

Katerina woke all at once. Her eyes opened on the off-white ceiling and in the middle of it, the yellow stain in the shape of a country she called Yellow Stain Land. There was a ministry order to fix the leaking plumbing in the apartment above hers, but the people living upstairs were never at home when they came. This is what they said whenever she called. It was trouble for her to limp down to the public phone box in the plaza, and she told them so. Fix it. I'm tired of looking at it.

*We understand, miss. We will try again.*

The truth was the upstairs apartment was empty and had been for a year. Still, she called once a week. Fix the stain. I'm tired of looking at Yellow Stain Land. My leg aches when I walk. I'm tired of calling.

*We have a work order, miss. A plumber is on his way. A contractor is on the way.*

Today was not a phone call day. The sun slanted through her ground floor window, softened by flowery curtains she'd made out of old butter coloured bed sheets. Kat got in line for the washroom early, so the water was hot. Even so, her shower was short- just long enough to scrub the commodity shampoo through her hair and rinse it out. It smelled like laundry detergent and left her shoulder length curls coarse and chemical scented. Later she would rub precious coconut oil through the hair to restore its lustre and texture, but for now it went into a short wet bun.

By the time she returned to her apartment, the sun beam had pivoted, moving closer to the wall. It was enough light to see by, and she was able to put on her mask. Dark lipstick, soft dark pencil for her eyebrows, powder for her cheeks. It wasn't much, just enough to lift her features. At thirty-six, she was prematurely lined, but her fine bones gave her face an aristocratic cast. Her penny-coloured hair was the product of cheap henna, now corn silk at the temples and hairline.

Her eyes were a flat blue, too bright without the complementary tones of her natural hair. They were distinctive and memorable, so she covered them with tinted gold-rimmed glasses. These had the unfortunate effect of emphasizing the beakiness of her nose and aged her by a decade, but she disliked it when strangers looked at her eyes rather than into them.

She emerged from the low slung apartment block upright and tall, unornamented except for her tortoiseshell handled cane. She wore conservative brown slacks that were faded from too many washings and an equally conservative starched white blouse under her shabby tweed coat. Her gait was rolling and awkward, but she made it graceful with studied dignity.

A tram malfunction made her a few minutes late to the university, but it was the first day of term and they would cover nothing important. The Templiner Straat campus was small, but dense, filled with high rises that were identical, a style that the anemic aesthetes of the east bloc referred to as brutalism, but Kat always thought of as "Communist Waffle". An American friend of hers had invented the term and it stuck. That conversation, of course, was before the wall.

Thankfully, the class was on the ground floor. She made it up the short flight of stairs to the lecture theatre and gained the landing just as the professor stepped up to the podium, notes in hand. She sat down in the aisle seat and waited for the lights to dim before removing her glasses.

Dr. Vann's lecture wasn't new to her- it was the same one he'd given at the beginning of last term. She had attended then to audit the class, but found that by the end of winter she had sat through every seminar. It wasn't that she was interested in Enlightenment Socialism so much as she was interested in Dr. Vann himself.

She was there to see him. She'd enjoyed his lectures, found them surprisingly edifying. He had a clever way of using the revolutionary era as a vehicle for criticism of totalitarianism. It was dangerous, but to the average mutton headed government auditor, his admonitions to avoid certain texts, certain arguments, very particular banned books, it seemed as though the professor marched to their tune. The younger students were especially deft at procuring these materials through the black market.

His given name was Augustine. He was an impressive, rangy six feet tall, maybe eight or nine years older than herself, possessed of closed cropped dark hair going grey at the temples, and soft brown eyes that seemed to radiate

warmth and understanding. This together gave him the look of a kindly wolf, practically domesticated. Rex Harrison, but not as arch. Not shrill, not bitchy, but open faced and keen.

He was also an engaging speaker with a deep, reassuring voice that carried from the podium without amplification. He spoke to the primary sources wherever possible, using the words of Voltaire or a German translation of the Putney Debates. His gestures were expressive, but pointed and open handed, and she could feel the subtle lift in the students around her, the way they engaged with his enthusiasm.

He was Viennese, and had the native elan of that caste. There was something polished about his physicality, and his back was ramrod straight. He was also an excellent liar, which was the thing Katerina admired most about him.

She was not the only person over thirty in the class. The ministry of education was keen to "alleviate" the ignorance of the people, though she herself had no need of more schooling. Still, it was one of those utopian ideas that managed to survive the mandate of pathological equality, so it pleased her to see a few white and grey heads among the young Berliners' crunchy home perms and stiff crew cuts.

The lecture was short, mostly introductory business and an examination of the syllabus. She ignored it, and instead turned her full attention to the man himself. As he spoke, his eyes wandered over the little arena, sparkling when the harsh stage lights caught them. As he drew the session to a close, his eyes flicked up to where she was sitting, and one well-groomed eyebrow twitched up for an instant. Kat stiffened. She knew he could not see her too well from behind the lights, but she also knew in that instant that he had marked her. She was surprised, as he'd never given her any indication he'd noticed her in the past. He'd made her and she felt an acute desire to get up and leave, and never return.

She remained in her seat for a moment, letting her eyes adjust once the house lights came up. She intended to hide herself in the press of students as they gathered by the exits. She rose, cane in hand, but hesitated at the door until the room emptied. Dr. Vann waited for her at the bottom of the stairs, briefcase in hand, his silk jacket folded over his arm. He unhurriedly ascended the stairs until he was just a step beneath where she stood rooted to the spot.

"Well," he said. "Shall we get coffee?"