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The Spade

February 14 on the Long Island Railroad platform and the asterisks cascading out of the steel sky, disappearing into my wounded, ungloved hands. I am the only human being alive here tonight in 1943, pacing my footprints from one end of the platform to another, fumbling in my coat for a cigarette, a match. I think of my wife, Zara, her twisted leg dragging a swath through the elements, the trail of ellipses left by her cane. My wounds ache in the palms of these hands and I strike fire, rubies burning in my coat pocket.

I buried diamonds in the old countries for Brahmovich before his revolution failed, and now I track stolen jewels in America for strangers who line my pockets with currency. I remember Brahmovich, stroking a black rabbit in his lap, the sunlight reflecting off his almond eyes. He said, *Better to go into the night with a weapon than a walking stick.*

When I think of all of us who did not make it out alive, I feel lucky to be here, to witness my breath spiraling up, out, away into what are no longer night-raid clouds, burning sails. But that was once upon a time.

Doctor Segovovich died with a stethoscope in his fist, night planes in his ears. His wife, Lady Segovovich, sailed later for America, where she abandoned her mourning veil for a newfound revenge. Brought over by her daughter, a poet, and son-in-law, who worked in umbrella repair. Lady Segovovich. Her mourning veil could not disguise those long, famous lashes that had once been batted at us from the movie screens

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of our youth. But here, in America, she was processed by an immigration official just like everyone else. Immigration official? A clerk I call him. Because even though I have seen where and how he lives, I know he is only a handsomely paid thief. This official, Von Schleissenz (the clerk!), asked after Lady Segovovich's possessions. She had an engraved cigarette case, a framed wedding photograph. Her rubies spilled out last, from a white velvet pouch onto the cold dark wood of the desk. A necklace that had been with her people forever. Just imagine Von Schleissenz, blinded by the glare of such jewels, in this room of all places. Now watch him slide the rubies into his hand, his pocket. He took a gold-papered cigarette from Lady Segovovich's engraved case and lit it with a small flourish of a match, dismissing her with a wave of smoke.

I wait on the platform for the bright light in the distance. Valentine's Day is also my wife's birthday. She waits for me with our friends tonight. They are gathered around a table in Brooklyn eating lamb as accordion music plays. I see Maurice lifting a wine bottle, Iphigenia's dance with a wooden spoon, Zara's hazel eyes full of candlelight, tapping her wrist to the accordion's waltz.

Brahmovich used to say, *Call a spade a spade*, digging the rusted spear of his bayonet into the dirt. He died in a torn shirt, his hands ruined, singing.

Lady Segovovich went to New York's Lower East Side, where many knew her face. They threw flowers at her on the streets, but she could not think of bouquets, of silver screens, of this horrible new country. Only the villain with her now. Her family's necklace, stolen away. Who would believe her? The poet daughter and umbrella repairman tracked me to Brooklyn,

where some know me as a thief. But you cannot thieve what has already been stolen.

When I arrived at the umbrella repair shop, Lady Segovovich was in a state of high drama. She swung at the tea service, tore off her mourning veil, cursing, *The thief!*, and ran into my arms. Metal spiders filled the ceiling, inverted, stripped of their rain cloths. The mourning veil, caught on a spire, swayed above our heads. Whispering in her ear, I told Lady Segovovich what I tell them all, *I too know what it is to have lost*. The bills she pressed into my then-clean hands! I tracked the jewels to a Long Island lawn while the roses were still in bloom.

Zara, wounded while gliding through the air on her trapeze during our season of the night raids. I was there at the circus grounds that night. With a sledgehammer I gaveled a plate, lifting the stone to a bell in the sky. It rang out as the night planes dove, bombing the fields. I saw Brahmovich the first time then, running for the fallen trapeze tent, a black rabbit tucked beneath his arm. I dropped the hammer and followed him.

A clerk is a clerk is a clerk. Von Schleissenz—thief!—had I not waited for you? Did you ever see me out among your rose bushes dancing alone, my arms full of branches, petals kissing my cheeks, fingers careful to only brush the thorns? Of course you didn't. I watched from your Long Island garden five months. Lady Segovovich grew impatient. I was receiving weekly visits from the umbrella repairman. *I get one chance, only one!*, I yelled at the son-in-law. *First the roses, then the asterisks*. Five months, Von Schleissenz! You with your tumbler full of rye and Madame Von Schleissenz nibbling slivered almonds. The two of you never danced, not once, in the window where you bored me to tears, gazing out, never catching the shadow in the roses. I tossed you several obscene gestures, spat in your flowerbeds, cursed

your name in three languages (the last created by Brahmovich, to be used if we were ever taken away). Saturday night for five months your windows stayed dark, uncurtained. Gone to the city from seven till midnight, where undoubtedly you dined beneath glimmering chandeliers and undertipped your elegant waiter before the vestibule spat you back into the night.

Your cat gave me my entrance. I watched her slip through a whisper in the window frame. I, who traveled with Brahmovich, who threw weapons into the Black Sea, who buried diamonds among the unmarked graves, I who know that with a flick of the wrist a whisper becomes a great yawn in the darkness. I was inside your house, hurrying past the china, the library, up the curved staircase and its polished balustrade, into your bedroom.

Brahmovich told us, *They will never understand that a weapon fires no music, that a jewel is just a pretty stone to hold and admire*. I dug up those diamonds. Later. For Zara. To escape our fates. We traded jewels for passage on trains that took us to unburning ships for America. New York. Brooklyn. A Polish neighborhood. With its bakeries and flower shops, nobody minded the smell from the glue factory so much at all, and the streets leading to the East River were lined with trees. Zara and I with our black hair and black eyes among so many gold heads and green arms.

What are you? The women asked my wife.

We were with Brahmovich.

I say a clerk is a clerk because only an imbecile would hide the rubies he stole in a shoebox, the obvious target in a walk-in closet the size of the apartment poor Maurice spent his childhood suffocating in. What do you know of rooms, Von Schleissenz? What do you know of Lady Segovovich's lashes? What do you know of my wife's trapeze career, crippled by occupation? I stomped your worthless shoebox, peeling off my gloves. It was people like you who stole the music from our lives.

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Our last night together, Brahmovich set fire to the ships at the pier. I carried Zara away in my arms, her cane beating a tattoo into the air, *No! No! No!* Our guns at the bottom of the Black Sea. Diamonds among the breathless. Brahmovich said he would spill the moon, free the songs. He poured kerosene, lit a match.

In the closet I heard voices. Loud, yelling, close. I dropped my gloves and went running.

My grandfather was a high dive champion in his youth, as was my father, and therefore, I. When I joined Brahmovich, my father disowned his only son. He told me, *Men in this family have flown through the air, and you, you have chosen to dig yourself into the earth with a maniac.* I chose Brahmovich. I fell in love with Zara. Running through Von Schleissensz's bedroom, I had forgotten the charge of great heights. Yet we remember through blood, instincts. Pigeons still return to sites of scorched awnings. Sailors will always wake looking for stars in their prison ceilings. I dove, bursting through glass, fists full of my blood and the Segovoviches' rubies. I was ready to plummet, churn through the night air, but landed on the floor, covered in shards. Still the voices, laughing now. Laughter, then music. An oboe, a bassoon. I got to my knees, dropping the wet jewels into a coat pocket, and looked back over my shoulder. It was not a window I dove through, but a free-standing mirror that had caught the moon. The room silent now. I laughed. I laughed in the shattered mirror. I laughed until I couldn't feel my hands, then went rushing through the doors, down the lawn, past the garden, to the streets. By the time I reached the railroad platform, the asterisks were falling.

Brahmovich applauding like a madman when he was caught on the blazing pier, and not one of us ran to him. We were already

hurrying, away. Even his black rabbit sped back into the forest. Brahmovich called out through the flames, *It is our music now!*, as his hands were taken and broken and broken and broken again.

The train, the light will come for me. Deliver me back to my wife and friends tonight. I am standing at the platform's edge, arms in the air, asterisks in my eyes. Von Schleissensz, you will find my gloves fallen in an obscene gesture on the floor of your enormous closet, my gift to you. I am keeping Lady Segovovich's rubies. Tonight I remembered Brahmovich. But the stones, they are not for him. Nor for me. Not even for St. Valentine, thief among thieves. When I arrive in Brooklyn, I will lift the bottle from Maurice's grip, bow before Iphigenia's applause, and kiss my wife, spilling wine into her glass and blood into her palms, singing, *Zara, darling, jewel of my heart...*