

The Less Gentle Brother

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I stared absentmindedly at my wrinkled toes. Behind them, the surface of the pool rippled and shimmered with light from a half moon, and from the pair of dull yellow porch lights, faintly whining on the other side. My legs were growing slightly numb in the cool air, but my great puffy coat kept my blood warm enough. To my left lay the three older men, bellies out to the moonlight, all of us lounging in reclining plastic chairs.

Uncle Vaska, swathed in a fluffy white terrycloth robe two chairs down from me, lay staring at the ceramic plate resting on his gut, with a look as though deciding whether to attempt the pâté or the salami next. Mr. Mikhail Petrov's dog Anya, a lumbering Caucasian Shepherd with a drooping face and a bursting coat of black and tan, came over and rested her great head on the armrest of Uncle's chair, wet eyes fixed hopefully on the aromatic meat.

"Mikhail, your dog has no manners!" Uncle chortled. With slightly more energy than the rest of his movements, he swatted at the dog, the back of his hand thudding on her nose. The animal gave him the sideways, wide-eyed look of any dog confused as to why it should feel guilty, and sidled over to her owner.

That younger Petrov brother, lying just next to me wrapped in a great green towel, stroked her muzzle. "Eh, we spoil her, I suppose. I can never bring myself to be too hard on her."

"You don't hit her when she does something wrong, then?" Uncle replied.

"I don't remember when I have."

"Well, you are certainly more gentle than your brother Yevgeny, then! How did you housebreak her? A newspaper to the nose once or twice, I find that's all puppies understand."

"I don't remember, it was so long ago, in my university days.... I think she must have been a quick study."

We all sat in silence once more, save for the heavy mouthbreathing of Yevgeny Petrov, half-dozed off with a grin in his chair at the other end of the cement. His nose and cheeks were flushed pink and he lay totally bare except for his damp swim trunks. Uncle and Mr. Mikhail sipped their wine.

"It can be the same with children, I think. At a particular age they are so bold and unflappable. Taking away a favorite toy will never work, they take an interest in something new every hour. Nothing serious, you know, just a light spanking if they get into any real mischief. Our dad hit us on occasion, anyway, I think helps explain my level of discipline. Your father ever hit you, Seryozha?"

"No, Uncle, not to my memory," I chimed up.

"Yes, he was always the more sympathetic brother..."

Yevgeny awoke from his nap with a snort, and remarked without opening his eyes, "You were always the one with a bit of a mean streak, though, weren't you, Vaska? In all our years of working together I never knew you to shy away from teaching a lesson!" I saw Uncle's lip curl slightly at this remark. "Then again, mother hit us a bit, didn't she, Misha? A little switch if we were found with our hand in the sweets?" He chuckled to himself.

"Here and there...." managed the younger brother in between long sips of wine. He drained his glass with a slurp.

After another moment, Uncle piped up, "Seryozha, would you be so good as to take down another bottle?"

"There's an '82 Château I've been waiting to open! See if you can find it!" added Mr. Mikhail. I went in to take down the wine, and when I came back out the three hadn't moved an inch. I passed the wine to Uncle on the way back to my seat, who refreshed his glass and handed it down to Mr. Mikhail.

The new potion seemed to stiffen him slightly, and he remarked as Mr. Mikhail poured a fresh glass, "something to think about now you're a father, Mikhail. Discipline. I'm sure you're eager to see the little man grow up right."

Mr. Yevgeny crowed again. "Ah, we all hope the best for Misha's little boy. I told him, first with going on to be a bright doctor, and now bringing this lovely piece into the family, and she is an admirable home-keeper of course, he was a real credit to the family! He does not wallow in the muck like you and I, Vaska, he is higher-minded than us! Like father, like son! Get the young boy a good private education and turn us into a family of scholars I say, hoo hoo!"

"I suppose I haven't actually congratulated you yet, Mikhail," Uncle broke back in, with a brief, sneering glance at Mr. Yevgeny. "Mother and child in good health I trust?"

"The best, thank you! Yes, we just got out of the hospital this morning as you know, and mother and baby are staying with her parents in the city tonight, she didn't want to travel yet, you know. But she'll be coming with the child out here to the dacha in the morning and we'll install the little boy in his room."

"Excellent, excellent! Pleasure to hear it! Another hale addition to your proud Petrov family!" Uncle finished.

After another moment, he offered, "well, with a newborn in the house starting tomorrow, you'll want as much rest as you can save up tonight, I wager. It's late enough, we ought not to keep you up any later, had we?" And with a start he took his plate up and rose from the chair. "Don't you agree, Genya?" he intoned, stirring the man with a curt prod from his boot.

Mr. Yevgeny's eyes popped open for the first time and he looked around as though to regain his bearings. "Oh yes, yes, undoubtedly, I'm certain you and my dear sister-in-law have more than one sleepless night up with the child ahead of you! We'll let you save your strength." He pushed himself up effortfully and sat with two legs upon the ground for a long moment before he was stable enough to stand.

"I had better make a strong cup of coffee before I try to make a drive back, I think," Mr. Yevgeny concluded to himself.

"Right you are," Uncle agreed, and a slightly sour look came over his face.

"You want me to make you one too, then?" Mr. Yevgeny yawned.

"No, no, no need. It would keep me up all night, I fear. And anyway, Seryozha here will be doing the driving, he's only had two drinks, haven't you, lad? I do realize I need to use the toilet before we depart, though. Oh, eh, and it was a pleasure to meet you, Mikhail, and best wishes with the newborn!" and with that Uncle stormed, robe swishing, into the house.

Mr. Yevgeny grinned to me, "a young man of such temperance!" and shuffled following Uncle's tracks into the house. The dog rose from her master's side and followed Mr. Yevgeny hopefully to the kitchen. I lingered outside for a moment longer.

When I came into the kitchen the espresso machine was loudly buzzing and burbling black liquid into a mug, and Mr. Yevgeny was dozing off again on a stool. "Mr. Yevgeny, you'd ought to get

home before you fall completely asleep!" I prodded, awkwardly attempting a smile. "Your wife will wonder what you've gotten to, anyway!"

"Yes, yes, you're right. I'll take my coffee in a paper cup and be gone." The machine done, he pulled a Dixie cup from the cabinet below the sink and poured off his espresso into it. The dog loitered around my feet and peered up at me.

"I'll clean the mug for you, don't worry about it!" I offered. "Have a safe drive back!"

"Right, right... well, uh, thanks, then! What a generous family you are, uncle and nephew alike! I'll see you and your proud uncle again soon, I hope!" he offered, and made it carefully out the front door. Uncle emerged from the toilet just in time to see him drive off.

He took a piece of salami from his plate on the counter, watched carefully by Anya. Leading her down the hall he tossed it into a bedroom, she sprang in after it, and he shut the door behind. "Go see how Misha is doing out there."

I walked back out to the pool to find Mr. Mikhail still in his chair, with eyes closed. "Sleeping, uncle."

Uncle came out onto the cement behind me and produced a silver pistol. Turning it toward the porch lights and squinting, he set the safety off. He walked around beside Mr. Mikhail's chair, lightly touched the barrel of the gun to the sleeping man's temple, and squeezed the trigger.

The echo resounded through the empty countryside around.

After the shot, Mr. Mikhail's frame swayed slightly, and having been already leaning in the direction of Uncle, it sagged against his leg before sinking to the concrete with a dull crack. Turning up his moustache at the dark red swiping stain across his white robe, Uncle used his foot

to push the head away in disgust. The head and shoulders dunked into the pool and a stream of blood began to cloud the chlorinated water.

"Egh. Clean this, will you, lad? If the blood sets it'll never wash out." He stripped off the robe and handed it to me. "Oh, wait!" he hesitated, and pulled the corner of the robe back to himself long enough to fish a box of cigarettes and a lighter from a pocket. He lit up and heaved into a chair once more, and I brought the robe inside.

I ran the robe under the shower and lathed it with shampoo until only a faint yellowish shape could be seen, and then only under the bright, sharp lights of that room. I collected Uncle from outside and drove us home.