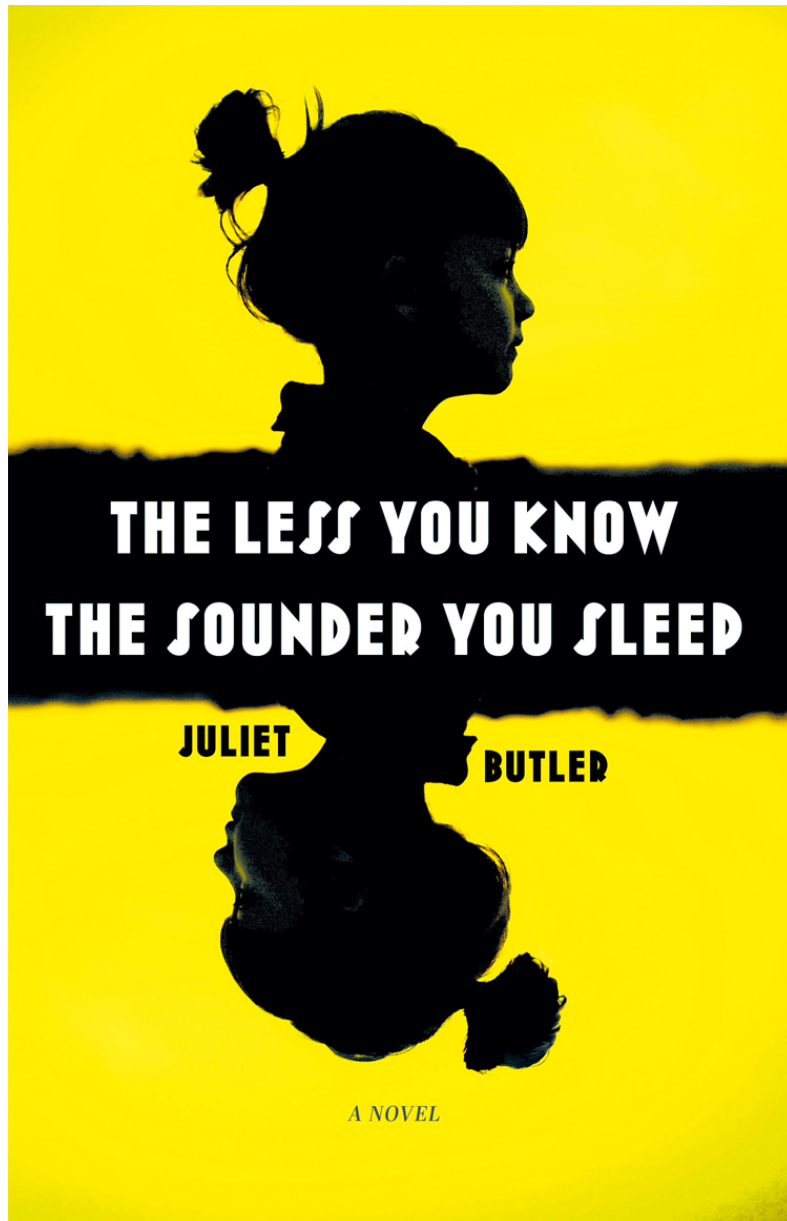




Juliet Butler

**The Less You Know
The Sounder You Sleep**

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Butler J.

The Less You Know The Sounder You Sleep / J. Butler —
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‘Do yourself a favour and read this wonderful book’ ScotsmanBased on the true story of conjoined Russian twins, Masha and Dasha Krivoslyapova, The Less You Know the Sounder You Sleep is a tale of survival and self-determination, innocence and lies.No one expects Dasha and Masha to live beyond childhood. Not the Soviet scientists who study them, the other ‘defective’ children who bully them, or the ‘healthies’ from whom the twins must be locked away.But they don’t know Masha like her sister does. While Dasha is gentle and quiet and fears everything, her twin is fearless and irrepressible and determined they will survive. Whatever the cost.Through the seismic shifts of Stalin’s communism to the beginnings of Putin’s democracy, the sisters strive to be more than just ‘the together twins’, finding hope – and love – in the unlikeliest of places.But strength can come in many different forms and if Dasha is to live more than half a life she must find the courage to emerge from her sister’s shadow.

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The Less
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Copyright

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This book is based on the author’s experiences. Some names, identifying characteristics, dialogue and details have been changed, reconstructed or fictionalised.

Juliet Butler asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

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Dedication

To David Llewelyn – literary consultant – without whose persistence Dasha’s story would never have been told.

Epigraph

‘A happy life consists not in the absence, but in the mastery of hardships.’
Helen Keller

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THE END

12 April 2003, 12:05

I know I'm dying. I just don't know how.

The ceiling rushes past me in the First City Hospital as we're pushed down the corridor in a white-coated swirl of medics. First City; we've been here before. Masha, my Mashinka, you're here with me. But this time it's different. This time I'm alone.

Two nurses are running along with us, one on each side. They're talking, their voices muffled through their surgical masks.

How long has she got?

God knows!

Where are we taking them?

Emergency unit.

Do the doctors know? Can they separate them?

No, no, of course not, they'd need a team of twenty surgeons.

Everyone's always thought we're fools. That we can't understand, because we're Together.

What do we tell her?

Nothing, of course. Tell her nothing.

The nurse bends over me and speaks loudly and slowly.

Masha's fine, she's just sleeping, that's all.

I start crying.

Hush, hush now, everything's going to be fine ...

PAEDIATRIC INSTITUTE, MOSCOW

1956

‘One cannot hold on to power through terror alone. Lies are just as important.’

Josef Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party, 1922–53

Age 6

January 1956

Mummy

‘I’m bored,’ says Masha.

Mummy’s sitting by our cot, and she doesn’t look up from all her writing.

‘I’m really, really boooored.’

‘You’re always bored, Masha. Play with Dasha.’

‘She’s booooring.’

‘No, I’m not,’ I say. ‘*You’re* boring.’

Masha sticks her tongue out at me. ‘You stink.’

‘Girls!’ Mummy puts down her pencil and stares at us over the bars, all cross.

We don’t say anything for a bit, while she goes back to writing. *Skritch. Skritch.*

‘Sing us the lullaby, Mummy – *bye-oo bye-ooshki* – sing that again,’ says Masha.

‘Not now.’

Skritch. Skritch.

‘What you writing, Mummy?’

‘None of your business, Masha.’

‘Yes, but what you writing?’

No answer.

Masha squashes her face through the bars of the cot. ‘When can we have those all-colours bricks back to play with? The all-colours ones?’

‘What’s the point of that, when Dasha builds them and you just knock them down?’ Mummy doesn’t even look up.

‘That’s because she likes building, and I like knocking.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Can I draw, then?’

‘You mean scribble.’

‘I can draw our Box, I can, and I can draw you with your stethoscope too.’

A bell rings from outside the door to our room, and Mummy closes her book. A bit of grey hair falls down so she pushes it behind her ear with her pencil.

‘Well, it’s five o’clock. Time for me to go home.’

‘Can we come home with you, Mummy?’ I say. ‘Can we? Now it’s five clock?’

‘No, Dashinka. How many times do I have to tell you that this hospital is your home.’

‘Is *your* home a hospital too? Another one?’

‘No. I live in a flat. Outside. You live in this cot, in a glass box, all safe and sound.’

‘But all children go home with their mummies, the nannies told us so.’

‘The nannies should talk less.’ She stands up. ‘You know exactly how lucky you are to be cared for and fed in here. Don’t you?’ We both nod. ‘Right, then.’ She gets up to kiss us on top of our heads. One kiss, two kisses. ‘Be good.’ I push my hand through the cot to hold on to her white coat, but she pulls it away all sharp, so I bang my wrist. I suck on where the bang is.

The door to the room opens. *Boom.*

‘Ah, here’s the cleaner,’ says Mummy, ‘she’ll be company for you. Tomorrow’s the weekend, so I’ll see you on Monday.’

She opens the glass door to our Box with a *klyak*, and then goes out of the door to our room, making another *boom*. We can hear the cleaner outside our Box, banging her bucket about, but we can't see her through all the white swirls painted over the glass. When she comes into the Box to clean, we see it's Nasty Nastya.

'What are you looking so glum about?' she says, splishing her mop in the water. She's flipped her mask up because Nastya doesn't care if we get her germs and die.

'Mummy's gone home all weekend, is what,' says Masha, all low.

'She's not your *yobinny* mummy. Your mummy probably went mad as soon as she saw you two freaks. Or died giving birth to you. That there, who's just left, is one of the staff. And you're one of the sick. She works here, you morons. Mummy indeed ...'

I put my hands over my ears.

'She *is* our *yobinny* mummy!' shouts Masha.

'Don't you swear at me, you little mutant, or I'll knock you senseless with the sharp end of this mop!' We go all crunched into the corner of the cot then, and don't say anything else because she did really hit Masha once, and she cried for hours. And Nastya said she'd do something much much worse, if we told on her.

When she's gone, we come out of the corner of the cot into the middle.

'She *is* our mummy anyway,' says Masha. 'Nastya's lying like mad, she is, because she's mean.'

I sniff. 'Of course she's our mummy,' I say.

Supper time and bedtime in the Box

Then one of our nannies comes into our room with our bucket of food. She puts it down with a clang on the floor outside the Box, and we both reach up with our noses, and smell to see what she's brought. It's our Guess-the-Food-and-Nanny game. We can't see her, but the smell comes bouncing over the glass wall and into our noses, and it's whoever guesses first.

'Fish soup!' Masha laughs. 'And Auntie Dusya!'

I love it when Masha laughs; it comes bubbling up inside me and then I can't stop laughing.

'Fish soup it is, you little bed bugs,' calls Auntie Dusya from outside the Box. Then she clicks open the glass door and comes in with our bowl, all smiling in her eyes.

'Open up.' We both put our heads between the bars with our mouths wide open, to get all the soup one by one spoonful each.

'*Nyet!!* – she's getting the fish eyes, I saw, I saw!'

'Now hush, Masha – as if I pick out the nice bits for her.'

'You do, you do – I can see, I can!'

'Don't be ridiculous.' It's hard to hear Auntie Dusya because she's got her mask on, like everyone. Except Mummy, who's got the same bugs as us. And Nastya, when she's being mean. 'And stop gobbling it down, Masha, like a starving orphan, or you'll be sick again. *Yolki palki!* I don't know any child at all for being sick as often as you. You're as thin as a rat.'

'I'm thinner than a rat,' says Masha. 'And Dasha's fat as a fat fly, so I should get the popping eyes!'

I don't know what a rat is. We don't have them in our Box.

'What's a rat?' I ask.

'Oooh, it's a little animal with a twitching nose and bright eyes, that always asks questions. Here's your bread.'

'I want white bread, not black bread,' says Masha, taking it anyway.

'You'll be asking for caviar next. Be grateful for what you get.' We're always being told to be grateful. Every single day. Grateful is being thankful for being looked after all the time. 'I'll come back in half an hour to clean you up, and then lights out.'

Masha stuffs her bread into her mouth all in one, so her cheeks blow out, and looks up at the ceiling as she chews. We know all our nannies' names off by heart. And all our cleaners' too. And

all our doctors'. Aunty Dusya says only special people can see us as we're a Big Secret. She says it has it in black writing on the door. I don't know why we're a Big Secret. Maybe all children are Big Secrets? Masha doesn't know either.

I love black bread because it's soft and juicy, and fills me all up in my tummy. I have to stuff it all in my mouth, though, because if I didn't, Masha would take it.

Aunty Dusya comes back to wash us after we've done a poo and a pee in our nappy, and gives us a nice new one.

'I'm scared of the cockroaches, Aunty Dusya.'

'Nonsense, Dashinka, there aren't any cockroaches.'

'Yes, there is!' Masha shouts and points up. 'See that crackle up there?'

'Well, there is a small crack in the ceiling ...'

'That's where they come out when it's dark, and they go skittle-scuttle across the ceiling, then drop down with a plop on top of Dasha, and then they skittle-scuttle across her too, and she screams until I squish them and they go crunch.'

Aunty Dusya looks up at the crackle then, and picks up the stinky bag with our nappy in.

'Well, we used to have cockroaches, once upon a time, when you were babies, but not now. There are no cockroaches in the Paediatric Institute. *Nyet*.'

She looks over at us, all cross and black, so I nod and nod like mad, and Masha pushes out her lip, like she does when she's being told off, and twists the knot on our nappy with her fingers.

Then Aunty Dusya goes and leaves us alone, and the lights go off with a snap, and the door bangs shut with a *boom*.

I lie and listen hard, because when it's dark is when they all come out.

'I'll squish them,' says Masha in a hushy way. 'You wake me and I'll squish and squash and squelch them. I know all their names, I do ... they're scared of me ... Yosha and Tosha and ... Lyosha ...'

After a bit I can feel she's gone to sleep, but I can hear them all coming out and skittle-scuttling, so I reach out and hold her hand, which is all warm. Masha's hand is always warm.

Having our heads shaved and dreaming on clouds

Skriip skriip. Aunty Dusya is doing Masha's head with a long razor, and slapping her playfully when she wriggles. 'Stop squirming, or I'll slice your head right off!'

'It hurts!'

'It'll hurt even more with no head, won't it? Stop being so naughty! Dasha sits still for all her procedures, why can't you?'

'I'll sit still,' I say, quick as quick. 'Do me. I like having my head razored. If we had hair, we'd get Eaten Alive by the tiny, white, jumpy cockroaches.'

'Lice. That's exactly right, Dashinka.'

'But can you cut the top bit of my hair off too, and not leave this?' I pull at the tuft they leave at the front.

'You know we leave that to show you're little girls, not little boys. You wouldn't want anyone to think you were boys, now, would you?'

'But everyone knows we're little girls anyway. And Masha pulls mine when she's cross.'

'Like this,' says Masha, and goes to pull it, but Aunty Dusya gives her another little slap and her mask goes all sucked into her mouth with breathing hard.

Dusya's got a yellow something on today. I can see it peeking under the buttons of her white coat.

'Why don't we wear clothes like grown-ups? Do no children wear clothes?' I ask.

'Why would you need clothes, lying in a cot all day? Either that or in the laboratory ... doctors need to see your bodies, don't they? Besides, we need to keep changing your nappy because you leak; we can't be undoing buckles and bows every five minutes.' She pushes Masha flat on the plastic sheet

of our cot, and starts on me. *Skriip skriip*. It tickles and I reach up to touch a bit of her yellow sleeve. It's more like butter than egg yolk.

'There. All done. Off you hop.' We wiggle our bottom off the plastic sheet in our cot and she folds it up and then leaves us, wagging her head so her white cap bobbles.

'*Foo! Foo!*' Masha's huffing and puffing because she's got bits of cut hair in her nose, so I lean over and blow in her face, as close as I can get.

'Get off!' She slaps my nose.

'*You* get off!'

'No, *you!*' We start slapping at each other, and kicking our legs until she gets hers caught between the bars and howls. Then we stop.

Saturdays are good, because we don't have to shut off like we do when Doctor Alexeyeva comes in to take us into the Laboratory. But Saturdays are bad, too, because Mummy isn't here and there's nothing to do.

I hold my hand up and look through all my fingers. That makes the room seem broken and different, it's the only way to make it change. I look at the whirly swirls of white paint on the glass walls of the box, then I look up at the cockroach crackle in the ceiling, and it breaks up into lots of crackles, then I look up at the strip light, and my fingers turn pink, then I look at the window to see what colour it is on the Outside now. Sometimes it's black or grey or has loud drops or a rattly wind trying to get in and take us away. It's blue today and I smile out at it, and wait to see if there'll be a little puffy cloud. Mummy says there are lots of other buildings like ours on the Outside, but we can't see anything ever. Just sky.

'A bird!' Masha's been lying back, looking up at the window all the time. 'Saw a bird! *You* didn't!'

I didn't, she's right, but we both stare at the window and stare and stare, as they sometimes come in lots of them. But not this time. I stare until my eyes prickle. Then I see a cloud instead, which is even better – we imagine being inside clouds and on them and making them into shapes by patting them. And they move and change, like nothing in our Box ever does.

'I'd sit on that one up there, see? *That* one, and I'd ride all the way round the world and back,' I say.

'I'd shake and shake mine,' says Masha, 'until it rained on everyone in the world.'

'I'd jump right into it, and bounce and bounce, and then slide off the end, down into the sea with the fishes.'

When we do imaginings of being on the Outside we're not stuck together like we are in the Box. In imaginings you can be anything you want.

Learning about being drowned and dead

'Well, *urodi*. Here I am, like it or not.' On Sundays, our cleaner is always Nastya. She's got a nose like a potato, and hands so thick they look like feet. We must have done something very bad to make her so mean to us, but I can't remember what, and Masha can't as well.

'Urgh. You should have been drowned at birth.' She's got the mop and is splishing the water over the floor again, banging the washy mop head into the corners. *Shlup, shlup*. I put my hands over my ears and nose, because I can't shut off with her, like I can with Doctor Alexeyeva. Masha sucks all her fingers in her mouth.

'Shouldn't have been left for decent people to have to look at day in, day out ...' I can still hear Nastya through my hands '... and when the scientists have finished with you here, they'll drown you, like kittens, and put you in a bag and bury you in a black hole, where you'll never get fed or cleaned again.' She makes a big cross on her chest with her fingers, which is what lots of the nannies do with us.

I won't think of the black hole, I'll think of the blue sky and bouncing on the clouds. I keep my hands over my ears and nose, so I don't hear or smell anything, and close my eyes tight, so I don't see anything as well. Except clouds in my imaginings.

When she's gone, Masha starts pulling me round and round the cot, and I count the bars to see if they're still the same as all the ones on my fingers and our two feet (not counting the foot on our leg at the back because the toes are all squished on that one). We only know up to the number five because Aunt Dusha told us years and years ago that we were five years old, just like there are five fingers on my open hand. Now we're six, but I don't know when that happened. Maybe it was when Mummy brought us the wind-up Jellyfish to play with? Mummy says we don't need to learn how to count or read or write anything, because she'll do it for us.

'What's drowned?' says Masha, stopping going round and round for a bit.

'I don't know,' I say. 'But I think it makes you dead.'

'What's being made dead like?'

'It's like being in a black hole with nothing to eat.'

'Let's play Gastrics.'

'*Nyetooshki*. I never get to put the tube down you.'

'That's because I'm always the Staff and you're always the Sick. Here.' She gets a pretend tube out. 'Open up. Down we go.' I open my mouth but I'm starting to bubble laugh, because she always puts her finger in my mouth pretending it's the tube and wiggles it, and I bubble laugh before she even does it.

'*Molchee!* Do as you're told, young lady!' she shouts, just like a nurse.

Then we both jump, as the door bangs open again.

'Morning, my dollies! Now – what have I got for you today then?'

'Aunt Shura!' shouts Masha. Aunt Shura's nice, too, so we can't have done anything bad to her either. 'It's ground rice!' says Masha pushing her nose in the air to catch the smell coming over the Box.

'With butter!' I shout, but I can't smell it. I only hope it.

'Yes, Dashinka, with butter,' says Shura, and clicks open the door to the Box, carrying our bowl in her two hands.

She sits on a stool, and spoons a spoon of it into Masha's open mouth, and a spoon into mine.

'*Foo!* It stinks of bleach in here,' she says, wrinkling her nose. 'Nastya overdoing it again. Enough to drown a sailor.'

'What's drown?' I ask, keeping the ground rice stuck in the top of my mouth, so I don't lose the taste when it goes down in me.

'Hmm, it means when you're in water and can't breathe air.'

'Do you get dead when you can't breathe air?'

'Sometimes.'

'What's getting dead like?'

'Goodness! What silly questions.'

'Is it like being in a hole and hungry all the time?' I ask.

Her eyes crinkle up so I think she's smiling, but I can't see for sure under the mask. 'Now, now. That's quite enough. *Mensha znaesh – krepcha speesh*: the less you know, the sounder you sleep.' It sounds like a lullaby, all shushy and soothing. And when she's scraped the last little bit out of the bowl, she goes too. So we go back to crawling round the cot while I count off the bars on my fingers and toes.

Fighting to get single and then learning not to

'Why have you got two legs all to yourself and we've got only one each, and an extra sticky-out one?' I ask Aunt Shura, next time she comes in. But she pushes my hand away, because I've

lifted up her skirt through the cot bars to see what's there, and I can see, plain as plain, she's got two legs all to herself.

'Well I never!'

'Why though?' I ask. 'Why?'

'Because ... well ... because all children are born like you, with ... one leg each ...' She pulls her mask up higher, then she loosens the laces on her cap and does them up again tighter.

'So all children are born stuck together, like us?'

'Yes, yes, Dashinka. They're all born together ...'

'And then what happens?'

'Then ... they ... ahh ... become single. Like grown-ups ...'

'So, do we grow another leg each, when we get single?'

'When *do* we get single?' asks Masha, trying to pull herself up on the top cot bar. 'When? When? When *do* we get single?'

'Now then, you two Miss Clever Clogs, you know you're not allowed to ask questions ...'

'But when? When do we get single?' Masha asks again. 'Tomorrow?'

Aunty Dusya looks all round the Box for something she must have lost, and doesn't look anywhere at us. Then she goes out with a *klyak* of the glass door, without saying anything at all.

'I want to get single now,' says Masha crossly, and grabs with both her hands on to the bars. I can see the black in her eyes that gets there when she's angry. She snatches my hand, and twists my fingers all back, and starts shouting: 'I want to get single now! Go away! *Urod!* Get off me! Get off!'

I get scared as anything when Masha is angry. She kicks and scratches and punches and pinches, and I kick and scratch too, to keep her away. But I know it won't make us get single.

'Girls! Girls!' After we've been fighting for hours and hours, Aunty Shura runs back in the Box, but she screams when she sees us, and I look, and see all red blood on us, but I keep kicking and punching to keep Masha away, and Shura runs out again.

She comes back with Mummy, who pulls at us both, and tells the nurse to tie us up to one and the other end of the cot with bandages. Masha hates being tied up all the time, so she starts shouting with bad, Nastya swear words, and so Mummy stuffs a bandage in her mouth too.

'You two will kill yourselves if you carry on fighting like this,' she says, leaning over us with her eyes all screwed up small and angry. 'Do you understand? You're black and blue from fighting all the time, but one day, one of you could die.'

She leans right into me then. 'Do you want to die, Dasha?'

I shake my head. I really, really don't want to die. I hate being hungry. And I hate the dark. So I decide then and there that I'll do something which will make sure we never die.

I won't ever, *ever* fight back again.

Looking out of the window to the real Outside

The next day Mummy comes back into the Box.

'What you are, is bored,' she says. She puts her notebook down on her chair. She's with a nurse. 'You need some fun.'

'Oooh, can we have Jellyfish back?' asks Masha, sitting up on one arm, with her mouth open. Jellyfish has gold and yellow and black and blue patches on his hard back, and lots of dangly legs, which rattle and shake when he's wound up with the key. He makes a buzz, and trembles and we only had him for once. For one day. He's loads and loads of fun.

'No. You know you're not allowed toys. That's only for the filming. But I'll tell you what: as a treat, I'll let you look right down out of the window at Moscow. Now that you're not in the Laboratory so much, you have nothing to do, day in, day out.'

And then she does this wonderful, wonderful thing.

She gets the nurse to push our cot right over to the side of the Box, which is by the wall. Right under the Window.

‘Now then. Hold on to the top bar of your cot and pull yourselves up.’ Our legs don’t stand by themselves, but our arms do, so we keep pulling and pushing until our chins and arms are on the bottom of the Window.

And then we look out and round and down and up, and we can see *all* of the Outside at once. I can’t think at all for looking and laughing.

‘Well?’ she asks. But we’re so bursting to happy bits with looking and laughing, we can’t talk. It’s full as full can be of new things, moving and happening.

‘Those grey blocks across there and all down the street are like our hospital block,’ says Mummy. ‘We’re six floors up here, which means six windows up from the street. The black holes are windows, like this one. The little black things moving down there on all the white snow are people. And the bigger black things, going faster, are cars carrying people inside them ...’

I’m still so bursting inside with happy bits I can’t hardly hear her talking.

‘Those orange sparks come from the trams on the tramlines – they’re the black lines in the snow. The trams carry lots of people. And all the red banners up there on the buildings have slogans, which help people to work harder and be happier.’ I don’t know a lot of the words she’s saying, but I have no breath to ask.

One side of a block is all covered from top to bottom with the face of a giant man with kind eyes and a big moustache, which turns up at the ends, and makes him look like he’s smiling a big smile to go with his gold skin and gold sparkly buttons.

I point at him and look up at Mummy, but I still can’t talk.

She looks at the giant for a bit and then says, ‘That’s Stalin. Father Stalin. A great man. He’s dead now, but he will always live in our hearts. Just like Uncle Lenin.’

Questions we’re not allowed to ask about life on the Outside

‘Look! Look! That one’s fallen flat! Look! Haha!’

‘Where? Where?’

Masha’s pointing, and I’m looking and laughing too, but I can’t see it yet. There’s so much on the Outside, I need a hundred eyes or a hundred heads to even start seeing it all. ‘There! See the people trying to get him up. There!’ I follow her finger.

‘I can see! Haha! It’s the ice, Masha, they’re slipping on the ice because the snow’s melting, isn’t it, Mummy?’

I turn to her. She’s sitting behind us, writing in her notebook on her stool. She nods. We stay by the window all the time now, and it’s the best thing in the world. My head and eyes are all whizzing and whirring like Jellyfish legs, with all the things down there. Like fat green lorries full of soldiers who keep us all safe, but whose faces look like boiled eggs, looking out of the back, or children being pulled along by their mummies on trays, or packs of dogs, or lines of people waiting to get food from shops, or the clouds going on and on forever, getting smaller like beans, and the blocks going on and on forever, getting smaller too. And all watched by giant Father Stalin.

‘Why are some people allowed on the Outside and some aren’t?’ I ask after a long bit. ‘Like us?’

‘Because on the Out— I mean, out there, everyone is ordinary and you’re Special.’

‘When we get Single, will we be ordinary too?’ asks Masha.

‘What do you mean, “get single”?’ She stops writing and her eyes go small.

‘Aunty Shura said, when we grow up, we’ll get single and grow an extra leg each.’

‘Hmm. Aunty Shura should chatter less and work more,’ says Mummy, and makes a sniff as she rubs her nose. ‘Aunty Shura will get a talking to.’

‘Aunty Shura said *all* children are like us, but they’re not, see.’ She points at the street. ‘Not on the Outside, anyway, not even the baby ones.’

‘That’s quite enough of that. How many times have I told you not to listen to the nonsense your nannies talk, what with their prayers and their fantasies.’

We look back out again. I still don't know why we're Special. I hope it's not nonsense that we'll get single. I hope it's true. I'll go Outside then.

'Can we see all the whole wide world from here?' I ask.

'No, Dasha,' says Mummy. 'I've told you before. This is only a small part of Moscow, which is the city where you live. I do wish you'd listen.'

'Are there lots of cities? What happens when the city stops?'

'Yes, there are lots of cities. And when it stops there's grass and trees and a road, until you get to the next one.'

'What's grass and trees? Can you draw them for me?' asks Masha. Mummy makes a whooshing with her mouth like when she's tired or cross.

'I really can't draw everything, Masha. In fact, I can't draw at all. I'm here to write. Why don't you both try and stay quiet for five minutes?'

'How long's five minutes for?' I ask.

'Just please be *quiet*, and I'll tell you when five minutes is up.'

I take a deep breath, to see if I can hold it for five minutes, and look straight at giant Father Stalin to help me. I hold my breath forever, but then it starts to snow and Masha laughs, so I do too, with a big sssshhhh as my breath blows out, and we pretend to reach our hands out and snap the fat flakes up as they bobble past our window. I'm getting lots of breaths in now, to make up for not having one for hours, and Masha looks round at Mummy.

'Why can't we go on the Outside too? Why are we in the Box all the time?'

'Five minutes isn't up,' she says.

We wait again for more hours, and I hold my breath again, and count to five Jellyfish over and over, and then forget, because I keep seeing things, like how the snowflakes make the black clothes all white when they land on them.

I start breathing again, but I keep my mouth tight closed to stop all the questions spilling out. I don't want Mummy to be cross with me, so I stuff them all in my head for later. Like, what sort of noise does snow make? How do the trams and cars move? Why can children smaller than us walk? I look up. And what does the sky smell like?

'AAAKH!' Masha screams all excited in my ear, so I scream too, and Mummy shouts crossly, and I start shouting, 'What? What?' until Masha points at a man who's fallen under a tram. Everyone's stopped in the snow to look and the tram's stopped too, but then it goes on forward a bit, and the man is left squished in two pieces with all his red blood out on the snow.

'He's dead! He's dead!' shouts Masha, all excited as anything and laughing, and she jumps so much, we fall back into the cot.

'And now you can stay there!' says Mummy, and pulls the thick curtains closed, shutting the Outside all out.

'Is he really dead, Mummy?' I ask, panting.

'No, no. He's not. He's just ... ill.' She peeks through the curtains.

'Will the doctors mend him?'

'Yes, Dasha. They'll take him to hospital to be sewn together and made all better.'

'But he's in two bits. Can they sew two bits together?'

'Yes.' She doesn't look up.

'Will they take him to a hospital like ours?'

'Well ... a hospital for grown-ups, not children, but yes.'

'Are we sewed together? Are we ill too? Is that why we're in hospital?' I ask.

'Do stop asking questions, Dasha!' Mummy stands up, picks up her pencil and notebook. She looks all tired and old. 'You know it's *nyelzya*. Not allowed.'

'*Nyelzya, nyelzya*,' mutters Masha. 'Everything's *nyelzya*.'

The door to our room opens then, and Mummy looks round to see who it is. She's tall enough to see over the glass walls of our Box, but we can't.

'I don't *want* to be ill!' shouts Masha. 'I'm *not* ill! I want to go on the Outside!'

'*Molchee!*' hisses Mummy.

'I won't be quiet! I *yobinny* won't! I'll run away I will, I want to be single like all the other people there on the Outside, I want—' Mummy reaches down then, quick as quick, and slaps her hand over Masha's mouth to stop all the shouting coming out, but it's too late because the glass door opens and Doctor Alexeyeva walks in with the porter, the one who carries us in to the Laboratory.

We both get all crunched into the corner of the cot to hide when we see it's Doctor Alexeyeva come in, and we start crying, because it means it's time for our Procedures. Masha covers her face with her hands and I squeeze my fists tight and my eyes tight too, waiting, until I make everything go black and empty in my head.

February 1956

Leaving the Box

It's sunny today and our cot is back in the middle of the Box, not over by the window any more.

Serves us right, said Mummy, for being so naughty. But it was Masha who was naughty ... not me.

It's worse, being back in the middle, than it was when we were always in the middle, because now I know the world's happening through the window and I can't get over there and see it happening. I can only do lots of imaginings about it in my head. But it's not the same.

And I ache and ache, thinking that Mummy is cross with me, which is even worse than missing the world. I know it must have been Doctor Alexeyeva who got us back in the middle of the Box. I heard her shouting at Mummy, just before I switched myself off, saying me and Masha were being spoilt and treated like *real* children.

There's a white patch of sunlight on the floor, which is moving. I can't see it moving but when I close my eyes and count to five Jellyfish over and over again, for hours and hours, it's hopped a tiny bit over when I open them again.

Masha's asleep, but after a bit she wakes up and yawns.

She looks up at the ceiling and then at the window and then she asks me, 'What did she mean when she said *real* children? Why aren't we real?'

'I don't know, Mashinka. I asked Mummy, didn't I? I asked why we're not real, and she wouldn't say.'

'Why doesn't anyone ever *say* anything? Why not?' And then she starts hitting me and punching me and telling me to go away so she can be real like everyone else. But I don't fight back any more. I just curl up small as a snowflake, until she gets too bored to keep hitting me. And then we both cry.

After a bit Masha goes back to sleep.

After a bit more, the door to our room opens.

'Girls!'

It's Mummy. Her voice is all high, instead of low like it normally is. 'I have a wonderful surprise.'

Masha wakes up again, and does another big yawn as Mummy opens the glass door, *klyak*. She doesn't have her notebook and pencil in her hands, she has clothes instead.

'*Nooka* – I have these beautiful white blouses for you, see?' She holds them up in front of us. 'And a pair of trousers, specially tailored, just for you.' She holds them up too.

Masha starts bobbing around all excited and smiley, and reaches out her hand to grab one.

'That's right, good, good, let's get you all dressed up,' says Mummy in the same high voice, like she's not her, but someone else. I'm not as excited as Masha, because she really *does* sound like she's someone else. 'Look at the frills on the front, and the buttons. How many buttons, Dashinka?' She holds out the blouse, so I take it.

It's all soft, not like our nappy or our night sheet, which scrapes my skin.

‘Can I have a yellow blouse, not a white one?’ asks Masha, still bobbing around as she tries to get it on, but can’t, because she needs one arm to keep sitting up.

‘Of course not. Goodness, what a spoilt little princess you are.’ She turns away then, and has her back to us.

‘I’ll help then, Masha,’ I say. But I don’t know how to tie buttons up, so I pull through the bars to catch Mummy’s coat and get her to help. She turns round, but her nose is all red and her eyes are shining. It’s almost like she’s crying, like some of the nannies do when they see us for the first ever time. Sometimes they cry and cry and cross themselves and don’t stop forever. And Masha and me just watch them and don’t talk, but we sit there thinking it’s funny how some grown-ups cry even more than we do. Then she puts my blouse on too, and ties the buttons up. She tells us to lie flat and puts our legs in all the sleeves of the trousers, and ties them up at the front with two big buttons.

‘Well, well, *yolki palki*, you’ll look as pretty as two bridesmaids in this when you go to your new home. Yes, as pretty as two little—’

‘New home?’ I stare at her. ‘*What* new home?’

Masha stops playing with the frills and stares at her too. Then we both push ourselves away into the corner of our cot.

‘Don’t be silly. Nothing to be afraid of. Now then, are we all ready? The porter’s waiting to take you away.’

‘Porter?’

‘Away?’

‘*Nyet!!*’

‘We want to stay here!’

‘This is our home!’

‘*You’re* here.’

‘I’ll be good, Mummy!’

‘We won’t ask any more questions.’

‘Don’t let us go!’

‘When?’

‘Are you coming with us?’

‘MUMMEEEE!’

Masha and me are talking all over each other, but Mummy has her eyes closed and is shaking her head from side to side, and holding tight on to the top of our cot as if it’s going to roll away.

‘Stop this at once!’ She opens her eyes all of a snap, lets go of the cot and goes out of the Box to open the door to our room. ‘You may take them away now,’ she says. ‘They’re ready.’

A porter walks in, but not Doctor Alexeyeva’s one. He’s different. He smells different and has no mask but has a moustache like Father Stalin. But it’s not Father Stalin. This man doesn’t have kind, smiley eyes. He looks at us for a bit, then goes all yukky like he’s going to be sick. I feel like I’m going to be sick too.

‘Go away!’ shouts Masha as he bends to pick us up, and she starts hitting him with her fists.

‘Stop that at once, young lady, and do as you’re told!’ shouts Mummy. ‘Just do as you’re told! Do as you’re ...’ she chokes, like she’s swallowed a fish bone, so Masha stops hitting him.

He smells like old mops as he lifts us out of the cot, but we have to hold him tight round the neck to stay on. We’re both scared as anything and crying.

Mummy kisses us both on the tops of our heads, like she does always, every night after she’s sung to us, and then she opens the door to the Box. *Klyak*. He pushes out through it sideways.

‘*Nyyyyyyet!*’ I’m holding his neck with one hand and leaning to Mummy with the other, I’m screaming for her to take me back. Masha’s doing the same.

The porter staggers a bit. ‘Hold still, you little fuckers, or I’ll drop you on your heads, and then you’ll be going nowhere!’

Then Mummy opens the door to our room as well, to let us out for the first time ever. She's swallowing and coughing and her face is all blurry and wet. 'I'll visit you, girls. I'll come and visit. I promise.'

'Mummeeeee!' I scream. 'Mummeeeee!'

She's holding on to the door handle now, tight as tight, not saying anything. As he takes us away from her, I look at her over his shoulder, getting smaller as she stands in the door to our room, not moving to run and take us back. Until I can't see her at all because of all the tears in my eyes.

Then I hear her voice. 'You've got each other!' she calls as we go through another door. 'Always remember – you've got each other ...'

SCIENTIFIC NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF PROSTHETICS (SNIP), MOSCOW

1956–64

‘Stalin often chose the path of repression and physical annihilation, not only against actual enemies, but also against individuals who had not committed any crimes against the Party and the Soviet Government.’

Nikita Khrushchev – General Secretary of the Communist Party 1955–64, in his Secret Speech denouncing Stalin; 25 February 1956

Age 6

February 1956

Being brought to our new hospital and told we can walk

I’m still holding on to the porter, taking us away from Mummy, and I can feel Masha’s fingers round the back of his neck, holding on too, but I can’t see her. He takes us down a long thin room that goes on and on, to some gates, which pull open with a crashing, banging, into a small box room with a woman sitting in it who says, ‘What floor?’ The gates crash again, and I’m just thinking we’re taken to be drowned because the scientists are all finished with us, like Nastya said, but then the little room shakes and my tummy whooshes up and out of my head.

We land with a crunch and come out of the room into a big space with green walls. The porter carrying us keeps banging through more and more doors until we’re on the real Outside. I look up and try to breathe, but my mouth gets filled with icy air that rushes down inside me like a freezy tube, and I feel like my cheeks are being slapped.

‘Quick, get this thing into the car,’ gruffs the porter, talking to a nurse. ‘Dressed in frills as it is.’

The door of a black car opens and he pushes us into it, pulling my fingers off his neck. The nurse gets in too, but we’re all tumbled as it’s not flat like a cot so our other leg is all in the way.

‘*Gospodi!* It’s like trying to get ten cats in a bag,’ hisses the nurse, and she pushes us on to our tummies so we have our faces in the seat. I think of kittens being drowned, and want to cry, but can’t find the air to breathe.

The car makes a roar and starts shaking. I turn my head a bit and can see a man dressed in black holding a round bar in the front seat. He has a little white tube in his mouth, which makes smoke and smells prickly and hard.

‘God, what a stink,’ he says and sucks so hard his cheeks pop in.

‘What do you expect?’ says the nurse. ‘They can’t hold it in. And they’re shit scared.’ She says *nooka* to us then, like the nice nannies do, and starts picking us up and plonking us the right way round.

‘You’ll suffocate, you two will,’ she says, ‘before we get you there – and then I’ll be for it.’

Get us where though? A bucket? A hole? I wish Masha would ask, but I can feel her tummy turning right over and bumping into mine turning over too. I’m yelling inside, yelling for help. I can hear me, loud as anything, but it’s not coming out. Help, Masha! Don’t let them drown us! But she won’t even look at me, she just takes my hand and holds it tight as tight can be, while all the buildings rush past through the windows, like they’re running away as fast as they can, turning the world in a spin.

‘Here it is, thank God. I need some fresh air,’ says the man, and stops and makes the window go down so that another man in a hat can stick his head in and look at us.

‘You got the *urod*?’

‘Yeah. I wouldn’t look at it, mate, it’ll give you nightmares for weeks,’ says the man in the front. I sit right up then and I can see eyes with no head, staring at me out of a shiny bit of glass in the front. I shut my eyes tight, because it’s a monster, and hold Masha’s hand even tighter.

‘OK, take it round the back. They don’t want anyone to see it.’

‘Not fucking surprised.’

The car goes off and we go through hundreds of blobs of snow. I can see a building with a long red strip on the top telling people what to do, but there’s no picture of our Father Stalin here.

We stop. The door opens, and a porter pulls us out into the cold and carries us up a curly, dark staircase, round and round, then through doors and into a big room with shiny green walls and long windows, as tall as the wall. There’s a cot with no bars, pushed against the wall and there’s no Box. It’s got a dry white sheet on it, not a sticky one, but he puts us down on it anyway and leaves, booming the door closed. My heart’s banging like it’s jumped into my head and so’s Masha’s. We try and breathe and listen. Really hard.

Boom. The door opens and two nannies come in with a trolley. No masks.

‘Well, well,’ says one, ‘you’ll need a bit of cleaning up.’

I see then that Masha’s been sick on her blouse, and it’s over her mouth, too, and hair. The nanny goes to wipe Masha’s face with a cloth but Masha hits her.

‘Fuck off!’ yells Masha. She’s scared we’re going to be drowned. The nannies gasp. ‘Fuck off, *urodi!*’ Masha yells again. She’s so scared, I can feel her trembling coming all through to me.

‘*Yolki palki!* These two are like rabid dogs! *Nooka* ... we’re here to feed you and care for you. Look, look, see? Here’s some nice soup for you both.’ She takes two bowls with spoons off the trolley and gives it to us and I can smell it’s yummy cabbage soup, but I’m holding my breath because they don’t have masks and I’ll get their germs. Masha always, *always*, eats so she takes the bowl and pours the soup in her mouth. Then she takes mine and pours that in her mouth too. Then she sickens it all up over the bed. The two nannies don’t shout, they just make lots of tuts, and clean up, then go out.

We don’t say anything for a bit.

‘Where’s Mummy, Masha?’ I say after we’ve been sitting, looking at the door for hours and hours.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Is this our new home?’ I ask.

‘Don’t know.’

‘There’s no glass Box here. I want a glass Box to be in.’

We look over at another door, like the one in our own room, which goes into the Laboratory. It’s white too. I go cold and look at the window instead, and the snowflakes.

‘Big window,’ I say.

We both think that’s maybe good, but I want Mummy here anyway. I want her here so much that the wanting is bursting inside me, pushing everything else out and making me cry again.

BANG! The door opens and a woman comes in with a white coat and cap, like all the staff at the *Pediatrya*. She’s not wearing a mask though, and she has big red floppy lips like sponges. She walks up near to us. Not too close to hurt us, but I still hold my breath against the germs.

‘I’m Nadezhda Fyodorovna. You can call me Auntie Nadya, if you like.’ She crosses her arms and puts her head on one side. ‘*Tak tak*, you needn’t look so frightened. We’re going to look after you now. You’re here to learn to walk.’

I swallow lots of air in surprise. Walk! Like the children on the Outside? Will they wait ’til we get single first? Or maybe they’ll *make* us single? I want to ask her everything, but my voice is all buried inside still and won’t work. I nod.

BANG! The door opens again and another woman in a white coat and white cap comes in, and walks right up to us. She sticks her head in Masha’s face and then mine. I put my hands over my eyes because she’s got thick eyebrows like Nastya, and grey skin, and looks cross. I start hiccupping so I put one hand over my mouth and keep the other over my eyes.

‘*Tak*,’ says this other woman in a big voice. ‘What do we have here, hmm?’ She takes my hands off my eyes and my mouth, and looks at me. I try to say I’m Dasha, but my voice is still all swallowed up, so I just nod. She looks at Masha then, but Masha’s got her fingers in her mouth and is all frowny.

‘You do understand plain Russian, don’t you?’ says the grey woman, and I nod again, to be polite. ‘You certainly speak plain Russian, so I’ve heard. Very plain. Hmm.’

She touches the other woman’s arm. ‘Come along with me, Nadya, into the nurses’ room. Let them settle in for a bit, while we wait for Boris Markovich.’

They walk across our big room and open the other door, but it’s not bright white with lots of lights like inside the Laboratory. It’s a small dark place with a desk and two chairs. My heart stops being all tight at that. We’re still up in the corner of our cot with no bars, as we’re afraid we might fall right off the edge. I like bars better. I can see Aunt Nadya through the crack in the half-closed door. I can see her put her head in her hands and start shaking and crying all over the place.

‘She’s crying, Masha,’ I whisper. But Masha just sniffs.

‘Stop this at once, Nadya!’ says the other woman in a crunchy, bad voice. ‘One would think you’d never seen Defective children before. Pull yourself together!’

People think we can’t hear. I don’t know why. Maybe other children can’t hear so well as us? But if we couldn’t hear really, really well, we wouldn’t know anything at all, because we don’t get told anything. I can see Masha’s listening to them too.

‘*Ai, ai, ai!* It’s the state of them, Lydia Mikhailovna. It’s not that they’re together, it’s not that at all, it’s the state of them. They’re like two frightened wild animals – that’s what they are. What did they do to them in there?’

I make a humming noise. I don’t know why she thinks we’re like wild animals when we’ve never been on the Outside before. I’ve seen wild dogs on the street from the Window; they’re thin and mean.

‘I’m told by Comrade Anokhin that his scientists merely observed their behaviour, Nadya. I have no reason to disbelieve a member of the Academy of Medical Sciences, and neither should you.’

‘But just look at them,’ she’s sobbing and sniffing now, ‘they flinch as soon as you look at them, they can’t feed themselves, and if they *do* speak, it’s in the worst common language of the cleaners.’ I squish up my nose. That’s not fair. I don’t swear like Masha does. Mummy told us not to. It’s Masha that swears. I try and stop listening and think of Mummy instead, coming to take us back home. But all I can see of Mummy in my head is her holding on to our cot hard as if she’s going to be blown over, and that makes me want to cry again. Masha feels my crying bubbling up, and pinches me hard so she can keep hearing them.

‘Oh, do stop snivelling, Nadya. You’re a physiotherapist whose job is to treat them, not a simple peasant woman to sit and weep over them. You’ll be praying next! Your task is to rehabilitate them.’

‘But, Lydia Mikhailovna, how am I to do that? Did you see their legs? Completely withered. And their arms, too – the muscles are non-existent. It’s a terrible thing, just skin and bone ... *ai, ai ai*, how am I to work on that, Lydia Mikhailovna? How am I ever to get those little stick legs ...’

‘None of that talk. You *will* get them to walk. You are the best physiotherapist in this hospital. And this is the best Prosthetics Hospital in the USSR. And that means the best in the world. As for Comrade Anokhin, *his* job was to observe them, in whatever way he desired. As a student of Dr Pavlov, he is pushing back the boundaries of Soviet scientific achievements and that is why his observations will continue while they are in our care. At least for as long as they survive.’

Survive? I look at Masha, just at the same moment she looks at me. Her eyes are open wide. Survive means not being dead. Yet.

She pinches me again to stop me crying, but then the door goes *Boom* again and a thin old man comes into the room. His face is nearly all nose and big glasses. He’s smiling and his teeth are yellow as old garlic cloves.

When they hear the door, Aunt Nadya and the other woman come quickly out of their room. He nods at them and walks over to us.

‘*Nooka!* Well now! What’s all this then? So they had enough of you two bedbugs in the Paediatric Institute, did they?’

He lifts his eyebrows and pushes his glasses up his nose with a finger so his eyes grow big and they gawp at us through them. After a bit I stop thinking of crying, and look at his gawpy eyes instead, like great big popping fish eyes.

‘That’s better,’ he says. ‘Right, so we’re going to get you two on your feet, are we?’

Aunty Nadya shakes her head. ‘It’ll take an eternity, Boris Markovich, to get those bony little legs to support them – completely atrophied, they are. I’ve seen a lot of children in my time, but this, this ... *Aaakh nyet*, an eternity ...’

‘We don’t have an eternity, Nadya, as you know. We have Plans. Five-Year Plans, new Targets, new Thoughts. So there’ll be no going back for them, thank God, only forwards. And I’ll wager, if anyone can get those two trotting along these corridors of ours, it’s you. We both know that ...’

Aunty Nadya sucks her spongy lips in. The gawpy-eyed man leans towards us. ‘I’m the Director of this ...’ he waves round the room ‘... um, hospital. SNIP. That’s easy, isn’t it? It stands for the Scientific National Institute of Prosthetics – Snip for short. This is your home now.’

‘Snip!’ says Masha. ‘Snip!’

It’s the first thing we’ve said to them and everyone laughs as if it’s a big joke, so she says it again, louder. Masha likes making people laugh.

‘Snip!!’

‘That’s right!’ The man’s smiling even more, crinkling his face into lots of lines, and Masha’s smiling too. ‘Easy, isn’t it? So, is there anything we can get you now? A jigsaw, perhaps? Picture books? Mmm?’

We don’t know what they are, so we don’t say anything.

He lifts his eyebrows up again. ‘Well, would you like to meet some of the other children then? Eh? Don’t suppose you’ve met many children before, have you? Come along, what would you like? I can tell by those bright little eyes of yours, you can understand me.’

I know what I’d like more than anything in the world.

‘I’d like to go back home,’ I say. ‘To Mummy.’

His eyebrows go right up, and he looks back at the two women, but their eyebrows go right up too, so they’re all standing there with their eyebrows right up as if they’re not hearing me, and I remember to tell them what everyone else calls Mummy in the Ped.

‘I want to go back to Anna Petrovna. We want to go home to her.’

He laughs and pats my head. ‘No, no, no. Snip is your home now, not the Paediatric Institute, and you have Aunty Nadya to look after you instead of Anna Petrovna. Anna Petrovna must stay in her own hospital.’ I start crying again in silly sobs that won’t stop, so he pats my head again. ‘Now don’t you worry, you’ll have lots of fun with us – Aunty Nadya will show you how to do a jigsaw.’ He smiles again, then bangs the palm of his hand on the bedstead as if he’s angry about something, and makes the bed jump. ‘Come along, comrades.’ He turns to go. But when they’re all at the door, he stops.

‘Nadya?’ She looks at him. ‘Clean them up properly and then let the other children in to play with them, will you?’

The stupid children are let in to play with us

They’re all talking at the same time and bouncing and tumbling and saying stuff I can’t hear because it’s all being said at the same time. ‘Dima ... your name ... stand on my head ... three months here ... upside downs ... Mummy ...’ and jumping and laughing, ‘til my head’s buzzing like nasty shiny equipment that won’t turn off.

‘Go away!’ shouts Masha. We’re in the corner of our bed, but they’re on that too, all different sizes and colours and making such a shouting they can’t even hear us.

‘Here!’ It’s a boy who’s tall as a proper grown-up. ‘Piggyback!’

He moves to pick us up and put us on his back.

‘Hold on to me!’ he shouts. I hold on like mad because I’m scared he’ll drop us with a bang on the floor. The other children run round after us, whooping. Masha’s holding on too, and we’re thumping up and down on his back. She’s grabbing his hair, which isn’t razored, and he yells in pain and dumps us back on the bed, but it’s covered with children and we squish some of them so they yell too. We’ve never seen real children before and we never, ever get touched normally, except to have our Procedures, so Masha hates other people’s skin on hers. She starts hitting and scratching and yelling at them to go away and the children start squealing, and one howls with a big open mouth, like a hole, making so much noise, like there’s a monster coming out of it or something, that I put my hands over my ears and squeeze my eyes closed.

‘*Tak!* All right, you lot, all right, that’s enough!’ It’s Aunty Nadya who’s come into the room. She claps her hands and they all go quiet as quiet. ‘Shoo, off you go, back to your ward. That will do for one day.’ Then the door goes *Boom* as Aunty Nadya closes it after them. We lie on the bed breathing in and out loudly and I can feel Masha’s heart banging. Aunty Nadya goes out too then, tut-tutting, leaving us alone.

‘Stupid children,’ Masha says after a bit.

‘Stupid children,’ I say.

April 1956

We get leech therapy and a fairy tale for being sick

I hurt all over, like I do when Masha’s been kicking me, but it’s not just the bits she kicks this time. It’s everywhere. And I’m so hot I tremble all the time. Masha’s the same but worse. She’s gone all floppy and hardly talks at all.

‘Well, well and how’s the fever today?’ Aunty Nadya comes in with her trolley. She’s been looking after us since we got sick from the children’s germs. That was weeks and weeks ago. I knew we’d get germs, but I can’t always be holding my breath. Mummy told us about how germs are our enemies, but I wish she’d told them here in SNIP too. No one listens to us.

‘Well, you’re over the worst. Nearly lost you, we did!’

‘Where?’ I say. ‘Where did you nearly lost us?’

She just laughs and says, ‘You’ll be glad to hear we’ll have no mustard plasters today.’

‘*Ooraaa!*’ I clap my hands. Mustard plasters are hot as hot.

Masha lifts her head up. We get a pillow here, which is for your head to rest on. We didn’t back home. One each.

‘No *banki*?’ she asks.

‘No *banki*,’ says Aunty Nadya. I look at the trolley, just to make sure, because grown-ups trick you like mad. *Banki* are little glass cups, which she lights a fire in, so it can suck up our skin in lots of round, pink lumps. It doesn’t really hurt, not like proper hurting, but when she plips them off they leave these bumps all over, like soft jellyfish. I can count to ten now, because she’s taught us all the way up to ten, and I always count the ten red lumps on our backs. It’s easy-peasy. I bet I could count to a hundred, but there’s only ten cups.

‘No cupping. We’ve got the little leeches today.’

‘*Fooo!*’ Masha hates leeches more than anything. I look hard at the trolley and I can see them now, all squelchy and squishy and black, in a nasty big jar of muddy water.

‘Won’t!’ says Masha. But she’s too floppy to be too cross. I see them sticking on the glass and want to cry. Every time they take that first bite I feel sick, and won’t look at them or think of them, slimy-slithery on my tummy.

‘*Teesha, teesha* ... hush now. You know they suck out all the fever and badness. They’re good little worms with magic healing juice for you. You’re two funny little fish, you are – you don’t so much as blink at the sight of our biggest needles, but show you a leech and you’re all over the place. You’re squeamish, that’s all. I’ll put them on your backs today so you won’t have to see them.’

‘*Nyet ...*’ moans Masha and wriggles and wiggles. ‘*Nyet ...*’

‘*Da*. Just lie still.’

‘Tell us the fairy story then,’ I say and pull at her sleeve. ‘About Lyuba. Loud as loud can be, so we can’t hear them eating our blood.’

‘Well, what nonsense, you can’t hear leeches ... But very well. Once upon a time ...’ I hear her pop open the jar and splash inside for a leech. I can smell them. They smell like the porter who took us away. Like dirty mops. I grit my teeth together and listen as hard as I can to get everything else out of my head. ‘... in a faraway land, there lived an old couple, who thought they could never have children. But one fine morning they found a baby girl who’d been left on their doorstep, and brought her up as their own.’ I go all tight and put my fist in my mouth, waiting for the leech, but she puts it on Masha first.

‘*Aiiii!*’ she squeals, but I know it’s not the hurt, it’s the thought of its slimmery slimy body. That’s the worst thing.

‘She grew up to be perfectly beautiful. Lips like rosebuds, eyes as blue as the summer sky and hair like spun gold. They adored her and gave her everything she wanted and called her Lyuba – which means Love.’

I think hard as anything of Perfect Lyuba as Aunt Nadya puts the leech on me and holds it ‘til its teeth dig inside me. ‘By the time she was sixteen, her parents had been forced to sell their house and their land to buy dresses for her perfect figure and rings for her perfect fingers and fine food for her perfect little mouth. But she still wanted more.’

‘*Ai, ai, ai, ai!*’ cries Masha.

‘*Teekha*, Masha! Listen! And then they said: “Lyuba, my love, we must find a husband for you who will love you as much as we do and give you everything you desire.” So word went out over the land that Lyuba was looking to be wed. Handsome princes came from far and wide, and to every one, she gave a task. The first had to bring her pink river-pearls, the second golden sea-pearls and the third a necklace of black diamonds.’

She only puts three each on us, so I’ve got two to go. If I was Lyuba, I’d want to stay with my mummy forever, not marry a prince and get pearls and things.

‘Then a young peasant boy came to her, and said he would give her the greatest gift of all, his True Love.’

Masha groans. She thinks love’s stupid. She likes the next bit best.

‘Lyuba laughed scornfully and struck him over the head with her gem-encrusted cane, intending to kill him, but instead she was at once turned into an ugly leech squirming in the mud. “There!” said the peasant boy. “You have what you deserve. You are a spoilt, blood-sucking leech. But now you have the power to do good, and heal the sick. When you have healed a hundred thousand humans, you will be returned to your original form.”’

‘What’s a hundred thousand?’ I ask through my pillow.

‘It’s more tens than you could ever count. So Lyuba sadly swam through many ponds and rivers and streams until one day she was picked up in the Moscow River and put into a big jar in a city pharmacy. The jar was sent to a big hospital where she was used for her magic juice to save a hundred thousand sick citizens. The hundred thousandth one was the peasant boy who was dying of pneumonia, and she saved his life too.’

‘Are these leeches saving our lives?’ I always ask this.

‘No, you’re *zhivoochi*. They’re just helping you get better faster.’ We get called *zhivoochi* lots. Even back in the Box. It means you’re a survivor, which means you keep not being dead even when you should be. ‘So do you know what happened then?’ Aunt Nadya asks and looks at us. We do, but shake our heads. ‘She changed back into a beautiful girl. But now that she wasn’t spoilt, she had a beautiful soul too.’

‘So the peasant boy fell in love with her ...’ I say, quick as quick.

‘And she fell in love with him ...’ says Masha, quick as quick too.

‘And they lived happily ever after!’ we say together, and then we all laugh because we always finish the fairy tale like that. Together.

She takes the leeches off with a *shlyop shlyop* and plops them back in the jar. I don’t want to look, but I can see they’re all fat as her fingers now, and happy. I wonder if one of them is a mean prince who will turn back into him and marry me.

‘So, girls,’ she says, leaning over us and rubbing stinky spirits on the bites. ‘Tomorrow Uncle Vasya will come and visit, and he’ll have a present for you to keep.’

‘What? What? A jellyfish?!’ asks Masha, getting herself up on her elbow.

‘It’s a secret.’

‘One present each?’ I ask. Because I know, if it’s only one, Masha will keep it.

‘You’ll see,’ says Aunt Nadya.

We like Uncle Vasya more than anything. He was in SNIP too, after he got both his legs blown off in the Great Patriotic War, and she was his physiotherapist, just like she’s our physiotherapist. And because she loved him, and he loved her, she took him home when he was all better. And they married and live happily ever after.

‘Masha,’ I say, when Aunt Nadya has gone and it’s all quiet, ‘do you think she’ll take us home when we’re better too?’

‘No. She doesn’t love us.’

‘Yes, but what if she *did* love us?’

‘Mummy loved us and she didn’t take us back to *her* home.’

‘Mummy still might come and get us. She might be just waiting until we get better here.’

Masha looks up at the ceiling for a bit.

‘I don’t think I love Mummy any more.’

‘Why not?’ I ask.

‘Because she made us go away.’

‘But she made us go away to get better.’

‘We were better anyway,’ Masha says.

‘Well ... she said she’d visit.’

‘And she hasn’t. So I don’t think Mummy loves us any more. Why should I love her, if she doesn’t love me?’ She sniffs so much then that her nose goes all sideways.

Well, I don’t care what Masha says, I still love Mummy. But I won’t tell her that. It’s my secret.

Uncle Vasya gives me a dolly called Marusya

‘She’s called Marusya,’ I tell Masha.

‘I know, idiot. You’ve told me a thousand times.’

I’ve got a dolly. All of my own. Uncle Vasya gave her to us yesterday. She’s all soft and rubbery and when I hug her inside my pyjama top she’s just as warm as me, and I can feel her little heart, like I can feel Masha’s, but Marusya’s goes faster, plip, plop, plip because she’s so small.

‘Anyway, how do you know she’s called Marusya?’ asks Masha. ‘Uncle Vasya just called her *Kooklinka* – plain Dolly.’

‘She told me.’

Masha shrugs.

Uncle Vasya told me she got lost from her last little girl and has been very sad waiting for another one. That’s me. She fell out of a car, he said and almost got run over and was very frightened at being alone but she walked and walked and hid in a train until he found her all dirty and tired, hiding in a cardboard box in his street. So he told her he knew just the little girl for her. Marusya’s Defective like us, he says, but I can’t see why, except that she’s got only one ear, which is the one I whisper into, so not even Masha can hear what we say.

‘I can’t hear her talking. How can *you* hear her talking?’ says Masha after I’ve been whispering a bit to Marusya.

‘She only talks to me. Uncle Vasya said she didn’t talk to him hardly at all, except to say she was sad at being lost, and that she came from East Germany.’

‘Where’s East Germany?’

‘Outside Moscow. A long long way away.’

‘How did she get to Moscow?’

‘Wait. I’ll ask her.’

‘I don’t want her to talk to me anyway,’ says Masha, sniffing. ‘I wanted a tractor. Like in the picture book.’ I’m really glad about that. Masha took Marusya for herself to start with, but just bounced her off my head for a bit and then got bored. So I get to keep her to myself now. ‘I know!’ she says, all laughing suddenly. ‘Let’s do roll-overs!’

‘All right.’ I put Marusya under my pillow. I’ll ask her later.

‘I’m a hedgehog!’ shouts Masha and we roll over and over on our bed to one end, and then upside down on our heads, to the other end, laughing like mad as the room goes round and round. And Masha keeps trying to get us to fall off and I keep trying to get us to stay on.

‘I’m a hedgehog too!’ I shout.

‘You can’t be one too, I was one first!’

‘All right, I’ll be a ... a ... curly caterpillar!’

Boom! Aunty Nadya comes in with her white cap and popping eyes.

‘*Tak, tak, tak.* What’s all this? I told you to do your leg exercises, not break your necks!’

‘We was, we was! Look!’ says Masha, and kicks her leg in the air, so I do too, laughing like anything. Aunty Nadya does her special frowning, which is a smile really, and slaps our legs.

‘Were, not was. We were. Right. Time for another massage to get those muscles working. Sit up straight.’

‘Can Marusya have her legs massaged too?’

‘Yes, Dasha, you can do her, and I’ll do you. Now then, we must work extra hard because I have some very exciting news.’ Her eyes pop at us like she’s trying to keep them in, but the exciting news is pushing them both out of her head.

‘What? What?!’ We shout together.

‘We are going to be visited in a month’s time by a Very Important Guest. He wants to see what progress you’ve made since you left his care in the Paediatric Institute, so you must make me proud of you. It’s the great Doctor Anokhin himself! Pyotr Kuzmich Anokhin!’ Her eyes are all bright and sparkly.

We don’t know who he is and where his care was, but she’s so happy about him coming that we’re all happy too. I want to make her proud of us lots. Perhaps she’ll love us then. And take us home with her. That’s if Mummy doesn’t come for us first.

Age 7

September 1957

The great Doctor Anokhin comes to see us with his lesser doctors

‘They’re here! The cavalcade has arrived. They’re here!’ Aunty Nadya is standing by the window. She’s been standing by the window for hours. ‘Now then, just do as you’re told and try your very hardest.’

‘How Very Important is he again?’ asks Masha, bouncing up and down.

‘Well, he’s the successor to the Great Doctor Pavlov ...’

‘So more important than a Professor *and* a Hospital Director, like Boris Markovich ...’ I say.

‘Or even a Tsar ...’ laughs Masha, still bouncing.

‘Well, I don’t know about a Tsar, I’m sure,’ Aunty Nadya laughs back. ‘But he’s not quite as important as our First Secretary. Nearly, though! He’s very famous. And he’s bringing people to film you for a documentary for the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences. That’s why we’ve got flowers and this nice rug in your room, and pink ribbons in your hair.’

I pat my own pink ribbon on top of my head, which must be the same as Masha's, and feel it all puffy like a butterfly. They don't shave our heads any more so we have two little plaits each. Aunt Nadya said Anna Petrovna (Mummy, that is) worked with Doctor Anokhin and that she might come to see us too. That's what I'm more excited about than anything in the world: seeing Mummy again. Because I miss her all the time, every minute and second. And most of all at night. Even after all these months.

Marusya got stolen from me. One of the nannies here said it was the night nurse who took her from my folded arms when I was sleeping because there's a shortage of East German dollies like her, and they can't be bought for love nor money, the nanny said. I cried for days and days, because I hadn't even said goodbye or told her she'd been taken away and that I'd never, ever have given her away. Not ever. And now I don't know where she is, and she's probably crying too and thinking I don't love her. And all I want in the world is for her to know I didn't give her away, but that she was stolen from me.

But I won't think of that now.

Boom! My heart jumps like a frog, but it's only Lydia Mikhailovna opening the door, looking cross as she whooshes into the room.

'Take those ridiculous ribbons out of their hair, Nadya. We're expecting scientists, not school boys!'

'I thought ... for the filming ...'

'Take them *out*.' Masha grabs on to her bow and holds tight, but Aunt Nadya pulls them out anyway, tugging so hard it hurts. 'Right!' says Lydia Mikhailovna. 'They're here. Everything in the entire hospital is scrubbed and clean. The children are all quiet in their wards. Boris Markovich is outside meeting them. They'll be here in a moment.' She pulls down at her lab coat and goes all straight and starched. 'You have the corsets and the pole ready, Nadya?'

'Of course.'

Everything's ready! Everyone's been going crazy all morning, running outside our room, up and down, and bringing stuff in like posters of Young Pioneers blowing trumpets, and lots of flowers and more red rugs and other pretty things. But now it's quiet as a stone everywhere.

We wait. Then we can hear voices and steps in the corridor. Lydia Mikhailovna's still standing up all straight, like she's blowing a trumpet too, and Aunt Nadya keeps tucking her hair back under her cap, and I can hardly breathe for waiting for them to get closer and closer and then *Boom!*

The door opens.

A man in a suit comes in and says: *Nooka?* It must be Him. He's in front and he holds out his arms to us like he's known us forever.

'My little girls!' He's smaller than all the other people crowding into the room behind him and has a smiley, crinkly face that looks kind and not Very Important at all. He's got no moustache or golden uniform or faraway eyes like Father Stalin. His eyes are like apple pips and his suit is all floppy. 'My little girls!' he says again. His girls? Why are we his girls?

'Well now, Comrade Doctor, and here they are indeed.' It's Boris Markovich. I didn't even see him. 'Your little charges. I believe you'll see an improvement. I shall leave you in the capable hands of Doctor Voroboiskaya.' He waves at Lydia Mikhailovna, who's standing by our bed, and then pushes out through everyone, and leaves.

'Yes, yes. So here we are again, my little berries. How time flies,' says the Great Doctor.

I don't remember him a bit. Neither does Masha. I keep trying to look through all the people crowded in our room to find Mummy. 'And here are your old friends Doctors Alexeyeva and Golubeva.' He turns to two women behind him and my heart goes all shrunken like a nut because I do remember them. They're two of the ones we always shut off for in the Laboratory. Doctor Alexeyeva nods at us and we back up on to the corner of the bed and squeeze into the wall. Lydia Mikhailovna tuts with her tongue crossly. Masha puts her fingers in her mouth and sucks so hard that Lydia Mikhailovna tuts again, even louder.

‘Now don’t you worry!’ says the Great Doctor, laughing as if we’ve done a joke. ‘Doctor Alexeyeva won’t be working on you today. Haha.’ Then he comes and sits on our bed where I’m nearest and brings two green, shiny things out of his pocket in crackly paper. ‘Here we are. Two sweeties. Chocolate sweeties. Had any chocolate before?’ We both shake our heads. ‘Haha! Thought not.’ He gives them to us and Masha unwraps hers and pops it in her mouth, then reaches round and takes mine to unwrap and pops it in her mouth too.

‘Haha!’ He laughs again, and everyone smiles a bit with him but I don’t think it’s funny. I wanted to taste chocolate too. ‘Nothing changes with these two, I see!’

I’m looking and looking at all the faces and men putting up big lights on poles with round, black cameras with glass in them, but I can’t see Mummy anywhere in the room at all.

‘And what have *you* lost, Dashinka?’ he says, looking behind him.

I want to ask if she’s come, and I try and say it, but it doesn’t come out of my mouth loud. It doesn’t really come out at all.

‘What’s that?’ He leans into me with his ear and I can smell something sweet, like he’s had lots of chocolates already.

‘Has Mummy come?’ I say again and this time he hears and looks round at the doctors with a frown.

‘Mummy?’ he asks.

‘Ah, yes, that must be the ... late Anna Petrovna,’ says Doctor Alexeyeva in a quiet voice and shakes her head all sadly. I nod and nod like mad. That’s her! And if she’s just late we can wait a bit.

‘Hmm. Anna Petrovna, eh?’ He looks back at me. ‘No. She couldn’t come today, I’m afraid. Not today. But she’ll be sure to visit before long, eh? In a twinkle. We’ll see to that.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Yes, yes, Dasha. Tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow. Right, let’s see what you two little berries can do then, shall we? Cameras at the ready? Yes? Off you go!’

Aunty Nadya nods at us and we start undoing our pyjama tops, every button by ourselves, having a race, and all smiling because of Mummy coming tomorrow and because we want to show off too. When we’re all naked we lie back on the bed and Aunty Nadya slides the metal pole under us, flat on the bed, so we can hold on to it with our four hands, pulling higher and higher up the pole to squeeze us closer and closer. That’s because we have to be close as anything in order to walk. Like scissors cutting. Masha’s laughing, all excited at showing off, which makes me laugh too. I bet I get closest to the pole, because I always try the hardest to be good.

‘And now show your coordination, girls.’ It’s Lydia Mikhailovna. Coordination means lifting our two legs together for ten times and then lifting them one at a time for ten times. I could do hundreds of times, but we can’t count that far. We’ll be able to count when we walk though, because then we’ll go to the SNIP schoolroom and get taught writing and reading and counting, like real children. I bet Mummy will be surprised as surprised when she sees us really walking. I can’t wait to see her face.

Then Aunty Nadya dresses us in the two corsets and ties the laces tight as anything between the two of us until we’re nearly pulled right together. She stops when Masha squeals. It hurts.

‘Wonderful, wonderful.’ He claps his hands. ‘Now then, we’ve brought your old friend the electroencephalogram to see what’s happening in here.’ He taps our heads with his two fingers. Doctor Golubeva steps towards us with two metal helmets and all the wires like sizzling, biting snakes coming out of them, plugged into a trolley. We both can’t stop from shouting out then and reaching for Aunty Nadya to make her stop it, because of remembering them in the Laboratory. I don’t want to even think of them. Aunty Nadya looks all goggle-eyed at us but doesn’t move, and Lydia Mikhailovna stamps her foot and goes, ‘Tssss!’

Anokhin gets up then, and holds us down so she can put the helmets on. His eyes are still all kind and twinkly, but his fingers are digging into my shoulder.

‘Now, now, girls. There’s no need for this, is there? Done it all before many a time. Same old routine. Sit still. That’s good.’

Doctor Alexeyeva comes over too, to watch us while they stick the helmets on, and I remember her dead fish eyes and sharp smell and get some sick in my mouth, which I swallow, and I’m trembling with being scared as anything of her. More of her than Doctor Golubeva even, who’s pushing buttons now. The helmet starts buzzing like stinging wasps and squeezing my head like it’s going to be cracked open like an egg. I try to look at Aunt Nadya to get her to help us, but I can’t see because of my shaking eyes and we both can’t stop from yelling with the hurting. But Aunt Nadya doesn’t stop them.

When it’s over, I feel like my head is all buzzed to bits and has come off my neck, and I’m crying and so’s Masha, even though Lydia Mikhailovna is stamping at us not to, as she wants to be proud of us, and I want that too, but I just can’t stop crying and shaking. I hate myself.

Aunt Nadya has her hands all tied in knots in front of her, twisting them.

‘Pyotr Kuzmich,’ she says, ‘I’m sorry, but was that necessary?’ There’s a Big Sucked-in Silence in the room except for me and Masha sniffing.

‘Now don’t you worry about them, Nadya, it doesn’t really hurt ... simply squeezes a little. All necessary in the name of Soviet Science, I’m sure you’ll agree?’

There’s another Big Silence as they wait for her to agree.

‘It’s just ...’ she starts.

I look up at her because she’s still talking but she’s all blurred with my tears.

‘It’s just that we were told you simply observed the girls ... in the Paediatric Institute.’

‘Yes, yes.’ He’s rubbing his hands like he’s washing them. Like they’re sticky. I’m glad I didn’t eat his nasty chocolate sweetie now. ‘Active Observation is what we choose to call it. Active Observation of the brainwaves in this case. Anything else?’ He looks round. ‘Thought not. Well, good work, comrades. In six months’ time they’ll be trotting around like ponies – an achievement to show the whole world.’ He gives a little salute. ‘Until the next time then.’

After they all go out Aunt Nadya stays to dress us in our nappies and pyjamas and says we did really well not to leak, which just shows we can, if we try.

She then holds my face in her two hands and kisses my nose and does the same to Masha before she leaves because her shift is ending. She closes the door behind her.

‘Didn’t like him,’ says Masha, after a bit.

‘Didn’t like him too. I’m glad Mummy sent us away from there with him, to here,’ I say. ‘She’s coming tomorrow, Mummy is. To see us.’

‘Mmm ...’

‘Masha. Why’s he going to show us to the whole world?’ I ask after another bit. ‘What’s the whole world?’

‘Don’t know,’ she says. ‘No one tells me anything.’

She puts her head on her pillow, her end of the bed, and I put my head on my pillow, my end of the bed, and wish I had Marusya.

I’d hold her so tight I could hear her heart and I’d kiss her all over. Not just the tip of her nose.

3 November 1957

We walk to the schoolroom and learn about Laika the space dog

‘What’s the date today? Dasha?’ Galina Petrovna, our teacher, points her stick at me. I have my hand up.

‘It’s November the third, 1957!’

She asks us this every morning and I always know what the exact right date is. Masha doesn’t. She keeps forgetting. I know the months and the four seasons and what’s a vegetable and what’s a fruit. The only fruit I’ve seen in real life are apples and oranges. We’ve had an orange twice. But there are lots of other ones too.

‘Yes, yes, Dashinka,’ she says. ‘And what’s the day, Masha?’ Masha screws up her eyes and I put my hand up high as high again because I know it’s Tuesday. She keeps looking at Masha though, who just puts her pencil up her nose while she’s thinking and makes the others laugh.

We sit right at the front of the classroom, which is really the canteen and smells of cabbage and fish. I know almost more than any of the other children, because the most they ever stay in SNIP is three months, but we’ve been here for more than seven times three months now, so that’s seven times longer than anyone else.

‘Well, it was Monday yesterday, so today is ...’

‘Tuesday!’ grins Masha.

‘Exactly. And I want you to remember this day forever and rejoice because this is the day of a Great Soviet Achievement.’ Masha yawns. There are lots of Great Soviet Achievements going on all the time. Like dams and bridges being built and quotas being fulfilled and Five-Year Plans being met. I think me and Masha were a sort of achievement too, when we first walked, but I don’t think anyone rejoiced except Aunt Nadya. She fell in a pile on the floor as if getting our legs to work had stopped hers from working. I keep thinking how much I wanted Mummy to see us walking. She’d be so amazed she’d fall off her chair! But she never did come the day after Anokhin visited. We waited all day with our hearts beating so fast I thought mine would burst in two. But she didn’t come at all.

I won’t think about that. We had to use crutches to start off with and then we learnt to walk by just putting our arms round each other and balancing like that. And then once we’d started we couldn’t stop, we could go everywhere all by ourselves. We went running in and out of all the wards and bumping down the stairs to see Lydia Mikhailovna in her office and into the schoolroom-canteen, and even down to the kitchens.

Galina Petrovna looks round now, with her eyebrows up to make sure we’re all listening. She looks like a bird with a beak for a nose and big ringed glasses and smooth black hair. She’s my favourite (apart from Aunt Nadya) of all the grown-ups we know – that’s the doctors and nurses and nannies and cleaners. She’s so happy at this Achievement, whatever it is, that she’s almost dancing in one place. I’d like to see the People rejoicing in the streets about it, but we’re still a Big Secret so we don’t go Outside. If I can never, ever, *ever* go Outside I want to do schoolwork hard, as well as I can all the time, so I can be a doctor, and work in here when I grow up. Masha wants to work in the kitchens so she can eat oranges all day.

‘Yes, Pasha?’ I look back at him with his silly hand high up. He’s ten and we’re seven so it’s not fair when he knows stuff and I don’t.

‘Our scientists have launched a dog into space, Galina Petrovna.’

‘Exactly! We are the only country in the world advanced enough to do this. And what country are we in, children?’

‘The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics!’ we all chant – even Masha.

‘And where is that?’

‘In the Best of All Possible Worlds!’

‘*Tak tochno!* Any questions? Hands up.’

‘How do you launch a dog into space, Galina Petrovna?’ asks Masha. ‘With a catapult? Does she float? Will she drop back?’

‘I said hands up, Masha ... How many times ...’

She holds up the front page of *Pravda* to show us a photo of a dog inside a metal kennel with cushions. ‘She’s called Laika and she was sent up in this capsule in a big space rocket. Soon we will send a man into space. The first man in the history of mankind. Then we will put the first man on the moon and perhaps soon, in our lifetime, everyone on earth will be living on a Soviet moon.’

She looks round at us, smiling as proud as can be of this first Space Achievement. I’m proud as can be too, but I don’t want to be fired up in a rocket and go whizzing through blackness from

star to star forever, or even live on a Soviet moon. I'd always be afraid of falling off it into space. Masha would though.

Then I think of another question and put my hand up, quick as quick, before Pasha can. 'Where did Laika come from?'

'Ah. She was a stray on the streets of Moscow. Scientists take strays for their experiments because they're *zhivoochi*, they're survivors, and don't belong to anyone.'

'Like the dogs kept in cages on the top floor?' asks Masha.

Galina Petrovna nods. We've never seen the dogs up there, but we can hear them sometimes at night, howling. They're used by the scientists in SNIP. Auntie Nadya told us that Doctor Anokhin started out working with Doctor Pavlov, who's famous all over the world for working with dogs in laboratories. She says Pavlov built the best laboratory ever, called the Tower of Silence where they experiment on them. I wouldn't like to be one of his dogs in a Tower of Silence. It sounds scary. There's rabbits up on the top floor of SNIP too but we never hear them. I wonder what noise rabbits make?

'Why will a man be next? Can I go up next instead, Galina Petrovna?' asks Masha, and the kids giggle all over again, and I do too.

'Well, I'm not sure Dasha would like that ...' She's smiling too.

'She can stay here and watch me go *zooooom!*' She shoots her hand in the air. 'I want to go into space. I'm *zhivoochi* too.'

'Will the dog Laika come back down again?' I ask, with my hand up.

'No, I'm afraid not. The technology to de-orbit hasn't been developed yet so she'll just be flying around looking at the stars out of the window for a few days.'

'Will she die?' That's Pasha again.

'Yes, yes. She'll be painlessly put to sleep, ah ... killed, that is ... after one week of umm ... flying ...' she coughs, 'round and round in space.' There are no hands up now because it's a bit sad to think of her being killed up there, all on her own. 'But she doesn't know that now, does she? So she'll be looking out at earth all beautiful and blue, and thinking what a lucky Laika she is.' Galina Petrovna smiles a big smile at us and we all smile a big smile back.

Age 11

March 1961

We have our weekly bath and meet Lucia

The best day ever in the week is Saturday. It's bath day in the *bannya* down in the basement of SNIP. We get a whole tub for just us and one other kid. We're at the front of the line. We're always at the front. We've been here a million times longer than anyone else, so Masha's the boss of everyone, even if they're older than eleven, which is what we are.

'*Yolki palki!* Stop shivering,' says Masha. 'You make me shiver too.'

'It's cold ...'

I hug myself to see if I can stop, but it doesn't help. I keep hugging myself anyway.

Tomorrow's Sunday, which is Visiting Day, so we all need to be soapy clean for parents. We don't have any parents, of course, but Auntie Nadya says we need to be soapy clean all the same, in case the other kids' parents see us. But they wouldn't ever do that, because we have to stay stuck away in our room all day on Visiting Day so we don't traumatize the Healthies.

The door to the *bannya*'s open and we can see the rows and rows of free-standing tubs, all being filled up with steaming hot water from jugs. I'm so excited I almost forget to shiver.

'Hey, I'm first in, see?' It's a girl, loads taller than us. Her head is shaved so she's from a State Children's Home, not a family home, and she thinks she can get right to the front where Masha is, because she's new and doesn't know Masha.

'Get lost,' says Masha.

'Get lost yourself, midget.'

‘This is my place. Get to the back of the line, shit-face. Don’t want you making my bath stinky.’

‘Who are you calling shit-face?’

I shrink back, away from them. No one messes with my Masha. Last week we were walking down the stairs from Ward C and there was this gang of boys at the bottom, waiting to beat us up, and Masha got her skewer out, the one she’d stolen from the kitchens when I was talking to the cooks on purpose so they wouldn’t notice. She keeps it stuck down our nappy. It’s almost longer than anyone’s chest and she pushed the point into the skin of the neck of the first boy and said ‘Just try it, fucker’ and then walked on right through all of them without looking back or anything. I swear I’d die without Masha.

But she’s got no skewer now. We’re all naked so it’s only her.

‘How long you been here?’ she says to the girl.

‘Week.’

‘Well, I’ve been here five years and this is my hospital and my spot and everyone knows it, don’t they? So get the fuck to the back of the line.’

‘Yeah, you, get lost.’ All three of us turn. It’s Pasha who’s in line behind us. He keeps coming back to have more prosthetic legs that fit as he grows. I haven’t seen him for ages and ages though. He’s got a deep voice now but it’s still him. I can tell easily. I didn’t even know he was back.

‘She’ll come and skewer you to your bed if you don’t,’ he says and laughs. It comes out all deep again but it’s still his Pasha laugh. The girl looks back at Masha and shrugs, but stays where she is.

I didn’t know Pasha was right behind us. Right there, behind us, only half a metre away, but I didn’t know. I hug myself again and wish we’d get called in right now. There are loads and loads of us here, all standing naked, waiting forever, and Pasha is older than us. I wish he wasn’t right there behind us.

‘Yeah? Try it and you’ll get stuck first,’ says the new girl.

‘That’s a laugh. Whatcha gonna stick me with? Babushka’s knitting needle?’

‘OK, children. Come along, come along!’ It’s Auntie Mila the bath attendant calling us in.

‘*Oooraaa!*’ Masha and me go running in, slipping and sliding on the wet tiles and jump with a swish and a plop into the very first tub. The girl runs in with us and jumps into ours too, squealing like anything.

‘Splash!’ laughs Masha and kicks her foot to splash the girl. ‘What’s your name? Besides Shit-Face?’

‘Lucia,’ she goes. ‘What’s yours? Besides Midget?’

‘Mashdash. I’m Masha and she’s Dasha, but we just get called Mashdash.’

‘All right then, Mashdash. I can hold my breath underwater longer than you. Ready?’ She holds her nose and so does Masha, but I don’t. I like floating, not getting all wet in my mouth and eyes and stuff. It makes me scared that I’ll never come up and get air again. Lucia goes down and blows loads of bubbles but Masha doesn’t, she just waits ‘til Lucia starts coming up, then she ducks her head in and comes right back up again.

‘I won!’ she shouts. I laugh because Lucia doesn’t know she cheated. Masha’s funny.

Auntie Mila comes to scrub us with a brush and soap and Masha goes *miaow* like a cat and tells her not to bother with me, as she wants double time. But Auntie Mila does me too and then she does Lucia and pulls Masha’s ear before she goes to the next bath to scrub them. I’m floating in the water like a fish in the sea or green seaweed, and I’m melting away until I’m nothing at all except water too. It’s like being all single in the water, like it’s just me floating away. I’ll be sucked down the plughole and swooshed right out to sea and then get washed up on a warm shore. And there’ll only be Pasha there but that won’t matter because there’ll be coconuts to live off and we’ll learn to climb the coconut trees and swim ...

Ding Ding! The bell goes to say our ten minutes is up, clanging like the fire alarm, and we have to get out, quick as anything, and run for our sheets to get dried with, while the next three jump into the bath.

‘What ward you in, Mashdash?’ asks Lucia.

‘None of them. We got an Isolated room,’ says Masha, because Lucia wasn’t talking to me.

‘Fuck you. Why? You infectious?’

‘Nah. We’re special. Not like you.’

‘Fuck you. I’m in Ward D. You a State kid or Family kid?’

‘State.’

‘Good. Family kids suck.’

‘Yeah. They suck. *Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, I want marmalade and oranges ...*’

‘Yeah, makes you sick. I’ll come see you tomorrow then.’ She’s dried herself in two seconds flat. Quicker even than us.

‘OK. Ask for Mashdash.’

‘See ya then.’

‘See ya.’ She hops really fast, back to the changing room, and then I see she’s got only one and a half legs.

We make four wishes because we’re bored

‘She was all right,’ Masha says, stuffing a chunk of black bread into her mouth all at once when we’re back in our room. She stole it off the plate of a little kid in the canteen and hid it down our nappy for later. We get all our bread and food weighed out on scales by the gramme. I lie back on my pillow with my leg hanging over the bed and think a bit about what we’re going to do all day, now we don’t go to school any more. It only goes up to primary school in SNIP, so now we’re eleven, it’s stopped. Aunty Nadya has other kids to work on because we can walk, and run, and climb, and if we haven’t leaked in our nappy for more than an hour, we’re allowed to ride our red tricycle round the Physio hall as a treat. It’s Masha that leaks anyway, not me. She can’t be bothered to try not to. But I do. I squeeze down there like mad. Uncle Vasya bought us the red tricycle. Apart from Marusya, it’s the best present in the world.

I try not to look at the chunk of spongy black bread because I’m starving. I know we get Fully Provided For, and I’m grateful, but I still always seem to be starving. There’s only a bit left now and Masha’s chewing away at it, looking out of the window. She never shares.

I make a steeple with my fingers and press it against my nose. I miss not learning. It’s like I’ve only just started knowing things. It’s like opening a bag of all different sweets and trying a few, then having it taken away. It’s like when we were taken away from the Window.

Galina Petrovna said I had Amazing Potential, and almost cried sort of, when we had our last day of schooling with her. I think she *did* cry, almost, although Masha said she didn’t. It’s *nyelzya* to borrow school books, but Aunty Nadya sometimes brings us picture books filled with coloured photos of sharp mountains like in the Altai, and blue lakes in Siberia, which are the deepest in the world, and of snow in Murmansk where it’s almost always night time even in the day time. I wish she’d leave the books for us when she’s gone, but she can’t, or they’d get taken, like Marusya was. You don’t get to keep your own things in an Institution.

‘D’you think Lucia will come tomorrow?’ I ask. I don’t usually make any of my own friends because Masha doesn’t like the sort of girls I like. I don’t care though, because they keep going away, so you have to keep saying goodbye as soon as you *really* get to like them. While we keep on just staying and staying.

‘Course she will.’

‘Mash ...’ I lift myself up on my elbow because she’s lain down the other end of the bed now and is sucking her fingers. ‘We won’t get sent away will we? Like the Uneducables. To an orphanage? Now that we can’t study any more?’

We've heard all about the orphanages for Uneducables from some of the other kids. You don't even have to be that Defective to be classed as one, just a bit Defective like having a squint in one eye. They say you get tied to a cot all day, and not fed until sometimes you starve to death. I think that can't be true because the grown-ups say Defectives are all cared for. But you never quite know ...

'Nyetooshki. We're not morons, are we?' She doesn't lift her head from her pillow. I shake my head. There are three classes of Uneducables. There's the Morons, the Cretins and then the Imbeciles, but I can't tell the difference when they're brought here for treatment, I really can't. They all seem nice enough to me.

'And anyway,' says Masha, all muffled, 'Anokhin needs us. You heard Aunt Nadya.'

'Is she telling a lie though? Maybe she's tricking us?'

Grown-ups tell lies to make us feel better. Maybe Uneducables *are* tied up and starved to death

...

'He keeps coming back, doesn't he? With his *yobinny* delegations to show us off.' She yawns and then pretends like she's catching bubbles in the air with her hands. *Plyop, plyop plyop*. She swallows them for wishes. I do the same. One wish for being adopted by Aunt Nadya and taken to live with her family. Second wish for getting Marusya back. Third wish for being a beautiful Lyuba non-leech with perfect spun gold hair and perfect cornflower-blue eyes and perfect rose-red lips just like all the strong peasant women in the posters everywhere, standing in fields of wheat. And the fourth wish is to be all on my own in the field of wheat. And for Masha being all on her own too but next to me so she can stay close by if she likes.

Lucia comes on Visiting Day

The next day – Horrible Visiting Day – is all warm and sunny. It's spring time again and we're looking out of the window at the other kids from SNIP playing in the grounds. Family kids aren't congenital like us, because congenitals get taken away by the State when they're babies and their parents sign rejection forms. We're the *Otkazniks* – Rejects. Most of the family kids in here were born normal and have had an accident, like they've been run over by trains or cars. Tasha got blown up by a German hand grenade in a disused church. Petya climbed a telegraph pole and got electrocuted. They were here about two years ago. Or maybe three. Or even four. The years all get muddled now. I liked Tasha lots. She said she'd write but she didn't. They never do ... I don't like it when people call us *Otkazniks* because no one knows for sure we were actually rejected.

'I want to go *out*.' Masha's sticking her nose and her forehead and her flat hands up against the window, like they're glued there. I can see her breath puffing shapes on the window, and I puff some too, then I quickly draw a smiley face in it, winking at me, before it disappears.

I want to go out too, but we're still a Secret so we can't.

'Let's play Kamoo-Kak – *Who's-What?*' I say. We play that all the time. It's when you have to think of a person and the questions are all different sorts:

What sort of flower are they like? What sort of colour are they like? What sort of transport are they like? What sort of fruit are they like? What sort of animal are they like?

I go first, and mine is daisy, yellow, bicycle, strawberry and bird, which Masha guesses as Galina Petrovna first off. I think I've done her before.

We go back to pushing our noses against the window again. I can hear all the laughs and shouts from the corridor as the mummies come in and I stick my fingers in my ears. I hate Sundays. I look out of the window at the block opposite, and imagine that I'm the girl who lives there. I've called her Anya, and she's got curly blonde hair and wears a white pinafore to school. She walks past the five shops called Bread, Vegetables, Meat, Wine and Clothes, with her school bag swinging on her shoulder, every morning, and then jumps on a tram to go to school. But not on Sunday. Aunt Nadya says there are playgrounds in all the back yards with slides and swings, so I imagine I'm Anya now, being given buckwheat porridge by her mummy this Sunday morning and then going out and whizzing

down the slide over and over again with Pasha until neither of us can breathe so we sit in the sandpit and eat loads of chocolate instead.

‘Hey, Mashdash! Get a life!’

We jump and come unstuck from the window. It’s Lucia. She’s found us! She’s got freckles and green eyes like Pippi Longstocking. She goes over to our bed, drops her crutches and starts bouncing on it.

‘The Administrator here’s a right bitch. Confiscates everything but your heart. I had a grass-snake skin, all curled up small, and she found it and tore it in half right before my eyes.’

‘She’d tear your heart out too and stamp it with *Property of SNIP* like everything else in here if she could,’ says Masha, going back over to the bed. ‘She’d have a thousand hearts in a five-litre jar in the freezer in the kitchens. And eat one a night.’

We laugh at that. But I think I might, maybe, hold on to my chest at night now, in case she comes in with a knife. Masha says the strangest things, it gives me nightmares sometimes. And our Administrator really is the meanest person in the world. She hates us more than she hates anyone else. Sometimes I think it’s her who took Marusya, not the night nurse. Masha thinks so too. She says she’ll get revenge for me.

‘I reckon she’s an American agent,’ says Masha. ‘I’m watching her so I can denounce her.’

‘Yes! And if she *is* one and we denounce her, we might get a medal!’ I say excitedly, and they both look at me like I’ve said something stupid, then look away.

Lucia lies back and does a bicycle with her leg in the air and then tips herself over so it’s resting up on the wall, and she’s all upside down.

‘What’re you in here for?’ asks Masha.

‘New leg. I was in an orphanage. I wasn’t a congenital, I was healthy as anything, my stupid mum just didn’t like me. But I ran away from there and got my leg all chewed off by a mad dog. So after that I got sent to an orphanage for Defectives. That sucked even more. It’s much better here in SNIP. You get fed and the staff treat you like people.’

‘Did it chew your leg right off?’ I can’t stop myself from asking. ‘The mad dog?’

‘Stupid question,’ says Masha. ‘She’s still got half left.’

‘Well, it didn’t exactly chew it off. It got hold of me and wouldn’t let go. I got found five days later by the militia, all delirious with fever. They sent me back to the orphanage, but by then my leg had got all stinky and had to be cut off.’

Her voice is all squashed upside-downy as she reaches higher and higher with her leg and then falls off the bed sideways and we all laugh.

‘How come you’ve got to stay here for so long?’ she asks, picking herself up. ‘Most of the kids here have legs and arms missing, but you’ve still got all yours.’

‘We’re some sort of Big Secret, so we can’t ever leave here,’ says Masha.

Lucia sits up and hugs her leg up to her chin looking all interested. ‘A Secret? No shit. Why?’

‘Because, we’re Together.’

‘What’s so secret about that?’

‘Dunno.’ Masha shrugs. ‘Maybe we’re a secret experiment. Maybe the scientists joined us together. I haven’t seen anyone else Together, not ever. Have you seen anyone else Together?’

‘Nope. But then you haven’t seen anyone with a leg bitten off by a dog either, have you? Doesn’t make me a Secret. Don’t they tell you why?’

‘No. They don’t tell us anything.’

‘S’pose they know best. Better not to know,’ she says, and balls one fist into her eye, rubbing it. ‘Does your head in, knowing does. Anyway, you’re lucky. It’s healthy here. You get two hundred grammes of bread a day – and butter and meat. We get shit-all, and they pump us full of injected crap to keep us quiet.’

‘Do they tie you to the bed too?’ I ask, thinking of the Uneducables.

‘Yeah, sometimes. Or tie you up in a sheet so you can’t move. It sucks. Wish I was a Secret like you two and could live here.’

She unthreads a shoelace from my boot, which is tucked under the bed, puts the middle bit between her teeth and gives me both ends behind her head. ‘I’m a pony. Click click.’ I laugh and pull the reins. She throws her head up and down and whinnies and we all laugh some more as she rears up and paws in the air. Then after a bit she looks round the empty room. ‘Don’t you have any toys or books or stuff? If you really live here, don’t you get your own stuff?’

‘*Nyetooshki*,’ says Masha. ‘It’d get nicked. If it’s not screwed down or stamped with an SNIP stamp, it gets nicked.’

‘Same with us in the orphanage. My mum brings me stupid books, when she should bring lard or cooked potatoes. Books get nicked by the staff as soon as you look at them, to sell on.’

‘At least your mummy visits,’ I say.

Masha rolls her eyes. ‘Ignore my moron here. She’s obsessed with mums, right?’ I bite my bottom lip. I kept waiting for Mummy after she didn’t come that tomorrow time and so in the end, Auntie Nadya told us that she wasn’t our real mummy at all. She said she was only one of the staff. She says our real mummy is in Moscow, because we were born here and that she probably couldn’t cope with the two of us as she was too busy working. So now I write letters to my real mummy every week telling her what we’re doing and how we’re getting along. Because everyone wants a mummy, don’t they? Whoever she is ... Auntie Nadya says she doesn’t know if Mummy actually properly rejected us, so she takes them and posts them for me. I always put a return address in big capital letters at the top, but she hasn’t written back yet. I’ve been writing for years and years. Masha says Auntie Nadya just pretends to post them, because she can’t tell us anything at all about our mummy, however much I ask. Lydia Mikhailovna says to Banish her from my Mind. One of the nannies says she went mad, and another one says she died having us. But I believe Auntie Nadya when she says that Mummy is just really busy.

‘Yeah,’ says Lucia, rolling on to her stomach, ‘my mum didn’t sign the rejection form when she gave me away.’ She gives a big yawn and stretches like a starfish. ‘Silly bitch. I could’ve been adopted if she’d like *proper* rejected me. If she’d signed the forms and stuff. Then I wouldn’t have had to run away and get my leg bitten off almost. She comes in every month and brings me shit-all, when all I want is black bread because I’m always fucking starving. Just my luck to be born to someone like her. She’s retarded.’

‘Why did she give you up if you were Healthy?’ I ask.

Lucia shrugs. ‘She was an *alkasha*, I s’pose. The militia make them send their kids to orphanages.’

That’s strange. Alcoholics normally have Uneducable kids, but Lucia’s as sharp as a knife. Our real mummy can’t have been an *alkasha*, because we’re sharp as knives too.

‘C’mon! Let’s go out into the grounds and knock over some kids who’re learning to walk,’ says Lucia, jumping off the bed and grabbing her crutches.

‘We can’t,’ says Masha. ‘We’re a Secret, remember?’

‘What? You’re too secret to even go into the grounds? *Chort!* That sucks to China and back. Well ...’ she makes for the door. ‘I’m off. It’s stuffy as fuck in here. Can’t you open the window?’

‘*Nyet*. They think we’ll fall out.’

‘That sucks too. All right. See ya.’

Once she’s gone, Masha’s eyes start getting black like they do, and she walks fast round the room, up and down and across and back again. I can feel her crossness at being stuck in here with nothing to do, growing up and up inside her. She thumps the wall.

‘Let’s play *Who’s-What?*’ I say quickly. ‘Or pretend to be a fighter pilot ... I’ll be the Fascist and you can be the Red.’

‘Shut up!’ She keeps pacing up and down, up and down, getting tighter and tighter until I feel like I’m going to burst. ‘I want to go OUT! It’s because of you I can’t go out! Because you’re stuck to me. Get off! Get off me! I hate you – go away, I’ll kill you and then they’ll cut you off!’ Then she starts hitting me with her fists and pulling my hair and scratching my face and kicking me in my leg, so I do what I always do and lie back as far as I can with my hands over my face.

Poor Masha. The only time I can ever really go away from her is when I close my eyes and imagine it. But she can’t do that as well as I can. I don’t think she can even do it at all.

After ages and ages of being beaten up, she gets slower and then stops and turns over and puts her head right deep into her pillow. I’m trying to stop my nosebleed, cos the Administrator will kill me if I get blood on the sheets, so I push my pyjama sleeve right up my nostril. I can wash the sleeve out myself later. After a bit, when Masha’s gone to sleep, I decide to think of what I’m going to write in my next letter to Mummy. I’ll write: *We hope you’re well. We’re well thank you. We haven’t been punished all week so far for being naughty. We get a bit bored so if you come and visit us that would be nice and you don’t have to stay long if you haven’t much time, and you don’t have to bring anything either. Your daughters, Masha and Dasha.*

April 1961

We get the news about Yuri Gagarin and watch him on television

We’ve been moved into General Ward G now and the little kids are hiding under their beds because Masha’s telling them about how her father’s a Cannibal King in Africa. She says he’s got a bone through his nose, from one of the children he’s eaten up, and she’s told them he’s visiting her today.

‘He makes a soup out of them and spits their bones out,’ Masha’s saying, ‘and makes a necklace for each of his wives. When I was little, I burnt his soup and he took an axe and chopped me in two. That’s why I’m like this, and he’ll do the same to—’

‘Children! I have news for you!’ It’s Lydia Mikhailovna who’s just thrown open the doors. She hardly ever visits the wards so the kids all scream when the doors bang open, because they think it’s the Cannibal King come to visit with his axe.

‘What on earth are you all doing under there? Come out at once.’ She looks across at Masha and I think she’s going to be angry, but she’s not. She’s happy. Happier than I think I’ve ever seen her. ‘*Tak!* Everyone come along to the Room of Relaxation. I have an important announcement to make. Something wonderful!’

Wonderful? What? Maybe we’re all being taken to the Circus? The family kids told us about the Circus, where sparkly ladies fall out of the sky, and clowns are so stupid they make you fall off your seat laughing, and lions that eat their trainers right before your very eyes. We all run outside and find the kids from the other wards there, excited as a buzz of bees. I can hear the word *kosmos* going round and round, and think maybe they’re sending us off in a rocket to start the Soviet moon at last.

We race off to the Room of Relaxation, which we’re never normally allowed in. It’s full, and everyone’s crowded around the new television. We’ve never seen it before, but we heard it was there from the nannies. It’s a little black box where you can see everything that’s happening on the Outside, zooming right inside to it. But only in black and white, not colour like the real world. It’s so healthy!

‘Now then. Quiet!’ Lydia Mikhailovna’s standing with all the staff, even the kitchen staff, by the television. ‘This is a wonderful day!’ she says again. ‘A day of one of the most incredible Soviet Achievements we have ever seen.’ She looks around at the staff, who are all smiling fit to burst. ‘We have sent a man into space!’

There’s a sort of gasp all round. Space? To the moon? Did he die like Laika?

‘That man was Comrade Gagarin,’ she goes on, ‘he orbited once and then returned to earth and the People are rejoicing throughout the Soviet Union.’

Masha's pushing to the front, round the side of the room, by the windows, and I look out and I can see the People celebrating, I really can, hugging each other and throwing caps in the air and running somewhere.

'This proves that our country, the Soviet Union, is the most advanced in the world. In the entire world,' says Lydia Mikhailovna loudly. 'We are now going to watch Comrade Gagarin being congratulated by First Secretary Nikita Sergeyevich, right here in Moscow.'

'Gaaa!' groans Masha. 'It's another *yobinny* Achievement and not the circus.' But she's got us to the front so we have the best view of anyone of the television. There he is! I can see him! Walking down a long rug at the airport, dressed in a uniform like Father Stalin's. He's so ... so *handsome*. I just stare and stare. Lydia Mikhailovna's talking about how the Soviet Union has finally proved its superiority, and how Communism will now spread throughout the world, as everyone can see it's the best system possible, but I can't stop staring at him. I've never seen anyone in my life so perfect before. I kind of all swell up like dough with happiness that he's been so brave and that he's Ours. Comrade Khrushchev takes his hat off and hugs him so hard I think they're both going to cry or something, and then there's pictures of the crowd holding big banners of Gagarin's face, and there's schoolgirls with bows in their hair, running up to him with bunches of flowers. We're all laughing now and the staff are hugging each other too. I've never seen anyone so happy, all at the same time. Masha's shouting '*Oorrrraaaa!*' at the top of her voice and doesn't even get told off.

When all the huggings are over we all go out of the Room of Relaxation and I think this must really be the best day ever, even if I'm not going to the Circus or to the moon because I'm living here, where Yuri Gagarin is.

In the Best of All Possible Worlds.

Lydia Mikhailovna tells us off for Masha being naughty

'So. I expect you know why you've been called in this time?' Lydia Mikhailovna's sitting behind her big desk in her office and we're standing in front of it. She's all cross again, like she always is when we've been naughty. But everyone else is still happy. It's like the sun is shining all the time. We cut a photo of Gagarin out of the newspaper, which was stuck up on the news board (that was *nyelzya*, of course) and keep it folded up under a loose tile in the toilets to look at. He's got a dimple and light green or maybe blue eyes. I'm not sure, as it's black and white. I think they're probably blue. He's a hero. It just shows, this does, that we're the best country ever. It just shows.

Masha's twiddling the button on her pyjama bottoms. We both know we're being told off because of Boris this time.

'Boris called me Mashdash-Car-Crash! It's *nyelzya* to call Defectives names,' says Masha quickly. 'We Must Respect Deformity. That's what you always say, Lydia Mikhailovna.'

'True. And breaking his leg in two places is showing respect?'

'It was an accident,' she says sulkily.

'So you accidentally stole a bottle of vegetable oil from the kitchens, while Lucia was pretending to faint, and then accidentally spilt it on the floor, just as Boris was coming out of his ward?'

'I didn't know he'd got over with such a crack—'

'His leg was both fractured and broken. Extremely painful. As if we haven't got enough work to do in here.'

I shiver. It was horrible. I feel sick remembering it. The bone was sticking out all white and knobbly in his only leg.

'*Yolki palki!* It was him who got the other kids to hang us over the banisters by our feet. I thought my last hour had come, Lydia Mikhailovna!'

'I will hear no more excuses. What am I to do with you?'

'Send us into space?' says Masha and does her little kitten look.

'Don't tempt me.' She picks up a piece of paper. 'So. Here is a list of your recent activities. One. Playing hide-and-seek in the top-floor laboratory, which is strictly out of bounds, and being

eventually found trapped in a rabbit cage.' I bite my lip and look past her at the paintings of Comrade Khrushchev and Uncle Lenin. That was so scary. I was crying loads. I thought we'd never *ever* be found, but once we got in, we couldn't get out. Masha couldn't get the door back open and the rabbits just sat there with their bulging eyes staring at us for hours and hours and I thought we'd die in there.

There's an empty patch on the wall where they've taken Father Stalin down. Maybe they'll put Yuri Gagarin up now instead.

'Next ... calling up all the emergency services from the guardroom phone while Lucia again feigned a fainting fit. We were treated to the fire service, the militia ... and you even managed to call an ambulance to a hospital. Three. Stealing syringes and scalpels from the Medical Room and skewers and knives from the kitchens to use as threatening weapons on fellow patients, one of whom claims he was stabbed through the hand.'

'I tripped,' says Masha, being sulky again.

'Four. Traumatizing young patients with some ridiculous story of a severed hand that stalks SNIP and then placing surgical gloves filled with water in their beds. And Five, riding a food trolley down the kitchen stairs. Repeatedly. Well. The list goes on, culminating in Boris.'

I'm biting my lip so hard now I can feel blood in my mouth. The worst punishment is having our pyjamas taken away so we're just in our nappy. Last time was for two weeks and we couldn't leave the ward then for anything.

'And you, Masha, you beat your sister black and blue behind closed doors.'

'Don't too. She keeps falling off the bed.'

'And you, miraculously, stay on it?' She's rapping a pen on the table with a *toc toc toc* like a time bomb. I hold my breath and I'm thinking the same thing, over and over, hard in my head. She's going to send us away. Please, please, please don't send us to an orphanage for Uneducables. 'Well,' she says eventually, 'I think it's high time we got you out.'

'*Out?* No, no, no!' I jump up. 'Please, please, Lydia Mikhailovna! We'll never be naughty again.' I lean right over the desk with my arms out to her. 'Don't send us away! Please! Please!'

'*Gospodi!* I don't mean away, Dasha,' she says, putting the pen down. 'I mean out. Outside. To exercise. I'm not sure it's such a good idea, because there's a chance you might be seen by the Healthies in the street ...'

Outside? I stop crying. Out into the grounds? Into the fresh air? I can hardly hear her for the swirling in my head. '... but,' she goes on, 'we have planted high bushes around the fence and Boris Markovich believes it will benefit you both to get out of the building.'

'*Ooooraaa!*' shouts Masha. 'We're going out to play! When? Now? Right now?'

'No. Tomorrow. The Administrator will sort some clothes out.'

We go on the Outside for the first time ever

'Mwaah! It's hitting me! It's hitting me!'

We've walked down the steps into the Outside and the wind is all slapping us, trying to knock us over, and Masha's shouting like anything and waving her arm around because we can't balance. My head's spinning like it does when we do loads of somersaults. The grass is mushy, not hard like the floor, and there are no walls anywhere to keep us upright. *Plookh!* We sit down with a bang that makes me hiccup.

'Get up this instant!' shouts Lydia Mikhailovna, turning around. She was walking off down the path, thinking we were behind her. 'I've taken you outside to exercise, and exercise you shall!'

'Caaaaan't,' goes Masha in a high voice, the one she has when she's really scared. 'It's all moving!'

'Don't be so ridiculous. Nothing's moving.'

But she's wrong. It is. All the trees are waving and the grass and the bushes and leaves are jumping about like crazy so we can't stand up in case the ground comes up right in our faces too. We hardly know which way is up with the clouds all moving too.

‘It’s too big, there’s too much space, there’s nothing keeping us in! Caaaaan’t!’ goes Masha again. I can’t even breathe because the air’s colder than me, not the same as me like it is inside, and it keeps trying to whoosh in my mouth when I don’t want it to. Lydia Mikhailovna stands over us for ages, trying to get us up, and stamping her foot, getting crosser and crosser until Stepan Yakovlich, the groundsman, comes over and picks us up, laughing like anything, and carries us back inside.

We go out with Lucia to play

‘I can throw a pine cone so high it never comes back down and gets burnt up by the sun,’ claims Lucia.

‘Bet I can throw it high enough to kill a dirty old crow,’ says Masha. ‘Watch!’ She picks one up off the grass, and throws it at Lucia. I laugh when it bounces off her head.

We kept trying, every day, for weeks and weeks to stay standing outside, because Auntie Nadya (who was cross she wasn’t even told we were going out for the first time) said we could learn easy-peasy to walk on squishy ground in the wind, just like we learnt on firm floors with no wind before.

Now we’re so good at balancing that we’ve been let out to play with Lucia for a bit. Just us. We even get to wear the trousers and red shirts they keep for when the Academy of Sciences come in to film us because they don’t want us in the pyjamas we wear all the time. Proper clothes for proper playing, not just for show!

‘Aiii! That hurt! I’ll show you where this one’s fucking well going!’ Lucia picks the cone up and grabs us, pushing us down into a tumble on the ground, and then stuffs it into Masha’s mouth. I’m laughing like anything.

‘Stop, stop! Let’s play tag,’ says Masha, pushing her off and spitting out bits of cone. ‘You’re it, count to five.’

We go running off across the grass like mad things, zigzagging and then running straight on and on and on because the grounds are so big you can run forever and not even hit anything except a tree. I look round and see Lucia’s cutting us off to tag us from the side, so we both stop in our tracks to run back the way we came. She’s even faster than us though, and pushes me instead of tagging me, so we all go down in a tumble again, hardly able to breathe for running so much.

‘Hide and seek!’ shouts Masha, tickling Lucia off her. ‘You’re it.’

‘Get lost! I was it last time.’

‘Well, now you’re it again. Shut your eyes and count to twenty.’ Masha pushes Lucia’s face in the grass, and we run off to the bushes because the tree trunks wouldn’t hide us both. There’s a big bush by the gates with purple berries that Lucia says shrivel your insides up, turn them black and tie them into knots if you eat them, but we run towards that faster than anything. We’re not going to eat them. Just hide in them.

Then I hear someone screaming, really screaming, like when Boris broke his leg. We both stop and stare. It’s coming from the gate. There’s loads of Healthies from the street standing there, holding on to the bars and they’re shouting and yelling, *Monster, it’s a monster!*

Monster? Where?! We look back, but there’s only Lucia, who’s got up and is running towards us, but we’re so scared we don’t move to run and hide from her in the bushes any more, we just keep standing there, thinking we’re going to be eaten up by a monster which we can’t see but everyone else can.

‘Fuck off, you lot! Fuck off!’ Lucia’s caught up with us and she’s waving at the crowd, which is getting bigger all the time as more people run over and start screaming too, saying things like *Help! Help me, God!* One of them’s fainted, but for real, not pretend like Lucia does, and all her apples spill out of her bag and run under the gate. I’m shaking all over for fear. I can’t see anything, I keep looking all around me.

Lucia’s not scared. She’s angry, and starts yelling and swearing at the Healthies. Then she grabs a hosepipe and turns it on them full blast. ‘*You’re* the fucking monsters! Have this to wash your fucking mouths out with!’

‘Comrades! Comrades!’ Stepan Yakovlich the groundsman has run up and starts shouting at them all too. ‘For the love of God, comrades!’ His dog, Booyan, jumps up at the gate barking and snarling like he wants to eat them and Lucia’s still spraying them, then Stepan Yakovlich turns and picks us up because we can’t move from being scared stiff of the monster and runs with us both clinging round his neck. I hear a woman wailing, ‘How could they let that live?’ And then we’re back inside.

We’re told not to traumatize the Healthies

It was us.

Us that’s the monster.

But why? How? Monsters are ugly and evil and scaly and breathe fire. Monsters are Imperialists, or leeches, they’re green and slimy and mean. Monsters aren’t us! I can’t stop crying, however much Masha swears at me and punches me. She’s just angry. Not hurt like me.

‘For goodness’ sake!’ Lydia Mikhailovna has been called in because I’m so upset that the nurse thought I was going to have a fit. She’s standing over me with her hands on her hips. ‘You’re going to run out of tears at this rate!’

‘She’s using all mine too. I’m getting all dried out. I’ll drop off of her like a prune, soon.’

‘Do be quiet, Masha. You could show a little sympathy.’

‘They were screaming at me too. The pigs—’

‘And how many times did I tell you both to stay close to the building? Eh? And not to go traumatizing the Healthies? Not to draw attention to your condition? Now we’ll never see the back of them. SNIP is virtually surrounded by baying crowds looking for a two-headed mutant.’

‘B-But, but, but, why?’ I say through all my snotty tears. ‘What’s wrong with us? Why are we a m-mutant?’ I can hardly get the words out, I’m crying so much.

‘Have a handkerchief, for goodness’ sake,’ she says, getting one out of her pocket and snapping it in front of my face. ‘You’re not monsters. As such. You’re different. Deformed. And healthy people are not used to deformity of *any* kind. It is our duty to protect them from you, but sometimes, especially when orders are disobeyed, this proves impossible. However,’ she sniffs and looks out of the window, ‘this attention from them is something you must accustom yourself to in life.’ I go to hand her back the hanky. ‘Keep it,’ she says with another sniff, ‘as well as that word of advice.’ Then she goes out and bangs the door.

After a bit, Masha looks up at the ceiling. ‘Stop whimpering,’ she says, ‘we’re only monsters to those pigs. If they don’t need us, we don’t need them. Not like we’re monsters to anyone who matters, is it? Not to anyone in here. You heard what she said, we’ve just got to get used to it.’

I nod. But how do you get used to someone fainting in terror when they see you? I put a pillow over my head. I don’t want to go back Outside ever, ever, *ever*. We turn into monsters when we go Outside.

We hear about Pasha losing his legs and he kisses Masha

‘You’re a sheep. A stupid. Silly. Stubborn. Shitty. Sheep!’ Masha thumps my arm to emphasize each word.

There are only two kids in Ward G right now, and they’re sitting in silence, watching her hitting me. Masha doesn’t normally hit me in front of other people. Most of the kids in our ward are doing schooling or physio at the moment, so we’re just sitting on our bed by the window. The crowds are still there by the gate.

‘No. Won’t go out,’ I say, holding my bruised arm. ‘Won’t.’

‘They’ll take us out the back door through the kitchens, that’s what they said. We can play in the yard where the skips are.’

‘Won’t. Can’t make me.’ She’s tried, but she can’t. I won’t even start to walk.

‘But think what we’ll find in the skips. All sorts. It’ll be like looking for treasure. We might find dog brains or ... or, gold nuggets.’

‘Won’t.’

‘Or scrunched-up newspapers with pictures of Yuri Gagarin.’ She looks at me hopefully. ‘Loads and loads of photos of him.’ I shake my head. It’s stupid now to think of going up in space with Yuri Gagarin like I did in my dreams. He’s a Healthy.

‘Won’t.’

She slams her fist down on the bed.

‘*Yolki palki!* I’ll smash your skull in!’

‘Hey, Mashdash!’

It’s Pasha. He’s poked his head round the door. ‘Wanna go play with my dice on the stairs?’

‘Yeah, I’ll come,’ says Masha, hopping down from the bed. ‘Better than staying here talking to this Cretin.’

Playing dice with Pasha isn’t going Outside so I hop down with her and we run off down the corridor with Pasha scooting in front on his trolley. He hasn’t got his new legs yet. Auntie Nadya’s husband, Uncle Vasya, has no legs either but he has a proper fat chair like a wooden car to sit in with three big wheels and two paddles which he pulls and pushes himself along with. Everyone else just uses trolleys on the floor until they get given new legs. Uncle Vasya didn’t want false legs. He liked his own best. Pasha’s fast. Faster than anyone. Bet he’d be faster than Uncle Vasya even.

‘Let’s play Kiss or Pinch,’ Masha says, once we’re all sitting on the stone stairs by the half-open back door. Pasha’s sitting next to her. I’m glad he’s not sitting next to me. Kiss or Pinch is a silly game. She throws the dice.

‘Odd number! Pinch!’ She can pinch him anywhere and she always pinches really hard.

‘*Aiii!* You pinch like a crocodile!’ He throws the dice.

‘Odd! Kiss!’ He kisses her in her ear so loud I can hear and she jumps back.

‘You kiss like an exploding bomb!’

I don’t get turns. I’m glad. I don’t want to get kissed by Pasha. I don’t even want to watch him kissing Masha.

They go on playing for a bit and then Masha says, ‘Tell us about how you got your legs chopped off.’

‘Again?’ He rolls his eyes. ‘You’re strange, you are. OK. I’d gone down with my mates to watch the prisoners working on digging this ditch outside our village. We played this game that whenever the guard wasn’t looking, one of us would jump out and tag a prisoner.’

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘Cos you get some of his meanness passed on. See?’ He tags Masha then goes to bite me, growling. We all laugh. He’s got dimples like Yuri Gagarin. ‘I was lookout on the railway track, it was a dead-end track, see, so there was never any trains. Then I hear this noise and turn round and there’s a train reversing down the track. Come out of nowhere, it did.’ Masha’s sucking the dice in her mouth. I think she might swallow it when it comes to this next bad part.

‘So I’m wearing my cousins’ shoes, which are too big and laced up round the sole and my ankles to keep them on, so when I go to get off the track, one of them’s stuck in the rails, see? So I’m sitting there screaming my head off and pulling to get the shoe out and the kids are running up the bank to the train, to get the driver to stop ...’

‘Why didn’t you just untie the laces?’ says Masha in a thick voice because the dice is still in her mouth.

‘Didn’t think of it. All I can think of is this train rolling back towards me with sparks flying, and then ZING!!!’ We both jump. We always do at that bit. ‘I got electrocuted and next thing I know I wake up in hospital with no legs left.’

‘What happened to them?’ says Masha. She knows what happened to them, so do I, but she wants to hear again. ‘The train rolled over me and cut them clean off. If I hadn’t got electrocuted and fallen back, I might’ve been cut in half myself.’

‘But what happened to the legs?’ says Masha again.

‘My dad went back and got them – he thought they’d be able to sew them back on, but they couldn’t because he didn’t put them in ice, see. So he buried them in the garden instead. Maybe he thought they’d grow back into a new me. Anyway, Mum goes out and cries over them every day but they’ll have rotted away and have all worms in them by now.’

‘Healthy!’ says Masha, and takes the dice out of her mouth, wipes it on her sleeve and throws it again. ‘Kiss!’

‘Shhh!’ Pasha puts his hand over her mouth. There are voices by the back door and we’re not allowed to sit on the stone steps. I can smell stinky papirosa smoke.

‘Bloody nightmare, getting in this morning,’ says one of the voices. It’s probably one of the nannies or cleaners because the nurses don’t swear.

‘It’s spread all round town like wildfire; they’re like a pack of slaver dogs out there. It’s disgusting.’

‘Can’t blame them really. They want to see the Two-Headed Girl. Give them something to blab about.’

‘Some of the questions though ...’

‘... like – has it been sewn together by Stalin’s scientists as an experiment ...’

‘... or come down from Outer Space ... heard that one?’

‘Heard them all. Brought back by Gagarin ...’

‘Work of the Devil ...’

‘Poor kids. One thing they’re right about: they should never have been left to live.’

‘Seem happy enough ...’

‘For now ...’

They go off then.

We don’t say anything for a bit. I’m shivering. Or trembling or something. I wish Pasha wasn’t here.

‘Yobinny idiots,’ says Pasha. ‘Ignorant goats, the lot of them. There’s nothing wrong with you two. Except you can’t kiss for peanuts. Well, Masha can’t. How about you, Dash?’ He leans over to me. ‘I should get two kisses for the price of one with a Girl with Two Heads, right?’ He laughs.

I don’t want to. I’m feeling sick, but I kiss him on the cheek anyway, as he’s right there, so close I can smell his soapiness, and I feel all tingly when I do. And stop shaking. And then he kisses me back on my cheek. And that feels all tingly too.

Aunty Nadya always comes in to say night-night before she goes off her shift, so I ask her then. It was Masha who told me to. I ask in a whisper so the other kids can’t hear.

‘Why are we Together? Were w-we sewn together?’ We looked, when we got back to the ward, but we can’t see any stitches or a scar or anything, not even the smallest little trace. ‘Are there other children who are Together like us? Or are we from another p-planet?’ I don’t remember being on another planet but we’d have been babies when we came down. The only thing I *do* know is that Gagarin didn’t bring us back.

She jumps back, all shocked and cross.

‘Well! What on earth put all that nonsense into your head? What ridiculous questions! I don’t know how you think them up, I really don’t.’

I bite my lip. I have to ask the next one, quick. Masha’s looking out of the window like she’s not listening at all, like she’s not interested. ‘And what ... what would happen if we got c-cut in half?’ Masha told me to ask that, after Pasha told us about his legs. We remember that man we saw from the window in the Ped, who got cut in half by the tram and got sewn together, Mummy said. What would have happened if *we* were on the track?

Aunty Nadya looks like someone’s slapped her. She stands there with her mouth in a big O.

‘Cut in half?!’ She says it so loud some of the other kids look round, so she pushes her hair back into her cap and straightens her white coat a bit. ‘*Gospodi!* That’s quite enough of that! It’s *nyelzya* to ask questions. Do you understand? *Nyelzya!*’ We both nod. She straightens our bed covers and then leaves. Just like that, without even kissing us.

‘Told you not to ask,’ says Masha, sniffing. ‘Go to sleep. And don’t wake me up with all your stupid tossing around.’

I can’t sleep. Not knowing why we’re Together gives me lots of nightmares. And now I’ll probably have nightmares about being a slimy monster too. Not Masha though. She sleeps sound as a stone. I wish I’d been born Masha instead of me.

Age 14

March 1964

We go on a day trip to see Uncle Lenin

We’re naked down in a well, but it’s not a dark well, it’s all lit up and the walls are made of slippery glass, so though we can see the opening at the top, we can’t climb up to it. There’s people’s faces, lit up white, staring in at us, all around on every little bit of glass with their mouths open wide like leeches sticking to a jar. I can’t hear them but I know they’re screaming and their hands are flat against the glass, trying to get in at us. The glass cracks at the bottom and I see the crack run up past me to the top and know it’s about to break wide open and let them all in to grab us and tear us to pieces like wild dogs, because we shouldn’t be alive ... I start screaming too ...

‘Shut up!’ Masha slaps me.

‘Arrghh!’ I sit up. She slaps me again.

‘You and your stupid nightmares! You’ve woken the whole ward.’

I blink and look around at the beds lined up against the wall in the darkness, but my head’s still full of those faces.

‘It was that dream, Mash, down in the well ... the same one.’

‘With me?’

‘I’m always with you in my nightmares.’

‘Thanks a lot ... Well, never mind, you’re awake now, and so am I, what with all that screaming. And anyway, Auntie Nadya says, “Bad Dreams – Good Life. Good Dreams – Bad Life.” See? And today’s the best day ever, because we’re going Outside on our Day Trip!’

She jumps out of bed to pull back the curtain. It’s starting to get light. ‘We’re going to be dressed in our new trousers and shirts.’

‘I know.’ I get up and we go over to the window to look out at the weather. It’s icy cold, but there’s an orange sunrise making everything glow red. It’s going to be sunny. I press my nose against the window, reading the big red slogans as hard as I can, to stop the pictures from the nightmare filling my head. *To Have More we must Produce More. To Produce More we must Know More.* I see it every morning, but I don’t ever know more. I hate that all the other children in the world are going to school and learning all about everything, so they can work to build Communism, and me and Masha aren’t. We’re fourteen now and we should know loads, but we stopped knowing things at eleven. As Lucia would say, it really sucks. (She said she’d write when she left but she never did, just like all the others. Perhaps she ran away again.)

‘Real trousers made from Boris Markovich’s curtains! *Lya-lya topo-lya!*’ laughs Masha. I stop frowning and smile at her. She’s funny. There’s a shortage of fabric Outside, so they used the curtains from Professor Popov’s office to make them with. And we’re going in his black Volga, driven by his own chauffeur. ‘*We’re going to see Lenin! We’re going to see Lenin!*’ sings Masha, dancing down the ward and sticking her tongue out at the other kids who are slowly waking up.

The 7 a.m. bell clangs and we run down to the washroom to be first in line.

Two hours later we’re in the car on our way.

‘What’s that? What’s that?’ shouts Masha, bouncing up and down in the back seat.

‘It’s the Red October chocolate factory – see, it says Red October across the top,’ says Aunt Nadya, who’s sitting with us.

‘It’s *huge*! How come it’s so huge when there’s no chocolate? Where does all the chocolate go?’

‘Well now ... there’s a shortage because it has to supply the whole of the Soviet Union, you see. That’s a lot of chocolate.’

The only time we ever get chocolate is when Anokhin comes to visit us in SNIP. None of the other kids have ever tasted it. Not ever. Not even the Family kids.

‘When we build Communism, we’ll eat it all the time!’ says Masha. ‘For breakfast, lunch and dinner! There’ll be chocolate factories everywhere instead of just this one!’

Ivan Borisovich, the chauffeur, winds down his window. ‘You can smell the chocolate fumes,’ he says, smiling into the mirror. We both sniff with our noses in the air and we can, we really can smell nothing but chocolate. Everyone’s happy, even Aunt Nadya is bursting with happiness through her frowny face, I can always tell.

‘Does all of Moscow smell of chocolate?’ asks Masha. ‘All of it?’

‘No,’ he says, smiling. ‘Only here.’

‘Can we go to the Red October chocolate f-factory instead?’ I ask. ‘I don’t think I want to go to the M-Mausoleum.’

‘Now then, Dasha, how many times have I told you that we’ll drive right over Red Square, up to the door, and give you a king’s chair ride with a rug over your laps, so you’ll look like two Healthy girls.’

‘Red Square! Red Square!’ sings Masha, bouncing again. ‘Look! What’s that? What’s that?’

‘That’s a ferry boat which takes tourists up and down the Moskva River.’

‘Can we go on a f-ferry boat instead?’ I ask.

‘No, Dashinka. This is an educational trip, before you join the Young Pioneers. The ceremony’s soon and all the children in Moscow go to the Mausoleum before they join. You know all that. About time you joined the Pioneers. Better late than never ...’

I look out, pressing my nose to the window, staring at all the flat-faced, grey blocks of flats, all looking the same, with their hundreds of windows where families live. The pavements are full to bursting with people who’ve just come out of the Metro, walking in black coats and black boots. I’ve never walked on a street before. I’ve never been down in the trains that run through tunnels in the ground. Aunt Nadya says the Metro stations are like palaces, with sculptures and chandeliers and sparkling mosaics. Palaces for the People, she says. They’re lucky. I’d love to walk on a street and go on a train under the ground and be like everyone else.

‘What’s that, with the golden hat?’

‘Cupola, not hat, Masha. It’s a Russian Orthodox church where ignorant people used to pray to their god.’ I stare at it as we drive past, it looks all small and scared, squashed between the big grey blocks, but its gold cupola shines brighter than anything I’ve ever seen before.

‘Is it *real* gold?’ I ask.

‘Yes, yes, it is.’ She sniffs. ‘Very thin gold leaf.’ Then she shakes her head. ‘*Pozor*.’

I don’t know what’s disgraceful about it, but I don’t say anything. The road’s wide but it’s empty, like the river, except for some lemon-yellow taxis and some other official black Volgas with chauffeurs like ours.

‘What’s that? What’s that with the spire? It looks like a fairy castle. Is it a fairy castle?’

‘No, Masha, of course not. *Gospodi*, you are about to join the Pioneers, do stop dreaming. It’s one of Stalin’s towers. There are eight of them. They’re the tallest buildings in Moscow. See, there’s another one over there.’ I stare out to where she’s pointing and see it for myself, all soaring and beautiful. I love Moscow! There are trees and islands and flowers and chocolate factories and People’s underground Palaces. Moscow must be the best city in the whole wide world.

I just don’t really want to go to the Mausoleum.

We drive down a cobbled side street near Red Square. There are still no other cars. My heart's beating like a drum and I keep wiping my hands on the rug because they're sweaty. I want to keep driving and driving and looking and looking and never stop.

'Chort!' Ivan Borisovich brakes hard and we nearly knock our heads on the back of his seat. There's a militiaman standing with his hand up right in front of us, on the edge of Red Square. We look past him, across all the cobbles going on and on for ages and ages, across to the little black Mausoleum surrounded by crowds where Lenin is. Ivan Borisovich gets out to talk to him, but we can only hear bits, like *only official cars* and *nyelzya*. He gets back in the car and lights up a papirosa.

'Won't let us drive across. Now what?'

'*Nyetnyetnyet!*' I grab at Auntie Nadya. 'I'm not w-walking, there's a long, long queue, they'll all be watching us g-getting c-closer! I'm not, I'm not!'

'Of course not! Outrageous!' says Auntie Nadya, and gets out of the car leaving the door open. 'Now then, Comrade Militiaman, I have two girls here who are Defective, but they are about to join the Young Pioneers. You cannot deny them the right to visit the Mausoleum as part of their propaganda education. This car belongs to the Director of the Central Scientific Prosthetics Institute and as such is official. Everything is arranged. I demand that you let us past.'

'*Nyelzya*,' says the militiaman again. He spits on the ground and taps his baton on the bonnet. 'Turn around.'

'We will NOT turn around!' storms Auntie Nadya. 'These girls are invalids, they cannot walk across Red Square.'

'Let them crawl then. And invalids should be locked away, not paraded across town for Healthies to see.' He spits again.

I want to cry but I can't even breathe. Masha's bobbing all up and down like a rubber ball trying to see him.

'He looks like Gagarin in that uniform,' she says.

He doesn't look like Gagarin to me. Not at all. I hate him. Why should I crawl? Auntie Nadya stamps her foot angrily and gets back into the car, but Masha jumps out of the other door dragging me with her and round to the front where he's standing. I go bright red.

'Please, Uncle Militiaman,' she says in her little kitten voice, making big eyes at him. 'We're sick, see. Really sick.' He staggers right back when he sees us, like he's been punched in the face, and almost falls over. Masha takes a few steps towards him. 'We've not got long to live, Uncle Militiaman, and all we want is to see Lenin's tomb before we die ... just like he has ... died I mean ... please ...' He keeps right on staggering back as Masha keeps walking towards him, his eyes popping out of his head and his mouth open. 'And it says in all the slogans that Our Militia Protects Us. That's what it says. I saw one on the way here. I did. I saw it.' He doesn't say anything at all, he just swivels his baton crazily at Ivan Borisovich, meaning drive on.

'Hehe!' laughs Masha, jumping back in. 'That showed him.' Auntie Nadya still looks cross, but Ivan Borisovich is laughing too. Sometimes I think Masha loves being Together.

No one notices us as we get carried down to the tomb, getting darker and colder with each step. It's silent. All I can hear are footsteps. I'm shivering so much my teeth are chattering. I don't want to see a dead body, even if it's Uncle Lenin. I really, really, really don't. I can't look, but I do, out of the corner of my eye. He's lying down, dressed in a dark suit and tie, as if he's just come out of a meeting. He's in his own glass box, all lit up. I can see people's faces all bright and white and ghostly as they shuffle slowly past him. His beard looks like it's still growing and his eyelids are blue with blood and his hands have veins in them. He would hate to be there. He'd hate to be behind that glass, dead, being stared at by all those eyes. I can't be sick here. I can't scream. Can't, can't, can't! Squeeze my eyes shut ... hold tight to Auntie Nadya ... put my head in her neck ... swallow down the sick.

'*Zdorovo! Zdorovo!* Can we go again? Can we?' shouts Masha as we come up the stairs and out of the exit into the sunlight and I can breathe again.

‘Certainly not, Masha. Your sister is scarcely alive with terror.’

‘Mwaah! She spoils everything, she does,’ Masha whines. And pinches me hard under the rug.

June 1964

We’re saved from death by a new friend, and join the Young Pioneers

‘Aaaaaarghh!’ We’re both screaming our heads off because they’ve got us by the ankles and are dangling us over the windowsill, four floors up, just about to drop us.

‘See who’s Boss now, you little fuckers?’ It’s Boris. He’s back to have a new leg fitted and he wants revenge. They came up behind us. We didn’t see a thing. They’ll drop us, I know they will. We got dropped once before, and only survived because of the snow drifts. Now there’s only nettles. I can see them down there, I can, miles away. We’re going to die! My head’s all filling with blood, and I’m scrabbling at the wall, upside down.

‘Help! Help!’

‘Wrong. *I’m* the Boss. Bring them back up.’ I can hear a girl’s voice, but can’t see anything. Everything stops. ‘That’s if you don’t want your guts spilt on the floor like apple sauce,’ the voice goes on. Then slowly, we get pulled back up into the room and fall to a heap on the floor, all scraped and dazed. There’s a girl on a trolley with a great big knife. Its sharp point is touching Boris’s belly.

‘Crazy fucking witch,’ says Boris in a shaky voice.

‘Get out,’ she says in a low, threatening voice. ‘And don’t come back.’ They move away slowly. There’s four of them. We didn’t hear any of them coming up on us from behind. They grabbed us and threw us over the windowsill before we even knew what was happening. When they’ve gone, she sticks the knife back under her trolley into some sort of secret sheath. ‘So. Want to play draughts then?’ she asks.

‘All right,’ says Masha, getting up and pulling her pyjama top down. I’m just nodding madly and trying to stop my heart jumping out of my chest by pressing on it.

I’ve seen her around. She’s pretty, with the longest, thickest black eyelashes and the biggest brown eyes. Masha always said she looked like a cow, and probably just moody, which is why she never talked to anyone, and so she hardly noticed her. But I did.

Her name’s Olessya. She was lent the draughts board by Galina Petrovna, the teacher.

‘You two can be the same turn,’ she says, once we’re back in the ward. ‘First you, then next time Dasha.’

‘Dasha doesn’t want to play,’ Masha says, leaning over the board and not looking up.

‘Well, I want her to,’ says Olessya simply. ‘OK?’ Masha glances up in surprise, then shrugs.

Khaa! I’m going to play! I’ve always just watched before. I hope Masha doesn’t make a wrong move that I’ve got to make up for!

‘You a Reject then?’ asks Masha, moving a black piece without really thinking.

‘Yeah. Actually, I’m a twin, like you two.’ She moves her orange counter. ‘My sister Marina’s blonde and blue-eyed. My dad said if we hadn’t been twins, he’d have killed the MosGas man, cos him and my mum are both dark-haired!’ We laugh.

I look and look at the board, and then take a deep breath and make a move. I hate that Masha’s got to make the next one for us.

‘We were born Healthy,’ says Olessya, looking at the board, ‘but Dad gave us his cold when we were five and we got polio. We had fevers for a week, but when we got better our legs had stopped working. Crippled, and that was that.’

She tips her head on one side, thinking, and then moves another counter.

‘Polio’s a bitch,’ says Masha. ‘SNIP’s filled with Polios.’ She looks back at the board. ‘You both get rejected then?’

‘Yeah. Never saw my parents again. We had a baby brother who was healthy so they had him to raise. I’ve got one eye that strays, so I got sent to an Uneducable place out of town and Marina stayed in Moscow in an Educable orphanage.’

‘Shit,’ says Masha. ‘Separated. That sucks.’

I carefully move my piece and look up at Olessya.

‘Are you g-getting schooling here, though?’ I ask.

‘Yeah. Been here five weeks and I can read and write and do maths now. Healthy! I’d stay here forever. You’re lucky. Good rations and nice staff.’

‘I know. We’re grateful. But we don’t get schooling because we’ve had our f-four years. They don’t do secondary here. It would be n-nice to have more lessons.’

‘Shame,’ says Olessya. ‘I’ve heard there’s a good boarding school for Defectives in the south of Russia somewhere. Galina Petrovna told me. She says I should get myself transferred there. Why don’t you go there?’

We both look at her like she’s crazy.

‘Go to live in a school?’ says Masha, lifting a counter from the board. ‘Oh yeah, why not? Might as well fly to the moon with Gagarin on his next trip while we’re at it!’ We both laugh. But Olessya doesn’t.

‘Everything’s possible,’ she says. ‘Everything. You just need to try.’

Olessya won at draughts because Masha kept making the wrong moves. I knew she would. I was so cross I actually felt like crying, but now we’re standing in the Room of Relaxation for the Young Pioneers ceremony, and it’s so exciting I’ve forgotten all about that and I’m nervous as anything. I wish we had the whole uniform and not just the red scarf to wear with our pyjamas. We’ve been wearing nothing but pyjamas indoors for eight years now and only get dressed if we’re being filmed by the Science Academy or go outside. But never mind that now, I’m going to be part of the Young Pioneers, and then the Young Communist organization – and *then* a Party member like Doctor Lydia Mikhailovna, Professor Boris Markovich and Doctor Anokhin ... You have to be a member of the Party if you want to be a doctor, like I do. Auntie Nadya’s a physiotherapist. I wonder if you have to be a Party member for that? I don’t think so.

We’re a bit behind with joining up because you normally become a Pioneer when you’re ten, but never mind that either. We’ll catch up.

‘Attention!’ We all straighten up as Lydia Mikhailovna walks in to inspect us. She marches up and down the line like we’re proper soldiers on parade. There’s a great big mural all across the wall at the far end, showing Uncle Lenin patting a Young Pioneer on the shoulder. He’s a Healthy Pioneer (there aren’t any Defectives in the posters) and there are mountains, and ships in the sea, and peasants in fields of corn, and new factories with chimneys. There’s everything you could ever want to see out there in our beautiful Russia, and it’s always sunny. Auntie Nadya brought in a conch shell once and held it to my ear so I could hear the waves crashing as if they were right there, caught in the shell. I could really hear them.

‘One, two, three, march!’ Most of the kids are on trollies and can’t march, but we all get ourselves over to the Red Corner to where the big bust of Lenin is, and line up again.

The Komsorg, who’s come in from the local Young Communist Youth Organization, is looking sick and yellow. Auntie Nadya says it’s frightening for the Healthies from the Outside to see us kids when they’re not used to it. The Komsorg keeps looking at her watch as she goes through our oaths. There’s this loud patriotic music coming from the State Radio speaker on the wall, which reminds me of the time that engineer came in to mend our speaker on the wall in G Ward. He kept looking round at us from the top of his ladder, and was trembling so much that in the end he ran out, saying he couldn’t be expected to work under those conditions. I try to understand people, I really do, but I’ve never seen us so I can’t see what they can. I can only see Masha. And she’s pretty.

‘... duty to uphold the great morals of Socialism ...’ The Komsorg’s still talking. Now she starts going on about Equality and Justice and Doing No Wrong. It’s a bit awkward, as we’re standing next to the little kid Masha tried to stuff down the rubbish chute the other day. He would’ve gone right down too if he hadn’t held on really hard to the frame. And on the other side is the girl she fed with

marbles that we found in the skip (they must have been confiscated from one of the Family kids – we were so excited, but we couldn't keep them as all our hiding places have been found out). Masha told her they were magic balls, which could make her invisible. She really tried to swallow them too, but they were too big and she coughed them up, but she almost died choking. Masha had to hold her upside down while I slapped her back to pop them out.

'Young Pioneer!' I jump. It's my turn. 'Are you prepared to fight for the cause of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union?'

'Always P-p-prepared!' *Chort!* I keep stuttering now. It started after I went Outside that time, to play hide and seek, and realized I was a monster. I just can't get words out any more, unless I'm alone with Masha.

'I, D-Daria Krivoslyapova, joining the r-ranks of the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization, in the presence of my Comrades, do solemnly p-promise to love and cherish my Motherland p-passionately ...' Masha looks up at the ceiling, like she's got nothing to do with me. She hates me stuttering. She says it's pathetic.

There's a big poster of the Young Pioneer, Pavel Morozov, on the wall. Masha said she'd denounce her father in a second, if she had one, like Pavel did, and have him sent off to be shot too, for anti-Soviet activity. Then she'd be famous like he is. She keeps on trying to find ways to denounce the Administrator. In summer, when all the staff went, she got into the Administrator's room and went through all her files to see if she'd forged documents to help bandits, like Pavel's father did, or was an American spy, or is involved in anti-Soviet agitation, but there was nothing. I was scared to death, but it was healthy fun. I felt like a proper Activist.

'And now you have been sworn in, we shall sing the USSR Hymn,' says the Komsorg, and we all go at it, at the top of our voices because we're all so happy and proud. Actually, I'm *so* proud to be in the Best of All Possible Worlds I could really burst or something. Defectives are killed at birth in Amerika. Everyone says so. But we're cared for. Well, maybe the Uneducables aren't so much ... but we are. I almost feel like crying, I'm so proud. Masha's singing louder than anyone. She's shouting out, *We were raised by Stalin to be true to the People, Inspired by him to heroic deeds of labour!*

As we're filing out, Lydia Mikhailovna taps me on the shoulder at the door. 'Don't forget. Delegation tomorrow with Doctor Anokhin.' Masha sniffs so hard her nose goes all sideways. As if we could forget ... 'And that's quite enough of that sneer, Masha! You are very lucky to be playing a small part in Soviet Scientific Progress. You should know that, now more than ever. Get a sound sleep.'

A sound sleep is the last thing we'll get ...

July 1964

We perform for Anokhin's delegation but Popov steps in

'Not going in.'

'We've g-got to, Mashinka.'

'Why? They can't make us.'

'They can. We'll be sent away if we don't, to an orphanage. We must.'

We're sitting on our bed waiting to be called into the Conference Hall at 11 a.m. The black Volgas full of delegates from all over the USSR, and this time from all over the world, have been driving up all morning outside the window. We watched. Loads of them. Like cockroaches swarming up to rotting food.

'What's so bad then?' Olessya's sitting with us. 'About the Delegation?'

Masha's twiddling the button on our pyjamas and both of us are jiggling our legs up and down like mad things. I wish those marbles really could make you invisible. I'd swallow them all, however big they were, and disappear right now.

'Dunno,' says Masha.

'You two get delegations in to see you all the time, don't you?'

‘Yeah, but they’re usually in a little room, for doctors from our Soviet republics,’ says Masha. ‘They lay you out naked as a baby on a slab and get all these pip-eyed medical students in from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and Fuckistan to poke at you, and pick at you like a piece of meat, with all their medical jargon. But the ones with Anokhin are different. That’s like being up on the *yobinny* Bolshoi Ballet stage.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘the small ones aren’t f-fun but they’re OK. One of the K-Kazakh students asked our doctor, “Can theys tork?” And Masha sits right up and says, “Hey, we can speak Russian better than you’ll be able to in five lifetimes, you illiterate camel!” and he looked like he’d been shot through the heart, d-didn’t he, Mash? D-didn’t he?’ But Masha doesn’t even smile. She just keeps jiggling her leg, making the floor thump.

Olessya’s sitting on my side. Everyone sits on Masha’s side normally, except Olessya.

‘That’s what keeps you in here, isn’t it? The delegations ... the research ...’ she says slowly.

‘Yeah, well, right now I don’t want to be here,’ says Masha.

‘Girls!’ It’s Lydia Mikhailovna, come to get us. My tummy turns right over in a somersault. ‘Come along. Everyone is gathered in the Conference Hall.’

We get up slowly and follow her. Down the corridor, on and on, round one corner and then another and another.

‘Come along, stop dawdling.’

We go round the back of the Conference Hall to where the stage is. It’s dark as anything. There are wooden stairs going up to the stage, which is all covered off by a heavy red curtain with a gold sickle and hammer on it so we can’t see them all sitting in rows and rows of black suits.

‘Right. You know the routine. Get undressed.’ Lydia Mikhailovna’s standing over us. I can hear them all buzzing in the hall behind the curtain. Like wasps waiting to sting. We undo our buttons, take off our pyjamas and untie our nappy. Masha’s sick then, and Lydia Mikhailovna’s all cross, saying she should have asked for a bucket if she felt nauseous, not thrown up on the floor.

‘Fucking *kefir* for breakfast,’ mutters Masha, wiping her mouth. ‘Knew it was off.’

We’re naked now and shivering like anything. Waiting. We can hear Doctor Anokhin on the stage. *Very rare example of ischiopagus tripus twins ... under our care, quite remarkable that they have survived into their teens ... under our care ... remarkable ... survived ...* There’s a circle drawn in chalk on the stage that we have to stand in, behind the curtain. I want to swallow marbles. We walk up slowly and step into it. We wait. I won’t fall down, I won’t. Soviet Progress. Grateful. Grateful. Grateful. Best of. I squeeze my eyes shut and dig my fingers into Masha’s neck where I’m holding her. She digs hers into mine. The curtains slowly open. I can’t see anything because the spotlight is on us, bright as anything and blinding me, but I can hear the gasp go up. They always gasp.

Anokhin comes up on to the stage with a pointer. *Two hearts, two brains, two kidneys, two nervous systems, two upper intestines, one blood system, one liver, one lower intestine, one leg each and a shared leg at the back. Turn!*

He taps my forehead with his pointer and we turn. The spotlights come from everywhere.

I’m glad I’m blinded and can’t see them. I won’t cry. We’ve been told to keep our eyes open and look straight ahead but the light’s so bright my eyes are watering.

‘Turn!’ He taps the back of my head. I turn to face them again, blinded by the spotlights, I take my hand off Masha’s neck to wipe my cheek because my eyes are watering. I hope they don’t think I’m crying or anything stupid like that because I’m not crying. I’m not.

Crash! There’s a noise like a chair falling over and then the door to the hall bangs. I look at Masha. Did we do something wrong?

‘Stand on one leg,’ says Anokhin. Masha lifts hers up because I’m stronger. ‘Run to the edge of the stage and back,’ he says. We run to the edge of the stage and back. ‘Hop,’ he says. We hop.

He talks and talks and talks while we stand in the spotlight, in the chalk circle, doing what he tells us to with his pointer for ever and ever until he runs out of talk and dismisses us. There’s a round

of applause as we walk off. Lydia Mikhailovna is waiting for us backstage. We get dressed slowly in our nappy and then our pyjamas and go down the wooden stairs. She stops us at the door and we can see Boris Markovich standing in the corridor with his hands in his pockets. Doctor Anokhin walks up to him and holds out his hand.

‘Comrade Popov. You left the auditorium?’ he says with his eyebrows raised. Boris Markovich takes a step back and doesn’t take his hand out of his pocket.

‘Yes, I left. I could watch no more. They are not one of your dogs, Pyotr Kuzmich.’ He says that all quiet, but somehow really loud. ‘We no longer live in Stalin’s Soviet Union. We live in the country that Lenin intended. These are normal, intelligent, fourteen-year-old teenagers, not a dumb animal. They should never be forced to witness the spectacle of a room full of men, analysing their naked anatomy.’

Anokhin gives a little smile and tips his head on one side.

‘Then next time blindfold them,’ he says. And walks off.

We go to amputate our leg, but I mess it up – as usual

‘I got a plane, got a plane!’ shouts Masha, pulling a wooden plank out of the skip. She’s half in the skip and I’m half out. I won’t go all in because it stinks of blood and dead dogs. They incinerate the experimental ones but throw the strays, which hang around the grounds, in here to rot when they die.

‘I’m the Soviet fighter pilot and you’re the Fascists!’ she says, jumping back down, and we start racing around with the plank on our back, bombing the little kids playing with us. They run away screaming like we’re really bombing them. Masha whacks one with the plank and he goes flying into a tree trunk and just lies there, so I think he’s actually dead. Then he gets up and goes right back to being a Fascist. There’s all sorts of stuff in the skips. We go out there every day now, and find bits of metal for swords to play Whites and Reds with, or nails to play surgeons and patients with.

I’d rather be inside, sitting with Olessya, but she’s in the schoolroom, learning. They give all kids an elementary education here, whatever their age. She’s just taught herself up to now with books the kind nannies in her orphanage gave her.

After a bit, we all sit down to get our breath and sort through what we’ve got; like, who’s got the bloodiest surgical gloves, or sharpest bit of metal. One piece is like a mirror, but I won’t look in that.

They don’t have mirrors in SNIP to protect us from seeing ourselves, but me and Masha went off one Sunday to the Old Wing where the Party Conferences are held, and went right into the Party Hall where no one has ever been, because it’s strictly off limits. It used to be a ballroom for decadent people before the Great October Revolution, and it had a wooden jigsaw puzzle floor and lights like worlds of falling diamonds. And a massive mirror with a golden twirly frame. I didn’t understand what it was when I first saw our reflection as we walked up to it. I thought it was just a door leading to somewhere. Then we saw this lumbering, ugly thing with bits sticking out everywhere rocking towards us ... like nothing we’d ever seen before. It was me and Masha. It was how everyone else sees us. I won’t even think about it now, it makes me sick. It makes me want to cry every time I think of it. Even Masha was so shocked she couldn’t talk for ages. It’s like we’d never really seen what other people see, with our great big stupid third leg waving above us like some scorpion or something. But now we’ve seen we’re all mashed up together and not like anything else on earth, I can’t forget. We hid in bed under the sheet for days and days after that. Auntie Nadya said, over and over, that we were beautiful, but she’s lying. It’s another of their Lies. The Healthies outside by the gate are right. That Nastya, the cleaner in the *Pediatrica* was right. The driver who took us there was right. We’re *urodi*. No one in the whole wide world looks as ugly as us. Olessya said some stuff about what matters is what’s on the inside, not the outside, but if we look like this on the outside, no one’s going to bother about what’s on the inside. They’ll just run right away screaming.

In the end, Auntie Nadya said if it would make us feel any better we could have our third leg amputated as we don’t need it.

So now the amputation’s all set for next week.

Masha's drawing a Nazi swastika in the ground with a metal shard. She shouldn't. That's treason or something. She's crazy, Masha is. The others are laughing at one of the kids, who's pulled a surgical glove on his head like a cockerel.

'So, Mashdash,' the kid says, taking it off with a snap, 'you doing the amputation next week?'

'Maybe,' says Masha. Like there's a choice now.

'Well, you can hear them sawing through the bone,' he says. '*Karr, karr ...*' and he goes like he's sawing at his good leg with the shard of metal.

'Fuck off, piss-face. They'll give us anaesthetic. Knock us out.'

'No they don't! They don't! Honest they don't! It's only local, right? So you're in there with all the lights and the surgeons and you can see the saw and its sharp teeth and everything. All the time.'

'Yeah, yeah – and the vibrations go all up your body to your head,' says another kid, all excited to be making Masha cross, 'and you can see them mopping up all the blood with towels, there's loads and loads of blood, everything's red. The whole room goes red, they just can't get enough towels in there to mop it all up.'

I put my hands over my ears to stop listening, but I can still hear them all.

'There's a shortage of anaesthetic, you might not even get *any ...*'

'... Uncle Styopa in our village got caught up in a crop mower and they just gave him a bottle of vodka. He passed out during the operation, but they didn't know if it was the vodka or the pain!' They're laughing.

'You can smell the blood above even the antiseptic,' says one little kid.

'Fuck off!' shouts Masha, getting up. 'Fuck off, the lot of you!'

We get up to go.

'Aunt Nadya said we'd have anaesthetic,' I say as we go back inside.

'Yeah, but she didn't say it was only local. I'm not doing it if it's only local. Fuck. I like my leg. It's mine. Well ... half of it is.'

'I like it too. It balances us when we climb. How are we going to climb without it? Aunt Nadya says it's like our tail.'

Masha shrugs.

'But they gave us general anaesthetic to have our appendix out, Mash, Remember?'

'Yeah ... in the end. But they weren't going to give us anything to start off with – just tie us down.'

I shiver. That was awful. I had a terrible pain in my stomach, which kept making Masha throw up. But she didn't want to go to a hospital to be looked at because, whenever we do that, we end up with loads of doctors crawling all over us, poking every bit of us. Like maggots in meat, as Masha says. But we had such a high temperature that our SNIP night-duty doctor diagnosed appendicitis and Lydia Mikhailovna was called back in from her flat to take us to the Botkin Hospital. The pain was so bad it was making everything dizzy and black, but the doctors wouldn't operate as they didn't know how much novocaine to give us and thought they'd kill us by mistake. They wanted a signed form from Professor Popov, or Anokhin, that if we died, it wouldn't be their fault. But Anokhin was in Amerika and Popov was at his country dacha so in the end they said the best thing to do was operate without any novocaine and just tie us down. We screamed and screamed then, at the very thought, like we were being tortured. Well, actually, it would have been torture – and Lydia Mikhailovna was screaming at the doctors that we had a burst appendix and would die anyway from blood sepsis if they didn't operate *with* novocaine, and one of the nurses started screaming when she walked in and saw *us* screaming. So then Lydia Mikhailovna took us to the Usokovski Hospital instead, but no one would operate on us again, so in the end, she sent a driver to get the forms from Professor Popov in the country. It was early in the morning before they finally put us under. And Lydia Mikhailovna was still there, sitting right by our bed when we woke up, looking like death herself.

So now, talking about it, we think she actually likes us.

‘Hey, *I* know,’ says Masha, ‘let’s go to Lydia Mikhailovna’s office, right now, like right now, and tell her we don’t want our leg off after all.’

I nod happily, so we go running off and knock on her door and tell her.

‘No, it’s all arranged, girls. Next Wednesday. Amputation.’ Lydia Mikhailovna has her hand up in front of her.

‘P-Please, p-please, it’s *our* leg. We want to k-keep it!’

‘No, Dasha. And that’s final.’

‘But it will be general anaesthetic? Won’t it?’ asks Masha.

Lydia Mikhailovna looks down at her desk and starts arranging papers. ‘No. It will be local. Doctor Anokhin will be present with his Medical Sciences film crew to observe your reactions, and Doctor Golubeva from the Brain Institute will be measuring your brain activity with her electroencephalogram helmets. They need you conscious.’ She doesn’t look up. ‘Scientists need you conscious to monitor reactions.’

It’s the morning of the operation and I’m so scared I can’t see straight. Masha keeps thumping me and saying I’ll ruin it. Olessya’s sitting with us on the bed.

‘You won’t feel anything. Nothing at all,’ she’s saying to me in her low, quiet voice, which is like being stroked. ‘And the helmets are so painful anyway, you won’t even be thinking about your leg, will you? It won’t take long. You’ll be back here in a minute ... we’ll play draughts.’

I’m shaking all over though and sobbing. I think I’d rather die.

‘Stupid sheep! Bad enough to go through an operation, without having a fucking shipwreck by your side!’ Masha slaps me hard on the cheek.

‘Enough of that!’ Aunt Nadya’s walked in. ‘As if she isn’t in enough of a state as it is.’

‘Just needs some sense knocked into her,’ grumbles Masha.

‘Well, be that as it may, everything’s ready so come along, girls. We’ll have that leg off in a jiffy and you’ll look like new.’

‘Now?!! *Nyetttt!*’ I try to crawl back up the bed away from her, but Masha’s pulling the other way and Aunt Nadya’s pulling my hand and they half drag, half carry me down to the operating floor. I start screaming at the door to the theatre. They’re trying to take my hand out of Aunt Nadya’s and leave her behind and shut it. I scream and scream and don’t even feel Masha’s slaps and won’t let go of Aunt Nadya’s hand until they let her come in too.

There’s bright hot lights everywhere and the room’s so full with doctors and cameras I hardly see Anokhin until they put us flat on the table, face down, and he looks into my face with his chocolatey eyes. There’s no room for Aunt Nadya round the table because of the surgeons, but I won’t let go of her hand so she has to crawl down under the operating table, still holding on to mine. Doctor Golubeva fits the helmets and turns them on and everything goes juddery like my brain’s being fried. She comes into SNIP every few months with the helmets, but we never get used to it. I scream even more and I can hear Masha yelling at me and then I see the saw that they cut your leg off with, sitting on a tray, right in front of my very own two eyes. It’s like the one Stepan Yakovlich uses to cut down branches, maybe it’s even the same one. Then a man comes at me with a needle as big as my arm.

‘Inject all round the root of the leg,’ says another voice I don’t recognize above all the noise. ‘Let’s get on with this. *Gospodi!* ... these two were bad enough as babies ...’ The needle goes in like a hot burning skewer and I try and get off the table then, pulling Masha with me, and hear Anokhin shouting:

‘Hold her down! Nurse – hold her down! God in Heaven, this is turning into a circus act!’

I can’t stop shaking and as soon as the injections are done Masha pops up and starts punching me in the head.

‘You idiot! You stupid weakling, you coward!’ she screams, hitting and hitting me. The nurse lets go of me to push her down and I try to crawl off the table again, to get down under the operating table with Aunt Nadya.

‘This is absurd!’ shouts Anokhin. ‘Tie them both to the table and let’s just get on and saw this wretched limb off!’

And then everything goes black.

I wake up in bed and as soon as my eyes open Masha starts hitting me again.

‘Bitch! Spineless snake! They didn’t take it off because of you!’

‘Stop that this *instant*, Masha!’ shouts Aunty Nadya.

Then everything goes black again.

When I come to properly, Olessya’s sitting with Masha, holding her, to stop her hitting me, and Aunty Nadya’s telling me what happened.

‘You fainted. I could just feel your hand shaking and then it went all limp and wet. I thought you’d died.’

‘Wish she had. And left me in peace ...’

‘Do be *quiet*, Masha ...’ She turns back to me. ‘I could hear them all saying: “What’s happened? What’s wrong?” And Professor Popov shouting, “Dasha! Dashinka! Wake up!” So I couldn’t help it, I crawled out from under the table and saw your surgeon, Professor Dolyetsky, and Doctor Anokhin and Professor Popov walking out of the door to smoke. They were standing there, sucking away like their lives depended on it in the corridor. I could hear them talking. Professor Dolyetsky said it could only be a reaction you had to the novocaine and that it was strange because you’d had novocaine before, and I was thinking, What’s strange is that they don’t realize Dasha just fainted from sheer terror.’

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