

The Girl in the Water

A novel by Joseph Howse

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About the Book

The Girl in the Water is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination; any resemblance to actual events, places, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my family and Pat McLarney,
who remind me, Life is a mighty force.

Cast of Characters

Listed in order of first mention:

Nadia (Nadezhda) Mikhailovna a scholar

Nastya (Anastasia) Mikhailovna Nadia's older sister,
an artist

Ida Ivanova Nastya and Nadia's friend

Johnny (Jaan) Nastya and Nadia's friend

Gramma Ninel Nastya and Nadia's paternal grandmother,
a veteran

Katya (Yekaterina) Lvovna Nastya and Nadia's mother,
a factory worker

Misha (Mikhail) Pavlovich Nastya and Nadia's father,
a shipping clerk

Grandpa Pasha (Paavo) Nastya and Nadia's paternal grandfather,
a veteran

Grandpa Lev Nastya and Nadia's maternal grandfather,
a schoolteacher

Tolyan a hooligan

Giorgi Licheli a detective

Cherny Gramma Ninel's cat

Pierre/Petrushka (Robespierre) Gramma Ninel's warhorse

Kio a leader of partisans

Galya Gramma Ninel's youngest sister

Anton Igorevich Yahontov a psychiatrist

Andrei an orderly

Yuly Lvovich Babich Gramma Ninel's neighbour

Petya a radio operator

Sokolov an officer in Naval Aviation

- Sergei Sverdlov** a detective
Anya Vladimirovna Sverdlova Sergei's wife,
a childcare worker
Rosya Lekht Yuly's cousin
Manya a childcare worker
Fenya (Agrafena) Petrova a detective
Marat Petrovich Fenya's older brother,
a manager and photographer
Pyotr Marat and Fenya's father,
an optical engineer
Avel an informant
Yuri a custodian of a library
Fraydel Yuly's daughter
Minah Yuly's wife
Tentser Fraydel's cat
Gramma Marusya Nastya and Nadia's maternal grandmother
Igor Igorevich Yahontov a psychiatrist
Cosmos / Tentser II a cat of changing circumstances
Oleg a doorkeeper
Kazimir a barbecue operator
Sveta (Svetlana) Kazimir's wife
Wayne/Pricey (Gawain Price) a merchant mariner

I: Swept Away

i: Daydream

Call her Nadia; her parents did.

She never once dreamt of lions but there was a time, as a colourless childhood advanced into benighted adolescence, when foreign candy and shortwave radio seemed the stuff of dreams. She and her elder sister Nastya and Nastya's friends Ida and Jaan collected the candy wrappers. Their rainbow colours had no parallel in the blocks of crumbling tenements that looked like sullied wedding cakes, picked over by all and sundry hands in an atmosphere of sweat, smoke, secrecy, and dubious libations. Hunger, sated briefly—that was a wedding party.

Jaan styled himself “Johnny”. He was the one with the shortwave radio, which he had put together in a shed on a country road somewhere, from parts he scrounged on his truant expeditions by commuter rail. He was pleased to lecture the youngest, Nadia, on the workings of the device and the role of the ionosphere in shortwave propagation. Nastya and Ida were more excited by Johnny's plan to resurrect a motorcycle he had hauled from a bog.

Lecturing Nadia was one thing but Johnny was not one for chitchat. Nastya never got much out of him when she gushed about the man he would be: an engineer, a scientist, a cosmonaut, a radio anchor, a motorcyclist-adventurer.

“I'm nobody's worker and nobody's hero,” Johnny scoffed at Nastya one time.

Ida took a different tack. One summer, day after day, she voiced a daydream about finding a new place to go—instead of the shed in nobody's hayfield, a beach between nobody's forest and nobody's sea. On the high sand dunes, even higher pine trees would give them shade and the breeze would fill their lungs with salt and pine as it rolled the water and the branches and the sand. They could be “just happy, just us,” in such a singular landscape of straight and waving forms.

“A change could be good,” even Johnny admitted at last. The motorcycle was not starting; it had not started since their grandparents went to war. He had sweat in his eyes, greasy gashes on his hands, he stank unbearably even to himself, and he was beginning to imagine that the shed was being watched.

Anyway, the hayfield had become infested with ticks that year, so Nastya and Nadia were ready to support a change.

As if she had already chosen the spot from a library of survey photographs, Ida led them all to it the following day. It was far. They had only two hours of late afternoon to enjoy there but they agreed it would be a fine place to return. “If only we could camp for a night or two and spend the whole day... Hmm,” Ida sighed and by then, all four were living in a daydream.

A youth event in a farther town afforded a pretext to be away. Johnny used connections to falsify their attendance.

On the first evening, around their campfire on the beach, they experimented with lightly roasting a few foreign candy bars in their precious wrappers. This had been Nadia’s idea, she had emptied her secret stash, and she was proud to make this contribution to the illicit party. They laughed like mad as they tried to lick molten chocolate from the singed rainbow foil.

Nastya passed around a bottle of Vana Talinn rum liqueur. “Not for you, Little Hedgehog,” she said to Nadia.

They climbed the dunes to watch the sunset. At the last light, Ida said, “Hmm, I’m going down again. I need a moment.”

She went walking East, her feet straddling the tideline in a kind of dance. As she got farther, Johnny reached into his pack for something else he had scrounged—a pair of large binoculars.

“What’s she doing?” Johnny crowed.

Even without binoculars, it was plain enough that Ida was stripping, tossing her clothes to the wind, and then wading out into the surf. Johnny’s optics just gave him the best view.

“Stop that!” Nastya said.

“Why?” asked Johnny. “I’ll share if that’s the problem; here, look.” He held out the binoculars but it was Nadia who reached for them. “Not you.”

This second refusal stung unexpectedly. Nadia lay back and chose to ignore it all in favour of scanning for Venus and Mercury in the western sky.

“Is she drowning herself?” Johnny asked. “No. False alarm.”

Nadia drifted off to the sound of the wind in the pines. She was tired from the day’s travel and sun and earlier swimming (in bathing suits) and staring into the fire and eating chocolate, along with tons of mussels they had gathered and bread from home.

The stars were many when Ida returned with most of her clothes. Nadia was awake to hear her say, "I lost my neckerchief." Nastya made chitchat about all the places they could look for it tomorrow. That put everyone to sleep.

The next day, supplies ran out and there was little appetite for mussels alone. "Are you alright to gather mushrooms without me?" Nastya asked her sister. "I did promise Ida I'd help her find her neckerchief."

Being excused from that errand suited Nadia well enough, so she spent the morning in the pine forest. She knew from their grandmother what was poison and what was not. The old woman had survived among partisans.

The party got back together for lunch on the beach. There were plenty of mushrooms, as well as clams that Johnny had dug. He was showing Nadia another of his recent scroungings—a portable radio—and they were about to string an antenna up the dunes when Nastya and Ida arrived with a red neckerchief full of red-and-gold cloudberries. By luck, they had found both and thought they made a pretty presentation to share between sisters and friends.

Nastya and Ida laid the fire as Nadia and Johnny strung the antenna and tuned in a faint crackle of rock and roll. They were less well equipped than in the shed and hayfield, where they had hidden a splendid antenna by stringing it along a rotten fence. "*En tout cas,*" said Nadia, putting on airs of an international scholar, "*l'ionosphère fonctionne mieux la nuit.*" She got a little smile from her teacher. He was good with languages, on account of his shortwave listening.

They baked the clams and seared the mushrooms with rocks in the fire; the cloudberries they ate raw. The feast was briny, earthy, and tart.

Everybody sat, sated. They were hot from their labours and the fire, sun, and sand, and a diet newly rich in molluscs.

The wind had died down. The radio reception was improving just a little. A distant freighter passed from East to West.

They lay burning. Nadia read a book of Chekhov's tales. Nastya embroidered little cloudberries on Ida's neckerchief. Ida took Johnny's binoculars and studied an island a good kilometre away—just more dunes and pines, pines and dunes, but captivating to her. Johnny was at a loose end.

"I can swim there," Ida said.

"You can't," Johnny informed her.

"You'll have to stop me."

The binoculars went down in the sand. Ida was on her feet, striding out to sea, and—once more—stripping on the way.

The other three sat up. Nastya rested her sewing in her lap and appeared unable to breathe. Nadia placed a bookmark in Chekhov and put him away in

her satchel.

Ida, now thigh-deep in water, was bending to throw it on her face and back. From below her shoulder blades, down to her buttocks, she was crisscrossed by red and purple stripes; she had taken a beating for something lately. The deepest wounds were C-shaped—a buckle—while her upper back bore a more diffuse bruise, faded to yellow, where she had probably been held down. *Doesn't that hurt?* Nadia wondered about the salt. Ida did not show it. She finished splashing herself and just kept wading deeper.

Johnny tensed, stood up, and tensed some more.

Up to her breasts in the surf, Ida paused to unbraid her long hair—blond, which seemed whiteish against her burning face and neck—and then she dove headlong against a surge. Rolling back a little and then forwards in fierce strokes, she made her way out to sea.

“She’ll drown,” Johnny said, as if to cue the hero to action. Finding no man but himself, he stripped to his shorts and raced after her.

Now in deep water, Ida rolled over in a wave and started to backstroke. She was a good swimmer and Nadia thought there was no need to panic as yet.

Johnny was not closing the distance.

The daydream ended, for some of them, within the next couple of minutes, which can be a long time to swimmers. The wind picked up again fast. Ida, on full display, went under in a swell. Johnny kept paddling after her like mad and went under in the next one.

They came up together choking. That awful sound blew ashore and further covered up the crackling rock and roll.

The wind lulled a little and they got to shallow water before the next big swell. Linked shoulder-to-shoulder, sputtering all the way, they marched ashore.

Pair of fools, Nadia thought. Ida was actually coughing out a laugh. Her clothes, except the neckerchief, had washed out to sea. Johnny looked back out there as if unsure he were wise to have left the depths.

What Nastya thought was in her eyes. She was crying.

“Nastya?” her sister asked.

“We’re leaving,” Nastya rasped. “I was wrong to bring you here.”

2: Suitcase

That autumn, when Ida got an abortion (and Nadia was not supposed to know), it was the end of the fellowship of four; the sisters’ parents made sure of that much even if they had not made sure of much till then.

Their father, Misha, and mother, Katya, pulled strings to relocate the family from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

(He was a shipping and receiving clerk. She was a factory worker.)

Misha's colleague from Odessa suggested to him that it was a fine city, sure to be edifying for the girls. Odessans are famous as practical jokers.

The grandmother would stay. "I made a promise to Misha's father," she said, "and anyway, dears, the South would never suit me. I'll take the long winter nights with the long summer days."

They stuffed their lives in one suitcase apiece, Nadia's being the smallest. She had little besides books and clothes. There was a formal photograph: grandmother and granddaughters. It showed the old woman in a wooden chair with little Nastya and Nadia standing by her knees and her husband's mariner's cap in her lap. There was the candy wrapper collection. There was a leftover length of antenna wire that had served as a bookmark. To Nadia's regret (if hers alone), there was nothing as a keepsake of Ida.

They travelled two days and nights by train via Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev. Nastya and Nadia had never travelled overnight, nor such a distance. The dormitory car had fifty-four bunks, with sheets spilling into the corridor. On one side, each grouping of four shared a little table, not big enough to spread a newspaper. On the other side, the bunks were in twos with no tables. The toilets were locked whenever the train got near a city, in order to create a "sanitary zone" where no waste was flushed.

People chitchatted, wandered, chitchatted with somebody new, nibbled and drank, wandered, shared their nibbles and drinks, lounged, slept, played cards or chess, changed their socks, opened windows, waited for the toilets, took potions for indigestion or a cough, closed windows, and looked for missing socks.

The world unfolded. The world got warmer. The world stank of socks. Everything brushed together; every sense was overwhelmed by pickled herring, pickled men, shirtless men, farts, and foul breath.

Nadia barfed in the cavernous Kiev station in the middle of Night II. This drew attention to her family and then a tramp tried to sell them a bronze ring. "Gold?" he asked. "Something fine in gold for a girl's hand?"

Enticed to look, Nadia thought, *That's pretty. He's rubbed it till it's bright. Poor, dirty fingers and a bright ring with X's cut into the face.*

"Go away!" hollered Katya, throwing herself between her nauseated younger daughter and the tramp. "Go away or it's you who'll pay!" The tramp moved on without a word.

Nadia felt regret (a distraction from her discomfort, at least). Had that ring been a keepsake? She thought the tramp misunderstood the ring because

it looked to her like a gift a girl would give, rather than one she would find flattering from a man.

“Let’s go,” whispered Misha. “Katya—Mama—girls, let’s go.”

“Come on, Nadia,” Nastya said, “hold on to my arm. Papa, take our cases, please.”

They continued on to Odessa in a car recently vacated by another fifty-four people, shifted from various states of unconsciousness.

Nadia begged to lie in an upper bunk and to have the window open so she could feel the updraught. The neighbours bitched about it and chastised Katya as a madwoman of a mother; the girl would die of cold. “I’ll shut the window if you stick your tongues in it!” Katya hissed. “Anyone who isn’t blind drunk can see my daughter is sick from this stuffy air. Whose fault is that? You, you hustle alongside like parrots on a perch and you echo your great-grandmothers’ wisdom and for all your preening, all you do is shit and stink up the air! Die of cold in autumn, wrapped in blankets on a train? Let me tell you, her grandmother was a partisan! Tell them!”

“As my wife says, we would prefer to have the window open.”

The train is going in circles, Nadia thought—or perhaps she said it aloud but no one heard. She was burning. She tried to ask Nastya for water, ask Nastya to read to her, ask Nastya for anything but no words would come out.

A conductor thrust his way down the shaking corridor. He bellowed threats and everybody shut up.

On the bunk below Nadia, Nastya was holding her breath in an effort not to sob.

Rocked to sleep, Nadia felt a little relief again. She dreamt of a sand dune and pines, Venus and Mercury, and in her dream she woke in the night as she felt on her face something hot, which was ash. It had blown from a cigarette Ida was smoking. “Bad luck,” said Ida. “Here,” and Ida offered the cigarette to Nadia. Had something like that been real?

3: Transformations

Odessa afforded them better housing: a detached cinderblock home with five rooms and a little garden. The outside door opened onto a kitchen with a gas stove. To the right was a shower room; ahead was a family room. Off the family room were two bedrooms with three beds.

This home was on a street corner next to a small park with a seesaw and a disarmed T-34 tank. Street cats frequented the park (the tank being a hot seat in the sun), the roofs of houses (likewise), and every part of Odessa, especially

the waterfront. Street dogs were also common around wastelands, including the unkempt corners of big parks.

Misha had a long, daily walk to his work at the docks. He also took long walks alone in the evenings. Sometimes, he befriended a particular cat or dog. Occasionally, he would take his daughters out to meet such a friend but his wife would have nothing to do with that.

On other occasions, Misha would take his daughters to naval airshows and he would point out the types of planes by name. The girls got him a book on Naval Aviation for his birthday, so they all became quite expert.

Katya took every opportunity to send her daughters to youth events pertaining to the arts and culture. She considered these things essential to their Odessan edification. Nastya was considered good at drawing and crafts, Nadia at literary recitals in multiple languages.

“The girls are transformed,” Katya wrote in a letter to a work-friend up North. She never got a reply.

Katya was a person who believed wholeheartedly in transformations. Daily—even hourly—she seized upon some newfound goodness or badness in a drama with an audience of one. She would fly to the Moon; she would die of oppression; could no one see that it was so? She would honour her father (a teacher, dead of a heart attack), for a life of extremes was the burden of the educated worker.

The transformative school that Katya’s father might have founded (had he not died of exhaustion at his middling post) was nothing like the latter-day Odessan school his granddaughters attended. Katya never asked about the school’s realities and was never told.

Within their first term, Nastya and Nadia saw a teacher attacked in the schoolyard. A gang of boys was squatting by the wall, on either side of a door, and when this teacher stepped out, one boy called, “Now!” They grabbed chunks of masonry and flung them at her from both sides. Hit on the head, she moaned and staggered back in a strange, abstract form: flailing arms, gaping face, bloodied hair, floral dress. She retreated back through the threshold and slammed the door on the boy-kingpin’s hand.

“Cunt!” he wailed in pain. “Filthy whore! Fuck! Fuck! I think she broke it!”

A rival jibed, “Tolyan thinks she broke it.”

“Dear Comrades, we’ve suffered the heavy loss of Tolyan’s cock.”

There was more of that and a scuffle. Like a ball of fighting cats, tumbling into more cats, the scuffle threatened to become a general schoolyard brawl.

Police sirens were approaching, *Ba-woo-ya, ba-woo-ya.*

The Tolyan gang fled over the fence and out of sight. A minute later, the streets echoed with either firecrackers or gunshots.

4: Such Hosts

Two years later, Gramma came South to visit. She arrived in a cold snap, a week before the winter break. Nastya was finishing her first term of higher education and Nadia was about to turn sixteen.

Gramma was on an evening train, so Misha, at the end of the workday, was supposed to go straight from the docks to the station to wait for her. Katya had planned it that way; meanwhile, she was cooking and the girls were getting the house ready.

At one point, Katya went out to dump vegetable peels in the garden. When she re-entered, she found Gramma sitting on her big suitcase, near the stove. The old woman was breathing soup steam and listening to her granddaughters, who had not yet noticed her; they were bustling about, chitchatting and laughing, in the family room and their bedroom.

“Gramma!” Katya greeted her. “Girls, come!”

“Hello, dears. I slipped in when you had your backs turned.”

The old woman was welcomed with kisses. Without getting up, she touched Nadia, Nastya, and Katya in turn. Gramma’s hands had changed in the last two winters; her fingers had become crooked and knotty. Pine trees grow like that on the rocky cliffs in Crimea. (On summer vacation, the family had even sent Gramma a postcard of such a tree.)

“Gramma,” said Katya (squeezing in between her and the stove to give the soup pot a quick stir), “you must be tired. Did you stay the night in Moscow with your friend, the archivist?”

“No. I think I am more a trial than a friend to her.”

“How can you say that? You two are always writing each other.”

“Well, I’m writing requests that she obliges when she can. Anyway, I went via Vitebsk, not Moscow.”

“You should have gone via Moscow. It’s faster. You must have tired yourself out, coming all that way on slow trains—day, night, day, night...” (Vegetable peels rained into a bucket as Katya spoke and peeled.)

“No, it was fine, dear. I’ve travelled that route many times by night.”

“When was that, Gramma?”

“When we blew it up.” With a grunt, Gramma shifted herself off her suitcase. “I do wonder, though, whether Nastya and Nadia might show me our bedroom and then the new shower and toilet you’ve mentioned in your

letters, and where is my son, anyway?"

A potato dropped to the floor. "What?"

"My son. He wasn't at the station and I had your address from your letters, so I came on my own to surprise you."

"He's probably with a cat or a dog," Nadia said. (Till then, she and Nastya had stood attentively near the threshold of the family room.)

"You might have to explain that, dear."

Nastya interjected, "Papa is always nurturing animals he meets on his walks. He loves them to distraction."

"Dear, a distraction is what men do love."

Just as Misha's mother said this, he slipped into the house with sweat on his brow. He wore a smile that only added to his fevered look.

"Mama—Gramma," Misha panted—"missed you by minutes. Got your message from the Station Master when I arrived. He was taken, couldn't say enough about you, told me you saved his father's life in the War!"

"Oh, the nice Station Master," said Gramma as she got another kiss. "He thought his father and I must have met at some point. I wasn't so sure."

"I've had..."

"Where were you?" Katya enquired as she sliced a large potato in two.

"Yes, I'm telling you, I've had the most remarkable encounter of my own today. That's what made me late."

"A remarkable encounter, do tell. I haven't had one for years."

He wheezed and then managed to speak more clearly. "A young detective came to the docks today." As this announcement settled, all were quiet, save the bubbling pot. "He's coming to dinner tonight."

"I hope he's cooked something," Katya said. The words were her usual fare but her voice sounded strange.

"Why is a cop coming to dinner?" Gramma asked.

"A young detective, Mama." Her son assured her, "He's a new kind. He's very attentive to the truth of things. I helped him ... with some things he needed to learn about the docks."

"I hope he's paying for that," his wife said. She tossed the last of the week's potatoes in the pot. This one seemed to have a bit of extra force behind it and the pot spat back, far enough that the scalding spray was felt by more than one person in the poky kitchen.

"No, it's not like that. Just trust me, this is a person we want to know. He could be a good friend to us."

"What's he like, Papa?" Nastya wondered.

"I would call him a serious sort of man, about twenty-five, not yet thirty, tall, very neat, clean-shaven, with dark hair and dark eyes. What else about

him?”

“Does he prefer cats or dogs?” Nadia asked.

“What’s his name, Papa?”

“His name is Giorgi, Nastya. Nadia, you’ll have the chance to ask him anything at all and find out whether your questions puzzle even a detective.”

“You know, dear,” said Gramma to Katya, “it’s hit me that you’re right. I am tired. The company would be too much for me, so I’ll go straight to bed.”

“What about this food?”

“Just keep it warm and have the children bring it in after you’ve all eaten. I’ve had nibbles all the way here, from the people on the train.” Leaving the kitchen and looking for the bedroom, Gramma said, “When I was young and hungry, I starved. Now I’m old and have no appetite, they feed me all the time.”

“This way, Gramma,” Nastya said as she led the old woman by the hand. “Nadia, would you bring Gramma’s suitcase, please?”

The case was heavy. *She’s got the old bombs in here.*

The sisters showed their grandmother the bedroom, then showed her the way back through the family room and kitchen to the toilet, and finally got her placed in the bedroom once more. Meanwhile, Katya had told Misha to go change his shirt, so he crossed paths with his mother and daughters in the family room as he headed to the other bedroom. Then, on his return to the kitchen, Katya pronounced her judgment: “No, it’s no good. You’ll have to shower.” His mother was, at that time, still in the toilet, so he waited alongside his daughters, who were waiting to guide his mother.

“Goodnight, goodnight, goodnight, goodnight,” Gramma bid each of them in turn as she left the toilet.

“No, we’ll get you settled first,” Nadia said. *I gotta see what’s in the trunk.* However, she was to have no satisfaction, for Gramma just wanted the big suitcase put out of the way in a corner with a spare blanket over it.

“... to keep out the damp. How humid it is! Oh, I’m sure you’ve heard enough out of me for one night. Thank you, dears. Go meet ... whoever it was, Georgian name, my son’s new...”

(Gramma fell asleep in the middle of giving this instruction. Nadia eyed the case for a moment before following Nastya out.)

Misha took his time in the shower. The design was a wet room, vented by a pipe-hole through the cinderblock wall. If one stood on tiptoe to look through the pipe, the garden and street were clearly visible. The whole system did much to contribute to the home’s dampness and draughtiness. However, the shower did have a water heater in it, so it was one place to get warm on such a night and, unlike the stove-front or bed, it was a place to be alone.

The shower left him sleepy—and ahead would be an evening of talk, food, and wine, all repurposed from the occasion of his mother’s arrival to the occasion of introducing Giorgi. For just a moment, Misha wondered why he was bothering to upend the family’s plans but that question seemed to go the way of the steam or of a cat’s nocturne.

Taking the clean shirt down from a hook by the pipe-hole, Misha found that the steam had improved it; it almost looked ironed. “Better,” said Katya when he emerged. She tasted the soup, straightened his collar, and called, “Nastya, Nadia, what are you doing?”

“Finding some things to entertain Papa’s friend,” Nastya replied from the family room. “I have my sketchbook...”

“Good!”

“...and Nadia is going to read from...”

“*Crime and Punishment*?” Nadia proposed.

“No, something romantic,” her sister said.

“*Anna Karenina*?”

“That might do. Let’s look for a scene...”

Thus, they all prepared a scene of their own, the best they could muster: a steamed shirt and straight collar; potato soup and Soviet Champagne; sketches and a recital of famous prose; and a grandmother already abed, so one could say, “Ah, we must speak softly because Gramma is sleeping; she’s just had a tiring journey.”

Giorgi showed up with a loaf of brown bread and bottle of Moldovan red wine. He was in uniform and, himself, looked a bit like a slim, dark bottle with a red wrapper around his cap. Katya was quick to wrest the gifts from his hands (“Nadia, put these in the centre of the table”) and lower the coat from his high shoulders (“Nastya, hang this in Papa’s and my bedroom”). The hat went the same way as the coat.

Next, Katya started to raise her hand to wipe soup steam from her brow. Giorgi interpreted the gesture as a proffered hand, which he clasped in both his hands as he made a kissing motion over it in the air. He proceeded to wring Misha’s hands and, finally, bow to the “young ladies” as they re-entered the kitchen.

“Well,” Katya said as if presenting a mystery, “why are we all standing here? We have a much nicer room...” (She hesitated to gesture towards it.)

“...just through here,” Nastya finished.

“Hi,” Nadia said belatedly. Giorgi looked at her, nodded, and went through to the family room, where the round table was set for dinner.

A room like this would fain be a pocket kingdom, its damp floral wallpaper an impregnable defence. Shortages and fear, along with the living memory

of famine and terror, could not sag (thin limbs and all) into the sofa like a shirtless Banquo's ghost. Spring could put Winter forever in the grave, sealed by flowers and more flowers, sewn up with grass that sprang through vegetable peels, and sated at last by libations of potato soup and wine.

"How nicely the young ladies have set the table with the meal their radiant mother made."

"Do sit," Katya bade their guest.

They dined, with much chitchat. At least, the family offered chitchat to Giorgi; he marvelled at it (especially anything Katya had to say); and the evening progressed as a superficial exhibition of their lives, made to seem more colourful by the appearance of this stranger as a black backdrop.

They all had their fill of potato soup and brown bread. They mopped the floral bowls with the crusts. By that time, the bottle of Soviet Champagne was depleted and the Moldovan red had been uncorked to give everyone a try. (It would get used up soon enough over the holidays.)

"You were kind to bring the wine," Katya said. "You must have rushed to get it, before Comrade Gorbachev bulldozed the vineyard and closed the store at seven. Happy holidays, Comrade Gorbachev."

"Ha," said Giorgi.

Then came a lull.

"It seems," said Misha, "owing to the suddenness of our friendly gathering, Giorgi, I have not allowed my wife time to prepare a dessert."

Giorgi raised his hand and was on the point of declaring his own fault in the matter and the lavishness of the hospitality under these or any circumstances, when Katya spoke up: "We're saving the sugar, eggs, and butter, Misha."

"For what?"

"A cake."

"A cake?"

"Can the detective help you?"

"A birthday?" Giorgi ventured. "One can scarcely believe the ladies are ageing but..."

"Yes," Misha laughed, "our Nadia turns sixteen!"

"Sixteen on Tuesday," Katya said.

"Congratulations!" Giorgi toasted, "May the young lady's wishes all come true!"

"A cake will do nicely," said Nadia. "Thank you, Mama."

"Nadia is our prodigy," Nastya told their guest. "One day she'll be on the radio, maybe the stage or the screen! You should hear her read Tolstoy!"

"I insist on it," Giorgi said. "She mustn't be shy."

“Alright, she mustn’t be shy,” Nadia consented, “but she must find her place in the book. Why doesn’t Nastya show you her sketches first?”

They performed the little show. Giorgi said he had never seen the Crimean coast evoked so well in charcoal, nor heard such a rendition of Kitty’s heart-break when Vronsky danced with Anna at the ball. The sisters thanked him, gave a bit of an encore at everyone’s insistence, and eventually packed off to bed with soup and bread for Gramma.

They could hear further snippets of the conversation, especially when its timbre deepened, and they struggled not to snicker at the tipsier-sounding bits.

“Tell me,” said Giorgi, “what way did you travel to Crimea?”

Katya answered that they sailed overnight on the best and oldest cruise liner, the *Admiral Nakhimov*. She and Misha danced on deck while below, in the theatre, the girls watched the best and newest action film, *The Detached Mission*. They did not usually watch such fantasies about machine-gun-toting musclemen fighting Americans in the jungle but it was a vacation, after all.

“That sounds like a good night on the *Nakhimov*,” Giorgi concluded, “but if you stay with her five nights, she goes to Georgia! That is because it takes five times as long to get a girl in Georgia. Ha.”

Katya did not stay up much longer. She said, “Giorgi, feel free to keep my husband as long as you like but when you’re done, don’t forget to send him in to fetch your hat and coat.”

Giorgi rose and bowed to the “dear lady”.

Misha assured her, “We won’t forget, thank you.”

Katya disappeared into her and Misha’s dark bedroom and shut the door. Giorgi sat down again. Misha was squinting in the manner of a man who has forgotten his aim. Giorgi glanced around the room.

Misha raised a finger. “One thing you won’t find,” he said, “is a television. When we moved here, Katya said, we’ll all find better things to do.”

“May one ask...?”

“Well, the *Nakhimov* and then there was a tutor, Galician girl, ended up moving to Poland.” Misha flexed his nose.

Over their drinks, the pair chitchatted for a while about transportation, geography, and boxing.

“I won a gold medal, in school,” Misha confided.

Giorgi raised his glass. “A scholar!”

“No, no, a boxer. They called me Yellow Bear, for my hair. I’m starting to lose a little of that now—a little. I was all ready to make my comeback at the Moscow Olympics but I quit when another bear stole my fame—another bear, Olympic Mishka, the mascot, the cartoon character.”

“Ha.” Giorgi glanced at the bottom of his glass before moving on to a serious statement. “Nadezhda Mikhailovna has true wit,” said he, speaking of Nadia to her father with great formality. Of the other daughter, he added, “Anastasia Mikhailovna has a warm soul.”

“Have they?” asked Misha as he refilled their glasses. “I suppose you must be right. You’re the detective, my friend.”

“You’re the father. Oh, to your health! That’s my last because I have more work ahead of me tonight and you’ve already been more generous than I deserve, you and Yekaterina Lvovna. Such hosts! Thank her for me.”

“You’re going already?”

“I must.”

“You don’t want to tell me more . . . about either of my daughters?”

“Another time . . . my friend.”

5: Dresser

Katya pretended to be asleep when Misha came to get the hat and coat.

Later, when Misha was in bed and snoring a wine-ful snore, Katya slipped away to sit at a little dressing table with a square mirror. There lay her husband’s cigarette case and lighter. They were a set, made of stainless steel, embossed with a scene of the sea and a seagull on the case and a lighthouse on the lighter. She had given him these as an anniversary present in the early years. He kept hand-rolled cigarettes, lately of Bulgarian tobacco, in the case. She lit one and, in its faint light and the moonlight sliced by bars on the window, she studied her face in the mirror. She pulled her hair back, found no change in the grey temples, and wondered whether she and her daughters should all wear their hair in loose, brown curls—maybe for Nadia’s birthday.

The cigarette tasted awful. If honey and flowers could go sour, they had done. She had no idea who got him started on this garbage—not, she hoped, some woman well acquainted with Bulgarian sailors and the haunts and ways of street cats.

She kept smoking it anyway and wondered how it would look with dark red lipstick and the curls, if she had curls, if she had lipstick.

6: Complicated Things

The following week, on the last day of school before the break, Nadia was walking home when a police car slowed down beside her to match her speed. She lowered her eyes towards the frosty pavement and kept going. A vaguely

familiar but greatly formal voice called out, “Nadezhda Mikhailovna . . . please, will you get in?”

The Coachman of Death, had he been stopping for a fare, might have received a reaction like hers.

“Forgive me, I startled you!” Giorgi said as he popped out of the car. “Do you remember me—Giorgi, your father’s friend? You didn’t recognize me, startling you like that!”

“Sure!” *Fuck!*

With a black-gloved hand, he pressed the black peak of his cap. He had knocked it as he rushed from the car. “I noticed you walking there.”

“I noticed you driving there!”

“Ha.”

“Was it that you had a message for my father?”

Of course, it was not that; he had wanted to drive her home. She decided to oblige. By the end of the short drive, she was “Nadia” to him.

Over the holidays, Giorgi became a recurring and spontaneous visitor. He would stop for a single drink and a little nibble; then, he would tell the whole family of his certain belief that Nadia would enjoy accompanying him on an errand he was running (sometimes by foot, sometimes by car).

Nadia was reading Shakespeare (her birthday present) and she had misgivings about her family’s willingness to humour this cop of a Petruchio. Nastya and their parents were agreeable with him. Their grandmother kept silent, to the point that Giorgi apparently believed she was a mute. He would always wring her arthritic hands and say something like, “Your smile warms us, Gramma. No words could be more precious than that.”

Nadia tried her best to prepare neutral topics of conversation for her outings at Giorgi’s side. She scrounged material from every corner of her life—but never too much from one place—and posed questions that bordered on the absurd.

One evening between New Year’s and Christmas, they walked to a recreational part of the waterfront. This was not far from her home. One just had to cross the park and go down a set of broad, unsupported concrete steps—nothing to compare to the Potemkin Stairs but a fine vantage point in its own way. The plateau gave way to a pink evening sky with inky clouds. Below, the sand of the long, flat beach looked grey because of snowmelt but the piers and seawall were caked in nodes of polished ice. These caught the low-lying light and it seemed as if giant, wet, pink roses were dripping into the sea.

Few people saw this. At this time of year, romantic ideas focused more on hot drinks and *The Nutcracker*, less on walks by the sea.

At the foot of the big stairs, Giorgi stopped at a kiosk to buy an evening newspaper with blocky headlines and a pack of Prima cigarettes with the fancy white script on the red box. That was his errand. He put the cigarettes in a pocket, leafed through the paper, stuffed part of it in his belt, and left the rest with the vendor.

They walked along a pier and back. They went down a little stairway in the seawall to a deserted patch of beach. She picked up a conch shell, bigger than her fist by half, and peered inside—sand. Bouncing it from hand to hand, she leaned against the wall and squinted into the setting sun. Giorgi smoked as he, too, looked out to sea. They stood there a long time in silence.

After finishing his cigarette and letting it fall to the sand, Giorgi turned away from the sunset to face Nadia. Below the little brim of his peaked cap, his dark eyes seemed to be photographing her piece by piece. She found herself at close quarters between him and the seawall.

“My father thinks highly of you,” Nadia blurted. *No, that’s a wrong turn.* “He worries about us, though, about Nastya and me. A father should worry about his daughters, shouldn’t he?”

“How so?”

“I mean, today, things can get complicated for young people, can’t they?”

“Do you ... or Nastya ... have some experience of that?”

You presume. “No. Let’s talk about something else.” She bounced the conch shell to Giorgi, slipped past him, and climbed the stairs in the seawall.

He followed her but kept a little distance now as they walked back. “What else did you want to discuss?”

“Your experience, I suppose—of young people.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, in your profession, you know people’s problems.”

“Go on. You have something particular in mind. I understand you that far, Nadia.”

Careful to avoid any details, Nadia mentioned that there had once been rumours of a boy at school who went truant and did strange things in strange places—a scrounger, a loiterer, but not a violent boy. How would such a case be punished; could he educate her on that point?

“Truancy from school, petty delinquency?” Giorgi asked himself. “Oh, depending on his age and the committee’s findings in his case, he could be sent to either a psychiatric hospital or a reformatory. The education at our reformatories has an excellent reputation. Oh, they might have him digging potatoes or they might make him a painter or, who knows, a politician? We call it all productive labour. He won’t be shot.”

Pondering the implications of her latest line of questioning, he added, “I don’t chase truants. I . . . do other things. Of course, we have no organized crime in Odessa. I make sure it stays that way.”

“That’s a great responsibility,” Nadia said. *We’re both too quick at this*, she thought.

He brought her home.

That night, in Nastya and Nadia’s room, the sisters whispered about the happenings of the day. The pair of them were sharing Nadia’s bed while the visiting grandmother snored in Nastya’s.

“‘Of course, we have no organized crime in Odessa,’” Nadia echoed in a *sotto voce* rendition of her admirer’s Georgian accent. “‘I make sure it stays that way—with my high boots and my high belt and my hat so high it wipes Comrade Stalin’s arse in Heaven!’”

“Shh! Shh! You’re horrible! He’s a . . .” (Nastya was struggling to contain her hysterics) “. . . good man! Papa says he’s a . . . good friend to us! Remember, Nadia, he’s your . . .” (but whatever he was supposed to be to Nadia was swallowed in a snort).

“I know!” Nadia’s farce had become unstoppable. “When he thinks about our wedding night, he has to pull up his belt—higher than ever—to make room for his cock!”

“Stop it!”

“That’s what Comrade Stalin tells him!”

“You’ll get us both in trouble!”

“Of course, you’re right, Stalin says that too!”

Nastya held a pillow to her little sister’s face. This was a protocol they had between themselves. A moment later, Nadia stopped shaking and touched her sister’s shoulders in a kind of hug. They had calmed down, it was again safe to breathe, and they lay in the dark in their cold, dank room.

There was silence.

When had Gramma stopped snoring?

7: Banishment

The next day’s blow-up happened on a geographic scale. Before breakfast and without explanation, Nastya and Nadia were banished to the park. That scarcely mattered, insofar as their grandmother’s hollering reached a good distance beyond the four walls that surrounded her and her direct target, their parents.

This was around dawn. The morning was not freezing but it was smoggy.

A tramp lay motionless on a bench. He had a newspaper over his face and a bottle near his hand, which dangled to the ground. Nadia and then Nastya sat on the seesaw, which was wet with dew. As they heard the harangue, they seesawed in the spirit of performing senseless labour.

Not every word was audible but the main points were clear.

Nadia was unfit to be courted or married. Try to push her into it and she could well destroy lives—not least, her own dear life.

Nastya was in no position to be a protector to Nadia.

Misha and Katya did not see their children as they really were. Misha, for that matter, scarcely saw anything at all and Katya saw too much of herself in everything.

A strange man in uniform did not brighten an old woman's holidays.

After expounding these points, Gramma lowered her voice. She, Misha, and Katya were negotiating something.

The neighbouring houses had remained quiet and unlit. Everyone was probably listening on the sly.

On her end of the seesaw, Nastya was weeping. "You've ruined your chance, Nadia."

Nadia said nothing. *Don't be hysterical*, was her first thought. *Oh, I don't know. I guess I have really made shit for us this time. Poor Nastya.*

Actually, at that moment, their father was taking the worst of it. His wife had broken ranks and she was railing at him for all the feckless matches ever made by Man. (Her father had introduced them in the days when Misha was the best boxer in the school.)

Katya having scored a point of her own, everyone hushed again. The sky was growing pale. Neighbours put on lights and made a clatter as they cooked their breakfasts or pretended to do so.

The tramp got up and stumbled away in a meandering path that followed other bottles, trash bins, and cigarette butts.

At last, it was Katya alone who came to the sisters in the park. Her eyes were red like Nastya's. "Eat," the mother said; "I have bread and cheese for us. Then, you're going to show me Papa's cats and dogs. We can save some of this for them if you like."

They crossed the park, went down the concrete steps, and took the direction opposite to Nadia and Giorgi's last walk. Near a pavilion, in the rubble shoring up a seawall, lived a colony of cats. "The small, grey, striped one is a favourite of Papa's," Nadia said.

"Yes, I see him. Him?" Katya asked.

"Yes."

They gave crumbs of bread and cheese to the cat.

“You can pat him, Mama,” Nastya said.

As if willing herself to touch a hot stove, Katya did. “Alright,” she whispered, “let’s sit somewhere here.” She took a place on the seawall. Nadia sat beside her. Nastya stood nearby and cuddled the cat.

“Do you miss Estonia, Nadia?” Katya asked.

“Sometimes.”

“I thought so. You’re going to spend some time with Gramma up there.”

“Oh. What about Nastya?”

“No, she has to stay at her studies here.”

Katya kissed Nadia on the shoulder, stood, emptied the last crumbs from a coat pocket, left them for the cat, and then turned to walk back.

Nastya put the hungry cat down beside the food and then speechlessly followed Katya.

Nadia looked at the cat eating crumbs, the coast with its ice now melting fast, and her mother and sister walking away.

To be separated from Giorgi was a relief. To be separated from Nastya was a punishment Nadia had never imagined—not in her life. They seemed to have dredged up such a cruelty from the history books.

8: Payphone

Gramma lived on the outskirts of Tallinn in an antiquated apartment block, which had been hastily erected after the War, shoddily renovated under Khrushchev, and utterly neglected ever since. Her flat’s greatest luxury was a coal stove, which had been installed when the building was converted from communal living quarters to single-family units. A toilet and shower were still shared with neighbours on the same floor—the eighth floor, up a staircase with broken lights.

If Gramma had ever called in a favour, it was not to get prime housing.

There were two rooms and no balcony. The main room had one window, which leaked. Gramma’s bedroom was windowless.

Nadia slept on a sofa in front of the stove. The rest of the main room’s furniture amounted to a table and pair of chairs near the window.

A sink, in a corner, looked lost and alone, like a child standing with a drooped head in a rainstorm.

A good deal of space was taken up by kindling and coal. The old woman carefully managed the supply, so the place stayed warm, albeit sooty.

A black cat, by the name of Cherny, shared the sofa with Nadia at night. By day, Cherny went hunting for vermin in the building and the grounds. If

one did not inspect Cherny at the door, her catch could end up under the sofa.

On the whole, Cherny's hunting was a benefit to the building's sanitation, so Cherny had probably saved human lives. Gramma, in turn, had saved Cherny's life many times with injections, powders, disinfectants, and lancets.

A lifetime ago, Gramma had been a veterinarian. When she mentioned names from the War, most were horses' names. She had a special fondness for a black-and-white gelding named Robespierre, also called Pierre or Petrushka. He was, she said, one-eighth Arabian and nine-eighths strong of heart. (This was, perhaps, the most sentimental thing Gramma ever said.) She mentioned that once, in a night and a morning, she and Pierre rode almost two hundred kilometres to escape "something".

The big suitcase went in Gramma's room and was never completely unpacked. Every week or two, a stack of papers arrived in the mail and Gramma filed them in the case. Other times, she took papers out, studied them, burned some in the stove, and put the others back. Most days, she wrote a letter to Moscow—to her friend, the archivist.

After school, Nadia would meet up with Gramma at the post office or in a queue at a store and they would take a bus back to the apartment from there. Encrusted in winter sludge, the Ikarus bus would splutter up to the curb and fill its jowls with shivering people. Gramma would be afforded a seat. Generally, others had to stand. The slow trip featured a view of snowy roofs in disrepair. Gothic tiles atop limestone masonry, corrugated iron atop hundred-year-old boards, and asbestos cement atop cinderblocks had all become equals.

Arriving back at the building after dark, they would climb the eight flights of half-lit stairs with whatever they had in their bags—at best, a great deal of mail and a few groceries, though sometimes nothing but Nadia's books and homework. The neighbours occasionally left nibbles and kindling at Gramma's door and the old woman saved a portion of everything, so she and Nadia could always manage a supper, however meagre.

Gramma had no telephone in her flat. (She refused to speak on a phone, ever.) There was a payphone on the ground floor. After supper, Gramma would get out a pencil and little notebook, take account of the money and supplies, and sometimes give Nadia coins for a phone call. Nadia would go back down the eight flights (and make an echo with her hurried steps) and feed the coins into the cold, steel phone box in the draughty lobby. The lightweight discs of aluminum-bronze and copper-nickel-zinc fell with a dull clack.

1,500 kilometres away, Katya would pick up the receiver of a carrot-coloured phone in the floral-patterned family room. She usually had a lonely spiel: Nastyia was studying late at the library, Papa was out drinking with Giorgi, "so it's you and me at home tonight, my young one, my soul. What are

you reading? Tell me something beautiful from it.”

Another time, it was worse: “I’m all alone, my soul. I’m all alone. I’m all alone. What are you reading? Tell me something beautiful from it.”

Then, one night, it all turned upside down. “My young one, hello, hello. . . I’m not alone tonight. I’m so happy you’ve called before. . . Oh, first, I should explain. You know how tired I’ve been. The quotas at the factory are impossible; the forewoman is a tyrant; she’s turned the others against me with this malicious gossip; don’t ask me to repeat it. Anyway, Giorgi has been so kind. He said . . . the stress is making me ill, so he took me to see the wonderful doctor whom all the detectives see and the Doctor has prescribed a month’s rest for me at the wonderful sanatorium where the detectives take their rest—you know, the ones who suffer injury or fatigue. Giorgi will drive me up because he wants to go anyway to visit his colleague, who is suffering a long-term case of. . . What? Oh, it started as a back injury and now he’s fatigued from the pain. Giorgi will drive me up early tomorrow morning, so he’s here on the sofa tonight. What are you reading? Tell us something beautiful from it.”

After that conversation, Nadia climbed the stairs in dull, weary footsteps. She found Cherny on the landing, went with her into the flat, and sat opposite Gramma at the table. Gramma was writing a letter. Nadia spent some time arranging books, pens, and sheets of paper on her side of the table. She had an essay to finish. *Concentrate, concentrate*, she told herself.

Without looking up from her letter-writing, Gramma said, “Go on, dear, say what’s on your mind. Talk.”

“Are your letters something about Grandpa?”

(His name was Paavo but he was Pasha to his wife and Grandpa to the granddaughters who never met him.)

“Yes.”

That was illuminating. Nadia penned a paragraph in her Astronomy paper on the search for extraterrestrial radio transmissions, felt Cherny weaving back and forth around the table legs and skirt-clad legs, and heard a whisper of wind under the window. *Soon, I’ll break into tears or chitchat like Nastya.* “How did you meet him, Gramma?”

“I recruited him, in a way. My unit was cut off and we came North. Well, that was a mistake in many ways. We had no friends here and we soon had difficulty feeding ourselves, let alone mounting a resistance. My Captain told me, ‘Go and watch the farms around here and find some boy of eighteen, who may be dodging the German draft, who lives alone with his mother and sisters. See that they have livestock. You are a woman of twenty-two and an animal doctor, so you can get their sympathy and trust.’

“My Captain spoke that way. I called him Kio (like the illusionist—well,

Kio the Elder to you, dear) because he could plan for something to be there and then, magically, it was. Thinking back, I suspect he had done his own reconnaissance before telling me what I should find.

“Now, when I found my match all on my own, I was quite proud of myself. Being proud of myself, I played the role with conviction and I had no difficulty in begging a hot meal from the mother, birthing a calf with the sisters, and, like an ingenue, catching the boy as he watched me from his hiding place. There he was, an open secret, the son and brother they were hiding from the German draft, and the way he was looking at me an even more open secret still, and I swore to them all I’d never betray him. Then, I confided my secret to them.

“They could hardly refuse to help us then.

“First, it was food. Then, it was siphoning off petrol for bombs. Finally, he couldn’t be apart from me, so he fought by my side. We got other recruits through him, too.

“For Pasha, I believe it was all for love. Our victory left him empty-handed, without his old country, but empty-handed and in love, so then it was my turn; how could I refuse? After the War, we married, had Misha, and stayed in the North. Then, one day, your grandfather disappeared.”

The old woman put a kettle on the stove and Nadia went back to her paper on alien radio chitchat.

The following week, the mail contained a priority letter from Odessa. Gramma and Nadia opened it on the bus. “Dearest Gramma, Dearest Sister,” it began with great formality.

The bus hit a pothole and the words seemed to fly everywhere. Nadia leaned closer to Gramma’s shoulder.

A rear wheel hit the same pothole and the words scattered again.

Gramma tried to fold up the letter in her clumsy and painful hands. “Perhaps we should read this at home.”

Nadia’s chest felt tight. The old woman’s voice, normally so calm or so resolute, had just then betrayed a hint of disaster.

Nadia seized the letter and scanned the next words: “Giorgi and I are married. Are you surprised? I believe I am! All so suddenly, after Giorgi came back from getting Mama settled into her rest at the sanatorium, Papa began to feel old and wistful and said the two of us should be giving him grandchildren! ‘Let’s get you married right away and surprise Mama when we go up to visit her.’ Giorgi said, ‘I agree,’ and I laughed and said...”

The bus lurched again and Nadia relinquished the letter. She felt dizzy and knelt beside Gramma’s seat. Other passengers rippled around them.

“Nastya loves you—you above all,” her grandmother told her—“but Nastya needs to be married. She’ll be a good wife and good mother. You’ll

have a little nephew or niece soon enough—far less trouble than a husband and child of your own if you ask me.”

I didn't. “I don't like to think of her with him. I hate him.”

“Then be glad you aren't his.”

“If I had been...”

“...she might have married another just like him. That's one shortage we don't have. Shh. You and I have a great deal in common.”

9: Letters

Letters kept coming and going. As Gramma continued her long exchange with the Moscow archivist, Nadia became a prolific correspondent to Nastya. All these letters were a form of traffic in hope and desperation, sustained in private acts of writing and rewriting, reading and rereading, sometimes on the page and sometimes in memory, stealing sleep in the night and concentration in the day. Thoughts of a letter are as close as a baby in the womb.

Gramma got sick at the end of February, had a slow recovery, and fell behind in her correspondence. Nadia brought letters and parcels back from the post office and left them on top of the suitcase for Gramma to process later.

All this time, the world and the school were full of news. The Mir space station went into orbit and got its first crew. (Nastya sent cuttings of colour photos from a magazine. She opined that the men were brave but the decor was bad, despite rumours of it being designed by a woman. Perhaps, Nastya quipped, it was the woman's revenge against men who painted kitchens green and white.) Meanwhile, the 27th Congress applauded Gorbachev's plans to outlaw nuclear weapons, counteract imperialism with sober thinking, and accelerate the country's socioeconomic development into the coming millennium, in keeping with the dynamic vitality that is inherent in Marxist-Leninism.

On a slushy day in March, Nadia came home to find her grandmother sitting with a letter in her hand. The paper, in her arthritic grip, seemed inextricable and harmful, like a nail in a knot of a tree. The old woman had let the stove go out and she was doing nothing about the leaky window, which she normally would have stopped with a rag.

“What's in the letter, Gramma?”

“News from Moscow, if you can call it news.”

“What news?”

“A record of your grandfather has been found, if you can call it a record, if it was really found.”

“He is dead, is he, Gramma?”

“Yes, dear, these forty years—probably within days of our last breakfast. You know, as a small child, Misha had big ears and after breakfast, Pasha kissed Misha on the ears and kissed me on the neck. He would do that in front of all the other families in the apartment. Then ... he went.”

Gramma continued, “The letter tells me he was arrested, later executed. The accusations and other ... details ... are no longer known. Recently, he was rediscovered and rehabilitated as part of a major review of the archives. Medals for him might be forthcoming.”

“Maybe in another forty years.”

“Yes, if all goes well.”

“I’ll make us tea and you can tell me more news.” Nadia went about stopping the leak, rekindling and feeding the coal stove, and getting a kettle on.

When Gramma spoke again, she was thinking of times before Misha’s birth. “That must be all of us dead but me. Only, my youngest sister, Galya, nobody could remember seeing her there when the Germans hanged our families. On the other hand, nobody saw her afterwards.”

Grandmother and granddaughter were sitting in the two padded wooden chairs by the round wooden table, near the leaky window that clattered as the sleet hit it. The furniture was small and it enforced a compact arrangement of one’s body and glass of tea. Gramma said, “I suppose, in the South, you would have been able to get lemons more easily for your tea.”

“A bit more easily.” They sipped tea that had no lemon. “Do you want me to try to get some next time? I don’t mind queuing.”

“No, I don’t like lemon in my tea.”

“Honey?”

“If you can find any.” They sipped tea that had no honey either. “What ever happened to that boy?”

“Mmm, what boy, Gramma?” For a moment, Nadia was unsure whether *that boy* might be of Gramma’s generation or her own.

“The one who could find anything—the Estonian who called himself something English.”

“Jaan—Johnny?”

“Mmm.”

“I don’t know what happened to him.”

“Then, there was the girl—Ida. I liked her.” They sipped tea that had no cloudberries. “I don’t hold anything against a girl with German grandparents. People are so foolish.”

“I liked Ida too.”

“You don’t know what happened to Ida?”

“No...”

“We should find out. That can be our private project.”

This proposal did not quite ring of Ida’s old promise—to be “just happy, just us” on a sand dune under Baltic pines—but Nadia agreed.

10: No Horse

Now, in the evening before bed, Gramma would drink a mixture she prepared for herself. She said it was to help her sleep, on account of the lingering cough from her recent illness.

Gramma’s sleep was troubled by more than a cough.

The first time the howling woke Nadia, she thought for a moment it might be Cherny in agony. A cat can cry like that when expecting to die. Then, she realized it was coming from Gramma’s room. Rushing in, Nadia tripped over Cherny (who had run alongside her), tripped over the suitcase, and added to this banging and howling by shouting, “Gramma, wake up!”

“Fuck off!” the unconscious woman barked in reply. “This horse can’t be left. Hand me your pistol.”

“Gramma, there’s no horse!”

“There is! There’s ... a fucking StuG III down the lane and I won’t leave this horse. Hand me your pistol.”

“Gramma!”

Nadia had to grapple with the old woman to wake her.

“What? Oh, dear. I had a dream.”

“I’ll make tea.”

“No, I’ll go back to sleep. Take Cherny. I’ve terrified Cherny.”

After a hush, something could be heard scurrying inside the walls. They had woken the building.