

Eat Fist!

The picture of Angelina Jolie in my locker stares at the Marilyn Monroe I've taped next to her. Angelina's lips are puckered half-moons ready to pull the tiny brown birthmark above Marilyn's mouth into their orbit. Whenever I close my locker, I worry I'm missing something celestial, a big bang of tongues and cheeks, hips and breasts. I look at Angelina's lips and feel their gravitational pull. Slamming the door, I whisper, 'You want to be like them, not with them, Libby. Like them, not with them.'

When I go to college next year, I want to major in math. I like the idea of isolating variables and breaking them down. When everything's a number, the world is a less frightening place. My lack of hips, for example, becomes just a matter of angles, of degrees or lack thereof, instead of the future C-section my mother predicts I'll need when I come into my 'womanhood.'

Whenever my parents ask where math is going to get me, I drop something on the floor. 'That's math,' I say ominously, pointing to the split apple. 'And that.' I point to the kid kicking a soccer ball down the street. 'That's math. And look there.' My finger follows a dragonfly that's somehow broken into the apartment. Actually, most of that stuff is physics, math's bastard child, but I don't tell them that and leave the room before they can ask me any questions.

For my mother, math is the solar-powered calculator that sits in a drawer underneath the microwave. Anything beyond its monochromatic keypad is someone else's business. Despite her innate hostility to numbers, she reduces my future into a single equation with the grace of a mathematician who's managed to disprove the existence of God: 'No Ukrainian,' she says bluntly, 'no money.'

'But I can speak it just fine.'

'Think about your father. Tell me how he's supposed to read the letters you'll send us every month.'

'Nobody writes letters anymore, Mom. Why can't I just call?'

'Your father likes reading letters. Besides, since you want to go as far away from us as you can, I can only imagine how expensive the long distance charges would be.'

My father looks up from his newspaper, the special one he has imported from Ukraine, and shrugs. His expression confirms that things are out of his hands. Later he puts an arm around me and sighs. My shoulders are so narrow he can scratch his own chest when I'm in his grip.

I retreat back to my bedroom and stare at the *Tomb Raider* poster I have taped to the wall above my desk. 'I want to be like you,' I tell it as coldly as I can manage, 'but not with you. *Capiche?*'

Angelina doesn't say anything back but I know she knows that I know that somehow my hand has found its way into my pants again.

Ukrainians like doing things through word of mouth. Someone sees you purchasing boys underwear at the mall, to use an example that in no way relates to my life, and all of a sudden you're getting black lace panties and makeup kits for your birthday. All it takes is one of Mom's casual conversations with our dentist and the calls for potential tutors come rushing in.

From a list three pages long my mother chooses a woman named Alana, mostly for price and a little for convenience of location, since she lives three blocks away.

We arrive at Alana's apartment in all our finery: Mom in a floral skirt and a matching blouse she usually saves for church and job interviews, me in my school uniform—a pleated dress (shudder) and a loose-collared shirt that achieves the impossible by making it look like I actually have boobs. Mom sprays a cloud of perfume in the air and pushes me through it and into the apartment building's lobby. She presses a button on the electronic keypad and a muffled voice buzzes us into the building. Mom takes me by the shoulders and shakes me gently. 'She used to be a teacher, Libanka,' she says. 'Grades 1 through 6.' She picks a fluff of lint off my shoulder. 'How's my makeup?'

She doesn't wait to hear the answer before making her way up to the second floor, navigating each stair nimbly, even though her heels are practically stilts. My heels are a fraction of the size and still my equilibrium's as fickle as a fish. After straightening her blouse and clearing her throat, Mom knocks on the door. Her fist barely touches the wood when it swings open.

Alana is a spectacle the way Godzilla is a spectacle. Her jeans cling to her thighs like plastic wrap stretched over a Buick. The shirt she's wearing is plain and white, loose at the stomach and pulling at the shoulder seams. Her extended hand is attached to a wrist thicker than a shampoo bottle.

'*Boje,*' I mutter to myself.

‘Very nice to meet you.’ Alana smiles as my mother shakes her hand.

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance,’ my mother says in a firm Ukrainian I rarely hear. ‘This is my daughter Libanka.’

‘Libby,’ I correct her.

‘Very nice to meet you, Libby,’ Alana says, her voice an echo. ‘Come in, please. I have coffee already made.’ Alana uses the same formal inflectives as my mother. In English, Alana says, ‘Libby, if you want to make yourself at home, there’s a TV in the living room.’

‘Go on, Libanka, while we talk *business*.’ My mother says ‘business’ in English and when she does I know that no matter how colossal Alana is, when it comes to money, she’ll crumble like the Berlin wall.

As they engage in the great Ukrainian pastime of haggling to the cent, I stare at the mantel over the television, where a collection of trophies are arranged in rows like little soldiers. Golden figures stand on top of wooden bases, hoisting barbells high above their heads. They look like Alana: 3-D maps of bulges, bumps where I’ve never seen bumps, disproportionately thick thighs and angular chins. The inscriptions are all in Ukrainian.

Eventually I get bored and watch *Springer*. Two paternity tests and one crackhead intervention later, my mother claps her hands.

‘Fifty dollars a month it is,’ she announces. She moves to the door. ‘Libanka will start next week.’ She gestures to me, patting her thigh as if I were some sort of pet. It shames me that I dutifully come as told. Alana leans against the wall and smiles, folding her veiny forearms across her chest.

The difficulty I have stuffing my feet back into my heels reminds me of the time my *babusya* called me into the change room at Zellers and asked me to help her squeeze a pair of stockings over ankles swollen to the size of tennis balls. Once my shoes are on, my mother smiles at Alana and pulls me out the door. We’re halfway down the hallway when Alana’s voice booms. ‘When you come, bring something in Ukrainian.’

I stop. I don’t have anything in Ukrainian.

‘Don’t worry,’ Mom waves, dragging me toward the elevator. ‘We have plenty of things she can bring.’

At home, I’m handed a slim book, smudged with fingerprints. My mother holds it gingerly. ‘Taras Shevchenko,’ she says reverently. ‘He’s my favourite poet. You and Alana can use him.’

‘You better be careful with that,’ Dad laughs. ‘Once I bent a corner and found myself almost divorced.’

‘Keep the jokes up and you still might,’ Mom says. ‘Treat him very carefully, Libanka. This book is older than you are.’

The fact that my mother and the book of poems are on good enough terms to use personal pronouns makes me wonder what I've gotten myself into. When I read through Taras, I start to get bored. He talks a lot about mountains. His words make me think of Alana.

The air in Alana's apartment is a strange yin-yang of smells: the steamy odour of boiled vegetables rubbing against the chemical-lemon scent of Pledge. There's some incense in there too, and hints of the perfume Alana was wearing the last time I was here. I'm sitting in a creaking couch and the cushions are swallowing me. As I fight their gravity, Alana deduces my level of comprehension. She says, 'So you can speak, but not read or write?'

'I can read a little.'

'Most people who haven't been formally educated in a language can only speak, so you're ahead of the game. Here, read this.'

She takes my mother's collection of poetry off the coffee table and hands it to me. I struggle phonetically over the letters, aware that the words are poorly articulated, stressed when they should be a smooth river, soft when they should be boulders.

'Not bad,' Alana says, 'though Schevchenko wouldn't have been my first choice.'

'Apparently my mom loves him.'

'No offense to your mother, but she's wound a little tight. I can see why a stuffy old nationalist poet who writes about trees and fields and potatoes would appeal to her. Why don't we try something a little more fun. Here.'

I expect a dense tome and instead get bright and colourful newsprint.

'They make these in Ukrainian?'

Alana claps me on the shoulder. It only stings a little. 'Wonder Woman comic books transcend the boundaries of geography and language. They're tough to find and most of the time I have to order them, but what the hell? If you can't read about women kicking ass in your own language, then you aren't really reading at all. Besides, the co-creator of DC Comics was a Ukrainian. Did you know that?'

'I had no idea.'

'A Ukrainian also made Spiderman.'

'You know a lot about comic books.'

'I was a teacher. You're dead in the water if you can't relate to kids.'

When I come home, my belly is filled with tea and *pompushki*, tasty little fruit-filled pastries that I wolfed down by the half dozen. My



mind is a cross-pollinated jumble of Ukrainian and English words, fighting for elbow room with thoughts of Alana. Before I can even take off my shoes, Mom calls me over and asks me to write something.

‘Anything,’ Mom says. ‘I don’t care. Just show me that I’m not wasting my money.’

I take a pen and scrawl the words Wonder Woman says whenever punishing evil-doers: ‘*Yisty kulak.*’

Eat fist.

Sometimes I’m translating from English to Ukrainian, sometimes the other way around. Sometimes I spell things out phonetically or convert Ukrainian words, written using English letters, into Cyrillic. After that, we read together, alternating sentences. I notice that some words make Alana breathe more deeply, from the pit of her stomach instead of her lungs. Whenever Wonder Woman says something clever before pouncing on villains, for example, she swallows gulps of air with the urgency of a diver about to break the water’s surface.

The first few times, I make mistakes almost every word. By the third week I can usually get through two or three lines before running into an idiomatic phrase that makes no sense to me. The Ukrainian language refuses to flow from the page the way it does from my mouth. We go through comic books and magazines and newspapers and once even a menu from the only Ukrainian restaurant in town that delivers. The only thing we never touch is Mom’s collection of poetry.

Today someone at school defaces my Angelina Jolie picture and rips Marilyn Monroe out of my locker. I find her pulpy corpse floating in the drinking fountain. What’s left of her bobbing face slides off the page like a snake’s second skin when I try to rescue her, leaving an inky black cloud in its wake.

When I get to Alana’s, I stare at the trophies on her mantel and wish the gold figures would spring to life and crush my enemies. Alana brings in a tray of pastries and plops down next to me. Her hair is tied back in a ponytail and for the first time I notice how symmetrical her face is, her high cheekbones bookending a nose that curves slightly upwards, her face a perfect combination of straight lines and parabolas.

‘You’re quiet today,’ she says. She puts her arm around me, not behind my back but over my head, the crook of her elbow just touching my hair. Her breath is a wave of heat settling on my ears. I stop thinking about Marilyn. I stop thinking about anything, until I realize that Alana is looking at me, her head a planet tilting on its axis.

‘Say something,’ she says. ‘Silence is boring.’

I look down and clear my throat. 'Did you know that if you put 23 people into a room together, 50 per cent of the time two of them will share a birthday?'

She cocks her eyebrow. 'Really?'

I stare at her coffee table and notice three circular stains intersecting. 'If you think about it, the number 3 is pretty important,' I continue, building up steam. 'The Holy Trinity, for example. Or how our planet is the third one in our solar system. And it's the minimum number of dimensions needed to describe a solid in math.'

She looks at me vaguely and I sense I've gone too far.

'So...' I say, drawing out the word to buy me time. I consider talking about the paintings, but know nothing about art. The pastries look good but I haven't tried one yet. I look around the room frantically and find salvation in the collection of trophies. 'What are those? I was looking at them earlier and couldn't figure out what sport they're for.'

'The one with the red base is my city trophy. The big one is from the national championship,' she says. 'I set a national record for my body weight that time. Bench pressing twice my weight. Go to the gym and find me a man who could do that.'

'I thought only guys worked out.'

Alana laughs. '*Working out* is what frat boys do. This is weightlifting. Different thing altogether.'

I've seen my cousins lifting weights before. Mike boxes and can lift 270 pounds off the ground. I look at Alana and wonder if her arms are bigger than his. She sits next to me and stuffs a pastry into her mouth. Flecks of powdered sugar float to my thighs like tiny angels before Alana's mighty hand sweeps them off.

'What do you do?' I ask. 'Just lift the barbells over your head?'

'You've never seen a bench press? Don't they teach you that stuff in gym class?'

'When the guys worked out, we always played badminton.'

Alana looks disgusted and for some reason I feel ashamed.

'I'll tell you what. Next time you come over, bring some shorts and sneakers. I'll give you a demonstration.' She shakes her head. 'It'll be a good break from all this reading crap.'

Days later I do as told, arriving in shorts, a T-shirt and running shoes that are still stiff from never being used. They squeak as I follow Alana down the sidewalk, toward the YMCA up the street.

I'm Alana's shadow when we move briskly to the change rooms. All around us, middle-aged women walk, breasts exposed, freckled, sagging, unashamed. I've never been in a health club and sheepishly

turn away from everyone. Alana throws her gym bag next to me and peels off her shirt. She lifts up an arm and smells herself.

'Oy boje,' she grunts. 'I think I forgot to put on deodorant.'

I tell her I can't smell anything. She peels off her bra and I can't help but look. Her breasts are like nothing I've ever seen before. They are small fists, pouches of flesh sitting atop two thick slabs of muscle. Her nipples are small and brown, the surrounding areola as vague as handprints on glass. As she bends over to tie her shoelaces, the slabs of muscle close like a vice. She catches me staring.

'They used to be bigger,' she says, stretching a tight Lycra bra over her breasts. 'But I'd rather have muscle than fat any day.' She flexes her chest again, the striated muscle like outstretched fingers trying to touch.

The workout room is chaos, people in cut-off T-shirts and Nike sneakers moving from machine to machine like free radicals.

'Do you want me to watch?' I ask as Alana scouts out a bench by the mirror.

'Now where's the fun in that?'

'I've never lifted weights before, so I don't think I'm going to be any good.'

Alana lifts my right arm and straightens it, squinting alongside my forearm the way someone trains the sights of a rifle. Her breath on my skin makes the tiny hairs I wish weren't there stand up on end.

'It's a shame,' she concludes. 'The distance between your chest and your arms is short and, judging from the length of your legs, it would take nothing for you to squat with your ass to the floor. Perfect dimensions for weightlifting.'

'But I'm not even a hundred pounds.'

Alana shakes her head. 'It's about strength and weight, yeah, but it's also about physics. The less distance the weight has to travel, the easier the lift is. Like look at him. With those long arms, he'll never lift much more than 250 pounds.'

I turn to look at a tall, skinny guy lying on a bench, lowering the weight quickly to his chest before slowly pressing it up.

'Imagine if his arms were a foot shorter, how much easier it would be.'

'I guess.'

'Go grab some weights and I'll teach you some things.'

I wander away and pick up a pair of small dumbbells covered in pink plastic.

As I walk, my sneakers announce my awkwardness with every step. I sit on the bench while Alana lets her head fall from side to side, a small crunching sound accompanying every movement.

She looks down at me and sighs. 'Leave those tiny pink things for the cardio bunnies.' She pulls me to a crate filled with old metal weights rusting along the edges. 'Use these. Now lie down on your back, holding the weights by your chest. Grab them in the middle.'

I do as I'm told. Her hands close around my wrists and guide my movement. In a few minutes, tiny blobs of moisture start forming on my shirt. Alana kneels behind me and says, 'Good. Slow. That's right.' Her grip loosens as I get the hang of the movement, until only the undersides of her hands graze my skin.

I become a building Alana is constructing, each limb a brick shifted into place. The movements are awkward, nothing like Alana's fluid presses. Every time she moves to get a drink of water from the fountain, she leaves the bench glistening behind her.

'Before I tore my pecs, I was doing more than this,' she laughs, kicking a dumbbell that weighs almost as much as I do. 'The doctors said I was this close to ripping the muscle clean off the bone.'

'Shouldn't you be taking it easy?'

She shakes her head. 'This is taking it easy.'

In the next hour, I learn how to spot a bench-presser and how to bench-press myself. I learn about forced negatives, supersets, and how to use cheating principles for better results. I learn how to squat with a metal bar on my back and lift plates properly from the floor. When we're finished, my shirt is soaked. Alana has already taken hers off, piling 45-pound plates back onto steel racks in her sports bra. Some people are looking at us. Like Wonder Woman, Alana is impervious to stares.

The next day I'm sore, but in a good way that's impossible to explain. I poke at my arms, those broomstick-thick cylinders of flesh, feeling for muscle. I imagine that they're pregnant, not showing signs of new life just yet, but with the seeds of growth already planted. I shrug my shoulders, letting them lull back, the way Alana does before she does a bench press. I stare into the mirror, into my own eyes, until I become blurry. For a second, between blinks, I'm gigantic. I can lift cars and tear lampposts in half. Then I hold my eyes closed for a split second too long and I'm small again, a speck, a fraction.

It's raining. The droplets of water sound like Wonder Woman's high-heeled boots stamping against the balcony. Alana has asked me if there are any boys I like at school and the only response I can think of is laughter. 'Most guys forget I'm even there. It's like, unless I have big tits and lips like Angelina Jolie, I'm invisible.' I regret taking Angelina's name in vain but it's true.

Alana raises her arms and crunches her bicep with a wink. 'Me, I'm too much woman for any man.'

I am aware of how hot it is in her apartment, how much her arms are like something Michelangelo could've carved out of stone. We're sitting close again, in a configuration that's become natural: her with her arm around my shoulders, feet on the coffee table, me absorbed by her mass. She smells like perfume and sweat, like the gym and some kind of fruit I can't pin down.

I entertain the thought of resting my head on her shoulder but say instead, 'Thanks for showing me how to work out. I mean, how to lift weights.'

'You have potential, Libanka.'

'I'd like to go again sometime.'

I aim to rest my head on her shoulder but find her breast instead.

'Me too,' she says in a voice that's probably as close as it can come to a whisper.

I'm visiting Aunt Olga for the first time in months. Olga is my mother's younger sister. She was only 7 when she came to Canada, to Mom's 13. In Olga's cosmology, men are either chivalric knights or sleazy ogres. Women are either chaste or whores. It's a bright, bright sunshiny day or it's a deluge outside. Conceptually, Aunt Olga doesn't believe in middle ground.

I accept a glass of Coke. 'Can you translate this into Ukrainian for me?'

Aunt Olga puts on her reading glasses, the thick ones she keeps hidden from the rest of the world. Her eyes follow her fingers, moving over each word on the piece of paper I've handed to her. She smiles.

'Who's the boy?' she asks.

I've come to her because she revels in taking part in conspiracies, hoarding forbidden knowledge, that kind of thing. She's our family's Eve, only she guards what she knows ruthlessly. To let the secret slip would be to ruin the power it gives her.

'Sorry?'

'There's no sense denying it, Libanka. You don't write love poems to nobody.' She sucks on her cigarette and blows a stream of smoke over my head. 'At least you've got the good sense to pick a Ukrainian.'

Olga's boyfriend of two months—an American working in Canada for an advertising firm—recently broke up with her via email. History has shown that anything Aunt Olga touches wilts. Dead plants litter her apartment. Romance novels about chesty Victorian women and even chestier Victorian lords are strewn on the floor, their spines broken. Her cat, a mangy tabby, has yet to make an appearance during my visit, leading me to believe that it's either dead or has had the good sense to escape.

A part of me is afraid that Aunt Olga will screw the translation up. Another part of me concedes that there's really nobody else to ask.

She puts out her smoke in an ashtray the shape of Elvis's head and leans over the table. The tiny fissures in her makeup remind me of a Da Vinci fresco that's starting to crack. 'So who is this boy?'

'You wouldn't know him.'

'From the sounds of what you've got here, he sounds like quite the hunk. "Arms like oak trees?" "Lips thin as the ice I find myself on around you?" A bit sappy, but the thought's nice.'

'Um.'

'Don't be so embarrassed. You should have seen the crap I've written to men in my life. Feh.'

'So you'll translate them for me?'

'Into Ukrainian? Sure, why not.'

Her smile is the outstretched hand of a waitress waiting for a tip. I know the rules.

'Only, can you not tell anyone, Aunty?'

She winks. 'It will be our little secret. Just promise me I'll be there first to meet him.'

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It's Saturday. I dipped into my father's beer and after one and a half cans I'm drunk enough to take Olga's translation and seal it in an envelope. I consider stamping the envelope's flap with a kiss but question my ability to put on lipstick. Slipping out of the apartment is easy. Dad's asleep on the couch, his reading glasses sitting low on his nose, a boxing match muted on the television. My mother's working on her memoirs in the bedroom, pecking ferociously at the typewriter Dad got her last Christmas. I wait in the lobby of Alana's building for 20 minutes before a pizza delivery boy gets buzzed in. I press my ear against Alana's door and pretend that the heartbeat I hear belongs to her. It sounds like someone's watching Jerry Springer. I can't bear to look down, so I drop the letter and use my foot to slide it under the door. When I step back I notice that the half sticking out on my side has the crescent imprint of my sneakers. I bend down and lick my finger, hoping to rub it off. I'm on my knees when the door opens. Her hand touches my shoulder. I stand and hold the letter out dumbly. She's wearing a housecoat, lime green, her hair a frizzy bouquet of blond helixes. She steps back and I step forward. When the door closes, I feel the chaos of atoms colliding.

We've started playing a new game. For every word or phrase I get right, she loses an article of clothing. Every time she stumps me, something of mine is stripped and cast off to the side.

She writes: '*Pes volossia.*'

'That's easy. Dog hair.'

Alana removes her shirt. 'Fine, what about...*Raduha?*'

'Rainbow. You're going to have to try harder than that.'

Off go her pants, her boxer briefs a glint of white between the tanned muscles of her thighs. 'Okay, try this one: *Brodjachaja sobaka.*'

'Dirty dog?'

'Vagrant dog, but very close.' She points at my shirt and I strip it off.

'That's a weird term. Is it common?'

'No, not common.' She stops, considering my body. 'It's what my mother called me when I told her I was in love with a woman. She didn't know how to say lesbian so she just said that. It was the name of a gay bar in Kiev that was near our house.'

The game stops after she says that. The pen she's been using runs out of ink. I kiss her mouth, my hands moving against arms, feeling her pulse through a vein that's like rope on her bicep.

That night, Mom asks me to write her something. Dad stands next to her. His newspaper from Ukraine is rolled up and tucked under his armpit, which means he means business.

'Go on, Libanka,' he says, rubbing my shoulders as though I'm a pole vaulter or a boxer or a 10-pin bowling champion about to roll the ball. Shrugging him off, I ask what they want me to say.

'Anything,' Mom says. 'Whatever you spend all day doing.'

Without meaning to, I flex my blooming abdominal muscles. They're armour and a cage at the same time. My hair is messy and I think I smell like the balm Alana rubs on her sore body after she works out, a pungent odour that I've grown to find sweet and inviting.

I take the pencil from Mom's hand.

In the moment where pen meets paper, Wonder Woman folds her arms and gets into her invisible jet and there's just me and Alana and the blank page in front of me.

I try to think of something like poetry.

Brodjachaja sobaka is the only thing that comes to mind.

