35

She loved me. She really did. I remember saying to myself: “If this bottle goes into the garbage can from across the room then she loves me...damn! Missed! Fine, best of three. All or nothing...good God! Again! Well, well...best of five then. Three days went by in this fashion, and it was safe to say that she loved me. Of course, there were other signs as well. If I could walk along a narrow brick wall in a neighbor’s garden without falling off then all was saved. Or if Steve would come around the corner before Bob then you could bet your life that she loved me. What else...whether the priest approached the sanctuary from the left or the right. I had started going to mass out of curiosity, to know what I was up against. Keep your friends close....He didn’t recognize me when I stood in line for communion, and didn’t blink twice when I ate the wafer out of his hand. He must have felt safe in church. No one dared to judge him there.

When Friday came, I looked out the kitchen window every hour, even though I knew she wouldn’t arrive until later that night. Every second that passed was bringing us closer. At least that’s what I had told her. And myself. I remember telling her:

“I’ve been all yours ever since I saw you at the station in Paris.”

“Really?”

“Even before I saw you.”

“How?”

“I dreamt of you even before we met...even though I had no idea what you looked like.”

“I don’t know what to say. I thought that I was one of many girls that you met...”

“I never dreamt about any other girl.”

“It’s hard to believe. It’s impossible that you never dreamt of anybody...”

“It’s true.”

“Anyway, I’ve never met someone like you in my dreams or in real life.”

When I heard the sound of an engine I rushed out of the house. She had just stepped out of the van and even before she could take her suitcase out I was alongside her, grabbing her and pulling her into a warm embrace. Just then Steve and Bob arrived. They must have been waiting in the darkness of the front porch, and they began snarling and yelping and biting at her ankles.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re harmless. Shoo! Scat!”

I got her bags and we started to head inside. But they followed us all the way, snapping at her heels and baring their teeth savagely. When we got indoors she said she was tired and would be going straight to bed without supper.

“Yes, you must be tired. All those hours in that little van.”

“Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight.”

She closed the door to her room but not before throwing a kind smile in my direction. The last thing I noticed before the door closed were her red-rimmed eyes; she had been crying.

The next morning, we had breakfast together. The smell of coffee and melted butter filled the kitchen. We sat like strangers at the table, neither of us saying a word. And our eyes refused to meet, darting around the room as if seeing all the cutlery and furniture for the first time. Finally, I had enough. When I reached out for the salt my hand brushed hers. There was a sudden jolt and a spark, and I felt all the hair on my arm stand on their ends. She looked up at me, her black eyes wavering, fear and something else, something deep and hidden, guilt perhaps, washed over her face.

I slowly pulled the butter knife from her grasp. Then, as I took her hand a glass was upset and fell to the floor. It smashed to little pieces spilling water everywhere. She stood up abruptly, all confused.

“Leave it,” I said. “We can clear it up later.”

I pulled on her sleeve until she took her seat. Taking her hand in mine I gently traced her fingertips on my lips. Her breathing grew shallower. Her eyes dropped. I took my time with her fingers, soft as petals but even more sweet, and after finishing with them started with her wrists, her scars.

The next two days we didn’t leave the house.

CHAPTER 36

For two days I didn't sleep. It was on the first night that I learned his name. It was by accident really. She said it in her sleep. I had no peace after that. The whole night my heart trembled, and my ears strained in the darkness for that name again. Every breath she took, every murmur she made, drew a cold finger across my heart. She woke early next morning, before sunrise. I closed my eyes and heard her footsteps on the wooden floor. When the shower started I opened my eyes again. But his name echoed in my head, shuttling from ear to ear. I never mentioned it once. Not at breakfast, or lunch, or when we saw the mountains of snow piled outside the window.

There was so much I wanted to say. So much I wanted to do. But the weather was so bad outside there was no going out. For two days only one question was on my mind. Last time I had asked she pretended it was a joke or that I was unwell. What would she say this time? I bit my tongue and bided my time.

In my head I had thought of this moment countless times. Even on the train — yes, even back then — I had thought of one day opening up my heart. Never had I spoken about the darkest, deepest secrets of my soul. Many times I surprised myself with the strength of my feelings and the reach of my memory. And when words would fail me I would let my tears speak for themselves. I would tell her that the only ones who truly understood me were wild animals...dogs and birds...Maybe it would be foolish of me to speak so openly, and to speak so much of myself. But for the first time I had found someone willing to listen...to understand. So I would go on, never stopping to think what I was saying, never considering the consequences or the impression I was making. At first, I would start cautiously, but her readiness to listen, to smile, to share my sorrows and fears would loosen my tongue. And would I exaggerate? Not a bit! Hardly worth mentioning at all. Even the most honest of men round up their numbers for clarity's sake. And the truth lies not in facts or figures but in the mind. What the mind seizes as painful must be true — whether it happened or not.

"But you should go to the police!" she would say.

"Why? That was many years ago. No one remembers anything. Even I have only the vaguest recollection of the thing."

She would run her fingers through my hair. "My lost boy...I wish I had known you then."

For how many hours had I rolled in agony, writhing on the floor at the thought of someone else's hands on her, someone else's lips, someone's loving gaze, cries and whispers? And now she was all mine. And I wouldn't give her up. I would tell her how cruel I was to others, the beatings I had given and taken, the curses flung in my face, and all the cruel left turns thrown by chance. But I

didn't say a word. And neither did she. We just sat there facing the window, watching the snow fall outside, as silent and solemn as if someone had died.

I knew his name, of course, that much I knew, but had no desire to know anything else. Once or twice it was on the tip of my tongue, and I almost broke the silence by opening my mouth. Instead, a strange sound escaped my lips, like a strangled beast or some pheasant shot in mid-flight now screeching to the ground. She glanced at me and then quickly looked away as if she were afraid it was a trap. For two days only one question gripped my mind.

"So...your uncle shot himself. How did he...it must have been a strange accident."

"He put the barrel of a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger."

"Oh."

Again, the room fell into silence. I could hear the kitchen tap dripping. But it always dripped no matter how hard you turned it.

She spoke again. "My parents had just got married. He loved my mother. He couldn't live without her."

"But he was..."

"He was married to my aunt."

I cleared my throat. "Marriage isn't always like that, you know. Many marriages are happy...couples have children..."

"I never want to have children."

"Why not?"

"They will just suffer. What's the point? It's better for them to never be born."

"B-but wouldn't you want a little Aleksandra of your own? Someone who would look like you. Someone you could look after and raise and play with. Think of all the happiness—"

"Yes, but it's not just about my happiness. What about her? The world is a cruel place. It's no place for a child."

"I had a happy childhood."

"I'm glad."

"I mean my mother left us and I never saw her again. But apart from that..."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. I was about five or six. My dad married again after that. So I hardly missed her."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? It's not your fault. Anyway, it's good she went. Whatever makes her happy."

"Did you try to find her?"

"Yes. But she didn't want to be found, I guess."

“At least you know she’s alive somewhere.”

“I don’t. Maybe she is, maybe she isn’t. I don’t think about it anymore. How long is this snow going to last? We can’t stay cooped up here forever.”

She said she didn’t know. So we just sat there quietly, watching the light slowly fade from the sky. For two days it snowed so much there was no point in going out. All the roads were closed, and we saw the neighbors take turns in clearing the snow.

“Have you ever thought that everything you did in the past carried you to that day, that moment, when we met? If we hadn’t been running late, we wouldn’t have met.”

“And even then, if my back had been turned when you came down the escalator...if you had been hidden behind the crowd...”

“If you hadn’t jumped on the train!”

“Yes, that too. But it felt like I had no choice. I had to.”

The snow never stopped. On and on it went. Everything was white, as if heaven lay outside our window but we were too scared to step outside. But suddenly it stopped, as if by the wave of a hand. The next day we went to one of her uncles, who, finding out about us, had invited us to dinner.

“You’ll like him,” Aleksandra said. “He’s the sporting type.”

He was bald, shirtless, and shadowboxing in the kitchen when we came in. The hot air above the stove felt the brunt of his jabs and hooks and sweeping uppercuts. He had the arms and torso of a body builder, and the head of a turtle. For a moment I thought we had come to the wrong house, or at least at the wrong hour. I averted my eyes to save him from embarrassment. But he came right into the living room to meet me, as if he had been expecting me.

“Rocky? Rocky?” he punched me playfully in the stomach. It was more the shock of it than any real force behind the blow that winded me. The hiss of air that escaped my lips drew laughter all around, and my face suddenly burned with confusion and shame. I was in good shape physically and if only I had been prepared I wouldn’t have let out a sound. But I had let my guard down — I had been so happy! Before I knew it, Aleksandra threw her arms around me and gave me a big kiss in front of everybody. Hoots and whistles broke out around the room. I stepped slightly away from her to show I could take care of myself. But she slipped her arm through mine and kept me close for the rest of the evening. She glared at anyone who dared to smile and made everyone keep their distance.

“I’m sorry I brought you here.”

“Are you kidding? I love your family.”

I really did. They were vigorous and free, and everyone wanted to have a drink with me.

“Hey Rocky!” the uncle slapped my back with a force that sent me staggering. “Here is your drink. Na zdrowie!”

“Na zdrowie,” I gulped down the shot of vodka, and barely put the glass down before it was filled again.

“C’mon, Rocky! You can do it! Eye of the tiger...c’mon!”

The uncle sat down next to me, still shirtless, to personally supervise my drinking. He made sure I matched him shot for shot. After every round he would slap me on my back and throw a few punches in the air. He was probably pushing sixty but had the physique of a man who had done manual labor all his life. He was the last person I wanted to get into a fight with, not least of all he would be walking Aleksandra down the aisle. If it ever got to that.

“Ok Rocky, serious now. Serious.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “You like Aleksandra, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You like her, or you love her?”

“I love her.”

“Ok. So you love her. Good. You want to marry her?”

“Of course.”

“Of course. And she wants to marry you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Why not?”

“I...I haven’t asked her.”

“You want to marry her, but you haven’t asked her.”

“Yes.”

“But you want to ask her?”

“Oh yes.”

“Good. When will you ask her?”

“I don’t know. I have to wait for the right time.”

“Rocky, this is the right time. Ask her now.”

“Now?” I turned to look for Aleksandra. She was surrounded by admiring relatives, and one of her nieces was bouncing on her knee. She was speaking in Polish no doubt, and I was too far away to hear her, but for some reason I felt she was talking about me.

“No, no, I don’t think so.”

“Why not? You are in my house. She is here. We are here. This is the best time.”

“I don’t feel well...”

“Have some more vodka. You will feel better. Na zdrowie!”

“Nazdrovyeh.”

“Aleksandra...she is like my child. I love her more than my own daughter. More than my son. You are living with her?”

“I’m a guest in her house.”

“Ok. And how long have you been...a guest?”

“A few days...maybe a week. She was away for some time.”

“It is none of my business. I don’t ask my son or daughter who they are living with, what they are doing...but Aleksandra is alone, you know? She is...we care of her. She has no one.”

“I can die for her.”

“Rocky, huh? You are a man! A real man!” He slapped my back. “Na zdrowie!”

“Nazdrovyeh.”

CHAPTER 37

Winning her family over was the easy part. Even the mess I left on her uncle's rug and later in her aunt's car were all laughed away.

"No problem, Rocky. No problem." He tried slapping my back again, missed, and sent half a dozen bottles crashing to the floor. "It's nothing. I fix it."

"I'm sorry," I remember bending down, trying to pick the rug up, but I don't remember reaching it. The next thing I remembered was waking up in bed, in Aleksandra's house.

She was getting dressed when I opened my eyes.

"He wants to meet one more time."

"Who?"

"I made you some breakfast. Hope you like it. Just some friends from high school."

She put on her hat, the one with holes in the side, and her torn gloves. We agreed to meet under the statue next to the town hall at three. After she left, I stayed in bed for another hour, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

The soup had gone cold by the time I got to it. But I lapped it up greedily. When the time came, I too got dressed and went out to meet her. The statue was of Saint Mary crushing a snake under her foot. Who knew there were snakes in Poland? I sat at the bottom of the steps of the town hall and counted the stars. Was that Venus? What else? Of course, she loved me! And there were other signs as well. Fleecy clouds arranged themselves in white hearts and sailed across the afternoon sky. Bare branched trees shook in the wind and sang to keep me company. A couple of birds darted from tree to tree, chasing one another. The winter sun sunk behind the church tower and its bell rang thrice. Even I hummed a merry tune as I waited. The sky darkened every minute, but that only made the stars shine more brilliantly. It was true, she had never been late before. Maybe she had been held up. Met a friend on the street she hadn't seen in years. She would be here soon enough. Red in the face from the exertion. But there was no rush...take your time...I'm happy to wait forever. Just the thought of meeting her made waiting a pleasure. Every second was bringing us closer. Every second, every minute, every hour. Every hour! The church bell rang four times.

I jumped to my feet. It was almost completely dark and was starting to get very cold. I paced around the statue...round and round in a circle I went....There was a deep silence, only the wind kept whispering his name.

She was late. A whole hour late. It was the longest hour in my life. I knew there was something wrong within the first few minutes. Aleksandra was never late. I should never have let her go. And now racked and ruined did I roll, tearing out my hair and cursing the heavens for my

plight. I checked my watch for the millionth time. Meet me at three, she said. In the Town Square, she said. Don't be late, she said. And like all of history's damn fools I believed her.

But of course she loved me! There was no doubting that. And all those signs! I looked up and there was nothing but darkness above — all the clouds had passed. And the bare branched trees in the plaza held their tongues, watching me quietly. I must have walked around the statue a hundred times. "Where is she? Where could she be? Could she have forgotten? Not her. Not a chance." I was a romantic when I had got up that morning. Now the ring burned a hole in my pocket, and my shoes were the brightest things in the night.

"Well? Say something!"

"Hush my child," Saint Mary replied. "Have faith and you will be rewarded."

"I should have my head examined. What was I thinking?"

"Never give up hope. She's the one for you."

"Alexander says there is no such thing as 'the one.'"

"What does Alexander know? He wasn't even baptized."

"Neither was I."

"Ah! But your heart is pure."

My heart was also beating so wildly I thought it would jump clear out of my chest and bounce away into the darkness.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," a voice said.

Where had she come from, breathless with sin? I didn't dare ask. It was written in her eyes. Those dark eyes that couldn't leave the ground. And in one shot of her glance I understood everything. But no, I reasoned. Give her a chance to explain. Don't judge her too soon or too harshly. Her marshmallow sweet voice, normally so confident and straight to the point, hesitated ever so slightly. Her lips opened; a ring of smoke sailed forth.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. And even then I knew that all was lost.

CHAPTER 38

Even in the dim light from the town hall I could see that something was wrong. She was still walking toward me when she checked her stride, as if unsure of her footing on the snow-covered flagstones.

“I was worried something might have happened to you. How was your party?”

“Great. It wasn’t really a party...I met him today.”

All of a sudden there was a sharp pain in my chest, and I could feel my heart — like drum beats in a deep valley: Apaches on the warpath — thudding in my ears.

“I promised him that I would think about us again.”

I couldn’t breathe anymore. The buildings whirled in front of my eyes and my legs started to crumble beneath me. To the river’s edge I ran, falling on my hands and knees, and slaked my thirst on the moon’s shadow half-hidden by passing clouds. Somehow, I made my lips move. So dry and faint, my voice sounded far away, like it was someone else’s.

“Why?”

“It’s hard not to feel anything after three years.”

I felt tears rising in my eyes, so I bit my cheek to force them away. “I don’t know what to say...I thought you loved me.”

“I know. Me either.”

“So you don’t love me?” I could barely get the words out, and once I did, I was terrified of what she might say.

“I love you.”

“And I love you, Aleksandra.”

“I’m just confused. My feelings for you didn’t change.”

My heart beat in triple time. I tried to stand up straight, but something dragged me closer to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, it’s okay. You should always tell the truth.”

“I’m hurting two people at the same time...”

“I don’t care if you hurt me...I love you and I want you.”

“Ok Zayn.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t change your mind. But I understand it must be hard for you.”

“I’ve never been alone...he’s always been with me...so yes, everything is hard for me. I didn’t change my mind. He needed hope. He can’t live without me...you’re hurt.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“If you say so.”

“I think I’ll go back to Paris.”

“Can you take me with you?”

“Do you really want to come?”

“Yes, if you let me.”

“I would like you to come, but I’m afraid that halfway there you would want to turn back.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Are we still together?”

“I really want to be with you.”

“Me too...but you didn’t answer the question.”

“Yes...but not everything is finished with him.”

Again! Something sharp pierced my heart and with jagged edges started to saw it in half.

“Do you love him?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then how can you say that not everything is over with him?”

“It’s complicated.”

“But what do you mean — ‘not everything is finished with him’?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Does it mean that one day you could go back to him?”

“I don’t want to go back to him.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Nothing Zayn. You can’t help me.”

“I understand that you feel sorry for him but...”

“We don’t have to talk about it.”

“Why can’t I help you? You don’t trust me? You don’t believe what I say?”

“So many questions. Yes, I believe you. I believe every word you say.”

“If we love each other...then nothing else matters...”

“You don’t understand anything. I should go now.”

“No, please don’t go. I’m sorry.”

“For what? For being the best thing that happened in my life?”

“Then why do you have to go?”

“I don’t know what I should do, Zayn. I can’t take it anymore. I don’t know what to say. I don’t want to hurt you. There is nothing to talk about.”

“Can we at least talk about something else?”

“Sure.”

“Tell me about the party. If you want to. You said it was great.”

“Because it was. I mean, I was only with my three friends. We were mostly sitting, having coffee, then we went to a restaurant for a pizza. That wasn’t a normal party. I’m planning to go to a real party tomorrow.”

“‘Real’ party?”

“At my friend’s house. But I don’t know for sure.”

“Not sure if you want to go? Why?”

“I prefer to stay at home and spend time with you.” She smiled, and I smiled back.

“I don’t want you to be a recluse because of me.”

“I know, don’t worry.”

“And sometimes I seem to make you sad.”

“No, you make me happy.”

“You make me happy too.”

“Zayn...”

“Whenever I feel weak, or down, or lazy...I just think of you and then I feel as strong as ten men...I feel like I can do anything!”

“I’m glad. You know his mother died today.”

“How did she die?”

“She was suffering for a long time. She was sick.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“That’s why I can’t leave him. He said he couldn’t live without me. I can’t just turn around and pretend that I don’t know him...I’m sorry, does it hurt you?”

“No, it’s ok.”

“I have something to say to you.”

“Go on.”

“But I know I can lose you after that.”

“Then why do you have to say it?”

“Ok, so I won’t say it. Forget it.”

“Well I guess it’s better you tell me now than later.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Obviously it’s something. Or you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“We were kissing today.”

She might as well have shot me. As flesh before cannon-fire I felt myself scatter to the four winds, my blood drenching the snow red. "Why me?" I thought. "What had I done to deserve this?" If it weren't for the statue behind me I would have struck the ground and never gotten up.

"She doesn't know what she's saying," a voice from above said. "She doesn't mean it. She doesn't know what she's doing. She...she needs help."

For the first time I heard his voice. "Yes, I kissed her."

"You did?"

"Why shouldn't I? She's mine after all."

My mouth opened and closed but no words came out. There was a jagged saw cutting at my heart and it started going deeper and deeper. I could feel the rough teeth of the blade cutting away. It took a whole minute before I got the words out.

"So you call that nothing?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, Zayn...should I leave you now?....Say something."

Drowning...I felt I was flailing desperately but everywhere I turned my thoughts ran back to her wandering lips. "How can you kiss someone you don't love?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because he wanted to. Zayn, do you still want me? I don't know what to say to you now. I didn't mean to hurt you. But I know that I did...do you want to be alone now? Please..."

"Please what?"

"Answer my question."

"I don't know...I don't know anything..."

"I'm sorry...I guess I should leave you alone now. Please Zayn. Say something. I can't stand it anymore."

"I'm sorry to have made you stand...I should go now."

"Please don't go. Or at least tell me if you still want me....Ok, I know the answer. Bye."

I heard her footsteps crunch over the snow covered stones, but I couldn't move, I couldn't say a word. When I finally looked up she was already disappearing around a corner of the town square.

"Aleksandra!" I shouted but by then she was gone. I called her again but all I heard in reply was my own voice echoing around the empty plaza. I don't remember when I started to run but the buildings started to float past me. Street after deserted street melted away. Statues and houses all watched vacantly as I rushed past. Like a fool! What a fool I had been! So what if she had kissed him? One little kiss! So what? Maybe it was just a peck. What was wrong with that? And even if it was more than a peck, so what? What concern was it of mine? Didn't she say that she loved me? And I cast her away! Like some pariah! I should fall at her feet and beg for forgiveness. Oh

Aleksandra! If only you knew what I could do for you. But every time I fell at her feet she slipped phantom-like between my fingers and her sweet laughter rang through the night spurring me on and on, endlessly through the cold and the snow. Stumbling, cursing, half blind with love and despair I slogged on. So what if she kissed him? They do things differently here. A real man would throw his head back and laugh out loud. A real man wouldn't let these trivialities get in his way.

Finally, an hour later, when I had given up all hope, and my throat was sore from laughter, and I was wandering aimlessly along the streets, I found her in the cemetery.

"Why am I the bad guy? You kiss him and make me feel like I'm the villain. You can't wait for me for a few minutes? A few seconds?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done it. I know it's my fault."

"I guess tomorrow you'll kiss him again...next day again maybe. You don't like to be alone. Of course, I'm nobody. I don't count...you've never been alone before...you can't forget three years..."

Tears streamed down her face and turned to ice. Spellbound I watched, instead of flinging myself at her feet.

"I won't kiss him again. I'm not with him because I met you. And I will forget about those three years because I love you. I broke up with him because I met you, you know that. Do you still want me, Zayn?"

"You said you tried to break up with him before you met me."

"Yes, you're right."

"So why I am the bad guy?"

"I never said that."

"I didn't want to fall in love with you. I didn't know you had a boyfriend when I first met you. And when I found out...it felt like someone had kicked me in the guts..."

"I know that I am the bad person, not you."

"But I was in love with you and I couldn't help myself. I never said you were a bad person."

"Yes, that's my fault...I didn't tell you. I didn't tell you that I had a boyfriend before because I was scared."

"Scared of what?"

"That you won't talk to me again. But then everything started happening so quickly. You were so...I couldn't hide this anymore."

"If I had known in Paris, I would never have gotten on the train."

"Please Zayn, I can't lose you."

"I don't understand...you said that you love me...you said all those things...all those beautiful things...and then...tomorrow if his father dies...or an uncle, a sister...what will you do?"

“Nothing, I told him today I was in love with somebody else.”

“But you still kissed him after that. And you promised you would think about the two of you.”

“That kiss was before. I know what I did. I won’t think of us because we are over. Please, I can do everything, just forgive me. If you want to. I know what I did was wrong.”

“There is nothing to forgive...I told you Aleksandra...I will always love you...no matter how many times you stab me in my heart.”

“So what now?”

“And I know that you will hurt me again and again...but that’s ok.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You have no choice. I still love you, Aleksandra.”

“I have a choice, and I choose you if you let me.”

“I meant that you have no choice but to hurt me.”

“I’m sorry. Why?”

“Because you hurt me all the time...every hour. Every day. I’m scared to talk to you...scared of what you’ll say...but then you bring me great happiness as well. No one can make me as happy as you can. But no one can make me as sad as well.”

“Can you be with someone who hurts you all the time?”

“If we love no one then no one can hurt us. Because of you I have a reason to live. A better man than me would have laughed it away.”

“No one can be better than you. And you love me. I did a horrible thing.”

“I have a feeling you will do many more horrible things.”

“I don’t know what to say. I mean I want to say lots of things, but in Polish.”

“It’s ok. You said you’re sorry. And I believe you. Maybe I’m stupid or sick in the head...but I believe you.”

“Thank you.”

“I just have to be stronger and prepare for the next time that you will hurt me.”

“Oh, I won’t hurt you again. It’s really hard for me, I hope you understand.”

“No...like you said. I can’t understand. I can’t understand anything. I don’t understand people at all. Oh, I’m sure you will hurt me again...but it’s ok.”

“I know it doesn’t explain for what I did...but it’s me not you who has to hear him thousands of times. He hurts me every day, that’s why I am confused. I’m sorry. I know that I hurt you. But I’m scared he will do something. I’m scared he will hurt himself...never mind. What do you feel now?”

“I don’t want him to hurt himself.”

“I know. Me too. I’m asking what you feel about us, about me.”

“He sounds crazy. I already told you, Aleksandra. I still love you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I love you too, Zayn. I know that I hurt you...I can’t imagine how you feel now. Do you still want me?”

“Yes...but it will take me some time...it takes time to mend a broken heart.”

“I understand.”

“But everything I said is true.”

“I broke your heart.”

“Yes, but you still have my heart. And you can do anything you want with it. You can throw it away...stomp on it...”

“Oh Zayn, I want your heart for all my life...and I want you to have mine. Don’t say that. I want to make you happy but all I can do is to hurt you and make you sad. I’m not asking you for anything...I will earn your trust and you will believe me.”

“I already trust you...with my life.”

In circles we spoke, pledging our undying love for each other. In rings we ran, repeating the same worn phrases over and over again, convinced of the sacred power of our words. As we were about to leave, she pointed out one of the tombstones, “Look, that’s my mother.”

The next day, around noon, she agreed to be my wife. We set the date for early summer.

CHAPTER 39

“I know what I did. I know how awful I was...I am...there is nothing between me and him.”

We were on the train back to Warsaw: one of my demands was that we leave for Warsaw immediately. Her holidays were almost over so she agreed.

“You can trust me, but I know it’s hard for you.” She looked tired, and I wanted her to get some sleep.

“You’ve apologized enough so we don’t have to discuss it anymore.”

She closed her eyes. “Zayn, I’ve never felt like this before. I thought I was in love in the past but that was nothing with what I feel for you. I wasn’t able to sleep last night. I don’t know if you care but I was crying so hard.”

Despite the fear and anger eating inside of me, there was a laughter bursting to get out. A laughter I couldn’t quite explain or control, and when she had fallen asleep I let myself go. It was my laughter that woke her up. She wanted to know what was so funny. Was she snoring? Of course not. Drooling maybe? Never! Then what was just so damn funny? She almost screamed at me, drawing the gaze of other passengers. I sunk lower in my seat so as not to be seen. Like a rat on its belly slinking along a sewer I couldn’t have stooped lower.

“I’m sorry, Aleksandra.”

“Why are you sorry? You haven’t done anything!”

“I can never do anything to hurt you.”

Her eyes flashed. “I know!” She didn’t say anymore. She didn’t have to. She lowered her eyes and didn’t look at me once for the rest of our trip. Often I tried asking her questions or drawing her into conversation but she always managed to reply with the fewest possible words. I too wasn’t in the mood for talking. My hands shook, and I closed my eyes, pretending to sleep. Once I was sure she was looking at me, staring closely, but I didn’t dare open my eyes. I even felt her sweet breath on my cheek for a few seconds, and my insides pitched as if we were rolling on the high seas.

“Zayn?” she whispered.

I kept my breathing as even as I could and didn’t stir a muscle. Soon her breath vanished, and my cheek slowly turned cold. A full three hours I kept up this charade, no matter how much my nose itched. And what I wouldn’t have done to give my knee a little scratch. How I longed to hear her voice again, to feel her touch. But I resisted. I showed remarkable restraint, surprising even myself. What lengths can we go to if only we put our minds to the task! In this manner we finally reached Warsaw. I hadn’t slept for even a second. My mind whirled with thoughts...there was no point mentioning children now. That could wait. I had no plans for the future. None whatsoever.

Now that she was mine, my only concern was to hold on to her. Better men than me have slipped from pride and complacency. I was determined not to repeat their mistakes.

CHAPTER 40

At Warsaw, I saw Aleksandra to her aunt's house, and then arranged lodgings for myself in a nearby hostel. I wrote to my father, confirming my engagement, and asked him to send money immediately. In the mean time I would try to find work as a tutor or a manual laborer or anything at all. He would approve of me working, and if I could show him I had a job he was more likely to give me a loan. Alexander was one of the first to arrive. But then he had known about it for some time. He came to Warsaw for a weekend, wanting to discuss his best man's speech. The best man doesn't usually give a speech in Polish weddings, but Alexander had insisted.

"Tell me, do you still sleep with *The Iliad* under your pillow?"

"I never did."

"Never mind. It reveals character. They'll lap it up. Also, how many women did you have before Aleksandra?"

"None! Apart from..."

"And since?"

"I think I'll ask my cousin to give the best man's speech."

"Why would you do that? I've almost finished." He turned a page in his notebook. "Just a few more questions. Won't take long. Let's see....Ah, yes. How often do you make love? And do you initiate it or does she?"

I lunged forward and snatched the notebook out of his hand. "What the hell's in here, anyway?"

"Don't blame me. People want to know these things."

"I have a feeling only you do."

"Oh, I couldn't care less. I think marriage is stupid. It's a tyranny. A bond to keep women enslaved and strengthen male fraternity."

"Then why did you agree to be my best man?"

"Only a disinterested party with no self-interest can discharge this duty. And as I have no plans for marriage myself, who better to...have you told her about Paris, or will you wait till after the wedding?"

"I can't see how it's any of your business."

"Of course, there are things she may be keeping to herself. I'm sure there were many boys before she met you. A girl like that...she wouldn't have been lonely."

"Will you shut your mouth, or do I have to do it for you?"

"No...loneliness would definitely have not been a problem."

"She's a virgin."

“She told you that? And you believed her?”

“Of course.”

He shrugged. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“You’re saying she lied?”

“All girls lie. It’s a part of their charm. Besides, they want us to feel masculine. They’ll never admit to being more experienced than the guy.”

Once again, I surprised myself with the restraint I showed. After a few deep breaths and counting backwards from ten I was less inclined to raise my fists again. “It makes no difference to me,” I said.

“It should. Of course, it should! Especially when you take a moment to think about it. Who wants to be second? Or third? Or fifth? Who wants to imagine what’s come before? Don’t tell me it’s never crossed your mind? Everyone has a history. It just depends how far back you want to go.”

“I don’t want to know. Besides, I believe her.”

“You mean you want to believe her. And I don’t blame you. But what about the truth? Above all things, the truth!”

“What good does it do? To dig up the past. Will it make me happier?”

“If happiness is what you really want then you shouldn’t get married at all.”

He had shifted in his seat and had turned away from me so I couldn’t get a good look at his face. From the sound of his voice I couldn’t tell if he was being serious. “This isn’t the sort of thing you’d expect to hear from the best man,” I said.

“Ah, but my duty remains to you. And your wellbeing. If you’re in search of a few months, perhaps even a few years of bliss, then go ahead. You have my blessing. But remember this. All happy marriages are alike, in that they’re based on lies. The moment truth trickles out, love dies....This feeling that you have,” he ground his shoe on the carpet, as if putting out a cigarette or the embers of a fire. “What you call love...will pass. Not suddenly, but slowly, bit by bit. Until you wake up one morning and wonder what kind of prison, what kind of hell you’ve been tricked into. Still, if you absolutely insist on making the ultimate mistake — for what is life but a long line of mistakes from birth to death — then take care of one thing immediately. Most marriages fail because couples don’t realize the difference between love and lust, and fail to make the necessary allowances. You’re shaking your head...you don’t believe me. Perhaps not now, but in a few years’ time you’ll know what I mean. But if I were you, I would raise the issue straightaway, while you still have some say.”

“By the way, what happened to your war?”

“Oh, war is inevitable...nothing to sneer at...and when it comes there’s nowhere safe. Maybe South America or some small island in the Pacific. But mark my words, when it comes, it’ll be the end of us all. They’ll be no winners here.”

The poor man! He was delusional. I was right to be patient with him. It’s true what they say — with marriage comes maturity. I no longer felt the need to strangle him. He would probably die alone one day, childless, friendless, without a soul in the world to console him. There was no need for further punishment. I smiled, patted him on the back and returned his notebook. I couldn’t read his handwriting anyway: they were the scrawling of a child still learning to write. He plucked the notebook from my hand and clucked his tongue at me.

“Tsk-tsk, you know better than to play with matches.”

After a while he wished me luck and then left: he saw his antics no longer had any effect on me and there was nothing else to talk about.

Not long after that there was a scratching at my door, as if someone, a dog or a lost cat, was trying to come inside. When I opened the door there was a figure doubled over on the ground. Her red jacket half-buried with snow, a pale face peered up at me. It was Roksana!

I brought her in and laid her on the floor next to the fire. Lighter than a feather, so pale the blue of her veins stood out. I wrapped her in a blanket and tried rubbing the life back into her. Soon, she opened her eyes. I had hot coffee waiting for her. As soon as she saw me her lips moved but no sound came out. I lifted her head so she could take a sip.

“Zayn...you’re getting married?”

“Yes.”

“I’m happy for you...congratulations. Will I...am I invited?”

“Of course! We’d be delighted if you came. We haven’t finalized the guest list but I’ll make sure you’re on it. We’ll send you an official invitation soon. You know, if it weren’t for you, I would never have found her. I’ll always be indebted to you. From the very first time I saw her I knew she was the one. I dreamt of her every night since then. I whispered her name in the darkness of my room, sung her praises in lonely streets, and prayed to God — yes to Him — to keep her safe...and to keep her only for me. She’s been in my thoughts night and day. Thanks to you. Sure, we’ve had our problems — what couple doesn’t? But they’re nothing compared to — but what happened to your fingers?”

“Oh nothing. I closed the door...they were in the way.”

“You should be more careful.”

“I was careful. Very careful.”

“Then how...”

She looked away and all at once I realized what she had done.

“But why? Why did you do it?”

“It felt good.” A sad smile played over her lips and for the first time I noticed her shortened upper lip. For the first time I noticed how pretty she was. But what madness! What had possessed her do such a thing?

“No matter how you’re feeling, trust me, things will get better.”

“I tried to stop...but every time I felt more hurt.”

“Please. I promise you things will get better.”

“Everyone says this but no matter how hard I try, I end up like this.”

“Oh Roksana! Think of your mum! Your dad! If they knew...”

I stroked her hair and then fetched some ice. She spent the whole afternoon with me. We didn’t speak much and I could never get the whole story from her. She just seemed happy to sip her coffee, curl up to the fire, and occasionally steal glances at me. Only children can enjoy the simpler pleasures of life. When the sun began to set she jumped up without a word and Cinderella-like rushed home.

CHAPTER 41

As the hawk follows the seasons, I too spread my wings. At first it was to her classes. Then to her meetings with friends, and finally whenever she stepped out of her aunt's house I found myself barely a block away. Using the sun as my compass and her dark hair as my guiding light I wove my way through Warsaw's streets. The way she walked...what bearing! What dignity! What abounding grace! There was a certain thrill in following her while she thought she was alone. It started as a joke. What fun it would be once she learned I was right behind her! I imagined the surprise on her face, the pleasure of recognising her true love. But like all good things I wanted to prolong it...the anticipation, the feeling of bliss accompanying the unexpected reunion of lovers. So I kept putting off revealing my presence. Many times I lost her in a crowd...on the tram, at a shopping mall, at the university....But I always managed to find her. At first I put it down to my perseverance and her singular beauty. Then I detected a divine hand, a celestial spotlight in picking her out amongst a throng of humanity. Finally, I saw she would be staring patiently at a store window or walking in circles until I arrived within eyesight — almost as if she were waiting for me — and then she would resume her journey. Never did she acknowledge seeing me. Neither pleasure nor pain would appear in her face. Sometimes, if I let her wander too far, she would double back, allowing me to catch up with her, before returning to her itinerary. And then, when we finally happened to meet, it was not with surprise but relief. When I look back on those times, I still cringe with shame. How could I have been so stupid? So blind and deranged?

One day, when we were supposed to meet at her house, I arrived an hour early. I hadn't planned it that way but I had nothing else to do. Her aunt looked a little embarrassed as she let me in, as if they had not been expecting me. Then, as I stood outside her bedroom, I had the idea that he was on the other side of the door, and if I went in I would catch him—them together. But to enter without knocking was offensive to my soul. I could hear furtive whispering from the walls. I pressed my ear to the door but the voices were too low to make out what was being said. I knocked on the door. The whispering stopped suddenly. I heard footsteps, some hushed voices, and finally she asked me to come in. She was at the pianola, her fingers poised over the keys as if she had just cut short some piece.

“Sorry to disturb you.”

“You didn't. I was just practicing.”

For five minutes I had waited outside her door but had heard no music. I looked around the room for some sign of him. There was just the one cup of coffee sitting on a bedside table. A piece of paper lay on her bed, a list of all the people she wanted to invite to our wedding. I went over and picked it up. She began to play something that would make Chopin roll in his grave.

“You’re not inviting Marta? I thought she was your best friend.”

“Please. I don’t interfere with who you’re inviting.”

“If it’s on my account...”

“Don’t flatter yourself. It’s nothing really. By the way, I don’t think Alexander should be your best man.”

“Why not? He loves giving speeches.”

“He’ll make a fool of himself, and us.”

“You said yourself that most people wouldn’t understand him. We just have to make him sufficiently drunk an hour or two beforehand and—”

“He’s seeing Marta.”

I tried not to act surprised. Alexander had never mentioned her. “So what? He’s free to do as he pleases.”

She stopped in mid-key and looked up at me. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t invite him at all.”

“Impossible! Look, I saw his speech and apart from one or two small factual inaccuracies, it was largely...child friendly.”

She gave up the previous piece and began an entirely new one. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Do you have to play that damned music?”

She stopped playing. The flash of her eyes cut me deeply. Foolishly, I tried kissing her, but she pushed me away. Not everything can be fixed with a kiss. Well, what about a hug? Not even that. So be it. I bowed to her will and left as graciously as I could. I took my post across the street, hiding myself in the doorway of a building, where I could see anyone coming and going on her street. These things take time, I told myself as I prepared for the long haul. It was a stormy day but most of the snow fell on the eaves and barely brushed my shoulders, and while the wind bit my nose and cheeks I hardly felt cold at all. The knife in my pocket kept me warm.

CHAPTER 42

Winter, spring, and then summer, and not once had I laid eyes on him. I was beginning to think I had imagined him. All trace of snow had vanished from the roofs and streets of Głubczyce Sady (we had returned to her village for the summer holidays). I had found work on a nearby farm. What did Ovid know about goats? Foul creatures whose odor you couldn't shake no matter how often you bathed and scrubbed. I spent my evenings along the banks of the Psina, practicing my wedding vows which I would deliver in Polish.

“Ja Zayn biorę sobie ciebie Aleksandro za żonę i ślubuję ci miłość, wierność i uczciwość małżeńską oraz, że cię nie opuszczę aż do śmierci...”

Again and again I repeated the words until I committed them to memory. Although the good people of Głubczyce had grown accustomed to my presence they still stared at me during my walks around town. I had a lot of work to do on my accent: Polish is not the easiest language for the English speaker to master. But I improved rapidly, and Steve and Bob understood me perfectly. Passersby, usually older people — sticklers for tradition and what not — often stopped to correct my pronunciation among other things. Our arguments were generally one sided as my policy during those times was to nod along and repeat everything they said with a strange lilt in my voice as if I was not quite right in the head. They soon left me alone after that.

The day before the wedding, she wanted to see him for one last time. He was going out with someone else after all. Sure, I said. Go ahead. Who was I to deny her? I even waved my hand like a wand or like a waiter would invite one to a buffet, showing how much I trusted her. Even then I knew what would happen. Or at least suspected it. But I cast it from my mind as a nightmare unworthy of a true believer. No one, I was convinced, could love her more. No one! Did he jump on a train and follow her across a continent at first sight? Could he abandon his studies and break with family and friends for her sake? Did his thoughts dwell on her at all hours of night and day? And yet, there nagged something at the back of my mind. Something no amount of logic or rational thinking could dispel. The odds were too much in my favor. The universe would not stand for it. For as long as I could remember, luck has not been a fellow traveler through the journey of my life. Why should it start now? And so with a trembling heart I set out for the banks of the Psina where we had arranged to meet at noon.

Through wheat fields and woods I made my way on a bright summer's day. It seemed every bird sang for me, every breath of wind cleared my path. The splash of ducks in the water and the sun basking in the leaves sent my heart soaring to the heavens. Waves of golden wheat broken by a ditch full of blue flowers...the black dots of workers in the distant fields...red poppies peering

through stalks of wheat...a flash of light and a partridge rose suddenly from behind the tides of wheat. If only she knew what was going through my head things would have turned out differently. At least she wasn't late this time. In fact, she was waiting for me: punctuality can soften the strongest blows. A pile of forget-me-nots lay at her feet. Their scattered petals showed how long she had been waiting. It was her turn to laugh in my face. I felt a crushing pain in the depths of my soul. All my hopes and dreams were melting. Thunderclouds swirled on the horizon. Hate me? How was that possible? My knees buckled and I was ready to give in. My world lit up in flames.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. She stared at me as I stammered pathetically. "B-b-but why?"

I looked away and all of a sudden I could see myself from high above, as if I were sitting on a cloud looking down.

"Yes, I hate you. And I like him. He knows everything about me. He is always with me when I need him. That makes me confused. Because I thought I didn't have feelings for him."

Impossible! It was her nerves. Nothing else. Only her nerves were playing up. Even then I could see that she wasn't well. Another thought grew in my mind. Had she been faithful to me? I even asked her, quite shamelessly, "Did you cheat on me?"

"I don't have enough strength to have this conversation right now. I told you, you are better off without me. And I'm sorry, because of me you lost so much money...the wedding...the honeymoon..."

"Did you betray me? Tell me the truth, please."

Silence. Only the ears of wheat rustling in the wind and the timpani of my heart.

"I don't know, Zayn."

"Did you kiss him? Just say yes or no. It's a simple question. Please tell me."

"You came into my life, ruined my relationship which lasted three years. You want me to leave Poland but I'm not ready, so yes, we kissed."

"But he has a girlfriend! You said so yourself. Did that make you jealous? Did you just kiss? Or more?"

"Just kiss, what else could we do?"

"You told me that you loved me. You told me so many things, Aleksandra. And I believed you."

"I know, Zayn. I guess I'm not that kind of person you thought I was."

Not she! Not she! All my life, my every breath, every thought, everything I had done in life had been for her. Of course, she was confused. But could she imagine what I felt then? Did the gods work this merciless flame or was madness my lot in life?

"I know what I did Zayn, and I can't say anything to make it better, to make you feel better. I don't want to hurt you anymore and I know that I will always hurt you. The only way to stop hurting you is that you forget me."

"Do you know what love is? Did you mean anything you said for all these months? Oh Aleksandra! You're the only person I've ever loved!"

"I don't know. I guess you fell in love with the wrong person."

"If you really loved me...."

"I don't know what to say. Everything is so easy for you. But for me everything is just complicated."

"I was dreaming of marrying you. I was dreaming of having children with you. And you knew that. You knew all these things."

"I hope your life will be much better with somebody else, Zayn. I hope you will find someone else who will make you happy."

"So you don't love me? Don't worry, Aleksandra. I will die alone. I can only fall in love once."

"You told me I don't know what love is."

"How can you love me if you kiss someone else?"

"I didn't do that because I love him."

"Then why? Maybe for you kissing means nothing. Who died this time? You promised me you were all mine. Oh, how many times did you tell me that you were all mine!"

"I don't know...I behaved like I was always behaving when I was with him."

"If you don't love him then why—"

"Now you are torturing me and you. How can I forget three years?"

"You told him that you did!"

"Did what?"

"That you forgot him."

"Oh please, can we just stop it? I'm sorry if you lost so much money for me, for the wedding...for that trip to New York."

"Money? I lost my life! I lost the girl of my dreams. I lost my future wife. I lost my soul mate. I lost my reason for living. I told you before, Aleksandra...my life is in your hands."

"Are we over?"

Light upon my dim mind broke. Still I harbored a drop of hope. Still she could be mine!

"What do you want? Tell me the truth. Do you want to go back to him?"

"I don't want him. I know we won't be happy together. I know I can only be happy with you, and I love you, but I know these words don't mean anything to you. I want to be only yours and only for you, even if you don't want me now, even if I lose you I won't go back to him."

"You asked me if I minded that you were going to meet him...and I said I trusted you. I even thanked you for telling me."

"I know what you said."

"But I guess it didn't matter what I said. Even now you say that you love me...and you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm the world's biggest fool."

"Why did you fall in love with me? You don't even know me."

"Why did you do this to me, Aleksandra? I don't deserve to live."

"It's me who should feel this way. I feel this way."

"Why? You must have been happy when you were with him."

"I wasn't."

"Obviously you weren't thinking of me when you were with him. I hate myself."

"Don't say anything you're not sure of. Why? Just please be angry with me and hate me...not yourself."

"If you were thinking of me then how could you...it's so hard for me to understand...I don't even...I can't even think of anyone else but you."

"I don't know. I regret it, but I can't turn back time."

"Even if you could...you would probably do the same thing again."

"Oh."

"This wasn't the first time."

"If you say so."

"How do I know you won't do it again?"

"I guess I don't know anything."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Do you still want to be my wife? Remember...the truth."

"Now tell me what do you want. I told you what I want."

"Please answer my question."

"I want you and only you."

"You want me to be your husband...but when I'm not there you will go behind my back?"

"I knew you would say that...do you really want to be with me?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I can only give my heart once. Maybe it means nothing to you. But for me...when I say I love you, I really mean it. I told you...even if you stop loving me...I will still love you.”

“How can you love somebody who hurts you?”

“I know you don’t love me, Aleksandra. You might think that you do...but you don’t. I just hope that one day...maybe ten or twenty or thirty years from now...one day, you might realize how much I love you. And maybe then you might love me a little too.”

“Please look at me...please darling...”

“It’s hard to talk when I’m looking at you. I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“Give me a chance. Please...please...”

“How many chances do you want?”

“I won’t ask for another one, I promise. I will leave you if you want that, but this one time please give me a chance.”

“Yes, Aleksandra...no one would ever give me a second chance.”

“What? Why?”

“But sure...I will give you another chance.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to...it’s your choice. I can only ask for it.”

“One chance, two chances, three chances...what difference does it make? You can have as many chances as you want. I guess you’re still young. You’ll probably forget all of this in a few days.”

“Forget what?”

“That was quick.”

“I know you want to hurt me, so go ahead.”

“If I wanted to hurt you, I could have said lots of other things. I don’t want to hurt you. I never want you to feel how I felt today. Maybe you feel bad too...”

“Oh please, you can hurt me. Maybe that will make you feel better...and don’t worry, I will forget that. I am so young.”

“Nothing can make me feel better. I only know one thing in this world...that I love you.”

“Do you want to love me?”

“I can’t help it...I don’t know you. I guess he knows you a lot better than me. He’s always there for you. His kisses are more real than my love.”

“You know it’s true, that he knows me better.”

“Then why do you say that you love me and not him?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

"I'm sorry if I keep asking you to prove it, but I feel...like death."

"I will. I don't know how to say that or what to say to make you believe that."

"You said the same thing last time..."

"I will prove it to you someday."

"Oh Aleksandra...you don't have to prove it to me. Prove it to yourself first."

"It's your choice now...you can say no to me. You can ask me to leave you. I will do whatever you want me to do. I won't hurt you. I will never hurt you again."

"I hope so. You said you used to pray for us..."

"I didn't stop."

"Except when you were with him. Are you going to see him again?"

"No....Please don't forget that I can make you happy. I know I hurt you, but please think also of all the good things we had."

"Yes, Aleksandra."

"I hope someday you will forgive me..."

"I will forgive...I guess I have already forgiven you because I said I want you to be my wife."

"Thank you."

"But I will always remember what you did with him. And that will leave a stone in my heart."

"I know...I'm hurt too, and I know that whatever I say won't make you feel happy again. But I'm angry too. Angry at myself and at you."

"At me?"

"Even though it's me who hurt you, who always hurts you."

"Why are you angry at me?"

"I don't want to argue with you. I even don't know how to explain that to you."

"I guess I don't believe in God, and I never will. If there is a God, he hates me. So I don't care about him."

"I'm sorry if you say that because of me. But please, don't you dare say that kind of thing to me. If you want to blame somebody, then blame me."

All of a sudden the knife appeared in my hand and I slashed the branches off a small tree. The air was thick with blue petals and I heard her gasp behind me.

"What are you doing? Only cowards carry knives."

"Fine. I'm a coward then. So what? Were you expecting a hero?"

"I love you Zayn, believe me."

I realized how ridiculous it was — me punishing a tree — but I couldn't stop myself. From tree to tree I went, not stopping for a moment, lashing out blindly. I would clear a path from here to the next world if necessary. After a while I calmed down somewhat. My hand was bleeding freely. A row of disfigured trees stared back at me, shorn of leaves and flowers. In the distance, a flock of crows swept across the blue sky and landed on the wheat field. The sun dropped lower in the sky. Worn out, eyes blurry with tears, we slowly turned to head home.

“What I said about God...it was...because I felt I was in hell already.”

“But that's because of me, not because of Him.”

“Why didn't he stop you?”

“Everybody has a choice.”

“But he must have known what you were going to do. And yet he let you do it.”

“Maybe He thought it was for the best...more good would come out of it. In future, I mean.”

Speechless with pain I turned to her, the knife handle digging deeper into my hand. “W-what good can come out of it?”

“Maybe you just want to love me. Because you don't want to be alone.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I don't know, Zayn.”

“I'm not scared to be alone. In many ways I know I will be alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one can truly understand anyone else. It's impossible.”

“I feel like I don't deserve to live. Like I ruin everything I touch. I hope you will fall in love with someone else.”

“I can only give my heart once.”

“Me too.”

It began to rain as we made it to the village. An unpaved road turned to mud. A couple of chickens wandering by the side of the road ran to find shelter under a hut. We dragged our feet, walking slower and slower the closer we came home, letting the rain soak us to the bone. Finally, we stopped in our tracks and stood looking at each other. I drew a finger across her sinful lips and then kissed her.

CHAPTER 43

Why did I go? It was the worst mistake of my life. Deep down I knew it was wrong, but I went anyway. For appearances' sake. What madness had made me agree to a bachelor party? We were still lingering in the rain, hoping that time would stand still, when she made a move, as if to say something, but stopped herself. Of course, I had seen something in her eyes before, in the way she stared into the abyss, in her words, in how she had spoken about her past, her parents, but I had never dared seek the truth. She drew me to one side, the rain pouring into our eyes, our mouths. She held me tightly, as if afraid I might run away or she herself might slip and fall. All this time she had been staring into the distance, at the woods on the edge of the village, as if she couldn't tear her eyes away. Her lips trembled. She tried to speak but at first no words would come out. She glanced at me and then immediately looked away again, as if it were too painful to look into my eyes. The wind seemed to whisper two words in my ear...

Tato, nie.

"Before our wedding, there is something you should know," she said. "I don't even know how to say it. You might not want me after that."

"Nothing can change the way I feel about you. Nothing."

"You don't understand. I've never told anyone before."

Tato, nie.

"You can tell me anything. You know that. But if you feel that way, then maybe you shouldn't tell me at all. We can save that for later."

"But I want you to know. The truth is...you're too good for me. I don't deserve you. It's better if you found someone else."

"You're perfect. The most beautiful girl in the world."

"Please, listen to me...my..."

Tato, nie.

I shut her lips with a kiss. It felt like our first kiss, something forbidden, something stolen. The rain thrummed in my ears as I sipped the sweetness of her breath. I felt her tremble as the jealous wind tore at our sleeves. Soon I tasted a well of tears, salty and warmer than the rain

gushing around us. Never had I felt closer to and yet more distant from someone as on that day. There was something monstrous between us. Something I didn't dare comprehend. There are certain moments in our life that we look back on and wish we had the courage to act differently. We realise, too late, that had we shown a moment's bravery, had we given a moment's thought to someone other than ourselves and we weren't afraid of being hurt, or feeling a little pain, our lives would have been vastly different, and certainly for the best. That day with Aleksandra in the rain was one of those moments.

"You better go," she said. "It's getting late."

"Oh, hang them all! How can I go leaving you all by yourself?"

"Then don't."

"But they'll be expecting me. They've made arrangements...everything's been paid for."

"I guess it'll be a chance to make it up to Alexander. He'll be upset at missing the wedding."

"I won't stay for long. An hour. Two at the most."

And so, like a fool, I went.

CHAPTER 44

Let the record show that I never mentioned strippers once. It was Alexander who had insisted on one, two if possible, for my bachelor party. But he had a hard time finding any in all of Głubczyce Sady. It wasn't from a lack of trying — he even went door knocking for a while, inquiring in his best Polish, accompanied with some crude hand gestures, if any of the occupants dabbled in exotic dance. His inability to secure entertainment for the night shook his spirits badly. He took solace in vodka.

“But haven't you had enough?”

“I haven't had a drop!”

Given his efforts I found it hard to tell him he was no longer welcome to my wedding. We were in the town inn which he had decorated with streamers and balloons as if it were a child's birthday. Every so often he asked me how I was feeling, and if I had any second thoughts.

“Not at all. My only wish is that it were today. Tomorrow seems an eternity away.”

“And how are the two of you getting along?” he said. “Fine? Fine, fine...don't forget, love is a lie. Let me tell you a secret: they're all the same. They're flesh and blood and bone. None of them have wings, but many have horns and tails.”

For some time he had been trying to catch the barmaid's eye. Finding the inn too dark for subtle gestures, he raised his voice and experimented with song. And when my cousin came to sit with us, Alexander shooed him off.

“Out of my way! You're blocking the view!”

“What about Marta?” I said.

“What about her?”

“I thought you two had something going on.”

At first he tried denying it. Then he broke into a wicked smile. “Women like to talk, don't they? Anyway, life is too short. How long am I in Poland for? Another few days? You'll be off on your honeymoon and I'll be back in Paris. So what's the harm?”

My cousin tried approaching a second time, meekly from one side. “Do you drink vodka?” he said.

“My good man!” Alexander slapped his back. “My mother was usually so inebriated her teats would secrete forty proof instead of milk.”

“I would've liked to have met your mother.”

“Sit down. I'll tell you all about her.”

“How long have you known Zayn?”

“All my life. Well...three years at least. Tough luck about tomorrow. Maybe I’ll let you be my best man one day.”

“What do you mean?”

The time to change the conversation had never been more ripe. “Ask Alexander about women,” I said. “He’s an expert.”

“Really? In fact I could use some advice. There’s this girl—”

“Blame me if you like,” Alexander said. “But there are no virgins left in Paris. By the time I left the City of Lights, I had squeezed the last drop out of it.”

Wine sprayed out of my mouth in a fine red mist, some of it covered Alexander’s face, and some of it my cousin’s. I went weak with laughter. All conversation stopped immediately, and everyone stared at me.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Show us how it’s done. Go and seduce the barmaid. Go on.”

“If you weren’t getting married in the morning I would have given you a black eye!”

There was a time he wouldn’t have dared speak to me like that. How long ago was it when we were sharing meals together and spending the early hours talking about women? He had been a romantic once. I remember there had been a girl — and I even wrote a poem for him to give her. He had taken it to her with a heart full of hope...now his face, red and swollen with drink, was drawn and tired like a cynic’s. His hands poised to lunge for my throat. A black eye is what I deserved, he said. At the very least. Everyone in the inn had heard. And no one disputed him. Not even me. My silence gave him the courage to carry on. Ever since I laid eyes on Aleksandra I had been acting strange, he said. The woman had cast a spell on me. She had come between friends, between family. Even my parents had withheld their blessing. And who was she? What was so special about her? A beauty, for sure. So what? There were thousands of beauties. Millions! You’re not the first to have kissed her, and you won’t be the last either. I felt the knife inside of my pocket. The edge of the blade almost sliced my thumb open. A thin fold of skin peeled back. My fingers itched. It was for his sake I had come. It was for him that I had left her. I could have been there now. I could have been holding her, instead of staring at his eyes that were now begging me to stab him in the heart. And why shouldn’t I? Why should I let him take her name in vain? He would stagger backward, off his seat and crash with a stupid smile on the floor. Maybe he would fall straight through the floor and into the depths of hell. God knows he deserved it. When would I do it? In the middle of his speech? During the wedding? What a shock that would be! Or right now? I forgot there would be no speech. I had to tell him he wasn’t invited. He didn’t take the news well. Before he could open his mouth, before he could go any further, I had to shut it. Not another word could I bear to hear against

her. Dizzy with anger and faint from the thought of her, my fingers wrenched the knife from my pocket. He flinched. Before I knew it, the knife had cut his throat. A thin red line stared openmouthed at me. Alexander flew back, shrieking, arms flailing like a madman. The barmaid screamed. My cousin dived behind the bar.

“He’s mad!” Alexander yelled. “I told you he was mad!”

A metallic clang sent a jolt through my heart. The knife had fallen from my hand. I wiped my hands on the table cloth and stood up, wishing everyone goodnight. Despite the sour note at the end, the party had been a success. Something told me I had overstayed my welcome, but what of it? No one would begrudge me an indiscretion or two. Not tonight.

As I got up to leave, Alexander backed away from me and flung his arms up instinctively, as if to ward off another blow, and an animal like fear peered between the splays of his fingers. I realized for the first time that the room had frozen. There was complete silence. No one dared move.

I apologized to everyone and asked them to carry on drinking. “It’s nothing,” I said. “Just a misunderstanding. Polish humor at its best. I’ll be going though. A lot of preparations for the morning, as you can understand. But please don’t stop. Keep enjoying yourselves. It’s all on me.”

I walked home in the warm night. The moonbeams played havoc with my eyes. Shadows kept lunging from behind trees. Home...Aleksandra would make everything all right. She would make the pain go away. Yes, she would make everything better. Only one person in the world could do that. Before I could take another step, I found myself vomiting behind a tree. What a night! I must have drunk one too many. But she’ll make things better. With that thought in mind I wiped my mouth and broke into a run. How beautiful the heavens looked, studded with stars, as I whizzed past. I had promised to come home by midnight. But I had lost all track of time. As the sun rose, the moon lingered on, and a melodious tune broke away from my throat and once it left there was no snatching it back. Singing at this time? At this hour? For shame! Shouldn’t you at least go back and see if he is alive — the poor man — spluttering blood all over the floor, crawling on his hands and knees? To hell with him! He had it coming. I should have aimed at his heart.

CHAPTER 45

A loud moaning came from the house, as if there were a ghost inside. The trees shivered nearby. There were several cars, even an ambulance, parked haphazardly outside. As I came in, the doctor was just leaving. He gripped my arm all of a sudden and said, "I'm sorry for your loss." He was a small man, more than middle aged, with a snub nose and a face hardened by time. But his eyes were soft and gentle, like a lamb's.

I burst out laughing. "What loss? It's my wedding day. Oh, I see what you mean. But ours will be different, I promise you! We couldn't be more different. And yet we're the same. I would have invited you to our wedding if we had met earlier. But what am I saying? Of course, you must come along. I'm sure my wife would be delighted if you...but what's the matter?"

Just then I noticed a small crowd in the living room. Everyone was standing very respectful and still. But what were they doing here? Some Polish custom no doubt. To accompany the bride and groom to church probably. I wish they had given us some time to dress. The sound of weeping came from one side. What foolishness! I promised them we would visit once a year, maybe once every two years. Still, I suppose they were entitled...she was like a daughter to them after all. I left the doctor without saying goodbye, for some reason farewells were the last thing on my mind, and followed the weeping into the bathroom. Aleksandra's aunt was on her knees, sobbing uncontrollably. She was flanked by a couple of other aunts. Before I could scold them for being silly, I noticed something in the bathtub. I took two steps into the room, no more, before I fell. A siren went off in my head. In mid-stride my foot found thin air...stumbling yet frozen to the spot, my ears began to ring. The world seemed to melt away. As if drenched with kerosene and my head set alight. Someone was lying in the bathtub in a wedding dress. One of her arms lay hanging from the edge of the bathtub. Her feet were drawn in so her entire body could fit. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted. She didn't move. She never replied. My pleadings, my begging, all my tears and kisses were in vain. By her own hand! What cruel joke was this! I looked around trying to find someone to blame, but all I found were words, hovering like flies, comforting, consoling words. I could feel them all over me...on my arms, my shoulders, my cheeks. I waved them all away. There was barely room in the bathtub for one but somehow I squeezed myself in. I wrapped her in my arms and chased the flies away. Not a single one could land on her. I made sure of that. She was too good for them. How beautiful she looked! Like an angel! But so still! Was she even breathing? I held my own breath and strained my ear. But she kept perfectly quiet. Not a sound did she make. I too knew something of this game. So I waited patiently. Hoping her patience would run out first.

She opened her eyes and we kissed as if for the last time. "I love you Zayn. I have loved you ever since I first saw you. I love only you. There is no one else but you."

“Do you have to go?”

“Only for a while. I will be back. Will you wait for me, darling?”

“All my life.”

“I wrote a letter for you. I wanted you to know everything. Don’t be sad, Zayn. I will see you soon.”

“Do you have to go? Won’t you stay a little longer?”

“I’m sorry darling. Please forgive me. Always know that I love you. Bye Zayn...my lost boy.”

“Bye Aleksandra. I love you too. I will be waiting for you.”

She kissed me again and then closed her eyes.

Part II: Aleksandra

Dear Zayn,

I've taken the pills. All of them. Or at least as many as I could get out of the bottle. A handful got away from me and must have rolled under the sink. Now there is nothing to do but to wait. Maybe an hour...maybe six. All I know for certain is that my life has reached its end. Never did I think my wedding day would start like this...sitting in the dark, at a corner of the bathroom, on a cold wet floor. All the dreams I had, all my wishes, my secrets...please forgive me for writing to you in Polish but there's so much I want to say to you, so much you don't understand — and I can do it in my own language best. Your life, Zayn, is just beginning. You can start anew. Finally you can find someone who can love you and respect you the way you want. You deserve better. Someone who will never lie to you. Someone who will always be faithful to you. I can't imagine what heartache, what pain, I must have put you through. But the fault was not entirely mine. You once told me that you could only give your heart once. To one person and one person only. I too can only give it once...and I have already given it to him. Oh Zayn! If only we'd met three, maybe four years earlier, then everything would have been different. Where were you then? I would have been all yours. Before I met you...I had promised him...given him reason to believe, to hope, that we would be together forever. And who could believe you? Perhaps someone less broken than myself. I have to leave you now. Believe me when I say that I wanted to stay, to return your love with the same fire, the same passion that you have always shown me. But if I have a shred of loyalty, of honor, of faith, then I can't put you through this anymore. If I didn't love you, if I felt nothing for you — then the choice would have been easy. It is because I love you that I must let you go. You have been the best thing in my life. More than I deserve. You will find someone else, someone as perfect as yourself. Please forgive me for taking so long to learn this truth. Please forgive my doubts, my impatience, my lack of understanding. You were right — I am still so naive. So young. There were times I saw only your dark side — your quick temper, your arrogance, your cruel humor. But that was all a mask, your armor. It took me a long time to pierce it. There was even a time I thought you were a common thug — when you broke Alexander's nose! But I couldn't help forgiving you. I tried to find excuses for you — each as impossible as the last. Until all my excuses ran out, and I stumbled upon the real you. Everything you did was for me. All your mad adventures, your bad behaviour, even your jealousy. Did you know that I used to follow you through the streets of Warsaw? Sometimes I would cut my classes to see where you were going, who you were meeting with. I could have simply asked you, but I enjoyed the pleasure of watching you unobserved, of listening to you ask for directions in your sweet broken Polish, of brushing against you as you passed by, as I hid myself in a doorway or a nook in a wall. In Głubczyce Sady I would

often lie in the wheat fields, hidden amongst the stalks, staring at the blue skies, listening to you stumble over your wedding vows over and over again. You were persistent — I'll give you that — but your mouth was made for kissing not for speaking. All those words were too much. Once I couldn't help laughing and you stopped and stared in my direction. You took a few steps towards me. I pressed myself further into the crops. I held my breath and waited. You came closer. I turned and fled, scattering a band of partridges that had gathered in the swirling wheat. You followed the birds with your eye, watched them carve through the hot summer sky. Satisfied there was no greater mystery in store, you went back to pacing the Psina's banks. Only glancing from time to time at the rippling tides of wheat.

Oh why did I take the pills! If only I had waited a few more minutes...but even now there is no one here. You're still not home. There is no one to stop me. Still, I will go to hell for what I did. One more sin can't make things any worse. I'm scared of going to hell. I don't want to go there. Oh Zayn why didn't you take me with you? You said you loved me but you left me here all by myself. I love you so much darling. But I can't wait any longer. All this waiting is killing me. I can't breathe...is that the first sign? There's something heavy on my chest as if someone were sitting on it...and is crushing the life out of me. How can I live without you? You don't trust me and I don't blame you. I have given you reasons for mistrusting me. But please believe me when I say there is no one else. No one but you. It was you Zayn. It was you all along that I loved and kissed every night in my dreams.

It was that night at Łazienki Park...no, even earlier, that night on the train...when we stood facing one another in the dark corridor, not saying a word, not daring to breathe, that I first fell in love with you. But no. It was even before that. It must have been. I remember the first time I saw you. It was in the Gare de l'Est. We were coming down the platform in such a mad rush when suddenly you were there in the corner of my eye. Would I dare stop and look at you? I couldn't stop — I had a train to catch, I was going home — but my eyes kept going back to you. Then, a few minutes later, I saw you outside our window. For some reason, call it woman's intuition if you like, I had turned around to face the window and there you were, staring back at me. You were looking at me with such fear and anguish in your eyes as if you had seen a ghost. What a shock that was! Like a bolt of lightning sizzling through the air! And like a coward I turned away, too scared to look, too frightened to wave or smile. I had fallen in love with a stranger. All my life I had been looking for you. And when I finally found you, I couldn't look you in the eye.

Later, I told my aunt about you. Not knowing how to bring the subject up I spoke of a madman on the train. I even said, "There was a madman on the train. He was in the dining car when I went down to dinner. He tripped the waiter and then smiled to see the poor man hobble away. Later he started talking to himself. Throughout dinner he kept staring at me and whispering to

himself. He kept staring at me with a hungry look in his eye as if he hadn't eaten for a week, or seen a woman in his life."

My aunt was horrified. Oh, she's the sweetest woman in the world! But I love giving her a fright now and then. I wonder if she'll miss me...I remember telling her, "The way he looked at me — oh I'm used to men's looks — but he looked at me as if he were ready to die for me, even before we had met, even before he knew my name."

"A fanatic!" she said.

"Yes, I suppose so. But still..."

"Don't go near him, my dear. Stay well clear. Goodness knows what's wrong with him. There're so many people sick in the head. It was different during communism. The state would look after people like him."

"He's a foreigner."

"Ah-hah! Even worse!"

I begged her not to laugh at me. Of all the things I couldn't bear that had to be the worst. But I had no one else to talk to. Marta and Róza themselves were in love with you. My closest friends, and I couldn't tell them a word. Of course, in the beginning I hadn't known that and I had spoken at length about you — I couldn't stop. Then I noticed how sad they would get whenever I mentioned you. So I dropped the matter altogether.

I always thought you were mad. At the hospital, when Alexander said you had followed me from Paris...I thought it was a joke. Who would do such a thing? But when you hit him again I knew it was true. For a moment your brown eyes burned red. You didn't dare look at me, as if you had committed some terrible crime. But the criminal was me. All along I was thinking only of you. Despite your short temper, despite your lies, despite my boyfriend, my mind turned endlessly around you. Who was this man? Where had he come from? Was he even real or was he only a dream? Can anyone be so stupid? So madly in love with someone he hardly knows? What torture! What agony! I didn't know what to believe. I asked Róza and Marta what to do. They said to ignore you. To avoid giving you hope and get away as quickly as possible. There were many good looking men in the world, many of them sane. Why gamble on this mad man? He might be a stalker or a murderer. Maybe he followed girls habitually. And cut their throats in dark alleys. Oh I could tell they were jealous. No matter what they said they only had eyes for you. But I didn't say a word. I didn't want them to think I was in love with you. I didn't want them to think I could be won so easily. And you...could I dare give you a reason to believe...to hope? There were many times I was afraid you would fall on your knees and propose to me. The safest course was to distract you as much as possible. Keep you talking about irrelevant things and steer our path as much as possible over cobbled streets which would scrape the romance out of any suitor. Even then, I wouldn't put it

beyond you to do something stupid. What was I afraid of? That I might accept? That I wouldn't have the strength to refuse? How could you possibly love someone like me? Someone who had sinned so much. Someone who had been sinned against from so early. I could never find a way of telling you. Whenever I thought of bringing it up, the conversation changed abruptly. My resolve wilted. I thought if you knew the truth you could no longer love me. How could you? How could anybody? Those long hours we spent in my house in Głubczyce Sady, waiting for the snow to stop piling on outside...I had all the time in the world. But I didn't dare turn to you. I just stared out the window...wishing I were buried under the falling snow. Unable to sleep or keep my heart's fancies from running wild, I turned to prayer. I always kept you, us, in my prayers. And glimpsed your beautiful face in the midst of my waking dreams. I've relived our conversations on many a midnight hour. Turning in my mind something you said, how your eyes shone as you spoke, how your voice trembled! I kissed your poems so many times because I knew your palm must have rested on the paper...your fingers must have run along the creases....Even before I read your words, your beautiful handwriting moved me so much. I kissed the envelope where you wrote my name with such loving care. I know you love me, Zayn. Your letters, your poems, your eyes, your smile...they show me how much you love me. No one can love me the way that you do. Your love is unique. I don't know what I have done to deserve it. I don't even know whether I deserve it. Thank you for writing them for me. They always remind me of you. They will always stay with me...I wish I could take you to those isles of delight...I wish I could have spent the rest of my life with you. I hope you will always feel this way about me. I hope you will never stop loving me...no matter where I am or what I do. If we truly love each other, then nothing, neither time, nor space, nor others, can ever keep us apart. I love your every gesture, your every mannerism...from the way you use your hands when you talk, to the way your eyes burn feverishly in the moonlight, to the way you kiss me. Kisses I can taste on my mouth even now.

How I've dreamt of you! Waited for some sign from you, waited for your touch. Perhaps the briefest kiss of our gloves. Throughout the train journey from Paris, in the dining car, I had been thinking — what is he waiting for? A written invitation? An impassioned request? Well, he certainly won't get that! Not from me. Who does he think he is? There are thousands like him. Maybe tens of thousands. Oh why doesn't he simply walk over and introduce himself? What is he afraid of? Well, what was I afraid of? I had never given him a sign. Nothing to encourage him and surely nothing to give him hope. I stared out the window — all my life I've spent staring out windows — catching glimpses of the scenery outside. But the reflection of the lights meant I could see him clearly in the glass. The fool! What was he stalling for? Sitting there gaping like a mad man. Hadn't I smiled at him when I walked past? True, it was only the briefest of smiles, but what more can you expect from a stranger? Anything else would be obscene. But what had I really been

hoping for? A friendship? An innocent tete-a-tete? Or something else? I really didn't know. I didn't think. All I knew was that his inhibition was infuriating. Is he a man or a wimp? And still he sits, sipping his tea. What have men been reduced to nowadays? What cowardice! What insecurity! Maybe he didn't like me. Had I considered that? Was I vain enough to think every man would come running if I simply batted my eyelashes? But I hadn't given him an excuse! A pretext for approaching me. Then what was that brief smile as I walked past? That was nothing — just a politeness, a courtesy. Nothing more. Nothing less. And yet I hoped. My blood pulsing through my veins. But Marta and Róża came soon enough and put an end to all that.

"Don't look now," Marta said, smiling foolishly. "But the dark-haired man over there keeps shooting glances at you."

"I know," I said with as much boredom I could muster.

"Well? Doesn't he strike your fancy?"

"He's really not my type."

"And what is your type?"

"I'd prefer someone with half a brain for a start. And someone who didn't look so nervous — as if he were planning a robbery."

"Maybe they are."

"Those two? Hah! They couldn't break into a birdcage if the only thing guarding it was a canary. Those heroes have been sitting there for half an hour and all they've done is talk and drink tea."

"Were you expecting something else?"

"From them? Don't be silly. What could I hope from them? They're not even good looking."

"Oh, you know that's not true! One of them's positively yummy."

And Marta described you so seductively that I couldn't help but blush. They caught my lie in a trice. Didn't I want to speak to him? Shouldn't I buy him a drink? But I was in no mood to humor them. As soon as we finished dinner I made sure we left at once. By the time we returned to our compartment I had resolved to wipe all thought of you from my mind. Did I know then that one day I would be dancing with you — one day I would be your bride?

That night, not asleep, not fully awake, I wandered lonely down the aisle. The carriage was dark, the engine rumbled, and the ground trembled underneath. The world outside the window was dozing peacefully. I never thought I would see you again. Love lights our path but once in life. And I had taken flight. Tossed by fear, by common sense, now I stood and sighed. Till the glass was covered with my cloudy breath and the stars hid from shame. As I turned, your face flashed before my eyes. The train staggered in its tracks. Sparks around my forehead flew. Some far-off bird screeched in my ears. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from you. The darkness hid your face but a

light behind you wrapped a warm glow around your head. Even then you were perfect. I gasped for breath. Before I knew it I was heading back — it was impossible to be there with you. How I wished you had called out to me, or given me some sign. I thought of you all night. Many times I had half a mind to go back down the aisle. Something told me you would still be there. Still standing quietly in the night.

I lost a scarf at Warsaw Station. As we took our bags off the train I felt a tug around my neck. But I didn't dare look back. It was only at the escalator, when I knew I had left something behind, that I risked a glance. And picked you out at first sight. There you were, sitting at a window, watching the world go by. Our eyes clashed. Through my spine shot a tremendous blow, like an arrow from Cupid's bow.

"Follow me," I said under my breath, before Marta took my arm and broke the spell. "Follow me...this way...over here..." I didn't dare raise my eyes, but my voice kept going in my head. "Follow me..."

Did I know then that wishes could come true? What made you heed my voice? What made you come on this journey? I was so far gone — you took such trouble to catch up. What lengths you must have gone to! The first time I heard you speak I thought it was a dream. Some lost tourist who had wandered off the beaten path. Some soft voice so desperate, so meek, I half expected to see a child stricken with fear. Dare I believe my eyes? It was you!

The first time you asked for my hand I thought you were drunk. I almost said yes but I had to be sure. I wasn't ready. It was too sudden...too absurd. A strange and beautiful dream come out of nowhere. And how could I deserve such happiness? A sinner like me. How could I forget I had given my word to someone else? But you must have been drunk! What were you thinking? True, I had hit you very hard. It's not every day that someone crawls through my bedroom window. I decided you were very drunk or very disturbed and sent you on your way. The first time you said that you loved me...you pretended it was the only Polish phrase that you knew. And I said that I loved you too. In Polish, of course. To expand your vocabulary. Did you see through me then? Was I blushing much? By the time you asked for my hand again I had forgotten my past. All I wanted was to make you happy. I couldn't bear to see your tears. I would die before I made you sad. So I said yes. Not realizing the consequences. I was with you and all I could think of was you. Nothing else mattered. For a moment only the two of us existed. We were taking a walk along the Psina. It was a cold, miserable day. The snow fell in such thick white sheets we could barely see two feet in front of our faces. You wanted to turn back but I made us press on. We came to a grove of trees sheltered from the snow. A magical place where sprites and fairies dwelt. A ring of light rose through the gloom. You fell enchanted on your knees, and asked me if I would be your wife. That you would spend your life making me happy. That no one else could love me more. You could even

die for me. I gave you my hand and you slipped the ring on my finger. It stays there even now. Even today. I never took it off. How long have I stared at it thinking of you? How much I wished my life was free to give you. If only my fate were in my hands!

You once told me your worst fear is that there is a God and you'll go to hell. What I fear most is that there is no God, and there is no heaven, no hell. Whatever we've done, will do, is all for nothing. There is no reason, no meaning, no good. The world is evil, and love is never meant to be. I should have told you sooner — and how often did I try! — even now, when nothing matters, I still can't find the right words. All my life I've spent pushing it out of mind...I've forgiven my father, even forgotten what he did. But I still remember the child they took away from me and I've never seen her since. What fault was it of hers? What wrong did she do? Of all my regrets this haunts me most. Every night and every day. But what could I have done? I was a child myself. I didn't understand. Born in sin, she shouldn't live in sin, they said. If I could only see her once more! Hold her in my arms...now she'll be much older. Five or maybe six. How little did I know you. How much would you have understood? I looked for ways to tell you but always thought it was too soon. And now it's too late. Nothing can be undone. Oh darling, how I wish you were here with me now! Where are you? Who are you with? Are they treating you well? Do you know who your real mother is? I don't even know your name. Do you look like me, at least? But no, it's best if you don't. There was a time, they tried to make me believe you weren't real. I pretended to believe their lies...they were only trying to help. But how could I forget? The truth can only be buried for so long.

The police came to our house one day and took my father away. He'll be out of jail a few days before my twenty-first birthday. Zayn, you've heard me play the piano. I know I'm not very good. But it's the only time I forget, at least for a while. It takes me to another world where life isn't so grim. An island in the sun where darkness never comes. Children dance around us and birds sing of love. The waves rush up to our knees....If you really want to know...I met my boyfriend in high school. That's often the way. Only he knew the truth. Only he understood. No one else seemed to know him. He was a stranger too.

I have sinned. I'm a sinner. And I will sin again. If only you weren't so perfect...we could have been two little sinners in a world full of sin. But you're the best man I've ever met in my life...or in my dreams. I have prayed to God to keep you safe...and to keep you only for me. But it seems I was never good enough. I could never make you happy. Or play your games...were they games after all? Well, what else can you call them? Ignoring me...pretending to be asleep on the train...not saying a word for hours...deliberating mishearing me.... Over time a certain coldness crept into your voice. And when I most wanted you to take me in your arms, when I needed your kisses most, you turned the other way, facing the wall or studying a stain on the rug. Sometimes you would smile and stare at the clock, wondering loudly how late it was. And then drop hints that

you've never been late...and never once broken your word. That *you* could never hurt anyone. Especially someone you loved. Oh sometimes I wish I'd never been born. That would have been best. I thought it was your way of punishing me and I soon grew accustomed to it. And why not? Didn't I deserve it? Then how could I complain? Yes, there were times I hated you. Hated the fact that I could never make the grade. Somehow, I always fell short of your ideal. But I won't play your games anymore. I won't be your toy...your doll. You said you loved me. And then you left me alone. Last night...after we had been through so much...I begged you to push back the date. Just for a few days. Until I could come to terms with...I needed some more time. To put things in order. To find a way to tell you about my life. But you insisted on today. Guests had their tickets booked. You didn't want to trouble them. You didn't want to lose face. A man must always keep his word. It's the only thing he has in this world...his honor. It's what separates us from beasts. And there had been winter and spring to think things over. A few more days would make no difference. It was now or never. Very well.

Last night, why, just a few hours ago, you were sharpening your knife. "Why do you need that?" I said.

"I'm waiting for him. In case he comes."

"For whom?"

"No one." And you carried on honing the blade. Running your fingers along the edge, while staring into space.

I wanted to tell you then there was no one else. But would you have believed me? Would you have believed me if I said he had vanished from my thoughts, my dreams, my life? I never had a boyfriend. It was all a lie. But a beautiful one. I needed someone badly. Someone to talk to, someone who could convince me that I never had a father. That nothing that had happened was real. Oh, I've only loved you! Why couldn't you see that? Why did you always need some proof? Why did my words, my acts, never carry enough weight? Yes, it's true, I once broke your heart. It's true that I made you suffer. You even gave me a second — no! a third chance! But must I be punished forever? Isn't there room for pity? But why should you? You had no knowledge of all that. How I wanted you to plunge that knife into my chest! I even thought of asking you. But no, I decided to wait. Maybe you would stay. Maybe you wouldn't go. I too played a game: if he stays it means he loves me. No question about that. And if he leaves then I would have to act fast. He wouldn't be gone for long. An hour, maybe two. No more. That would give him enough time to catch me in the act. How terrified he'd be! How shocked! How mad! No doubt he would forgive me. Purge me of my sins. Everything would be forgotten. I would finally come clean. And he would save me. The knight in shining armor all my life I never had. It would bring us together like nothing else could ever have.

But nothing could stop you. You had to go. You had given your word. “Oh, hang them all! How can I leave you by yourself?”

“You should go,” I said. “They will be expecting you. They’ve been preparing for so long.”

“I guess it will be a chance to make it up to Alexander.”

“Yes, you owe it to him. He’ll be upset at missing your wedding.”

“Just for a few hours. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Sure darling.”

“And what will you do?”

“Pack my bags...prepare for tomorrow. I have a hundred things to do.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

“I can’t! How can I?”

“Well...I’ll be thinking of you the whole time.”

“Me too. Enjoy yourself, Zayn. It’s your last night of freedom. Then you’re stuck with me forever.”

“To be your slave is my life long wish.”

“You say that now but later you’ll regret it.”

“I can do anything for you.”

“Just come back soon. And without getting drunk.”

“I’ve never been drunk in my life!”

“My uncle had to throw away his rug because the stains wouldn’t—”

“Oh that! Well, obviously they were mixing drinks. They gave me some kind of moonshine.”

“And they had to steam clean my aunt’s car.”

“I offered to pay for it!”

“It kills your brain cells. God knows you need every last one of them.”

“At least I don’t...”

“Don’t want?”

“Nothing darling.” You smiled and hurried off before I changed my mind.

I took my first pill that minute. Every ten minutes I would go and look out the window. A dark and moonless night would meet me every time. And each time there was no sign of you. After a while I stayed at the window, peering into the darkness outside. Past the ghost of my reflection, past the village green, past the Psina, past the town, straight to those dark nights of my childhood when I shivered lonely in my bed, wishing my hero would come sweeping in any moment. Would he be a knight? Or some daring prince? Perhaps a common man with an uncommon heart? A stranger in town? I dreamt of how he’d pick me up and carry me off. Kissing all my tears away. I

even gave him a name. And a peculiar walk. Halfway between a boxer and a ballet dancer. How his broad shoulders rolled when he walked! His faint sweet breath left a tingle in my ears and goose flesh ran up my neck. He saved me every night. It wasn't long before he began appearing during the day. How many hours did I spend with him — kissing, talking, going for long walks, planning our future...

When dawn broke through my window there was still no one outside. All my life I've waited for you. All my life I've prayed for someone like you. But finally I learned I was alone. The bottle was empty by this time. You left me to die. Why? You said you would be gone an hour, maybe two. Where are you when I need you most? I'm dying. I can feel it. After these few months I love you even more. I don't know how it's possible to love someone as much as I do. I can give you anything you want. I can do everything for you. I took your punishments in silence. And will go on loving you. You're all that I want, all that I need. But now I'm alone. I can't live without you. I don't belong here. This world is not for me. When we were in Warsaw things were different. You were different. You were romantic. You seemed to want me so much. I know we'll never be the same. The things I need maybe you just don't find necessary. I feel like I'm stuck in a place I can't escape. I'm so lonely here. Even when I'm with you. I can't speak to you because I'm scared of what you'll think, what you'll say. I want to be your wife, but I feel I will be dragging you down. I'm always there for you if you need me. Why can't you be there for me? I should have told you how I feel a long time ago. Why didn't I do it? Why can't I be happy?

I started to think, ever since that night at the cemetery, that things will be better if I'm gone. I've given you so much pain. You didn't deserve that. And here there is no future for me. Always by myself. Always thinking about my lies. Why couldn't you ask me? You should have known there was something on my mind. But it seemed like you didn't care. I always waited for you. To say something...anything! My life has been a never-ending waiting. I'm sorry I can't express myself properly. I'm sorry if I hurt you. That's why I preferred to be silent. Can you please, Zayn, help me feel normal again? I don't know why but I can't be myself here. This house brings back memories...memories I'm trying my best to forget. I'm stuck in this house by myself and I don't think I can take it anymore.

Please don't forget that I love you. I will always be with you. Whatever you want I will always give you. But please do the same for me. I know you'll be sad but please think of how I feel inside. My heart hurts so much. I am just so lonely here.

Yours forever,

Aleksandra

P.S.

Inside I'm screaming from pain. I'm begging you, Zayn. Never leave me like this. When you're not with me it's hard for me to breathe. You keep me alive. You are my whole life. It hurts, Zayn. It hurts so much. How can I live without you? I will die here darling. Only you can save me. I wish I could turn back time and tell you everything. Only you can understand.

P.P.S

Oh Zayn. It's so hard not to cry. I'm trying. I'm really trying not to do that. But I just can't. Everything reminds me of you. And that is killing me inside. There is no life without you.

PART III: The Rival

Chapter I

It was far, far too late by the time I noticed her wedding ring. The glittering harbor had not helped. Nor had the white washed buildings, the dazzling white sun, and the abysmal hangover I was struggling in vain against.

“She’s the new biology teacher,” the boy explained, following my eye line.

“Is that right?” I said as I descended the gangway, clutching at the railing that wasn’t there.

“Here, let me help you, sir,” he grabbed my arm, steadying me from the infernal rocking of the banana boat. The jetty didn’t go far enough so we had to travel in groups of six by water taxi to the awaiting ship.

He was a strong boy, about sixteen or so, but even he couldn’t stop me from stumbling face first on the wooden floorboards.

“Look out, sir!” he cried, far, far too late.

And the scream that escaped my lips did nothing to gain the respect of my tenth graders, or of Miss...Miss...

“Mrs. Dąbrowski,” she said as she helped me to my feet. “I’m taking biology. Oh! You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing,” I tried to feign manliness, but quickly realized it was not my calling. “I’m sure there will be a first-aid kit on board.” I looked hopefully at the captain of our unseaworthy vessel. But the man was too busy adjusting the Royal Navy hat that had mysteriously appeared on the side of his head.

“Rambo yah, Rambo, Rambo,” he said everything habitually in triplicate, an administrative throwback, no doubt, to colonial times. Having secured his headgear, he slammed the boat into gear and lurched us without warning into the frothing blue sea.

“Shouldn’t we have life-vests, sir?” the boy said. He really could be most pedantic at times. I never even bothered to find out his name — I’d be surprised if he had a name at all and would wager a good sum his parents called him “boy” at home.

“Not to worry, my boy. The water won’t be more than chest deep.” I grinned at the biology teacher. “Besides, I’m sure Mrs. Dąbrowski has training in mouth to mouth resuscitation.”

“Call me Ola, please.” She smiled. Self-consciously. It was clear she was not immune to my charms. I wondered if now was the right time to offer her the rum. But half a dozen teenage eyes were just then studying my every move. The rum would have to wait awhile. I turned to watch the

beach recede from us. A hundred palm trees waved us goodbye. A spray of salt water stung my eyes.

“Farewell, dear land! Away! the sun and sand! Adieu! But welcome to the cold bosom of the sea!”

I took a look around the boat. Anxious faces peered back at me. Clearly they had never heard such sweet strains before.

“Sir?”

“Yes, my boy?”

“Who’s Zayn? You kept saying ‘Zayn, Zayn’ last night.”

“Zayin, as I understand it, is the seventh letter of the Hebrew alphabet.”

“Not Zayin. But ‘Zayn’.”

“You must have misheard.”

He frowned. Yes, it was possible. Usually his hearing was very good, but it had been windy last night. So what else had he heard? Not much. He had stuck his socks into his ears after a while. I also snored apparently. While the practice of beating children has fallen out of practice in recent years I was often tempted to restore it. Even a simple cuff on the back of the head could do wonders for student morale. And no one would have objected in the slightest — they were mostly orphans after all. No parents to complain to. Yet, it was true. Whatever the boy’s faults — and there were many — he really did have good hearing. Last night I had slept fitfully. At first I had trouble closing my eyes, so long did I stare at the skies, wondering if she was among the stars, looking down at me. I don’t remember falling asleep, or even shutting my eyes, but I must have dozed off since I had the same recurring dream. How much stemmed from truth and how much sprung from fantasy still eludes me. It was dark, or maybe the sun was just beginning to break through, and I was passing by her window when I happened to look inside. What I saw brought me crashing to my knees. She lay writhing on the floor, desperately crawling on all fours. She was dressed in white: an angel fallen from heaven. Not a muscle on my body could move. My throat too had run dry. I watched her drag herself slowly, painfully across the room, until she disappeared behind a door. For a few more seconds I stood stock-still. My mind in shreds, in tatters. Finally, I pushed open the window and came inside. I followed the patches of blood to the bathroom. There she lay stretched out on the floor. Not moving...her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I knelt beside her and covered her with kisses. How cold she was! Her face like marble, and yet her eyes moved. They came down to earth but seemed to see right through me. I scooped her up in my arms and whispered in her ear.

“I’ve always loved you, Aleksandra. And I will go on loving you forever. You’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever met. You’ve always been my reason for living.”

She lifted her hand with whatever strength she had left, and ran her fingers through my hair. "Take care. Stay well. Look after each other. He'll need you now more than me."

I begged her not to leave me. We had been together for so long. I pleaded with her to stay. What did it matter if she had sinned? What did her past have to do with her future? Her lips spread into a smile. She wasn't leaving me forever. In time we would see each other again. She loved me too. And she would go on loving me. But now it was time for her to go.

I picked her up and laid her gently in the bathtub. One more kiss I allowed myself. One more kiss on those divine lips. That frozen mouth. That whispered my name as our breaths mingled. Then I turned and ran. Ran as if I had committed a crime. Ran far from human sight. Past valleys and rivers, past mountains and seas...past half the world until I was all alone. Who else could I serve? Who else could come close? Wine was my closest companion during this time. Wine mixed with her memories. Years passed. My hair flecked with grey. I wandered far and wide.

We got to the ship and it was almost dark by the time we reached the island. We set up camp under a couple of palm trees. That night the boy woke me up. "Sir, you were talking in your sleep."

"Really? Hebrew again? I'm so sorry. I'll try to exercise some self-control."

Ashamed and wide awake, I left our tent and went for a walk instead. I came down a hill and soon found myself at the beach. The ground was so flat, so smooth, I could walk with my eyes closed. It wasn't long before she joined me. We walked below towering white cliffs and the sand was a fine white powder that kissed our feet. The wind moaned softly and gently pulled our hair.

"You remind me of a girl I once knew. She was getting married too."

It was the middle of the night but the half-moon lit up the sea. A thin grey cloud slid across the sky. The surf broke white up to our knees.

"You remind me of a boy I once knew. He used to visit me every night."

"What happened to him?"

"He left me."

"Didn't he love you?"

"Whenever I needed him, he was there for me. Yes, he loved me."

"Why did he leave you?"

"He never told me. One day he never came back. Except...the day that I died."

"Maybe he thought you had found someone else. Someone better for you."

"I can only give my heart once."

"If only he knew."

"He knows now."

"It's too late. What's the use of knowing now?"

"He can come back to me. I'm still waiting for him."

With that she disappeared. When I woke up I found myself in the sand, at low tide, a small crab scuttling past me. It joined its family a little further on.

Chapter II

It wasn't long before the boy came to me for advice. But he didn't think it manly to come straight to the point and had to take a detour. "Is it true you were in the war, sir? In the army? What rank were you? Is that why you limp?"

"I don't limp. It's just hard to get a footing in the sand."

"Did you kill anyone? You must have seen plenty of people die."

"Killing is what we're best at. Nothing sums us up as well as war. What other species can arrange their own extinction? The universe would be better off without us."

"We're not all dead, sir."

"The best of us are gone. Only the dregs remain."

"Are you joking, sir?"

"Do you find it funny? Are you laughing?"

"No."

"Then it can't be a joke, can it?"

He realized he was getting nowhere and changed tack. "Please sir, how does one know if a girl likes a boy?"

I thanked him for his question. He had come to the right person. And it was a fine question. One worth dwelling on considerably as the responsibility for propagating the species would fall to his generation. "I would think you would see it in her face."

"But what exactly would one look for, sir, in her face?"

"Well, it varies from case to case. Not all girls behave the same. With some it's how long they stare at you, with others it's how they refuse to even look in your direction, or look away as soon as they catch your eye."

"But how can one know for sure? Beyond a reasonable doubt, as it were."

"Stick your neck out and only then will you know. You can't win someone's affections without being prepared to look like a fool."

"Is that what you did, sir? When you were young. Act the fool? Did it work for you, sir? What did you do?"

So it was a trap after all. And I had almost fallen into it head first. What a story he would have had for the other boys! But no one would make a laughing stock out of me. I shooed him away and retired for the night. There was a loud sniggering and the odd hoot of derisive laughter from a neighboring tent. The boy was no doubt relaying his tale. Embellishing the facts, throwing in some nonsense for taste. Maybe if I'd told him the truth, maybe he would have understood. But did I

know the truth myself? And would he have understood, without going through the same himself? It's a brave man who can make himself vulnerable.

There was a time when I didn't believe her. A time when I thought she was just lonely. She liked me, that much I knew. One day she even asked me: "Why don't you believe me when I say that I love you?"

"Please don't ask me this question."

"So you think I'm lying?"

"No, I think you want to love me, really, but you love the person in your imagination. Not the real me."

"Maybe you think I'm a fool."

"I don't think that."

"Don't you think I've asked myself that? You're too good to be true!"

Finally, she convinced me. She had always been very persuasive. And I had always wanted to make someone's dreams come true. She was so happy she was dancing on her bed, and jumping all around her room. All night she couldn't sleep because of me. She was only fifteen then. A child. A few months later she would have one herself.

Chapter III

She never spoke about her father. And I never asked her. I didn't have to. Somehow the police found out. And it wasn't long after that she went to Warsaw to live with her aunt. I went with her, of course. That was the time she needed me most. That was when she started to play the piano. It was her music that awakened me. Those soft notes of tragedy and despair. Those lonely strains of grief and shame, the slow beat of sin, the rising pitch of self-condemnation. Like a ghost she walked among the living during the day. Like a child she wept all night. Doctors came and went. But I was there every step of the way.

By the time she got better, she no longer needed me. School had finished. She had just started university. One night, she stared quietly out the window, staring at the snow gently rapping on the pane.

"I have to go now," she said, almost under her breath.

Of course, I thought. Her exams were approaching soon and she had a lot of revising to do. "Good luck with your studies."

"It's not that. I just don't feel like talking anymore."

"Why not? What's wrong?"

"Never mind."

"I'm sorry. Did I do something to hurt you?"

"No, you didn't. Don't worry. Everything is fine."

I didn't believe her for a second. Why, she was fighting away tears! She wouldn't even look into my eyes. "Please tell me, darling."

"I don't want you to know."

But why? She could tell me anything, she knew that. We'd been through so much. Didn't she trust me?

She sat down and buried her face in her hands. "I don't want you to know. It's not a good idea to talk about it now."

What could this mean? What made my heart hammer? What opened this strange gulf inside? A piercing cry rose from the depths of my soul, a cry that tore my reason in two. I racked my brain but couldn't think of a single thing. Deep down I probably knew, but quashed the feeling by recalling fond memories. "I just want you to know that I love you no matter what."

"I know. Thank you." She was sorry for breaking down like that. It wouldn't happen again.

There was nothing else to be said. All I wanted was to hug her, and kiss her, and never let go of her again. "You make me so happy. All day I walk around telling myself: 'She loves me. She loves me. Yes, me!'"

“I’ve met someone else. I’m in love with him.”

And that’s how it happened. So suddenly. As if a pillar from a great temple had fallen and the entire earth shook. Of course, I wouldn’t let her go without a fight. But even then I knew the end was nigh. But was it? Was it really? Couldn’t she be won back? Would she forget me so easily? Three years couldn’t fade into distant memory. Not overnight.

“It’s been going on for a while. I told you about him a few times.”

So she had. There had always been this strange flicker in her eyes whenever she mentioned his name. And then she would hold her breath. Her back would be rigid, her lips compressed, and a faint blush over her cheeks spread. I had thought nothing of it then. People were always such a mystery.

Did I say three years? More like three seconds! No more. I remembered how I had first met her. She was a stranger to me. We were heading in opposite directions. As we had passed each other on the street of life our eyes had momentarily drawn together. For those three seconds there was no one else in the whole wide world. Only we existed. Only our thoughts mattered. Then our paths crossed. And now we would go our separate ways. Keeping a piece of each other buried in our hearts.

Chapter IV

It was time to go back. We got into the boat early one morning. Before sunrise. The children were half-asleep. Ola and I could barely keep our eyes open. For a while, I had the strange sensation of something, ants maybe, crawling all over my hands, my feet, along my back, even in my hair. I ran my hands over my body frantically, again and again, to no avail. The crawling sensation did not leave me. I remembered that for a long while there had been a man on my tail. Each time I glanced around he was behind me. He saw me clearly but never drew closer. Never gave any sign of recognising me. At one point I stopped and waited, and let him pass by. When he drew alongside he turned casually and looked deep into my eyes! What anger! What pride! What burning gaze he raked upon my face! But as soon as he passed, he looked away. As if it wasn't worth his time to dwell on me. All day his eyes haunted me. They followed me home, to dinner, to bed. Even when sound asleep those eyes kept watch over my dreams. Soon our paths crossed again. Why didn't he simply approach me? But no, he bode his time. Each time I saw him he gained in familiarity. Each time he took more liberties. For instance, he would wait for me to break our mutual gaze, to lower my eyes. Which I did every time. But why? From shame? One day I cornered him. I hid in the dark and waited for him. As he came by, I jumped out and grabbed him by the throat.

"Who are you? Why are you following me?"

He smiled, as if he had been expecting me. "But it's you who has been following me."

What nonsense! Didn't I have anything better to do with my time? If he didn't leave me alone, there would be a price to pay. "Anyway, nice try."

He pulled out a knife and brandished it threateningly. "We're in love with the same woman. One of us must die."

Ah! So it was him. I had been looking forward to this meeting. "You're a thief! You stole her from me."

"It was her choice. She chose me. If you really love her, you'll let her be."

"What do you want? What will you do?"

"Anything to keep you away from her."

"But it's too late now. She's gone!"

"It's never too late. Stay away from her. She's mine."

"We share everything, don't you see?"

"Now I see that you're the thief. Not me."

"Admit it. You're scared."

"Of you? Please."

"Not me perhaps, but of the world. Of not being loved. By her. By anyone!"

“You’re drunk. Why don’t you run along before I hurt you?”

“You’re drunk too! You drink to forget.”

“No! I drink to remember!”

“Of how she left you.”

“Of how she loved me.”

“You still believe that?”

“I do. And I’ll still continue believing that till the day I die.”

“Then you’re a bigger fool than I’d imagined. Na zdrowie! I’ll drink to that!”

“She loves me. I’m the first, the last, the only man in her life. She only thought of me. And when she played the piano—”

“Terrible, wasn’t she?”

Terrible? Why, you madman! She was beautiful! And when she caressed the keys of her piano, she may as well have been running her fingers through my hair. And when her head drooped on the fall-board, it was as if after all energy spent she rested on my shoulder. And when, bent over deep in thought, her dark velvety hair danced over the sharps and flats they skimmed my cheek. Her soft music whispered in my ears as the boat started to turn back. The engine groaned under the strain and the petrol fumes made my nostrils twitch. Music and noise wrestled in my mind. But the battle was unequal. The sun burst on the horizon. A mushroom cloud fanned silently to the heavens. My sighs were drowned by the chug of the motor. Aleksandra...Alek-sandra...Alek-san-dra....The moment I saw her I knew I had to die.

Chapter V

The boat carved through the waves and entered the bay. Somehow salt water entered my mouth and made me nauseous. I swallowed the bitter taste and tried to keep it down, moving closer to Mrs. Dąbrowski in an effort to make small talk.

“Ola, you remind me of a girl I once knew. A long time ago.”

“A sweetheart of yours?”

“For a while.”

“Do I look like her?”

“Not exactly. But there’s a certain...the way you carry yourself...I felt the same way when she was with me.”

She rubbed her ring absently. Her eyes were on the shore, on the trees in the distance that crept closer every few minutes. The children were asleep. The helmsman too busy with the rudder. It was now or never.

“You remind me of someone too,” she said.

“How long have you been married?”

“Almost a decade this fall.”

She accepted the rum. And didn’t bother wiping the flask’s rim.

We spent the afternoon kissing. Every time she tried to leave I pulled her back down. She closed her eyes and gave up all excuses after that. She was all mine then.

“Can he kiss you like this?”

“Of course not,” she shook her head. “Only you can.”

“And can he bite you like this? And make you scream?”

“No, he wouldn’t dare do that.”

“And hold you in his arms like this? And run his hands all over you? Exploring every nook and cranny?”

No, no! A thousand times no! What else did they do? I broke away from her and started ripping my hair out of my head. I banged my head against a wall, again and again, but the pain wouldn’t go away. Three years! Or so they said. Maybe it was five. Maybe ten. Damn them! Let them rot in hell!

“Shhhh...sit down”, Ola said. So I sat down next to her. Did I really need that jacket? I guessed not. So she took it off. “That shirt. It doesn’t suit you.” So off it went. “And what’s that around your neck?”

“A lucky charm. A locket.”

“It’s pretty. It can stay.”

So I stayed the night. But my mind wandered. Over her neck, her arms, her back. How swift was her breathing! How her hair rose and fell!

“Aleksandra,” I whispered. “Why have you come back?”

“I never left. It was you that had gone.”

“Me? But you chose him!”

“I chose you, Zayn.”

I woke with a scream. My hands went straight for my neck. But it was bare. My locket had been torn off sometime in the night. It lay on the floor, dashed in two. Inside was a piece of blue silk, no bigger than my thumb. It smelled of pine cones and salty air.

Chapter VI

“You didn’t sleep well,” Ola said.

“I never do.”

We still lay in bed though the afternoon sun poured through a crack in the blinds. The ceiling fan whirred and creaked. A fly landed on a pile of clothes on the floor. The second hand of a watch ticked loudly in the room. Finally, she got up and dressed. I didn’t move.

“I have to go back,” she said.

“Close the door on your way.”

The door closed, shaking the dust off the shelves. Sunlight fell on a dressing table and bounced off a dusty mirror. Motes of dust danced in the sunbeams. What a fool I’d been. To torture myself and her. All that time...how blind I’d been! I rubbed the piece of blue silk between my fingers, hoping she’d appear like some genie from thin air. The revolving doors...her dress...how lightning sizzled from our touch. How could I have forgotten? What else was buried inside of me? Perhaps I had imagined the whole thing. Perhaps this blue cloth had come with the locket. I couldn’t tell what was real anymore. How long had it been? Years...it must have been years. Marta had chosen the hotel. Yes, they must be in Paris now. Alexander had taken her there just before the war. If only I hadn’t gone to the bachelor party. If only I had stayed home. It was all Alexander’s fault. Too bad he didn’t die. It was years before they let me out. Roksana had come to see me a few times. Yes, her, of all people! The doctors thought I would make a full recovery. But it was the war that really saved me. During the war I managed to slip out.

Before the war — what lengths I’d gone to find him! Sparing no effort or expense. The hardest thing to explain was that no one knew his name. Aleksandra had never told me. And I had never thought to ask. Her aunt too had never heard of a boyfriend before. Even Marta and Róża were of no help. It was too much to take. Could it be a conspiracy? Was everyone hiding him from me? No stone did I leave unturned to find this man. I tried the hotel in Zakopane where they had stayed for a week. For a few hundred złoty I found out that the room had been booked in Aleksandra’s name. And only one person had checked in. But that meant nothing. He could easily have snuck in any time of the day or night. The harder I searched, the less I found. I was ready to give up when I finally stumbled upon a vital clue.

I had been wandering along the streets of Warsaw one day, hoping to find the bridge where Aleksandra and I had once met. It was somewhere near Old Town where I saw someone out of the corner of my eye. She looked familiar. It was almost as if she was following me. She kept to the other side of the street, looking into storefronts or staring at trees, while all along I knew she was watching me. After a while I grew tired of this game. I crossed the street and took her by the arm.

Marta looked surprised to see me. Where had I been? What was I up to? Did I know that Alexander had made a full recovery? I took her back to my place — I was living in a hostel nearby — and asked her about *him*.

“He’s back in Paris. He asked me to visit him.”

“No, not him.” I meant the man Aleksandra had been seeing.

She hadn’t told me last time since Róža was listening, but she had once heard Aleksandra talking in her sleep. About some island in the Pacific. “It was a dream. She was talking to him.”

“What did she say?”

She hesitated. Maybe she felt guilty. “Not much. That she loved him. Could do anything for him. But tell me...what do you want? Why are you looking for him?”

“I have to find him. He knows Aleksandra better than anyone else. And he should know what’s happened.”

“What makes you think he doesn’t know?”

“He wasn’t at the funeral....We both loved her. She died because of me. I could have stopped her.”

“There was nothing you could do. You have to try to put her behind you.”

“I can never forget her. You can only give your heart once.”

She sighed. “That’s true....But Aleksandra would have wanted you to be happy.”

That wasn’t possible. “No one can come close to her. She’s like no other.”

“The world is so big...there are so many people...and time heals all wounds.”

“Time heals nothing. Nothing can take her place. No one.”

“Don’t do this to yourself. You’ll go mad!”

I thanked her for her concern. But I asked her not to trouble herself on my behalf. “It’s my life after all.” And if she didn’t have anything else to add...

“Fine then. Go! I’m with Alexander now, anyway. You’re a damned fool!” And she left in a flood of tears.

A few hours later they arrested me. How they found me I’ll never know. That didn’t stop me, of course. I spent every minute looking for him: they had shackled my hands, but my mind was free. I searched for him in every corner of my cell. Every guard, every prisoner, had some information about him. All I had to do was watch and listen closely. At first they pretended not to know him. But slowly, I discovered him in their stories. How they had come to be here...their crimes...their background, their history...everything was connected. I found links everywhere. The fabric of the universe left us truly interconnected. Soon I found out every step he had taken. His entire journey. How he had met her. How she had fallen in love with him. Everything made perfect

sense. Prison freed me. I could think clearly for the first time. By the time the first bombs fell on Warsaw I had solved the entire mystery.

The ceiling fan screeched suddenly with the violence of a shell, scattering my thoughts. I got out of bed and began to pace the room. Could it be she had imagined him? Why not? Everything was possible. A cruel father. A dead mother. She was an orphan practically. To deal with her past she needed a story. She needed a friend. A hero. Someone she could speak to. Someone who could set her mind at ease. Then I had come along and shattered the fantasy. Through her past, her dreams, her living hell, I forced my way. And in her struggle to choose between him and me, she destroyed herself.

Chapter VII

I'm always dizzy in the mornings. It's as if my memories hit me the hardest when I wake. No matter how remote the corner of the world you fly away to, you can never outrun your dreams. And so you drink. At first for the taste, for something cool in your throat in that clammy heat. And then it all tastes the same, and your mouth is still dry, and the heat never goes away even at night when you're lying half naked on the beach drenched with sweat and covered with flies. And finally it becomes routine, a habit you can't break even if you want to, but you don't. And the dreams get worse. You start seeing things. A puff of red smoke. A whizzing sound to your left, and there's a man without a head standing next to you. He stands for two whole seconds. Screaming. He doesn't have a head but he still screams. Then his feet give way and he crumples to the ground. You realize it was you who was screaming. A blast of hot air throws you into a tree. The smell of scorched flesh crams up your nose and you can't feel your feet. You look down and there's your feet still on the ground. That can't be right. You're not twenty feet tall. You start laughing. Louder and louder. Until you start crying. You check again, and the feet are still on the ground. A thick, fat tear splashes on your boots. At least the laces are tied. You were always afraid of tripping over them. You hang suspended in midair until you pass out.

You learn to walk again. One step...two steps...three....Your legs almost look real from a distance. Still, you always wear pants to the beach. You even start talking again. Yes. No. I don't know. Water, please. At first the doctors had said you would make a full recovery and even have children one day. A few hours later, and with the deepest of regret, they said they had underestimated the severity of your wounds and there was nothing more they could do. But it makes no difference to you. What does it matter now that she's gone? The very thought of children makes you sick and you pass out again.

I wasn't the only person in my ward. But the doctors and nurses seemed to spend most of their time with me. Even though I never spoke to them or hardly ever paid them any attention, I was clearly their favorite patient. Perhaps they pitied me. But I had no use for their pity. If anything, that made matters worse. They thought they were making me feel better by patting me on the arm or smiling at me or whispering words of encouragement in my ear. Once, when they thought I was asleep, I overheard two nurses talking about me.

"It's such a shame about him."

"And he's so young and good looking too!"

"I don't know what to do with him. He still won't eat. He hasn't had anything for the last two days."

"He's given up. He doesn't want to live anymore."

“Did he tell you that?”

“Why else would he stop eating? He was crying the other day...I pretended not to notice.”

“Men hate to show emotion. They think it makes them look weak. He’s perfectly healthy in every other way. Just...but he won’t last two weeks if he keeps this up.”

“I told him that it’s not the end of the world. That he should speak to a psychologist, and I could arrange a meeting for him.”

“What did he say?”

“He just shook his head and looked away.”

“Typical male. He’ll never ask for help.”

“Could you help me with the bedpan, please?”

“You’re awake! But...but you haven’t eaten anything in two days.”

“I’ve been backed up. That’s why I was on a liquid diet.”

Of course, it didn’t matter if they believed me or not. I left the hospital not long after that.

It was almost a year before I met someone else who reminded me of her. She was having dinner in a restaurant with two friends. I wandered over and introduced myself.

“I’m sorry if this seems too bold...but I had to come and talk to you.”

She turned red. Her friends smiled and exchanged glances with one another.

“Why...why did you think you had to speak to me? I’m sure we’ve never met before.”

“It’s true, we’ve never met. But I would never forgive myself if I didn’t at least say hello to you.”

“Well...hello.”

“Perhaps after you’ve finished dinner, you wouldn’t mind going for a coffee?”

She didn’t mind. And neither did her friends. In fact, all through dinner they teased her mercilessly. She kept glancing at me and would then redden to the roots of her dark hair.

We went to a cafe nearby and talked till midnight. Her eyes were of the same hue. Even her perfume was familiar. The color of her hair, in the string lights of the cafe, was the wrong shade, but it could have been a wig. She spoke slightly through her nose, but maybe she had a cold. Her habit of stirring her coffee constantly, even when she spoke, was a little annoying. Eventually, I took the spoon out of her hands and finished the remains of her coffee. It was a long walk back to her place, but it was a hot night and we took our time.

“Tell me...by any chance, are you married?”

“No, I’m single.”

“Not even a boyfriend?”

She shook her head. “What about you?”

“I was engaged for a while. And do you believe in God?”

“No. Why? Do you?”

“Hmm.”

“Is anything wrong?”

“I just imagined you differently, that’s all.”

The wind picked up and discouraged further attempts at gaining familiarity. So I decided to enjoy the walk and drink in the night air. The moon peered from behind a row of mango trees that lined the street. The smell of mangoes wafted from the ground where a few had smashed, juice oozing out of their burst jackets. I kicked one and it skidded away into the night, leaving a long dark stain in its wake. The branches of the trees shook in the wind. The rustling leaves seemed to be whispering to me: “So she reminds you of me?”

“No one comes close to you.”

“Hah! How long have you known her? And already you’re planning to spend the night with her! It didn’t take you long to forget me.”

“You never left my mind. Even when I was with Ola, I was thinking of you. Everything I did was for you.”

“And this? I suppose you’ll do this for me too?”

“Do what? It’s not like I can do anything. It’s just that I miss you.”

“You don’t miss me. You’re just lonely.”

“No, I was lonely all my life until I met you. Ever since I saw you in Paris, at the Gare de l’Est, I’ve never been alone.”

“I don’t believe you. If you really loved me, you would never forget me.”

“I haven’t...I don’t even like her that much. She’s nothing like you.”

“I’m no longer the queen of your heart. You can do as you please.”

“Why did you come back Aleksandra? You were gone for so long!”

“I’ve always been here. Waiting for you. Why didn’t you join me? Why did you stay behind?”

“But how? What do you mean?”

“You could have come to me. You could have followed me.”

“But...but suicide is a sin!”

“It’s still not too late. We could be together again. Forever.”

I almost tripped over my feet. Of course, I had thought of it many times before. But something had always stopped me. Was it fear of never meeting her? But now I had the proof! She had said it herself — she was waiting for me! All I had to do was hold my nerve. But try as I might, I couldn’t do it. A coward can’t become a hero overnight. But what was the use of living anymore? Every day was the same. Rum for breakfast, lunch and dinner. What had my vows said? “Together

in life and in death.” I never had the chance to tell her. But she had heard them somehow. Now she was waiting for me to fulfil my pledge. How could I have abandoned her? All these years she must have been waiting alone. Waiting for me to join her.

By the time we reached her place my mind was made up. Before sunrise we would be together.

Chapter VIII

My mind raced. Rope, knife or poison? Perhaps I'd go for a little swim with bricks tied to my feet. Her house was near the sea. Although it was too dark to see anything out the window, I could hear waves washing over the shore.

She made us some coffee. I took mine black and bitter.

"How long were you engaged for?"

"A few months. A day. I don't remember. It was a long time ago. I still talk to her. I hear her voice sometimes."

"She passed away? I'm sorry...what does she say?"

"That she loves me. And she's waiting for me."

"Have you told anyone about this? Maybe a doctor?"

"You think I'm mad."

"Of course not."

"I've often wondered too. I can't tell for sure."

"Anyway, it's late. You can spend the night here."

For the first time I noticed a scar under her chin. I asked her about it, but she deftly changed the subject. My hopes rose, and half-emboldened I took her hand and put the question straight to her face: "Who did this to you? You can trust me. I'm not like the others."

She didn't understand. Who was I talking about? It had been a childhood accident. She had stumbled down a flight of stairs. And lost several milk teeth in the fall. Was she sure? Of course she was. Even now she remembered the pain.

I kept holding her hand. "You still remember? Even today?"

"Sometimes, yes. Why?"

"I remember being slapped in the face. Twice. With hands like these."

She quickly pulled her hands away. "The sofa's comfortable. I'll make a bed for you now."

That night Aleksandra called me again. I was lying on the sofa, unable to sleep, when her sweet voice reached out of the dark.

"Do you remember the time you fought with my father? You came to the house one evening and he tried to stop you at the front door. You even said: 'Wait! Before you throw me out...there's only one thing I want to know from you. Is your daughter around?'"

"That never happened."

"Yes, it did. I was watching from the window. He told you to stay away from me: 'Leave my girl alone.'"

‘I won’t,’ you said. ‘She’ll come with me. We’ll run away together. And you’ll never see her again in your life.’

‘She’s a sinner...she’s sinned, you’ll see. How long before she betrays you too?’

‘I don’t care. You’ll never put your hands on her again.’

‘I’ll burn the house to the ground before I let her run away with you.’

Then he started beating you with his fists. I screamed. I said I would kill him if he hurt you: ‘Enough! Don’t touch him! Don’t you dare lay another hand on him!’”

“What happened next?”

“What do you think? You fought back. As he fell down, you came into the house, took my hand and we ran away together.”

“Yes...now I remember. You were just fifteen. You never let go of my hand again. We ran the whole night. We never stopped. Not even to take a breath. We flew.”

I woke up in the middle of the night and turned immediately to my side. She seemed to be at a corner of the room, sitting in the darkness, with her face buried in her hands; crying softly, not daring to make any noise. All of a sudden, Alexander’s face flashed before me. He backed away from me and thrust his hands out in front of his face as if to ward off an impending blow, and his childlike eyes, shining with fear, peered between the splays of his fingers. Aleksandra dropped her hands and turned to me. Her tears stopped, and her eyes widened as she searched my face. She shook her head, scarcely believing what she was seeing. Finally, when it was too much to take, her hands leapt up and again she dissolved in tears. I took her in my arms and her whole body trembled throughout the night. “Aleksandra, it’s a terrible thing that happened to you. Who could believe such a thing? And why you? There are so many people in this world and it had to be you. I don’t know what to say. There is nothing I can do to make your pain go away...to make that nightmare go away. If only I had met you earlier. If only you had told me sooner! But even then, what could I have done? What could anyone? But believe me when I say I still love you. Maybe even more than ever, if that’s possible. I had no idea what you must have been going through. I want to say that there was a reason for this too. That it was all a part of God’s plan. You told me once that He knows everything, but He gives everyone a choice. That some good might come of it in future. But I can’t think of anything. Only He knows. And you have to believe that this is true. After all, if your life was even the slightest bit different, we would never have met. But what am I saying? Not meeting would have been a small price to pay if all your pain could be taken away. You would have been happy. And that is all I want. Not knowing you I would have wandered longer. Forever. A lost soul drifting among the living. But even that would have been preferable...if there is a God, I don’t understand Him. But I guess we’re not supposed to. Isn’t that what faith is about? Believing without understanding? Trusting that in the end everything is for the best? If only we could see the bigger

picture. If only we could see what He sees. Even for a moment..." By the time I woke in the morning she was gone!

I rose from the sofa and walked over to the window. The first glimmer of dawn trickled over the harbor. "I'm coming, Aleksandra. We'll be together soon. But what a sunrise! My God! If only you could have seen it." I opened the window and breathed my first, my last breath of the day. In the distance, a ferry passed on the other side of the bay. On deck, a figure...the profile of a young woman perhaps...in a blue dress it seemed...took off her hat and waved. The wind blew her dark hair into her eyes. I didn't wait for further invitation. Off the ledge I sprang and the cool water swallowed me up. An entire new world met me at the bottom of the sea.

"If only you could feel this water, Aleksandra. This lovely sea. And see these red-gold rays piercing all around us. If you could have swum with me...and those bubbles of air floating to the surface would have merged together. And the deeper we'd go, the darker it would get. We could have touched the seabed and run our fingers through the soft sand. In the darkness, we could have kissed...you said you loved me. So why did you have to die? No matter how hard I try, my thoughts go back to the old ways. That the sun doesn't rise but the earth moves. That there's no life after death. Our bones just turn to dust. And back to nothing we go. At least we both left a child behind and we'll live on through them. Who knows where they are now? Whether they're alive or dead? Let them live happier lives than us. If only we could have held them once. Looked into their eyes...heard their voices..."

I burst to the surface, gasping for air, but my legs kept dragging me below. The blood red sun dazzled my eyes. I tried to float with my head above the swell. But the waves spun me around like an empty bottle. The sky slowly circled above me, with wreaths of clouds swirling about. How hard it must have been for her to die! Nothing is more frightening than nothing. I wiped the wet hair away from my eyes and raised a hand to block the pitiless sun. There was the lonely triangle of a sailboat on the horizon, as still as a picture in a daydream. Was someone there? Did I see a hand wave?

And so it continued, from girl to girl, woman to woman, always searching for her, finding parts of her in everyone, but not finding the sum of her in anyone. But hope dies hard and the heart will not stop looking no matter how many falling stars slip through the fingers. And so I keep swimming, from ship to ship, always with hope, and always surprised with what I find. She is everywhere, and she is nowhere. Only in my memories does she stay the same, only there do I feel that she is still with me. Waiting for me to turn a corner and find her standing against a fountain:

"Ah-ha! So you're finally here. A little late...but never mind. You're not drunk, are you?"

"Darling, I've never been more sober in my life."