

**DEAD
SOULS: AN
AMERICAN
POEM**

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POEM**

**Matthew
Keeper**



Measureless Oceans Press

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a Note from the Author to the Original Author to the Reader

“Whither, then, are you speeding, O Russia of mine? Whither?
Answer me!”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Countrymen! Lend me your eyes: here before you lies my little novel, based on the original written by fellow other-countryman Gogol. If you espy a passage that sounds unbelievable, or extraordinary, or not of this realm, your vision does not deceive you, for this is a work of life, less of art, and the realm of life is full of the fantastical, moreso than the bland. Should you spy a weak passage, know that, too, is no ocular deception, but rather the limits of my powers of eloquence and general cleverness. So, do be generous with my weaknesses, as we all have faults, mine perhaps more extraordinary than most.

My fellow other-countryman had intended his masterwork of the same title, what he lovingly referred to as his “poem in prose,” in three parts; know this, then, that I am lucky to

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end the second part of his prose poem. I pray we have world enough and time for the next poet to pick up from where I left off, but I, and perhaps many of us, have our doubts as to the longevity of our time on this fair planet. Unlike my fellow other-countryman, I decided to immortalize this work in electronic verse rather than in flames and embers, for I find it easier to read this way, though this is perhaps the first of my mistakes. Nor will that be the last of an unending train of errors. But we shall go upon this course together, perhaps the rockiness will make it endearing to us, for love lies in the errors, none of the perfections. I can say more of the errors of this continuation of ashes from a hundred seventy years prior, but I feel obligated to mention that an editor can only do so much.

The first of my un-mistakes was keeping worldly Tchitchikov. The immolated immortal lives eternal, and his story, more so than most, is necessary to understanding our current world's affairs. The only other thing I have written correctly perhaps in my entire thirty-seven years is his maintaining the friendship of his ever-companion Selifan. As our other-countryman left off the two, they had been knee-deep in—political difficulties, we shall say. One might also say they had been chased off by various local party officials for suspicious activity, the type of activity that has yielded Tchitchikov the muster roll of his invaluable army of dead souls. With but two full weeks to the mid-term election, our precious duet of living souls have precious little time to capitalize on their brave work over the past four months. Yet these two, together for eternity, to suffer through the travails of the modern world now, this seems a fitting Sisyphean judgment to they whose horrid crime was birth. It is through companionship, perhaps not romantic love, that we suffer through the pains of this world, and even I could not bear to rend the two apart lest the ghosts of the fictive haunt me at night. But here I am, waxing almost-poetic.

The second of my mistakes, the first being that this copy

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will not yield to flame, is, then, being a writer of the world rather than an actor in it. This is not true, not entirely, as I do my performance but to no audience. But many these days, they do act out, they do jump into the fray and frighten themselves into action. I hope this book does the same for you! Perhaps you are the person whose action will yield fruit, a load lightened as Dickens might have said, a fleshy persimmon as I would enjoy, or a world saved as others would appreciate. Know I shall await you in my miserable musings, and know that though I put on this play before you begin yours, it is how we end that determines the nature of the course we have passed; this one a comedy to play out before your deep work of philosophy and justice to come.

And the third mistake, as all terrible things, such as bill notices and babies, must come in threes, is that I have not started our American Poem where all good poems begin, and shall shortly amend this error.

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CHAPTER ONE

“The love of acquisition, the love of gain, is a fault to many.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Ring, oh Muses, ring the bell of Tchitchikov’s cell phone alarm! Let it sound through the hotel room, ring upon the deaf pages of Tchitchikov’s pocket pad resting on the bureau, dance upon the waters of his tepid gin glass gemmed with air bubbles and upon the tint of an unflushed commode. How it howls now, when last night the television were the only voices and only lights in the room, it Made in USA, Assembled with Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese parts. It lit up the previous Tuesday night much like any other weeknight, quiet like one of the lovely, modest domicile scenes across our fair, beautiful country, interspersed with informative drug commercials and patriotic political ads. Let this ring shrill into Selifan’s tender ears, that I see his face frown gauging the work that lay ahead, beads of sweat perspiring upon his semi-youthful brow.



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Perhaps these tremors are remnants of a nightmare, one consisting of those dead souls roused yet to weigh in on deciding our current justly leadership; or perhaps anticipation of a day of fruitful production, sweat accumulating to join his chauffeur's later toil-water under his heartening labor, under the unending sun's glorious benevolence. May this clarion rouse our two champions from their slumbers and into the fray of political lobbying!

Already we see Tchitchikov's inimitable twitch, a wrinkled eye spasm joining his fair neighbor's toes kicking about, our two heroes, tightly squeezed in one bed, head-to-foot and foot-to-head. This should speak to their mutual respect and love of one another, and it does, though I must admit, should I be in their financial conditions, one such as I might look upon this as an attempt to skirt unnecessary expenses and comforts. But one cannot pass one's own judgment upon these fair two! Does the law not say, "Innocent until proven guilty?" Does God's law not say, "Judge not lest ye be judged?" Are these not the tenets by which we abide, until the appropriate governing bodies vote on amending these two later in their legislative sessions—perhaps three months from now, should legislative calendars be held to some semblance of veracity? Then we shall not judge these two on their financial hardships, but on their bondage of brotherly love. And should a love be more than brotherly, more romantic than that, so be it! This is the era of free will, of God's love eternal, and gays may ever be gay at least until the next legislative calendar update!

Already we have missed him awakening—Tchitchikov is rinsing his face, preparing it for his morning shave. His blue eyes he may not notice—but we may notice—though they are not anything out of the ordinary for blue, neither sky-blue nor ice-blue, one can only say, just simply blue. Of his hair, one can say slightly more about that, though not by much: this is dark-ish, one can say, and neatly trimmed. His face, though, is

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clean, and that is the most remarkable thing I can say about his visage, though there is perhaps too much importance put into simply a face. No, there is more, there are secrets and capabilities that a face cannot show. This secret he has kept to himself for the many long years of his middle-aged life: he prodded his cheek with his tongue, poking it out, rounding it for his nearly vintage safety razor to nip at the errant follicles. No cream, just water and several careful swipes at it. That is his secret to a clean, healthy shave, that and not having the constitution to support a full beard.

Selifan stirred from his slumber as well, and his head hung off the foot of the bed in a position of discomfort, yet, I can say that Selifan was the type who was most comfortable when he felt uncomfortable. Like his companion, his constitution was not given to full beard-growth, perhaps less so than Tchitchikov, yet he took it upon himself to sprout a small handful of wisps upon his chin and upper lip in the hopes that, one day, those pioneers would be joined by ranks of their own fellows. That is not to say he is contrarian, or argumentative. Not in the least! His intents are more noble than that, for, like the giraffe who stretched his neck to reach the tallest tree, and hoped that his stretch would pass down to progeny, Selifan hoped, too, that his struggles with facial hair would yield hirsute fruit and pass down to his yet-to-be heirs. But that is as they say none-of-our-business, and not central to our story nor their current states of mind.

As we grow closer in feelings to those we travel with, so we get to know the other's foibles and faults, and thus, concomitant with their aforementioned brotherly love comes brotherly disagreement. Selifan's head bobbed over the edge of the bed. He spoke the first words they exchanged in two days. "They'll have our heads," he said glumly.

Tchitchikov was not one to be taken from a good, honest shave. He resumed, as did Selifan from the bathroom threshold.

“Did you not hear me? Though perhaps that razor should do the job first.”

Tchitchikov pulled his head up from the sink, water dripping off his now-clean chin. He was not quite satisfied with his work, though he should have been, for it was indeed a fine shave he had performed. “Perhaps,” he said. “Though a safety razor, that would be a novel way to perish.”

“The thing seems nearly a hundred-seventy years old,” Selifan said. “When you’re done with your morning beautification, could we address the issue of a small but impressive handful of people desiring our heads detached?”

Tchitchikov hummed to himself.

“Or something else stupid is on your mind.”

“I wonder what price these names could fetch,” Tchitchikov mused. He turned to Selifan. “In the right hands, they are quite valuable.”

“As are our heads, in our hands. Or rather, still on our necks. Could we consider those two first?”

Tchitchikov examined his fine work in the mirror. He wanted to poke his tongue in his cheek to further determine it finished, but he was self-conscious in front of Selifan. He pulled a cheek closer to the mirror and rolled his eye canted to better observe. “With the right contacts, we shall be immortal.”

“The fountain of youth? Sounds fantastic.”

“Unkillable, or better, even.” He tightened his cheek in a near-smile. “You jest, but I do not. I confess: we have power here. Real, true power.”

“Yet not the power to save our hides. You should consider that money doesn’t buy a pair of resurrections.”

Tchitchikov turned to the other cheek and semi-smiled in the mirror for his next swipe. “There is only some truth to that. Still, my confession isn’t complete. You do realize what this list means, right?”

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Selifan left the threshold. "I'm leaving," he said, picking up his scattered things.

Tchitchikov poked his head out into the room. "We can sell elections here."

Selifan shook his head. "Idiot."

"That is the power we have gathered."

"Of course. Certainly." Selifan was nearly gathered, himself.

"Selifan, please do not leave. Allow me to explain. These are empty votes. Votes that are guaranteed to the right bidder. All we need to do is find similarly empty legislators."

"And, again, explain how to keep certain pissed off county party officials from, one, catching wind; and two, leaving our hanged bodies to swing in the wind."

"Any lawmaker can protect us from chatty volunteers," Tchitchikov said. "That is the nature of power. It protects power, fool."

"Thank you." Selifan slung his backpack over his coat and picked up the canvas bag that held the other half of his road-tripping contents. "Who's going to buy these supposed votes from us? Who is conscience-less enough to buy themselves an election?"

Tchitchikov stared at his friend.

"Okay, but how will they avoid scandal and jail?"

Tchitchikov stared at his friend.

"Yes, but how will *we* avoid scandal and jail?"

"Dear, dear Selifan," Tchitchikov's tone took an admonishing color, as though he were addressing a foolish child, "you have heard of Washington, D.C. before, yes?"

Selifan lowered his canvas bag. "But that, that's insane."

"Aim high, friend. We'll still hit a worthy target even if we miss the first few."

"Okay, but," Selifan unslung his backpack. "Who'll protect us?"

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Tchitchikov returned to the bathroom and addressed the mirror. He poked his tongue again. “This is Congress. One hand washes the other.”

“Yes, true, but...” Selifan sat down on the bed. It creaked under him. “When will we start?”

Tchitchikov was finally satisfied with his shave. He proceeded to roll on deodorant, the third to last step of his morning ceremony. “When I am finished cleaning up.”

Oh, how rife with the good common life a gas station may be! It is one of the few intersections of interesting and boorish, of rich and poor, or rather, not rich, but those better off than poor, for the rich are more likely to be driven and to have their vehicles taken care of by people worser than they. But an intersecting place nonetheless!

Selifan pulled his car in front of the gas station pump and Tchitchikov came out to fill the car with gas, the common law abided between one who lacks a car and one who doesn't. Across from Tchitchikov was a man of, let's say, should one be full of discussion, they are verbose; this man was such. Then one full of scent, and a scent not entirely pleasant, we should call this person *scentful* to be polite, such as this man was, to the point that the acidic smell of gasoline was a godsend. As this man were the former, he produced the beginnings of conversation:

“Beautiful day. Fucking love Fall.”

As this man were the latter, to say *scentful*, Tchitchikov avoided these conversational beginnings as a cat might avoid the miserable sensation of water and wet fur. But when it rains, it pours, and even a clever cat as well trained as Tchitchikov could only dodge so many soft bullets such as

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they seem. The man continued, holding more aggressively a tone. "Fucking love Fall. Smells so good."

The irony of the comment did not escape Tchitchikov's ear, but, rather than goad the specimen, he decided the easier road would be to engage lazily like a half-asleep tortoise. "Yes. The smell. Yes."

"Fucking love it," the man said.

"Yes. It seems that way."

"Could I bum a smoke?"

The man smiled and revealed coffee-stained teeth, should the coffee be scant of milk and full of sugar. "I'm sorry, I don't smoke," Tchitchikov replied.

"Why not?"

It was Tchitchikov's turn to smile. "Let me pick you up one," he said. "One second, friend."

Tchitchikov entered the station convenience building. Should the gas pump be rife with lively commoners, the convenience store then was their hive, crawling with several segments of tittering life. Scentful smells of soon to be devoured egg sandwiches and pizza slices wafted through, as well as the aroma of over-toasted coffee grounds. Tchitchikov asked for the bathroom key and, on his way, clumsily brushed on the candy rack with his sleeve, spilling a handful of chocolate Sancho Peanut bars onto the ground and continuing.

"Hey," the cashier yelled, "don't go knocking things down!"

Tchitchikov paused and looked down at the mess behind him. "I'm sorry," he sounded flustered. "I didn't see them."

The cashier glared.

"I'll get them," Tchitchikov replied, and bent over to pick them up and replace them. "Sorry," he said, finishing and returning to go to the bathroom.

He stood in front of the mirror, smiled and grinned and smiled again. He looked at his watch. He breathed on it,

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buffed off the condensation, and ticked his head like a soft metronome for a few beats.

He left the bathroom and approached the cashier. "Pump two," he said.

The cashier gave him his change and another dirty look. Tchitchikov looked out the window to the man at the pump. He smiled to him. Tchitchikov pointed to the cigarette rack. "Sorry, how much are these?"

The cashier pointed at the rather obvious signs on the racks. "Never mind. I don't smoke; no need to start now. I'll take a paper," Tchitchikov said. "No, the local one." He left the building. The man at the pump followed him with his eyes and his full-blend coffee smile as he walked past and opened the door to Selifan's car and hopped in.

"Here you go," Tchitchikov tossed a Sancho Peanut candy to his friendly chauffeur. "We're making good time." He opened the newspaper.

Selifan peeled the topmost of the candy and wrapped his hand around it and the steering wheel. He scooted his seat forward another inch and his knees nearly cradled the steering wheel, that is to say, he looked rather uncomfortable, though, as aforementioned in our previous scene, this was comforting to him. They left and he cleared his throat. "How much do I owe you?"

Tchitchikov flipped to the obituary section of the newspaper. "Same as last time."

"Then how much did it cost?"

"Same as last time."

"You do realize I'm out as soon as you get caught. How much do you figure bail would be for a two-dollar candy theft?"

Tchitchikov hummed to himself. "The delightful Duval County has yielded another forty-one votes for us. Delicious." Tchitchikov pulled out his notepad and licked his pencil.

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“Don’t worry, no one we know. That makes a rough total of three-thousand, three hundred and,” he licked his lips, “seventy-two. Seventy-three. A state total of thirteen eight-hundred twenty-one. Thank you, Duval County.” Tchitchikov held back a sneeze. “And bail would be the same as last time. Easy calculation, that one.”

“Next calculation: how many people are in Florida?”

“Twenty-one million.”

“What does not quite fourteen thousand votes matter, then?”

Tchitchikov shook his head. “Wrong question, first of all. The better question is ‘how many people are registered to vote state-wide?’ Thirteen million. ‘How many cast a vote?’ Eight million. ‘How slim are the margins?’ Now that, that’s the best question.” Tchitchikov rolled down his window to get a fresh breath of the overly sunny air. “Six years ago, almost to the month, our fair incumbent won this state by a mere thirty-one thousand, six-hundred votes. A razor’s edge, compared to a pool of a few million. Now, our fourteen thousand votes look the substantial prize, don’t they? And, unlike our generous heapful of gerrymandering and ID laws, getting the dead to vote for you is a one-hundred-percent in-the-bank solution. It’s about as reliable as printing money. But better. We’re printing power.”

Selifan frowned. He looked uncomfortable, twisting his neck and face in a position comfortable to him. “Yes, but you just said that Whittaker won by thirty-one thousand votes. What if this time around, he needs thirty-one thousand to win? Our fourteen won’t cut it, then.”

Tchitchikov shook his head. “We can’t harvest *all* the dead here. It’s about playing each angle at percentages. This angle yields the best percentages.” He shrugged. “If Whittaker doesn’t win, we still make our bank. And if he does, though, and he recommends us to his friends: well, now we have

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capital and customers to run our business.” He took a deep breath of the beautiful air. “Isn’t it glorious outside?”

“You’d think reading the obits for the past four months would get you depressed. I wonder what that would take.”

“Reading the obits the past four months and not making a dime at it.” Tchitchikov stuck his nose out of the open window. “Let’s do it. Let’s plant the first seed of our sale. But first, let’s get in one more loop of this beautiful Florida sunshine.”

Senator Whittaker’s district office was in, not quite the heart of Jacksonville, but in a far nicer, cleaner area near a few large parks and small shopping centers, on such-and-such a street near such-and-such an avenue. It was a lovely, humble office, neat and clean and professional and producing mainly of gentle whiskey socials on Fridays. There were pictures of the Senator shaking hands and smiling with local stars, such as the lead actor on a large action movie, the movie but three years old; the Senator shaking hands and smiling with an international pop singer, one who might be called a one-hit-wonder, in terms of her song charting in the States; shaking hands and smiling with a recipient of recent a Nobel Prize, we shall not name which award as to hide their identity, but consider it in the field of either science or math or literature or otherwise; and the Senator most graciously shaking hands and smiling even wider with his fellow party officials, some of whom Tchitchikov recognized from certain alleged money laundering scandals of days past. These and other such photos decorated rather fine pieces of furniture, tables from a local designer, desks made of teak, so as to remind one of the more extraordinary possibilities of life. The ambience of the office was, to be truthful, very much in line with Whittaker’s personality and under its breath it whispered its agreement nearly literally.

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His aide's first name was M—, we have removed her full name at her request, and M— was a native of Florida for the majority of her twenty some-odd years. As a native of that state, she was used to the sun's limitless rays, shining down upon her over-tanned arms; to lizards everywhere, stampedes of the small things at the most inopportune and hilarious times; and less humorously, the mincing out-of-state elderly, whose seasonal habitation was Florida from October the first to March the thirtieth, or some variation of nearly six months. They came from Rhode Island or Massachusetts or some other cold, Godless, potholed New England state, and resided there no longer than six months and one day. M—, then, was happy to make acquaintance with our charming Tchitchikov, he being at least twenty-five years junior to the average constituent she usually dealt with, and he seeming that he would produce about a dozen points less blood pressure than she was used to. "How may I help you?" M— asked Tchitchikov.

"I'm curious if Senator Whittaker was in," he said.

"And who might you be, please?" M— smiled to him.

"My name is Paul Ivan Tchitchikov—the last name starts with a tee, the rest sounds itself out—and I live at such-and-such a road in Jacksonville. I wanted to ask the fair Senator if he were interested in speaking to our congregation the Jesus on High."

"The Jesus on High?"

"Jesus on High," Tchitchikov corrected, "and we are, I'd say, an intimate group of about fourteen thousand praying, shaking souls to bring God's word upon this lovely planet of ours. If the Senator could make a brief acquaintance with myself, in regard to his personal faith and how he has found God in these heathen times, then we could—"

"I'm sorry, what was the website you said? Jesus on High?"

Tchitchikov stared at her. "Website?"

"Yes, so I can do a little research."

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He blinked blankly at her, and the expression “grew two heads” might seem appropriate for Tchitchikov’s stare. “Miss, young Miss M—, we don’t have a website.”

“Yes, but how do I—?”

“I am, and I hope I don’t overstate myself in any way, a fair amount of research standing before you. We believe in two things: in human-to-human communication, one; but firstly, in Jesus on high.”

M— wrote furious notes. “Human to human...”

“Soul to soul, more accurately, but I don’t like to impose our sentiments upon others, not until they’re ready. Yes, you can erase that.” Tchitchikov bent over her desk. “Yes, ‘soul to soul,’ I like that better. Thank you.”

Tchitchikov continued. “If the Senator has some time, and really, a brief five, ten minutes is enough for me to get a sense of him, then we’d better be able to weigh the Senator’s faith and how his guidance might help us glide through these challenging times. We would love to hear his plans, if he wanted to address our congregation.”

“Hold on,” M— kept scribbling. “I think I almost have it.”

“Here’s my contact card,” Tchitchikov produced a simple black and white card, “and if you could leave this for him, I would greatly appreciate it.” M— took the card, keeping her face on the notepad and her scribbling. “You can say ‘work through,’ I don’t think I like the sound of ‘glide through.’”

“Okay, almost done.”

“Thank you, Miss M—, I do greatly appreciate your help.” Tchitchikov turned part-way and stopped himself, returning to M—. “I’m sorry, but I do have to say: your dress. I love azaleas. It’s rather lovely on you.”

Despite the dress having not azaleas, but rather violets on a white background, M— blushed. “Why, thank you.”

“Azaleas were my mother’s favorite. They always reminded me of warm days and warm apple pie.”

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M— curled up more into her blush, hit with a soft shaft in her tender heart. “Awww, that’s so sweet! Don’t embarrass me!”

Tchitchikov tapped his foot. His legs, though the aide could not see, signaled impatience, and his face signaled the brightest of the world. Tchitchikov was, one could say, tearing at the seams, and might literally have done so if both his upper half maintained its calmness and composure at her desk while his lower half sprinted away back to Selifan’s car as if from a runner’s block. *But a few moments more is necessary*, he internally told himself, and externally he told M—, “No need to be embarrassed. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“Would you like to come by,” M— paused. “Later?”

“To see Senator Whittaker?”

“I mean, well, I should say,” M— bit her lip. “I’ll let the Senator know. And I’ll give you a buzz.”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you so much, M—.”

“Of course.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Thank you.”

“I look forward to your call.”

“Yes.”

A few more smiles exchanged and Tchitchikov was satisfied. On his walk to the car, he critiqued his initial rabidity, nearly losing control from his ferocious hunger at the aide’s political access; he had looked like a wolf on its hind legs, whimpering at a piece of meat in a child’s hand, or at least certainly he felt like one. But such is the internal workings of a peddler of smiles, and what a noble profession it is! To bring such boundless joy to those who needn’t even ask for it, to lift others up quickly, very quickly, and to hope they glide gently down after. But the dark side of this type of work is the boundless inner critiquing, which, if Tchitchikov were to publish his endless self-dialog, he might be mistaken for a Proust or a Dostoevsky, at the very least. Perhaps one could

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mistake his work for a Cervantes, though Tchitchikov was openly more partial to a classic tale of traditional heroism, minus the quirky sidekick; and similarly partial, though less openly so, to the more modern tale of striking it rich, whether it be in mining California gold or mining other people's investment portfolios. Nonetheless, he was satisfied with the interaction overall.

"How was it?" Selifan inquired inside the car.

"Good," Tchitchikov replied. "More Godly than I'd intended."

"God does the trick," Selifan said.

"God is good as gold," Tchitchikov replied.

Selifan tapped the steering wheel. "When should we expect a response from Whittaker?"

Tchitchikov stared out at the Senator's office. "My dear Selifan, that is not how these things work."

"Then how will you sell him the list?"

"Dearest Selifan," he said, "you are rather uncouth at politics."

"What did you say to him?"

"I have yet to say something to him."

"Wait. What?"

Selifan was one of those earthy, humble fellows whose concerns were more anchored in the physical, the tangible. He owned a car, for one. And his compatriot Tchitchikov, as if Poe were speaking about him specifically and only him, dreamt by day and was cognizant of a great many different things than Selifan. He, for one, was cognizant of the many expenses of a car and opted to find a more earthy, more humble fellow to carry that particular burden of his journey. Tchitchikov, also, had a great many tools in his belt, so to speak, tools such as though he could build a house from nothing, nothing but an apt imagination and a great void in the air. Perhaps that is my love of the generous man and his overgenerous imagination. But, again, I digress.

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Tchitchikov explained to Selifan how the meeting went (it didn't); what to expect (almost nothing); and when to expect it (hardly ever, not without continual prodding). Selifan was, to say the least, determined.

"Okay. But allow me to clarify my concern." Selifan gripped the steering wheel and took a deep, calming breath. "Pray tell what the fuck you mean you haven't spoken to him?"

Tchitchikov was unperturbed, gliding endlessly on another day-dream. "We will, we will."

"How are we going to sell this list without speaking to the buyer?"

"We will, we will."

"When is that going to be? Are you even listening right now? Is your head so far up your ass you need an extraction team?"

"We will, we—" Tchitchikov broke from visions of mansions and money, from state after state laid in his open palms. "Selifan, please. Have I misled you thus far?"

Selifan stared at him.

"But not too far, yes? We have always righted course again, yes?"

Selifan stared at him and added a glare to it.

"We will be back in a couple of days. It's important to give both space and pressure. Contradictory, yes, but that is what they call a 'political pressure.' Endless nagging over an indeterminate table of time. It's conditioning them to always be at the ready, even at rest."

"Okay," Selifan said. "Then who's our next customer?"

"Next customer?"

"Yes. Actually, it occurs to me we could make multiple sales on this list. We are selling to more than one bidder, yes?"

Tchitchikov entertained the idea for that it opened the day-dream even further. "Yes. That is a good idea."

"Then perhaps we offer this list to Representative Fairwell?"

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"No, that is not a good idea."

"And why not?"

"Selifan, dearest friend," Tchitchikov shook his head softly.

"I am not sure where to start."

"This is his district, yes?"

"Yes."

"And his last election was a tight one, yes? Tighter than Whittaker's?"

"Yes."

"Then he should benefit more from this type of insider's list."

"Yes. He could."

"Then it's settled! We should go immediately to him. I wouldn't be surprised if he bought the thing right today."

"No." Tchitchikov's head slowed its soft shaking. When it came to a full stop, it turned to Selifan as if to say, *Why are you doing this to me? Why are you perplexing me with something as impossible as asking a domesticated kitten to feast on the lion's share, a full antelope? Should a fully pregnant sow grow wings within the span of a few hours and take flight these days? Should we truly be friends and this you ask of me?* But instead, Tchitchikov's lips took the easier route and spoke, "He would not take it."

"Maybe for less, but that's money in our hands."

"He would not take it if we gave him money to do so."

"I don't understand what you are saying. Is he not political? Is he no politician?"

"Yes, but," Tchitchikov sighed. "You see, Fairwell is one of those old guard, old school, very, very old school ones, whose beliefs lie in the impractical. He is one to campaign, to legislate, to speak to voters. He might as well be of the mind of one of the country's founding fathers, which, as you and I know, is antiquated in our modern times. Worthless, no, worse than worthless. It puts a target on his back. And further-more, he is proud of that fact. It is some colored

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badge of courage to him.” Tchitchikov shook his head more forgivingly this time. “Perhaps blue.”

Selifan’s knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. His expression spoke thusly, *Do you think I can afford to sit about far from home, hotel to hotel, in the hopes that you pull off the impossible? Does money still grow on trees these days? Do you possess one you have yet to tell me of? Should I subdue you into common sense through wit and reason, or through blunt force trauma?* He chose the former. “My dear Pavel Ivanovitch, are you not such a man as to have wheedled nearly the whole voter lists of the state for but the cost of a tuneless song?”

“I am.”

“And are you not as witty and hardworking as to have discovered profit from a total of fifty-two dollars and change in newspaper subscriptions from reading obituaries over the course of several months?”

“This is also true.”

“Then, does the saying not go, ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained?’ ‘Leave no stone unturned?’ Is not a politician but a politician, as a wolf must always be a wolf?”

“Yes, but...”

“The two men are the same party, are they not?”

“True, but still...”

“Then we should venture the possible sale. What is there to lose? We are waiting two more days here regardless.”

Tchitchikov found himself nodding through Selifan’s reasoning and discovered his agreement with him. “Yes,” he said, “there is nothing to lose.”

“Good,” Selifan said. “Then let us get going after we get our fill of this beautiful air and sunshine.”

Should Senator Whittaker's office be the height of elegance, perhaps Representative Fairwell's office, but a few skips and hops and highways away, and closer to the busy and trafficked heart of Jacksonville, would be more than a little dizzied and perhaps nauseous in its presence, should an office be capable of such commonplace emotions. Whittaker's office, if it could speak, would be loquacious and, some would say, capable of evoking all the emotions necessary to a welcomed guest without the unnecessary trouble of having to parse what exactly was being said. To which Fairwell's office might reply: rather, we'd not say, but something crude and cutting and very nearly a grunt in disapproval. Still, Tchitchikov made his acquaintance there.

The office, which thankfully was not capable of blunt speech nor disgust at lovely speech, was adorned with simple desks, piles of papers, people sitting at the desks with piles of papers and, if Tchitchikov could see the front faces of picture frames, boorish photographs of family. Fairwell's aide, O—, whose name we omitted for both our embarrassment of her station in life and also for sake of symmetry with Whittaker's aide, was harried, overworked, and should have been, by reason of constant contact with what I shall bluntly term "The Great Unwashed," less amenable and more assertive than she was.

"Hello," O— said, not looking up. "What can I do for you?"

"My name, fair lady, is Paul Ivan Tchitchikov," he offered a business card, "and I'd like to speak with—" Tchitchikov decided to undo the error of his previous visit earlier in the day, "Oh, my. I'm sorry, but I am taken aback by those bright earrings of yours. Perhaps they—"

"Thank you," she said. "What can I do for you?"

Tchitchikov smiled. "Why, I would love to speak to our dear Representative Fairwell."

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“Are you a constituent?”

“Yes, I live on—”

“Take a seat,” she said, pointing to a tight row half-filled with those “Great Unwashed” I mentioned earlier. “It could be an hour or two,” she told him, turning down into her work again.

Tchitchikov surveyed the three remaining seats and made a quick calculation as to next to whom he’d sit most comfortably. After the quick calculation, he made another, more careful calculation, as some decisions in life require a second thought, and after the third, quickest and most subdued calculation, he took the seat in the corner next to a nice, plump fellow. He grinned a near smile to him.

It was a torturous two hours. In that time, he had seen the Representative come out and shake hands with each of the previous tenants of the other seats, which gave Tchitchikov hope of speaking to the man directly. Tchitchikov bemused himself with idle conversations in his head, with personages of high rank and esteem—and who wouldn’t wish such a thing for himself?—of performing beneficial and generous services for them, and receiving but the subtlest commendations and lightest gifts from them. After a wait of two hours and eleven minutes, the disheveled representative addressed our hero.

“Hello,” he said to Tchitchikov. “Let’s head back.”

The two wove between packed desks and Fairwell’s worker bees, as I choose to term them, busy in their nest. Fairwell offered him coffee.

Although Tchitchikov did not drink coffee, he accepted out of politeness. “Thank you, Representative. A warm cup of joe sounds nice.”

“Okay,” Fairwell said, exerting no more energy than was necessary to reply. “It’s right there.” Fairwell stopped and pointed to a small table cramped with boxes plundered of sugars and carafes dripping of milk.

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Tchitchikov smiled. He was obligated to oblige the Representative and regretted it. But yet he came upon the table, poured the lukewarm beverage into a paper cup, viewed a slight film of oil, and resumed to Fairwell's office, following behind.

Fairwell's personal room—for it was too tight to be called an office—had family photos scattered about, along with a poster of the Three Stooges and a few Lego models, ships from Star Wars. Boxes crowded under his desk, and his chair was in the middle of the room, flanked by partitions on either side. Should some say the “office” was personable, Fairwell's personality was not, at least neither on first glance nor the next four following. His movements, like his speech, were ineloquent to the point of pain, and indeed, he seated in his chair with a near thud. His hair was appropriately aged gray-with-white, and his face, should we compare to Tchitchikov's, looked inappropriately aged, more aged and tired than necessary, perhaps from—well, I can only speculate, but from a lack of focus and running in all directions. Such is not how one wins a race, especially a race to the top, as Whittaker was of the mind. No, one must set upon that path directly and early, too, for it is a long race past and over others, and a race that Fairwell was clearly failing at.

“My dear Representative,” Tchitchikov started. He noticed that Fairwell turned to his watch almost immediately and gave it such a longing look that Tchitchikov could have mistaken it for his distant lover. He turned course with the representative, as any capable captain would, and proceeded as such, “Allow me to be blunt.”

“Okay.”

“You have barely scraped through your last election.”

“I know.”

“I may have something of use to you.”

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“What.” Fairwell’s question, like his entire demeanor, was flattened.

“I have at my access a fair voting bloc who are, as we shall say, hungry to support a worthy candidate.”

“So?”

The reply came like a light fighter’s jab to Tchitchikov.
“All I would ask is a humble donation to—”

“I don’t have money,” the Representative stood up. “And I don’t need votes. The people elect who does the job the best.”

“The polls say your challenger is that person,” Tchitchikov was being ushered out, “and by at least seven points. I don’t think you should—”

“Then that’s their problem,” he said, “and not yours. Hawk your bullshit elsewhere.”

Despite his attempts at a conversation, all of which were cut short, Tchitchikov found himself at the aide’s desk again, and Fairwell grumpily shook hands with the last person there and brought them back. The sun was nearly down. The aide didn’t turn her head up.

“Mr. Tchitchikov, right? How’d it go?” She asked, business affect.

“It went,” Tchitchikov said.

She kept hammering away at a keyboard. “Here’s my card.” She took one hand off it, halving her typing pace, and plucked a business card from a card holder to give to him. “Let us know if we can be of further assistance.”

Tchitchikov left with the card and a foggy daze. He had only felt that first jab. The other hits, no, he certainly did not expect nor even see them from the elderly politician, but he certainly did feel their implications on his psyche and mood. Tchitchikov nearly walked into the door of Selifan’s car, took

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a step back, and opened it instead, dropping down into the car seat. He mused over the brief exchange, weighed different possible scenarios, and summed up to Selifan the experience in as elegant terms as he could muster, keeping in mind brevity be the soul of wit:

“Well, that was a waste of time.”



CHAPTER TWO

“However so much, in certain respects, we Russians may be surpassed by foreigners, at least we surpass them in adroitness of manner.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

The following day Tchitchikov was met with less resistance and more agreeable chatter. He was speaking to Representative Taber, in the next county over, who specialized in chattering agreeably.

“This is an interesting, interesting proposition,” said the representative.

Taber was a man whom enterprising women found most attractive, but not in the traditional, predictable sense of physical attraction; no, not that base, animalistic type of attraction. What he lacked in what one might term “general good looks”—though beauty be held in the eye of the beholder—he made up for in corpulence and, more importantly, political pull. His physical fortitude was the first thing most people noted of him: he was a large, powerful man. The second thing

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they might notice were his eyes, neither excitingly piercing, nor inquisitive and commanding—for beauty’s beholder might not want to view upon an intimidating feature—but rather ocean-like and watery. His eyelids did their best to cover their shape, bulbous and slightly reminiscent of a fish, though those same enamored of him might say a rather majestic cod and not a base one. His chin, too, was similarly bulbous as well as hairless, his upper lip had a gentle, not overly hairy mustache, and the rest of his body rolled off from his face like water over a duck. Like a vacant room, the representative was also prone to echoing other’s words.

“I find this interesting, indeed,” he elaborated. “But what are you considering a fair exchange for the support of your faithful congregation?”

Tchitchikov was mulling over the crux of his months of research and toil. Yet, put to the question directly, his mind was a blank as a frightened deer who spied a predator in the bushes. “Now that, that is the question.” He pounced about searching for an appropriate answer before the full impact would come. “And a fair question, my good sir.”

“Yes, a fair question indeed.” Taber came at Tchitchikov as coyly as a panting lion could. “But perhaps we are over-estimating the value of such a herd.”

Tchitchikov was relieved to buy some time. “Perhaps so,” he said. “Perhaps your time is better off in more profitable pursuits to you.”

The lion—Taber—did not like the sensation of prey slipping through his claws. “Yes, profitable pursuits ... now these dead souls—I mean, loyal voters, they would be greatly appreciated. You should know that.”

“I think I can sense that.”

“Yes, you may sense, even though I certainly do not need the assistance. I mean, I am ahead in polling by three percent.”

Which is well within the margin of error of said polls, Tchitchikov thought to himself. “True, good friend. Perhaps we should talk further upon this.”

“Yes,” and at this moment, Taber rubbed his lips with a sleeve, “yes. I would appreciate further talk. Further talk is important to determine an appropriate value.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “Let us keep in touch.”

As he stood up to offer a farewell handshake, Taber, I can say, had a plummeting sensation in his stomach as the prey was sifting from out of his now sweaty handshake. “Yes. Let us keep in touch. Please do get back to me,” he said.

“Absolutely,” Tchitchikov replied, glad to leave and stall the most vital part of their negotiation. “Certainly, we shall.”

“We shall, certainly.”

Tchitchikov was thankful for the sweat, an appreciation he would never again have in his life, for it allowed him to wheedle his hand from Taber’s and allow for a quicker departure. With Taber’s business card in hand, and also with a little moisture to the card, Tchitchikov sat in Selifan’s car, oblivious to his friend’s chitchat for a few moments. He drifted off.

Tchitchikov found himself walking through the marble halls of Congress. His footsteps clicked on the beautiful white stone. A man approached him, a Senator, who had a particular problem. It didn’t matter what. Tchitchikov listened and nodded, and suddenly, the problem was solved! Many lackeys worked behind the scenes, Selifan one of them, and Tchitchikov was generously rewarded. Soon, a woman approached—a representative—asking for a favor, which he obliged (the same lackeys working their work), and another, and another. Now Tchitchikov was speaking to the Speaker of the House, and the leader of the Senate majority, suggesting such-and-such things, rather innocuous legislations, but that he knew they were his concept and were to come into the world solely through his mind and his breath. It was power. His power.

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He floated in the beautiful realm of possibility.

After those moments passed, Tchitchikov returned from his restful daydreams to reality, and addressed Selifan's and his curiosities. "What should twenty-five hundred souls fetch these days?"

Selifan smiled. "Why, depends on where their destination lies."

"At the ballot box."

"Then I should say, no less than a hundred thousand, for it is quite a strenuous journey from where they lie." Selifan laughed. "Though I should be happy with half! How much did he give us?"

Tchitchikov nearly winced at Selifan's "us." "Nothing," he said.

"Nothing? Why, you give all these false promises and—"

"Dearest, he is putty in my palms right now." Tchitchikov smiled. "A little more warmth from me, and I shall mold him to anything we desire. Perhaps something bigger than a hundred thousand. This one is hungry, very hungry."

"Mmmm." Selifan nodded. "Good work, dear friend."

"Why, thank you, good friend."

Selifan's stomach grumbled. "And speaking of hungry..."

"Yes," Tchitchikov said. "Let's get a taco."

Tacos are critical to a robust discussion of financial windfall.

Tacos speak much to the personality of a character, too, and if one should guess as to Tchitchikov's taco of choice (and guess correctly at it), they would guess at a type of seafood, in this case, seared tuna. His sauce was some sort of mango drizzle, light on chunks, even though he'd hardly eaten three full pieces of fresh fruit in his entire adult life; but the mango

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was satisfying in context of the tuna, and felt exotic, therefore he asked specifically for it. Selifan, however, was more the earthy type, as aforementioned, and took his taco al gringo: beef, mild salsa, much sour cream. They both poured cups of cola from a bottle from the nearby grocer.

“This,” Tchitchikov wiped mango from the corner of his lips, “is one majestic fish.”

Selifan would have agreed had not the sight and smell of all seafood turned his stomach: the fish was seared brilliantly. “More importantly, what is our plan of action today?”

Tchitchikov brought the plastic cup of cola to his lips, retreated it, and added a pinch of gin to flavor before resuming. “One moment,” he said. Alive, the fish had traveled with its fellow tuna, breathed fresh ocean and imbibed limitless sun, gliding through a fearless existence filled with friends and food; until—snatch—a cleverer fisherman yanked it writhing up from the glistening sea. Now the fish waited, too.

In a few moments he, Tchitchikov, not the fish, replied to Selifan, “Allow me to check.” His cell phone displayed an email from Taber’s office. “Well, well. It seems as if our dear Representative is knocking at our door, asking for his fix.”

“Well, what is he offering?”

“We shall see,” Tchitchikov said. He read the email and, hiding a bit of frustration at the lowball offer, continued. “He is not a full addict yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Give him time to withdraw. Power corrupts absolutely. The fear of withdrawal is the thing that kills them, the politicians, moreso than any outside source.”

“I do hope he survives long enough to pay us.”

Tchitchikov nodded. “He will, he—” He noticed an email from Fairwell’s office, addressed from O—. “Perhaps this is a joke,” he muttered.

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Tchitchikov perused the brief email. It was a survey and an offer of further assistance. “What joke?” Selifan asked. “What’s the punchline?”

Tchitchikov frowned. “This. This is the punchline.” Tchitchikov typed through the survey, led by heat and passion, not of the romantic type. He left scathing reviews of the staff, the wait time, the coffee, the business card layout, and of Representative Fairwell, the “lanky lackey of a bygone good-for-nothing era.”

Tchitchikov continued. “Fairwell’s assistant emailed me a thank-you-for-stopping-by-and-getting-thrown-out email. I showed my appreciation. We can move on.”

“To Martinez?”

“Yes, to Martinez.”

Eyes are the windows to the soul, and smiles are the lights in those windows, that we may peer in and see the domestic scene within: a family, they might be gathered at a table, enjoying each other’s time and pleasant conversation over repast and drinks, as Norman Rockwell would envision. Representative Martinez’ greatest skill was cultivating a smile that illuminated the whole of his eyes, those windows, so much so that glaring into them were much like glaring directly into a second sun. Visitors to his office would comment to friends and family on the brightness of his smile and personality and his careful, considerate words, and Martinez’ staff would often comment between themselves on the great pains the representative undertook to maintain such a golden disposition. Yet neither visitors nor staffers, nor family—for he had three children and a wife—could comment on the scene that played out behind his glorious shine, for perhaps the representative wanted to obscure the inner doings, even to

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the point that a shadow-play would reveal too much. But too much of our poetry goes into his eyes, and it had been said that in his childhood neighborhood some time ago there were reports of another pair of eyes that would peer into homes—quite literally—that is, until a well-respected relative of Martinez cleared up the confusion and police reports.

But I should not entertain such frivolous, though voluminous, rumors. Representative Martinez sat cross-legged, hands folded neatly on his thigh, as prepared as a school child for a photo portrait. Tchitchikov received a slight chill up his neck, hairs standing up, which I will attribute to a static shock from his chair.

“You look uncomfortable. You needn’t be uncomfortable.”

Tchitchikov gripped the armrests of his chair. “I am fine, actually. But thank you for your concern.”

Martinez stared at our hero; in fact, he was simply struck with deep interest. He took a sip from his cup of coffee—a happy family enjoying a Norman Rockwell turkey—and did not break eye contact. “You are noticing the mug. I am interested in the human condition. I appreciate works of art where the subject lacks self-consciousness. But you look rather self-conscious right now.”

Tchitchikov did not want to spend precious time on idle chit-chat; he went right in. “Representative Martinez, I would like to assist you in your campaign.”

“This sounds more than a matter of simple volunteering. It could perhaps be some staffing issue you would like me to address. Or some other complaint.” Martinez nodded once. “I am willing to listen. Go on.”

Tchitchikov was reminded of a recent videotaping scandal, but he kept on his path. “I am here to offer a different sort of assistance, more of a position of brief consultation. You see, my congregation is nearly fourteen thousand large, and a

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substantial portion of it, almost two thousand, reside in Alachua County, in your congressional district.”

“Go on.”

Tchitchikov paused. “You see, these two thousand, nearly two thousand to clarify, they are frequent voters despite their living situations.”

“Living situations?” Martinez tilted his head in interest. “Perhaps they are not settled in homes?”

“No, no.” Tchitchikov shook his head. “They are rather firmly settled. Their living situations are not the matter. What is the matter is whether their representative would properly represent them.”

“Hmmm.” It was Martinez’ turn to pause.

“That representative being you.”

Martinez straightened his neck. “Yes. Of course. Tell me the issues they want me to address.”

Tchitchikov overly cleared his throat, as there was a sudden tickle in it. “You see,” he coughed again, “they want me to report back to them, for I am their leader and,” another uncontrollable cough, watered eyes, and Tchitchikov was annoyed with the timing. “I would very much like to tell them...”

Martinez placed a water bottle next to Tchitchikov on the desk, again, maintaining eye contact. “You should drink the water.”

“Thank you.” Tchitchikov met his stare with a smile.

“It is safe to drink.”

Tchitchikov did not doubt that, as the bottle was still sealed. He took a generous sip to sooth his throat. “Very well. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” Martinez unfolded his hands and placed them gently on the chair’s armrests. “I believe you are asking for a bribe.”

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“Not a bribe, no, but an investment.”

“An investment. Yes. There is something else going on here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You feel these voters would turn out for me after I invest with you.”

“They will.”

“Yes, I do not doubt that,” Martinez said. “I am inquiring how you know that for certain.”

“They are dead.”

Martinez’ smile opened up. “I felt there was something amiss here. I am very good at sensing these things. Our state seems a fine place to find voters aged to Death. This is lucky for both of us.”

“Yes, well, perhaps in that sense.”

“I am joking,” Martinez returned. “But yes, I would like that. I should know how many exactly.”

Tchitchikov was taken aback by his forwardness, but had thankfully was prepared for a fair exchange. “Eighteen hundred.”

“Then a precise eighteen hundred.”

“No, a precise eighteen hundred and sixty-three.”

“Then I shall give you thirty-seven thousand, two hundred and sixty.” He nodded once. “That is twenty per soul.”

“Why, yes, that seems to be twenty.”

“Please show me how you intend to guarantee their votes. But at a later date.” Martinez stood up. “I have another appointment.”

“Thank you for your time, Representative.” Tchitchikov extended his hand.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Martinez’ shake was cold, due to poor circulation. “Have a good day.”

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Tchitchikov's heart was cooled much like a cut of fish on ice. "You look like a ghost ran you over," Selifan said.

Tchitchikov forced his head to shake. "No. No, it did not. I swear not. But we made our first sale."

Selifan clapped. "Fantastic! What is the windfall?"

Tchitchikov checked his phone. "I cannot quite remember. But it was twenty per soul exactly."

"That seems a fair price! We should celebrate!"

Just as the ice around Tchitchikov's heart started thawing, Tchitchikov was taken aback by a voicemail from Fairwell's office. "What might this be?"

"What might what be?"

"A message. One second."

"From whom?"

Tchitchikov pressed the handy radiation-box to his ear and listened. The voice was a woman's—it belonged to O—, the aide for Fairwell—inquiring about Tchitchikov's dissatisfaction at his meeting yesterday. The words seemed mocking to him, "...brief check-in to see why you felt the Representative was 'a dinosaur whose ignorance hearkened back to pre-democratic days,' now that's a mouthful to..." but her tone did not seem mocking or even admonishing. He thought she hid it well and pulled out O—'s card to frown at it.

"Again, from whom?"

Tchitchikov sighed. "From some dingbat ignorant of inciting the anger of a master flame god. One second." He dialed back.

"Yes, but is that Whittaker? You should be more generous to him."

Tchitchikov held up a finger to pause Selifan. "Dammit, went to voicemail." He hung up. "I should dial again, I need to prepare what I should say. Something along the lines of 'a dingbat such as yourself should not prod the god who controls

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fire.' Would that be Prometheus? What a noble fellow, that one, granting of power to the mortal man. I think I should leave him out of our quarrel, though." He redialed again, at the ready.

"Prometheus?" Selifan scratched his head. "Why, yes, of course, I do believe that sounds about right."

"It is ringing," Tchitchikov said. "Wait, hold on—why yes, hello O—! How unexpected of you to pick up!"

Tchitchikov continued. "Yes, yes, I am well. I appreciate your similarly unexpected concern. Though perhaps your concern were really to be—Well, yes, I learned that rather quickly of the representative's disposition. But nonetheless—Okay, fair, but you see, I ... Okay ... Uh-huh."

Selifan scooped himself closer to overhear the other half of the conversation. "What is it? Who is it?"

Tchitchikov shushed him. "No, that seems fair ... Do realize that we do not offer contributions to nearly anyone ... Oh, is that so? When would that be? ... That actually sounds rather delicious, allow me to check with my ride."

"Your ride?" Selifan asked.

"Tonight is a fundraiser," Tchitchikov said to Selifan. "Seven to eight thirty, no ties nor contributions needed. We will just show." He mouthed, "free food."

"Yes, we shall be there." Tchitchikov relaxed his grip on the phone. "Thank you for the invite. We shall see you then."

Selifan was boggle-eyed. "I have never seen you go from thunder and fire to snuggling like a lamb. What happened? Who was that?"

Tchitchikov knit his brow. "I do not know what or whom or why, but all I recall is the when." He shook his head. "The how escapes me most of all. But at least there's free food."

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While Tchitchikov did not entirely expect to find Fairwell's fundraiser full of well-to-do and more elderly concerned voters, he did not anticipate the event to be teeming with young people, ranging from students in school to those very barely out of school. As such, the food was a cut from their menu, pizza and macaroni and cupcakes, and the libations were virgin and fizzy. Their musical selection was likewise youthful and jarring to a refined palate.

"I didn't think you'd come," O— said. "Thank you for showing."

"Thank you for the invitation." Tchitchikov smiled. "I'm surprised the representative would want me here. It seemed our meeting didn't go that well."

"Like I said, he's a little," O— rolled her eyes, "grumpy."

"I think I insulted him more than that."

"Nah, he's just grumpy, I'm pretty sure."

"So did he—?" Tchitchikov wondered about their meeting yesterday. "He didn't mention our, erm, interaction?"

"What do you mean?"

"It seemed he would state..."

O— shook her head. "He doesn't share much about constituents to me. He likes to keep that private. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind." Tchitchikov determined she was truthful, and unaware of his proposition to Fairwell. "Thank you again for the invitation," he said without much conviction.

"It's important you see who he really is," she said. "I had the sense that you didn't, not yet."

"I believe I had." He relented out of politeness, "But I could perhaps be mistaken."

"You probably weren't. At least not entirely," she said. "But it's good to see you here."

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He turned to the tables of food and his stomach did the same. “The food looks good.”

“Okay, I wasn’t sure it’d be to your taste,” O— said. “Go grab some, there’s plenty of it. Enjoy.”

Tchitchikov thanked her and found Selifan at the pizza board. He had two layers on his plate.

“Since he insulted us,” Selifan explained, “I shall deplete his treasury.”

“Of pizza?”

“He had to pay for it, did he not?” Selifan smiled. “Out of house and home, as they say.”

Tchitchikov left his friend and wandered about.

The room was bright and packed. The younger crowd bustled about, getting to know each other. He spoke to a few of them marked with various colors of hair and tattoos and piercings. They all spoke with excitement about Fairwell, and Tchitchikov felt that the representative had another side to him, some aspect about him that sparked intrigue within him.

“He’s just so honest! Kingston is so full of, well, money. And shit, of course.”

Jenna’s various colors took the form of short, light pink hair, several piercings along her ear lobe, and a rose tattoo on her right shoulder with a woman’s name beneath the flower. James Kingston, Fairwell’s challenger, was a common target of derision among this crowd.

“Perhaps,” Tchitchikov said. “But I suppose the Representative is rather blunt.”

“That’s a good thing, though. Right?” Jenna took a sip of her beverage, and her upper lip left, colored orange from soda. “Look at the situation we’re in right now: banks are bigger than they’ve ever been, corporations are crushing us under their...” Jenna continued a rant of economics and class echoed by others in the room, “...is why we’re going to protest on Sunday.”

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“Protest? Protest what?”

“Everything! The banks, the corporations, the politicians, the government. Weren’t you listening? Everything!”

“That’s a lot to protest.”

“Maybe it is,” she said, “but those bastards at the State House have it coming. They put us in this shit-uation, and they won’t let us out from under it. If we can just come together, that’s the only way—” Jenna’s attention was taken from her by a man approaching from behind Tchitchikov. “I’m sorry, I’m chewing your ear off. Here’s my boyfriend. Andy, come say hi to Paul Ivan.”

Tchitchikov turned to the denim-jacketed youth, and to clarify, the jacket was of white denim, not blue, and tattooed with dark patches depicting various political slogans of the lower classes. An image of a stylized fist was on his right breast, safety pins around the edges. It was also sewn on by a crude hand. Andy shook hands with Tchitchikov. “Hello, Paul Ivan.”

“His full name is Paul Ivan Tchitchikov.” Jenna clapped. “Isn’t that delightful?”

“Please, Paul is fine,” Tchitchikov returned.

But the couple were already in a quick embrace. They kissed. Andy turned to Tchitchikov. “That’s a pretty cool name, man. Did your parents give that to you?”

Tchitchikov stared.

“Of course they did!” Jenna laughed.

Andy blushed. “Okay, dumb question. But seriously, tell us about you.”

Tchitchikov was unprepared for this question. It was a direct question, as direct as he’d received in his youth, and it took him back to his childhood in Russia, before he immigrated to the United States. The question reminded him of his mother bouncing him on her knee, and other questions, “How was school?,” “Did you make that yourself?,” “Do you want

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cookies?” For a moment Tchitchikov was stunned by the question.

“Like, what do you do?” Andy said.

“Oh.” The spell was broken, somewhat. “I am a political advisor.”

“Oh cool,” Jenna smiled. “For who?”

“Well, for now,” Tchitchikov thought. “Myself, truthfully.”

“You’re running for office?” Jenna asked.

“Not really, no.”

“Hmmm,” Jenna stroked her chin with equal parts of inquisitiveness and comedy. “Iiiiiinteresting,” she said.

The three of them discussed local politics and other Congressional races nearby. Andy caricatured Martinez, and Tchitchikov warmed with a touch of joy: he understood him to a tee. Andy had met the man at a local party meeting and recalled,

“...his eyes. Those eyes.”

“He’s a fuckin’ perv, you know.” I cannot confirm Jenna’s assertion, as gossip is not admissible in the court of law, and one must needs have proof. “Fuckin’ creep times ten. Times a hundred.”

“I feel bad for his wife!” Andy said.

“She knows,” Jenna retorted.

The lights dimmed and the music lulled for the first speaker. A young woman took the stage and related a story about her mother, an immigrant who never would have made it into the country had they made the attempt under current law. She smiled and finished her story, adding,

“I shouldn’t say this, but...”

Jenna and Andy cheered.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. They may crush our bones, but we’ll stab their feet in return! Long live our political revolution!”

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Jenna and Andy and the rest of the young crowd boiled. The young woman introduced Fairwell, who stodgily approached the podium.

“Debbie, you know you shouldn’t.”

Off to the side of the stage the girl laughed.

“That’s my granddaughter, in case you haven’t met her. She has some, let’s say, fire in her belly. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to stabbing feet.” He turned to her, and his mic didn’t pick up any of what he said other than, “Gruesome.” Fairwell gave what was a rare laugh.

Jenna kissed Andy on the cheek.

“Now,” Fairwell’s demeanor dampened and he neated the papers on the podium. He was getting to his speech. “So,” he cleared his throat.

What followed was a speech by most accounts, but really, it made Tchitchikov drowsy as though he were an elephant sedated on the savannah, and not in a pleasant way (as some of the students might prefer their powerful sedatives). An orator Fairwell was not, and Tchitchikov made out a few of his positions that were commonly shared by the more “progressive,” so to speak, and rarer members of his party. But after each proposal, the crowd erupted in cheers and applause, not the jeers and scoffs that Tchitchikov politely held back. Fairwell finished his speech. “Thank you,” he said, and quickly shuffled himself off the stage to embrace his family.

“What did you think?” Jenna turned to Tchitchikov.

To which he replied, “He is not the most eloquent.”

“That’s not the point,” Jenna said. “Did you hear what he said?”

“I believe so.” Tchitchikov lied; he had nearly gone to sleep on his feet like a horse.

“He’s got good policies,” Andy said. “I believe in him.”

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“We need him,” Jenna said. “He’s going to be there on Sunday. You should come.”

“Maybe I shall,” Tchitchikov said with no conviction.

They exchanged final pleasantries and Tchitchikov smiled and offered his good night. As he was leaving, he ran into O— again.

“You’re still here?”

Tchitchikov found the question rather impertinent. “Yes. I suppose I am.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean it like that. But I’m glad you stayed.”

Tchitchikov took a risk, but one he felt that would not offend her in their, to him, blunt conversation. “Are you?”

“Of course. You’re of a different world, Mr. Tchitchikov, but we all are. It’s important we find our similarities, come together and use our differences to fight for our world. You’re a good person. I can sense that.”

“You can?”

“Yes. But don’t be so harsh on yourself! We all have secret parts of ourselves. Things that we’re not proud of,” she said. “It’s a matter of acceptance and forgiveness, and moreover, change. Not that I’m suggesting you need to.”

Tchitchikov thought. “No. Of course.”

“But I should let you go. I think I’m making you uncomfortable.”

“You are not.” He surveyed the room and its packs of peoples thinning. “This is very open discussion, and I appreciate a little respite.”

“Thank you. Go enjoy the rest of the night.”

“I shall.”

Tchitchikov walked to the car, musing on the gathering that transpired. His question overshadowing the night, how

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he had been made to come, was answered then: O— was a gifted orator. Or, not gifted, nor fully common and usual, but she, and others, stirred something within Tchitchikov that he could not quite say, but we shall: generosity. A certain generosity that reminded him of home, far, far away.

Tchitchikov found Selifan snoring in the car.

CHAPTER THREE

“A pleasant conversation is worth all the dishes in the world.”
—Tchitchikov, trans. D. J. Hogarth

The alarm spoke to the pair.

Tchitchikov produced himself almost immediately to the bathroom to clean up. Selifan was stirred from his sleep, not by his sleeping mate, but by a massive stomachache.

“What did I eat?”

His sleeping mate answered from the bathroom. “‘How much’ is the brother of that question. I believe you ate a pig’s fill of slop. There, two birds, one stone.”

Selifan moaned. “This may be the death of me.” He adjusted himself to a more contorted, unforgiving position so as to produce his brand of comfort. “There we go. How long were we up?”

“Until the wee hours of nine,” Tchitchikov replied. “Serves you just as well, that spiteful hunger. ‘House and home,’ right?”

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There is a fresh saying here, I suspect." A thought hit Tchitchikov and he peeked his head out of the bathroom, concerned. "And you drove back like this?"

"No no no," he said. "Well, I do not recall."

"How much did you drink?"

"Half a bottle of grape soda," Selifan said. "I think I should stay in bed."

Tchitchikov approached his poor, food-humbled friend. "No no no, we cannot afford to do that."

"Tchitchikov, but I am sore and miserable."

He grasped Selifan's arm and tugged him. "No, you are unwieldy and unyielding." Tchitchikov relented. "Come on, now. You will feel better on your feet than twisted into a pretzel in bed. I do not understand how you suffer through those positions of yours."

"Suffer, yes, that is the word for this."

"We have much work to attend to. There is the matter of Whittaker, for one."

Selifan groaned. "Yes, that is true." He laid one foot upon the floor.

"Good, I see I pulled some sense from you. I have emailed Whittaker for an appointment this afternoon."

"I cannot sense my foot. Yet I shall go." Selifan rubbed his face. "But another five minutes and I shall produce the other foot."

"Excellent." Tchitchikov returned to the bathroom. "I shall need twenty more."

Their first stop was the office of Representative Everly of the opposing party. And what an opposition! Unlike his opponents who donned the blue color in politics, he donned the red. That is our first note. But in case that provides not

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enough distinction, one can say, in general, that his redder party were more dedicated to upholding the virtues of the Constitution, should one listen to their side of the argument on their more frequent and better funded television ads. But, in truth, both parties upheld the Constitution in the same regard: they loved it unabashedly, and would drape themselves in our flag given the opportunity. That is perhaps the most important position to take in today's modern political landscape. Yet there were skeptics of both parties, and they might suggest that either party was but a different side of the same coin; and skeptics of deeper disbelief would agree it was the same coin, though question the differences of either side.

But enough of that! Of Everly: this much is known not only in his close circles, but in all of Palm Beach County, that he is a businessman. And what is his business, exactly, though he not hold store-fronts on the main road nor heavily-trafficked online shops? He is in the most noble business in our opinion, that is, the business of businesses. Of these he owned a great many, more of such than the average collector of records owns in vinyl products, and as such one could say Everly was one of the luckiest men in all of Florida. There was no type of commerce that his businesses would not deal in, and this would make him seem a jack of all trades, as the saying goes. Yet these businesses were so simple for him to produce and run that oftentimes he would forget exactly to which one you may refer, should you ask directly, perhaps if you were a banker or a member of an enforcement agency. But his truer business, should we better give a sense of him, was people: he was a master of people, of a great many people. As such, he was well-versed in the skills of giving a firm handshake and an intimidating stare, which I must say, are two practical skills necessary to a successful politician. His name was well-known outside Palm Beach, well outside Florida, even so far as China and Italy and Tchitchikov's childhood home of Russia. Yet he



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made not a big claim to his international renown, such was his humility, and rather decided to remain local to Palm Beach first and foremost, dedicated to the inhabitants there. His wardrobe was of the finest silks, too fine for most all members of Washington, but if refined taste were his only fault, we should grant him that much.

As it were, Representative Everly had left to attend to other business, as happens often to someone with so much business on his plate, and Tchitchikov sat down with Everly's associate, that is what he termed himself, Mr. Green.

"You are a persistent one," Mr. Green said.

"I believe persistence a virtue," Tchitchikov said.

"It leads to success."

"It leads to fortune."

The two shared a knowing laugh.

"Well, Mr. Tchitchikov—the name rings a bell. Maybe first you should tell me if you have relatives in Russia."

"I do!" Recently, Tchitchikov had an ache to speak of them. "They are poor farmers, and I do miss them dearly. I remember but vague images of our farmstead now, and of our few livestock."

"They're not in the oil business?"

"They are no oil tycoons," Tchitchikov said. "They certainly do not deal in oil, save for their heating."

"Oh," Mr. Green said. "Please excuse my confusion."

"That is alright. Now, to the business at hand." Tchitchikov produced his hand-soiled notebook. "I have access to a great many voters and their ears, among other political parts of them."

Mr. Green laughed. "Sorry, I was thinking of a joke. But how many?" He smiled. "And which parts?"

Tchitchikov replied, "A total of nearly fourteen thousand in the state, and a little over one thousand in this county. And I have access to their votes, we shall say, almost directly."

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Mr. Green took careful note in his pad. "Just a thousand?"

"Well, yes, but their votes are nearly guaranteed."

"Nearly guaranteed?"

"Exactly guaranteed."

"And how so?" Mr. Green asked.

"Their votes, unlike their bodies, are quite alive." Tchitchikov smiled. "And those same votes are at the ready of my fingertips."

"I see," Mr. Green marked again in his pad. "I should be blunt, Mr. Tchitchikov."

"Yes, please do."

"Mr. Everly has won his last election with nearly ninety-five percent of the vote."

"Why yes," Tchitchikov said. "But he had no challenger last time."

"And as to the challenger this time, we feel he shall not win."

"But the polling suggests that the race is far closer than you suggest."

"Yes," Mr. Green said, "but our internal polling suggests it shall be a landslide in our favor."

"How is that?"

"Never mind how is that," Mr. Green said. "But let us say that we are exceptionally confident in predicting how this election will turn out. Our polls are *very* accurate, I assure you. I thank you for your time, Mr. Tchitchikov."

The two shook hands, and Tchitchikov felt his strong, strong grip, as if he might have wrestled oxen in a former occupation. Our tale's hero left and glanced at the parking lot in surprise: Selifan was gone.

"Where the blast is that...?"

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But as it was a rather lovely day, Tchitchikov went for a walk to calm himself. The heat was stifling in comparison to his childhood Russia, but he had acclimated to that, and the different culture in our free country. Still, sweat beaded upon his brow, and he was unused to such an extended exposure under the beating sun. He sat himself down at a bench and gazed upon the bustling beach nearby. Bikinied women lay on the sand, and muscled men patrolled the area lazily. A volleyball was hit about, and a few fellows with frisbees tossed their bright discs to each other. Despite the interesting people-watching, Tchitchikov mulled over his dreams of wealth and power within the District of Columbia. They were still there, these dreams, and his heels still clicked in those fabled halls, but strangely his mind drifted off in the direction of his innocent (somewhat) motherland Russia. The playful chums and simple games from a simpler time. The rough, hard work his father did in the field. His calloused hands as they tousled his hair and administered discipline. And his fair mother, also in some ways harsh, but he saw now to prepare him for the far harsher world. He slowly drifted back onto the bench, before the ocean sloshing itself, and meandered back to the parking lot of Everly's office.

Selifan's car had appeared in his absence.

"And where were you?" Tchitchikov asked.

"I went for a brief respite," he said. "I did not realize you would sell the souls so quickly."

Tchitchikov shook his head. "Everly is not one to need them."

"Why is that?"

"For I believe they have other phantoms to count on. Come, let us eat."

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Friday was fried fish day.

Selifan had his cheeseburger—no relish, no pickles, no mustard, ketchup and tomato only—while Tchitchikov dug into his portion of fried cod, neither base nor majestic. The shush of waves abated from the beach near the seafood stand. He foisted the fries upon eager Selifan; they were, he would not say but thought it, too plebian for his tastes.

“Another email,” Tchitchikov said.

“From whom?”

“O—. She’s a nice, polite person,” Tchitchikov said.

“Strange,” Selifan muttered.

“Strange what?”

“You made a kind, honest word of her. It is strange to hear that.”

Tchitchikov frowned to himself. “You may be right, for it felt strange of me to say that.”

“And another strangeness.”

“How so?”

“That you note her politeness, and not mine.”

Tchitchikov took a large bite, as an untamed predator might. “Selifan, it is not that I do not note your finer qualities. It is that I am terrible at vocalizing them.”

“I noticed.”

“Then do not doubt of them, but doubt of my own abilities.”

“Sometimes I do.”

“Very well, then.” Tchitchikov took another large bite of fish, sea lion-sized. “That is fair. But let us focus on the task at hand.”

“Yes, we could.” Selifan doused his burger in further ketchup. “Should we revisit with Taber? Should we make our first appearance to Stoddard?”

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“Whittaker returned my missive. We shall make our stop there.”

“Fantastic!” Selifan attempted a clap, but as his hands were also doused in ketchup, he rethought the reflex. “Then we shall likely hit paydirt.”

“Possibly,” Tchitchikov said. “But I would not aim for it. This is a first contact, and we have to size each other up initially.”

“I see.” Selifan finished his burger and struck into his fries. “Still, I am excited to hear what we turn up.”

“As am I, Selifan.”

M—, Whittaker’s aide, welcomed Tchitchikov to a seat in Whittaker’s office. “Just a moment,” she said, smiling.

Tchitchikov nodded and waited. M— engaged in idle conversation, with what some might even term flirtatious chit-chat. “I like that vest on you, Mr. Tchitchikov.”

“Why, thank you.”

“It looks as if you have a pocket watch. I love pocket watches.”

“No, just the one on my wrist.”

“Oh.” M— returned to her work for but a moment. “So, your mother liked azaleas?”

“Azaleas?”

“Yes. You mentioned them a couple days ago.”

Tchitchikov bit his lip in consternation. “Oh yes, she was fond of them indeed. I am surprised at your adept memory.”

“Why thank you,” she said. “I love them, too.”

Tchitchikov smiled brightly to her. “When do you think the Senator might arrive?”

“Oh, he’s here. He’s just in a meeting.”

“Yes, but then when might the meeting end?”

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M— checked her computer screen for the time. “Soon,” she said, in that perfect secretary’s vagueness that the cunning would pick up to mean “he is well over time.” “Soonish, I think,” she said.

Tchitchikov glanced at his watch. He was annoyed with the “soonish,” and did not quite pick up upon M—’s subtler context. “Okay. Soon, I hope as well.”

M— smiled uncomfortably. “Yes, but—!”

“But, yes?”

“But, perhaps,” she struggled for words. “Did you notice? I don’t have flowers today, but...”

“But?”

A remembrance of his interaction with M— had escaped him up until now. Normally, our hero would never have forgotten such important details, for indeed therein lies God and true company and, should one seek it out, wealth from such company. But ordering the events of the past four months, and especially those of the past night up until this moment, had fogged his brain into a confusion. Thankfully, the fog of his mind had cleared just in time to save their conversation.

“I mean, but perhaps the purple dress on you now is more lovely than the one last time. I suspect you are enamored of the color.”

“Thank you. You look nice as well,” she said, slain much as she had been last time.

A curious thing, then, to be young and to be wooed! How difficult a thing love is to navigate, and how unsure we are of the other’s feelings and motivations! Love can be a battlefield, the difficult strategies, the fog of war—perhaps I am getting carried away. But maybe it is a battlefield indeed, stratagems and traps laid before us, spies in our midst, sowing misdirection. Tchitchikov might be one of those clever spies, in my metaphor, though perhaps before I get too metaphorical I should clarify that M— was an earnest, young woman, and he, a man who

knew how to get what he wanted. The simplest terms are often the best.

“I wonder if you could nudge Whittaker so.”

M— flushed. She was torn between her loyalty to Whittaker and her growing fondness of Tchitchikov. Thankfully, before she dialed the phone, Whittaker came out to the desk. He had brought a warm smile and the faint aroma of whiskey, as it was Friday, though the sight of Tchitchikov evaporated one of those two.

“And who might you be?” he asked.

“I might be Paul Ivan Tchitchikov.” He stood and offered his hand in a friendly shake.

To which Whittaker offered an unfortunately brusque handshake. “And?”

“I emailed you about our meeting.”

“Oh.” Whittaker checked his watch. “I am sorry, but my meeting ran over time, and this next one I must get to.”

“My apologies, is that so?”

“Of course it is so,” he said. “M—, could you please block off the next hour?”

“Yes,” she replied sheepishly.

“Well, Mr. Chicha, it was nice to meet you. Perhaps another day.”

“Perhaps,” Tchitchikov said. The Senator left again, neither hurried nor slow to his office.

M—’s cheeks flushed even redder. “Mr. Tchitchikov, I am so sorry. I didn’t—I—I’m just really sorry.”

Tchitchikov took in the whole of the scene and was too polite to ask her if she had set up the meeting to the Senator’s agreement. “It is no bother. The Senator is very busy; I shall come by perhaps another day.” He gently lay his hands upon the desk. “When might be a better time to come by?”

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“Yes, of course!” M— pulled up the Senator’s calendar.
“I’m sorry again about today. I cannot guarantee, but perhaps he might be open next Tuesday?”

“What time might he perhaps be open?”

“Three to five. I cannot guarantee, of course, that he will remain so, but I will see to it he knows you are here.”

“That is all I ask.” Tchitchikov nodded once to her. “Miss M—.”

As he turned to leave, M— uttered excitedly, “Tchitchikov!” as a sneeze, almost. “Mr. Tchitchikov.”

“Yes?”

“Maybe, if you were open tomorrow, would you like to...?”

Tchitchikov judged what his Saturday would look like: reading newspaper obits, aligning them with his voters’ registration lists, entering those alignments into—

“I am sorry,” he said, “but I do have a busy Saturday ahead of me.”

“Of course,” she said. “And I suppose Sunday—”

“Is also full. My apologies.”

“I see.”

“But I shall see you on Tuesday,” he said. “And I look forward to the next lovely dress you will wear.”

Tchitchikov’s electronic missive to Representative Taber went this way:

*Dearest Representative,
I must firstly apologize for my much too long absence. My
sincerest apologies, dear friend!*

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Allow me to respond to your prior communication as such: yes, I would indeed enjoy further sharing of our time together. They say a first impression is a large one, but I suspect the old saying lies in this error, that I do hunger for another meeting for to repeat of my gentle first impression. As to our business, yes, we may discuss this further as well, but let us not be so bold as to think that it should be central to our rare time together.

I am traveled much, and as I am much traveling as of now, perhaps we could rejoin this Monday at six? I know this is after hours, but it will allow us a freer time to get to know each other. I have marked that time, in case you should be amenable. Or perhaps Thursday afternoon should work better for you, though I am unsure exactly of the time I may be open.

Let me know either way.

*Sincerely, your friend,
Tchitchikov*

He clicked the send button, and off it went. Next, Tchitchikov sent another missive out, this time to Representative Martinez, of this nature:

*Dearest Representative,
I must firstly apologize for my much too long absence. My sincerest apologies, dear friend!*

But let us catch up and discuss the finer details of our business of the prior meeting.

*Sincerely, your friend,
Tchitchikov*

Another click of “send,” and this one went off as well.

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Tchitchikov paused for a moment. He felt he had one other piece of business to attend to.

*Dear O—,
Thank you again for*

At this moment, he received a mail from Taber.

“My, that was sudden.”

“What was sudden?” Selifan asked.

“One moment,” Tchitchikov said.

Dearest Mr. Tchitchikov,

Our first impression was indeed a pleasant one. Yes please this monday would suit me well. At three. Such-and-such a bar works best. Please do be ready to produce exact proof of what we discussed.

*Your dearest,
Thomas I. Taber, III*

“And that was rushed as well.” Tchitchikov smiled his hyena smile. “That is good news.”

“Good news about whom?”

“About Taber,” Tchitchikov said. “A quick reply is necessary.” He thought a moment. “Tomorrow.”

“Ah, that putty-man. Very clever work.”

“Yes, I do appreciate the recognition.” Tchitchikov typed up the interrupted email. “But one more piece of business.” He wrote and stopped and rewrote. He conjured words, and dissipated them again. He plotted a more precise trajectory, and yet, it failed to hit the mark. After much deliberation, Tchitchikov found what to say:

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Dear O—,

Thank you again. You are a generous soul, and one worthy of this openness. I enjoyed your words last night, and hope these do not bring you to a shock. But that I doubt, for the truth cuts through and does not cloud our recognition of it. Good luck to thee and your Representative,

Best,

P. I. Tchitchikou

“Is that it, then?”

“Yes, Selifan. Let us retire. This was a full day.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Once more he embarked upon a life of toil, once more he stunted himself in everything, once more he left clean and decent surroundings for a dirty, mean existence.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

The weekend found Tchitchikov busy at his computer again, perusing his several online subscriptions to local papers; sorting through a few newspapers on the desk in his hotel room; entirely immersed in the endless work of harvesting the votes of the dead.

The checking and cross-checking, that was the difficult part of his work. He spent several hours lining up the names on the obituaries with those on the voter registration lists he “purchased” from both parties. That was the fun part, obtaining these lists from local party volunteers. In truth, hacking into the voting machines was the easiest phase of his plan. Tchitchikov was no computer whiz, certainly not, but he was nonetheless resourceful. He’d paid a local community college student of healthy pridefulness and questionable morality to

do this part. She had spent not quite three hours of honest work.

Plug in the names to the master list of voters, plug in their votes to her simple interface, and voila! The dead are among us again. Thankfully, unlike George A. Romero's depiction, they only show up for the one day, though just as frightening these undead are politically minded. Selifan, less politically minded, had gone his way to work a tan into his pale, Russian immigrant skin. This Saturday, Tchitchikov was interrupted by a call from a Florida fellow.

"Hello?"

"Is this Paul Tchitchikov?" The receiver spoke with a nasal voice.

"Yes, this is he."

The nasal voice continued; Tchitchikov imagined a pinched nose. "The Paul Tchitchikov formerly of Saint Petersburg? And currently of Liberty, Tennessee?"

"Saint Petersburg is currently the name, as we have not had a war recently, and yes, this is that Tchitchikov. How do you know of Liberty? Wait—who is this?"

"Thank you." And the phone hung up.

A dark pit grew in his stomach. Tchitchikov was not fond of surprises, let alone foreboding ones, and to him, unlike Selifan, un-knowledge was the greatest discomfort of all. He had many enemies—this must be, for all good men have a great deal of enemies—though his had the dubious distinction of being unknown to our hero. This might produce thoughts on Tchitchikov's character and the nature of his dealings, but I would like to quell those thoughts now. Perhaps a piece of backstory is in order.

Pavel Ivanovitch Tchitchikov, known to us as Paul Ivan, was born outside of St. Petersburg, Russia. Should one trace back his life's travels to find his birth certificate, one would come across two difficulties: many of the smaller towns

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outside of St. Petersburg had suffered fires in their civic records departments around twenty years ago, should one discover from Tchitchikov the exact town of his residence; the second being Tchitchikov's own reluctance to name the specific town of his childhood, though we should not be one to impose upon a man for personal information he does not wish to give freely. He has his reasons. But I trust his word upon his age—thirty-five—and in addition, his immigration papers are dated likewise from twenty years ago, marking St. Petersburg as his previous city of residence, so he, then, arrived in our country as a teenager. It appears he didn't bring his parents along, and that pain is perhaps one reason for him to keep these cards close to his chest, as the saying goes. He does keep many dear things to his chest, many secrets and hopes and dreams.

Selifan, too, immigrated from Russia incidentally, though Tchitchikov never inquired when or from where, or at least he never said he was knowledgeable of those particulars. Selifan's age is but a couple years more than Tchitchikov's, and the closeness in age and closeness in situation brought about a closeness in hearts: Selifan was one of the few, or perhaps the only one, whom Tchitchikov could confide in. Of Selifan's employment, I know not too much, other than a few brief food-delivery stints and the such; though of Tchitchikov, records state that he worked for the government in a small way, as a postal clerk in Virginia. He moved to Liberty, Tennessee and worked at the post office nearby for the greater part of his career; Selifan's movements, as due to the nature of his employment, are unfortunately more dispersed. If the postman Tchitchikov had inclinations toward deeper government work, there were no outward signs of it nor would his immigration status allow it. What did he do in Liberty, Tennessee? Even I cannot say exactly. He could have walked the main thoroughfare, which was certainly walkable, and shopped at the local market, a one-and-a-half room building

that offered tools and paper goods and unperishable foods. Perhaps he did not do much. But thus far we have seen a mind like Tchitchikov's is always at work, even at rest, or rather, especially at rest, so our presupposition of his settling into a restful little town in the middle of Tennessee would be marred if we supposed he would likewise be restful. To sum up, the assumption that Tchitchikov were a personage to acquire very many enemies over the course of his lifetime were to ignore the rather mundane nature of the course of his lifetime. The phone call was indeed puzzling.

The triad of a sudden call from a Florida number inquiring about him, and not answering who was inquiring, and furthermore, mentioning the small, unknown villa of Liberty, Tennessee, produced a chill in his heart. *Perhaps I should speed course*, he thought. *Mayhap I have said too much to a congressman.*

Selifan entered the hotel room at this moment.

"It was not you who had called me," Tchitchikov asked, "just now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't place a call, correct?"

Selifan was perplexed. "Your phone would have registered my information, would it have not?"

"Then from a payphone?"

Selifan shook his head. "A payphone? I have not seen one of those since—God unknowing—I cannot recall since when. Why do you ask? Did someone call?"

Tchitchikov's tongue touched the tip of his lip in thought. He withdrew it again. "No, it must be a scammer."

"We are in Florida, the Land of the Scam." Selifan laughed. "I read that on a license plate, I assure you."

"Yes," Tchitchikov said. His mind processed other trajectories. "That is likely so."

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“Here.” Selifan offered a meal: fresh calamari and many fries and much ketchup. “Since you are hard at work. I tried their fish this time. It was palatable. And the fries you loaned me yesterday are repaid.”

Tchitchikov thanked his companion for the generous heaping of food. “I see you are deep in thoughtful work,” Selifan said. “I shall be on my way again.”

“Wait,” Tchitchikov said. “You are a lobster.”

“You wanted something other than squid? Unless I heard correctly the first time, in which case you are senseless again.”

“No, Selifan, you are red as a lobster.”

Selifan blinked his eyes. “The expression, here, is red as a beet.”

“Maybe so, but I hate beets. They have too strong a taste of soil for my tongue.” Tchitchikov pointed to the bathroom. “Go check.”

Selifan did check and came back smiling. “Excellent!”

“Excellent?”

“Yes,” Selifan said. “I have the tough start of a healthy, American tan.”

“You have the tough start of a healthy, American cancer.”

“Death is always the risk of beauty,” Selifan said.

“Does it not hurt?”

“It shall,” he replied, “and that is how I know I have accomplished something for myself. No pain, no gain.”

Tchitchikov cocked his head. “Yes, I suppose this makes sense after all.”

“What makes sense?”

“Never mind. You go and develop the next stage of cancer on your tan.” Tchitchikov returned to his laptop. “The food looks delectable. Fried calamari is ... is ... I am thinking of a type of delicious food, but am short on words.”

“It is addictive like Cheesy Cheetahs?”

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Tchitchikov recoiled internally. "I suppose, to some. I don't know if I could claim calamari to be the Cheesy Cheetahs of the sea. But I believe a first bite of this will determine that. Regardless, thank you again for the food."

Selifan returned to his seaside bronzing, leaving Tchitchikov to toil through the night.

Sunday was sleep-in day.

It was unusual for Selifan to be up so early, before eleven, on a Sunday morning. Moreover, it was very unusual that he would be watching the television, and trebly so that the news was on the same television.

Tchitchikov turned over. "What is this...?"

"I overdid it," Selifan said. "I couldn't sleep."

Tchitchikov rubbed his eyes. "And now I can't. Misery needs company, and some company needs misery."

"I am aloed more than the blasted plant itself." Tchitchikov focused his eyes upon a shiny Selifan. "I feel I have spent our last savings on this expense."

"Is this true?"

Selifan stared. "No. That was a joke. But I appreciate the concern."

Tchitchikov lay back down. "How are you doing, then?"

"Fantastic."

"Fantastic?"

Selifan nodded. "This shall become the most fantastic tan I have ever had."

Tchitchikov grumbled. "Could you at least turn the television down?"

"I need the extra volume to deafen the burning sensation."

"Then what is this?" Tchitchikov bent upward again in bed. "Why the news?"

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“I need the extra news to deafen the burning as well. I have discovered the affairs of our world rather effective in drowning out other lesser pains.” Selifan turned back to the tube. “You have struck in me an interest for it.”

“It seems an appropriate show for a masochist.” A light switched on in him. “Let me see it. Is there mention of any local charlatans?”

“Yes,” Selifan said. “You must see this one.”

Tchitchikov’s heart pounded, *That was fast*, he thought. But on the screen was a young woman of short, pinked hair and a studded ear.

“...to recognize our pain, our suffering,” Jenna said. “And they d%*# well have to do something about it!”

The camera shifted to Andy and his white denim jacket. There was a new patch this time. “We’re asking the Governor to fix the massive problems with the HealthChoices website, and to expand health insurance coverage. People are dying and going bankrupt every day. And secondly—”

Jenna interjected. “Crush us, and our bones will stab your feet! Long live the political revolution!” Andy was stunned by her shrill voice. “Tell Governor A\$*#*~% that.”

The television returned to the newscaster. Selifan stood up and paced back and forth stiffly. “It’ll be a lovely one,” he said to himself.

Tchitchikov was not certain why he was drawn to the protest at the State House; there, he would not meet anyone of political import, nor would he further the designs he was working upon. Still, he followed the mysterious pull and furthermore, Selifan was strangely agreeable to the two-hour drive, made quicker by his state of comfortable discomfort.

“I am glad you agreed to this trip,” Tchitchikov said. “I wasn’t sure it was a reasonable request.”

Selifan’s head was into the wind, practically out of the window. “I don’t mind the drive,” he said. “The breeze is helpful.”

Tchitchikov was more than normally curious about his travel-mate, but allayed his curiosity for the time being. He had other thoughts on his mind, namely, whether Jenna and Andy would still be there, or if they would have been dispersed by police by the time they arrived.

Thankfully, this fear was unfounded. Rather than dispersed, the crowd had enlarged itself: signs, chants, shouting, effigies as well. It was difficult to spot anyone, let alone Jenna and Andy in the crowd.

“Selifan, do you see anywhere that young woman on the—” Tchitchikov turned around to face a shirtless muscled stranger. “Blast, where did that lobster scuttle to...?”

Tchitchikov waded through the vocal crowd. If Fairwell’s fundraiser was a simmering pot of agitation, then the protest was that plus onions, teary-eyed from despondency; meat seared on the flames of anger; and several potatoes of discontent. The malcontents had much reason to boil over, for the malfeasance of the state government had stirred the pot of—I am not sure at this point what I have made—justice, maybe. Tchitchikov tired of his search, and exited the crowd so as to sit and stew—this is what I have made, a savory pun!—on a sidewalk opposite the State House.

From a distance, the crowd writhed like one multi-legged animal, heaving as in the throes of either death or birth. Tchitchikov watched, entranced by all the passion out there, hoping to speak their truth to the powers that are. He was interrupted from his reverie by a young man. “Do you have a smoke?” he asked.

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Tchitchikov sighed. “Do I look like a smoke-embalmed mummy? Does my breath smell like stifled embers? Everyone asks. No one thinks.”

The young man laughed.

“What is funny here?”

“You, I suppose.”

“Come now, you rascal—”

“No, wait!” The young man held his hands up. “You got me!” He laughed further.

Tchitchikov pondered the various options of engagement that lay before him. He sized him up: the young man was cleanly dressed, and sharply, with dress pants—though cheap—and a dark jacket over a pale shirt—also cheap, some bare threads at the elbows. The young man was cleanly shaved, apparently very cleanly, and recently too, that spoke to the care he took in quality toiletries. Most importantly, he wore a large, but slightly devilish, grin. The whole presentation before Tchitchikov was effective for its purpose. And what purpose was that? To remind Tchitchikov of a young doppelganger of himself, he was certain.

After a few moments he decided not to box him after all.

“And who might you be, youth-of-protest?”

“I might be Aris,” he said, “And who might you be, lacking-of-smokes?”

“I do not smoke. That might be a surprise to a young dolt such as you.”

“Well, well. At least you didn’t punch me. You almost looked like it.”

“Yes, that is true.” Tchitchikov’s interest was piqued. “How could you tell?”

Aris looked him up and down. “You started doing this thing with your hands.” He motioned with his fingers, wrapping them around in the air quickly, trying different angles and positions until landing upon one: he gave Tchitchikov the



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bird. "I've learned to recognize I might get punched when people do that."

Tchitchikov smiled. "You have a head on your shoulders. Then what are you doing here?"

"I have a few friends here. I came to the party." Aris shrugged.

"Now you are a young fellow—"

"That being a term relative to my elder."

"...yes, but perhaps you can produce someone for me. She and her boyfriend are in this crowd, though I don't know how much they'd distinguish themselves from everyone else. In any case, she has short, pink hair, a rose tattoo on her shoulder—"

"Jenna?" Aris scratched his head. "Sure, I'll go grab her."

"You know her?" he asked. But Aris had already walked away in some specific direction. Soon, he was swallowed into the protest.

Tchitchikov tapped his foot. He watched the crowd slowly shrink and could sense they would dissipate in a couple more hours. After fifteen minutes, Tchitchikov stood up and turned to leave.

"Hey, wait, YOU! Guy, you!" Aris jogged over and panted before him. "Maybe ... I should ... stop smoking...?"

Tchitchikov was at the ready for a reply when he heard Jenna's voice and saw she and Andy sift out of the crowd. "Ohemgee! 'Funny Russian nut'—I KNEW it! Ten bucks, Andy!" She slapped his back.

"Paul Ivan, how goes it?" Andy and he shook hands. "I take it you know Aris?"

"I do now."

"He ... does..." Aris huffed.

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“How did you know we were here?” Jenna asked, “Ohemgee, did you see us on TV?”

“I did.”

Jenna gasped. “I’m famous!”

Andy laughed with her.

Aris recovered some of his breath. “You really do ... know everyone.”

Andy nodded. “We know all the crazy Russians worth knowing in these here parts.”

Jenna tugged at Tchitchikov’s arm. “You should come! We’re going to try my new slogan! I want to see if it’ll catch on!”

Jenna continued, “*Governor come out and meet. Do not crush us with your feet. If you do we’ll stab you back. And if you can’t we’ll still attack.*”

“Do you like it?”

“That’s clever,” Andy said.

Tchitchikov nodded. “It’s not too bad.”

“Yes, it took me a while to come up with it,” Jenna said.

“Come on, let’s practice!”

Tchitchikov shook his head. “I’m not one for such things.”

“Okaaaaay,” she said. “But come by the office.”

“Which office?”

“Fairwell’s, dummy.” She pushed a political card into his hand. “We’re organizers for him. We’ll set you up.”

“I might consider,” Tchitchikov replied.

“You’d better consider,” Jenna said. “Let’s go, Andy, before Fairwell speaks. Aris, come on, you too!” She winked at Tchitchikov. “I always wanted to save the world.”

The three of them reentered the protest. Tchitchikov sighed at their youth and energy.

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Tchitchikov and Selifan rejoined at the same sidewalk. As it was late, the sun came down on their ride back. Tchitchikov watched it go down in the side mirror. Selifan missed the sun, too.

As the two retired to their hotel room, Selifan reapplied another bottle of aloe vera, and Tchitchikov rechecked his email and messages. There was a text from the same number that had called him earlier that day. Tchitchikov's stomach plummeted, a combination of unknowing and, now, knowing; not knowing what to happen, but knowing by whom. He placed the cell phone on the nightstand and did his best to sleep.

The text had said: *You have been found, "Fyodor."*

CHAPTER FIVE

“Tchitchikov reflected that he had indeed fallen into an aristocratic wilderness.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Fyodor Nosdihanov was the progeny of two authors, one very famous, and one incredibly obscure: the aforementioned Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the never-mentioned Denis Nosdihanov. The former was, of course, known for his deep psychology and philosophy, and of the latter, he was unknown for a picaresque character in poorly structured plots. Their child, so to speak, was not dissimilar to Tchitchikov, for he and he were of the same body. The difference, then, was in appearance: Nosdihanov appeared to have acquired voter registration lists from both parties, being neither registered in either party, nor registered as a physical being by the government, and also purchasing these lists from one party for the excellent price of a few alcoholic drinks, and also to have wooed a married

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woman with them to do so; and Tchitchikov appeared to have not. These are the particulars and sum of their differences.

Tchitchikov did not sleep a wink the night through. That night he discovered Selifan mumbled to himself at approximately the middle of the night, senseless things that made it seem he was awake, though speaking another language. He may have been speaking of unceasing power in this language, or the comfort of a warm, berried pancake. Tchitchikov was unsure. At first Tchitchikov answered him back, and Selifan agreed, though in his own bumbling language; at which point Tchitchikov realized he was speaking perfectly fluent Nonsense. This Monday, Tchitchikov felt Selifan had muttered the solution to this proverbial monkey wrench in the works, though he had simply not been able to understand it.

Tchitchikov heard noises of Selifan in the shower.

He got up out of bed and paced about the room, unable to accept that Selifan beat him and delayed his morning routine. Tchitchikov looked at the clock, and noted that it was late, very late for a weekday: it was nearly eleven o'clock. Fear and exhaustion heaped themselves upon his mood in equal amounts, then stirred him about on his feet at a faster pace.

“Oh, you are awake?”

Selifan exited with a towel wrapped around himself, and with a most vicious tan intruding upon most of his skin. “I was asleep?” Tchitchikov asked.

“You snored loudly, I suppose, for about an hour just now.”

“I didn't realize.”

“Come on,” Selifan said. “Hurry up. We have much work ahead of us.”

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Their first stop of Monday was to Representative Stoddard's office. Stoddard was, or rather would be in any other context, a wholly incapable man. He was not gifted with self-composure nor beauteous speech, and it was said during his school upbringing, by one certain middle school teacher R—, that he could not compose a sentence with all three of grammar, main focus, and unique thought. That said, he was a gifted politician. His campaign drew in a fair amount of local talent, attributable either to a mystical *je ne sais quoi* or some cosmic accident. One could think the local political talent saw a blank canvass, and wanted graciously to fill it in. As to that important canvass of the countenance, I cannot say much beyond his pale flesh and the neat, blondish parting on top; but of his hands, I can certainly say that they drew Tchitchikov's attention. They frittered constantly, knitting more deftly than Arachne. As a politician, he would hide behind a podium, bend into a type-written speech, and offer it to the mostly uninterested media before him, dodging exposure of this weakness. In front of Tchitchikov, or any voter for that matter, it became apparent that Stoddard was not born for conversation nor grand speech nor independent thought; but rather, he was made for it. He was a rising star in the state party, and, as such, was blessedly able to avoid most any constituent. He was an enviable politician by most accounts.

"I am not sure what you are trying to say, Mr. Chee-chee-koft."

"Tchitchikov. Not 'coughed.' But this is a minor matter; the name is a Cossack one, and of little consequence, much as a sneeze in a windstorm. What is of great consequence is why I shan't have the delight of pursuing private conversation with Representative Stoddard, Mr. Raymond."

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Stoddard had an advisor nearby him most nearly all the time. The advisor was a Mr. Stu Raymond, a high school friend with whom Stoddard had become acquainted on opposite ends of a chummy high school hazing. Stu maintained certain characteristics from his high school career, namely assertiveness, an interest in sports, and a penchant for wooing women. It was these personable characteristics that would have benefited Stoddard's political career had he possessed them, though vicariously through Stu did his career enjoy these benefits. On occasion Stoddard and Stu would reflect upon their separate, yet intertwined experiences through those formative years of joyful juvenile delinquency, often upon Stu's request and with his laughter and often with Stoddard's quiet contemplation. "He does speak, does he not?" Tchitchikov asked Stu.

"He does. Show him, Alfred."

"I do," said Stoddard.

"Now," Stu said, "what is it you're trying to say again?"

"I understand," Tchitchikov said, and truly meant it. "I am merely saying it should be helpful to consider reaching out to our rather lively—ahem—congregation. I believe you would find the time spent to be most profitable, Stu. Both of you."

"So," Stu stood up and paced around his chair. "Allow me to understand what you mean: we reach out to your congregation, and we gain their votes."

"Yes, that is all I'm trying to—"

"A little donation, to some handful of votes. It would be a slam dunk," Stu motioned a distant shot with his hands.

"Done, finito. Easy peasy."

"Why, yes! You do—"

"Then, my question is how many votes—right?—are in a handful, and how many resources are required? That's the calculation, right?"



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Tchitchikov nodded. "It would be most profitable to you, I assure—"

"Wait, because we must consider," Stu pointed a finger in the air, balancing an invisible ball, "this: should our team be caught in any scandal, this little cheat would ruin us, cause us to lose the entire championship, if I may put it that way. We would have lost all because of some unknown handful of points—votes."

Tchitchikov furrowed his brow. "Well, not an unknown number, but..."

"You see," Stu said, "when you say this would be profitable to us, you really mean potentially dangerous. Really, it is profitable to one person here." Stu pointed his ball-finger. "By which I mean, of course, you."

"There are benefits to both parties."

"I don't see them," Stu said. "I see a joker trying to make off with my money—I mean, our money. Our time, too."

Tchitchikov attempted to parry. "I do not mean to spend overly of your time, and furthermore—"

"Then you only want to waste my money. That's the calculus in front of us. That's what I see." Stu felt the word "calculus" was extra weighty because he had never made a passing grade in it. "I think we are done here."

In a normal frame of mind, Tchitchikov would have dealt reasonably with Stu and left the contest between them only a few points behind, so to speak. But Stu's personality had aggravated him, and against his better judgment, Tchitchikov decided to call a new line of play. "Yes, I see what you are saying. It is a risk, and perhaps things should never be risked, lest the whole project—the whole exercise—come tumbling down. You make a fair point," he said to Stu. He passed the conversation to Stoddard, "I would not want to risk your neck. It is unfair of me to presuppose a thing."

Stoddard fumbled. "Why, I..."

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Tchitchikov returned to Stu, "I suppose I should be more cautious. I am unlearned of your situation, and I apologize for my offense. Consider it the offense of a hapless fool." To Stoddard, "Yes, a hapless fool. Besides, such a decision should not be left in the hands of a doddering imbecile, yes? It could be a great risk."

"No, I suppose not..."

Stu reddened. "What is it you're trying to say? Are you a man? Or are you only words?"

Tchitchikov smiled to Stu. "I have words, yes, and many of them." He turned to Stoddard. "Some of us are so blessed." Tchitchikov addressed Stu again, "But I consider myself a man of many words, my actions my failings, my strengths my mind and inner resources. I apologize for this, for myself. I imagine you ask for many apologies of people, for who they are."

"What do you mean?" Stu said.

"I mean," Tchitchikov glanced sideways at Stoddard. He was following his words intently. Tchitchikov answered Stu, "I mean to say that you may ask of me an apology for my impertinence, my intelligence. But there will be a time, perhaps soon, where you may no longer ask that of me." Tchitchikov continued softer with Stu. "But perhaps I am misled, though I believe in my heart intelligence is a difficult thing to crush down, as its voice echoes in our minds well after it falls from our ears. But crush as you might."

"You're making no sense," Stu said.

"Stu," Stoddard said, "there seems some sense here."

"And I agree," Tchitchikov adjusted to a normal loudness. "And should you, too, dear Stu. You may give us a few words, or likely, a grunt of affirmation—that means you agree."

Stu growled. "You are an ignorant buffoon you—"

Tchitchikov grinned. "Not a grunt, but close enough to conform to my request." Tchitchikov stood up. "I shall be

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going, with but one last word: do not crush the weak beneath you. Their bones will stab your foot-soles if you succeed. And if you do not, their hands shall drag your shins into their gaping mouths." Tchitchikov's stare was venom. "Take it as you like, but I intend it a parting shot—not a sporting phrase, but rather consider this my end and your warning. It comes from Parthians who—well I trust you know someone who can explain ancient history to you."

Stu fumed, nearly shaking. "You're a real piece of shit, Paul. Pardon my French. Arrogant assholes always get what they deserve."

"We do," Tchitchikov said. He nodded to Stoddard on his way out. "Representative."

"Wait," the representative said.

"Yes?" Tchitchikov replied.

"Never mind," Stoddard said. "Stuart and I have some discussions to make. Thank you for your time."

"Thank him? That ignorant jackass?" Stu shook his head as a duck might shake rainwater from its rear parts. "Alfred, have you lost it?"

"Give me a moment with him," Stoddard told Tchitchikov. "Now is an inopportune time for us."

"It seems it has been for some time," Tchitchikov said. "But I shall see myself out. Good luck."

Stoddard's hands relaxed. "Good luck."

Tchitchikov's Hail Mary, then, looked to have been caught.

"He is not one to use our list."

Selifan frowned. "Another Fairwell?"

"In a way, yes," Tchitchikov said.

"Another waste of time."

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Tchitchikov mused to himself. "Not so, but no financial gain."

"What other gain could we seek?"

Tchitchikov shook his head. "Never mind. There is one thing left, my meeting with Taber, but that is long from now. I believe we have some respite for some time."

"Do we?" Selifan asked.

Tchitchikov sighed to himself. His day-dreams of late had been shifting in forms, and he entertained these new shifts more than he'd ever had in his life. "Hmmm?"

"There is one more person we should attempt today."

"And who might that be?"

Selifan smiled. "Kingston."

Tchitchikov stared out the window. "Why? He has no power."

"He has money."

"He does."

"And it is said he shall receive power soon."

"Maybe."

"And a newly minted politician is especially moldable."

Tchitchikov found his logic sound. But he surprised himself. "Perhaps another time. I am not in the right mood."

"Right mood?"

"Yes, mood."

Selifan glinted. "Does that matter now?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps you forget," Selifan said, "that we are in this business together, in equal shares. That it is my risk with yours, and my reward as well. Kingston seems a low piece of fruit to pluck, does he not? Unless I am mistaken."

"No, you are not."

"I'm glad to hear it." Selifan started his car to more cranky sounds. "Let us go."

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Selifan was accurate in his assessment of the challenger Kingston. The Kingston family was one of the last great political clans in our country. James' lineage was formidable and impeccable, that is, what minor blemishes on the name that had been there were graciously forgiven and forgotten by colleagues and constituents alike.

Like all Kingstons, James' face was handsome: chiseled features, a wave of blonde hair, boyish smile. He was very nearly a living ghost of his great-uncle, their faces coincided that much. In fact, most of the male lineage were instantly recognizable as one of the Kingston clan, that particular brand of human being who was more than well-liked, but well-adored; whose family took their summer vacations on Martha's Vineyard, away from inquisitive eyes; who found political success wherever and whenever they showed. James' biggest asset, other than a youthful version of his family's face, was his and his family's legendary sense of speech. His great uncle had had this gift, had risen the political ranks propitiously, and he had ruled his particular dominion generously and graciously. James, rather far removed, had yet some semblance of this greatness, which, with even a dash of it, beckoned toward unbridled success. His speeches were enlightening. It left the listener elevated, transcendent, hitting appropriate notes of unexpected rhetoric and emotion, such that after the speech concluded, one was in such a daze as to not recall the matter of the speech. Such was the power and draw of the Kingstons, of James included, that they were often married at youthful ages by lucky models of women, and their youthful temperaments were tempered by the desire to nest and produce more; at least, the wives never complained otherwise of their temperaments.

Tchitchikov felt both intimidated and fortunate to have a meeting with the man. His vest and shirt felt warmer than

usual, despite the powerful air conditioning of James Kingston's office. To make matters worse, Kingston was minutely busy, and left our kindly hero to simmer in his office, alone, and wonder what future might befall him should he come into Kingston's good graces. He looked around: a few casual pictures of him with the Mahatma; with retired world leaders; with other, more famous—as of yet—family members. By the time James arrived, Tchitchikov was surfeit with dreams of overwhelming grandeur.

The door opened.

"Why hello," Kingston said. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Tchitchikov."

"As well as you, myself," Tchitchikov felt his firm, personable handshake. "I am glad you could make the time."

"I'm always happy to make the time for a future constituent!" Kingston smiled that Kingston smile. "Tell me, what's on your mind?"

"Well, Mr. Kingston—"

"James, please."

"Mr. James, I wanted to preface my offer of assistance with noting that you are in a tight race with the incumbent, Fairwell,"

Kingston laughed. "Why yes, thank you! That's not a tough thing to note, my friend."

"Then perhaps I should speak of the assistance I might have to offer."

"Nonsense," he said. "Take a seat, first. How do you take your coffee?"

Tchitchikov had a better sense about this cup of coffee than Fairwell's. "Let's try two creams, one sugar."

"You're not sure how you take your coffee?" He smiled.

"No, that is—that is not to say I don't know, but I don't usually drink it."

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He opened a beverage fridge. "Let's see, we also have some water, some ginger ale, and a few more drinks of varying strengths."

"Varying strengths?"

Kingston pulled out a bottle of white wine. "Unless you prefer a liqueur."

"I'll have the wine."

"Good choice, good choice," Kingston produced a corkscrew from his pocket. "Here we are," he poured into two glasses, also seemingly from nowhere. He offered one. "For you."

The chill of the wine fogged the wine glass. "Thank you."

"Cheers," he said. The two glasses clinked. "Now, what are you doing in Jacksonville?"

The white wine was not of the quality Selifan and Tchitchikov would usually share. "I didn't think I was such an esteemed guest."

"Why not?"

"We have just met, have we not?"

"We have just met!" Kingston took a healthy sipful. "And you're the clever kind to notice my generosity. Yes, we have not met before, but I know a little about you."

"You do...?"

"I do," he said. "Let's say the town is a-tittering with tales of the legendary Tchitchikov. You're the one with the bodies in your car, right?"

Tchitchikov shifted in his seat. "I don't believe I should answer that."

"Not real bodies, but more impactful. And I believe you shouldn't answer that, either. The question to me," Kingston slumped down in a large leather chair, "is not what you ask of me, but how you respond to what I ask of you."

"But what do you mean?"

"I mean: I don't want those votes." Kingston leaned in further. "I don't give a damn about votes. I want something

far more precious than some tick marks on a piece of paper: I want dirt.”

“Dirt?”

Kingston leaned back again. “You know, dirt. Not the kind you’d bury your bodies with, the kind you bury your opponents with.” He smiled. “That kind.”

“I do know of what you mean, but I do not possess any.”

“Then you should.”

Tchitchikov felt warm under his shirt’s collar. “Why?” He regretted asking mid-utterance.

“Because,” he said, “you’re one in a wee bit of trouble, as they might say. And green cards don’t exactly grow on trees.” Kingston stood up. “So tell me, what dirt have you heard about?”

Tchitchikov shook his head. “I told you: none.”

“You were at the protest,” Kingston said.

“And what ‘dirt’ might I uncover at a protest?”

“That’s not the question here.” Kingston retrieved another glass of wine for himself. “The question is ‘when’s the next one?’”

“What do you mean to say?”

“What I mean to say, Mr. dear Tchitchikov, Paul Ivan Tchitchikov—that has a lovely ring to it! A name, that’s the first start of a politician, a real, true politician—what I mean to say Mr. Tchitchikov, is that you should get to know when the next protest is. You should get to learn a lot more than that about Fairwell. And you should come back only, and only if you have something that the media might want to hear about.”

Kingston’s kingly smile again. Tchitchikov’s stomach roiled.

“Come here. Certainly you take your vodka straight, right?”

“I believe I am done,” Tchitchikov said. “I should leave.”



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“Paul,” Kingston paused Tchitchikov in his tracks. “Remember what I said. You are a boy in deep trouble.” He lifted his glass. “Cheers.”

Tchitchikov sat numbly in Selifan’s car.

“And how was it?” Selifan asked.

Tchitchikov mumbled.

“What? I cannot hear you, dear friend.”

Tchitchikov shook his head and stopped. “Selifan.”

“Yes.”

“I believe we should stop course. I do not feel comfortable with our pursuits.”

Selifan’s eagerness melted. “Tchitchikov, what do you mean?”

“I mean we head home to Tennessee. I mean we leave Jacksonville now.”

Selifan shook his head. “Why? But we have Taber to speak to tonight!”

“Selifan, let me not say exactly why.”

“I believe you should.”

Tchitchikov looked at his travel companion. He could not muster the words. “The interest has been sapped from me. That is all I can produce now.”

“That is all?”

“That is all.”

Selifan shook his head. “That is not good enough.”

“But, Selifan—”

“No, no more ‘but Selifan.’ Selifan has been plenty a butt to your jokes.” He turned his eyes to Tchitchikov: more poison than a cobra. “I know what you think of me.”

“Selifan, do you really—?”

“No,” he said. “It is time your speech ended, and mine began.”

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It will—no, it must, it must begin on this point: Why is Tchitchikov allowed to guide the both of us? For the past four months, it has been *you* who has determined to where I drive.”

“Selifan...”

“Do not ‘Selifan’ me, you buffoon of a madman!” He nearly coughed in anger. “We have made one sale, with only a handful of days to an election, and here you are: ‘I no longer wish to.’ Well, then, my car does not wish to, either.”

“Dear Selifan, I am sorry but—”

“Keep your sorries and your empty words. And do not ‘dear Selifan’ me anymore, Tchitchikov. Is anyone so dear to you as yourself? That is what I think every time you utter the damned phrase.”

Tchitchikov was mired in a thick tarred bog; he lost his strength and the will to move from it. He saw it creep slowly up past his waist, up at his chest. “Selifan, I am sorry that I have so abused you.”

“Twice now, that word sorry! I am sorry that you shall no longer abuse me,” he said. “Goodbye, you Russian idiot. Out.”

“But we have split the room tonight,” Tchitchikov said.

“Keep it,” Selifan said. “I’m heading anywhere but.”

“Selifan...”

Selifan got out of the car and opened Tchitchikov’s door. “Now.”

The tar was above Tchitchikov’s lips, and he could only nod.

The car shuddered into movement, and soon was gone.

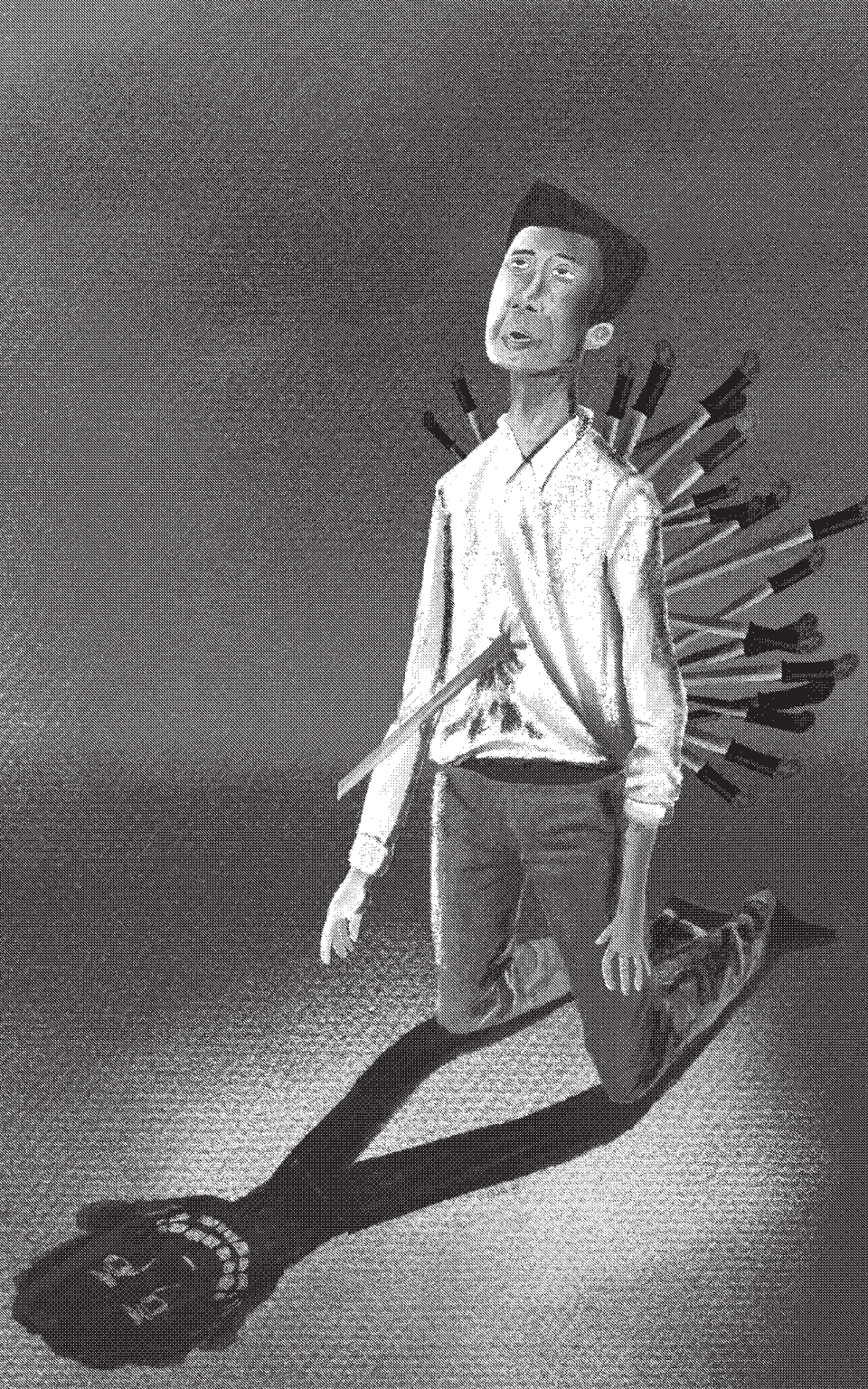
Tchitchikov reassessed his plans, all of them. Like so many china dishes on the ground, a masterful bull laid his plans at his feet. And now, with Selifan gone, the numbness continued and grew. Tchitchikov turned around again and surveyed the beautiful, lovely Jacksonville downtown.

CHAPTER SIX

“I wonder you don’t see scores of devils in your dreams!”

—Tchitchikov, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Tchitchikov awoke from the grasp of a dark dream. And what are dreams, but the dull shadows of our living world? They seem extraordinary in comparison to our reality, but I contend otherwise, that they are merely ordinary in comparison to the fantastical nature of our intricate lives. Tchitchikov’s dream was a fantastical one, and an entirely realistic one, as such: he’d dreamt that a candidate for Congressional representative offered him intoxicants and blackmail. Tchitchikov dreamt he was riding the public transportation for the first time in his life, and that a fellow on the bus proceeded for nine minutes to pick at his nose, Tchitchikov kept count. Tchitchikov dreamt that he fell into bed alone, no toes curled at his face, just him and the buzz of his cell phone and the quiet of the hotel room. He dreamt that



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Selifan had left him. But these were no dreams. These were the harsh silhouettes of reality.

And the reality Tchitchikov dreamed on this Tuesday was as such:

The sun is not out, what time tolls? it is four-thirty, not a time to contact Taber about last night, I must needs get sleep but no, I needn't sleep right now, the television is on, no more you electronic fiend, let us prepare for the day.

The warmth of a good shower, that is something to comfort, like a warm apple pie as Americans would say, and a nice shave, too, that is doubly important, put on a face to face the day's faces, oh, look at you, little bit sticking out, gotcha, wait, still not perfect, hold on here you little bastard, there, victory, the shave, step two is complete.

Three, teeth teeth teeth, DAMN, burns every time, mouthwash, have to, when you give cultured words they have to smell as good as they sound, adds an extra ring.

Four, a nice roll of deodorant, important to smell one's best, can't help it, damn, I do smell good, only thing better than that smell is the smell of money, perhaps I do smell it too, green like a mowed lawn, the ink fresh, that beautiful, inky, powerful smell on my fingertips.

And then five last ... wait.

He's not here.

Dammit, I don't want to buy gum, my teeth are nervously chewing in anticipation for Selifan's damn gum, he never mentioned my pilfering it, just a quick sweetness to start the day, I need that I miss that, the day will not feel rounded, it is not appropriate without a small, meaningless theft.

Kingston.

Fuck.

Taber sent four emails, it's time to go, no, wait, it's hardly five thirty and I should wait for a proper hour, but now that I

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notice, my feet are pacing about, it's time they left and took me with them, they're already starting to carry me away, I'll just go.

They have gum at the concierge desk, not quite the same, not Selifan's disgusting teaberry sticks, but a regular mint is perhaps preferred, I feel Kingston is following me to the bus, he must have eyes and ears in every state even, I must make this sale to Taber, maybe I can wheedle Whittaker as well.

The bus.

It is a bus, it is worse than last night, far, far worse, these people, this man with the chipped incisor, wonder why he does not get it fixed, looks like a puzzle piece, there is always the woman with her wailing child, it is the same woman and same child every time, and the smell, there is a smell wafting in from the back, hey fellow drinking the diet soda, how's the diet going for you? a transfer, into another transfer, I am right, this same woman now has three children, the same wailing child and two more, a boy and girl immersed in cellular distractions, the wailing child must desire a candy or attention or likely both, the smell from the back must linger on me as well, I wonder I should air myself out.

I'm at Taber's office, it is hardly seven.

They open at nine, but I should be more properly late, fashionably late as Americans would insist, or is that for women? perhaps politics has some sense of fashion to it, there they are, I spy two male citizens walking by Patriarch's Ponds under this fall sunrise, from this vantage point they are talking something Russian, perhaps about throwing me in front of a trolley, I can see my head rolling about, yes, that is what they are talking about now that I notice, as long as it were quick I would not mind, these thoughts are perhaps incited by hunger but there is nothing suitable nearby, well there is a diner, I fear me the people inside, but I must needs have sustenance, and money is light without Selifan.

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The pancakes, they are overly sweet overly buttered, what should I email Taber? I should email for an appointment at ten, apologize, what will the apology say? it could mention a sudden travel, Kingston, suddenly I am nauseous, we are done with these pancakes, we are done with this diner, we are done with this life and this unending pressure.

Should I...? I should, I shall rest myself on a bench, like these commoners, I am suddenly tired, waking up so early has hit me like a ton of bricks so to speak, I shall recover myself here, yes, on this sticky bedewed bench, a handkerchief will help, thankfully that part of my culture shall assist me in keeping—

It is nine, I shall make my appearance, I need to make it to Whittaker today, perhaps nothing from that, but, yes, against my better judgment, I must make my appearance early despite my email, perhaps he shall not notice the smell of bus on me.

Taber seems to have increased his girth since last I met him, the man smells my desperation, it is there before us, I am a piece of meat before him, the lion smells it, and here I am, the putty-man is having his way with me, but I have no choice, I need the money to flee, it is hardly Martinez' offer, but we shall be happy, we must be happy, we shall square away later this week, this transfer will get me on my way out of here, and I'm out.

These joggers do not realize how hot and difficult this sun is, perhaps it energizes them, insane, but today is a day of insanity, so how appropriate, I shall email Martinez, I should make an entrance in person, but that is not possible, not by a bus, we shall see what comes of this, I hope he maintains his word, a viper's word, a hiss and sudden bite, but beggars cannot be choosers of the snakes they deal with.

Another bus, that woman must have made her stop, the child is left behind, older now, a teenager awaiting his mother, perhaps when she comes he shall wail again, thank God and

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Google for cell phones, the brat is entranced, I missed Whittaker's stop, but I am early, it is post-noon by ten, and I should air out the smell of my desperation, I'm wearing eau de pretty fucked, the walk will help that, it is a brutal day for walking, but we Russians have suffered through Tsars, through war without guns, and through Presidents who are Tsars, a little suffering never hurt the Russian constitution, perhaps Selifan is right, it is the manure fertilizing the Russian soul, among other things it does to it.

Today is a special day of narration for me, I wonder how one suffers life without it.

I smell like outdoors and sun, lunch is in order, another diner, it is cheap, and again, the same not-dead souls in there, I wonder that our dead cast more ballots than the living, perhaps this is a fair service to offer, perhaps I was a herder of the dead in a former life, these pancakes are remarkably worse.

It is nearly time, I should enter a few minutes late but I am instead early, the desk-woman, how I forget her name, she is cold to me, I should try to open her generosity up some.

NOPE.

I should wait then, we shall see where Whittaker is, how strange, he is easy to make my acquaintance today, earlier than three, he seems lighter, mood as if he might start balloon-floating, and he offers a seat, and he offers—

Kingston.

The sentence was announced in a whisper, that is in accordance with the law, well, Russian law, but he told Whittaker, differing party truly doesn't matter, and it is too late, there is blood in the water and I am too late.

I am to be devoured.

I am endlessly plagued I do not hear what comes at me, nod, just only nod, nod and leave, the interminable—I cannot—interminable droning of my own soul being rent from me, no, being slowly chopped and packaged like headless sardines, I do

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not miss those wretched salt-things, none of the sea's majesty belongs in a can, and he is done with his speech, I do not recall a single word, he is asking me something.

Nod. Nod and leave.

We are done here, we are done, I am lost, there is one thing I must do now, I cannot, but I must, I am in deep shit, as the Russian colloquialism goes, I must follow the general's marching orders, march myself into the tepid Florida sea it seems to me, not a bad way to go, my death would be a cool reprieve from the blistering sun here, what did he say, no, he offered me nothing, he offered me my head or the souls' votes, I chose them, they are dead, I'd prefer not to be in their ranks if possible, it is now I feel the powerlessness of having no vote, I cannot vote, though maybe dead would be a different story.

I am to be Kingston's slave, this infernal bus again, drive me to Hell I would appreciate that more, I have no choice, another child wailing, mother indifferent smelling of cleaning sprays, she is bringing both of them to work, hers the cleaning and upkeep of the aristocracy, his the insistent suffering of life, mine the road paved with rich intentions, perhaps that is the lesson here, the lesson is Tchitchikov: fuck or be fucked, the general law of nature.

Tears, away, away, away, away...

March to one's death, if only it came quick, I see the American preference, we Russians choose as painful a death except over the course of a lifetime, I am a fount of learning today it seems.

I am here, O— is surprised, generous, kindly, points me in the direction, my feet carry me there again, and there she is, the poor girl, unawares of what I must do to her avuncular Fairwell, but I must, it is he or I, these are the decisions these days, Jenna is surprised and ecstatic, her uncle's goodness is extreme, and so is her vulgar verbosity and curiosity.

Her Andy has attached yet another patch to the denim quilt, this one ironic, "My other car is a consumer donation to a

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multi-national corporation," is it ironic, I ask, no, it is not, but here I am, I am a sick man, my bladder is unwell, I am unmoored from a decent bed to stay, they exchange looks, this is too much, too much to say to them.

But—there is something here, there is some blood in the water, they will drag me out of it, sympathy, sharks will abate for a night, there is understanding here, simply—I don't know—come this way, we shall, indeed, they shall help me for the night.

I am to wait for after-hours, Fairwell exchanges a look, I am not sure, maybe one of pity, certainly one of recognition, he walks bringing another constituent into his office, Jenna offers coffee again, I am sick but wise enough not to tempt more sickness this time, Andy talks to me, he is apparently the third son of a John Deere dealer, his father perished in a tragic landscaping accident, the details of which escape me, Jenna arrives, there is a long day ahead of them.

They train new volunteers, I am watching, this is the verbiage, word for word, of what she tells them, We must fight back, this is toward the end of her speech, Yes, we cannot let Fairwell down, he has not let us down, let us fight for him and for our future!

There is excitement here, they are preparing for a war, or rather they are in the deep stages of one, they will not palliate the infamies of Kingston, maybe I missed something at the fundraiser (I wonder what funds he might have raised!) but here it is, in front of me, the excitement of the people I will have to betray to save my terrible hide from that same Kingston.

They are off, no, they are back and off again, and there are no questions, not many, a well-oiled machine comes to mind, they are at task, these donuts are tasteful, sustenance is necessary, and at a fair price of free as well, this may well be the currency and dreams of these people, free.

It is over, Jenna and Andy guide me onto a bus, that woman and her bitter child seemed to have left for the day, the pair talk

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briefly, but thankfully they are quiet now, the mind spins, unhappy families find unique ways to unhappiness, these two are happy and alike, only I have found such a unique way toward unhappiness, mind spins and spins, a carousel, but I am further away from ejection of my breakfast and other meals, they jab another meal at me, something homecooked, a soft soft pasta with sauce, it was said a new person appeared: a man with a little dog (a new person? young and stunningly familiar?), but now here it is, a nice, soft, dusty couch, what I have been awaiting, better than a bench, this will suit me rather well, the events of the day—

Kingston.

I must ... I must keep him away ... I do not see how ... how phantoms can always outchase us, maybe there is a way around the inevitable, maybe I can dodge the fate thrust at...

Such was Tchitchikov's Tuesday.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Naturally, from a canine chorus of such executants it might reasonably be inferred that the establishment was one of the utmost respectability.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

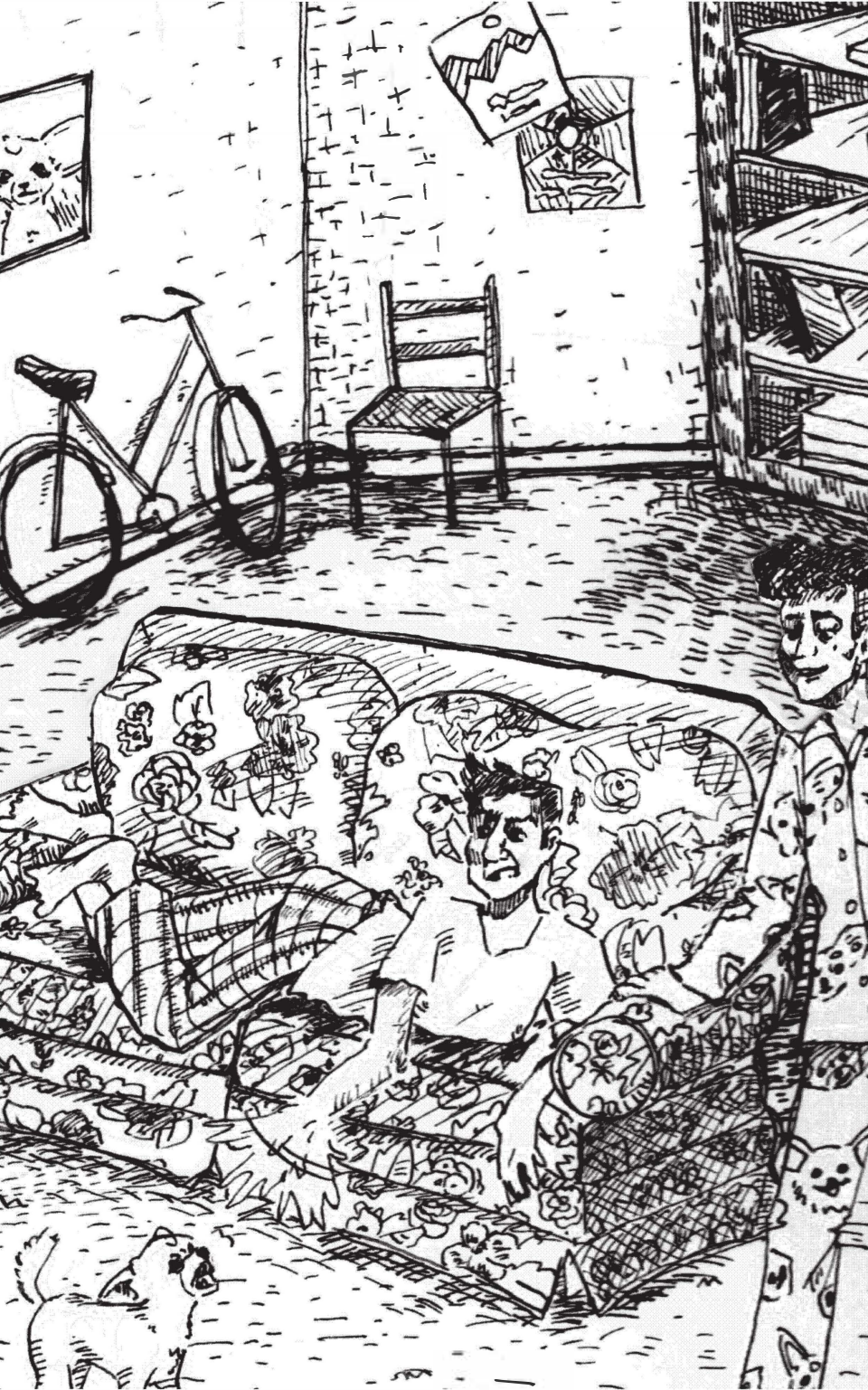
On Wednesday Tchitchikov awoke from his dream to the high-pitched yelp of a chihuahua mix. It growled and barked and, satisfied that it could do so with utter impunity, nibbled aggressively at Tchitchikov’s hand hanging over the edge of a rather uncomfortable couch.

The chihuahua mix soon discovered it was inaccurate in its assessments of Tchitchikov’s helplessness.

“Fie! Blasted hell-hound, be rid of me!” He batted it away.

“That’s no way to introduce yourself to Achilles.” Through tired vision Tchitchikov made out the rough shape of Aris, who donned blue and chihuahua pajamas. “Be careful, he can be a fighter. You want something to eat?”

Tchitchikov wiped the exhaustion from his eyes and assessed his surroundings: around him was a wooden chair and bike



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with a rusted chain, a nearly empty bookcase; above him was a ceiling fan, one blade missing, likely broken altogether; below him was a musty, flowered fabric couch and itchy-looking gray carpet; and within him was a growing sense of hunger and need for breakfast. “Yes,” he said. “I believe I do.”

“Okay,” Aris said. He turned back toward the kitchen and paused himself midway to consider something, “Do you like toast? I realize I don’t have much around to eat.”

“Toast is fine.”

“Do you want water? Tuna?”

“Tuna? Yes to both.”

“Okay, one second.”

Aris left to the kitchen. Tchitchikov sat up and rubbed his head. The last thirty-six hours were a blur to him, with the only overarching memory one of pain. He wasn’t sure how he’d gotten onto Aris’ couch last night, nor certain of nearly all of what transpired yesterday, but he was certain of one thing: many people would consider themselves fortunate to have such a place to rest, and Tchitchikov was not one of those people.

He faced Achilles.

“Now that your owner is gone, you should be as well. You see, I stare more viciously than you. And I needn’t bark, for my bite ... ah yes, my bite. That is my warning to you, mutt that you are.”

Achilles growled slightly, cocked his head, and left to the kitchen, uninterested in further conversation.

Tchitchikov took the respite to check his messages. He had none. He checked his emails, and he saw one from Senator Whittaker. His stomach growled. And one from Kingston, too. His stomach growled with even more agitation. Whittaker inquired about when he should expect Tchitchikov’s list of names and his contacts to getting their votes. Kingston’s email was simpler, and far more effective:

See you Friday.

Tchitchikov read and reread and, with each successive reading, his stomach turned further and further. He was addicted to the pain, much like Selifan—but no, he held himself back from that memory as well. The remaining memory was such: betrayal. *I must betray these people to save my—*

“Here you go,” Aris handed Tchitchikov a paper plate. There was, indeed, toast, though a little less golden and more blackened for his taste, and on top, a chunk and fibers of tuna. Tchitchikov noticed this and the band-aid on Aris’ left thumb as he handed him the plate.

“What is this?” Tchitchikov asked of his plate.

“Oh,” Aris held up the wounded thumb instead. “I cut myself on the can.”

“Can?”

“Yeah, the can of tuna.”

“Tuna comes in a can?”

“The can opener’s broken,” Aris continued. “Jagged little mofo.” He sat down on the wooden chair facing him and proceeded to eat his breakfast.

Tchitchikov looked down at his portion of toast avec canned tuna. Aris was eating the same, albeit a lesser portion of fish. Against his instinct, Tchitchikov forced the food down his gullet.

“Th-thank you,” Tchitchikov said, nearly gagging. “It was—thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Aris finished his breakfast hungrily. “You looked like you had one helluva trip last night.”

“It was a rather unfortunate excursion, yes.”

“Mushrooms, acid?”

“I hardly ate pancakes yesterday.”

Aris smiled. “Maybe a bad ganga trip, you know? Mind if I light up?”

“This is your place,” Tchitchikov admitted.

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“Yeah, but I don’t want to bother you. Or asthma or anything. Though that doesn’t stop me.” Aris lit up his cigarette and wolfed that down, too. “Do you—oh wait, you don’t smoke.”

“I do not.”

“Idiot tax, Jenna calls them. I wish I didn’t.” Aris shrugged. “So what’s your plan today? You coming along?”

Tchitchikov arched an eyebrow. “Coming along?”

“Yeah, we’re canvassing today.”

“You’re what?”

Aris laughed. “You said you wanted to help yesterday! But I get it, you had a rough day. You’re welcome to stay here whenever. The landlord is scared to come around; I keep telling him to change the carpet. Go rest up, you don’t have to come along.”

Tchitchikov recalled disparate parts of the previous day. He had indeed told Jenna he wanted to volunteer, though secretly at Kingston’s insistence. It was the only opportunity afforded him to save his scalp. He would have no choice, and although he told himself it was the unsettled tuna, which was not the most majestic fish he’d consumed, Tchitchikov felt a sinking feeling in approximately his belly region for saying this: “I should come along.”

“No, you don’t have to. Get yourself together first.”

“I would like to,” Tchitchikov said.

“Seriously, no. You look like hell.”

“That is no matter.”

“Yeah it is. You’ll scare the piss out of everyone we talk to.” Aris shrugged. “Just telling it like it is. Go relax. We’ll talk about this later. By the way, your water’s next to the couch. You probably didn’t notice it when you were staring at the tuna.”

Tchitchikov looked next to the couch. The water was there and, yes, he had indeed not seen it placed there because he had been studying the purported fish. Tchitchikov smiled,

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and when Aris went to the kitchen again, he investigated the glass of water: tepid, a slight feel and aroma of grease to the glass, and small particles on the bottom. It was not the most pleasing cup of water Tchitchikov had encountered.

“Sorry,” Aris’ voice came from the other room. “I shoulda told you, my water filter’s dead. It actually died like three months ago.”

Tchitchikov nodded. Aris re-entered, wearing his wool dress pants. “How do I look?”

Tchitchikov did the most American thing he could do and offered a thumbs-up.

“Okay, cool. I’m heading out. You can stay here. The key’s under the mat, but really, the door doesn’t lock anyway. Just shut it if you head out.” Aris gave a quick salute and left.

Tchitchikov’s walk around the neighborhood produced this:

Sights. There was trash on the streets. Trash everywhere. Where there were trees, squirrels were picking at the trash. Otherwise, it went unnoticed. Tchitchikov walked by a small furniture store, one that offered free layaway and rather sad looking dressers, and in the parking lot there was a car parked fairly permanently, with three of its four tires deflated for what appeared to be a long, long time. There also seemed to be either a liquor store or paycheck cashing business (often both) every other block.

Sounds. There was the omnipresent sound of bad music and garbled, deep bass. The lyrics played on a repetitive background. As Tchitchikov drew closer, he found the source to be something of a tailgating party: large, expensive vehicles with large, expensive speakers producing sounds for young

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men performing tricks on cheap bicycles. When they were within eyeshot, Tchitchikov adjusted his route.

Smells. The air felt stifling, though more so than usual, especially in the Florida morning. The air seemed to compress itself around Tchitchikov, likely the work of small, wrecked houses packed near to each other, which made it thicker and harder to breathe. A waft of urine and a dark trickle of it passed him by as a bearded man relieved himself upon the side of one of the abundant liquor stores.

Feelings. As in those of general and specific uneasiness. Nausea was present as well.

Tchitchikov cut his exploration short at the sight of two policemen lifting up a homeless woman and headed back toward Aris' apartment. But an errant turn somewhere, he was not sure where, had confused his tracking back, and Tchitchikov was reminded of the children in the woods with their bread crumbs, although he quickly realized that local gray rats would've feasted on his trail back. He came upon a pizza restaurant and decided to recover himself there.

Inside was a more tolerable smell, that of grease and dough, and a less tolerable heat in the air, despite the front and back doors, and the windows as well, being open. Tchitchikov sat at the counter on one of the few stools in a dazed state.

A female cashier walked to her register. "Anything I can getcha?"

Tchitchikov shook his head.

"Soda, slice of pizza?"

"No, thank you."

"The stools are for customers."

Tchitchikov sighed. "What do you have for pizza?"

The woman offered their menu of brief one-course meals. "I will take a slice of cheese," Tchitchikov said.

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As she went to heat the slice, two men conversed about the football season, apparently it had started not long ago, and about players and statistics and predictions. The discussion grew heated, yet it transitioned not into physical disagreements, but rather from verbal altercation to verbal altercation. They set upon talking about their families, and this seemed the loudest and angriest discussion of theirs.

“Yeah, my daughter is doing well! She just started fourth grade and already the teacher wants to put her in the advanced class!”

“My kid is having one hell of a time with his teacher, what a bitch! I can’t stand the sight of her!”

“Who is that! Maybe I can get Audrey into another class in sixth!”

“Her name is...!”

Tchitchikov came to the realization that loud was the volume in this part of town, something that he did not want to get used to, but that he might have to try to fit in. The cashier handed him a paper-plated slice of cheese pizza.

“Thank you!” Tchitchikov offered back.

“You don’t have to yell,” the woman said.

It was a slice of grease, as anticipated, and dripped down his arm as he lifted it. He closed his eyes, pinched his nose, and took a bite. One bite, one swallow.

The cashier and other patrons stared at him. Tchitchikov placed the food down on the counter. “I have a cold,” he said.

They slowly resumed their loud discussion.

Plan-maker that he was, Tchitchikov indulged his strength. Whittaker would need a demonstration and relinquishing of his souls today. Martinez would also need to be approached, and he should set a meeting with him to receive his payment. And Taber, he, too, would need one final meeting to exchange cheque and votes. But first, there was the matter of—

“AUGH!”

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Tchitchikov stared into the eyes of a young girl, no more than three, who tugged at his dress pants. Before he left for his walk, he had done his best to smooth out the wrinkles with his hand and a bit of moisture, the caveman's original clothing iron, but that careful work was being undone by a little devil whom it would be inappropriate to kick away. So Tchitchikov addressed her this way:

"Could you ... not?"

The little girl continued.

"Please girl, this is unexpected. Certainly, I do not wish to engage you."

More insistent tugs.

"Here, have some ... pizza." Tchitchikov cleverly prepared a win-win solution.

"Honey, don't take food from strangers!" The girl's mother glared at Tchitchikov and yanked her daughter away. The mother was barely in her twenties, by any generous account. "What are you doing to her? Leave my daughter alone!"

"Your daughter was harassing me."

"Really now?" She rolled up a sleeve. "So *my* daughter was harassing *you*?"

Tchitchikov offered the woman the remainder of his pizza to ensure peace.

Tchitchikov rubbed his cheek, certain a welt would fog up on it soon, and was indeed glad the woman exercised her sense of corporeal justice rather than involving the police. Things could've gotten dicey for the immigrant Russian, though, thankfully (he admitted to himself) he was not black. Then the police would certainly have engaged, and, should one peruse but one of the deluge of egregious police-on-black-man cell phone videos ... in any case, such is the nature of argument resolution in America. Tchitchikov got off easy.

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The sting of reality temporarily halted his plans: he would simply need to sulk in a place of safety, away from the prying eyes and prying fingers of the madding crowd. Rather than risk his skin, specifically the skin on his other cheek, in a neighborhood he could not navigate, Tchitchikov decided there was one place he could return to, one place he could now consider some sort of home, and that place was Fairwell's office. He plunked his change into the next bus and slowly navigated himself farther away, accidentally, asked the driver, and then navigated closer and closer to the office.

While the office was packed like a can of sardines a week ago to the day, it was, on this Wednesday, packed doubly so, much as a double-share of sardines in the same can. Jenna and Andy were out for the moment. All the seats were taken as well. O— smiled but could only offer but a bit of encroached standing space. Tchitchikov was, she pointed out, younger and more mobile than those who sat in the chairs. He sighed and agreed with her logic.

Fairwell shuffled out to the front of the office. He paused part way and glared at Tchitchikov.

"I remember you," he said.

Tchitchikov's heart pounded.

"You seem to be everywhere all at once. At least everywhere I am."

O— turned up from her desk. She wore a countenance of shock, but that was likely because she was shocked. She had seen her boss angry and agitated, but Fairwell had usually let it subside, for he rarely held grudges. But here was a grudge, and here her shock. She, and Tchitchikov, were speechless.

"What do you want?" Fairwell asked Tchitchikov.

Tchitchikov was cornered. There was nothing he could say or do, and now he was directly in Fairwell's path of fire. Everything hinged on this moment, and yet nothing came to

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him. So, for the second time in his life, he said the strangest, meekest words he could muster: "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

Tchitchikov nodded.

"You should be." He glared at our frightened hero. Fairwell walked past him and welcomed the next woman back to his office.

"Oh my God," O— said. "I'm so so sorry! I've never seen him like that before!" Which certainly supports what I said about O—'s shock. "Are you okay?"

Tchitchikov reeled in his mind a bit. He was uncertain how to take her question, other than at face value. "Yes?"

"Okay, I'm so sorry. I'll talk to him when he has a moment."

He calculated: he certainly was in the wrong in offering dead votes to Fairwell in exchange for a bribe. And he was sure O— would agree with this. But her concern—her rather genuine concern for him—was confusing, and perhaps to some extent, off-putting. He was certainly shocked as well, though in a different manner. He did not deserve her sympathy, not in any interpretation of a normal sense of morals. But he was hungry, and he took it anyway.

"Thank you," Tchitchikov said. "You needn't speak to him."

"No, I certainly will."

Tchitchikov shook his head. "That is fine."

"Are you kidding me? It's not fine!"

And, most surprising of all: "I deserved that."

This was another level of shock, one that, should Benjamin Franklin have been struck by lightning in the fable of the thunderstorm, this level was one ten times that, as when Franklin's wife looked on to see her husband flying a kite in a thunderstorm. Tchitchikov and O— both shared this surprise and shock.

"Why?"

Tchitchikov bit his lip. "I do. Please trust me, I do."

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O— nodded slowly. The reception area was quiet and more than pregnant with awkwardness: it was outright birthing new progeny of awkwardness. “Paul,” she said, “go get yourself a coffee, okay? You look like hell.”

Tchitchikov nodded and weaved himself between desks. The coffee was hotter this time, but nonetheless unpalatable. He placed the cup back on the table, remembering why he never sipped of the previous cups. He couldn’t find a chair to sit at, but backed himself against a wall and decided to make like a wallflower (even this saying confuses me, but let me clarify he was out of the way and observing).

He observed a young man conversing with a middle-aged couple on the verge of tears. His observations yielded that the couple were near tear-fall because he had lost his job, she was diagnosed with a serious malady, and they were soon to be kicked out of their shared apartment. The man was consoling his wife, which seemed strange to Tchitchikov because he seemed in as much a need of consoling as her.

He observed a young woman, shy and nervous, who whispered very nearly close to a mouse’s sigh. He couldn’t make out much about her story, but she seemed some sort of victim, and the woman she was talking to was likewise whispering, something about a police officer.

Tchitchikov observed these and many more, many people he hadn’t had a moment to consider. People from different walks of life, from the road more travelled, and not pleasantly so. People trampled upon and spat upon and generally regarded as extraneous, superfluous. Tchitchikov felt for them something new: he felt sympathy. It was a feeling that pushed out and replaced thoughts of himself and his own grand, crumbling plans. It was also, he hated to believe, refreshing to consider his luck in life.

“Oh hey, a crazy Russian!” Jenna waved to Tchitchikov from the middle of the main room. “Come on over!”

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Tchitchikov and Jenna sorted through the maze of desks into the small office next to Fairwell's. "I thought you were at Aris' place. What brings you here?"

Tchitchikov frowned. "I got lost."

Jenna opened her arms. "And now you are home!"

Tchitchikov almost nodded but was cut short.

"I'm kidding! But thanks for coming by. Did you still want to canvass? The day's almost over, but we can get you set up for tomorrow."

This time Tchitchikov completed his nodding.

"Great! Let's get you trained a little bit. Canvassing is really easy. It's even fun. So gimme a second..."

She brought him into the cramped training room. Jenna gathered a few materials and scooted a rickety folding chair near Tchitchikov; it took him too many moments to realize he was to sit in it. When he did, she presented him with a clipboard, a thick pad of paper, stickers, many pamphlets, and a couple "Fairwell for Congress" buttons. She pointed at the lump of paper.

"So these are the lists of people we'll be contacting. They're all registered voters, either with our party or independents." Jenna patted the stack. "Good ole voter registrations. Have you seen one of these?"

Tchitchikov froze.

"Anywho, they tend to be old and out of date, so half the time the people aren't there. So these are the addresses to hit up, and the people we *expect* are there." Jenna glided her finger on the packet. "This is where you mark them off, either supporting, unsure, et cetera et cetera. You'll want to engage these people in a conversation. It's important to connect with them personally. But you seem like a personable person. Right?"

Tchitchikov froze harder. "Then: example?"

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“Okay, let’s start here.” She placed a slightly less thick packet on top of the thick sum of voters. “Here’s a script. You don’t really want to use it, but it’s something you really should know and modify as you go along.”

Tchitchikov read it: it included painstaking directions such as, “Introduce yourself [[your name]]. Mention you are with the campaign [[Fairwell for Representative]]. Ask for the other person’s name [[their name]] and engage in personable conversation about...”

“Okay, so, example,” Jenna took in a deep breath and continued in a bouncy voice, “Hello, my name is Jenna! I’m with the Fairwell for Congress campaign! I would LOVE to...”

Jenna gave her spiel. Tchitchikov was unimpressed.

“Where do you mention the color of one’s dress?”

“Not everyone wears a dress.”

“Yes, but where do you make note of their jewelry?”

“Well, not everyone wears jewelry.”

“Okay, but how, how...” Tchitchikov reached, “how do you make them *like* you?”

Jenna scratched her head. “Okay, I’m not following. You give an example.”

Tchitchikov cleared his throat. “Okay. Hello. My name is Paul Ivan Tchitchi—”

“Give your first name. It’s more personable.”

“Paul. Let me say, you do look smashing today, and I am perhaps to understand that your hair might look as deep as a coral, yes, as exotic as a—”

“Paul.” Jenna stopped him there.

“Yes?”

“Are you flirting with me?”

Tchitchikov stared. “No. I am merely trying to get what I want.”

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Jenna shook her head. "Okay. Now that's cold. Look: we're trying to get their vote. You don't need to get their pants off, okay?"

"Well, I'm not sure why that wouldn't help."

Jenna thought of an initial reply but changed course. "Fair enough. Still, we want their votes. What you do on your time is your thing, right? Let's give it one more go."

Tchitchikov nodded. "Hello. My name is Paul Ivan Tchi—"

"First name. Let's try again!"

Tchitchikov sighed. It was to be a long afternoon of training.

Tchitchikov passed the remainder of his night in Jenna and Andy's company, feasting upon a far more palatable pie of pizza. Tchitchikov this time opted for their preference of terrestrial toppings over his hopes of sea food; that said, it was acceptable to his tastes. Perhaps that was because it was also a night of celebration, perhaps one too early, but such is the risk of spending quality time in the company of friends. Jenna and Andy were a treasure trove of stories about canvassing and politics, and should one ever doubt the perceptions of the lesser classes which, I admit, I have been wont to do from time to time (they are less glamorous, and yes, less beautiful, but their two eyes and two ears function just as well as mine!) then one should correct oneself and do so immediately so as to enjoy the tender company of people like Jenna and Andy. They related many stories, including "The Tale of the Temperamental Senior"; "Why You Don't Mention Your Last Name or Address"; "Young Children Lie Better Than Their Parents"; and "Beware: Guard Dog."

“But surely their dog is unfriendly,” Tchitchikov said between healthy gulps of clean water.

“My family had dogs growing up,” Andy said. “Jenna never had any, so she’s always been terrified of them.”

“Not all of them,” Jenna said.

Andy whispered loudly. “She’s still terrified.”

“No, I’m—okay, fine, go tell the story.”

Andy shook his head. “So in any case, the story, as *I am telling the story*, is that Jenna wanted to leave the place. She is—I mean *was*—terrified of dogs. Big deal. But we were drumming up support to fight the—I forget which bill.”

“It was that bullshit park safety bill,” Jenna said.

“Right,” Andy continued. “Basically some bill that closed parks in minority neighborhoods early. Anyway, the sign, Beware: Guard Dog. I read it and I knew this guy. This was an NRA-abiding hands-off-my-Constitution Super American. He had a vicious, man-killing Doberman and would shoot you twice after for good measure.”

Jenna hid her face in her hands. “Oh my God...”

“He’s going to vote for freedom. He’ll love fighting the bill, I just knew it. So, I opened the gate, which you should NEVER DO when there’s a dog sign, but it’s quiet. I knock on the door. Nothing. I ring the doorbell. Nobody. Dog and owner must be gone.”

“I hate you.” Jenna shook her head. “I hate you so, so much...”

“So, I forget, I think I go peek around the corner, see if the guy is outside, and I come back to the front door again, only Jenna is *screaming*.”

“Oh, shut up! I wasn’t screaming!”

“Bloody murder. She was terrified, shaking, freaking out. I’d never seen her so upset. So I—so I look around. The owner’s not bringing his machine gun, is he?”

“You keep making this part up.”

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“Wait,” Tchitchikov said. “Then what was happening?”

“Literally nothing,” Andy said. “Nothing as far as I could tell.”

“I really fucking hate you,” Jenna said red-faced.

“It was the literal end of the world. I just didn’t know it.”

Tchitchikov produced a very Russian scoff of confusion.

“At some point, Jenna catches her breath, and points at my feet.”

“Did you trample dog feces?” Tchitchikov asked.

“Almost! I would’ve noticed that. But there he was, everyone’s favorite warrior, Achilles. He was attacking my shoe. He very nearly undid a shoelace.”

Tchitchikov grinned and, against his better judgment, hiccupped a succession of quick, stuttering laughs. Jenna was, at first, confused, but then realizing her friend was not choking, but rather producing laughter, she responded in kind. “The beast!” Tchitchikov recovered some minor portion of his breath. “I should have known.”

“Whenever Jenna and I are out canvassing, I make it a point to risk life and limb to meet guard dogs and their owners.”

“Oh, shut up already!” Jenna captured some of her breaths. “I wasn’t freaking out like that!”

Andy nodded. “She was. But that’s how we met Aris.”

The three of them enjoyed their night together, and when they returned Tchitchikov to Aris’ abode, he was sad not to see him there. Tchitchikov turned off the light and lay on the couch, dangling his arm limply over the edge. A light nibble and generous licking came upon his knuckles, and Tchitchikov wished the warrior a good, peaceful rest.

“Good night, you Greek savage.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Without a friend, what are all the treasures in the world?”

—Tchitchikov, trans. D. J. Hogarth

The peace between Tchitchikov and Achilles was forged with kibble and carrots.

“There you go,” Aris said. “Yeah, slow. Offer it and he’ll come take.”

Tchitchikov flattened his palm with the last two bites of carrots. Achilles sniffed, then nibbled, then licked the last flavors of the snack from his hand. The ceremony was complete.

“There,” Aris said, “you two are officially friends. He’s more of a lover than a fighter, anyway.”

Tchitchikov sniffed his moist hand. “He seems more of a mouth and stomach than either of those.”

“Don’t even talk about the liver,” Aris said. He finished the final bites of his tuna-on-toast, dusted his hands, and then clapped once. “Okay! Are you up for it?”

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Tchitchikov nodded.

“Awesome. I’m so excited! Go take your shower and we’ll get going. You’re going to love it!”

Forty-five minutes later, Tchitchikov and Aris were on the bus toward Fairwell’s office. The lengthy ride was something he was getting used to and even strangely appreciating. He’d forgotten about the woman and her child that he’d imagined on every bus in Jacksonville, no, on every bus on the road. Those two had disappeared from his imagination, and in their place he saw a small family carrying groceries, an older gentleman conversing with an older lady, young men listening to music loud enough that their headphones projected it, and workers nodding off on their way to work. Aris and Tchitchikov greeted Jenna when they arrived and they took their canvassing packets from her.

Aris looked over the packet on their way out. “Oh, you’re not going to love this.”

“What’s wrong? Something is missing?” Tchitchikov said.

“Yeah, Jenna’s mind,” Aris said.

“Well, we can head back for whatever’s missing.”

“No, this happens sometimes. It’s just—” Aris shook his head. “You’ve never been to Happy Oaks Park, right?”

“No, why? I like parks.”

“Not this one. It’s a trailer park. And trust me, nobody’s happy there, either.”

Tchitchikov nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard of those.”

“Of Happy Oaks?”

“Well, no, but of the concept of trailer parks.”

“I’ll ask for another territory.”

Tchitchikov almost agreed but something akin to curiosity struck him at the last moment. “No,” he said. “We can stick with this one.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Tchitchikov shrugged. “Why not?”

Aris sighed. “Okay. Here’s the gameplan: stick by me. If things get dicey, just run the fuck outta there. Seriously. I can take care of myself.” Aris shook his head again, as if it might dissipate his incredulity at the territory before them; but the shaking of his head didn’t even disturb his neat hair, nor undisturb his disturbed state of mind. He shrugged as well.

“Okay. Let’s do it. Why not? Right?”

On their way to Happy Oaks Park, Aris pointed out the window. “Look, we’re almost there. Let’s meet up at that palm tree if we get lost.”

“Of course, but I don’t see—”

“Actually, if we can’t meet up at that tree, no, fuck it: head back to Fairwell’s. You good?” Aris stared into Tchitchikov’s eyes. “You good?”

“Well, now you’re scaring me.”

“Okay, good. That’s where you want to be right now.” The bus stopped and Aris stood up. “Take a breath: it’s the last breath of fresh air until we get through this list.”

Happy Oaks Park was everything Aris promised of it and more: it was a trailer park. There were, by my accounts, at least two things wrong with the name, but I shall not clarify so as not to scare you, my fair reader! Let us instead recall its far sunnier and happier past: in times of Spanish conquest, the area was home to a small subset of an indigenous tribe who had prided themselves on fishing and the toolmaking for such. The Spanish had heard tales of their fishing prowess from other tribes, and had heard of their peculiar method of diving off their fishing skiffs into the ocean water to harvest their catch, purportedly for hours at a time. The first meeting between the two cultures was cordial to the extent that one of the conquistadors caught fancy of a native woman. Their second meeting was less cordial, as the Spanish inquired as to her

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price, and their third meeting was their final one, with the Spanish having satisfied their curiosity about the tribe's ability to withstand the ocean's waves unaided.

Happy Oaks Park on this Thursday morning was as busy as it was on every Thursday morning, and the Wednesdays before these Thursdays, and every weekday, as well as weekends, too. The hum of air conditioners hummed throughout the mobile home park in those mobile homes lucky enough to have them. Aris flipped through the packet of voters and looked around, then back, then forth, then closed the packet and sighed.

"I hate trailer parks."

"Where do we go first?" Tchitchikov asked.

"I don't know. It's a trailer park. They all confuse me." Aris gave Tchitchikov the list and pointed at the top. "Here. Number one. No idea where they put it."

Tchitchikov held the list in his hands. There was something about it, something magical about the mundaneness of a voter registration list.

"Have you seen one of these?" Aris asked.

Tchitchikov nodded his head. He glided his fingers down the columns, the extraneous ones were cut, items such as the years they'd voted, where they'd been registered, only Name, Address, Party Affiliation and other columns for the data they were to collect. Tchitchikov smiled. "Where do we mark if they're dead?"

Aris looked over the list. "Oh, trust me, some of them are in a lot of ways. Some of them you'll wish were. Come on, I found the first house. Let's get going."

Tchitchikov pointed to a sign at the house, Beware of Dog. Aris laughed. "So Andy told you that story? Achilles didn't attack shit. But yeah, these dogs here, they're all crazy. This house is a definite skip."

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It took several attempts to speak to a John Concerned Voter, as most of the mobile homes there had guard dog signs. Eventually he came out. "What do you want?"

"Sir," Aris started, "we'd like to ask you for your vote for—" John Voter slammed the door.

The next few mobile homes ended up like this:

"Go away."

"Don't need to vote."

"Not buying."

"Get a job, you bum."

"I don't talk to commies."

"Am I a commie for telling you to vote?" Aris yelled at the door. "Whatever. We've got like fifty doors left, but I think we'll finish in an hour. Forty-two cee is this one here."

Tchitchikov knocked on the door this time. An elderly woman with tangled gray locks answered and, face to face, the two were stunned by each other.

Tchitchikov made a vague attempt at conversation with her. "Ummm, Miss..."

The woman smiled and looked around and nodded.

"My name is Paul. I'd like to inquire as to how you intend to vote next Tuesday. Do you have any preference for the Congressional representative race?"

She nodded.

"Great! Perhaps you can enlighten me toward whom you're leaning."

She nodded again.

"Fantastic, would it be Representative Fairwell?"

The elderly woman nodded.

"Great!" Tchitchikov looked over the script. "Aris, perhaps you could assist me?"

Aris shook his head. "Just watching."

"Okay," Tchitchikov looked over the script, "it says here that we can offer a ride to the polling place." He looked up at

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her. "Would you want that? Would you want a ride to your local polling station?"

The woman nodded yet again.

"I am glad to hear it! Let me see. When would you want to be picked up?"

She nodded.

"Right, so you want to be picked up. But what time would best suit you on Tuesday? Morning? Afternoon?"

She smiled and nodded some more.

"Yes, I see we are in agreement, but to clarify—"

"Thank you for your time, ma'am." Aris tugged Tchitchikov's shoulder. "Let's mark her a no."

"But I don't understand! I am—!"

"Paul, let's go. Let's call this one a learning experience.

Next one."

The next woman Tchitchikov spoke to was younger than her, by age, though not necessarily by wear of life's experiences. They discussed the race briefly.

"Why should I care?" The woman asked.

"Miss," Aris said, "we think it's important to participate in democracy, and to elect the best leaders who are up for the job."

"Why?"

"So they can pass legislation to help us," Aris said.

The woman shook her head. Then she laughed. Then she cackled, much as a hyena, nibbles of laughter on the larger carcass of life, until she finally sated her hunger. "Really."

Aris was stunned. Tchitchikov picked up. "Why, yes, would you not want the most beneficial policies for yourself?"

The woman's demeanor darkened into a storm cloud. "Let me tell you something. Listen, both of you:

"I have a stomach thing. Like an ulcer, but worse than that. I can't eat spicy foods, I can hardly eat anything. I went to the doctor, and he laughed me off. This was like, I don't know, five months ago." She ground her teeth. "Two months ago, my

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stomach burst. I was here, watching TV, watching Days of the World, and I tell you, it was the most unbelievable pain you'd ever felt. I've had two kids, almost twenty hours of labor each. Worse pain than that; you probably never felt such pain. The ambulance took me to the hospital. They stitched up my stomach. I still can't eat anything, except now I can only eat less, they cut a few parts out of it. My stomach is so small, I'm lucky if I can have a donut."

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am," Aris said.

"That's not even the best part," she continued. "The ambulance sent me a bill: almost three thousand dollars. Now, how the hell am I supposed to pay that? They keep sending it, and I keep throwing it away. I'm never going to be able to pay that bill. I'm on Social Security. Already that's gone down. Now let me ask you something: why the fuck on God's green earth am I supposed to care about—what's his name?—Fairman?"

"Fairwell," Tchitchikov corrected.

"Fairwell. Well, fuck Fairwell." She laughed more viciously this time. "What's he going to do for me? Pay my fucking ambulance bill? Does he want me to die? I don't give a shit. Kill them all." She slammed the door.

Tchitchikov and Aris stood in silence. The woman's story penetrated Tchitchikov to his core. He'd never heard such a pathetic tale, and had never met someone who was, as she might term it, "totally fucked." He stared blankly at the trailer door, mucked over with grime and a dusting of green moss, and could not compose any words, let alone thoughts to process what had just happened. But Aris, thankfully, had been able to do so.

"Let's mark her a no," he said.

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“You remember that lady?” Aris took a bite of burger. “I feel so bad for her.”

Tchitchikov nodded over his burger.

“I mean, man, this is why I hate doing trailer parks. So many people are just, well, fucked. Straight fucked. That lady, now don’t get me wrong, she’s definitely kind of nuts. But yeah, still, it’s not fair.”

Tchitchikov put his lunch down. “Yes,” he said, “it isn’t fair.”

“Not gonna lie, but she’s got a point.”

“Hmmm?”

“Remember what she said?”

Tchitchikov sighed. “I did not realize an ambulance was so expensive.”

“No, dude, about the—” he whispered. “About Congress. About killing them all.”

Tchitchikov took a quick survey of their surroundings before proceeding: no cops, no bystanders within immediate earshot, just two kids on bikes likely playing hooky. “What?”

“Yeah, she said ‘kill them all.’ Remember?”

Tchitchikov nodded.

“Well, not gonna lie here, but I want them dead, too.”

This is a moment that I should want to preface—though certainly that is too late, Aris has already spoken—with my views on this belief, that is, to desire of the literal extinction of Congress, these views are such: no. That is not what I want to advocate here, and perhaps Aris would not wish to—

“Dead. Absolutely.”

—then perhaps I am wrong on that account, and should not have spoken for the beliefs of our hero’s friend. Yet, I must again impress upon you the standard disclaimer, dear reader, that yes, although Aris is entitled to his opinion, it is not necessarily the opinion of myself, nor necessarily of

Tchitchikov, and that I must vehemently deny murder of said Congressional members—they are simply doing a job they are tasked with—though if one should feel they are not doing their job, nor up to the task, then the offending parties should be summarily dismissed, rather than having their lives rent from them. Violence, I hope, is not the solution here.

“But that’s just my opinion. I’m not far from fucked, myself. Achilles has liver cancer. He throws up yellow bile every now and then. If there’s one thing that’s expensive, it’s dog cancer. I’m not sure how I’m going to pay for the surgery.” Aris looked distant. “Dead: yes. Every last one. I think about it all the time. You know, I’ve never told anyone that.”

“Not even Jenna?”

“Heeeeeeeell no, she’d flip. She’s not one to hear this kinda crap.”

“Oh,” Tchitchikov said.

“Anyway, we gotta get moving. We still have to hit up half these places.”

The second half of the Happy Oaks Park canvassing list revealed these inhabitants to the two:

A young, tattooed man, perhaps younger than Aris, who worked at a local retail chain, and who subsisted (if that) on a paltry wage and even sadder health insurance. He would not have been able to afford any sort of home, or even rent, were it not for the unfortunate circumstance of his mother’s passing and bequeathal of her trailer to him. He admitted, despite the gruesome circumstances, that “I’m lucky to have even this.”

A young couple, two women, whom had been kicked out of their respective households in their teens due to their preference in gender of love (let us note: such a preference is still legal, thankfully!) and likewise struggled, though they were able to make ends meet. The one was a waitress at a diner, and the other served ice cream at a nearby shop, which, in Florida, is a year-long profession. The diner was less than

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nearby, and quite a bus ride away, which was affirmed by the deep circles under her eyes.

An older woman who fed a local contingent of cats on her doorstep (or perhaps trailer-step) and who had no need for people, only for more cat kibble.

An elderly widow whose wife had passed away, and whose bills exceeded his reduced income, forcing him to sell his house and move into a smaller existence in the world. All of these and more Aris had marked as a clear “no.”

Aris wiped sweat from his brow. “Dude, not gonna lie, but that was depressing. Let’s head back. I gotta get ready for work.”

“For work?”

“Yeah. I’m a maître d’ at this pretty upscale restaurant. Italian is overpriced, let me tell you. And our customers are stupid cheap, too. Bad tips. Let’s go.”

They rode the bus back silently. Aris nodded in rhythm to some unknown song playing in his head. Tchitchikov wasn’t sure if he was thankful for the introduction to those who belong to that unfortunate class, what I had termed some time ago “The Great Unwashed.” But he was sure of an indelible impression made upon him by these hopeless souls, lost and deadened by brutish life, and whether that impression were to temper his soul into something better, that is a distinction that either he or you can make, and one that I shall quietly remove myself from.

They arrived at Fairwell’s office and dropped off their materials. “How did it go?” Jenna asked.

“A trailer park,” Aris said. “What would you expect?”

“What do you mean?” Jenna asked.

“Never mind,” Aris responded. “I’ll catch up with you later. Gotta get to work.”

Aris left. Jenna turned to Tchitchikov. “How does it feel to make a difference?”

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Tchitchikov answered uncertainly. "It feels..."

"Don't let Aris get you down. Did it feel good?"

Tchitchikov didn't want to disappoint. "Yes." He nodded.

"Cool! So let me properly introduce you to him."

"Him who?"

"Fairwell. I heard you two had a bit of a tiff."

Tchitchikov stiffened. "I would rather not."

"Well, I would rather you did. You'll see, he's really a great guy. I think you two would get along."

Jenna nearly dragged Tchitchikov outside Fairwell's office. An elderly woman left, and Jenna knocked on the door. Fairwell appeared from behind the door.

"Yes?"

"Alex, I'd like to you meet Paul."

"Yes. We have," Fairwell returned.

The only sound was the steady rhythm of bustle in the surrounding room. Jenna tried again.

"I know. I'd like you to meet the real Paul. He helped Aris canvass today."

Fairwell's demeanor darkened. The storm, however, abated in a few moments, and he welcomed them inside. "Okay," he said.

Jenna explained the circumstances of Tchitchikov's arrival into the campaign, in lieu of Tchitchikov's own silence. She entreated the two to converse, and the attempt that came of that was such:

"Russia?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"St. Petersburg."

"I have a friend who moved out there."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

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There was an extended pause. Jenna itched to fill the void.
“See! You two have something in common!”

“I suppose,” Tchitchikov said.

Fairwell frowned.

Jenna smiled awkwardly. “Okay, well we’re going to get going. Have a good night!” She exited, and before Tchitchikov could follow, Fairwell spoke up.

“Paul.”

“Yes?”

“About our meeting earlier. Last week.”

Tchitchikov made a comically audible gulp.

“It’s okay.”

“It is?”

“You apologized.” Fairwell groaned. “I was raised to accept those. Apologies.”

“Okay.”

“And one last thing.”

“Yes?”

“Listen very carefully. I’m not one to mince words, as you probably know. I choose them with great care.”

“And what are those words?”

Fairwell cleared his throat. “You’re not a bad person, Paul. Remember that.”

Tchitchikov took in a deep, humid breath, and relaxed. “I have tried to remember that. That was some time ago, and my memory is not what it was.”

“Then try harder. Good night.”

Afterward, Tchitchikov made his way to Whittaker’s office on the public transport.

Senator Whittaker offered Tchitchikov a glass of whiskey. “Neat?” he asked.

Tchitchikov nodded.

"I'm glad you stopped in," Whittaker said. "I usually wait for Friday to come around, but this is an appropriate occasion for celebration."

Whittaker smiled, and Tchitchikov imbibed the fiery drink.

"Are we done here?" Tchitchikov asked.

"Yes," Whittaker said. "I have your dead souls. Maybe a little more. We are done," he smiled a crocodile's smile, "for now."

Tchitchikov nodded. He made his way past the teak desks, past the glare of M—, who no longer invited his company, and he left to one of the lovely parks of Jacksonville.

Tchitchikov was, to borrow an overused phrase, lost in thought. Even I could not tell whereabouts he was in his mind, only simply that he was buried inside. His noble intentions were thwarted, his plans teetering on tragedy, and, seemingly, turned against him: the wolf in sheep's garb was fleeced. (Never mind the quality of the costume's wool, likely it was a cheap polyester blend from a stingy retail store, but all you need imagine, dear reader, is that wolf with its tail huddled between its legs.) This was the start of Tchitchikov's troubles, and the initial opening to his labyrinthine stroll through his thoughts. He did not see the couples splayed out upon their picnic blankets. He did not hear the birds chirping incessantly their mockingly bright songs. He did not feel, either, the small sprinkles of rain lightly kissing his now-sunburnt skin.

Yes, my reader, as you have guessed, Nature seemed to sympathize with Tchitchikov's plight, as we both are, too, I hope, and She started to squeeze her clouds into rain.

The rain did not chill Tchitchikov, however. It pressed his vest and shirt against him, feeling tight like a snake's skin against his flesh. He walked through the park, the couples now packing up, the dogs heading home with their masters,

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a cat as well headed back, she participating in a leashed walk apparently, though much more frightened of the rain than the gregarious dogs. Tchitchikov planted himself against a tree, a deciduous and not a palm, and let the large drops fall upon him from the leaves.

And yes, while we could assume the weather was mimicking the internal turmoil of Tchitchikov's thoughts, let me remind you, this book is one of the realm of life, not of grossly clichéd fiction, and the weather neither felt nor conspired with Tchitchikov's dark rumination. Rather, the air chilled from its job of oppressing with heat and gave a breath of life to Tchitchikov, in addition to cleansing his flesh, and I would like to say, some part of his soul. His hair fell down upon his face, matted against it, and he simultaneously yearned for a return to his earlier life as a simple postal clerk, and for the return of his simple friend, Selifan.

Now you may ask of myself, this is not action central to the plot. And yes, you would be correct in your perception, my reader. But I include this because we all must, at some point in our time, put aside our dreams, our hopes, our troubles and our pains, and remind ourselves that, yes, we exist in nature, we are part of nature, and that a blade of grass is indeed no less and perhaps even more than the sum journey-work of the stars. We, too, are folded into that journey-work of the stars, and must be humbled, as our kind hero is, to accept these facts as they rush into our consciousness and flee from it in the same breath.

That, my reader, is why we must rest a moment and view upon Tchitchikov, lost in thought and doused in rain.

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Tchitchikov dusted the couch before he took his rest upon it. He stared up at the ceiling for some time, and then closed his eyes for some time longer. But his attempts at sleep were stifled by the insistent voices he'd heard throughout the day, and then by others he imagined were out there in similarly dire circumstances. He unsettled himself into a sleep far later than he had intended.



CHAPTER NINE

“A Russian driver has at least this merit, that, owing to a keen sense of smell being able to take the place of eyesight, he can, if necessary, drive at random and yet reach a destination of some sort.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Aris snored louder than a fire engine rushing to a four-alarm fire.

Which, I shall note, is a strange metaphor to use, as Aris was indeed immobile and certainly not going anywhere in his sleep. But he seemed to rush there, deeper and deeper into his dreams, his snores keeping a rapid pace, and his twitches signaling deep thoughts unknown to myself or Tchitchikov. Was Aris dreaming of a generous tip at his restaurant? Was he knocking on further doors and soliciting their owners' civic engagement? Or perhaps he was freed from the mundane expectations of this world, from his job and obligations, and was quietly walking with Achilles on beach sand, breathing in soft, humid brine-scent. But much as this story before you is a work of life, I feel obligated to re-remind you that dreams

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are made of baser things than reality; but what a noble baseness an honest dream can conjure! What simplicity and respite one can find in the mind's jumbled imaginings! I would like to say that Aris was living the good life in dream, up until a shudder from him, perhaps a sudden nightmare, disrupted his course, and he was thrust back into the cruel nature of our real, living world. His pacing about awoke our kind Tchitchikov.

"What is afoot?" Our Russian mumbled.

"Sorry to wake you," Aris replied. "Nothing. Just can't sleep."

With that, and with an aching head, Tchitchikov returned to the dominion of the Sandman.

In the full light of Friday morning, Aris was gone, leaving Tchitchikov to roll about in his perspiration gently soaked into the couch. Aris left him a note, *Getting dog meds. Thanks for canvassing. Let me know what you want for dinner.*

It was also a restless sleep for Tchitchikov, though not unfruitful, for he knew there was much he could square away today. He checked his phone, dimmed and waterlogged from the showers of the other night, and grumbled.

Achilles also grumbled, sympathizing with Tchitchikov's frustration.

"Much work lay ahead of me today," Tchitchikov told him. "And now this blasted thing is dead. That is the price of straying from your course. Now I have to recall the day's schedule."

Tchitchikov paced back and forth, followed by Achilles. The general knitted together his war-plans with his faithful lieutenant.

"Today is Kingston's victory," Tchitchikov told the warrior. "I must yield my defenses to him if I am to stay in this country. Perhaps the payments from Taber and Martinez will help me

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avoid a total rout. That is the best I can hope for.” Tchitchikov gathered his things. “I must be gone from you for good. I am sorry, my dear Mycenaean. I yield tonight’s meal to you.”

Achilles yelped once, an acknowledgment of the brutal cost of war.

After a brief half-hour of morning preparation, Tchitchikov took to the road via public transportation. His mind was spinning too much for him to notice a man sitting down next to him and humming. When this man left, Tchitchikov also did not notice a young man in bicycle garb replacing him, glistened with a coating of healthful sweat and emanating a powerful, we shall say scented scent. He, too, left, leaving Tchitchikov with only his thoughts and fearful anticipations. He sighed.

He arrived at Fairwell’s office, and to Jenna. She smiled and asked, “Hi Paul, where’s Aris?”

Tchitchikov could not make eye contact. “I am not sure. But I have something I should tell you. I must leave.”

“No way, really?” Jenna offered a hug that Tchitchikov declined. “Come on now! Let’s go chat a little. You’ve had a rough few days.”

“Surely you have other things to attend to,” Tchitchikov said.

Jenna waved him into the semi-private training room.

Jenna frowned. “Don’t say that! I mean, there’s always something to do, yes, and some place to be. But it’s more important to be available for a friend. What’s the point if I’m not? I mean, that’s what we’re fighting for, right?”

“Perhaps.”

“Anyway, what’s up, Paul?”

Tchitchikov slowly shook his head. “I must leave.”

“Yeah, where to?”

“Tennessee. It is where I must reside.”

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“What’s in Tennessee? Country music?” Jenna said. “You don’t seem like you want to go.”

“No. But I will be there regardless. I am sorry.”

“Okay. I see.” Jenna sighed. “I’m sorry, too, Paul. It was really nice to hang with you.”

Tchitchikov nodded. “Thank you for your kindness. You are a generous soul. There is no doubt of that.”

Jenna could no longer hold back: she hugged him. It had been some time, yes, since Tchitchikov had felt physical affection. There was the shock, yes, then acceptance, then a slight appreciation. He felt guilty.

“I should leave.”

“Okay. It’s a shame,” she said.

On his way out, Tchitchikov nearly bumped into Andy and his new patch: “This Jacket Kills Fascists.” He did not nearly bump into the man following him, a reddened and overly tanned man, now sporting a tattoo sleeve of a sharp-fanged bear from right shoulder to right elbow, biting into a symbol of hammer and sickle; nor did Tchitchikov bump into the heavily pierced woman behind him, mostly the same height, perhaps a few inches shorter, well adorned with thick patterns of tattoos and sporting long, dark hair.

“You,” the man with the bear tattoo said.

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said to Selifan. “I.”

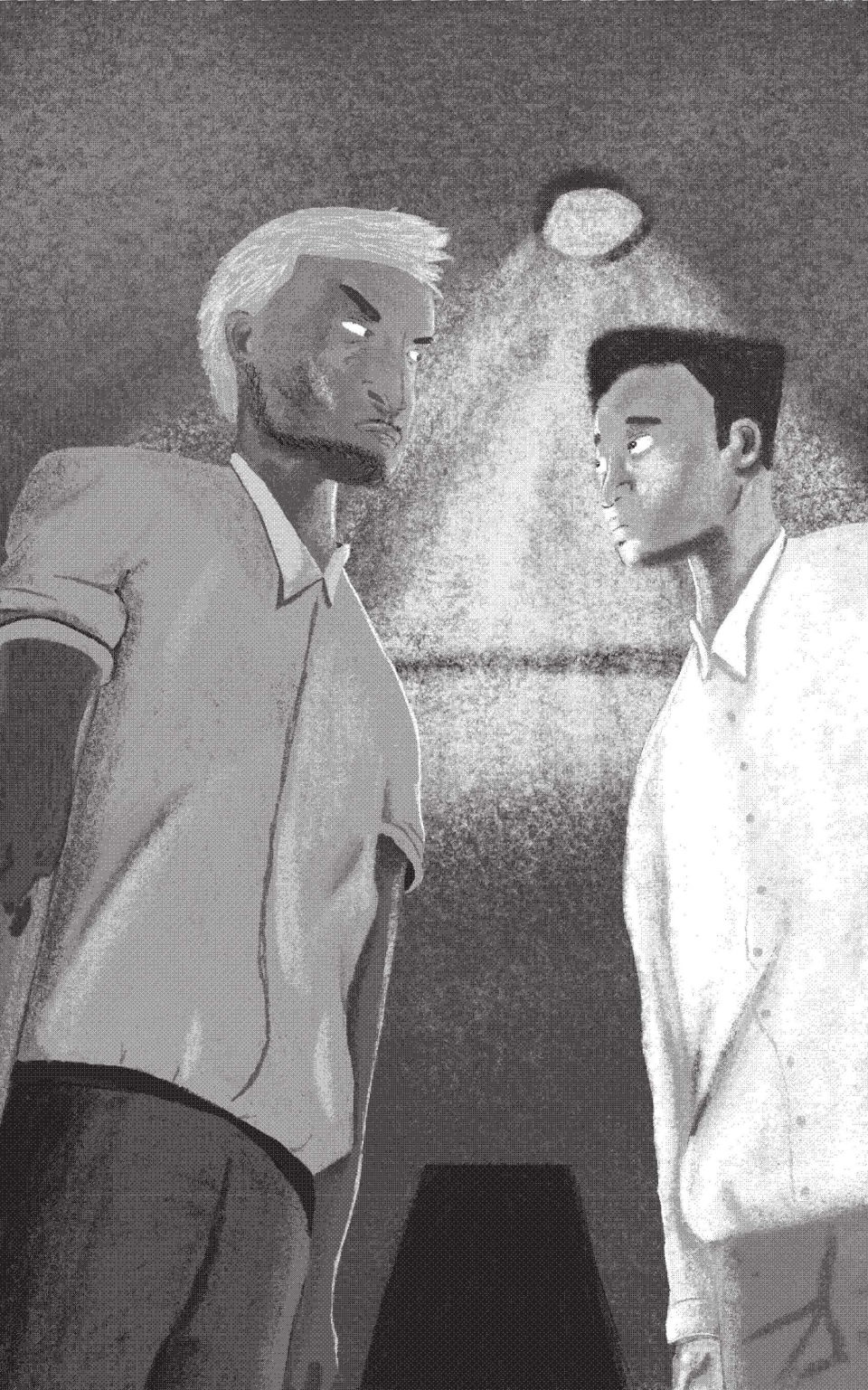
They sized each other up. Andy broke the silence. “You know each other?” He smiled. “I didn’t realize all Russians knew each other.”

The woman frowned at Andy. She offered her hand to Tchitchikov. “You must be Pavel, then.”

Tchitchikov nodded. He took a moment to realize he should shake her hand. “And you are...?”

“She is my girlfriend,” Selifan responded.

“Georgina,” she replied. “It is nice to finally meet you. Selifan has told me a lot about you.”



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Andy motioned for Jenna to come by. He whispered to her, "I told you they would know each other."

"Oh shut up," she replied back.

"I have some business to attend to," Tchitchikov said. "But let me say this: I appreciate your time and your help, dear friend. I am sorry that I was not a good friend in return."

Selifan was not sure how to take this confession. It is an unusual thing to feel much betrayed, and Selifan's instinct was to let his betrayer leave in that state as well, but that Georgina pinched him on the small of his back—an affectionate pinch, one of appropriate pain—to goad him into saying, "Thank you."

"Thank you for accepting my apology," Tchitchikov said. "I must be going."

"How is the—project?" Selifan inquired.

"It is nearly over."

Jenna interjected. "We'll miss you, Paul! Good luck."

"Good luck?" Selifan asked. "Why the good luck?"

Jenna butted in. "He's leaving for Tennessee. Right?"

Selifan tweaked his head slightly, half curious. "Why is that?"

"The project, let us say, is something of a failure. Its fruit is rather rotten."

"Then I am sorry to hear that," Selifan said. His stomach slightly turmoiled, but his deepest shock came from his truthfulness in his own reply. "I am," he confirmed.

"I have much travel ahead of me. Goodbye, again. You are a kind, forgiving soul, sincerely."

"Wait." Selifan turned to Georgina. "One moment, my darling. Pavel and I should talk separately."

The two friends crossed the street to a shawarma stand. "Here, choose what you may. It is on me. If this is to your liking."

Tchitchikov was well aware of the Lower Court ruling of *Beggars v Choosers*, and decided it would be impolite to turn down the free food. He ordered a pita wrap avec la avocado. For his first bite of the soft, green fruit, he found it thankfully rather unfruit-like.

Selifan took a hefty bite of shawarma. "How has this fruit of yours been corrupted? What has it flowered into? It is a shame to hear of its rot."

Tchitchikov's stomach was unstable, though not for reasons of street meat. Yet, in his hunger he forced a second bite down, and after that, "My plan has been found out. Kingston conspired against me, and I have already produced the votes gratis to Whittaker. I am going to get the two payments I can and be gone from this cursed state." Only Tchitchikov felt the absence of the full truth, of Kingston's threat against Fairwell.

Selifan said, "Then it's not a total failure, is it?"

Tchitchikov corrected him. "It is. Kingston wants..."

"Wants what? Just give him the votes."

Tchitchikov could not summon his courage to speak up. "Yes. That is what I shall do."

"Good then!" Selifan clapped. "Then why return to Liberty?"

Tchitchikov, at this point, was a man in a hole of his own digging. With the only tool at his ready, the ever-trusty shovel, he had two options before him: to shovel a deeper hole; or to not. We do not know the deep psychological machinations of why Tchitchikov, and the human animal in particular, feel they must keep digging themselves ever deeper into this metaphor, but to a man with a shovel, every problem looks to be dirt. We must necessarily move forward with the tools at hand, even if they move us backward.

"This is true," Tchitchikov mustered a smile through his lie. "Maybe I needn't go back."

"Excellent! Where is our first stop?"

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“First stop...?”

“Yes! We have some money to make, do we not?”

“Yes. I believe there is some small profit here. I owe you that much.”

Selifan's car was bumper-stickered with many slogans and advertisements for local businesses in the matter of only a few days. It still cranked up angrily. Georgina sat in the passenger's seat holding Selifan's hand, the two of them exchanged gentle sweetnesses to each other, and Selifan glanced occasionally into the mirror to check on his friend.

“We're almost to Taber's office,” Selifan said. “It will be something of a rush, but maybe we can also make Martinez today.”

Tchitchikov nodded. Selifan's payment was the least he could do, and he looked forward to some comfort of success out of the four-alarm fire of his foiled plans. Tchitchikov stared out of the window and into the pitch-dark cloud of his tangled messes until Georgina addressed him. “You know, I'm glad you two met up again.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said numbly.

“Selifan was worried,” she said. “I'm sorry, but you were! He wondered how you'd manage out here by yourself. You're really sweet, honey.”

Selifan blushed through his powerfully tanned skin.

“Anyway, I heard you two were trying to stick it to the man! Good for you.” Georgina gave her thumbs-up to Tchitchikov. “So cool to see people interested in politics.” She laughed. “Oh, I have something funny for you, Silly Selly!”

“Yes, my dear?” Selifan said.

“What they say is only a half truth! Russia is trying to *sell* the election!” Georgina laughed.

Selifan and Tchitchikov shared a large dose of confusion. “But I am no ambassador of Russia, Miss Georgina,” Tchitchikov finally said.

“No, it’s that—” she replied. “You didn’t see the last election? Buy, sell, it’s—no, never mind what I said.” She sighed. “I’ll make you laugh one of these days, Selly.” She pinched his cheek, seemingly a mite hard from Tchitchikov’s vantage in the back seat.

Selifan sighed and relaxed. “My dearest, I am a lucky, lucky Russian, so much so that I need not sell an election even to the highest bidder.”

Georgina laughed. “I’m glad to hear that! But I hope you two still make out well.”

Tchitchikov was shocked, and a sudden jolt passed through him. It was static shock. And after the static shock, Tchitchikov asked, “Georgina ... what exactly do you—?”

“Oh, Selly told me all about what you two were doing.” Georgina turned part-way to reveal a grin. “You two are pretty clever!”

The next shock Tchitchikov felt was that of betrayal. “Yes, but, still—”

Selifan glared at him in the mirror. “Yes, Pavel?”

Tchitchikov sighed. “No,” he said. “I mean, yes. Yes, we are rather clever. But perhaps not clever enough.”

“What do you mean?” Georgina asked. “It sounds like you snagged some suckers for your trouble. It must be good money.”

“More headache than cashflow,” Tchitchikov softly replied.

They arrived at Representative Taber’s district office. Selifan offered to join Tchitchikov in a show of moral (or more accurately, immoral) support. “Thank you, but I’ll see this one through,” Tchitchikov told him. “I must be careful. The putty-man has been getting impatient the past several days.”

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Tchitchikov entered the office. His aide, a young Mr. C— (since we have sheltered M— and O— in anonymity, we feel it only fair to extend our gracious offer to C— as well) welcomed him and called Taber. Tchitchikov waited. And he waited. And after that, he waited some more. It was some time before C— signaled him into the office in back.

“My, my, my,” Taber’s grin bared his hungry teeth. The leopard had—no, he was a lion last time, so let me maintain that metaphor—the lion had finished stalking his prey and was prepared for the feast. “Welcome back, dear, dear Tchitchikov.”

Tchitchikov produced his notebook and laptop. “I believe we have some business to attend to. I would prefer the payment up front.”

Taber shook his head and, inadvertently, his jowls. “I would prefer you prove your value to me first.”

Tchitchikov cleared his throat. “Very well. Let us go through our business.”

Tchitchikov opened his laptop and scrolled through the program. Taber was surprisingly agile when it came to matters of fraud, and he was quickly apprised of the scheme. Tchitchikov sent Taber an email with the required files and Taber grinned wickedly. “Thank you,” the representative said.

“And my payment?”

“Your payment?” Taber echoed. “I believe you have already received it.”

“I believe I have not.”

“Then I believe there is a mistake, or a miscommunication here.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “I believe there is.”

Taber grinned wickedly. “I will not turn you in,” he said.

It was at this moment that Tchitchikov’s stomach plummeted.

“That is my favor to you,” Taber said. “Be grateful.”

“Grateful?”

“Do not spit upon my gift,” he said. “Besides, there is something more I need of you.”

“Something more?” It was Tchitchikov’s turn to echo back.

“Yes, more. I take it this program is for only this Tuesday? Right?”

Tchitchikov nodded.

“Then you will need to provide me these votes for the next election. And the election after that!”

Tchitchikov was dazed: his fears coalesced in front of him, in the form of thick, fish-eyed and cruel Congressman. “You must agree,” Taber said.

Tchitchikov had only one thing he could possibly say to save his hide, and it was not this: “No.” Yes, that is what he said instead.

“No?” Taber squinted an eye in Tchitchikov’s direction, as if his bulbous eyelids would shield him from incredulity. “It is incredulous that you refuse.”

“No.” Tchitchikov stood up to hide his trembling. “It is incredulous that you requested. My answer is still: no.”

“Well then. ‘No.’” Taber took a drink of coffee. It improved his breath. “Allow me to answer back: no to your no. You see, Mr. Tchitchikov, if you want to stay in your beloved adopted country, by which I mean the United States of Glorious America, then you must bow to my demands. And my demands are to provide the votes next election, and then next election after that. That is not too much, is it?”

Tchitchikov calmed himself. “Anything you say is too much. I shall not accede to your demands. These votes today are what we spoke of, and all you shall receive. I am not your servant.”

“All I shall receive?” Taber laughed. “Wrong! Not my servant? Also wrong. You obnoxious little worm, you *are* my servant. Let me clarify something for you: a green card

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doesn't mean shit. It's nothing. It's worse than nothing, you idiot Russian. I own you. You want to stay here, you want to not get deported back to your communist Russia, well, then you listen and you listen very closely: I. Own. You." Taber clapped his hands. "This is something you can't escape. You are done."

Tchitchikov watched him salivate. "I agree," he said.

"He agrees!"

"I agree. I am done," Tchitchikov said. "Deport me. Arrest me. Shoot me, even. None of these things matter. I have fulfilled my obligation to you, bulbous cretin."

"Bulbous cretin? That's brassy."

"The truth shines better than brass. Now, threaten all you wish, and I will wish upon you something far, far more sinister: I wish upon you the watering of your own conscience, so that it might grow within you." Tchitchikov set his sights upon him. "You need it. You need to understand the reckoning that is to come your way. Elsewise, you shall be caught off guard and pulled into the deepest pits of hell. I wish you this sinister thought, that you discover your iniquity and yet have a chance at repentance."

The lion was stunned. "The brass on this one! Come on, how—no, where did this insolence come from? I think maybe you don't fully appreciate your situation in my country, you grimy little—"

"Your country?" Tchitchikov shook his head. "Hearing this makes me sad. That is what I had wanted, too, long ago. I wanted this country. I wanted it to be mine. But here is the secret, and open your ears for it: that is not possible. What you love of my adopted country, its freedoms, its extravagances, its fifty flavors of soft ice cream, even, all these melt down your hand when you grasp for them. It is the butterfly in the savannah: you open your hand, it may land upon it. You grasp for it, it is no longer the butterfly you have sought. Do you

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understand? It is dead. I hope you realize this before you have your carcass of a country laid before you.”

“Why do you think you can leave? Don’t walk away! We have plans, we have arrangements to make!”

Tchitchikov arranged his hand as such: one finger up, three and a thumb folded in. “I owe you nothing further you vile, fish-putrid vote-monger.”

Selifan, Georgina, and Tchitchikov approached Alachua County in the early afternoon. “I’m sorry to hear the plan did not work out,” Selifan said.

“It is something I should have anticipated,” Tchitchikov said. “A little more preparation and I could have avoided much of that disaster.”

“You have done your best,” Selifan said. “Come, now, we are but a few roads away from a payday. You said Martinez will pay?”

“He will pay,” Tchitchikov said uncertainly.

“You have come for your payment,” Representative Martinez said.

Tchitchikov’s trepidation was similar to the tight-rope walker’s after having dropped his balancing pole. He felt eyes upon him, and worse, these now were Martinez’ eyes, the same eyes that sucked all light into their orbit and let nothing escape.

“Yes,” he said, “I would appreciate a payment for my services.”

“Then you shall receive,” Martinez said. “Let us view upon these services.”

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Tchitchikov opened his laptop and navigated Martinez through the voting software. He sent a copy via electronic missive to the Representative, and although Martinez made no outward sign of it—again, emotions and thoughts are irretrievably sucked into him—he was satisfied.

“This is good,” Martinez said.

Tchitchikov was wary. “I believe we agreed upon a price of twenty per soul.”

“We did,” Martinez said, not budging.

“Yes.” Tchitchikov slightly trembled.

Martinez sat again in his leather executive chair. “I believe new information has come my way.”

“I believe it might have.”

“This new information requires careful thought.” He sipped from a new mug—a gift from his wife—with the vertical text of “Perfect Exciting Responsible Venturous: My Julio.” Martinez placed the mug down again. “The careful thought yields this: that you are at a certain roadblock.”

“Meaning?”

“That I, among others, am blocking your stay in this country.”

The room filled with the quiet anticipation of a terrifying fall from a stupendous height.

“But it is no matter,” Martinez continued, “for I am not one to hold grudges, and I suspect neither are you. I believe we shall be of use to each other later on down this road, so I shall not block your path. You may remain here yet. Do remember my generosity.”

“Your generosity?”

“Oh yes, speaking of which,” Martinez stood up. “I believe I owe you a payment.” He removed his wallet from his pocket and produced a bill of twenty dollars. He placed it on his desk. He smiled, “Your payment.”

Tchitchikov felt a chill. “This twenty is for...?”

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“For payment of your soul. I am buying your freedom. These other souls, they are, shall we say, in God’s hands, and you cannot offer what is not yours.” Martinez’ smile grew, as he felt what he said was rather clever reasoning. “Take it.”

“So, you are saying that you purchase my skills for the price of twenty dollars.”

“Yes.”

“And you would graciously not thwart my presence here.”

“Yes.”

“Then I must say this: no.”

Martinez shook his head. “This is not an offer you should want to refuse.”

Tchitchikov bent forward. “And yet I shall. Do you know why?”

“You are stupid.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “I cannot deny that. But you cannot deny this, that you live on a lake of ice, and what you do not realize is the heat of your anger thins your cold ground. You shall fall through, and you know it. And I know that, when you do, you shall grasp like a child to any nearby object to yank yourself out of the icy dousing; that shall not be me. Go in, chill your soul further—should that be possible—and realize that this is something that you have crafted of your own design. You know this to be true.”

“Are you mocking me?” Martinez asked.

The room was silent. They both did not anticipate a slight heat from Martinez, nor the formulation of his first question in several months.

Tchitchikov grinned. “If truth be a mockery here, then yes.”

“Very well,” Martinez said. “Then leave me as a foe. Know that I did speak the truth earlier as well, that I do not hold grudges. But I do hold memories, especially unfond memories of my foes.” Martinez waved his hand toward the door. “You may leave now.”

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Tchitchikov stuck his head out of the car window on the way back.

“This is doubly unfortunate, my friend,” Selifan said.

“I’m sorry the plan didn’t work out,” Georgina said.

“No,” Tchitchikov yelled, “it is working out better than I’d hoped.”

“What do you mean?” Georgina inquired.

Tchitchikov pulled his head back in. “If my plan were to succeed and I receive their money, even then would I be indebted. I would always be on my hands and knees to someone, even if others were on their hands and knees to me. I understand now why the American is so obsessed with freedom: I have tasted it. It is frightening, like the first fall of a rollercoaster ride, and there is that chance of never breaking that plummet, that’s what shook my body at first. But now, after that fall—am I mixing metaphors? perhaps—I have felt the nubs of my wings stretch and course me through a rocky ride on the wind. It is no longer a fall, it is a flight! It is terrifying, it is deadly, but anyone who tells you otherwise is your captor!”

Georgina turned the volume of the radio down a few ticks. “Selly, dear, what is he talking about?”

“Pavel is intoxicated by freedom.” Selifan glanced at Tchitchikov, “This is something I should have—”

Tchitchikov resumed sticking his head out of the window.

“Something I should have warned you about!” Selifan finished. He turned to Georgina, “My Georgina, there is a little explanation to be had here. The Russian soul is composed of equal parts fear, tyranny, suffering, and death. Of these, we look forward only to the release that is death. The others

we appreciate insofar as they guide us toward that release. Pavel has tasted but half of death, the part of it which you call 'freedom,' and has gotten himself rather inebriated."

Tchitchikov yelled out the window. "Inebriated indeed!"

Selifan continued. "So what Pavel is feeling, then, is something alien to the Russian soul. It is a full-bodied wine to an unfortunate child. Poor, poor Pavel."

"Okay, I get the child part," Georgina said, "but that still doesn't explain why he's basically drooling all over your car door."

Tchitchikov howled into the wind. "I am more courteous with my drool than that! I have a handkerchief—here—though what's a little drool on the car? It is American-made, and intended to be drooled upon." He patted the door.

"Well look at you!" Georgina shook her head. "You *are* excited! And you can control some of your precious bodily fluids."

"Dear Pavel," Selifan yelled out his window, "you are scaring my lovely lady!"

Tchitchikov took one last breath of hot, humid air and returned himself and his thoughts to within the car's cabin. "My apologies, dear Georgina."

Georgina raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I mean, I knew you'd be weird, but..."

"But?" Tchitchikov asked.

"But Fairwell didn't request your votes," Selifan asked, "correct?"

"No, he did not."

"Then perhaps there is one last play you may make," Selifan said. "You may ask for his protection."

"Ah, that is—" Tchitchikov's excitement immediately deflated. "No. I do not understand what you are saying."

"Fairwell may have some protections to offer you."

"Yes. Why?"

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“Because he’s a good guy,” Georgina added.

“Yes.” Tchitchikov admitted, “I’m not. Why me?”

“It is worth the asking,” Selifan said. “And nothing ill could come of it.”

“Yes, true, but we are not exactly the best of friends.”

Georgina said, “Just go for it. Better to try than not to. Right?”

Tchitchikov sighed. “Perhaps.”

“He seems to have come back down to earth,” Georgina told her Selifan.

“Yes.” Selifan sighed. “Though I do like him better when he’s snubbed authority.”

“Pavel,” Georgina said, “how fun was it to tell those two jerks off?”

“Tell those two jerkoffs what?”

“No, well—”

“It was a flat joke, Miss Georgina.” Tchitchikov laughed his snickering, giddy laugh. “But that verbal smiting, it felt as powerful as wielding a hammer to smash my own manacles.”

Georgina was confused. “Smiting? Manacles...?”

“Liberation is the deepest thrill one may ever get. One must always eschew banal authority.”

Georgina turned to Selifan. “Honey, is he still talking English? I haven’t heard these words since I was in high school.”

“That is how we get,” Selifan shook his head. “My dear, consider it this way: consider the excitement one finds in love. I have felt giddy since I had met you and you dared me to eat that whole pizza.”

“And I still can’t believe you did it,” Georgina retorted.

“Yes, I did! And somehow survived to tell the tale.”

“Awww,” Georgina said, “you’d die on a pepperoni slice for me.”

Selifan laughed. "Yes, so please do not ask that of me. But in love, we find parts of ourselves that were lacking, and to Pavel, no, to every Russian that has come out of our country, we all lack that thing that you twirl your flags for and makes you sing off-key and ignite colorful explosives: that same freedom I had mentioned. This is what he has imbibed, a draught enough to fill the soul." Selifan turned to Georgina. "As much as a draught of your love—"

"Road, darling."

Selifan turned his eyes back on the road. "Yes. In any case, Pavel has gained freedom and thereby lost his mind. Perhaps it takes a true Cossack to fully appreciate the intoxication of American freedom!"

"Okay." She shrugged. "Freedom. Go 'Murica."

"Yes!" Tchitchikov pulled his head into the car again. "Exactly! We should be proud of the freedoms that we have!"

"Yes. Proud," Georgina replied.

"There is many a nation on this planet that denies these very rights!"

"Of course. I might know of one," she replied again.

"We certainly all have seen it, I am sure."

"I'm being sarcastic, Pavel."

"Yes! Be sarcastic! The Russian rebellion thrives in irony."

Georgina sighed. "We hardly have any rights in the US. Have you seen what's been happening for the last, I don't know, my whole life?"

"I have seen it," Tchitchikov said, "and it is horrible and atrocious and that is exactly why we must always appreciate those rights we have, so that we may fight for the remainder ahead."

Georgina nodded. She fiddled the radio dial to land on a nondescript talk channel.

"How does Fairwell take his dinner?" Tchitchikov asked her.

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Fairwell nearly choked on the question and on the second forkful of the peace-offering pad thai. “And you think I can help how?”

“This is perhaps a mistake,” Tchitchikov said.

“Yes, and your fraud is another mistake.”

“Yes, you are correct. I shall relieve myself from your presence.”

“Not yet,” Fairwell said. “Let me think.” He stood up and paced back and forth, though a quick back and a quick forth, for his office floorspace had been encroached upon by more boxes of files since last Tchitchikov had entered. “I think, no, maybe you could...”

Tchitchikov performed a quick calculation. This time, he did not need a second adjustment to make it. It was simple. “I must receive the bullet.”

Fairwell grasped Tchitchikov’s shoulder. “Kill yourself? Nonsense. That’s crazy talk.”

Tchitchikov was perplexed. “No,” he said, “I mean eat the bullet—no, actually, the expression is bite the bullet. Still I don’t understand this expression. You don’t test lead like gold.”

Fairwell scratched his graying hair. “You’re a weird one, alright. I think you’re right, though, you have to bite that bullet. Let me tell you a quick story.”

Tchitchikov relaxed his anxiety, or rather, Fairwell’s kindness gave him the space to do so. Such is the nature of compassion, in that shared passion—pain—lightens and diffuses a burden borne by one. But that, reader, is also basic, simple math: pain divided by two is halved.

“This is a stressful job, and—no, I can’t really let myself off that easily. But it is. A few years ago, I cheated on Martha, my wife. I did. It’s a shameful thing I did, and, at first, I couldn’t even admit it to myself, let alone come to tell her. The girl

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was young—well, in her forties—but you get the idea. I was ashamed.”

Fairwell looked around and found a cup of water nearby. He imbibed the drink and continued. “For four months, I’d felt the worst I’d ever felt. I was a prisoner. I thought everyone was talking about—about my shame. It was strangling me, quite honestly. I was terrified. I thought, let’s say, a lot of thoughts.” He reddened. “It was bad.”

Tchitchikov recognized the moment of one baring one’s soul, and not in the presence of alcohol. He shouldered some of Fairwell’s burden.

“But, one day, I thought to myself: I have to end it. End the whole blasted thing, one way or another. So, I did. I made that promise to myself, and I gathered my courage for the most difficult, the bravest thing I’d ever done. I told Martha. She knew. She saw it eat at me, and while she was broken and shattered by my betrayal, there was also that deep sigh of relief from the depths of my soul. That’s the nature of hiding in the shadows. It crushes you, it hides your good in the shadows, too. And to let that out, that kind of release...”

“It’s a breath of fresh air,” Tchitchikov said.

“Up from the depths of the cold sea. Yes.”

“I see,” Tchitchikov said.

“You may not believe it, but these moments, these mistakes in our lives, they are the greatest opportunities to believe in our better angels, to reconstruct our faith and, well, I found it renewed me. It gave me something, a vision I’d never seen before.”

“And that is?”

Fairwell grunted. “Run away. Politics is hell. And I suspect you see that now, too. Don’t ever, ever get sucked into it. It will suck you dry.”

“But you have been in Congress for...” Tchitchikov could not come up with the number.

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Fairwell did. "Fourteen terms. Twenty-eight years." His eyes glazed over. "That's a long time."

"Then why are you there? Why are you running?"

"I need to save this world." Fairwell continued in a whisper. "Or needed to. But, from what I've seen, fuck it, Paul."

Tchitchikov's stomach plummeted. "But—but—"

"You have not seen what I have," Fairwell resumed his normal volume. "And you have not been through what I have been. So, I beg you: bite the bullet. Get out of here, get out of politics. Save yourself. That's the best you can do here. That's the best anyone can do these days, and all we can try to do."

Tchitchikov trembled. "That is..."

"The best advice I can give," Fairwell said. "So please, take it."

Tchitchikov was in such a daze that Selifan could hardly get through to him; he mumbled something to his friend. O—made an attempt for Tchitchikov's attention as well.

"Aris was just looking for you. Did you...?"

But Tchitchikov, stunned, did not hear about Aris' inquiry, and instead he smiled and left Fairwell's office for a walk. He was half-certain he left an outwardly positive impression upon them.

Tchitchikov started regaining himself on the bus. His smile quickly soured. He was uncertain of what he was doing for some time, and managed to keep the day's final destination a secret, even from himself: he had one last gift to offer. As the bus drew him nearer to Kingston's campaign office, he noticed the streets packed with cars, expensive BMWs and Mercedes and other cars of foreign ilk. There was a crowd outside the office, through which Tchitchikov awkwardly maneuvered, squished between a smattering of young rich white men and old rich white men and, on occasion, their

wives. Inside the office, Tchitchikov tapped one of them on his shoulders.

“James?”

The man turned around, wearing an amicable smile. Tchitchikov recognized him as a Kingston, but not the appropriate one. “He’s in the back,” the Kingston replied, pointing through the crowd.

Tchitchikov attempted to navigate himself through the glob of self-important people—perhaps they were packed over the fire code, and no matter, for many higher-ranking police there certainly would have noticed—but he found himself “lost in the shuffle,” so to speak. There was no way to deliver his final, shameful prize.

Tchitchikov located a table of beverages of varying strengths and picked up a glass of red wine this time. He nearly bumped into a man who picked up a chilled glass of white. A masculine hand grabbed and squeezed his shoulder. Turning, he met his foe.

“What are you doing here?” James Kingston asked our hero.

Tchitchikov took a healthful sip before responding. “James, I have something for you. Fairwell, he and his wife, he—”

“Really now? Well, let me say something, you idiot Russian: you’re late to the party. Never needed you. We’ve practically won! So, you can kindly get the hell out of my hair.” Kingston shook his shoulder. “Now.”

“What do you mean?”

“This kid just gave me his spiel: Fairwell cheated on his wife. The TV will have a field day with him; thank God and Jesus for twenty-four hour news stations.” He laughed. “And, just between you and me—and everyone here—a little bit of money makes everyone brave. Brave enough to step up and reveal the truth.” He lifted his glass and shouted: “TO ARIS!”

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A few of the nearby partygoers turned to James, and one of them, perhaps a brother or a cousin or some other relation, patted him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“No no no, I’m fine. I handle it *quite* well, I assure you. Almost as well as I handle my victory.” James turned to Tchitchikov. “You should watch the news tomorrow, my friend.” Tchitchikov’s stomach plummeted. “Now get the hell out of here,” he finished.

Tchitchikov’s nausea turned his head around and around. He made his way through the crowd outside and turned the corner. He dropped the glass of wine, its contents bleeding out from fang-sharp shards, and bent himself against a secluded wall.

CHAPTER TEN

“On first speaking to the man, his ingratiating smile, his flaxen hair, and his blue eyes would lead one to say, ‘What a pleasant, good-tempered fellow he seems!’ yet during the next moment or two one would feel inclined to say nothing at all, and, during the third moment, only to say, ‘The devil alone knows what he is!’”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

“I’m going to kill him,” Jenna said.

And, at approximately two o’clock in the morning on a Saturday, in Jenna’s and Andy’s apartment, after much drinking and much cursing of Aris and his ancestors, Tchitchikov found himself in the awkward situation of silent disagreement: Aris’ betrayal had spared him from his own.

“The only question is: slow and painful, or ... no, it’s slow and painful.”

“Jenna...” Andy said.

“That lying little shit,” she returned. “I never, EVER should have trusted him. Where the hell does he find this bullshit?”

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With a clam's sense of the situation, Tchitchikov's voice stayed trapped in his lungs.

"The fuck, Andy? Why would he do this?"

Andy shook his head. "I don't know. Money? Power?"

"Who's going to believe him?" Jenna asked.

Tchitchikov replied, "It doesn't matter. All that matters is there are three days to the election. Even a lie cannot be diffused fast enough." He re-clammed himself.

Jenna shook her head. "Well, in any case, he's going to be dead."

Through the morning, Andy verbally fanned Jenna to cool the flames of her anger, though the only real result was the fanning of her flames of anger. A slight miscalculation! Tchitchikov laid in their spare "bedroom," a storage room laid out with a few blankets, and slept even worse than the night before. He stared at the ceiling in a vain attempt to tune the couple's arguments out, and in a few moments the sun rose through the smudged window. Tchitchikov groaned.

Jenna sat at their kitchen table and sipped from a cup of chain shop coffee. "Hey, Paul," she said.

"Hello, Miss Jenna." Tchitchikov's vocal cords could have been through a blender. He coughed and yawned. "I am sorry for Aris'—"

"No," she said raspily. "Please don't apologize. And definitely don't say his name."

"Okay," Tchitchikov said. "I won't."

"I'm sorry if I kept you up."

Tchitchikov shook his head. "It is fine. I should—" he yawned again, "—prepare for the day. I wonder what lay ahead."

"Do you need a ride to the train station?"

Tchitchikov seized. It was perhaps a slight shock—which I cannot attribute to static electricity, since he was neither seated on fabric nor standing on shag carpeting—but I could

well attribute the shock to the pang of a growing conscience. He stumbled, verbally, I should clarify, though the light night of sleep was nearly enough to make him stumble physically. “No, well, that is, umm, I should—” Yet he recovered some semblance of clarity, “I could do so at a later date.”

Jenna forgave him his befuddlement and attributed it to a lack of proper rest. “Okay, then. I’m sorry for keeping you up.”

Tchitchikov shook his head. He pulled out his cell phone—yes, it was still waterlogged, darkened blotches of water spread through the screen where it had invaded it—and he added an eye roll to his repertoire of morning head shaking. “Oh, this is right, you blasted, infernally cursed contraption from the deepest parts of cancerous nuclear technology—”

“What’s up?”

Tchitchikov revealed his phone to her. It was, sadly, still dead.

“Hold on, Paul.” Jenna crept open her bedroom door carefully and closed it again.

Within the room were moans—no, that was not happening, you foolish reader, these were moans of light sleeping and general exhaustion—and Jenna tiptoed out and gently closed the door again. “Here you go. You can keep this one. It’s an extra.”

Tchitchikov noted a few things about the free cell phone offered to him: it was shattered, much like his soul; its battery was low on energy, much like his disposition; its sound was garbled much like his thoughts; and it was small, very diminutive, much like his (fend those foolish thoughts away!) current ego. The phone was also plastered with and likely held together by ridiculous cartoon animal stickers. Unlike Tchitchikov, I should note.

“It’s not much, but it still works. I think.”

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Tchitchikov placed his card in it, and the first thing the phone wanted him to know was that he was not much sought-after: it buzzed one cruel little message to him.

Dear destroyed Mr. Tchitchikov, the message relayed through splinters of screen, I hope you are happy.

It was from the number of the mystery text exactly one week ago. The memory the text summoned, of his manipulation of a married woman for his now-dashed scheme, brought Tchitchikov no small amount of shame.

“We’re going to canvass like hell,” Jenna said. “We’ve got one weekend to save Fairwell’s campaign. If you’re still around, you should come join us.”

Andy and Jenna stopped into the local breakfast chain, “Go Nutz 4 Donutz.” As he placed their orders, Jenna turned to Tchitchikov. “Ohemgee, please make it stop.”

“What? Make what stop?”

“This thing is KILLING me.” Jenna pointed to a television.

Tchitchikov recognized Mr. Green, standing arms crossed behind a genteel, silk-suited man who was clearly his boss, Representative Everly. “...lack of morality is a travesty,” Everly was saying. “An elected official’s greatest asset is his word. And Fairwell broke that. He broke that, smashed it open like a ripe melon on a concrete floor—” Mr. Green smiled and nodded behind his boss, “—and betrayed his wife. Of course he’s going to betray his voters! That’s what liars do. That’s why I stand behind James Kingston of my such-and-such party, a noble man who has proven his faithfulness to his community.”

“Thank you, Representative. Now an update from the Sumter County race: revelations from former campaign manager Stuart Raymond of Representative Stoddard’s—”

Andy tugged at Tchitchikov. “I got your lox, we gotta go.”

Jenna was silent while Andy drove. The car hummed along and blasted air with faint wisps of air conditioning. The whole of Jacksonville passed by unabated. The lox was surprisingly tolerable.

To say the scandal flew through Fairwell's office was an understatement: it was vacant enough to expect tumbleweeds blowing about. The office was emptied of most of the constituents, and many of the volunteers as well. Jenna wiped her eyes. "Dammit, this is such ... this is so not fair..."

O— turned up from her desk. "We roll with the punches," she said. "At least Mr. Abad is here."

"Wait, who?" Jenna asked.

"Mr. Amir Abad." O— said a little more quietly, "Jamal Washington. The guy who—"

"OH!" Jenna covered her mouth. She whispered to Andy, "Amir Abad is here!"

"The name sounds familiar," Andy said.

"You're coming with me." Jenna grabbed his arm. "Where is Mr. Abad, O—?"

"I'm not sure, somewhere in the office. At least I didn't see him leave, anyway."

Jenna dragged Andy toward Fairwell's office in the back. Like any curious feline with a couple of extra lives at his disposal, Tchitchikov followed.

Fortunately, he did not need to spend anymore. Jenna found Abad in the training office. Mr. Amir Abad, formerly known as Jamal Washington, wore a plum thobe, a white frizz of hair and tug of beard past his collar, and a congenial, old man smile. He also sported a slight hunch to his back and spoke in a seeming sing-song, in a tone with musical flights of a bird. "Why hello, little sister! Have you seen Alexander about? I believe I may have missed him."

Jenna was either stunned, shocked, surprised, or some combination of all three. "Uh, well, uh ... ummm..."

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“Alexander?” Andy asked. “Oh, Alex Fairwell.”

He nodded and smiled, missing one tooth. “Yes, Alex Fairwell. Is he not about?”

Tchitchikov noticed Jenna’s legs, impatient as an antelope ready to spring in any random direction. “You *are* Mr. Amir Abad. Right?”

“Of course I am!” The man laughed, and it seemed to fill the whole training room. “Now, little sister, you needn’t look so surprised.”

Jenna then proceeded to bite her lip and flick her hands about in anticipation. When she calmed down, she asked, “May I shake your hand?”

The man obliged, leaving Tchitchikov more than a little confused at her being star-struck. She turned around.

“Paul, this is Mr. Amir Abad. *The* Mr. Amir Abad.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “I believe he may be.”

“Can I—?” Jenna halted herself, but her propriety could not hold back the overflow of her excitement. “Could I have a photo, please?”

“Of course!”

The old man obliged. Jenna put on the brightest smile that Tchitchikov, and Andy for that matter, had ever seen. After Andy finished taking more than a handful of photos, Jenna stood there in pose for some time longer. Andy took a few more.

“I’m sorry,” Jenna finished her photo shoot. “I just had to; I hope you understand. It’s not every day that I meet—” she bit her lip again, “—a legend.”

“A legend? My little sister, come on now. All I wanted was a sandwich!” His laughter filled the room even more than before.

“A sandwich?” Jenna looked incredulous. “Yeah, from a segregated diner. That’s a big deal! I can’t believe I actually got to meet you! Wait, so you know Fairwell?”

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“Of course I do! Alexander and I go some time back.”
Abad’s smile faded. “I have never heard him upset like this. He called last night, and I thought it necessary to come in and cheer him some.”

Jenna laughed nervously. “Of course you know him! And you’re so humble, too. It was more than just wanting a sandwich.”

Abad assented. “It was. At the time, I had wanted to go there tomorrow, too. But I got this,” he grinned and showed the gap of the missing tooth. “And their Rueben was too much overpriced. I never went back.”

Recognition struck Andy, and he turned to Tchitchikov. “Wow. Paul, this is Jamal—I mean Amir Abad. He sat in at lunch counters during MLK’s time. They beat him and arrested him. Oh my God, I can’t believe he’s actually here...”

“I am no celebrity,” Abad insisted. “I’m just a stubborn young man grown up to be a stubborn old man. Do you know when Alexander is coming back?”

Jenna reddened and shook her head. Andy rubbed her back. Tchitchikov had a sense of the gravity of their meeting him, but there were few Russian equivalents to measure Abad against.

“We are sorry,” Tchitchikov said, “but we do not know when the Representative is to return.”

“Then, may I ask for your company during my lunch?”
Abad smiled. “I see you have your breakfast, but I missed mine. Our talk makes me want a sandwich. Without the beating, hopefully.”

Jenna slowly nodded, then increased the pace of her nodding before saying, “Yes. Yes yes—” her voice squeaked, “yes.”

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“You must forgive me, for I am one of those old, ‘long-winded’ folk, if you listen to my daughter’s opinion. But I think that’s because my life has been caught up in the winds of change, as they say.”

Abad laughed. Jenna nodded and Tchitchikov quietly nibbled on his Reuben, a sandwich new to his tastes. He was trying to determine where he landed on its strange intersection of flavors. Abad patted the lunch counter.

“Now this, this I am familiar with. I left a tooth on one of these. A policeman slammed my face down on one of these, on a copper one. I was lucky. Some of us got the dogs.

“But enough of that. These are stories you likely know, and stories I have told many times. Stories are important, yes, but my stories are those of the past, and there is much future ahead to be made yet. I prefer those stories these days.

“Here is one story I like to tell. Here, here she is, my daughter. She is beautiful, yes? Can you see her on my phone? A little smudged. But yes, gorgeous, seriously, she is. And smart! Smarter than me, that’s for sure. This young girl here—young woman, I mean, you see, with how fast time goes, sometimes I need to catch up to it still—she teaches in an inner-city school in Alabama, a brutal, really sad kind of place, and she teaches her students the most important thing they can possibly learn: the Fight. Not just the fight for freedom, the fight against oppression, but the Fight. You know, that thing in you, that thing I see in you, I see in a lot of young people, that makes them challenge authority, that makes them—or you, I suppose—makes you fight for yourself, fight for each other. The Fight.

“The Bronx in the fifties is not a good place for a child. I had the Fight. But it was different back then. We were kids. We learned it from the cops who beat the snot from us. They’d see us, they’d pull us into a hallway, and punch and

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punch and just beat us. We got in our hits, too. We'd throw bottles at them from our balcony, at this mean one in particular, some redhead, a tall glass of water. He was the worst."

His laugh nearly startled the counter server. "Here I am, telling these old stories again! You see, I'm still half living in that era, and here I wanted to talk to you about my daughter, what makes her so special. What makes her so much smarter than me.

"She teaches in Alabama, this poor, dirt poor neighborhood. Oh yes, I remember now what I was saying, yes, she gives her students the Fight. You see, she is an advocate for the young punks, what I was in the Bronx, it's not much different these days how kids get trampled on and beat up. But yes, she's got heart and she's got the Fight.

"Tayla, that's my daughter, she organizes an afterschool program for her students. They get together, she and her students, and work on different art projects. This one student painted a mural on an old, crumbling—here it is. Can you see that? How lovely, what talent! I like how she used the crumbling wall. It's scary, this picture—can you see it?—there's a girl running away. The world is crumbling, where the wall is crumbling, right there, but even this gives me hope. Seeing this girl's understanding, her awareness of her situation; seeing that kind of art in the world, it gives me hope.

"Now what was I saying? My mind, you see, it isn't as sharp as it once was. It's been filled with words and stories, but in my old age, sometimes there's no point. Get it? It isn't sharp, no point ... never mind. I was making a bad pun, but I see you're not interested. No, it's okay, I appreciate your politeness.

"My daughter. Gorgeous. Smart as a rod. She asked me something the other day. She said, 'Dad, when will we get there?' There is a little context needed, she meant when will



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the struggle be over? When will the human race come to love itself, when will it find itself to be enough and stop devouring its people with hate? And then she said something else. She said, 'I'm so tired.'

"I was frightened. But I understood that, I was her age once, and I was tired, too. Look at me now! Seventy-eight years old, at least I'm pretty sure I'm seventy-eight (that was a joke, you know, I'm not that senile, not yet). In any case, I was frightened to hear that, to hear the exhaustion and fear in her voice, because your generation, you are the ones to be making the change that we need in the world, the change that my generation promised but could not deliver. Hearing that, it scared me. It made me think the Fight was going to leave her. So, I did what any respectable father would do. I asked her 'What's wrong?'

"She told me. I think I see now the obstacles your generation faces. They are far more vast than the ones I dealt with, far worse than some redhead police jerkoff who liked to wale on black boys. She went into her speech about modern racism, corruption, corporate power, the underground sex trade, global warming, climate destruction. That's quite a handful for your generation to deal with! So, like any good father, I tried to make her feel better. I tried to tell her things will be alright."

Abad smiled and shook his head. "Parent mistake number one: don't lie. You see, she asked me how I knew that, but I had nothing to back up what I said! Now Tayla, she's very smart, and she caught me up in some conversation about literature, no, about stories in general. I think what she said was that stories are written by the survivors, yes, but the problem is that we don't tell the stories of those who perish. We ignore them and their stories. You see, when I said 'things will be alright,' that's the story a survivor tells after they triumph. What do the fallen say after they fail in their stories?"

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I don't know. We don't have those stories. That was her point, and one I'd never thought of before. She's way smarter than me. You see that?

"But I realized something well after the fact, and I will call her back soon and tell her this: that there's still hope. There's still a chance we will end the struggle, that we'll arrive at love and peace and the goodness of eternal life on this Earth. I know it's hard to see hope in this kind of world, but it is there. There is always hope! I think that is something my generation learned, we learned it the hard way, and sometimes I had no hope, but I just kept going. It comes and goes, sometimes, or we feel it does, but it's always there. Allah, God, is always there. Now, let me be clear, I have to acknowledge my daughter's wisdom, and I have to flesh out this about hope, that hope doesn't mean we will get ourselves there. Hope is no guarantee. Hope is a chance, even if it's one in one billion, hope is the chance that we will get there, not as an individual, not as a generation, but as the human race. That is hope. There is always that hope. And I see you have that too, it's braver of you to have that than my generation, given all these things crashing down upon our world. But, hope: don't forget that. It's always there. Don't give up on it. It won't give up on you."

Abad's smile softened, and slowly dissipated from his face. He looked worn, like a smooth river stone weathered through by several small, unending trickles. "I got a call from Alexander yesterday. I felt something deep. I'm not quite sure what he said, but I felt it was gone. I felt he lost the Fight."

Jenna was too caught into Abad's story to touch her sandwich. "What do you mean?"

Abad shook his head. "This scandal is too much for him. It's only been a day, and already he is—he is hopeless. I had never heard him speak like this before. He was—let's say he

didn't spit that fire I knew from him, from when he'd come to bail out 'ungrateful citizens' like me.

"But there is a reason for everything. Whatever happens, I believe that. Maybe this is what he needs to bring himself back into the fight. Or maybe I'm wrong, which is often the case, and maybe it's time someone else stepped in. Someone from your generation. You, probably."

Tchitchikov watched Jenna freeze up. She shook her head. "No no no, what do you mean? Not me. I'm just—I'm—I can barely pay my rent!"

"Oh, please now, that is what my foolish generation says about you. All the time. Now when I look at my daughter—you know, the 'Greatest Generation,' those who fought in World War II? I don't buy that. I don't buy that *they* are the 'Greatest Generation.' Yes, they faced Nazis, and yes they killed Hitler, and yes they saved the world from fascists. But that makes *them* the greatest? No, here's where I differ: I see your generation, my daughter, you, little sister, even this silent Russian here—sorry, not to point at you—and already it has been decided that *they* are the 'Greatest Generation,' and that your generation, those who are now entering the next Great Depression, who are making ends meet on a quarter of the budget my family saw, who will now face not just the dominant world of fascism, but the destruction of the planet itself? That you might not be the 'Greatest Generation' after all is said and done? Bull. Total bull. I see in you something greater than I saw in my parents and their parents' generation, though I love them dearly. Do you know what I see? I see the Fight, yes, but also heart. That's what their generation, and my generation, too, that's what we lacked. We had brains, we had plans, so, so many plans, we had a promise that everything would be fixed. But we lacked the heart to guide our sense of the Fight. That is how we have failed. We forgot, long ago, or maybe we never knew we were placed here on this planet, by

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Allah, to save ourselves with each other. To bring all to that place of peace and beauty. Or, because maybe my daughter might be right, to bring all toward its final destruction. The end of the human race. But maybe I'm being foolish."

Jenna shook her head. "No," she said. "I wonder about that, too. We can't do it; we can't save the planet. Not alone. That's why we need Fairwell to—"

"Darling," Abad said, "and I do apologize if you feel I insult you. That is how I was brought up, to say 'darling,' and sometimes it slips, so I hope you don't take offense at that. But Miss, little sister, what I'm trying to say is, for all Fairwell has done, for all a small handful of my generation has accomplished, and sometimes that looks like a lot, that the burden of saving this planet is placed on your generation, the Bravest Generation. That is who you are. You get up, you work, you struggle with no money, you head out and you make a difference, sleep, and the next day you get up and do the same. You, your generation will climb the biggest mountain the human race will ever have to climb. And I think you will succeed, you will deliver us into that promise my generation wanted to give but could not, at least I pray you will deliver us. You're tougher, you're smarter than this old guard, anyway, and you have the heart and the love to guide you. That is what I think, anyway. But I have been wrong, and like my daughter would say, there is no guarantee in life. There is no guarantee that ours is a story of survival, and not one of destruction. But, in any case, do not give up. Hope. Fight. Do not give up."

Jenna and Andy were silent. Tchitchikov hated to admit it, but there was some morsel of truth to Abad's desperation.

Abad sighed. "And here I am, with a cold sandwich and cold fries. I warned you I was a long-winded old man. And now I must suffer the price, it seems."

Tchitchikov was lucky. He finished his sandwich. It was a good Reuben.

“Thank you for keeping this old, stubborn man some company during his lunch.”

The four of them walked back to Fairwell’s office. Andy carried Abad’s leftover fries. They were a gift from the elderly radical who believed that food was a blessing and should not go to waste, and moreover, that microwave ovens were Allah’s promise that it shall not henceforth. They returned to find Selifan and Georgina engaging in idle chatting with O—, who was wiping her eyes of a great many tears.

“My, wow ... I mean, so—ha—those must be good dreams!”

“They seemed delicious ones,” Selifan returned to her, “for he licks his lips sated in the morning.”

“Selifan,” Tchitchikov said. “You beast! Abate your attacks at this poor woman at once!”

O— attempted a good look at our hero, but broke gaze within a moment and a half and resumed wiping her eyes. “I just, I—Paul, do you remember any of your dreams?”

“What? Why?”

“Do you have weird ones? Like,” she looked at Selifan, “being a good puppy dog?” O— laughed.

“What now? Laughter...?”

O— caught her breath again. “I’m sorry. Selifan was telling me that you nodded a lot during your sleep. Like this—” she scrunched her arms toward her face, paws downward, “—like a sweet little puppy?”

Tchitchikov growled, like the suggested puppy, though less sweet. “Why, now, I think I prefer you accosting her, dear friend. No. All of you. The bed was tight, and I was very cramped in upon myself. Hence my compactness.”

O— successfully fought off the next round of laughter. “It’s okay. I had a partner who dreamt they were a cat. They

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had crazy adventures.” A sudden thought hit her. “Oh, maybe I could introduce you two!”

“No,” Selifan said, “I know the nature of this one’s dreams. There is no room for another in them.”

The shaft of truth from his former friend hit Tchitchikov. He had no rejoinder to Selifan’s attack, and only had the choice to receive it rather than return it.

“In any case, we shall head out,” Selifan said. “There is much ahead to do.”

Abad shook his head. “I’ll be here,” he said. “Alexander may come by.”

“Oh, you don’t have to, Mr. Abad,” O— said. “The Representative hasn’t emailed me back. I’m not sure when he’s planning to stop by.”

“It is my duty to a friend,” Abad said. “He has demons he must face, and I will face them with him. Besides, we have very many TV shows to catch up on.”

“That’s sweet of you, Mr. Abad.” O— addressed Tchitchikov, Jenna and Andy, “Are you staying, too?”

“We’re going to head out,” Andy said. “Selifan’s right. There’s so much we need to do until Tuesday.”

“You have quite the drive in you,” Abad said. “It makes me sad a little. My course is near an end. But I see our battle is in good hands.”

“Thank you, Mr. Abad,” Jenna said. “Thanks so much. We should get canvassing again today.” She turned to the remainder of the group. “I’m ready. Are you ready? ‘Cause I’m ready.”

Jenna was not ready for the fallout from Fairwell’s scandal. “God DAMN.”

Even Andy, Tchitchikov, Selifan and Georgina were not quite prepared for the amount of vitriol lobbed in Fairwell’s general direction. Some highlights included:

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“Isn’t he too old for that?”

“Leave me alone. You’re all perverts.”

“Good for him, the old bastard. No, I’m still not voting for him.”

“Him? He’ll destroy the sanctity of all marriages. He’s just getting warmed up.”

“What a dick. That’s how a man thinks, with his...”

And so on and so forth. It is no small matter, a politician having an affair, though it should be said many a man (and woman) of the wonderful United States have participated in many an affair. So why should it matter that a politician, or this politician more specifically, had betrayed his spouse?

Why could a Kingston, should it ever happen, get away with such an indiscretion, but never a Fairwell?

“They’re all a bunch of prudes and hypocrites,” Jenna said. “And don’t get me wrong, Andy: you cheat on me and you’re dead.”

“Oh, I know,” he said.

“But you know half of these people cheated, they’re probably cheating right now, and the gall of them, the straight nerve to bash Fairwell. He’s done so much for Florida! What a bunch of, of...”

I shall put this simply: because an honorable personage such as a Fairwell should never attract dishonor. The honest suffer worst from dishonesty, for there is much more luster to tarnish there.

“It’s not fair,” Jenna said. “It’s so not fair...”

On the ride back, Tchitchikov felt a need to do something important. He pulled out the phone gifted to him, and texted a reply to the message he received earlier:

I am ashamed and sorry, his message read.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Let it not be inferred from this that our hero’s character had grown so blase and hard, or his conscience so blunted, as to preclude his experiencing a particle of sympathy or compassion.”

—Gogol, trans. D. J. Hogarth

Tchitchikov awoke on an early Sunday and found himself in a brief textual exchange.

You’re an ass, came the message.

Methinks I am, Tchitchikov replied.

Why did you do it?

For money

So my marriage was worth how much to you?

I got nothing I am sorry for so using you

You did. You did use me

Tchitchikov stared at the splintered cell phone screen. The conversation produced two contradictory effects on our immigrant: one, a feeling composed of an emotional pastiche of fear and embarrassment, infused with a swirl of fidgety discomfort, not unlike a shameful sundae with terrifying

topping; and two, a feeling of release. I find some difficulty in correlating this second feeling with an appropriate food—perhaps meringue? I warned you before restarting this one-hundred-and-seventy-year-old journey, reader, that my literary powers are weak compared to most. But nonetheless, there is an airy sweetness of relief in confronting one's fears and mistakes.

You're a real bastard, the text issued back.

Even I felt the truth of this, to some extent. Dear reader and fellow-journeyer, is this what you think as well? Do not banish the thought! Heroes are made, not born, and if they are born, then they are borne from the ashes of their own failures and weaknesses. One does not forge a steel blade in the spring air, but rather in the bowels of flame and cinder. It is not that we must forgive the failure for the hero is a hero; nor even less should we make such excuses as "he is but human, let his error lie." Nonsense, we observers have nothing to do with the hero and his or her journey! We can but recognize their mistakes, and their knowledge and wisdom gained from such mistakes; and, furthermore, the pains they take to enact justice with the wisdom from their failings. The reader has no input on a hero other than to watch and to learn! Theirs, and ours, is the self-guided road, and one's volition and decisions are what cobble the path.

Our dear Russian gave the texter his mildly insightful input: *Shit yes*

And then the phone rang.

"I want to kill you," issued the familiar female voice.

"Yes," Tchitchikov said.

"But I think you're sorry. It's not much, but," the woman paused for a thought or two. "I want to make sure."

"Make sure?"

"That you mean it."

It was Tchitchikov's turn to pause. "I do. I am not sure how to prove it, though."

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"Come to such-and-such a restaurant. It's in Pensacola. It's the one off of I-90. Five tonight."

"Yes, but—"

"Prove it, you bastard." The phone hung up.

Tchitchikov relaxed again on the makeshift bed. His hostess knocked on the door.

"Morning," Jenna said. "That sounded like it went well."

"It is to be expected," Tchitchikov said.

"You coming out with us today? We've got a lot of ground to cover."

Tchitchikov shook his head. "I have a date with rotten destiny, it would seem. I should get going to Pensacola."

"Pensacola? Yikes, that is a rotten drive. Holy crap."

Tchitchikov stood up. "It is, and I should summon the safest ride in all of the eastern coast."

Selifan assumed the role of coachman once more.

"You look more relaxed," Tchitchikov said to him, which was true.

Indeed, Selifan's posture was one of calmness and composure. But, recall that Selifan was one to find the comfort in discomfort; to such a man, this composure was anything but! Thus, his mumbled response clarified to Tchitchikov his annoyance and actual discomfort: "Hmmm."

Tchitchikov took the hint this time. "How fare you and Georgina?"

"We fare well."

"That is good to hear."

Selifan scoffed. "I am only driving you on this hellish journey because my Georgina has a full day today. Do not forget this: you have angered me."

"I will not," Tchitchikov said.

They pulled into a gas station partway on their journey. Tchitchikov paid and offered a Sancho Peanut bar to his ride.

"I do not accept the gift of lies anymore," he said.

"Then at least take this." Tchitchikov offered Selifan the receipt to the delicious and inexpensive combination of chocolate, nougat and peanut.

Selifan studied the receipt and accepted his gift. "Only because you are mending," he said. "And it is a long ride, and I am hungry."

On the road, Selifan licked the chocolate off his lips after he finished the healthful candy. "We are going quite out of the way of your normal targets. I suspect I know what is going on. Or who, at least."

"Yes," Tchitchikov said.

"Then why torment the poor Mrs. Smith again? Has she not had enough of you?"

"No, for she needs my contrition as well."

"Contrition?"

"Strange as it may seem," Tchitchikov said, "but I find the metaphorical whitewashing of fences to be meditative."

"If it is metaphorical fences and literal contrition, the expression is mending fences," Selifan corrected.

"Oh," Tchitchikov said. "That seems more correct. I never finished *Tom Sawyer*, anyway."

"You would like it," Selifan said. "There are a good many scams and hoaxes."

"A part of me yet might," Tchitchikov said.

They came into Pensacola. Selifan slowed his drive along the coast; he frequently turned his eyes out of the window to the pale, white sands and the sky-blue waters nestled between our two traveling Russians and a strip of more beach off in the distance. "It is gorgeous here," Selifan said.

"I will miss it very much, Tchitchikov said.

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“I was thinking,” Selifan said, “that perhaps I am lucky not to have been as immersed in this project of yours. It seems there is much backfiring of late.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “It is lucky.”

Selifan cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome. The restaurant is here.”

They pulled into the parking lot. There were a great many restaurant-goers enjoying the sun and the food at tables outside, and Tchitchikov recognized the scent of brine and butter. He relaxed somewhat.

“I will textually message you when we are done,” Tchitchikov said.

“Whenever is fine,” Selifan said. “I’ll make myself busy on these roads. Good luck.”

Tchitchikov texted Mrs. Smith, *I’m sorry I am a bit late*

He waited some moments for a response.

I am here. Where are you? He tried again.

A few moments more, and nothing.

Sandra, where should I go?

The phone rang.

“I can suggest where you can go,” she said. “But instead you can come around the back, by the view of the bay. I’m at the table near the end of the bar.”

Tchitchikov approached the maître d’ and she guided him to the table. Unlike most of the well-dressed customers, Mrs. Smith was dressed in a graphic tee and khaki shorts. She was a buxom woman whose face wore a sour expression normally, and at this moment, her expression soured even further.

Tchitchikov sat down and pocketed his phone.

“Does your girlfriend like unicorns?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“What?”

“Your phone,” she said.

He pulled it out again and examined it. There were a pair of neon unicorn stickers on the back.

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"It is from a friend," he said.

"A friend? I find that hard to believe."

"Sometimes I do as well."

The waitress came and they ordered their dishes. When she left, Mrs. Smith began.

"You have no idea."

"I likely do not."

"I hardly saw my kids the first two months. My husband still hates me."

"That sounds difficult."

"It is," Mrs. Smith said. "Waitress! Some wine!" The waitress added to their order. "Don't worry, you'll get this one for me, too," she said. "It seems fitting."

Tchitchikov paled. His funds were nearly depleted. "Yes," he replied hollowly.

Mrs. Smith shook her head slowly. "I've been thinking of what I wanted to say to you for several months. There's a lot I could say. I'm not sure where to start."

"Start anywhere," Tchitchikov said.

"I could," she said. "But I don't want to waste my whole night being with you. Besides, there are only two things I need to say to you. The rest can go away. I think I know what I want to say."

"Okay," Tchitchikov said.

Mrs. Smith took a measured breath. "Sam and I have been together for fifteen years," she said. "We've seen a lot. We've struggled so much, and, of this whole experience, I'm more disappointed in myself than in you. You're a scoundrel, yes, and a cheat. A hack. But I'm not—or at least I thought I wasn't—and I see what I have to lose now that I've lost most of it. I say this not to blame you, but warn you: consider what you have to lose. There is always something to lose, even to those who have nothing to lose. Behave. Behave honestly and nobly."

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“Yes,” Tchitchikov said.

“You look like you want to speak.”

“It is not my place right now. This is your space to speak.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Here’s the wine.”

The waitress placed the bottle of red down along with two glasses. “We just need the one,” Mrs. Smith told her. Tchitchikov nodded, and the waitress picked one of the glasses up.

Mrs. Smith took a full sip. “I should also say this. We have little time on this earth. My bigger regret, bigger than letting you wine me up, bigger than subjecting myself to your rather gross kisses, is that I’ve spent so much time volunteering for the party when I should’ve spent it with my kids and my husband. I spent more time hobnobbing with fakes and phonies in the stupid hopes of ‘getting somewhere in life,’ they like to say. I was already somewhere in life. I had what I needed, and I neglected it. Maybe you understand that.”

Tchitchikov waited. Mrs. Smith sighed and took another drink and shook her head again. “Yes,” Tchitchikov said. “I do understand that.”

“Tell me.”

“I have lost a dear friend,” he said. “We are only close in physical proximity now; I have tainted the closeness of our friendship with my lust for power. He is—or was—perhaps the only one who would understand me in a way no other has in my life. It is painful even to admit he is gone, and it is a different kind of pain, but I think I understand losing someone dear to my own cupidity.”

“I think you do,” Mrs. Smith said.

“I don’t have an answer to how to carry on. Does the pain soften? It might. But it certainly lingers, and so does the source of it, my cruel hunger. It is something I must be on guard for, but now I have seen the reason why.”

Mrs. Smith swirled her wine. She nodded softly.

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“That is little consolation for the loss, but it is something, and something is better than nothing. I should not have seduced you, Mrs. Smith.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

Tchitchikov rubbed the condensation on his glass of water. “Also, I am unused to kissing.”

“It was like you were trying to eat a gooey brownie.”

“I haven’t made a kiss since I kissed my mother’s cheek, countless years ago.” Tchitchikov thought. “Brownies are okay.”

“You don’t kiss? Do you have no one to kiss?”

“No, but it interests me not.”

The waitress deposited the food on the table. Mrs. Smith put on a bib for her lobster. Tchitchikov stared at his fine dish of scallops, balsamic vinegar, lightly browned: the height of seafood. Yet he could not enjoy it; a single bite, and he could not continue on with the main course. He put his fork down and left it there.

“I lied.” Mrs. Smith tapped the bright lobster shell. “There was one last thing I should say. I won’t pursue this any further. We’re done. But please, do not come back here again. Ever again.” She wiped an eye. “You can go.”

Tchitchikov stood up and pulled out his wallet, leather with “The Master” embroidered on it. He pulled out a credit card. “I haven’t much cash, but I shall approach the waitress and—”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “No,” she said. “You came and you delivered your part. I’ll buy the food and wine. Just please leave.”

Tchitchikov acceded to her request.

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“It shall be late. I should stop by Georgina’s on the way.”

Selifan’s statement pulled Tchitchikov from his day-dream, or rather day-nightmare, a turbulence of the events transpired over the past four months. He considered the time he’d invested, and had little way to justify its loss. “It has been many days put into this scam,” he said.

“It has,” Selifan said.

“It makes me wonder that you have stuck it through for so much of it with hardly a kind word from me.”

“Let me clarify that I have shed that part of my hunger,” Selifan said. “I am the better for it. And I consider you my friend.”

“Still?”

“You have taken the brunt of the consequences,” Selifan said. “And I none. We were into this in equal parts, yes?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I consider you a friend with my best interests in mind. Let us leave it at that.”

The two arrived at The Rooster and the Dragon well after sundown; it was a two-faced type of building, painted yellow on the left, and orange-red on the right. The yellow half was dimmed and the right half but a few tints brighter. “Come,” Selifan said.

The two entered a hybrid diner and tattoo parlor; Georgina wore a blue surgical mask and pink headband, immersed in tattooing a stylized fist holding a thin stem onto a woman’s breastbone. “One moment, Selly,” she said.

The left side had a counter and four booths, and the faint smell of hashed browns still lingered. On the walls hung black and white photos of varying subjects in awkward and artful poses. Grand dragons and mythical creatures soared on the walls of Georgina’s half of the building. Selifan and Tchitchikov took their seats at the diner counter.

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"You should watch," Selifan said, staring at Georgina.

The black coloring of tattoo was in its final stages. Georgina's needle was adding crosshatching to the meaty part of the palm, just below the thumb. "That's my boyfriend, Selifan," she told her client.

"Oh, that's nice. You said you two met at a Fairwell thing?"

"Yeah, at one of his fundraisers. He's really sweet. You should see the Slavic bear I did for him."

The fist deepened. Georgina finished the crosshatching and distinguished the fingers one last time. "You said you were at the protest a week ago?" Georgina asked. "At the state house?"

"Mmm hmm," the woman replied. "It's nice to see so many people there. Maybe something will get done."

Georgina nodded and the stem darkened. She stepped away and dabbed the sweat on her forehead with her headband. "The stem should be quick," she said. She switched needles.

Green slowly suffused through the stem. The woman said, "Now's such an important time. It's nice your boyfriend is in the fight, too. Most of the men I meet don't care."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "Everyone on dating apps is either a fish-touting status-quo moron or an idiot who doesn't care. It's sad."

"Mmmmm," Georgina replied. A green leaf slowly grew out of the stem.

"Sorry," the woman said.

Georgina returned to the black needle and defined the tip of the leaf. "No, no problem. What were you saying?"

"Men are douchebags," the woman said. "Your boyfriend is nice, though."

Georgina returned to the stem and two sharp, green thorns sprouted from it. They looked exceptionally painful to Tchitchikov. "I've been there," Georgina said. "A lotta jerkoffs online."

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The woman continued. "It's not just that. I mean, yeah, people on the internet are terrible. But it's so sad what a little money does to you. Get twenty dollars to your name, and you close off to everyone else. To everyone else's suffering."

"Yeah," Georgina replied.

"I'm not sure why that is," the woman said. "It's like the money stuffs your ears."

"And your heart," Georgina said.

The thorns were finished. Georgina placed the two needles down and dabbed her forehead again. "Red, right?" She asked. "What kind of red? Bright red? Deep, blood red?"

"The most beautiful red you can make it."

Georgina nodded.

"I think they're the problem," the woman said. "All these idiots who have a little money—all the ten-thousand-aires out there—more than the richest rich pricks who keep robbing—I'm sorry, but you don't mind my...?"

"The choir listens," Georgina said.

"It just gets in your blood, I guess. I don't know. I just hate it, I hate feeling so powerless in all of this." The woman sighed. "And thanks."

"That's what I'm here for, sweetheart. Tattoos and therapy."

The woman laughed.

Petals grew from the stem, faint outlines and tips marked off in red. "I understand it," Georgina said. "It's not an easy world. It's okay. I don't mind listening. I'm in the same spot. I also think it's important to remember we're all in the same spot, even the fish-touting morons."

"What do you mean?" the woman asked.

"They're not the ones writing the laws."

"Yeah," the woman said.

"Yeah." Georgina continued. "I'm not sure this helps, but for me, I feel better when I find something I can do about it."



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Small things. And that's what gets me going through the day to the next. Maybe someone will listen to me and share one of my posts. Maybe I'll listen to someone and tattoo her chest. Day to day, that's what it is."

"It is," the woman said.

"Day to day, sometimes..."

The petals filled out in a royal red, seeming to burn from her flesh. "The thorns, too? You sure?" Georgina asked.

The woman nodded. "Pain in love."

Georgina brought the needle to the thorns. "One day, this is something my grandmother would always say, one day we will. One day we will break the system. One day, we will fix what has been so wrong. One day, we will get our chance to speak truth, disarm power, and free ourselves and our children will rest on that."

Blood dripped from the thorns in the same royal red. "Yes," the woman said.

"One day..."

The parlor was quiet except for the slight buzz of the tattoo equipment. Georgina stood back and mopped her forehead again, then resumed one last time on the thorns. The blood on the thorns deepened and darkened. "There," Georgina said. She brought a hand mirror to her client.

"This is lovely," the woman said, checking out her new tattoo from several different angles. "Wow. That's all I can say."

"There you are," Georgina said. "First one of these I've done. Pretty sure not the last."

The woman smiled. "Peace and power." She left a tip for Georgina in an old army helmet overturned for the purpose.

"God bless," Georgina said.

Selifan rose and hugged his Georgina. "My Georgina," he said, "I am sorry it is so late!"

MATTHEW KEEFER

"It's okay," she said. "There were a few things I caught up on. What were you two up to again?"

"Burying the ax," Tchitchikov said.

"The hatchet?" Georgina replied.

"Oh yes, that."

"I'm glad it went well," she said.

"I realize now that I have one more task ahead of me," Tchitchikov said. "I am not one to disturb the flowering of your love, but this is something I must begin immediately, for it must be finished by tomorrow night."

Selifan cocked his eyebrow. "Already?"

"I am sorry," Tchitchikov said, "but I realize I have a great many betrayals to make in the next twenty-four hours."

"How so?" Selifan asked.

"Let us say the dead do not mind how we use their votes," Tchitchikov smiled. "The living might complain more."

"If I understand your plan correctly, then that would clearly backfire."

"It would not just backfire. It should dumpster fire if done appropriately. I believe that is the term."

Selifan turned to Georgina. "Go, go," she said. "Jacksonville's only an hour round trip. I'll still be here. Just come back so I can feed you."

Tchitchikov's Monday was spent slavishly hunched over his laptop, click click clicking more votes onto the rosters of his political blackmailers, and chomp chomp chomping much better diner food through the day and well past sundown.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“It’s my onion, not yours!”

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, trans. Constance Garnett,
from “The Brothers Karamazov”

Welcome, kind reader, to the final chapter of *Dead Souls: An American Poem*. We hope our journey together wasn’t so rocky that it tossed you from our rough carriage ride; though if you are here, then most likely you have survived the turbulence of my prose and plotting. Yes, there are only a handful of pages left between you and the end of this book, the second section to Gogol’s much more masterful work. I have a few questions for you, and would appreciate your honest replies to them:

- Have you found this novel entertaining? Do you have any particularly favored parts to it?
- Was this instructive? That is to say, morally instructive? I hope more that you find meaning and significance in

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some of the fiction presented here, more so than in the incredulous scam our fair hero had concocted.

- Should you recommend this journey to a close friend, or a family member?
- Which dish do you intend to dine on post-reading?

I apologize for my imposition upon you, my dear unseen reader! It is doubtful that I will hear your answers from you, and here I am still hoping you shall breathe them into the universe. Yet, for my impertinence, I am of the mind that if we are to follow our timeless hero Tchitchikov, it is imperative that you and I glean something small and of precious value from both our times spent here; and furthermore, that moral instruction is only possible on a full and healthy stomach. Is this what you believe, too? It is no matter should we differ; our differences with each other are many-sized cogs that spin the world together in synchronous harmony.

But I catch myself spinning up another turn of near-poetry. My deepest apologies! We are now at the Tuesday election, and Jenna had left a note on the table for our imperfect Tchitchikov.

You looked wiped, she had written. *Hopefully you got some sleep. Help yourself to anything in the fridge.*

Tchitchikov had indeed been “wiped,” for it was half past noon by the time he awoke. The day’s voting was well under way. And let it be noted that Jenna and Andy didn’t keep many comestibles in their refrigerator as well. But yesterday Tchitchikov was fueled by several helpings of eggs Napoleon throughout the day, care of Georgina’s co-entrepreneur, and during which day Tchitchikov had completed his masterwork: a massive army of dead souls lead by a phantom command of still lively ones, ones that were likely also to vote corporeally as they had voted the previous three elections. This left no small imprint of satisfaction evidenced on Tchitchikov’s face

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as he performed his daily shave. He also hummed a tuneless childhood rhyme in his native tongue.

“And Michael, he carried that old hag, and the onion, it bore her weight...”

Tchitchikov sat down at his hosts' kitchen table. It was another hot, humid, miserable day. He fanned himself with his shirt and declined wearing his too-warm vest. But though the air was thick, it was bearable, for it lacked the pressure of the last few months that had weighed upon him. Events converged, and soon the unknown would be known: the die had been cast.

He brought his items together. A duffel bag, a few changes of now-smelly clothing, a backpack, and a suitcase to hold his laptop. He walked a few blocks to a shady-looking motel, not shady in the cool sense, for it was rather oppressively humid inside; but shady in the colloquial sense, that is to say, not inviting to those who live other than in the shadows of society. Tchitchikov made his acquaintance to a possibly inebriated frontdeskman.

“How much for a room?” Tchitchikov asked the man.

“Roomissixtyfive.”

Tchitchikov nodded. “Could I first make a call?”

The man's eyes widened.

“Not long distance, I assure you. I want to confirm an appointment first.”

The frontdeskman pulled an old touch-tone phone from underneath the counter.

“Thank you,” Tchitchikov said. He tugged at the cord.

“Privately?” He asked.

As the frontdeskman was aware of a great many frightening things in this world that, should he hear of them, these things would make himself far more vulnerable than not, he decided it best to let the mystery go past him. So he said, “Nocashinregister,” nodded once, and walked to the other side

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of the room, still within earshot, the truth must be told, but he busied himself in a three-year-old magazine of women's fashion.

Tchitchikov grinned at the man, who was authentic in making himself seem rather engrossed in his magazine. Tchitchikov dialed and spoke, "Hello, is this the Gainesville Sun Obituaries?"

A man answered. "The obits? Sure, let me transfer you over."

"No, wait," Tchitchikov said. "I misspoke. I mean to say that I have an unusual occurrence that I would like the Gainesville Sun to investigate."

"And what is this unusual occurrence?"

Tchitchikov produced his notebook. "I was informed that Mr. G— B— of thirty-seven such-and-such a street had complained that he had already cast a vote."

"Democracy. And?"

"Well, yes, but that he had never visited the polls, nor cast a vote from his person. He is afraid someone has pilfered it from him."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, and I heard a few of his neighbors on the same such-and-such street are complaining of the same condition. I would appreciate if you could look into this for they are all very upset."

"And what is your relation to them?"

"They are cousins to me," Tchitchikov thought. "Cousins-in-law. We are related by marriage."

"All of you?"

"Yes," Tchitchikov said.

"Oh," the reporter said. "And what is your name again?"

Tchitchikov hung up. He glanced at the frontdeskman, who had taken to sitting down in a worn chair and was fanning himself. "A moment more," Tchitchikov told him. He dialed again.

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“St. Augustine Recorder, how may I help you?”

“Hello, my dear compatriot,” Tchitchikov thumbed through his notebook, “one Ms. E— W— has recently told me that the polling station found her vote cast before she had ever cut a chad.”

“We don’t have chads anymore.”

“Well, yes, but you know what I am saying?”

The woman on the other line thought. “No.”

“She has had a vote cast for her that she did not cast herself. Could you please investigate? Her address is...”

Tchitchikov relayed the message and smiled back to the frontdeskman. He was authentically engrossed in picking at something stuck between his teeth. “One more,” Tchitchikov told him, though he made no recognition of the utterance.

“Hello,” Tchitchikov said. “Is this DeWolf News Jacksonville?”

“Yes, what can I—?”

“The immigrants are voting! ELECTION FRAUD!!”

“Who, where, how?”

“All of them! Just—just all of them!”

“We’re on it!” The man hung up.

Tchitchikov replaced the earpiece and smiled congenially. “I’ll be back in an hour. Thank you,” he told the frontdeskman.

He left the motel. Now the cast die had no chance but to turn up a foul side.

Tchitchikov took the bus to Fairwell’s office to wrap up a few more loosened ends. But as he was walking toward the door, he was accosted by a familiar voice.

“Hey, Paul,” Aris said.

Tchitchikov was stunned; he turned to face the familiar, young copy of himself, but with less care to his morning toiletry

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and hair than usual. Tchitchikov was sad at Aris' betrayal, and yet still thankful it was not his own. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm really sorry. I'm a piece of crap. Could you tell Jenna that? She's not returning my texts."

Tchitchikov felt the cold pang of sympathy. "I have a question, though. Why did you do it?"

Aris shook his head. "Achilles isn't doing too well. Kingston approached me a while back. I couldn't afford his surgery, it's crazy, but..." Aris sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I am as well."

"He's scheduled Monday next week. I hope the little bastard can hold out until then."

"Me too," Tchitchikov said. He nodded. "I will tell her that. I will relay your penance."

"Okay, thank you," Aris said. "Good luck."

"You as well."

He entered the office, busier than this weekend, though still halved in peoples, by the measure of the previous week. There was an eerie reserve of calm. Tchitchikov inquired about Jenna.

"Oh, she's out and about at the polls, holding our signs," O— said. "Hopping about. I'm not sure where. Sorry."

"I see. And Selifan, is he in?"

O— shook her head. "He's driving today."

"Yes, he is always driving."

"He's dropping off people to polling locations," she said.

"Oh. That makes sense." Tchitchikov frowned. "I shall send a text message his way."

As Tchitchikov typed on the sad cell phone, Andy approached him. "So that's where my phone went."

"Your phone?" Tchitchikov replied.

"Yeah. Fluffy and Cloudy are my favorite Magical Pegasi. Are you looking for Jenna?"

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Tchitchikov nodded.

“She’s out holding signs. I’m holding down the fort. Something I can help you with?”

Tchitchikov mulled over a few things to say. He landed upon this: “No, just to thank you for the stay.”

“Sure! You’re welcome, Paul.” Andy smiled. “Are you leaving this time? I see you have your stuff.”

Tchitchikov nodded. “Soon.”

“Oh. Okay. It was a pleasure, my man.” He offered a shake, which Tchitchikov greedily took.

“I have a few things I need to do today,” Tchitchikov said. “Where is Jenna holding signs? I have a message to relay to her.”

Andy texted her and gave him the polling place and directions to it. Tchitchikov followed those directions and caught her on a median with another woman, both of them shouting and shaking signs, *Fairwell: Fair Man for Congress*. “Don’t forget to vote,” Jenna yelled at the traffic.

“Jenna, good morning,” Tchitchikov said.

“It’s afternoon, but hello all the same,” she said. “You come to help? We could use the visibility.”

“No,” Tchitchikov said. “Not today. I wanted to say something about Aris—” Jenna scoffed “—that you should consider his repentance and to forgive him.”

“Nope,” she said. “And if you can tell him to stop texting me, that would be fabulous.”

“Jenna,” he said, “do know that there aren’t many opportunities to offer forgiveness, and they should all be considered. And there are fewer opportunities to offer that same forgiveness to someone deserving of it.”

“Well, he should piss off. That’s what he deserves.”

“Do open yourself to the possibility of forgiveness,” Tchitchikov said. “That is all I am asking.”

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Jenna's eyes became slits. She sighed, a release came upon her, and she said, "Okay. I'll consider. But only because you're asking. That's it. No promises."

"That is all I ask."

"Okay." Jenna turned back to the traffic. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes," Tchitchikov said. "Sometime today."

"Okay."

"Good luck today," Tchitchikov said.

He crossed the street again, received a few honks from a driver or two, and waited by the polling station, a school along the route of the bus. He heard the many colors of invective from a man old enough to know many curse words, but seemingly too old to invoke them. He shouted one of the less creative ones and growled, turning to Tchitchikov.

"Can you believe it?" The man spat on the ground. "They said I already voted!"

"Did they?"

"I HATE WHITTAKER. There is no way on God's dying earth I'd vote for his party. What is going on?"

Tchitchikov shook his head to help suppress a smile. "I do not know, but I suggest you might bring this to the attention of the local news."

"You know," the old man wagged his finger, "that's a good point."

"Is it not?"

"For a fellow with a weird accent, you're talking sense." The old man pulled out a flip phone. "Could you look up the newspaper's number for me?"

"It so happens that I have it right here," Tchitchikov said.

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It took Tchitchikov one bus transfer and his last remaining loose papers to compose and write his letter:

Dear James Kingston,

You have beaten me. That is fine. And while you are finished with me, I am not finished with you. Not quite.

There is one last thing that needs to be said, and should I say it correctly, its effect shall haunt you that no blade shall cut it away, nor political suppression suffocate it:

You are a tool in a machine greater than yourself, one that feasts upon the souls of the living. The machine always hungers and it always feasts, and you shall find that out for yourself when there is no one left to help you. Names matter to tongues, not to teeth. May this truth haunt you.

*Sincerely, your foe,
Tchitchikov*

He was satisfied with the final product. Tchitchikov relaxed on the bus when a man more advanced in years than he stared at him for more than a few moments from the seat across. "Are you Greek?" he asked.

"No," Tchitchikov said. "I am from St. Petersburg in Russia."

He pointed to the letter. "Oh. So that's not Greek there?"

Tchitchikov looked at the letter again. He had written it in his native tongue, in Cyrillic characters. "Oh blast."

"So that's Russian? Heck, it all looks Greek to me."

Tchitchikov deflated. He rapped his fingers on the suitcase which served as his temporary desk. He stuffed the paper into it again.

“You don’t happen to have a piece of paper on you?”
Tchitchikov asked.

“I’d love to see Greece someday. It sounds fantastic.”

Tchitchikov sighed. A few hours later, he arrived at the Rooster and the Dragon. Diner smells entered from the left half into the right half, where Tchitchikov took a seat.

“Hey there, Pavel,” Georgina said. “What can I do for you?”

“I have something I would like you to tattoo for me.”

“Huh.” Georgina pursed her lips. “I didn’t think you were the type for tattoos.”

“I am not, but it feels important at the moment. It is something I want to remember.”

“Okay.” Georgina leaned on a small table. “I advise people to wait on it a day. Impulse tattoos aren’t particularly fun for anyone.”

“Yes, but I suspect I might not have a day to wait.”

“Why’s that?”

“I might have demolished some suspension bridges.”

“Not sure what you mean, but demolition sounds fun,” she said. “What is it, then? A wolf? Lenin?”

“None of those. Just a phrase, ‘a soul at home.’” Tchitchikov nodded. “That is what I would like.”

Georgina hummed to herself. “Yes. I like that. I would actually advise getting that tattoo right away. It sounds lovely. Where would you like it?”

Tchitchikov brandished his pointer finger and pointed it to exactly no specific direction. “I am not sure, actually.”

Georgina took out her sketch pad began to pencil in it. “How about you figure out where you want to place this? One second.” She licked her lip and after a few moments flipped her sketch toward Tchitchikov, the phrase housed by an outline of walls and a pointed roof. “How about this?”

Tchitchikov squinted. “That is not how to spell it.”

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Georgina flushed with alarm. She looked over her sketch and traced the letters with her finger. "I must be losing my mind. It looks fine to me. Wait, could you just double check my spelling?"

She offered the pad to Tchitchikov, who quickly wrote in it. "This," he said.

She took a glance at it. "Aiwah what? Wait, is this Russian?"

Tchitchikov tipped the pad back in his direction and squinted at it. "Oh. Yes it is, apparently. I must be slipping into Russian again. What you have is fine."

"No, wait." Georgina got a ball point pen. "That's perfect. Idea: come here."

Tchitchikov approached Georgina's desk and she laid his hands on it, palms down. She sketched the letters on his knuckles. "That looks pretty badass," she said. "What do you think?"

"I think you don't know what a *de* looks like. Hold on." Tchitchikov sketched out the Cyrillic characters more carefully and Georgina nodded. "There," he said.

"Okay, go clean off," she said. "Use the hand sanitizer over there. I got you."

It was more painful than Tchitchikov anticipated.

But, as some might say, "No pain, no gain." Others might say, "Pain in love," and sometimes a work of art is one of pain and love. I can confirm this notion. "Let's see it," Georgina said.

Tchitchikov had some trouble making fists, as his fingers were stiff, yet he suffered through it (he has suffered through much so far, so what is a little more?) and produced his tattoo to her. "Do I punch someone with this?"

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“Hold on, like this.” Georgina gently touched Tchitchikov’s raised fists and carefully touched them together. “That’s what you’re supposed to do. That’s how you show it to people.”

“Like I am hanging onto a ledge?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.” Georgina scratched her head. “Imagine you’re holding onto a pipe or something. A bag. I don’t know.”

“The rollercoaster of life?”

Georgina laughed. “I’ll take it. Is it okay?”

Tchitchikov turned the two fists toward himself. “Yes. It is actually quite splendid.”

“Good,” Georgina said. “That’s the only one of those I’m going to do. I promise.”

“Could I borrow your pad? I have a letter I need to rewrite.”

Georgina offered it and the pencil to him, except Tchitchikov was unable to handle the pencil without extreme pain. He dropped it, picked it up, and dropped it again. “Could you write something for me?”

“Sure. What is it?”

Tchitchikov laboriously opened his suitcase and produced the letter he wrote in Russian. “A curse and a prophecy I want to send. The letter I want to write is thus: *Dear James Kingston—*”

“Is that in Russian, too?”

“It is, hence why I need it Americanized.”

“Huh.” Gerogina said, “Why don’t you just send it like that?”

“Then he cannot read it.”

“It may be my working in Cyrillic, but I think a Russian curse is more powerful than an American one.”

Tchitchikov thought. “Well, we do have much more experience in such things as suffering and curses.”

“Cool. Glad I could convince you.”

“Do you have a postal stamp for it?”

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“Do I look like I can afford my email?” Georgina asked.
“How do you think I can afford real mail?”

“Oh, well...”

“Just kidding. I definitely don’t have any. But don’t worry, I’ll find one for you.”

“Thank you.”

Georgina shook her head. “You Russians are too serious. I’ll get it mailed.” She looked at her phone. “You’re coming tonight, right?”

“Tonight to what?”

“Tonight to Fairwell’s victory party. Selifan will be by in an hour to pick us up. He’s finishing up driving. The polls are gonna close soon.”

Tchitchikov had not received word back from Selifan. “Then, yes,” he said. *For I shall need him one last time*, he thought to himself.

Georgina, Selifan, and Tchitchikov arrived at Fairwell’s office. Georgina waited for the two to leave the car.

“One moment, darling,” Selifan told her. “We shall catch up.”

She nodded, and Selifan turned to Tchitchikov. “Tonight?”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said.

“I saw your tattoo. Why that?”

“A reminder.”

“Of what?”

“Of some sense of home.”

“It is nice to be settled,” Selifan said.

The two gave a few moments into the heavy air. The air held those brief moments, but Selifan and Tchitchikov knew there was far many more to come this night, and they left the car to march toward them.

The office was packed more than in the morning. It was bustling with youth and noise and humidity and food smells. A local news station eked out a small vantage from which to view the office, though the reporter and camera-woman were chatting and sipping from bottles of water. A few televisions were planted on desks in the room. Fairwell was not in the crowd.

Tchitchikov directed his attention toward one of the televisions to another local station interviewing an older woman, who was in the heated throes of verbal exchange. Despite the noise in the office, Tchitchikov made out a few of her verbal exchanges:

“...don’t understand why ... the Russians? Did they steal my ... ? I don’t get it. In all my ... I’ve never seen ... My vote! Where’s my vote?”

The reporter on the television nodded and *mmm-hmmed* and offered nothing more to the distraught older woman. Were Tchitchikov there in person, he could have at least offered her a wry snicker, which he instead gave away in Fairwell’s office to no one in particular save himself.

“Turn it up, they’re reporting results!”

The office hushed. A few of the younger crowd bent into their laptops, and the televisions were indeed turned up in volume. A woman stood in front of a map of the Congressional districts of Florida, and the news ticker at the bottom kept the audience informed by and captivated with a procession of numbers and percentages.

“...this highly contested year. We have the first figures coming in from Duvall county, and even though it looks neck-and-neck, keep in mind less than five percent are reporting. We’re going to turn to our analysts to ask them what to expect tonight.

The camera switched to a round desk with four political analysts: a white man in a suit, a black man in a suit, a white

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woman in a red professional-looking dress, and a tanned woman, Tchitchikov couldn't make out her ethnicity, but made out a pin of a flower on the lapel of her gray suit jacket. The white man in the suit led them off.

"This year," he said, "we have the most contested midterms in the state in almost twelve years. There are a total of five seats on the House being challenged, and one in the Senate, Senator Whittaker, of such-and-such Party who faces a tough race against a liberal insurgent. What should we expect? I think this year is a moratorium on whether Floridians feel that their Congress is doing a good job. There are clearly those who feel they could do better, but ultimately, it's the voters who have to decide that question: can the challengers do a better job?"

"Yes," the black man said, "I agree: the voters will decide who can do a better job. Will it be these new faces, young upstarts in Alachua, Sumter and Duvall Counties? Will more traditional opponents prevail in Palm Beach or Nassau? Or will the voters decide that, yes, they trust the direction their Congress has taken, and that everything is on a safe, stable path?"

The white woman spoke up. "Yes, we shall see this moratorium, as you so gracefully put it, addressed and answered tonight. Will Florida want a new direction? That's the question for tonight."

The woman in the gray jacket blinked blankly a few times. "Yes. Voters are going to decide tonight."

Fairwell weaved through the seated volunteers, shaking hands and smiling appropriately. He took a seat in roughly the middle, and one of the volunteers patted on his shoulder extra luck. Tchitchikov saw a woman in the back, against the wall, an appropriate age to be his wife.

Tchitchikov turned to the television again, watching the woman at the county map. "Duvall County is off to a

competitive start, again, five percent of precincts reporting, with Fairwell's and Kingston's race a really heated contest here. I believe we should weigh in on these two."

The black man spoke. "Here we have Fairwell, a relatively unknown incumbent, in what's certainly an unusual kind of race: polls have shown Kingston to have the greater name recognition. Which is no small factor, especially given that Representative Fairwell recently has come under fire for what has turned out to be a big scandal, his infidelity to his wife about five years ago."

"Yes," the woman in a dress said, "I personally find it disgusting that he betrayed his wife, and I feel that the voters could well punish him for his lack of moral courage."

The woman in the grey jacket said, "I find it rather convenient that Fairwell's affair may be the story of this race, considering that Kingston himself has had quite a rap sheet for an aspiring representative."

The other woman jumped in. "Yes, but this is—"

"Hold on, I wasn't finished." the woman in the jacket continued. "The disgusting part of this story is the massive media coverage of Fairwell's affair. This network dedicated almost twenty-eight hours to this scandal in the past five days, since the story broke Friday. Do you know how much airtime Kingston's DUI *and* accident received on this same network?"

"Well now," the white man spoke up, "I don't believe that's entirely accurate—"

"Less than an hour and a half, and it hasn't been mentioned since August, even though the civil proceedings are still under way. Two segments total; yes, I counted. Doesn't that tell you something about the media's priorities, specifically this station's priorities?"

The other three analysts were silent.

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Tchitchikov turned to a young man on his laptop. “Western Jacksonville is looking pretty good,” he said, his face buried in it. “Fifty-seven, forty-one.”

There were murmurs of hope.

“...Taber did the tried-and-true approach,” the white analyst said. “Immigration is a huge factor, and you can’t discount it. If he keeps his seat tonight, that was the reason he did. Or one of the biggest reasons.”

“Again, I agree,” said the black analyst, “but do keep in mind, we’re not quite at twenty percent reporting. He hasn’t won yet. I suspect Taber will keep his seat as well, and yes, immigration is one of the biggest issues of this midterm.”

“I agree,” the woman in the dress said. “Their tough-on-immigration stance is what Taber and Martinez have hammered home all through their campaigns. And voters seemed to have responded! Now Everly’s staunchly pro-business platform—I’m sorry, where is he at?”

The camera shifted to the woman at the map. The map was starting to gain color. “Right now, ninety to less than ten percent, with thirty-five percent of precincts reporting.”

“Yes,” the woman continued, “the economy is another big issue on the minds of voters. Everly’s political ads hit this issue again and again. Is it safe to say Everly has successfully defended his seat yet? I think we know why he kept it this year.”

The woman in the jacket spoke up. “Well, yes, immigration and the economy have perennially been the two major issues in Florida politics for the past twenty years. You’re going to find that with most of the country, even in conservative Midwestern states like Minnesota. We can take that for granted. Now, what I think is the real story here is the emergence of a third major issue last election and now at the forefront of this election: the issue of major discontent. Yes, the economy is

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doing well, but people aren't. The working class are hurting. They've seen stagnant wages since—”

The black man interjected. “I don't see what you're saying. The economy is doing well, people are doing well—”

“I didn't finish,” the woman said. “Since the eighties, yes, the eighties, minimum wage, and real wages, has hardly done up, while worker productivity has skyrocketed. There's a disconnect: the economy is not the working class. The economy, specifically the stock market, the Dow Jones, all those little tickers at the bottom of the screen have nothing to do with the average Floridian who's living on a seven-hundred dollar Social Security check every month.”

“Seven hundred?” The woman in the dress scoffed. “I don't buy it. Where do you get your...?”

“Eastern Jacksonville coming in,” the young man at the laptop said.

“What's it look like?” A young woman asked him.

He frowned. “Kingston so far. But we kind of knew this, as long as we can scrape by in the other precincts.”

“We're at almost fifty percent reporting,” the woman at the map said, now filling in with color, “and it's clear Representative Everly has maintained his seat, we called it a few moments ago. But if you look at Duvall County, Fairwell is actually behind, forty-seven percent to about fifty-one. What do you make of this?”

The young man at the laptop frowned harder. As the results came in, the discussion on the television grew more heated.

“I'm not saying Everly did commit fraud,” the woman in the jacket said. “We'd need evidence for that. But I am saying that something is fishy in this election. I've seen almost half a dozen stories of people whose votes seemed to have been cast well before they hit the polls.”

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“Oh please,” the woman in the dress shook her head. “Of all the things I’ve heard, this is not the story of tonight’s election. Was that garbage on your blogs?”

“You shouldn’t discount how serious this is!” The woman in the jacket sighed. “And yes, I do keep open to media other than cable news, and this is a story that I think is going to break soon. Now whether mainstream media is smart enough to pick up on it and report it...”

The numbers flowed in. At sixty three percent in Duvall County, the young man reported forty-three to fifty-two, Fairwell trailing. The crowd of young people started thinning.

“We still have a chance,” the young man said.

“I feel that we’re going to see a vindication for almost all of these races,” the black analyst said. “We have Everly and Taber clearly with the voters’ mandate, and it’s looking like Julio Martinez is going to hold onto his seat as well.”

“That may be for this election,” the woman in the gray suit said, “but it’s foolish to discount the real pain the voters are going through. Poverty levels in the state are almost fourteen percent. But actual poverty—can a person put food on the table, keep a roof over her head, even retire?—those levels are not accurately reported. Let me say, the Federal Poverty Level guideline for a single adult is around twelve thousand; now, tell me how much you have to make to afford an average apartment in the state at a thousand dollars per month. Would you have to make twenty-four thousand to scrape by? Twenty-thousand certainly doesn’t cut it. That twelve thousand is a cruel joke.”

The figures were forty-one to fifty-three at seventy percent reporting. The young man shook his head and the crowd thinned. “He can still get this,” someone in the back said.

“The voters want someone with new ideas,” the white analyst said. “It looks like they chose James Kingston, so far, over Fairwell, because of Kingston’s progressive messaging.”

“I’m not sure what’s progressive about James Kingston,” the woman in the jacket said. “He espouses the same policies that are so rampant in his, let’s face it, insular and even racist party.”

“Racist?” The white man said.

“When you demand IDs to vote, which impacts voters of color so disproportionately—and this is true, voters of color have less access to driver’s licenses and other forms of government ID—then you suppress the votes of minorities. If anything decides this election, it’s the massive voter suppression—”

“What voter suppression?” The black man asked. “What are you talking about?”

“These policies don’t need to be overtly racist. They don’t need to say ‘separate but equal.’ But they do target voters of color, whom, we’ve seen in polls, tend toward more progressive policies like raising the minimum wage, healthcare for all—”

The woman in the dress rolled her eyes. “I wish you’d go away...”

The crowd was thin. Jenna moved to an empty seat by Fairwell. The young man closed his laptop and stared down.

“We’re now declaring a massive upset, with James Kingston winning Duvall County’s seat in the House from Alexander Fairwell, fifty-six percent to forty, with eighty-two percent of precincts reporting.” The woman at the map nodded toward the table of analysts.

“Well I’m not surprised,” said the white analyst. “Fairwell was out-performed, and the scandal caught up with him.”

“Yes,” the woman in the dress said. “That horrible scandal.”

The black man nodded. “It’s clear that the wrong message, and that scandal, made voters choose a new, fresh voice. It was Kingston’s seat to win. Now what was interesting tonight was Alfred Stoddard’s victory, after a rather huge upheaval in his campaign—”

DEAD SOULS: AN AMERICAN POEM

The television was turned off. Jenna turned to Fairwell. “There’s still eighteen percent left to count. What if...?”

But Fairwell didn’t hear her. He nodded solemnly, and something slipped off of his mind. He smiled. His wife came from her position on the wall and rubbed his shoulders from behind.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

He placed his hands on hers and rubbed them. Fairwell chuckled and shook his head to himself.

“It’s still ... you still might...” Jenna said.

Fairwell stood up and kissed his wife on her lips. He pulled back and petted her cheek.

“There’s still a chance, right?” Jenna asked him.

Fairwell smiled to her. He took his wife’s hand, and they left the mostly-empty office—the reporter was packing up—with an impenetrable cloud of silence and understanding. Jenna, Andy, Tchitchikov and Selifan remained, and Jenna, after several more moments, would lock it up.

It was a late ride to the bus station.

“I am sorry we have missed the train,” Selifan told Tchitchikov.

“Well I am not,” Tchitchikov replied. “It is important to see things to the end.”

“And this is the end.”

“Yes,” Tchitchikov said.

Tchitchikov glided his hand on the air currents as the Jacksonville night passed him by.

“It was a lovely run,” he said.

Selifan smiled. “Yes. It was.”

MATTHEW KEEFER

Would you not agree my reader? Was this adventure not a lovely one, though ending on an unexpected note?

We are never guaranteed a victory, though we fight for it, and may not even make a blunder at it. Sometimes the odds are too stacked against. Sometimes it is too high a mountain to climb. I would like to think Tchitchikov learned this, and perhaps even Fairwell, to some extent. And of that failure, or rather, that miss at victory: what of it? What comes next? Do we pack up and go home, and give up as our defeated representative did?

That is an individual choice. Sometimes we need to heal. There is no shame in that; it is part of life and action and, yes, the Fight.

We may or may not come back to that Fight again, but realize, or at least hear my thoughts on this, that having been in the Fight, even for but a moment, that is what counts. Whether we complete it, in victory or defeat, as long as we have participated, that is our good deed to the world, that is our Dostoevskian onion, the painful vegetable to carry us from hell's grasp when our time should come. I would like to think that action, regardless of other inaction, is our salvation in the eyes of the after-life, whatever that may turn out to be.

And an onion at that moment texted Tchitchikov. I apologize, a metaphorical onion, not a literal one, but you shall see soon, my reader.

Tchitchikov frowned at the text.

“What is it?” Selifan asked.

“I realize it is nearly midnight,” Tchitchikov said, “and I do not know what may come of this, but I have one more visit to pay before my departure.”

DEAD SOULS: AN AMERICAN POEM

Stoddard's office was dimmed. Tchitchikov knocked, and Stoddard opened the door. "Welcome," Stoddard said.

There were not many remnants of a party there, not that the remnants had been cleared away, but Tchitchikov had the sense that it was a small party for his victory. Stoddard waved at a chair, "Take a seat," he said, and he sat on his desk. "I appreciate your coming so late," Stoddard said.

"I am not sure of your insistence," Tchitchikov said. "But yes, here I am. What is the matter, then?"

Stoddard frowned. "So, I'm not sure where to start." He nodded a few times. "When you're imprisoned a long time, it's a strange place. You don't hate it. It's what you know."

"I see," Tchitchikov said.

"It's something you get used to. In a way. There's a certain, I suppose, stifling notion to the air. It gets thick and tough to breathe. And after time, it only gets thicker and thicker, but you've been breathing it for so long, it's easier to keep at it, even knowing that one day it will choke you." Stoddard knit his fingers together. He stared down, and willed them out of their nervousness, loosening them and placing them on his thighs. "It's hard. Sometimes you can't escape. Sometimes it's impossible."

"I would assume escape would be exceedingly difficult," Tchitchikov said.

"I'm not sure you understand me," Stoddard said. "My whole life, I've been imprisoned. That day you came by, you loosened my shackle—Stu—and for some reason, I felt I could—and should—undo it. He is gone. And I was terrified. That's the worst part of losing your prison, the absolute, abject terror. The fear that you will plummet endlessly. And I did." Stoddard smiled. "Until I didn't."

Tchitchikov tried to gauge him. "Freedom," he said.

MATTHEW KEEFER

“I realize this now, what makes one man different from another. We all have our prisons, our sufferings. Some walk away and say, ‘never again, never again will I suffer.’ It is selfish, but I understand it. And some say, ‘never again, not to another soul.’ I have suffered and survived, and I know I will survive should it happen again; but I also know these things must never happen to another.” Stoddard nodded nervously. “You have powerful enemies.”

“I do have powerful enemies,” Tchitchikov said.

“Then it is settled.”

“What is settled?”

Stoddard stood up. “There is much for us to do, dear friend.” Stoddard presented a handshake. “Come, join me. In this last term of mine, I intend to do some good.”

Tchitchikov stared at Stoddard’s hand for a few incredulous moments before he realized this was the destiny he had always craved.



Author's Ending Note: THE CONCLUSION OF POETIC COMEDY

To my reader, whomever you are,

Thank you for your patience. Before we part and you return to your everyday situation, should you have fear, or uncertainty, or hope in your world's situation, I have one last thing to relate to you: I have that, too. Be afraid, but do not always be afraid. Remember to learn, remember what it is to thrive, to play.

I was not lying when I invited your third act, the one to follow my little play of poetry. Know that as well.

So then, truly lastly, one parting shot.

Tag: you're it.

Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged. Missing me one place, search another. I stop somewhere waiting for you

