

COME TO BRATISLAVA!



Benjamin Reed

BY THE TIME Edgar Rusel reached the third-floor landing of Naama's East Village walk-up, his heart was pounding like it wanted to escape his chest. He could hear it in his ears. Edgar was not overweight, precisely, but neither was he aging very well. He lingered in the hall, waiting for his heart rate to slacken, to catch his breath enough to allow a full sentence before Naama opened her door. Naama, who was not quite young enough to be Edgar's daughter, was the only surviving employee at his store, Austerlitz Rare & Collectible Books. There had been others—a couple of girls from NYU who helped out on the weekends, a kid from the neighborhood who clocked in a few hours a week to wash the windows and alphabetize the shelves, and Helen, his former bookkeeper, who still included Edgar's address in group emails soliciting donations for leukemia research, disaster relief, and orthopedic surgery missions in Central America. Edgar deleted these emails without reading past the subject line. Over the last three years he'd

been forced to cut costs wherever he could. The store was now dark on Sundays and Mondays.

Edgar, his pulse still thumping like a trapped hare, walked down the hall searching for Naama's door, a bottle of red wine hanging from the bent fingers of his right hand. Edgar walked the unheated hallway until he found her door. 3-G. He paused before knocking. He reminded himself to be careful. On two occasions Naama, unthinkably, had campaigned to seduce him. Edgar couldn't fathom why. Not only was there the significant difference in their ages, Edgar often felt Naama was too exceptional to work in his dusty, crowded little store, let alone graft herself onto his personal life, such as it was.

The first time she made a move had been the year before, in Germany, after too many drinks on the last night of the Frankfurt Book Fair. The second occurred a few months ago, late one evening while they took a break from end-of-quarter inventory to eat Chinese food while sitting on empty, overturned paint buckets under the single bare light bulb of the storeroom. She just leaned over and kissed him, his closed mouth warm with macerated cashews and gingered prawn. Both times Edgar had smiled and politely ignored the warm center of her advances. At home, afterward, he castigated himself, wondering how he could refuse her, why he feigned emotional paralysis. There must have been some reason. Fear, probably. But fear of what? Finally he satisfied himself with a comprehensive recitation of his previous relationships. Several of them

had been lovely, but all had eventually imploded. What would happen if Naama, scorned, left him? How would he possibly replace her?

He knew he was flirting with disaster when he finally surrendered to Naama's standing inducement of a home-cooked meal. In his mind, ironically, the approaching evening became so much takeout Chinese. Sweet and Sour Dilemma. Naama was, all pretense aside, the closest thing he had to a best friend. "You're my rock," he'd say, hoping she'd know he wasn't joking, hoping also that she wouldn't force him to elaborate. He could only imagine that she wanted more than to be someone's heavy, reliable stone.

Edgar's pulse increased, again, when she opened her door and he was bathed in warm light and the spice and steam of a complicated meal simmering on her stove. Naama was barefoot but wearing makeup and a thin gold necklace that disappeared into her cleavage. Her black hair, as it had been since he first met her, was arranged in a neat bob, her short bangs cut with laser-beam precision. She wore a clinging burgundy dress that crossed her heavy chest and hugged her waist. Edgar reminded himself not to drink too much.

"Jesus," she said, touching his forehead. "Did you run here?"

They embraced briefly. He nodded at her pedicured toenails. "Should I take off my shoes?"

"Please."

He stepped out of his soft leather shoes and handed her the bottle. "Thank you," she said, reading the label. "But

nothing I'm making pairs very well with red."

Edgar shrugged. "Then save it." He'd paid sixty-eight dollars for the bottle of Bordeaux, which was more than he spent on lunch in an entire week, an impulse that belied Edgar's belief that he'd fully acclimated to his current state of penury.

"Or we can open it."

"No, that's okay," Edgar said as Naama took his coat and hung it by the door. "Save it for a special occasion. I could use some water, anyway."

Naama poured him a glass from a Brita pitcher and walked to where he'd collapsed onto her couch.

"Thanks," he said.

"Anything interesting happen at the shop today?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact," Edgar said, leaning to the side to pull his phone from his hip pocket, "I got a rather exciting email this morning."

"Oh?" Naama said, distracted, as she abandoned him for the kitchen nook.

"Unless you don't want to mix business with pleasure?"

Naama's dark hair fell forward as she dropped a pad of butter onto a frying pan. He could tell she smiled, even though he could only see a sliver of her face, illuminated in the light over the range. "Of course not," she said. "Mix away."

Edgar opened the email application and read aloud, in a cartoonish Eastern European accent:

Hello Mr. Rusel,

I am writing you because I have possession of the lost work of master Polish writer Bruno Schulz. These documents were hold by our family for many years, even though I just recently have discover their authority. These are written in hand, titled «The Messiah». If you are interested in purchasing, you will contact me at very soon ability. I read about your business reputation, and think that would interest you to buy. If you can please visit me in Košice, Slovak Republic, at your earliest convenience personally you will verify the authentic value of papers.

Sincerest,

Mira Sokol.

Naama turned around, wiping her hands on a white dishcloth. “Is this real?”

“Who knows?” Edgar said. “But I figure, I’m going to Frankfurt anyway. Why not leave a couple of days early and check this out?”

Naama turned back to the stove and stirred something in a saucepan, tasting it from the tip of a wooden spoon. She winced. “I don’t know very much about Bruno Schulz,” she said. “He was German?”

“No. Polish. Jewish–Polish. Died in the Holocaust.” Edgar gave Naama a thumbnail biography. Bruno Schulz had been a favorite of Edgar’s since he was an undergraduate. Particularly his collection of short stories, *The Street of Crocodiles*. Edgar had been snared by a single detail in the first story—Schulz’s description of walking through the

center of his town, past anonymous faces in the warm light of afternoon. From memory: “The passers-by, bathed in melted gold, had their eyes half closed against the glare, as if they were drenched in honey.” It was the last time he could remember finishing a book then immediately reading it again from the beginning. *The Messiah* was the title of the novel Schulz was supposed to have been working on when he was killed.

Naama turned off the gas. “Almost ready to eat. You sure you don’t want a cocktail? Gin?”

“I’m okay for now,” he said. Then, before she could change the subject, “I made a few calls. A critical volume of his work is about to come out. Even if I only broker a deal between this Sokol person and a publisher—acting as an agent, really—the fee could be considerable. Well worth our time to investigate.”

Naama nodded as she laid two china plates on the little wooden table between the kitchen and where Edgar sat watching her from the couch. “Which is why you don’t simply forward her email to a publisher.”

“Right.”

“Why not just buy it?” she asked. “Or would there be a conflict? With, you know, his estate? Does he have an estate?”

“Schulz’s published work was owned by his niece’s son. But it’s all public domain now. I’m not sure there’d be a conflict if this—if something new came to light. I don’t think so.”

Naama eyed him skeptically, back-lit by the light over the stove. “You should call a lawyer,” she said. “To make sure.”

“I know,” he said, nodding, looking at her hardwood floor. Actually, this was something he’d hoped Naama would understand implicitly, and resolve before he could be disheartened.

“Wait,” she said, straightening. “Flying out ‘a couple days early’ means you’d have to leave the day after tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“Well, let me know, and I’ll have your flight changed.”

“How much will that cost?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. Usually about a hundred dollars. I can change my ticket, too.”

Edgar considered this, eyeing the unopened bottle of Bordeaux. “No, just do mine. I’ll meet you in Frankfurt. If it’s a wild goose chase, better just one of us goes.”

“Okay,” she said. “If you don’t think you’ll need me.”

She seemed hurt. This surprised Edgar. “Naama,” he said. “When do I not need you? But I’ll have my phone. I’ll just be there a day or two.”

“Well, I hope it works out. Now: enough mixing. Let’s eat.”

After dinner Naama made dry martinis from a towering bottle of Bombay Sapphire, which she knew from experience was a kind of kryptonite for Edgar. At ten o’clock he was again slouched into her pristine white couch, swimming in gin, while she sat at the other end

in a demonstration of correct posture. Poised but not rigid. Was that what he was afraid of? Her unflinching self-awareness? As they talked, Edgar felt Naama watching him. She was plainly unbothered by the late hour. She shifted on the cushions and Edgar retreated by inches, but Naama advanced again. Then she was on him, and it was suddenly too late to invent a migraine.

“I’m happy you came over,” she said. Her eyes were soft. She’d matched him drink for drink.

They kissed and fondled, Edgar’s heart lulled by the gin and the caress of her lips across his earlobe. She bit gently into his neck and he laughed, not because it tickled but because he’d abruptly solved a small mystery.

Naama pulled back. “What is it? Why are you laughing?”

“It’s nothing, I swear. I’m sorry.”

“No.” She tensed. “What?”

“It’s just—I’ve been smelling this faint trace of *vanilla* all night. I thought maybe you’d made a dessert or something. Like a cake. I just realized, it’s your perfume.”

She laughed as she stood. “Come here,” she said, pulling him toward her bedroom. Edgar followed her into the darkened room, where Naama’s double bed abutted a large casement window, the white duvet cover blue in the moonlight. He stood before her as she sat on the edge of her bed, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. It had been so long since he’d been alone with a woman in her bedroom. This felt unreal, like *déjà vu*.

From the day he’d hired her, Naama’s youth and

beauty had incited in Edgar a Calvinistic reaction to even appearing to play the part of the lecherous boss, though he had often stolen glances. Yes, he'd privately marveled at her figure. Naama's body existed on an ethereal plane between hale and voluptuous, an arrangement of shapes that Edgar had always found quietly inscrutable. Watching her undress was a kind of revelation.

“Naama, are you sure—?”

She told him to hush. “Of course I'm sure.” She reached for his belt buckle. He felt himself unfasten.

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