

STAYING

PROLOGUE, NABU AND MAIKU

It was Friday evening, the first day of April, and the young man at the center of our story had just stopped at an old brick building on the corner of Vale and Bloomfield. His way back from school took him past the apartment of Nabuchadanzar Ezerbaidinov, Nabu for short, and he thought to pay his old friend an impromptu visit.

As he reached Nabu's door, two women and a little girl rounded the corner. The women were lost in a serious discussion and paid no mind to the little pigtailed girl. They passed outside the doorway but did not see the young man. Or perhaps they saw him, but did not really register seeing him as he blended in the shadow of the doorway. Likewise, the man did not really see the women, for they looked too much the common city wife variety. He did, however, see the young freckled girl. He smiled and waved at her. The girl smiled back at him and slowed her walk. She was thoroughly adorable, bouncing about like a freckled bundle, pigtails swinging impishly.

"I don't know how I could possibly bear another child. *Koshmar kakoi-to budet.* She was such a pain coming out. Besides, it would absolutely spoil my figure." The blonder woman petted her large belly, then petted the shoulder of her friend and went on in her endearing Russian accent. "*A tebe znatchit nada srazu za muzh viyti.* Yes, you should hurry and get yourself pregnant before your breasts sag and your behind spreads out like a hoop dress."

The young man reached out to and tried to touch the little girl.

The not-so-blond woman noticed the extended hand and looked away in chagrin. "*Oi, zdes tozhe takie est!* There is no end to these beggars. Let's hurry, Masha."

The pregnant one finished her thought. “You must ask yourself, dear. Ask yourself what good man will consent to inseminate you at that point, my beloved Elena. When you’re old and wrinkled. If you ask yourself, you will see that the answer is hardly any. *Sovsem nikto*, dearest Elenotchka. Therefore I will introduce you to some established older man that will take care of you. Without delay, Elenotchka, for we must hurry. They are all friends of my Charlie and you will not regret it. *Dazhe naoborot, blagodarit menia budesh*. You are fresh from Russia, dearest, and you don’t know what to do. Therefore, you should listen to me and you will not be sorry.”

The little girl stopped and reached out to meet our man’s hand. Her mother gave her a good tug and the girl staggered and quickly caught up with the grown-ups.

Our man turned and knocked on the door. A latch slid. The door clanked and then cracked open. A little voice shot through.

“Who is?” It was Nabu’s Japanese girlfriend.

“Me, Maiku. Friend.” The young hero smiled.

More locks creaked and more metal jangled before our man could worm through the narrow doorway. Once inside, he saw his friend Nabu lying in bed under a host of blankets. Nabu peeked out of his cocoon and nodded at the guest. His face was pale and his lips shivered.

Nabu was a young Uzbek from the old city of Samarkand. His hair was raven black and straight, just like his father’s. He weighed a hundred and thirty pounds and stood at no more than five feet and four inches of height.

“Sit.” Maiku patted our hero’s shoulder. Then, she asked him if he would take tea. He nodded and she sprinted into the kitchenette. Soon, vapor rose from the pot.

The young guest turned to Nabu. “Nabu, what is wrong with you? Are you sick?”

“Yes. The phlegm, it is rising. I may have a wet spot there.” Nabu pointed to his chest.

“Such weirdness. I got sweats, too.”

Maiku's small feet approached the bed. Her hands held two cups. “Green tea.”

Nabu sniffed his cup. “Good drink, Mai. Look, mushi-mushi,” he played with Maiku’s black shiny hair. “Japanese have great hair. The tea is good for you. Makes you healthy hair.”

Our young hero took a drink. The warm tea made him calm. He found it was much better if he drank it with eyes closed on account of its disgusting green color. In fowl and animal flesh, green was the mark of rot and moldy poison. In stagnant waters and marshes, much the same. In fruit, the color brought intimation of sourness and general unfitness for eating. The only time the color green was a good thing was during the glorious vernal rebirth of the plants in the hopeful spring.

The two computer workstations in the far corner of the room buzzed in idle gear, their cursors blinking invitingly. Their sinewy nerves fed into the wall and each other in the complex functionality of a network and seemed to glow from the heat exchange. And if one looked at the cables long enough, they seemed to be heaving as though a natural breath coursed through them. Beat, then rise. Exhale, then sag. And again.

Maiku’s voice broke the visitor from the charming machines. “I go now. Ok. I see you back soon.”

Before he could say anything, Maiku had left the apartment.

“Where did she go, Nabu?”

“I sent her for soup. I’m sick”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“And many more. They don’t know for crap. They can’t tell what is it, just what could. But I know I am sick.”

Nabu took a few shallow breaths and expelled them with a cough. Then he deliberately swallowed a lot of air so he would not have to pause a lot.

“I don’t see you much lately. Remember that time? We flew for Hollywood. I lost wallet with all money. Ended up in a bad neighborhood. Pimps in blue shine suits. Then, whore. I miss Hollywood, man. Two of us in Hollywood. With pimps and whores.”

He paused to take air with a wheezing like wind in a narrow tunnel.

“Things have changed. You have Maiku now.” The guest smiled.

Nabu grew red in the face. Choking, he reached for the night table. Our young man rose in alarm.

“My in-. My inhaler.” Nabu shook and gurgled.

The young man spotted the L-shaped device on the table and handed it to Nabu. After a few puffs, the small Muslim eased back and took a normal breath.

“God is punishing me for my transgression. Oh, Allah. He is all knowing, you know.”

“What brought this on? Your breath was fine when I came in.”

“Hot liquids. Tea.”

The young man looked at his friend’s cup. It was already empty.

Nabu’s breath became normal and he eased back onto his bed. “Friend, sit and listen to my tale. Hear it for good. The first time I met Maiku, good grace. I will talk about it.”

Nabu’s visitor was about to say that he knew the story of how Nabu met Maiku and when, but Nabu was already well into it and besides it gave the young man pleasure to see his friend so transported by the past and by the hint of romantic emotion.

Some two years ago, back at St. Anselm's college, Nabu was in the process of choosing his economics courses for the semester. Much like most other foreign exchange students, he was

an Economics major and needed to satisfy the program's core requirements which included classes in the field of Advanced Economics. His original plan called for him to take a “softer” class, something like Women in Economics or the History of Economic Thought. But as he ambled about in front of the Economics department doors at the start of the semester, he saw a small exquisite East-Asian-looking girl enter the corridors and head resolutely for the office of Prof. Aschauer who taught Macro 411, a math-heavy course in Advanced Macroeconomics. Nabu stopped in his tracks and stared at the tiny girl and her lightly bowed legs. Japanese, he murmured with delight, and decided that he was being given a sign by God because he had suffered without a girlfriend long enough (two years, at the time). Nabu craved Japanese women because, unlike the local Uzbek women, they were quiet and obedient and not too assuming. Besides, a Japanese woman was a crowning trophy for an Uzbek’s social ambitions since the Japanese were considered the jewel ethnicity of the Far East.

Drawn by the blind leash of lust, Nabu, too, made straight for Aschauer's office and signed up on the spot. But when the class began some two weeks later, Nabu found himself in a peculiar predicament. He had a nature prone to easy distraction and had essentially forgotten what the girl looked like. Besides, the class was teeming with East Asians, many of them women, who all looked alike. He had no idea how to tell the Chinese, for instance, whom he disliked, from the Koreans, whom he also disliked but not as much. Not to mention, the Japanese, whom he loved, from either of those latter races. Nabu was lost for about a week and then just as he was about to pick one girl, any girl, really, flit up to her full pendent flower and buzz around in an amorous dance, the gracious God intervened and showed him the true way.

One fine afternoon, after two hours of ceaseless monotony of half-explained theorems and screeching chalk, Professor Aschauer cracked a joke. It rose and fell with hardly an effect,

for you see the joke had no purchase to latch on in the extra serious soil and context of the class. It came and passed and a few students who actually heard it narrowed their eyes, if that were possible, trying to make sense of something that had no necessity or value, was immeasurable and thus by default useless and wasteful. Aschauer did not even pause for effect, but trod on with his abstrusities. The diligent minds went back to their notebooks and soon forgot about it. But not the small shy girl at the far end of the table. Upon a moment's deliberation, she burst into thunderous laughter.

Papers stopped rustling. Pens ceased from creaking. Everybody stared at the merry girl. She covered her mouth from decency and scuttled out of the room in mid-giggle. The professor nodded his head in self-appreciation and muttered the words again, as if to better taste them the second time around.

“To the mostly male economic eye, the science of economics is all about curvature.”

The girl's name was Maiku. Staring at her backside and her bow-legged gait now leaving the room, Nabu's eyes lit up with recognition and delight. He rose and followed her out of the room and the rest, as they say, was Fate working out the kinks.

“Beautiful story, my friend. I never tire of hearing it.” The young guest smiled.

Nabu made to say something but only phlegm loosed from his lungs. He trotted over to the kitchen sink in which he spat profusely, then shuffled back to bed.

“I did bad thing, friend.” Nabu sighed. “You know the girl down South where I stay for my contract job?”

“Magda. The landlord's daughter.”

“Magda-Gelmrud. The other week I was there testing their Local Admin Network and I stayed with my bud, Sammy, Sam, you know, Samail?”

“Samuel, at the branch office.”

“Yes, him. We did boom-boom weed, him and me. Just like that.”

“Why do you go there, anyway? It is so far down.”

“I like down there. Away from city. By ocean. Calms me. But that day, I was just sitting. I didn’t mean to, but. It’s all my fault, I could have stopped it. I was just sitting. Tea-having with her. I brought her some Uzbek invasion.”

“Infusion.”

“I was just sitting there. She undid my trousers.”

Ezerbaidinov got on his feet. His little wiry legs cracked and flared with life. The pajamas were too big for him. Most men’s clothes were.

“Oh, man. I screw Maiku-San everyday like rabbit. All the time. But I need different. Understand. I need to have much. Many screws. I feel big. Otherwise look at me, midget. But when I look at rod ready to work I feel great. Maiku will kill me. No, she will herself. Harakiri. But I think I get punished. God will bring me down.”

Nabu’s lungs wheezed. “He is already. But Magda, man, she swooped me, like a loose witch. It’s her. All her.”

The young Uzbek lost his breath again. His friend reached for the inhaler, but Nabu waved a dismissive hand. His friend moved closer to him and squeezed his shoulder warmly.

The inside of the apartment had turned into laboratory whirl and warm faint electric glow from the computer screens. A dark so natural and intimate that neither of them noticed its coming covered the walls. The sky light outside was nearly extinguished, while streetlights were

yet to warm up to the dark and sense the need for ignition.

It was by memory that the visitor and Nabu could continue being aware of each other. The quiet nightfall blotted one sort of seeing but allowed another. Without the senses, intuition and fancy, the very makers of perfection, had it all to themselves. The gathering black rippled through the tall narrow windows of the apartment and blurred most manner of shape. The rickety table became a raising in the milky dark, the two cups thereon a horned coalition of ethereal smoke about to disperse and lose its founding law.

The young hero recalled the time when he and Nabu roomed together at St. Anselm's. Nabu had transferred from Tashkent State University to St. Anselm to study computer science. One night, the little Uzbek spiked a very high fever and asked his friend to take him to the hospital. It took hours of waiting in the ER to get him seen, and then a minute for the kind emergency doctor to wave a hand and tell Nabu one should not make a mountain from a molehill.

“Mole? This human or animal clinic?” Nabu raised an eyebrow.

Now, those were the times of shared living. Then and now. We must acknowledge the power and preciousness of these moments, our man thought. We must be more expressive about these personal things, these warm exalting things. We must not let this pass unpraised, the young guest resolved. But he did.

“I am sick of being so. I’m sick all the time!” Ezerbaidinov grabbed the inhaler and hurled it at the cluster of computer screens, coughing the while. He sat back on the bed and stared at his body. A drum of stretched skin, that body. No patch of it drooped, sagged, flapped like a crane’s underchin and even in bending nothing flowed over. Like his minimal speech, it was without redundancy, by nature sucked of fat, a paragon of nothing but necessity.

Nabu wiped his mouth distractedly. Some sweat had dripped down his temples and into it. “Oh, grace, I’m so hot I need to cool off. I am running fever, right?”

Without forewarning he pulled his pajama pants down and went to the open window trying to catch some of the night’s breeze. He stood there a while and stared down at his nakedness.

“What is this guy I am, my man? How do I live it? You think all the time, friend. You know all. Tell me how to live like this?”

The wiry form turned to our hero in expectancy. “Please, spell me the instructions, if you love me. Please!”

Nabu’s friend reached into the nearby drawer and took out a notebook, then started to write. As fingers moved in writing, so he spoke.

“There are these psychologies inside the several men. Some presage and gall the name of action, while others will not cease buzzing about.”

His voice trailed off. He wrote for some time until it was so dark that he could not see even the white of the paper. The streetlights outside flickered helplessly like candles in the rough wind trying to ignite. A key turned in the keyhole and a figure slid in with small pattering steps. The young man tore the paper from the notebook and folded it neatly.

“Nabu, why you sit in dark here?” Maiku spoke with concern. “What wrong?”

Nabu pulled up his pants and eased back into bed just as Maiku flipped the light switch by the door.

The light was too much to bear. It flew out and lit everything out of its mystery.

“I brought stuff to make soup.” The little girl dashed to the kitchen counter and bustled with the pots. Sweet comforting vapors rose off the stove and Nabu soon grew mellow and

closed his eyes.

Maiku came over to the bed and sat down. Thinking Nabu had drifted off to sleep, she confided to the visitor that she herself had been feeling indisposed. Her muscles in the morning were so sore that she thought she must have overexercised the previous night. But in fact she had not been exercising for many weeks now.

Then, Maiku shot up and set about pouring the hot soup. She had enough manners to dread boring her guest. Our man thought of going over and also touching Maiku's shoulder, but in the end did not.

Maiku came back with a bowl of steaming soup. She set it down and turned to the guest. "I worry for Bu. He sick like this all the time. He won't talk to me much."

Nabu stirred on his bed and snorted. "I'm not dead yet. You can talk about me with me."

"Bu, sorry, you looked sleeping."

Nabu sighed a heavy foreshadowing sigh. "Maiku-san, I have a talk to have with you. It is very serious and you won't like it. You know how I go South for contract job..."

The visitor got up. He disliked being around people on the verge of confronting each other. He had thoughts to think and ideas to organize and there was no space in his head for drama.

"Asian friends, I have to go." The young guest announced. "I've had a long week at school and I would like to rest. Good night to you and sweet dreams."

Nabu became agitated. "Hey, bud, I'm European. Look at map. Well, we should be, anyhow. Ukraine is Europe, why not we?"

The visitor was at the door. As he turned the knob and slid out, he could hear the lovers talk. Mushi, mushi, you never talk. My friends think you mute. Nabu, you talk enough for both. I

am quiet, unassuming Japanese, you never read about us?

Nabu, why not lie with me? Maiku-san, I can't do the sex. I'm sick! Nabu, who means sex! To you, it's all sex. Maiku, why no sex? I tell you why. You drink anti-depressants. And so on and forth, like this.

Out on the street, the young man's mind turned to the things ahead and strong, yet still somewhat vague, purpose filled his head.