

Ever wonder what might happen when an Upper East Side dowager meets a poor Ukrainian cabbie who has a war wound, PTSD, and an advanced interest in music? A MEMORABLE THING

A Memorable Thing

by Zack Carden

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Patricia deGroot Abercrombie

Patricia deGroot Abercrombie peered through her bedroom window at the Carlyle on the familiar scene below. It would be for the last time. Had it really been forty-one winters? Yes. Forty-one. Memories flooded in: Simon, her life with Charles, and the Little President. Oh, those days ... She watched a garbage truck lurch and brake before turning onto East End Avenue.

Her faded green eyes, once bright emerald, followed the East River as it made its familiar journey down to the Atlantic. Once majestic ocean liners had awaited their passengers at the wharves: film stars, bankers, and the bourgeoisie, all preparing for the crossing. She had favored the White Star Line, its understatement, and the RMS *Queen Mary* with its aplomb during the festive chaos. But now the river carried gritty barges, stubby bows sullen on oncegraceful waters. She blinked, the morning sun warming her, but its brightness bothered her cataract-afflicted eyes. The urgency to move on encroached on old dreams, some achieved, some not.

Trish pondered the new distances in her life. Gracie Mansion, once a portal to elegant private dinners, was now a lost world to an old and ill woman. Leaving. Moving. But first, there were things to do, memories to recall. Luggage ...

She straightened her curtain, catching the familiar flight of an airliner climbing away from La Guardia. A quick but Spartan mode of travel these days, something that no first-class enhancements could temper. None of the luxuries of a first-class cabin on a first-class ship outward bound. Tuxedos, dresses in latest fashion. A quiet moonlit sea, with dancing and sparkling conversation over aperitifs before the seven-course dinner. The finest Beluga! And it was placed onto small triangles of toast with a petite spoon fashioned of mother-of-pearl. Exquisitely shaped and pointed nails maneuvering over the offerings, speculative smiles timed by the mouthful.

Those were the days she remembered: the opulent Towle silver service, Wedgwood china, and white-gloved attendants, artifacts of pomp and circumstance. Who was on the Four-Hundred Register, who was on the financial ropes, sweating under exclusive fragrances? They would speak of London and Paris *haute couture* as they dined. New fashions by Vionnet and Schiaparelli, shoes by Ferragamo, Perugia perhaps, always ahead of New York, where debutantes awaited them, knowing where they would show them off first—then checking the *Times'* social pages. Good photos?

Trish, as she was called, from her youth and adventurous I'lllive-forever-days, caught the tang of tobacco smoke. She set her leather suitcase on the floor and walked from her bedroom. Tobacco tang had always stopped her when it came to her. Cigar smoke. Balkan Sobranie. Today of all days, she wasn't surprised. A time of communing with both.

"Charles. Is that you? Simon?" It had become a familiar reverie since their passing. A reaching across loneliness in a shrinking world. A world now dominated by freeze-frame memories. Not the strident TV news and increasingly heavy traffic, urging itself forward on vaporizing exhausts captured by a winter cold. Tomorrow, traffic would be the lightest of the year. So she had chosen today, and Charles would see some drollery in it. A sort of Noël Coward cavalcade. Today was the day.

"I know it's almost time, Trish," Charles said, a familiar presence. "But would you stop by my study before you leave?"

She took her time walking down the hallway. She looked at her fingers and massaged a knuckle. The swelling had worsened. She reached out to touch the richly paneled walls. When she entered the study, its cigar essence, so much a part of Charles, gently took her in. Her great regret strengthened her resolve to not die alone, as had Charles.

"I feel you, Charles. How are you, love?"

"The same, darling. The same. Thinning gray hair still thinning. Belly a little bellier." She walked across the Persian rug to his roll top and touched the dome of his old ticker tape machine. "I brought you here on Christmas Eve the year of our wedding, remember, Trish?"

"Fortunes made and lost in those days, Charles," she murmured, her fingers examining the dome's contours.

"This is the machine I was watching when the Crash hit in '29."

Trish stared at Charles' last cigar, a vestige of her changed world. It lay on the glass desk cover, enshrined under a crystal dome where it had fallen. The varnish had melted beneath the cigar's fire. The ashes now lay in crumpled repose. A chill in the room passed through her as she lifted the crystal cover housing his Macanudo. Old cigar, old aromas. Old memories. "Seems it's lost its body, Trish, like me."

"You're still a comfort, Charles. Those one-liners."

"Don't forget me, Trish. Don't forget where we've been, what we've done, and don't forget the 'Little President."

"I'll remember, Charles. I'll remember everything."

The lifting of the suitcase, the short walk from her bedroom, had left her breathing hard. A familiar wheezing in her lungs. She lowered herself into Charles' leather chair and took in the panorama of their lives through its corporate prism: corsairs, all of them, riding the Crash down to huge profits while others jumped from windows. That wall in front of her had held no photos when Charles had brought her here on Christmas Eve in '48. A Christmas present, he had said. But over the years destiny had shaped itself, now caught in elegant frames, blood and tissue of their lives before her. She looked at the more intimate photos first. That was her routine, a comfortable prelude, a setting of the stage. There was Charles just after he had graduated Columbia, standing with his father in front of their firm's elegant lettering on Wall Street. His hair was already thinning.

His father had phoned her father, Gabby, on a Monday in autumn. It was easy to remember the date because it was her brother's birthday. Her brother killed in the Great War before they had the sense to number them: killed in France in the First when she was four; Simon dying in the Second.

That call to her father on September 10th in '29 had made all the difference.

Zack Carden

"I'm telling you for the last time, Gabby ... get out of the Market!" Charles' father said. "It's crazy in Europe, from what I'm hearing. Even Thorndike's out—that snotty Limey bailed. I'm out. You need to get out, too."

Old urgencies echoed. The pendulum on the grandfather clock remained still, yet offering its phantom arc.

Much of the wealth she, Charles, and their families enjoyed was a result of those hurried calls. Trish looked at their formal wedding portrait. She was smiling in her now-dated dress, and now she also was dated. Charles' smile was forced. It was a smile with an air of sternness, projecting a broker's burdens over his winged collar and tie. And it was one of conquest. "You always said this was your favorite picture, Charles. That you had captured me, a pet peafowl."

His voice comforted her, as it had increasingly over these later, difficult years. "I loved you from the moment I saw you, Trish. I suppose today I'd have said something better than 'pet peafowl."

"Different times ... different terms of endearment. But I cared for you, Charles. And I was always faithful." The sound of her voice startled her. She looked around, embarrassed in the pre-Christmas quiet. "We did okay, everything considered."

"The day we married was the best day of my life," Charles said. "The reason I love that photo."

But even as he said it, she saw Simon, helping her out of the snow, skis askew, his gray eyes dancing behind his round, wireframe glasses. Her very best day. "But you did look solemn, Charles," she said quickly.

"Of course. We were corporate adventurers conquering the world. A solemn business."

"It was a wonderful day." On her very best day, in 1938, she and Simon had made plans and he had offered one of his wry English indictments. That had been when he overheard the Nazi SS officer suggest to his cadets forced communal relations with the girls later that night. Their eyes had been too eager.

"Everyone was at the wedding," Charles said. "FDR had planned on coming, too. Remember? But he ended up going to Georgia for the therapeutic springs." Trish studied the signed FDR photo on the wall, the dashing, uncompromising Roosevelt signature, his jutting cigarette holder.

She turned to the picture of herself and their son, Francis. Her hands trembled as she removed him from the wall, pulling him to safety. "Francis. Francis. Why did you risk your life, my Little President? And you would have made such a good one. If anyone could have given to our country ..." She placed the photo inside her bag, securing it in its lavender darkness.

Trish stared at her former self as a baby held tightly by her mother, Margaret. The protective arm of her father. Odd how she had gained insight into them as she matured. It was in their eyes: Father, calculating deals, Mother more devious, her calculated blackmail strategies embedded in captured indiscreet photos. There was a photo of Trish being christened. Her daddy stood proudly. And next to them was a picture of her father, grandfather, and her uncle standing in front of their diamond mine at a place now called Kimberly. *The thirst for the blood diamonds had cost us all. Dad, my uncle, my grandmother. Your dad was wounded, too. Was it worth it? Did my real great-grandfather pass on a curse to us? If so, there was no romance to it all. Only presidential dreams drove us. And they were snuffed.* Trish fingered her diamond bracelet and looked at her threecarat engagement ring, ultimately barren. *I did what you asked, Dad. I did my part.*

"Charles?" She waited. But he was silent now. He had become quieter, less droll, these last few weeks. Why was that? "Charles, you were always involved, weren't you? But things are just things, aren't they? One never truly owns them; they can't give you love, and they can't keep you from dying. They're just things. So what counts in life, Charles?" She fingered the Dahlonega Stella, the pendant smooth against her wrinkled neck.

"We never got around to discussing that," Charles said. "It was always things ... things and times—and winning. But we had some good times, didn't we, Trish? I suppose the nice things made up for our marginal love life."

Other photos, other photos, so long ago. So dreadfully long ago. And there was a photo her mother had taken of her daddy when they

lived at Richmond Hill. He was standing behind Mr. Capone. What was she? Six? Yes, she was six. Her new precocity sported itself as she sat in the lap of a mobster. But he had been an opera lover to her, offering a gilded world of arias, trained voices, *elegante*. No violence had entered her life, not truly. Not until Simon, and that had been in the next war, after the War to End All Wars. Al Capone offered his camera grin. Trish had touched his scar with her pudgy fingers.

"You were a murderer, Uncle Al," Trish murmured. "A primal brute. That's impossible to bring into focus now after sitting on your lap, playing with your watch fob. I know you and Dad did a deal on booze. But a lot of people had entrepreneurial bathtubs back then, right? Then you disappeared later, succumbing to tax evasion and syphilis.

"Someone should compose an aria, Uncle Al," she murmured. And why not? The Gershwins wrote a tribute to jazz. Why not a tribute to an economy humming along on bathtub gin and murder?

Charles gently entered her thoughts. "He did provide that soup kitchen for the needy during the dark days of the Depression. Recall he fed over five thousand."

"You can't buy your way out of murder with soup, Charles."

"But of course, love."

"I did know him as a kind man, Charles. But it was a sheltered child's perception." Trish's hand trailed across her lavender overnight bag. Only half full. Not like the younger days, those fabulous nights riding in the straight-eight Caddy with the top down, out on the Island Sound, water glittering in the moonlight.

"I see you have your bag, Trish."

She hefted it and felt the protesting ache. "Memories. Know what's in here, Charles?"

"Tell me."

"That inlaid box I got from Capone."

"Ah. The one from the Mountains. As I recall, you didn't visit him in prison."

"Daddy wouldn't hear of it. DeGroots didn't visit prisons. And it wouldn't have played well politically. It would have gotten in the way of deals and those long Machiavellian knives. The deGroots distanced themselves." Trish looked at Capone smiling, her father smiling.

"It was the times, Trish."

"I think Dad didn't want to take a chance on the deGroots being associated with Prohibition in public. What's the phrase today? Ah, yes. Dad was always ahead of the curve."

"First rule of the blue bloods," Charles said. "Survive."

"And always with style," Trish added. "Grandfather Gabriel and Dad ... how skillfully they clawed their way up the social ladder. Do you know what's in the box, Charles?"

"You know I do. I came to your bedroom that evening."

"Oh, yes. I forgot. You were going to ask about dinner plans, weren't you?"

"Yes. But Simon's letters were on the bed. One was lying there. You were at the window."

"It was raining."

"I still remember your face in profile. You know, I sometimes thought I saw you more often in profile than full face, denied those lovely emerald eyes."

"It was a lonely rain, Charles, and you wouldn't talk much at dinner that evening."

"We went to the Waldorf."

"A tense evening."

"I should have knocked." A hesitant moment as she listened. "Damn it. I should have knocked! Simon would have knocked!"

A stronger whiff of pipe tobacco affirmed Charles' statement. Then another voice, a lover's voice, a whispered presence to Trish, "Yes, love, I would've."

"It was an inadvertent cruelty, Charles," she said, overriding her lover. "I saw you glance at that elegant English handwriting of his. A dead giveaway."

"You don't have to apologize for loving him."

"I gave you all I could, Charles. Everything I could."

"I know, darling. And it was always enough."

Trish touched the signed black-and-white photo of JFK standing suntanned, peak capped, in the cockpit of PT 109, skinny, brave, and

tragically flawed. "Charles? This one goes to our attorney, Milton Berwyn. Remember how he loved Jack?" She looked at the dried-out cigar again, fossilized from earlier times. At one time, it had offered its curling smoke to spontaneous laughter and judicious use of power.

"I know what you're thinking," Charles said. "Smoking is bad for you."

"I know." All the important men in Trish's life had been smokers. Most preferred cigars. And she thought of the occasions when Charles had shared them with JFK, the chats in the lounge downstairs. Now, Charles' last Macanudo lay a relic. But the ashes summoned something more oblique. Her beloved Simon had smoked a pipe. "Dear Simon, love of my aching heart. How are you?"

Another picture her mother, Margaret, had taken of her dad smoking a cigar. The background caught her eye. The farm out on the Island. Alba, her Arabian, magnificent, proud head, his eyes on far horizons. Her dad's boot, uncompromising on the white fence.

The composition was very fine, a delicate balance of contours and power. Her mother, whatever else in her blackmail machinations, had been an excellent photographer. "Remember when I asked you to teach me about photography, Mother?" she murmured, casting around for a palpable presence, so rarely offered these days. "Not only did you teach me about the camera, but I learned about the darkroom as well." A wry smile pressed at her mouth."I found that negative file and your cache' of pictures after you and Dad got killed. It was finally clear what you and Grandfather did, what compromising photos you had captured in that ugly lens. I cleaned out the safety deposit box too, Mother. I found the photos you never wanted me to discover, photos of political rivals, hair ruffled, clothes disheveled, eyes ugly with passion." A weariness gathered, along with the ache in her bones. "You were in some of them, Mother, and some were close-up, no doubt to the accompaniment of moans and groping, your African diamonds strewn on bed sheets, an exotic aphrodisiac. Something ugly ... "

No answer.

"Don't worry. Your secrets will die with me, Mother. I burned them. I burned them all. I destroyed any noxious power they held. They're ashes now, like Charles' last cigar." She studied the Arabian's great golden orbs, scanning horizons. He wanted to run, to run forever. "But it all came apart when the Little President died, didn't it?" What caused it? Diamonds? Booze? Photographs? Or was it just life teaching the deGroots and Abercrombies a thing or two? So it must be true, sins of the fathers and judgments traveling down the line.

Other photos, other photos. A photo President Eisenhower gave Charles when he had invited him to a conference in the Oval Office to discuss Wall Street reform. A picture of Ike with his golf club, standing in front of his nemesis, the huge pine tree on the left side of the seventeenth fairway at Augusta National. It had grabbed his tee shot again. The President appeared chagrined, playing alongside Arnold Palmer, Sam Snead, and his chief of staff. What was it the President had told Charles? Something Arnie was supposed to have said.

"No wonder you want to have it cut down, Mr. President." But the powers at Augusta would have no part of it. Ike had taken it in stride, though, remarking when the picture was being taken that the hole should have been named Pine instead of Nandina.

The wall, empty in the beginning, now offered a lifetime. But it was for the last time. A deGroot gallery. Other photos captured American historical figures, *dramatis personae*, slugging it out behind calculating smiles. A Who's Who of Broadway had their special grouping: Vincent Price, Rex Harrison, Diahann Carroll, and Bob Hope. But it was Ginger and Fred who caused her to linger. They, more than the others, symbolized her times when her heart had beat for Simon, when he had dug her from the snow where she had upended on the Matterhorn run. And when her eyes adjusted, the first things she saw were Simon's laughing gray eyes behind those round wire-rimmed glasses.

"Charles? Remember telling me about the night you saw the premier of Carole Lombard's *To Be or Not to Be*? That was years

before we married, of course. You hob-knobbed with Gable, Lubitsch, and the cast. Drinks and dinner. I was impressed."

"Ah. Lombard. Yes. When her plane crashed, Gable was positively destroyed. A love like that is rare and forever tragic."

"He blamed himself, didn't he?"

"Yes. He had suggested she fly home from that war bond tour. Something like that is hard to live with. Strange, isn't it, Trish, how an off-hand choice often decides life?"

"You're thinking now of our son."

"Him. Oh, and Trudy, our first maid. Remember her? My parents, the President's trip to Dallas. That open-top limo. You can't fight Fate, Trish."

She looked at the aristocratic Vincent Price. "You know, I think Vinnie was a better cook than an actor."

"A man of sensibilities."

"Good Fate for him, all told, while our political machine faltered." She glanced at her suitcase, then her watch. "I must go, Charles. It's time."

"Remember the opera? Gigli, Caruso?"

"And Capone?" Her smile was bitter. "I must go."

"Is the pain bad today?"

"Emotional or physical, Charles?"

A sullen silence. "Nineteen years, Trish." The stilled pendulum on the grandfather clock did not capture the moment. No tick, no tock.

"And I thank you for them. I do thank you for them."

Karsh's photo of Churchill held her gaze. What was his photo doing beside Vinnie's? He should be with Ike.

Trish took a final look, this time at Charles' cigar ashes, a reminder he had died alone. That would not happen to her. She would leave today. No relatives were left to see her to the other side. And death had claimed her bridge partners. Love and loyalty now had Yamile, her ailing maid, caring for her elderly father on weekends. And Trish's plans? She would not die alone, last in a cavalcade of deGroots.

"I told you I would look after you, Trish. I kept my word."

"You did, my love."

"I couldn't fight Simon."

"Let Simon rest, Charles."

Trish lifted free the double-matted photo of herself and Charles mounted in a sterling silver frame. The Savoy, London. Charles gaining in poise as his hair receded. A mixed memory. She placed it in the box in her overnight bag. It nestled with other treasures: Simon's sporadic letters; his small framed photo; her grandmother's deformed bisque-head doll; the Romeo y Julieta cigar band Churchill had discarded; and the letter from Simon's family concerning his death in England's darkest days. There was a velvet-lined container with her pearls, Charles' wedding ring, and a menu from the Triangle Hofbrau Restaurant signed by Babe Ruth. All in the wooden box, along with memories of JFK and his rakish, elegant manner; and Capone, the opera lover and soup kitchen maestro, pulling at the strings of public opinion.

The window was, of late, her only vista on a world that was passing her by. The sky had darkened, and the sun had hidden behind the dense gray. She watched random snowflakes falling in a relentless softness. A gravity of memories. "I'm so sorry you died alone, Charles. How did you do it? How did you say goodbye to this place?"

She felt his voice again, reassuring. "You're struggling, Trish." "Yes "

"It's not so bad here, my love."

Trish replaced the crystal cover over his cigar and its gray ashes. "It was a good ride, Charles. Do you hear me? It was a good ride."

Trish's careful steps took her fall-prone body into her favorite room, the library. Her thoughts were inevitably on Simon. God, how young they were at the Matterhorn! It was 1939 ... stirrings of war. She sat at the massive library table and went over her list. A final check. She retrieved her reading glasses on their jeweled lanyard. She scanned Dr. Wintrobe's notes, her living will, the other notes from her lawyer, the pain pills, toiletries, concerns of a moribund life. "You are a deGroot, Patricia." Her mother's voice. "You must always look your best. Why did you destroy my photos? Surely at your age you can appreciate the game, the infighting for survival. We were deGroots, after all"

Swollen fingers checked her purse. Lipstick and compact. "Doing my best, Mother," she murmured, "but I'm a bit the worse for wear."

She continued to mentally check her list. Gallery photos. Wearing my bracelet. Gold necklace with the Stella pendant. Rings. Her mother said nothing. Trish sought solace in Simon, their time together in London and Oxford before the war. Before the war took him. Silence. How loud the silence! And so exquisitely cruel.

Dear God.

Trish's fingertips trailed across book spines, stopping at *Profiles in Courage*. She paused, remembering JFK's cigar ash dropping onto the flyleaf as he signed. A treasured smudge. She saw other favorites on higher shelves. But she dared not climb the rolling ladder, not even for a last time.

She could see it play out. *Her deteriorating form on a stretcher, some EMT crew member calling out. "Watch her leg on that banister!" Watch my leg, indeed. There was a time when men stole glances at my legs. They rivaled Betty Grable's.* She selected a convenient volume, a favorite leather-bound edition of Tennyson, and placed it in her overnight bag. She took a small photo album, too. Family photos captured by her mother's discerning, sometimes cruel eye.

Time for a smoke. She selected a Pall Mall from the silver case in her purse. She placed it in her jeweled holder and lit it. Smoke trailed up. "Simon? Remember those Capstans in London? Nice, but a bit too mild. I had that designer dress on and worried about burning holes in it. Mother would never have forgiven me." She waited.

"You were fidgety, love."

"The deGroot fidgets."

The three-carat ring Charles had given her caught the light and splashed its fire. She coughed. Ashes spilled. Too many ashes in this bloody house. "Simon! Where are you?" In the claustrophobic silence, she got down to business. "Yamile?" She picked up a small brass bell from the table.

"Yes, Madame. You rang?" Her personal maid, housekeeper, and pill organizer stood as always, at that exquisite social and domestic distance. Not too close to be familiar. Not too distant to be disrespectful.

"Yamile, when did you ask for the cab?"

"Exactly when you requested, Madame. Ten o' clock." She pulled at the frilly cuff to her maid's uniform and looked at her wristwatch. "It's 9:44, so it should be here in fifteen minutes or so."

Yamile drew a sharp breath when she saw the suitcase. "Oh, Madame! Surely not today? It's Christmas Eve! And I should have assisted you."

"It's time." The bell sounded a grace note as Trish returned it to the table.

Brown eyes studied her. "Madame, I thought it was just another doctor's appointment."

"No. I'm finished with all that. Today is it."

Yamile fumbled for her handkerchief in her apron.

Trish made her way back to the window, the light slanting in, the snow now graying, retreating at the curbs and lights. She turned a chair and pushed the sheers aside. In younger days she had sat there and scanned the heavens. Old skies, once adorned with dirigibles, before the Hindenburg tragedy. She looked at the snow, wet edgings of tire tracks. Another jetliner climbed on slanted wings. Everyone was going somewhere. Christmas.

"The cab should pull up any moment, Madame."

"Thank you, Yamile." Her maid's expressive eyes looked calmer now. That, or they had focused in on private worries. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Madame. But I-I need to check something in the hallway."

"Very well." Trish retrieved a small notebook from her Chanel purse. She rechecked the address of the hospice. Her fingers sought the bias relief of the deGroot family crest on her ring, now old and worn and loose, a companion for her declining self. It had brought her pride in her early years, those post-flapper speakeasies where it pinged against flutes and martini glasses.

Ring on my finger, on my hand, a hand that had once raised Champagne as another year ended on laughter and promise. That family heirloom that had projected power at private, ego-circling parties. Charles had commented on it within minutes of their first meeting. And don't forget to check my teeth, Charles, but don't check the dark blood in my veins. Even now, in dwindling days, it was all about deGroot honor and attending to family concerns while awaiting a taxi.

"I remember the night we met, Charles," she murmured, adjusting the sheers.

The Carlyle, The Taxi, And Ziggy

Trish turned once more to view the interior of her apartment, her home for over forty years. The furnishings understated, hellishly expensive, and so necessary, of course. Except Simon wouldn't have cared. "Would you have cared about the furnishings, Simon?"

"Things are just things, love. One can only sit in one chair at a time."

Charles, journey-bound to wealth, had no time for furnishings. Life, to him, was in the acquisition, not the existential function. Such as the art on the wall. The tiny dancer, a study from Degas. Charles saw capital appreciation. She saw quiet splendor. That small painting was her favorite. The tiny figure had seen her through times of worry and times of joy. She took a moment to enjoy the pink tutu prancing, a dance for all seasons. Outside a horn blared into the quiet Christmas Eve morning. "Yamile, I might ask Mr. Berwyn to bring me the Degas. Once I get settled."

"That driver's got his nerve, honking like that, Madame."

Trish shrugged. "We live in a different time, Yamile. Look, I can manage the overnight bag if you can take the suitcase."

"Your coat, Madame? It's chilly today, but it's stopped snowing. You can't afford to get sick."

Trish slid her arm into the white wool sleeve and stretched for the other one, a twinge in her shoulder. "Yamile, dear, I'm already sick."

"Yes, Madame. But I don't want you to catch pneumonia. Your headscarf."

Trish felt the coat settle against her bony shoulders. *God. I'm a walking coat hanger.* "I understand what you're saying."

Trish draped the scarf around her neck, and took up her overnight bag in one hand, then her purse. Yamile maneuvered the leather suitcase over the marble foyer, the rose in her other hand. She stopped and straightened her apron. She waited expectantly.

Leaving.

Dear God ...

Yamile opened the door. A last errant whiff of cigar on a cool breeze. "Trish," Charles said, "I always loved you. Remember that."

"Goodbye, Charles," she murmured, glancing at Yamile. "Forgive your employer talking to herself."

"You are not just talking to yourself, Madame."

They waited for the elevator. "That horn again, Yamile. Cabbies used to wear nice uniforms with peaked caps."

"Not anymore, Madame. Now, most of them don't speak English."

"I hope I get one of those. I want to be left alone."

The elevator doors opened. They got in. It took them down, down, clanking and jerking. "Know the thing I dread most, Yamile?"

"What is that, Madame?"

"Being interred."

"Your spirit will have gone, Madame. It's just your body, your journey on earth. Let them have it."

"Yamile?" Trish's eyes sharpened in amusement. "Do I detect a hidden rebellion in you?"

"Perhaps."

"How about cremation?"

"Why not?"

Trish pressed her hand. "I'll remember that little snap of rebellion. I wish we had known each other better."

Yamile blushed. "It comes from my mother."

"Then I wish I had known her, too."

The doors opened to the lobby and Trish stepped out, maneuvering her overnight bag and her purse. Remembering, Trish reached into her purse for an envelope. "This is for you, Alford."

A Memorable Thing

The doorman touched his cap. "Thank you, Mrs. Abercrombie. I told the cabbie to watch his manners, that he would soon have a real lady in his cab."

"I'm sure he appreciated that, Alford," Trish said, dryly.

And so two people meet, highbrow and lowbrow, passenger and driver. What would follow was pure New York. Or perhaps, merely two vulnerable creatures in a cocooning and rather shopworn space.

When Trish first saw the cabbie, he was pacing. Smoking a cigar and pacing. Good God, a cigar. Life in a bizarre cavalcade was going on. She watched him shove back his sleeve and look at his watch. She squinted at him, this slender gnarly man with dark wavy hair. He sported a sparse goatee, a tuft below his lip, and three days of stubble. She noticed his eyes immediately as he walked over to her. Not soul-empty, like her mother's, but something she knew well. A weariness. Maybe some disillusionment in their odd amber gaze. He looked through her, preoccupied. He took her overnight bag and suitcase while she made her way to the cab's back door. Yamile followed to the end, ushering her forward, pushing the doorman aside. The cabbie opened the trunk and slung in the bags.

"Please be careful," Trish called out. "I have some special memories in the lavender bag." The trunk lid thudded down. Trish sighed and turned to offer her hand to Yamile. She hid the pain when her housemaid squeezed too hard. "Thank you for everything, Yamile. You've been wonderful."

Yamile lowered her gaze. "Madame," she said, handing her the rose.

The cabbie opened the door, waiting. She was just another fare, apparently. His amber eyes scanned around him, pausing to stare at Boofy's tree just up the street. But no hoopla from the old broad. *So far ... so good*. She took in the worn cuff of his Habersham tweed, its missing leather button. She eased herself into the seat and looked straight ahead. Cigar tobacco lingered inside; it bolstered her spirits, summoning old friends. She flinched as he slammed her door.

Trish adjusted her neck scarf, a defensive gesture. Once she had had a creamy white swan neck, searched out by confident beaux, sometimes too confident, during slow dances at the Savoy. She watched the cabbie swing with a practiced ease into the driver's seat. She waited as he did quick nervous things with keys and clipboard. *Hurry up! Do hurry up, get me away, away!*

"Trish! Trish? Are you free to talk?"

"Simon! Oh, my love! It's so good to hear your voice. Where have you been?"

"You were with Charles. It was not my place—"

"So, I was right. I knew you wouldn't intrude on Charles' last hours. I know that's what you said in the beginning and why you spoke only rarely. But I felt your presence."

"It just isn't done, love. I must say, though, your driver looks a bit seedy"

"A little rough around the edges, perhaps, and he's impatient. It's so good to hear your voice again, my love. I've missed you with every deteriorating fiber."

"Say something, ma'am? You okay?" His amber eyes observed her, framed in the rearview mirror.

"Fine, thank you." You obnoxious little man, slamming the trunk on my life.

"And I've missed you, Trish, just as much," Simon muttered.

The cabbie stopped jotting in his log. "Where to?" She slid the address through the Plexiglas window. A diffident hand took it. "The Island, huh?" She nodded.

He turned and jotted the address in his log as he lifted the mike. "Pinkie, Dispatch."

"Go ahead, Pinkie."

"Headed to Glen Cove out on the Island."

"Glen Cove. Got it."

The cab swung away on a surge of engine as he checked his mirrors.

"This chap's driving is a bit erratic," Simon said. "Better hold on to the strap or something."

"I love you, Simon."

"No more than I love you, my love. No more than I ..."

So here Trish meets Ziggy, no fancy taxi driver's cap, no neat uniform. Trish sat in his world, looking out, her one true love manifesting himself only to her.

The taxi settled into its familiar rhythm of movement and rattles. Trish felt his strange eyes watching her in the mirror. How many people, moribund souls like her, had he assessed this way? And what was that bizarre goatee thing? An artist when he wasn't weaving his hack? A beatnik poet? Readings in the Village? She watched as he relit his cigar.

"It's okay to smoke your cigar, driver."

"Sorry, I should have asked."

"What brand, if I may ask?"

"Dutch Masters. Why?"

It was unfamiliar. "Driver, I have a few other places I need to go before we go out on the Island."

"Where exactly, ma'am?" He scratched his goatee, scanning the traffic. A car went by, back seats loaded with beribboned Christmas presents. "He should cover that stuff up."

Trish opened her purse and removed a cigarette from its silver case. She placed it into the jeweled holder. She hid the trembling in her hand as she pushed the button on her Ronson.

"So, where to?"

Trish looked at the distant blocks of anonymous buildings, a Cubism array. "I want to go into Central Park first ... a few other places." She stared at her cigarette holder, some glossy artifact from—what? Her salad days? Zoot suits? Boogie woogie at the Savoy? No. Finishing school. She smiled in spite of herself. Yes.

Finishing school. And her best friend Margaux with her wicked laugh.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

The cabbie ran his fingers through his wavy hair. "Uh, doglegging through the park can run the meter. That okay with you?" He stopped for a traffic light and scribbled in his logbook again.

Trish leaned forward. She looked at the unpronounceable name on his license. She pushed an envelope through the slot in the scratched plastic. "Yes. This should cover it, Mr. K."

A mangled hand with angry purple scars took the envelope. Two remaining fingers and a thumb riffled the hundred dollar bills. "Geez! Must be \$2800 here." The light turned green. The cab surged.

"Three thousand, actually." She watched him chew on the cigar, already half-smoked. So different from Charles with his graceful hand, reflective mood, and his talk. What did he call it? Of cabbages and kings. This unpleasant little man summoned only cabbages.

He glanced back at her, his look carrying that weariness, disillusionment. "So. Just keep me posted—where you want to go next, ma'am?"

Trish flicked a first ash. "We'll begin with Central Park, Mr. K. Drive slowly, please. I have memories."

The mike crackled, an intrusion, dissonant in the sudden quiet. "Dispatch."

"Pinkie, again."

"Yo, Pink."

"The fare from the Carlyle horse-hired me out of the blue. Still heading out on the Island, but a few other stops along the way."

"Lucky you."

"Roger that. Catch you later."

He eased the cab into the slow lane. "Ma'am, as long as we're going to be spending most of the day together, you might as well call me by my name. It's Zhelyazko Kowalchuk. Most folks call me Ziggy."

"Very well, Ziggy. You may call me Mrs. Abercrombie. My name is Patricia deGroot Abercrombie."

"Mrs. Abercrombie, just let me know where you wanna go, when you wanna stop."

"Would you take a right into the park at 72nd?"

"I can get water for that rose if you want."

"That's thoughtful of you, Ziggy, but it'll be all right. So, we're going to the park?"

"Yes, ma'am. Any place in particular?"

"Boathouse Lake." She hesitated. "Ziggy?"

"What?"

"What's that thing on your steering wheel?"

"Oh, that. It's a ball. Some of the cabbies call it a suicide knob."

"That's strange."

"How's that?"

"They were called necker knobs when I was a girl."

"Really?" Ziggy said, peering in the rearview at arched brows. He held up his mangled left hand and wriggled his remaining fingers.

"You handled my envelope with great dexterity."

"Practice ... just like Carnegie."

"Accident?"

"Sort of."

"What happened, if I may ask?"

"I don't mind you askin' if you don't mind me not answerin'." Ziggy looked straight ahead. He turned the glass ball and slowed as the lake came into view. "Do you want me to stop, Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Just for a moment, please. I haven't been here for a long time." She removed the half-spent cigarette from her holder, deposited it in the receptacle, and closed the cover. Ziggy pulled to a smooth stop.

"Ziggy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You look withdrawn, turned in on yourself. May I say that? I shouldn't have asked you about your hand. It was rude of me."

"Forget it, Mrs. Abercrombie. Just the park. Memories. A bit different from yours, I guess."

"But just as valid."

His eyes held hers in the rearview mirror, a primal quickness, she decided. Trish stared at the lake. It was docile ... slate gray. The snow had left a delicate encirclement. She sought out her son. When the police came that evening, Francis, they said you had drowned here. Two more months and you would have been fifteen. Maybe you would have been more mature by then, taking on that first cynical perspective of a deGroot. Why did you risk your life to save that child? It sent your father to an early grave, and I'm the worse for the wear. But I will visit you soon, my Little President. I'm bringing you Yamile's flower

After all these years, Francis. Why haven't I heard your voice? Your father spoke, comforting in his way. And I've heard from my old, one true love. I even get a jab from Mother, if but rarely. But nothing from you. At fifteen you were seasoned in some ways, but I never hear from you. And since I left the Carlyle, your father has retreated somewhat into my memories as well. Oh, Charles. You were faithful. My Old Faithful. Perhaps in leaving I was cold. And I do apologize.

"Ready to move on, ma'am?"

"Not yet, Ziggy. I was thinking about my son." She waited for his response. Something comforting in her enclosed, diminishing world.

Ziggy picked up the *Times*, adjusting the rasping heater. "Let's see," he said, musing aloud. "Five across: a six-letter word for writing instrument. P-e-n-c-i-l." His face brightened as his gaze found hers. "The *Times* always suckers you in with a couple of easy ones"

Trish stared into her past, then at the lake, where her past slipped down under a docile surface. Her grip on the strap was tight.

His eyes were sharp, piercing the Plexiglas shield. "What is it?" "Nothing."

"Don't give me *nothing*. You just about ripped that strap loose." "Sorry."

"Forget sorry. You okay? What's going on?"

"A bad memory popping up."

Ziggy set aside his *Times*. "It's the day for it, I'll give you that. When fronts like this come through, it causes all kinds of feelings, some good, some bad. Hey, if it makes you feel any better, I have flashbacks, too."

"That's what it was, Ziggy, a flashback." She massaged her fingers, the lines where the leather strap had cut into her blue-veined skin. "Anyway, nothing could have been done."

"So ...?"

"So, Ziggy, you need to give an old woman---"

"Oh, yeah? So, who else you got?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"So who else you got to talk to? Here we are: it's Christmas Eve. Only a few cabs running, we got Christmas Eve. Anyway, I'm all you got."

"True. Not kindly put, but true."

"So?"

"Very well. I lost my son. He was going on fifteen. He drowned." She leaned forward in her seat and pointed. "He drowned right out there."

Ziggy grasped the steering wheel ball.

"Well?" Trish said.

"Well, what?"

"You asked. You pushed. Aren't you going to say something?"

"Do you need that, Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"What do you mean, do I need it!"

Ziggy picked his goatee. "You and me, Mrs. Abercrombie ... we're in this taxi, see. The world's going by. It's just you and me. So can we loosen up a bit?"

"I'm not in the habit of loosening up, as you so indelicately put it."

Trish pushed against the rear seat, fiddling with her reading glasses. "Let it go, Trish," Simon said. "You know, thinking back, I asked you to let some things go."

"What was his name—your boy?" Ziggy asked.

"His name was Francis. We had plans for him. Big plans. Charles and I called him the Little President."

"As in—?"

"Yes. As in." She stared at him, a rehearsed retort ready.

"And what did he want?"

"What did he want?"

"Yeah. Me? I didn't want to be president. All I wanted was Babe Ruth's autograph. So, what did he want?"

"You and your simplistic world view, Ziggy." She regretted it immediately. Yamile would be so disappointed in her.

"What, because I'm one of the great unwashed, one of the havenots?"

"Upper crust don't ask, Ziggy. They tell. They demand."

He turned and amber eyes bore into her. "Really? So upper crust is just a bunch of cookie cutter people? Six generations of doctors, lawyers, big shot Ivy Leaguers, logos on their pants?"

"Shut up. How dare—"

He jabbed his thumb at her. "Let me tell you something, lady, about your boy. I know about dying, too—maybe even more than you do."

"Just shut up! I wished for a quiet driver. You are becoming tiresome and too forward."

"Yeah, that's me." Ziggy turned back around and inserted Rachmaninoff into the 8-track.

She looked out the window into the grayness as the *Prelude in C-sharp Minor* filled the cab.

"Ziggy?" "Now what?" "I'm sorry. I—" "S'okay. Where to?" "I'll let you know." "Like Rachmaninoff?"

Trish looked out across the lake. "Simon?" "Yes, love?" "What do you think?"

"I think he's a good sort. And he likes Rachmaninoff. We had chaps like him in the army."

"Simon?"

"Yes, love?"

"I lost Francis here. This lake took my son. You may have heard."

"And the war took me. There are so many ways that life can make us casualties, love."



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