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The Accident

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The Accident

Upside down, the world looked ridiculous. It was April 27, 1986, my last good day in Kiev, and I was hanging from the exercise rings in the doorway of my kitchen. My knees were tucked into the plastic circles, and my hair grazed the floor, collecting dust as I swung back and forth. “Ivanna,” Mama said, “get down from there. All the blood will rush to your head and you’ll explode.” But I ignored her. If I came down, I would have to help Leta and our mothers, who were best friends, chop vegetables for borscht. Besides, I was enjoying the view. Leta looked like a fool in her velvet dress and stockings, with her slick black hair launched above her head in a braid, as if she expected to be somewhere more fancy than my kitchen on a Sunday evening. Mama and Aunt Alla appeared vaguely menacing as they sliced cabbage and carrots into tiny pieces, Uncle Igor looked silly as he chomped on a pickle and read the newspaper, and our stove and fridge appeared to have sprouted from the ceiling. I was the only thing that made any sense.

Then our front door swung open and Papa ran into the kitchen, ducking past me. I couldn’t make out the look on his face, but it must have been bad because Mama dropped her knife. Papa shut the balcony door and said, “Nobody goes outside today, do you hear me?” My head grew heavy as he said that one of his co-workers from the Kiev Institute told him that there had been an accident at the Chernobyl power plant, only a hundred kilometers away from where we lived. He said the city was silent. There were no rickety ambulances plunging down the Khreshchatyk, no echoes of sirens wailing through the Lilac Gardens, no doctors and nurses leaving the city hospital in droves. This made him even more suspicious. As he continued to speak, I took my legs out of the rings and planted them on the floor. But my knees were wobbly, and bright white spots fluttered in front of my eyes. I tried to reach out to catch one of them. The last thing I heard was Papa saying, “Nobody knows how bad it is, yet, but...”

I woke up on the couch as Leta hovered over me, pressing a wet washcloth to my forehead. Though we had just turned twelve, and though I was older by one day, she was the one who insisted she was an adult. I never saw the appeal. The adults reeked of vodka and spent their nights reminiscing about Soviet summer camp and the slimy fish

they supposedly caught with their bare hands during family trips to the Desna, presenting them to their thorny and war-ravaged fathers, who couldn't have cared less. Didn't Leta get it? The adults were always pining away for their childhood, yet there she was, acting like a grown-up. The real grown-ups were sitting around the radio, waiting for confirmation of my father's news.

"For once," Leta said, "you should have listened to your mother."

A reactor at the Chernobyl power plant exploded two days before, just past one in the morning, outside the town of Pripyat. A team of technicians botched a safety test, and a nuclear reaction spun out of control. The water in the reactor boiled, and the building's roof blew off, caught fire, and scattered radioactive particles into the air. Of course, we didn't know any of the details at the time. For the first two days, the government was as silent as a corpse. The Soviet radio played only classical music. As we grew more and more desperate for information, we were only offered *Swan Lake* on repeat. Any news we received came from a combination of rumors from our building and the university where our parents worked, information passed down from the doctors, scientists, and firefighters in Kiev who had been called to help out in Pripyat, and from the Russian broadcasts of BBC or Voice of America.

We understood that there were certain things you were not supposed to do after the accident, under any circumstances. You should leave the house only if it was absolutely necessary, and if you did, you'd better wear a hat and long sleeves and shower as soon as you got home. And you were never supposed to walk under a tree or near a bush, and if it rained, forget about setting foot out the door. Many of the residents of Volinsky 54 began to board up their windows and balconies. My parents covered the windows but couldn't bear to board up the balcony, not just yet; my father was too attached to it. Another thing we did was turn our vacuum cleaners on about twenty times a day to suck up any stray particles of radiation. Though all of us were scared, you had to laugh a little, or you'd go insane. While our mothers furiously scrubbed the apartment, our fathers wrote a song about the accident. It began:

*Kiev's safe, I swear, I swear
Just try not to breathe the air!*

Our mothers were hardly amused by our fathers' antics. "If songs could mop floors and notes could do dishes, I'd love every word," Aunt Alla would say, turning away whenever Uncle Igor picked up his guitar. When they weren't cleaning, they spent their time in the kitchen. The BBC sat between them, offering updates on the status of the accident, but there wasn't much information yet. Mama would shell entire bags of sunflower seeds while Aunt Alla picked at the paint on her fingernails, speculating about the extent of the disaster.

My father, he wasn't a big talker, but you could always tell how worried he was depending on how much time he devoted to his latest hobby. When he wasn't singing, he spent his days at the coffee table in the living room, constructing a tower out of matches. Twice, the tower reached over his head until it toppled when my mother turned on the vacuum cleaner. After we got the news, every time I walked into the main room, Mama was either madly dusting or lying in bed with my father, giggling like a teenager. I even caught them in the kitchen, kissing in front of the open fridge while the cold white air escaped around them.

That is to say, things were strange at home after the explosion. Leta and I spent most of that time with our friends, not our parents. Luckily, most of them were within arm's reach; after the accident, children were not forbidden to leave the building, but staying inside was strongly recommended. Uncle Anton, a retired police officer, patrolled the entrance and stared us down until we ran back to our apartments. We lived on the fifteenth floor of the twenty-two story building. The fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth floors belonged to the Kiev Institute; this meant that Leta and I grew up hanging out with a loud, unruly crowd of scientists' kids. A few of them were even Jews, like us. Most of them were only children, too, and I liked to think of us all as distant cousins to feel less lonely in my small family.

We spent those first afternoons playing Captain Radiation, a game I created. The designated Captain was wrapped in an old white bedspread and chased the others like a blind and bewildered ghost. To stay safe, you had to direct the Captain toward one of the other "victims," as we called each other. "Two steps to the left! Three steps back, and you'll catch him! Closer, closer, closer!" we would shout. And if the Captain was going in the wrong direction, we would cry, "Farther! You're getting farther away!" Another rule was that the Captain had to be in constant motion. If he faltered, we would count to three and he would melt to the ground and had to sit out the next round. Once the Captain tagged you, the round was over, and you had

to take over as the next Captain. Leta was never the Captain—she always fled as far away as possible and was barely even a participant. But I could see the glee in her eyes as she ran away during those first few seconds. She would have loved being the Captain, if she gave it a chance. Our game was chaotic and disorganized, but it felt just right.

As you can imagine, the parents hated this game. It made them uneasy. They banned it just two days after the accident. That day, as the Captain, I ran so fast that I nearly knocked over a lamp in Leta's living room. Aunt Alla snatched the bedspread off my head. "That's enough," she told us. "Now get out of here, you little fools." We retreated to the apartment of Marat Maksimov. This was where we hung out whenever we were chastised but when our actions weren't offensive enough to warrant separation. Marat's family paid us little attention. His mother was a lab technician who spent most of her time at the university, and his father was a firefighter who was hardly there, either.

As soon as we were settled on Marat's living room floor, one of the three Anyas began laying cards for *durak*. Leta positioned herself outside our circle, braiding the frayed threads of the rug. My best friend, Yulia, and I were tying and untying our shoelaces together, and the underfed brothers Kravtsov were trying to see how many marmalades and peanuts they could stuff into their mouths at once. I noticed that Marat was unusually quiet that day. He kept looking toward the kitchen, where his mother sat, listening to the radio.

"Well," I said, elbowing him in the gut. "What is it?"

"What makes you think I know something?" he said, carefully studying his cards. "And even if I *did* know something, I wouldn't want to scare the ladies," he added, gesturing toward us. "Everybody knows women have a weak constitution, and I don't want to upset anybody." As soon as he said that, the brothers Kravtsov locked his arms behind his back until it was clear that either he would talk or his elbows would pop out of their sockets. I helped out by repeatedly kicking him in the shins, and Yulia yanked his ear. "Okay, okay," he said. "But you can't tell anybody. Promise," he whispered, and all of us nodded furiously, letting go. He jerked his head toward the bedroom, where his father was. There was no sign of life behind that door—no light, no footsteps.

"Well," he said. "My dad went to Pripyat a few hours after it happened, just before morning. By then, the worst of it was over, and he was just throwing water over steam. But he says that the ones who lived in Pripyat and got there first got *really* sick. At least six of them

are dead already, and there are like a dozen more in the hospital. And you know what else happened?”

“What?” we all said, even Leta. Her skin was the color of sour cream.

“He said that some of the guys got so sick from the radiation that after only half an hour over the fire, they were *purple*. And then they got dizzy and started to throw up blood. They weren’t even wearing anything to protect their skin. By the time my dad got there, they gave him a full-body suit. When he came back, he told us what happened and then he just locked himself in his room. Since then, he hasn’t come out once, I swear, not even to take a crap or anything.” Marat paused for effect and added, rather gleefully, “He said that the accident was a thousand times worse than you can imagine. That the worst is still ahead.”

“I’m going to be sick,” said Leta, crossing her hands over her stomach. The Anya cousins didn’t say anything, but they didn’t look so good, either.

“The toilet’s in the next room,” Yulia said breezily, jerking her thumb in its direction. I snorted. The other girls ignored us.

“See?” said Marat, glaring at the brothers Kravtsov. “I didn’t want to upset the ladies, and now look what you’ve done.”

“Are you lying, man?” asked Yuri Kravtsov, the older brother, who, at thirteen, was the second-oldest in our coterie, after Marat. “You sure you’re not lying?”

“Hey,” said Marat, holding up his hands with a wide grin. “Would I ever lie to you?”

Of course he would lie to us. He had lied to us on a number of occasions, the most notable of which was when he convinced us that Uncle Grisha, the drunk gardener, had been in the Gestapo. Only after Yulia and I narrowly missed dropping a potted plant on his head from her balcony and the rest of us pelted him with rocks and called him a “filthy fascist” did one of the Anyas realize that he was the same age as our parents, that he had to have been born at least a decade after the Holocaust. But I still believed Marat, that day. Something in the tenor of his voice told all of us that he was telling the truth, that the BBC was telling the truth, and that the Soviet government, with its silence, was telling the biggest truth of all: that we should be scared, and very much so.

We didn’t say much after that. We played a few half-hearted games of *durak* and ate all of the peanuts. That was when Marat’s father, the firefighter, emerged from his room. He grunted at us and headed

for the bathroom. As I stared up at him from where I sat, he looked infinitely tall. His face was blank, but at least it wasn't purple. I knew what this meant: it was time for us to go. There were two elevators on either side of the long corridor, and they each could hold two grown-up-sized people. The brothers Kravtsov darted up the stairs while the Anyas went for the other elevator, leaving Leta, Yulia, and me alone. Yulia had even more energy than I did and loved stomping down thirteen flights of pee-scented stairs.

"Well," she said, pinching my waist, "I'll see you soon, okay?" She never acknowledged Leta's presence, and though Leta never mentioned her, I knew their distaste was mutual. Yulia waved good-bye and ran for the stairs, her orange hair floating behind her.

It took a while for the elevator to come for us. Finally, it squeaked open and we stepped inside. I liked being in there, having the doors close around me. The floor was always sticky, and your shoes made a smacking sound whenever you got out.

Leta didn't look so good; even her braids were wilting. She gripped my arm and said, "You know what, Ivanna? I believe Marat. I really do."

"It's not a big deal."

"Should we tell our parents?"

"No, you idiot. What good would it do?" I said, shoving her hand away.

"Ivanna? I'm scared," she whispered.

"Well," I said. "Don't be!"

The elevator groaned down to our flight of stairs and deposited us on our floor. I darted out, leaving Leta in the elevator, hugging herself. I had no time for her little display and wanted to see if dinner was ready. As I sprinted to our apartment, I ran smack into Mama's stomach. She jumped back and yelped, dropping her cigarette. Her hands shook as she reached down to pick it up. I don't know who was more surprised by this encounter, Mama or me. My mother never smoked.

Leta and I spent the next day watching television in my living room. Our parents sat in our kitchen, smoking and listening to the BBC. We ate the apple slices Mama cut up for us and watched the television that buzzed with daytime cartoons. The television categorically refused to show any signs of Chernobyl. We only had three channels: the Moscow channel, the Leningrad channel, and the Kiev channel. While Leta wanted to join the adults and their nervous murmuring, I wished I were still young enough to appreciate the simple cartoons, too young to know about things like men whose faces turned purple, men who

threw up blood and fainted toward their deaths in the middle of a fire. After we watched so much TV that my head was spinning, Aunt Alla came into the living room and yanked us into the kitchen. “At last,” she told us. “They’re speaking up.” For the past few hours, the radio had been playing classical music, which was the Soviet signal that news about a disaster was on its way. Aunt Alla informed us that the Soviets sent a representative from the official news source, the TASS Informational Agency, to speak with a BBC reporter. The interview came on a few minutes later.

BBC: What can you tell us about the incident at the Chernobyl Factory?

SOVIET AGENT: I can tell you...that there has been a nuclear accident in the city of Pripyat. I can tell you that there have been several casualties.

BBC: How many casualties, would you say?

SA: I would say that we are giving aid to the injured. Yes, we are helping the injured as best as we can.

BBC: All right, and what can you tell us about the spread of the radioactive particles? Today, Sweden and Finland reported that even their Geiger counters are showing seven times the amount of radiation as they did before the explosion.

SA: I can assure you that measures have been taken in order to eliminate the consequences of the accident.

BBC: The citizens of Pripyat were evacuated today. What is the country’s policy about the rest—

SA: Thank you.

Mama switched off the radio and said, “This is bullshit, not glasnost.”

Papa had kept his hands on her shoulders during the broadcast, and he massaged her back in order to try to calm her down, but I don’t think it did any good. Once Mama had her heart set on being mad about something, there was no stopping her. She informed me that

earlier that day, they had heard that the wind, which had been blowing west of Pripyat, away from us, had changed direction; that day, it began blowing south toward our city. It was illegal to own personal Geiger counters, but there were plenty of them at the Kiev Institute. Papa received a frantic call from a colleague who told him that the counters there were going off the charts.

The rumors about the wind changing were true, which led people to fear that the rest of the factory could explode. Nobody knew how carefully the fourth reactor had been contained: according to Uncle Yan, an engineer who lived on the seventeenth floor, the reactor had been shoddily blocked with sand and cheap aluminum. The roof wasn't even fire-retardant, and who knew what would keep the radioactive particles from bubbling up again and setting the entire factory ablaze. If the rest of the factory were set on fire, our city was in big trouble. Not only would the radioactive particles fill the air, but the factory was also only two miles away from the river that led to the Kiev Sea, an artificial dam that was built to control the Dnieper River. If the factory exploded, the dam that held up the Kiev Sea would burst, and the water would flood the Dnieper River and drown my city. We lived on the Russanovka, only half a mile away from the river, and our district would be destroyed first.

The city began to filter out the next morning. I stood near the balcony when Mama wasn't looking, watching our neighbors join the exodus, lugging suitcases over their shoulders and wearing full jackets, hats, and gloves, even though the sun was out and Kiev was in the middle of a breathtaking spring. The cars on the main road were backed up, and so were the buses. Their honks punctuated our conversation all day long. The Anyas and their families went to stay with more cousins in Sevastopol, the brothers Kravtsov found refuge with their grandparents in Pskov, and Marat Maksimov and his family, who were less fortunate, booked a flight all the way to the seedy city of Tashkent to stay with an aunt, where they would probably have to live in a tent and eat towering piles of raw, fly-infested meat. As for Yulia, she was stuck: her family had no place to go.

My family had no place to go, either. We had all been living in Kiev for four generations, since the pogroms sent my family there from the villages of Eastern Ukraine. My grandparents, Mama's parents, who lived only a few kilometers away from us, on the Desna, refused to consider the option of moving. "Die now, die later," my grandmother said. "What's the big difference? I've lived through enough." Mama's parents had survived the German occupation of Kiev, starvation, and

the slaughter of nearly a million Ukrainians, mostly Jews, at Babi Yar. Babushka was right: after all that, wasn't it silly to be afraid of a few particles in the air, invisible to the naked eye?

As luck would have it, the next day was May first, International Workers' Day, one of the biggest holidays on the Communist calendar. Every year, my friends and I would put on our best white dresses and watch the parade on the Khreshchatyk, holding up balloons and hearing the loudspeakers proclaim the progress that our country had made over the course of the last year. For my friends and our parents, it was primarily a social gathering, and everybody went just to chat with their friends and neighbors. But that year, my family and the Bermans stayed in our living room, watching the parade on TV. "What a surprise," Mama said. "I don't see any of the officials. Tell me, where are all of the children of our courageous leaders?" Mama was having a fit because my grandparents were somewhere out there, marching along with their co-workers; they worked as engineers at the airplane factory, and it was mandatory for them to go. But they would have gone anyway; they would hear none of my mother's logic. I was scared for Yulia, who was also breathing the air somewhere along the Khreshchatyk, flanked by her parents; her father was a journalist and had to show his support for the state.

The parade put our parents over the edge. That night, both Leta's family and mine sat in our kitchen, listening to the latest dispatch from the radio. Finally, Leta's mother flicked it off and took a deep breath.

"I have a plan," she said. "A way for us to get out of Ukraine. But I'm not happy about it." Leta and I sat on the floor, feigning indifference. She kept busy by tying and untying the bow on her dress as I balled up tiny pieces of a dirty napkin and dropped them on the center of her head. Her mother stood in front of the balcony with the stars glowing behind her, blocking the moon with her head. Everything about Aunt Alla was big: her poofy black hair with its red highlights, her hot-pink fingernails, her full, freckled breasts, and even her raspy voice, which I could hear from our balcony on the fifteenth floor when she was downstairs, gossiping with my mother. She had developed a reputation for getting things done at Volinsky 54. Though the tenants appreciated her efforts at getting rid of rats, chastising the drunk gardener, and even catching the brothers Kravtsov as they drew yet another giant penis in the elevator, they still referred to her as "The Matriarch" behind her back.

“My parents still live in the center of Leningrad,” she said. She had grown up there, unlike the rest of our parents. Mama once told me that Aunt Alla was a descendant of the revolutionary poet Grigory Bogdanov. I knew nothing about this man except that his stony portrait hung in our school hallway and that his Leningrad family was probably quite rich because of him.

Aunt Alla explained, “There’s an extra apartment within their apartment. I don’t get along with my father, and believe me, if I could avoid him, I would. But my mother called this morning and invited us to stay there until it’s safe to go back. I asked about your family too, Tanya,” she said to Mama. “And they said you’re welcome to come. It’s going to be cramped over there but it’s better than—well, just think of the children.”

“Think of the children?” I whined. “But *I* like it here! The children like it here!”

“Speak for yourself,” Leta said to the floor, but I was the only one who heard her.

Our mothers embraced, ignoring me. I was not so happy. I liked where I lived. I liked Volinsky 54 and all the friends I had there. I liked our living room and didn’t mind that it doubled as a bedroom for my parents and me at night. I liked my bed against the window and hearing the cars gunning down the roads late at night, when I couldn’t sleep; and really, I didn’t mind sleeping so close to my parents that I could hear their late-night whispers and the wet smacks of their kisses. And I especially liked our old kitchen. I liked the peeling orange wallpaper and the bulb that hung above our table, which was covered in little stars that I scratched into it with a kitchen knife. I liked the green curtains with the wild strawberries on them. I liked the red chairs that had been clawed by Ksyusha, our black tabby who got killed by a mail truck the year before. I even liked the smell of cigarettes, dill, and vinegar.

And most of all, I liked the balcony outside the kitchen. Every Russian I knew took great pride in his balcony and made sure it looked nothing like his neighbor’s. This gave Soviet buildings the look of a patchwork quilt, the one scrap of structural individuality we could salvage. We painted ours a mossy green and had two rocking chairs on it, three pots of lilacs, and a pickle jar that must have held a year’s worth of my father’s cigarettes. Papa did his best smoking and philosophizing out there, and for that reason he was reluctant to board it up. Whenever I joined him, he would always take a drag of his

cigarette and tell me something mysterious. “Life is a river,” he would say, or, “A firefly in a jar is no firefly at all.”

My father spent a moment staring at the balcony before he followed the rest of the adults out of the kitchen. They left to discuss the details of their new plans. I stepped onto the balcony and stared at the dark water, the place where I would swim and skip rocks with my father, the place where I had celebrated almost all of my birthdays. And now, the same water threatened to flood my home and my city. I stood out there for a long time, until I got cold. When I turned around, I saw Leta pressed up against the glass, watching me. I was sure she’d run and tell the parents that I was outside, inhaling toxic fumes, but she didn’t move. The year before, when our mothers took us to the Kiev Aquarium, Leta had watched a shark with the same expression: half wonder, half fear. The shark came lurching at her, butting its head up against the glass so suddenly that she fell backward and sprained her ankle.

I don’t think I have ever had a full night of sleep. That night was no exception. I tried all of my usual tricks: first, I read *The Jungle Book* until Mama told me to turn off the lamp that stood near my bed. Then, I pretended that the faded photographs of my great-grandparents that glared at me from our bookshelf were talking to me, telling me to fall asleep, telling me that if I didn’t, I would look just as lifeless and severe as they did. I tried to convince myself that if I didn’t go to bed, thousands of Russians would be killed, that the Dnieper really would burst and flood my city, or at least Volinsky 54. I imagined all of my friends and neighbors ascending with the water that rose to the top of the building. But that didn’t work, either.

Then I tried my last resort. I imagined I was Queen Ivanna, princess of the new, flooded Kiev, that the drifting residents were my loyal subjects, groveling at my wet feet. But pretty soon they stopped praising me and got desperate instead. All of them—Anton Volokhonsky, the wily brothers Kravtsov, Yulia and her parents—started to say, “What do we do now, Ivanna? Tell us: what next? What do we do next?” I even saw a crowd of firemen, their faces black and sooty, bile dripping from their mouths as their teeth fell to the floor. And behind them stood an army of children, their eyes black, their hair sizzling fire, their skin so translucent that I could see their neon, radioactive blood flowing through their veins. “What *now*?” one of them said, shaking my shoulders. “Come on, what *now*?”

This did not help me relax. My parents were having trouble drifting off, too. All night long I heard their sighs, the rustle of their thin blankets, their pillows being uselessly plumped. At one point, they even spoke to each other. I peeked over and saw Papa with his arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

“What’s the matter, Pasha?” Mama whispered.

“Nothing. I’m just thinking.”

A silence.

“This is a blessing,” Mama insisted. “We should feel very lucky.”

“My mind tells me you’re right. But my heart—my heart, Tanka, is floating somewhere on the Dnieper.”

Mama sighed. “Sleep, my poet,” she said. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

I stayed up for a while, trying to imagine what our lives in Leningrad would be like, and some time later it was morning.

After breakfast, Mama told me that we were leaving for the city in the evening. She and my father took temporary leave of their jobs. Papa was at the train station, waiting to pick up our tickets; he had been there since the crack of dawn. Even though all the trains to Leningrad were booked for weeks, Leta’s grandfather had managed to reserve us a cabin on the afternoon train. The train to Leningrad normally ran only once a day, at 6:45 every evening, but the government arranged to have a train coming every three hours; this was its only admission that anything out of the ordinary was going on. “A small consolation,” Mama huffed. “All things considered.”

Though she insisted that we would only be staying there for a few weeks, a month at most, she practically packed up the whole apartment. She put away all of our shoes, coats, and towels, and I was getting a bit suspicious when I saw her piling all of my summer dresses and even my swimsuits into two enormous duffel bags. I was surprised she didn’t throw in the dishes and the pictures off the walls, but no, the portrait of my great-grandmother Polya, who insisted she had been forever traumatized by the pogrom of 1906 even though she was in her mother’s belly at the time, stayed right where it was.

When Papa finally returned with the tickets, Mama instructed him to match all of the socks and roll them together; when he was done with this, he halfheartedly dusted the furniture. I took a small duffel bag and tossed in a few of my toys and favorite items of clothing. I begged Mama, but she wouldn’t let me bring the exercise rings with me. “Are you crazy? You plan on swinging around in a stranger’s home?” she said, and when she saw how upset I was, she added,

“Besides. What if there’s no place to hang them up?” I answered her by knocking over my father’s latest match tower.

Before we left, I went down to the second floor to say good-bye to Yulia. Her parents were sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea, and she looked very sad. I noticed the blanket we had used to play Captain Radiation wilting over a chair, next to three Soviet flags.

I said, “How was the parade?”

“Lonely,” Yulia said. She gave me a big hug and I smelled her Yulia smell: the fruity product of her hair, the faint black tea that was always on her breath, the stench of her father’s cigarettes. “See you tomorrow,” she said. It was something she always said—when we went away during the summer, when one of us would be gone for an undetermined period of time.

“Tomorrow,” I repeated, as she reached over to wipe a tear from my eye.

Her mother came over and tousled my hair. “The hairdressers in Leningrad, I hear they’re all barbarians,” she said, winking. “Just wait for me to fix you up, all right?”

I nodded. Yulia walked me to the door. I handed her a piece of paper with my Leningrad address scribbled on it. “I’m going to write you every day,” she said. “Every single day. You better write back, or I’ll have to kill you.”

“Obviously,” I said, and that was all.

She was still standing in her doorway, scratching the back of her knee, when the elevator slammed its jaws and took me home.

A little while later, the Bermans came to our door, wielding equally large duffel bags. It took four trips to get everything down the elevators. As we left the building, for the first time, the giant penis that the brothers Kravtsov had drawn over the entrance brought a tear to my eye. As we walked away from it, I tried to locate the fifteenth floor, but couldn’t find our balcony. The building was yellow and infinitely tall; I could barely make out even the Shurov widow’s balcony, and that was only on the third floor. Paint peeled off the walls near the entrance, and a row of maple trees stood outside, rising out of the sandy muck before the playground. I saw Tasha, the local stray mutt, sticking her head into a cardboard box.

Volinsky 54 was a Twenty-Fiver, one of the thousands of buildings that Khrushchev had built in the late 1950s so fast that it was destined to collapse after a quarter of a century; it was true—it had passed its prime. I imagined that when we came back, the rest of the building would crumble along with the cheap cement stairs that led to its

entrance. The last I saw of my building was Uncle Grisha watering the rosebushes with a bottle of beer. Mama pulled me away.

To get to the bus stop, we had to walk through the playground that stood in front of our building. On the way out, I ran up the yellow slide and back down again. My parents didn't reprimand me; in fact, Papa even dragged his hand over the slide's smooth surface as he walked by. There was also a merry-go-round, and a seesaw that I had been banned from after I had run off, making Leta thud to the ground and claim that she had permanently injured her backbone. I would never forget the rubbery tires that stuck halfway out of the ground like half-moon slices; one of my favorite things to do had been to jump from tire to tire, even though they were too far apart for this to be done safely. And then, of course, there were the benches where our mothers sat, gossiping over newspapers and beckoning us with offers of sliced apples and honey sandwiches. Leta listlessly pushed a swing as I conquered every piece of playground equipment one last time.

The bus stop was packed. Three full buses passed us without even slowing down; a little boy with his head out the window stuck his tongue out at me. Papa stood behind Mama, massaging her back. "That's right, Pasha," she kept saying. "Right there. Right *there*. Ah, that's better." She closed her eyes and smiled. Though I knew I was lucky to have parents who loved each other, they were still a huge liability in public. That was one thing that made me envy Leta: it would have been more acceptable for my parents to yell at each other, as hers were doing. The Bermans were arguing about a suitcase. They couldn't get it closed, and they elected Leta to sit on top of it while they struggled with the zipper.

"What do you plan on doing in Leningrad, opening a clothing store?" Uncle Igor grumbled.

"Half of that garbage is yours," Aunt Alla snapped. "How about you do the packing next time?"

When Leta had fulfilled her task, she moved toward my parents, pretending they were hers. I didn't want to be associated with a single one of them and stepped to the other side of the bus stop and stared across the river. Kiev's Mother was glaring at us; there was no avoiding her. She was at least seventy feet high, made of gleaming silver, with a torch-bearing arm sticking out into the sky; her other hand gripped a shield. She was constructed the year I started kindergarten, yet another form of Soviet propaganda. It was called *Mat Rodina*, which was conveniently close to *Mat Urodina*, meaning "Hideous Mother," which was how our parents referred to the monstrosity that

blocked the pretty hills and dwarfed the Kiev Lavra, the most stunning church in our city. I consoled myself by thinking that at least I wouldn't miss her at all.

A bus finally stopped for us. It was already overflowing with sweaty people and their cheap luggage, though two men about my father's age stood up to make room for me and Leta. I forged ahead and elbowed my way for a window seat. Our parents stayed near the front with the bags. Papa stood behind Mama again, resting his chin on her forehead. I scrunched down in my seat and stared out the window. The bus stopped outside the Sadovoyi Gardens, and more people crammed inside. Though I tried to listen as carefully as I could, I only heard snatches of phrases: "Glasnost my ass," "All the way over to Stockholm, imagine!" or "My cousin, he's a radiologist and *he* says..." I gave up on hearing anything good. Instead, I reached into my pocket and found a Kors Bar. I bit off a gooey chunk. Leta looked like she was going to cry, so I shoved the candy in her face. She swatted it away.

"Look around," she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "What difference is a candy bar going to make?"

"Don't know yet," I said, shoving the remaining chocolate into my mouth.

I stared out at the Dnieper. I knew the bus would turn soon, away from the river, and I wouldn't see it anymore. I would miss that river more than anything, more than my building or my friends. That was where I got my first sunburn, where I first learned to swim after Papa launched me into the waves, confident that I would learn how to keep myself from drowning.

And I would miss the rolling hills of the city, the way the little propeller leaves would spin from the trees in the fall; how I could lift up my head to watch them twirl, surrounded by so many branches that not a speck of sunlight pushed its way through. And I would miss the festivals in the Marinsky Gardens, how I would eat so much ice cream that no matter how many times Mama warned me to stop, I'd always puke up a rainbow of flavors. And then there were the chestnut trees—would there be chestnut trees in Leningrad? Would there be trees at all?

The crowd in front of the Kiev train station leaked out onto the street. The station was gray and ordinary, with a green awning. Angry guards stood at every corner, trying to keep people in line with their thin batons. But it was impossible. Kiev was packed with busloads of indignant residents, and all of them had been dumped right where we stood.

My grandparents came to see us off, holding a bouquet of lilacs. Once again, Mama begged them to come with us, or at least to find another place to stay for a little while. "I'm too old for change!" my grandmother growled. "Too *old*, I say!" Mama shook her head but didn't fight them. She gave them our address in Leningrad, just in case. I stood in between them as they both hugged me at the same time, but they just ended up hugging each other and suffocating me in the process. My grandfather opened his fist to reveal a tiny plastic airplane that he probably got at the parade and tucked it into my hand. "Don't fly too far away from me," he said, and frowned. The last thing my grandmother said to me was, "Behave, Ivanna, behave," pinching my earlobes for emphasis.

Then my grandparents said good-bye to the Bermans; my grandmother patted Leta on the head and said, "You'll make sure Ivanna doesn't run into trouble, won't you?"

"She's unstoppable," she said, but I could see that she felt pleased to be given this responsibility.

My grandparents watched our train pulling away from the platform with handkerchiefs over their mouths.

The train smelled like mold and cabbage. The tiny round windows in the hallways barely let me see what was going on outside, and I felt like I had boarded a submarine. Most people had to sit up all night in the main cars, with their luggage piled against the walls in the back. But, thanks to Leta's grandfather, our families were lucky enough to share a compartment. It was in the last car of the train and gave us some privacy. It had two bunk beds and a small table that leaned against the window. There was a bag of sunflower seeds on it. The fathers stayed on the top beds, and Leta and I shared the bottom beds with our mothers. As we settled in and the sun crept below the poplar trees, Aunt Alla said, "Welcome to the size of your future home."

Though she was laughing, I could tell that the adults were nervous: she kept reaching over to squeeze Mama's hand, and our fathers stepped out into the corridor to smoke more times than I could count. Leta and I kept busy by chewing on the sunflower seeds, which she neatly deposited on the table; I spit them on the floor whenever Mama wasn't looking.

Another reason why Leta drove me nuts was because she had a bladder the size of the Dnieper; I was always the one who had to go pee at the most inconvenient times. When Mama took me through the train cars to find the bathroom, I was shocked by the number of small children who sat side by side, staring up at me. If you counted

the pregnant women, the kids on the train outnumbered the adults. “Unbelievable,” Mama said, shaking her head. “So many children, and not one of them crying.” She glared at me as if daring me to break this trend.

As I crouched over the toilet, the look I had seen in Mama’s eyes made me furious. If she expected me to cry, then why not cry? If she thought I would throw a scene, then what did I have to lose, anyway? I knew I would never be like Leta, with her perfect hair and huge bladder, so I might as well have some fun. I emerged from the bathroom, sobbing hysterically—first, because I was angry at Mama, but then, as she covered my mouth and begged me to stop, I realized I couldn’t, that I was crying for real, crying about leaving Kiev and Yulia and Volinsky 54 and my grandparents, crying about going to a strange city to live with a strange family.

Mama pulled back my hair and said, “Please, Ivanna, not tonight. I don’t have the energy to yell at you. Let’s go and get some rest. All right?” Her final question was both desperate and threatening. “Look,” she added, “this isn’t easy for me, either.” I let her have it for another minute before I stifled my tears.

A pregnant woman walked by. When she saw my face, she put her hand on top of my head and said, “You poor dear.”

Mama, who probably wanted to strangle me, nodded at the woman sympathetically. I put my hand on the woman’s round belly; I was surprised by its warmth. Who was in there, I wondered, and how did he feel about all of this? Could he be forever affected by Chernobyl, the way my great-grandmother Polya claimed to have been changed by the pogroms while being in her mother’s belly? It seemed unlikely.

When we entered the cabin, Leta ran her hand over my cheek. “Your face,” she said. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I threw up the chocolate bar,” I snapped. “What do you care?”

I waited for her to reprimand me, to tell me once more not to disobey Mama by doing things like eating sugary candy, but instead, she said, “You should have saved me a piece.” Her hands were trembling. My friend was even more upset than I was.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

For only a moment, I let myself think of what it was like to be Leta: the girl who was everybody’s favorite was ripped from her environment, forced to live with a relative who supposedly couldn’t stand her family. All I knew about her grandfather was what she once told me: that he cut off all contact with her family once her mother married her father, a Jew. I was used to being a rogue, but how would

Leta survive? As Aunt Alla listed her grievances against her father, I dreaded the rest of the ride instead of listening. It would take almost twenty-three hours to get to Leningrad, and I knew I would be awake for all of them. Back then, I was so hyperactive that my grandmother carted me from doctor to doctor, insisting I had an undiagnosed mental disorder. But they all told her the same thing: that I'd be fine as long as I avoided candy.

Hours later, when the fathers had consumed enough vodka to fall comfortably into their throaty-snored sleep, I looked up and was surprised to find that Leta was wide awake too, staring at the bed above us. She lifted her hand to her mouth and puzzled over the thin stream of blood that had leaked out of it. It was black in the moonlight. She had been chewing on the inside of her cheek the whole night. A strand of hair had unraveled from the tightly wound braid her mother had perfected that morning and mixed in with the blood. That was the first time I took Mama's advice and really did feel sorry for her.

"Let's go," I said, yanking Leta up.

I grabbed the itchy blanket off the bed and gestured for Leta to follow me to the corridor. She looked dazed, but not frightened. Before she knew what was happening, I threw the blanket over her head. We were alone in the quiet hall as the train chugged forward. Our game wouldn't disturb anyone. Leta was nervous about being Captain for the very first time, giggling as she approached. But then she grew serious. I could imagine her face, stony and hard under the blanket.

She continued to follow me as I stumbled to the far end of the corridor, gliding her hands against the narrow walls for guidance. I realized that since I was the only victim, I would have to direct her toward me. "Come on," I said, nearly whispering the words. "You're getting closer." I kept backing up, but she wasn't far behind. It didn't take long for me to see my mistake. We were in the last car, and I couldn't escape. "Closer," I kept saying as she closed the gap between us. She marched forward, and I didn't know what to do. There was no place to hide, and there was no stopping her. Captain Radiation was coming for me. "You can't come any closer," I told her. "You're here."