

The Zilchers by Utahna Faith

Contributed by Utahna Faith

1. "Oh, you put up my postcard!" I ran into Sergei and Lilly's living room, waving the card in one hand and splashing g&t from my glass in the other. "Of course we did." Sergei took the card and read. "Darlings, a week in the middle west (I like to say middle west, like they used to) is torture. Please come and shake things up. Shock the matron--and even more so the patron--with me. Oh, I know, you won't leave the Quarter until it's time to go somewhere even close as interesting. See you soon. Love, Arielle." Lilly soaked up my drink spill with a retro rooster tea towel. I apologized, and she waved her hand and said it was nothing. She stepped into the kitchen and came back with a slim, glowing-green bottle. "A little Chartreuse to welcome you back to civilization." Lilly poured the liqueur into my drink and the g&t began to glow. "Mmm. Thank you." I reached for her and she leaned to kiss my cheek. I turned my lips to her and made a wet, smacking sound. Lilly licked the licorice flavor from her lips as she walked away. She returned with ice and glasses and mixed a chartreuse g&t for herself and one for Sergei. "Lilly, remember when we toured Poland and they thought I was a criminal?" said Sergei. "You are a criminal, honey." "Why did they think you were a criminal?" Sergei leaned forward, his eyebrows and forefinger rising. "It all started when--" "Let's do some coke," Lilly said. "But we're going out to dinner," said Sergei. "We'll just do a little." "Let's wait 'til after. We won't be able to eat." "I'll eat." "You said that last time. You said that, and you ate zilch." "Zeelch?" I said. "So what? Zeelch. It is legit." I laughed. Lilly went to the kitchen. Sergei got out a piece of paper and a fountain pen and wrote "zilch" on it in two-inch-high flowing letters. I heard the gas burner flare in the kitchen and a solid clanking sound. Lilly came back in a moment with the jagged slab of pale pink marble that set my heart racing. "Feel," she said, handing the marble to me. It was very warm. "Nice." "It keeps the stuff from clumping in this humidity." She pulled a baggy of white powder from the drawer of Sergei's cherry wood desk. "But I wanted to sniff it off my new novel," he said. He poked out his lower lip. "Someone's going to bite that," I said. He pushed it out farther. Lilly dipped her pinky finger into the bag and dabbed a bit of coke onto Sergei's pout. "There," she said, "now he's had dental work." Sergei pulled his lip in and sucked at it. He ran his tongue over his teeth. He held out his hand to Lilly. "Give me that," he said. "I thought you wanted to wait until after dinner." "Fuck dinner." Lilly shook the powder onto the marble in my lap, knelt on the floor by my legs with a razor blade, and started chopping. 2. We flew down to the river, over the crumbling sidewalks, under the wrought iron balconies, under fat ferns dripping. Sergei took our arms as we crossed intersections. We were all three talking, fast and at once, but somehow we were all three listening a little, too. "The creamy, buttercup buildings!" I screamed. "There they are! Look at them!" "...and then the woman next in line held out her book and said, will you inscribe it, 'To Tammy's pussy--'" "I don't know if I should let Lane borrow the Volvo or not; he's only sixteen--" "The buildings! The creamy, buttercup--" "Yes, you wrote about them, didn't you, darling? That was a lovely story." "Well, at least Volvo is the safest; that's what it's known for, so--" "Let him borrow whatever he wants to borrow." "So did you sign it that way?" Then we were through the little park with jazz trumpet playing, down at the railroad tracks, and then at the door of the restaurant. Small and nondescript, old European, no name, the number engraved. Inside we went up in an elevator. We held onto one another, laughing as the car jerked and took its time up two floors, and the uniformed attendant stared up at the lighted numbers. Sergei gave the attendant two dollars and we fell out into the room that ran long and narrow past windows overlooking the Mississippi. A pianist played something soft and background at a black baby grand. A maitre d' appeared. "Right this way." He started for a middle section of four-top tables by the windows. "Excuse me," Sergei said, "we would like this little table in the corner." He gestured to a smaller table in the far right corner where river water sprayed up from a small pier onto the sparkling glass. Lights twinkled on the pier. A candle flickered on the table. It was set a bit away from the others. The maitre d' stopped, lowered his head slightly, looked quite serious. "I'm very sorry," he said, "but that table is for couples only." Lilly and I looked at one another. "We don't give a crap about that," said Sergei. "There's plenty of room. We'll take that one." The maitre d' lowered his chin farther, then lifted it. "I'm very sorry, sir..." "We'll take the small one." Sergei walked away toward the corner table. Lilly and I followed. Sergei held out chairs for us, grabbed one for himself from another table. We jiggled their wooden bases as close as possible around three sides of the table. Sergei stood again, stole a third place setting from nearby. He was arranging it, clinking and jingling, when the maitre d' rushed up, sweating, followed by a manager-looking guy and a waiter. "You see, sir..." said the maitre d', his voice shaking. The manager stepped in front of him. "I'm very sorry, but as we have explained--" "Do you have any idea how much money I've spent in this place?" Sergei said. "Sergei, let's go to another table. It's fine." Lilly stood. "We want this table!" Sergei slapped his palm down on the white linen. "Sweetie." Lilly took Sergei's hand and pulled him to his feet, ignoring the wait staff and everyone else, and started walking. She caught my eye and tilted her head in the direction of the larger tables. "Fine." He snatched his hand away from Lilly and crossed his arms. We all walked. The pout he'd shown earlier was patrician compared to this one. We sat down at a four-top in the center of the long row of window-view tables. I felt exposed. The maitre d' threw menus at us and went away. "What a lovely scarf," said Lilly. She leaned over to touch the material at my neck. "Unusual knit. Is it vintage?" "I made it. The yarn is really fancy, so that makes it look more difficult than it is, really." "That's a wonderful boot, too. The color, the height, the heel angle. Excellent find." "Thank you!" I glowed in Lilly's approval. Sergei frowned into the menu. "Where's that piano player?" he said. "What are you guys ordering?" I said. "I'll just have the cup of mango soup," said Lilly. "See! See!" said Sergei. "I knew you wouldn't be hungry." "You could play the piano," I said to Lilly. "I'll order for you." "Oh, no, I..." "Yes, play!" said Sergei. "You're so good," I said. "They wouldn't want--" "They should be honored." "I'm bashful." "You're a shy girl who loves attention," said Sergei. "Go play!" Lilly rose smooth like a leopard and crossed the shorter length of the room to the piano. She slid onto the bench and placed her hands on the keys. Her eyes closed. "What will she

play, do you think?" I said. "A scherzo." "What's a scherzo?" She began. It was lovely. It sounded like Chopin to me, but darker. "That," Sergei said. "3." Back outside we were feeling a little low but tried to stay chipper. We wandered upriver for a few minutes, then went over the levee and came back down in front of Cafe du Monde. As we passed, a man in a French New Wave cinema hat stood and leaned over the rail. "Aren't you Sergei?" "I am no one." "Your book is like a pornographic folktale! I loved it!" "Thank him," I said, grabbing Sergei's elbow and leaning toward his ear. "I can't. He will follow us." We crossed Decatur, ducked into Tujague's and ordered an oyster po'boy to share. Lilly and I left for the bathroom while Sergei sat at the bar under bright lights looking at lions on the Animal Channel. "Do you have the stuff?" she asked. "I think Sergei has it." "Damn. He won't want to give it to me until we eat something." We washed our hands and went back out, trying not to touch the doorknob. Lilly finished Sergei's drink. On the sidewalk we took turns with the sandwich and walked toward Frenchmen. "Mmm, the oysters. The bread. It's so good." I chewed, took a breath, made myself swallow. "Delicious," said Lilly. "But I can only eat a bite." "I told you," said Sergei. "They bake their own bread," I said. "Lilly is a wonderful baker." Lilly ducked her head and smiled. "And an amazing piano player," I said. "That stupid manager and sick headwaiter--" "The other diners loved you," said Sergei. It was true; some had clapped for her Chopin rendition, and no one seemed happy about it when the staff made us leave. "Look, it's Choo!" Sergei pointed out. "You can't see Choo from here," said Lilly. "Why not?" "It's Venus," I said. "You are Venus," said Sergei. We finished our sandwich and stuffed the paper bag into an overflowing trashcan. "4." It was early for The Abbey, and no one was sloppy yet. The floor-length fringes of plastic were tacked back from the doorway to let in cooler late-night air. AC/DC was on the jukebox, and Madeline was behind the bar. Her dimples popped out when she saw us. She shook her high black ponytail and pushed at her Betty Page bangs. She twirled and danced toward us as we squeezed up to the bar. Her ruffled skirt bounced up and down showing glimpses of lace-rowed knickers. "Hey dudes, what can I get you?" Sergei and Lilly ordered Makers Mark on the rocks, and I a cosmo. We watched Madeline, impressed with how she could mix drinks and dance on chunky six-inch platform heels without getting klutzy. She leaned over and left a classic red lip print on Sergei's cheek. The hardware-sized chain around her neck jangled on the bar top. A four-piece Dixieland jazz band was setting up in the back, one table pushed aside to make room for them. We squeezed past and leaned against the wall in the tiny hallway that led to the larger and less smelly of the two bathrooms. A mailbox-lettering sign high on the wall read "ladies" and below it was written in tilting magic marker "and sex and drugs". Sergei spotted a decapitated red rose on the floor. "A posy," he said, picking it up. He held it out to Lilly and she looked at it, at him, at the dirty floor. He pulled the outside petals from it. He spat on his finger and wiped the short bit of remaining stem. A speck of blood welled on his finger. He put the finger in his mouth and held the rose out to me. I tucked it into the center of the palm-treed twist of hair atop my head. "C'mon! People are waiting," yelled the woman in front of us. She banged on the bathroom door. "Hold up, bitch," came a guy's voice. "Chill," came a girl's. When the couple left the bathroom they looked straight ahead, holding hands and moving to the music of the band that had started warming up. The woman in front of us glared at their backs then went into the bathroom and slammed the door. Lilly shrugged. When it was our turn we fastened the metal latch and gave it a tug. Sergei took the little baggie of white powder from a zippered pocket of his leather jacket. I brought out my mailbox key. We took turns dipping the key tip and sniffing. We passed it around again, and then again. Lilly checked her nose in the mirror. I put lipstick on. "Don't you girls have to pee?" asked Sergei. "No, we did at Tujague's." "Damn." We went out, through the little hallway crowded with people waiting for the bathroom. "5." Washboard Lisa joined the band for a set, playing a beat-up cello. Her pit-bull Henry sat on the hem of her hiked skirt, guarding shadowy thighs. Lisa's long hair swung as her head rocked. A milky pink bangle slid up and down her wrist. Her fingers quivered. A boy with shaved head and bolts through left eyebrow and right nostril approached us with four shot glasses filled to the brims and splashing against his black jacket. We were sitting on bar stools between the end of the bar and a short row of video-crack machines. We made room for him. He handed us the glasses and looked bashful. "Thank you. What is it?" I said. "Cheers," said Sergei. "Are you old enough to be in here?" said Lilly. I glanced over the bar to Madeline, caught her eye, raised my eyebrows and looked at the drink. She nodded slightly. I hoped the boy hadn't seen this. We lifted the glasses, clicked them together, whooshed them up to our mouths. I downed about 3/4 of it and let the rest spill to the floor as I brought the glass away. We slammed the glasses on the counter. The liquid was vaporous and burning. I breathed in. "Yiy!" shouted Sergei. "Another round!" We heard a shriek from the doorway. "No! No, let go of me!" It sounded familiar. "Noah!" I said. I grabbed Sergei and Lilly's arms. We looked at the door, and the front blue tire of a little red bicycle popped in. Noah's hands were clenched on the handlebars. His shining blond head appeared, his baby blue vest, and the bouncer twice Noah's size holding Noah's upper arms, lifting Noah, who lifted the bike, kicking. Lilly stood; Sergei took out his wallet and called to Madeline; I ran to the door. Soon we had Noah inside, the bouncer drinking an Abita Amber in the doorway, and the little bicycle sharing a pillar outside with Madeline's pink bike and bike lock. "Fiasco averted," said Sergei. "He hurt my arm," said Noah. I placed a kiss on his striped sleeve over the small, hard bicep and Lilly got him a cosmo. "6." "We're getting tight," said James. He flipped his honey-colored hair off his forehead. He still looked young and elegant, like in the photo from his first book of poetry twenty years earlier. "Tight? I'm tight," said Noah. "Yeah, like Hemingway characters." I held my glass the way I imagined Lady Brett would. "Lilly and Arielle are getting tight," said Sergei. "Wet. They're already tight, I mean, and I hope they're getting wet." "Please, I'm trying to drink my cosmo." Noah turned his little nose into the smoky air. "Do you have a mint?" I asked, unbuttoning Sergei's pocket. I pulled out a sheet of lined paper, unfolded it and smoothed it on the damp bar. "Zilch! Zilchers!" I shouted, hitting the bar top with the palm of my hand. "What? Zilch? Zilchers?" asked Noah. "Yes!" Sergei grabbed the page and waved it over his head. "Us! We will be the Zilchers! We will write about Zilch and write it stunningly." "I don't want to write about Zilch," Noah said. "Do it, do it," I told him, slinging my arm around him and rocking him back and forth. Sergei handed a pile of bar napkins to each of us, and we went hunting for pens. Noah looked in his messenger bag, Sergei at the bar, Lilly in the back pocket of her black jeans, me in the shirt and jacket

pockets of drinkers at adjacent tables. We were back in a moment and ready. We held pens over napkins and reached with our other hands to the shots lined up on the table. "Go!" shouted Sergei. Clink, gulp, slam, write. We bent over our napkins, squinting in the semi-dark. The bar noise whirled around us, ceiling fans lifted the edges of our masterpieces, the jukebox or the band played, girls danced past us, girls and girls, guys and girls, a girl sandwiched between two guys. We flipped napkins over, scratching words onto the backs, ignoring splotches, swaying against one another a little, grabbing the next napkin, putting the previous to the bottom of the pile. "Stop!" shouted Sergei. We stopped. "But I'm not finished," said Noah, putting pen back to napkin. "You're finished. You will begin again." Sergei dashed his hand across the table and grabbed Noah's pile. "Hey!" "Darling, he's not finished," said Lilly. "Give back his writing; don't be a beast." "Beasts, beasts, beasts," I chanted. "You will see. It will work better this way." Sergei handed a new stack of napkins to each of us and waved for more drinks from the bar. "Two shifts to the bathrooms," he said, reaching out to me and to Lilly under the table with palm down, pressing the small baggies into our hands. I motioned to Noah and James to follow. I slid my hand into my pocket as I walked, weaving through dancers grinding, ducking under a bopping muted but still loud trumpet. In the bathroom the walls pulsed hot pink with black squiggles raving across them. "Good lord," said James. "I should have brought my sunglasses." I pulled mine out of my purse and put them on. We looked at them in the mirror. "For morning," I said and took them off. I passed the bag of coke around, and the mailbox key. James sniffed a very large bump off the key tip, carefully, then looked at his nose in the mirror. "We used to wear little silver spoons around our necks for this," James said. "And the police didn't bother you?" "Madrid." He shrugged. Noah was looking at the powder, dipping the key and shaking it back off. "I don't know if I should. I just can't decide if I want any. What if I do it then I don't feel good and wish I hadn't?" "Pass that back to me while you decide," said James. "No, I want some," said Noah, turning away. He sniffed loudly with one nostril and then the other. "Ow, it's burning my nose!" I had a bit more and James had more, then we collected Noah and went back out to our booth. Lilly and Sergei were already back, and fresh drinks awaited. There were also small black notebooks, spiral bound. We beamed at them and exclaimed over them. Lilly sipped her drink and tried to hide her smile. And the pens were new, too. Black paper inside the notebooks, and the pens wrote in glowing silver, sparkling pink, shiny mint. "This is better than ice cream!" I said. "Go!" shouted Sergei. 7. Too much, the shots the bumps the words the friends so beautiful, I run out the door feel the plastic curtains slide against my damp arm, the bouncer says something, tattoos on his face, dots over eyebrows, tilt head grin at him, the sidewalk tilty too, Washboard Lisa's dog urinating on a hydrant, cliché I say to him his tongue lolls his eyes glitter studded black collar the door guy would like to steal, step in something, shit, thank goodness it isn't, white bread and ketchup stuck to my shoe, a deep-fried breaded edge protruding, I've seen that before, pork chop sandwich, keep going down the street, Aunt Tiki's, Jet Boy Jet Girl on the jukebox, swooping in, everyone look at me, Laurie Belle with her pale retro hair, glamour, a bandage on her plush cleavage, what I ask, impolite, mole removed she says, me too, barely see it, tiny scar looks like caterpillar, lifts her blouse, had one here years ago, I brush it with my finger, her husband and their boyfriend smiling, a shriek from the other end of the bar, dark, sticky floor, Goya faced goth girl rushing toward me yelling bitch, get out, this is my bar, I will go where I want I tell her, grabs a bottle off the bar, squats and breaks it, waving it at me, Laurie Belle screaming, husband and boyfriend grabbing goth girl's arms, boyfriend scratched, blood on his cheekbone, Laurie Belle has hanky not tissue, bartender climbing over, everyone standing, loud, dizzy, Lilly is there, pulling me, have to do something about goth girl, no Lilly says, you're my friend and I'm getting you out of here, sidewalk, running, Lilly pulling, Sergei and Noah and James, in through the curtains, through the Abbey, into the courtyard, commotion, questions, side alley, sidewalk, moon and stars, past the nunnery, goodnight says James, turns right we turn left, stumbling, flying, the gate, angels in the courtyard, the stairway, holding onto each other, all of us, laughing, the key, shh, the neighbors, nevermind, restoration. 8. The bed was filled with pillows of the loftiest down. Lilly pulled out a full-length body pillow from somewhere, and tucked it along behind me. I leaned against it and it felt so nice. Comforting. She put a little ceramic trashcan near my head, up against the bed, and led my hand to it. "Just in case you don't feel so good, sweetie," she said. "Thank you, thank you," I murmured. I heard her voice, soft, and Noah's, words and sounds of blankets and pillows and the little love seat and Noah's petite frame and curling up there on the couch. I opened my eyes and saw Lilly kiss Noah on the forehead and tuck a pale blue blanket around him. I closed my eyes and felt the room spin, first side to side and then, slowly, end over end. The lights went out and it was quiet and I felt heat and slight movement from the other side of the long body pillow. Lilly's breath caught, Sergei hummed against her, they moved, rhythm, sliding, exchanges, grace, familiarity, heat, words that were partial, phrases, my beautiful wife, my husband, my husband, and I was shocked at the joy of it, I love you, I love you, hers first and then his just after, beautiful, discovery. But I was spinning again, and the muscles deep in my stomach were churning, and I didn't want to be sick in the ceramic waste bin just after and just next to such bliss, so I slid from the bed and made my way to the bathroom where I switched on the mermaid night light, collapsed on the floor, and leaned my cheek against the cool, clean porcelain of the toilet. 9. The sun would be just overhead soon, and Lilly had roused us out of bed with cafe-au-lait, fresh squeezed orange juice, warm croissants, aspirin. I contributed two pale blue Valium. Noah and I split one. Lilly declined, and Sergei saved the last one for later. We sat on the balcony with our breakfast, chaise longues, a candle with three wicks. Sergei had gathered a stack of our bar napkins, words scrawled, pieces of paper, black and silver sheets torn from our notebooks. "I was wrong," he said. It hurt seeing his forehead tighten, his lips harden. He held the pages high, then tilted them into the candle flames until they went up flaming and smoking. He held them away in his fingertips and we watched, quiet. After a bit, the smoke alarms in the gallery roof started buzzing. We all looked up at them just as the new sprinkler system kicked on in the two hundred year old eaves. Water showered down on us like a tropical rainstorm but with a slight chemical scent instead of the smell of beignets and gardenia. We sat looking at one another, with dampening hair, wet lips, glistening cheekbones, at soggy bread and drops splashing in milky coffee, out at trees and vines and flowers that were dry in the sunshine, at colored prisms floating between us and the unrainy world out from under the balcony.

At the sooty ash of The Zilchers forming between Sergei's thumb and forefinger. Â The sprinklers stopped. Â Sergei leaned forward and pressed a dot of soot onto each of our foreheads.