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EXCERPT

I fell in love with Nataša Ružić at the Renzo Casale gallery, the night of Alex Rebane's opening. She walked out into the street as I made to leave and called my name. She kissed me, thanked me for coming, and I was hers if she wanted me. Point of no return. She had been a student of mine for about a month. I found her attractive, but I had no interest in compromising my position as an instructor. The hours I was cobbling together amounted to the first decent work I had gotten since returning to Canada. My night classes in Parkdale were sparsely attended, but at least I could tell my supervisor no one was dropping out. The regulars were two nun-like sisters from Port-au-Prince who might have been twins, an older, well-dressed gentleman from Lvov who said he had been a jeweller (he wore a gold signet ring on his baby finger), and a short-order cook named Tran who sat near the back and kept his ski jacket on over his kitchen whites. Nataša showed up in the last week of March and took her place in the last seat of the last row. With her dyed black hair and her green leather jacket—surely a relic from the eighties—she had her own bold way of putting the glamour on. It was there with the eyeliner around her dark eyes, the sharp angle of her nose, the smile that showed a glimpse of sharp little teeth. She met my gaze that first night and her smile widened, even though she appeared self-conscious about her teeth and concealed them. She seemed to see something in me that was of interest, but then her eyes darted to the notebook in front of her. And when she spoke it was clear she was so far ahead of the others that I wondered why she was there, why she kept coming, week after week. I supposed it might have been a nightly escape from a one-room apartment nearby, a way not to be lonely for a while.

How could a woman like her be lonely?

Some weeks later, she waited until the others had filed out to approach my desk. She put down a shiny gallery card advertising an art show called Imperial Travesties.

"You like painting, Mr. Bollinger?"

I smiled, picked up the card. It was all I could do to say that I liked paintings a lot.

"You should come to the show. He's my friend."

Over the next week, prior to the opening, I did all the research I could on the artist, Alex Rebane. In the eighties, when I was still a kid, he had been huge, with shows in Manhattan, Berlin, and Tokyo, his paintings selling for six figures. He had real technique. He could paint a skinhead rally and the work would look like it had been on some rich man's wall in sixteenth-century Italy. But then he flamed out. The market went cold on him and he squandered his fortune, tried and failed and tried and failed to kick heroin, moved to Hamburg, then to Ubud, to Vancouver and then back to Toronto, finally clean. It looked like he was heading for a middle age of obscurity. The latest magazine profile reported that there was a time when no art dealer in Toronto would touch him anymore. But then something happened with his work and he was suddenly selling, suddenly something of a star again.

Maybe it was a maturing of his vision or maybe it was the times. This was after 9/11. The big money clients were seeking out more sober, contemplative, blue-chip investments, and Rebane began producing work on classical themes, stripped of all the too-clever postmodern tics like the split screens and the comic font he'd toyed with in the early nineties. He'd become cold-eyed, his crush on old masters turned almost noble. His work suddenly had all the ambition that the last vestige of a critic-driven market was looking for.

This man, this was Nataša's friend. Maybe nothing would come of us, but at the very least she could introduce me to an artist—or a community of artists—that I had been hoping to find in Canada after close to a decade in Tokyo. There I was, teaching newcomers, but it was me who still felt like an alien after two years in the city. Nataša, the quiet woman in the last row, held membership in a world where I wanted to belong.

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