Sunshine Cleaners

Any weekday in Brookline, drivers caught in Beacon Street traffic might see Sergei hurrying along a certain stretch of wet sidewalk. Sergei's back crooks slightly to the left, and his pants, baggy on thin, bowed legs, billow in the cold April air. If he's already completed his transaction, he'll be heading west, pockets sagging with quarters. When he arrives back at Sunshine Cleaners, he obeys the "PUSH" sign on the door, half expecting–one might call it hope–to find something changed. But there's old Lida behind the counter, smoking her second cigarette of the day, taking dirty silk shirts from a bald man. The man has also brought a pair of shoes to be resoled, and Lida is shaking her head.

"But the sign in the window says, 'Shoe Repair,'" the man protests. Other signs read, "24-Hour Tailoring," "Instant Zipper Fix," and "We Store Winter Furs!" but those are incorrect, too.

"Down the street," says Lida, already turning back to her sewing machine, while Sergei, now out of his snow-flecked red satin bomber jacket, begins work: taking piles of clothes around to the front, past the partition, into the laundromat, over to the wall of bright yellow washing machines. All day he tosses clothes into washers and dryers and adds them to flat, folded stacks.

If it is a Monday, Sergei keeps an eye out for the tall girl. Last week she told him, "You disgust me!" This was after the change machine took her dollar without giving quarters, and Sergei, when notified, said, "Not my machine." Other customers have given up on Sergei–if they ever addressed him at all–and no longer bother to approach him when machines malfunction. Not the tall girl. When she offered him her other dollar for four quarters, Sergei

just shook his head. That was when the tall girl yelled, “You disgust me!” The two other customers looked frightened, not realizing that Sergei and the tall girl have such conversations regularly. Sometimes Lida, from her wooden seat in front of the Singer, joins in while hemming a skirt, not looking up, yelling, “You disgust me!” or “Not my machine!” or something in Russian that the tall girl can’t understand.

The tall girl always does her wash on Mondays, when there are fewer people. Strong, fit, with blond hair that meets her shoulders, and clear, bright, flawless skin, she looks to be in her early twenties. If a dryer doesn’t work and Sergei tells her, “Not my machine,” she confronts him with frank eyes that at times force Sergei to look to the ground. She speaks in the flat voice of someone used to her demands being met. After firing some comment at Sergei, she transfers her clothes to another dryer, then sits and reads. Usually she peruses magazines, but last week it was a book, Love Poems of Pablo Neruda, from which she copied phrases, every few minutes or so, onto a sheet of paper.

Her easy confidence Sergei sees as purely American. When the dryer buzzes, she sweeps out her clean clothes heedlessly, a clumsy shower of mixed cotton; she does not separate dark and light loads. Sergei has never seen her give any article of clothing special treatment, to be air-dried or placed flat. Her clothes are mostly denim and jersey, solid colors. She has no fancy fabrics or patterned socks like the other girls doing their laundry. But her underpants, Sergei has noticed, are the satin kind with just a thin band down the back.

Today, though, is a Thursday. It might as well be Tuesday, Wednesday or Friday. Lida has turned the radio to “Easy Jazz 107.9,” filling the air with the thin, slinky whine of an electronic alto sax. Outside, Beacon Street is already busy with altercations, a wrangle of horns. It has been a long winter, and even the cars are starting to show it–rusty, tired, snapping

at each other. The snow began in early December and doesn't seem to have finished. Down the street, store windows display flowered dresses and pastel pocketbooks.

Inside Sunshine Cleaners, the morning bustle is fluorescent-lit and smoky. People drop off broken computers; Sergei's friend Val runs a computer repair business and tells perplexed early-risers to leave their machines at the cleaners. Sergei wonders about Val, a widower a good twenty years older than Sergei. Val has been in this country longer, nine years. It was Val who stood in wool pants and bright red suspenders to meet Sergei at the airport two years ago, holding a sign with his name on it. All they had in common was a mutual Moscow acquaintance with whom neither has kept in touch. Now Val and Sergei play poker with two other men every Friday. The men are not yet sixty but look ancient–teeth missing, hair gone. Their skin is gray-green and deeply wrinkled. They tease Sergei because he is slim-boned and lean, and call him "Omar" because of his dark coloring and high cheekbones.

From its wide spout, the fabric softener pours a lazy pink veil. At cards last week Sergei lost four days' pay. Val sat across from him in a peaked flannel cap, winning, smoking ceaselessly, complaining of frequent doctors' visits for lung tests. This computer business of his has to be a sham. How could a fifty-year-old from Smolensk, rotted through with emphysema, know a thing about computers? Val claims never to have touched one until he came to America, says one day he just found one, took it apart, and figured out how it worked. "It's just a little chip!" he has said. He claims to know all the programs, all the languages, and tells Sergei, when asked how he does it, "I'm a genius!"

Sergei adds bleach to a load of whites. Nearby, Mr. Tyne, the young freckled man who owns the washers and dryers, is making his daily visit to empty them of their quarters. He says nothing.

Sergei wonders when he'll next have luck at cards. Ivan, the eldest, gambles on anything–horses, dogs, Val's test results. He plays the Massachusetts lottery regularly, claims to know someone who won. He and his wife have been here three years. "On the T today," Ivan said recently, "I saw a man with a mole out to here!" He held his gray-green hand an inch from his chin and shivered with disapproval. "I come all the way to America, I'd like to not see such a thing, for once in my life." That last bit is in English, one of the few American phrases Ivan uses (often, and somewhat indiscriminately.)

Sergei thinks of his own skewed back. Ivan must disapprove; his wife is a big old Petersburg beauty with perfectly sculpted hair and eyebrows. On poker nights she puts on dark lipstick, tan stockings, and matching outfits from twenty years ago to go see a movie with her friends. Her ankles puff over the tops of little fur-lined boots.

The change machine is broken again, but Mr. Tyne has already left, his bag heavy with loot. Sergei hopes Val won't raise the stakes again this Friday. The third man is a retired physicist named Miro. He has bad luck with poker and mutters to himself in Belorusian. His wife does things in the kitchen all night long and every half-hour or so calls out some comment or other, always something brief, anxious, and inconsequential.

When Sergei sits in Miro's dark apartment on a Friday night, dealing out the worn plastic cards, he thinks to himself that all over this city young people must be having fun and making love. For some reason–the long hours at Sunshine Cleaners, he supposes–he has yet to find those people. American ones, that is. Not the Russians Val has introduced him to: glossy-haired Yelen; her sister; her cousin; their neighbors and friends. He's in America now; why should he hang around with them all the time? When he walks home from work at seven every evening, Sergei wishes there were a bar to stop into on the way, where he could meet other

thirty-year-olds. People outside of his circle, friends to make on his own, nothing to do with Yelen. But it's a college town founded by Puritans; the only bar on his route is a big one with booths and fried food and students in baseball caps.

Sergei wonders about the tall girl, what she does when she isn't reading magazines or copying poetry or telling Sergei, "You disgust me!" Perhaps her friends, like Sergei's, are aging geniuses. Sergei doubts it. He has run out of quarters.

He will have to run down the block to change a twenty. Lida has gone on her lunch break, so there is no one to leave in charge; on a piece of paper Sergei scrawls "Back in Five Minutes" and tapes it to the glass door, which he locks behind him. He hurries to the nearby liquor store. There is rarely a line there, at most someone asking for the on-sale cigarettes or buying a lottery ticket.

It happened once that he hurried back, nearly out of breath, to find the tall girl scowling in front of the door, her hands on her curved hips, and a plastic bin of dirty clothes in front of her. "People have lives to get to," she said in that firm voice of hers. "People don't have all day."

"Neither do I," said Sergei.

"You have time to run to the liquor store," the girl said. Her hair was pulled back in a clip, so that her skin looked especially luminous. "I see where you go. Don't bother denying it. And meanwhile your customers have to wait."

Sergei felt his face heat up. Why didn't he say anything? Why did he just unlock the latch and, feeling that he might burst, walk ahead of the tall girl without holding the door? From inside Sunshine Cleaners he watched her bend down to lift her laundry, and, without even

trying, saw right up her denim skirt. He pretended not to notice as she struggled with the bin of clothes and an unwieldy bottle of detergent. Afterward, he had a horrible headache.

Sergei replays this in his mind as he enters the liquor store. The manager recognizes him, knows why he's here, greets him in a not-unfriendly manner. Sergei hands over a bill and takes back coins. How many times have their hands touched this way? Sergei leaves the store, passing shivering trees and an enigmatic sign announcing, "April 25: HAZARDOUS WASTE DAY!" He takes up his restrained run, his back at a tilt, pants parachuting. He considers that people may be watching him.

He does not understand that to Americans his red satin bomber jacket looks like a remnant of high school varsity and is insufficient for a New England winter. He does not realize that people who come to Sunshine Cleaners suppose he is Lida's son, or that they suspect he is slightly ill–a Chernobyl victim, perhaps?–with his sunken cheeks and tweaked body.

He does not know that last week the tall girl called the Chamber of Commerce to complain about him, or that the woman on the phone told the girl, in a bright Brahmin accent, that Sunshine Cleaners was not a member of the Brookline Chamber, so that the girl now pictures the Chamber of Commerce as some sort of blue-haired ladies' club. The girl was given a telephone number that turned out to belong to the Consumer Complaint Bureau, where a different woman asked, with a harsh South Boston inflection, "Have you lost any money?"

"Well, yeah, some quarters, a few dollars, I guess. But it's not the money; it's the rudeness, I mean–"

"I can only lodge a complaint if money has been lost. If you don't like the way they run their business, there's nothing we can do except urge you to take your business elsewhere."

These are just some of the things that Sergei does not know.

Today is Tuesday. Wednesday? Sergei shuffle-runs down the street. He arrives at Sunshine Cleaners, takes a breath, pushes the door that says "PUSH." What change could he possibly expect to find inside? That Lida will be suddenly young and unwrinkled, like a re-plumped raisin? That her hair will be blond, her figure slim, and she will look at him when she speaks? Instead he smells cigarette smoke, sees the same faces, the broken machines.

Last night he had dinner with Yelen and her younger sister, Sonia. They ate hamburgers downtown, and Sergei admired Sonia, who had dyed her hair blue-black and pierced her eyebrow with a small silver hoop. Yelen said it was horrible, but Sergei could only like Sonia for it. Amazing what difference a few years can make; Yelen still spoke with an accent and wore embarrassing lace-up shoes, while Sonia, five years younger, looked and sounded American and had a skate-boarding boyfriend named Timothy. Timothy met them after dinner, and the couple went off together.

Sergei wonders where they went. He wonders if the girls' cousin Johnny (he gave himself that name) knows of any good parties going on this coming weekend. Johnny doesn't always invite Sergei along, only when he happens to see him right beforehand.

Sergei works his way across the wall of yellow washers and dryers. Around ten, Val shows up to claim a computer keyboard. He flirts with Lida for a bit before telling Sergei, "Ivan wants to go to Foxwoods this Friday."

"The casino?"

"In Connecticut. Ivan says he knows someone who won big."

Sergei heads to the other side of the partition to start a new load.

"Where's your enthusiasm, Omar?" Val calls to him. "It could be fun."

"What do people play?" Sergei calls back. "Poker?"

"Everything! Blackjack! Slot machines!"

"No machines," says Sergei. "I'm sick of machines."

"We can all four play together," Val says through his cloud of cigarette smoke. "You might win. Right? You could win something. Anything could happen!"

"This Friday, then?"

"Unless my doctor's appointment goes late. I've got another evaluation in the afternoon."

"Everything all right?"

"Of course not. You of all people, Omar, asking me that, with that spine of yours." Val picks up the broken keyboard. "Your back, my heart, we're all breaking down. All these breakdowns!" He winks at Lida and heads for the door. "'Til tomorrow!"

Sergei checks the pockets of a pair of baggy pants before adding them to the cycle. He finds a roll of breath mints. They have the same scent as a mint that an aunt who raised him sometimes gave him when he behaved. He shuts his eyes to find the memory, but Lida says, "What does it mean, 'Hazardous Waste Day?' How could they celebrate a thing like that?"

"It's not a festival."

"I wouldn't be surprised, in this town. It's always something: flag day, flu vaccination day, cat-spaying day, voting day. That must be what it is: checking for toxic garbage. I like this town. They make sure everything is o.k."

Today is Monday. Sergei stands in Sunshine Cleaners with a cart full of laundry. The tall girl is glowering at him.

A washer has left her clothes in a sudsy bath instead of rinsed clean. Sergei has again told her, “Not my machine,” but she refuses to budge. So Sergei adds, “Tell the owners” and points to the telephone number inscribed on a small sign on the wall.

The girl takes a slow breath. “Fine, then I’m going to call them.” She heads toward the phone on Lida’s counter.

“This is our phone,” Sergei tells her, blocking her way with his body. “Not theirs. The laundromat is a separate business.”

The girl raises her hand in an ambiguous half-fist: she could be about to punch him, or she could be about to pull out her own hair. “Then may I use your phone?” she asks, her jaw tightening visibly.

Sergei pauses for a thoughtful moment before saying, “No.”

The tall girl looks him in the eye, pushes past him to the counter, and picks up the phone. She dials a number and says angry things to an answering machine. Sergei watches the way her blond hair falls pleasingly forward across her face.

“This is pitiful,” she says when she hangs up. “This is no way to run a business. You’re rude, and your machines never work. My clothes come back smelling of cigarettes.”

“So don’t come here,” Sergei says, knowing at once that he does not mean it. Except for Val’s visits, would Sergei even exist here, without the tall girl to notice him?

“This is the only laundromat nearby. I don’t have a car. How can you treat me this way?” The girl has begun crying; this has never happened before.

"So you don't have a car," Lida says from the other side of the room, threading a bobbin on the Singer. "I waited three years for a car. When it came, it was orange and made of plastic. I had to pick it up in Petrozavodsk. I broke the door just getting in to drive it home." This is all in Russian, so the tall girl does not reply.

"I need quarters, too," Sergei is saying. "The owner doesn't give me a discount. When he comes to take the money from the machines, he doesn't even talk to me. I use the machines just like you."

"Well, then we're all pathetic," the girl says through tears.

Sergei hasn't stopped talking. "I have to run to the liquor store to change my dollars. If Lida's not here, I have to lock the door; I have to hurry, and it hurts my back. I have a bad spine, I take quinine at night. I didn't used to be this way. I was strong, but one day..." Sergei hears his voice crack. That's it. He feels tears, ready to reveal themselves the minute he blinks. He stops talking and concentrates on not blinking, tries to distract himself by focusing on one of Val's broken-down computer monitors. The tall girl, without appearing to have heard him, has begun sobbing.

"Same with the telephone," Lida is saying, as the sewing machine hums along efficiently. "We lived in that apartment two years before they gave us our phone. Then it didn't ring. We could only make outgoing calls. People thought we were never home."

But Sergei, suddenly exhausted, is not listening, and the tall girl has already gone to the other side of the partition, to sit on a plastic chair and cry.

Today is Friday. Sergei runs to the liquor store for quarters. He's thinking about the piece of paper in his pocket. He won't look at it again yet. Not that he hasn't already

memorized the lines, even looked up one of the words in his English-Russian dictionary. He'll wait until he has finished one more load, and then he'll allow himself another glance at the loopy blue handwriting. But first, the quarters. It's cold inside the liquor store. An unclean man in front of Sergei is buying something called the "Megabowl."

"One hundred and forty-two million," the manager says. "I bought my ticket, alright." He is already opening a roll of quarters for Sergei when Sergei tells him, "I will buy a ticket."

The manager hands Sergei a long card on which there are many numbered boxes. Sergei looks at it and is overwhelmed. With the manager's pen, he fills in a few of the boxes. He is sure he ought to be choosing his numbers more carefully but worries he is taking too much time. He does not realize that he has used only part of his card, or that there is another side of numbers to choose from.

He turns his card in incomplete and shuffle-runs back to Sunshine Cleaners, ticket in hand, past the sign announcing HAZARDOUS WASTE DAY! On the trees that line the sidewalk, tiny retracted buds shrink back from the cold. Rich? Who said Sergei wanted to be rich? It's a vague term, and Sergei wants concrete things: an entertainment center with surround sound. A Honda motorcycle. A pair of Ray Ban sunglasses. He would like to go to California at some point.

Val comes by at ten. "There may be some drop-offs this afternoon," he tells Sergei. "I have a doctor's appointment."

Lida looks up from her sewing machine.

"More tests, huh?" says Sergei.

"More tests. We decided to postpone Foxwoods." Val's fingertips are a yellow with nicotine.

"I bought a lottery ticket," Sergei tells him. "One hundred and forty two million."

Val slaps him with approval and says, "Ivan knows someone who won."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You never know," Val says. "Anything could happen!"

It's true. Like Monday, after the tall girl finished crying and stood up abruptly to gather her clothes, and a scrap of paper fell out of her magazine. Sergei just watched it land on the linoleum floor beside the plastic chair. It was still there after the girl left. When Sergei got home that night, he looked up the word "abyss."

Now as he heads around to the front counter, he notices the way that Val and Lida are speaking to each other. Why isn't she looking at her sewing machine? Val touches her shoulder while saying something, and Lida's eyelids drop slightly.

"I lie in this cold abyss," Sergei thinks to himself. That's what the scrap of paper said. Well, actually, that part was crossed out. But Sergei looked hard to figure out what was hidden underneath the scratches. After that part, he read:

The goodbye of your eyes
to me in the cold bed abyss
Weeks emptied of you
are mountains harsh and steep
Like a flower I wilt
without your

That was how it ended, as if falling off a cliff. Now, Sergei notes, Val is lightly touching Lida's elbow. She says something to him about her two tabby cats, and Val, coughing, says he would like to meet them.

Sergei doesn't like to remember things. It's a superstition of his. Pleasant memories–being with friends at age thirteen and laughing so hard their guts ached, or eating Turkish figs with a girl in the park in June–such memories leap past him quickly, and Sergei cannot focus enough to make the moments linger. But when the bad memories seep back, like they always do, they stick, so vivid that Sergei finds himself frightened. He is frightened that he won't be able to get out, that he'll blink and find himself back in some long-gone moment: shivering in front of a broken space-heater; lying on a Moscow street in a pool of his own blood, hearing someone say, "Careful with his neck."

When this happens, Sergei shakes himself, like a dog just out of a lake. He really would not be surprised if one day such a memory, so real–the smell of the bloody pavement, of the stranger's damp shoes, the sound of a woman's voice saying, "Is he alive? Don't move him,"–forced him back to that midnight street, and he had to go through it all again.

He would like to reverse this somehow, make the good memories stick, or to produce kinder images so strong that they might actually occur. He wants to do this but cannot. Maybe that's why he was put off by Val's bit of abracadabra this past Friday.

Val brought a computer to poker. He pushed the chips and card deck aside and slid a small monitor onto Miro's table. He connected wires and even the telephone line and dialed a number. "You said you missed Petersburg!" he said happily and slapped Ivan on the shoulder. "Well, take a look here!"

Sergei stood beside Val, with Ivan and Miro looking over his shoulder. He had never seen such bright colors on a computer screen. The ones in the laundromat were never on. This one had a turquoise pattern, with text in various hues. Val typed things, and the telephone rang in a muted way. "Wait until you see this."

A photograph emerged on the screen. There was a building of some sort, with people in front. Sergei was amazed by the clarity. But it wasn't a photograph, it moved. "Look familiar?" Val asked, turning to Ivan.

"I can't believe it. The University library."

"Live coverage. Some students have put a camera lens facing it. Anybody who goes in is on film. It's for research or something. What do you think of that!"

"Miraculous!" said Miro, and Ivan said softly, "It's like I'm right back there. For once in my life."

"It's on 24 hours," Val explained. "The wonders of the Internet." He smiled at Sergei and said, "Not bad, eh Omar?"

But to Sergei this seemed somehow unfair. This satellite image, or whatever it was, it was too real. Like bad memories. They shouldn't be able to look back at something like this, so simple and nice, and far away, so easily.

Why can't good memories be easy like this? Sergei would like to be like Val and turn pleasant daydreams into concrete visions. When he confronts the glass and metal door with the "PUSH" sign every morning, he tries to imagine something other than what's there, certain that if he thinks hard enough of what he wants to be inside, it just might happen.

Luckily, Sergei ran into Yelen's cousin Johnny this past Saturday. Johnny is an audio technician the women all seem to like, and he took Sergei along to a party hosted by two Americans he works with. This was in Dorchester, with lots of beer.

A woman from Waltham paid attention to Sergei. She asked him about his back, and he told her about being mugged and left for dead.

"A couple coming home from a disco found me," he explained. "Saved my life, probably. I was in hospital six months."

To show that she understood what Sergei had gone through, the woman told him, "My brother-in-law fell off a roof and landed on a metal rake. He almost died. If he had landed one millimeter to the left, the rake could have gone through his heart. He's ok, now, though. You never know what's gonna happen."

Sergei tried to picture the man, the roof, the confusingly placed metal rake, and could make no sense of the logistics. But he took the woman's phone number and has considered calling her sometime this week. There is a movie about female vampires he wouldn't mind seeing. That's how it happens, Sergei knows. You call and make your offer–a movie, a drink, maybe dinner. It happens all the time, all over, especially in Spring. He is sure of that now. This morning he saw Lida standing close to Val, talking about potatoes, of all things, saying she knew a recipe that he was sure to like. Val's skin was no longer so green but instead almost rosy.

Well, Val's heart may be getting better, but seeing him smiling there, Sergei felt a cold spot in his own. Why can't he have that? No, not Lida. Maybe with Sheri from Waltham. At any rate, it's too soon to call, only Monday. Outside, the air is cold for April, but the treebuds aren't yet dead, just knotted up patiently on their branches. At Sunshine Cleaners, the tall girl is standing in front of Sergei, announcing that the change machine is broken again. "Not my machine," says Sergei.

"Well, I think you should at least write 'Out of Order' on it, so that other people don't lose money trying to use it."

“There’s a light,” says Sergei, meaning the little orange one that lights up next to the words “Out of Order.’

“The light’s not on.”

“Then it’s working.”

But the girl won’t move. “No, it’s not working.”

“Yes, it is,” says Sergei. “See?” He walks up to the machine, takes a dollar from his pocket and slides it into the machine’s thin mouth. He and the tall girl watch as the dollar is sucked in, and for a few seconds nothing happens.

But then the quarters begin to pour out, first into the little cup below the machine, and then onto the floor. The quarters keep coming, hundreds of them clinking out and landing in a noisy pile. Sergei and the tall girl watch together, for minutes, it seems, until the machine’s bowels have been emptied.

On the floor, the shiny pile barely resembles coins. Sergei and the tall girl just look at it for a moment. Then the girl bends down, picks up four quarters, and Sergei sees where the band of her underwear meets her skin.

When she walks back over to her dirty clothes, Sergei goes to the other side of the partition and returns with a medium-sized plastic bag, into which he begins scooping the coins. He knows the tall girl is watching. He ignores her as she waits there with her paperback, whose cover says A Woman Scorned. When he has filled the bag with all of the quarters, Sergei brings it to the other side of the partition.

After about twenty minutes, the tall girl transfers her clothes to a big yellow dryer and then sits down to read again. That is when Mr. Tyne makes his daily visit and, without saying hello to Sergei or Lida, begins his rounds, emptying the quarters from washers and dryers, one

by one. After fifteen minutes or so, he progresses to the change machine, opening it up to take the dollars. He removes the bills, counts them up, and then says to Sergei, "Hey, you have any idea what's going on with this machine?"

Sergei shakes his head.

"All the quarters are gone, but there's only forty-two bucks here. I've never seen the machine empty before. You notice anything odd about it?"

"Not my machine," says Sergei.

He sees the tall girl staring at him over her book, her hair pulled back from her rosy skin. Mr. Tyne collects his money, refills the machine with quarters, and leaves.

Sergei looks over at the tall girl, though he is tired and wants no more trouble; their fights can be exhausting. But he dares to look at her. Their eyes lock, her stare expectant, and Sergei thinks—with surprise, for some reason—"She despises me."

Now that he has allowed himself to think this, Sergei cannot stand it. He must apologize to her. Not for his own behavior, which he knows will not change, and not for having taken the scrap of paper, which she'll never know, but for whatever it is that has made her so sullen, whatever caused her to sit on the plastic chair that day and cry.

Or perhaps it was Sergei, just Sergei and nothing else, that made her cry. After all, he disgusts her.

He wishes he had not taken the money, knows that that too must disgust her. There must be something he can do about it, prove that he is not so disgusting. He thinks of what he can tell her, that in fact he is donating the money to the town Police Department, or to the Committee for the Elderly. Anything to stop this. How many times have they yelled cruel things back and forth? He is tired of hurting, his back and his feelings. All that incivility, what

a waste of energy. That's it: he will say that the money is going to the Hazardous Waste Board.

He takes a breath and says, "About that money."

The tall girl says, "You hit the jackpot there, didn't you?" This must suddenly strike her as funny. Like a rainbow or some other naturally-occurring wonder, apparently shocking the girl as much as Sergei, a surprised smile breaks across her face.

"Hit the jackpot," Sergei repeats. "That's good. I guess I did. Something good. For once in my life."

"Or maybe twice in a life," says the girl, tilting her head slightly. "I'd like to think it's at least twice."