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SUNFLOWER

by Susan Lindheim

"Wild sunflowers don't turn toward the sun," my brother Ben wrote, his tidy block print recognizable despite the smudged blue ink. "Unlike the domesticated variety, they aren't solar slaves." It was the first postcard he had sent me in years, and then, his last. Postmarked Malenkaya, Slovakia, January 17, 1992.

I scanned the Prague Central Train Station, unsure of exactly what more I really wanted to know. According to the police, three months ago, my twenty-five year-old brother hitchhiked to Malenkaya where he bought this postcard of a young girl standing in front of a plain white church holding a sunflower. A female postal clerk claimed to have seen him purchasing the stamp. She told the investigator from the American Embassy that she recognized the blurry passport photocopy because Ben resembled her own derelict son, all the while asking whether the Americans were offering any kind of reward.

The Czech and Slovak authorities were less helpful and clearly anxious to close the case. "Abducted by gypsies" was what the Second Deputy Chief of Police told me he had written in the file before it was sealed. "*Koshmarny*," he added. "Malenkaya, big problems. No go you there."

The clock on the station's schedule wall read eleven-thirty in the fading late afternoon light, and the building smelled of diesel and damp stone. Pigeons flapped high above in the rusting metal rafters, and an occasional feather floated down through pale rays of sunlight to land on the soot-covered floor.

Everyone else had given up on Ben years ago, but I still couldn't. Not on the brother three years my senior who, when I was seven and our parents were in the midst of their divorce, spun his globe to a different spot every night, pointing out places like Irkusk and Tashkent and Vladivostok, imagining what could lie behind "that curtain made of iron. All that heavy metal might be there to protect *them* from *us*, after all, you never really know." Later, when he was in eighth grade and a mutual restraining order heralded the demise of Mom's subsequent marriage, he taught me to tune his short wave radio to the most faraway stations we could find, listening in late at night just to hear the accents, the oddly textured vowels and strange consonant combinations, static-laden promises of a different kind of life.

It was Ben who looked out for me then, I reminded myself, yet again. Sheltering me although no one had done the same for him. The least I could do was to press on.

I waited out the hour and a quarter until the next train by sitting inside a tiny store selling baked snacks on crusty white rolls. I sat on a creaky metal stool and munched on a *vegetarianáská* of tomato paste, onions, mushrooms and cheese, while I examined the map yet again. Still labeled Czechoslovakia despite the recent split; like so many others, the geographic publishers had yet to catch up. I looked up and noticed the store owner watching me.

"Where you go?" he asked.

"Malenkaya,"

"Tsk, ts." He shook his head.

"Do you know if the train stops there?" I asked. He shrugged and retreated behind the counter. I stared at the small dot in the southeastern corner of the tangerine-colored map and forced down the rest of my stale pizza roll.

An hour later, the train station was more crowded, and the din of conversation echoed and distorted off the stone.

"Brilliant. Fucking brilliant."

The first words I understood. Spoken by a young British couple arguing with the man behind the ticket window.

"Two more days," the woman said. "Unbelievable. I hate this country."

Her companion tilted his head. "Come, come, Jenna. Be reasonable."

She swung a long brown ponytail into his face and walked off.

The man shook his head at her, then turned to notice me.

"Excuse me," I said, frantic to talk to someone who might understand. "Do you think you could help me?" I turned and pointed to the schedule on the wall. "I'm trying to get to Malenkaya, only I can't figure out which track to go to, or whether the train even stops there."

"That one should," he said, pointing to the far right of the station. "In theory, at least. Around here, you never really know."

"Thanks," I said.

"At least she's polite," he yelled toward Jenna.

Only a few other people waited on the platform, sparsely scattered the length of the train and cloaked in long winter coats. The older he got, the more Ben liked being anonymous so he could hide in plain view. By the time he turned sixteen, he was talking — when he was still actually talking to Mom and me, that is — about "camouflage for the soul. All the better to observe the clarity of real and actual truth." At the time, Mom had said she was sure it was just another passing phase, like the clove cigarettes and his stoner so-called friends. But not all endings are either crisp or clean, or timely.

Before anything else, I heard the rumble, low and steady, followed by the overpowering smell of diesel fumes. And then it arrived, the dark silhouette of the engine blotting out the remaining afternoon light. Covered in soot, the paint was once black and red with green

borders and numbers. It was chugging along, powerful and fast, too fast. First the locomotive swept by us, then car after car was swallowed up into a trail of black smoke. Then there was the screeching, metal wheels against the metal track, so high-pitched and loud. Before the train even came to a full stop, the other passengers were picking up their bags and jogging to catch up with it. I grabbed my suitcase and scrambled to follow.

As I pushed my bag up the steep stairs and into the closest car, I noticed the English backpacker behind me on the platform, as if he, too, were waiting to board. A part of me wanted him to be here precisely because he'd followed me. But my gut told me no, no, no. Stay away. I wrestled my suitcase down the corridors and wobbly connectors for three successive cars until I found a cabin with empty seats. I took one for myself and another for my bag and tried not to think about omens.

"Mind if I join you?" the Englishman asked before I'd even had time to pull out my book. "My name's Nigel, by the way."

"Isabel," I replied, instantly sorry I had given my real name. "Should I save a seat for your friend?"

"What friend?" Nigel asked as he sat down on the bench next to me.

As the train moved out of the city, I tried not to make eye contact with Nigel.

I stared out the window at the stream of rectangular gray concrete apartment buildings with their lines of small square windows. "Regularity that numbs not just the senses but the spirit," that's what Ben would have said about this scene. But I wasn't sure I agreed with him, not entirely, not anymore. Regular was also reliable, and reliable meant predictable. It meant you could stop being so anxious all the time.

"You know the whole Velvet Revolution thing was staged," Nigel told me.

I stared at him for a long moment and tried to think of a reasonable response.

Clank, clank, clank.

Finally, I said, "What I saw on TV looked real."

Nigel tilted his head and smiled. "Oh, come, come. It wasn't. The communists knew their time was up, so they brought in a mob of students, stacked them all in Wenceslas Square and then pretended they were forced out." His eyes glided along my body as he spoke. Softly appreciative, I told myself, or at least not entirely sleazy.

I shifted in my seat and took *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* out of my bag.

He continued, "The problem was, they didn't plan it right."

"Oh." I flipped the paperback open and stared blankly at the pages as I listened to the empty rhythm. Clank, clank, clank. After what seemed like twenty minutes but was probably only five, Nigel got up and told me he was going out for a smoke.

I stared out the window at the rain. Willow trees bent in the wind on the deserted road, the branches helpless and flopping, the leaves offering no shelter at all.

"Is it good?" Nigel asked. His voice startled me. I hadn't noticed him return. "Your book?" he said, gesturing to it.

"I just started it."

"Do you mind?" He picked up the novel and glanced at the back cover. "Kundera," he nodded. "Everyone's account of history airbrushed and unique." He handed the book back to me, took another cigarette from his bag and got up again.

"You should have just stayed in the smoking car," I said.

"Perhaps," he smiled as he pushed open the cabin door. "But the company's not nearly as good."

It was then that I noticed the postcard.

Peeking out of his rucksack, the bright colors were what struck me first, so familiar. I nudged it out slightly to reveal more of the picture: black shoes on a cobblestone street in front of a white building. I tugged the postcard slightly more and saw the hands of a girl holding the stem of a bright yellow sunflower.

The same sunflower. It matched the postcard in my bag.

On the back was the start of a letter to someone named Elizabeth. "Often we don't know the end until we're looking at it in rearview."

"There is luck and there is coincidence," Ben had told me once, shortly before he left for good, in one of those spaces between his angry bursts and the fugitive overnights when he could still be soft and kind. "But," he continued, "never the two together."

Nigel was reading a paperback with blocks of ice and penguins on the front cover, the words "Antarctica" and "One Man's Adventure" visible between his fingers. My eyes drifted back toward the postcard.

"Is your impolite stare at something in particular?" Nigel asked.

"Sorry," I said. "Must have been daydreaming."

Nigel kicked his bag under the seat for good measure.

I swallowed hard. "Where are you going?"

"Malenkaya," he said. "But don't worry, it has nothing to do with you."

Outside, the twilight had turned the gray sky a drab violet, and the leaves on the trees blurred into fuzzy olive blobs. I imagined finding Ben in the dim corridor of a dingy hotel. He didn't recognize me at first. Then he stopped to ask why I bothered to travel all this way. He didn't ask me to, he said, and he certainly couldn't imagine doing the same, not for Mom or Dad, or me.

Fighting the motion of the train, I grabbed my purse and headed toward the bathroom at the end of the corridor.

Malenkaya's train station was a single small waiting room the size of a tiny theater lobby with an unadorned ticket window built into the wall. Nigel had already gone and I was alone at the station, half wishing I had let myself trust him. Only one fluorescent light was working, and the back half of the room was dark. I searched each wall in turn for a posted map of the city but found none.

Outside, clouds turned the night sky a uniform black, like a lid. The cool night air felt electric, charged and magnetic, and a light wind carried the faint smell of pine. There was no taxi stand, not even a

bus stop, and as I dragged my suitcase toward the faint lights in the distance, I felt like I was watching myself in a black and white movie.

The city, once I got there, seemed stuck in another era. Sparse yellow streetlights, dark corners, the feeling of tired decay. The buildings were pockmarked with holes from bullets or shoddy construction, or both.

Toward the center of town, I stopped at a café bar to ask for directions. Two overweight middle-aged men with rosy cheeks and bushy gray mustaches — grandfatherly, I told myself — recommended a local hotel, or hostel, the translation was extremely rough. They offered to escort me there, and after some charades and mistranslations from my dictionary, I agreed even though I knew it was a mistake.

The first man insisted on carrying my suitcase, but I managed to hold onto my purse. The men mumbled at each other with too many consonants and elongated vowels. The one with my suitcase fell several steps behind. We turned a corner and I realized that the man with my suitcase had not followed.

I turned and went back, but he was gone.

"Where is he?" I yelled.

The man beside me shrugged. He pulled my arm and led me back down the street.

"But he stole it! He stole my bag!"

The man waved his index finger at me. "Tsk, tsk" he clicked with his tongue.

Up ahead was the sign for the hotel. I sprinted and easily outpaced my heavy escort. He did not follow me into the building.

A petite woman with highly bleached hair, too much black eyeliner, and long purple fingernails, was at the front desk.

"My suitcase was stolen." I told her.

"That happens," she said.

"Can you call the police for me?"

"No."

"Then, can you tell me how I can get in touch with them? I'll even go down to the station, if you tell me where it is."

"Not a good idea," she said. Her English was perfect, accent and all.

"If they didn't actually steal it themselves," a man's British accent told me from somewhere on the stairs, "they'll take everything in it before you get it back." Nigel. I turned to him.

"Thanks for giving me directions to the only hotel in town," I said.

"You didn't ask." He retreated up the stairs.

I turned back to the woman. In the pile of loose papers on her desk, I caught sight of a postcard of a girl standing in front of a white church holding a single small sunflower.

"That postcard you're holding," I said. "Where's it from?"

She flipped it over and glanced at the picture. "Some town nearby, perhaps," she said. "Definitely not Malenkaya. There's no church like that here." There was nothing on the back, save for empty boxes for the address and stamp. "There's a newsstand a couple of blocks from here that sells them, if you like."

The woman studied the blank postcard some more. "Maybe this girl has your suitcase," she said.

"A big middle-aged man has my suitcase," I said. "Or at least he did twenty minutes ago."

I asked the woman whether there were any rooms available for the night, and she said that if I paid in advance I could have the room with the single bed at the top of the stairs with a shared bathroom down the hall. I took the key and started upstairs, then turned back around.

"Have you heard of any people disappearing from around here?" I asked.

Her eyes widened, "People?"

"One person in particular. Tall American man with glasses and blond hair, about twenty-five?"

"Lots of things disappear," she said as she stored my registration papers away, "but I wouldn't know anything about it."

More than anything, I missed my toothbrush.

I woke up early in the saggy single bed, not feeling at all rested even though I had slept. I put on the clothes I had been wearing the day before and went downstairs.

I asked the woman at the hotel desk whether she remembered anyone named Ben Ashford staying here about three months ago. It was a different woman in the morning, and she didn't speak much English. She shrugged. She wasn't here then, she said. She can't tell me when the woman from last night will be back.

"That bastard owes me much money," a man called from the hotel restaurant in thickly accented English. He got up from his table and approached.

His gaze sliced through my clothing. "You know, there are ways you could help him," he said. His eyes were fixed on my chest. He thrust a business card at me. His breath smelled of greasy pork sausages and last night's stale alcohol, and the thick gold chain around his neck glistened in the lobby light. Poking out from his jacket, I made out what I thought was the wooden handle of a gun. "If you have interest, of course."

"I don't."

Outside the hotel, I paused to catch my breath. Even in the daylight, the sky and buildings were an unending solid shade of gray. A sloping red bus spewing black smoke lilted slowly down the street. As I watched its halting progress, I decided to try to find the newsstand selling the postcards, just in case there was something more to them. I wandered around for half an hour before I spotted a small kiosk at the end of a long narrow block.

Just then, I felt a soft lump under my right foot. A mound of bright green dog shit, smashed and stuck into the crevasses of my sole.

"You need help?" a thin old man asked me from a doorway across the street. He was wearing a stained coat and wrinkled pants and his glance made me cringe.

"No." I walked away.

"It's dirty," he called at me. "Very bad. Come here. I help you." I walked faster, a trail of green shit behind me. He crossed the street and followed me.

"Come here," he grabbed my arm. "I help you wash."

"Leave me alone," I said.

He grabbed my waist. The gristle of his beard brushed my face and his tongue touched my cheek. I pushed him away and he fell back into the building behind us.

"Let me help you," he yelled as he struggled to prop himself up. I turned a corner and ducked out of sight.

After another half hour of wandering through Malenkaya, I had uncovered nothing. I returned to the hotel and attempted again to question the woman at the desk. This time she merely grunted at me.

"She can't help you," Nigel said from the top of the stairs.

"And you can?"

"Perhaps."

In the hotel restaurant, over black tea in clear glasses with scorching metal handles, Nigel told me that I should look for a woman with henna-colored hair and a silver and blue pendant, Eva as she was known, although surely that was not her real name. She lived in the apartments on the far edge of town. As he smoked three cigarettes in rapid succession, Nigel explained the true workings of the "new business opportunities" in the area. Import, export, and distribution, he said with authority, but without ever clarifying his own exact role. Of so many things, he continued. Raw opium. Routed from Central Asia and Afghanistan to Moscow, it passed conveniently through Malenkaya on its way to Western Europe. "Via the Roma," Nigel explained, "the Travelers, the gypsies, or whatever you want to call them. Stateless people in the eyes of the government, the locals, just about everyone else." He paused to bring yet another cigarette to his lips. "They don't do the actual dealing or transacting, but they cloak and facilitate transport quite nicely. And, for a ridiculously small fee, the police have agreed to look away."

"So did you know my brother?"

"No."

"Then why are you helping me now?" I asked, leaning in toward him. "The honest reason, please. No airbrushing."

"I have a sense about you," he said quietly as he reached for his lighter again. "You remind me of someone."

"Someone who's still talking to you?"

Half a mile outside the city, on the same road as the train station but far past it, there was a small, untended patch of dirt surrounded by sterile concrete apartment buildings with laundry spilling out. Next to the buildings, a few old Fiat campers were parked alongside rusting vans. Sparse tufts of grass poked out from large patches of mud where several boys played soccer in the steady drizzle.

Nigel stood where I had left him, half a block behind, holding guard.

Women loaded down with baskets and bags began to pile out of the vans. I scanned their faces for some kind of recognition, of anything. They looked down and away from me. Finally, someone who looked like Eva stepped out of one of the vans.

"Excuse me," I said to her.

She paused to look closely at me, then started to walk away.

"Please," I tried again. "It's Eva, right?"

She stopped and stared at me.

"You know my brother Ben Ashford." I described him again, watching her face closely for any kind of recognition, reaction. "I came here to find him."

"Don't."

She walked away.

I followed her into one of the buildings and up the dirty staircase to the second floor. Voices echoed down the concrete hallway lined with plastic bags and empty glass bottles. Once we were inside the apartment, I handed her two \$100 bills.

"Please," I pushed the money into her palm. "I came all the way from San Francisco. It would mean a lot to me, even just to know what happened."

She closed her hand around the bills and let them rub against her palm. After a long moment, she nodded. "Follow me."

Eva took me up several more flights of stairs and out onto the roof. She pointed beyond the cluster of buildings and vans to a flat

field surrounded by trees. The last time she saw Ben — the last time anyone had seen him — he was running toward the makeshift cemetery in that field. He looked afraid.

"Why?"

"I'm only a watcher," she said. "Ben helped me once with a man and a fight. Please, please — not get more involved."

I grabbed her arm. "You know more than that. I can tell."

She sighed and wriggled her arm free. "Ano. Matti drove Ben in his truck." Matti, a cousin or uncle or brother, it wasn't clear, would occasionally pick up men like Ben to break up the routine of driving, to improve his English, to recruit new faces to help transport the drugs.

"But with Ben was too much," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Bad luck," she said. "Matti had to curse his own truck to get rid of it. He had to destroy everything."

And then, as I stared at her in disbelief, I noticed it.

Next to the silver and blue pendant on her necklace, it was there on the chain. A gold ring, his gold ring, the one Grandfather had gotten him in Greece near the Acropolis, that oriental puzzle ring that Ben learned to put back together so smoothly and quickly that the solution became nearly unconscious, over and over, until all the yelling finally stopped.

Eva clutched at her necklace. "Present," she said. "He gave me."

"Sometimes we get what we deserve," Ben had told me after Grandfather's funeral four and a half years ago, right before he dropped out of touch. "Sometimes we don't. Sometimes there's little difference between the two."

The first thing I noticed about the cemetery was the girl. She was young, perhaps eight or nine, and she was holding a yellow flower in her hand. She stood in front of a grave in the middle of the field with a tall man who could be her father or brother. She looked nothing like the girl in the postcard.

The smell of earth was strong and heavy with metal, and the breeze pelted freezing rain onto my cheeks. Mud caked onto my shoes as I started back toward the apartments and town. Even from this distance, I could see him clearly. Nigel. He was smoking a cigarette as he paced back and forth across the empty space, waiting.