

Broccoli

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Lara Vapnyar

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"Here's another one, seduced and abandoned," Nina's husband often said, pulling a bunch of wilted, yellowed broccoli from the refrigerator shelf. He held it, pinched between two fingers, his handsome face contorted in disgust, as though it smelled.

Nina, blushing, took the broccoli away from him and threw it in the garbage. She told him she was sorry; she had been busy all week and never had time to cook. Nina worked in Manhattan. By the time she got home to Brooklyn, it was already seven-thirty, sometimes eight, and the most she could do was make her husband and herself sandwiches, or boil some meat dumplings from a Russian supermarket.

"I know," her husband said. "But why buy all these vegetables if you know you won't have time to cook them?"

Nina shrugged. She liked shopping for vegetables.

She couldn't say exactly when she'd first felt the urge—possibly two years earlier, on her second day in America, when she and her husband had left her sister's Brooklyn apartment for the first time to explore the nearest shopping street. Nina's sister, who'd lived in America for fourteen years and called herself an American, assumed that Nina would be impatient to see it. "Go, go," she said. "But don't buy anything. There are two rules you have to remember in order to survive in America. First: Never buy anything in expensive stores unless they're having a fifty-per-cent-off sale. Second: Never buy anything in cheap stores."

On the unimaginatively named Avenue M, Nina and her husband browsed through stores that all looked alike to them, no matter what was being sold: food, electronics, clothes, or hardware. They seemed to be walking in and out of the same store over and over, simply to hear the doorbell chime.

It was a pale, cold February morning, and Nina was hiding her reddened nose in the fur collar of her Russian coat. She clutched her husband's elbow, stepping carefully over piles of garbage, reluctant to look up at the ashen sky or sideways at the motley signs of the shops. She was feeling dizzy and a little nauseated from the flight and the all-night talk with her sister that had followed. Only one store attracted her attention—a small Chinese grocery, with fruit and vegetables set outside on plywood stands. Colorful piles of oranges, tomatoes, cucumbers—everything was sparkingly clean and bright. Nina read the side of the box of tomatoes: "Sunripe." She was still learning English, and every new expression seemed to her exciting and rich with meaning. "Sunripe" brought to mind a vegetable patch on a summer afternoon, the smell of dark soil heated by the sun, pale-green stems bent and bursting

under the weight of juicy tomatoes. She wanted to touch the tomatoes in the box to see if their skin was still warm from the sun that shone on them as they ripened. She was just reaching out her hand when her husband pulled her away to another store.

Now Nina shopped for vegetables alone every Saturday morning—her husband loved to sleep late on weekends. She drove to Eighty-sixth Street and shopped in the Chinese and Russian stores between Bay Parkway and Twenty-third Avenue. The stores all offered pretty much the same selection of produce, but Nina liked to explore them all, in search of something surprising: the occasional white asparagus, plastic baskets of gooseberries, tiny, nutlike new potatoes. On the days when there was nothing new, it was still interesting to compare the stores. In one, the onions might be large and firm but the heads of lettuce wilted and colorless. Another might have the freshest greens and onions that were soft and gray, hiding timidly in string bags.

Nina felt a thrill as soon she got out of the car and placed her feet on the sidewalk, littered with torn lettuce leaves, onion peels, and overripe tomatoes. In the stores, she walked up and down the aisles, running her fingers over tomatoes as smooth and glossy as polished furniture. She cupped avocados, feeling their lumpy peel with her palms. Sometimes she dug a fingernail into the rind of an orange until it spat out a little of its pungent juice. She avoided touching the hairy, egg-shaped kiwis and the wormlike string beans, but she liked to stroke the feathery bunches of dill and parsley and squeeze the artichokes, which felt like soft pine cones. She patted cantaloupes and she tapped watermelons with her index finger, listening to the hollow sound they made. But, most of all, Nina loved broccoli. It smelled of young spring grass, and it looked like a tree, with its hard solid stem and its luxuriant crown of tight, grainy florets.

Nina bought a bunch of broccoli every week, along with various other vegetables. She carried big brown bags to her car, firmly believing that this weekend she would find time to cook. There was still Saturday afternoon ahead, and then all of Sunday. She would wash the vegetables as soon as she got home and then cook something with them—spinach gnocchi, maybe, or grilled zucchini parcels, or three-cheese broccoli gratin.

But as soon as she got home Nina found herself in a whirl of things to do. She had to shower, curl her hair, brush it out if it started to go frizzy, try on and reject several sweaters and pairs of pants, put on makeup, find her husband's missing sock, iron his shirt, check that the gas was off, and lock the door. It seemed only minutes before she found herself in the car again, on the way to a party, glancing back and forth between her husband in the driver's seat and her own reflection in the mirror on the sun visor. Her husband was deep in his thoughts, which was natural, Nina told herself, since he was driving. And her reflection was unsatisfying—despite her efforts, her hair was still frizzy, her soft-featured, round face was poorly made up, and her blue angora sweater was too tight around the armpits. Clothes bought at fifty-per-cent-off sales were always either the wrong size or the wrong style.

In the car, Nina rarely thought about her vegetables. They lay abandoned on the cramped refrigerator shelves: tomatoes buried under zucchinis, lettuce leaves caught in the edge of the vegetable drawer, a bunch of broccoli that wouldn't fit in the drawer sitting by itself on the third shelf.

The parties were thrown by Pavlik, a friend of Nina's husband from work, whose wife had divorced him a few years earlier. Pavlik was a heavy man with an uneven ginger-colored beard. He wore ill-fitting trousers and shirts that never seemed clean. He loved to laugh heartily and smack his friends on the back. "Don't mind the mess!" he yelled as his guests wandered through the dusty labyrinth of his house, stumbling over secondhand furniture, broken electronic equipment, and heavy volumes of Russian literature. It seemed to Nina that Pavlik's functions as a host were limited to calling out that phrase. He didn't feed or entertain his guests. People arrived with their own food and wine, their own plastic dinnerware, their own guitars, and sometimes their own poems, written on scraps of notebook paper.

None of Pavlik's guests were professional poets or musicians. Most of them worked as computer programmers, an occupation that they had taken up in America, where they found it easier and more profitable than trying to prove the value of their Russian degrees in science or the arts. Some of them, Nina's husband included, adopted a condescending attitude toward their new profession: it was boring; it was beneath them. "Computer programming, like everyone else," they answered reluctantly when asked their occupation, "but that's not what I did in my previous life." They preferred to talk about art or music or such exciting hobbies as alpinism, rafting, and photographing Alaskan sunsets.

Nina was a computer programmer, too, but she had always been a computer programmer. She didn't know much about poetry or music, and she didn't have any exciting talents or hobbies.

"My wife is a vegetable lover," Nina's husband would say, introducing her to Pavlik's circle.

Nina didn't like Pavlik's guests. The men were untidy and unattractive. They loaded their paper plates with cold cuts and smoked too much. They said the same things over and over, and it seemed to Nina that there was always a piece of ham or salami hanging out of their mouths when they talked.

The women, with one or two exceptions, were attractive, but in an unpleasant way. They were thin and sophisticated; they had straight hair; they had strong hands with long, powerful fingers, toughened by playing piano or guitar; they had soulful eyes, saddened by all the poetry they'd read; they had mysterious expressions of eternal fatigue. They had everything that Nina lacked.

Nina usually spent the evening in one corner of Pavlik's stiff sofa, away from her husband and the other guests, who sat on the floor by the cold fireplace. The sound of their laughter, their singing, and their reading floated around the room, but didn't seem to reach Nina. The food and wine, arranged on a rickety folding table by the window, were more accessible. She made frequent trips to that table, where the cold cuts were spread out on paper plates, loaves of bread sat on cutting boards, and pickles swam in glass jars. There were usually a few unopened bottles of vodka and a five-litre box of Burgundy or Chablis. The wine dripped from a little plastic faucet onto the beige carpet, forming intricate patterns, so that by the end of the party Pavlik's modest floor covering looked like a fancy Turkish rug.

When Nina and her husband first started coming to Pavlik's parties, she had joined the others by the fireplace. She'd loved to sit across from her husband and watch his face as he played the guitar. His head tilted forward, and the bangs of his dark hair fell to his half-closed eyes. From time to time, he glanced at her, and his eyes flickered through the forest of his hair like two fireflies. At those moments, Nina felt that he was playing for her alone, and the music touched her, making her skin prickle and her throat hurt.

With time, though, Nina noticed that she wasn't the only person watching her husband as he played. Other women watched, too, and in exactly the same way. Nina saw how their faces lit up under his fleeting gaze, just as hers did. Those women probably felt that he was playing for them, too, and sometimes Nina thought that they had more right to be played for by her husband than she did. When they looked over at Nina, she felt as if she were expanding, bloating, metamorphosing into an oversized exhibit of a dull, talentless woman with the wrong clothes and the wrong makeup. She knew that they were all asking themselves why this interesting, talented man had married her. Her sister didn't ask. "You were his ticket to America," she reminded Nina frequently. "Can you disprove that?"

Nina couldn't. It was true that her husband had always wanted to emigrate but, without close relatives in the United States, hadn't been able to obtain a visa. It was true that, having married Nina, he had got his visa. It was true that Nina hadn't wanted to emigrate but had yielded to her husband's wishes. It wasn't true, though, that he had married Nina for those reasons alone, and it wasn't true that he didn't love her. Nina's sister didn't know what Nina knew. She didn't know that when Nina had been in the hospital with appendicitis her husband hadn't left her room for even a minute. She had begged him to go and get some coffee or a breath of fresh air, but he had stayed with her. He'd held Nina's hand and squeezed it involuntarily every time she moaned. Nina's sister also didn't know how he'd sometimes hug Nina from behind and bury his face in her hair and whisper, "There is nothing like this. Nothing in the world." She could feel his sharp nose and his hot breath on the nape of her neck, and her eyes filled with tears. Nina's sister didn't know that he often said the same words when they were making love.

It was a relief to come home after the parties and find herself in bed with a book, next to her husband. Nina's nightstand was piled with cookbooks, bought at a fifty-per-cent discount at Barnes & Noble. She read lying on her back, resting the book on her stomach. The thick,

glossy pages rustled against her satin nightgowns, bought at a fifty-per-cent-off sale at Victoria's Secret. She loved that sound as much as she loved the prickly sensation on the soles of her feet when they brushed up against her husband's hairy legs. And she loved the euphoric feeling she got when she looked at lustrous photographs of okra-and-tomato stew in rustic clay bowls, baskets of fresh vegetables shot against a background of meadows or olive groves. In her favorite book, "Italian Cuisine: The Taste of the Sun," there were also images of the cooking process. In those photographs, smooth, light-skinned female hands with evenly trimmed fingernails performed magical actions on vegetables. The hands looked like Nina's hands, and Nina fantasized that they were her hands. That it was she who had made those perfectly curled carrot strips. It was she who had pushed the stubborn stuffing inside the bell peppers. It was she who had rinsed the grit off the greens and chopped the broccoli, scattering tiny green seeds all over the table. Nina's lips moved to form the almost passionate words of the cooking instructions. "Brush with olive oil," "Bring to a boil and simmer gently," "Scoop out the pulp," "Peel," "Chop," "Slice," "Crush." When she put the book away and stretched out against her husband's back, her lips continued moving for some time.

Nina's husband left her at the end of the summer, just as the tomatoes and the peaches were performing their yearly invasion of the fruit-and-vegetable stores on Eighty-sixth Street. Nina's refrigerator was full of them when her sister opened it.

"The fifth week is the worst," Nina's sister was saying. "The first four weeks it hasn't sunk in yet—you feel the shock, but you don't feel the pain. It's like you're numb. But the fifth week . . . Brace yourself for the fifth week." She crouched by the refrigerator, unloading the food she had brought over. She had come to console Nina with four large bags from a Russian supermarket. Nina felt tired. She sat at the table, staring at her sister's broad back. She was thinking that if you banged on it with a hammer it would produce a loud, reverberating sound, as if it were made of hard wood. The refrigerator shelves filled quickly: cartons of currant juice ("Currant juice saved my life—I basically lived on it when Volodya left me"), cream cheese, farmer's cheese, soft cheese, Swiss cheese, bread, pickles, a jar of cherry compote.

"Nina!" her sister shrieked. "What is that?" She had pulled out the vegetable drawer. Inside, there was a pile of old tomatoes, with white beards of mold growing in the places where their skins had split; there were peaches covered with brown spots; there were dark and slimy bunches of collard greens. "You've got a whole vegetable graveyard in here," Nina's sister grumbled, emptying the drawer into the garbage. The vegetables made squelching sounds as they landed.

A faint rotten smell stayed in the kitchen for a long time after Nina's sister had left. It wasn't unpleasant. It was the simple, cozy smell of a kitchen, the smell of vegetable soup simmering on the stove, the kind that her mother used to make.

Contrary to her sister's prediction, the fifth week didn't bring Nina any extreme pain. It only added to the fatigue. She felt as if she were recovering from a long, exhausting illness. She tried to do as few household chores as possible. She didn't shop for vegetables anymore. She still read her cookbooks after work, but she was too tired to do much more than scan the index. She ran her finger over the smooth pages and neat columns of tiny letters. The austere phrases were logical and easy to read. "Broccoli: gratin—17; macaroni with—72; penne and—78." She had no desire to look up the recipes. She just went on to the next entry. "Eggplant: braised chicken with onions and—137; and tomato, baked—162." "Zucchini: and mushrooms, sautéed—34; shredded, jasmine rice with—201; soup—41; stuffed—57."

Pavlik's booming voice on the answering machine broke into the elegant sequence of artichoke recipes. Nina had turned off the ringer on her phone weeks before, and now she listened to the messages as they came through her old scratchy answering machine. Most of them were from her sister, calling to ask if she was eating well and to tell her the latest news: that Nina's husband had been spotted on Brighton Beach with some "dried herring," that he was moving to Boston, that he had already moved. Nina's sister's voice seemed to her distant and somewhat unnatural. Pavlik's voice made her jump. "Hey! Nina! Are you home?" he shouted. On impulse, Nina looked at the front door. It was hard to believe that the roaring was coming from the modest plastic box on the wall. Then Pavlik's voice dropped too low, and it was hard to make out his words. "Don't disappear," he said, if Nina heard him correctly.

Pavlik's place looked different. Nina realized it as soon as she stepped into the living room, but she couldn't quite figure out how it was different. The rickety table still stood on the stained rug, the fireplace was stacked with old magazines, Pavlik's big frame was shaking with laughter, the vacant sofa was waiting for Nina. Everything was there, everything was in place, and yet something had undeniably changed. "The size—it's become bigger," Nina decided, taking her seat in the corner of the sofa. Pavlik's house had more space and more air than it had had before.

A thin, delicate woman with a guitar was singing something about a little path in the woods that meandered through the trees. Nina liked the song. When it ended, the singer put the guitar down and walked to the food table. She was wearing a long blue cardigan with drooping pockets. There was nothing mysterious about her. A man with receding hair and a closely trimmed gray beard took over the guitar. Nina's eyes travelled from the man's moving, outstretched elbow, protruding through his shabby corduroy sleeve, to his hunched shoulders and the greasy line of his hair. She suddenly understood that his untidiness wasn't a kind of snobbish fashion statement but a sign of loneliness, of neglect. She saw that the women sitting in a circle were watching the man, just as they had watched her husband. They were tired, lonely women, just like her. There was nothing mysterious about them, either. Nina also noticed that she wasn't the only one sitting outside the circle. In fact, there were only a few people in it. Others were scattered all around Pavlik's house. She could see lonely figures here and there, sitting quietly on a chair, an old box, a windowsill, or wandering

through the house. From time to time, the paths of the lonely figures intersected and then conversations were struck up. Awkward yet hopeful conversations, just like the one that Nina was having now.

“You’re a vegetable lover, aren’t you?” asked a man who had seated himself in the opposite corner of Nina’s sofa. Nina nodded. “I thought I heard that from somebody. Do you like to cook vegetables?” Nina nodded again. “You know, I love vegetables, myself. My wife hates it when I cook, though.” The man rolled his eyes, making Nina smile. He was short, with thin rusty-red hair and a very pale complexion. He had a tiny piece of toilet paper with a spot of dried blood stuck to his cheek.

“Are you a computer programmer like everyone else?” Nina asked. The man nodded with a smile. “And in your previous life?”

“A high-school physics teacher. But I can’t say that I miss it. I used to be terrified of my students.”

Nina laughed. He was easy to talk to. She looked at his smiling eyes, then down at his hands—white fingers, short fingernails, red hair on the knuckles. She tried to imagine what it would be like if one of these hands were to accidentally brush against her breast.

Nina wiped the little beads of sweat off her nose. He was a strange, married, not particularly attractive man.

“So what’s your favorite vegetable?” she asked.

“Probably fennel. Fennel has an incredible flavor, reminds me of a wild apple and, oddly enough, freshly sawed wood. Do you like fennel?”

Nina nodded. She liked fennel: it had a funny, slightly ribbed surface, it was heavy, it had weird green shoots that seemed to grow out of nowhere. Nina had never tasted fennel. “I like broccoli,” she said.

“Oh, broccoli! I love how they cook it in Chinese places. How do you cook it?” The man with the piece of tissue stuck to his cheek looked safe enough to confide in.

“I’ve never cooked broccoli, or any other vegetable,” Nina said.

Nina spent the better part of the following Saturday shopping for cooking utensils. “Let’s have a cooking date,” the man from the party had suggested. A cooking date. Nina was sure that, at some point in the past, she had been as excited as she was now, but she couldn’t remember when. She went to Macy’s and, breaking the fifty-per-cent-discount rule for the first time, bought two drastically overpriced skillets, a set of shiny stainless-steel saucepans, a steamer, and a pretty wooden spoon with a carved handle. “Do you want wedding gift wrap?” the cashier asked.

Halfway home, Nina realized that she hadn't bought nearly enough. Knives! She needed knives, and a cutting board, and a colander, and God knew what else. She swerved her car in the direction of Avenue M, where, breaking the rule about never buying anything in the cheap stores, she bought a set of knives, two cutting boards—one wooden and one plastic—a colander, a curved grapefruit knife, because it looked so cute, a vegetable peeler, a set of stainless-steel bowls, and two aprons with pictures of wild mushrooms on yellow backgrounds. In a grocery store next door, Nina bought olive oil, black pepper, chili pepper, and a jar of dry dark-green stuff with Chinese characters on the label.

By two-thirty—half an hour before the man was due to arrive—Nina had everything ready. The sparkling saucepans and the skillet stood proudly on the stove, and the bowls, the colander, the cutting boards, and the knives were arranged on the kitchen counter in careful disarray around the centerpiece: "Italian Cuisine: The Taste of the Sun." Nina observed her kitchen, trying to shake off her embarrassing excess of excitement.

The man came on time, early even. At five to three, he stood in Nina's hallway, removing his bulky leather jacket and cap, sprinkled with raindrops. He smelled of wet leather. He handed Nina a bottle of wine and a baguette in a sodden paper bag.

"In the movies, when a man hands a woman a baguette and a bottle of wine, it always seems chic, doesn't it?" he asked.

Nina nodded. He was more homely than she remembered. Her memory had somehow managed to erase the red spots on his pasty cheeks, to color his brows and eyelashes, to make him slimmer and add an inch or two to his height. It was strange to see him in her house, especially in her tiny hallway, where every object was familiar, its position carefully chosen. He clashed with the surroundings like a mismatched piece of furniture. Nina quickly led him into the kitchen.

"So, are we cooking broccoli today?" the man asked, leafing through "Italian Cuisine: The Taste of the Sun," his freshly washed hands still smelling of Nina's soap.

"Broccoli, yes," Nina mumbled, suddenly struck by a dreadful suspicion, which she confirmed on opening the refrigerator. She had forgotten to buy the vegetables.

She jerked out the vegetable drawer, hoping for a miracle. It was empty and clean, wiped down with a kitchen towel dipped in Clorox by Nina's sister's firm hand. There was only a tiny strip of onion skin stuck between the edge of the drawer and the shelf above. Nina turned to the man, motioning to the empty drawer; she found it hard to speak, as if someone were squeezing her throat. Everything seemed hopeless and ridiculous. The counter crammed with its gleaming kitchenware. The barren vegetable drawer. This perfect stranger, who had come to cook in her kitchen. Nina herself, her energy drained away, standing now with her forehead pressed to the cold rubber lining of the refrigerator door.

“Do you want me to go to the supermarket?” the man asked. Nina shook her head. Now that everything had been exposed to her in all its absurdity, she knew that it would never work.

A bunch of broccoli was stuck between the third shelf and the back of the refrigerator. It hung upside down, the florets nearly touching the shelf below. The man saw it first and pointed it out to Nina. The broccoli wasn't yellow or covered with slime. During the weeks that it had hung between the shelves, it had become darker and dryer. In a few more weeks it would have become a broccoli mummy. It smelled all right—or, rather, it didn't smell of anything.

“I'm sure we can still cook it,” the man said.

Nina ran cold water over the florets, then shook the bunch fiercely, letting out a shower of green drops. She chopped off the stem, then cut off the base of each floret, watching with fascination as each piece split into tiny new bunches of broccoli. She peeled the stem and cut it into even, star-shaped slices. Some things turned out to be different from her cooking fantasies, others exactly the same. Some were disappointing, others better than she had ever imagined. Then, when the broccoli was in the pot on the stove, boiling water sputtering under the saucepan's shiny lid, the man suggested that Nina move one of her kitchen chairs closer to the stove and stand on it. “Climb up and inhale,” the man said. “The hot air travels up. The strongest aroma should be right under the ceiling.”

Nina stood on the chair, her hair almost touching the ceiling, her eyes closed, her face pointed upward, her nostrils dilated. The warm smell of broccoli rose, caressing her face, enveloping her whole. ♦