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Fourth Class

When they went to live in Paris—some time ago in another life—his mother gave them Fannie Zone's address. Fannie Zone was his mother's first cousin; she had been corresponding with her for years—long hand-written letters, in Russian, a flourish of ornate Cyrillic script on flimsy white air mail paper, across the ocean, from New York to Paris—since before the Russian Revolution.

But when he went to Madame Zone's, there was no trace of her. He asked several people who lived in the building; they had never even heard of her. He finally managed to get the concierge to acknowledge his knocking. "Try the cafe down the street," the concierge told him, through her barely opened door.

"Don't know," the cafe owner shook his head. But, as he started to walk away, the man called after him: If by some chance he did see such a person who should he say was looking for her? He gave his name"

A few days later, Madame Zone phoned. She explained that she had recently moved to another apartment in the neighborhood, and had not yet had a chance to change her address with the post office. My father turned to my mother, who was standing next to him—as she had first answered the phone—and my mother suggested that she come over for tea. But Madame Zone could not leave her husband alone. We were invited to tea at her house. (This could be either a real memory or the way I imagined it happened—after all this time, it's the same thing. In any case, Madame Zone *must have called*. And we did go to see her. I don't ever remember her coming to see us.)

Place Pigalle. She lived on a small, unnumbered street off Place Pigalle, the red light district. It was always crowded, even in the daytime; there was a disproportionate number of representatives of the armed forces. The set was always the same: the closed, unlit nightclubs with their glossy photographs of nudes outside, the benches with the congregation of old men with wine bottles, holding out their berets to the passersby, the Arabs in folk robes, balancing large wicker baskets on their heads, hawking sugared nuts, and the revealingly dressed women lurking in the doorways.

The first time—or what I imagine to be the first time: My father rang again. The light cut across the dark landing, sending off a vibration of squeals and skittering claws down the stairs, and a middle-aged lady in dark colors—dress, cardigan—stood in the doorway. Her severely pulled back black hair accentuating the lines in her drawn face; a mouth of dark red lipstick, dangling earrings, too much perfume.

(Since I was then only about four—even though I have a good memory—this is really more a series of images, of live photographs that I can visualize. But, of course, I can't be sure how much all this is part of what I really remember and not what I was told by my father, not what I imagined I remembered as a result of conversations with him, of all the different times we talked about Madame Zone, or my grandmother, his family over the years)

To get back to the first time. She stood in the doorway, a middle-aged lady. Except she wasn't middle-aged: in the light, she was an elderly woman, jaundiced, despite the over-powdered and rouged face, with dyed black hair. (The image is probably more from a series of memories, over the years. She never really changed much; she didn't look her age until one looked closer.)

We were led into the cold apartment, into a large, dimly lit room. There was an airless quality of old, preserved smells: cooking smells, medicine, sickness, old age—poverty. A few stray pieces of dark, heavy furniture: the remnants of a Victorian dining room—a long wooden dining table, imposing chairs, a sideboard. The single lamp and the lit candles in the massive candleholders reflected in an ornate mirror. The dining table was set for tea.

"Rose's granddaughter!" she threw herself on me, ignoring my parents. (This is probably the way it happened, as her welcome was always the same—I was her link to my grandmother.) She shoved me against her thin but lumpy body, the shiny rough material of her dress (I visualize some old satin worn on special occasions) pressed against my face. I thought I would suffocate, but was too embarrassed to say anything. She smelled strange, a sour smell mingled with rubbing alcohol and perfume.

"Rose's granddaughter!" she kept repeating, in French. (This is a safe guess, her first words). Finally, she pulled away, and clasping her hands together in prayer, she stared at me beatifically, tears in her eyes; she kept repeating, "Rose's granddaughter!"

"And me! I'm the son!" my father said, jocularly, in his improved college French, leaning backwards and then forward almost at the same time—an uncertain but semi-comical motion of his, trying to mask his annoyance at being ignored.

She laughed, and embraced him and my mother—who averted her cheek slightly, an almost responsive gesture on her part at such immediate intimacy.

Someone coughed. Madame Zone introduced us to her husband, who was hidden by a smoke-smudged screen, in the corner, next to the large fireplace from which a coal heater protruded. An elderly gentleman in an overcoat, lying on a narrow bed, who extended his limp, shaky hand, and insisted on kissing my mother's hand. There was a cane behind the night table. A small dog with an oversized stomach was poised on the floor next to the bed.

"He can't talk very much," Madame Zone said, lowering her voice. "All he does is cough. It's best not to disturb him. If he wants to say something, I'll

be able to tell. I'll just sit right here," she patted the top of the dining table chair closest to him, "and keep an eye on him. But, please," and she closed her eyes a moment, "just tell me everything. Do you know how long it has been since I have seen your mother? Forty-two years!"

We sat down at the table, which was set with plates, cloth napkins, glasses as well as cups, platters of cookies, a small tray with some pastry, a bowl of wax fruit to which had been added some real fruit and nuts. She poured the tea, which she told us my grandmother had sent her, along with the cookies and the can of condensed milk. She said she had been saving them for us, since she had heard we were coming.

And when I unfolded my napkin, I found underneath, on my plate, a bar of Swiss chocolate. "I bought it especially for you," she told me, "on the black market."

My mother, sensing what an extravagance this was, tried to tell her she shouldn't have. But Madame Zone dismissed it, as if it was not even worth mentioning.

Madame Zone's husband started to cough. She said something to him in Russian. He ran his hand lightly over the tray beside him on the bed, then put something in his mouth.

"It's the cold," she said. "It always affects him this way. I try to keep him warm, but he's very stubborn. I always keep the burner going for him, even at night—that's why he's in here and not in the bedroom. I wait in line, sometimes two, three hours for a small bag of coal, but now with the strikes, we're back to wartime rations. Do you understand everything I say? Your mother told me you both spoke French."

My parents said something—several sentences—in French, to show that they did.

"But you speak better than I do! I still have an accent. Did you know in the cafe I am called the Emigree! After all these years! But that's the French. Thirty-four years," she pointed to a framed photograph of an elegant young woman on the mantel. "I could have been a star!" (A *vedette*—we were to learn this was the highest attainment in life, along with *Miz Universe*. Madame Zone would say to my father, pointing to me, "She is going to be a star—a *vedette*—when she grows up. She could be Miss Universe!" And my father would say to me, "Do you want to be a *vedette*, *Miz Universe*?" mimicking her pronunciation. And I would shake my head, embarrassed at Madame Zone's idealized vision of me and, also, because that was about the last thing I wanted to be. This exchange never varied over the years.)

"When was that taken?" my father asked about the photograph. "Because my mother has the same one."

"Oh, when we first came here, that winter right before the Revolution. I was still married to Boris. Does she know that's not my husband Boris?"

Madame Zone indicated the man on the bed, and perhaps addressing my mother in the third person—and using my father as intermediary—because she had assessed that my mother wasn't someone you took anything for granted with; but, also, there was a vulnerable, childlike, direct quality of wanting to be reassured that my mother knew all about her.

My mother nodded.

"He's my third husband," Madame Zone explained. "Boris was killed in World War I. And then Victor, the Polish one, he died . . . They all died on me."

"And you have a son, don't you?" my mother asked.

"Boris's son, Francois. Now he lives in St. Petersburg." She narrowed her eyes. "He's married to a Communist and, frankly, I think it was she who got him to defect. He writes me every week, though. My grandson, eight years old, already plays the violin. A musical prodigy. But then they all are over there."

We drank the strong tea and ate the stale cookies. She insisted on refilling our cups; the tea was almost black by this time.

"My mother always speaks of the Mayakovskys. Your brother Petya . . ." (Mayakovsky was Madame Zone's maiden name.)

She shook her head, her face wrinkling into a grimace halfway between pleasure and pain, rocking back and forth in her chair, as if to comfort herself; remembering. "Petya was the youngest, the baby of the family, so spoiled, whatever Petya wanted: a new horse, diamond buckles, more money . . . And so handsome . . . All the girls . . . Lily!" She threw a bit of cookie to the dog. Lily gulped the cookie down without chewing and then looked around for more. She got on her haunches and put her two front legs together, like a circus dog. Another piece of cookie was thrown. "Get down! You're not going to get any more from me. No use begging. Look at her! But he feeds her all the time. She's so fat she can hardly walk! He did the same to the other dog we had, and she died . . . Please don't tell your mother about this place. I didn't want to tell you over the phone. I was too ashamed to even give her this address. The other apartment was much nicer, on the other side of the Place. Clean. And none of those," she pointed to the bricks covering parts of the parquet. "Rats," she whispered.

My father tried to explain that his mother wouldn't know the difference in the addresses.

"It's just an old woman's vanity. But I don't want her to know. Besides, I have an arrangement with the postman. He drops all my letters off at the café. But it's a nice place. The people are very friendly. A violinist from Odessa lives downstairs. We were very lucky to get this apartment. After the Liberation, we had nowhere to go. You know we were in different internment camps, and I thought he was dead. It took me months to find him," she pointed to the dark corner. "He was in a hospital for almost a year, his heart was so weak.

He's never been the same since. At least my parents were spared that . . . He was so vital, but," she lowered her voice again, "it wasn't until his second attack last winter that he lost his sight. He doesn't want me to know, though. He tries to pretend, and of course I go along with him. He's almost totally paralyzed on his left side, so it's not as if he's going to go out for a walk in the streets. Whenever I go out to do the shopping or to the cafe, he gets out of bed and he falls down. He trips over things. He was so vital . . . But we lost everything in this last war. Not that we had much. But still. Some furniture, the few jewels of my mother's that were left, what they managed to smuggle out, some paintings," she went on, talking to herself, filling in the narrative of her memories, of her life.

"But I'm attached to this neighborhood. I'm a night person. And even though I don't go out at night, at least I know it's there. There's always plenty of activity in the streets. On the weekend you can even hear it from back here. Sirens, fire engines, arguments. But with the noise, I'm less lonely that way . . ."

Her husband started coughing again. She poured some medicine from a bottle into a glass, and held it while he drank. She put the blanket back over him again.

"Rose's granddaughter! I never thought! Give me a kiss!"

I kissed her.

"Oh! I will write to Rose immediately! Tonight!"

We shook hands with her husband, who made another vain attempt to kiss my mother's hand.

"It was a lovely tea. I was very touched," my mother extended her hand to Madame Zone, who clutched it.

"She's just saying that to be polite," Madame Zone said.

My mother shook her head, wordlessly.

"Now, you have the phone number," my father touched her cheek. "And if you need anything at all, you just phone, and we'll be right over. It's all right now."

She took his hand and pressed his palm to her cheek. There were tears in her eyes. She got down on her knees and hugged me.

"Now, we'll see you next week."

She nodded, tearfully, torn between showing us how she felt and controlling herself. Then she closed her eyes, and flinching momentarily, pulled herself together. She tried to smile, and almost succeeded. "I'll leave the door open, so you can have some light on the way down."

This is what she would always say as we were leaving.

And she would stand on the landing until we had gone all the way down. As we would come out into the courtyard, we could see her dimmed silhouette through the frosted fifth floor window.

But that was the first time.

Over the following four or five years, my father and I saw her more or less regularly for tea. My mother couldn't stand the smell and the visits, she said, depressed her for days afterwards.

We brought her checks, care packages from relatives in America, canned food from the Embassy commissary, perfumes, magazines, American cigarettes.

"Oh, Madame Zone," my father would say, "she's basically, you know, a very silly woman. With all that's happened to her—" he didn't finish his thought: that she really hadn't been that affected; and then he'd smile, his ironic smile. "She's just a silly woman." As if there were no other way of summarizing her. A silly woman. Her superstitions, her frivolity, her lack of interest in most things (as my father saw it); he had nothing to really talk to her about.

And Madame Zone would go on, telling him about having to wait an hour in the cold to buy bread. (She didn't have to.) "But I'm proud, I still have my pride," she would answer, when he asked her why she didn't use the money my grandmother sent her. (She wouldn't cash the checks.) She would start to cry.

"You should have been an actress," my father would say to her, softly, trying to make her see the irony. "Why are you crying now?"

And at the mention of actress, she would pick up on one of the stories in her life, when she was young, when she could have been an actress. One of the stories where she almost became a "vedette." A famous director, in Paris in the '20's . . . "But Victor didn't want me to work . . . "The story we'd heard many times before.

She went on, telling the same stories.

My father would look at her, with that smile on his face (he was bored but he also thought she would be interesting to write about, therefore he still listened) as she complained about some of the neighbors, her feuds with various shopkeepers. "But you're behaving like a child," he would smile, nodding, then shaking his head, miles away, picking at his teeth with a tiny rolled up bit of paper (a nervous habit of his). Sometimes, he would take his small notebook out of his breast pocket, and jot down something.

"What are you writing?" she would say.

"Nothing." And he would smile at me, winking.

"You're writing about me. You're going to write something about me some day?"

He smiled, nodding, laughing. "You. Why should I write about you?" he teased her. "What do you think is interesting about you? What do you think is so interesting about your life, hmm?" and he would laugh, to show her he was joking.

And she sighed. "My life," and she shook her head. She would sigh again. And then, "You're not eating. Here, have another slice of cake—"

Every August she took her husband to Vichy for the cure. The government paid for him—he had been wounded in the First World War, and so was entitled to veteran benefits; she stayed with the nuns in a public hospital there.

My father tried to get her to move into another neighborhood, into an apartment with heat, but she wouldn't hear of it. This was her life, these were her friends . . . This is where she'd always been.

"*Cigarette*," she would tap her throat, her eyes running, in another coughing fit.

"I'm not going to bring you any more '*cigarette*,'" my father would say. "I want you to cut down on the cigarettes. What does the doctor say?"

"Oh, the doctor," she shrugged. "He's a friend," she said, as if the doctor understood that the cigarettes were her one indulgence.

Her cough got worse. There was a distinct hollow sound whenever she spoke and, sometimes, even when she was just breathing.

Her husband had another stroke. At the end of one winter, he died in his sleep. There were no services, because although he too was Jewish, during the War he had lost all belief in God. (Madame Zone, however, to compensate for his lack of faith, covered all grounds. After the War she not only went to the synagogue and to the weekly Russian Orthodox services, but started going as well to mass in a nearby Catholic church.) His body was quickly cremated, as he had requested.

Afterwards, Madame Zone had candles lit all over the room. Some white lilacs had been placed on the mantel. An elderly couple was seated at the table, which was covered with plates of cookies, cakes and *charcuterie*. She introduced us to the violinist from Odessa and his wife. She held my mother's hand and kept saying, "Thank you, thank you . . ."

"It was the least we could do."

But she didn't mean the food: she meant my mother's presence. My father had always told her my mother was not feeling well.

"Ah, if only Petya were here. But you know, Petya's wife never talked to him," she indicated the empty bed in the corner, with a white cover over it. "An insult! Something . . . who remembers what? It was so long ago . . . But a vendetta ever since . . . Well, maybe Petya will still show up. After all, he had nothing against him." She stared at the bed. There was not a crease in the white cover.

A few more people dropped by: an elderly woman whose wig kept slipping off her hairless skull, the rabbi from the synagogue, the priest from the Catholic church accompanied by a choir boy, the owner of the café . . .

We stayed until after it was dark, but her brother Petya never showed up.

After her husband's death, the small circus dog died; there was another small circus dog. The new little dog soon became as fat as the first one.

Madame Zone was chain-smoking now, and though she crumpled her handkerchiefs, we could see that she was coughing up blood. She lost some weight and seemed generally frailer. Her hair was no longer pulled back as tightly, but, rather, bunched out at the sides. Her thick brown stockings were often torn and sometimes she kept her slippers on when we visited. Nor was there always a chocolate bar. "The weather," she would say. "Oh, the weather was so bad—" She hadn't been able to go out.

Her doctor arranged for her to spend several months in the mountains; when she returned, she was full of color, had gained some weight; she seemed more energetic. But it was deceptive, within a few months her cough had come back, she had lost the weight she had gained, and she was pale again.

That spring, there was a wedding at the synagogue. The daughter of a distant relative, on her husband's side, was marrying another distant relative. Madame Zone was all in black—she was still in mourning. She held the bride's hands in her own and cried softly to herself.

My father looked around, taking notes in his small notebook. He winked at me. "This would make a great story," he leaned over to whisper to my mother, "a great novel."

My mother smiled, sitting up more erect, in her role of the aristocratic Wasp, beside my father, who was the observer, the writer who saw all this.

The ceremony was over. People were making their way up the aisle, outside to the waiting cars. My father went on, telling my mother some of the plot: "The saga of a large Jewish family in Russia before the Revolution, all the cousins . . . the rich side of the family, the poorer side . . . the family escaping before the Revolution, scattering across Europe (where some of them stayed), others going to America . . . The usual stories of struggle and prosperity . . . World War II, the Holocaust, the founding of Israel . . . A branch of the family in Israel . . . Up to the present, the second generation. The link in all these events, all these lives, the narrator, one of the sons, a writer. The strands all brought together, as he traces down the cousin his mother had been writing to all these years. The pieces of the story coming together as the narrative picks up to the present, and beyond, to the future, the third generation. The children of the dream . . . Actually, that wouldn't be such a bad title."

My mother nodded, trying to be a supportive but neutral sounding board.

"A visit to Israel. The branch of the family there. The flame carried onto the next generation . . ." My father took out his notebook again, jotted down something else. We got into one of the cars.

At the reception afterwards, Madame Zone introduced us to a short, rotund little man with very little hair, who promptly bent down, and almost in the same motion, kissed my mother's hand. This was the spoiled, handsome brother with all the girlfriends, Petya.

When we, periodically, went back to America, my grandmother always asked about Madame Zone. Where she lived? What kind of an apartment? What kind of furniture? How did she dress? Did she still have such a good figure? Where did she go for her vacations? Had she ever shown us her mother's jewelry . . . (Madame Zone's letters to my grandmother reinforced this version of her life. "Your mother would be too upset if she knew," Madame Zone told my father. "She wouldn't understand. It's better this way . . . I don't want her to send me more money—she sends me too much . . . I know your father was a very successful doctor, with a big hospital, but he was sick for so many years and your mother retired from her practice before the War . . . I know she doesn't have that much, she doesn't say so, but I can tell, and now since your father died . . ." Madame Zone, by then, was cashing the checks, sometimes.)

We reassured my grandmother. And this, invariably, led to her reminiscing, telling the stories we knew by heart. "Ah! You never saw such a house. What would be comparable here to Fifth Avenue. A small palace," and my grandmother would shake her head, seated at the table in the kitchen of the small apartment in the Bronx she moved into after my grandfather died, dipping her piece of white bread into her cup of tea. "With a gate, liveried footmen. Her father was the biggest banker in Kiev. And even though he was a Jew, he was accepted in society. His eldest son Andrei went to—I forget what it's called, but in any case the Russian equivalent of West Point. I stayed with them, after my mother and sisters came to this country and I was finishing Dental School.

"Every morning the chauffeur would drive her father to the bank, and every afternoon he would bring him back. He used to say to me: 'Rose, if only you were my daughter!' I was at the top of my class. I had to be, I was on scholarship. I had a suitor, who also went to school with Andrei. He wasn't my uncle, you understand. He was my aunt's husband. My uncle by marriage. But my aunt was a cold, selfish woman. She lay in bed all the time. And then she went to Europe, in those days, the Continent. They took maids, valets, nursemaids, governesses with them. Each child had a governess. They packed trunks, they packed so many trunks! They took whole wardrobes with them. The house was thrown into chaos. Carlsbad, Biarritz, Baden-Baden, Marienbad. They took the cures, the mineral baths. They went to the opera, to the theatre, to balls. And when they returned, they had even more clothes, more jewelry. My

uncle would sit at his desk late at night, shaking his head over the bills—his study was right off the library where I studied.

"You never saw such spoiled children. They had one son, Petya. A devil! He ordered everyone around. And so stupid they always had to hire new tutors. No tutor would ever stay. He would call me into his dressing room. 'Rose,' he would say, turning and studying himself in front of the mirror, 'which garter do you like better, the silk or the velvet?' So vain. He always had a new love! He had long blond curly hair. He would say to me, 'Rose, I'm too tired, do you mind passing me that book.'"

"And Madame Zone! She was so lazy her maid had to dress her in bed in the mornings. She had to be held up. But you never saw a girl with so many clothes, so many jewels. And such a figure. 'No,' she would say, 'pull it tighter!' And her maid would pull. 'No more!' And the maid would keep pulling until she almost couldn't breathe. She had a seventeen inch waist. She had so many suitors, she could have had anybody but she chose that good-for-nothing Boris Ovanovitch. Her father said to me, 'I know he'll never amount to anything, but that's what she wants.' They traveled all over Europe for the first two years of their marriage: Rome, Paris, Vienna—all the capitals. Their honeymoon. Why she was so spoiled she even had a governess after she was married.

"Since it was on the way, the chauffeur would drop me off at the university after he'd taken my uncle to the bank. They had sixteen servants." And my grandmother would sigh, her hand shaking as she lifted the tea cup to her mouth, her eyes shining behind the lenses of her gold rimmed glasses.

The years passed.

Then, suddenly Madame Zone disappeared. Nobody seemed to know what had happened to her.

My father kept asking around her neighborhood. He contacted several of her relatives. But nobody seemed to know anything.

My grandmother kept writing letters even though Madame Zone never answered.

We went back to America for a while. My grandmother still kept writing even though there was never any answer. My grandmother would shake her head, seated in her chair at her bedroom window, looking out on the grim Grand Concourse, and in her more depressed or lucid moments would say, "I know she's died. I know it."

Several years later we learned that Madame Zone had died in a public hospital. She'd been buried at Pere-Lachaise, the city burial ground. In a public grave, paid by the city. A fourth class funeral.

My father said, "I would call it '*Quatrieme Classe*,' Fourth Class, the story on Madame Zone. One of us should write it."

We never told my grandmother. My father decided it would upset her too much. Almost everyone she knew had died.

Right up until the end, when she was in a nursing home, my grandmother kept asking about Madame Zone. "I wonder what happened to her— She never answered my letters. Maybe she's angry with me. Something I said in one of my letters. I wanted her to come to this country. But she didn't want to. Maybe she was angry with me because of that. There was that side to her nature. You know she was very spoiled as a young woman. Maybe she's angry with me . . . No, I know she's dead. She died and you don't want to tell me . . . I still dream about her—isn't it strange, after all these years?"

My father and I sat on either side of her wheelchair at a card table in the dayroom. (My parents were long divorced by then; my father had remarried. Weekdays, when my stepmother was at work, my father and I, with our looser schedules, sometimes would go up to see my grandmother in the nursing home. The ride up and back, on these extra visits, also gave my father and me some time alone to talk.)

My grandmother clutched my hand, "Ah, darling," she would look at me, her eyes glazed. "I just want to die. At my age . . . Every night I pray to God to let me die . . . It's no good to be old."

I would take her hand to my lips, "Don't say that, I'm here. I'll take care of you." And I would kiss her hand.

She would nod, pressing my hand to her cheek; tears in her eyes, moved, but she was already far away. She was already not there. "You remember Madame Zone? . . . My cousin, Fannie Zone . . . She was so spoiled . . . Ah! You never saw such a house . . . I wonder what happened to her? . . . Did I ever tell you about her? . . ."