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One

SHE IS LOOKING at me. Her blue eyes are glassy, they flicker down to her drink and back up. I look at my own drink and can feel her watching, wondering if I'm as interested as she is. I glance over and smile to show her I am. She smiles back. Most of her lipstick is gone, now a reddish smear on the rim of her glass. I walk over and take the seat next to her.

She fluffs her hair. It is unremarkable in both color and length. Her lips move, she says hello, and her eyes are brighter. They look backlit.

Physically, I appeal to her the same way I would appeal to most women in this bar. I am thirty-nine, in excellent shape with a full head of hair and a deep set of dimples, and my suit fits better than any glove. That's why she looked at me, why she smiled, why she is happy I have come over to join her. I am the man she has in mind.

I slide my phone across the bar toward her. It displays a message.

Hello. My name is Tobias.

She reads it and crinkles her brow, looking back and forth between the phone and me. I type another message.

I am deaf.

Her eyebrows shoot up, she covers her mouth with one hand, and the pink rises on her skin. Embarrassment looks the same on everyone.

She shakes her head at me. Sorry, so sorry. She did not know.

Of course you didn't. How could you?

She smiles. It is not quite whole.

I am no longer the picture in her head, no longer the man she imagined, but now she isn't sure what to do.

She picks up my phone and types back.

I'm Petra.

A pleasure to meet you, Petra. You are Russian?

My parents were.

I nod and smile. She nods and smiles. I can see her mind churning.

She would rather not stay with me. She wants to go find a man who can hear her laugh and does not have to type out his words.

At the same time, her conscience tells her not to discriminate. Petra does not want to be the shallow woman who refuses a man because he is deaf. She doesn't want to turn me down the way so many others have.

Or so she assumes.

Her internal battle is like a three-act play unfolding before my eyes, and I know how it ends. At least most of the time.

She stays.

Her first question is about my hearing, or lack of it. Yes, I have been deaf from birth. No, I have never heard anything—not a laugh, not a voice, not a puppy barking or a plane overhead.

Petra gives me a sad face. She does not realize this is patronizing, and I don't tell her, because she is trying. Because she stays.

She asks if I can read lips. I nod. She starts to talk.

"When I was twelve, I broke my leg in two places. Bike accident." Her mouth moves in the most exaggerated, grotesque way. "Anyway, I had to wear a cast that went from my foot all the way up to my thigh." She stops, draws a line across her thigh in case I have trouble understanding. I don't, but I appreciate the attempt. And the thigh.

She continues. "I couldn't walk at all for six weeks. At school, I had to use a wheelchair, because the cast was too heavy for crutches."

I smile, half imagining little Petra with a big cast. Half imagining where this sad story is heading.

"I'm not saying I know what it's like to live in a wheelchair, or to have any permanent disability. I just always feel like ... well, it feels like I've had a small taste of what it would be like, you know?"

I nod.

She smiles with relief, afraid her story might have offended me.

I type:

You are very sensitive.

She shrugs. Beams at the compliment.

We have another drink.

I tell her a story that has nothing to do with being deaf. I tell her about my childhood pet, a frog named Sherman. He was a bullfrog who sat on the biggest rock in the pond and hogged all the flies. I never tried to catch Sherman; I would just watch him, and sometimes he watched me, too. We liked to sit together, and I started calling him my pet.

“What happened to him?” Petra asks.

I shrug.

One day the rock was empty. Never saw him again.

Petra says this is sad. I tell her it isn't. Sad would've been finding his dead body and being forced to bury him. I never had to do that. I just imagined he went to a bigger pond with more flies.

She likes this and tells me so.

I do not tell her everything about Sherman. For instance, he had a long tongue that darted around so fast I could hardly see it, but I always wanted to grab it. I used to sit by the pond and wonder how bad of a thought that was. How terrible was it to try and grab a frog's tongue? And would it hurt him? If he died, would it be murder? I never tried to grab his tongue and probably couldn't have anyway, but I thought about it. And that made me feel like I wasn't a good friend to Sherman.

Petra tells me about her cat, Lionel, who is named after her childhood cat, also named Lionel. I tell her that's funny, but I'm not sure it is. She shows me pictures. Lionel is a tuxedo cat, with a face divided between black and white. He is too stark to be cute.

She continues to talk and shifts to her work. She brands products and companies, and she says it's both the easiest and the most difficult thing. Difficult in the beginning, because it's so hard to get anyone to remember anything, but as more people start to recognize a brand, it becomes easy.

“At some point, it doesn't even matter what we're selling. The brand becomes more important than the product.” She points to my phone and asks if I bought it because of the name or because I like the phone.

Both?

She smiles. “See. You aren’t even sure.”

I guess not.

“What do you do?”

Accountant.

She nods. It is the least exciting profession in the world, but it is solid, stable, and something a deaf guy can easily do. Numbers don’t speak with a voice.

The bartender comes over. He is neat and clean, college-aged. Petra takes charge of the ordering, and it is because I am deaf. Women always think I need to be taken care of. They like to do things for me because they think I am weak.

Petra secures us two more drinks and a fresh bowl of snacks, and she smiles like she is proud of herself. It makes me laugh. Silently, but still a laugh.

She leans toward me and puts her hand on my arm. Leaves it there. She has forgotten I am not her ideal man, and our progression is now predictable. It’s not long before we go to her place. The decision is easier than it should be, though not because I find her particularly attractive. It is the choice. She gives me the power to decide, and right now I am a man who says yes.

Petra lives downtown, close to the bar, in the middle of all the big branding signs. Her place is not as neat as I’d expected. There is clutter everywhere: papers and clothes and dishes. It makes me think she loses her keys a lot.

“Lionel is around here somewhere. Hiding, probably.”

I don’t look for that stark cat.

She flits around, dropping her bag in one place and removing her shoes in another. Two glasses appear, filled with red wine, and she leads me into the bedroom. She turns to face me, smiling. Petra has become more attractive—even her plain hair seems to sparkle. It is the alcohol, yes, but it’s also her happiness. I get the feeling she has not been this happy in a while, and I’m not sure why. Petra is attractive enough.