

Their meeting ends abruptly. Walter stands and stretches, allowing me to examine the dark hairs around his groin and the other parts—the ones no girl is meant to see without a wedding ring. Katherine, more modest, straightens her skirt and brushes her hair. Silently, they stroll along a pebbled path and then part ways.

The clearing becomes mine: the matted grass, the dents where toes or heels or fingers pressed. The cherry trees are beginning to bloom. The yellow-green lake reflects only darkly. The grass is still warm. I sit where Katherine had and try to imagine myself beneath Walter. If he closed his eyes, as he did with her, he would not see my skin. I lie back and, with only emptiness above me, think of Jack.

Things will go back to how they were before he arrived and after mother left her previous lover: She would give dance lessons; three of her old students had followed her from uptown. She'd schedule them for the afternoon instead of the morning. She'd sleep late and my brother and I would make breakfast. Nights, when Father worked or went to party meetings, we'd go on city walks, me and my brother, searching for salt cod or fresh ginger root. We'd pretend not to notice our neighbors, too (though perhaps people would be kinder here in the Village). My brother and I could make dinner and clear the dishes. And after, when no one was looking, we could steal cigarettes from the cloth sack Mother kept full and guarded when she was sober, and trade them for hard candy or respect in the school playground. We'd start a new school, closer to the Village, start over ourselves.

I run my hands through the grass where Walter and Katherine had lain. The air seems different, thicker somehow, and beginning to darken, though it is not so dark that I can't see her dropped lipstick. I open it, note the curve her lips have pressed into the pigment. It is mine now. I can paint her desk with it, tall letters advertising that she is a whore. Dark red marks on her books and chair. Red, as she's marked me. Or maybe, I stand and turn homeward, I can summon the courage to paint my lips, just like a grown woman, and spread my red smile.

Ostrakon

Katya is searching for her glasses. They were just here. One minute ago, on the counter, the big brown glasses. Without them, everything is waxy. She lays her hand on the cool Formica and makes a brushing motion. Keys, coffee mug, phone book. Two different pens. Why are there so many pens? She has never bought even a single pen.

Katya squints to see the table, pats various spots. The sisal placemats are crusty with stale crumbs. The Shabbos candles are dribbly stumps. Another pen.

She's had these glasses for so long. Decades probably. They are chestnut brown and shiny like a stone you pluck from the shore. They fit her face just right.

Now Katya is in the den. She is overturning newspapers and envelopes. She would like to throw them out, but what if they are new? Without her glasses, the headlines are smudgy glyphs.

When Joe comes home from work he finds his wife crouched on the floor, her sweater frosted with lint. She looks up and smiles.

*

Workmen have cut a hole in the living room ceiling. Apparently there was a leak in the roof which Joe said was causing some kind of damage. The men are short and brown and smell like the inside of a taxi. They smile at Katya, but she is suspicious. She is protectful of her space, this home she has spent half a century grooming and curating. Clods of who knows what are caked to the treads of their boots. One of them is smoking outside. *A choleryeh ahf dir*. He had better not leave the butt on the porch.

*

Writes the Russian neurologist, Alexander Luria: "I shall never forget a case in which a man wounded in the temporal region

could easily read his surname 'Levsky' written on an envelope addressed to him, but was completely unable to read the much simpler word 'lev' (lion), which was not fixed to the same degree in his memory."

*

Joe is becoming impatient. He is inspecting a spoon Katya has scrubbed—she is certain she scrubbed—and making angry whispery grunts. He grabs a fistful of silverware from the drawer and hastily examines each utensil. He is shaking his head, glowering. He dumps them in the sink, which makes an explosive clang, and walks away. The ringing lingers in his ears like a tuning fork all the way back down to his office.

*

The workmen have left for the weekend. They said they needed to order a special tool to refasten something to something else, and that they would be back on Monday. In the meantime, there is a jagged half-moon gouge in the ceiling which looks into the dark crawlspace above. Katya is uneasy. She dislikes all that translucent tarp over everything, the little flakes of paint and plaster clustered in its folds. Will the men remember to wash off their dirty fingerprints from the ceiling once they've sealed it up?

*

Katya appraises her teeth in the bathroom mirror. How did they get like this? Each tooth is a pale, caramelized beige and emplaqued with creamy filament like dried-up caulk. Her lips are crackly and sallow. Is someone playing a trick? *A farshlepteh krenk*. She touches her hand to her face but it too has gone bad. Her flesh is slack and splotched with moles. Her fingers are too small, the veins too big. She traces the brittle etchings in her hand, remembering briefly the tender pink palm of a monkey that grasped her finger through its cage during a childhood trip to the zoo.

*

The noun *reflex* made its way into the medical vocabulary during the 17th century, having derived from *reflexion*. It was believed

at the time that spirits in the nervous system were "reflected" into the muscles in the manner of light bouncing off a mirror.

*

As a younger woman, Katya illustrated books of Jewish folktales. One tells of a young student who has been traveling with his rabbi for many days. Each day they roam the land, study the Talmud, and sleep at a village inn. Tired of spending all his time with the rabbi, the student one night decides to continue his travels alone. He instructs the innkeeper to wake him extra early, so that he may take the first train before the rabbi wakes. The next morning the student stealthily gropes around in the dark for his clothes and, in his haste, dresses himself in the black robes of the rabbi. He rushes to the station, buys the ticket, boards the train, but is startled when he sees his reflection in the compartment mirror. "What a fool that innkeeper was," he says. "I ask him to wake me and instead he wakes the rabbi!"

*

During the Han Dynasty, Chinese soldiers wore mirrors over their breastplates to ward off wicked spirits. If these mirrors broke, the warriors would grind up the shattered glass and ingest it, so that its magic would protect them from within.

*

The men are back today. Katya is surprised at how glad she is to see them. Why shouldn't she be? The men are friendly. They smile and call her "meesez."

The living room is even less recognizable than it was last week. Thick orange cords, navy blue sound blankets, pails, toolboxes. It's like a crime scene, or a fabrication shop. The men are wearing thick gloves and gauzemasks.

The sound of the drilling is savage but also fascinating. It's like a dentist's drill, high-pitched, metallic, and loud enough to be inside your mouth. It growls through the resounding crawlspace, sending specks of fiberglass across the rafters in jangling spurts.

What are the men doing in there? They've set up a yellow-caged lamp so they can see their way around. Katya is curious to look,

but something seems perverse about the open cavity. Too intimate. Like looking into somebody's guts.

*

Of particular concern is the fate of the armoire. As a piece of furniture, it is not much to speak of—a clunky oak display case enswirled with scratch-marks—but its contents are delicate and irreplaceable, protected only by a thin sheet of glass. Atop each of the four, dimly-lit shelves sit a selection of rare items Katya and Joe have collected over their many travels.

Fragments of pre-Columbian textiles, a beetle entombed in a bulb of amber, a lock of Madame Curie's hair. There is a vial of perfume recovered from a sunken barge, an opened letter post-marked to a Ukrainian village which no longer exists. On the top shelf, a jar of gallstones sits beside a splinter of Katya's coccyx salvaged from the surgery last year—as foreign as an ancient mollusk.

Each year at Passover, the grandchildren ask Katya to identify these curiosities, and each year she enchants them with tales of adventure and magic. A bullet casing from one of the revolvers used to shoot Grigory Rasputin. A diamond smuggled from Kiev in the stomach of a boy who'd swallowed it in a ball of wax.

As the children grow older, they become more skeptical of Katya's stories, though the objects remain radioactive with mystery.

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In 1873, a young Italian anatomist named Carmillo Golgi discovered a revolutionary method for viewing nerve cells. He'd converted a small hospital kitchen into a makeshift laboratory where, in the evenings, by candlelight, he would carefully impregnate microscopic samples of neuronal tissue with silver nitrate. Laboriously, he experimented with various chemical baths and exposure times until one night he observed what he called *la reazione nera*, or "black reaction." The silvery-black clusters of neurons were suddenly crisp and vivid, the gossamer stain sharply articulated by the luminous yellow slide.

Thirty-three years later, the German physician Dr. Alois Alzheimer used this same technique to investigate the neurological roots of senile dementia. What he found was an almost literal

correspondence between the pathology of the disease and the resulting affliction: nerve fibers were gnarled and pasty, synapses were clogged with proteins like a grimy sink drain.

*

It was about this time last year when Joe found the checkbook. The bank had called asking all sorts of questions. Why hadn't the amounts on the deposit slips matched those on the checks? Whom had number 3601 been made out to? Why hadn't these four been endorsed? Joe was flummoxed. Katya had always handled the money. She was good with numbers, with the planning and organizing. Her parents had run a textile business back in Poland, and had trained her to run the accounts since the age of nine.

Joe went to the study and fished through the drawers. Already something was off. Calculators, envelopes, typewriter ribbons—all were piled into heaps. Loose staples were scattered about. Had the maid carelessly dumped everything together? When he finally discovered the mint-green checkbook with its marble saddle-stitch, two thoughts entered his mind at once. The first was the hope, the fantasy: *clearly, one of the grandchildren defaced it.* The second was the fear, the reality: *clearly, my wife has lost her mind.*

The carbons were ablaze with gibberish. The penmanship was a dance of curlicues, like a roll of barbed wire. But the scribbles were neither childish nor methodical. They were discernibly Katya's, hers alone; they contained both the impulsive, half-cursive jabs and drags of her handwriting and the needlepoint slopes and slashes of her drawings.

*

In World War I, fighter jets were first becoming equipped with machine guns. They were initially crude and imprecise. A tail gunner needed the flexibility to swivel his gun along a 360 degree axis in order to follow a moving target, yet this increased the odds of accidentally shooting his own propeller. Bullet proof propeller blades were no solution—they simply deflected the bullets back towards the gunner. Finally, in 1915, an ingenious instrument was engineered by Anthony Fokker which synchronized the rate of the machine gun with the oscillation of the propeller, such that

the trajectory of each consecutive bullet would be interleaved between the microsecond windows in the spinning blades, like a beam of light through a movie projector.

*

On the bottom shelf of the armoire is a shattered limestone ostrakon, each segment propped up with small Lucite sawhorses. The paint is pale and chalky, the accompanying text jagged and pocked. There is a narrative of some sort running across the grid of panels, though the events aren't clear, not with so many sections missing. A czar, a bride, a lake. Rust-colored figures strafe this way and that. Bare-breasted women carry baskets through fields of maize. A fire. A dance. A gift.

*

Katya is at the osteopath for her hip. She has been coming here ever since she fell down the front steps and shattered her coccyx. Dr. Mallah is a short, gym-built man almost exactly half her age, with furry black forearms and slow walnut eyes. He is, of course, Jewish. She would never think to trust a gentile with her health.

On the walls are laminated pictures of skeletons and organs, the same ones that adorn every doctor's office. Such a mess the insides of bodies are. All that cartilage, all those valves and wires.

*

The term *synapse* was introduced by Charles Scott Sherrington in 1897. He'd taken it from the Greek verb *synapsis*, meaning "to clasp." Synapses, the connection points between neurons, were essential to Sherrington's conception of the brain. They were like docking stations in a vast network of stockyards, transferring or withholding cargo from one freight to another.

*

It is dusk and Katya is inexplicably agitated. She is getting up and sitting down. She is licking her finger and rubbing away tiny stains on the glass coffee table. Joe is demanding to know what's wrong.

A gesheft hob nicht, she keeps muttering. *What do I care.*

*

In 1963, a peculiar article appeared in the medical journal, *Brain*, authored by a former student of Sherrington named Wilder Penfield. Entitled "The Brain's Record of Auditory and Visual Experience," Penfield described a series of intracranial experiments he and his colleague, Phanor Perot, had performed on patients with severe epilepsy. Before operating, the surgeons applied local anesthesia and stimulated the exposed brain areas with tiny charges of electricity while the patients remained awake and fully conscious on the operating table. The results were startling: subjects reported sudden flashes of dreamlike imagery, many of them accompanied by a deep sense of familiarity. Some spoke of nightmarish visions, like being chased by robbers, while others reported quotidian episodes from the past, such as hanging up a coat or boarding a train. One claimed to hear voices in the dark, coming from "around the carnival somewhere—some sort of a traveling circus."

*

Where is the camera? The Seder is tomorrow evening. Her grandchildren will be there. Everyone is counting on her to capture the event like she always does. They are expecting her to develop the pictures and send them to each family. The precedent has been set by years of tradition. She can't let them down.

What will happen if there are no pictures? No one will remember the party. They won't remember the laughter and the children's games and the magnificent feast she is preparing.

Without a document, who will remember?

*

One of the men descends the red ladder holding a slender, forearm-length strip of wire. He shows it to the other men like he has just caught a great fish! It is warped and steel and strangely sculptural, with rusty perpendicular brackets clamped to the ridges like vertebrae. Was this the problem? Have the men solved the problem? Katya is excited. She would like to keep the metal wire for the armoire but worries it may be impolite to ask. After all, they were the ones who excavated it.

*

Joe stares up at the ceiling as Katya sleeps beside him. He is thinking of Matisse. *My lines are not crazy*, the artist claimed, *for they contain an implicit verticality*. The words loop in Joe's mind like an incantation, half soothing, half maddening.

Katya's parents were moderately wealthy, enough so to buy their daughter a ride overseas just before the occupation. There is a slightly over-exposed picture of Katya boarding the ship in a grey peacoat with big white buttons and white gloves, looking not unlike Anne Frank.

A maidel mit a klaidel, is the name Joe has given this photograph. A Yiddish expression meaning, approximately, "a pretty maiden showing off her fancy clothes." He has a name for all his favorite pictures of Katya.

Who could know what was going on inside her at that moment? Children never appear traumatized. Here is the thirteen-year-old refugee, buoyant and alert, her shoulders angled into a sort of lopsided shrug, like she is concealing some private joke.

"There are no specific recollections in the brain," writes Israel Rosenfield, "there are only the means for reorganizing past impressions, for giving the incoherent, dreamlike world of memory a concrete reality. Memories are not fixed but are constantly evolving generalizations—recreations—of the past, which give us a sense of continuity..."

New York was strangely welcoming to the fourteen-year-old Katya. Her wizened and soft-spoken uncle, who had taken residence in the Prospect Heights section of Brooklyn a decade earlier, converted his attic into a small bedroom. A single window, diamond-shaped, sepia-stained, faced the bustling intersection of Washington Avenue and St. John's. The vaulted ceilings and exposed beams in the space were both rustic and cathedral-like, hidden and holy. On her first day of school, Katya was shocked to receive a compliment from her homeroom teacher. *That's a pretty dress*, said the woman. Katya assumed it was a trick—friendly

language between teachers and students was unthinkable back home.

It is Tuesday and the men are still working on the ceiling. Katya is growing anxious. What if they do not finish in time for Passover? The possibility quickly forks off into a host of attendant worries. Is there time to reschedule? Could one of her children host the Seder this year? How hard would it be to serve dinner outdoors? She's overwhelmed. There are too many fires to stamp out. She is pacing about the house, tending to various minor tasks without actually committing to any of them. *A foiler tut in tsveyen*. She sweeps the dust from the kitchen floor into fluffy grey islands but forgets to collect them with the dustpan. She scrubs the bathroom but leaves the filthy sponge in the tub.

Again, the glasses are missing. Every spot of light is plied out into fuzzy radial threads.

"I sit at my worktable, a still world around me, and stare at the wall, empty of decoration," writes the gardener, Thomas DeBaggio in *Losing My Mind*. "I become lost in the vocabulary of silence. Thoughts squiggle and writhe into sentences that disappear before they can be acknowledged."

A mighty storm had lashed the roof in the spring of 1940, causing a smattering of leaks in the attic ceiling. Within hours, the beams were soggy and dripping. Katya was at school while her few belongings were soaked. Her pretty white dresses, which hung from an iron dowel, were jaundiced about the shoulders; her shoebox full of letters from home became a cloudy palimpsest of multicolored inks. Katya's uncle had managed to rescue three of her paintings, but most were soiled beyond recognition.

Of the three, one has survived the intervening decades. It is a humble yet darkly evocative composition, a capricious earth-tone

sketch of bustling shoppers and vendors cramped in the Prospect Heights thoroughfare.

Something in its hasty, boyish contours suggests an immediacy, an urgency, held at arm's length. There is also a murky, gauzed quality, a faint glow smeared into the weathered flax canvas reminiscent not of fallen tears but a world seen through misting eyes.

In her adult life, Katya has now and then returned to this painting, adding texture, dynamism, gradually threshing the implicit verticality from the adolescent craziness.

*

There are moments when Katya's youthful beauty reveals itself. The mid-April light casts a sudden sheen to her pewter hair; an impromptu smirk betrays a girlish sneakiness otherwise lost.

*

Katya is dusting the piano keys with the feather brush. She swipes in gentle curls up the octaves—*plink-tink-dink? piddi-tunk-tonk?*

The piano has not been played in a while. It must be clean for the Seder, when the grandchildren will stage a little recital as they do every year. She bends over the bridge to dust the strings like a mechanic under the hood. Each swish sends a thrum of crystalline whispers through the birch chamber.

*

The party is underway. Children are performing handstands in the den. Katya's nephew is showing off copies of his latest book to the in-laws. Rain-flecked peacoats and scarves are piling up on the guest room bed.

Katya is thankful that no one has noticed, or at least commented on, the hole in the ceiling, which has been sealed with a makeshift slab of cardboard. She makes an effort not to look up, fearing that the duct tape might peel under the weight of her fretful gaze. She is not normally superstitious, but why push her luck?

Soon the Seder will begin. The family will take their seats at the long oak table. Katya's son, Ben, who is now twice the age she was when she married Joe, will read from the Haggadah with his nicotine baritone. Her nieces will serve the salty parsley, the bitter

herbs. The youngest children, Jennifer and Rebecca, will skitter about the house, searching for the *aficomem*. After the Seder, they will beg their grandmother to read one of her books to them, either *The Train to Kiev*, or *The Czar's Magic Mirror*.

Dusk is early to arrive this year. The windows are foggy and lusterless in the waning violet light. The muted scent of frost and peat leaks into the living room from the thawing backyard garden.

Who will remember?