

"Recollection" by Myra Thompson

Winning story in the 2008 Nick Adams Short Story Contest

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## Recollection

Gathering up his journal and pen, Pavel prepared to record the day's only call before the details of his friend's passing, seventy years old from a coma to the afterlife, were swallowed into the fog of a half-remembered existence.

Pavel had been at the kitchen window watching a crew of workmen crouching and sharing beers on the other side of the street when the phone rang. He lifted his forehead off the glass, thinking he'd have to wipe it before Tanya got home, and shuffled down the hallway. "Allo?" he answered.

"Pavel Grigorovich?" From the way the caller said his patronymic, Pavel understood that the taut female voice belonged to Lilya, Yuri's only daughter.

"Speaking."

"Yuri is dead."

Although unsurprised, he had no answer prepared. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said after a pause.

Lilya sighed. "I'm sorry for yours." He heard heart monitors beeping. So Lilya had finally visited the hospital when it was too late. Only a week before, Pavel had been holding Yuri's hand at the sickbed ceremony of the Parting of the Soul from the Body while Yuri kept scanning those gathered around him and trying to sit up whenever he heard footsteps in the hall, only to close his eyes and sink back into the pillow as the footsteps faded without bringing Lilya.

Pavel said, "Yuri was a good man."

"Yes."

"He had a hard life."

"Yes."

They had known different Yuris and had nothing else to talk about. The man who read Lilya bits of the paper every day that he could get one, at least until she took up with that bad influence of a boy, was not the same man Pavel had reminisced with about Soviet times. So, they'd hung up awkwardly and Pavel had started running his hands over the pages of his journal, feeling the texture of the words on thin paper, thoughts pressed into thoughts.

Pavel had been his mother's memory once her own was lost; this collection of blue pen on graph paper was his insurance against that same fate. He'd begun writing in it daily during the perestroika, when he was five years away from a pension but suddenly unemployed. On the cover he wrote, "*When these are no longer your memories, you have lived too long.*" The last few days, sitting in the kitchen with the warm honey light of late afternoon, waiting for Tanya to come back from teaching, he'd begun to suspect that the message on the cover was meant for him now.

Yes, Pavel had lived too long. He had outlived his parents, Yuri, and even the remembrance of his own life. He still had some moments preserved, events he'd cradled in his mind, but what of the average days? What of the days that stacked one on top of the other somewhere between routine and monotony? There were inexcusable gaps. He couldn't remember what direction his desk faced in the office he had worked in for thirty years, carefully disassembling, diagramming, and reassembling foreign production line components. He couldn't remember how Tanya had done her hair before she had let it go gray, even though he was sure he'd seen her in the bathroom mirror doing something to it morning after morning. He couldn't

remember what he had drunk tea from before his grandson, Seryozha, had given him a hand painted mug last New Year's.

Pavel had begun failing his tests, further evidence that his own mind was leaving him. Once a week he took apart the stopped brass pocket watch from his father's army days and hid its components throughout the apartment, carefully marking in the journal where everything from the escapement to the hairspring had been hidden in case he needed a reference. A week later, he would look for the pieces to put it back together, only to start the cycle over the next day. Lately, he'd been checking the journal more and more. There were tally marks to prove it. On the last scavenging day, he'd had to look five times.

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As Pavel gathered his thoughts to put on paper, he studied the sugar bowl on the kitchen table. About fifteen years ago, Yuri had come over to Pavel and Tanya's apartment with this flower-patterned bowl, explaining at the door, "It doesn't match the rest of the china, and, well . . ." Yuri handed over the bowl and peeled off his jacket. "Lately I either have my tea black or get cubes straight from the box, and maybe it's not as refined, but there you have it." He nodded at the bowl in Tanya's hands.

It was not the first item of his wife's that Yuri brought over in the weeks after she died—March 7, 1983, just before Women's Day—but it was the only one Pavel could recall. Yuri often presented these gifts with talk of Natasha, about how suddenly it happened, her being struck by a careless driver when she just wanted to cross the street and buy a little butter, and how her once-graceful neck had looked wrong, even after she was made up for the funeral and Tanya tied that elegant scarf about it. In those days, Yuri spoke of Natasha almost remorsefully, without any of the formerly typical outbursts about her soup not being served hot enough or her phone conversations with her mother being too lengthy. In those days, when the death was so recent, almost every conversation began and ended with Natasha.

This time, however, Yuri opened with, "How is your Sasha?" once he and Pavel were seated at the kitchen table.

Pavel shook his head. "We want him to study for exams, in case he changes his mind about University."

"I wish things had worked. Between Lilya and him." Yuri studied his fingers where they rested on the plastic tablecloth. Pavel's son was only a year older than Lilya, but their mothers had never quite managed to pair them off.

"How is Lilya?"

"She moved in with that Pyotr. Left a note and no number." Yuri tapped his right index finger and watched its movements closely. "And before that she was coming home late, unlocking the door real slowly, as if I wasn't awake, waiting for her to come back." He stopped tapping. "With bruises that the makeup doesn't quite cover, and those eyes."

Pavel, too, had noticed how Lilya's eyes flitted about, hovering on doors, windows, corners, shadows. But he placed a firm hand on Yuri's shoulder and said nothing.

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Tanya came home and left her heels by the door, switching to slippers. Pavel didn't like to think about her walking around in those shoes that rubbed against her blisters and calluses. Oh, when she was young, she was a presence in heels; they sculpted her calves and punctuated

each step. But now, she hobbled home and every night he cared for her feet, kneading away the memory of the walk to and from the metro.

Taking off her coat, Tanya said, "Pasha?" turning around to look at him.

"Yes."

"Yuri is dead."

"Yes."

They didn't speak again until Tanya had heated the supper. Stirring their cabbage soup to let it cool, they talked about Tanya's coworkers at the Moscow Russian Language Institute.

"Katya—" she began.

Pavel looked up. "Alekseich?"

"Yes—she didn't come in today. Called saying she slipped and fell yesterday." Both knew they hadn't had a good snow yet and the mud was just beginning to harden. There wasn't enough ice to slip on.

Pavel could see the concern stitching his wife's brow, the way it used to when she worried about Natasha. "Leave it alone."

"I know." Tanya turned her head toward the window, eyes focused somewhere in the darkness beyond the curtain. "But it's the third time she's been out this month."

"It's a private family matter," Pavel reminded her, as he'd once had to remind her that *Yuri* was Natasha's husband, not either of them. It was not their problem how other couples sorted out disagreements.

"Yes." Her gaze reentered the room and rested on the tray of *pelmini*. "But our Sasha has his own apartment now. She could sleep where he did."

"Let's hope he can afford the unit."

"They've managed for years. He'll find new work." Tanya looked into Pavel's eyes. "He's a good son."

"Yes." Pavel gazed at their living room to the right, the room that their son had slept in before he started a family.

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Looking at the living room, Pavel remembered the last time the bookshelf, or anything else in it, had been moved. Tanya had insisted on rearranging the furniture *that weekend*, even though Sasha and a few of his classmates had taken a trip to Petersburg. She'd pointed out where pieces were to go then left the apartment in order to give Pavel more space to work with. Without the aid of their eighteen-year-old, he'd had to shove and grunt until his muscles were limp and his arms shook if he lifted even a teacup.

To ease the soreness, Pavel was indulging in a little extra water for his Sunday evening shower when Yuri called.

Tanya cracked the door to the bathroom and Pavel felt the cool draft.

"Pasha?" she shouted over the spurting water.

"Yes." He let his left hand, holding the showerhead, go slack, and he stopped lathering the bar of soap with his right hand. The water now struck him at the knees and the hose was warm where it skimmed his calf.

"Yuri called. I think you ought to visit. Tonight." Tanya closed the door with a small click and Pavel, who wanted only to stand under that stream of forgiving water, put the soap back in its dish. He lingered only until his neck and shoulders were thoroughly rinsed.

Pavel was waiting at Yuri's door less than an hour later, carrying in the crook of his aching arm an oversize jar of peach *kompot* that Tanya said would do Yuri good to drink. Pavel buzzed and surveyed the hallway—two of the three doors had horseshoes near them and the electric-blue walls were cluttered by phone lines poking out of holes, by skis and fishing poles and scraps of lumber casting long shadows on grimy surfaces. After a long wait and no answering footsteps on the other side of the door, Pavel pounded on the leatherette padding the door and then put his ear to the crack. He heard plastic crinkling and glass colliding, as though bottles were being thrown into a trash bag. "Yuri!" he called, "it's just me." When the door still didn't open, he added, "You don't have to clean. Just let me in."

Finally, he heard the scrape of a lock and was allowed inside. The wood-patterned laminate flooring was a mess of used dishes and empty bottles, with a knot of blankets and a pillow by the television. Pavel didn't let his eyes stray too long on any part of the flat, he just carried the *kompot* over to the table, setting it down with a dull thud. From the vantage point of the kitchen, he noticed Lilya's room.

"Yuri?" Pavel said, crossing over to her doorway.

Yuri followed and let Pavel look in at the prim bed, the empty shelves, the brighter squares of wallpaper where posters had been. Yuri said, "Things got bad with her boyfriend."

Pavel nodded, although that did not explain her barren room.

"Pasha, she moved to Kiev. She's not coming back."

Then they sat at the table and mixed vodka and the *kompot* because they didn't know what else to do. The memory dissolved with the two of them hunched over the table, elbows nestled in between newspapers, crumbs, and glasses.

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Tanya's voice was worn at the edges as she spoke from the doorway. "Pasha? Did Yuri ever talk to you about his wife?"

Pavel nodded then set the article—it concerned the effects of strong magnetic fields on human health—next to him on the bed and looked up at her over his reading glasses.

"Did he love her?" she asked.

"Yes."

"She died young. Never put on weight or colored her hair."

Pavel wished Tanya could see herself with the light from the kitchen softening every edge, silhouetting the narrowing of her waist and the swell of her hips. Where the light came through her lacy shawl it was a luminescent wing. "She would have become more beautiful," Pavel told his wife.

She smiled, and although he could barely make out her features with the halo around her, he knew that on her face were the lines recording an accumulation of smiles.

Tanya came into the room and perched herself on the edge of the bed, laying a hand on the quilt over Pavel's shin. "If he loved her, then how did he do that to their only daughter?"

"Do what?" Pavel picked up his article again, but didn't resume reading. "Lilya left him for that—that hooligan, even when she knew he was in mourning."

"Lilya was in mourning, too." Tanya folded her hands in her lap and looked to the door. "If only he had forgiven her."

"If only she had apologized!" Pavel did not mean to sound so forceful, but Yuri was dead and someone had to defend his memory. When he looked up from the article, he noticed her eyes

were the vibrant blue color they only took on before and after crying. “Tanya,” Pavel whispered, “Tanyusha.” He folded back the bedding and moved next to her, letting her head rest on his chest. He put an arm around her and felt her rise and fall with his breathing.

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One of Pavel’s favorite going-to-sleep memories was from sometime in his thirties. He could no longer place the exact year. Tanya had come to meet him at the office because they had tickets for *Evgeny Onegin* at a nearby theater. It was only her second or third time in the building, so he relished the chance to show her off to his colleagues. She came to his desk wearing her good dress, light material heavy with the summer rain. Pavel saw her chest rise, gathering breath to say, “It was sunny when I left!” The clinging cloth accentuated every perfect curve, transforming her into a Grecian sculpture somehow more explicit than naked flesh, and he had hurriedly put his suit jacket over her shoulders before introductions.

After touring the office, they went down the hall to the elevator. While waiting, Pavel rubbed some stray hairs off of Tanya’s temple with his thumb. He didn’t want the water that had plastered them there to drip into her eyes or run down her flushed cheeks, cheeks that were finally full of life after what had seemed a week or a month of paleness.

“You should have worn a coat,” Pavel told her. He couldn’t remember what color the dress had been, but he knew that even its worn color had looked brazen in the shabby, institutional hallway.

“I had hoped it would stay warm.” The doors for the freight elevator opened and she stepped in. She looked over her shoulder to say, “I wanted to feel a breeze without shivering.”

Pavel stepped in after her. “Then we will schedule a trip to the sea. I will talk to my supervisor.” He pressed in the button for the ground floor, but had to press it twice more before it stuck. The doors came together, squeezing out most of the light except for the glow of the single working bulb overhead.

The elevator was always dark, Pavel could say with certainty, and that day all of its feeble light was falling on Tanya’s cheekbones. Their hands touched as the elevator jerked to life and Tanya threaded her fingers into his. Pavel turned toward her and put his free hand on the small of her back, on the worn wool of his own jacket, and their mouths came together. When the elevator stopped, they stayed in the embrace but looked to the doors. The doors stayed closed. Pavel stepped forward and bent down to look at the gap where weather stripping might once have been, but there was no light on the other side. “It’s stopped,” Tanya said.

“Yes.” Pavel agreed, standing to examine the call button. He pushed it and explained their situation, but there wasn’t even the reassuring crackle of static. “Looks like we’re stuck.”

Tanya nodded. “Yes.” They resumed their kiss. Even as his suit coat was cast to the floor that had been dirtied by years of slushy boots, Pavel was glad of the shared space that was somehow theirs alone.

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Stepping into the church, Pavel was greeted by the strong perfume of wax and incense. It somehow reminded him of childhood every time he smelled it, although at most he would have smelled such candles and oils only at his baptism and his sisters’—and he didn’t know for certain whether those had even occurred. Pavel believed they had, thought he had a scrap of memory in which he was clutching his mother’s thick skirt. He was almost certain that his mother’s devout

fear of the afterlife was greater than her fear of what would happen if her Party-member husband found out that she'd led the children into a church.

Yuri's casket was open in the middle of the sanctuary. Pavel bought four candles, but couldn't remember which saints answered which prayers, so he lit one for the Virgin and one for the Christ. He and Tanya held the other two during the service, the hot wax gradually dripping and forming patterns like exposed tree roots on their left hands. With their right hands they crossed themselves at the proper times.

The priest's resonant, deep voice and the swell of the choral responses were divine, the sort of earthly echoes from heavenly realms that made lifelong drunkards want to repent, only to be part of such a sound.

"My soul cleaveth to the dust; O quicken thou me," the priest sang in his rich baritone. He continued reciting even as a shaft of blue light cut into the candlelit chamber and Lilya entered, almost twenty-five years older than Pavel had last seen her. She wore a skirt, but it was short enough to emphasize the shape of her calves in tight black boots. She covered her hair, but the vibrancy of her headscarf almost competed with the icons. The phrase "O quicken me after thy loving-kindness" wafted up into the darkness above, the space candlelight did not penetrate, and Pavel realized he had not been listening to the words. He tried to follow until "Thy truth also remaineth from one generation to another," and then thought about Yuri. Did anything survive the test of generations? Yuri had inherited his looks and need to read the paper every morning from his father. Maybe he had learned some of his mother's polite social graces. But what had his daughter inherited?

Pavel noticed that Lilya, who had always been confident, was glancing at the people around her each time she crossed herself. She looked lost, a prodigal who didn't make it home in time.

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As Pavel and Tanya rode the metro back from the funeral, Pavel scanned the ads for discount shoes, homestyle *pelmini*, and internet dating. A young woman in a skirt had stood up and offered her seat to Tanya, even though the gentleman reading a paper next to her, obviously in good health, should have been the one to offer.

Pavel had a hand on the rail above Tanya's seat. While his eyes moved to the peeling stickers obscuring parts of the advertisements, he tried to latch on to just one memory of Yuri instead of the blur of half-formed images of Yuri at the end, in the hospital with the tired white bed sheets. When nothing came, he closed his eyes, swaying instinctively with the movements of the subway. It was stuffy because more people got on than off as they approached the ring line and none of the upper ventilation windows in the car were open. The warm air put Pavel in mind of the *banya* that he and Yuri used to visit a few times a year.

"I think I'm going to ask Tanya to marry me this weekend," Pavel had told Yuri when they were young with skin that stretched over muscles and joints without sagging anywhere. Pavel shook his head the way a dog does, sending a shower onto Yuri's back, then ruffled his hair with his towel before wrapping it around his waist.

Yuri nodded while tucking in the corner of his own towel, but didn't say anything until they were in they were sitting down in the dressing room for the bread-and-cheese break, both still glistening and goosepimpling from the dip in the pool. Yuri pulled his bag off the small table

and slid the plate of open-faced sandwiches to the middle of it. “So, you’re getting married?” he asked.

“If she says yes,” Pavel answered, smiling. He picked up a sandwich, adjusted the cheese so it was centered, and took a bite.

“She’s been saying yes for three years—you just haven’t asked her.” Yuri unbuckled his satchel and began rummaging in it.

Pavel swallowed. “Think I should wear my blue tie, or the red?”

Yuri began to laugh. When Pavel continued looking at him, waiting for an answer, he said, “Well, . . . red is more patriotic, but blue brings out your eyes—” He never reached a decision because they began laughing, not exactly sure what the humor was, but enjoying that special *banya* laughter which erupted from the various clusters of men in the dressing room at regular intervals. When the joke had dissolved into smiles, Yuri brought out a jar of pickles and thumped it on the table, followed by a 200 milliliter bottle of *Stolichnaya* and two shot glasses. “Now, to congratulate you,” he said.

Pavel opened the jar while Yuri poured out vodka. They drank to marriage, to Tanya, and to happiness, chasing their toasts with pickles. The flavorless burn at the back of their throats, the saltiness on the tips of their tongues—if these things didn’t guarantee a couple’s happiness, nothing could.

Yuri put the empty vodka bottle back in his bag before the attendants came over and saw they were enjoying something stronger than *kvas*. “Back to the steam room?” he suggested.

Pavel nodded. They picked up their small bundles of birch twigs from the bench and walked, attentively and without swaying, to the steam room. One didn’t so much enter the steam as become immersed in it. They breathed it in deeply, draped their towels on the wooden benches, and sat. The vodka burned from the inside while their skin adjusted to the heat of the heavy air surrounding them.

It was a small wooden chamber designed to retain its heat, but once the door was closed and there was only the glow from the box of exposed embers and the diffused light from a frosted pane of glass on the door, the walls and ceiling disappeared and Pavel and Yuri were in a miniature cloud of darkness that neither began nor ended.

While they waited for a good sweat to begin, Yuri said, “I don’t know if I could do it, Pasha.” He was just eyes, teeth, and a smudge of body.

“Do what?” Pavel crossed his legs, put his palms behind him on the plank and leaned back.

“Get married.” Yuri said. He ladled water onto the embers and they listened to the hiss, watched the air thicken. “I don’t know if I could go through with it, when I know I’m going to have to look at that same woman for the rest of my life,” he filled himself with the dense air and continued, “to talk to her every day and watch her grow old, become less and less the woman I married.”

Pavel shifted further back on his seat, until his feet were on the edge of it and his back was against the wall. “I’d rather look at the same woman every day than empty pillows, empty chairs.”

Yuri said, “They’re only empty if someone used to be there.”

Pavel hadn’t argued. Yuri was no doubt thinking of the space his former girlfriend had filled when they were in university together. Pavel noticed that Yuri’s brow and chest had begun

to glisten and catch some of the available light. He slid the back of his hand across his own damp forehead. “You want to go first?” Pavel asked.

Yuri murmured agreement, got up to reposition his towel, then lay on his stomach across the wood. Pavel stood and picked up his white birch *venik* and stepped toward Yuri’s indistinct form. He began beating Yuri’s back with the birch bundle, thwacking it rhythmically, bringing his arm down in the perfect arc then swiftly pulling away. They didn’t speak.

Nor did they speak when Yuri was standing over Pavel, and Pavel’s skin tingled where it anticipated a blow and hummed where it had been struck.

Only after they’d left the steam room, dunked in the pool, and were again drying themselves off did Yuri say, “Maybe getting married wouldn’t be so bad.” He broke out a smile and added, “After all, I’ve had to stare at you for years and it hasn’t killed me yet.”

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“Are you going to sit down and eat this?” Tanya called from the kitchen the morning after the funeral.

Pavel set down the watering pail on their wide bedroom windowsill, between the Glacier Ivy and the Split Leaf Philodendron. “Just a minute.” Pavel put his hands on the sill, leaned forward just a little to look down at the kiosk across the street and the crowd of teenagers at the side of it, huddled against the wind.

“It’s supposed to snow today,” Tanya said, putting a bowl of *kasha* at Pavel’s place setting.

“That’s what they say.” Pavel sat down, his back to the stove. Tanya remained behind him, waiting for the water to boil for tea. Pavel leaned over the bowl and breathed in the steam, trying to remember the last time he and Yuri had gone to the *banya* together. Three years? Five? Pavel asked Tanya when she thought he and Yuri had last gone and glanced at her over his shoulder.

Tanya had her hip pressed into the counter and was sorting buckwheat grains in her hand, discarding anything blackened. “It doesn’t seem long ago, but it must have been,” was all she said, perhaps wondering how many decades it had been since she herself had visited.

While Pavel spooned up his *kasha*, Tanya listed the things she would appreciate him picking up from the market before she came back from teaching. Pavel nodded and thought that perhaps Yuri wouldn’t have been so apprehensive about marriage if he knew how many conversations took place like this, without eye contact or any meaningful communication.

Tanya didn’t speak again until she was seated across from Pasha, drawing patterns in the sugar. “Pasha,” she said, adding two scoops to her tea.

“Yes?”

“I found some little piece of that watch in the sugar again yesterday.” She stirred the tea, clinking her spoon against the ceramic. “Your memory is better than mine, and I can think of plenty of times I’ve told you not to put *any part of it* where it touches food. What if we’d had a guest?”

Pavel nodded and inspected the smiling faces in clashing colors painted on his teacup. Tanya didn’t understand that there were very few places in the apartment better than salt, sugar, and flour for concealing miniscule cogs that could be sifted out on his collection days.

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Pavel looked out the window again. It was the sort of weather he and Yuri would have loved to walk in, sunny and at the change of seasons. They'd taken Saturday morning constitutionals regularly.

Some early-summer morning when they were wandering around Yuri's neighborhood, only a few metro stops farther from downtown than Pavel's, Yuri had announced, "Today, Lilya turns twenty-five."

The statement was stark, without a branch on which Pavel could hang a comment, so he just nodded in agreement. He'd not seen even a photo of Lilya since she was a sprightly seventeen-year-old. As far as he knew, she was still in Kiev.

"How do you think she's celebrating?" Yuri asked.

Pavel looked at the cottonwood pouf gathered in the grass. "Why don't you call her and ask?"

Yuri shook his head. "She doesn't want me to."

"She said that?"

Yuri answered, "She doesn't have to." He took them on a path to the right, a small road winding through apartment complexes, and elaborated, "I've tried, but she just gets upset." They slowed their pace, approaching a courtyard and playground surrounded by a shin-high green fence. "I say something like, 'Are your drawings getting better?' just because I want to know if she's still an artist, and she thinks that means I thought her drawings were bad, when I didn't." Yuri walked to a bench on the edge of the courtyard and they sat down. Yuri smiled slowly and shook his head, dismissing the subject before Pavel could ask how many years ago that call had been.

Pavel surveyed the playground, which consisted of salvaged metal scraps disguised by bright paint that would fleck off come winter. Little children cast off the coats that their mothers had insisted on and scrambled about the structures. A girl with brown pigtails tried to push her blonde friend down the slide, but the blonde twisted and grabbed her friend by the ankles, the two of them tumbling and squealing down the flat metallic plane into a heap at the bottom. Two boys of the same age standing on a flat-seated swing giggled. The giggles and squeals, more than the brightest paint, transformed the space from a junkyard masquerading as a park into a rainbow of wonder.

Yuri sighed then asked, "How's your Sasha?"

"He's in and out of the house. Still working on the trains." Pavel continued scanning and saw that teenagers were grouped around a short dome of mint-painted steel, probably meant to evoke a turtle. Their shoulders were conspiratorially pressed together, their backs to the world.

"Does he ever work the Moscow-Kiev line?" The direct sun made Yuri's hazel eyes glisten.

"He's never seen Lilya there," Pavel answered, looking at the cluster of older women on a bench across from them, wearing kerchiefs under the summer sun and frowning over the whole courtyard and even at the sky when they looked up.

Pavel remembered that he'd had a moment of unexpected clarity on that park bench, the sort he sometimes had at work when he suddenly understood why a bearing fit exactly where it did. On that bench, he had suddenly realized that all those people in the courtyard were the same, himself and Yuri included. The little girls on the slide would one day wear kerchiefs and glare at a group of teenagers—teenagers who once been little boys on a swing set and would someday be

fifty-year-old men on a park bench. And it would all happen so gradually that most of them would never know that they were the same and that what they hadn't been already, they would be in the future.

On the walk back to the metro, they heard a group quarrelling on the other side of the small street lined with cars, parked and rusting. Pavel was going to keep walking, but Yuri crossed the street and Pavel noticed that the four young men were standing in a semicircle around a girl about their age or a little younger, flattened against the rough cement wall of an apartment building. One of them said, "All he's saying is, now his girlfriend needs a new bra," the girls cheeks were flushed as though she'd just come inside on a windy, winter day and she met none of their eyes, "and we can see that you—"

"Miss, do you need an escort to the metro?" Yuri interrupted, ignoring the troublemakers who turned their sulky eyes away from the girl and towards new prey. All he noticed was the girl's continued discomfort. "Or money for a taxi?"

At what should have been the most interesting part, Pavel's memory dimmed. He knew that no fight had broken out, that the girl had been safe, but he didn't think she'd accepted either of Yuri's offers.

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After Tanya had bundled up and headed out the door, Pavel washed dishes and wiped the table of crumbs in preparation for the morning's activities. It was a scavenging day. Once the kitchen was satisfactorily tidy, he went to the bedroom rummaged in the drawer of his bedside table for reading glasses and his journal, pushing aside a photo album full of faces frozen in happiness, keys that no longer opened anything, and expired metro passes that would take him nowhere. Finding the journal, he settled on the bed then held it by the spiral so that a pen fell out.

Pavel set the journal on his lap upside-down and backwards in order to begin from the last pages, where he kept a log of specific memories for future reference. He paged through the short lists recording the details he could still latch on to, all of which were attached to something concrete: name days, important news, pivotal conversations, trips to Petersburg, moments with the important people in his life. He added the *banya* memory with all the preciseness that he could, and then the morning in the courtyard.

Standing and surveying the room, Pavel set about his project for the day. Things began easily enough. The first few pieces—the chain, the clock face crowned with its roman numerals, and the collection of screws he always hid together—were quickly retrieved and ferried to the table, but when he decided to look for the hands, he had to close his eyes and concentrate. There weren't all that many places to hide things in their small apartment. The entry way joined the living room, which bled into the kitchen, off of which branched the bedroom, the toilet, and the bathroom. He'd hidden the hour and the minute hand together, that much he could assert, but he had a sense that they were not waiting for him in one of his favorite hiding places, that they were somewhere new.

He didn't want to lose momentum by peeking at his chart after such a good start. Perhaps, he thought, he should look on Tanya's side of the wardrobe. He opened the left door and it felt unnatural, as if he'd only stood at this opening sometime in the distant past—yes, he and Tanya had been setting off to somewhere with a suitcase and the dented metal door to their building had barely banged closed when she sent him back up to their apartment after her bathrobe, or something of that nature. Whatever it had been, it was easy to find. In contrast, this

time he was far from certain that what he sought was even here. He trailed his fingers over items Tanya hadn't worn in years, full of colors too outdated, too youthful, or too faded, and it occurred to him that the pockets of such garments might be a good place to hide something.

Pavel put his hand on the shoulder of a blazer that would be too tight on Tanya and eased the hanger out of the closet. It was much heavier than he'd expected, and once he turned it to face him, he noticed that there was a folder clipped onto the hanger, right where a matching skirt or pair of pants ought to have been. He unclipped the folder and threw the jacket and its hanger to the bed, forgetting he'd meant to check pockets for hidden watch hands. He was focused on the folder. He took it to the kitchen and spread it out before him on the table. In the front were hand drawn sketches, probably Tanya's, on scraps of newspaper, all very small because newspapers offered little bare space. Even though they were yellowed and delicate between his fingers, he liked the thought of Tanya smiling slightly as her ballpoint pen curved over flower petals, dark faces, and houses surrounded by trees. He didn't think he'd ever seen her drawing these, and yet he could picture it perfectly, the way she would lean over a table so that her head would be close to the image and her heel would slide gracefully, seductively out of the back of her shoe.

Next there were receipts and documents, many of which he glanced at only long enough to see uninteresting words like post office, noting the uneven red and blue outlines of official, rubber-stamp certifications. While paging through he noticed their two unused tickets to *Yevgeny Onegin* from April 21, 1972 and he thought he might try to remember that date.

Pavel was still running his fingertips along the edges of the tickets—the way one does standing in line with the promise of a show, less for the physical sensation than for the concrete proof—when he noticed the page under their tickets with its heading from a clinic on Leninsky Avenue. It was dated only a week before the unused theater tickets, and stated that a procedure had been performed on one Tatyana Ilychovna Kozlova, an abortion.

Pavel closed the folder. Tanya couldn't have been pregnant. They had strictly followed the rhythm method of avoiding unwanted pregnancy; the communal apartment they were living in at the time simply hadn't been big enough for anyone more than Tanya, their young son Sasha, and Pavel.

Unless, of course, Tanya had been pregnant by some other man. Pavel had himself run sweaty fingers along curves other than his wife's a few times in their marriage, but that was just sex, not pregnancy. For such encounters he'd always used imported condoms.

The file went back into the closet. Pavel didn't want to see what other secrets it held. He didn't want to think about finding the rest of the pocket watch in that meaningless battle against the forces of time, in that effort to preserve a memory that for years had reinforced the idea that Tanya had loved him, and only him, when maybe she had been sketching out on newspaper a different life, a life in black ink that he was not part of.

Pavel got up and stood in the enclosed space between the kitchen window and the rest of Moscow, a balcony of sorts that provided a buffer between the air outside and in. Even though Tanya would have scolded him, he rested his shoulder and the side of his face on the smooth glass and let the relief of that cold surface against his flushed cheek rush through his body, slowing the flutter of his heart and releasing the tension in his muscles.

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There were things Pavel had entirely blocked from his mind that came back to him while he waited for Tanya to come home. He remembered once, when they'd been young, in their thirties, he was packed into a metro car coming back from the office and Tanya had gotten on to the exact same car at the circle line stop where she made her daily transfer to and from the factory she worked in. With the press of bodies all around him, Pavel hadn't been quite sure at first that it was her; he usually came home to find she'd already picked up six-year-old Sasha from day care and started heating soup. But as he studied the tuft of hair that wouldn't stay behind her right ear and the concave curve of neck-to-shoulder, the convex curve of shoulder-to-arm, he knew it was his Tanyusha.

Pavel began to navigate his way through the crowd with "Please let me pass" and "Are you the next stop?" until he stood behind Tanya, near the right-hand doors of the car, which wouldn't open until the last stop on their line. She was gazing out in to the blackness that looked so much farther and deeper than tunnel walls, a hint of a smile almost dimpling the corners of her mouth. Pavel wanted her to notice his heat and the cadence of his breathing and realize that he was different from everyone else on the car, that he alone was familiar and safe. If that was impossible in this crowd of overcoats, he at least wanted her to see him in the reflection on the door. But she was staring far away.

Pavel looked at her in the glass, his Tanya, and noted a stylish bronze scarf plumed about her neck, one he didn't think he'd seen before. He entertained the idea of trailing his fingers over her coat sleeve or whispering her name, but he didn't want to frighten her, so he simply said, "Hi."

Tanya pivoted, her reverie broken, the hint of dimple gone, and returned his greeting. She met his eye and smiled—a bright smile that almost negated the momentary blankness that had preceded it—then faced the door again and asked him how work had been.

Pavel answered that it had been ordinary. They made eye contact through the reflection and Pavel said, "I like your scarf," admiring how it made the color in her cheeks more pronounced.

"Oh, this thing?" Tanya asked. "I think it's a terrible color." She loosened it from her neck then held it so it hung limply from both sides of her fist. "But I had to wear it. My girlfriend gave it to me, when she had me over for coffee, during lunch today." Tanya crumpled the scarf and stuffed it in her handbag. "Perhaps I'll give it to Yuri and Natasha's girl."

They'd been stoic reflections for the rest of the ride, jostled and jolted all the way home. The only other thing Pavel could remember was that Tanya had woken up sometime that night and drawn the covers up over his shoulders, thinking him asleep. But he was curled toward her side of the bed, and through slitted eyelids, he watched as she perched on the edge of the mattress, pulled that scarf out of her purse, and smoothed it across her lap. Then she'd carefully folded it and tucked it back in her bag before putting her head on the pillow again.

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By the time Tanya came home, Pavel still hadn't decided what he was going to do. He had written in his journal about what it felt like to discover betrayal, so that he might remember such an intense emotion when senility had dulled everything to a murky blue and simplified life to a succession of bad television shows with the proper pills at regular intervals.

As Tanya closed the door behind her and tried to brush the glistening droplets of old snowflakes off her shoulders, Pavel realized that in his day spent shuffling about the apartment

he had forgotten about the things she wanted him to buy. He had been so absorbed staring at the pattern of the wall paper with unfocused eyes, gripping the curtains with sweaty palms, and breathing all of the air in their small apartment and never quite getting enough, that he had accomplished nothing tangible that he might point to and say, “Today, I have done this with my own hands.” He realized that if Tanya asked him what he had done, he would have no answer for her. He could not even say he had thought. At most he had let ideas come until they spiraled into a single conviction: he had been deceived.

If it had only been an abortion, he could have used the afternoon to pretend it out of his life. But it was a tear in the fabric of a Tanya he knew everything about, and he was afraid that inside he might discover more things he didn’t know because he had not been given a chance to know.

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When they were young married men, Pavel and Yuri would go out a few times a year. “Going out” meant that they drank together somewhere that wasn’t home. When the evenings were almost warm, they’d go to a park, or any bench that presented itself sooner, with some bottles from a kiosk and drink until the night air, until everything, was a little less crisp.

But some bitter nights called for bars, usually with a few shots taken on the way there for the sake of economy.

They didn’t have a favorite bar. The point of going out was to escape the familiar: the four small walls of Pavel’s communal apartment inching closer, young Sasha’s cries for others to sit vigil with him through the terrifying night.

One bar Pavel remembered had been sloppily painted the color of earwax and had a wall of bottles glinting behind the counter. They slipped through the smoky air to a small table for two against the wall and started with *Baltika* 9 beers, cheap and strong.

There was a billiard table, probably purchased from an elite gaming hall once it failed to meet their standards, and the only strong light in the bar flooded over the table. No one was playing and all the balls that weren’t slung in the pockets were lined against the right edge, displaying its tilt. There was a woman facing away from them on the other side of the table; it was likely she was part of a group on the other side, but this woman alone was in the cone of light, lit from the small of her back down.

Yuri was the first to comment. “What do you think of that girl in the tight skirt?”

“Which?” Pavel asked, not drunk enough to admit he’d noticed. However, a few drinks later, and laughter bubbled out of them as they each remembered times before marriage when the other had been spurned. Pavel stared at that waist in the lamplight, wanting to prove that he was more skilled now than he’d been in adolescence. The woman’s company had left without her, and she now rested against the table, almost sitting on it, the light now catching the despairing curve of her back and shoulders.

Yuri banged a fist on the table, causing their glasses to clink together, struck with a sudden idea. “Pavel!” he said in a rush of sour breath. “You should go talk to her.”

Pavel couldn’t remember her face or the way she’d tasted, only that he and Yuri had parted in good moods, and that it was not the last time one of them capitalized on loneliness.

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Tanya flipped on the television to watch “Wait For Me,” the show that reunited lost friends, lovers, and relatives. Her legs stretched across the daybed that Sasha used to sleep on and she sighed the way one does upon reaching a destination.

Pavel, because he had formed no other course of action, decided to follow routine. He sat next to her, taking her feet into his lap. He began by putting the base of each palm on opposite sides of her left foot and pressing inward, moving his hands in slow circles. He could feel the strain on his upper arms and knew he was pressing harder than usual, but he continued. After he’d rubbed circles into both feet, he began to pinch with his thumbs and the sides of his curled index fingers around the edge of a foot, taking into his grip bones, veins, muscles, toes and squeezing with his new strength, almost wanting her to gasp a little in pain.

But when he looked up, Pavel noticed that Tanya’s lips, lit by the flickering blue light of the television, were parted slightly in what was practically a smile. He didn’t know what prompted that look, if it was the chatter of the show or his foot rub or an event he hadn’t been part of. It upset him that she could experience happiness when he was so far from it himself, but his thoughts were again interrupted before he had decided what to do, this time by the buzzer of someone at the door.

Tanya moved her feet out of his lap and into slippers then shuffled to the door.

Pavel stood, his joints stiff and heavy from the sedentary day, and scuffed over to the television to shut it off. Sasha was always promising to buy a remote next time he was at *Izmaylovo*, but hadn’t picked one up yet.

The door swung open to reveal Lilya, looking flushed from wind and wet from snow, standing in the green hallway carrying a cake sealed in a clear plastic container. “Hello!” she said in a rush of breath.

“Hello,” Tanya replied and Pavel nodded a greeting.

“I’m sorry for coming unexpectedly, but I brought a *Kievsky Tort*,” she said. The cake container was bound with ribbons, and she raised it for them to admire.

Tanya turned to look at Pavel, who said simply, “Come in.”

Opening the door more fully, Tanya accepted the cake from Lilya. Tanya smiled and walked to the kitchen.

Lilya stepped over the threshold to sit on the small chair by the door and unzip her boots. Pavel got out a pair of guest slippers and handed them to her. She thanked him and they joined Tanya in the kitchen where the electric teakettle was warming up.

Lilya sat at the table, a table she had been at before, when the apartment had been new and Natasha would bring her along sometimes when she and Tanya gathered to gossip. “I wanted to thank you,” Lilya said, “for taking care of my father, for visiting him.”

Pavel asked the question he most needed her to answer. “Why didn’t you visit Yuri?” While he looked into Lilya’s hazel eyes and waited for an answer, at the edge of his vision he noticed Tanya tuck a wisp of hair behind her right ear and turn around, embarrassed by his direct question.

Lilya sighed, but didn’t look offended. “He didn’t want me to.”

“He said that?” Pavel pressed.

“He didn’t have to.” Lilya played with the spoon in the sugar bowl, tracing out patterns. She lowered her head and Pavel was reminded of Yuri’s funeral, when they had lined up to bestow farewell kisses on the man they’d loved. Lilya had bent over and kissed Yuri on the

forehead and each cheek then wilted over his chest. When she rose, there was a damp patch on Yuri's sweater and her face glistened with grief.

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The slackness in Lilya's whole body as she lowered her head to her arms on the tabletop was something Pavel had seen before, and not only at the funeral. Someone else had collapsed like that on his very table.

Yes, they had been playing cards at here, a long time ago when the apartment still felt new. It was just Yuri and himself, because Tanya and Sasha, perhaps ten years old, were out somewhere.

Yuri's forehead had been pressed into his arms and his voice had been muffled. "Pasha."

"Yes." Pavel continued shuffling the cards, even though the game was finished.

"Pasha, sometimes after we go out," Yuri paused before continuing, "Lilya, in the morning," and again he broke off.

Pavel cut the stack, tapped the two halves on the table to straighten them, and shuffled them together with ease, waiting.

"Pasha, sometimes there are bruises, not big, but I can't really remember what's happened the night before, only that, say, Lilya had looked beautiful but wouldn't give me a bedtime kiss, and so I had to pull her to me. That's all."

After a quiet moment filled only with the sounds of breathing in and breathing out, Pavel said, "Yuri," while dealing the cards for *durak*, "want to play another hand?"

Pavel couldn't remember anything else, only that they hadn't gone out after that, switching instead to Saturday morning strolls.

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After Lilya left, Tanya bent to look in the refrigerator, opening the door wide because the bulb was out, and called to Pavel, "Didn't you go to the market?"

"I'm sorry," he answered back from his seat at the table, "I forgot." He put a hand on the table and another on the chair back and slowly stood, feeling heavier and more tired than he'd felt in days. "I can go in the morning."

He looked at Tanya, hunched slightly to examine a block of cheese that had been lodged at the back of a shelf. And standing there, she was his Tanya, who bore his child, cooked him *pelmini* from scratch, and let his wedding ring rest over her heart when she crossed herself; she was his Tanya even if sometime, long ago, she had almost been someone else's.

In earlier years, she might have scolded him for not going to the market. She would have had a litany of things she did for him and would have complained that after all that, she ought to be able to get a small favor. But with Lilya's presence still weighting the air, all she said was, "I'll have to write it down next time."

Pavel stretched by twisting his torso while his hands were on the back of a chair, the wine they'd washed the cake down with still making him tingle, and thought that it felt good to forget.

He got up and hugged his wife, hugged her because she was his to forgive in a way he could never pardon Yuri or Lilya. All he could do was stand with his wife in his arms and let the firmness of her grasp, the softness of her shoulder where his hand clenched it, help him to let go of everything else.

Yes, it felt good.

And he thought that he might let the pocket watch turn up by itself, piece by piece, revealed in its own time. Maybe when it was all put together, he'd pass the watch on to Lilya and allow himself to forget.