

The Countess

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The summer that we turned fourteen, Lenka and I were tall, lovely, and precocious. We wore fashionably short skirts and passed time in a literary club at the Palace of Pioneers where Lenka wrote poetry:

*We were drawn towards romantics,
towards words yet undiscovered.
We were drawn towards daisies,
but the fields with grass were covered.*

People praised Lenka. They said she had great potential and sparks of young talent.

In June, our classmates left for the state farm to pull weeds while Lenka and I stayed behind and did skilled labor. Our instructor and classroom supervisor told us to redecorate the biology department. She wore gold-rimmed glasses and a tall hairdo. We called her the Viscountess.

In the early morning, we arrived at the school. It was strangely empty and we could hear the echo of our footsteps in the hallways. We climbed to the third floor and began drawing every type of caterpillar and ciliate we could imagine.

The days were warm and sunny. When the windows were open, a light breeze blew and the sheer curtains billowed. The classroom was bright and empty. Lenka and I crawled along the pieces of drawing paper sprawled on the floor and discussed Kazantsev, the only one of our classmates who attended the literary club.

On poetry nights, Kazantsev read Blok:

*The worlds fly by. The years fly by. The empty
Universe looks at us with dark eyes.
And you, my soul: tired, deaf,
Talk of happiness, who knows how many times.*

The Palace of Pioneers was located in a luxurious nineteenth-century mansion. We usually conducted our poetry nights in a wooden guest room with

scarlet satin walls, ornately carved armchairs, and a ceiling which depicted milky-rose cherubs brimming from the corners and gliding towards each other. Blok's voice boomed in this guestroom.

“I am Hamlet. My blood grows cold,” read Kazantsev, tossing his head back and teetering on his toes. As he read our blood grew colder.

Kazantsev tossed his head back again, fixating his green mystical eyes on us: “I remember the tenderness of your shoulders. They are thoughtful and responsive...” and at that moment, every girl in the audience believed *her* shoulders would be tender, thoughtful, and responsive under Kazantsev's touch. However, not one of us was Kazantsev's Wonderful Dame, the heroine of his romance; such a woman did not exist in nature. The hero of his story was himself.

That summer, Lenka and I craved love. Lenka lusted after Kazantsev and I ravished Blok's poetry; I was too naive for tangible human love. Lenka was always one step ahead of me in maturity.

The city nights loomed over us warm, clear, and beautiful. After a quick supper, we would promenade around the city. Usually we ended up at the university embankment since Lenka dreamed of studying philology. Classes were in session and pale-faced students walked along the Neva. They seemed worried, or perhaps relieved after a successful exam period. Regardless, we admired the students with delight and envy – they represented our not-so-distant, yet hard-to-reach future.

Sometimes we walked into the university buildings and wandered along the long, vast hallways, where ancient books with gold bindings stood in tall shelves and weightless academic dust settled on the portraits of the greats. It all invigorated us. After we emerged from the cool building shade onto the sunny asphalt, we felt rejuvenated. We had surrendered ourselves. We were reborn, yearning to accomplish an extraordinary feat. It was after that the game of “Blok's Stranger” began.

“And the ancient superstitions,” read Lenka, “blew her elastic silks, and her hat with giant feathers, and her slender ringed hand...”

Lenka wore a simple chintz dress with polka dots that she'd sewn during home economics lessons. But the game transformed the chintz into silk that flowed elegantly around Lenka's curves. She held her head so that the imaginary ostrich feather on her hat bowed and fluttered. Lenka wore no rings on her fingers. Her hands, frankly, were not slender or graceful: they revealed the strong, healthy blood of her peasant ancestors. Nevertheless, Lenka was “Blok's Stranger” in that moment-- a woman for whom you were willing to die, a fascinating beauty who captured your gaze and soul. How clearly and sharply this is imprinted in my memory!

The pointy end of the Vasilyevsky Island, the harmony and precision of the granite embankments, the sharp spire of the Peter and Paul Fortress, the heavy ornateness of the Winter Palace, the white, bottomless night – and us, two grains of sand, lost in the century-old beauty of the city. Two strangers...

We explored meandering paths on our walks. One evening, we accidentally stumbled upon a small yard formed by two deaf walls of neighboring houses. The yard was lush and comfortable. Lenka sat on a bench under a spreading old poplar, removed her tight shoes, and cradled her head in her hands.

“Wonderful,” she breathed, becoming quiet.

“Very,” I agreed, joining her on the bench.

Lenka squinted towards the setting sun.

“Did you ever notice that Kazantsev has an orange tint to his hair?” she said. “He was standing in the sun one time, and I saw it...”

“Really?” I tried to remember Kazantsev’s hair; he was a brunette in my opinion.

But that summer, Lenka saw in Kazantsev something that he did not even see in himself. It is a shame that they say love is blinding; in reality, it makes your vision crystal clear. However, it's all dependent on future experience. For now, we are fourteen years old, we are careless, gullible, loving – sitting in a strange yard under the lacy shade of a poplar. Summer is in full swing...

When I became bored of sitting, I got up and ventured into the depths of the yard. The window on the second floor was wide open and a ray of sun fell unevenly across the room, illuminating its outlandish furnishings: An old cupboard of red wood with tall deaf doors, a painting in a gilded frame, and a massive black piano.

Facing me from the behind the piano sat a beautiful old woman. Her features were thin and her hair was pulled tight in a snowy bun, the way women would have styled it in the previous century. She wore a lacy top with a tall, starched collar and a long, dark skirt. As I scrutinized her, I had an intense feeling of déjà vu; I felt as though I'd already seen the woman with the snow-white hair. It all looked like a painting in the Hermitage, where we often went on excursions.

Suddenly I noticed Lenka breathing unevenly down my neck. “That’s a countess!”, she whispered, “A countess from old St. Petersburg...”

The countess opened the piano lid and began to play. Sounds of Chopin with loud, ringing notes wafted from the room, filling the entire yard. The notes coalesced in a high, solemn chord and froze in midair. For a moment, there was silence above us, and then, smoothly and sadly, a new, unfamiliar melody began, yanking our hearts with indescribable tenderness. We stood numb under the windows. A painted man gazed at us from the gilded frame on the countess's wall--

the great singer of “The Wonderful Dame,” creator of “Scythians” and “Twelve,”-- Alexander Alexandrovich Blok, my hopeless and passionate love.

Suddenly, the music stopped. The countess closed the windows and drew thick curtains, leaving us stunned in the yard.

“She’s a countess,” murmured Lenka, “and Blok loved her.”

I looked into Lenka’s glimmering black eyes, afraid to move. Nearby, a fat janitor was watering the flowerbed, the rubber hose tangled and tugging at our legs.

“Why are you standing here?” the janitor asked suspiciously, “You need something?”

Lenka sprang into motion.

“Let’s go to Kazantsev. We have to tell him...”

Kazantsev stood in the doorway wearing house slippers, a blue tracksuit, and a scarf.

“What do you want?” he asked, paranoid. “I’m sick. The Viscountess herself released me from the state farm. I have a temperature! Thirty-eight point six, and my throat is red. See!”

He opened his mouth to show us his throat. Lenka glanced in with trepidation.

“Does it hurt really badly, Sergei?”

“Not *really* badly,” Kazantsev answered, humbled by her reaction. “I can bear it. So why are you here?” he repeated. “You’re not from the Viscountess?”

“We’re from the countess,” answered Lenka. “Blok loved her.”

“What countess?” Kazantsev’s eyes widened. “What, have you lost your mind?”

“She hasn’t lost it,” I chimed, stepping up for my friend. “We truly did find a countess. If you don’t believe us, you can come look with us.”

“Who told you she was a countess?”

“No one,” Lenka said. “I figured it out myself.”

With that, she began to describe the woman with the snow-white hair, the red cupboard, and the portrait of Blok on the wall in a gilded frame.

“What fools,” scoffed Kazantsev, “The madhouse weeps for you.” With that, he slammed the door. Heavy, round tears rolled down Lenka’s cheeks. She turned and slowly descended the stairs. I hit the doorbell once more.

“Alright, I’ll go,” answered Kazantsev, grinning.

In a few days, we set off for the countess.

Kazantsev feigned indifference, but his mannerisms revealed his curiosity; as we walked, he lurched ahead of us, Lenka skipping after him.

“Maybe she’s not a countess at all,” mumbled Kazantsev, “and she has the portrait of Blok by accident. Who knows? Maybe she bought it at the store.” Lenka shook her head. “Definitely a countess,” she retorted. “You should have seen how she was dressed!”

When we reached the yard we were disappointed. The countess’s window was closed and covered by curtains, but to our delight, there was a slight gap between the fabric.

“Let’s climb the tree,” suggested Lenka. “Then you’ll see the portrait for yourself.”

Lenka and Kazantsev climbed the rough branches of the poplar. I stayed on the ground and awaited the outcome.

“There,” pointed Lenka. “You see, Sergei?”

“Where?” said Kazantsev, shaking his head.

“There, there!”

“I don’t see it.”

“THERE!” Lenka reached toward the window with all her might.

And then the unexpected happened: The bough on which Lenka was standing creaked and she lost her balance. Lenka waved her arms, grasped helplessly for the tree and fell between two thick branches, where she dangled absurdly. The bottom of her dress billowed in the breeze, parachuting around her shoulders and revealing her blue panties that shimmered comically in the sun. Kazantsev, dumbfounded, gawked at Lenka and began to howl with laughter. Lenka twitched frantically between the branches and crashed to the ground below. She rose with a limp and staggered into the street, crying all the while.

“Fool! Cretin!” I yelled at Kazantsev, running after my friend. Kazantsev stopped laughing, jumped from the tree, and shrugged as if he were insulted.

Lenka sat in her room on a velvet couch. Her nose was red and swollen from crying, there was a deep cut on her cheek, and her knee was wrapped in a thick bandage.

“Well, don’t cry,” I soothed. “So what!”

“Oh, yeah?,” she sobbed. “So what to you. He saw everything!”

“What did he see?” I said. “Well, he saw your legs...”

Lenka’s face contorted and she began to cry inconsolably.

“What is wrong with you?” I urged. “Well, if you had bowlegs or hairy legs, I’d understand. But you don’t. You have great legs. Long ones.”

Lenka stretched her legs and studied them meticulously.

“You think?” she asked with hope. She had stopped sobbing.

“Of course, wonderful legs. Perfect!”

“Then why did he laugh?”

“That was from delight.”

Lenka pondered this idea.

“She’s no countess,” Kazantsev told me over the phone. “She’s a musician. She taught at the conservatory, and now she’s retired. A fellow artist once gave her the portrait of Blok as a gift. She told me so herself. The artist knew Blok very well, was friends with him...”

“Lenka!” I yelled into the room, “the artist was friends with Blok. With the *live Blok*, can you believe it? Kazantsev told me.”

“Did he say anything about me?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“At all,” I confirmed, my voice falling.

“Well, I do not care about your artists!” yelled Lenka, her face becoming ugly and angry. “I do not care about anybody! Even you! Why won’t you leave me alone?”

I leaned against the doorjamb, looking at Lenka's red, tear-streaked face. I kept silent. I felt sorry for her.

...Time passes. Lenka is performing at poetry night. She appears on stage in a short skirt and a white collared shirt. Her thick hair falls loosely around her shoulders, gleaming in the light. Her eyes sparkle and her cheeks are rosy. She reads with a thin, gently faltering voice:

*We were drawn towards romantics, towards words yet undiscovered.
We were drawn towards daisies, but the fields with grass were covered...*