

Four

It is past midnight and Mother is vacuuming. She rants about my unacceptable filth. I hear the neighbors' dogs barking at the noise. We've never met, but I doubt they like us much. While I attempt to get her attention she says nothing. Her face congealed in a familiar expression that my father always refers to as bovine. As a kid I assumed he was just calling her fat, but it was actually more of a comment on her ignorance. She is quite fat though, a model of Eastern European genetics at their finest. The vacuum is still humming in place as she approaches me. I need to be nice. I need her to pay my tuition.

"How can you treat me like this?" She is not pleased. "I don't deserve this. This is shit. Sasha, and I won't live in shit." Her arms wave at the sofa. It looks as acceptable as ever. As always, I ignore the childish nickname. It's been years since I dropped it but she refuses to adjust.

"It's late, just vacuum tomorrow."

"And live in the shit?" she shuts off the machine. "Ungrateful! I travel all this way just to see you, and you don't even offer me your bed. Do you have any idea what this piece of shit will do to my back?"

"Boundaries Mom."

"That's bullshit. If you're going to be a bitch then stop this nonsense so I can finish this and maybe get some sleep." the vacuum is going again and my blood pressure spikes. I am powerless as years of rational thinking dissipate. And suddenly I'm sixteen with nothing but blind anger and loathing. Fuck maturity. Fuck

accountability. I want to scream. I want to shatter her delusions of entitlement and self-worth. I want the next nervous break to be permanent.

But that was a different situation. This is just a couple days. I can't afford to be rude. It's not her fault. She doesn't understand. In the mornings I hug her and she's unreasonably happy.

It doesn't last.

"Spend some time with me! You promised that you'd listen to me."

From her perspective, I promise a lot.

"What is it?"

"Come sit next to me, and bring me some paper."

I hand her a nearby stack of post-it notes. She scribbles over several.

"Now I know you think you know everything, but I have lived quite a bit longer than you." She pulls out two post-its: the first has a straight line and a moderate curve; the second is taken up entirely by an erratic infinite curve. A manicured nail taps the first.

"These two are how normal people's brains and emotions work. This one," her arms are flailing for added immersion, "is how a creative brain works."

Somehow, I don't laugh. I had yet to realize that this would be a four-hour process.

"The rest are lists," She says, four post-it sheets joining the pile. "I wrote them down so you can remember. I'm giving you the secret here because I see you acting like your father: miserable with no hope for humanity. And that's wrong. You should be happy. You are happy."

She mistakes the silence for agreement.

“I know that you enjoy this bohème lifestyle with the cigarettes, the drinking, the hanging out and whatever.” She’s been using the word bohème to describe me for a little over a decade. I don’t know what she thinks it means. “You think you’re young so it’s okay, well that’s wrong. Your laziness is wrong. So from now on, everything you do must be toward positioning yourself to find a good husband.”

“And what if I end up marrying a woman?”

“Don’t say stupid things. It may be hip and popular right now to be confused and that’s fine so long as you know that it’s just another part of your bohème habits.”

“With your track record, I really don’t trust your input for any kind of relationship.”

“I have important wisdom to offer!” she held up the post-its “Don’t make my mistakes! This husband must have a six-figure salary and come from a good family. It is your job to then have at least two children, raise them Jewish of course, and you will do it because you owe me. It’s selfish of you not to.”

I stare. She’s hysterical and I am actually speechless. Moments later it’s a recap of every fight we’ve ever had: expletives from me, tears from her, escalating until she threatens to stop all tuition payments. This time though I can’t fathom giving less of a shit. Fuck her money. I imagined my father’s voice yelling, “Grow a pair douchebag!”

And for once I take his advice. Now I owe her nothing.