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THIRD CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

*Third Culture* is a work of experimental autofiction that follows a manic, troubled, unnamed American student on a single day of his study abroad trip in London. Throughout this day, the student interacts with a diverse cast of characters whose differing nationalities, upbringings, and psychographics throw every social situation into a state of 21st century-globalist-whatever-have-you-confusion. Such confusion is especially troubling to the student, who undergoes an identity crisis of his own while trying to figure out where he stands with Rena, the Dutch-American Muscovite he has been seeing on-and-off over the years. On top of all this, he is trying and failing to write a research project, which he feels “too removed from a shared reality” to finish.

As the story progresses, the reader will hopefully experience a whole other social world, removed from any easy national or cultural signifiers or character types to which they can relate. The student and the other characters are deep within in a ‘third culture’ - where no person has a true home, no character a set identity, and no two individuals a shared language. The thrust of this story is the process figuring out a way in which to navigate this rough social terrain while retaining respect and love for those around you.

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Next, thanks to my mom, whose, brilliance, honesty, great taste in literature, and critical sideways glances sent in my direction have molded me into the occasionally good the writer I am today. Thanks for always being the first one to tell me whether I am onto something or completely out of my mind, and thanks for imparting your curiosity onto me. Every day is more vivid because I get to be your son.

Thanks to Dr. Maxwell for showing me first how bad I was at reading, and second, how to actually read. Without you it would all be slapstick - I would still be lost in one of those infamous systems that defies comprehension, forever hitting my head on low surfaces. Maybe I still do that, but you've provided me the tools to understand this and improve from there.

Thanks to Maggie for the shelter from the storm. Further thanks for making an exception for me.

# 1.

## RESEARCH BEGINS – RUSSELL SQUARE

Central London. Early spring, 2016. Morning. Light rain.

I started the first day of research taking triple my prescribed daily dose of Adderall. I wanted to see how this would affect my ability to enjoy an experience I'd already had in the past - my chosen testing stage being the British Museum. I'd been only once before, two days after arriving in London, and, for reasons I couldn't quite explain, had been completely bored and washed out by the experience.

Since then I'd harbored acute feelings of guilt about the whole thing, feelings that materialized in their purest form every Wednesday morning when the Museum's newsletter found its way into my inbox. Someone from the University College of London's Exchange Student Outreach program apparently thought it necessary that I be updated on the Museum's happenings on a weekly basis, and hence arranged to have what I assumed was an automated system forward the letter to me - as well as the eight other American students in the program. Thus, I could always look forward to a hump day reminder of my own philistinism.

I read there was going to be an afters<sup>1</sup> party at the museum this night and the next, geared specifically towards University College students, it seemed from the email. There would be drinks, a "casual lecture" on ancient Egyptian sexual art<sup>2</sup>, and games with prizes. As I scanned the newsletter, prone in bed, down to my boxers and socks, I found that I wasn't considering the possibility of attending – In fact, Rena, the only woman I really knew in London at the moment,

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<sup>1</sup> Cool London shorthand for *after hours*.

<sup>2</sup> Featuring a discussion of something called "the Turin Erotic Papyrus".

would probably laugh at me for even bringing up something so pedestrian<sup>3</sup> - as much I was recounting my embarrassing first trip there. More specifically, I was considering how ridiculous and shameful it was that I could have stood in front of the actual Rosetta Stone and feel as little as I did that day, two short months before. How inane it was that the entire collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts - many of the works almost perfectly preserved - all had started to blend together after the first two galleries.

Equally absurd to me now, with the truly self-alienating slant of hindsight, was that I'd spent most of the first visit engaged in a strange, aimless sort of people-watching. Taking notes in the margins of an unrelated travel book I happened to be carrying with me at the time, I'd used up about two and a half hours and a quarter book's worth of margins sitting and taking notes while museumgoers photographed the statues and jewelry of the Museum's *Sunken Cities of Egypt* exhibit. I'd jotted down ages, nationalities (my guesses), make of cameras, etc., as well as little irksome half-thoughts like "I wonder what the Rosetta Stone means or could mean to a fortyish probably Chinese man, and how that differs from the meaning I assign to it. At museum alone. Expensive-looking Canon w/ lens hood." At the time, I must have thought for some reason that such notes would be useful to my research, despite the fact that (1) none of the notes I took that day were really related to my project and (2) that in my project had been - and had continued to be - a total non-starter anyway.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Pedestrian" being the word I imagine Rena would use.

<sup>4</sup> Whenever asked to speak on the project, the only aspect I could conjure was that it was to be a work of creative nonfiction about the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolution of the Anglo-American "special relationship", as seen through the eyes of college-aged American and British citizens. The more I repeated this sound bite the more I came to hate the topic. As the semester drew on, the whole idea felt increasingly juvenile, innocent, and pointless, maybe because I slowly realized that I - having grown up in Washington DC, and, now, studying in London - was only really getting the educated middle-upper class perspective, which left gaping subaltern holes in my piece. On top of this, I personally had been feeling too removed from a shared reality with the rest of the world to work on the thing.

Anyway, this was the morning I was going to give it all another try - the Museum as well as my research. Maybe I'd surprise myself and find inspiration in repetition. Then, perhaps, I would meet up with Rena later, feeling accomplished and academic from the day's work.

I began to leaf through the marginalia in my travel book as I waited for the mediocre espresso machine, which I had bought duty-free upon arrival in London, to spit out its watered-down product. My notes were in red ink - a color which, due to singular and entirely personal associations - I usually couldn't bear to write in, and were scrawled in a hand more tremulous than normal for me. To me, these derivations spoke to some sort of disconnect between the me that was writing the notes and the me that was reading them now. I even entertained the idea, though for only a moment, that maybe I had misremembered taking down the notes, that maybe I had found the book on some stone bench at the Museum and had unknowingly absconded with another museum goer's hard - if ridiculous - work. This idea was immediately refuted when I came across a page about halfway through the travel book, where I - or a former version of myself - had apparently circled the word "unwell" and signed our name underneath. I decided then that I needed a strategy to assure none of the above would be repeated.

High doses of amphetamines had in the past allowed me to register profundity in novels and essays I'd once considered dull, *Moby-Dick* and *The Poverty of Student Life* being notable and somewhat embarrassing examples. Especially interesting to me, though, was the fact that *extremely* high doses - that is, triple or quadruple what I was meant to take - had actually proven effective at jolting me out of what I had begun mentally referring to as "the negative thought templates of ADD". These were the obsessive yet aimless systems of thought very much like the one that had taken hold on the first Museum visit, and which my prescribed doses of Adderall and Vyvanse were quickly losing the ability to steer me out of.

Ensuring that I'd be fully and productively present this time around, I dry swallowed an extra 30 mg Vyvanse before leaving my flat. Only then did I put on my glasses and get dressed. I grabbed Rena's pink and yellow Tweety bird umbrella from the spot she'd left it by the door the night before, locked up, and waited in the hallway for the poshly-accented elevator to announce *floor four, doors opening*, then again, *floor four, doors opening*.

Inside the elevator I texted Rena, who, for mysterious reasons that I found myself unwilling to investigate at the moment, had left that morning without waking me. We had been out together a few times since she had arrived in London from Moscow a week ago, and the night before was the first she had slept over at my place - this being after we both got a little too drunk at a gay club in Soho.<sup>5</sup> The other nights she had spent with her friend at the friend's boyfriend's flat, a place not so far from mine that Rena had described as roomy and fairly luxurious. Rena had made it clear to me that visiting this friend – a mysterious and attractive British woman named Heather, who I'd only seen once in passing – was her primary reason for being in London. It was just a happy coincidence that I happened to be in town as well.

“There's no need to get yourself all worked up about me being here,” Rena had told me. This was just after I had surprised her as she got off her flight at Heathrow last week, as we made our way to retrieve her luggage from the carousel.

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<sup>5</sup> Rena, like many other women I had met in London and elsewhere, loved going to gay clubs, citing the fact that sometimes she just wanted dance without having to worry about crude pick-up attempts. I had always been more than fine with going along, not only because I saw how much some women enjoyed it, but also because it did great things for my self-esteem. See, I had recently gained enough weight (too much, if you were to ask most women) and let myself get hairy enough to be deemed a “bear”, even a “bear poster-child”, according to one gay friend back in DC, and had been purchased enough drinks at clubs to back this assessment up. Personally, the whole dynamic with the drink buying feels a little exploitative and uncouth, and bringing it up here feels a lot like bragging, but I maintain that it was nice to feel wanted. I just want that fact to come across on the page.



“I bought an espresso machine here,” I had replied, ridiculously, wanting to change the subject. She nodded slowly as I motioned to the reflective black shop counter where I’d made the purchase.

I found myself cringing as the elevator doors opened, and thus corrected to a more neutral expression.

*Lunch?* I wrote, after editing a much longer message that I thought maybe came off too strong. I then added: *Also, I have your umbrella.*

Out of instinct I began fishing around in my chest pocket for a cigarette, before remembering I had quit (after what was a short-lived career in the first place) before coming to England. This, I’ll say now, was something pretty consistent for me, one of only a few personal traits I think others may consider enviable: I could give up anything, be it smoking, failing academic projects, or bad acquaintances, on a day’s notice. All I needed to do was tell someone what I planned to do, sometimes even before I had gotten around to actually starting to do the thing, and from there it became incredibly easy to stop. I didn’t know why, but that’s how things were. I’d quit sports betting – a practice my dad had always told me was for middle-upper class degenerates anyway - the day after I told my friends I was done with it. I had once gotten out of a long-failing relationship by telling my mom, the day before I actually ended the thing, that my girlfriend and I were already broken up.

Only when I was outside of the dorm complex, waiting to cross the small but busy road just outside it, did I remember that a mediocre espresso was waiting for me on my desk.

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Rainfall went from light to extremely heavy, especially for London, as I waited for a cup of coffee in Russell Square.

I had walked either through or past the park every day, purchased hundreds of cappuccini from the cafe at its heart, but failed to ever come up with anything very meaningful to mention about the locale in itself. The park wasn't a particularly pretty or lively place, despite scores of Google reviews stating the contrary, and at dusk the area was badly lit and sad. Ditto for rainy days like this one. Still, once inside the Square's Cafe in the Gardens, I felt myself shiver slightly at the nice atmospherics generated when the sound of rain on roof is coupled with the harsh-adjacent noise of an espresso machine's steaming wand submerged in milk. I noted my increased reactions to sensory input - pretty much consistent with my previous reactions to high doses.

Rena texted back, *Do you have the money for it?* For lunch, she meant. I replied that I did, though really I wasn't sure. I then tried and failed to recall ever telling Rena about my money problems.<sup>6</sup>

*Then want to get takeaway and meet me here @ 2?* she wrote

I said this sounded good. In another second a Camden address appeared on my screen.

I stood for a moment listening to intensifying rain ping off the cafe's ceiling, smirking moronically, as I often did, at the observation of a tiny, inoffensive difference in Rena's terminology. *Takeaway*. So she was the Dutch-American daughter of a big time American diplomat who had lived in Russia most of her life, yet she ordered food, or at least talked about ordering food, like she was British. In trying to put together how I had known her so long without noticing this, I remembered: since the only two times we had seen each other (besides the last few nights) were in Moscow for six months in 2013 – where she and I had worked

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<sup>6</sup> ...which were complicated in a way many college student's money problems are, meaning my money problems were infuriating and infantilizing and having to do a lot with parents who grew up with 65 cent Big Macs not being able to comprehend how expensive life has become since they left college, but not so bad as to existential or anything like that.

together as tennis instructors<sup>7</sup>, and then Todi, Italy for a week - where she was my date to a cousin's wedding - and since she was fluent in Russian and (like me) more than passable in Italian, I would have never heard Rena order food in English, or *an English context*, I guess.

Small, weird, distinctions like this fascinated me about Rena and people like her. They were *hybrid people*, essentially - nomads belonging to several nations and thus no real nation, free to pick and choose, or to edit and fully disconnect, from aspects of each and every culture they lived in. It seemed like such a trip, this life. So interesting, so attractive<sup>8</sup>, yet possibly, I realized, very lonely as well.

I walked back out into the rain with coffee in hand, thought about breaking out the Tweety umbrella, decided against it.

My thoughts, whooshing in my ears now: Would my use of this umbrella signal to the people of London my Americanness, of which, I had decided in the past few weeks, I was neither proud nor embarrassed, but which I didn't particularly want to advertise? Or is Looney Tunes and Looney Tunes apparel ubiquitous enough to offer up no significant clues regarding the bearer's nationality or heritage? And, anyway, what *class* status did I give off walking through Camden in the rain in my scuffed up Adidas sneakers, my wrinkled Banana Republic flannel, my nearly torn to shreds timbukt2 messenger bag? Could the famously class-wary English people see right through my meagre ensemble, right down to the comfortably wealthy American east coaster who had always felt an entirely neurotic need to dress down for every occasion? And do people's scattered earthly belongings, the small nations of meaningful objects they accrue throughout their lives, say *anything* about them anymore, in the context of late capitalism and late empire? ISIS soldiers drive used Toyota pick-ups through their young caliphate - what does

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<sup>7</sup> Much more on tennis and Russia to come.

<sup>8</sup> Especially to me, personally.

that say about the market ethics of their Wahhabist state, or their take on American manufacturing? Or their form of protest: procuring American products in order to attack American institutions? Buying (through back channels, granted) from American industry in order to attack the American populace?<sup>9</sup> All of these questions suddenly seemed vital to my research.

I holstered the umbrella, deciding it, if not too American, then too pink. I made a mental note to later ask Rena what her experience of Tweety bird was, being a Dutch-American woman born in Moscow in the early nineties. I then promptly passed out.

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<sup>9</sup> Among other populaces, of course.

## 2.

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LONDON HOSPITAL**

*Milkshakes*, Rena had texted me an hour ago. Then shortly after: *And anything that goes well with milkshakes, your choice on that. Get something for Ana if you can.*

So Ana, Rena's other friend in town - a Ukrainian immigrant to Russia she knew through tennis, also the daughter of some big diplomat - would be there to. I groaned out loud, mulling over (1) the exasperating fact that Rena always seemed to need a female chaperone when she was around me and (2) that Ana, who I had come to know well over the last week, was an exasperating and in my view fairly mean person.

I looked up from my phone to a nearby Accident and Emergency physician, who was looking blankly not into but at a cabinet on the wall, her mind definitely elsewhere. Behind her was a familiar yet somehow slightly different-looking ER from what I was used to - plastic curtains cutting small enclaves out of a larger shared space. Assorted medical machines made semi-foreign noises that echoed slightly through the room. I wondered briefly if the room was more echoey than normal rooms were or if the drugs had caused me to develop some newfound sensitivity to reflected acoustic waves.

A rough-looking young guy in the bed directly across the room from me was handcuffed to his stretcher. He was accompanied by a lawwoman in the trademark Hi-Vis vest, ridiculously hatted, gun-holsterless get-up.

"Someone injected me I swear," the guy said, I think.

The policewoman nodded. I didn't see her face.

Turning to see me lying there awake, the doctor walked over and sat down at my bedside.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked, in a tone a little too judgmental for my liking or comfort. She spoke with the slightest Indian accent.

She may have double-blinked only slightly at hearing the accent in my reply: “The university hospital?” I got this reaction more than I thought I would coming to England, me having a run-of-the-mill - incredibly neutral actually<sup>10</sup> - American accent.

I too may have double-blinked slightly in turn at hearing a gravelly other-something issue from me in place of my voice, only now realizing I had lost it last night— probably yelling over the club noise to Rena.

She nodded. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

I attempted to see myself through the physician’s eyes and hence conjured an image of a badly dressed, especially for London, overweight, soaking wet twenty- to thirty-something male presenting with tremulous hand shakes and minor periorbital<sup>11</sup> puffiness verging on major, if major was in fact the next step up.

“I fell in a puddle” I said, lifting my arms to indicate myself, my dampness. I sounded like Tom Waits. The physician smirked, and something about her smirk made me realize that she too had some pronounced swelling under the eyes. Despite this she was young and very pretty - probably a UCL medical student - with dark skin and long black hair.

While her positive reaction should have calmed me a bit, I only found myself getting more worried. I honestly couldn’t remember if I’d gone down in the Square, or at the museum, or even at lunch with Rena, though the last one seemed most unlikely.

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, a linguist I once sat next to on a bus from DC to Boston once gave me his card and told me I *must* visit him if I was ever in Boston again. He told me my accent was one of the most neutral he personally had ever heard, and that he be remiss if he didn’t conduct an interview with me to investigate why exactly that was. I never called, having not been to Boston since.

<sup>11</sup> A term I’d found online when looking for a word describe how my eyes looked whenever I experienced sleep deprivation.

The doctor ran down a list of questions to which I felt compelled to uniformly answer ‘no’. Before fainting, did I have a headache? Did my vision change? Did I feel my bowels release?

Had I done anything outside of my normal routine that day?

“No,” I said, hopefully without blinking. The last thing I wanted to do was experience how the National Health Service dealt with potential drug overdoses.

Further down the list: How many days a week do you drink, usually? “A lot on the weekends, admittedly,” I said, although since I’d arrived in England it was more like a lot every day.

Prescriptions? “Small amounts of Adderall and Vyvanse,” I said.

“And those are...?” she said, looking up from her clipboard. I balked, thinking any medical professional would recognize these brand names, but also distracted by a classically amphetaminic inner monologue (CAIM): Everyone in here, now that I look around, seems to have swelling under their eyes. Patients as well as doctors. One can probably attribute the room’s general eye puffiness to sleep deprivation, and since the English are not nearly as likely as Americans to be prescribed Adderall or drugs like it, the sleep deprivation must come from elsewhere. Long hours and stressful work could be the staff’s case, but what about the patients? What is keeping the people of London up at night? Am I reading too much into it?

I felt a familiar headrush and suddenly found it a huge struggle to keep upright. I slowly leaned my head back against the hospital bed, careful to not to give away the fact that I was doing it more out of necessity than for basic comfort purposes.

CAIM (cont.): Worst case scenario: I am in a wing of a hospital specially dedicated to drug abuse. This is why my across-the-way neighbor has a police escort.

“ADD meds. Both of them,” I said, after a beat. She made a note.

“Stimulants?”

“Yes.” Another note, this one longer.

She went through a few more housekeeping-type questions before finally asking me what I found myself desperately wanting to be asked: “What do you think happened?”. Maybe a bit too eagerly, I launched into the story that had been forming in my head from the second I’d regained consciousness - a mostly true story I repurposed and fictively punched up a bit to benefit me in this particular situation. I’ve included footnotes to separate fact from fiction.

“I was in a car crash a few weeks back,” I told her, “a violent one where my Black Cab was T-boned at a ludicrously high speed.<sup>12</sup> T-boned? It’s when a car hits another car directly on its side. And get this, the other car was another Black Cab. And the other driver turned out to actually know the guy driving my car, and when they both exited their cabs curbside at the entrance of the Elephant & Castle tube stop they shared a picture-perfect knowing look that hinted at a long friendship populated by thousands of similar knowing looks.<sup>13</sup> Anyway, I walked away from the incident feeling pretty much fine, with the added plus of my driver’s business card and his promise of a couple of free rides as long as mum was the word re: the whole accident, which he, like the good friend he was, assured me was neither driver’s fault.”

“So I was okay at first but later that day found myself feeling really lightheaded and dizzy - so much so that climbing the stairs at the University College library became a grotesque misadventure, featuring me gripping a railing with both hands and having to slide myself up the stairs sideways onto a landing and sitting there with my head between my legs until the world

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<sup>12</sup> True.

<sup>13</sup> False. Added to make the story, and by extension, me, more human. An attempt to move the emphasis off my trustworthiness and onto my interestingness, either as a patient or a person capable of noting such things.



stopped contrazooming.<sup>14</sup> And later that same evening when I laughed too hard at something someone said in the pub, I began to ‘see stars’, not in the Looney Tunes sense but in the sense that if, well, you know the floaters you get in your eyes? It’s as if all at once I had ten of them in each eye and they in themselves had tracers attached to them and were travelling at ludicrously high speeds<sup>15</sup>. I’m saying ‘ludicrous’ too much. But it was in the pub that I guessed, probably correctly, that I’d gotten whiplash from the accident<sup>16</sup>, and when I read the NHS site later that night it said I didn’t need to do anything or come see anyone unless it was really bad, and I didn’t think it was that bad. But my sleep’s been awful lately, and when I’m awake I’m just zombie-like, and I’m finding it incredibly hard to read or work on my papers, and I still get incredibly dizzy from time to time, and my voice isn’t usually like this, so I think what might have happened today is I passed out from exhaustion, exhaustion caused by the lasting effects of whiplash. And I was at a club last night which couldn’t have helped.<sup>17</sup>

The man across the way started to wail, loudly. “I swear it! I swear it! Please! Someone injected me.” His voice was remarkable, like a dog’s bark flattened into an MP3 file, then played over a telephone. I thought about voicing something to that effect and then quickly thought *why the fuck would I say something like that her?*

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<sup>14</sup> True, though I wasn’t that troubled by it. Inner-ear exercises I looked up online later that day had basically cleared things up for me, balance-wise.

<sup>15</sup> True, but this only happened once.

<sup>16</sup> Lie of omission. It was probably a mix of whiplash, my medication, lots of alcohol, and less-than-stellar diet that caused everything, but I decided to pin it all on just that for the sake of expedience.

<sup>17</sup> Essentially, I was doing this shitty and self-serving and pathetic thing I do when I feel backed into a corner, which is speak quickly and stiltedly enough so that I sound not just knowledgeable and self-aware, but maybe *more* knowledgeable and self-aware than the person I am talking to, even if said person is the authority in the situation.

Initially, I make use of distracting language (t-bone, in this instance) and completely disparate connections just odd enough to make the listener feel a little left behind, using words catered to confuse my meaning just enough so that I am still intelligible while remaining opaque. I find this throws everything I say afterwards into a state of confusion - with the person I am talking to forced into the awkward position of trying to catch up with my rambling. Finally, in the end, I will provide a clearly expressed, memorable conclusion. The confused person will feel a need to agree with this conclusion in order to maintain the illusion that they were understanding me all along.

The physician looked over to a South Asian male colleague, who was nodding while listening to a woman in hijab with bloody bandages tied around both palms. He returned a wide-eyed look and pointed at the Wailing Man with his chin in a way that must have meant: “That’s your patient too.”

“That man is my patient too,” the physician said, to me, shaking her head a little. “But I think we are mostly done here. Unless you have any questions?”

I shook my head back at her.

“Get some sleep,” she said. “And I would see someone about the dizziness. It doesn’t always go away on its own.”

“I’ll do that,” I said, now watching with morbid fascination as the South Asian male colleague removed his patient’s hand wraps. Underneath were two sizeable holes in her hands – *industrial-grade stigmata*<sup>18</sup> is the description I landed on.

“Fucking Christ, what happened to *you*?” the Wailing Man yelled at her, finally prompting a hush from his police escort. The woman quickly looked down and away. With a grim look that started with the Wailing Man and landed on me, the woman’s doctor drew the curtain closed. Just like that, the tableau was gone behind dull and faded green plastic.

The doctor cleared me to go soon after. I may or may not have double-blinked when she asked if I wanted blood work done, before answering that I thought we pretty much had the issue solved. She let me go with a hospital folder containing (1) a form confirming an appointment she made for me with a neurologist’s office in London Bridge, (2) a letter, signed by her and addressed to my professors, saying I should receive extra time on my midterm papers due to a ‘traumatic head injury’ (3) a bill for the services I’d received from the hospital that day,

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<sup>18</sup> I was unaware at the time the correct plural is *stigmata*.

including Accident and Emergency room consultation and medical transport costs, and (4) a receipt to which was attached an Acknowledgment of Fees Paid, informing me that this one was on the taxpayers of the United Kingdom. I breathed in as I turned to this last page, unaware I was even holding my breath in the first place. If the same thing had happened to me on the campus of my big state school in the middle of nowhere, the ambulance ride alone would have put me out 1,500 dollars.

“And will I have to pay for my neurologist appointment?” I asked, affecting a hopeful, American look I realized I was everyday getting better at selling.

“The first appointment will be eighty pounds,” she said. “The MRI scan, I would guess about three-hundred and forty.” My heart sank.

“Oh,” she said, registering my deflation. “But your student insurance plan will almost definitely cover that.”

I suppressed the urge to kiss her. Or to declare my love of England to her and the far less fortunate occupants of the Accident and Emergency ward. Moments later I was all but running down Tottenham Court Road toward a milkshake-serving American joint close to where Rena was staying, giggling ridiculously and beaming at the people of London and skidding on puddles in my Adidas - unaffected in mood and movement by the now torrential downpour.

## 3.

**RENA - THE THIRD CULTURE - UGLY AMERICAN TENNIS**

The elevator I took up to Heather's boyfriend's five-bedroom flat in central Camden opened not into a living room - like one saw in certain really expensive properties - but into an antechamber/hallway kind of room that separated his living room from several other rooms. The ceilings were high, far higher than any residence I had seen in London, and the interior was decadent in a way I likened to Moscow's insane metro system. Just like the Russian capital's train service, everything was of marble and gold trim. A small bronze statue in the corner depicted a man sitting cross-legged, reading a large book with a Russian title. The likeness answered to my conception of Pushkin, taken from portraits I'd seen online. The statue looked out of place in someone's home - I thought it would look better in a train station. Or a museum.

I walked up to one of the larger doors, which, I could easily derive from a telltale chemical smell, contained an indoor tennis court. Hearing the thwack of a serve and the twofold thwack of a hard return, followed closely by Rena's high-pitched laugh, I pushed through double doors to find Ana, red-faced and sprawled out on her side of the dark green court, looking up at the ceiling with a smirk that belied the futility of it all. Rena, on her side, was doubled over and still laughing, silently now due to a lack of air, but straightened up a bit upon seeing me.

"I almost killed her with that one," she said, in the strikingly Californian way they had taught her at the Anglo-American School of Moscow.

Ana nodded a bit from her spot on the ground, her eyes obscured by the black visor she was wearing. "It is true," she said, in her more classically Russian accent. She then exclaimed softly in what sounded more like Ukrainian than Russian, though I couldn't be sure. Either way, I was positive it was something involving God.

“What did you bring?” asked Rena, doing something that involved touching her dirty-blonde hair<sup>19</sup> in jerky movements. Loosening something, tightening something - I didn’t know what, but I wondered if she was doing it for my benefit.

“Two chocolate milkshakes and one vanilla. Two chicken sandwiches and a vegetarian thingy. One side of sweet potato fries and one side of regular,” I said. “I thought I’d give you some choices”. Ana and I made the sort of eye contact that said she hadn’t understood most of that, and I waited for Rena to translate ‘vegetarian thingy’ and a few other things.

“Should I take all this to the kitchen?” I asked. Both women shook their heads.

“Heather is in there,” said Rena.

“Okay. We can’t eat with her?”

“She’s doing a show,” said Ana, finally getting to her feet. She was much shorter than Rena - who herself stood towering at 5’ 11” - with intense green eyes and features I’d describe as feline if that wasn’t such a cliché. She had blonde hair that looked bleached, and unusually thick lips seemed somehow enhanced as well. “For, like, thirty more minutes in there. Then it’s okay.” She finished the thought with a cryptic grimace.

“Show? In the kitchen?” I asked, genuinely curious. Heather was becoming more interesting every time her name came up, though Rena had failed to give me any concrete details about her.

Ana solemnly nodded Yes to my question, her frown temporarily becoming even more pronounced.

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<sup>19</sup> I wanted to use the word ombre, but I wasn’t quite sure how this differed from dirty blonde. I am still not sure.

I recalled for a moment the only time I had seen Heather. It had been two nights ago: we had crossed paths in the Peckham hipster club where I was meeting Rena that night – she was leaving as I was just getting there. From the basic descriptions I had received of her, I was able to make her out as she exited through the haze of the club’s designated smoking section. Heather was pretty tall herself, just about Rena’s height. She was red-headed, and her face, shoulders, and back were splashed really interestingly with unusual freckles – much thicker and more pronounced than I had ever seen on a woman in real life. Her outfit was right on with what seemed to be popular in London that Spring, a drapey earth tone dress that totally covered everything below the shoulders.

I knew Heather was English but not from where specifically, that she was loosely connected to Rena and Ana’s social network in some way Rena was unforthcoming about, and that she was around my age. Anything past that was up to my imagination and, of course, the aimless yet recursive systems of thought that infected it.

Rena was smirking at her friend’s reaction. She turned to me and said: “She wears only an apron, nothing underneath. She sometimes cooks a little, but mostly eats pre-prepared meals.”

“That’s it?” I asked. “People online watch her do that?”

Rena looked at Ana. “She really is a good entertainer. Fun to watch, I would bet.”

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We decided, since the building apparently kept strict rules about eating on the courts, to save our meals until Heather was done. “I am sorry,” said Ana, directly to me, “but this fat English bitch on the house board has it out for Heather. Otherwise I say we can eat out here.”

“I think she’s Welsh,” said Rena.

“Welsh bitch,” said Ana.

“It’s totally fine,” I said, putting my hands up, palms out. This drew Ana’s attention to them for a second. She then looked back to my face before finally landing on Rena.

“I can wait,” I finished, registering ‘a moment’ had just happened, though failing to glean the meaning of it.

This prompted a charged silence in which I would guess all three of us were considering how to spend the time until then. I considered the question while also making mental note of the psychoskeletal framework of the current situation, common in my experience, wherein I posited that - judging from the slight awkwardness of the others - my presence had sprung on them a jarring social shift that they had yet to adjust to, compounded by the fact they had to switch languages for my benefit and might have right then been speaking English for the first time that day.

“You still play, yes?” asked Ana after a moment.

She had been lightly but not deftly pushing me on my sporting past ever since Rena had introduced us a few back, inquiring about things like my serve speed and general game strategy - then shooting Rena searching looks in response to my answers.

I told her I did, though only as an instructor during school breaks. Ana’s face lit up.

“It is the same thing with you two then?” she said, looking to Rena.

Rena was spending her summers holding clinics for the children of diplomats in Pokrovsky Hills - a gated community in northwest Moscow that housed the Anglo-American high school. It was in the Hills, or more specifically, on one of AASM’s slow-bouncing carpet tennis courts, where I’d first met a seventeen-year-old Rena Kuznetsov<sup>20</sup>. I was a year and a half

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<sup>20</sup> Rena’s father was Russian-American, hence the Russian surname.

older, which seemed like a much bigger difference then than it did now. She and I and five seventeen-to-eighteen-year-olds with well-off diplomat parents would split time that summer catching trains to low-level Eastern European invitationals and working with an organization called American Tennis Management, which paid us (not well but in all cash [USD]) to hold weekday clinics at the school.

Ana said something about finding me a racket and clothes and walked off before I could respond. When the double doors shut behind her I looked at Rena. I looked her up and down in a way that said I wanted her to see me looking her up and down, as in “look at me looking at you”. I liked seeing her sweat in her white Uniqlo top - it was natural, not only in *that* sense but in the sense it was how I was used to seeing her in practice and competition. The effect was purely nostalgic.

She leered and smiled at me concurrently, her eyes severe but her upturned lip undercutting their effect, and I was suddenly very aware of my heartbeat (increased reactions to sensory input).

“She wants to see if I can beat you,” Rena said.

“That was my guess.”

“Can I?”

“I doubt you can.”

“Really? I practice every day still.”

“Teaching kids isn’t practice.”

“You teach kids. And you’re out of shape.”

“You won’t beat me.”

“Well we’ll see. How has your day been?”



“Fine so far” ← Considering how things had gone at the hospital, this was fairly true.

“And your ‘research’?”

“I need to make some British friends”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know how they think. *Need to*, I guess, if I want to write about them.”

“Do you think it’s that different from you?”

“Yeah, but I don’t quite know how.”

“You don’t have any British friends yet?”

“I don’t know how to meet young Londoners.”

“Go to clubs.”

“No one talks in clubs. You can’t really meet people”

“People talk to me in clubs.”

“And do you have any British friends?”

“A few. Heather.”

“That you just met in clubs in London?”

“No. From high school.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Why not?”

“British people from your high school are as British as you are American.”

“I am American.”

“Not in a way that is valuable to my research.”

It seemed we were quick approaching a topic Rena and I had always disagreed upon. This was the question of whether people like her possessed a more thorough understanding of what it

meant to be a “citizen of the world,” whatever that means, as well as an “expanded worldview” that provided them with “an ability to look at things through more than one lens.”<sup>21</sup> Taking this idea further, many of them thought that their multicultural worldview *also* gave them special insight into what it means to be a citizen of their particular nation - their argument being one of negative definition (I know I am this because I am not that).

A card-carrying member of the class in question, Rena bought the theory completely. A sedentary, if well-travelled, east coast American skeptic, well-off enough to only travel occasionally unless I was being paid to do so, I was more resistant to it. To me this thinking reeked of wanting it both ways, and I had met and befriended enough of her type to see something deeper, something that let me know that these “third culture kids”, as they sometimes called themselves, were far from the cosmopolitan wunderkinds they claimed to be. They were quirky and interesting, sure, but few of them had proven to be all that insightful when called upon to provide their expanded worldview. Rena, for instance, hadn’t been anywhere in Russia besides Moscow and St. Petersburg, and had never read Dostoyevsky. I had attended a really not great DC public high school, in one of the worst public school systems in the nation, and even there we had at least cracked *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Rena must have been internally formulating her own version of the dynamic stated above - the inverse of my thoughts - because she repeated herself: “I am American.” It occurred to me she was annoyed, though only slightly. Still, it wasn’t the type of conversation I wanted to have right then, so I apologized. I told her I was only joking and “who am I to tell you who you are?” and that seemed to end it - though of course there were unresolved problems there. After that we

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<sup>21</sup> I quote here from an explanatory tri-fold poster board, titled “Knowing Yourself Through Others: Third Culture Kids”, that was left in the Anglo-American School’s cafeteria the summer I was teaching clinics there, compelling me to read it daily - like one does the back of a box of cereal at childhood breakfasts.

tried to maintain small talk in the passable Italian we each knew, but stopped as soon as we grew sick of being so inexpressive. Ana returned with my clothes, and I, lacking the confidence to strip down in front of her - as she seemed to expect I would - took to the anteroom to change.

While I declathed in silence and casually reflected on the more unfortunate aspects of my body - the start of a beer belly, small biceps for someone of my size - my ears adjusted in the echoey, cubic room to register faint vibrations coming from the Heather boyfriend's apartment. This sound was overlaid with occasional soft moaning, muffled behind the door.

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Wilson racket, recently strung. White Birddog shorts that fit me quite well. I chose to stick with the Adidas I was already wearing, though Ana had offered me a really nice pair of off-white Nikes, half a size too small. It struck me that Heather's friend had a stylish middle- to upper-class American's taste in tennis gear, though all of it felt only lightly used. I also found it odd that Ana was so comfortable with offering up the host's clothes to me, and that Heather didn't find this objectionable. And had Ana passed Heather - in the middle of her show - on the way to retrieve this stuff?

I squinted across the court at Rena, who was shifting her weight from one foot to the other in anticipation of my serve, and wondered briefly if she was aware of my advantage here. Beyond the obvious height and strength imbalance - which of course she would be aware of - there was the fact we were standing on acrylic hardcourt, the surface I'd played on my whole life. Acrylic - the surface the US Open is played on, as well as the surface most Americans will picture when they think of tennis courts, as well as the surface comprising all six courts within walking distance of my childhood home in northwest Washington DC - was my domain, the surface I'd come of age on and built my game around. Among other small but useful details, I

knew this court's surface was almost sure to be way faster and lower bouncing than Pokrovsky's carpet courts, which I recalled had done a lot to bolster Rena's funky southpaw sidespin. On hardcourt, her sidespin would be reduced to a slight annoyance, and my topspin would only be amplified.

Rena also had no way of knowing about the changes I'd made to my game in the past year, which surely would be a factor. She'd be expecting controlled points, me hitting mostly cross-court shots from the baseline as I had done my whole life, as I had done the last time we'd played. That would be the past summer in Todi, on clay, where Rena, who'd flown in on her ludicrous supply of frequent flyer miles to be my date to a distant cousin's wedding - because that's the type of thing people like Rena did, if they felt like it - spanked me 6-4, 6-2.

Ana, now standing courtside with her arms crossed, said something in Russian. Though I didn't understand any of it, I recognized from her inflection it was a joke. I quickly looked over to see Ana's expression hadn't changed. I then looked back at Rena, who suddenly seemed fairly uncomfortable. Her eyes were darting around the court in an obvious attempt to look at anything besides Ana and I.

Thus my theory began to form.

CAIM: Rena must have at least mentioned in passing her victory to Ana - not in a bragging or malicious way either, I realize - just recounting facts, as is Rena's MO. Ana, however, must think it funny or interesting or both that I - who as a tournament-quality player at eighteen years old would have been counted on to destroy any female in my age bracket - could possibly have fallen so far in such a short amount of time that I would lose to Rena. Ana probably thought the loss in Italy burned me deep to my masculine core - burned me in a way that it would burn the hyper-macho Russian men that no doubt populated her social sphere.

Could her reaction to my hand gestures have been about that, then? Did she see them as distractingly feminine? Unmanly? Because then the rest of Ana's motivations here were easy to unpack. Because then of course Ana's end goal here wasn't to entertain Rena and I, or to experience a competitive round tennis. She didn't even want to see if Rena could win - that's not what mattered. What Ana really wanted to see was the symbolic destruction of my manhood and, of course, that destruction's after-effects. 'What will the fragile American male do if he loses yet again?'-type thing.

CAIM (cont.): Why do I find myself wanting to say that this realization has "instilled me with cool focus regarding the task at hand", or something equally sportsmanlike and kicky? That's a complete lie. I'm lying to myself. Honestly, I feel hurt in a deep, complex way I haven't felt hurt in quite some time. I feel embarrassment and sadness and rage at Ana's shittiness, her meddling -- I feel bad for Rena, being caught here between egos as big as mine and Ana's -- and finally, I feel utterly helpless, knowing that if I were to bring any of this up Ana and probably even Rena will act like I am crazy for being offended, hence reifying my supposed fragility and by extension my symbolic lack of phallus. Ana's been too subtle for anything I could say or do in my defense to seem warranted. After all, what has she done besides suggest we play tennis, then provide me with the necessary instruments for doing so? And, of course, what if I'm misreading everything?

Whether I was right or not, it seemed to me that playing the game and winning was the only option I'd be okay with.

I hit my first serve dead on, right at Rena's comparatively weak backhand, which she always sliced. Rena was only able to get the tip of the frame of her racket on it, which produced a light clicking noise signaling that contact with the ball had technically been made. This saved

her from an ace, but the ball hit the room's back wall as if it had been untouched. I walked back to the baseline. I didn't look at Rena. I didn't look at Ana.

CAIM: It was an understatement for Rena to say I'm out of shape. I've gained about thirty pounds since Moscow, have stopped working out almost completely, and am not nearly the mentally stalwart high-percentage player I used to be. I've let myself become extremely unfit, bordering on the unhealthy, and am now more like of one of those players who can only be described as a tightly-strung headcase - this would be a more apt description. But is this change the cause or the effect of the three "prolonged depressive episodes" I've been through since last summer? And where do all of these events fall in what I have experienced - an experiencing - as the long downward slope of my mental health's decline? And is this the most productive thing to concern myself with at the moment? Haven't I already come to realize, through an attempt and failure to trace it, that the downward slope is largely untraceable? I definitely left the umbrella at the hospital.

Rena was able to return the next serve, which I again aimed at her backhand. She didn't anticipate though that my subsequent move would be to run to the net and volley her shot before she could split step and recover. She barely got to my return and was forced to pop the ball up, allowing me to step in with an overhead smash that landed in-bounds but ultimately stopped its trajectory when the ball was a full court away (it was a two-court setup). Rena, after walking across the complex to retrieve the ball, found my eyes and said with her familiar leering smile: "Ugly American tennis". From as far away as she was, this had a comedic yet somehow chilling effect.

*Ugly American tennis.* I let myself smile. She was right in that respect.

In my “growth” as a player over the past year, I’d basically learned how to play away from my weaknesses: my weight gain, my inability to focus on constructing points due to the appearance and eventual takeover of the negative thought templates, which confounded me and distracted me and left me looking awkward and lost on the court. I know how I looked because I was instructed to watch tape of my play, my coaches telling me that intensive review sessions would help me to work out some mistakes, mistakes they uniformly characterized as “quick fixes” or “easily tweakable”. So I watched my play on my laptop, watched its quality continue to decline in spite of the knowledge the footage gave me, until I deemed the whole process unproductive and then just stopped. To see clearly what was wrong, and not, for whatever reason, being able to remedy the situation, I found too depressing. To have little action-shot icons of me fucking up saved to my desktop, waiting there for me every time I opened my computer, even more so.

Since Italy, though not *because* of Italy, nota bene, I’d shifted gears. I cleared my desktop. I stopped listening to coaches - who didn’t really have the time to put in work with a failed prospect like me anyway. Now I played my own way. I no longer waited for points to develop, I tried my best to end them early, eliminating the need to run too much. I got comfortable with a ~ 100 mph serve that I could aim at people’s weak sides. I adopted the very American style of serving and immediately running in for a volley, which in modern tennis made me a kind of maverick, a throwback. I didn’t make it look all that great, no doubt, but I was winning again in scrimmages, and while I was aware this was nothing that big, I’ll admit it felt good be trending upward, tennis-wise at least. As for fulfilling relationships with women, or reaching a point of academic productivity, there was still a lot work to be done.

I beat Rena 6-2, serving and volleying the entire time, and we called it quits at a single set. Rena took the defeat well, and in the end gave Ana a look that said ‘what are you gonna do?’, accentuating it with a light shrug, and went to collect the food from a courtside bench. The look and gesture were reminiscent of looks I’d seen her direct at her coaches in tournaments, always coming after botched shots, the rare double fault.

In that moment, I experienced her look transposed onto other countries and landscapes - all the gorgeous places I’d been once but, due to my game’s decline and the financial realities attached to it, would most likely never see again. I saw Rena beachside in Odessa after a semifinals loss to a Finnish girl, mumbling something in Russian. I saw her in Almaty, framed by the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains, blowing off an unexpected first-round exit. I saw her in Helsinki, losing again to that same damn Finnish girl, shrugging it off in the eerie silence of Finland’s summer, when it seems everyone in the country leaves for the states to the south. Always a ‘what are you gonna do?’ look. Always a shrug. I suddenly felt very cold.

Maybe it was the mix of the pills and adrenaline, or the growing weight of my lies of omission re: today’s events, or the general inexpressibility of everything I wanted to say to Rena but couldn’t because Ana was there, and because Rena and I didn’t talk about things like where we stood and when we would see each other again, but I looked at Rena’s unmoved and/or removed look - how generally she could apply it - and became aware of the possibility that I might breakdown crying right there. I tried to see myself through Rena’s eyes and saw an American who drifted in and out of sight, always coming back a little heavier and quieter, who less and less inspired any type of positive, sustaining feeling. I felt ridiculous in the ridiculously expensive shorts.



Ana, without looking at either Rena or I, announced that we probably in the clear as far as Heather's show was concerned, then pushed through the double doors into the anteroom. Rena followed suit, but turned to see if I was coming, her expression neutral as she brought the milkshake to her mouth.

And it was then that I saw her in Todi, drinking not a milkshake but maybe an off-brand sports drink - through a straw, ridiculously - while my machismo Italian cousins laugh at me because I just lost to a girl, which satisfies their definition of embarrassing. I'm ignoring them and watching Rena wipe the red clay off her calves, actively trying to commit the scene to memory because of how great she looks, even doing something like this.

Cut to that night, post-wedding, when only the college-aged and drunken are still up. Rena is saying that the dress she wore was probably made for a shorter person and she is glad to be out of it, while Perugian wheat fields don't sway but outright convulse behind her as the wind comes through the hills. A former, skinnier and less recursive version of myself shrugs and says *indovina*<sup>22</sup> and Rena says *cosa?*<sup>23</sup> and he pushes her into the pool of Zio Antonio's agriturismo, rented for the occasion. He jumps in after and so will others and he'll pick her up and look at her with what really was a loving expression - he'd always liked weddings and what side they brought out of him - and she would smile but not in the way I wish she would.

But how does one bring any of this up? I literally bit my tongue, coughed, and followed Rena into the apartment for a cold chicken sandwich.

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<sup>22</sup> "Guess what?"

<sup>23</sup> "What?"

## 4.

**HEATHER – EITHER UNAWARE OR APATHETIC**

Post-shower, I sat on the edge of Rena's bed dressed in what was probably the nicest casual wear I'd ever been allowed to touch, let alone walk around in. Unlike the tennis apparel, the labels I now donned were foreign and unplaceable to me, the branding subtle and secondary in way I saw as nicely un-American and un-Italian. Rena laid prone in her dark blue bathrobe, her hair dark with hydration, shooting off text messages between short stretches of staring out the wall-length window at the foot of her bed. Rain continued to fall outside.

The view from the apartment's loft was, I think, a comprehensive one of southern Fitzrovia, though I didn't know London well enough to be sure. My reference point here was the eminently ugly BT Tower, looming over this part of the city like some horrible medieval weapon made of nausea green glass. It wasn't visible from Rena's room, which meant it was probably directly behind us, which meant in turn we were probably facing south toward Soho and then on to the Thames if you went far enough. Rena - in all likelihood facing south at that moment - was distractedly watching construction workers in His-Vis vests as they did something vaguely destructive to the roof of a nightclub with sledgehammers and a drill. Mid-day traffic was at a near standstill in the streets outside, nothing really coming or going either way. A guide carrying a small South Korean flag could be seen leading a group of fifteen or so into a tourist trap-seeming pizzeria with unappetizing pictures of the establishment's menu items taped to the storefront.

Without looking away from the scene, Rena let me know she planned to take a nap. She got to arranging pillows - setting them in such a way that she could lay down on her side and, with her head tilted slightly upwards, continue to look out the window while she drifted off.

Once settled, she looked at me and then looked at the spot next to her in bed, her version of an invitation to cuddle.

“I’m not going to be able to sleep now,” I said. Although I was beginning to feel notably less frenetic, sleeping at this time would mess with my sleep schedule and psyche for days.

“Okay. Go away then,” Rena said, trying and failing to disguise a small smile re: her dismissiveness. She then produced a sleeping mask from her bedside table.

Though I was at first puzzled about how the city scenery and the mask would work together for her, I was also fairly touched to see that the mask was one I’d bought her in a St. Petersburg bazaar - two tiny red hammer and sickle symbols stitched onto furry black material. Registering my confusion, Rena explained that she was so accustomed to the feel of the mask she couldn’t sleep without it - whether it was bright out or not didn’t matter, it was all about the presence of the thing on her forehead. She then turned more to her side away from me, signaling conversation over. I suppressed a commentary on how everything she just said and did with the USSR mask and the work scenes outside could be almost too perfectly funneled through a smooth critique of early 21st century entertainment<sup>24</sup>, and opted instead to lightly ruffle her hair in the way she hated. This caused her to reach out blindly and attempt to slap at my hand with hers, while I silently made my way out of the loft, turning off the light behind me.

I was halfway down the steps to the living room, planning to educate myself about the local culture with an hour or so of English daytime TV<sup>25</sup>, when a door opened across the way.

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<sup>24</sup> See the thinly veiled class contempt present in reality TV shows focused on Jobs - anything from *Undercover Boss* to *Million Dollar Listing*-type programs that focus on the plight of the real estate agent. Especially note that the viewers of these shows were consuming another person’s livelihood - or a highly stylized version of it - for entertainment purposes. More shows than you think followed this model - *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* was essentially a show about the titular family at work, which, due to the program’s late-night reruns, you could nod off to if you were so inclined.

<sup>25</sup> Which I presumed was as vast a wasteland as its American counterpart.

Heather, her auburn hair in a bun I would ineptly characterize as messy, appeared in the doorway, dressed for the rain in a long billowing polyester blend and big black boots. In the daylight I caught the full effect of her freckles, which were more asymmetrical and fascinating than I had remembered. Her two front teeth were set far to the front and were strikingly white.

She looked up at me and nodded once.

“Hiya,” she said<sup>26</sup>, eyebrows raised.

“Hey.”

“Heather,” she said, indicating herself. “You’re Rena’s friend, yeah?”

I nodded, gave my name, and inquired: “Where you off to, Heather?”

“I was going to ask you that,” she said. Her face remained neutral, providing me no hints as to her earnestness.

“Really?”

“Yeah!” she rejoined, hand going to heart. “I’m about to go get some stuff for an impromptu little party here -- tonight that is -- and it’s going to be hell carrying it all back just me. I assume Rena is asleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Everyday at three, like clockwork,” she said, with what I heard as the slightest bit of contempt.

“Hey,” she said, brightening up a bit and bringing her hands together quickly. “I’ll pay you if you want to come help me out. I need another person is all.”

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<sup>26</sup> In the contemporary British greeting way, as opposed to the dated American pickup artist way (i.e. “Hiya, ladies”)

I shook my head at the offer of pay, perhaps a bit confusingly. “Of course I’ll help,” I said. “For free,” I added. “I was just going to watch the telly anyway,” I added further, though I immediately regretted the attempt at British slang.

Heather nodded again, in a way that told me she didn’t notice or care. “Right on. Back in a sec.” She then disappeared back into her room, shutting the door hard behind her.

Finding myself momentarily alone in the apartment, my thoughts went down what I considered to be two separate but connected paths. Actually it was three paths, but the first was just a small consideration of whether or not ‘Right on’ was a common thing for a British person to say and whether that might have been Heather’s playful, reciprocal attempt to use my country’s slang back at me. I decided I didn’t know her well enough to tell.

But the two main points were as follows: (1) Now that I’d finally met the third roommate, I was more confused than ever about the social dynamics of the environment. All of the weird micropolitics neither Rena and Ana seemed to want to talk about could now be tied in with the more central-seeming question of how Heather – supposedly a cam girl/chef hybrid with what I thought to be a fairly run-of-the-mill and therefore hard to place English accent – had ever met and befriended two jet-setting Russian tennis players. (2) While considering this, I also began half-idly scanning the room for clues that would inform me about her boyfriend. I wanted to know about the strange man this niche culture seemed to be built around.

As far as I could tell, though, there was little of his essence, his nationality, or even his psychographics built into the place. Nothing in the living room jumped out at me, besides its scale. The large, right-angular black leather couches, the two huge, fully-equipped, wall-mounted wide screen TVs, and the big pricey-looking cube thing containing an electric fireplace didn’t

offer up the kind of information I was interested in. I didn't see any book shelves, the contents of which probably would have helped me most in characterizing the man.

I shifted focus to the appliance-packed, wood-floored kitchen - it seemed to be the essential core of the apartment anyway, as I came to realize the room was flanked on both sides by nearly identical living room sets with the same black couches. These were facing the same make of widescreen TVs, with identical cable boxes and Apple TV setups.

Set in the countertop was a nickel-plated sink full of trays, dishes, and mixing bowls – presumably the leftovers of Heather's web show. The doughy matter stuck to the inside utensils smelled deeply of vanilla. Next to sink sat a top-of-the-line Italian espresso machine, finished in a quirky Golden Gate orange. A Calder-like miniature mobile hung above a central island counter, which was made of some nice-looking stone I lacked the knowledge to name. Various Arsenal Football Club magnets were stuck to the fridge, all perfectly aligned in an institutional way that to me seemed silly. And finally, with the pull of what I thought would be a drawer containing the trash and recycling, I discovered a huge roll-out fridge filled entirely with Perrier, with plastic compartments shaped in such a way that only Perrier-shaped bottles with Perrier's distinctive glass trim would fit in them.

It was this fridge - so decadent, so stupid and useless, and most importantly, so clearly the touch of a low-grade, Perrier-sponsored interior decorator - that closed the case for me, that solidified in my mind the fact that the boyfriend wasn't a man who could be known in the way I was trying to get to know him. This was because I now knew without a doubt that this man owned a penthouse or two just like this one in every important city in the world, that he bought a couple more every year in order to bolster his international portfolio, and that he filled all of them with mass-produced (if high-end) crap haphazardly airlifted in from every section of the

earth. I'd read about this sort of thing weeks ago in *The Guardian*<sup>27</sup> but only then applied it to the situation at hand. I was standing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century iteration of the McMansion, one in an endless chain of too-expensive living spaces made lifeless by some rich citizen of no real country. No doubt there was one of these units in Dubai, in Tokyo, in New York City – all outfitted with the same tech, all carrying the same tennis gear, each of them different only in the fact that they displayed the local soccer team's stickers on the fridge.

The whole situation was a real problem, and an especially well-reported one with the referendum on the horizon: the way these ultra-high net worth foreigners bought up land was fucking things up when it came to the normal Briton's housing prospects. The real crappy part, as I understood it, was that once these super-rich people were in, they didn't "create" or "develop" all that much, as of course was a vague expectation governments and certain innocent individuals had of the super-rich. Instead they simply bought up land in Chelsea or Fitzrovia or wherever, creating a demand that drove housing prices way up, out of range for any normal English person, or couple, or family hoping to live in the city. Then the rich simply left, keeping their properties empty for years - not even bothering to rent them out - while the land the property was built on appreciated enough to sell at a profit, probably to an even richer foreigner several years down the line. Our case was special only in the fact that the apartment was furnished - a bunch of them in London were left completely bare.<sup>28</sup>

Fucking Perrier. As I stood there, watching the nicely dimmed yellow fridge lights shine up through the green bottles of carbonated water, feeling the cool vapor rise up and fill the air around me, I found the recursives gearing up for a brutal self-critique of my own place in the

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<sup>27</sup> Which seemed to me to be a publication left-of-center enough for my tastes - though I could never really be sure due to my general ignorance of English media.

<sup>28</sup> Early 2016 estimates had the number at 50,000+ owned yet unfurnished units.

whole depressing state of affairs. I was about to fully condemn my own willingness to look good in this man's clothes, my readiness to live so well, even if temporarily, in this golden monument to nothing - when luckily, Heather chose that moment to re-enter the room. She had her phone to her ear with one hand, was carrying five or so reusable shopping bags in the other, and was in the middle of inviting a shrill-voiced someone on the other end to her party. As she motioned for me to follow out the door, she put her hand to the microphone and - looking at the still-open rollout fridge - whispered "Get me one". I nodded and grabbed two.

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I'll say upfront that the walk to Marks & Spencer was something else.

Since I didn't have an umbrella, Heather offered to share hers if I agreed to hold it for the both of us. From there, though, she tacked on further stipulations. Since it would be awkward for us to walk so closely together under the umbrella while trying not to bump into each other, I would have to give her my arm. Then, since I apparently wasn't holding the umbrella in the right way and she was getting wet, Heather demanded I give over the Burberry scarf that I'd borrowed from the apartment's coat rack to "Those of us in dire need of cover," by whom she of course met herself. Finally, since I'd allowed too much rain to get into her Perrier with my poor umbrella work, I would have to give up my bottle, which I'd left unopened in my coat pocket.

It took me way too long to realize that she was totally playing around with me – partially, I think, because I had yet to meet an English person as personable and playful as she was secretly being.<sup>29</sup> I only knew what was up when Heather, after looking straight into my eyes while drinking from my bottle, finally broke, cracking up and basically doing a fizzy spit take onto the

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<sup>29</sup> In the country's defense, I hadn't met many English people.



Burberry scarf, the lower part of my jacket, as well as the blackened chewing gum-dotted sidewalk of Tottenham Court Road.

“Well,” I said, quickly forcing my thought template to shift from the paralyzed self-defensiveness I’d adopted to a cool and removed distance-type stance where I could try to be even partially funny. “Now’s a good time to tell you that the last two blocks were probably the most excruciatingly awkward thing I’ve been through in my life.”

Heather coughed up some more water, then looked at me with a smile, then coughed a little more. “I was going to take it all the way back to the apartment, I swear it,” she said, after her lungs were clear. “I was going to have you carrying everything back.”

“I probably would have done it.”

“Yeah I know you would have.”

“Really? You’re so sure?”

“I could have had you in your pants.”

“Ok, well let’s not go that far,” I said, after a half-second of not getting her meaning.

“*Underwear*,” she said, affecting a drawl.

“Hey, I got there. Eventually.”

We walked into Marks & Spencer, right past the spectacular aisles of lingerie, the candy kiosks decked with delicate and colorful chocolates, purposefully kept at the storefront. Our eyes were only for the wine and liquor section near the back.

A loud yet bored-sounding voice told someone to depart with the bottle they had taken into the store with them, and when we turned around the bald salesman standing at a brilliantly white rectangular soap display said “Yes, you.” Heather made a ‘yeesh’ face and dropped it in a trashcan.

“I get yelled at so much over here,” I told Heather, as we kept on our way.

“Who is yelling at you?”

“Service industry people - bartenders and McDonald’s staff with thick accents I can’t decipher in time. Drunk, old dudes in bars. I accidentally walked onto the set of a movie they were shooting at the Senate House Library the other day, and got escorted off by security. They yelled at me a lot.”

“You’re joking,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “What movie?”

“Never found out. However, I did recognize during my exit that there were far more swastika banners in the Library than usual.” I was excited when the last part, which I fictively punched up just a bit<sup>30</sup>, got a big laugh.

“Well I’m sorry about that. The yelling,” she said. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that people tend to be far more accommodating outside of the city.”

“Oh no, I like it. Pure intercultural exchange like that is hard to come by where I’m from, so I’ll take it where I can get it.”

“And where do you come from?” she asked, as we finally arrived at the towering cabinets of booze that lined the walls at the end of the store.

“Washington DC,” I said. I thought about cornily rattling off some of DC’s nicknames<sup>31</sup> for comedic effect, but realized the jokes might be lost on a foreigner.

“And there’s no ‘intercultural exchange’ there?” she asked, suddenly skeptic.

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<sup>30</sup> The banners on the walls were actually swastika-like, red, white, black, and severely angular - obviously a visual reference to the Third Reich meant to show that the villains in whatever movie was being shot that day were really, really bad. But I thought the longer explanation would have ruined the joke.

<sup>31</sup> Nation’s Capital, Diamond District, “A Capital City!”, Chocolate City, The Capital of the World (an unfortunate one), Hollywood for Ugly People, etc.

“Well I don’t yell back in America; I don’t want to get shot. Here I can say whatever I want, within my own limits of decency of course.” This bit was entirely improvisation - I’d never thought about these ideas before voicing them that moment, and I could tell that for whatever reason they weren’t going over as well as my more scripted material. Heather was nodding while trying to decide on a brand of tequila.

“Where are *you* from?” I asked.

“Plymouth,” she said. “In the south.”

“We have one of those,” I said, trying to play cool again.

She smirked and rolled her eyes, then told me something I can’t recall about the town, something about how close to the coast her childhood home in Plymouth was, or maybe how because she grew up in Plymouth the coast would always be her home to her, but I was too distracted to grasp the particulars. I’d picked a bottle of Russian Standard from the shelf and turned it to look at the writing on the back, hoping Heather might ask me if I could read Russian so that the conversation would continue on to bigger and better things than respective hometowns. I was only a little disappointed when she didn’t take, but had my disappointment immediately checked when I remembered that of course Heather knew Rena, who must have mentioned something about me being in Russia with her. Through our mutual friend I could lead the conversation back to greener pastures, then onto foreign fields.

“So how did you and Rena meet?” I asked, to which Heather responded by having her face go immediately blank. My heart jumped as I recognized I had probably just talked over her, or failed to respond to a question, or just generally betrayed the fact that I wasn’t really listening through some unexplainable human essence we all emit when we are too wrapped up in ourselves.

“Wow,” I said. “I’m sorry. I do that way too often.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, in what sounded like earnest.

“I’m ADD as hell if that excuses me at all, which it doesn’t. What were you saying?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she repeated, placing a pricey bottle of Gran Patrón in her carrier.

A few minutes went by in silence as we moved on to other liquors. I decided to buy a cheap bottle of Stolichnaya for Rena and I to share sometime in the near future, already looking forward to the small pleasure of hearing her say the company’s name. Heather turned a corner and went for the gins, I followed a few steps behind.

My phone buzzed, displaying a picture of Rena and I. We were standing together in the foreground of a panorama at the Peterhof Palace, golden fountains and bridges descending into the distance - finally disappearing into the powder-blue<sup>32</sup> Gulf of Finland. I was picking Rena up off her feet, she was laughingly resisting me since I’d obviously caught her by surprise. I looked strong, tan, and happy. About ten years younger, too.<sup>33</sup>

“Pronto,” I said, causing Heather to turn and give me an amused look.

“No more Italian today,” Rena said, sounding out of it from her nap. “Just got off the phone with my mom so that’s four languages. Too much.”

I briefly wondered how Dutch people answered the phone. “Hello,” I said.

“Where did you go?” Rena asked, sounding, to my surprise, a little worried.

“Shopping with Heather. For the party tonight.”

Rena was silent for a moment.

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<sup>32</sup> I’ve never seen the Gulf of Finland actually described in this way, but it was an especially bright day, and the photo was taken with enough exposure that everything in it – especially the green of the palace gardens, had been jacked up a few tints.

<sup>33</sup> I then felt stupid for feeling so nostalgic while still attending college.

“What are you wearing?” I asked. Heather guffawed and quickly clapped a hand to her mouth.

“*Boug moi!*<sup>34</sup>” Rena said, laughing a little herself. “What is Heather saying to you?”

“Oh, come on! I meant to the party. What are you wearing to the party?” I said, feeling myself go a little red.

“Is it casual?” Rena asked, meekly.

I relayed the question to Heather, who tilted her head from side to side, then did the same with her free left hand.

“I’m hearing semi-casual, maybe even slightly dressy, from your friend here,” I said.

“Shit,” Rena replied. Then, after another short silence: “What will *you* wear?”

It sounded like she expected me not to own a single non-flannel button-down. And she was nearly right – I had only brought along to England two nice shirts and one passable blazer my freshman year RA, upon seeing I had been severely undereducated style-wise, had taken me to a local men’s fashion place to buy – but I found myself resenting the fact that *this* was a thought that so troubled her. I mean, of course I knew women thought about how guys dress and take care of themselves and stuff like that, but to hear her doubt [re: my ability to dress myself] put so bluntly was hurtful. It had always seemed to me that this was something the genders should only discuss among themselves, anything further being an obvious encroachment. I’d never heard a guy just assume out loud that the woman he was seeing wouldn’t have nice enough clothes to be seen with him that night.<sup>35</sup> This theoretical guy would be a condescending pig, and

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<sup>34</sup> My god!

<sup>35</sup> I’d never seen this happen in real life, that is. Talking heads and media-engorged male celebrities had been commenting on how women dressed a lot lately, sometimes, it seemed, just for the controversy they knew it would generate. But there were also fantastically popular shows where women would sit down and as a group make fun of what other women are wearing (i.e. *Fashion Police*) - so there was something complicated going on there.

if this guy were more wealthy, or had obtained through his many travels a more “expanded worldview” than the theoretical girl, well, the sin would only be multiplied.

I told Rena I would stop at my flat first and meet up with her later. I hung up before she could reply.

“Well, I’m all set if you are,” said Heather, lifting up her reusable bags, now bulging and weighty. I took two of them from her and we began to walk to the front of the store. I was too distracted to say anything - forget about something that could be called “witty” or “breezy” in the way conversations between near-strangers has to be - so we made our way in silence for a bit.

Soon enough we passed the same bald man who had yelled at us before. All apparently forgiven, he asked us if we wanted to sample a new fragrance by a company with an unusually ugly French name. I must have said “No” a little too forcefully because I saw him jolt back a little, as if I’d actually said ‘Fuck off.’ For the second time now, I turned to see Heather eyeing me oddly. She was deliberately keeping half a step behind as we walked, giving me a look that was at once inquisitive and amused. She wasn’t being flirty or anything like that, I didn’t think, but her look effectively melted me as if she were. It isn’t so often that someone so beautiful looks at you in this way.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You’re going to hate me for asking this,” she said, feigning coy.

“I’m sure I won’t,” I said.

We arrived at the checkout, staffed by a short, dark-skinned man in a tan suit. He was wearing a large plastic name tag that introduced him as Ifechi. It flapped up and down noisily as he handled our booze.

“You must be prescribed meds for the ADD, right?” she continued. I tensed up out of instinct, not wanting to discuss something so personal in front of the clerk, but quickly decided it actually didn’t matter to me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Two prescriptions actually.” I watched Ifechi for a reaction and saw none.

“Oh, that’s beautiful. And did you do the thing where you get all of your prescriptions in advance before coming here?”

I smirked, wondering how she knew so much about the practices surrounding controlled medications, of which Adderall - being the miracle drug that it was - was a big one. The topic also made me realize I was feeling just about back to normal – the stuff most likely being almost entirely out of my system by now<sup>36</sup>.

“Yeah. They gave it all to me at once in these huge bottles, so big they look like stage props,” I said. I had actually kept the things in my carry-on just in case English customs decided to seize them, which apparently they were known to do with Adderall from time to time. “I have about four months-worth left,” I added.

“I’ll ask you this directly then,” Heather said, as she went in her purse for the booze’s payment. “How much of it, if any, would you want to sell?”

Without even thinking, I heard myself answer: “All of it, I guess. I’m actually trying to live without it for a bit, to be honest.”

I knew right then that I was going to quit. That’s just how things were.

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<sup>36</sup> Maybe unrelated, but I often considered what societal shifts would take place when They created an amphetamine that lasted not just for hours, but *days*. Surely the science would get there within our lifetime, but would such a pill be used recreationally as well? Or would it be on special order for long-hour wage laborers with miserable jobs? And would people actually be more productive on it – going at whatever menial thing they were assigned to do for days at a time? Or would the need to do human things like eat and play and have sex at regular intervals outweigh the worker’s need to be more productive?

Now Ifechi reacted. He looked at Heather and, maintaining a flat expression, shook his head slowly. Heather, either unaware or apathetic, slid her credit card into the slot and began inputting information.

“Well, if you want,” she said, slowly, “I could sell it all for you tonight. All I’d want in return is a little of the – wait – this one too, thanks” she said, indicating my bottle of Stoli.

“Thanks,” I said, not even bothering to insist otherwise. I was legitimately grateful to not be dipping in to my meagre personal holdings. The longer I could hold off on emailing my dad for more cash, the better.<sup>37</sup>

Heather waited until we were outside to continue on. She hooked my arm as we quickly ducked into the cover of a wood and scaffold construction site, built up around the store adjacent to M & S. The rain was falling steadily on rush hour traffic – several people stood close to us under the shelter.

“Yeah so,” Heather continued, “I could sell it all at once tonight. All I want is, like, ten percent of what we make - if that suits you - plus a little bit of the stuff for myself.” She shrugged her shoulders.

I stopped to consider all of it for a moment. Heather had definitely done this or something like it before, I just wondered how many times. If I were a tiny bit more paranoid and two touches more delusional, I would have said the whole situation smacked of the classic honey pot, if you swapped low-level drug dealing for international espionage. Of course I knew it was far from anything like that – Rena wasn’t so indifferent that she would let me walk around with a

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<sup>37</sup> The man, great as he was, was incapable of understanding the facts that (1) the pound was fractionally stronger than the US dollar at this time, necessitating him to send a good deal more cash to make up the difference (2) that London was near the top for most expensive cities in the world, and (3) my student visa forbade me from working and collecting a salary, which I actually would have been happy to do under the circumstances. Alas, the student, even when he or she ventures abroad, is forever infantilized.



dangerous person, and Heather really didn't look like a person capable of, say, harvesting my kidneys. I trusted her - she seemed legitimately nice. Not just that, but down to earth. Far from aloof, in the way one might expect an obviously well-liked woman who lived in a huge apartment in the middle of London to be aloof.

"Let's do it," I said, extending my hand for a shake, mostly as a joke. Heather rolled her eyes and waved it away.

"Do you need a ride back to your place? We can't have you walking all the way there in this. I can call you an Uber if you give me your address."

Again, I decided to forgo the whole polite shuffle of denying her graciousness. I told her to input The Calthorpe Arms, a cozy pub<sup>38</sup> directly across the street from my flat. This was really the easiest way to get there, since my residential complex wasn't actually marked as a location on any of major navigation apps. I had found this out the hard way as I tried, jet-laggedly, to make my way there on my first day in the country. Heather laughed a little as I related all the above, her eyes set on her phone.

"My flat is directly on the way to yours, you know," she said, using her thumb and pointer finger to zoom the map in. I noticed she had rather messy cuticles, which was something I rarely ever noticed on people. "I'll just hop along with you for the first leg, yeah?"

"By all means," I said.

"Great," she said. "Amir is arriving in four minutes."

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<sup>38</sup> In a city where so many old pubs had either been bought out, badly decorated with pre-millennium, mass-produced furniture and lighting, had their food services outsourced to centralized food distributors (meaning many pubs in London kept the exact same and quite awful menus as their competitors), or all of the above, The Calthorpe Arms was a haven of old-school Victorian atmospherics and homemade cooking.

The sedan that arrived was small and cramped, especially for someone of my stature, with a backseat about half the size of those found in the sublimely spacious Black Cabs. Just as with the umbrella situation, Heather and I were forced once again to be pressed in against one another, shoulder to shoulder. Once Heather had confirmed with the driver that multiple stops were okay, she undid her bun and immediately went to trying to tie it together again – a sequence which involved me having to dodge her highly-active right elbow a few times as it flew back and forth across my line of sight. In this frenzy caught a whiff of what must have been cocoa butter or something like it, this scent mixing with what I knew to be the smell of wet hair. When she was finished arranging, she looked at me, smiled, and crinkled her nose. This, I realized, was her little way of tipping me off to the fact I was staring at her. I turned to look out the window.

We crawled through traffic at airport people-mover speed, never going more than a block without having to stop again. Every time we hit traffic, Amir, a very muscular Middle Eastern-looking man whose huge biceps seemed to be stretching out the sleeves of his white Ferrari jacket, would bring the car to a jerking stop, then give a small sigh.

Heather and I talked quietly on the way, with me mostly directing questions at her. She gave short answers with charming little practiced-seeming anecdotes attached. She told me she had studied International Relations at the University of Southampton, where she'd written a thesis on EU policy in Poland during the Donald Tusk years.<sup>39</sup> She hadn't since received any job offer she especially liked since she had graduated last year. She had a brother and two sisters, of which she was the oldest. Yes, she had, in fact, been kicked on Kick a Ginger Day by a school-yard rival in Year 6.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tusk, on top of being the former Prime Minister of Poland, was also the only Pole to ever hold the title of President of the European Council.

<sup>40</sup> Corresponds to fifth grade, in the American system.

“Eliza Gay,” she said, shaking her head with mock severity. “That little bitch.”

I had just about forgotten about my little investigation of her boyfriend when I broached the topic by accident.

“How did you end up in London?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, looking up at the ceiling as she pieced it together. “There was a bed for me at Alexei’s, and I’d always seen myself in London anyway, so I thought I would just move here and put it all together as I went along, right? There was an internship for a while, but that ended up leading nowhere. By the time I got out of it though I was already quite settled in here.”

Alexei, I thought - another Russian then, which definitely backed up my super-rich-buying-up-the-world-and-all-of-its-real-estate theory. As much as I had heard and read about all the vacant apartment stuff going on in England, I’d heard far more from American media over the years about the Russian oligarchy’s practice of hiding their liquid assets in foreign real estate. This made their capital very hard to access by anyone who should seek to tax, regulate, or seize it.<sup>41</sup> Maybe I was stereotyping the Alexei in this case, conceiving of him as the shady Friends of Putin type – who, by the way, you could spot in any Russian nightclub because they would walk in and immediately buy out half of the alcohol for bottle service, causing groups of high-heeled women to flock from the dance floor to the special VIP sections in the corners, thus thinning out the crowd considerably<sup>42</sup> - but it seemed all too plausible. I wondered if this guy and Rena had ever met.

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<sup>41</sup> The year before I had worked in Russia, in fact, a Russian billionaire had purchased for his 22-year-old daughter an 88-million-dollar apartment overlooking Central Park. There was speculation that the man had done this to hide the money from his wife, with whom he was engaged in divorce talks. The whole thing was in the news for like three weeks.

<sup>42</sup> Back in Russia, I saw this happen far too many times for it to be a stereotype. Rena and I and whoever we happened to be out with that night would just sit back and watch the gaudy spectacle with deep fascination. For reference, Rena once remarked that reserving a single table would cost more than we were getting paid that entire summer.

“So what are you doing now?” I asked, maybe a bit too late in the conversation, since I saw we were approaching the apartment building. I asked this question not to embarrass Heather, or even out of any sort of prurient interest, but simply because it seemed like an appropriate thing to ask in that moment, all things considered. It also occurred to me, for the first time, that she might not be all that stigmatized by it - it being her job and all.

Heather looked around the cab. “Small things here and there - that whole clichéd thing,” she said. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the latest venture, though.”

“Only whispers.” I said, trying to downplay how interested I was but probably achieving the opposite. “Rena and Ana said something about a web show?”

Heather nodded quickly. “I’m blazing a trail in the web show business, really. Doing something I doubt ever has been done before: burlesque cooking.”

I thought I saw Amir’s shoulders bounce up and down slightly in the front seat, and presumed him to be laughing silently to himself. I laughed right along with him.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” she said, clearly pleased by my reaction. “I have the choreography down and everything. And you might not believe me when I say it, but it’s more of an art form at this point, that’s how good I am at doing both at once.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said. “I’m not saying I’m picturing it now, but I could definitely picture it.” At this she slapped me playfully on the chest with the back of her hand.

Though the last thing I wanted was to stop the conversation there, we had finally come to stop outside of the apartment. Heather told me she would see me at the party, reminded me not to forget our deal, and told me to wear something nice. I got out of the car with her so that she could exit on the sidewalk side and handed over her bags. After that I handed over the umbrella, immediately afterwards wishing that I had remembered to open it for her. She thanked me again

for helping, even though I hadn't done much carrying anyway, then rushed away so as not to get drenched. I saw her struggle with the umbrella's velcro strap for a second before finally getting it open with an explosion of red nylon canopy. As I watched her walk away, I realized something I should have seen from the start: Heather wasn't someone I wanted to be in business with. She was someone I wanted to know, not collect profit from. And definitely not patronize – the thought of going home and watching her dance on screen, though initially tempting, was tinged with *use*, with the forever ephemeral and sickening concept of human *usefulness*. The whole thing was just another shitty business arrangement. An artfully orchestrated *deal*. A pricey little monument to nothing.

Amir took his foot off the brake and let us coast down the side street for a bit. He then made a sharp turn that set us in the direction of my apartment. There was the BT Tower, its solemn green horribleness seeming to reach into the stratosphere. The sound of rain on the car's roof didn't strike then as much as it had that morning in the coffee shop, but I found it calming.

My thoughts, less urgent and anxious than they had been all day, went to academics - to the research I had never gotten around to starting. Then to the British Museum and its hodgepodge collection of artifacts shipped in from far-away lands, all of the Empire's holdings somehow incapable of sustaining my interest. Then to the plaques that sat underneath the displays, explaining each piece's presence in the gallery with neutral adjectives: *This pillar retrieved from an artist's house in rural China. This sculpture found during excavation in northern Egypt*. It occurred to me briefly that it may be impossible to travel the world without in some way exploiting it. Well, I had to maintain hope it was possible, but I seriously doubted whether it had ever been done.

Sitting there in Amir's backseat, something powerful suddenly came over me - something I felt intuitively had been lurking deep in the limbic system of my brain all though the day, muted until now by the meds, which, I was beginning to think, were perpetuating the recursive feedback loop rather than snapping me out of it.

I thought about it for a second to make sure I wasn't mistaken, then leaned forward and said the only thing I needed to say:

"I don't think I want to see any of those people for a while," I said.

Amir found my eyes in his rearview mirror. "What?"

"Yeah, I am just going to go ahead and pause all those relationships right here, I think. Give it a little time."

"Hmm," Amir said.

"Have you ever been to the British Museum?" I asked.

"Yeah, plenty of times," Amir said.

"I'm going later tonight - they're doing this afters thing I want to write about."

"Sounds good, brother," he said.

Amir was obviously not too keen on talking, so I decided to just let him be. I rested my head against my seat and continued listening to the rain. I tried to remember if I had ever in my life experienced a day as rainy as this. It hadn't let up for even a moment.

## EPILOGUE

Without prolonging things too much, I'll conclude with some resolutions. I think the reader is owed this much.

It wasn't the end of any of those relationships, besides with Ana. I haven't seen her since, and for that fact we are both glad.

I finally texted Rena a week later, after she had already gone back to Moscow, just wanting to check in. She told me that what I had done was for the best – she was seeing someone else anyway, and that someone was at the party that night. Furthermore, that someone was actually Alexei - the owner of the apartment. The whole thing with him and Heather was a lie for my benefit, which explained a lot looking back on it. Rena had already moved on, but didn't want me to feel bad.

Rena and I still write to each other frequently, and for this I'm really grateful. The reader may doubt the veracity of this claim, but I find Rena easier to love, though its probably something different from love now, from far away. She's a great pen pal, always quick with an interesting take on the day's events.

It turns out Heather was simply Alexei's property guardian – he was paying her to stay there and take care of the place while he was elsewhere. Heather (who really did not care all that much about the pills anyway) and I actually went out a few times after the whole thing, she introduced me to her friends, who were great, and we even spent a few memorable nights together in that huge lifeless apartment. The last day I saw her, right before getting on my plane for DC, she was telling me she was having Brexit nightmares. When she messaged me a few months later to tell me she was having Trump nightmares, it was a bad sign.

I quit the pills. I also, against all odds, finished the research project. It didn't turn out exactly how I was expecting, but here we are.



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**EXPERIENCE:**

Student Teaching in English Rhetoric  
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**AWARDS AND ACTIVITIES:**

Two travel grants from Schreyer Honors College.  
Two stories published in Kalliope (student literary journal).  
Studied at University College of London.  
Four years of Italian