

## SECOND PERSON

*For Amy*

***Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry***

Do not reply.

Do not say something you will regret later. Pretend you didn't hear. Pause for breath. Sip the air. Imagine being a fish. Swim away. Hide in the water. Do not return. Stop feeling guilty about things you can't change. Start changing the ones you can. Shake off fear. Smile. Make peace. Move on. Think of the times you shared. Of the years you spent together. Of the happiness you brought to each other. The intimacy. The longing. Forgive and forget. Embrace the sadness. Let go of grief. Let go.

"Don't just sit there, Peas, ogling the dessert menu, playing deaf. Say something."

Stall for an answer.

Contemplate the flimsy, greenish paper in your hands. See above the lines. Watch her pull a lipstick out of her purse, then slide the black cap off and twist the tube and dab pink shimmer in a mindless gesture against her broad, pulpy lips. Do not get distracted. Focus on the menu. Read in the brackets. So what if it's the last evening, the last dinner, the last conversation between you two as a couple. Keep your head up, your eyes down, your hands on the menu. Try to stay calm.

Say: "Death by Chocolate looks good."

Curt.

Nothing personal. Nothing to regret later. Polite. As always. That's your downside. Your flaw masked as a merit. Your petit bourgeois upbringing. Your mother's hopeless smiles and coiffed hair. Your father's gray double-breasted suits and stiff-collared shirts. Cultured tea-roses in your family garden. Pathetic-yellow. Shameful-red.

"That's it? That's the best you can do, Peas?"

Need to ask her not to call you Peas again. You no longer like that name. It feels small, uncomfortable. It's too Russian. It doesn't fit.

"Peas?"

"What?"

"I asked you a question."

"What was the question? I'm sorry."

Have to stop apologizing for something you didn't do. You possess many faults. Forgetting is not one of them. It simply does not run in your genes, in your family, where children have been taught discipline and the word 'mine' from the moment they latched onto their bottles.

"I asked, are you okay?"

"Define okay."

"Now you're being spiteful."

No answer.

Nothing to say. Isn't that how all of your conversations ended in the past few months? She asks a question for which you don't have an answer. For which no one has an answer. Because they aren't really questions—they don't end with a question mark but a period or three dots. It reminds you of playing soccer by yourself. You can't lose. You can't win. But toss a ball around a field of green, kicking and running after it. Need to stop feeling sorry for yourself. Pull together. Put the goddamn menu down. Face your partner. Your ex-lover. Your long, drawn-out spring. Your well of happiness and pit of misery. Face the girl she no longer is.

Say: "I'm okay. I'm better than okay. I'm fine."

Too many words. You're a writer. You should avoid wordiness and repetition. Should know better. She taught you that. You owe her the clarity that you possess. The pulse your stories have now. The beat.

"No, you're not. I can hear it in your voice. You've never been a good liar."

True. Your mother taught you that if you lied once, you would always have to remember that lie. And nobody can do that. Not even your father. One lie begets another, until your whole life is nothing but a web of stories you pass around as your own. But isn't that what writers do? Spin stories out of lies? Weave hope into an otherwise hopeless existence? Try to make sense where there is none? Answer inaudible questions that most people are afraid to ask?

Watch her shake her head, spilling copper-streaked hair over her shoulders.

You love this hair.

And this loose curl caressing her perfect ear adorned with a diamond star. You gave her this star five years ago. You even put it in, screwing the gold post through a tiny hole in her delicate earlobe. Should have given her a baby instead, the baby she always wanted, dreamed about. You could have adopted or conceived in a lab. She could have carried it to term. You could have watched her give birth. But you bought her a diamond star and went back to writing a book. Your book. Her story.

"You need a haircut, Peas. You look... older."

"I AM older."

"Don't get mad."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. But you won't show it. You're not being honest. Like that character in your last story. She's afraid to act. Afraid to be honest with her partner."

"She doesn't have a partner. The partner leaves."

"It's because the character isn't honest, even with herself. You ought to rewrite that story."

"Don't tell me what to write."

Shouldn't have said that.

## Second Person

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Shouldn't have. Shouldn't have done many things. Encouraging her to fly to Moscow for her high-school reunion was one of them. Welcoming her old classmate in your house, hosting him under your roof, was another. Do not mull over the details. Do not inflict more pain. Need to grow up and out, out of her. To switch topics. Cut your hair. Just cut.

"I'm sorry, Peas. I am."

No, she is not.

Or maybe she is. But what difference does it make now? It won't change anything. You know it won't. She's moving in with the guy. That sly, disgusting, worthless shmuck, who is just using her to get a green card. But what can you do to stop her? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The same feeling of total powerlessness as when your mother announced for the sixth time that she was pregnant. Your father's prideful grin wider than the table you all sat at. Your younger brother slipped from his high chair and pulled his light-brown pants down and started to wet the rug. Your mother, waving her thorn-pricked hands in the air, snapped at you to stop him, grab him, do something. Reaching for a dirty soup bowl on the table, your hand brought the bowl down to catch the urine. Your father threw his napkin on the floor. Your younger sisters slid under the table, tickled with laughter. But you didn't even smile. You thought it wasn't funny. You got tired of being a diaper disposal in that family. Tired of being in charge. Of being older. Always watching out for your siblings. Conceding to their selfish, baby ways.

"Peas, can you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"Don't say anything until you know what it is."

Look at her and then away.

Seek movement outside the table. Some sort of distraction that will ease the tension, relax your shoulders, relieve your gaze. It's getting late. The restaurant no longer hums with people. The waitress has abandoned the tables, sipping a glass of disturbing-red at the bar. You should go. Should pay for the dinner, get up and leave. Kiss her goodbye. A friendly peck on the cheek. Try not to stumble. Do not ask for her new number. Just go. Leave.

"Will you stay in touch, Peas?"

"No."

Firm.

Do not let her torture you any more. Return to your home that she left. Burrow in books. Unplug the phone. Write the best goddamn story you've ever written. Pray to get better and over, over her.

"Why, Peas? Why won't you stay in touch?"

"Why?"

"I asked first."

"It's no use. I see no point. No point whatsoever. It's all worthless and meaningless. A waste of time, energy, breath."

Too wordy.

Need to keep it short. She's getting to you. She always does. She knows how. Knows the way. You've shown her. You let her in. And out. Have to shut that door. Shut it now. Change the lock. Seal the cracks. You can do it. You're an award-winning author. People listen to what you have to say. They praise your books, the books you wrote daily, nightly, hiding in the attic, while she waited for you in the kitchen, cooking and eating her meals in solitude, or in bed, dosing off with pages of your manuscript sprawled atop her blissful breasts.

"So you're just going to cut me out of your life for good?"

"For good."

"That's not fair, Peas."

"Fair?"

The waitress turns to look at you. The bartender, too.

Try again.

Try not to raise your voice. Not to show her your anger, your defeat. Curl your toes inside your shoes. Repeat: "Fair?"

"Yes. Fair. You aren't being fair."

She pisses you off. The very sight of her. This hair, swept casually to one side. These green, shady eyes that speak of peace. Her low, full-of-deceiving-tremor voice.

You love her. Say you love her. Don't you dare.

Watch her hands slide under the table and pet that invisible belly of hers, the life that buds inside as the two of you speak. It could have been yours. She could have been yours. Selfish. You're being selfish. Selfish and scared. Scared that when she is gone from your life, you won't write a thing. Won't produce pages and pages of images she's taught you to envision, emotions she incites you to unleash. Your work will dwindle. You'll become the apparition your mother has become after your father took off with a younger woman and you and your siblings fled the family nest. The roses have grown wild, overtaking the garden, pushing against the lurching fence.

Say: "Life isn't fair, is it?"

"No. Not always. But we choose what we want or don't want to be."

"I see. You chose some ..."

Search for the right word.

Do not rush. Try not to sound cruel. He's the father of her baby she's been waiting for all her life. He is... "stranger." Yes. Stranger. You did well. No other description is necessary or preferable. Nothing suits better.

"You chose some stranger over me."

"I didn't choose anybody over you. You'll always be—"

"What?"

She doesn't answer. Tightens her lips, pouts. The gesture that is all too familiar, all too adorable.

Press your finger to her lips.

*Second Person*

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Wrong move. Slip your hand in your pocket. Then hide it between your legs. Wish to hide your face, too. And everything else she can see, touch. Everything she shouldn't know but will try to guess. Pray to disappear. Disintegrate. Turn into dust. Sift through the floor boards.

"You know I've never meant to hurt you, Peas. But I always wanted a baby. I'm old-fashioned, I guess. I can't even tell my parents that I'm ... I'm—"

"What? Gay?"

"They're Russian, Peas. Always will be. I am, too, even though I've been living here forever. But I see women as mothers first and then as everything else. I know you think it's pathetic. But I never lied to you."

"No. You didn't. Only about sleeping with men. Men, for Christ's sake."

"One. One man. Well... in my younger days... before we met.... You said you tried sleeping with men, too, but it didn't work out."

"No. It didn't. And I wasn't planning on going back either. And certainly wasn't planning on cheating with a man. I wasn't planning on cheating. Period. I was happy with you. I thought you were happy, too."

There.

You said it. All the right words in all the right order. All the spaces intact. Nothing to add. Nothing to take out. Ask for the check and get up. Do not look at her. Bite your tongue. Swallow your tears. Move.

"Of course I was happy, Peas. Even when I had to share you with your books. I knew you needed me, so I stayed as long as I could. But now my baby needs me. I need me."

Do not beg.

Do not say a word. Let her go. She has the right to be whom or what she wants. She has the courage not to drag you into this, not to force fetters of motherhood on your liberated, childless soul. If she stays, you'll become a diaper jinni, Mom number two or number one. Doesn't matter. You'll stop writing. You'll cook, clean, nurse the baby you want as much as she does. You'll squander hours, like your mother, in baby sections of department stores, picking out cute outfits, dolls, ridiculous tiny shoes. You'll be wasted. Spent. Miserable. You'll stop being you—this eccentric, five-foot-nine lesbian, worshiped for her prose, adored for her wit, defying the boredom of conventional marriage that the world has imposed upon generations of sad, helpless women. You'll stop breathing.

Halt.

Slip the restaurant check in your pocket, eyeing her fair Russian face.

Say: "I love you. Be safe. Give me your new number. I'll stay in touch."