

Emma Kausc: *Plot Disruption*

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RITUAL FOR THE INITIATED

2011

A person is reborn, and it's often a woman, the moment when she decides not to be the object of a suffocating gaze. She decides to be the one who looks. To be part of the unspoken agreement between two pairs of eyes, consensual erotica.

Much has been written in literature about the male gaze from which there is no escape – how it falls upon women from behind, embodying unrequitedness. The observer indulges in a voyeuristic intrusion into a private world. A single glance can set off entire lives, whether those in which both actors are directly involved or hidden, imaginary ones. They extend around the perimeter of the fantasy until one almost forgets that this is a relationship where one is alone.

When I describe Alyona I met that night in Soho, I won't be describing a beauty that exists only to understand the plot, the point of the story. When I go back to the Swift on Old Compton Street, I'll return to exploring a history reinforced by repetition. For the meaning of Alyona was, and indeed still is, created by the replaying of gestures and unreliable memory. I want Alyona to be seen through my eyes. The survivors, after all, are the ones who can tell the story. Stories exist mainly in the hands of storytellers. Alyona's charm rested in her unassuming posture, an effect she had been aware of for as long as she could remember. In the slight tilt of her head, which expressed empathy. She communicated with this: "What you're saying touches me." A woman aware of herself.

A man could have written that he had walked in, and as he leaned against the door, he saw Alyona's lone silhouette in the corner of the room. His silhouette was the first to enter the Swift, an establishment with a name derived from a space with limited time and a constant stream of guests. Alyona sees the shadow approaching and turns in its direction, setting in motion a course of events that culminates in her tragic death. Without a word, the man sits down; the two are surrounded by a darkened interior that steps one foot into art deco decadence and is characteristic of noir films.

The male gaze would likely not have been able to separate Alyona from the danger she was meant to represent. I feel that I'm only starting to fully understand this now, after I went back. I can now clearly name what were once merely vague, unsettling wrinkles.

I feel like I'm under surveillance. And I feel that way even when I'm alone. Women often can't shake off this feeling; their efforts amount to nothing. Women's bodies exist as a threat and a subsequent invitation to punishment for all that they are in our society. They are under the constant scrutiny of institutions, people and language. Every single one of them seems to be waiting for the moment when the body stops living up to expectations; it begins to wither and fade. A body slowing down is as dangerous as a body that changes, that defies language, people and institutions. We've built entire societies on women's bodies.

The universal backdrop of bars tends to overshadow nuances, disregarding them entirely. But I had to have met Alyona there, I told myself; in no other setting would the meeting have fulfilled its potential. Bars have their own history. This is how ours started:

I observed Alyona cautiously for some time. She was reading. Even as I watched her that evening, something stirred in me. A few days after we met, I came across an article about a mysterious heartbeat emanating from a cosmic gas cloud. There is nothing mysterious about the cloud at first glance. There is on second glance. Its core beats to the rhythm of the neighbouring black hole. Under gamma radiation, the two formations seem inexplicably linked, forming a connection across light years. No one can explain how it is that a black hole provides the energy to the heart of a cloud. Naturally, I connect the dots in my head. I met Alyona and something inside me stirred. An echo of a cosmic event.

Alyona looked up from her book and looked in my direction. I felt a gaze on me -- the same one she had likely sensed on her own body just moments ago. When our eyes met, I caught a slight smile on her face. Neither of us batted an eye. The smile grew, and she wrinkled her nose in amusement. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she looked in the direction of the book tentatively. When her gaze returned to me, she gestured to the empty space beside her. She remembered to raise one eyebrow questioningly.

“Do you prefer any particular genres? Do you avoid any?” I follow up on my first question, sitting down, putting my jacket down beside me. In the days when it was unthinkable to approach a person of the same sex, to express attraction with words, both parties relied primarily on glances. And how all-knowing they could be. Alyona folds the corner of a page and closes the book. She prompts me to respond.

“Death on the Nile.”

“You prefer grey brain cells, then,” I say.

“Absolutely,” she retorts, her elbow resting on the book. She props her face up with her thumb and forefinger. She looks at me quizzically.

The underground of the bar has a completely different, heavier atmosphere compared to the lightness of the floor that gave the entire establishment its name. The aesthetics here are based on a darker, deeper palette. The lights are placed low and the interior, made of dark oak, has an intriguingly peculiar power over people. The tables here fit right into the round alcoves. The seats inside are upholstered in red leather. Evenings end here, they don't start.

“I don't read crime novels,” Alyona says, looking at my reflection in the mirror, “I don't read crime novels to find out who did it.” By the last word, she's looking right at me. “Besides, I'll never figure it out anyway, I don't have the head for it.” When I remain silent, she continues. “What I like about them is the certainty that they'll come to an end.” She looks thoughtful.

She may not have been aware of what she just said until the last few seconds. The knowledge only surfaced at the moment of formulation. I'm disturbed by what she said that night. Unlike Alyona, mysteries strike fear in me. There is no point in trying to understand them, they have existed and will exist outside of us. Her statement, however, confronts me more relentlessly than ever with a possible reality. In a few months, in a year, she will vanish without a trace, and the investigation will be closed. That will be the official statement – photographer Alyona Shevchenko has vanished without a trace. *What I like about them is the certainty that they'll come to an end.* Alyona didn't disappear like the women who walk home alone late at night. She didn't leave a letter behind. Her phone number went silent, then her social media accounts disappeared. She didn't share anything with anyone the police questioned. She didn't withdraw money from her account and didn't act differently in her last weeks. She disappeared in the truest sense of the word. Only the knowledge that she wanted it that way could alleviate the

distress. People have a habit of noticing only what has meaning for them and then form a memory of it. Now that Alyona's not here, I'm reminded of long-forgotten conversations.

"...so, living one's own life always means coming to terms with the undeniable desire to depart from it." She takes a sip from the delicate glass. "That's also why I'd like to make New York, London and Odessa into one place. I think I'd handle it better that way, you know."

"Did they pack you the biggest lunches at home?" I drop the question mark between us.

I tried to appear focused, without signs of numbness from the alcohol and the surrounding noise. But the body cannot be commanded, and I fought in vain against my quickened breath. The immigrant experience is hard to translate for anyone who hasn't been through it. The key to describing immigrant life is, at best, a contradiction. Some may even feel and will feel that I am in denial of myself, and even they would be right. Lives in foreign lands go against maternal time. In another language, we relive life's milestones, rejecting those we once were. We fight time.

Alyona bites her lip. She fixes her gaze on the book, nods slightly, and then blinks slowly. Suddenly, she exhales loudly. She understands: "In the first four years, we moved seventeen times. Our family only managed to escape the Soviet Union because we pretended to be Jewish. That's how a lot of people got their tickets out. It wasn't until some time after arriving in America that I realized immigrants aren't meant to be lulled by certainties in life – we're supposed to keep looking ahead to better, brighter tomorrows. Yes, I used to have the biggest lunches. Just in case something went wrong and we had to leave in a hurry."

She looks up from the book. Her pupils are dilated. "I've cultivated a hatred of rehearsing the norms of suburban life over the years. Before college, I moved to Odessa to live with my father for a year and taught English. I realized there the overwhelming need to travel. It's so strong, I can't resist it."

"That must be nice," I say, sounding like someone who has always been afraid of exploring. Europe for me was the route between Prague and London.

"It sure is!"

I looked at Alyona and thought about mysteries and their endings. Unbidden, the thought of James who vanished and his unfinished story crept into my mind at that moment. Even though he had only recently disappeared, everyone was just actually anticipating the discovery of the body. You'll never find him. Someone else decided his story.

Every relationship has its own language and every language is a ritual for the initiated. If one does not know the language, one usually begins by pointing. Lovers of great literature have always felt they were discovering unknown astronomical bodies. Alyona's body was not just the shell of a person with whom I quickly fell in love. It was also a meeting place. Despite all the history, I could have sworn it was the first time. The kisses, the touches, the bursts of passion. Female desire is often spoken of as something inevitably grotesque. But there's nothing grotesque about the need to point a finger at parts of Alyona's body, to create a ritual for the initiated with the secret language of the two of us. If the remains of the rituals of a vanished love were found centuries later, they would be barely decipherable.

When I speak of the relationship as a language, I cannot fail to mention that I still hear voices. But only hers, ours, makes sense. There is a tribe in the Amazon rainforest that doesn't talk about what it hasn't experienced. Its members don't have stories of ancient history, why would

they? They weren't there. Now that I think about it, our almost ancient history doesn't make sense without Alyona's presence.

We walked from the bar in Soho to the Borough. Somewhere near the Millennium Bridge she asks me if I know that Shakespeare's Globe on the other side is actually just a reconstruction, a replica built hundreds of meters from the original theatre. *I couldn't not know. I mean, I've studied it. But when you lent words to the events, I heard the echo of something ancient, more real than our present, I thought.*

She continues fervently, "The original Globe was destroyed by fire in the early seventeenth century, something like that," Alyona looks towards one disturbed story. Almost eagerly, tentatively, I take a few steps closer. "This here has only popped up recently," she whispers, pulling me close. It's January and unusually cold in London. I'd like to ask her what she does in life, watching the expression on her face, the possible change in intonation. I couldn't place her anywhere. The truth is, I didn't care.

I invite Alyona to breakfast and two days later I realize that the bond between us needs no proof. Even though literature loves to collect evidence and explain love at length. The canons are clear. The bond will not grow in proportion to time; it will endure between us in the terrible magnitude suggested by the cosmic event hidden in the reciprocated gaze.

The two most important women in my life were dangerously close to disaster. They were playing with fire. Unlike my mother, however, Alyona was – Alyona is – someone who doesn't start destructive fires. She awakened the warmth necessary for human survival.

(pp. 47–55)

THE ISOLATED CATASTROPHE OF HER LIFE

Unfortunately, we can't surpass technology, only people. Alyona constantly wanted to surpass something or someone; she started with her own limits and ended with the boundaries of others. The only exception in this already lost battle with machines was the film *Blade Runner*. Alyona could watch the monologue about human distrust and warships in the orbit of Orion for hours. She seemed genuinely relieved when Replicant Roy Batty told of moments that will be lost like tears in the rain. Technology acknowledged its own defeat and Alyona felt a glimmer of hope. And what's more, the defeat of the machines saved a person.

Sometimes, after returning home from work, I would find Alyona curled up on the sofa under a blanket, her limbs pressed against her body, repeating the replicant's monologue with the same dramatic pauses. Then she closed her eyes for a moment and smiled tenderly. She remained like that for a few minutes. Then she stood up and went back to whatever she was doing, as if it were a dream. I watched Alyona, a little taken aback. But now I feel stupid to be honest. After all, isn't it only the smallest of things, the most imperceptible findings of ordinary life, that ultimately predetermine everything else? Giving a 1980s science fiction film such importance is no worse than making decisions based on seemingly fatal portents or cats crossing the road.

When I asked Alyona a few times where this hatred of technology came from, she always came to one moment (and no other) on her journey into her own past – September 11th. It was, as she said, the first and for a long time the only catastrophe of her life. In my head, I'm now of course crafting the continuation of the story of the heartbeat shared by the cosmic cloud and the black hole. I perceive this cosmic coincidence as the aforementioned human unity after a

hurricane, like that unstoppable surge of energy. September 11th, on the other hand, is a staple of catastrophic vocabulary. Maybe that's where it started. Maybe it was 9/11 that taught Alyona to destroy.

People who were in New York that day never failed to mention how beautiful that Tuesday morning seemed to be. Clear blue skies, no clouds, a bright day. Pilots hadn't enjoyed weather conditions as much as they did that day in a long time, the newspapers reported. She was studying in New York at the time and found herself just a few blocks from the World Trade Center. Soon after the catastrophe, language itself becomes prey in a relentless hunt. The effort to track down the perpetrators shifts to how the global world speaks of terrorism. Alyona was horrified by the knowledge of the extent to which the Twin Towers were an unreplicable event; we stopped seeing the attacks. They are invisible and hard to talk about. There is nothing to say. She spoke about anxiety, about cyber attacks. They're quite silent, inaudible. Nothing blinks, nothing buzzes. It's not like in the movies. The employees mostly just assess the source of the attack, cut the connections, and leave the rest to the machines.

"Unfortunately, we can't surpass technology, only people," she said to me as the credits rolled on the screen. She finished watching *Blade Runner* for the umpteenth time. But in our world, technology didn't recognize defeat, which is why Alyona wanted to get away from Google, to escape the algorithms. The ominous calm that hung over New York after the fall of the Twin Towers was also strikingly similar to the silence at the eye of a hurricane.

(pp. 194–196)