

The End User, Feodora

-a short story

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By the time Feodora had visited the last of the best and brightest doctors with their enormous machines, and the healers with their enormous claims, the family jet seemed like another hospital hallway to her. But among the most optimistic and grandiose of the experts she met, her condition made even the liars err on the side of truth.

So she stopped searching for a cure, and started a final round of visits - to her grandchildren. She was in New York with her daughter's young son when she got a call from her one of the oncologists - the one she could least bully, the one she liked the best. He said there was someone she should meet, but he wouldn't say more than that. He wasn't one to be coy, or one to call for no reason, so Feodora did. The young man on the other end was named Troy. His voice was buoyant and polished - his smile was audible over the phone. She started to explain, but he said he knew who she was and who referred her, and why. He said he had something that would interest her, but wouldn't say more. She said she didn't have time to waste. He said the meeting would be brief, and promised it wouldn't be a waste of time.

Feodora suggested they meet at a restaurant near her apartment on Central Park South the next day, early, when her husband would be at physical therapy. The young man agreed, asking that they meet outside the restaurant, and apologizing for the strange request, given that it was winter. On the busy midtown corner, the young man introduced an older, aloof gentleman wearing what seemed like a back brace under his raincoat as Arnold. While Troy was the quintessential salesman, all double-windsor dimpled charm, well-calibrated eye contact, hair spray and shoe polish, Arnold was another sort of creature entirely. His handshake was cold and soft as mist, and his body was discombobulated, as if composed of other bodies, poorly managed. He was hard to look at, as if she'd been commanded not to look in his direction.

"Thank you for making the time, Ms. Andreyevich," Troy said, using a name no one had in decades. "I think you'll like what we have to show you."

"I agreed to meet with you, but I won't go anywhere with you. As I said..."

Arnold leaned in, saying “Ma’am, it’s not...” But during the last syllable he spoke, they were transported to another 58th Street. On it, the people were replaced with what seemed like ecstatic statues, exchanging shapes and sensations that coalesced into human forms, hieroglyphics eclipsing each other to speak a language that encompassed the entire avenue. Feodora couldn’t take her eyes off the statues, each unique, still the person that they’d been, but also very much like the whole universe and like fountains, with luminous water bubbling from the tops of their heads. She knew instantly that this was no trick, no hypnosis or drug. The buildings on either side undulated with lazy pleasure. Even the old man at the pretzel cart on the corner and the hobo camped out on the exhaust grate of a high rise gurgled with pure, elaborate enjoyment. The sun ran its fingers down a glass-and-steel curtain wall, and looking up, Feodora made eye contact with it - the sun was alive, and deeply familiar with her. *Don’t worry, it said, I’ve done those things too.*

A rat stopped to regard her, decided it had better things to do, and waved as it scurried off, promising they’d talk another time.

She wanted to ask what was happening, but she knew. The world, this world, like this - it was familiar. It was a place that had always been there, but it was a place for which she’d always carried a peculiar indifference.

“So, we’ve invited you here to make a very exciting offer,” Troy said.

“Can you cure me?”

“No. We don’t do that.”

“So? What? Can I live here from now on?”

“I’m afraid not - no more than you ever did. But we can offer you something better. Would you like to be God?” Troy said, his smile clear as money.

Feodora, before asking more, asked the price. The answer shouldn’t have surprised her: It cost what only someone who could have anything would pay.

That kind of price took some convincing. So Arnold showed her wonders she had known or at least suspected all along. Troy explained what they meant, along with what was possible for her, with their help. It took what seemed to Feodora like an entire delightful week in that magical place. But she was home before her husband had returned from physical therapy.

She was convinced, but called the oncologist to thank him, and to ask a few questions. He confirmed that she had seven or eight months, adding that maybe she could get to a year with

aggressive chemo, but it wouldn't be worth the agony. She asked how he knew Troy. He said, *we all have to aspire to something, right?* It would be the last time she spoke to him. Feodora always controlled the family finances, and began to liquidate or transfer the properties, shell corporations and trusts that week. With payment arranged, the three of them went to work.

"You will make an entire world from your life," Troy explained, during an early meeting in his office, just across town, on Park Avenue. It was gray and freezing outside and the sparse square tops of skyscrapers seemed to float in the concrete-colored air.

The thought excited and frightened Feodora. She knew her reasons for not being nice, and she was smart enough to know that wasn't an excuse. Her whole life, Feodora had been smart - never in a showy way, more like a squirrel on a branch who could tell when a rot had set into the roots, and when it would fall. She always made the right gambits at the right time, based on the baldness of the tires of a passing truck, the disparity between a neighbor's food and the plate it was served on, the fit of a clerk's shirt, the pace at which vodka was poured at a party, the pause before a man mentioned his wife. She never missed. She couldn't.

She had seen it all coming and jumped from branch to branch. And after she and her family were ensconced, wealthy, seemingly beyond want and from the whims of fortune - this betrayal, this ambush, this joke. After surviving so many people, so many huge doors crashing shut forever, Feodora was dying angry. That was bad material to build with.

"The creation will happen very quickly at first," Troy said. "Whatever you imagine and decide in those first minutes will be decided forever, for everyone and for everywhere."

Arnold wasn't at this meeting. The ones Arnold did attend seemed to take whole days. In them, she wouldn't get tired, and when they were done, just a few minutes would have passed. She was in a white leather chaise - firm but comfortable, like a stylish version of the examination table in a doctor's office. Most of the time, Troy sat beside her, facing her at an angle, in a hard wooden chair. If someone opened the door, they might think they were interrupting a psychoanalysis session.

"So you need to start to decide, or at least consider," he continued. "What will be in this world? Will it be like this one? Or should it be another kind of world entirely?"

"How can I decide everything? What's to keep the sky and the earth separated, or keep the land and sea apart, or make it so that it isn't too hot, or too bright, or too cold? I'm not a scientist or an engineer."

“Your knowledge of this world will be enough. You merely need to imagine it, and will it. There are others who will bind the world together in an orderly, consistent way.”

“Other gods?”

“No. You could think of them as builders. They take the raw material and interpret it in sensible ways. From your desire and your vision, the world will get its shape and its meaning. From them, it will get its consistency.”

“Who are these builders?” Feodora.

“They’re ordinary people, like the people you see every day, who cook and clean, who make your clothes and drive your cars. They’ve all agreed to do it, one way or another.”

“Why would they do that?”

“The same reason they agree to dry-clean our clothes or cook our food.”

“And what becomes of them?”

“Some of them will live on in the world you’ve created, and rule.”

“Many?”

“Creating new a an entire independent reality is a violent process. I won’t lie. People are destroyed. But people are destroyed anyway,” Troy said, solemn without letting the conversation sag. “The important thing is the whole world - what kind of place will it be? Do you want a place that’s familiar or exotic?”

“Exotic how?”

“How many suns would you like it to have?”

“We can do that?”

“Absolutely - it’s more a question of keeping it from happening. Many of the new worlds have multiple suns, because even with the sun, people remember it differently. But just to change the number of suns is thinking small.”

“Is it?”

“The sun could be an elephant, or a huge bird, or a bust of Ludwig Van Beethoven. What would you want the new world to be like for you? Some clients go picayune: Think of Norman Rockwell planets around a Tropicana sun. On the other end of the spectrum, you have the ones who want undulating hive moons populated by snake-people, in cloverleaf orbits around black leather planets.”

“Oh really?”

“Sure. You could even have both, and more. It is, after all, an entire universe. You don’t have to decide now. But you should decide soon. We have to set the art department to work on the key concepts.”

“Are they the builders?”

“No, they build simple models of the main things you want in the world. The moment of creation itself is very brief and very intense, and so we set images before you - dioramas and figurines of the things you most want to remember in that moment.”

“So this part is like shopping,” she said, casting her eyes on Troy, with his tie knotted just so and golden speckles of late-day stubble on his pinkish face.

“Yes, it’s shopping and wishing and dreaming all at once. This is my favorite part of the business.”

Feodora, who saw small things, watched a small blue vein pulse on Troy’s temple. He was expert at showing no stress in how he comported himself. But she could tell that he was trying his hardest not to think about his least-favorite part of the business. She could tell that it had called up some subtle but very real damage that the business inflicted on him.

“I’ll tell you what I always say to our clients,” Troy continued. “You’ve spent most of your life anticipating and adapting to the world. You’ve done it better than most, and carved out small spaces where you could have things as you believed they should be. Now’s the time to tap into that. Now’s the time when indulging that sense of *taste* isn’t extravagant or selfish - it’s the golden road.”

Saying the practiced words restored the gleam to Troy’s eye and restored Troy to the true glory to which he’d been born - an account executive to the gods of yet-unborn worlds.

Feodora never enjoyed shopping in the way some of the other wives did. And this work was harder than shopping. Consciousness is a legislature, and no one can decide if it’s corrupt, incompetent or both. Probing her own mind for her deepest wishes, she found it more like a frazzled chairman banging his gavel than a single narrator telling a story. And if a whole universe depends on it, then clear decisions are required, or else, who knows? These were Feodora’s thoughts, walking one final spring afternoon down 57th Street, after another consultation with Troy. The salesman was, as she’d suspected, not as wise as he tried to appear.

“The only thing I would warn against is the Pegasus. You wind up with ponies who have short lifespans from carrying around huge, mostly useless wings,” he’d advised. “I think

someone made it work, by having them glide off of cliffs. But you wind up with a lot of cliffs everywhere. Just another thing to consider.”

The taxis tolerated the Central Park horse-drawn carriages and honked at one another. The buses sidled up and eased off. The point as Feodora had taken it was that she needed to take drastic action to feed her better angels better food.

Feodora had survived and risen to her quiet promontory in the affairs of men by being bold when others were terrified, and terrified when others were warm and fuzzy. She had grandchildren in New York and grandchildren in St. Petersburg, and a husband who didn't like to spend much time outside of his two homes in one or the other. She was an old, sick woman. Everything said to stay put, like a lamb before the hammer.

“You wouldn't understand, but you've trusted me this far,” she told her husband, in their pink marble dining room a thousand feet above Central Park.

Neither Feodora nor her husband had found a satisfactory way to speak about what would happen to her next, except in riddles and vagaries. So they tried not to speak of it. Now she was asking him not to come barging into wherever she went for her last few months. He was, after all, a very powerful man in every room around the world - besides the one he shared with her.

It wasn't easy. She invoked love, trust, loyalty and the Almighty. Her plea was passionate, perverse for being a lie. And she wasn't sure that she'd succeeded when she left. From New York, she burned through a few weeks of misdirection, travelling legally to Helsinki, semi-legally to Khabarovsk. The landscape there pulled at her - the Cyrillic signs, the leftover Soviet murals, more faded than they'd been in her youth, the trucks and tractors gone to seed, hanging on like abandoned cathedrals. None of it could pull as hard as the husband she'd left confused and alone in New York, or her grandchildren, her son and sometimes her daughter. Feodora, however, had always known that emotion was a constituency that could be ignored, for a while. Beyond that congress, beyond everything was the destination.

From Khabarovsk, she travelled illegally, with a weak fake passport and bribes to Sydney. From there, it was a fishing boat, freighters and a cruise ship - seamen always found a berth for an unthreatening old woman with cash on hand. A frail woman with incriminating papers and a few vacuum-sealed bundles of 500-Euro notes stashed on her body. It was a risk, but eternity was on the line and when you look weakest is when to make the strongest gambits. Everyplace was dingy, smelly, but far more vivid than the last safe decade had been.

She made it to the island she'd had in mind. It burst from the sea stony sudden and green like an impatient fantasy. The jungle relented here and there in dramatic clearings anchored by trees with trunks wider than the old American cars were long. Beautiful, the people were soft and patient as children. This was the place where she would feed her angels.

Feodora unwrapped her satellite-phone, and told her husband to tell him she was alive. She called Troy when it suited her, and they would discuss her happiest memories, about what she'd loved, what she had hoped to love, or be loved by. She described how those things, described the island.

Feodora was still herself, of course, and even paradise was a calculation. She could seem to feel a pressure where she knew the tumors were. She tried to ignore the heaviness that seemed to be building in her inhalations, to pretend the coughing jags were from pollen. One day, looking from her porch over the gentle blue waters where dolphins played and peaceable turtles coasted through their long, long lives like dreams, it was clear: She would have to take the paltry beauty she'd found, and do what she could with it.

Troy had a helicopter pick her up from the island that night. A day later, she was at a posh seaside clinic in Long Island. It was early fall, but it felt as cold as the moon. Her children and husband visited her at a seaside clinic. That night, the ruse of the experimental procedure was the only way to get her husband to leave. Her children didn't need much convincing. Feodora rested.

Her husband was old when they'd married. man. Her children, greedily shielded from the harm they most needed, were spoiled, made wrong, she thought, imagining the world to come. They would all need money to live on, so Feodora had opted for a universe that was less than infinite - a galaxy, with a hundred billion stars and dozens of billions of years ahead of it.

After a nap, Troy introduced her to a friendly, well-dressed black woman named Charlize, who Troy said would answer any questions that she might have about what comes next. With big eyes and long fingers that drew out the things he explained in the air, Charlize had the sort of warmth that makes people comfortable, quickly, efficiently.

Feodora was weak. If it was a scam, it was too late to pull out now. If it was a scam, she'd be no wiser in a week. She gestured to Charlize and asked Troy, "she knows what she's doing, right?" Troy said "yes, she's very good." Feodora nodded, now past concealing her weakness. Whatever it all

Doctors managed the pain and prepared her for the one last burst of energy that she'd need. Feodora didn't question doctors anymore. The sun set, and they injected a mix of vasodilators, steroids, amphetamines and painkillers, all timed to reach their optimal mix not long after they reached the city in a blazing ambulance. Charlize, who was in the back of it with her, though busy with her phone for most of the ride, squeezed her hand and said everything was set up. It was late and traffic was light. The night was clear and the flashing city gleamed.

The building where they arrived, 432 Park Avenue, seemed impossible, bolting straight up in an unrelenting grid. It was just across town from where she'd lived with her husband. Feodora stopped, with the IV stand in her hand, and looked up, before Charlize suggested that they get inside, out of the cold.

The elevator took them up 35 floors in what seemed like a second. Feodora's ears popped. The drugs made her feel like she had when she was young - invincible. Though late, the office that the elevator opened into was bright and busy with people at screens everywhere. The doctor from Long island checked her pulse and her breathing, and injected a syringe into her IV, and said to Charlize, as though Feodora wasn't there, "we need to do this soon. I don't know how much longer she can keep this up."

This was a surprise to Feodora, because she felt so good that she'd almost entirely forgotten the cancer. Her heart sank as she remembered, and they led her into a vast room. It was enormous, kind of like the stage of a theater-in-the-round, and kind of like the alleyway between two skyscrapers. A few men helped her onto a bed, and told her to get comfortable. They gave her five seconds to get comfortable, and began to pull bandages across her body. The bandages were soft but firm. While she could still move her head, she looked around the impossibly tall room - a cone with hundreds of widening circular tiers above her. And she was in that bottom part of the cone where all the melted ice cream would collect.

From a shadow, a large metal arm swung out, over her. From it dangled a child's mobile, but enormous and detailed, with her mother's ornate tea set, the last thing they'd sold when she was a girl, before she was taken from her parents. There were models of Palace Square and the Winter Palace from Leningrad, a model of the first home she'd had in Geneva. There was her newborn baby boy. There was a dolphin, a quilt, a small glass of vodka, and so on. She watched them play in the cold air until the straps pulled tight, and she was immobilized on the bed.

It's time, Feodora, Charlize said over the intercom, her voice soft, but the words clipped. The attendants left the room. The way they hurried bothered her. The bother brought her back to the cancer. The cancer brought her to death. Death brought her to the hundreds of people she'd used, maybe as shields, maybe worse, while deep in the political blood sports of her young life. The thought of the people she failed to protect brought her back to the cancer - that rank betrayal in her tissues - which expanded and loomed ever larger in her thoughts.

The cancer - a terrible string of meat, coiling, spreading - Feodora tried not to think of it, tried to only think of what she was doing - creating a new world from a million impossible choices. But Feodora wasn't imagining, so much as negotiating, pleading. *Maybe just a world without terrible beasts and impossible traps that force you to destroy one friend to save another.* She thought of Arnold, and what he'd said in one of their rare meetings, "With reality, there is how much you want to talk versus how much you want to listen. It may seem like courtesy, but it's much deeper than that. You need to stop listening, and to speak clearly, or else someone else might."

But the radical unfed elements in the congress of her mind were howling, and would not heed the gavel. It was too late to find a clear voice, a pure image to hold, Feodora thought, as the machine started. The tiers above her began to spin, the dim forms in the upper tracks catching the moonlight. The entire 60-story chamber seemed to gyrate, the walls full of slithering.

Feodora knew what she'd done to get here, and that knowledge was like the cancer. It would follow her to the next world, it would infect the universe like the serpent in the garden. The new world would be full of pain and fear and injustice. She sensed this like she had anticipated everything in her life. The titanic slithering intensified. A vast and blinding light opened up on all sides of her, leaving just a spot of in its center darkness. Feodora began to move with a magisterial slowness into that spot.

The last of her physical pain became a concept, omnipresent, but mostly unnoticed, like the nose at the center of all you see. Alone in the rich and pregnant darkness, Feodora knew she could do whatever she wanted. She no longer had to listen. She was in control of everything, and all of existence could be whatever she wanted. But she also knew, with a vertiginous certainty, that she could not control what she wanted. She could not control who she was.

All of creation unfolded from her deepest wishes and desires. And Feodora, the only one true God of the universe, had a bad feeling. Darkness separated from light, time from space, matter

from energy, the living from the dead at the dawn of eternity. And Feodora knew: Her angels had not been fed; the serpent was the garden; this wouldn't go well.