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MARIA RAPOPORT

## CITY BY THE WOODS

The building was made of red bricks, but in my memory it's a single brick standing tall and upright on its side, or not a brick but a brick-red vertical block without a single door or window and with the long rectangle of a gravel lot trailing behind it like its shadow. And the key thing about this image is its starkness. There are only two forms to it: the simple block of the building and its gray shadow, the gravel lot. Beyond these is the edge of the known world—nothing.

The first time my cousin Misha and I talked about Russia, something he said brought this image to mind. "When I was three," he told me, "I would go up to every person in our courtyard and say hello. I remember there was always this guy on the same stoop who asked to ride my bicycle. I would always tell him, 'No, you can't ride my bicycle!' This was when I was three or four. For some reason, I asked my mother about that guy when I was five or six and she said, *Yevo bolshe net*. 'He's not here anymore' is what she meant, but you know in Russian this could mean he doesn't exist anymore. It made an impression on me."

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Both Misha and I had grown up in the projects on the outskirts of Leningrad, so his descriptions of his building sounded like descriptions of mine. But there was also something else, a familiar way of remembering home as circumscribed by an absolute boundary. "Behind our building, there were three playgrounds that were joined by two wooded areas," he recalled. "On the other side of the street, there was a building just like ours. I don't remember what was there, only that it was a scary place. I never really went there. I remember specifics about each of our playgrounds. The first playground right outside our building felt like the home area. It had this big *raketa*, a lot of things to play on. The second playground had a sandbox, and all of these old ladies sat there. The third playground I don't remember much at all. I generally didn't go that far."

He squinted as he spoke, as though he were really trying to see into the distance. I imagined that if he'd attempted a trip across the street to the other playground behind the other building, he might have fallen off the edge of the earth and disappeared like the man who used to ask to borrow his bicycle.

As a child, I only ever saw a small patch of land. Eventually, this patch would have sprouted roads that stretched out to join the wider world, but for me and for Misha, this was a process interrupted. We left Russia when we were kids and came to America, which looked, felt, and acted nothing like home. Sure, in American school I learned about the unconvincing facts of geography—a teacher points to a spot on a globe and says, “This is where we are,” and then to another spot almost on the opposite side and says, “This is where you’re from”—but my mind never stopped fussing over my lost patch of land in the same way that my tongue was always caressing the gap left by a freshly lost tooth, until memory eroded home to its essence: two rectangles floating in uncharted space, unreachable.

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Photos of me from before the emigration are black-and-white, like pictures most people my age have of their grandparents. They’re scratchy, too, and leave a lot to the imagination. We seemed always to be traveling. There are photos of us at the Black Sea. I was no longer a toddler. My legs had grown longer, and I wore a dress shaped like a bell. In one photo, I hide demurely behind a palm tree while two unfamiliar boys glance in my direction. There’s one of me admiring rustic stone lions guarding the path down to the beach. There’s a carnival shot of my mother and me in a bumper car, her smiling face, my tiny head sticking out above the hood.

There are photos from trips to our *dacha*. We would pack our things and run to the busy train station. We’d board a pine-green train with hard wooden seats and do our best to cram our luggage into the overhead rack before someone else could claim the space. After we settled in, I’d inevitably fall asleep and wake to the sight of trees, shade, dancing light. Our stop was a platform made of raw planks that still smelled of sap. Once the train was gone, we were alone with trees as far as the eye could see, parted by a narrow ribbon of tracks that wound away endlessly in each direction. I’d follow my parents down from the platform and up a dirt incline to the tree line, where they searched for the familiar gap between the ferns that marked the faint footpath we would follow until we reached our cottage.

How had we gotten there? I had no idea. One second we were in the city, and the next we were staring down endless train tracks flanked by endless woods. My memory won’t connect the two states.

Later, after the emigration, I was haunted by a series of dreams in which I’d remember a secret route and arrive at a familiar place, the place I’d been

trying to get to but had forgotten how to reach in the waking world. In one dream, I went to the basement of our first American house and found a hole in the concrete wall behind the boiler. I crawled through the hole and emerged into a windowless, subterranean room with a hardwood floor, hardwood walls, even a hardwood ceiling. The whole thing felt like being inside of a man-made tree. It was strangely comfortable, even though there wasn't a stick of furniture to be seen. On the other side of the room was a door, and when I walked through it I found myself in a similar room, only the ceiling was oddly angled, and there was a single chair in the center of the otherwise bare floor. I wandered through another door, found another room, and wandered some more for what seemed like days. All of the rooms varied slightly—an oddly angled wall, here a chair, there a table—but were all in essence the same. Finally I came to the last of these rooms, walked through the last of these doors, and emerged onto a marble staircase with ornate ironwork railings that rose infinitely upward and descended infinitely downward. *Oh*, I thought with relief, *this is how you get here*.

Had I been searching for those train tracks in my sleep? Of course I know, without having to try it, that if I stood again on that spot between the platform and the lip of the woods, I wouldn't recognize the place or—even if it were not overgrown through lack of use—be able to find the gap in the ferns where the path begins. These landmarks exist only as memories, and only in me.

My earliest memory of Baba, my father's mother, is of the two of us alone at the *dacha*. It was there that she gave me my first scar—a fibrous, shiny patch of raised skin on my left outer thigh—when she tripped while carrying a saucepan of boiling milk, then treated my burn with butter. She would take me through the woods in search of blueberries and mushrooms while she told me stories about snakes that eat children whole. I still have habits I picked up in those days. I sniff the forest air to catch the scent of blueberries, and I look down as I walk to watch the tangled tree roots weaving beneath my feet. I remember that they wound around the banks of the forest lake where neighbors from other hidden *dachas* gathered on hot days. At our *dacha* we were alone, but at the lake there were dozens of people in swimsuits tucking their clothing into cubbyholes between the tree roots. Once, on my way there, I looked down to find my foot suspended above what I'd thought was a root but then saw was a striped snake so fat that its width was greater

than the length of my little foot and so long that both its head and tail lay out of sight in the rough fern patches on opposite sides of the path. It didn't move, not even to breathe, and with my foot poised just above it and about to descend, I understood with surprising clarity that either it was dead or I soon would be. What happened afterwards? I think my parents came up behind me. I remember trying to scramble up my father's leg and into his arms, but he laughed and wouldn't pick me up. And a decade later when I asked him about that episode, he laughed in the same way and told me I'd imagined it.

While digging through our family album, I found a photograph of what I decided must have been our *dacha*. It's grainy, vague like memory, and has ornately cut edges that resemble the illustrated border of a children's storybook. Light pours over our garden, raking shadow peas over the ground. White birches behind the gate hint at the forest beyond. On the left side, Baba stands in the shadow of the cabin door, while on the right, I loiter in front of a rough wooden gate, my knees twisted bashfully together. Next to me, in a patch of light, a chubby blonde girl is caught in the gesture of a dancing Rococo cherub—was she a neighbor's child?

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Then there were pictures taken long before my birth, ancient daguerreotypes of Baba as a girl wearing a linen sailor dress and sporting an enormous bow on her head. There were a few more images of young Baba with her older brothers and sisters sunning themselves in wicker chairs on a dappled lawn. There was also a romanticized studio portrait of her, now a young woman, sitting in front of a painted landscape and gazing toward an imaginary horizon. I showed it to my father. "Baba was beautiful!" I said. "Sure," he replied, "like the Wicked Witch of the West."

But I was surprised to discover that—although everyone told me I looked like Babushka Masha, my mother's mother and my namesake—I recognized in Baba's cheeks and lips the prototypes of mine. And though Baba was feminine and petite, her face also carried within it the master code of not just my face but also my father's, and not just his features but also the spirit, the familiar sylvan dreaminess, the inner life that was opaque in real life but so apparent in photographs that it separated Baba from every other person in the shot, from people who seemed to fit into their surroundings but could not transcend the brief moment when the shutter snapped open and light carried them *en masse* through the lens, inverted them in the dark, deposited them onto the sensitive film while Baba's soul kept flying.

I searched for more young Baba pictures, but by her thirties she was already losing the roundness of her face. Her hair was graying. Her eyes seemed to shift closer together, to crawl under her brows for cover. She began to look frail, shrunken, like a withered girl.

Years after finding that first photo of our *dacha*, I found a second one that shows the gate and the cabin from farther away and from a different angle. And bleeding off the photo's plain-cut edge is a well made of stacked logs.

There had been a well. A grandfather—either Dedushka Misha, my mother's father, or Dedushka Oskar, Baba's husband—had led me there. I remember the sun on my skin, my eyelashes fluttering in the light. I remember water pooled and dancing inside an old man's hands. I remember him pouring water from a white tin cup into my cupped hands. Watching it drain slowly through my interlaced fingers, I realized that water could be held, if only briefly. It was the greatest magic trick I'd ever seen—to hold, even for a moment, something whose nature it was to escape.

But the more I remember that moment, the more I change it. When I try, for example, to visualize the face of the old man, an image of his rolled-up sleeves mixes with a remembered photograph of Dedushka Oskar sitting on a couch with his arm around me, then with the cabinet in Baba's apartment on which the framed photo stood and the impression Baba gave me of Dedushka Oskar being a war hero of such distinction that his gravestone was like a monument, then with that monument as I imagined it, a column topped with an angel standing on a ball, and with photographs of Dedushka Oskar's actual gravestone, an ordinary slab of polished granite with my last name etched into it, and with Dedushka Misha's sagging eyelids, with the way his flesh hung from his small shoulders and pooled at his waist, and with the time he forced me to eat an entire bowl of cottage cheese while I choked back my tears, smiled, and said "delicious" after each bite. I begin to build a narrative about Dedushka Oskar—he was a hero—and about Dedushka Misha—he was a tyrant. My memory of the well also becomes a narrative, a framework that I fill with gardens I saw later in life, with other birches, other *dachas*, with images of any Russian cottage found in a family album or while browsing the Internet.

The more you study something, the more you change it. The more I write about my memories, the more they transform—from sensations that seem as necessary to recapture as a vivid dream does just after waking, into words scribbled on a page, a string of signs and symbols, abstract shapes.

Meanwhile, something is constantly flipping to the earliest pages of my recollections, erasing from the beginning, erasing at the edges, erasing scenery, erasing secondary characters, their names and stories, leaving only their images in old photographs on the backs of which there are no descriptions, only dates—if that much.

The date on the back of the second *dacha* picture is 1922, the year of the formation of the Soviet Union. In front of the well stands a girl with blonde bangs peeking out from under her kerchief, socks bunched up at her ankles, and a sack of something in her hands. And plopped next to her on the grass is Baba, shockingly resembling my father disguised in a wig and sundress instead of the old woman I knew, whose bones were as frail as a bird's, whose papery skin stretched tight over a hooked nose, whose eyes were too close together, were sunken and remote, were the blue of a membranous poison mushroom, of a blue wick inside a wax candle, of blueberries stewed in milk until their dye is released, diluted, and spent; whose eyes hid behind cataracts while her mind replayed her own childhood memories, scenes from a place I didn't know, from the house her father built, from its wide rooms always full of friends and life, from the special room whose roof was made of pine branches that slid away for Sukkot to reveal the starry sky, from Petrikov, her *shtetl* by the Pripyt River, of which we have no pictures.

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Postcards of Leningrad always feature a few familiar attractions: a statue of Pushkin in a stance codified through repetition in later sculptures of Lenin and Stalin; the famous iron gate of the Summer Garden, for which (legend has it) a Persian king once offered its weight in gold but was refused; the Hermitage with its grand baroque façade and neoclassical addition, a portico with giant Atlas figures arching like question marks to support the heavy stone roof on their broad backs; and, of course, the canals. The canals slice through the city like silver wire. They are the city's emblems, as are the bridges that span from island to island.

Since we lived on the outer ring of the city, I saw more of these landmarks on postcards than in person. To get to our apartment from the city center, you'd have to take the Metro out until the buildings leapt from three stories to twenty and the architecture changed from baroque to utilitarian. We lived in one of many *novostroyki*, Soviet-era high-rises, that stretched away toward the horizon until the rules of perspective compressed the orthogonal blocks they occupied into one flat line. There's a Russian romantic comedy about a

man who lives in a *novostroyka* in Moscow on Such-and-Such Boulevard. One night he goes to a farewell party for a friend who is moving to Leningrad the next morning and gets so drunk that he, instead of his friend, catches the flight. When the plane lands in Leningrad, he thinks he's still in Moscow and has a cab take him "home" to Such-and-Such Boulevard. Sure enough, there is one of those in Leningrad, too, and on it stands a *novostroyka* identical to his own. He takes the lift to what he thinks is his floor, and his key fits into what he supposes is the door to his apartment. He enters, and it's his place exactly, only there is a beautiful woman living there. That's how generic the *novostroyki* are.

Our building was part of a row of buildings that stood shoulder-to-shoulder, their faces to a long, broad boulevard and their backs to an equally long and broad strip of gravel. This gravel strip would one day be transformed into a park, but during my childhood it remained the barren site of my father's attempts at teaching me to ride a bicycle. He would run alongside the bike, holding me up, and then let go and scream for me to pedal faster, faster—I would feel myself tipping over, then time stretched out, giving me the world's longest second to ponder how I would impact the gravel. Sometimes he didn't let go, just kept running with me. This was usually toward the end of our session, by which time my lacerated knees were clotted with pebbles. I would collapse on top of him and take him down with me. "One more time," he would say, but we both knew I had reached my limit.

I never managed to ride by myself until after the emigration, when both of my parents were away at work, and I felt the magic of speed and balance coming together without the pressure of witnesses. But in the year before the emigration, my father was home often. He explained that his new job allowed him to spend more time with me, and I didn't give it much thought. Sitting on my father's shoulders, my head almost touching the ceiling of the tiny elevator rising toward our apartment, I would ponder my own choices, playing and replaying the sound of gravel under the tread of rubber tires, sprayed up and clacking to earth in a hail of pebbles.

I usually spent my free days running around with my friend Ira, who lived on the fourth floor of our building. I lived on the sixth. She and I would enter the building's massive gray and green lobby with its twenty-foot-high ceilings and damp plaster smell. We'd call for the tiny elevator, and when it came, Ira had to press the sixth-floor button because I couldn't reach it. She would leave the elevator on the fourth floor, and I would travel on home by



myself. My parents used to call Ira my *soplivaya podruzhka*, my “snot-nosed friend,” because her nose was always either crusty or runny. I don’t remember much about her, only that once we got in a fight, and she refused to press the elevator button for me. *Akh tak*, she said, “If that’s the way it’s going to be,” with a meaningful glance at the elevator, then turned abruptly on her heel and walked back out onto the street. I called for the elevator and tried jumping to reach the sixth-floor button but couldn’t get the proper leverage to press down on it. Finally, I decided to risk the permanent dusk of the stairwell. I was afraid of the dark, so I got more and more nervous the farther I climbed. I tried to calm myself because I knew that the creatures lurking in the stairwell could sense my fear. The stairs seemed to go on forever. I had been counting off floors—*raz, dva, tri*—trying to keep the numbers in my head while I pulled myself up. At last I reached number six. The sixth-floor door had a window of frosted glass above its rusted doorknob. I tried to turn the doorknob, but it wouldn’t budge. I threw my shoulder against the door, banged, started crying, hit the glass with my fists. *Vpustitye menya!* I screamed, “Let me in!” A dark shape floated across the frosted pane. The doorknob turned, and the door swung backwards, revealing my mother’s flower-print apron and surprised face.

Photos of our apartment overflow with prints and patterns. In one of my favorites, my mother holds me in her arms. She stands in front of a wall-papered wall bursting with tiny flowers. She is wearing a wraparound dress whose floral pattern looks like a magnification of the wallpaper. Everything seems to merge, as though a gust of wind had caused a cascade of blossoms to rain down from some unseen branch over the entire room, forming islands of my white swaddling clothes, my mother’s bare arm and elegant profile, and the dark mass of her pinned-up hair. In my memory, I move from the checkerboard of black-and-white tiles in our entrance hall to the amber herringbone pattern of the parquet floor. I gaze down at the swirls of the oriental rug and up at the wallpaper’s pale floral drizzle. I wear a green dress covered in white daisies.

My room was toward the end of the checkered hall, to the right. I was lucky enough to have not only my own room but also a complete set of child-sized furniture, of which I was constantly reminded by Baba. There was a miniature bed frame, a tiny table, and four little chairs, all finished in black lacquer and painted berries, oak leaves, pine cones, mushrooms, and tree

boughs that wound, ivy-like, around scenes from Puss-in-Boots and Little Red Riding Hood. I had a mountain of dolls stacked in the corner, one of which was as tall as I was. I named her Nina, after Baba, but there was no resemblance. Nina was a little girl with long blonde curls and dark lashes protruding from plastic eyelids. Her eyes were set on some sort of pivot so that when I laid her down, there was the faint sound of a tiny weight rolling around inside a hollow sphere, and her lids slid sleepily closed. Sometimes her eyes fell out of sync so that one would be closed and the other half open, and then I would quickly close one eye with my finger or pry the other slightly open and admire its lifelike blue glass iris.

I also had a record player and would listen constantly to my two favorite records. One began with a soft, intimate voice asking, *Kuda ischezayut starye pesni?* “What happens to old songs once they are forgotten? Where do forgotten things go?” I used to close my eyes and watch the darkness under my lids expand until I could almost make out a distant horizon and the flitting shades of sad, forgotten things. I used to promise the characters in the record that I’d never forget them, but now all I can remember is that first line.

The other record was called *Tri Tolstyaka*, “The Three Fat Men,” and was about three obese tyrants whose palace is infiltrated by a little girl, a young circus performer who impersonates the life-sized girl doll belonging to the fat men’s adopted son. I would pretend that Nina was the girl from the record, wind my arm around her hard plastic elbow, place her tiny foot on mine, and go walking with her down the checkered hall, careful to avoid the living room, where Baba sat knitting.

Baba spent most of her time at our apartment after Dedushka Oskar passed away. He died when I was four, a month after the white nights had passed. In Leningrad, the white nights happen every June. The sun lingers in the sky. At midnight or so, it settles into a spot just over the horizon, and there’s twilight instead of dark. I must have seen the white nights every year of my life, but that year I found them particularly odd and disorienting. Maybe I’d finally become old enough to form ideas about the way things should be. Now this understanding was being threatened by nights filled with silvery light that streamed through my thin curtains and spread over my pillow.

*Spi*, my mother told me, “sleep,” but I couldn’t. I couldn’t understand why the grown-ups so easily accepted such a bizarre thing. I had not even heard the term “white nights” until my mother voiced it into being. “Sleep,” she

said, “it’s only the white nights,” as though this adequately explained why the sun had failed to set. I lay awake inspecting the embroidered edge of my pillowcase, made subtly alien by the strange light.

A month later the darkness returned. I was awakened in the middle of the night by footsteps and muffled voices. The hall light shone through the crack beneath my door. I must have called for my mother because she came into my room, letting in the glaring yellow light from the hall.

“What’s happening?” I asked her.

*Spi*, she said.

“But where is everybody going?”

*Dedushka Oskar umer*, she said, then left the room and closed the door behind her. I didn’t understand, but I snuggled back under my blanket and closed my eyes.

A while later, Baba told me a war story. “Have your parents ever mentioned the *Blokada*?” she asked. By *Blokada* she meant the German siege of Leningrad that had left the city without supplies for nine hundred days. “People were so hungry,” she told me, “that they were eating cats and dogs. They died right in the streets, and others ate their corpses. Mothers cut off their arms and legs to feed to their children. Oskar had gone to the front. Before he left, he gave me a can of sardines, but I told him, ‘I will not even think of opening these until you return and we can eat together,’ and I never touched the can. When the war ended, Oskar returned and asked me why I hadn’t eaten the sardines. I said to him, ‘because I was waiting for you.’” As Baba spoke, her milky blue eyes emitted a filmy, distant sparkle. Her slack lips tightened around the word *trup*, Russian for “corpse.” Years later, I asked my mother about Baba’s story. “Babushka Nina was never there,” she said. “My mother, your Babushka Masha, was the one trapped in the city. She became so skinny you couldn’t recognize her, but she survived. She never said much about that time. She didn’t like to talk about it.”

Babushka Masha died when my mother was eight years old, so everything I knew about her was from family legend. She’d been one of the first female surgeons in Russia, a tall, beautiful woman respected and loved by all who knew her. *Dedushka Oskar* had also been universally loved and respected. He was a prominent engineer, a war hero, an expert chess player, an even-tempered, wise man—the kind others went to for advice. After his death, Baba’s independent life faded away. She became part of our nuclear family, and *Dedushka Oskar* became a character in her stories.

My parents applied for emigration three times. These attempts were like stones cast into a pond—they made a deep impression on those at the center of things, but, by the time they got to me, they'd become barely perceptible ripples. People were coming and going. Voices were hushed, doors were closed, and I played in the hall. The first two times, their applications were rejected, but finally, on the third time, they were accepted.

My parents never told me we were emigrating. They didn't want me talking. I was too young to be cautious, and if I'd blabbed to my classmates, who knows what would have happened? They told me we were going on a trip while our apartment was being renovated. It would be like those trips to our *dacha* or to the Black Sea. It would be like the time we went to Moscow to visit Dedushka Misha, like that first night in his apartment with darkness pressed against the windowpanes and the yellow light of a table lamp seeming to flatten the room. That night, I had watched, amazed, as a squadron of daredevil flies dove between the blades of a slow-moving ceiling fan. The next morning, light shone through the tall windows, was reflected by the parquet floor, and set a mood of crisp sadness. Leaving the shelter of my wool blanket felt like diving into a swimming pool on a cold day—and it was cold, a cold early autumn day. Outside, the streets were littered with red and yellow leaves. I crawled out of bed and wandered into the living room, holding my linen nightgown around me. Everyone was already up. I heard a squawking sound. In the corner was a cage with two parrots, one lemon yellow, the other baby blue. They made noises that sounded like words. *Chto oni skazali?* I asked. "That one said, 'She's awake! She's awake!'" Dedushka Misha told me. "And this one said, 'I know that, stupid. I can see for myself!'" But later when I mentioned Dedushka Misha's talking parrots to my mother, she looked at me like I was crazy. Strange things always happened when we traveled, but then we always came home.

I never said goodbye to our apartment, to Nina, to my black lacquer furniture, to the floral wallpaper or the threadbare couch, or to the checked hallway floor. As far as I knew, I would see them again, just as I would see the tiny paint-caked elevator, the crumbling building entrance, and the gravel lot where I had left so many layers of skin. I didn't say goodbye to the long, broad boulevard that led away from our building. The one thing I did notice, just as we reached the subway stairs, was a giant crane with its great tank-like base resting in an abandoned construction site, its metallic neck white

against an even whiter sky. It stood out in my mind as an image of transition, of incompleteness, of surrender, but this is perhaps only so in hindsight.

Of course, remembering that day now, I know where Misha's bicycle man had disappeared to. I've begun to piece together seemingly isolated incidents into an epidemic of disappearances. At the time, though, it was confusing: family friends, people I'd called *dyadya* and *tyotyа*, "aunt" and "uncle," seemed always to be vanishing without warning or explanation. Our upstairs neighbors, a married couple who had played the cello and viola for the Leningrad Philharmonic, suddenly cut short my violin lessons. *Ikh bolshe netu*, "They're not here anymore," my mother told me, after I'd gone up for my lesson and found only an empty apartment. That day, our turn had come. We descended the subway stairs that were as far down our street as my memory will take me and fell off the edge of the earth.