

Wednesday is Viktor's

**Dark City Lights
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WEDNESDAY IS VIKTOR'S FAVORITE. WEDNESDAY, Alik is off. It's not Alik himself that Viktor does not like. Alik is Viktor's cousin, his older cousin, by six years. He likes him. Respects him, too. Of course. But when Alik is in, which he is the other five days the shop is open, Alik pulls business from Viktor. That is what Viktor does not like.

Alik doesn't think this way. After all, Alik opened the shop. Alik had the imagination to see that a shop could fit there, in what was once a news kiosk, then a locksmith, located in the cramped space between two buildings on the south

side of West Eighty-sixth Street, almost exactly in the middle of West End Avenue and Broadway. There isn't even a proper roof; the first few years, whenever the inspector came, Alik felt his heart try to accelerate, felt the need to fight the appearance of nerves, not yet sure how many hundred-dollar bills it would take to stop the inspector from closing him down. And, although he doesn't tell it to Viktor over and over, as would be his right to, Alik remembers that he was the only one back then, in the shop, in New York City, in the entire United States of America.

Viktor and the rest were still in Kazakhstan, cutting and styling at the three shops Alik built in Almaty there, before that Major's daughter began coming in three, four times a week for blowouts, always in Alik's chair, always with makeup already applied to her cheeks and eyes, and lipstick to her thick young lips, and it was suggested that Alik consider either a different vocation or location. The words didn't rhyme in Russian. And even if they had, Alik wouldn't have cared. He noticed things like that here, appreciated them even, because he could allow himself to. Now. Before, back there, anything that might distract you from hearing the messages underneath the words people were using, anything taking your attention at all, could lead to the kind of mistake that's very difficult to undo. Such as not packing up and leaving first the town, then the country itself, within hours of a subtle but direct conversation with the Major's aide.

In the beginning, those hundred-dollar bills (two of them, it turned out), every three months from Alik's back pocket to the inspector's, were a week's profit. But Alik had lived on little for much of his life. In some way, he—well, if he didn't enjoy it, it did feed something in him, did stoke some deep knowledge that he could make do without whining, without even considering giving up. So he paid. You don't get to open three shops, nine chairs in each, in a competitive market like Almaty without knowing who to take care of. And Alik understood that the same applied in New York.

Which is why Alik owns the shop and Viktor works there. Viktor could no sooner do the negotiation/pay-off dance with the inspector than he could sprout a third arm from his belly and spin around on it 'til he launched himself to the moon. Not here. Not at home. He isn't too stupid to do it, he's not stupid at all, just cold, with sharp-edges, visible in the set of his jaw, the far off, uncaring look in his eyes which narrowed when angered and seemed to go black. A real Kazakh. Even his father said it, in the way only one Kazakh could say it to another, and then, only to one with blood ties.

What would happen if Viktor were left to deal with an inspector or regulator or any bureaucrat? Alik knows: Viktor would pay the money, but he would make the officials feel dirty for taking it, so that without even being aware of their true motive, they'd be rooting against him, and would not offer support when a rival salon would show up and want to open around the corner. And before he could stop it, and without ever knowing why himself, Viktor would be out of business.

But Alik makes people feel good when they are doing something bad together, makes them believe they are conspirators in a great, joyful ruse, like they are the only honest ones in a game everyone else is too ashamed to admit they are playing. So everyone likes Alik. And most feel just a little uncomfortable around Viktor.

There are two barber chairs inside the shop—the first, two feet from the front door, the second two feet from the back wall. Five days a week, Alik cuts at the first chair, Viktor at the second. Each man hugs his own chair while cutting and has become so adroit at avoiding the other barber, there's never even a moment they come close to touching.

The chairs, the barbers, the heads. Those are the only things that fit, besides razors, scissors, combs, and the blue disinfectant in which these tools soak. There's no room even to put down a coffee. Or if there is, in a tiny nook next to the wall, it's a risky thing to do, and you have to keep half an eye on the head's leg, so you can spin the chair if he kicks unexpectedly, before he sends the scalding liquid flying. There is no back door. No emergency exit.

THERE ARE ALSO TWO CHAIRS outside the shop. Viktor unfolds and clunks them down on the sidewalk every morning when he arrives, after lifting the heavy iron security grate and before turning on the lights and sweeping. Heads wait in these outside folding chairs, and others stand beside them, also waiting, all year round, for one of the barber chairs to free up.

To Viktor, the way it's supposed to work, the way Alik told him it would work, is that whenever a head got out of a barber's chair, that chair would be filled by one of the heads in an outside chair. Simple. Fair.

But sometimes, too often as far as Viktor is concerned, the head will wait even after a barber's chair has opened up. Viktor's chair. These heads don't seem to care about the way Alik told Viktor it was going to work. They decide Alik is their special barber. Their friend. And that's that. They smile at him, and look sheepishly in Viktor's direction, with maybe a shrug of the shoulders, as if to say, „It's not you. It's me.”

VIKTOR IS EVERY BIT THE cutter Alik is. Alik would admit this even. Viktor knows that. But Viktor also knows, because he is not stupid and puts those merciless eyes to good use, that Alik has a way of making heads think that he is their friend, cares about them, about their lives, about more than hair he is removing from their scalps.

Viktor sees that this matters, but cannot understand why it should. It's a transaction. Business. You sit in his chair. Tell what you want. He gives you exactly that, to the eighth of an inch. You get up eleven minutes later and pay, in cash, fourteen dollars. Nineteen if, by your request, he uses scissors instead of the razor. If you tip, you tip. Thank you. That's all.

Sometimes a customer will ask Viktor for his opinion—longer, shorter, part on this side or that. How should he know which your wife will like better? Which way is more handsome? He's a man. Not a woman. Who has time for that kind of conversation anyway? There are more heads to cut, five an hour, fifty bucks after Alik takes his share. So Viktor shuts them down, demands that they choose.

NOT ALIK. ALIK CAN LISTEN to your questions, answer them, guide you to your best look. And if some world events hold your interest, the football game or the latest terrorist action, Alik can offer an opinion on that, too. When the Muslims beheaded those journalists, Alik frowned—why torture? If you have to

kill, if your interests demand that, fine, do it, quick, no need for the rest. No need to make a man suffer. And the heads frowned right along with him. Perhaps only one in ten would even wonder if Alik was speaking from experience. Perhaps one in one hundred would know by the expression on his face that he was.

Here's something that would surprise Viktor: Alik agrees. It is business. But on the nature of the transaction—that is where they would disagree, were they to discuss it. Which they don't. Alik does what he does, and his chair remains filled from nine in the morning until, sometimes, seven thirty at night. Viktor just cuts and, when his chair is not filled, he stews.

But not Wednesdays. Wednesdays, there is no Alik. Wednesdays are different. Wednesdays, Viktor cuts at Alik's chair, while Andrei, who is first cousin to both though brother to neither, cuts at Viktor's. Wednesdays are also different because the folding chairs outside, while still getting use, sit empty sometimes, and the heads waiting barely have time to open their newspapers or unlock their iPads before they are moving inside to let Viktor put shears to them.

This lack of traffic is mostly Andrei's loss. On Wednesday, the heads get no choice of barber chair. If Viktor's is empty, it must be filled before Andrei's. But Andrei is young, and his needs are simple, enough to buy exactly the amount of vodka it takes to slow him down a little in bed, without softening his chlen. So he cuts whichever heads happen to park themselves in his chair, barely thinking about anything other than the feeling he'll have when the cash is in his wallet and the alcohol about to hit his belly.

On Wednesday, Viktor arrives even earlier than usual. Chairs out. Broom moving across the floor. The shop is his today. It is his shop. And an actual smile breaks out across his face.

As he's placing the broom back into the far corner, he hears the front door open, turns, and that smile doesn't fade, it disappears, as quickly as it arrived. His cousin Andrei is not walking in. Alik is.

„But it's Wednesday, Alik.”

„Andrei sent the text. Sick.”

„But it's Wednesday.”

„It's fine.”

By this Alik means, it's fine that I have to work today, don't worry about me. I'll take next Wednesday and maybe a Friday, if Andrei can fill in. But Viktor isn't worried about Alik. And as much as Alik understands about people, as much as his instinct has served him, this time he misses it. Maybe the price of forgetting that even in America, even in New York City, when a man from back home is talking, you better listen closely.

Viktor nods. That's all. And begins organizing his station. Alik begins doing the same.

It's not that Viktor doesn't like Alik. Of course he likes him. Respects him, too. But that does not change the fact that Wednesday is ruined. Which means the week is ruined. And who ruined it? Alik.

Viktor takes his sharpest scissors out of the blue disinfectant, shakes them off, and takes half a step—the chairs are that close, remember—and he plunges them in between Alik's shoulder blades.

Or aims there, anyway. By the time the blade has reached Alik, he has sensed his cousin's approach, seen the quick movement in the mirror and begun to turn, so the scissors cut Alik's left bicep, but don't really penetrate and are knocked to the ground. Viktor shoots his knee up, toward Alik's groin, but Alik raises his leg, blocking it, while reaching back, grabbing his own scissors and jamming them into Viktor's liver.

Viktor falls, moaning, thick dark blood begins to pool around him. Alik looks at his watch. The heads are going to start showing up soon. Viktor moans louder. „Tishe,” Alik says, and kicks Viktor in the face. Viktor shuts up, as he's told, lies there shuddering. Grabs for the scissors in his side.

„Don't. Leave them. You'll bleed out.”

If he thought about it, Viktor might be surprised to know Alik's breathing hasn't changed, his heart hasn't begun to beat faster. But Viktor isn't thinking about anything besides the pain.

Alik goes outside, brings down the grate, slides under it, brings it the rest of the way down.

Inside, it feels like night.

As his pupils adjust, Alik admits it: he's never liked Viktor. Never respected him. But Viktor is family. So he took him in, gave him a living. He allows himself to picture their grandmother, how she kept photos of the three of them, Alik, Viktor, and Andrei on her mantle, how proud of them she was, in business in New York City, with lines out front waiting. And all three together.

But she's still in Kazakhstan. He's here. The heads are out there, waiting, some sitting, some standing, all wondering when the grate will open. This is his business, his life.

And it's wrong to make a man suffer. If you have to kill, if it's in your interest...

Alik rolls the barely conscious Viktor onto his back, then yanks the scissors out of his cousin's side. Blood begins spilling across the floor, mixing with the hair that the broom can never quite wipe away. Without hesitation, Alik, gathering all the force he can muster, rams the point of the blades into Viktor's left eye, through it, and into the younger man's brain. A quick spasm and it's over.

Alik takes a moment. Watches close. When he's certain Viktor is dead, he exhales. The shop feels small to him, tight, but he knows this is adrenaline, panic, and he allows it to come for a few seconds before forcing it away.

He glances at the grate. He can feel them outside, waiting, wondering, reading their iPads, iPhones, and newspapers, but he can't do anything for them now. Nor they for him.

So he sits in his chair and breathes. Then his mind begins to work. You don't open three successful salons in Almaty and one barber shop in New York City without the ability to think clearly no matter the situation. This is a difficult spot. But it isn't the first difficult spot he's found himself in. And, although he doesn't yet know how, he's going to make sure it won't be the last.
