YOU ARE NOT BABA YAGA

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"Am I still your biiiiitches?"

You knew just how to ask that. Why did you want me to call you biiiiitches? American girls would never understand. You pronounced it "beaches." You insisted I call you biiiiitches, always in the plural, always with a heavy Russian accent.

"Because you made it." That light confusion between "to do" and "to make" in European languages. "It is your name for me. So I love it." Then comes the big smile and the deep kiss. And up next, immediately, appear the jutted bottom lip and the pouty voice. That train is never late. "But then you said gallery owner is biiiiitches. Is she your biiiiitches, also?" Lip, lip, pout, pout.

And on and on like this.

That was the melodrama of the minutes. Always up and down, no matter what the moment called for. A hot and cold seduction divorced from the facts.

I didn't understand the upside.

And that, right there, was the measure of our problem. I grew up to be some kind of business person, and now I talk and think like one. Something has happened to me. I am the son, grandson, and great-grandson (on two sides, and I'm counting) of three painters, two sculptors, and a prodigy filmmaker. Visual art was my DNA, my destiny, maybe my birthright. I was especially good with works on paper. My parents' friends were scenesters, art critics and writers. They said when I was fourteen that my work revealed a gifted charcoalist. They noted the composition, sensitivity and confidence in my lines. When my mom hung three portraits in our living room, the art critic for the New Republic wrote on the wall in pencil: "precise limbs, expressive faces, exceptional impressionistic if undifferentiated hair. Keep going, young man." The note is still there, of course faded, but never touched, even after my parents renovated. By sixteen, I mixed the powder, willow, and compressed coals like an expert. Just enough pressure and shape in the jawbones to convey the agony in my subjects. When I was sixteen, there was a lot of agony in my subjects.

Then I got to college, and the Internet happened. Business was suddenly a new and fertile field. I grew up in New York City and managed to get all the way through high school without ever hearing the words "Goldman Sachs" or "investment banker" or "corporate lawyer." I guess now I would think that's impossible. But not in my family. If it wasn't hanging on the wall or headed that way or the trash heap, it wasn't something we talked about. Almost immediately after I got to college, the Internet exploded. A brand new dawn broke, one in which creativity and youth could turn the world upside down. If you grew up in the city wanting to be Basquiat,

suddenly you realized that the Basquiat of tomorrow wasn't going to paint to offer people a different lens but instead was going to use a computer to change how people lived. Kids in garages were building startups and realizing blockbuster ideas. I wanted in. I joined forces with a guy I knew from high school, and we leapt. We didn't call it business yet, but of course it was. Fifteen years later, I hadn't looked back.

So I have become a businessman, a startup guy, an Internet CEO. I don't remember the last time I had to scrub charcoal off my hands or acrylic off my jeans. I don't even remember what year it was. There was the sophomore winter break in Boston when I took out the paper and charcoals for two weeks of drawing in my dorm, but I ended up playing Snood. I played so much I beat the world record. That was a lifetime lowest high. What surprises me the most is that I haven't even tried to maintain the pretense. After that winter, I never kept my supplies around. When I graduated college, I packed up my easel and put it in my parents' apartment, intending to retrieve it, but I didn't.

Nowadays I talk in the language of business. I think about which of the weekends "this quarter" I can visit my father. My friends and I say "let's talk live" when we mean "in person" or, less often, when we mean "on the phone," for which we usually say "let's talk offline." "What's the upside?" is the contemporary version of the old shtetl "what's the percentage?" that I grew up with. Of course, it all makes a certain sense. These shorthands are useful and accurate, and it doesn't bear condescending to them. But vocabulary reflects an ethos or at least, to borrow a word, a perspective.

Not one you shared. You didn't need to see an upside to creating drama. You just impulsed to "make it," so you made it. Of course the Freudian economist would say your upside was successfully keeping me tethered to a leash of your alternating kisses and pouted lips. But I say you would have made it in any case.

You did, actually. Even when it stopped working.

You were worried about the gallery owner, Maria. She was Russian, too. Late that night it occurred to me it was funny to call her biiiiitches. I was past four glasses of starchy red wine that came in a bottle with a Norman Rockwell style fire engine on the label, and now I was into the ice cold Beluga Gold Line vodka, which made me feel more in place at the Mishinkin Gallery. The Mishinkin is Russia's unofficial headquarters in San Francisco. White collar expats, software engineers, miscreant billionaires, and taxi drivers find comfort in one another whenever Maria opens a new show. It's the place any super-Russian wants to have her cocktail party or birthday. They'll do anything you want with the blank canvas of the space, and your guests will be standing next to priceless paintings. Everyone came, all ages, most everyone speaking Russian. Perestroika immigrants who remembered communism and flourished cashmere scarves gesticulated wildly at the 25 year old Yeltsin babies who flourished perfect skin and jobs developing self-driving cars for Uber but were starting to ask openly if Lenin had been on to something.

Ever since you moved to San Francisco to prepare your show, at least once per weekend, I stepped into your Russia at the Mishinkin. I was starting to feel at home, even if I could barely understand what people were saying.

Maria ruled the gallery like an imperial salon hostess. She insisted on a fair mix of the rootless and famous, of the shiftless and the productive, of the young and the old, of the beautiful and, as she put it, "the peasants." She didn't really care where people actually came from, only where it looked like they came from. That was probably her attitude to her collection, too, some of which appeared especially valuable and some of which probably was especially valuable but looked like it couldn't be. The only thing you could consistently say about the Russians around San Francisco in general and the Mishinkin in particular was that provenance was as unclear as it was unimportant.

Oh. There was one more thing. Drama and tragedy were critically essential to these Russians. Maria herself, a glamorous 50-something and the absolute top shelf drink in her mini-planet, appeared to derive no better satisfaction than she did from her perpetual, smoldering grief at her handsome husband's constant philandering. She behaved almost as if her mission was to procure a never-ending stream of blonde Russian girls for her parties so he could seduce them. Her gratification seemed to be her suffering, her starring role in her own tragedy.

These were your people. This was the scene into which you dropped me, an Internetik who now thinks like a businessman.

Your main concern of the minute was that I had imprudently addressed her as biiiiitches.

"Anna, she's twice your age. I thought it was funny."

"She likes it. You see her face. Like koketka (coquette). Biiiiig eyelashes for you."

Then you stormed across the room, wrapping your hands on the ends of your shawl.

"I don't speak wiz you."

That was the giveaway. That "Eastern mentality" you talked about, the one you said I would never understand. In this setting (a word I learned from the MBAs), the Eastern mentality translated to

- withdrawing speaking privileges as a form of punishment
- making punishment a regular part of courtship and flirtation
- out-coquetting the gallery owner Maria: you waited for me to follow you into the back studio, away from the party, your chin tilted just so, so I could see your face.

"No!" You said, when I found you. You torqued the "no" into a high-pitched yawp. It was pretty disarming. Then you returned my kiss, refusing to let go of my head.

The Eastern mentality also meant hyping your Russianness.

- "American girls are too much fat. They should vomit. They should stop from eating."
- "If you don't drink a wine, you will have a boring life."
- "I have never shaved my legs in my life. Only wax."

- "You are my men." Spelled always with an "e" and pronounced as if "min."
- "You should make it." Which meant some form of "you decide," equally looking at a restaurant menu and whether we should continue dating.
- "How can I be feminist? I am Russian woman. It is impossible."
- "You have cold today? Take babushka rezept. Vodka, lemon juice, crushed pepper."
- "Did you take babushka rezept? Listen to Russian woooomaaaaannnnn!"
- "Those two bitches. Terrible Russian accent, terrible makeup, terrible shoes. They must be Ukrainians."

You pulled my hand and returned us to the party. You raised your right fingers to the main entrance wall. "And what you think, Misha?"

"It's all S&M."

"You think?"

You had spent more than two months preparing your solo exhibition in San Francisco. Your first one in America. You worked diligently, if not passionately, commuting like a salaryman and putting in your "ten hours." I was impressed by it, actually, the regularity of it, the professionalism. It was like watching my family go to work and make art when I was a kid.

"Anna, every graphic is a woman in bondage gear. Harnesses, bit gags, whips. They're all on their knees licking water from dog bowls or getting sawed in half by elks with chainsaws."

"You forgot antlers." Even in English, you were funny.

"Yes, lots of antlers." Antlers were a constant in your work. All the elks sported antlers, of course, but half the women, too, and some other anthropomorphic creatures. One of the drawings had a house with antlers, below which kneeled collared women at a trough drinking water and whipping each other. Wearing antlers.

"What do the antlers mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. Women in bondage." You smiled at me. We laughed. That was your best feature, in the end. You were funny.

I asked you once about a Russian journalist whose work I liked. "You like Masha Gessen?!?!" You threw your arms up to the ceiling. "Let me tell you somfin. She is so full of shit. So angry. So annoying."

"Yeah, but she seems so smart."

"Yes but who give a shit. So angry you can't believe it."

Then at the restaurant: “See those Russian bitches? Probably Ukrainians. See their clothes they are wearing? Tousands. Wearing tousands. They want the money. They can look at your shoes and decide they will have your baby. If they have your baby, I will decapitalize zem. If you speak wiz zem, I will decapitalize you.”

You knew enough English to know you were mucking with it. That turned me on. I think that’s what the MBAs mean when they blog about being sapiosexuals. Your accent and deliberate misspellings worked their way into your SMS. You declared our love to be the “inspirrrrrratziya” for your “exhibitziya.” You continued to use “buy” for “bye” and “text massage” instead of “text message.” And the best one was when you told a story about one girlfriend or another who was about to “burn the baby,” instead of, of course, “born the baby,” which, of course in turn, meant “give birth to the baby.”

On the way to the opening you wore the same bright purple fur coat you were wearing when I met you at the hotel bar. Actually, you met me. It was unlikely, of course, probably statistically impossible: a Russian blonde in a bright purple fur coat and jeans writing Hebrew language exercises in a workbook. Like probably everyone else in the world for whom this is true, meeting a young Russian woman in a hotel bar wasn’t in my business plan, and your mock offense at my mock offense became our first private meme. You were then, as now, so thin, so elegant, your jawline simultaneously gently delicate and sharply defined, like a feminine David Bowie with slightly puffier cheeks. In an email, you said that, when you saw me, the word “husband” popped into your head for the first time. You said it was when I compared you to David Bowie that you fell in love. My responses to you have chiefly been far more primitive. I’ve repeatedly wished it wasn’t so.

It took us a couple of turns of the Internet to establish that I wasn’t married and that you weren’t an escort. I couldn’t quite believe it. Here was the picture of what I had lost back in college when I chose the Internet. A real life artist. Not only that. A statistically impossibly beautiful painter who had at the young age of 20-something been declared anathema by the Russian Orthodox church for a work she had sold to an iconoclastically liberal St. Petersburg patriarch who was later tossed from power and excommunicated. I couldn’t imagine my luck. So much better than what I was used to in Silicon Valley. The last girl I’d dated was a medical startup CEO who was using her venture capital to come visit me in different cities for trysts. Only later did I find out she had a husband and a couple other guys, including one of her investors. Lesson learned: stay away from venture funded women. Date an artist. Better if she’s already famous in Russia.

“You don’t want your biiiiitches to meet your sons?” Lip, lip, pout, pout. “You think I’m just hoooootel prrrrostitute biiiiitches?”

You might as well have asked if I had stopped beating my wife. There was no really good way answer to that question.

“Of course I’d like you to meet them. But I will want to know this is more serious before I introduce you. They’re small. They might be confused.”

“Why they live wiz you? Why not wiz mother? She crazy bitch?”

Translating Russian divorce culture to Northern California was off by two centuries and a bottle of vodka.

"My ex-boyfriend is very famous CEO top manager startup guy Moscow. He has daughter, and he sees daughter once in per month. This should be enough."

But I was drunk with you. It didn't matter what you said. And even then you always followed with a kiss. You'd suck my lower lip and graze my lower abdomen with your fingers. Then: "My Misha. I love you. You are not just businessman. You are like artist." I was plastalina.

Two nights before your exhibition, I finally watched your film. You wondered why I hadn't yet even though you'd sent me the link three times. It was a thirty-four minute hand held job, alternately color and black and white, apparently based on what you were feeling that day. Most of it was interviews of your Russian girlfriends sitting on their living room couches or bedroom floors talking about sex. There was a four minute wordless shot of your getting your head shaved. And two three-minute exposures without sound, one of commuters boarding and offloading subway cars and the other of a woman sitting on a park bench.

My great grandfather escaped the pogrom by walking from the Ukraine to Rotterdam. He stowed away to America, where he failed as a squash farmer and succeeded as a sculptor. The one sepia photo I have shows an impatient face and a Marxist beard, but the lens particularly loved his knobby, muscular hands. They must have been the size of my MacBook screen. He made dense sculptures of wood, stone, and bronze depicting musicians and boxers in the throes and ecstasy of breakthrough or defeat. The story was that, on Shabbat, he would play the balalaika perfectly for hours and insist on accompanying himself with a miserable singing voice. When I watched your film, I could feel the lactic acid of agony and resentment build up in my legs. Your movie was selfish. Without hesitation, you imposed on your viewer the laziness of your craft and the tired, maudlin aspect of a film school student. It was suffocating to watch. At minute 29, an old man emerging from a train in Moscow reminded me of my great grandfather, and I relaxed as I realized he would have laughed at the movie and thrown up his hands! "Lazy bourgeois shit!" he would have said.

Thinking about your movie made me drink at your opening. Every piece I examined, even the forty-foot painting on linen, reminded me of the film. At least the work in your show was intentional, not like the haphazard philosophies you captured your drunk friends uttering. But….

"You are still my biiiiitches," I said to you, hearing myself beginning to slur. I was going to have some kind of headache in the morning. Wine plus vodka even sounded dumb. At least I was munching tiny pickles.

You let the tips of your fingers run down my back and on to my ass. "Such a good ass," you said, turning your waist so I could see yours, too.

"Such a good ass," I agreed. You skipped off to talk to the curator, a veritable personage from the SF MOMA. He seemed delighted with the showing.

You were drunk often, most nights we saw each other. It didn't take much, true, maybe two glasses. And who was I to complain. I drank with you. The first weeks, you danced and tra-la-la'd and rolled your r's harder and cooed "call me biiiiitches, please, Misha, just one morrrrre time…." Then maybe I laughed less at the jokes, maybe I smiled less at the charm, or maybe I started to worry about the effect of the alcohol on my brain. You noticed the change in my response. So you mirrored mine with yours. After 11 pm, your tune shifted from "Misha dolce vita" to "you can never understand my country. You cannot imagine what has happened in Yeltsin." I was at a loss. You liked it.

I watched you and Maria corner a shabbily dressed man in his fifties who was probably a biotech billionaire. You smiled demurely as Maria gesticulated at the largest graphic on the wall. It showed two perfectly formed female assess and legs pouring themselves into thigh high stilettos. The figures were bent over at the waist so as to obscure their upper bodies, but the antlers presumably emerging from their heads were plainly visible. The man raised his hands over his head with his fingers pointing akimbo to show antlers.

When you actually met my kids, we had a fight. I invited you to one of our typical Sundays, defined by activities for four year olds. We started at what my younger son calls the "golden coffee place," due to the color of the walls, and sat outside for coffee and croissants. They asked you questions about Russia, and you answered with faces that made them laugh. I loved you for it. Then we walked to Johnson Park and kicked a ball. You rode down the curving green slide with each of them in turn, maybe ten times in a row, and I loved you more. I threw them in the air, and they insisted "Anna, you do it, you do it!" and you laughed. "You are too hhhhheavy," you said, and they loved you and your accent.

Then under the shade of a sequoia tree I read Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea, and they put their heads on my chest and looked at the pictures. Then I saw your lip pout appear. Perhaps you thought better of it, and you took out your phone, sat on the grass a few feet away, and flipped through Instagram. At lunch you were despondent, even when my older son asked you to make jokes about the sushi. I could tell you wanted my attention, but I did not imagine what would come next. We drove to the Ducky Car Wash. The kids love going because they can sit in the Jeep during the wash and then ride a giant gyrating coin-operated yellow duck big enough to fit them both at the same time. While they were sitting on the duck, you looked me in the eyes and fainted on the concrete. You did the full-on hand-to-forehead-fall-sideways-on-the-concrete-B-movie faint. I helped you up as my sons, 3 and 5 years old, scrambled off the yellow duck to ask if you were ok. You were fine.

Back in the car, I was stone silent. You knew you had fucked up, competing with my sons. I escalated by not talking with you and again by immediately dropping you off at your place. "I'll call you later," I said, coldly.

"No, Michael. Now. I stay wiz you now."

"Not now, Anna. I have to cool off."

You slammed the door and stalked into your building. The boys asked what was wrong. I wish I had done a better job of lightening the mood with some faces, but instead I gruffed out "let's go home and play."

Five hours later, you were on a plane to Frankfurt. You sent me an SMS from SFO airport, "good buy." I didn't have the energy to protest, and I didn't know if you were telling the truth. But you were. The next night you were sleeping at Schloss Beesenstedt, a faux 19th century castle people rent for weddings. The owner says he's an art dealer and hosts parties when it's not rented. Two years ago, on one of the walls, you mounted a three meter painting of a pair of athletic, female, winged angels opening, at the middle of the two opposing canvases, a large, gashed red vulva. For the next three days, you sent me photos of empty wine glasses and hipsters dancing to house music. Then you decamped to Berlin, where you sent me photos of late night dinners at the gallery your local ex-boyfriend painter built and of the King Size bar where you drank with your friends till the early morning. You told me you were so sad, "so much crying, so much hurt, you frow me away from your life!"

I said I wanted to talk. We named a time, my Friday afternoon and your evening. You missed the window and sent me an "apology massage: sorry, no wifi here in gallery. Lots of artists talking about soullllllll. Such bullshit. Buy."

We agreed to talk the next day. In the morning, I drove to the Great American Frame-Up store on El Camino Real and ordered frames for two paintings you had made for the show but decided were too small to use. I took photos of the framer, a Russian immigrant named Ivan, holding the pieces up next to his chosen mattes. I sent you the pictures.

But you missed the time again. I waited in my bedroom for thirty minutes, the boys napping in theirs, sending you SMS and trying you on FaceTime Audio. You didn't answer.

At midnight my time, you sent me a message.

"Can tell you somfin?"

"Yes."

"I took drugs. A lot."

"What kind?"

"Cocaine."

"How much?"

"Fourteen lines. I think."

At the moment I was in the framing store, making a gift for you of your oils, you were sucking down powder with your friends at the … well, I never found out where, did I? The gallery, King Size, your ex-boyfriend's bedroom. It wasn't clear.

Why did I take you back? You returned to San Francisco to start preparing the show. I agreed immediately to see you again. Like some kind of cyber-day Solomon I decided I could keep a cocaine person in my life while I had kids but only if she promised never to use again and only if she agreed not to see my sons. Looking back, holy shit. Talk about splitting the baby.

But I was in your control. Your skin softer than sable, your eyes so bright and clear, your words so well timed, our sex so desperate.

On the nights I went to San Francisco to see you, we would drink and sex. The next morning – back in my office and you back at the studio – I would send you carping texts.

"So you liked the parties in Berlin, huh?"

"It is NOT a party. It is a *comm*unity." When you spoke, you hit the emphasis on "comm." That's how I heard it in my head when I received your SMS.

"I dunno. Looked like a party." The problem with SMS is that everyone sounds snarky, even when they're not trying to sound snarky, so when I'm trying to sound snarky, it may not come across as sufficiently snarky. But I guess, in this case, it did.

"My friends, oligarchs, inventors, artists, actors, directors, idlers, excuse if they don't correspond to morals scales, they are beautiful people. You know nothing about it. You know nothing about me. You are simple businessman."

Then the same night we would make love.

These were the weeks running up to your show.

Having watched you and Maria make the sale to the shabby billionaire, I walked over to a black leather and stainless steel bench just inside the entrance of the Mishinkin to sit and take in the scene. My head was starting to throb. There must have been a hundred and fifty people there, looking at the pieces, talking about them, comparing them to other artists they had seen. They looked like they knew what they were doing. I was impressed.

I fished my phone out of my jacket breast pocket and, for the first time since meeting you, googled the images of your past work. I had seen samples on your personal website, and you had shown me cuttings of past exhibition catalogues from Europe. But I realized I had never done an actual search.

It was uncanny. I found myself scrolling faster and faster through the images, my heart rate rising as I dove deeper into the results. The same motifs kept surfacing over and over again. The same pastels and hot pinks and blacks. The same S&M girls and elks. The same antlers. The same collages. The same poorly drawn faces and

perfectly formed asses. From a public art commission eight years ago to a gallery exhibition three years later to a group show two years since, it was all the same. A musician playing the same five notes for a decade. You were 28, and you were making the same art you were making when you were 24 and 20 and…. I felt like I was in the reveal at the end of the Hollywood thriller when the protagonist pieces it all together.

I held my phone up to eye level and saw you in the back of the gallery. You smiled at me. From where I sat, your body and my iPhone were the same height. In art, they call that perspective.

"You're a lousy artist," I said out loud, smiling back at you, though of course you could not hear.

I slipped my phone into my breast pocket, put the vodka glass down on the reception desk, and walked out the door onto Stockton street. I caught a car down to Palo Alto, relieved the babysitter, kissed the boys, and drank four huge glasses of water to lean against the coming hangover.

At 6 o'clock, I woke up and listened out for the kids. Sunlight hit your paintings on my wall, the ones I had framed while you were in Berlin. Now I could see. Lazy, uneven oils. Simple themes, unexplored, repeated from canvas to canvas without evolution. I removed them from the hooks where they were hanging next to my great grandfather's oil of a lighthouse in a storm and my grandfather's watercolor of a ketch intercepting a Massachusetts breeze and my father's dark pastel of a student learning lute from his master. And I dumped your superficial shit in the trash. I opened my phone and ordered a set of charcoals and heavy paper, and I went into the other room to wake up my sons.