

# A Country of Shoes

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Olena had tired of hanging the paintings weeks ago, and so Michael's daily visits grew more and more tense. At first, she would hear his truck and grin to herself, close her reading spectacles and let them hang on the chain Bodhan had purchased for her, or she would place a spoon on its rest and turn a burner down, or she would place the watering can down on the cracked bricks in the back garden. Michael's arrival once meant the advent of pleasing work, seeing the icons and pastures and noble portraits again, seeing the colors she had missed for months on end, seeing the promise on her wall of all they would bring to her and Bodhan when they were sold.

Now, her spine stiffened when she heard the burping sound of his truck idling in the driveway. Each time a corner of a frame knocked the door jamb, or when he slid a large work along the plastic liner covering the hall carpet, the skin at her neck would prickle. At first, his visits meant she would pull down two of the small, cut crystal glasses that had been her grandmother's, and she would pour each of them a glass of wine. She hadn't poured him a glass in weeks. Before, he had stood in the kitchen, the way bellmen

stood inside rooms in American hotels, with that look that she took almost as a scolding. But he was neither as stupid or persistent as a bellhop. He stopped eventually.

She grew more cross with Bodhan. During the days, she kept quiet. He drove at night, drove taxis, drove students to bars and back. It was less dangerous than the *marshrutka* had been, less dangerous than his trips to the ports in Odessa, especially in the years just after the Soviets reluctantly gave them back their city and the Russians came in only to try to buy everything not nailed down. The new job had far less dignity. He came home frustrated.

The other day, he slumped at the kitchen table as usual, pulled out his box of Belos, and she told him, "Don't smoke."

She pointed to the paintings.

"That's crap," he said—another charming word he'd picked up from his fares.

But she knew otherwise. She had not realized how yellow their rooms had been in Odessa until she first walked through the fourteen white rooms of what would become her new home. Each room had been newly painted, and the realtor had told them this with a smile bright as a new car. The carpet was new, and while it was not white, the shade of brown might as well have been white, all one tone, all blending into the walls in the corners where the shadows met. She felt, at one point, that even the new asphalt driveway was white, as it was so clear of seams, blemishes, rises, or anything that might reveal the fact that it was made by imperfect men.

Bodhan was the king of imperfect men. He had always been a loiterer in their home, holding court at the table of their apartment when the unemployed men would sniff out their open door and the sharp smell of his horrible Russian tobacco, and would come and sit with Bodhan and drink and beg cigarettes and put up with his opinions on art and the tides and shipping and opera, his condemnation of the

Buddhists who lived below them in their silent and efficient way, or of the politics, newly emboldened by the fact that Odessa's political threats were no longer specific, no longer particular, and therefore, in their vagueness, almost silly. None of the other men said much, getting quietly drunk while her husband's fog of invective and brittle wit hung over them all. But now, he sat and, without an audience, drank quietly, made notes in the little book he'd taken to carrying in the breast pocket of his icily translucent blue shirts, picked his toes. Olena once caught him digging lint from under the nail of his big toe with a silver butter knife.

"It is not crap," Olena said. "Michael has worked very hard—"

"He has worked very hard to do something no one asked him to do," Bodhan thundered.

Michael had written her first, detailed how many he had been able to save, how many he had gotten out of her gallery, then out of the apartment, how he had covered them and driven them around, using the network of drivers to get them out of the city, out of the region, and then out of the country. He had rented an apartment in Zagreb, elaborately expensive because it had climate control, and he stacked the works there. He arranged for their passage out on a freighter run by a Pakistani captain cagey enough about searches to be able to hide things in plain sight.

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