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Great House

Written by Nicole Krauss

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Great House

Nicole Krauss

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ALL RISE

Talk to him.

YOUR HONOR, in the winter of 1972 R and I broke up, or I should say he broke up with me. His reasons were vague, but the gist was that he had a secret self, a cowardly, despicable self he could never show me, and that he needed to go away like a sick animal until he could improve this self and bring it up to a standard he judged deserving of company. I argued with him—I'd been his girlfriend for almost two years, his secrets were my secrets, if there was something cruel or cowardly in him I of all people would know—but it was useless. Three weeks after he'd moved out I got a postcard from him (without a return address) saying that he felt our decision, as he called it, hard as it was, had been the right one, and I had to admit to myself that our relationship was over for good.

Things got worse then for a while before they got better. I won't go into it except to say that I didn't go out, not even to see my grandmother, and I didn't let anyone come to see me, either. The only thing that helped, oddly, was the fact that the weather was stormy, and so I had to keep running around the apartment with the strange

little brass wrench made especially for tightening the bolts on either side of the antique window frames—when they got loose in windy weather the windows would shriek. There were six windows, and just as I finished tightening the bolts on one, another would start to howl, so I would run with the wrench, and then maybe I would have a half hour of silence on the only chair left in the apartment. For a while, at least, it seemed that all there was of the world was that long rain and the need to keep the bolts fastened. When the weather finally cleared, I went out for a walk. Everything was flooded, and there was a feeling of calm from all that still, reflecting water. I walked for a long time, six or seven hours at least, through neighborhoods I had never been to before and have never been back to since. By the time I got home I was exhausted but I felt that I had purged myself of something.

SHE WASHED the blood from my hands and gave me a fresh T-shirt, maybe even her own. She thought I was your girlfriend or even your wife. No one has come for you yet. I won't leave your side. *Talk to him.*

NOT LONG after that R's grand piano was lowered through the huge living room window, the same way it had come in. It was the last of his possessions to go, and as long as the piano had been there, it was as if he hadn't really left. In the weeks that I lived alone with the piano, before they came to take it away, I would sometimes pat it as I passed in just the same way that I had patted R.

A few days later an old friend of mine named Paul Alpers called to tell me about a dream he'd had. In it he and the great poet César Vallejo were at a house in the country that had belonged to Vallejo's family since he was a child. It was empty, and all the walls were painted a bluish white. The whole effect was very peaceful, Paul said, and in the dream he thought Vallejo lucky to be able to go to such a place to work. This looks like the holding place before the

afterlife, Paul told him. Vallejo didn't hear him, and he had to repeat himself twice. Finally the poet, who in real life died at forty-six, penniless, in a rainstorm, just as he had predicted, understood and nodded. Before they entered the house Vallejo had told Paul a story about how his uncle used to dip his fingers in the mud to make a mark on his forehead—something to do with Ash Wednesday. And then, Vallejo said (said Paul), he would do something I never understood. To illustrate, Vallejo dipped his two fingers in the mud and drew a mustache across Paul's upper lip. They both laughed. Throughout the dream, Paul said, most striking was the complicity between them, as if they had known each other many years.

Naturally Paul had thought of me when he'd woken up, because when we were sophomores in college we'd met in a seminar on avant-garde poets. We'd become friends because we always agreed with each other in class, while everyone else disagreed with us, more and more vehemently as the semester progressed, and with time an alliance had formed between Paul and me that after all these years—five—could still be unfolded and inflated instantly. He asked how I was, alluding to the breakup, which someone must have told him about. I said I was ok except that I thought maybe my hair was falling out. I also told him that along with the piano, the sofa, chairs, bed, and even the silverware had gone with R, since when I met him I'd been living more or less out of a suitcase, whereas he had been like a sitting Buddha surrounded by all of the furniture he'd inherited from his mother. Paul said he thought he might know someone, a poet, a friend of a friend, who was going back to Chile and might need a foster home for his furniture. A phone call was made and it was confirmed that the poet, Daniel Varsky, did indeed have some items he didn't know what to do with, not wanting to sell them in case he changed his mind and decided to return to New York. Paul gave me his number and said Daniel was expecting me to get in touch. I put off making the call for a few days, mostly because there was something awkward about asking a stranger for his

furniture even if the way had already been paved, and also because in the month since R and all of his many belongings had gone I'd become accustomed to having nothing. Problems only arose when someone else came over and I would see, reflected in the look on my guest's face, that from the outside the conditions, my conditions, Your Honor, appeared pathetic.

When I finally called Daniel Varsky he picked up after one ring. There was a cautiousness in that initial greeting, before he knew who it was on the other end, that I later came to associate with Daniel Varsky, and with Chileans, few as I've met, in general. It took a minute for him to sort out who I was, a minute for the light to go on revealing me as a friend of a friend and not some loopy woman calling—about his furniture? she'd heard he wanted to get rid of it? or just give it out on loan?—a minute in which I considered apologizing, hanging up, and carrying on as I had been, with just a mattress, plastic utensils, and the one chair. But once the light had gone on (Aha! Of course! Sorry! It's all waiting right here for you) his voice softened and became louder at the same time, giving way to an expansiveness I also came to associate with Daniel Varsky and, by extension, everyone who hails from that dagger pointing at the heart of Antarctica, as Henry Kissinger once called it.

He lived all the way uptown, on the corner of 101st Street and Central Park West. On the way, I stopped to visit my grandmother, who lived in a nursing home on West End Avenue. She no longer recognized me, but once I'd gotten over this I found myself able to enjoy being with her. We normally sat and discussed the weather in eight or nine different ways, before moving on to my grandfather, who a decade after his death continued to be a subject of fascination to her, as if with each year of his absence his life, or their life together, became more of an enigma to her. She liked to sit on the sofa marveling at the lobby—All of this belongs to me? she'd periodically ask, waving in a gesture that took in the whole place—and wearing all of her jewelry at once. Whenever I came, I brought her a chocolate

babkah from Zabar's. She always ate a little out of politeness, and the cake would flake onto her lap and stick to her lips, and after I left she gave the rest away to the nurses.

When I got to 101st Street, Daniel Varsky buzzed me in. As I waited for the elevator in the dingy lobby it occurred to me that I might not like his furniture, that it might be dark or otherwise oppressive, and that it would be too late to back out gracefully. But on the contrary, when he opened the door my first impression was of light, so much so that I had to squint, and for a moment I couldn't see his face because it was in silhouette. There was also the smell of something cooking which later turned out to be an eggplant dish he'd learned to make in Israel. Once my eyes adjusted I was surprised to find that Daniel Varsky was young. I'd expected someone older since Paul had said his friend was a poet, and though we both wrote poetry, or tried to write it, we made a point of never referring to ourselves as poets, a term we reserved for those whose work had been judged worthy of publication, not just in an obscure journal or two, but in an actual book that could be purchased in a bookstore. In retrospect this turns out to have been an embarrassingly conventional definition of a poet, and though Paul and I and others we knew prided ourselves on our literary sophistication, in those days we were still walking around with our ambition intact and in certain ways it blinded us.

Daniel was twenty-three, a year younger than I was, and though he hadn't yet published a book of poems he seemed to have spent his time better, or more imaginatively, or maybe what could be said is that he felt a pressure to go places, meet people, and experience things that, whenever I have encountered it in someone, has always made me envious. He had traveled for the last four years, living in different cities, on the floors of the apartments of people he met along the way, and sometimes apartments of his own when he could convince his mother or maybe it was his grandmother to wire him money, but now at last he was going home to take his place alongside

the friends he had grown up with who were fighting for liberation, revolution, or at least socialism in Chile.

The eggplant was ready and while Daniel set the table he told me to look around at the furniture. The apartment was small, but there was a large southern-facing window through which all the light entered. The most striking thing about the place was the mess—papers all over the floor, coffee-stained Styrofoam cups, notebooks, plastic bags, cheap rubber shoes, divorced records and sleeves. Anyone else would have felt compelled to say, Excuse the mess, or joked about a herd of wild animals passing through, but Daniel didn't mention it. The only more or less empty surface was the walls, bare aside from a few maps he'd tacked up of the cities he had lived in—Jerusalem, Berlin, London, Barcelona—and on certain avenues, corners, and squares he had scribbled notes that I didn't immediately understand because they were in Spanish, and it would have seemed rude to have gone up and tried to decipher them while my host and benefactor set down the silverware. So I turned my attention to the furniture, or what I could see of it under the mess—a sofa, a large wooden desk with lots of drawers, some big and some small, a pair of bookshelves crammed with volumes in Spanish, French, and English, and the nicest piece, a kind of chest or trunk with iron braces that looked as if it had been rescued from a sunken ship and put to use as a coffee table. He must have acquired everything secondhand, none of it looked new, but all the pieces shared a kind of sympathy, and the fact that they were suffocating under papers and books made them more attractive rather than less. Suddenly I felt awash in gratitude to their owner, as if he were handing down to me not just some wood and upholstery but the chance at a new life, leaving it up to me to rise to the occasion. I'm embarrassed to say that my eyes actually filled with tears, Your Honor, though as is so often the case, the tears sprang from older, more obscure regrets I had delayed thinking about, which the gift, or loan, of a stranger's furniture had somehow unsettled.

We must have talked for seven or eight hours at least. Maybe

more. It turned out that we both loved Rilke. We also both liked Auden, though I liked him more, and neither of us cared much for Yeats, but both felt secretly guilty about this, in case it suggested some sort of personal failure at the level where poetry lives and matters. The only moment of disharmony came when I raised the subject of Neruda, the one Chilean poet I knew, to which Daniel responded with a flash of anger: Why is it, he asked, that wherever a Chilean goes in the world, Neruda and his fucking seashells has already been there and set up a monopoly? He held my gaze waiting for me to counter him, and as he did I got the feeling that where he came from it was commonplace to talk as we were talking, and even to argue about poetry to the point of violence, and for a moment I felt brushed by loneliness. Just a moment, though, and then I jumped to apologize, and swore up and down to read the abbreviated list of great Chilean poets he scribbled on the back of a paper bag (at the top of which, in capital letters overshadowing the rest, was Nicanor Parra) and also to never again utter the name of Neruda, either in his presence or anyone else's.

We talked then of Polish poetry, of Russian poetry, of Turkish and Greek and Argentine poetry, of Sappho and the lost notebooks of Pasternak, of the death of Ungaretti, the suicide of Weldon Kees, and the disappearance of Arthur Cravan, who Daniel claimed was still alive, cared for by the whores of Mexico City. But sometimes, in the dip or hollow between one rambling sentence and the next, a dark cloud would cross his face, hesitate for a moment as if it might stay, and then slide past, dissolving toward the edges of the room, and at those moments I almost felt I should turn away, since though we talked a lot about poetry we had not yet said much of anything about ourselves.

At a certain point Daniel jumped up and went rifling through the desk with all the drawers, opening some and closing others, in search of a cycle of poems he'd written. It was called *Forget Everything I Ever Said*, or something like that, and he had translated it himself.

He cleared his throat and began to read aloud in a voice that coming from anyone else might have seemed affected or even comic, touched as it was with a faint tremolo, but coming from Daniel seemed completely natural. He didn't apologize or hide behind the pages. Just the opposite. He straightened up like a pole, as if he were borrowing energy from the poem, and looked up frequently, so frequently that I began to suspect he had memorized what he'd written. It was at one of these moments, as we met eye-to-eye across a word, that I realized he was actually quite good-looking. He had a big nose, a big Chilean-Jewish nose, and big hands with skinny fingers, and big feet, but there was also something delicate about him, something to do with his long eyelashes or his bones. The poem was good, not great but very good, or maybe it was even better than very good, it was hard to tell without being able to read it myself. It seemed to be about a girl who had broken his heart, though it could just as easily have been about a dog; halfway through I got lost, and started to think about how R always used to wash his narrow feet before he got into bed because the floor of our apartment was dirty, and though he never told me to wash mine it was implicit, since if I hadn't then the sheets would have gotten dirty, making his own washing pointless. I didn't like sitting on the edge of the tub or standing at the sink with one knee to my ear, watching the black dirt swirl in the white porcelain, but it was one of those countless things one does in life to avoid an argument, and now the thought of it made me want to laugh or possibly choke.

By then Daniel Varsky's apartment had gotten dim and aquatic, the sun having gone down behind a building, and the shadows that had been hiding behind everything began to flood out. I remember there were some very large books on his shelf, fine books with tall cloth spines. I don't remember any of their titles, perhaps they were a set, but they seemed somehow to be in collusion with the darkening hour. It was as if the walls of his apartment were suddenly carpeted like the walls of a movie theater to keep the sound from getting out, or other sounds from getting in, and inside that tank,