

Mésalliance

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They had gone away for the weekend, and I was supposed to sleep in the guest bedroom, which I liked to call my bedroom, even though I was too well aware of the fact that many other people occupied it beside me, because Rebecca and Sebastian led a highly social life—but I couldn't resist the master bedroom. It was a spacious room with wall-size windows all across it. When you entered the bathroom and looked into the mirror, you could see a colorful garden and unevenly, artistically, as I thought of them, planted trees; this view, in fact, being an architectural illusion created by the reflection of the windows. The bed was king size and always dressed in some fancy fabric, dark-red satin sheets or intensely green velvet. Every time I passed by the room, I felt an irresistible desire to peek in, to know which material was covering the bed, and thus, which was covering their bodies at night. I imagined them under the satin, her skin smooth and tanned, his strong hands touching it, and I realized that I was jealous.

When I was already closer to them than any other student of theirs, but not yet an intimate friend, they had invited me over for a Saturday lunch and a walk with their dog. Or rather, she had invited me, and he was there. After the light Brie and avocado sandwiches and a stroll alongside the woods that surrounded their property, as I was thinking of ways to delay my departure, Sebastian had offered to watch a movie together, an idea to which I nodded with a self-restrained enthusiasm. Without a word, I followed them upstairs, into their bedroom, which I then saw for the first time and was mesmerized with its grandness, even if I was too nervous to look around. Sebastian sat on the bed, in front of an old, bulky television, similar to the one my parents had in Russia, and

therefore one that was outdated in the U.S. A thought crossed my mind that the three of us had this in common—we were somewhere in between the old and the new, tradition and convenience, Russia and America. Sebastian picked up the remote control, clicked some buttons. Rebecca jumped on the bed, and rested her back on its right corner. Max, the dog, followed her, and positioned himself at the foot of the bed, which was all black velvet.

“Sit in the middle,” she said to me in the most natural voice, as if she was inviting her students to sit on her bed between her and her husband every Saturday afternoon. I sat at the foot of the bed and petted Max, trying not to look at her.

“You can’t be comfortable like that, come here,” she said, and touched the spot next to her, in the middle. I put my legs on the bed, and extended my body into the designated spot. I felt the silky pillow on my bare arms but sat stiff as a mummy. I always did this—when I found myself in an uncomfortable situation, I stiffened my body, hoping to become invisible, to shrink into disappearance. When Sebastian sat next to me on the other side, I imagined myself telling one of my classmates at school on Monday that I had sat on our professor’s bed—I’d never taken a class with Sebastian—between her and another teacher, her husband, and that we were so intimately close to one another. But I knew already that I wouldn’t tell this to anyone.

We saw “Talk to Her,” Pedro Almodovar’s masterpiece about obsessive love, which I had seen several times but lied and said I hadn’t, because I wanted to extend this afternoon like a piece of chewing gum, make it last, and it was the movie they’d been planning to watch. I had to go to the bathroom, my stomach was full of their homemade iced tea and nerves, but I had taken vows not to move. In the middle of the movie, when I

slowly regained my ability to sit comfortably, Rebecca left the bedroom and went downstairs. The bed grew to larger than life dimensions, but the space between Sebastian and me didn't. To hide my panic, I stroked Max's head, and then Sebastian leaned over and stroked the dog's back. Our hands touched for less than a second, or maybe I only imagined it, because I'd wanted it to happen; either way, Rebecca was gone for what seemed to me like a suspiciously long time. When she returned, she wasn't carrying a drink or anything, and I couldn't stop wondering why she'd left us alone. Was she testing us or teasing us? I wondered, and that night I had a dream from which I woke up both confused and hopeful. Rebecca, who is 61 and eleven years Sebastian's senior, had died. In her will, she'd left half the house to Sebastian, and half to me. "Take care of each other," was her message to us.

I wouldn't tell anyone about this dream either.

I did tell my boyfriend, though, that I had a crush on Sebastian. It was after I had brought him over to the house and introduced him to them. We discussed politics and the writings of Philip Roth at the table, that is, Rebecca, Sebastian and I did, and Michael just sat there with this stupid expression on his face, turning his head every time one of us spoke, as if ready to jump in at any second. I was annoyed and embarrassed, and when he drove me home, I had told him. He looked at me surprised, and slowly repeated my words. He had a long face, and when he was nervous or unhappy, his jaw dropped and his face stretched down, making him look skinny and unattractive. "This is not right," he said after a while, and I knew that I would not see him again, because I could never forgive him for acting like a guy with no opinions in front of two people whose opinions I valued most, and also because he could never understand my relationship with those two people.

To say that I had a crush on Sebastian was only half the truth, though. The other half was that I also had a crush on Rebecca. Or rather, I became obsessed with the two of them, without knowing when or why. Rebecca and Sebastian were perfect in body and soul: they had a perfect house, a perfect dog, a perfect relationship. They never talked about trivial things such as the weather or grocery shopping. Their daily existence had nothing to do with that of everyone else, the ordinary bread eaters, people who wake up, have breakfast, and then go to work. There were times when I wanted to catch them off guard whispering about a car repair or something very practical, but it never happened, at least not when I was there, so I assumed, perhaps naively so, that they never discussed such matters. When I was with them, my mind was a mother giving multiple births of ideas; when I was away from them, I thought of things to say to them when I next saw them. In Dostoevsky, obsessions usually end badly, but I had convinced myself that mine was different.

She was my favorite professor. That's how it started. My mother was a literature teacher, and, being an only child of a divorcee in a small Russian town where going to church on Sunday was not a matter of choice, I had spent a lot of time in the company of other teachers, listening to their gossip, their problems, their complaints. Every school I went to, I was weary of my childish classmates and established a close relationship with the educators. I'd had crushes on them, too, meaningless and innocent yearnings for men—they were all men—whose knowledge I'd admired and whose voices made me blush. I'd never felt attracted to a woman that way. And then in my first semester abroad, in the suburbs of New York City, I took a Dostoevsky class, and saw Rebecca. She was beautiful in an aristocratic way. She smelled of Russia somehow, and I later learned that

her mother was a Russian émigré. Her eyes were green and deeply seated in her face. At 61 (I'd given her 48 at the most), she had better legs than me at the age of twenty-five and anyone else at school. She dressed differently, too. She wore elegant corsets or a burgundy skirt with tights full of unusual patterns or a fitted pair of pants that on anyone else would have looked like they were going horseback riding but on her they looked classy. When she stood in front of the classroom and talked about Grushenka or Natasha or Sonya it was easy to imagine them because she was like them or they were like her or both. Since I'd got to America, it seemed to me a crime to wear the same outfit twice during one week, but she did, and looked great every time.

I'd become her favorite student. She read my Dostoevsky paper out loud to the entire class, and later complimented my understanding of "The Possessed." After class, she'd asked me questions about my origins. I was Russian, and Dostoevsky was my bible. I had come to America to live the American Dream. I had been working full time as a nanny to pay tuition. She was impressed with my English, with my erudition. She was curious about my life in Russia the way no one had even been curious about my life, and one day, when I visited her in her office, there was Max, her beloved dog. I had always wanted a dog but could never have one due to constant moves and small apartments, I had told Rebecca. We started talking about dogs. She mentioned she had someone walk him in the previous semester, but that the girl had graduated. I volunteered to replace her. Rebecca was thrilled.

Then I met Sebastian. It was spring break. Rebecca was away and, for the first time, I came by their house to pick up Max for a walk. Sebastian was wickedly handsome, but not in an obvious way, as I'd later thought. His eyes were honey brown

and strong, and when he spoke, they entrapped you and made you feel you were the only person in the world. He was three years younger than my father whom I hadn't seen since I was twelve, and perhaps it was due to the lack of a father in my life that I'd been attracted to older men, especially if they were intellectual. I quickly discovered Sebastian's power to speak in hypnotizing and philosophical and mind-burning sentences about a movie he'd seen or a book he'd read, and I wanted more. He fascinated me and always made me feel slightly uncomfortable, as if I was missing an earring or I had an untied shoelace, or as if he'd been waiting for something to happen. I would have never made a move on him, because he belonged to Rebecca, but I'd enjoyed wondering what it'd be like to kiss him. We discussed literature and cinema and music. It so happened that I began walking Max twice per week, and that on one of those days, when I dropped him off at the house, Sebastian was always there, and we'd talk. When I returned back to the car, my mind was burning in an intensely pleasant way. I imagined that's what it felt like to be stoned, until I was, stoned, that is, and afterwards didn't alter my description of the effect Sebastian had had on me.

They had gone away for the weekend, I'd agreed to pet sit, and it was the first time I was left alone in their house. At first, I didn't do anything. I had planned to take long walks with Max, study for the upcoming exams, get some writing done. I watched their car drive away, disappear into the rustle of the trees, and immediately, as if driven by a supernatural power or an animal instinct, I went to the master bedroom, and sat on the bed. It was soft, the sheets were dark red and fiery. I picked up the phone and called Tarek, a new guy I'd been seeing, although I had decided to cool it off because it was getting too intense and I needed time to be with Rebecca and Sebastian. He came over on

his motorcycle a few hours later. I tried to kiss him through his helmet but my mouth couldn't reach his lips. I gestured for him to follow me. We had sex in their bedroom, and while he was moving inside me, I imagined Sebastian moving inside Rebecca, her face when the realms of pleasure overtook her womanhood mixed with his sighs of pleasure, and it was good.

Later I listened to their old messages. One was from Rebecca to Sebastian, "I'm on the beach, thinking about you. If you get this soon, come and join me." I was mesmerized by their long-term relationship—they'd been together for eighteen years—how did they manage to keep their romance going? I'd thought of my parents who'd separated as soon as their only daughter came into this world, because, as my mother says, romance and diapers don't go well together. My mother was a flirt—I'd been told that I was a flirt too—she could entangle a man within seconds, but couldn't hold on to him after the excitement of the first few dates had worn off. Watching Rebecca and Sebastian together was like reading a love story, except that I wanted to transform it into a triangle.

Another message was from a woman whose voice sounded old and harsh, "Rebecca, sorry I missed you, but Sheila would love to come to your pool at noon. Thanks for the invitation!" Sheila. Who was Sheila? I'd tried to recall her name in relation to something, but couldn't. Rebecca never said anything about her. Was she another one of her students? What if there were more of us, young bright women they'd befriended and invited over for dinners and little get-togethers? I couldn't understand how there could be another girl whom Rebecca invited to her pool. Actually, it was barely a pool and more a square hole in the ground—if you laid down inside it and

stretched out your arms you could almost touch both sides—which we’d used mostly as a cooling device for the humid summer days. Rebecca and I would sit on the grass and dip our legs into the water which was often ice cold because the pool was never exposed to the sun, and every once in a while, when we got hot, we’d jump into it and tread water for a few minutes. In my mind, the pool was something special between me and her, no one else allowed, not even Sebastian, who was more interested in William James than the treading water anyway. I felt betrayed but convinced myself that Sheila was some young kid with no brains who simply wanted to come for a swim. I could forgive that.

I played another message. This one was from Rebecca’s daughter from her first marriage, Samara. “Hi mom, I’m calling with my good news, you know the project I’ve been working on, well, I finished it at last night, then went to this crazy party, which I’ll tell you about later, and this morning, I got a call from the graphic design editor who complimented it and said they want me to do more stuff for them! I’m so excited! I hope your classes are going well. Bye.” Samara was eight years older than me, and doing graphic design in New York. I suddenly felt a piercing desire to be Rebecca’s daughter. There was a picture of her on Rebecca’s fridge. She wore a tight black dress, exposing her beautiful figure, which she inherited from her mother. Her hair was long and brown, and she had a lovely smile, and it was her mother’s smile. At that moment, I was ready to switch lives with Samara and send her back to Russia and ask my mother to pretend that she was her daughter so that I could pretend to be Rebecca’s. I remembered when Rebecca gave me a tour of the house once. When we got to the top room, she pointed to a small balcony without rails and told me that her daughter used to smoke pot there. “Did you punish her?” I asked. “No, I preferred her to do it here than somewhere else,” she’d

said, and I thought of my own mother, my Russian mother, who had caught me smoking my first cigarette behind the house with a classmate when I was thirteen. She'd screamed at me so hard that the neighbors came out and then watched her give me a spanking, and I don't know which hurt more—the pain or the humiliation. I'd never smoked a cigarette again. Now I'd wondered what it would be like to grow up in America, the country of freedom, under the wings of a liberal mother like Rebecca. In a moment of insanity, I'd decided to write Rebecca a long desperate letter asking her to adopt me. But then I came up with a better idea. I called up a classmate who lived on campus and an hour later I had a small amount of pot. In the evening, I climbed up on the roof and rolled a joint the way they did in the movies. It looked pathetic, skinny in the middle and very thin at the ends, but I lit it and took my first puff and smiled. The pot spread around my mind, and the more I smoked, the more I turned into Samara, an all-American girl who could smoke marihuana on the roof of her house without being punished for it, and who could live in a small but centrally located apartment in Manhattan because her mother helped her pay the rent “until she was able to afford it herself.” My hair was no longer blond, it was brown. My eyes were sparkling green, like Rebecca's. I was a butterfly with wings that extended all the way from Moscow to New York. I was a freelance graphic designer, with a chance of getting a full-time job at a place that loved my projects. I was happy.

I'd spent the weekend fantasizing about our future, that is Rebecca's, Sebastian's and mine. I'd imagined us seeing each other every weekend, exchanging opinions like books and exchanging books like others exchanged gossip. They could be my everything: my friends, my parents, my lovers, my gurus. I could be anything they'd want me to be. I

could walk their dog, read Dostoevsky in the original, cook borsch. I could even clean the house if they'd asked me to. Anything. I had found a home at last.

They were due back on Sunday evening. In the afternoon, I had taken a long bath, put on my blue summer dress that Rebecca said looked beautiful on me because it was the color of my eyes. I cooked dinner, even though they'd told me to worry only about myself in terms of food. I was afraid that they'd be too tired to eat, or that they'd already had something on the drive back, but I wanted them so badly to see that I belonged to them, that I'd become a part of them and a part of their house, that without me something would be missing. I wanted them to give me a sign, some secret word or gesture, to let me know that they knew—there was no need for big confessions. When they entered, the pork roast with mashed potatoes was on the table, accompanied by a bottle of red wine and candles.

“Look at this,” Rebecca said with excitement and kissed me on the cheek. “You're our Russian Penelope,” she added, and Sebastian kissed me on the cheek and nodded, and as we sat down to eat, I had to hide the tears in my eyes.