



**DISTURBING
PIECES**

ROBERT N. PORTER

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CHAPTER 1

An Unexpected Gift

A warm April breeze from the southwest carried hints of the freshness of days to come as spring exhaled over the coastal Connecticut town of Black Harbor. But although life was in the air, you couldn't miss the reminders of the unusually severe winter just past—patches of gray snow in shaded areas, sand gathered where pavement met the sidewalk, and burlap-wrapped shrubs on lawns. Dr. Ivan Koslovsky and his wife, Carolyn, sat at the breakfast table finishing their morning coffee. Their two children, Peter and Sonia, had just gotten on the bus, and the couple was enjoying their fifteen minutes of calm between the whirlwind of getting the kids ready for school and the bluster of this Thursday workday. In just a few moments, Ivan would be off to the office, and Carolyn would be busy with her own responsibilities.

Their two-story house, with its covered front veranda, was built at the turn of the century by a well-to-do fishing captain. From the eat-in kitchen, they enjoyed a spectacular view of the Inner Harbor framed by a protective concrete and rock break-water a few hundred feet from the shore.

Though not engaged in conversation, they were enjoying each other's company. Ivan picked up and unfolded yesterday's *Black Harbor Standard*. He glanced at the date on the front, April 7, 2010, just to be sure, and flipped to the editorial section on page five. Ivan was a lanky six-foot two, with wavy black hair parted on the side and a carefully trimmed goatee and mustache. His small round metal-framed glasses gave his thin face a serious look—and he did have a tendency to be more cordial than frivolous. But his so easily evoked and unaffected smile and dry sense of humor immediately put one at ease.

Ivan took a keen interest in politics and seemed to have a point of view even on the most trivial matters. But his day-to-day work life was far from an ideal setting for a free exchange of ideas: as a dentist, more often than not, he was exposed to a captive audience. But given the opportunity, he could argue with the best of them, and while his views could be somewhat rigid, he was by no means beyond persuading.

As Carolyn sipped her coffee and stared out across the harbor, she was mentally ordering the events of the day ahead. Her tall slender form sat erect, and her elbows rested on the table. With her deep brown eyes and straight brown hair tied back in a pony tail, her face revealed a rare combination of youthful freshness and mature confidence. She was at ease with herself, happy with who she was and her situation in life.

She had first met Ivan at the University of Connecticut. They had been students there for nearly three years and hadn't crossed paths until the day that Ivan found himself standing behind her in the lineup at the library. He noticed that she was checking out Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Carolyn had done a course in Russian literature in second year "just to do something different," and, unexpectedly, had become hooked on the

likes of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. In fact, she sometimes questioned her choice of business as a major and felt that a career as an English teacher—or even a journalist—would be more to her liking. When she heard from the tall man standing behind her, “Is that for a course you’re doing?” and had to admit that she had just picked up some light reading, a conversation began that they would both come to recognize as a turning point in their lives.

Ivan had been inculcated with Russian history and literature by his mother and had read many of the classics by the time he finished high school. Although he liked to read, he never really appreciated the necessity of reading books that none of his friends had even heard of, and once at university, he focused almost exclusively on the sciences. But he eventually came to realize that his forced familiarity with the greats of Russian prose had been worth it, not only in fostering an appreciation for literature that would be rekindled later in life, but for the simple fact that it allowed him to have an intelligent conversation with that attractive business major in the library.

Carolyn finished up an accounting degree at the same time that Ivan graduated dental school. Having known each other little more than a year, they decided to marry and start a family. That was almost thirteen years ago—now she was thirty-six and Ivan thirty-eight, and they had become accustomed to an unpretentious but satisfying life. Carolyn loved the charm of Black Harbor—and the fact that living there allowed her to be relatively close to her parents, who still lived in the same small New Hampshire town where she grew up. She worked three half-days a week as a bookkeeper at a supply store for the local commercial fishing fleet and was able to keep in touch with her literary side by writing a biweekly opinion column for the *Black Harbor Standard*. These things, along with her two children, with

whom she was perpetually preoccupied, kept her busy and content.

“They’re definitely overspending on that new town hall,” Ivan muttered as he downed the dregs of his coffee. “Two million . . . and we’re only a town of twenty thousand!” To see what he considered a waste of public funds, which in his estimation belonged at least in part to him, bothered Ivan. He was no miser and gave liberally to charity but that was his own money and his own choice.

“It is a lot of money,” conceded Carolyn. “But we do need a new town hall. And the building will certainly spruce up the look of the place. Downtown looks pretty drab. I was actually thinking of writing a piece on that very subject. Maybe you’d better not read it,” she said with a laugh. As she often did, Carolyn acted as a counterbalance to Ivan’s sometimes knee-jerk conservatism.

Ivan looked up from his paper and smiled, revealing white but slightly crowded teeth. “I’m sure it will look very nice. But two million is still a lot of money for a place like Black Harbor!” Though rarely conceding verbally, Ivan was often persuaded by his wife in the end.

“Maybe you should run for Mayor,” needled Carolyn, knowing very well that her husband was more of a talker than a doer.

Ivan responded simply with a glance over his glasses, followed by an affectionate smile. “You know,” he said after a moment’s thought, “one thing that a little more money *could* be spent on . . . in my humble opinion as a lowly taxpayer . . . is law enforcement. Have you noticed how many break-ins there have been around here lately? It seems like when we first moved here there were hardly any.”

“There certainly seems to be more crime lately . . . or maybe

it's just that more of it gets reported in the papers. I suspect that there really has been an increase . . . but there's usually some other social ill at its root . . . you know, poverty, drugs, things like that.”

Ivan bristled. “Of course, drugs . . . the universal excuse!”

Carolyn allowed him the last word this time. She knew that her husband often saw black or white rather than shades of gray, and knowing his father, she realized that he had come by it honestly.

Ivan was raised as an only child in a middle-class neighborhood in the New Orleans suburb of Chalmette. His father, Alexi, was born in Russia but had defected to the United Kingdom in the 1960s and completed his education there. After finishing his PhD in physics at Cambridge, he was able to take a post-doctoral position—and eventually a faculty position—at Tulane University in New Orleans. It was there that he met his wife Katherine and eventually became an American citizen. Alexi had a big heart and a brilliant mind, but he expected the same predictability that governed his research to apply equally to his personal relationships and was known as a hard man to work with. Though now in his seventies, and officially retired, he still kept close ties to the university. Katherine had taught English at Chalmette High School until her retirement and, unlike her husband, was comfortable with the inevitable ambiguities of life. While Ivan recognized in himself, somewhat reluctantly, some of his father's traits, he always thought of himself as more like his mother.

Carolyn began to move the breakfast dishes from the table to the counter. “Don't forget to come home as soon as you can after you finish up today,” she reminded her husband. She was thinking ahead to the birthday party they had planned for their

son, Peter. Eleven of Peter's friends would be showing up for supper and, although Carolyn had planned well, she needed all the help she could get.

"Don't worry," he replied. "I've got a light afternoon . . . should be home by four thirty." This Thursday would be similar to all of Ivan's working days; the nature of his work precluded much variety. When he moved to Black Harbor, he knew that being a small town dentist could be somewhat of a pedestrian existence. But he enjoyed his work and was diligent just shy of being obsessive, a trait which had grown more conspicuous as he got older. Ivan had been very strong academically and had been accepted for Harvard medicine. But in weighing his options, medicine had too many loose ends, too many uncertainties for his liking, whereas dentistry seemed to fit him perfectly.

Ivan folded the *Standard* and laid it in his briefcase. Opening the refrigerator, he grabbed the brown-bagged sandwich he had prepared the night before and laid it next to the newspaper. As he kissed his wife good bye and walked out the door, briefcase in hand, his day was laid out for him. He would see patients from nine to noon and one o'clock to four fifteen. His lunch hour was similarly prearranged—forty minutes for a walk and twenty to eat his sandwich and finish the paper. That was his routine.

When Peter and Sonia got off school at three that afternoon, Carolyn was there waiting. On nice days like this, when she wasn't working, she walked the half mile home with the children, carrying the book bags and listening to the news of the day. This was the day that Peter turned ten, and his mind was focused on his imminent birthday party. He was hoping his gifts would include one particular video game, and he seemed pretty confident of getting it. Peter was a stocky boy with his father's

black hair and his mother's deep brown eyes. He had a carefree way about him and didn't seem to mind the fact that he was often upstaged by his much more talkative eight-year-old sister. Sonia, with her long curly dark brown hair, was much more impulsive than her brother and had a habit of telling others what they should do and when they should do it. She ran on ahead of Peter and her mother and waited at the end of each block. "Wait for us!" Carolyn yelled, as she and Peter hurried to catch up. The air was warm, the snow was nearly gone, and the sidewalks were drying up. All over the neighborhood, bicycles and skateboards were being pulled out of sheds and basements, and driveways and streets were being reanimated from winter's sterility, becoming alive with children playing and owners walking dogs. When they arrived at their home at 51 Black Rock Road, all a little out of breath, Carolyn laid down the book bags on the covered veranda and unlocked the front door. Scooting inside only long enough to toss their coats on the floor, the two siblings ran back out again to enjoy the warm sun before the party began at five o'clock.

Ivan got home around twenty minutes to five and managed to corral Peter and Sonia back inside to get cleaned up for supper. After changing into jeans and T-shirt, he labeled some lucky plates and glasses and set out snack foods in the play room. This was a big open room in the basement painted with a kaleidoscope of bright colors. It was Carolyn's creation, and the children loved it there.

When five o'clock came, the doorbell rang, and Susan Ryan appeared in the doorway. Susan was a nurse at the hospital and had moved to Black Harbor three years earlier when her husband, a family doctor, took over the practice of a retiring physician. She was younger than Carolyn—in her early thirties—and

always seemed upbeat and confident. She loved to chat and was often a bit gossipy and since moving to Black Harbor had become good friends with the more reserved Carolyn. This evening she was dropping off her son, Nathan, a slight, freckle-faced redhead who was one of Peter's best friends.

"Good evening, Carolyn," said Susan with a smile. "And happy birthday, Peter!" She raised her voice, so he could hear.

Peter, having heard someone at the door, was standing in the hallway. "Thanks, Mrs. Ryan," he replied shyly.

"Nathan's looking forward to playing your new game tonight . . . if you get it that is," she teased, as she helped her ten-year-old hang up his coat. Peter just grinned.

When his mother had gone, Nathan passed his wrapped gift to Carolyn, and he and Peter headed downstairs to the play room. "Oh. One more thing," he said, wheeling around about halfway down the steps and bolting back up. "I've got something else!" He ran to the front porch where his coat was hung up and reached into one of the pockets. His lips began to form an impish grin as he handed Carolyn a small box. It was neatly wrapped in rich looking glossy blue wrapping paper. On top was a folded tag, taped down to conceal whatever was written on it. Curious about the gift, Carolyn turned to question Nathan, but he had already scurried downstairs. So with a twinge of guilt, she began to carefully peel back the tape on the tag.

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