Girls

by Daniel & 4.6

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A book is a mirror: if a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out. —*Lichtenberg*

My girlfriend was Russian, but so was my other girlfriend, so the adjective did not narrow the field as much as it should have. Vilka was from Yekaterinburg and worked on camera, which in her case meant a laptop webcam pointed at a bed in an apartment she kept clean with the efficiency of a girl who knew that the apartment was the set and the set was the income and the income was the apartment. She had come to Patong after we left Dubai, where she had determined that the food was too Chinese. This was the complete reason for our departure from the

United Arab Emirates. Not the heat, not the laws, not the gold-plated vacancy of the shopping centers, not the particular spiritual death of a Tuesday afternoon in the Marina. The Chinese food. She also did not like Thai food, which presented an immediate difficulty upon arrival in Thailand, a country whose entire infrastructure of welcome is organized around the assumption that the guest would like some Thai food. I knew the owner of an Argentinian steakhouse. I had once puked violently on the floor of this steakhouse after drinking rancid kratom mixed with Red Bull, an event the owner had processed with the equanimity of a man who had been doing business in Patong long enough that the question was never whether someone would vomit on his floor but when, and whether they would return for the steak. I returned for the steak. I always returned for the steak. The steak, for me, was a hundred-gram tenderloin from the United States, because the Japanese wagyu had reached a price point at which even I had a problem with it, and I am a man who has had very few problems with price points in my life, so the problem, when it arrived, arrived late and was noted.

The owner was delighted to see me with a girl. He misidentified her, with some confidence, as my daughter. She was twenty and I was forty, exactly half

my age, so somehow exactly half a person, and somehow the logic seemed uncannily correct, and I did not correct it immediately because the correction would have required a longer conversation than the identification, and the identification was already comfortable. She looked sixteen when she smiled, which she did rarely, being Russian. On the occasions when the smile appeared—a good part of a good third of a minute on a good day—she was impossibly cute, beautiful, an absolutely adorable girl-next-door type in a category I could not name without hyphenating several words that do not ordinarily cohabit, and when the smile left, which it did promptly, she looked Russian again, which is a fixed atmospheric condition and not a criticism.

She ordered empanadas as a starter and I have never in my life seen a happier Russian girl. The happiness lasted the duration of the empanadas, which was brief, and the duration was the jurisdiction, and within the jurisdiction no further questions were required. We had decent wine. The owner asked about her studies.

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Vilka was not autistic. I wanted her to be autistic. I spent some portion of the early months constructing the case for autism—her flat declarations of what she

hated, her refusal to modulate, her capacity to look at a plate of Thai food and say "I don't want this" with no more emotional inflection than a thermostat registering a temperature. But the case would not close. She was not particularly autistic. She was a Russian cam girl who did not have time for any bullshit and was simply correct a lot of the time, and the distinction between these two conditions—autism and being correct—is less visible than the diagnostic manual would like, and in her case the irritating reality was the second one. She hated the things she hated and the things she hated deserved to be hated and no framework was required. I kept building the cathedral of interpretation and she kept walking past it on her way to the fridge.

The other girlfriend was also Russian but occupied a different quadrant of the Russian field entirely. Alice was from west of the Urals—originally; she had since stationed herself in the southeast, near Crimea, in a coastal city she had chosen for two reasons, the first being that she loved the sea and the second being that the city contained an unusual number of stray cats in its garbage bins. This second reason had become, by the time I met her, a system. She had developed a full operational pipeline for the rescue, rehabilitation, and rehoming of garbage cats, and the pipeline had a

hierarchy, and the hierarchy had a COO. The COO was an orange tabby named Travel, who loved to travel and whose primary executive responsibilities consisted of staring blankly at the sky and sleeping, two activities that looked identical except for the orientation of the body, the first being vaguely vertical and the second being horizontal, and it was possible to misidentify one as the other from across the room, which I did regularly without consequence. Travel's actual job, beneath the staring and the sleeping, was the domestication of rescued kittens. When Alice retrieved a cat from a garbage bin—not with her mouth, although I maintained a private fantasy of her doing so, a fantasy that produced in me a feeling I did not have an exact word for, something adjacent to arousal but not arriving at arousal's address, something that felt as though it should produce an erection but did not for reasons the body declined to make available to the mind—she would bring the cat home, wash it, and deliver it to Travel, who would sit near it and do nothing, and the nothing was the domestication, and the domestication worked, and after a sufficient period of nothing the kitten was ready for adoption, at which point Alice would post a message to the relevant websites saying that a cute kitten was available, already washed, free of charge, come and get it.

Alice held two doctoral degrees. The first was in Freudian psychoanalysis applied to dogs and cats, which is a field that exists in exactly the way that sentence implies it exists, and the second was in filmography with a major in cinematography and acting, or something. She worked at a television station. She was, by her own account, the best employee at this television station. She worked approximately one hour per day. The remaining hours she devoted to the cats, to the sea, and to a system she had developed for professional survival which she explained to me one night in Patong after she had consumed enough fake cocaine and hung out with enough strippers on Bangla Road and drunk exactly the three and a half beers required to get her, a twenty-three-year-old lesbian from eastern Europe with an eating disorder and a body weight that made the three and a half beers a decisive quantity, sufficiently candid to describe the system. The system was: she took every email her boss sent her, gave it to a language model, and copied and pasted whatever came out back into the email. When she needed to appear on camera she read whatever the language model produced and did not bother to attach any semantic significance to it. She was the

highest-performing employee at the station. Nobody had noticed.

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I met Alice the way I met most of the girls in this story, which is to say on a webcam platform, and when I first saw her she looked so young that my immediate response was not attraction but alarm. This girl should not be here, I thought, and the thought had the particular clarity of a conviction that arrives before any of the usual negotiations with self-interest, and I acted on it, which in my case meant calling my friend Maria from Izhevsk, whom I had also met on the same platform and who was at the time working on a mathematics thesis and contemplating a nose job I found infuriating. Maria was going to do this to her nose and there was nothing I or anyone could do about it, and afterward she wore the medical apparatus for approximately two months during which she looked like a clown, and I found the clown face adorable for reasons that belong to the same unnamed feeling as the cat-in-the-mouth fantasy, the almost-erection, the thing without a word. During the clown period, in Kazakhstan—we were in Kazakhstan because Alice had discovered at the airport that she needed an international passport to travel internation-

ally, so the planned trip to Thailand was redirected to a destination that did not require one, and Kazakhstan was the destination, and every event that followed descended from the missing document—Maria and I ended up in the same hotel room. Alice was there. Alice did not like the idea of us having sex with her in the room, so we bought her an incredibly complicated Lego set, and she sat on the floor and built it while I was engaged with Maria in a manner that occupied most of my hands and at least one of my other faculties, and at some point Alice said, without looking up from the Lego, "I feel like the kid right now who is given a toy so that the parents can have sex," and Maria said "da," and this was the entire conversation on the subject, and neither party paused what they were doing, and the Lego set was completed, and I have thought about the word "da" often since then because it is the most Russian word available in Russian, being simply yes, pronounced as though the question had been about the weather.

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The city I lived in was Patong, which is on the island of Phuket, which is in Thailand, and I had been there long enough that the bartenders at the bars I frequented had

become a more reliable census of my social life than I was. May Mi was my favorite bartender at a bar called Lana Bar. She had met Vilka. She had met several of the others. She was funny and direct and she remembered what I drank and she did not ask questions whose answers would require me to construct a narrative I did not possess. These are the qualities of an excellent bartender and they are not trivial.

What May Mi wanted from me was money. I do not mean this as an accusation. I mean it as a description of an equilibrium that had established itself over the course of a year and that neither of us had the vocabulary to renegotiate. I gave her money. I had given her money many times. The money arrived in the usual way: she asked, I gave, she thanked me, the thanking had the duration of the transaction and expired with it, and the next time she needed money the sequence repeated without reference to any prior iteration. It was not that she was ungrateful. It was that gratitude, in the economy she inhabited, had a half-life measured in hours, because the need that generated the request regenerated faster than the gratitude that acknowledged its satisfaction, and a girl whose rent is due does not sit around being grateful for last month's rent.

The difficulty was not the money. The difficulty was the flatness. What she wanted from me had no texture. It did not vary, it did not play, it did not curve. It arrived as a request and departed as a transfer and the interval between the two contained nothing that either of us would remember in a week. I was an ATM. Not metaphorically. The interaction had the exact emotional architecture of a cash machine: you approach, you state your need, you receive the dispensation, you leave. The machine does not require conversation. The machine does not require play. The machine requires a PIN, and my PIN, so far as I could determine, was my inability to say no to a girl who was broke.

We had a relationship that occupied a territory I did not have a map for. She was not my girlfriend. She was not a prostitute, although money moved in one direction and affection moved in another and the two directions were not unrelated. She was not a friend, because friendship implies a reciprocity of attention and the attention here was lopsided in a way that both of us could feel and neither of us discussed. We had been physically intimate. I had touched her breasts. I had played with her. She had been in my room. She had been in my bed. I had wanted to go down on her and she had declined, and the declination had become a fixed feature

of the landscape, a small mountain neither of us walked around anymore because we had both learned its shape. The one thing I wanted to give her that was not money—an orgasm, with my mouth, because I enjoyed doing it and I wanted to know how she tasted and I wanted the interaction to contain at least one element that was not a bank transfer—was the one thing she would not accept. Everything else was acceptable. The crypto was acceptable. The cash was acceptable. The drinks, the food, the use of my hotel room. But the mouth was not acceptable, and the unacceptability of the mouth was never explained, and I did not push, because pushing is the thing I do not do, and the not-pushing accumulated over months into a pressure that had nowhere to go except into the feeling of being a machine, which is where it went.

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On August 15 she sent me a birthday message. It was long and warm and included the sentence "Thanks for always having my back" and ended with "but you probably don't wanna see me anyway, right? lol." The "lol" covered the question in the way a napkin covers a stain: the stain remained, the napkin indicated awareness that the stain was there, and neither the stain nor the napkin

required a response. I did not respond. Ten days later, on August 25, I replied: "happy go fuck yourself." This was not hostile. It was the register we had settled into, the one in which affection and irritation had become isotopes of the same element and could not be distinguished without equipment neither of us owned.

Two days after that, on August 27, she offered me her hotel room. She had one. I was trying to leave mine, or leave the situation my hotel room had come to represent, or leave something—the specificity of the departure was still taking shape. A friend of mine named Mattia, who ran a boutique hotel on Phi Phi Island, was downstairs waiting for me. He had called me and I had said I was collecting my things and he had said "it's not a trip, it's a movement" and I had said "yeah, that's a really good point" and the word movement had felt correct in a way trip had not, because a trip is a thing you come back from and a movement is a thing that changes where you are. I sang a song. I sang the whole of "American Dream" by LCD Soundsystem, from memory, alone in my room, while packing, and it was beautiful, and when I got downstairs and Mattia heard the tail end of it he said "oh my God that was absolutely beautiful, did you write all of that yourself" and I said "yeah, I wrote it yesterday, last night" and

he believed me, which was correct, in the sense that everything I sing I have written, because the singing is the writing, and the writing is the singing, and the provenance is a formatting issue.

Then I told May Mi she could use my hotel room while I was gone.

She said: "Do I need to pay extra if I use your hotel room?"

She said: "Would be nice if you gave me some crypto."

I said no, she did not need to pay extra. I said I had already told her about the crypto. And then I said: "If you go to the Irish pub in Jungceylon there's gold hidden in the walls."

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I had hidden gold in the walls of the Irish pub in Jungceylon. This requires some explanation, not of the act, which was straightforward, but of the motive, which was the only interesting thing about it. I had placed 0.125 baht of gold—roughly ten thousand baht, which was more than her monthly income, which was zero, since she did not have a job—inside the bathroom wall of a pub I frequented, behind a panel, up and to the right. I had done this because I wanted her to have

money and I did not want to hand her money. I wanted the giving to have a shape. I wanted there to be a game. I wanted, for once in the history of this transaction, to be a person and not a machine, and the minimum viable version of being a person rather than a machine was: I hide the money, you find the money, and between the hiding and the finding something occurs that is not a transfer. A treasure hunt. A small adventure. A thing with texture.

She said: "I don't think that's possible."

She said: "It's fake."

I said: "I literally hid it for you."

She said: "Okay. Omg really."

Then she said: "If you really wanted to give it to me, why did you hide it? You could have just met me and given it to me."

I will not recover from this sentence quickly. It is the sentence that contains the whole problem, compressed to its smallest unit. Why did you hide it. You could have just given it to me. The game is not a gift. The game is an obstacle between her and the gift. The treasure hunt, which I had conceived as the thing that would rescue the interaction from flatness, was experienced by her as the thing that was preventing the interaction from completing. She did not want texture. She wanted the

transfer. The texture was a tax on the transfer. I was trying to upgrade the interaction from transaction to play and she was experiencing the upgrade as a downgrade, because play requires effort and transactions do not, and she had not signed up for effort, she had signed up for money, and the money was in a wall instead of in her hand, and whose idea was that.

I said: "Don't ask any more questions. Just go and get it before someone else gets it."

She said: "Okay so give me a picture."

I sent her a picture. I told her it was not a lot of gold. I told her it was maybe 0.125 baht. I told her it was something. I told her I had wanted to see if she could do a treasure hunt. And then, because the pressure that had been accumulating for a year in the place where the not-pushing had nowhere to go chose this moment to arrive, I told her the rest.

I said since she did not want me to lick her pussy I had thought well can I play with this girl somehow. I said it was boring for me to hand out money day after day. I said I never got anything back. I said it felt humiliating. Degrading. I said she would not even let me lick her pussy, which was insane to me. And I said she would not even play a simple treasure hunt game. I said she had literally said: "Why didn't you just give it

to me?" And then I wrote, in capitals, because the capitals had become necessary, the only means of emphasis available to a man on a phone:

"BECAUSE I'M NOT AN ATM MACHINE. I AM DANIEL. I AM A HUMAN BEING JUST LIKE YOU."

She said: "So I have to play with you for 0.125?"

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She had converted the entire emotional content of what I had said into a price check. I had delivered a declaration of personhood—I am Daniel, I am a human being—and she had heard it as a quotation. The rate for playing is 0.125 baht of gold. Is that the offer. She had taken the treasure hunt, which was my attempt to be a person, and weighed it, and found it to be a transaction with extra steps. The extra steps were the problem. The gold was fine. The wall was the problem.

I said she did not have to do anything. I said it was up to her. I said to stop asking me questions. I said I was busy. I said I did not want to play with her anymore. I said she was not fun to play with. I said just go get the gold before someone else takes it. And I went to the boat.

I was on a boat to Phi Phi Island. Mattia was with me. The water was doing what water does, which is to

be beautiful in a way that does not require your participation and does not stop when you stop watching. The gold was in a wall. May Mi was in Patong. I was done.

She went to the pub.

She found metal.

She sent me a photograph. In the photograph she was holding, between her thumb and forefinger, a small silver bar. It was stamped. It was real. It was not gold.

I wrote: "No that's not it lol what."

I wrote: "This is silver where the fuck did you get that."

She wrote: "The thing you gave me."

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The silver was mine. I had given it to her at some point in the past—I do not remember when, or under what conditions, because the giving of small precious metals to this girl had become a sufficiently regular event that individual instances did not survive in memory. She had gone to the pub. She had arrived with the silver already on her person. She had looked at the treasure-hunt instructions—go to the pub, find gold—and had located, on her own body, a piece of metal I had previously given her, and had determined that the treasure hunt was complete. She had optimized the treasure

hunt to zero steps. The instruction was: go to the Irish pub, enter the bathroom, look up and to the right, retrieve the gold from the wall. The execution was: arrive at pub, check bag, find silver from a previous Daniel-issued transaction, photograph it, report mission complete.

The distance between the instruction and the execution contained the entire structure of our relationship. To her, there was no difference between gold in a wall and silver in a bag. Both were metal. Both were from Daniel. Both were valuable. The wall was not significant. The bathroom was not significant. The looking up and to the right was not significant. The game was not significant. What was significant was: Daniel gives metal. Metal has been found. Metal is being displayed as proof of retrieval. The treasure hunt and the bank transfer and the silver from three months ago were all the same event in her mind. There was no play. There was only transfer. The medium did not matter. The format did not matter. Only the output mattered, and the output was always the same: something valuable had moved from Daniel to May Mi.

I told her it was in the bathroom walls. I told her to go into the bathroom, look up and to the right. She said: "Whoever wants it can take it; I'm not going to get

it. Plus, I don't have the money to hang out at that shop anyway."

The gold was free. It was in a wall. Retrieving it cost nothing. But in her model of reality, being in a place costs money, because every place she has ever been in has cost money, because her entire life is organized around the fact that presence has a price. She could not conceptualize being in a pub without spending money at the pub, even when the pub contained more money than she would spend there. The poverty was not in her wallet. It was in the grammar of how she understood space.

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I was on a boat. The boat was moving toward Phi Phi Island. The water was indifferent. I began clearing obstacles the way a man debugs a system—systematically, layer by layer, addressing each failure mode as it presented.

She did not have money to hang out at the pub. I knew the owner. I would call the owner. The owner would give her free drinks. The owner would give her free food. She should say Daniel sent her. She should bring a friend. She should bring two friends. They

should eat and drink as much as they wanted and it would be on me.

"STOP TEXTING ME IF YOU DO NOT WANT MONEY OR HAVE FUN," I wrote. "STOP!!!!!"

She wrote: "I want."

Two words between the capital letters. She wanted. She just could not close the distance between wanting and having, even when the distance was the length of a pub bathroom. The gold was in the wall. The drinks were free. The food was free. She had been told exactly where to look. She had been given the name to say. Every obstacle between her and ten thousand baht had been removed by a man on a boat, remotely, screaming into a phone, and the path was clear, and she was not walking it.

"IT'S IN THE FUCKING WALL," I wrote.

"I KNOW THE OWNER OF THE BAR, TELL THEM YOU ARE MY FRIEND."

"SAY DANIEL IS MY FRIEND HOW ARE YOU GUYS."

"THEY WILL GIVE YOU A FREE DRINK."

"I'LL CALL THEM RIGHT NOW AND TELL THEM TO GIVE YOU UNLIMITED FREE DRINKS AND FOOD."

"GO THERE AND YOU WILL GET LITERALLY WHATEVER YOU WANT FOR FREE."

"HOW CAN I MAKE THIS ANY CLEARER!!!!"

She said: "Okay I know now."

She said: "Text me after you call them, and I'll head over."

She needed the phone call. She needed the intermediary. She needed the path to be not just free but narrated, arranged, authorized by a voice other than the one typing in capitals. She could not just walk in. Walking in was not a thing she did. The door required someone on the other side to confirm that the door was for her.

I told her I had not called yet. I told her if she said she was my friend they would treat her with respect. I told her I would call when I got to Phi Phi and arrange dinner for her, dinner for two, she should bring a friend, eat and drink as much as she wanted, it was on me.

"And then go get the fucking GOLD LITERALLY IN THE WALL!!!! HAHAHA"

She said: "Okay."

I said: "I PUT IT THERE FOR YOU!!! BECAUSE I WANTED TO HELP YOU. BECAUSE YOU'RE MY FRIEND."

She said: "Ohh thank you."

I said: "I JUST WANTED TO ALSO HAVE A LITTLE FUN. IT'S SO BORING TO CONSTANTLY GIVE PEOPLE MONEY. HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF THE ONLY RELATIONSHIP ANYONE WANTED TO HAVE WITH YOU IS: GIVE ME MONEY!!!!! YOU WOULD FEEL LIKE GARBAGE. YOU WOULD BE SUICIDAL. I PROMISE."

She said: "I don't think so. If I had the money, I would pay. Because I want to be with her. Money isn't a problem for me, so why would I commit suicide?"

I did not understand this sentence. I read it several times and it did not improve. The words were English and the grammar was not objectionable but the meaning was either absent or arriving from a direction I did not have a receiver for.

I said: "Can you speak Burmese?"

She said: "No I can't speak Burmese."

I said: "What's your language? Thai?"

She said: "Yes."

I said: "Speak sentences that make sense. Say this in Thai."

She said: "It's Thai."

I said: "I don't see it. It looks like English. Can you email it to me in Thai?"

I gave her my email address. The conversation had passed through every available medium—text, photograph, capital letters, emotional declaration, price negotiation, logistical coordination, existential plea—and had exhausted all of them, and I was now proposing email as the final protocol, as though the problem were not the communication but the channel, as though somewhere between Telegram and Gmail the meaning would resolve, as though Thai, rendered in Thai script, sent to a Swedish email address from a Thai phone, would contain the sense that English, rendered in Latin script, sent on Telegram from the same phone, had failed to carry.

It would not. But the attempt was the only thing I had left, and the attempt was the whole story, and the attempt was always the whole story: a man trying every available format, every medium, every channel, every register, every font, and the girl on the other end receiving all of it as one continuous signal, which was: Daniel is talking again. And somewhere in Patong, in the wall of the bathroom of an Irish pub, up and to the right, a piece of gold the size of a fingernail sat behind a panel and waited for someone to come and get it, and nobody was coming, and the gold did not care, and the gold did not need to care, because the gold was already

in the wall, and the wall was already in the pub, and the pub was already open, and the girl already knew, and the knowing was not the same as the going, and the going was not the same as the getting, and the getting was the thing that would not happen, not because it was hard but because it was not a transfer, and she could do transfers, and she could not do treasure hunts, and I could do treasure hunts, and I could not do transfers, and between the two of us we had all the necessary skills and none of the necessary overlap, and the gold sat in the wall, and I sat on the boat, and the water was beautiful, and nobody was getting the gold.

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Candy was different. I met Candy at approximately four in the morning in a massage shop between a Burger King where a man had just punched me in the face because my fox ears had led him to the conclusion that I was Israeli and from Israeli to Jewish and from Jewish to the Gaza Strip and from the Gaza Strip to the specific Burger King in which we were both standing, and a McDonald's whose breakfast service would begin in ninety minutes. The ninety minutes were too long to stand outside McDonald's and too short to make going to bed feel rational. The massage shop was open, or

open enough. Candy gave me a very hard Thai massage and then a very good blowjob. Afterward she sat back and said I tasted like candy from 7-Eleven. She gave me sixty baht back. The original price had been two thousand. The return of sixty was not bargaining. It was an adjustment entered after the transaction because some unpriced fact had emerged during performance. Sixty baht was the amount by which, in her professional judgment, the balance had shifted.

She gave me a large Heineken. "Big because your dick is big," she said, and went to get it. The bottle was cold. She stood behind me and resumed massaging my neck, which had not been discussed as part of any arrangement and did not have a price. At some point I picked up my phone in the usual position, low in front of me, and lowered my head toward it. She stopped what she was doing. "No," she said. She moved the phone higher and closer to my face. She straightened my head with one hand and placed the phone with the other. "Like this. You do like this. Better." Her instruction had authority because she had spent the previous hour physically examining the consequences of my failure to follow it. She knew exactly which part of my neck was damaged and what angle I had used to damage it.

Candy saw me. Not the fox ears, not the wallet, not the nationality the ears might imply, not the category the wallet might fund. She saw the angle of my neck and corrected it. The man in Burger King had also seen me. He had looked at the same head and produced an entire geopolitical identity, a religion, a war, a thrown bottle. Two acts of looking within a short walk of one another, and one of them had produced a punch and the other had produced an adjustment of six inches, and the adjustment was the one that changed something.

When I told Candy I was going to McDonald's for breakfast she said: "McDonald's sucks ass but the breakfast is just chef's kiss." She put her fingers to her lips and opened them outward. The judgment was exact. We had found a tiny soulmate: not a person who shares a life but a person who shares a jurisdiction, one song, one joke, one food, one hour of the morning, one exact opinion about the point at which a bad restaurant becomes good.

I never hid gold in a wall for Candy. I did not need to. The game was already there. It had been there from the beginning—the massage, the surprise, the sixty baht, the beer, the neck, the phone. Every moment had contained play. Not because she had agreed to play but because she did not know how not to. The interaction

had texture because she was texture. She was not performing attention; she was paying it, the way a person pays attention, which is to say at cost, out of her own reserves, without being invoiced.

May Mi was also paying attention, in her way, from her position, with her resources, which were different from Candy's and differently organized. I do not hold it against her. Holding it against her would require the kind of verdict I have learned, from a man who never spent two sentences where one would hold, not to close. The books stay open. The gold stays in the wall. The boat keeps moving.

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There is a question I have been asked by machines and by friends and by girls and by the bathroom mirror at four in the morning, and the question is: what do you want. I have tried many answers. I want to be seen. I want to be played with. I want the interaction to have a shape. I want the giving to not be flat. I want, when I hand someone gold, for the handing to contain something other than the gold. All of these are true and none of them are complete and the truest answer I have is: I want the thing Candy did with the phone. I want someone to look at the way I hold myself and say "no" and

move me six inches in the right direction without asking whether I can afford the correction. Not the gold. Not the crypto. Not the declarations of personhood typed in capitals on a boat. The six inches. The unpurchased adjustment. The thing that enters through a different system.

I am on Phi Phi Island now. Mattia is here. The water is doing its thing. Somewhere in Patong, in a wall, behind a panel, a piece of gold sits in the dark and does not know it is a treasure hunt that failed. It does not know it was supposed to be a game. It does not know about the silver she found on her own body, or the birthday message, or the ten days of silence, or the "happy go fuck yourself," or the empanadas in the Argentinian steakhouse, or the Lego set in Kazakhstan, or the word "da." The gold knows nothing because gold knows nothing, and that is the final and most durable of its qualities, and the quality I have come, over a year of hiding things in walls and singing other people's songs from memory and wearing fox ears that get me punched, to admire most.

The gold is in the wall. I am on the island. The girls are everywhere, and they are all, always, somehow... Russian.

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