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## Smoke and Shadows

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## *Smoke and Shadows*

Translated from the Russian by Anya Migdal

It's December, four p.m., and getting dark; I am sitting in a student cafeteria of an American university campus. The space is enormous, its ceiling disappearing into the dim light and cigarette smoke somewhere around the third floor. It's the mid-nineties and they haven't yet prohibited smoking in public places, but they soon will. In the halls and in the classrooms, it is, of course, already forbidden. The professors' lounge has been sterilized. But in this cheap student cafeteria it's still allowed, and so all the professors—the ones who haven't yet been swept up in a healthy lifestyle—eat, smoke, and conduct their student consultations right here.

"Life is but smoke and shadows," as the sign over a gate that shall remain nameless proclaims. Smoke and shadows.

The food, of course, is god-awful. One popular dish is chunky little pasta that in my faraway, snowy homeland we call "little horns"; it's drowned in yellow sauce but it's not egg—I'm scared to dwell on its provenance. They serve pale turkey meat, taken from some parts that are far from the bird's core: if you poke around with a fork, you might find the trachea, which looks like a little tube; you might also find some bits resembling knees, or skin with hair. Hopefully that's just the comb, which rests not upon the turkey's head, but hangs from its nose down to the neck. Lord, that is what You decided on the fifth day of creation, and I am no judge of You. Here they, in all seriousness, serve canned pureed corn. Not to mention tepid brown water they call "coffee." Although if you add some soy cream substitute it's not that bad—quite potable, actually. I'm used to it.

At a table across the room from me is Eric. He's American. We're having an affair.

I can't say anything particularly good about Eric: he's not all that handsome, his main virtues being his teeth and his height. I also like his rimless glasses and his fingers, lanky as if belonging to an imaginary pianist. Alas, he's no good at the piano, and all that he can extract from the instrument is something akin to chopsticks.

I can't even tell if he's all that smart. I don't have enough information to go on. How can I tell if someone is smart if that someone doesn't

speak a word of my mother tongue, which is Russian, and from my country's entire national literary canon is familiar only with *Uncle Vanya*? Not that I can claim to understand the first thing about what Eric does. He's an anthropologist, specializing in the Pu Peo people of Vietnam, an ethnic minority of just four hundred members. The Pu Peo are part of a large ethnic group called the Yi; well, not that large—eight million, living mostly in China. In contrast with the rest of China's population it's a pitifully small handful. The Yi people speak a number of different languages, including Nousu, Nisu, and Nasu. Just to keep things interesting. Yet Eric specializes not in their language, but in the everyday life of this distant minority-within-a-minority. He's traveled to their part of the world and brought back their national costume, their headdress (which resembles an overnight train window with the drapes drawn back), wooden bowls, and an exotic grain: buckwheat.

He was hosting a small get-together for his favorite colleagues from our department: standing buffet, wine from plastic cups, smoking outside only, in the autumnal backyard—"Please close not only the screen door but also the glass door: it reeks of smoke, yuck, yuck." Snacks and spreads: "Dip the celery sticks in the hummus and the carrot sticks in the guacamole."

Eric's wife triumphantly, but with false modesty, brought out a dish filled with hot buckwheat; the invitees—the bravest, anyway—reached for the kasha with plastic forks. Exclamations of multiculturalism and feigned delight. I tasted some, too: they forgot to add salt to the kasha. It was inedible.

It was necessary to explain some things that may have escaped Eric's, and his colleagues', attention; it was necessary to bring down the flame of exoticism down to a common, grocery store fact: this rare pink grain can be obtained at any American supermarket under the name "Wolff's Kasha"—sure, it'll be expensive and yes, outrageously so. Also, this being a Polish import, it can be obtained at any Russian store in Brighton Beach or beyond. The taste will be awful, and so will the quality; it will be under-roasted and upon boiling it will swell and turn into mush, but yet, here it is, and there is no need to travel to Vietnam. We Russians can eat kasha for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Doctors prescribe it for diabetes. There is even an old Russian saying—"buckwheat compliments itself"—which means that it's so delicious that there is no need to compliment the cook. You can fry it in a pan; you can slow-cook it in a clay pot in the oven, if you had a clay pot here, but you don't; and

you can never add too much butter to kasha. And oh, if you add mushrooms!...and onions! Actually, why don't I just show you!

I took the kasha from his wife and quickly and properly refried it. Her heart filled with hate. And Eric's with love. Or something like it. It's hard to tell. When I see Eric my heart swells. But what swells in him—I just don't know.

Our affair proceeds with some complications, and frankly, it'd be better if it weren't happening at all. The clock points to December, and when it's over, I'll leave here and never come back. I'll go back to Russia; I'll visit New York occasionally—that bolted, splendid, ogival, cast-iron, windy anthill that never sleeps; I'll visit my friends in San Francisco, where it's always spring and where, as the song goes, “a lilac coatroom man will hand you your manteau”—maybe he'll hand me my coat, too, a cashmere belted one with a shawl collar, if I buy it in time. I'll rent a really wide Jeep and buy myself embossed leather cowgirl boots with pointy toes, a cowboy hat and motorcycle sunglasses; stock up on water and beef jerky; and will then bolt, cigarette a-danglin', through California, Nevada, and Arizona, through rocky deserts—brown and pink, lavender and purple—and their mirages that tremble over salty and waterless lakes. Where to? No idea. Why? No reason, just because: there is nothing better out there than the desert. The fresh, dry air through an open window, the smell of rocks, the smell of emptiness, loneliness, freedom—the right kind of smell.

But to this tiny, ornate, gingerbread town that is covered with the purst of snow, I will never come back. Then why do I need this love? As I keep saying: I'd be better off without it. Or maybe it just seems that way.

In the Yi language “snow” is *vo*.

Every day I keep repeating to myself that Eric is limited, poorly educated, and generally not that smart. If he is smart, then it's not readily apparent. And he's not that attractive. Teeth, shmeeth. And we have nothing to talk about. I mean, we can't keep talking about the Pu Peo, can we? But every time we meet, be it at that smoky student cafeteria, or in the swanky little bagel shop (and there—progressive bagels “with everything” for intellectuals and also cranberry scones, rare coffee varieties, and a free copy of the latest *New Yorker* for quick browsing—this could be Paris!), or at the post office nearly by chance, or quite unexpectedly at the boundless campus parking lot—every time he's back to chewing my ear off about the Pu Peo, and every time, to my dismay, I keep listening to his mumblings as if it's a chorus of angels. With every passing day I get more and more stuck in this love like it's glue.

In the Yi language buckwheat is *nge*. At least that's how I hear it. *Nge*.

I'm a steadfast tin soldier: nothing gets to me—even love can't get to me—but dear God, when I see that lanky specky-four-eyes; when I watch him climb out of his car like some daddy longlegs; when I suddenly recognize him, absurd in his long coat, as he materializes from the snowflakes in the storm, trying to turn his face away from the wind, covering his eyes from the blizzard—all my inner towers, bastions, and barricades melt, crumble, and disintegrate as in a lousy, drowsy cartoon. Tell me, dear God: why him, specifically? Aren't there other absurd and inarticulate spectacle wearers? Why him? I don't understand You, Lord. Please reveal your plans to me!

Whenever confusion stirs within my soul, instead of going to the student cafeteria to dine on turkey corpses, I drive to that progressive bagel shop, buy myself the biggest cup of real coffee there is and a cranberry scone, and sit by the window with the local paper. Turn it inside out and then fold it over twice to read about the latest goings-on. Pretty standard stuff: two sedans collided on the highway with a van that was transporting dry ice—four casualties. A house was robbed: the owner stepped out for a bit and didn't lock the front door, pinning his hopes on the glass one—hopes dashed, computer stolen. Two people fell into an ice hole in the lake and couldn't get out. Once again campus police detained J. Alvarez, a homeless man who is forbidden from loitering around the campus and who violated this order for the sixth time. He was taken to the local precinct, and the situation was explained to him yet again, to no avail. Alvarez likes the campus; it's spacious and pretty, and with its tree-lined paths it's equally beautiful in the winter and summer. The female students are pretty, too, and so Alvarez comes to check out the ladies, and they, in turn, complain to the administration.

“What do you want from me, Eric?”

“Tell me something surprising about your alphabet. The Russian alphabet.”

“In Russian we have the letter Ъ. The ‘hard sign.’”

“What does it sound like?”

“Like nothing.”

“At all?”

“At all.”

“Then why do you have it?”

“It's a certain type of silence, Eric. Our alphabet has elements of silence.”

Of course I could easily explain to him the meaning behind the letter Ъ—the modern and the historical one—but why? He’s not planning on learning Russian, and he really has no need for it. It’s a waste of time. And besides, it’s already December, and I’ll soon leave and never come back. I look out at the bluish evening town, all lit up and covered with beads and tinsel—it’s close to Christmas, and here the shops start selling gifts, sparkles, candles, and flickering well in advance. Right around Thanksgiving they start. This is a northern town, as far north as they get. Farther up is where the earth curves, farther up are only simple little settlements with savage Poles and detached-from-reality Canadian Ukrainians, cliffs and snow, giant stadium-sized supermarkets that sell only canned goods as the surrounding population does not consume any fresh greens for historical reasons, and then again cliffs and snow, cliffs and snow.

Up there, up north, is the boundary of the habitable world, the kingdom of darkness; from there the Arctic air comes down in massive blocks and hangs in the dark above our uncovered, or perhaps bundled-up heads, while stars piercingly shine down through an icy lens, pricking our eyes.

Americans don’t seem to wear hats—perhaps they are waiting for their ears to fall off from the cold? I’ve seen them wear gloves, scarves, sure, but not hats. Perhaps they feel that it’s weak to wear them? Unless, maybe, when one goes to Moscow, and at the Red Square buys one of those Chinese-made polyester *ushankas* with earflaps and a red star, and then expects all Russian hearts to melt upon seeing them. Eric is no exception: in order to be closer to my heart, unreadable with the help of his cultural codes, he attempted wearing an Uzbek *doppa*: a square, pointed hat, his being embroidered with beads and pink paillettes. This reminded me of Maksim Gorky when he was terminally ill. I banned it.

Me, I swaddle my head in a warm scarf to avoid meningitis, arachnoiditis, and trigeminal neuralgia; I forbid Eric to call this scarf a “babushka” with the erroneous stress on the “u.” I’ve already weaned him off of saying “borscht” instead of “borsch” and explained to him that in Russian, as opposed to Yiddish, there are no “blintzes” but only “blinis,” no “schav,” but only green “shchi,” also known as sorrel soup. I know I’m disseminating useless knowledge. I’ll leave, and he’ll go back to his erring ways, to his poor linguistic and cultural habits. He’ll go back to adding cumin and star anise to buckwheat, to making salad with cold farfalle pasta, red caviar, and sesame oil. Driven by his unbridled imagination, he’ll make a heap of something awful and ridiculous from mushrooms or beef.

Rice, I bet, he could do well. Rice is rice, a basic, simple thing, no need to invent anything there. Some things should be simple and clear. You don't need to add anything to it—let it stay pure and unchanged, as it's been for thousands of years.

“Eric, how do the Pu Peo say ‘rice?’”

“*Tsa.*”

This town, to which I'll never come back, is small, and everyone sees everything. Even if you don't know someone, they know you. Students are the majority here, and of course they know their instructors' faces. There is virtually no place where Eric and I can meet. We manage to see each other in various coffee shops while his wife, Emma, is teaching. Sometimes we don't even get to talk: too many acquaintances around us. I know how sensitive and watchful they are of other peoples' affairs—I've personally gossiped with them about this one and those two. Eric is scared of Emma. He sits in a far corner looking past me, staring at the wall or at his cup. I respond in kind. I get heart palpitations. Don't know what he gets.

Emma is a beautiful, high-strung woman with long hair and anxious eyes drawn up to the temples. She teaches something artsy and can make anything and everything imaginable with her hands. She sews complex blue quilts covered with the delirious stars of otherworldly skies, weaves beaded shawls, and knits thick, puffy white coats resembling snowy hills. She makes homemade lemon and vanilla soap and other such things, conjuring up acute jealousy in women and fear and bewilderment in men. She orders emerald- and tree-bark-hued cowhides from special designer catalogs and from them makes little boxes with silver inserts—I bought one of those myself at a local shop, not knowing that it was made by Emma.

She's a real woman, unlike me; she's a goddess of the hearth and a protector of all arts and crafts, not to mention that she volunteers at the student theater, designing and painting sets for plays that her students produce. She suspects that while she's painting those sets Eric isn't sitting around in his office but is circling the town in an effort to run into me at this and that spot—accidentally, inadvertently, unintentionally. Emma is a witch and she wishes me ill. Or maybe it just seems that way to me.

Due to the fact that we are rarely able to speak, Eric and I have developed an ability to read each other's thoughts. It's not terribly difficult, but it of course results in many mistakes, and our limited vocabulary

comes down mostly to the nitty-gritty: “Later.” “Yes.” “Not now.” “Me too.” “No.” “I’ll get in the car and drive—follow me.”

We tried meeting in another town, fifteen miles away from ours, where we scouted a quiet inn at the edge of human settlement and surrounded by snowbanks, but at the last minute, almost by the front door, we ran away in fear: through a lit window and its little lace curtains we spotted two professors from our college, two married ladies—who could have suspected it?—kissing and embracing quite unambiguously over a cup of coffee in the cozy bar under the prematurely displayed Christmas lights.

Sure, we could have wandered in saucily from the cold and resolved our mutual awkwardness with a jovial cackle: Oh, you too? Hahaha! But Eric is timid and considerate; me—not so much, but he’s the one who lives here and I’m leaving and never coming back.

I couldn’t bring him back to my place: I lived at the campus hotel for homeless professors. It was cheap, but splendid and mysterious, like a haunted house. Back in the 1930s, some wealthy patron of the college donated this house when she inexplicably had no more use for it. The building was surrounded by the world’s fluffiest snowbanks; the rooms were so overheated that everyone kept their windows open regardless of the weather; and the beds were so narrow that one would fall off of them without fail, even while sleeping on one’s back and at attention, like a soldier in formation, for there was no other godly way of sleeping there. The rooms also had odious little low armchairs with legs like a dachshund’s. There was no smoking allowed, but of course everyone smoked anyway while hanging out the window. No, this was wholly unsuitable for a clandestine rendezvous.

Theoretically, we could have risked it by meeting right at Eric’s place while Emma was teaching or set-designing, but I felt trepidation knowing that it wouldn’t end well: there have been times in my life when I was scared to death, or to laughter, and when it was necessary to urgently hide in the closet or under the bed. Emma could be a mind reader, too, I could see it in her eyes; she would have caught us, would have given chase through the snow, over the treetops, through the dark blue night, leaving her students behind.

Emma had a third eye, and I could see it clearly when she was lit from the side, pulsating under her thin skin; when she would turn her head in alarm, it picked up my thoughts, like a radar detector. Once a week, Eric and Emma held small gatherings for their colleagues—it had become a tradition, and they didn’t bother changing it. I also attended these by

default. Not coming would have been equivalent to exposing my guilt. At these parties Emma would read my thoughts, watching me with her still-subcutaneous, still-unhatched third eye, as she filled with hate.

To ward off her evil eye, I bought an amulet at a local antique shop; there were many such shops in our little town with all kinds of amusing knickknacks from old license plates to empty glass perfume bottles. Tin watering cans, porcelain kitties, dishes, washbowls, and chests of drawers; lifeless corsets for women with small breasts and unimaginably tiny waists; and hopelessly rumpled lace parasols for a sun that has set and stopped shining long ago. Faded enamel jewelry, old magazines, and patterned ice trays.

The charm jumped out at me right away from its spot between silver jewelry boxes and Victorian lorgnettes. It was a tiny little *mano fico*, a real amulet, a thing of power—it was unclear how it got there and why no one had purchased it yet. The shop owner didn't pick up on its value and meaning, and so luckily it didn't even cost me that much. I took it to a jewelry store to have a little loop soldered to it, and I also bought a silver chain for it there.

"Do you want to have it engraved, perhaps?" asked the saleswoman. "Usually these things get engraved with a name. Or a word. You know, like an incantation."

I looked out the window at the snow and the snowdrifts. Pure, endless. I'll leave and they'll stay. They'll melt and turn into water, and then it'll snow again.

"Okay, engrave it with *vo. Vo.*"

"Good choice!" exclaimed the saleswoman, not a clue as to what I was talking about. An excellent, professional way to react.

I started wearing the amulet under my clothes. I kept it on at night. Emma panicked and twitched, but she was powerless against it.

Love is a strange thing; it has a thousand faces. You can love anything and anyone; I once loved a bracelet from a shop window, but it was too expensive and I couldn't afford it: I had a family, after all, kids. I worked hard, burning out my brain, so I could pay for our apartment and the kids' college tuition, so I had something to set aside for illness, old age, for my mother's hospital bills, for unexpected emergencies. I couldn't buy that bracelet, and I didn't buy it, but I loved it, I thought about it while falling asleep, I pined for it and shed tears for it.

Then it passed. It unclasped its jaws that were clutching my heart and mercifully let me go. What difference does it make who or what it was? It could have been a person, an animal, a thing, a cloud in the sky, a book, a strophe in somebody else's poem, the southern wind tearing

at grass in the steppe, an episode from my own dream, an unexplored street making a turn in the honey glow of a setting sun, a smile from a stranger, a ship's sail in a blue wave, a spring evening, a pear tree, a musical fragment from an incidental window.

I, for one, have never been in love with waterfalls, or high-heeled shoes, or a woman, or dancing, or inscriptions, or coins, but I know that some have and were blinded by their love, and I understand them. Maybe I'll fall in love with something from that list—who's to know? It happens suddenly, without warning, and it envelops you immediately and completely.

And so Eric was the object of my obsessive and inexplicable love. I had to rid myself of it somehow. Overcome it, somehow.

I'm sitting in a coffee shop (the one that feels like Paris), looking out at the blue night and the theatrical-looking snow outside. "We'll take Route 50, just follow me, then we'll make a turn at the fork," Eric mentally communicates. I drop my magazine, steal a bunch of napkins from the coffee shop to wrap up my cranberry scone, bus my table, bundle myself up in my scarf—I'm warm, my blood is red-hot, my palms and my heels are like boiling water, I can burn holes in the ice; yes, I'm the only one like this in your gingerbread town, you do as you want—and walk out on the street spruced up with swaying garlands of sparkling lights. I drive down Route 50, make a turn at the fork, and pull over. Cars are whizzing past me, in a hurry to get home. Or away from home. Who's to say?

Eric stops his car, gets into mine.

"I have an idea. We should go to Lake George."

"What's there?"

"A motel. It's beautiful there. We can go this weekend. She'll be visiting her mother in Boston."

"And what's in Boston?"

"Uh...her mother has some sort of anniversary coming up. She can't miss it."

"Why aren't you going?"

"I have an urgent deadline and an inflammation of the gallbladder."

"I wouldn't buy that."

"Neither will she. It's an excuse."

I look into his sad, gray, sincere eyes.

"In our culture," he says, "the most important thing about a lie is that it be plausible."

"Oh, really?"

“Yes.”

“So any kind of a lie is okay? Even an outrageous one?”

“Yes. As long as there is plausible deniability.”

“You know, we’re big on lying too. I doubt you’re world leaders there.”

“We respect other people; we try to lie credibly.”

“Okay. Good thing I’m leaving soon and never coming back.”

“You can’t leave!”

“Sure I can.”

“What if I killed her?”

“What for? She didn’t do anything.”

“No, I think I’ll kill her. It’ll make things easier for me.”

“But not for me.”

We both just sit there, sulking. Then Eric asks, “Did you know that buckwheat, sorrel, and rhubarb are related?”

“I didn’t. What stunning news.”

“There are two types of buckwheat: bitter and sweet.”

“There is also a Polish type, a special varietal called *Crappy*.”

“You’ll leave and fall out of love with me.”

“Yes. I’ll leave, fall out of love, and forget you.”

Eric’s feelings are hurt.

“Women shouldn’t say such things! They should say: ‘I’ll never, ever forget you! I’ll never, ever stop loving you!’”

“That’s women lying plausibly out of ‘respect for other people.’ Of course, they’ll forget. Everything is forgettable. In that lies salvation.”

“I’d like to break your heart,” says Eric vengefully.

“Only solid things break. I am water. I run off and seep through somewhere else.”

“Yes!” he says, with sudden anger. “Women are water! That’s why they cry all the time!”

We sit in silence for a long time, as our car is swept over by a dry, fine, rustling snowstorm.

“It’s coming down like rice,” says Eric, “like *tsa*.”

It’s as if he’s reading my mind. It’s hard to stop loving Eric. I have to pull myself together. I have to turn my heart into ice.

But then doesn’t that mean it could break?

It’s the second half of December, only a week left till Christmas. The central street of our town, that ubiquitous “Main Street,” is ablaze with gold, green, and pink shop windows, string lights stretched from pole to shining pole. There are so many Christmas lights that the snow, as it blows through the street, appears multicolored: multicolored sparkling *vo* that looks like *tsa*. “Jingle Bells” soars and dances ad nauseum from

every door crack, it drills a hole in your brain and turns it into a sieve; by the umpteenth store you want to run up to it, swing a baseball bat, and—pow! pow! pow!—beat the crap out of the mirrored glass. But one has to, of course, contain oneself.

I'm picking out some gifts for myself: an embroidered tablecloth, scented candles, and striped pillowcases. I don't need any of it, but that's no reason not to buy it. Back in the day the Magi also brought strange gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It's unclear what they meant by it, what they were hinting at, and where those gifts went, although all kinds of beautiful explanations were later presented: gold for kingship on earth, myrrh for mortality, frankincense for burning, believing, and praying. Legend has it, too, that this gold was then stolen by two thieves, and that thirty-three years later those two very thieves were crucified to the left and to the right of our Savior, and that Jesus promised that if they came to believe in Him, they would be transported to Heaven instantly. Since they go way back to their nursery days, as it were. Here, truly, is a case of someone benefitting from Christ both in His birth and His death.

I also really like this beautiful, soft purse with silver inserts, but something about it perturbs me. Who is the craftsman? What if it's Emma? The saleswoman doesn't know, and the owner of the shop isn't here. Something inside me, perhaps it's the amulet, tells me: Don't buy it. Don't buy anything, put back the tablecloth, and return the candles to where you found them. Nothing here is yours; it's Emma's. All of it.

"Thanks, I changed my mind. No, I don't need the pillowcases either."

Eric is hosting a Christmas party, his last party of the year. He sends me a wordless invite—we have fine-tuned our communication technique: "Come by tonight, I'll make *nge* properly. Don't you want *nge*?" Oh, for God's sake, Eric, I only want one thing—for someone to erase you from my eyes, from my heart, from my memory. To forget everything, to be free. "*No dreams, no recollections, and no sounds,*" surrounded only by a dark sky and a snowy blizzard, and nothing else, just like it was on the second day of creation. So I can purify myself of you and begin anew, I need to begin anew, for I won't be coming back here again.

Lights are shimmering, Christmas songs are seeping out of everywhere, making their way inside your brain. In a few days the baby Jesus will be born. Does this mean He's not among us now, just as before Easter? Does this mean that He abandoned us during the darkest, gloomiest, most commercialized and hopeless week of the year? And does this

mean there is no one to turn to inside your heart, no one to ask what to do? Figure it out yourself, is that it? Not far from town there is a Russian monastery. The monks there are sullen hobgoblins, as per usual, but perhaps it's worth a visit there for some advice? What if among them is a person with a strange, all-seeing heart? I could ask him: is it a sin to kill and trample love within yourself?

Alas, the blizzard has swept over the smaller roads, and there is no way of getting to the monastery in this weather. There is no Russian Orthodox Church in town. I can't go to the Baptists—those aren't churches, those are community arts and crafts clubs, where they encourage bright-eyed honesty and where you're greeted by a ruddy man in a suit, beaming with welcome: "Hello, sister! Jesus Christ, our Savior, has a wonderful plan for your salvation!" And that plan will entail loving thy neighbor by immediately sitting down to gift-wrap donations with youthful, undertreated drug addicts from broken homes. And singing something as a group. And listening to a sister in Christ speak: some lady in a handmade cardigan, in the manic stage of a bipolar episode, insisting that because of her deep faith in the Lord our Savior, her chocolate chip cookies always come out well. Always.

Well, I don't want to love my neighbor. I'd like to stop loving him, actually.

The Catholics have set up their church a lot better; it's more mysterious, but now is not the right time: it's too bright there, too festive, too joyful, full of too many happy expectations, and I just can't; I don't want joy, I'd like to sit in a dark room full of vile and bitter people so I can turn my heart into ice. Because life is but smoke and shadows.

I drive to visit the hexadactyls: there is a small town nearby where almost everybody has six fingers. They are all related, from one big family. One of their grandfathers happened to have a sixth finger, the deformity was passed on to subsequent generations, and now they are everywhere: at the gas station, in the bank, at the local stores. At the pharmacy window. At the bar. At the café. Full of bitterness and spite.

It feels good here, it feels right. A bitter waitress brings me my coffee; she knows that I'm looking at her hand, and I bet she has already spat in my cup as a preventative measure: cappuccinos are convenient for spitting. Okay, lady. I feel you. A spiteful hexadactyl bartender is wiping down glasses, and a sullen young man sits on a barstool while talking to him and gloomily smoking, and it's so, so strange to see which fingers he's using to hold his cigarette. Is there a name for this extra digit? And do the local six-fingered grannies knit special gloves for their six-fingered grandkids?

They cast unwelcoming side-glances at me, knowing full well I'm here to gawk at them. They expertly sniff out us nosy scum, the normal, regular-looking strangers, who out of boredom or schadenfreude, or with the sole purpose of lifting their own spirits and heightening their senses, need to stand next to those for whom having more does not bring merriment.

One could also spit into sparkling water with great pleasure. Or into Diet Dr Pepper with a cherry flavor and a lowered calorie count. Me—I'm water. Spit at me, you unattractive and unhappy people, for I am planning a murder.

The nativity of the Baby is only a day away. If not now, then when? Eric is right: it's time for decisive action...time to get rid of her. She's a witch: she sewed all the clothes in this town, made all the quilts so I couldn't hide under them with Eric, knitted all the scarves and the woolen shawls to strangle me, stitched all the boots to hobble my feet so I couldn't leave, baked all the bagels and scones so I would choke on their crumbs. She poisons food, she cuts up bird tracheas into the white sauce, she boils cartilage and skin to put a curse on me and turn me into a turkey with a comb for a nose. She picks cranberries in a swamp, ones that smell like a crow's armpit. She paints sets, and once she's finished, it'll be too late. So it must be done now.

I arrive at Eric and Emma's: the screen door has been removed for the winter, the wooden one is wide open, and through the glass you can see the flames, dancing in the fireplace. The guests—university colleagues that I'm, quite frankly, already fed up with—stand around the buffet, twirling wine glasses filled with cheap wine. Eric made *ngé*; he's proud of himself, admiring the pink heap of buckwheat as if it's a real accomplishment, as if it contains a secret meaning of some kind.

But there is none.

It's crappy food.

He bought that Polish muck again.

A charming Mozart recording is playing in the background. Emma's third eye has finally hatched: blue with red veinlets and no eyelashes, it's covered with a translucent third eyelid, like a bird's. But what good is it now? It's useless.

"Eric, Eric, get ready. Don't drink any wine—you're going to drive. We'll go to Lake George and drown her there." Sending your thoughts by ESP is a wonderful and truly convenient method of communication. It's indispensable in social situations.

"Why Lake George, specifically?"

“I don’t know any other lakes around here. It was your idea.”

Guests disperse early: they have to get ready for tomorrow’s festivities, wrap presents in sparkly paper. We all get into the car: Eric and Emma in front, and me in the back. Emma is using two eyes to look ahead at the snowstorm and her third eye to look into my heart, into my piece of wicked, black ice, but my silver amulet blinds her, and she can’t see what’s in store for her.

It’s pitch dark at the lake, but Eric brought a flashlight. We walk along a fisherman’s path—seems we are not the only ice-fishing enthusiasts. Today, however, they are all at home, warm and cozy, by their decked-out trees.

The ice hole is covered with a thin layer of frost.

“What are we doing here?” Emma wants to know.

“That’s what!”

We push Emma into the ice hole. Black water splashes my feet. Emma struggles, trying to grab on to the sharp icy edges. Eric pushes her, using an ice pick for good measure: wait, where did the ice pick come from?—Doesn’t matter. Bloop. Done. They won’t find her till spring.

“My hands are freezing,” Eric complains.

“So are my feet. Let’s drink.”

“You brought booze?”

“And meat pirozhki. They are still warm: I wrapped them in foil.”

And right there on the ice, we drink Popov vodka out of a flask—awful swill, truth be told. We eat meat pies. We finally kiss as free people—relieved in knowing that no one will see us, nor stop us. Freedom is precious, as every American knows. I throw the flask and our leftovers into the water. Take off the silver amulet and throw it in there too: it’s served me well and I don’t need it anymore.

We slowly walk back toward the shore.

The ice cracks under Eric’s feet, and he falls up to his armpits into a snowed-over ice hole.

“Ahh! Give me your hand!”

I step away from the ice hole’s edge.

“No, Eric. Farewell!”

“What do you mean, farewell?! What the... what do you mean... why farewell?”

Yes, farewell. Don’t grab at me, don’t call after me, just forget me. Well, you won’t remember, will you, because you don’t exist, you’re an invention; you don’t exist and never did, I don’t know you, I never talked to you and have no idea what your name is, tall stranger, sitting at a table across the room from me in a cheap student cafeteria, enveloped

by darkness and cigarette smoke, wearing rimless glasses, and holding a cigarette with your lanky fingers, as if belonging to an imaginary pianist.

I finish my last cigarette—it's easy to get lost in your thoughts and absentmindedly go through an entire pack. Wrapping myself up in a warm shawl, I leave without looking back, walking from the shadows and smoke into a blinding December snowstorm.