

Dostoevsky in the Dining Room

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Riordan met Ramsey every Wednesday around 9:00 A.M., and they ate and gabbed until the first luncheoners nudged into the dining room, pushing chairs to and fro, hunching over menus. He had met Ramsey at a party only a few months before his colonoscopy, and they both—being in their fifties—decided to undergo the operation at approximately the same time, bolstering each other for the grim event. Their sumptuous breakfast at the hotel marked their final meal before the fasting and evacuation began. They ordered and ate the breakfast buffet the day before their procedures, and between bites they spoke of things that gave delight: politics, sports, family, women, history, books, and movies. Since they were both given a post-operative clean bill of health and had enjoyed breakfast together, they decided to continue meeting on a weekly basis.

They gathered in the dining room of a recently restored late nineteenth-century resort hotel along the New Hampshire seacoast. It had sat empty and abandoned and crumbling for more than two decades, and Riordan once saw a frightening scene from a horror movie filmed in one of its decayed guest rooms.

The hotel resembled a ship, and like a great ancient ocean liner, it possessed a large promenade deck along its eastern side where guests could stroll its length. The dining room emphasized tall windows with water views, and was elegantly furnished below a domed ceiling with a large blue and rouge mural in its center featuring vaporous clouds and one long spherical flower festoon borne in the sky by smiling cherubs.

Riordan saw their gatherings as magical; he believed this weekly breakfast with Ramsey was the beginning of his new post-colonoscopy life. He believed he had been given a second chance. This belief wasn't immediate; it occurred only after a new person entered his life during these mornings.

After much confusion and anxiety since he retired as an English professor a year earlier, he no longer saw his life as tragic or farcical.

On the anniversary of their second week at the hotel dining room, they met a new waitress, Anya.

Anya was Russian and looked to be somewhere in her early 30s. Like all the waiters and waitresses, she wore a dark livery jacket with

the hotel's gold insignia beside one lapel and a name plate on the other, while the dark sleeves each bore a thick gold stripe. Unlike the others who appeared in the same uniform, Anya seemed to Riordan to embody the very essence of the hotel's authority, as if she were the personification of its hospitality and competence, of its quixotic willingness to please.

Right off, he thought her features aristocratic, especially her nose and jaw line, which were both slender yet prominent. Her short blonde hair was pulled back from her face, and gathered into a short ponytail resembling the ones worn by Roman gladiators. Her eyes were large, green, and open to suggestion, as if awaiting a ruling, a prompting. She had a full mouth with the slightest hint of lipstick, and when it opened Riordan liked the urgent Russian accent in her sometimes flawed English. A contralto, almost a baritone sound, her voice often trilled in the upper register to indicate amazement or emphasis. He liked watching her wait on other tables; she moved nimbly across the dining room floor, her forearms hung athwart her sides as if she were about to break into a runner's stride.

Anya instantly became their favorite waitress because from the first day she waited on their table, she fetched them free hash browns to accompany their breakfast buffet.

Anya Svetlanov—a mix of Polish, Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Russian—came from a small village north of the Black Sea and east of Odessa, they learned from her the second week she waited on them. She arrived in the US on a six-month student visa with no knowledge of English; when she landed in New York City, she could only say, "I'm Anya from Russia." She was alone, the only member of her family living in America, but during her stay found a sponsor, a job, and a work visa. Because she had lived in the same latitude as the New Hampshire seacoast, the weather was almost identical and made her feel at home. The prior summer, after a six year residency, she became an American citizen.

The third week she waited on them Riordan asked her, more out of cordiality than genuine interest, who was her favorite Russian writer.

"Dostoevsky," she responded without hesitation.

"Dostoevsky?" Riordan said. "Wow. You don't really hear about him anymore. It's always Tolstoy or Chekhov or Pushkin, or even Gogol. But not Dostoevsky."

"And what novel's your favorite?" he further inquired. "*The Brothers Karamazov*? *Crime and Punishment*?"

"No," she said. "*The Idiot*."

"*The Idiot*, whoa!" Riordan said. "Another surprise. You don't hear much about that one either. Why that book?"

"That novel made me sick, nauseated," she said, speaking slowly and intently as if bitterly recounting some past transgression against her. Though it appeared she resisted it, she blushed. "I was so sick after

reading it. For days I could not eat and took to bed. My mahder was so worried for me.”

“It’s your favorite novel because it made you ill?” Ramsey asked, astonished.

At that moment Riordan wanted Ramsey to go away.

“I don’t have, “ she said, fumbling forward, “I wish ... but I don’t have ... the full command of your language to explain—”

“You don’t have to,” Riordan interrupted, waving his hand to halt her explanation. “Been through it myself.”

“You have?” Ramsey said. “I guess you gotta be a lit major to follow this.”

Although Dostoevsky never entered Riordan’s thoughts on those fine moments when he considered life-altering authors who condemned him to a lifetime of reading difficult texts, he would acknowledge if pressed, that he owed the Russian a debt. Riordan came from a home without books, but one night during his fifteenth year, he was invited to a friend’s house in the neighborhood for dinner where a discussion took place on Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and he was never the same.

That night his young mind was transfixed by the family’s dialogue, and the next day he purchased a copy of the novel, one of those old paperbacks with the tiny, visually challenging print, and a glum cover showing a man sitting on a bed looking dyspeptic. Nevertheless, he feverishly read every word. In a year, he had consumed most of the master’s great works and read his biography. But since that brief burning time in early adolescence, the rest of his life had been devoid of any thought of Dostoevsky or his work, and he never heard his name mentioned outside the academe until Anya uttered it that morning in the hotel’s dining room.

For Riordan, who had been in awe of writers and sometimes devastated by their words, her response seemed spot on. What respectable novel would give you joy and contentment? He long believed Kafka’s famous dictum that a book “should act upon you like a misfortune.”

“I also loved it because it was written in Florence,” Anya said. “I think it is the most beautiful city in the world, and though I was young when I visited, it moved me.”

Riordan recalled a trip he had taken to Florence when he was a young man of twenty-five. Like all tourists he visited the required sites, but none of them—though he wanted them to—moved him. However, on the second day of his visit he rode a tour bus to a small town just north of Florence called Fiesole, and it was there that something moved him. In fact, two things happened, though both appeared at first, if he cared to consider them when they occurred, wholly unrelated and insignificant.

In Fiesole, he discovered a well-preserved Roman amphitheater with rows of ancient stone seating arranged in a semicircle. As he wandered near the stage at its center, he passed the largest ant hill he had ever seen. It was about three feet tall, and he noticed one side of it had been

accidentally stripped away allowing a rare glimpse into the labyrinth of an ant colony. He paused a moment to observe its many chambers. He saw large ants engaged in a variety of activities in the tunnels they had created, and much to his surprise—for insects had always repulsed him—he found harmony and beauty in what he witnessed, and, after a few minutes of observation, traveled past the ant hill with a feeling of unexpected delight and serenity. He had not gone more than a few feet when, from behind, he heard a large grunt of distaste and rage, and turned to witness a German male roughly his own age remove a sandal from his foot, commencing to violently smash and collapse the exquisite ant hill, madly grunting with each blow until the entire mound had been demolished. Riordan had difficulty hiding his disgust and even contemplated intervening on behalf of the insects, but instead found himself walking away from this brutal and disturbing scene with a sense of deep shame, believing the rest of the day would be poisoned by it.

On the return trip south from Fiesole, the bus paused at a large and ancient Tuscan cemetery. The dead were buried aboveground, and there were huge decorative stone mausoleums chockablock along one border. But what instantly struck him was the sight of two pale statues erected over adjoining graves. The statues displayed young lovers—a man and a woman—smiling and holding each other as they danced. The man wore his military uniform, while the woman was attired in a long flowing gown. Below their statues an escutcheon displayed words explaining he was a pilot in World War II who perished when his plane was shot down by enemy fire. He died in March. She died in May. The image of the destruction of the ant hill vanished the instant he saw their ghostly figures. Though he knew it wasn't unreasonable to conclude this was just another pitiful story of two victims of war, he felt differently. The tableau of them dancing in the graveyard felt morbid and fatal and strangely exhilarating.

During the week Riordan quickly and fervidly read, for the second time in his life, *The Idiot*, and waited until the ensuing Wednesday to ask Anya a follow-up question when she again stood before their table in the dining room. He hadn't been so keyed up about anything in a long time.

"In *The Idiot*," he said, "did you become ill because of Aglaya's and Natasya's inability to understand Myshkin's compassion?"

"Yes," she said, blushing. She spoke the word slowly as if reluctantly yielding to some demand in his question. "And because of their—and others'—misunderstanding, they went to death and abandonment, and Myshkin to madness."

"So: you suffered because you knew they suffered for not recognizing his different love for them—is that it?"

"My *haart* is pounding," she confessed, her Russian accent more pronounced than before. "I have not spoken or thought of this for years." She paused. She drew her breath and continued.

"Yes, it was that, and more. I believe Dostoevsky described my country better than any other Russian writer. He described gloom everyone lives in, and love that isn't understood. Life is lived in this dull merciless gray that is everywhere. And because it has been so hard for so many for so long, no one is friendly, not even neighbors. You pass a man walking his dog in the street with greeting, and he won't say anything. He stares at ground and does not look up. No one can show this like Dostoevsky. That is why I left my country, and why I will never return although I miss my parents more than I can say."

"You like it here that much?"

"Here you are so much more friendly. Everyone is so optimistic. I have that feeling. Last month I saw girl smiling as she stood on street corner, and before I spoke to her I knew she was Russian girl. She was so joyful. That is why I came here, and why I became citizen, and why I will never leave."

In the weeks that followed they regularly saw Anya, although sometimes she wasn't their waitress. Riordan would spy her waiting on other customers, and he was surprised to find himself jealous. Occasionally, he thought he saw her return his gaze and smile, but wasn't sure. He could not ascertain from these brief glimpses across the vast expanse of the dining room if she were developing the same feelings about him as he was her. He was nearsighted, making it almost impossible to discern the sentiment in her eyes. It was at these times Riordan felt he was channeling a character from a novel he had read long ago, but couldn't remember the title or the story. Then one day it came to him; he realized whom he had been portraying all along: he was Hans Castorp from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and Anya was Frau Chauchat, modestly hiding her true feelings, causing him both speculation and longing. The novel portrayed romance in the dining room. But unlike the novel's setting at a sanatorium located on a mountain top in Europe between the great wars, the dining room of this old hotel was on a hilltop overlooking a harbor that led into the Atlantic Ocean, and they dined here during war time, although the Iraq War was on the other side of the world and seemed by turns distant and insane and horrible. But like the novel he imagined himself a character, Riordan felt as removed from the real world and its hardships as those tubercular patients Mann described, and he occasionally imagined himself a convalescent from a terrible illness.

One day as she waited on their table, Ramsey told her, "Y'know, because of you, we refer to this place as the Dostoevsky Dining Room."

“Oh, my God ... I’m going to blush,” Anya announced dramatically. Her blush was deeper than any before.

Her blushes always charmed him, but her reaction this time only confirmed to Riordan what he knew all along. This was a dining room not of Mann’s masked and reserved emotions, but of Dostoevsky’s unleashed and unconstrained ones. That was what he believed. Like water running right below top soil, Anya’s emotions ran just below the surface; her blushing was merely a seismographic index of her true heart, a reflection of her inner tremors whenever she was near him.

He had felt empty for more than a year. Ever since he retired from teaching, there was this huge gap lodged in his center, located somewhere between the top of his chest and the bottom of his abdomen. He moved with this hole there, and wherever he went, and at whatever speed, the hole—while occasionally changing shape and density—remained. His wife, Melanie, recognizing his loss and pain, tried to help but was unable. As long as the basics remained unaltered and unreplaced, he believed there was nothing anyone could do.

Before Riordan entered this dining room he believed his life finished. He had underestimated the loss of the exultation of the classroom, and the purposelessness and emptiness of his post-teaching years. He began to see that, however brief, those moments of ecstasy with his students were all that prevented him from descending into despair and disintegration. He now realized he had been carrying depression with him all those years in the labor force; he sensed it, but never gave it account. It nudged him at odd hours—at night before bedtime, on Interstate 95 driving home from classes, on late Sunday afternoons—but he always eluded it with the next workday. His intrinsic melancholy was, in effect, what had attracted him to reading writers like Dostoevsky. He was surprised he held together for so long on so thin a thread, however bright and colorful, wound around him so tightly it could snap at any arbitrary or unexpected movement.

The past summer his wife, Melanie, and he had stayed at the Long Wharf Hotel in Boston to celebrate their wedding anniversary, and he was not happy. In hazy sunlight, he strolled with Melanie along Boston’s waterfront past the Aquarium and onto Rowe’s Wharf. From there they journeyed away from the shoreline, crossing the new Greenway, and walked down a street darkened by skyscrapers into the financial district. The more he walked the more Riordan felt lost and hopeless and ill. These summer city streets that used to give him joy, ambition, and purpose, now all seemed spent and purposeless and distant. But as they aimlessly wandered the tangle of connecting streets they came upon a small, quiet park bounded on all sides by tall buildings. The grass seemed luminously green and trimmed, and few people in the city at 5:30 PM on a Friday loitered on benches or sat on the large lawn. Riordan and Melanie passed under an extended arbor, and just beyond it, found a wooden bench where they took a seat across from a small fountain. The fountain was unusual.

A great jet of water emerged from its wide center and made extravagant, looping figure-eights into the air above, while along the low circular perimeter wall, smaller arcs emerged from stone holes resembling the crooked squirt from the spigots of bubblers. Pigeons bathed, extending and flexing their wings under the spray of water. Riordan stared at the birds, the water, and the vivid green of the park's lawn and received some surcease from the menacing forces pursuing him. They stayed in the park holding hands until twilight when the first glimmers of light jiggled in the street lamps. Then they arose and walked back to their hotel where Riordan spent most of the night on the toilet, watching the bowl of water below him turn bright red. He felt certain he was dying.

For the next few weeks Anya wasn't assigned to their section in the dining room, and Riordan felt the loss. The weekly exchanges with her were to him like weekly installments in a serialized novel he didn't want to end, or extraneous injections of some life-enhancing serum.

But finally, after three weeks had elapsed, with Ramsey unable to make their regular breakfast meeting, Riordan arrived alone and requested her section from the *maître'd*. And shortly, after she had brought him fresh coffee and orange juice, Anya disclosed a confidence in response to a question which gave him both surprise and elation:

"There are still days when I fear I will become invisible," she said. "It was my first fear when I came to this country, and it is my last fear when I fall to sleep at night."

"Invisible?"

Across the room a group of old ladies wearing red hats took their seats at a long table reserved for them.

"Cannot be seen by anyone," she said, as a vein appeared on her forehead. Riordan noticed it before; it always emerged whenever she got suddenly moved by something he said, or by what she told him. It traveled aslant from the top left to just above her right eyebrow. "By my colleagues. By acquaintances. By friends. By customers. I have dreams of waiting on empty tables, speaking Russian to empty chairs, and writing food orders no one has given to me in my old language. I leave dining room, and then wander the hotel looking for guests, for workers, for anyone, but though floors are polished and the walls ornate, I find no one exists." He liked the odd way a small word, an article would suddenly disappear, then correctly reappear in the same sentence. It reminded him of old movies where the Russian *émigré* stunner would speak of political turmoil in her home country with broken sentences and accentuated first syllables and divided loyalty. She would fall in love with the first tongue-tied Yank she met with a big heart, and an appetite for justice as stubborn as his cowlick. Together they would strike back at evil, and their resolve to fight their enemies made them closer and sexier.

"Once, on my first night here in your country, I went to delicatessen for supper in New York City where you must to shout your order

to cook over glass display case filled with food," she said. "My English was so bad I was so frightened to speak, so I just stood there paralyzed as countless people shouted orders on both sides of me. I stood there for what seemed my whole life looking so foolish, fighting back tears. I felt hopeless. Finally, when everyone had been served, a cook looked at me, and I looked at her, pointing like an idiot to the food I wanted to purchase. I wanted to cry so badly. My face was hot with it. I will not cry here, I say to myself. And though I have cried alone many nights since I arrived in your country, I never felt so invisible and unwelcome as then, but every day I live in fear of it returning. But even if it did, I would never return to my country. Never," she said, shaking her head. "It is gone from me. I want nothing of it."

"Nothing?" Riordan repeated, surprised by the finality and ferocity of her resolve.

"I should not be telling this like you are psychologist," she said. "Psychology for a Russian girl is calling home long distance and crying on the phone to her mahder."

Later, when she returned after waiting on other customers, Riordan tried to change the mood from her last response. He asked her what was the happiest moment in her new country and she told him it was going to Disney World. There, she explained, she found the childhood she missed. At the end of the day she watched the fireworks display and heard the patriotic music, and trembled at the thought that she had come so far to finally arrive at a place where her heart might be light.

His meetings with Ramsey, which had begun in late winter, continued into spring, then summer. They had remarked in March that every Wednesday seemed to be accompanied by some form of precipitation: sleet, snow, freezing rain. A strong ocean wind would roar outside the hotel's tall windows, ripping limbs from trees and hurling them to the ground, but Riordan felt insulated, untouched by any of it and barely glanced outside. None of it interrupted his meal, or his conversation, or his occasional glances at Anya as she served other guests. Week after week as he sat with his new friend in the Old World elegance and insouciance of the dining room, the rough edges of the outside world seemed harmless and distant and irrelevant. The only decisions of any consequence concerned whether fruit or omelets or mini-waffles should be the next choice on the return trip to the buffet table.

He was content, and under ordinary circumstances he would have remained so. But his growing preoccupation with the Russian waitress slowly eroded that contentment. He would wait with anticipation for Wednesday to reappear on the week's calendar, and began to show up a half hour earlier in the morning so that he could request Anya's section, and spend a little time alone with her before Ramsey arrived at nine.

On one of those early mornings in late spring, Anya approached his table with a pot of coffee and asked, as she always did,

"Will you be having orange juice this morning, sir?"

"Anya," he said, pausing with a slight flourish. "Would you allow me the honor of calling me, Jim?"

She stepped forward to place the pot of coffee on his table, and then retreated a few feet as the blush reappeared.

"Oh, but I *can't* do it, sir," she said, her voice emphatic with a blend of regret and frustration.

"Jim," he said, repeating his name as if the repetition would somehow demonstrate to her the harmlessness of its sound, and the ease of saying it. "You can call me that, can't you? After all, I've...we've known you now for almost a half year. You're like...extended family. I mean, I'd greatly appreciate it if, but...if you are uncomfortable...well, then—"

"OK," she said quickly, "Jim. Jim, Jim, Jim." She repeated his name with a touch of joviality, but he could still hear the tension in her voice. "Now, would you like orange juice this morning, *Jim*?"

"Yes, thank you," he said. "Now see, that wasn't so hard, was it? And you say it so much better than anyone I know."

She smiled, and of course, blushed as she left, and Riordan returned her smile, but he suddenly felt ashamed he had pushed so hard, and made her uncomfortable. He was surprised and frustrated that—after all she had confessed to him—it was so difficult to say his first name rather than the formal, "sir." Most mornings she addressed the two of them with, "What can I get today for you gentlemen?" The other, American waitresses in the dining room got on a first name basis almost immediately, and therefore he surmised, her reluctance had nothing to do with hotel protocol, but rather something to do with Russian culture: perhaps it was regarded as a cultural transgression to address older men this way. Or maybe she was uncomfortable with the age difference, or the fact that he wore a wedding ring. Or maybe she found him physically unattractive.

As he had gotten older he felt less of a need to appear attractive to women other than his wife. It was a relief in a way, a sorrow in another, but either way there was considerably less tension, and as a result, he felt more at peace around attractive women. On reflection, he was not grateful but resigned to this, regarding it as a trade off, a compensation for his lost youth. But Anya, with her radiant eyes, Russian accent, impeccable manners, and spontaneous joy hovering over Riordan's table in the dining room each week shattered that resignation. The tension had returned, and with it the longing he thought he had so long ago abandoned.

He was torn. Like Myshkin in *The Idiot*, he slowly realized he loved two women: Melanie and Anya. He loved his wife, and had known this from the moment he first saw her standing on a train station platform so many years ago. By contrast he believed he had fallen, quite involuntarily, in love with Anya, but was uncertain just when it occurred. He tried to explain to himself the loves were different, and they were, but

in a way he couldn't fully distinguish. In Dostoevsky's novel, Myshkin loved one woman compassionately and the other romantically. Riordan felt guilty for being unable to define his heart that way. If he could, he believed, he could be forgiven, because his loves, rigidly defined, might give him the excuse he needed to pursue both, and for the objects of his affection to both accept, return, and further the existence of the other in his life. However, Myshkin couldn't make the women understand him even when he knew the parameters of his separate but equal loves, so how could Riordan expect to do any better? Besides, although he believed his wife loved him without reservation, he had no idea what Anya felt about him, if anything at all. And he had no idea of how to find out, or act on his feelings for her. One thing was certain: he was starting to become undone by her proximity to his life.

The time between his breakfasts in the dining room became difficult to fill. Riordan's wife had recently left for a few weeks for an educational retreat in the White Mountains, and since they had no children, he was left alone to contemplate the six day loss of Anya. During this period he discovered he could not read, watch television, sleep, or talk to anyone. The only brief rescue from his growing anxiety was constant motion. Each morning, after a quick breakfast at the Golden Egg, he got into his car and drove somewhere, anywhere but home. His post-operative euphoria period was gone; he regarded that brief interlude—although only just a spattering of months removed from it—the way inhabitants of a village might have viewed their lives in the period before some great disaster struck, its contentment as fugitive and unreal as viewing old burnt-edged picnic photographs.

Riordan motored around town. First, he went downtown and parked the car in Market Square. He sat on a bench, pausing for a few minutes until it became impossible to remain there, and then abandoned his seat, returning to his car.

Next he rode out of town, northwest, toward Newington. On Woodbury Avenue he drove past strip malls containing *K-Mart*, *Home Depot*, *Ruby Tuesdays*, *Wendy's*, *BJs*, *Staples*, *Barnes & Noble*, and *IHOP*. The frenetic gathering of them somehow both soothed and agitated his jangled nerves. They gave no comfort, only a sense of life lived outside him from the world of the passionless, a world too intent on its own commerce to pay him heed.

He felt trapped and lost as he drove these streets jammed with cars and shallow agendas. He was impatient if he got behind a motorist traveling too slowly. Though he was going nowhere it was important that he maintained a certain speed, a speed that was not too slow, but fast enough to give the sense he was going somewhere, moving toward some vague destination where he might find, at the very least, a temporary stoppage of things. His desire roiled inside him. He could not elude it.

It was one of the reasons he kept moving; he could not face anyone now except Anya, nor could he remain alone at home.

For the next several days while his wife was away, he ate at out-of-the-way restaurants, and spoke only to strangers. When he spoke it was vapid, superficial banter, which only deepened his anguish and dislocation. As the days mounted, he felt his essence dissolving, as if he were being gradually replaced by another while his old self receded to a place foreign and inaccessible.

While he still loved his wife and felt deceitful for his obsession, he could not get Anya out of his head. Despite his urgent need for her, he remained somewhat protected by his age. The sexual urges of a young man would have overpowered his judiciousness at a time like this, and he would have been far more reckless in his actions. He wanted Anya, but he wasn't certain for what. Her friendship alone would have been insufficient to silence his yearning for her company, and yet the idea of her becoming his lover seemed overreaching and maniacal and destructive.

Early one morning, on an impulse, he stopped at a local barbershop to get a haircut. He needed a haircut, but getting one had nothing at all to do with improving his appearance. This gave him something to do, something different to fill time.

As a "walk-in" he took whatever barber was free. She was a middle aged, overweight woman with hollowed eyes, and dark hair cut in severe bangs across her forehead.

"What's your name?" she asked as he took his seat in the barber's chair.

"Jack," he said. For some reason, he did not want to tell his real one. Already he believed he had made a mistake coming here.

"Mine's Jess," she said. "I think it's good to know names, first."

He said nothing.

"I'm not much good at talking, but I'll try to keep up a conversation during this," she said as she draped a long white sheet over him. "I think that's a good idea."

Again, he said nothing.

She wrapped and fastened a white paper collar around his neck, then coughed.

"I haven't had the flu all winter, and here it is June, and I've got one."

There was a long unsteady pause.

"You mean..." he said, "...are you *really* sick?"

"Well, I've had this cough and a runny nose for three days," she said as she ran her hands through his hair. "That should be a sign."

"Oh," he said, and felt the skin under his collar start to itch.

"Don't worry. I won't breathe on you."

"Thanks for that."

"How do you want it?"

"Just a quick trim around the edges," he said. He desperately wanted to leave as his anxiety and despair mounted. At that moment he would have paid her for nothing if he could have left then. "That should do it. Nothing more."

"OK," she said. He could feel her breath on his face. "We'll trim it up."

She awkwardly tugged the hair above his ears, and then cut the bottom ends straight. She repeated this process until she had circled his head. He felt the cold hard metal of her scissors pressed tautly against his temples, his cheekbones. She then styled his hair using a wet comb.

She took a mirror and placed it behind his head.

"Is that the way you want it?"

He looked at the back of his head, and then stared at his face in the large barbershop mirror. It looked pale and alarmed.

"Yes."

"Want me to dry it?"

"No thanks," he said. "I'm kind of in a hurry."

She removed the collar and sheet.

He followed her to the cash register.

"That'll be twelve dollars," she said.

He reached into his pocket, removing the money she requested.

She took the bills he gave her and silently counted them. He included no tip. Even in his melancholia he was furious.

"Well, thanks," he said. He almost said, *Take care of that cold*, but he knew not leaving a tip meant he could not express concern for her well being.

He felt the distance lengthening between them as he walked away from her toward the exit.

The following day Riordan waited for Anya to leave work, and trailed her blue Dodge Neon from the hotel's parking lot all the way to the ocean highway, Route 1A, where she drove south. To his left the sea bulged in tarnished silver, and a murky sky appeared packed with clouds as fleshy and magisterial as those painted on the mural in the dining room. He followed what he considered an inconspicuous distance from her car as it moved past dense marshes and rocky breaker walls flanked with wild roses, past state beaches, tidal estuaries, summer mansions. On the way they traveled through Rye, North Hampton, and finally arrived in Hampton Beach where Route 1A became Ocean Boulevard and where, after miles of sparsely populated pavement, hordes of sunbathers wearing swimwear suddenly appeared walking along sidewalks jammed with outdoor vendors and tawdry arcades as if they had a destination. Somewhere around the middle of town, she turned off the main thoroughfare and drove west down one of the many narrow side streets. Riordan watched her blue Neon pull into a rear gravel parking lot belonging to

what once was a summer motel, now converted into a year round beach apartment complex. He drove about a half block past, then circled back only to watch her disappear behind a purple door belonging to one of the first floor units. He parked his silver Corolla across the street and watched the entrance to her apartment for about an hour, then left.

The next day he followed her again, but this time she drove into downtown Portsmouth, parking her car on Market Street, and entered a florist's shop. Riordan parked his car around the block on Penhallow Street, and then took a shortcut through Commercial Alley to her location. As he approached her parked car, his heart shuddered when, in an instant too narrow to assimilate, Anya exited the flower shop and walked towards him.

As she drew nearer, it took a moment for her to realize whom she was seeing. Her eyes focused and then enlarged with the recognition, and she smiled broadly. It was the kind of smile he hoped to receive: full of delight and the unambiguous appreciation of greeting someone she liked.

"Is that you?" Riordan said, still shaken she stood before him, although it was his plan she would.

"Yes, how are you, *Jim*?"

Riordan reflexively reached his arms around her to hug before he thought how presumptuous it was; but to his surprise she hugged him back with a firmer grip than anticipated. Since he was the initiator, he let go first.

"What are you doing all the way here in my town?"

"I just came from the florist," she said, pointing and partially turning to the direction whence she came.

"Ah, flowers," he said. "For anyone I know?"

"They are meant for many," she said, and started her famous blush. "That is long story."

"Ah, hah." He felt foolish he couldn't think of anything clever to say.

"Which...I'd be willing to tell if you have a moment to spare," she said.

A moment to spare, he thought, and he repeated the words in amazement in his head. He couldn't believe it. He had finally met her outside the hotel, and she wanted to spend time with him. He felt dizzy for a moment, and then steadied himself.

"There's a great little outdoor café around the corner where I could spare all the moments required," he said. He quickly cautioned himself to speak slowly and calmly so he wouldn't say something so ridiculously foolish he would regret for the rest of his life.

"Let's go," she said, and she immediately took his arm as Riordan walked with her. He had the sense that any minute he was going to trip.

At the café on Congress Street, he seated Anya at an outdoor table and fetched them a couple of iced teas. As he sat across from her he couldn't get over how beautiful she looked in the sunlight of Market Square, even more so than in the dining room. It was strange seeing her out of uniform. She wore a light navy blue jacket over a white scoop-neck shell tucked into a pair of white denim jeans. She also wore a pendant around her neck, but its details were too fine for Riordan's weak eyes to discern even with his sunglasses removed. Her eyes still sparkled with joy as they had moments earlier on the street.

Riordan knew the history of Market Square, and he tried to silently invoke, however ridiculous the notion seemed, its spirit as he sat across from her. Nearby George Washington and Daniel Webster once spoke, and just a couple of blocks away at the Music Hall, Mark Twain and Frederick Douglas graced the stage with their oratory. They were men of passion, and they expressed it in the vicinity of where Riordan now sat. He hoped to conjure their spirits in order to find the strength and the articulation to say what he wanted to say to her. He just didn't know what it was he wanted to say, or what acts should follow whatever statements he made.

Despite all the local inspiration, all he managed to say to her was, "It's so weird seeing you out of uniform, in your civies." He quickly realized she may not know what "civies" were.

"I try to dress well," she said. "Nothing very expensive, though back in my old country, I couldn't afford to do even this. I love waking every morning knowing I have money for food, and money to pay bills. Before I was so poor because my family was so poor. You cannot know what it means to being able to send money home to my parents. I once sent a gift to my grandmother who never, until that moment in her life, received a gift from anyone."

"I'm glad you like it here so much."

"Every morning," she told him, pulling a few strands of hair away from her mouth that a gust of wind had placed there, "I drive to work from my home in Hampton Beach on the small highway along the coastline, and watch the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean."

"Really," he said. "I didn't know you lived so near the ocean." He hated lying to her, but felt guilty for having followed her home. The lie was an attempt to erase that act.

"It's hard not to fall in love with something so beautiful."

"It's impossible."

Just then a tattooed man with purple hair on a motorcycle revved his engine in the street as he passed by the cafe.

"But unfortunately," she said, looking down into her drink as she slowly stirred it. "I have something very sad to tell."

"Don't tell me you're leaving the dining room," he said lightly, but realized as soon as he said it, it was true.

"Yes, I am," she said, looking up. Her accent grew heavier as her emotions rose. "But I'm going to miss everyone. All my friends and customers. And you, and your friend."

"You'll still be at the hotel, though."

"No. I am leaving to work at hotel in Portland, Maine," she said. "There I'll be in management training. I'll get a chance to run dining room, not just work in it. I'm getting on to thirty years now, and it is time for me to choose."

"But, you can't..." Riordan said. "What will we, I, do if you're..."

He paused a moment when he realized something.

"You weren't going to tell us," he said. "You were just going to leave."

Anya stood to depart, leaving her unfinished drink on the table. Riordan got up immediately and stood awkwardly blocking her way. Then, realizing what he was doing, began to step aside as Anya grabbed his arm and embraced him.

Riordan smelled the scent of lilacs in her hair as he felt her kiss his neck. Slowly but firmly, she disengaged from the embrace she began, and stepped back. Her blush was strong, and her eyes were moist and intense with hurt; lips trembled as she spoke,

"I will always remember you, your kindness, and your smile," she said, "You always made me feel good and wanted." She turned then and walked away from him.

In the period that followed his last meeting with Anya, he sagged and retreated. While awake he was buffeted by alternating episodes of anxiety and despair, and when asleep he could hear himself sob as he breathed, almost as if his insides mourned the deep sorrow of her parting. Though he went outside he, as before, avoided seeing anyone. Buried somewhere beneath the debris and rubble of his grief, was his missing wife and his urgent need for her, but that emotion remained dormant and inaccessible as the torrent of privation swept him far from home ground. Unlike his earlier untethered days when he feverishly drove around the Seacoast, this time he walked city streets. It wasn't a decision formed by careful thought; rather, it was an action born of instinct and desperation. If he walked far enough he might be able to rid himself of the sorrow gathering as a sharp hollowness at his core, expelling pain by the simple act of pushing himself to the point of exhaustion. And since his weak back could no longer support running, he walked.

Time passed, but nothing changed. Days went by. Still, he walked. He walked from his home all the way downtown to the river's edge and back. He marched through strange and familiar neighborhoods, and trudged across the Memorial Bridge into Maine, but nothing seemed to work. Then on a hot late June day toward the end of his first week of walking, just as he was leaving Fleet Street for Congress, he felt—without warning or

understanding—something dislodge from his chest. And as he entered Market Square, he experienced an easing: a small, almost undetectable ebbing of ache at his center even as he passed the café table where he had last seen Anya. A block later he approached a sign on the window of a State Street bar reading, *Instant Relief* and, on impulse, abandoned his journey and went inside.

The smell of alcohol in the air conditioned air strangely soothed him, and he took a seat at the bar, ordered Red Hook on tap, and watched the large flat screen TV to the left of the cash register, featuring live tennis from Wimbledon. He witnessed a match between the American, Andy Roddick, and a tattoo-covered Serbian, Janko Tipsarevic. The fortieth-ranked Tipsarevic defeated the higher-ranked Roddick in a tiebreaker fourth set, then dropped to his hands and knees on Centre Court in disbelief and joy. To his surprise, Riordan became emotionally drawn into the contest and found himself—along with other customers—shouting at the TV set for the entire match. For the first time in days his mind hadn't turned inward. He identified with the Serb, but in his addled state was unable to discern why.

When the match ended he heard tennis commentators remark that on Tipsarevic's left arm there was a quote from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. It was written in Japanese and read: *Beauty will save the world*. Later in the day Tipsarevic told a BBC Sport journalist about his early interest in Dostoevsky, "I started reading *The Idiot* when I was 13, and I didn't understand it then."

At that moment he realized that as crass and foolish as it seemed, Riordan had always believed the quote. He had believed it when he had read Keats' famous quote, and he believed it when he read anything similar on bumper stickers and greeting cards. It was one of the reasons he stopped reading Dostoevsky: he believed the great Russian writer didn't believe it was true. Indeed, there were strong emotions portrayed in *The Idiot*, but in the end, everyone and everything is destroyed, especially beauty.

Riordan walked home, got into his car, and then drove to the ocean, parking above the breakers at Wallis Sands Beach. He stood for a long time on a small cliff and watched the waves collapse onto the shore below. Anya and the Russian novelist had already started their retreat from him. This surprised and fascinated him. He still held Anya in deep regard and affection. He believed she possessed a soul as beautiful as Dostoevsky created in Myshkin. He believed she would one day love another, like the statue of the woman in the cemetery below Fiesole, with an intensity that would prove fatal.

Then he remembered: Melanie was coming home in two days.

Riordan arrived before Ramsey at the Anya-absent dining room, and was taken by the hostess to a small table outdoors, one of seven that occupied the porch. It was a cool morning, but warm enough on July 2nd

to sit and eat comfortably *al fresco*. The sky was partially clear, the sun fringing a large cloud.

Riordan seized the menu at the moment when the hostess returned and placed one long stemmed white rose and a small envelope with the name "Jim" cursively written on its cover. He opened the envelope and read the note inside:

Dear Jim,

This is to let you know, again, how much I appreciate you and your kindness to me. Now you know you were one of the reasons I stopped at the florist that day.

I gave flowers only to those who made me feel special and needed. Though I've only known you for a short time, I know your heart is very beautiful. I will remember you and Dostoevsky and *The Idiot* and our talks together in the dining room. You are a good person. I am glad I met you.

Always,
Anya

At the entrance of the bus depot Melanie held an umbrella in one hand as she stood under the bricked archway containing a large circular clock with Roman numerals and a rectangular granite slab with the word *PORTSMOUTH* etched across its façade. She no longer closely resembled the young woman he had first gazed upon so many years ago at the train depot; her hair was long, straight, and brunette then; now it was shorter, blond, and curly. But the expressively affectionate face was still there, and the dazzling smile anchored by dimples when it appeared.

He could see she hadn't located him at first as he had parked behind a lamppost, but as he closed the distance between them passing between twin *Reserved Parking* signs with blue handicap icons both depicting a person in a wheelchair, she spotted him and smiled. Even from afar he clearly saw the look in her eyes; he had seen that look before. He had seen it in his mother's eyes when, as a child, he met her by the lion statues in front of the *Art Institute* in Chicago, and he had seen it again in her eyes years later when she regarded him from her hospital bed for the last time. He had seen that look countless times in Melanie's eyes. In his life no one besides these two women ever looked at him that way.

He couldn't get over his sudden and piercing joy at seeing her there, alone on the station platform, waiting for him.

"Hello."

"Hello, back," she said, and gave him one long kiss.

After the kiss he stepped back, placed the umbrella beside her bag, took her hand, and put his free arm around her waist.

"We dance?" she asked, coquettishly smiling. She felt light and agile in his arms.

He felt neither tragic nor morbid. But exhilarated.

"Fatally," he said.