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SANDY CHRONICLES

Coney Island, Brooklyn

Titanic

My windows are taped in crosses like in Soviet war movies. The wind is bombing in gusts, and trees are bending to the ground. High tide and full moon, they say: the Grand Ball at Satan's. The TV and the lights in the house suddenly make a dry *ssch-poooh* and the power is out. Here we are. I light the candles and glance out the window at the parking lot downstairs.

The water has come in so quickly that within minutes the parking lot is a sea, the extension of the ocean filling the beach, the boardwalk, the street, and now spreading further inland, in and around buildings with dark unseeing windows. I can hear it from my fourth floor island splashing nonchalantly against my building façade, as if it had been there all along. I am perched above the infinite ocean.

All of a sudden, the dark silence explodes with a bright lightning and a loud cacophony of car alarms in crying voices: some wailing, some yelping, and some demanding. I think I hear my own little car crying but then I remember it has no alarm. Scriabin's *Prometheus* in sinister hues and notes of white and orange lasts for a few minutes until the cars sink one by one and begin floating, bumping into each other and into the building slowly, soundlessly, almost gracefully. Dark silence, without reflections and movement, arrives. Titanic has sunk.

Hurricane Intimacy

I suddenly don't care about the consequences. Nothing rational matters: four years incommunicado, the deleted number, the whited-out name ... I am alone in the dark, surrounded by black water, facing a long night. I am helpless as a child, and I am allowed.

The civilization we have known has suddenly vanished—except for my cell phone. I cannot call but can still text, standing in one particu-

lar spot in the kitchen, persistently pressing the ‘send’ button until the words, my little messenger birds, finally take off and fly away.

He is here, holding me and whispering in my ear: I’ve been worried about you. I miss you. Do you need anything? I can drive right in. My car is submersible ...

Oh no, he has no idea what it is like here, but I courageously say, I am OK, thank you. I have a bathtub filled with water, a few candles, and a flashlight. You are as sweet as ever. It is pretty apocalyptic here. Water is all around. It keeps coming.

He is whispering: Are you in the evacuation zone, Love? Why didn’t you leave? Where is Julia? How is Baba?

The most intimate words ever—timelessness, tenderness, connection. They are gliding, like a gulp of vodka, down my throat into the chest and staying there warmly and whitely. I am not alone.

He keeps whispering on my tiny screen: It is frightening now, but tomorrow will be better. The water will recede. Try to relax now, eat and have a glass of wine.

It will never recede. How can so much water recede? I’ve just taken a sleeping pill and will try to go to sleep. Will turn off my phone now to save the battery. Thank you.

I go to bed and hug my pillow in a brisk wing-like movement, as if swimming freestyle, with my mouth reaching out for air, my head sideways on the water, the pillow, the water, the pillow. I am sliding gracefully and freely. My body is strong and healthy. My thoughts are sweet, like those on a night before a date. I drift on.

When I wake up, grey light seeps from the window. The water has receded, just as he promised. Uprooted trees and muddy cars with steamed windows are on sidewalks, on lawns, in the middle of the road, or smashed into a collapsed wavy fence. The parking lot is a cemetery of cars.

A text on my phone, last night’s whisper: Good night Love. I will be thinking of you. Tomorrow will check on you. I always want to check on you.

I love this English tense—present indefinite ... Come and check on me! Check on me! But the storm is over. And my phone makes the dying-swan-dance final movement.

*What birds plunge through is not the intimate space
in which you see all forms intensified.¹*

1 Rilke, Rainer Maria, [“What birds plunge through is not the intimate space”], *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. and Ed. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Random House, 1982

The Day of All Saints

Post-Sandy Ocean Parkway at Brighton Beach is the beach, only muddy, with mounds of sand and garbage. As in an outlandish post-nuclear TV series, dead cars are frozen in their final moment: some are burned skeletons, some are incongruously stuck in the middle of the avenue at an oblique angle, some solitary, their rears sitting on benches, some coupled, and some in ménage à trois collisions, with their windows opened or taped with black plastic bags. Inside, sand and water.

Disasters look exactly like movies—a monstrous fantasy converging with reality, minus popcorn, with the audience transported onto the screen somehow.

Zombie passers-by are staring down, their tired eyes zeroing in on the pavement, their clothes as if bleached and colorless, their boots and pants covered by red mud. Many are carrying big plastic bags filled with Greek yogurts and juices already on sale at flooded powerless stores. Small groups form around these sidewalk vendors, like ants, in complete silence. Cut-off conversations echo in ghostly Russian voices: ... no we have no water ... my charger was in the car ... Con Edison ... yes I called the insurance ... she has Verizon ... there will be no school ... Geico ... National Guard ... FEMA ... Many are squatting to take pictures of “the movie” with their (still charged) phones. For their insurance? For posterity?

The air is moist, warm, almost tropical for November, and a group of young people from *St. Petersburg*, the Russian bookstore, is drying CDs with paper towels, sitting outside on folding chairs and chatting with insouciance. At a corner, a table with wet Russian calendars and a handwritten note: “Take—free.” But nobody wants them: time is endless, dateless, unstructured—one big heavy lump of present filled with basic needs and concerns, water, food, light, warmth, family. One day at a time is a motto, so familiar, so Russian from generations of survival, and I suddenly get it, my acquired-in-America love for Protestant structure—it is hope, future, safety, control, predictability.

A Trump Village building on Ocean Parkway has its own electricity generator, and, rumor has it, people are allowed to charge cell phones there. Crowds of Russians mixed with a few native Brooklynites are in the lobby, where connectivity-hungry clusters are squatting around the outlets. At once, I strategically assess the situation with my Soviet-trained eye, zeroing in on a line that seems shorter and multitasking to seize and hold two of them simultaneously. For that, one needs to engage in small talk all the while keeping one’s eyes and ears open for arising opportunities.

And indeed, such an opportunity materializes almost at once: a

woman ahead of me asks her daughter to take me to her other line, which of course she was also holding, and where her phone would be finished charging momentarily (wink wink). I sit down on a pile of Yellow Pages, ready to jump in, like a tiger, to get hold of the outlet.

Next to me, hooked to the same outlet, a family is shepherding a few phones at a twin extension, their faces absorbed in the task of watching the electricity flow and checking the displays every thirty seconds. I try to engage in small talk, but nobody responds. Nobody smiles. The grandpa complains to his son-in-law that it takes forever to charge a phone in this building and that once charged, the phone's power is immediately spent! I suggest with a smile that there must be poor quality of electricity here—and he confirms with a stern face: indeed, electricity is not good in this building. Echoing this sentiment, another old man, his phone already charging, jumps in to unplug his phone and triumphantly cries out, “I found another, better outlet!” (The Russian word he uses sounds like “aperture”).

In another corner, where an outlet looks like a pyramid of extensions and strips, an elderly couple in heavy winter coats is loudly bickering. Sitting on the floor, a woman in a crooked wig is asking every man who enters—never a woman—if he has a knife to open a can, since she is awfully thirsty and got this good orange juice, and how come men don't carry those pocket knives with can openers anymore ... What happened to real men?

I am wondering, too.

At that moment, as if responding to our question, a swift man in his early sixties, business-like and well-shaven, storms in—we are all in awe. He walks straight to our charging station with “poor electricity,” takes out four laptops, three phones, a power strip, and a bunch of wires and cables from a duffel bag, nodding toward the group for permission to hook up his equipment. Silent scene. Somebody exhales, “Nastoyashiy muzhchina ...!” (A real man!)

When the thirsty woman in a crooked wig repeats her plea for the juice, the “real man”—oh so predictably!—pulls out a pocket knife and confidently digs a hole in her can. Yes! We are all relieved to see the woman finally quench her thirst. A moment of dreamy erotic silence hangs over this lobby corner ...

About three hours later, when my phone displays “Fully Charged,” I slowly crawl home, holding my phone in the air like an antenna, trying to catch a connection: call my mother, who has no light, no heat, no water but amazingly has a working landline phone; call my teenage daughter, who is cut off from me in Manhattan, and text my dear friends—for news, love, hugs. Three of them have lost their homes.

When I walk into the lobby, something feels different. The tiles are

still muddy, the air moist. I start climbing the stairs, both reluctant and happy, and suddenly realize that the staircase and hallways are not dark! When I walk into my apartment, the lights in the kitchen and living room greet me, just as I had left them in the long gone pre-Sandy era. *Que la lumière soit!* The water is running, the refrigerator is humming.

Later at night the door bell rings: two kids in Halloween costumes. Trick or Treat! Their mother is waiting in the hallway, acting out normalcy from behind the corner. Halloween ...? I am shocked and relieved at the same time. I am so sorry, I've got no candy.

NPZ (No Power Zone)

On the tenth day after the storm, Coney Island Resort is officially Coney Island Desolation. Mounds of sand fill sidewalks; most street lights are still out; ever-green is now ever-muddy; dust and sand are swirling in the wind. Sea Gate community is destroyed, its homes cracked open; and in the "projects," I hear, extreme powerlessness is both literal and metaphoric. From my balcony, I hear the sirens and see a long convoy of Humvees heading in the direction of the "barrio."

The college is still closed; schools are closed; banks are closed. There is no gas in the city; the subway is running by piecemeal; and buses in service are free of charge and looking like sardine cans. It is getting chilly. I get out of the house and head to Brighton Beach.

On my way down Surf Avenue, I bump into a group of young people struggling to communicate with Russian-speaking locals: Do you have power? Water? Food? Anybody need medical help? *Occupy Sandy*. Unevenly ripped tape is pasted on their jackets instead of name tags (Bill, Samantha, Sean), and their hands are loaded with legal pads, maps, and cell phones. They are definitely Park Slope types, and for a minute I feel like an indigenous Guatemalan woman patronized by an international NGO. (Park Slope, a middle-class neighborhood in downtown Brooklyn—shrinks, writers, academics—was generally unaffected by the storm except for a few collapsed trees and, in some places, a couple hours of candlelight.) I introduce myself on behalf of the indigenous population and explain that in this complex, the condominium with a maintenance crew, we got back power and water quickly, in a matter of days. We all lost our cars, but this is a bourgeois problem, isn't it?

I can read fleeting puzzlement in their eyes. I sound more like them (people with bourgeois problems) and not like an indigenous woman. We got power, I repeat, but my mother, who lives in an old apartment building, still has no power or water. Neither does my friend Sasha, my uncle, and a few others in my surrounding who live in the neighborhood. They nod sympathetically. "Brighton Beach is NPZ,

No Power Zone,” the leader, a tall handsome prince, says as he writes down names and addresses, adding that they have opened a help center nearby with supplies and water but unfortunately they can’t help with power restoration. Landlords must pump the water out and electricians have to certify that the system is dry for Con Ed to switch them back on. “Are there older people you know stuck on high floors?” he asks, and mentions that National Guards are in the neighborhood.

Really? Better late than never, and I turn around the corner to West Fifth Street and West Brighton Beach, closed to traffic. Humvees and ambulances are flooding the intersection and paramedics and soldiers are running around and into the buildings, distributing water and blankets. Better late than never, I want to say to my mother, who has received a visit from the American Government, of which she wants less—and is offered less: bottled water on the tenth day and a nurse with a blood pressure contraption. She still has no power.

I continue on to Brighton Beach, maneuvering around piles of wet sand and mountains of black plastic garbage bags overflowing with spoiled cornucopia. Stores and restaurants are being emptied and the stench of decay is overwhelming. Almost all businesses are closed, but I spot one with light and walk through the doors. It is cold inside, but the herring and fresh homemade Russian *zakuski* (appetizers) are already there. A few freezing middle-aged saleswomen are behind the counter, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands, looking and sounding their usual Odessa selves. Pickles have just arrived, the red beet salad is fresh: “Berite, kushayte na zdorov’e!” (Please have some, enjoy!). Petya, the owner, unearthed some gas for the delivery, one of them adds with a conspiratorial wink. I congratulate them on rising from ashes so quickly; I was really craving those pickles.

Standing in the middle of the devastated immigrant paradise designated NPZ, I suddenly have a flashback of huge red letters hanging on a building across the Moscow River from the Kremlin: *Communism equals electrical + Soviet power, country-wide. V.I. Lenin.*

Chewing on my crunchy pickle produced without electrical but with plenty of capitalist power, I turn back home. Our parking lot, formerly the cemetery of cars, is now renamed Occupy GEICO Place. Indeed, the GEICO “catastrophe team” were our first responders, arriving here the day after the storm in cars and trailers. They set up office right in the parking lot, their RV equipped with satellite-powered laptops and printers. Car by car by car, within a few days, we the lucky GEICO-insured had our claims processed, cars totaled and towed away, and checks issued on the spot by friendly compassionate adjusters from Chicago, Georgia, and Florida.

For weeks to come, tow trucks will make sad trips back and forth,

dragging away our Sandy-slain sputniks of comfort and freedom. Slowly but surely, new shiny cars will occupy the empty parking spots. Eventually, I too will have gotten myself a new cheerful red Hyundai with an appropriate name for an immigrant, *Accent*, jotted in optimistic silver letters on its hatchback.

This is America after all. I had been craving a new car.