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Sudba 1

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Sudba 1

I remember the last time I saw snow on the mountaintops; I was five. I remember learning the national anthem in school: *Mila rodino, ti si...* I remember that we are out of sugar, but there is none to buy. I remember how Baba likes her coffee. I remember the last walk I took before things began to change, on a winter morning that smelled like clean water. I remember saying good-bye to my mother, but I do not remember where she went. I remember sitting with Lili under a dirty orange overhang and telling secrets in the rain. I remember names for six of the planets. I remember how to make baklava. I remember Baba's pills, where they are kept in the bathroom and how often she needs them. I remember some words of my own language, but others are missing, like pages torn from a book.

On my way home from the hospital, I see an old man sitting on the sidewalk. He squats over a closed manhole cover, his bare legs as white as his hair. He has that glazed look. I cross the street away from him, take out my GSM, and dial the hotline number stapled to every disused telephone pole. I give the man's location and hang up. A stray dog whines at me from an alley, tags on its collar jingling, but the poster for forgotten animal rescue has been rained through, and I can't read the number.

Six days to launch.

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I'm afraid I'm not too reliable anymore.

I do remember the first case. Fifty-two days to launch. A young man brought his mother in, stood in front of my desk with his hand tight around her upper arm. The woman had bobbed black hair, was fashionably dressed with a shawl swept artfully across her shoulders. I had seen her before, at a pastry café, sitting behind a computer and wearing wire-framed glasses.

We were having lunch, the young man said. All of a sudden she didn't know who I was, or the word for salad. Please.

We rushed the woman in, ahead of a brittle Roma grandmother who had been waiting for hours. Her granddaughters muttered to one another, clutching their fidgeting babies. In the afternoon, I heard the

nurses talking in the break room. No apparent physical cause for the woman's sudden loss of memory. By the time her tests came back, there were four new cases: a small boy with a lisp, a white-socked widower who sold tomatoes at the market, a councilman with mob connections, and a waitress who worked in the city center.

The real fear of it was in what they forgot. Individual words or whole decades, they disappeared just the same. The boy no longer recognized his cat; the mobster forgot how to read. Like memory could just break on the kitchen floor, and any shard could go sliding under the counter and out of reach.

I called Lili then. I think it was nearly Christmas. When I walked home that night, small white lights dotted the bones of the trees.

Something's happening, I told her. Don't come home.

I'd caught her on the way to the bus station. I heard her put down her bag, heard Georgi barking. He knew what her suitcase by the door meant, and he hated being left behind.

Something, she repeated. I imagined her squinting her eyes shut.

A long pause, the dog barking. I think she had a dog. I think I remember a dog.

There's something happening here. People are sick. Stay at home; I don't want them to ground you.

Later, she would write: *Every time I lose my keys, I'm afraid it's the first sign, and they won't let me go up.* She was always losing her keys, usually in yesterday's pockets. On the phone, she said, But it's Christmas.

Tell your mother anything. Don't come home.

Another pause. A nylon rustle I think came from her coat. It was a pink coat? Puffed up with down, shedding white wisps onto every shirt. You're sure? she asked.

No.

She sighed. I'll think of something to tell Mama.

I hope it's nothing, I said.

Merry Christmas, she said.

On December twenty-sixth, the quarantine began. Roadblocks appeared at every way into the city. I don't think I saw them in person, but the television showed them. Policemen wearing paper masks over their faces, heavy guns across their bodies, halting the Christmas travelers trying to get back home.

The waitress had served the mobster his dinner. The mobster's wife loved tomatoes. The lisping boy passed the market on his way home from school, had asked the old tomato man for change so he could ride the

merry-go-round; the woman who sold apricots from the next stall remembered the exchange until she was found wandering the market with glassy eyes three weeks later, and she didn't remember anything at all.

I don't remember if I was scared at first. My grandmother had been ill for years: had forgotten how to dress herself, frequently mistook me for my mother. I was preoccupied making sure she stayed warm in a house we could not afford to heat with electricity. Three times a day while I was at work, bald Uncle Lyupcho came from next door and built up the fire in her bedroom. Lately, Uncle Lyupcho hasn't been by; when I try to remember, it seems that his windows have been dark for weeks.

Space, said Prime Minister Imanev in his press conference. That's where Lili is going.

Space, he said—*That is where we can rise to new glory*. The national anthem swelled behind him as he waved for the cameras, accepting the nation's praise with his open palm.

We were far from the first; we were lagging far behind. The sky had been buzzing for decades: floating hotels, massive colony shuttles bound for new settlements. Mostly prison volunteers for the first few rounds, but once they carved the footholds, civilians donned space suits. On the news they showed night views of the earth, photographs from fifty years ago and from now: large dark patches shadowing today's map, whole cities left behind. Walking outside in the mornings, I imagined I could hear the rising silence coming in across the globe, imagined I could feel us more and more alone. The television showed animals reclaiming Paris, deer pulling at the grass growing up from heavy cracks in the rue de Rivoli while the grounded poor hurried past with bowed heads and radiation burns.

Even our own population was shrinking, bleeding through open borders, filling those abandoned houses in the countryside. Latest reports claimed that half of Bulgarians now lived abroad. Some eighteen thousand dual citizens had already taken off with other space programs, but those of us left behind stubbornly dug roots deeper into the ground.

On the television: *This is no way for us to move forward*, Imanev said. *We must move upward*.

Mobsters were convinced, money was borrowed, training programs created. Open calls for volunteers, and at the end of it all, one of the four chosen for our first flight since 1988 was Lili. The token civilian, pulled from the masses to prove the charges of nepotism wrong. Lili was nobody but was brilliant, hardworking. When we were little, she drew countless pictures of rockets, stars, planets of her own invention. She went through black crayons at alarming rates, painting the sky.

Forty-four days to launch.

Eighteen new patients have been reported in quarantined Vuzlevo this week, and now concerns have surfaced about the health of prospective cosmonaut Liliana Dancheva. Dancheva, a native of Vuzlevo, claims she has not returned home since late September, three months before the outbreak began at Christmas, but this has not allayed fears that she may still be a carrier of the unknown disease. If she is allowed to launch with the rest of her team on the twenty-fourth of February, Dancheva will become the first Bulgarian woman in space.

A panel of hastily fabricated specialists took the stage, debating possible scenarios. The anchor said they had reached out to Lili for comment, but had received none. In an e-release, the BNCA politely told the press to go fuck themselves.

I half-listened while I set the moka to brew. I took Baba her porridge and coffee, helped her stretch two pairs of wool socks over the cold hams of her feet. That morning she thought I was my aunt.

Have you studied for your history exam?

I assured her I had. I got the fire going and settled her in front of it. Books sat within arm's reach on the table beside her, but I have no idea if she ever read from them when I was gone. When Uncle Lyupcho came, she told me, they sometimes played cards.

I have to go to work, Baba.

I kissed her cheek and pulled the blanket tighter over her shoulders.

Do your best on the exam, she said, and I promised her I would.

The young man brought his mother back. At the front door, a security guard in a rubber suit distributed masks. The paper crinkled as she breathed, eyes fixed on a point none of us could see.

She's worse, her son insisted.

The doctors examined her, interviewed the son at length.

It just kept happening, he said. Some days she was almost normal, like she was learning the things she'd forgotten, and then—

He'd found her walking down the middle of the street in her bathrobe and one bedroom slipper, her other foot red with the cold, a rusted nail in her heel.

More tests.

We have to send them out, the doctor explained. It might take a while. With the roadblocks.

They gave the woman a tetanus shot and sent her home with extra masks for her son.

At the end of January, the paper reported on the story of a six-year-old girl who got lost in the woods chasing after her dog. Her father forgot to look for her until a stranger found her coat tangled in a bush. He knew where to take it from the name and address stitched into the pocket. When he returned it, the father burst into tears, holding the coat to his nose. The house behind him was piled with half-cleaned dishes, clothes sorted for the laundry and then abandoned. The girl's body was found in the woods with a broken ankle, two weeks dead, muddy-gray and chewed by wolves.

I thought I'd dreamed her, the father said.

The next two columns in the paper were blank, as though the editors forgot to fill them with print and the printers forgot to ask. The next day, there would be no new paper, nor the day after, nor the day after that.

I was the only receptionist still coming to work, but more and more, patients were missing appointments. By then, they were mostly brought by motorists after traffic accidents. Slow days, when I did old crosswords to check my memory and sent Lili optimistic dispatches from my desk. *We're seeing fewer cases now; I think it may all be over soon. How are your preparations? Only one month to go!*

Outside, orphaned pets dug through the trash by the sides of the roads. Thieves walked calmly in and out of houses that owners had forgotten to lock. People wandered, staring into the sky. The mayor's office reminded us to carry identification at all times, just in case. So that if we forgot where we belonged, we could be returned to our homes like lost books. A city van patrolled the streets, collecting the sick before they froze, depositing them in the closed high school, a makeshift human kennel. Grocery stores swept bare; no deliveries made since before Christmas. Official estimates: one half of all Vuzlevo had forgotten something of Importance.

Twenty-nine days to launch.

One night Baba and I watched a documentary about the rocket. It was called *Sudba 1: Nova Bulgarska Nadejda*. Inspirational swelling music, slow-panning shots of the construction, clipped interviews with the chosen cosmonauts talking about their hopes for our national future.

Lili came up, first in uniform, a space helmet under her arm, and then just her voice, overlaid with photographs of us as children, pictures of her family, posing with her dog.

What a nice-looking girl, Baba said. I wonder where she's from.

So you can see how sometimes, I could forget any of it was strange.

The market emptied quickly. Someone left the heat lamps on. The thick plastic winter sheets obscured the stalls like ghosts in a mirror. Inside, some merchants had posted signs. For asparagus, visit this address. Thanks to forgetful thieves, cucumbers are available only at this house. Or, from the import farmers, *Sorry, no oranges—roads closed*. At the foot of one stall, a caved-in cantaloupe rocked in the wind, leaking seeds and a line of black ants onto the concrete.

Sudjuk for dinner! I told grandmother when I served her plate of cured meat and crackers, as though it were exciting. She was clearer that night. I told her I was scared and she patted my hand. We pressed our fingers into the plates to gather the crumbs.

When the first case outside of Vuzlevo was reported, the cosmonauts were moved into a security complex somewhere underground, though they were still a hundred kilometers away. We watched mass panic in the streets. A man was beaten to death in Krivograd for asking directions after he lost his mobile phone. Everybody wore masks. Somehow we'd been so quiet in Vuzlevo, watching it unfold.

It was nineteen days to launch. The news cut the footage from reruns, but the video was all over the Internet by then. A protester in Varna was giving a speech on the steps of city hall, a picket sign in one hand and a megaphone in the other. People cheered around him, waving banners made of bedsheets.

Close-up of the man and his magnified voicebox: *Forget your glory—the rest of us have to live here*.

And then he stopped, swayed, and gave a soft mechanical gurgle through the throat of the megaphone. His eyes lost focus and he lowered the horn. Cameras rolled on as he looked for someone to hand it to.

Sorry, did you need this?

The news mics caught the collective intake of breath from the crowd. People lifted scarves and shirts to cover their faces, stumbling back like pigeons, while the police stepped in closer, raising their batons.

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There's a word I keep thinking of today, one that I can't remember. Today it consumes me. Something for the brightness of the day, for the cold whiteness of sun without leaves on the trees. The pale wash of the concrete, color leached from the chipping ceramics of the roofs. I sit at my desk with a pen poised over paper, waiting for the word to come. Or waiting for the phone to ring or for the door to open, for there to

be work today. Instead there is the buzzing of the lights overhead, the squinting grayness of the sky.

You are going there, I think to Lili, through that shell. You're going so soon.

Sudba 1, they called the rocket. The name was announced last year, along with the names of those cosmonauts selected to go. *Sudba*—destiny. Calculated propaganda, Baba said cheerfully, on a day when she remembered her own childhood in this country. But remarkable, she agreed, looking up. Remarkable nonetheless.

Sometimes I imagine that Baba will be the only one of us left with any memory at all. Walking down the street, I see more doors hanging open. The school windows glow in the dark. The roads are still blocked, though there hardly seems to be a point anymore. They have traced the Varna case to a man who wandered through the woods onto an unguarded road and was picked up by a driver heading north. The driver was the protester's uncle. Later, from behind quarantine glass, the motorist told the press: I asked him where he was going and he asked where there was to go.

Some days, Baba still remembers her life in sharp detail. Somewhere, she is intact. The rest of us are losing pieces once and for all. I imagine one day she will wake, lucid, to a town of empty people. She will bundle herself in a winter coat and step outside for the first time in months. She will walk among the ghosts and realize she is alone, and the only thing she will not know is where she's been for the change.

Before I go to sleep, I move the rest of our pantry into Baba's room, within easy reach.

One day to launch. Lili calls me, and I can hear the smile straining her mouth over the phone.

I can't believe it, she says, over and over. I can't believe it's tomorrow. Is it bad to be so excited? So many things are happening *here*.

I assure her that it isn't.

In case anything happens while I'm gone—

Nothing will happen, I say. You'll be back in a few weeks. Don't worry.

Okay. Okay. I have to go. I need to call Mama before I leave. I love you.

I love you, too, I say. Have a good trip.

We hang up. I can't remember where she's going, but I think it's far.