

## **Sour Cherries**

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Freshman year of college met my expectations. Other than the sour cherries arriving on my doorstep via UPS from Los Angeles, my family and I were an ocean apart. Mom and Len's arguments were in the background, way back there with my numbed parts where they belonged. Because of this, when I got the phone call from Len, I was caught off guard. "We are going to China for a vacation," he said, with a hint of paranoia. "A father-son trip."

"Can I call you back? I have a lot of studying to do for finals."

"Don't worry, I already checked with your university, Eddie. They have agreed to allow you to take the tests early."

"You can't just call my school and change my test schedule without asking me, pap." Len's other line was beeping. "I have a lot of plans over spring break."

"Your plans can wait. I will meet you at JFK for our flight to China in three days."

"How long is our trip going to be?"

"In China, we will stay a week. After, I have a surprise for you in Moscow."

"We're going to Moscow, too?"

"Yes, after we go to China."

"What time are we leaving?"

Len hung up abruptly without answering the question. It was something he did ever since he had issued me my first phone. A few minutes passed and my Motorola flip phone vibrated again. Without checking caller-id I picked it up, assuming it was Len.

"Can I call you back?"

"Orgies in Moscow!"

"What?"

"Your dad and I have been dying to tell you all week. I'm going to Moscow with your family!"

"Bill?"

"In two weeks, after your trip to China."

"You and my dad organized this without me?"

"No, remember the last time you were in town, we all talked about it in your kitchen." He went on to describe the meat blintzes we were eating. "What kind of clothes should I bring, Eddie?"

"Dress light," I said sarcastically, "the winters there are supposed to be freezing."

"Okay, Eddie, I'll see you at the airport in Moscow. I'm on the same flight as your mom."

I shot down 6th Ave to a pizza stand and ordered a slice with extra pepperonis, and a Sprite. I was so heated I dropped my wallet when I took it out to pay. After finishing the slice, I bummed a Marlboro Red from the cute cashier and smoked it on MacDougal Street. Bill promised he would bring my Stussy hoodie. It was on top of the Sega Genesis in his bedroom.

\*

Right off the bat, they bumped Len and me up to business class. It was a helpful way to start the sixteen hour direct flight to Hong Kong from New York. Leaving on the red-eye would get us into Chek Lap Kok Airport by early Monday morning. The plan was to explore the city that afternoon, but first Len wanted to go to his favorite sausage restaurant. "You never had sausages like this in your life, Eddie."

"Your favorite sausages are in China?" I cried out.

"Second favorite," Len said. "Your babushka's sausages are number one, of course."

"Of course," I said.

Len reclined his seat. "Find for us a movie with action."

This was our first opportunity to watch a movie together since my departure to college. "Have you seen Rush Hour with Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan?"

"Good choice, my boy."

\*

When we got off the plane, it was a nippy Monday morning in Hong Kong. I put on my headphones and Len put on his BluBlocker sunglasses as we waited outside in the taxi line. BluBlocker sunglasses were not hip. They were made of indestructible plastic and their orange lenses appeared to fit the faces of men who aspired to be extras in Al Pacino films. Lunch with Len when he wore his BluBlockers back home was humiliating. Even Len's friends in the Russian community made fun of him for it. They tried to get him to convert to brand names like Fendi, but Len insisted that BluBlockers were superior quality.

"So, any chance you'll tell me what we're doing in China now?"

"Of course I will tell you. While we eat."

"Finally," I said. "I'm starving."

"Starving, starving. Next time eat on the plane, Eddie."

"Eat what?"

"There was beautiful salad with crackers."

"With soft tomatoes!"

"How about the chicken?" Len said. "Also disgusting?" I did not take the bait. "How were your final exams, Eddie?"

"Fine," I said, even though I did not have enough time to study for my favorite class, "Genocide in the 20th Century," and left an entire essay unanswered as a result. "How far is the restaurant?"

"Don't worry, son. We're going to eat the best sausages you had in your life before you starve."

"Sausages for breakfast?" I shrieked.

"The best sausages anywhere in the world. You'll see, China is country of geniuses compared to idiotic America."

\*

An hour later, I followed Len down the staircase of a Holiday Inn before entering a humid restaurant, and confronting a single cook standing at a grill. Behind him was a television broadcasting a ping-pong match.

I looked around. "This is where the world's greatest sausages are?"

We grabbed plastic trays, diner style, and approached. The chef slopped our plates with potatoes and soggy sauerkraut. Then came the sausages. Despite the lack of options, being able to choose between them made Len giddy. I had at least two restaurants on my block in the east village that had more options, and they didn't even specialize in sausages. Other than a few high-knee-socked Austrian tourists, we were the only people in the restaurant.

"You know, Eddie," Len said as we began our breakfast, "in Kiev if I had sausages once a year, it would be a fantasy come true." I nodded. I knew Len was raised modestly in Kiev, and that this was a thorny source of pride for him.

"You remember how I told you," Len continued, with oil from a sausage oozing out from his lips, "about my business operations in China?"

"Yeah," I said. "Your factories."

"No, not my factories. The factories that make *our* costume jewelry."

"These sausages are pretty bomb," I said, trying to change the subject. And they actually were, as juicy as any I had ever tried.

"Costume jewelry can be produced in extremely enormous quantity, because it's plastic. Afterward we sell to stores like Hot Topic and K-Mart."

"Got it," I snapped, "costume jewelry is made from plastic."

"Yes," Len said. "We make mold, send to China, and they produce for us thousands of pieces, very inexpensively. After we take pieces and sell for enormous margins."

"Cool," I said, "I'll bust out some designs for you."

"Forget about designs, Eddie. I'm not talking about designs. For that we hire your girlfriends."

I thought of Sam, my ex-girlfriend. We had not seen each other since the last day of high school, and I heard she was spiraling. I was grateful she hadn't told anyone about what happened the last time we were alone together; it was humiliating. "It's funny you say that, pap. Last I heard Sam was making jewelry."

"Of course she's making jewelry," he said, as if she had been doing it for a decade.

"It's actually kind of a new thing for her."

"Smart girl. Nobody can support a family with painting."

"Her paintings are what got her into the best art school in the country," I said.

"Good, she will continue to paint when she can, but I guarantee you that jewelry is where she will earn her money. Now," he said, "have you thought about how you will make money after you finish school?"

"Not really. I still have three and a half years to go before I graduate."

"This whole American school system of four year vacations, it's an enormous waste of money, Eddie. Your very wealthy mother begged me to let you go, so as usual I said yes, but I guarantee you that you're not going to learn about how to make money in a school for *liberal arts*." I grabbed some napkins. "Nu, have you thought about how you're going to support a family?"

"I'm nineteen!"

"Look at Dimitry," he said, he's two years older than you are and he is already in business."

I was desperate to change the subject. "So, you don't sell diamonds to Neiman Marcus anymore?"

Len placed something hard in my palm. "This is your future," he said. It was just a cheap earring, but I couldn't take my eyes off of this future no matter how hard I tried.

\*

The sights in Hong Kong were fine. We took river boats from one side of Hong Kong to the other, and in between trips to Taoist temples, ate xiaolongbao and more exotic foods like Shark Fin soup, along with some other culinary staples of the region. Two hours after landing in Shenzhen, the city in which Len's factories were producing thousands of pieces of costume jewelry, our taxi got a flat tire. Smoke was fuming from the tops of factories adjacent to the highway. "Look up," Len said with pride, pointing at the apocalyptic clouds. While the taxi driver replaced the tire, the sky and I were both losing our patience. Nothing was all around us. Occasionally a radio tower peeked out over the silver smog. "See how fast China is growing, young workers from all over Asia are coming here to make a life for themselves."

"I don't see anything, pap."

He was pulling on my headphones, laughing. "What?" I said.

"Your naushniki," he snorted, "are made in China."

I was smearing my face with SPF 50. "What about the smog, pap? My professor says that the weather is going to become a weapon of mass destruction in some places around the globe soon."

"Of course he said that, only American liberal arts school professor could say something so unsophisticated."

"He's Indian."

"India! The cleanest country! In India, I would see human bodies rotting in street, and dogs being fed to children to stop them from starvation."

"Every country has its problems," I said naively.

"I was sick for two months after India. Ask your mother if she even left the hotel in India."

"Did she just stay inside reading?"

We laughed. As combative as things got, we could always share a joke about mom.

When we got to the factory, Len gave our driver a tip larger than I had ever seen him give to anyone in the States. "How much did you just give that guy?"

"A little more than he is used to," Len said. We were making our way into the factory now through an empty parking lot big enough for a Phish concert. The sky was packed with copper clouds.

"Where are all the cars?"

"They don't need cars here," Len said. "They live at the factory. Like you do at the apartments in school."

"I live in dorms."

"Here also dorms," Len was laughing. "Like in your liberal arts school."

As we entered the factory, I looked for the residential area, but didn't see it. Inside, fifteen hundred Chinese workers were assembled along glistening tables that seated fifty with nary six inches between them. Some were polishing, others were hammering, all were using their hands. A representative with a British accent called this area Piazza de Michelangelo. Len was as high as I had ever seen him. "Your opportunity here is to the moon, Eddie. Next year, our business here will be triple what it is now. It will be yours," he said, eyes bulging with pride. "All of it. What do you think, my son?"

"Truthfully?" I said, as I tasted something metallic on my lips. "I think it's a great idea, pap."

"Ah?" Len was straining to hear me over the vents blowing out manufactured air.

I repeated what I said the first time. "I said it's a really good idea!"

"Very good, my boy. Three more years of vacation in New York, and then you move to China."

"Move to China? I don't get to stay in Los Angeles even?"

"You will live between Los Angeles and Hong Kong. You will travel the world and make enough money to support yourself and have children, and then afterward you can do whatever you want."

“How old will I be when I can do whatever I want?”

“No more than forty.”

“It's a pretty amazing opportunity, pap. Thank you.”

He didn't hear me because of a loud siren sounding throughout the workfloor.

The factory representative pointed to a flashing white strobe light above our heads. “Pegasus.” He raised his voice to yell over the siren. “Pegasus! So employees are aware it's time for a break!” The *employees* were listening to music, playing Chinese board games, and smoking Marlboros now via an effortless transition.

“We are very selective during the interview process!” the factory representative continued. “Most young people who come here have to go back to their villages without a job! For the ones who do win a position with us, we offer seventy hours of work each week, and free housing!”

I looked around as Pegasus blared, thinking about Sam. I avoided her after the last time we saw each other, and then played it off like it was Sam's bad, ignoring her to avoid the shame of going limp during sexual intercourse. I was too embarrassed to call her even, even though I really wanted to, even though I was still getting numb in college when I had sex, except when I was wasted, which I was every time I went to bed with a girl now, numbing the numb with spirits. The factory workers appeared happy to be there. They were using their hands to support their families. Just as I began to convince myself that Len's ideas for my future had more to them than futility, the siren transformed into the sound of a wailing mother, and then exactly five minutes after their break began; silence. Not a disgruntled face in the room. Not even a slouched shoulder. I spotted a red airplane above our heads on the way out. One of them had no doubt launched it during the break. By the time Len's BluBlockers were on, it was sucked into a vent.

\*

Getting from Moscow to Hong Kong was painful, and I was grumpy when we landed. Bill was at the baggage claim when we got off the plane, having arrived an hour prior with the rest of my family from Los Angeles. Seeing Bill, my best friend from the United States, in Russia, with mom, was surreal.

“You think your dad will introduce us to girls, Eddie?

"Shut up, Bill," I said. "I don't want anyone to hear you."

"He better introduce us to some fine ladies."

"Does your dad introduce you to girls?" I said, checking to see how far we were from mom.

"No, but that's different," he said. "My dad isn't in the Russian mafia. If my dad were Russian Tony Soprano, he would definitely bless me with some Russian girls."

"What were you listening to on your iPod?"

Bill was waving his arms around like he was in a music video. His jeans were sagging heavily, revealing his childish alligator boxer-briefs. In his hand was a first-generation iPod, which he had before anyone I knew. "Was my mom annoying on the airplane?"

"Not at all," Bill said. She passed out as soon as the flight took off. How about you guys? How was China? What'd you guys do there?"

"Mostly nothing. Had some bomb sausages, but my stomach has been hurting since."

"Sausages in China?"

"Don't ask, my dad has a hard-on for this sausage place there."

"Where is it?"

"At a Holiday Inn in Hong Kong."

Bill laughed, but it was at something else, and he wouldn't tell me what.

A few feet away, Len was flagging down transportation for our group. Luggage was swiftly trunked, and we were off. Len, Bill, and I shared the Mercedes, and mom and the others followed in a taxi. Len's Russian driver, Sergey, had a muscular face, and resembled a character from the Nintendo game Mike Tyson's Punch Out. Bill couldn't get enough of it. "The way Sergey nodded at your dad, that's exactly the way they do it in 'The Godfather,' Eddie!" Bill unzipped his CD case, which he still used frequently even though he had an iPod. "Can Sergey bless us with some N.W.A?"

I tapped Sergey's shoulder. "Can you play a CD for us, Sergey?" He didn't budge.

I turned to Bill. "Our radio is under the control of an evil warlord, Bill. Sorry." Bill plugged his nose. I was surprised it took him as long as it did, frankly. "What you're smelling there, Bill, is banya smell."

"What?"

"The banya." I said. "It means sauna in Russian. And that smell is a mixture of sweat, farts, and eucalyptus leaves."

"You like banya?" said Sergey.

Bill turned to me. "Is he talking to us?"

"Look," said Sergey.

"What did he just say, Eddie?"

"He wants you to look at something."

A CD case flew over the headrest. On the cover was a photo of five fluffy teenage boys sitting inside of a photoshopped banya.

"You know N'Sync?" said Sergey.

"Very well," Bill replied.

"Brothers Golgy is Russian N'Sync."

"Brothers Golgy?" Bill was beside himself laughing.

"Sasha, Vanya, Seymon, Leonid, and Grishka."

"Who's the one who looks like Justin Timberlake?" Bill said.

"Grishka, the more popular with the girls. Nickname, Lady Killer."

"That's your new nickname from now on, Eddie."

Len was grumbling up front on his Nokia phone. “Is everything okay, pap?”

“Problems,” Len said. “I had to make new room reservation for your mother.”

“Of course. Why?”

“Ask mother.”

Bill squeezed my thigh. “I don’t mind sleeping in bed with Eddie.”

“It’s okay,” Len said. “I already find another room for her in our hotel.”

I looked out the window and sighed, our lane had heavy congestion, and the lanes on either side of the car were no better. Horrific gridlock lousier than the 405 freeway and Holland Tunnel combined. “She probably just wants a private area to eat sour cherries and stay connected to air conditioning,” I said.

Len ignored me. “When your father come to Moscow, Bill, I will get him Veep light, too.”

“Veep light,” Sergey said, as he accelerated out of the lane and pointed to the roof of his Mercedes. Everywhere around us stressed out Moscovites were blaring their horns, but we were in a sparse lane at the center of the highway between the traffic now. All of the cars in our narrow lane had flashing blue police lights on their roofs. Bill was hooked. “Okay. Veep light. I have to have one.”

“Look,” Len said, “see the Range Rover coming from there?” There was a Range Rover lumbering toward us with a flashing blue light. The lane was not wide enough for both our vehicles. “Do you see it, boys?”

“Yeah,” I said, “coming right at us with its Veep light. Is it going to stop?”

“Maybe,” Len laughed. “Russians with Veep light don’t play by rules.”

With less than fifty feet to go before a head on collision, Sergey pumped the brakes, and avoided the Range Rover by a hair, which still nearly hit us before flying off with its Veep light.

“They are crazy,” Sergey said.

“How is this fair?” I cried. “The cars with Veep lights just get to skip traffic?”

Len laughed. "Fair? Since when is life fair?"

Bill could barely control himself. "Can anyone get one? How much do they cost?"

"Only the extremely connected," Len said.

Bill nudged me. I had no doubt what was in his head. To clarify he whispered it, "Russian Mafia."

I looked out the back windshield at the traffic grinding behind us. It was legit. Legit Mordor.

"Tonight you will see girls that you have never seen in your life, boys. Da, Sergey? Not like the girls in disgusting New York."

Sergey flashed a toothless grin. "Ochin Charoshi devachki," he said.

\*

The Hotel Krasnapolsky was built into the bones of a 19th century cathedral. Maroon-capped bellboys with broad shoulders and ironed green uniforms greeted us and rolled our luggage inside. The hotel's fifty foot ceilings, floral wallpaper, and ornate chandeliers were impressive. Every counter was touched off with an expensive crystal vase. Hard light found its way in through stained glass windows, some of which were from the original cathedral. Outside, Bill offered me a Parliament Light cigarette. We were standing near valet parkers who were greeting guests who all looked like dignitaries in their fur coats and forest animal hats. Since it was March, snow covered the castles of Red Square, giving the whole scene an allegorical edge. "It'll make you feel better," Bill said.

I took a drag of the cigarette. "I'm a little scared of what's going to come out once I do. I haven't taken a dump since eating sausages with my dad in Hong Kong."

"How long ago was that?"

"Four days."

Luckily it was Bill who was holding the cigarette when Len walked outside. "Tell me, boys, ah? Where in New York can you see such a gorgeous view?"

"It's divine," Bill said.

"And if you think this is something, you won't believe Nightclub Vodopad."

Bill casually sucked on the cigarette. "What time are we going?"

"Late," Len said. "Moscow is not like New York. In Moscow, nightclubs are empty until midnight."

I turned to Len holding my cramping stomach. "See you for dinner, pap. Bill and I are going up to our room."

"First we go together for a tour of Lenin's tomb."

"Now?" I said.

"Meet in lobby in twenty minutes." I turned to Bill for support, but he was mute. Len walked away. "Why didn't you back me up with my dad?"

"Because I want to have an orgy tonight, Eddie."

I smiled, but I had no interest in having sex in front of Bill again.

\*

Our luggage was waiting for us when we got to the hotel room. There were two queen sized beds with stiff maroon comforters on them, barely separated by a wood dresser. A battle scene with horses and swords was carved into the surface of the cabinet. I was zoning out on the battle on the cabinet trying to avoid conversation, when Bill turned the shower on. "We need to score some drugs for tonight, Eddie."

I pretended not to hear the question. "How's the water in the shower, Bill?"

"Delicious. Do you mind taking the bed by the door?"

"Why?"

Bill laughed, "I get nauseous if I'm not fucking by a window."

One night, during the first semester of school, Bill and I were at his hotel room in Soho, and Bill called an escort. Bill had sex with her first, and then paid her to have sex with me on the living room couch, while he watched. I was so terrified of saying no that I ejaculated instantly.

The bathroom was full of steam when I entered and I couldn't see anything. "Tell me about the rest of your trip to China, Eddie."

"Pretty whack, my dad brought me to China so he could show me my future working for him at some factory."

"That's some Charlie and the Chocolate Factory shit!"

"No, the factories where all the jewelry he makes is. There's nothing special about it."

The shower turned off. "By the way, Eddie, I would share my condoms with you, but — you know, size limits."

"Yeah," I said, "well at least my dick is one color."

"My dick is too big for one color."

"Don't worry," I showed him my three pack of Trojan condoms. "I came prepared."

"That's all you brought? You're definitely going to need more." Bill was on the bed, lying flat on his stomach. A towel over the lower half of his tan body did not cover the muscles of his meaty buttocks. His speech was muffled because his face was buried into a pillow. "I bet there's bodegas everywhere in Moscow that have condoms that fit your little Russian dick."

"Fuck you," I said. "Not all of us need an elephant dick."

"Oh yeah, I'll show you elephant." Bill jumped off the bed and chased me around the hotel room, using his penis as a windmill. "Have you ever shown a doctor your colorful dick?" I said, as I jumped over the beds like our room was an obstacle course.

"Hi, boys."

Bill jumped off me and hid behind the bed. Somehow mom had figured out a way to get into our room without knocking. It was unclear whether she had seen Bill chasing me naked.

"Hi, mom."

"Having fun, boys?"

"Yes. Um, where did you come from?"

"My room is next door." She pointed to a door connecting our rooms. The hair on our necks stood up as we realized it — mom's room was connected to ours.

"Pap got us adjoining rooms?"

"Is that a problem?"

Bill stood up, wrapped from head to toe in the bed's maroon comforter. "Hi, Eddie's mom. I just want to tell you how grateful I am to be here with your family, and how—

Mom sat on the edge of Bill's bed and crossed her legs. "I want you to have fun while you're here, boys."

"We are having fun," Bill said, his voice as high pitched as a school girl's.

"Go take a shower, Bill," I said.

The door to the bathroom clicked and the shower turned on once again. "Do you want a drink, mom?"

"Where is your father taking you tonight, Eddie?"

"Nightclubbing," I said, as I reached inside the mini-fridge for a Sprite.

"Nightclubbing where?"

"Come on, mom, you're embarrassing me."

"What kind of nightclub is it?"

"I've never been, how should I know?"

"You won't drink too much tonight, Eddie?"

"No, you know I'm not a big drinker." There was a subtle silence.

"How have your studies been so far this year?"

"Okay, I guess. I kind of wish I had studied more in high school and gone to a better college. Some of my classes are easy."

"Could you speak to your teacher about switching into a harder class?"

"It doesn't really work that way in college, mom."

"How about taking night classes at another school?"

"That's not a bad idea. I could look into the schedule at Fordham or something."

"And maybe meet a smart girl," she said.

"Yeah," I laughed.

"Be good," she said as she walked through the door that connected our rooms. "Have fun with your father and your friend, Bill." After locking it twice to make sure it was secure, I sat on the bed.

\*

Snow was coming down lightly enough on Red Square that Bill and I caught it on our tongues. As we sloshed through the soggy sidewalks Len encouraged us to temper our playfulness in public. According to him, police in Moscow did not take well to expressive American tourists. After a short wait in line outside of Lenin's mausoleum, we were inside the tomb. Water was dripping off the pipes, and it was damp, like the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland.

"Come boys," Len whispered, "come closer."

We joined a small group of off-duty Russian soldiers who were photographing something.

"Is that him, pap? Is that Lenin?"

"Yes."

“Do they keep his carcass in there all the time?” Bill asked.

“For at least fifty years.”

“Where was he before that, pap?”

“Cemetery,” Len snapped. I wondered privately if that was true.

“Do you know the story of the Bolshevik Revolution, Bill? My son doesn't know history. Only liberal arts.”

We were back in the thick traffic of ruddy-eyed pedestrians.

“Unfortunately American history books will never teach you correctly,” Len continued. “In this case, even Russian history doesn't give proper information about all the rebel groups during Revolution.”

“Lenin just gets the credit?” I said.

“Lenin gets credit because he destroyed other socialist groups.”

“I think there's a painting about this on the cabinet in our hotel room!”

“Don't forget, Eddie,” Len said, “whoever has power *creates* history.”

Bill squeezed my behind. “Let's go eat,” he said. “I'm starving.”

“We're in Moscow, I said, “Let's go see some cathedrals first.”

“We can do that tomorrow, Eddie.”

“No,” Len said. “Tomorrow we have very cool plans.”

I wanted to stand up for myself. I wanted to go back to the hotel. I wanted Bill to stop touching me. But instead I smiled. “What's on tap for tomorrow, pap?”

“Kiev.”

\*

After a vodka-soaked lunch, I was finally able to relieve myself of the sausages. I must've passed out on Len's bed after using the bathroom in his hotel room because when I woke up it was 10pm, and the pillow was wet from sweat. I heard the water in the shower running and scrambled before I was forced to confront Len in his underwear. The last thing I needed was to accidentally see him in his Hanes. Compared to me, he was outright hairy in all the wrong places.

Bill was strumming a balalaika when I got to our room. "Drugs, Eddie."

"What about them?"

"We have none."

"We're not doing drugs, Bill. Last thing I need is to get thrown into a Russian jail."

"Chill, Eddie, your dad will just call one of his Veep-light friends and they'll get us out."

"Have you ever seen Brokedown Palace?"

"I've seen every Claire Danes movie, Eddie."

I shook my head. "Who are we even getting drugs from?"

"It's taken care of."

"You scored drugs for us?"

"Yeah, and we should have enough for Kiev, too."

I grabbed the phone without thinking. I was seething.

"Dude, who are you calling?"

Len picked up. "I'm not going to Kiev, pap. I can't do anymore business."

"Kiev is not for business, Eddie."

"I thought you had hospital projects there."

"Yes, for half an hour we will see my properties," Len said, "and then we will go to see my childhood home."

"That's business. How is that not business?"

"Without business, you would never be in liberal arts school in New York," Len said.

"I know. But—

The phone went dead before I finished my sentence. There was a click a minute after the call ended, which broke the silence between Bill and I. Mom walked in through the side door, clutching a novel by Danielle Steel, and wearing a Chanel robe. "I brought you some medicine for your stomach, Eddie."

"Thank you, how did you know my stomach was hurting?"

Mom grabbed a tissue. "Bill."

Mom placed the Danielle Steel book on top of the cabinet. "Here, Eddie," she said, "this will make you feel better." She handed me a cup of bubbling pink fluid. I drank it.

"I highly appreciate that you're keeping your voices down, boys."

"Of course," Bill said. "It's our honor."

I kept my eye on Bill to make sure he wasn't being lascivious.

"Your father always gets sick when he travels. His diet is terrible."

"You should've seen these sausages we had in China, mom. They were drenched in oil."

Bill put his arm around my waist. It made me squirm, but I let him keep it there. "I hope they were beef," Bill said.

"What else would they be?"

"Most likely beef." Bill laughed. "Unless they were dog."

"I would've known if they were dog."

"Would you have, Eddie?"

"They were definitely not dog."

"You're good, this will protect you from dog meat. Says so right here." He let me go to tap the box of pink fluid.

"Have a good time tonight, boys," she said. Please continue to be respectful."

I locked the door, unlocked it, and then locked it again.

\*

"I swear his face was pink." Bill was talking about the drug dealer. He'd forgotten the name of the person delivering our narcotics, and had no way of contacting him. "Don't worry, Eddie, he'll find us here."

"I have no idea why you told him to meet us in the hotel."

"Be quiet, your dad is rolling up at six o'clock!"

Len was charging toward our table, looking electric in a Versace suit and tie. The Frank Muller watch on Len's wrist was brighter than I had ever seen it in the States. Damn near glistened.

"Ready to go, boys?"

"Almost, pap. We want to finish our chess game."

Len checked his watch. "It's exactly midnight. Finish chess later." He snapped at the waiter, which I had never seen him do before. For some reason, in Russia, Len had the style of a wise guy. Bill joined Len at the bar, and I overheard bits and pieces of their conversation.

"Mother," I heard Len say. "Then yes, you need to wait. I will send Sergey for you and Eddie in half hour."

"Perfect," Bill said. "Thanks for not making me go the club alone"

Bill sat down to finish his vodka. "Make your move. I'm about to shach and mat you."

"Picking up some chess lingo from my dad, I see."

"Your dad introduced me to a few things."

"Well, I believe I have *you* in check mate, Bill." I stood up and offered my sweaty palm. When Bill realized that he was the loser, he unbuttoned his pants. "Dude, this isn't the States, you can't just take your pants off in public."

"Take back your move, Eddie."

"You really hate to lose that much, Bill?"

"If you were me, you would too!"

"You win, Bill. Now put your pants back on!"

"That's him!" Bill shouted. That's the guy who I scored the drugs from." An employee of the hotel was charging toward us like a confused pigeon.

"God, Bill. Please put your pants on before we get arrested."

\*

The ride to the nightclub from the hotel was ten minutes, and Sergey had the Russian N'Sync, Brothers Golgi, playing the entire time. Whenever Grishka, the heartthrob of the group, would sing, we celebrated. Bill was high on cocaine and any of the tension between us from the chess game had dissipated.

"Have you thought about what you want to do after you graduate from college, Eddie?"

"Not yet..."

"I'll probably figure it out on the last day of class or something, like the morning of graduation. I'm sure your dad will help you after you graduate, right?"

"It depends on what I do," I said. "In China, the factory he brought me to was a joke."

“What kind of factory was it?”

‘It was scary. The people in it were all acting like they were dead.’

"In what way?"

"They just were."

"Show me."

I recreated the way the workers were sitting because Bill asked me to. "They were just frozen without any control of their bodies."

“Were they high?”

“Yes, Bill.”

“What were they doing?”

“Hammering things,” I think.

“You wouldn't have to do that, though, would you?

I shrugged. “I guess not.”

The window was frosty. Bill drew angel wings on it with his finger. "You'll figure it out, Eddie."

"Yeah," I said quietly.

The line outside Nightclub Vodopad was full of people in tight clothing when Sergey dropped us off. All the cars outside were European. "You talk to the bouncer," I said, as we approached the velvet rope.

"He's not going to understand me," Bill said.

"Tell him you're here with my dad," I said confidently. Bill was not interested. "All you have to do is say you're here with my dad."

“He’s your dad, Eddie.”

I walked up to the bouncer while Bill waited. “Hi,” I said timidly, “I’m Eddie. I’m meeting my dad, Len—

The bouncer cut me off. “Lenny’s boy. Come in, come in. We’ve heard so much about you from your father.”

I waved Bill up to the front and we sauntered in like winners. I felt a lot of pride in that moment.

“I knew your dad had muscle here, Eddie.”

We went straight to the bathroom for more narcotics. The walls were black graphite, and water trickled across them horizontally like they were sweating or something. Soft halogen lights were above our heads as we took key bumps of the cocaine in one of the stalls. On the other side of us was the dance floor, and *through double sided* mirrors we could see a taut Russian couple dancing. They could not see us. The male dancer hungrily squeezed the female dancer’s thighs like they were peaches. His hands were pulsing. I leaned against the window so we could not see what happened next. I could tell that Bill was high by the fact that he did not protest. “You alright, man?”

He nodded.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Four,” he said slowly, slurring.

“How high are you, Bill?”

“I snorted some Oxy.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Unless you want me to piss on you, Edide, get the fuck out of the bathroom.”

As I opened the door, I saw Bill take OxyContin out of his sagging slacks. Last year, right before college, Bill and I had a sleepover. Bill snorted Oxy that night, too. I woke up before the sun was up to Bill babbling about his grades and bruising himself with my stapler. I had seen Bill messed up before, but I had never seen anyone this high, period. Naively, I had forgotten about the

episode after starting school. I was too busy trying to reinvent myself as a confident lover in New York City. I felt something touching me. Bill was in the hallway rubbing my shoulder like it was his. His eyes were glazed. “Should we do a bump before we find your dad?”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“You have the blow, Eddie.” I gave him the bag of cocaine and Bill did yet another line.

\*

Len was right, Nightclub Vodopad was unlike anything in the States. It was three floors of suspended cages and zig-zagging staircases that gave it the feel of a high class dungeon. The *piece de resistance* was a fifty foot waterfall that stretched from the ceiling to the main dance floor of the nightclub. Young Russian club goers could walk around the waterfall or directly through it. Staff members wore ridiculous diamond studded outfits like they were high class Oompa Loompa. They carried gold mops. We spotted Len in the V.I.P room, and squeezed through a humid hallway to avoid getting drenched by the waterfall. Beauty was all around the table. Len introduced us. “The green eyes is Olga, Sasha; hazel, and Masha and Yulia — blue. Meet my son, Eddie.”

“Hi, nice to meet you,” I said. Bill was salivating. “This is Bill.”

While Bill got to know the girls, I met Vasya, whose house, Len informed us, we'd be going to the very next day for dinner in Kiev. I could tell that Vasya was a big shot — by his right thumb. Half of it was missing, the surface flat like a screwdriver. Anyone who had the courage to wear Fendi sunglasses inside of a nightclub, and who was missing half a thumb; yeah. It was a lot to take in, and the thumping electronic music did not make it any easier to relax. I noticed Len was not wearing BluBlockers, but a pair of Fendi sunglasses like Vasya. “Why aren’t you wearing your high class BluBlockers?” I yelled to Len over the music. I don’t think he heard me. “Buddha Bar,” he screamed.

“What about Buddha Bar?”

“The D.J. tonight is from Buddha Bar in Paris.” Len was jumping around like a puppy when he said it and I could smell the Red Bull on his breath.

“I fucking love Buddha Bar,” Bill yelled while he climbed toward my dad and the dancing Yulia and Sasha. Their unique eyes looked blank in the white lights of Nightclub Vodopad.

“What time are we driving to Kiev?” I yelled.

“Not driving, Eddie, flying on *helicopter!*” Len said, with his arms out horizontally.

A hairy, bulbous arm hit my shoulder. It was Vasya, whose sausages, I was informed, I would be eating tomorrow. “More sausages!” I yelled.

“So, your father has told me about your special experience in China, Eddie. Ahh?”

“Which experience?”

“How you will go into your father’s business after university. Da?”

“No plans yet,” I said, trying my best to escape the weight of Vasya’s arm.

“Look,” he said. “Look at all the girls your father bring for you.”

I was a little confused as I looked across the table at Bill and Len dancing with some of the women. “Yeah, what about them?”

“Your father loves you.”

I tried getting away from Vasya, but no matter how hard I pushed he wouldn’t let go of me. “Is it your house we’re going to tomorrow, Vasya?”

Vasya held my hand and moved it around. “Give me your finger, son.” He now had full control of me. “Pick one girl for you, one for your friend, and one for both of you to share.” I looked at Bill. He was snuggled between two of the women, hidden. Two other women were giving Len a lap dance and kissing each other seductively. “You’re the guest,” Vasya said. “Pick the girls you like.” Len was kissing them now, too. One of them had her hand on Len’s chest, unbuttoning his shirt. When she unbuckled his belt and crawled into his underwear, yeah, that was my cue. I ran, and went straight through the waterfall without realizing it. I was soaking wet when I hailed a taxi and freezing by the time we got to Hotel Krasnapolsky. That night, when I went to sleep, I didn’t want to see Bill. When I woke up at dawn I was alone in the room, and wished that he was there.

\*

In Kiev, a smog filled city with ugly buildings and active streets, Bill and I were hung over and half-asleep. Despite what Len said about “less than half hour of business” in the city, our daylight hours were spent at dark office buildings, where he negotiated contracts on various investment properties. There were no discussions about Nightclub Vodopad. Partially because I was hungover, mostly because I was unwilling to find out what had happened.

Late in the day, we drove a few miles out of the city and stopped by a snowy field with three windowless towers on it. Len found an opening in a broken fence and directed Bill and I to follow him. Other than a few bushes there was nothing about this plot of land that was alive.

“What do you see here, boys?”

I was standing as far away from Len and Bill as I could, but could still hear the question.

“A shitty piece of cement,” Bill said.

“Shitty, yes. What else?”

“Some soccer balls,” I yelled. “Is this one of your properties?”

Len smirked. ”Right here, boys, is where we used to play soccer.” I turned to them, unable to downplay my curiosity. “This is where you grew up?”

“Where else?” Len laughed. He pulled aside a couple of trash cans to show us how they would create goal posts for soccer. “We played together for hours.” Len had an innocent energy as he led Bill and I around the field. “Fima, Slava, and Valery Milman lived there.” He was pointing to one of the three buildings. “Sometimes there were fights against the boys who lived in there.” He was pointing across the street at yet another building, which looked exactly like his.

“Over here used to be a tree.”

“In the middle of all of this?” I said.

“Lemon or tomato, I don’t remember.” Len wrapped his arms around me. “You know, boys? Before I had money, I was much happier.”

“My dad says that all the time,” Bill said.

“Why?” I wondered.

"Before you have money everything is possible. You can be a pilot, inventor; drive Toyota Tercel across Italy, but once you start to have children, it's very difficult to be irresponsible." Bill was nodding. The sun was setting over our heads. "Okay. Let's go to Vasya's and have sausages before his dogs eat them all."

I stayed back while they walked toward the rental car. Stood there by myself on a slab of cement that Len had played soccer on when he was a hopeful teenager. In Kiev, on a patch of land that my father lived on, without me. "Come on, Eddie," Bill yelled, snapping me out of my trance. Now was the time. Time to find out what happened after Nightclub Vodopad.

\*

Vasya's home was in the middle of a bucolic forest three hours from the yolk of Kiev. After being frisked and admitted by the security guards protecting the compound, we drove down a wide driveway surrounded by olive trees imported from Italy. Vasya greeted us as soon as we parked, holding a trash bag of raw sausages. "My friends, we will feed the puppies before we eat." A tough woman in an apron, Vasya's age, was standing at the door examining us. I assumed she was Vasya's wife. Either that or she was his muse. I turned to Bill as we followed Vasya to the garage. "Puppies, it sounds like he's training dogs for World War 3 in there." Bill ran in the other direction and defecated. Vasya was laughing. "Your friend had little too much fun last night, ah?"

"I think so, Vasya."

"The girls in Russia have much stronger pussy than in America," he said, like the former inmate he was. How was your night? Ah, Eddie?"

"It was fine." I turned to Len. "How was yours, pap?"

"Perfect. Give my son a sausage, Vasya."

A garage ten feet away creaked open while I reached into the trash bag. The barking of dogs was deafening inside and the smell of urine made me want to sneeze.

"Go inside," Vasya said. "Don't worry, you will be okay."

It was impossible to see inside of the garage. "Go, go!" Vasya said, pushing me all the way in with his deformed hand. The garage door shut behind me, and finally I was alone. I was

surrounded by shaking cages and had no idea what kinds of dogs were in them. My mind was racing. *It's going to be fine. Bill isn't going to say anything to anyone. So what if Bill never came home last night? So what? Bill could've passed out anywhere. And there was no proof whatsoever that Len and Bill had shared a room together. What are you thinking, pussy? Why would Len and Bill share a room together? What proof do you have that they didn't? What proof do you have that Bill and Len fucked women together in Moscow? "Fuck these fucking animals! Fuck,"* I yelled, feeding the dogs in darkness. Light poured in when the garage door opened from a spotlight being held by Vasya's wife. I was shaking, and she saw it. What I witnessed was more than a dozen fanged Doberman, half of whom were still snarling. I fed them all with Vasya's wife, and then we all had a lavish dinner.

\*

Mom was sobbing in our hotel room when we returned the next morning from our trip to Kiev.

"Where were you, Eddie?"

I looked at Bill and he left immediately. "In Kiev."

"What were you doing there?"

"Nothing," I said. She wanted more details. "Seeing where pap grew up, having lunch with Vasya; feeding the killer dogs."

"What dogs? What were you doing in Kiev?!"

I got a Sprite from the mini-fridge. Mom sat down on the sofa and faced me with spiky tears in her eyes. She looked to me, in her Gucci sweater, like a traumatized teenager. She was only thirty-seven years old. "Where were you two nights ago, Eddie?"

"We met pap at this nightclub."

"What nightclub?"

"Nightclub Vodopad. What's this about, mom?"

She was holding the phone. "Room 1020." I stood up and was light headed immediately. "Len, your son and I are in his room, please come now!" I heard my dad protest, but there was no way to ignore her. I stood between the beds and decided that no matter how angry it made Len, I had

to refuse China. Mom flipped through Russian Vogue. And then Len came in. "I'm going to ask you once, Len, with your son in the room. What happened at Nightclub Vodopad?"

"I introduce Eddie and Bill to dancing."

Mom was looking at the cabinet, the one with the Bolshevik battle on it. "What were you doing at the discoteque?"

"Dancing," Len said again.

Mom threw a perfume bottle at Len. "What bed did you fuck your whore on, Len?" I stared at the bottle of perfume on the carpet. It was a Polish brand. Mom opened the door that connected our rooms. Len followed her. I shut the door and did not lock it. I was alone for a few seconds before there was a knock on the front door. "Come in." Bill and I sat on the bed in pajamas as my parents audibly belittled each other next door.

"Were you and my dad in the same room after Nightclub Vodopad, Bill?"

"No," he said. We didn't even leave the club together."

"Did you see him leave?"

"Yes," Bill said.

"Did he leave by himself?"

Bill shook his head. "Can I ask you a question about the dogs, Eddie?"

"The what?"

"At Vasya's house."

"Sure."

"Were you scared when you fed them?"

"No."

"What if one of them went crazy and took your thumb off?"

“They wouldn’t. My dad would never let that happen.”

Bill shook his head.

“Thanks for not having a threesome last night with my dad, Bill.”

Bill laughed. “You’re welcome, but I never said I didn’t have a threesome.”

“Did you? No you didn’t.”

“You missed out, Eddie.”

We opened the blinds to reveal Red Square, and got under the covers like brothers. We were in Moscow. Funny Russian game shows were on every other channel. We turned the volume up. During one of the skits young couples competed in a pie eating contest. One of the couples was disqualified for barfing. The winning couple devoured more than two dozen sour cherry pies, and it was one of the funniest things I had ever seen on television.