

## **Black Pearls in an Amber Sea**

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The senior living center is just off of Silver Dollar Avenue, right next to the beaten down Tom Thumb grocery store with the sun bleached plastic flamingo out front. The one that still has those small candies you can purchase for a nickel. If you see the yellow house with the porch swing, you've gone too far. Backtrack a bit. It's a nice neighborhood, so take your time.

The sign for the home has long since whittled down to nothing more than scraps of paint that name a pile of sagging brick. Maybe the neighborhood isn't as nice as it once was. The living center could use a renovation, but then again, what would the seniors have left to complain about if not the tragic state of the building?

Go inside, all the way up to room number three hundred and thirteen. There, upon a desk too old to be of taste and too young to be classically vintage, sits the ugliest phone in existence. The color of watered down pea soup, the receiver connects to a spiraled chord exposing more than enough bare wire to be a hazard, and a loud circular dial with most of the numbers rubbed away by its many users.

But Ilona Ozolina had no need for the dial numbers. Not only because she knew their placement by heart (it was her phone, after all), but by now, everyone she knows is either too busy or too dead to bother to call.

Well, with one exception.

At 11 a.m. every morning, for an hour until lunchtime they would talk. On and on they would go, making even the bland of topics full of spice and excitement. And in that hour, just for a moment, everything was how it used to be. Her spine would straighten, and the pain in her hands would lessen. She could see clearer, and she would even let a chuckle or two slip out. So Ilona sat beside the phone, at that ugly desk wearing an ill fitting grey dress made for comfort instead of class, with a string of lustrous black pearls and amber around her neck, an unlit cigarette between her fingers (just because she wasn't allowed to smoke inside didn't stop her from pretending).

It was 10:51 a.m., and Ilona had been up since 4. But she was a patient woman, and in here, she had nothing to do but wait.

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The first time Ilona met Rose Pederson, she was twenty-six, with a husband of eight years at her side and four perpetually sooty boys at her feet. The year was 1948, and this was their ninth home, though she didn't count the brief stay in New York, or the foul refugee camps. "It is a nice house, a good neighborhood, and that church is just down the street. No need for a car." Her husband said, squinting up at the house through the bright summer sun. His english was getting better, she noted, and Ilona couldn't help but agree about the house. It was a catalog perfect home. If she tilted her head, she swore it even had the glossy sheen of a magazine in the afternoon light. Sturdy and freshly painted, with vacant window boxes waiting for flowers, and a fence in the back. The three bedrooms would mean that she and Valdis would get their own bed for the first time since they were newlyweds. But that was before, when war was a looming afterthought, and death was only a grief meant for the brave soldiers of war.

Valdis wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her hairline, "Now we are home." She gave him a small smile, a gesture she forced for so many years it had now become almost natural, and watched him walk with squared shoulders. How hard they had worked to get here, to have this very moment. The nights she had waited for this moment, to see her husband walk through the front door of a place they could call a home, even with his fraying suit and second hand hat, their four children trailing after him.

But though she loved him for trying, she knew, just as he knew, that this was not their true home.

That place was forever buried beneath the rubble and screams, ash and blood and bullets. Home was a place of lost souls, no more than mounds of frozen flesh, a nuisance for the other laborers that would soon join them. Siberian death camps, those were the english words for where her family was. Had been, she reminded herself. Sometimes, when she was sitting up late at night because she couldn't sleep, or when she closed her eyes for a second after giving the children a bath, she would see herself there. Her bones, crusted in frost, skin the pale blue of milk and eyes hardened to ice.

But that was before, and that was a time to be forgotten.

And this was now. Which apparently, came in the form of a perky, kitten-heeled young woman from the house next door, bedecked in a pie and an aggressive smile. "Hello there, Darling! You must be the new neighbors, The Ozolina's? So nice to meet you. Here, I baked this for you. Lemon, I hope you don't mind? I'm Rose. Rose Pederson. Awfully nice to meet you. Oh! I love your jewelry, such a beautiful dark metal, is it iron? And how I love a

gorgeous honey colored amber, it really brings out the darkness of your hair! I noticed you have boys? Wonderful! The children will be thrilled!”

Rose’s voice was soft and sweet, flawlessly english in a way only native speakers could manage. However, Ilona had never heard someone speak with so many audible exclamation marks and so little time for breath.

Rose seemed to misinterpret the look of shock on Ilona’s face for misunderstanding, for she slowed down her speech, “My apologies. We were told that english is not your native language, yet I’ve always been one to talk with a certain quickness. Please, don’t be afraid to correct me if I speak too fast.”

Ilona hated American women.

“Excuse me?” Ilona snapped in her broken, harsh sounding slavic accent which was never more prominent than in this moment, “I can understand english just fine. And that pie is burnt.”

She realized when she saw the change in Rose’s expression that she had made a mistake. The hot flash of anger melted into coiling embarrassment. She might as well have thrown ice water into the woman’s beautifully painted face.

But then Rose’s face broke into a wide, gap-toothed grin that turned into a laugh that outshone even the vibrancy of her clothing. She handed Ilona the pie as she dabbed her eyes. “I think you and I, Mrs. Ozolina, are going to get along just fine.” And without another word, she left as she had come, with a bounce in her step and a smile on her face. She was the kind of woman Ilona had never been, even at her happiest. Ilona didn’t know what to make of her.

Rose paused and turned around once more, “I’m opening a bottle of wine tonight at nine tonight once the children are asleep. Don’t be afraid to join, the door will be unlocked and I’ve got a fabulous jazz collection. Have that husband of yours come over as well, my husband is not fond of drinking alone, and lord knows that he could never keep up with me. Don’t be a stranger, darling.”

And with that, Rose left with a trail of confidence and lily scented cologne.

And that was the day Ilona met her best friend.

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It was 10:57. Ilona fidgeted with her cigarette, and stared out the window. Quite a pointless window, since it faced the brick wall of the nextdoor building, but she didn’t have the energy

to complain. She counted the beads on her necklace. From the scents coming from downstairs, it appeared they were having dinner rolls and soup again for lunch.

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Their Saturday night neighborly party of four had turned into a whole weekend experience over the years. The two couples would meet and drink until they could barely stand, stumbling towards their respective houses (only once had they accidentally swapped houses, Ilona and Valdis in the Pederson's bed, and the Pederson in the Ozolina's. Their children were quite confused the next day) and collapsing into bed with their stockings and belts still on. These moments, while they danced to jazz records with each other, Ilona wanted to bottle these moments, and savor them on a later date. Like fine wine or rich chocolate. "We, my loves, are the liveliest parents in the neighborhood," Rose would slur as she danced and Ilona danced barefoot in the living room. Valdis let out a deep, rumbling laugh around the cigar in his mouth sitting in the chair next to Rose's husband, and Ilona would fall in love with him all over again, just like she had when she was sixteen.

But right now was not one of those moments. It was a Tuesday, at 9pm. Rose and Ilona were in the woods, sitting on a cold mossy rock near a forgotten creek, sharing a cigarette smudged with pink and dark red lipstick that could be seen only by the silver light weaving around shadowed branches. Rose took a drag before passing it back to Ilona.

"You know, I used to come here with my girlfriends when I was young. At fifteen, we would go skinny dipping in the pond here, and drink liquor we had stolen from our fathers, and wear tiny dabs of our mother's perfume." Rose let out a soft laugh, "We were so beautiful and young back then. Full of limitless giggles and smooth stomachs free of pregnancy stretched stomachs. I love my life now, do not misunderstand me, but I look fondly back on the time gone."

Ilona paused for a moment, letting the heat of the summer night settle on her skin. "We would do something similar, my friends and I. Back in Lithuania."

Ilona could feel Rose still beside her, like she did whenever Ilona mentioned her childhood home.

"We would go out dancing, by girlfriends and I, we would dance with handsome, nameless young men, and afterwards race out to the Baltic sea at night, down to the rocks. The water was always so terribly cold, even during the summer. My older brother caught me sneaking out once."

"He didn't!"

Ilona chuckled, “Yes, but he never told my parents. Just shook his head and told me I better not be meeting some young fellow,” Ilona gave an absentminded smile, “turns out that night I was going to see Valdis. And then, time sped up and suddenly I was a wife. The wedding was right before it all happened. And then...”

Ilona remembered.

Her breath and heartbeat created one melody of chaos that was in tune with her racing feet. Valdis next to her. “Don’t let go of my hand. Ilona? Do you hear me? Do not let go!” The dead of night. If they had waited another day they would have been in the chattel carts that now carried her family to... no, she would not think of that. “Who will the Russians take over first when they invade?” Her father had said during a night of politics, “The biggest threats.” She had not realized it then, but her father had given them a warning. Only, Valdis had been the one to figure it out. Not her. The threat in question was holding her hand right now. A Lithuanian government official. Who are the biggest threats? Her father’s voice had echoed in her mind as they ran in the dead of night. Such a respected man, her husband. But respected men are dangerous in a war torn country, because those are the men who have the potential to stop it, and the Soviets could not have that. A respected man is a dead man. Now her father was gone, along with her mother, and her brother who gave her pocket candies. Her friends, her childhood. Her home. It was all crumbled to dust like the buildings around her. It rang in her ears. What were screams and what were bullets? But she kept running. She never stopped running. Cries and blood. A child’s sock on the decimated street. Her tiny hand just a few paces away next to a headless doll covered in ash from the explosion.

There is no language for these things. These are not moments made to become memories, and yet they do. And nightmares are always clearer than dreams.

“It was all gone.”

Rose did not press, and she never would. Some things are not meant to be turned into stories, for fear that they become burdens to others.

But then Rose stood up and stretched out a hand to Ilona.

“You know what? I think we should go swimming.”

It was not the Baltic sea, and these women were far from children, but Ilona would be damned if she didn’t hear the laughter of teenagers in their voices that night, and feel the lightheadedness of youth as they washed away age in that creek until their skin was smooth and unblemished.

Memories cannot be bottled, but sometimes, in rare moments, the world is painted in such vivid color. Color that sings and moves and touches every aching piece. Those memories, if they are held close enough, can weave their way into souls and heartbeats. They

do not erase the cracks and the hidden parts of the spirit, but instead, cradle the nightmares softly like salve over a cut, or a father's kiss over a bruise and say, I am here, and I will never leave you. Ilona had found that moment. And she was never letting it go.

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11:13. The tears that fell into the grooves of her skin made no sound as they plopped onto the silent phone. In her will, she had told her only living son to spread her ashes over the Baltic sea. Rose is gone, but she's still here, waiting for a phone call that will never come, and counting down the days when she can finally breathe in the air of her homeland. Even though it's been almost seven decades, she still remembers the taste of the sea brine, and she can see the golden light of the city that she used to dance beneath before she raced towards the water with her friends, dresses rippling in the night wind and sweat cooling on their skin. Though the water is freezing, she thinks Rose would love the sound of the waves, crashing with limitless energy, barely pausing for breath.