Pooja Subramaniam

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**Ms. Morozov’s Baby Grand in Apartment 4C**

As you enter your room, you become vaguely aware of the Clair de Lune bouncing through the walls of your home, humming softly in the background. It is a small apartment. Furniture from IKEA, some taken off of Craigslist. You would not have guessed this future for yourself: mediocrity never seemed to be in the cards. Yet, as you grew older, it became the only constant you trusted. Your memories of college days with dreams larger than life and aspirations to *be* something or *do* something or even *see* something are distant at best. You could not rekindle those feelings anymore. You take off your shoes before you get into bed; it is these small actions that remind you that you have not all semblance of civility. The old clock near your bed reads 5:30 PM. There’s time to kill before you have to sleep and start this day over again, and again, and again. The days have been blurring together for a few years now. Looking up, you can almost envision Ms. Morozov’s translucent skin and blue veins and arthritis-ridden fingers. She is the source of the music. She would be sitting on her small bench, you imagine, at her baby grand that took up her entire living room, leaving no space for a couch or television. She plunks the keys and the music floats down to your own apartment. For a few hours, you simply lay there, still clothed but shoeless, on your bed and listen to the muted sounds of her slightly out-of-tune piano. After Clair de Lune, she plays Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata and then some Chopin. Only the classics tonight, you think to yourself. These are songs you learned when your mother enrolled you in piano classes, trying to find talent in your teenaged self. After only six months you quit, and but still, you have never found that talent she was looking for.

It is 9 PM before you realize you have not eaten dinner. For 4 hours, the muffled music of Ms. Morozov’s piano played in the background while you thought about nothing and a little bit about everything. You wondered if your mother knew you applied to graduate school to study public policy once before. You had been 23 and believed that another degree would legitimize your place in the world. Of course, you had not gotten into any of the schools you applied to. Waitlisted, rejected, placed on hold. These were words you were now comfortable with. But, would your mother have been proud that you had even tried? Did trying to do something great even matter if you did not accomplish something great in the end? It was these thoughts that had eaten up your last four hours. You get yourself up from bed and made your way towards the kitchen.

The upper cupboards of your kitchen are mostly empty. Reaching in, you find a box of pasta. There’s butter in your fridge, and you walk over to grab it, setting the two on your counter. It takes you twenty minutes to make this mediocre meal. When it is done, you head over to your couch to eat, and bite into flavorless buttered noodles. Salt. You’re missing salt. You head back towards the kitchen, opening cupboards with abandon, pushing cans aside to find a salt cellar. After a few minutes, you stand rejected, your pasta getting cold, still as flavorless as it was when you tried them moments before. Chopin is still playing above you, and you once again stare up at the ceiling. Ms. Morozov must have some salt to spare, you think to yourself. For a moment, you consider asking her for some salt.

Ms. Morozov has been living in the building for as long as any of the tenants can remember. This apartment complex in northern Chicago, a small neighborhood off the lake, was home to young professionals who could only afford to live a 30-minute train-ride from downtown. You have seen Ms. Morozov whenever you both get your mail in the apartment lobby at the same time but have never actually tried talking to her. She was always impeccably dressed, even to get her mail, and your sweatpants and crewneck never seemed formal enough to introduce yourself. As the only tenant who shared a wall with Ms. Morozov, you were probably the only audience member to her nightly concerts. You look down at your slacks and button-down shirt, thankful that you decided not to change after work.

Closing the cupboards you haphazardly opened, you take your bowl of lukewarm buttered pasta, slip into your slides, and silently climb up the stairs to apartment 4C. The walls in the stairwell are stained orange: they have been since you moved here. You’re not sure how this happened, because the walls look like they should be beige, but you’ve never questioned it. In a few seconds, you’re standing outside Ms. Morozov’s apartment and your knuckles are a few inches from her front door. You pause before knocking. Do you really need salt? You shake your head. It’s simply asking a neighbor for a favor. And an introduction, although a late one. It shouldn’t be nerve wracking. You rap your knuckles on her wooden door three times, practicing what you want to say in your mind while you wait for her to come. The music stops, and you hear slow steps. Ms. Morozov opens the door and stares at you. You forget to speak for a moment too long, looking at her gray, thin hair and her clean but faded suit. She has a silk scarf tied under the collar of her blazer with a pattern that matches her pant suit. Pink with floral patterns embroidered into the collar and onto the scarf. You remember you are here for a reason.

“Hi Ms. Morozov. I’m sorry to bother you this late, but I don’t have any salt for my food. I’m just in the apartment downstairs. Could I take some?”

“Salt?”

“Yes. My pasta doesn’t taste like much. It needs salt. It seems like I’m all out.”

She nods in understanding. “Ahh. I have salt. Follow me.”

You follow Ms. Morozov into her apartment. You’ve never been inside, and now see that a shiny baby grand piano takes up her entire living room. There are paintings on her walls and her kitchen is immaculately clean and stocked up. She pulls a new container of salt down from her upper cupboard, her fingers barely grazing the cylinder, just enough for her to pull it down to the counter. You watch silently. Maybe you should have brought a jar to put it in. Ms. Morozov hands you the salt, and you pour a bit into your pasta and stir it. Trying it, it tastes much better. You try to hand her back the salt cannister, but she motions it back towards you.

“Keep it. I have enough salt.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you. I’ll use it for my food.” You’re not sure what else to say. This feels awkward, but also comfortable. You haven’t talked to someone that wasn’t your boss, coworker, or mother in a week. It feels nice to know that Ms. Morozov knows you are alive and that your food is well-salted. She nods curtly, and points to a chair in the kitchen with a clear view of the piano. It’s as if she is inviting you to her performance tonight. She walks back to the black, cushioned bench that is positioned next to her baby grand and starts plunking at keys. It’s something you don’t recognize, but you sit in the chair eating your butter noodles and let the music flow over you.

You don’t know what commands you, but the next day, after work, instead of laying on your bed and daydreaming, you find yourself walking upstairs towards the Rimsky-Korsakov playing above you. You think that Ms. Morozov must have retuned the piano because “Flight of the Bumblebee” is flowing out perfectly. You knock quickly and once again hear the music stopping and the shuffling of feet towards you. Ms. Morozov is wearing a yellow pant suit today with an orange scarf tied neatly at her neck. She smiles ever so slightly when she sees you and does not ask you any questions, simply moving aside to let you in. You sit in the same chair as yesterday and Ms. Morozov goes back to her padded piano bench and picks up where she left off. Her fingers have large knots at the knuckles, and you notice this right away; it must be painful, you think, to play for hours like she does. But Ms. Morozov’s face is painted with joy. She plays with her eyes closed, and her crow’s feet reach her temples. She nods her head slightly to the slow and succinct rhythm of the music. Her feet tap gently at the pedals of the piano and there is no sheet music in front of her. Like this, she plays and like this, you sit and watch her.

Around 8 PM Ms. Morozov rises from her bench for the first time. She walks over to you with that slight smile on her face and with one of her hands, she cups your chin. She is short, less than five feet tall, so sitting in a chair, your eyes meet.

“What do you want to eat?”

Flustered, you respond, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude on your dinner. I just like listening to your piano music.”

Ms. Morozov pats your cheek twice with her hand and shakes her head. “You like beef?”

“I’m not a picky eater. Are you sure it’s okay if I stay for dinner? I have food in my apartment.”

Ms. Morozov walks around the kitchen pulling meat from the fridge and pasta from the cupboard. She cooks for thirty minutes and asks you some questions. Talking to her is easy; she reminds you of what you wish talking to your grandmother would be like. Your parents put you on the phone with your grandparents for 30 minutes twice a year and you struggled through those conversations. But talking to Ms. Morozov is nothing like this. When she asks you if you are married, you laugh as you respond.

“No, I’m not. I’m only 26 though.”

“I was married at 22!” She looks at you in shock. “Does that seem young?”

“Yes, mostly people don’t get married until their late 20s these days. Do you have children? Are they married?”

She’s quiets for a second. “No children, my husband died when I was young, just after I moved to New York. Then my second husband never wanted kids, and he died three years ago. Since then it has been just me.”

You don’t know the best way to respond to this confession of personal information, so you decide to provide your own. “I don’t think I’ll ever get married. It’s cool that you’ve been married twice.”

She looks at you and tilts her head slightly. “You will get married. Love is easy. Even the poorest people find love, even the stupidest people find love. Love is the only thing for everyone.”

You smile at this. Ms. Morozov places a plate of beef stroganoff in front of you and it smells delicious. You dig into it and she joins you. For a few minutes you both eat, not talking to each other. Between bites, you thank Ms. Morozov for the best meal you’ve eaten in months, maybe a year. She laughs.

“Come tomorrow. I’ll make borscht.”

Before you leave, you promise to come tomorrow and offer to bring ingredients. Ms. Morozov simply shakes her. “I have everything. Just bring yourself.”

Before you know it, every weekday this is your schedule. You go to work, sit in a cubicle for 8 hours pretending to work and working to pretend you know what you’re doing. Then you take the metro home, walk up to the third floor, put your bag down and take yourself, a notebook, and sometimes your laptop up to Ms. Morozov’s apartment. While she plays piano, you write. You haven’t written since you were in college, but you write your ideas down. You write about your dreams for your future, about your views on the world. You write to understand yourself, to unravel the ball of yarn that is your thoughts and opinions and emotions. You write about how falling in love must feel and you write about how it felt to grow up scared to fail. Journaling until dinner time then helping Ms. Morozov cook becomes your new normal. While you cook, Ms. Morozov asks you what you did at work that day and what you wrote down in that journal of yours. She talks about how she stiches her own pant suits and plays piano to pass the time.

“When did you first learn how to play piano?” You ask her one day as you peel carrots and cut onions for the night’s soup.

“When I was growing up in a small town near Moscow, my mother enrolled me in classes. I’ve been playing ever since. My first husband, we met when we were only 15 years old in our piano classes. He was a genius musician and wanted to play piano professionally. Of course, his mother wanted him to go to school and work for the family business but my Dennis, he wanted to be an artist.”

“I think if I had told my parents I wanted to be an artist they would have reacted the same way.”

“Maybe your parents would be right. With Dennis, we had little money. It was only with Viktor that we had nice furniture and money to come to the U.S. Viktor bought me my piano. Dennis would never have been able to afford one.”

“Well, I’m glad Viktor did. You’re a talented musician.”

“Ahh, it’s just something to do. I am no musician.”

Ms. Morozov takes the vegetables you have cut up and threw them into the pot with vegetable broth and an array of spices.

“Stand here and stir,” she commands you.

As you stir the soup, you look over at Ms. Morozov who is setting the table. She carefully places spoons next to bowls and smooths the tablecloth. You decrease the temperature of the stove and set the soup to simmer, helping her set the table for the both of you. With the ladle, you dish yourself a hearty serving of soup and a much smaller serving for Ms. Morozov, walking the two bowls back to the table. As you sit down, you pause a second before eating, letting Ms. Morozov say her prayer before she digs in with you.

“You know,” you say, between spoonfuls, “I don’t feel like I am doing much in my job. I don’t like what I do, much less, love what I do.” This confession has been on your mind for months, but it feels as if a dumbbell has been lifted from your chest when you say the words out loud for the first time.

“Well, tell me again. What is your job?”

“I help invest portfolios. I’m a wealth and asset manager for a bank.”

Ms. Morozov is silent and continues eating. She looks up after a minute has passed and examines you closely.   
 “Why are you so scared to quit your job?” Her question catches you off guard. Picking up your napkin, you wipe your mouth, buying yourself a moment to answer.

“I have rent to pay, don’t I? And I just don’t want to fail at my job. I don’t want to have no direction. Maybe I’ll apply to school to study public policy, and I’ll quit my job then.”

“Hmm. You cut these vegetables evenly.” Ms. Morozov eyed the carrots in her soup, bringing a spoonful to eyelevel. “Maybe you could be a cook while you decide if you’re going to go back to school! Sounds more interesting than being a rich man’s bookkeeper.”

You laugh and don’t bother correcting her. After emptying your bowl of soup, you sit quietly while Ms. Morozov slowly finishes her dinner. As soon as she finishes her final spoon, she picks up her bowl and your bowl too, walking them over to the sink. As the water runs over the dirty dishes, she comes back to you and sits down at the seat directly to the right of you. At her little square kitchen table, Ms. Morozov places her leathery but soft hands over yours.

“Life is long. You have time to find happiness, but happiness does not need to be your job. It does not need to be grand or great. Young people, they think happiness comes from achieving this or winning that. But happiness is much simpler than you would think.”

“I want to achieve something though.” You respond. “I feel like I had all of these goals about being someone important and dreams for myself about actually helping the people that need it most. And now… well, now, I’m a rich man’s bookkeeper. I just think that leaving this job will make me happy, but I can’t risk it right now.”

Ms. Morozov simply shakes her head and pats your cheek. “Child, you do not understand happiness yet. But yes, change your job, change the world. Just make sure you find time to come here for dinner tomorrow.”

You laugh at this, knowing that Ms. Morozov underestimates her role in your life. She has taken the place of the friend you thought you’d keep forever in high school, of your favorite roommate from college, of your own mother sometimes. Of course, you’ll be back for dinner tomorrow.

Most weeks, on Friday evenings, you call your mother. The conversations always follow a similar pattern: you ask about her week, she asks about yours. Then a pause in conversation, filled with the weight of all that went unsaid, grows a little too long before one of you hangs up first, using a fake doorbell or a kettle on the stove as your excuse. You and your mother have never seen eye to eye. This week she is more focused on your little brother’s college rowing competitions and your older sister’s upcoming wedding. Today, before hanging up, you mention Ms. Morozov.

“I made a new friend in my building, mom.”

“Oh, that’s good. Is it someone you see yourself dating?”

You almost roll your eyes. “No, she’s a 76-year-old Russian woman who plays piano and stitches a lot. Her name is Ms. Morozov.”

“That’s great, dear. I’m sure she’s glad she has someone to pass the time with. Oh, before I get off the phone with you, your sister wanted me to tell you that she’s picked out her wedding colors and wants to know how you feel about wearing green? I think green is a bit dreary….” Your mother’s voice drowns out. In your apartment, you become acutely aware of the mess of clothes on your bedroom floor and dirty dishes in the sink. Without saying a word, you hang up on your mother and throw your cellphone onto the closest chair. You begin to pick up the clothes and move them into the hamper. After, you make your way to the kitchen, wiping down the counter and running warm, soapy water over some dishes. Next week, you think to yourself, you will skip this call with your mother.

Three months pass, and you have spent most weekdays at Ms. Morozov’s home. After a few weeks, those journal entries slowly became essays on workers’ rights and local environmental issues. These essays slowly became coherent and focused. There wasn’t a moment when you decided to reapply to graduate school; rather, it was a series of small moments. It was when your boss, at your annual review meeting, asked you what your five-year plan was, and you had no answer ( but it was not to continue staring blankly at numbers on a computer screen, you felt like telling him). It was when your cousin shared the good news of his new baby and you realized that you wanted to be able to, one day, support a family too. It was when Ms. Morozov listened patiently while you spent all dinner explaining your opinions on different policies and laws in the local government. In these small moments, you began to plan a life for yourself. You did this when you were younger; you would dream about a future where you created something of yourself. You imagined being someone important, someone who left a legacy, whose name was known to others. Slowly, these dreams pop up again in your consciousness.

One evening, you were fixing Ms. Morozov’s internet router, crouched on the floor facing away from her when you finally worked up the courage to ask a question that had been burning in your mind for weeks now.

“Ms. Morozov, why did you leave Russia?”

You continue to fiddle with the wires connecting the router. Ms. Morozov is silent. After a minute, while you are waiting for the router to boot up, you turn around from your crouched position and look at her sitting thoughtfully on her piano bench.

“My parents, they fled Kiev to Moscow when they were just married – they were spared by the Holocaust. And then, when I was young, Stalin made it clear that Jews were not welcome in the Soviet Union. After Dennis died, I had decided I wanted to leave. Viktor, he needed to get out of Russia too. His life was in danger there – during his time in the army he had laid with men and word was getting around. We met on a Monday and decided to marry on Friday. I received asylum as a Jew, and we were allowed to emigrate out of Russia. Very few were. Viktor could not offer me love or children, but he gave me an escape, and the money for it.”

You’re silent. Three weeks ago you had tried to match up Ms. Morozov’s age to the USSR timeline and over the days had grown more curious, looking for clues in her home. This was more than you thought you would receive.

“That’s very brave of you, Ms. Morozov.” You finally say to her. “I’m sorry you had to give up so much.”

She looks at you kindly, the crows feet near her eyes deepening as she smiles. “Ah, but now I have a friend who sets up my internet and have my own apartment and my own piano. I have not given up everything.” You stand up and join her on her bench. You begin plunking at keys, drawing from your lessons so many years ago. Laughing, Ms. Morozov shoos you away.

“Let me handle the music. You go back to fixing my internet.”

Even with the new knowledge of Ms. Morozov’s past, most evenings you spend in apartment 4C are quiet. You research schools and apply to programs while she plays piano or stitches her pantsuits. California begins to call your name: the idea of leaving Ms. Morozov sits heavy at the bottom of your stomach, but Irvine has a program that you’re infatuated with. Every once in a while, sometimes when you are in the middle of typing a word, a pang of pain hits you in the chest. You remember the rejections you faced the last time you applied. You remember the feeling of not being good enough. You remember the disappointment of dreams dissipating in front of you. That feeling of opening up an email and seeing words that sealed your fate. These pangs will never go away, you know that now.

Some evenings, you bring in ingredients from the shop downstairs and take the lead cooking dinner. You make foods that Ms. Morozov has never tried before. She likes falafel, you discover, and pad thai noodles. She uses a fork and knife to eat tacos but enjoys their flavor anyways. Ms. Morozov was hesitant, at first, to let you cook for her. She’s never had someone cook for her before, she tells you. Not even Dennis or Viktor, you ask, but no, she says. Neither of them knew their way around the kitchen. Yet, that first evening that you set down a poke bowl with raw fish in front of her and saw her face as she tasted how the tuna mixed with the sriracha mayo, you knew you had won this argument.

It was a spring evening and the flowers on Ms. Morozov’s window box were starting to bloom. Tonight on the menu was an Indian curry that you had trialed yourself over the weekend to make sure it was good enough to make here with Ms. Morozov. You stirred in a can of crushed tomatoes and asked Ms. Morozov to cube the paneer you had bought at Safeway earlier that evening. As you cooked together, you asked Ms. Morozov about her day.

“I am working on a green pantsuit with new material I bought from the fabric store. The lady there told me green is my color.”

“Green is your color. So, just stitching then today?”

“No, I also spoke on the phone with my sister and we video-chatted over the phone. I saw her grandchildren!” You had showed Ms. Morozov how to use Skype on her old desktop last week, and since then she had video chatted her nieces and nephews almost daily. They still lived in Moscow, she told you, so until last month she had only seen pictures of them.

“That’s nice,” you say absentmindedly as you focus on chopping the onions as neatly as Ms. Morozov does it. You feel her eyes on your back, simply begging to chop those onions herself, but ignore them and steady your hand against the cutting board.

“How is your schooling?”

“My applications?”

“Yes, those.”

“They’re going okay. I should be hearing back soon. I applied to about ten schools.” You move to the stove to heat up the naan you bought.

“Is this going to be spicy?” You see Ms. Morozov leaning over the pot and smelling the curry you are cooking. “You know I don’t like spicy.”

“I’m not going to make it spicy, don’t worry!” You’re exasperated, but you smile. Today Ms. Morozov played Liszt and it always made her a bit more antsy. She preferred slow and simple compositions to virtuosic pieces, but she always played her way through the music she had memorized and never skipped any. As you take the curry and naan and head to the small dinner table, your phone buzzes in your pocket. For a moment, you think about checking the notification, but Ms. Morozov looks too excited at the prospect of eating for you to make her wait another moment. You sit down, spoon yourself some curry and wait for Ms. Morozov to complete her prayer. Then you dig in, chuckling as she scoffs at your use of your hands to eat. She daintily picks at her food with a fork and knife, but after her first bite her eyes roll back and she shakes her head.

*“Vkusnyye.”*

You hope this is Russian for something good. As you lick your fingers and finish your meal, you walk your plate over to the sink. Just then, your phone buzzes again. Rinsing and drying your hands off, you reach into the front pocket of your jeans. A notification from the University of California, San Diego. Your heart rises to your throat and your heartbeat quickens as you tap the notification. You skim the email. Waitlisted. Your chest falls in disappointment and you shake your head. Stuffing your phone back into your pocket, you head back to the dinner table where Ms. Morozov is reaching for seconds of curry. She notices your head hanging down and how quiet you are. She taps your cheek with her hand and cups your chin when you raise your head.

“You’re not okay.” She does not ask.

“I’m okay. I just need a minute.”

“What happened?”

“I just got an email. From one of the schools I applied to. I got waitlisted.” Seeing her confusion, you explain further. “It means they don’t want me right now, but if other people drop, they might take me later.”

Ms. Morozov lights up. She smiles brightly and squeezes your face before getting up heading back towards the kitchen. She stands on her tip toes and reaches high onto a shelf. From it, she brings down a dusty bottle of red wine. She returns to the table to see your bewildered face.

“You know this means I did not get in, right?” You say to her.

Ms. Morozov uses her small body weight to pry the cork out of the wine bottle. She then uses a kitchen towel to dust off the bottle before pouring you a large glass of wine and pouring herself an equally large glass.

“We must celebrate!” she says.

You shake your head. “Ms. Morozov. I didn’t get in. I was waitlisted.”

Now she shakes her head and holds her glass up. “But you did not get turned away! There is a chance for you.”

Her optimism is contagious. Ms. Morozov is smiling and waiting expectantly. You roll your eyes teasingly and pick up your glass.

“*Nostrovia!*”

“Cheers,” you say back, and take a large gulp of your wine.

You lean back into your chair sipping your drink as Ms. Morozov heads to the piano with her glass. She sets it upon a coaster on her baby grand and plunks at the keys. It’s Clair de Lune. Slow, romantic, one of her favorites. As you sit in the kitchen, watching Ms. Morozov play between generous sips of wine, you close your eyes. If this is the mediocre life you feared in your early twenties, this life is not too bad. It is filled with love, hope, good food, and comforting music.