

VANDA. And this is hard for him, right?

THOMAS. It should be.

VANDA. So give it a shot.—*I'm sorry. I'm prying.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *Actually... I had an aunt who was very fond of fur...*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *Well, there. That explains everything.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *We're all easily explicable. What we're not is...easily extricable.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *Extricable from...?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *What we are. What the world has made us. And the thing that fixes us only takes an instant. "The overturning of a dragonfly's wing," to quote one of the Greeks. One innocent instant and you are different, forever... How's the coffee?*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *I've hardly tasted it, but it's excellent so far. —And that's symbolic, right? I mean, he's the coffee. She's only had a sip, but he's got her like all intrigued.*

THOMAS. Aw, shucks. You saw right through me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *Did you have an "innocent instant," Herr Kushemski?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *I did, actually, very early on. But this is of no interest to you.*

Start

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *No, I'm enthralled. It's like one of those English mystery stories. I await the mysterious aunt who was fond of fur.*

THOMAS. I really can skip this next speech.

VANDA. No, read it, I want to hear.—*I await the mysterious aunt who was fond of fur.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *I was an impossible child. Sickly as an infant and spoiled by my parents. I spent my childhood reading in the library and tormenting the servants—and our cat. Then when I was twelve, an aunt of mine came for a visit. The Countess was a regal woman. Voluptuous, imperious, and terrifying. She refused... in a...*

(He breaks off.)

VANDA. What.

THOMAS. Nothing. It's just—it feels different, actually saying the words. Out loud. It's not like tapping the words onto a screen at 2:02 A.M.

VANDA. No, you're doing fine, you're doing good. Your aunt's come for a visit. And she is...what...?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *A regal woman. Voluptuous, imperious, and terrifying. She refused in a thousand ways to indulge my moods, and I took against her for her majestic disdain. I needled her rudely, I insulted her, I called her Messalina. Well, she took her revenge. My parents went off one day and my aunt comes striding into the library. She's wearing an enormous Russian cape of black fox fur. On her head, a diamond tiara. And in her hand, a length of fresh green birch. The cook and the scullery maid follow close behind. My aunt throws off her fur and rolls up her sleeves, revealing sleekly muscled arms. I try to escape, but the other two women grab me, overwhelm me, they fling me down onto the fur and pull down my pants. I try to be heroic, but those two hold me hand and foot while my aunt lays into me with the cane. The birch whistles in the air again and again as the blows descend. The backs of my legs and my naked backside are on fire, the lashes are like acid eating into a copper etching plate, each stroke laid on by a true artist. Meanwhile the servant women urge her on and mock me. They call me a little girl and laugh at my tears. I struggle, but it's no use. My aunt keeps whipping until I'm weeping outright, sobbing and begging her for mercy. When she's done, she forces me to kneel and thank her for punishing me. Makes me kiss the very rod with which she chastised me. Then, threatening to return for more, she takes her leave. All of this witnessed by the two laughing servants—and our cat. From that hour forward, a fur could never be just a fur, nor a length of birch an innocent switch. You see, in that moment, in that room, by that woman, I was made.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *And did she return?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *You might say she did. For every night thereafter my Countess-Aunt visited me in my dreams, wearing a black fox fur and carrying a birch cane to continue her punishment. Each night she visits me still. An exquisite despot.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *You poor, poor man.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *Am I? In a way, I couldn't be richer, knowing all I know, having been taught at her feet.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *What have you learned?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI. *That there can be nothing more sensuous than pain or more pleasurable than degradation. The Countess had become my ideal, you see. Ideal woman, ideal mate. An avatar of the goddess of love herself. I've been on the hunt for her double ever since—and for a woman of her delicious cruelty. And on the day I meet that woman, I shall marry her.*

VANDA. Thomas, that speech, it's brilliant.

THOMAS. Thank you. I spent enough time on it. **STOP**

VANDA. So, actually, this play is, like, all about child abuse.

THOMAS. What? No, this play is *not* about *child abuse*. Jesus Christ! This idiotic urge these days to make everything about some trivial social issue!

VANDA. Child abuse isn't exactly trivial—

THOMAS. No, it's not trivial, but you are being *trite*. Let's not be *trite*, all right? This is not anthropology, or sociology. This is a play.

VANDA. Yeah, but—

THOMAS. Don't generalize. There's a lot more going on here than "corporal punishment issues."

VANDA. Okay. Sorry.

THOMAS. This stupid, impoverished world we live in! Why are we so eager to diminish ourselves? Why do we want to reduce ourselves to *examples* of something? As if we were nothing but proof of Freud, or proof of whatever dime-store psychology is in *People Magazine* this week. What are you going to throw at me next, "*race, class, and gender*"?

VANDA. You oughta write all that up and send it to the *Times*.

THOMAS. I did. They didn't print it. Anyway...

VANDA/DUNAYEV. *Well, you are certainly unique, Herr Severin von Kushemski. But I'd be careful if I were you. When you obtain your ideal she maybe crueller than you care for.*