

THE MEET

Written by
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INT. AUDITORIUM. DAY

CLOSE on EMMA TORY, 17, baking under stage lights, a sheen of sweat covering her face, eyebrows knit in concentration.

She wears a spider-like metal HEADPIECE, bulky and clasped painfully to her skull. Wires are attached to her temples with small suction cups.

EMMA

...Hippopotami...breakfasting...
...with...Martian...Landlords...
...Can...you...tell...which...is
...which?
...Because...I...can.....not.

ZAP!! We ORBIT around Emma to reveal a CABLE coming out of the back of the headpiece. We follow it as it feeds into a:

MASSIVE, CHURNING, HISSING MACHINE. Pipes extrude out of it like spilled guts. Bellows mounted to the sides inflate and deflate.

DING! A translucent pink JELLY SPHERE on a ceramic platter pops out of a small door of the machine.

A STAGEHAND picks up the platter, walks down to a table by the front row of the audience and places it before:

THREE JUDGES - who stare at the Jelly Sphere, eyes gleaming.

Judge 1, a bespectacled thin man, takes out a knife and a strange two-pronged fork. Cuts thin slices of the Jelly Sphere. Passes them to the other judges.

They place the slices in their mouths. Do not chew. Then swallow.

Judge 2 gasps. Judge 3 leans back in his chair, clearly impressed. Judge 1 writes down some notes.

They hold up score cards. 9.5, 9.3, 9.8.

SUPER: IOWA STATE THOUGHT PAGEANT - YEAR 2066

JUDGE 1

A melancholy structure gives way to
ambling notes of lavender and
weighted blankets, which themselves
collapse - coalesce - into a
singular melodic phrase: I felt my
mother's warm hand against my back
while I vomited into a bowl.

The other judges nod in assent.

A *noise* - a mix between a cough and a groan - catches the judges' attention.

On stage, next to Emma, sits a SWEATY BOY, her opponent, also hooked up to a machine. He grunts and jolts in his seat.

ZAP!! His machine rumbles. A platter with a slushy pile of grey jelly pops out.

The Judges scoff and hold up zeros.

JUDGE 1 (CONT'D)
Improper formulation.

Emma smiles.

INT. AUDITORIUM. WINGS. MOMENTS LATER

Emma walking off stage. VANCE, 40s, her godfather, hands Emma a towel and an insulated water bottle.

VANCE
Great work.

Emma mops her face with the towel.

Sweaty Boy limps into the wings and collapses into his mother's arms. Emma watches him, amused.

INT. BACKSTAGE. DAY

Cavernous, fluorescent lighting, loud and echo-y. Teens recoup while parents mill around, chatting, strategizing.

Emma walks silently through the crowd. Her eyes are focused ahead.

Other contestants watch her, whisper to each other, envious, resentful, adulatory.

INT. EMMA'S DRESSING ROOM. DAY

RACHMANINOFF PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 playing.

A small room. A mirror, a rack of towels, a backpack on the floor.

Emma is seated by another MACHINE, a miniature version of the one in the auditorium. She wears another headpiece.

Emma grunts and hums to herself, mumbling something we can't quite hear -

Zap!! The machine whirs. Then a small Jelly Sphere emerges. It's a milky bluish color.

She takes a bite out of it.

Chuckles.

She spits into a bucket, as if it's a wine tasting spittoon. Then takes off the headpiece.

She leans back in the chair, inhales slowly, holds, then exhales.

VANCE enters, holding a tray with a lid over it.

He puts it down. Then flicks his fingers outward, producing, as if out of nowhere, a small piece of folded paper.

VANCE
Your rank and schedule.

Emma unfolds the paper, skims through it, and grins.

VANCE (CONT'D)
What's this?

Vance picks up the half eaten milky bluish Jelly Sphere. Pops it into his mouth. He GIGGLES uncontrollably.

VANCE (CONT'D)
A joke? Hehehehehe

Emma eyes the tray with interest. She lifts the lid.

REVEAL another Jelly Sphere.

It's translucent orange, and half of it is missing, cut off.

VANCE (CONT'D)
Ah. Thought you'd be interested.
Haha. Swiped it before it was
tossed. Hehe.

Emma tries the orange Jelly Sphere. She pauses, then:

EMMA
A ball of fur purring on my chest.
Mature foundation, effortless
clarity. Whose idea is this?

VANCE

Her name is - heh. Sorry. Her name -
haha - She's - hhehehehehehe

INT. AUDITORIUM. WINGS. DAY

OLGA LEBEDEV, 16, pimply, wearing a large sweater and bulky headphones, dances silently. She holds a sports bottle.

She is watched by Emma - in the wings on the other side of the stage.

EMMA

Her?

Vance nods. Emma's eyes narrow.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Rapid simultaneous ideation - round
one of three.

The audience is, and always is, silent.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Olga Lebedev.

Olga takes off her headphones, walks out onto stage, waves.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Emma Tory.

Emma walks out, waves, shakes hands Olga.

They both sit down next to their respective machines and put on their headpieces.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

Contestants. Your prompts.

A Worker enters and hands them each a SEALED ENVELOPE.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

And...

Emma and Olga straighten their backs.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

...begin!

Emma and Olga rip open their envelopes.

Their eyes scan the contents within.

Then Emma CLOSES HER EYES.

She starts muttering quietly - piecing something together in her head - blood pumping - then, loudly for all to hear:

EMMA
Messianic...Gerald...Ford...
Jackaroos...in...the outback...
Legacy...not...for...sale.

Zap! Her machine whirs. She collapses. A Jelly Sphere, clear with a wispy tornado pattern inside, emerges.

Emma glances at Olga - who is hunched over in her seat - shaking - then in a crazy burst:

OLGA
SCANDINAVIA UNITES, CONQUERS NEW
HAVEN FOR DOBERMANNNS, FINDS ONLY
POODLES.

Olga's machine JOLTS into action. A yellow oozy Jelly Sphere pops out.

Stagehands pick up the two platters and walk them down to the Judges.

Judge 1 cuts up Emma's Sphere and passes it to the others.

The judges taste it.

They write down some notes.

They raise their score cards:

9.2, 9.1, 8.9

The judges pause, then slice up Olga's Sphere and taste it.

They raise scorecards:

9.4, 9.7, 9.9

Emma freezes - in shock. Judge 2 clears her throat.

JUDGE 2
These are both remarkable pieces of
ideation. Messianic-Gerald-Ford-
Jackaroos-In-The-Outback-Legacy-Not-
For-Sale constructs a fragmentary
narrative that probes the chasm
between past and present.
(MORE)

JUDGE 2 (CONT'D)

Scandinavia-Unites-Conquers-New-Haven-For-Dobermanns-Finds-Only-Poodles ventures into a distinct vision of myth and the early millennium. Ultimately, the latter prevailed as the more potent experience and hewed closer to the prompt - despite lacking in aesthetic cohesiveness.

Olga hobbles to her feet. Celebratory. Shakes Emma's hand.

Emma, dumbstruck, silently walks off stage.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Round two will commence after the break. There is potato salad and orange juice in the lobby. Parking validation is in the booth by the back entrance...

Vance, waiting for Emma, hands her a towel.

VANCE

It's okay.

Emma shrugs him off and keeps walking.

EXT. AUDITORIUM. ROSE GARDEN. DAY

The auditorium is a brutalist concrete cube surrounded by a grid of rose bushes. Parents and contestants eat and chat.

Emma and Vance sit on a brick stoop. He eats potato salad. Emma picks her fingernails, peeled down to her skin, dry.

VANCE

Dial up the resonance at the tail end of the formulation, and she doesn't stand a chance.

Emma looks across the garden where Olga, Olga's parents, and younger siblings picnic on the grass.

EMMA

You think she's classically trained?

VANCE

You should eat.

ON EMMA - cogs turning in her head.

INT. EMMA'S DRESSING ROOM. DAY

Emma stares at the orange idea ball that she tried earlier.

She throws it in the spittoon, adjusts her practice machine, and puts on the headpiece.

Emma hunches over and closes her eyes. Her face begins to twitch in concentration. She winces. Trembles.

INSERT CUT: A BLACK ORB IN A WHITE HAZE. IT GROWS AND GROWS...UNTIL THE DARKNESS ENGULFS US.

Zap! The machine spits out a new Jelly Sphere.

It's transparent with a ribbon of red spiraling through the middle like a marble.

Emma appraises it.

Then digs into her backpack and takes out a pocket-sized leather KIT - like a small binder that zips up.

Inside is an array of forks, knives, and zesters.

Emma zests a tiny portion of the idea ball, making a small pile on the table.

Emma digs into her backpack again. Finds a pen. Uncaps it.

CLOSE on the pile of zest as Emma guides it off the edge of the table and into the pen cap.

EXT. AUDITORIUM. DAY

Emma pushes herself against a crowd of people who are trying to get back into the auditorium. She scans the side of the building, looking for Olga.

VANCE (O.S.)
Where've you been?

Emma turns. Spots Vance.

EMMA
Resting.

VANCE
We're on soon.

EMMA
In a sec.

VANCE
Everything alright?

EMMA
Yes.

Vance shrugs.

VANCE
You know where I'll be.

He follows the rest of the crowd back into the auditorium.

Emma heads around the corner of the building. Peers into the rose garden.

No one there.

INT. BACKSTAGE HALLWAYS. DAY

FOLLOW Emma fast walking through the hallways.

She stops.

Lost.

She looks at the doors of the dressing rooms.

They're numbered.

INT. BATHROOM. DAY

She locks herself into a stall. Opens the folded SCHEDULE that Vance gave her earlier.

Rows and rows of printed names and times - various match ups. Then below that: a list of the contestants, their ranks...

...and room numbers.

INT. OLGA'S DRESSING ROOM. DAY

CLOSE on Olga seemingly at peace, her hair weirdly standing on end.

REVEAL - Olga doing a perfect handstand on a yoga mat in the middle of her room. The door opens.

EMMA
Oh shit wrong room.

Olga continues doing the handstand.

OLGA
No. No worries.

EMMA
I'll leave you to your prep.

Olga recognizes Emma.

OLGA
No please. Come in.

Emma steps inside. Awkward beat.

EMMA
I thought it was clever, the way
you goosed the structure.

OLGA
Your stuff's not bad either.

"Not bad" rubs Emma the wrong way.

EMMA
(re: handstand)
Is this your prep?

OLGA
It's just relaxing.

EMMA
I listen to music to cool down.

OLGA
What kind?

EMMA
Rachmaninoff.

OLGA
I don't know who that is.

EMMA
Just an old guy.

OLGA
Do you want to try this?

Emma hesitates, then steps forward, places her hands on the ground, and launches her feet into the air. Emma is weirdly good at the handstand.

She locks eyes with Olga. An upside down staring contest.
Emma's muscles twitching. Olga's face set like stone. Then -

An ELECTRONIC BELL rings over the PA System: *VROING - VROING - VROING*.

Olga disengages, does a swift roll, and pops up standing.
Emma heaves herself up to meet Olga at eye level.

OLGA (CONT'D)
I gotta take a piss.

Olga exits into a side restroom. Emma's eyes search the room.
On the ground is a bag.

And Olga's SPORTS BOTTLE.

Emma's eyes narrow.

WITH OLGA -

Washing her hands and coming back out into the main room.
It's empty.

She grabs her stuff and her bottle.

INT. AUDITORIUM. VARIOUS. DAY

Workers inspect the machines and wipe them down.

INTERCUT

-Olga lightly jogging through the halls.

-The Announcer doing vocal exercises in the back of the house.

-Emma, in the off-left wings, stretching her arms.

-The judges clearing their notepads.

-Olga reaches the off-right wings. Takes a swig from the bottle. Puts it on a table.

Olga immediately slows down. Looks at the bottle.

Tears stream down Olga's face.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
Rapid Simultaneous Ideation round
two of three. Please welcome back
our contestants: Olga Lebedev and
Emma Tory.

Emma walks out on stage.

Olga tries to wipe away her tears - and fails. *Fuck it.* Olga trudges onto stage.

Emma and Olga shake hands. Olga is weeping and trying to hide it. Emma studies her.

The crowd is quiet as ever, but some members of the audience exchange uncomfortable glances.

Emma and Olga take their seats, lock themselves into their headpieces.

Olga's hands shake, fumbling with the clasp.

Finally, Olga is ready.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
Your prompts.

A Worker hands them each a sealed envelope.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
Your time begins...

Olga's lower lip trembles.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
...now.

Olga weakly opens the envelope, barely looks at it -

When a massive, ugly sob RACKS her body. Olga drops the prompt. Tears FLOOD down Olga's cheeks. Olga WAILS, body spasming.

The judges watch her, curious, concerned.

Emma opens her envelope. Looks at the prompt: a weird collection of numbers, finely printed Latin sentences, and logical symbols.

EMMA
Um....heli...helicopter...disco...

Olga's wailing SHOOTS up in volume - now a bloody SCREAM - cutting Emma off.

EMMA (CONT'D)
Helicopter...disco...moonlight...
...gazing...um....agh....

In the crowd, Olga's FAMILY watches in horror.

EMMA (CONT'D)
 Helicopter discography moonlight
 gazing....downward....while...
 Pomeranians...float...?

Zap! Emma's machine spits out a blood red Jelly Sphere.

The judges don't even notice it. Their eyes are on Olga.

Olga's neck bulges. She spasms out of her chair and cries in the fetal position, inconsolable.

OLGA
ARGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

ZAP! Olga's machine comes alive with noise. Immediately, commotion breaks out in the auditorium:

Workers dash in from the wings to provide assistance, prepping shots of sedatives. Olga's family rushes onto stage.

Emma watches in horror, then her gaze drifts towards Olga's machine:

It spits out a CRAZY, MULTICOLORED Jelly Sphere that looks like a Tie-Dye.

The judges lean forward, trying to get a better look at it.

Vance walks out onto stage and grabs Emma.

VANCE
 You okay?

No response from Emma.

VANCE (CONT'D)
 Emma?

The judges nod to a STAGEHAND, who picks up Olga's idea and walks it down to them. The judges slice the Jelly Sphere.

Emma watches. Olga groans as she gets cradled by her family.

The judges swallow their slices. There is utter disbelief in their eyes. Judge 3 begins to speak.

JUDGE 3
 Ms. Lebedev, your earnest and raw
 account under such unimaginable
 duress is one of the most vividly
 realized pieces of ideation that we
 have ever encountered.
 (MORE)

JUDGE 3 (CONT'D)
And it is our honor to have
witnessed your mind at work. Ms.
Lebedev, congratulations, you are
the Iowa State Rapid Ideation
Champion.

Emma stares at Olga's Crazy Sphere. Dumbfounded. Livid.

Then, Emma pushes past Vance, steps into the wings, and gets
obscured by shadow.

VANCE
Emma?

INT. BACKSTAGE. DAY

Emma walks past the other contestants, who stare and whisper.
Vance follows Emma from a distance. Emma quickens her step.

INT. EMMA'S DRESSING ROOM. DAY

Emma locks the door behind her. Vance pounds on the door.

VANCE (O.S.)
Emma. Open the door. EMMA!

Emma looks at the rest of the Jelly Sphere that she poisoned
Olga with. Most of it is still intact, only a bit of the side
was shaved off.

She sits down by her machine. Straps herself in. Eats the
rest of the Sphere.

Tears stream down Emma's face. She clutches the table. Sobs
rack her body. She squeezes her eyes.

ZAP! The machine CHURNS. Then the machine's door opens. A
platter with a pile of grey, formless Jelly comes out.

Emma SCREAMS.

INT. EMMA'S DRESSING ROOM. LATER

We're looking at the door.

BAM!

The door jolts, the lock rattles, and the frame splinters.

BAM!!!

More wood caving in, hinges breaking, as Vance stumbles in, having shouldered his way through the door.

He stops short, in utter horror, as he sees:

The mirror has been smashed.

And Emma, face bloody, shards of the mirror in her skin, cries in the corner.