

THE NEBBISH

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We tried to imagine the other team's journey from Zurich. Private, lockable compartments on quiet coaches, storage compartments built into their seats where their reflectors and bulk-packs of lens gel, plastic wrapped like Pepsi six-packs, could be kept. We argued over European train design. Cam thought there'd be mahogany and brass and Patrick said he was thinking of the Trans-Siberian Railway, or the Orient Express, and when Cam said the Orient Express wasn't real an argument broke out that made Pae's silence impossible to ignore. It became the only thing in the room.

He didn't like this game, daydreaming about the other team, so he counted the silhouettes of dead insects in the light fixture above our heads instead. It was unfathomably hot in there, in The Nebbish's kitchen: A sweat cloud bloomed under Pae's shoulder blades. His back hunched and his head craned painfully upward. As the hours passed, whatever he was stewing in took ownership of him completely. It began to leak outside of his body and into the rest of us. We stopped guessing about the other team, the clean Benelux air they must be breathing, and we rapped our knuckles on the apartment's plastic surfaces and wedges bits of paper underneath the table leg, to stop it rocking. One of us stuck our head out the window at the petrol station down the main road, where a board displayed the weather and the time and the price of diesel. We'd been in that flat for twenty-one hours.

We joined Pae in counting the black spots, but they multiplied and vanished and our tallies were never the same. There was no telling when The Nebbish's mother would have an answer for us. She'd been in her daughter's room for a very long time.

We could only imagine that she was still in that sad girlish nightgown she'd been in when we'd asked her for use of her daughter, a conversation led by Patrick that lasted close to an hour. We couldn't tell if she'd understood any of it. She didn't say a word.

Not everyone knew her as The Nebbish. It was our name for her, a name that Cam applied to her, when he recognized her swaying as something like the *shukkeling* during the Minyan, the rocking that men do in synagogues. We hadn't known Cam was Jewish – maybe he wasn't. Maybe he just knew those kinds of things.

We had less than twelve hours to get to Luxembourg. Pae excused himself to the bathroom. The door couldn't shut all the way (a fallen frame, some exposed insulation) so we heard him not-pissing and we heard him splash his face.

Patrick had brought an actual print-out of the article with him. Not from the magazine itself, which had gone fully digital in the year and a half since the interview about The Nebbish was featured in it, but from his own printer. Sidebar ads for charcoal mouthwash cut off at the paper's edge. Patrick was young enough to fuck up printer settings without shame. His face could not do shame. Patrick rarely erred, and so he never seemed heavy, in the way most adults are, despite his size. (Lacrosse.) We kept the print-out in a copy of Wired that Cam picked up from the airport. It was the one shred of

evidence that this, this endeavour that spanned across so many nothing-countries and principalities and dishevelled, modernist tollbooths, had been attempted once before.

The British blogger had found her in Volgograd. They were called that then: bloggers. The story is unsatisfying, and all things considered, much of it is probably fiction. But it went like this: She'd been seeing a specialist with her father. The blogger saw her from across the road and took a photo with his phone, which had an anamorphic lens attached, giving the scene a cinematic quality that made him look vastly more skilled than he was, and capture some generous fraction of her. Why the blogger had been in Volgograd has never been explained. In the photo, she is waiting beside a Rabobank machine in a patch of sunlight on an otherwise dim afternoon. Most of the image is a blur of white car, but then there she is, in the far left, accidentally in focus, baring her teeth and crushing the flesh of her neck downward, into her spine. She's on her toes, and she looked off balance, about to fall. She might have fallen in the moments after the image was captured. Her father is nowhere in sight.

The blogger put it online. The reactions were instant.

wot am I looking at?

она самый красивый человек в мире

What is she???

i've never seen anyone like this in my liiiife

holy shit what's going on with her skin?goalz goalz goalz goalz goalz

I can't take my eyes away from this, can anyone else? It's the creepiest thing

Que linda deseando estar aquí en este momento

I've been looking at this picture for three days, I don't know what's going on

what happened to you when you looked away from this photo? Need to know, because I'm getting kind of freaked out by what my eyes did...

seriously can't get over this

no lo entiendo Me siento raro después de mirar hacia otro lado. ¿Alguien mas?

No but really though who is this and how is she so perfect

Who is this

tengo miedo de ella

By the time the image had reached the end of the typical lifespan for sharable media, little had been discovered about The Nebbish. Only the blogger, (male twenty-four, grey tongue, deaf in one year from frequent a Browning B15 he'd shot growing up in South Bucks) had any information on her whereabouts, and he invested this information skilfully. It was he who coined 'The Tunguskan', which stuck, because it sounded so fucking cool, but also like a monster, like tusks, like Tusken Raiders, like dust. Something about her possibly-Siberian origins, the way you could almost see her

organs under her skin, the alien quality, the endless blurring, which was of course a product of the endless motion, left men and women and children obsessed. She had a particularly dense following among wealthy Mexican girls between the ages 15 and 18.

One magazine outbid the others for the shoot, but the blogger had set his tricky rampart: Getting to her meant placing him at the helm of the whole thing. He would be photographer, art director, location scout.

The location was where he fucked up. The particular street in the Marais is one of the narrower in the city, and it was hard for the ambulance to get there. When they managed to get inside, the flat looked like an ice cave, such was the smashed glass. The Nebbish had to be strapped in, her head pushed into one of those restrains that looks like styrofoam packing.

The magazine's Creative Director – a transplant from Toronto called Josiane Schwartz, whose name is unimportant but gets stuck in our head like a radio jingle – tried to ask questions and provide reassurance in slow, monotone French. She was the last one to see The Nebbish or the mother until us.

It had been Schwartz who'd ended up interviewing the blogger himself. That's how it went. The shoot was such a disaster (and one that the blogger had live-streamed) that merited its own story. Schwartz and the blogger disappeared from The Nebbish's story after the article came out, just as The Nebbish did from the face of the earth, like a kind of dyslexic rearrangement of ink on page.

Patrick pulled the article out now, and let his eyes scan the words he already knew well.

JV: What went through your head the day you first saw The Tunguskan in the street?

TB: It was like I was on the moon and saw alien life for the first time, really. I can't describe her. The way the photo exploded like it did, I mean [he laughs into his Americano] that says it all really. No one has ever seen anyone like her. Then pair that with the, you know, the difficulty she has, the cognitive problems, and you just have this really compelling madness. Like the most beautiful girl in the world possessed by the devil. It's kind of crazy that I'm the only one to have seen it, like, in person.

JV: You and the crew in your flat on that day.

TB: Well yeah, of course.

JV: And presumably her family.

TB: Sure.

JV: Did you get a sense of her background at any point in your meetings?

TB: Her mother tried to explain it, but honestly no one could understand what she was saying. She was born somewhere north of Novosibirsk, but whether that's just the next village up or the bloody Arctic we don't know. She was in Volgograd that day because she was spending time with her father and I got the sense they'd moved there to be closer to him. She obviously can't get, you know, the medical, psychological help she needs in the middle of nowhere

Siberia. Do they even have doctors there? (laughs)

JV: You seem fairly good-natured about your experience with her given how your last encounter went. Shall we talk about that?

TB: Sure, look: I'm an open book. And maybe that's why I seem so good-natured about it, as you say. It was such a sort of frightening, [pauses, considers his words] yeah I'll say it: disaster, frightening disaster, that I feel kind of comforted. Knowing that I probably will be the last person to have captured her, at least for a time. There's a kind of perverted pride in that.

JV: That speaks to a larger point: Other photographers have been trying to track her down, as you well know. Do you feel at all possessive of her?

TB: Possessive is the wrong word. I feel extremely serene. I've let the world know about this strange, manic, beautiful creature. And what a joy it is to have sort of borne that. Given it to the world. Really caught the intention of a young digital audience whose attention is impossible to catch. Yes, it's pride, and serenity, and almost a kind of motherly joy. And really her condition...it makes her kind of a Moby Dick, right? Except I caught that Moby Dick. Before anyone else got to catch it. Now it's up to them to, like, try to catch it again. And what makes a giant whale even scarier than you'd think a giant whale was?

JV: (after a pause) Tell me.

TB: A giant whale who's just like, completely spazzing out. So there you go. Good luck to anyone else, but I suppose in a way she will always have...emerged from my eye.

No one tried to find her for a long time. She aged: sixteen to twenty-one. Xavier Gaal contacted our magazine. He wanted to try again. He wanted try with The Tunguskan. She'd slipped out of vogue and into that space of perfect obsolescence, where some mix nostalgia and irony would make her explode on the page, just as she was always fated to do. Xavier Gaal doesn't make calls. He had not even attended the International Photography Awards in Manhattan earlier in the year, despite receiving their greatest accolade. He sent, in his place, a large jar full of pig's blood, affixed to which was a pair of sunglasses. A silent, shirtless attendant carried this proxy through the event, carrying the Very Cool Jar Of Pig's Blood along the press queue. Xavier Gaal doesn't make calls, but he did then.

Cam was the one who traced her mother down, eventually, through a European IP directory which pointed to the accountant for the father's printing business, and then to a former residency of his, and then to a series of phone numbers, all of which Cam tried, until one was answered by a woman in rasping English who handed the phone over to a man who said he was The Nebbish's father. His English was accented heavily with we didn't know what, but spoken slowly with the careful vowels, learned from British television, perhaps. He told Cam that The Nebbish and her mother had moved to Eindhoven and would need a Paypal transfer to give the address. We went to that first building,

straight off our respective planes, hardly saying hello to one another. It led to a squat olive-painted barn across from a building site. A cleaner answered the door and did not know who the girl or her mother were. We called the father once more, sent one more payment, and got a taxi to an estate in the south east of the city where the cycling lanes stopped.

We put Patrick in front of us. It worked – he said almost nothing, and we were invited in. He introduced our proposition about her daughter (with gesturing, firmly spoken keywords, many gestures toward the door as if to say “We will leave the moment you tell us to leave”) so subtly that the shock, the resistance, came long after we’d emptied our glass teacups out into the sink, one by one, building gradually, until she half-brought the Nebbish out of her room, changed her mind, ushered her back in. It was hard to follow. The appearing and disappearing, the absence of any recognisable language, The Nebbish’s small twitches and fluttering eyes, all gave the feel of vaudeville, or some absurdist student theatre. We were left in the living room after nightfall. We guessed that we were allowed to sleep.

We were half of the full production team. The other team were the freelancers. We would bring The Nebbish to Luxembourg, to a canal that Xavier Gaal had in mind. We would convince The Nebbish to come. We had no choice.

Pae emerged from the bathroom bleeding from the teeth. Dom was the first to notice – he gasped – and the rest of us realised we’d forgotten that Dom was there at all. We looked back and forth between the two. How different they were. Pae – saying something about leaning out the bathroom window, he was okay, he bashed himself on the frame, we really had to listen. And Dom, who’d been so quiet this whole time, his hair falling into his eyes, leg shaking. He’d become a jobbing camera operator by sixteen, just two years ago. Maybe one of the managers had thought he’d be the best bet with The Nebbish. Here, now, the idea felt embarrassing. The idea of her swooning over a boy. The idea of her swooning over anything but her hunger for symmetry, or sea-level, whatever it is that governs her synapses and palsies.

The Nebbish’s father had said the words “motor neuron”. When we used them with the mother, she slapped them out of the air with such force that we knew the father had been fundamentally wrong. We each had our guesses, but it felt vulgar to speak them aloud.

Pae was still speaking.

“I saw inside. I saw inside her room. The ledge juts out. She’s in there. She’s awake.”

“What was she doing?” we asked.

A bloody smile spread across his face.

“Packing.”

While The Nebbish’s mother babbled at our midsections and shouted at the ceiling, Patrick tried to show her how to use the translation app. We should have thought of this earlier. Now it seemed

urgent.

She jabbed an outstretched hand at Patrick's middle, and slapped the phone out of his hand. He checked it for cracks and held up the screen.

"Cyrillic?" he said loud. "Slavic? *Slovanský*?"

The Nebbish was in her room. We still hadn't seen her since we figured out that she was coming with us.

The mother made sounds like a child crying but there were no tears on her face – maybe she was translating alongside us. It was the strangest duet.

"Hoo hoo!"

"This is the Russian from near Mongolia? Is that right? *Iz-pod Mongolii*?"

"Haw." She drew sad mouth across her face with a limp finger.

"Estonian?"

There was more guessing until the sink-smell of the boxy reservoir made its way through the window behind our backs.

Then very suddenly: progress. The Nebbish's mother squinted at the phone, scrolled through a list of languages, and carefully, as though it was a delicate string instrument, began pushing at it with her fingertips. We waited in silence for her to finish. Patrick bit at his thumbnail and let weight settle to one side, giving the woman a radius, his focus on her making everything else in the room less deliberate or fixed.

She handed the phone back to him. He hit the button that made a robotic female voice speak the translated words aloud with messy emphasis.

we CAN'T hear-THEM.

Patrick stared at the woman. We all stared at the woman. He played it again. Before it could finish, The Nebbish's mother grabbed the phone again. She hit buttons with a frown that made her face fold in on itself, crinkle into pure shadow. She held it up to Patrick's ear.

the MEN ARRIVE and the GIRLS transit and WE CAN'T HEAR THEM.

He looked at it for a long while.

"What the fuck does she mean?" He pointed it in our direction. Cyrillic and English side-by-side.

While the mother waited patiently for us to decipher it, a thump came from The Nebbish's room. Calmly, the woman turned from us and we heard her muttering something soothing through the bottom of the door. We heard the bird-like calls of The Nebbish. Pae was the first to say something.

"She's saying men like us come," he said, leaning back in a folding chair and rubbing his face. "They take the girls away, to model, like we're saying. And then no one heard from the girls again."

We were quiet and perfectly still for some time, until reggaeton began to play from the carpark below, in a thorny time signature that made us too tired to come up with ideas different from

Pae's. We knew he was right. Of course he was. And that meant, among other things, that The Nebbish's mother would have to come with us.

Cam and Dom took opposite sides of the couch and draped their hoodies over their bodies. We switched off the kitchen lights and slept where we sat. We heard a few noises coming from The Nebbish's room – quick speech and then slow speech, both from the mother, and then footsteps. One of them, either The Nebbish or her mother, brought us each glasses of water before disappearing into the dark. Eindhoven water smelled like golden retriever, and before we fell asleep, into the deepest sleep we'd had in days in which we each dreamt of insects, Patrick whispered her words to himself one more time: “We can't hear them.”

The platform was rammed, but once we held The Nebbish out in front of us like a carved figurehead on a ship's prow, people parted. Mothers pulled their children back gently by the shoulders to show them how to make room for people like The Nebbish. Some teen boys openly stared, then barked something that we couldn't understand.

We realised that we'd never seen her in proper daylight, and the station's murky glass ceiling made her skin look warmer than normal. Patrick and her mother held both her arms down by her side. Her knees jutted out while she walked. She made a chirping sound every few steps. She blinked in a familiar, uncomfortable rhythm. Her lips never quite closed. Her eyes looked drawn on like a doodle you'd find on a junior-high notebook, and she gave off a smell like motor oil. There was something like that dog-like water coming off of her, too. But that was everywhere. We imagined that bathing must be an ordeal, which would explain the smell, but we quickly felt shame for imagining it at all.

A sound came on overheard to mark the hour, two o'clock, and someone behind a counter shouted “panini” and our attention wavered for a moment. She wrenched free. We each lunged at her, just an inch, fearing a chase. Her thin arm reached for the suitcase Dom had been rolling alongside his own, her suitcase, and when she came near to him it was like the glow from her skin was contagious. Something on him seemed to glow in return. Patrick almost laughed, and pointed to the mirrored tag on one of our duffle bags, casting the light on his face. How ridiculous.

We watched as she tried to lift her case, her muscles spasm with intention, unlike how they normally whirred on and off, her weight shifting side to side like a tin man. We saw the budding of her deltoids and a slip of white hair get tangled in her shirt. Her chirping stopped, replaced by the more recognisable sounds of strain. No one dared help her. Even an attendant stood wide-eyed from inside the train, fingertips pointed outwards, ready to catch her.

As the train pulled out, the palette of the planet changed. The more turquoise light that fell across the afternoon sky, the crueller her home became in our memories. We hoped to never see a yellow fluorescent again, which of course meant that we hoped that The Nebbish would never see a yellow fluorescent again. So maybe we were wishing for it, even then, without knowing it. Wishing for what was to come.

Our thoughts went to the British blogger in Paris, the one who's so casually cursed the outside world for her. We imagined the devastation she left in her wake. All the shattered glass. It brought us something close to peace.

We were crammed into two sets of table seats, across the aisle from one another, and a few of us had laptops out. We'd sent management a long text explaining that she'd decided to come all on her own, but that her mother needed to be on set for the entirety of the shoot. We hadn't received a reply.

For obvious reasons The Nebbish took an outer seat, long leg outstretched, ankles peeking from wrinkled slacks that could have belonged to a greeter in an American mega-store. They'd lost any color they once had. She wore black on top, a tee shirt with a green clover on it. She'd made some effort to tuck it in.

She was still for a long while, her twitches reduced to what might be mistaken for the normal nods of a quiet conversation, and her teeth bared while she tapped with her middle finger – we hardly noticed after a while. At one point she rubbed her mother's arm and whispered words quickly. Wordlessly her mother reached into her bag and brought out a thick charcoal pencil. It looked expensive, from an art supply store, and had clearly been dulled. The Nebbish began to draw something on the back of a call-sheet, pulled quickly from a pile underneath Patrick's laptop. She began to draw, taking long pauses to look out the window, or tap out on the table, or let her eyes float to the ceiling. After a time, something on the page began to take shape.

"Is she trying to tell us something?" said Dom.

"She's not a fucking collie."

"No, look man."

She leaned diagonally across the table, almost spilling his tea onto the lap of The Nebbish's mother. "I think it's Russia," Cam said. "Look at the shape."

Each of us craned our necks to look. Neither The Nebbish nor the mother took much notice of our sudden attention.

"No way," we said.

She added dot-eyes and a nose like a number three to the blob. She hit the thing with the tip of her pencil. Then she made a sound at us, looking us each in the eyes. We noticed for the first time that they contained flecks of purple.

"*All ak*," was the sound she made, but she made the end-sound, the hard *k*, over and over, until one of made the sound back at her.

"*All ak*," said Dom.

"*All ak*," she said. She smiled.

"Maybe it means whale," he said. "It sort of looks like a whale."

As we crossed the Belgian border, Pae took her pencil from her hand. In a blank space below her creature he crossed four lines against each other. He made an X in one of the boxes. Her mother

was asleep by this point; The Nebbish stared at the sheet for almost a full minute before stealing a look at her, checking, and coming back to the sheet, and smiling bright, in the direction of her own chest. She lifted the sheet to eye level, and it shook in her little pulses while she studied the markings. She laid it flat on the table top once more. With her index finger she poked a square perimeter around the four lines. Then she drew an O.

We arrived alongside a parade of black, icy clouds. It wasn't winter, not by a long shot, and the commuters in the wide square outside the station looked caught off guard. They wrapped cardigans over their heads to protect themselves from drizzle, and fled into sandwich shops.

We showed her and her mother how to use her room key, how it needed to be snug in its slot for the lights to work. We tried to tell her that she'd be woken up at quarter past six tomorrow morning, and that she should try to sleep soon. We tried to tell her someone could probably rustle up a pill to help her sleep, if she needed that, but by that time her mother was pushing us gently out of the door.

We agreed that there was a small chance that she'd understood English all along, but later, speaking in quiet voices underneath street level, we would definitively change our minds about this.

The last glimpse we got of The Nebbish that night was her thumb gently pressing against her temple, the other hand playing with the lights, slotting her room key gently in and out of the wall. Her face was joyless – this was not wonderment, this was procedure. Mathematics. We didn't know how long it needed to go on for until she could allow herself to get into bed, and so we left them there in that strobe. We imagined it continuing all night, a two-person rave, no sound but the click of plastic and the breaths of her laboured magic.

We woke at sunrise and decided to scope out the Old Town. In the lobby we saw most of the team and felt our first wave of real fear. We had suddenly multiplied, and only a handful of these faces were familiar. There was Emmie the stylist who seemed to work in every one of our offices all at once, teleporting from New York to Mumbai to Seoul, often creeping up behind you in the staff kitchen and guess-who-ing you over your eyes with small cupped hands. And there was Ali, the most senior of the global editors.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” asked Pae. “Anyone know he was flying out for this?”

None of us did. He fingered through a tray of biscuits set in front of the check-in desk. He spotted us through a glittering pane of installation art, a chandelier upturned and frozen, suspended with fishing wire in some kind of explosion. He saluted us and we picked up the pace. We couldn't speak quite yet. We knew there'd be questions about how we convinced The Nebbish – no, The Tunguskan now, now that it wasn't just us – to agree to this. Our answer would be unsatisfying. It would sound suspiciously simple: She just decided to come.

The air was colder than it looked. We moved downhill naturally, without trying to, until we lost sight of the H&Ms and the buses. Without a map, we made our way to the quiet depths of the lower-city, a tangle of crumbling cliff face and wild garden hedges, zig-zagging footpaths leading to house facades overtaken with moss, and caves – pink rock caves, like The Flintstones, which offered nothing, hid nothing, except for the impressive feat of remaining untouched for many decades, maybe a century. We laughed when we heard two duelling accordions in the distance. We found ourselves underneath a railway arch so tall it made us nauseous to look at. The idea of trains passing that high up seemed Olympian, like something out of a bizarre Norse myth. Vines dangled from the arch's highest point, but we couldn't make out the details. We only made out the gentle, constant impression of shadow in motion, of constant motion.

It finally occurred to us to check the time. We had been gone two hours. The shoot had started.

A teenage assistant was clearing away traces of a homeless person's cardboard tent. It looked melted, from last night's rain. We were indeed on the most impressive bit of the canal, based on what we'd seen of Grund, with a cobblestone path wider than some roads we'd watched cars creep through earlier that morning. At first we couldn't find The Tunguskan. Instinctively we held our breaths, like when driving through a tunnel, making frantic wishes. We trod across cigarette butts and mulch and eventually found the clothes rails and standing lamps. There she was, in the centre of it, under a footbridge which had been blocked off by traffic cones. Emmie was braiding The Tunguskan's hair with ballerina sadism while the mother pinched the soft spot of her daughter's arm. A private ritual, maybe, one to do with pain and awareness. The Tunguskan rocked on her pelvis and Emmie occasionally pressed her forehead back to keeping her still.

Ali tapped one of us on the shoulder and gestured behind him with a nod. When we'd moved to the far end of the walkway he leaned his back against the wall. "Glad you guys showed up."

"It was a long few days," said Patrick.

He might have been about to say more, to defend our lateness or our sleepy confusion, but Ali cut him off.

"You know we can't pay half these people, right?" Ali looked thinner than he had the last time we'd all seen him, at the company all-hands in New York or poking around wonton soup at SFO.

"Cam over here said insurance was standard, but..." He rubbed his face.

"It was," said Cam.

"Yeah, you didn't mention anything about a fucking medical staff."

We looked around until we spotted it: a pair of paramedics, looking bored in high-vis jackets, rubbing their arms in the unexpected frost.

"That's not right. We need one medic on site for location shoots –"

"Well when you were fucking around in Amsterdam someone decided we needed to full-

blown paramedics and now we can't pay anyone under 25."

"Eindhoven," Pae said.

"You seem pretty calm about it," said over him. "Why are so many of the ringers under 25?"

Ali pulled his phone from his back pocket. "You have managed to miss the point with breathtaking fucking pazzaz."

Two cars honked at the road block above where The Tunguskan was being styled.

"Welp, there's nothing I can do about it," Ali said as an afterthought. "It's kind of a nice feeling actually. Out of my hands. The world wants this twitchy retard, so we're giving the world this twitchy retard."

He grimaced at his device as though it let off a smell. Tourist feet sounded above our heads, and one of the cars began to reverse in slow pulses.

"Jesus, Ali," said Patrick.

Ali looked up, baffled. "What did she do to you?"

None of us could answer.

"Forget it," Ali said. "This is me keeping you in the loop. When Xavier gets here your job is done."

"Wait," said Dom, nervous. "What does that mean?"

"If this goes ok then, fuck, we sell actual physical issues and Xavier becomes a brand ambassador. It's fine. I'll be fine." Ali took a sharp breath in through his nose. He sounded congested. "What the shit are you guys doing?"

"You brought us over here," said Pae. "Is that what you wanted to tell us? That no one's getting paid and we can go home?"

"Christ. Fuck," he said. "Yes. That and that your expense account is obviously shut."

"We had an expense account?"

Patrick stormed off in the direction of The Tunguskan. A cluster of pigeons who'd gathered by some extension cables leapt out of his path.

We could hear Emmie try out some Russian – learned from the teen models she worked with most often – on The Tunguskan. Something about the shape of the footpath and the water made sound travel loudly, and we almost wanted to speak a message back to them, along the wall: It's no use, Emmie. Whatever she speaks is older than that. There was a crowd gathering now, at the edges of our pathway and above us on the bridge. It couldn't possibly be long until someone figured out who she was, put the message out. Had anyone considered this? It occurred to us that it was not our job to think about this, and that Xavier Gaal was nowhere in sight, but we felt protective of the secret nonetheless. The secret of what we managed.

Pae paced until The Tunguskan approached, moved past us, still propelling herself with a sideways motion, the addition of makeup and hair accessories throwing off her non-equilibrium and making her reach frantically for an assistant's hand. Her feet were bare. It looked like she'd float

away. She clenched and released her jaw.

We watched as they approached the water. Pae went still. We heard Ali shout out to a driver – something urgent – and then Xavier Gaal was on set. He wore a grey hoodie under a denim jacket and wore socks with women’s sandals. The order of events seemed terribly wrong: now The Tunguskan is in the water, thigh deep, now a goth teenager is unpacking Xavier’s equipment, now Ali asking after Patrick, now Emmie is calling out: “That’s enough!”

She’d begun to make a lowing noise, The Tunguskan, and several assistants stood at attention, ready to reach an arm. The Tunguskan stood shaking, on hand hovering next to her hip bone for balance, something loosened from her hair, and we now feel we should have had many, many more medics on set. We didn’t know if she could swim. Surely someone must have asked.

After The Tunguskan became still again, more assistants appeared with a single large deep red sheet, soaked with mineral water from 1.5 litre bottles. They waded out until their boots were submerged and draped the dripping thing across her. From behind us, Xavier shouted “Higher! Cover her! Tighter around the middle!” and her mother faced the wall, a styrofoam cup of tea sending steam into her face. There was a flash from the crowd, and then another.

None of us watched the rest of it unfold. We sat in folding chairs under the bridge and watched our feet. Patrick returned from we-didn’t-know-where and sat beside us. We didn’t need to look, because we knew what we’d see:

The straight line of her nose held closely to her chest, to the sludge below her feet, and then cracking backward, light bouncing off the distant roofs of the New Town, the muscles of her neck pulsing like kittens in a sack. We’d see Ali looking away as well, thumbing the sticker off the refrigerator magnet he promised to bring back to his stepson. He would keep one eye on Xavier, who would hold the DSLR up to his chest while tilting his head at The Tunguskan, now his Tunguskan, his attention on the dots of cloud threatening to obscure his light. The sharp edges of her shoulder and endless trajectory of her thin arm will look like a slice of pure pigment under that red sheet. A wedge of very expensive spice. If she twisted herself by a few degrees we would see her heart beat beneath her ribs. She would ugly-squint in the light and Xavier would groan with satisfaction and her pupils would stay small the whole day long. Her lips and freckles would look blue.

We let ourselves watch the scene again when Xavier paused to watch the monitor. He removed his hoodie and let the goth teen rub his shoulders, awkwardly, her head only coming up to the middle of his spine. Patrick noticed that something was wrong before the rest of us.

She was frozen in place, wrists bent at painful angles, everything still. Her hand brushed at her face, and Emmie tried to approach, shouted for her to turn around, shouted over Xavier shouting. When no one could get her to turn around, Emmie jogged to the curve in the pathway to get sight of her; she screamed for the medics. They stayed motionless, watching Xavier and then Ali. Emmie screamed obscenities, and several of us were in the water: The Tunguskan spoke that language in a

monotone, is a voice more grown-up than we'd heard before. In the end Emma grabbed hoisted her back to the dry cobblestone, flanked by Patrick, who was shouting, and then the medics were on her.

It looked worse than it was. The blood was down to her navel. We expected her mother to scream, but she didn't. She simply grabbed something – Xavier's hoodie – and pushed the medics aside with alarming force. One, who'd been squatting, was knocked backward and spat something in French. The Tunguskan's mother held the grey thing to her daughter's face, and instinctively we kept our distance, kept the others at bay, pulled back on their arms and gave short instructions. "Stay back," and "Leave them." We let terror consume us. Cam couldn't stop swearing. Pae walked off and we didn't see him again until everyone returned to the hotel, broken and exhausted, much later.

The Tunguskan bent her knees so that the pads of her feet were planted firmly on the ground, and spoke softly to her mother. We rearranged our vantage point. She looked peaceful. She breathed slowly, and her fingertips dusted the ground. A medic reached across her body and her mother slapped him. Xavier had begun to shout, about the hoodie and we couldn't tell what else. The Tunguskan's mother held it there, and The Tunguskan's eyes looked at the sky.

"It's just a nosebleed," we heard Xavier say.

"Mate," said Ali from somewhere behind him.

The sounds from the bridge were ceaseless and booming, but there came a point when we understood, and we wished that they could see what we saw. There was nothing so calming as watching The Tunguskan in that moment. On her back, she was smiling.

She became The Nebbish again, to us, the moment we learned that she'd disappeared. It felt foolish to have thought she'd do anything else, and to have called her by any other name. Her mother didn't even leave a note. There was another full day left on the shoot, and she had not yet been paid. We didn't play-act surprise, like the rest of them. What did surprise us was Patrick. The fact that he was missing, too.

In the three days that we remained in Luxembourg, we took to those underground passages, to the shops and restaurants hidden there. We thought of the archaeology kits we were given as birthday gifts as children. You could chip and brush away at dirt and uncover gems and plastic dinosaur bones. When we felt claustrophobic we'd walk up hill, to the attractive exterior ecology of Grund. Its gardens were rarely crowded. We were searching for her, of course, although there was no doubt that she had left the city. But somehow we couldn't see them returning to Eindhoven. We would always imagine her somewhere between an alien forest near the Arctic Circle, and a padlocked shipping container at the bottom of the sea.

Twice we were approached by strangers who knew to speak English to us, despite us not often speaking aloud.

"Are you the ones from the photoshoot?" They'd ask. "With the sick girl from the internet?"

We answered yes once and no once and the reaction was the same: “Do you think she is okay?”

Once, we became genuinely lost underground. The gelaterias and boutiques gave way to empty shop-fronts, and then to wooden planks, the ground beneath our feet becoming dustier and the pathway flooring dissolved completely. Dom pulled his t-shirt neck above his nose. It’s funny what happens to time when you’re somewhere like that for long enough. It distorts and flickers. Some ghostly saboteur whispers in your ear, telling you that the outside, that time, was never there at all. That you’ve never been anywhere but here, the corridor, in the dark. It never crossed our minds to turn around. We were only lost down there maybe twenty-five minutes, but when we eventually spotted sunlight we felt like a different species. Like aeons had passed. The garden square we found ourselves in was ludicrously clean. When the adrenaline drained away, our skin felt softer. Amphibious. We looked for benches but didn’t find any, so we stood side by side with our hands on our hips, catching our breath. We didn’t need to say it to each other: We knew we’d stop looking for The Nebbish now.

“I’ve been thinking about the *shukkeling* thing some more,” said Cam, after a while.

We gave him a minute or more to say whatever it was he was going to say.

“Never mind,” he said, and we tried not to think of her, just for a moment. We felt the train driving along the bridge in violent echoes across town. We tried to enjoy the sound.