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The last time I saw Molya Sustradanye

S G Collins

When I hear from her again I don't believe it. Molya Sustradanye is alive. She's here somewhere. Or is she?

A Tuesday evening in late May. Fly and I go to Bombay for dinner. You know Bombay my latest beloved Indiaas, down at the forgotten end of the Lange Leidse so it's never too crowded, and the vindaloo is so good I'm dancing in my chair. Twice I see somebody's grandma poke her head out of the kitchen, and I wink at her. I'm okay. It's hot not homicidal, hot like somebody cares. Fly has the rogan josh.

Fly my old friend, the one who first taught me not to be afraid of Amsterdam. He always seems to know the truth even when he's wrong. I don't see him so often. He turns fifty this week. I had no idea. Together we tear off bits of naan bread and talk about the shifting electrical potentials of our peeps — how their needs and flows have changed, and how have ours, and who used to drink at Mulligan's that's now changing diapers, and which girls only ever wanted to go out with us so they wouldn't be seen walking into a bar alone looking for a date, and how that made us feel, and who is lately mad at each other, and who has disappointed us, and whom we've disappointed, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Cuz we're really not the boss here, are we. Love is the boss. And after a while you have friends your old friends never heard of.

By now we're back at Eijlders, sitting at a table under the paintings and drinking Westmalle Tripel from the foofy glasses, just cuz I'm on

Belgian beer trip nowadays. Then Fly goes up for a pee, and my phone shakes three times in my pants.

There's a text from MOL SUS. Show message.

NEED U @ RIRO.

Me mumbling "What the fuck," talk about blast-from-past. I'm sure it's not really her, but in some sick way I want it to be. I know sometimes the Bulgarians give away their Dutch phones when they leave. So who's using Molya's phone? It can't be one of *my* Bulgarians.

I tell Fly I'm tired, and that I need to go, both of which are separately true, just unrelated. It's still light outside. The rain has stopped, or at least it's on pause. *Knuffel*. He promises to help me move house next week. He goes to find his bike. I turn toward Leidseplein like I'm gonna go catch the seven. But I don't.

I turn in along the row of little bars lining the sunset side of the square, and find the darkness of a place called Rock In Roll Out. None of the regular smokers are sitting outside yet, just some blond junky in sunglasses, and Johnson the oracle, who nods but doesn't remember me. I prowl the length of the bar to the back, looking for anyone who might seem to be looking for me. There's nobody I know. I carefully climb the steep curly stairs to the toilets and cig machine, then climb down again even more carefully, not wanting to slip or twist an ankle. Nobody, nothing. My eyebrows rise and fall. Whoever was using Molya Sustradanye's phone has moved on, they couldn't wait for me. The little jolt of adrenaline from seeing her name on my phone now fizzles back out to ordinariness, and I sink a little. I feel like I'm already drunk.

I step outside again, stare empty-hearted at the *teras* tables under their big umbrellas, take out my tobacco and start to twist a shag. Thinking: Molya only seems long ago because she's so far away. She's beyond geography. She came from beyond space, as they say.

Something hits me in the ass.

Judging from how she's sitting on the bench, it would seem the blond junky just kicked me. She's staring at me expecting something. What, like am I blocking her view? Or like I'm supposed to know her? She takes off the dark glasses and I get it. She *is* Molya.

Molya Sustradanye, only blond.

"What the fuck," I mumble.

"Nice to see you too."

A bit awkwardly with the not-quite-rolled cig in my hands, I lean to give her the triple-avoidant Dutch kiss, as in cheek one cheek two cheek three you know the drill. But she intercepts my mouth just as meaninglessly as ever. And I start to remember. One thing I always admired about Molya: she has no use whatsoever for custom, really doesn't care what country she's in, and doesn't spend gestures as if they were the last three strips on a tram ticket. This is all cake frosting to her. She's cracklingly aware of our bounty of meaninglessness, and just likes smooshing it around. And the other thing is, she's never entirely here. I find that strangely charming. She's always just slightly elsewhere, distracted, like she's nominally with you but really more interested in the ghost behind you. Which in the moment is that cute drinks waitress, not the Macedonian one but the small young one. Molya waves at her, points to me, and makes the international hand signal for *pint*. Three gestures fast and crispy, like the lady who interprets the news for the deaf. Only blond.

And not just blond, I mean blond like some kinda fucked up custard blond. It's an impossible color. I think it's a wig, but no. She's become an infrared photo of herself, eyes so black with hair and complexion so unearthly pale. I swing a leg and straddle the bench beside her.

"Um, since when do you come in this flavor?"

"I didn't come yet," she tells me.

"No? Whendya get back from Plovdiv?"

She raises one finger to her lips. "I'm not back."

I finish twisting my shag and take out my lighter.

"So you need me for something."

"Yeah," she says, in a sigh.

I look at her and wait. She shakes her head, annoyed.

"You have to stop putting things in little boxes. Stop fucking quantifying. Just be your wave nature for once, will you?"

I can't tell if it's a serious critique, or just another one of those grains of wisdom she hands out like Smints. I turn to look at the table. I guess I am still mad at her. I want to be unmeltable.

"Okay. Was that it, should I go now?"

"No, stay," she says, and holds my sleeve, and leans her forehead against my shoulder. "You need to stay."

So much for unmeltable. Time crumples like a gum wrapper and we're chemically back in that same instant when I first got within a breath of this girl.

The truth is, I never told anybody about Molya Sustradanye. Not even my Bulgarians. Especially not the Bulgarians.

A rainswept winter midnight sometime before the smoking ban. I'm sitting by one of the big tables at Maloe Melo, listening to a slightly baked American guitarist-vocalist-conspiracy-theorist sing about hating the government. Maybe I'll buy his CD.

I check my watch. The Bulgarian musician I'm waiting for is an hour late. He's supposed to play here too, it's open stage night. A hand is on my shoulder, I almost think it's his, but no. It's a woman I don't know,

looming over me pointing at my cigarette lighter on the table. I make the international hand signal for *please do*. I glance sidewise at her silver belt buckle while she lights a skinny cigarette. She returns my lighter and leans in to say "Thanks," close enough so I'll hear, and her movement baptizes me with tiny raindrops. So she just walked in. I catch a glimpse of her hair all dark and twisty and twinkling in the light from over the toilet doors. Then she turns away toward the bar.

Five seconds pass and I know something just changed, but I can't tell what it is. I twist hard to my left to try and see who *was* that chick. She's vanished. The American finishes his lamentation, and we clap our hands.

I take out my little notebook to write something, as I do sometimes when I'm alone waiting for something to happen. The page I open to is from last summer. It tells me, in big sloppy drunken Dutch, that pigeons appear and disappear, and everything is possible cuz this is Amsterdam after all. A thought so damn profound I just had to stop and scribble it at five in the morning on the corner of Staalstraat and Kloveniers, with birdsong already raging.

Duiven verschijnen, duiven verdwijnen. Alles kan. Het is toch Amsterdam.

"Man what bullshit is that." Loud enough for only me to hear. Her hand reaches past me to slip the ashtray closer so she can share it. She's been sitting on my right the whole time.

I make the mistake of thinking she's commenting on my observation about pigeons. I close the notebook and look at it. It's one of the thin ones Pani got for me in France. "The stuff I pretend I'll remember cuz I wrote it down," I tell her. "I have a stack of these going back to 1993, but I never look at em. I keep a journal on line."

"I know," she taps her ash. "I like your bullshit, it's his I don't enjoy." Nodding to the angry young man with the guitar.

What the fuck?

If I tilt my head far enough, maybe the answer will roll into place.

"Electricity," she smiles to my presumably very blank stare. "I was one of the extras. With the phones. In the fog. In the cold."

"You were in the Electricity film?"

She nods. "I was at Ruigoord too. But we didn't meet."

Taking the cue, I offer my hand and tell her my name, and she says she knows my name. And she tells me her name, three times, and I still don't get it. So she grabs my notebook and writes down her surname. In cyrillic.

състрадание.

I'm looking on as she writes. She is way too close. Something disgustingly beautiful is going on. I can't smell any perfume on her. Maybe there's something about the shampoo she uses, or her soap. Maybe not.

You can chalk it up to pheromones if you want, but remember, none of this is supposed to be happening. My beard is gray now. These juices are no longer licensed to flow in me. It's inappropriate. And it will never lead to anything. My biology is just wasting my time. But Molya Sustradanye is beyond biology. Some stray molecule she's shedding quietly screams *yes* when we both know that's the wrong answer.

And so I hear myself say "You smell good," which everyone knows is polite English for *I wanna try and tickle your cervix with my tongue*. At least I hope they know that — I'd hate to think I've been misleading them all these years.

What I learn about her that night isn't much. She speaks such good English because of the school she attended, which she will not name. She's not old, just old enough to remember Communism. She remembers when mayonnaise first appeared in Bulgaria. But she doesn't eat omelets

or *uitsmijters* because eggs creep her out in principle. And yes of course she likes cats. She has two cats back in Plovdiv.

I tell her I know a great guy from Plovdiv, and she doesn't care.

I ask her if she knows Ianko or Huby or Menna or Chico or Krasimir or Marina or Vasil, and she's just shaking her head. She doesn't know any of my Bulgarians, and doesn't want to. What's more, I'm forbidden to tell them about her. She raises one finger to her lips. "Promise."

My eyebrows go somewhere, then return. "Whatever."

"It's like I don't exist, okay? Remember that."

By now I'm already feeling that discomfort in the loins, the slow dull ache of insulted plumbing. Then my friend shows up with his bouzouki. Before I can introduce her, Molya goes to the ladies, and doesn't come back.

Hours later I stagger home, zigzagging the sidewalks, a danger to passing lamp post and bike rack — thinking of her silver belt buckle, and what little it told me about the inner nature of her abdomen, and trying to remember what she said, and wondering why it all sounded so neatly wrapped. I resolve to write a new song titled "The Fecund Second". I stop on a bridge just to write that down. I've taken the Rozengracht route instead of going back through Leidseplein and Koningsplein. Maybe a good thing too, because as it turns out some guy gets stabbed to death in Koningsplein that night.

Arriving home at my little place on the Raamgracht, I take care of some urgent biological business, then eat a bowl of Kellogg's All Bran, then go to sleep. And I forget all about her. Almost all. Till next time anyway.

The next time is after I've already moved to JK's house, cuz the guy who owned the place on the Raamgracht was selling it. It's a Thursday in

early September, after the smoking ban, and three days before I'm gonna fly to Boston to do some work. I'm at the Cave waiting for Djax to show up. We're gonna get drunk and talk about love and pain and art and politics, or something.

The smoking ban has made the Cave into a sort of doorway culture. The ban works okay for those bars whose natural populations mostly don't smoke, which at my last count was 75 percent of the Nederlanders. But at the Cave it's just weird. At any given moment most of the clientele are out on the sidewalk, with just two or three metalheads inside waiting for the bartender to get back from his smoke break. I'm sitting at the bar with half a pint in front of me, waiting. A Tool song is playing. I wish Djax would hurry up and get here, so he could sing to me. I've already written whatever bullshit I was gonna write in my notebook. Now I just want a smoke. So I gulp what's left of my pint, and rise and turn toward the door.

A woman with dark wavy hair is walking in, purposeful, like she's here to meet someone. I get to my feet and now her foot is resting on my left shoulder, most gently, as if a black dove has alighted there. With her toe pointed toward the stage behind me.

"Hmm. That doesn't usually happen," I remark. Sometimes my clarity astounds me. I look at her shoe. A black shoe of soft textured leather, almost like a slipper, but with delicate thin laces. I replay the last two seconds in my head, but I can't make it make sense. A woman doesn't just walk up to a guy in a heavy metal bar and lift her foot onto his shoulder as if she were a ballerina. Does she?

She removes her foot and kisses me square on the lips. Meaninglessly. But her lips are very soft. I want to take a nap on them.

"Wil je iets drinken?" I ask.

"Please don't speak to me in this disgusting *throat* disease of a language," Molya says. "Let me get you a beer."

She waves to Chicha, and sits on the stool beside mine. My nicotine craving thus momentarily eclipsed, I sit back down.

I watch their bar transaction, and I'm surprised at its absence of charge. Chicha is a great Venezuelan volcano of a man, and very soundly spoken for, with a beautiful girlfriend. But the women love him anyhow, and he loves them too, in his own way. Strange that he doesn't notice that Molya Sustradanye is such an incandescently beautiful woman, or even that she is a woman. Their contact has all the passion of a visit to a bank machine. I watch the money in her hand. It occurs to me that Molya is the only Bulgarian I know who has never let me pay for anything, not once. But Molya Sustradanye is beyond economics.

Maybe I should ask her out to dinner. Then she'd have to let me pay.

"Molya will you go to dinner with me sometime?"

"Sure," she says.

We touch glasses and look each other in the eye.

"Cheers," she says, like I'm freakin British or something.

"*Nazdrave*," I tell her. It's one of the six words I can say in her language, the others being *chlab*, *bira*, *zapalka*, *papyelnik*, and *blagodarya*. Bread, beer, lighter, ashtray, thank you. What more do I need?

"It's very strange—" she starts to say.

"Weird, I was just thinking of you the other —" I start to say.

But her hand is grasping my sleeve. I've interrupted her.

"You were in my dream," she says. "It was a very strange dream. We were having sex."

"Who was?"

"You and I."

"Really." I put my glass down slow.

"Yeah." She takes a sip of whatever that is, I think it's Apfelkorn.

"Um. What was it like?"

"Not very nice. You were hurting me."

Something turns upside down in my chest. My eyes dart left and right, my tongue swipes my lip, and I feel my left eyebrow tilt. Maybe I don't need to say anything. There's no need to comment on the impossible.

"You couldn't see me crying," she says, softly, locking on to me with eyes as black as the hell I came from. And she's right, in the dream I couldn't.

"Uh. Sorry," I tell her and I look away.

"No you're not."

She smiles. She's laughing at me.

I pick up one of the cardboard Heineken coasters. I want to cry. I want to confess. It's not my fault is it, that my secret passion for Molya is purely alimentary in nature, that I have no ambitions involving procreation, that her just speaking the word *throat* has practically given me a stiffy already? I would fuck her in the duodenum if I could reach it. And in my dreams maybe I can.

But I know I will never touch her in real life. And she knows it too. She knows everything. She's stuck a webcam deep inside my brain, in a place where it hurts. We're both equally sodomized now. Can we forgive each other?

"Don't cry, it's okay," says Molya Sustradanye. "Forget it. Just pretend I never existed." And she puts her arms around me, and holds me for the whole length of that song by Rage Against the Machine.

"How are you getting home tonight?" she asks me.

"I'll probably just walk home, if it's too late for the tram."

She shakes her head. "Take a taxi. Stay and have a couple more drinks with your friend."

"Which friend?"

"The guy you're waiting for. Can I have your phone for a sec?"

I pass her my new Nokia, the one Pani helped me buy on Bol.com. She finds the contact menu and punches in her 06 number, with the name MOL SUS. All caps. I hate all caps.

"There. Call me. Or else I'll call you. If I don't pick up it just means I've gone home for a while."

She knocks back the Apelkorn and leaves, leaves me, leaves me helplessly studying the swing of her hips as she goes up the steps to the sidewalk of the Prinsengracht. *Fuck her*, I'm thinking. On her way out she brushes past Djox on his way in. He's bearded again. He smiles and grabs me like a long lost brother.

"Did you see that girl? You know her?" I ask him.

"Which girl? You mean Arifa?"

"No no no, the Bulgarian, with the curly hair. I think she's some kind of ballet dancer or something."

Djox shakes his head and stares at me, still smiling, just like he did that time when he thought I'd eaten some moldy bread.

"What's wrong, man?"

"I really need a smoke," I tell him.

Three hours later I take a taxi back to de Baarsjes. Paused at a traffic light on the Marnixstraat, I turn to see three guys avidly kicking the shit out of a fourth one. When he falls, one of them kicks him in the head, and he goes for a nap on the curb. The news will call it "*homohaar*" and Geert Wilders will blame Islam.

Anyway I'm glad I'm not walking.

I sleep until the afternoon, then drink coffee and start packing for my trip. On Sunday at 15:10 I'm in seat 23A on Northwest 37 for Boston. And for a while I forget how much I hate that fucking ballerina.

I do try her once from the States, but nothing happens. Between work and watching movies in my hotel room, I phone MOL SUS, prefixing +31 before the number she gave. I want to tell her I'll be back in October, and would like to take her for dinner at my favorite steak joint in Rembrandtplein, assuming she's not a vegetarian and has forgiven me for my impolite dreaming. If I get the voicemail I'll just tell her to read my mind when she gets a chance.

But there's no answer, not even voicemail — an operator says the number is not in use.

Then my client keeps me busy for an extra three weeks. I finally touch down at Schiphol on the same day the Americans vote for Obama. Everybody seems happy that I'm back. Or maybe they're just happy. We set about enjoying the famous crisis, doing what little work we have and slacking the rest of the time.

In December I try Molya's number once more. Same thing.

"Het nummer dat U heeft gebeld, is niet in gebruik."

So she just hangs there, like a spiderweb I can't reach to sweep away, and I never tell anybody about her. I never hear from Molya Sustradanye again, until one Tuesday evening in May.

"You need to stay," she tells me, with her forehead on my shoulder.

Our drinks come, and she pays for them. The waitress is a little peeved cuz she has to break a fifty.

We clink and look each other in the eye, and this time I don't say *Nazdrave*. I just look.

"So what have you been doing since I last saw you?"

She shrugs. "I got my hair done. Not so sure about the color."

I smile at her and she smiles back. I'm in love with her mouth.

She shrugs again and exhales. "I've just been waiting. Watching. Keeping my eyes open."

She looks at the foam in my beer, as if she can read it.

"Yeah, everything is saying something," she tells me. "The whole thing is like dripping with meaning, and yet at the same time it means nothing. I just have to, you know, stir things around a little sometimes."

I blink.

"I'm supposed to move to the top floor in my building soon," I tell her. "I'll have more space. Maybe you can come visit me."

"I will."

"I'll make you a cup of coffee."

"Okay good." Her voice trembles just a little, and she squeezes my hand, in a way that kinda scares me.

Then she takes my lighter and lights one of those skinny cigarettes, and I watch her smoke the whole thing without saying another word. We listen to the music from inside. They're playing that Johnny Cash cover of a Nine Inch Nails song.

The wind is rising. She brushes a tear from her cheek.

"Do you think I'm powerful?" she asks me, as if she really wants to hear my answer, for once.

I nod my head. "Yeah I do."

"But you know I'm only just so strong," she says. "And no more."

"That's okay, isn't it?"

"I guess it has to be," she says. "No more than that."

"I'm working on a little movie about a choreographer," I tell her.

"Yeah," she nods, as if she's already seen the finished edit. I almost want to ask her how it turns out. Better not.

"Let's go for a walk," she says.

"Don't you wanna finish your —"

"No."

So we just get up and leave our drinks unfinished, and I remember that such a thing is possible. I walk with Molya in the wind and twilight, around the lazy arc of the Prinsengracht toward the west. We walk mostly in the street, except when a car is coming, then we step up onto the sidewalk. Then it's narrow, and either she is following me or I am following her. When I'm following her, I'm watching the way her ass moves in those jeans. It's really quite magnificent.

"You need to be careful with the Vanunu thing," she says. "You're probably on some kind of list already."

"It was just a couple of emails," I say. "I'm sure he corresponds with thousands of people."

"Just be careful," she says.

And then I ask her flat out, the question I've often tickled in silence. "Are you working for Mossad? Is that like why you know so much?"

She giggles and takes my arm. "No, dear."

And we walk along like that for a while, just as if she were my girlfriend, and I know she isn't. But it feels nice.

In the last of the light, the clouds to the northwest of the city are tumbling and hurtling and puking each other. It's really quite magnificent. Then a great ship passes across the sky, an ocean liner, maybe the Queen Mary, with lights gleaming and smoke pouring from its smokestacks.

"Wo, check that out," I say.

"Cool," Molya says.

It seems physically impossible. But Molya Sustradanye is beyond physics. More things come and go in the sky, and I have to ask her "But why a unicorn? Why a giant frog?"

"Hey. Remember what I said about putting things in little boxes?"

"Yeah."

"Well cut it out already."

"I wish I could make love to you," I say.

"I know," Molya sighs. "Just be patient, huh. Someday soon we can go be a constellation in the sky, and the people in the dark can tell each other stories about us. About how you hurt me, and I hurt you, and how we always loved each other anyway."

Suddenly the Westerkerk is looming ahead of us. We stop. The traffic races across my sight, cutting me off from progress, and the noise and light pulls me back to the corner of the Rozengracht.

"Now give me a proper kiss before I go," Molya says.

And I do, wishing I had a breath mint, but I do. And it feels really nice, feels like something that *is* supposed to happen. Even though I know it's not supposed to.

But then again, the last time I kissed a girl like this — just outside the restroom at the Audubon bar in Boston — that wasn't supposed to be happening either. And look, that turned out okay.

Then Molya draws away from me, and smiles a tiny smile, and waves a curly wave at me. And turns to walk away, toward the Dam. I call my benediction after her, I'll see her soon, she should get home safe. And just out of habit I do it in Dutch.

"Hé ik zie je zo, eh? Veilig thuis! Dooeg!"

Molya Sustradanye turns and smiles again, and gives me the finger, then keeps walking.

I really like the way her ass moves in those jeans.

Having come this far, I decide to take the thirteen home. The tram stop is right across the street. I reach in my right pocket and pull out my ticket. I have three strips left. Life is perfect.

Wednesday afternoon I turn on the AT5 news. A tram conductor on line seven got hurt real bad the night before, in a dispute with an enraged passenger. The "doer" is now "forth-flying", and is described as a man in his twenties with a "North African outwardness". Geert Wilders will blame it on the failed immigration policy of the last three decades.

But you know, bad things happen sometimes. I'm just glad I was riding the thirteen.

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