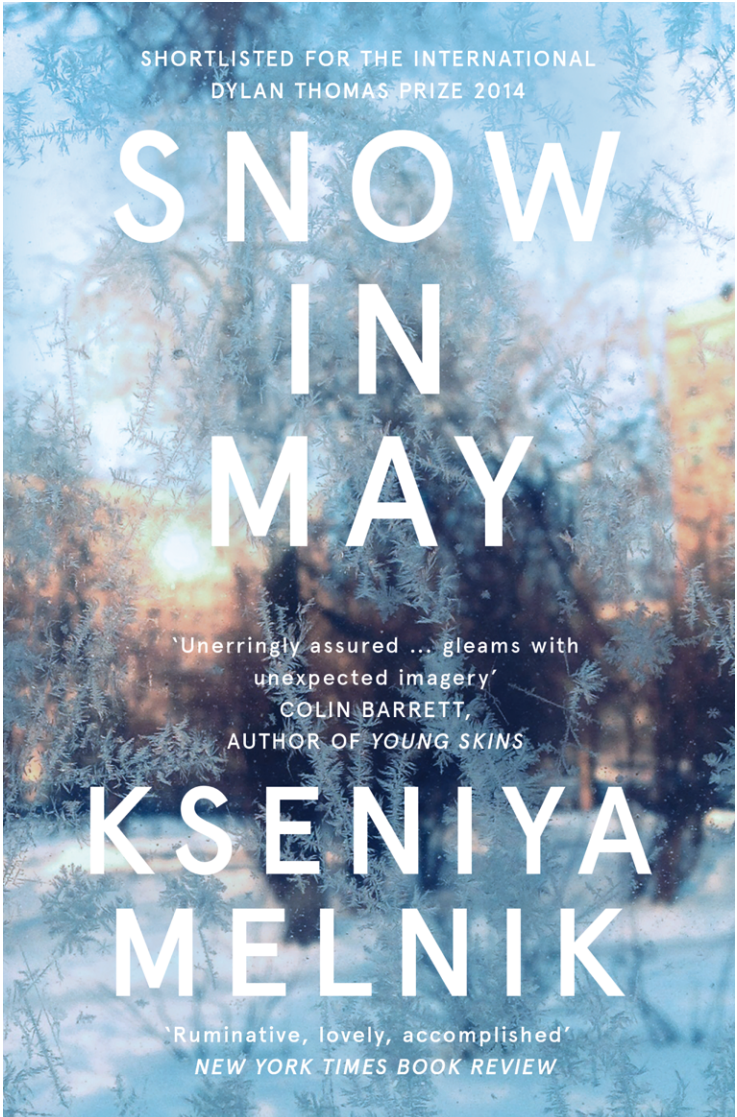
SHORTLISTED FOR THE INTERNATIONAL
DYLAN THOMAS PRIZE 2014
SNOW
IN
MAY
'Unerringly assured ... gleams with
unexpected imagery'
COLIN BARRETT,
AUTHOR OF *YOUNG SKINS*
KSENIYA
MELNIK
'Ruminative, lovely, accomplished'
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Kseniya Melnik
Snow in May

Аннотация

SHORTLISTED FOR THE DYLAN THOMAS PRIZEThe stories of Kseniya Melnik's debut collection are small-town miracles, each a miniature epic.Their focus is Magadan, a town in the Northern Far East of Russia, and the unvisited lives of its inhabitants and emigrants – schoolchildren, doctors, teachers, mothers, daughters. Some characters span several stories. Some of their stories span decades and continents. The measure of their telling, though, is invariably the measure of everyday existence. Their dramas, too, are made of quotidian stuff, each life with its own sly or suppressed tragedies, and its brief, often unexpected ecstasies.Kseniya Melnik's sensibility is sober and humorous; her stories are moving and funny. In their patient, deliberate unfolding – at once surprising and convincing – and in the fitness of their details – vital because they are suggestive – we sense, above all, an assurance that is dazzling.

Содержание

SNOW IN MAY

Stories

Kseniya Melnik

FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

Copyright

Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.4thestate.co.uk
First published in Great Britain by Fourth Estate in 2014
First published in the United States by Henry Holt in 2014

Some of the stories in this collection have appeared elsewhere, in slightly different form: 'The Witch' in *Granta*'s New Voices series on Granta.com, 2010; 'Rumba' in *Epoch* magazine, 2012 series, Volume 61, Number 3; 'Love, Italian Style' as 'In the queue' in *Prospect* magazine, May 2011; and 'Closed Fracture' in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, fall 2011. Lines from 'But could you?' by Vladimir Mayakovsky, translated by Dorian Rottenberg; lines from 'To He BeTep' ('Kruchina'), music by A. Varlamov, lyrics by S. Stromilov; lines from 'When Youth Leaves', music by V. Sorokin, lyrics by A. Fatianov.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Source ISBN: 9780007548705

Ebook Edition © May 2014 ISBN: 9780007548712

Version: 2015-05-22

Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmothers, Olga and Irina, and my friend Allison Powell

Contents

Love, Italian Style, or in Line for Bananas
1975

"**G***razhdanka,* it's forbidden to sit here. Follow me."

Tanya looked up from her shopping list. The stewardess's curt demeanor was so incongruous with her childlike face, Tanya felt a swell of pity. Here was someone already kicked around by life, her defenses permanently raised.

Moments earlier, Tanya had sat in one of the open seats directly behind a group of men in identical blue T-shirts and track pants. On an otherwise full airplane, they were buffered both in front and behind by an empty row. Preoccupied with planning the most efficient shopping itinerary for Moscow, Tanya hadn't given this much thought.

Now she wrestled her frayed carry-on from the overhead compartment and followed the stewardess. The empty rows were puzzling indeed. When she looked back, the blue-T-shirted men grinned at her over the tops of their seats. There was something glossy in their appearance, something one didn't see in everyday people. With their smooth faces, shiny hair, and lime-white teeth, they looked freshly washed and wrung free of life's problems.

Tanya's assigned seat was in the last row, beside a middle-aged couple.

The husband turned to Tanya. "The Italian soccer team," he said with enthusiasm. "They're trying to keep us away from them. International security measures, you see. But if seriously, what secrets do they think we could give them? That the country's short on soap and rope?" He snickered. "Soap and rope, yes."

"Who thinks? The Italians?" Tanya said. She'd never seen a foreigner before, not even someone from the Eastern bloc —the so-called Soviet camp—although she'd heard they were easily spotted in the bigger cities. But these were real foreigners, real Westerners. There were separate hotels for them, and shops and restaurants. Separate seats at the Bolshoi Theatre. She felt embarrassed for having sat down behind them now.

"*Them*. The—"

"Sasha, quiet," his wife said, glaring at him as though the plane was bugged by the KGB. And who knew? Maybe it was.

The plane taxied for takeoff from Leningrad, where Tanya had spent five days slumped in a seminar room at the Hermitage. She curated the arts wing of the Regional Museum in her hometown in the northeast and every five years attended these educational programs, required and paid for by the countrywide arts board. During the day, she half listened to lectures on "the portrayal of socialist reality through painting and sculpture." In the evenings, she strolled down the Neva embankment, its austere neoclassical buildings the color of cucumber flesh, omelet batter,

sour-creamed borsch. What a shame it was that she had to travel so far to see real beauty.

She closed her eyes and thought of all the things she needed to get in Moscow to take back home to Magadan, where the grocery stores weren't empty but also had no variety. Leningrad, with its theaters and museums, was Russia's starving artist; the capital was the rich merchant, the pride of the country—a requisite stop for everyone on the way back to the provinces. She and Anton had saved all year for this shopping trip. Baby Pavlik needed a winter coat, and Borya needed a backpack, notebooks, and all the bright school accessories to get him excited about first grade.

Fruits and good vegetables. Avitominosis was common during spring in Magadan. Tanya loved cabbage for its excellent transportability. She'd have to get three or four heads. Juicy southern tomatoes, too, if she could find a sturdy box. Apples, oranges, pears. And maybe something exotic and a little magical to jolt their life, if only for a moment, out of its bread-and-potatoes doldrums. Pineapples or bananas if she was lucky, though even in Moscow they were a rarity. Anton had asked for color film and photo paper, preferably East German. He loved taking pictures on his geological expeditions. She wished she had time for the shopping bus tour that went to all the foreign import stores: Warsaw, Dresden, Budapest, and, of course, Belgrade.

Tanya pulled out *Eugene Onegin* and opened at the bookmark.

"Ehhhhh. *Ciao, bellissima.*"

She looked up. It was one of the Italian soccer men. His right

arm was propped on his hip; the other inched toward her with a piece of paper. He was mockingly handsome—his features oversized, his full lips shiny as though dabbed with olive oil. He stared at her with intensity, the way the blue-cloaked Zephyr looks at Venus in her favorite Botticelli.

A pang of sweet fear seared her stomach.

"Ehhhhh. Would like rendezvous," the Italian said.

His arms were tan and muscular, and not at all hairy, as she had expected of Italians. People were turning back to watch. Some even stood up to get a better view.

"*Bellissima. Sono Luciano. Per favore,* Hotel Rossiya. Eight." The Italian thrust his note at her. She took it, if only to divert the spotlight from herself. He held on to her hand and kissed it wetly. "Luciano."

He kissed her hand again and sauntered back to his seat. It wasn't only his arms that were muscular, she noticed.

Tanya's neighbors looked at her as though she were a chicken who had suddenly learned to fly. She turned back to *Onegin,* her face flushed. Not once in her thirty-three years had she been paid such a compliment by a stranger. And from Italy—the birthplace of art and beauty. It was a miracle.

"What did he want?" asked Tanya's neighbor, the wife. She hadn't dared look up from her knitting.

"He invited me to meet him at his hotel, I think."

"You will go? It's not illegal, but—"

Tanya caught the accusation in the woman's tone. "You must

be joking," Tanya said.

"It is discouraged. Yes, it is strongly discouraged," the husband whispered. "You will be put on a list for observation, if they even let you into that hotel."

"I have two children, seven years old and one and a half," Tanya said. "A good husband. Nondrinker."

Anton was much more than a nondrinker, of course. Had he been a bachelor, he would have made a perfect personal ad: thirty-five, ethnic Russian, tall, nonsmoker, employed. And he'd never raised a hand to her. Tanya loved him for his decency, for being a good father to her sons. Yet, he'd never looked at her as she thought the Italian had, as if she were a newly discovered Michelangelo painting. Anton told her that she was getting a bit plump and to please bring him his coffee and a piece of cheese, for which she had to stand in line for an hour.

Italians, on the other hand … Don't make me laugh, please, Tanya thought not without pleasure. She knew all about them from films: *Marriage, Italian Style* and *Divorce, Italian Style*. They didn't have divorce in Italy, and the only way out of marriage was to catch your spouse cheating and then kill him or her to protect your honor. And the lover, too, while you're at it. The sentence was more lenient for a crime of passion. She tried to remember whether Luciano wore a wedding band.

"Luciano Moretti, Hotel Rossiya, 8," the note said in loopy, Rubenesque letters. She peeped out. Luciano was looking at her over his headrest. But thinking rationally: What did a sportsman

of international caliber, rich and free, see in a tired, ground-down Soviet woman? She went back to her reading.

An hour later the plane landed in Moscow. The Italians were let off first, followed by the running-of-the-bulls-style disembarkation of everyone else. Tanya got punched in the ribs and her feet were stepped on several times. To her surprise and mortification, the entire soccer team greeted her with cheers and whistles at the arrivals terminal. Luciano, blocked by the large bosom of a peroxide-blond interpreter, sent her a battery of air kisses. Must be weariness from the all-male company, she thought. It won't be long now, given the women in the Intourist welcoming delegation.

Studying herself in the mirror of the airport bathroom, she felt dismayed by her own credulousness. Her face was red, her mascara had flaked under her boring pale-blue eyes. Her blondish hair, badly in need of a root touch-up, was frizzy in the back, while in the front her bangs were glued to her forehead with sweat. The neckline of her old traveling blouse was hopelessly stretched. Luciano must be blind.

Outside, the spring morning was in full bloom, and Tanya found herself wishing she'd worn a short-sleeved dress to let her skin breathe. To her right stretched an endless taxi line. To her left, a bus was about to depart for central Moscow. Just off the

curb, the Italian soccer team was boarding the Intourist van. Luciano waved and cried out, "*Otto! Otto, per favore*!"

What a peculiar man, Tanya thought. Italians … This was a real cliché. She tried to keep from smiling. She stole one last look at Luciano and ran for the bus, her heavy carry-on banging against her legs. It was almost nine hours until *otto,* plenty of time to forget about the way he'd looked at her.

Exhausted by the multitransport trip from the airport, Tanya rang the doorbell of Auntie Roza's fifth-floor *kommunalka*. They kissed hello. Auntie Roza smelled like Tanya's late mother, of sugary sweat and fresh-baked bread, scents that calmed Tanya no matter how stressed she was. She noticed that while she'd been in Leningrad, her aunt had given herself a makeover: she'd tweezed her eyebrows down to threads and dyed her graying hair the color of peeled carrot.

"Look at you, Auntie. Ten years younger! For the May Day party at work?"

"Trying to keep up with you."

"Me?" Flattery was in the air today.

Tanya changed into a pair of house slippers and followed Auntie Roza through the darkened hallway, which branched off into rooms where different families lived. All the doors were closed. Every few steps Tanya bumped into something—boxes,

metal-edged trunks, wood boards, a bicycle, a baby stroller, and God knows what else.

Halfway down the hallway they almost collided with Sergeich, who was carrying a bowl of eggs and a packet of sausages to the kitchen.

"Good afternoon, Roza Vasilievna. You look wonderful as always. Ah, I see Tanechka is back."

"Good afternoon, Mikhal Sergeich. Thank you for the compliment."

He pressed his barrel-shaped body against the wall to let them pass.

"Are you hungry?" Auntie Roza said when they reached her room.

"I want to take a shower, wash off that airplane grime."

"Why shower? You'll be running around dirty Moscow all day. Besides, Ivanova has the bathroom for the next two hours."

"When's your turn?"

"In the evening, Tanya, in the evening. Weekends are busy, you see, everyone's home. You rest now while I warm up borsch and cutlets." Auntie Roza opened her fridge and pulled out two pots.

"I'll help. Want to tell you something, you won't believe."

On their way to the kitchen they ran into a tall, heavyset woman with a column of sooty hair piled on top of her head. Letting her pass, Tanya tripped over the bicycle, and it crashed to the floor with a ring. Fierce yapping started up at the other

end of the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Tanya said.

"To the devil!" the woman yelled, gesticulating with a pot of pea soup in front of her heaving bust. "That bicycle was new. If it's broken, you'll be standing in line for a new one yourself, Roza Vasilievna."

"Broken!" Auntie Roza came to an instant boil. "You should see your sons ride it down the stairs. First bicycle, then their necks, I'll say. Broken—*tfoo*."

"That's none of your business. You better tell your niece here that she turned on our lightbulb when she splashed in the washroom for a whole hour last week, and we now have to pay for that electricity," Pea Soup said. "Do I look like a millionaire to you? She's the one from Magadan here."

"And who's going to pay when your boys steal my—"

"Sergeich!" Pea Soup hollered. "How many times do I have to tell you that pets are not allowed in the common areas?"

The communal kitchen contained five ovens, five tables, several standing and hanging cupboards, most of them with locks on their doors, and a sea of kitchenware occupying every available surface and wall. The entire space was segmented by bedsheets, towels, and various other laundry articles hanging to dry from a network of ropes. An invisible radio babbled the news. The smells of fried onions, pea soup, and fish fought for airspace. A beautiful young woman with curlers in her bleached hair flew into the kitchen, chirped hello to Auntie Roza, and carried away

a whistling kettle.

Auntie Roza turned on the gas and struck a match. “Now tell me what happened, Tanechka.”

In a half whisper Tanya told her about Luciano.

“I’d go,” Auntie Roza said.

“But you …” Her aunt’s husband had left her many years ago, when their children were still in grade school, and she’d never remarried. “How will I look Anton in the eye? It’d be so stupid for me to run there like some prostitute. They already have their own, from Intourist, KGB-trained.”

“Not like a prostitute, Tanya. Like a woman. When will you have a chance to enjoy such an exotic man again? Italians, they’ve got a temper. Anton is a good man, I’m not arguing. But … he’s Anton. He’ll be there on that couch for all eternity. Go, enjoy. Could be your last chance. I met, once, in Bulgaria, a certain engineer … Bulgarians love Russians, you know.” Auntie Roza pressed her ringed hand to her chest, which was rosy and laced with delicate spiderwebs of wrinkles. It struck Tanya as incredibly beautiful—and this, too, reminded her of her mother. She was overcome by a desire to rest her head on Auntie Roza’s soft shoulder—to forget about Luciano and her obligations to her family.

“He was tall, very good-looking. Such beautiful black eyebrows,” Auntie Roza continued. “I didn’t go, I was a good wife. To this day I bite my elbows in regret.”

The bedsheets next to them moved.

"What, Sergeich? Spying on us?" Auntie Roza said.

Sergeich emerged from behind his cover. Balding, with a stained undershirt stretched over his paunch and a grouchy expression, he seemed to have stepped out of the dictionary entry for "*kommunalka* neighbor, male."

"Err … Roza Vasilievna, would you be so kind as to spare a pinch of salt. I'm all out." His bite-sized white poodle twirled around his feet.

"Oh, you should have listened," Auntie Roza said, holding out her salt dish.

Sergeich blushed. "You"—he addressed both of them, his tone philosophical—"you womenfolk are odd. I want to say …" He dove under the sheets to his oven, then reappeared and returned the salt. "First you complain …" He looked at the floor and said through his teeth, "One simply cannot understand women, and it's your own fault." He pouted his thin, lilac lips.

"My dear Mikhal Sergeich. Don't get so upset. Like all normal people, women just want a little corner of happiness." Auntie Roza smiled coquettishly and threw the poodle a piece of her cutlet.

"If it were me, I'd be careful with the foreigners." Sergeich looked in Tanya's direction. "There's a reason why the State wants to keep us regular citizens away. It's for our own protection. I've never met any real foreigners myself, but I've heard such stories—*ogogo*!"

"What stories?" Tanya asked.

"Well, I heard from a friend of a friend who knows someone who's friends with one of the Party kids. You know, they all travel to the West like it's Crimea. So, that particular comrade lived in America for a year and he said that they have special pornography schools there." Sergeich made a sour face at Auntie Roza. "They teach … technique and some kind of philosophy of love there, as if it could be taught." He hit his chest. "It's amoral and it's expensive. They don't have free education there, so not everyone can attend. Those who do, you know, they have to bring a partner. They don't have to be married, and—can you imagine?—it doesn't even have to be a woman for a man. You know what I mean? They study special books and have homework assignments, also class demonstrations. As if it was some woodworking class!"

Pea Soup barged into the kitchen, tore through the bedsheets, and yelled out of the window: "Kolya! Grisha! Lunch is ready. March home on the double!" The poodle began to yap again. Pea Soup squatted down and clapped her big hands right by the dog's flappy ears.

"Don't you dare do that again, *grazhdanka*!" Sergeich yelled after Pea Soup. "*Tak*, where was I? These so-called students learn to hold—well, you know what I'm talking about—for a whole hour and sometimes more. And during the, the … during this, they see God. Yes, God. It is insulting to me even as a nonbeliever. But this is in America, I don't know about Italy. Or Bulgaria." Tanya thought she saw Sergeich wink at Auntie Roza.

"Are you sure it's not the yogis in India?" Tanya said.

"An orgasm for an hour? That would finish Comrade Brezhnev right off." Auntie Roza laughed, a beautiful, throaty trill. Sergeich's face was completely purple now. "Those Americans must have a lot of free time. Italians, on the other hand, they don't need any special schools. They have passion in their blood."

"Now is not *Yezhovshchina*, of course, but it never hurts to be careful," Sergeich whispered, then in full voice: "Remember that the State disapproves of intermingling with foreigners. It's for our own protection, Tanya."

"But what could happen?"

Sergeich stared at her with incredulity.

Tanya envisioned Luciano's shapely olive arms. Her skin prickled.

"Every room in the hotel is bugged by the KGB. You may get accused of spying, that's what. Arrested," Sergeich said. "Or you could get recruited to spy on the Italians."

"Mikhal Sergeich, my darling, what are you talking about? First of all, this is a onetime thing. Second, she's not going there to talk." Auntie Roza finally gave him the smile he'd been waiting for.

"Spying … I don't have time for a second career," Tanya said, a little exhilarated just thinking of the idea.

The women picked up their pans of food and went to eat in Auntie Roza's room.

"Don't listen to him, Tanechka. Listen to me," Auntie Roza said, meeting Tanya's eyes over the perfect nostalgic borsch.

The giant Children's World department store stood across the square from Lubyanka, the KGB headquarters. Entering the first floor, with its marble columns, a sparkling double-decker carousel, and endless rows of toys still gave Tanya the same thrills she'd felt here as a child on her family's transits through Moscow. Practical things first, Tanya said to herself, and marched up to a line that started at the base of the stairs. She took her spot at the tail and tapped the woman in front of her on the shoulder.

"What are we standing for?" Tanya asked.

"Finnish snowsuits."

"God help us. What number?"

The woman showed Tanya her palm with "238" written on it in pen. Tanya pulled a pen out of her purse and wrote on her own palm: "239."

The woman's cheekbones were beautifully pronounced, convex like the bowls of soupspoons. "And where are you from?" she asked Tanya in a soft, friendly voice.

Too nice for a Muscovite.

"From Vladivostok," Tanya lied.

Magadan was famous for having been the entry point to the cruelest of Stalin's network of camps. People might think her

parents had sat there; and if they were arrested, then there must've been a reason. Now people were paid good money to live in the northeast. It wasn't a good idea to advertise either.

"And you?"

"Odessa. I'm buying the snowsuit for my relatives in Arkhangelsk."

While they chatted about children and tricks for procuring this or that *defitsit* item, the line crawled up the stairs. The woman's name was Zina. Tanya also made friends with a man behind her, Denis from Sverdlovsk, and asked him to hold her place. In the shoe department on the third floor, she was lucky to happen upon some Yugoslavian winter boots. She got two pairs, two sizes too big for the boys to grow into. For now, she'd sew a little pouch of wool inside the toe.

The line for Finnish snowsuits climbed to the second landing. Denis gave Tanya a nod of cooperation, and she dashed to the fourth floor, where she stood in two lines for a pencil box, a stack of notebooks, and a yellow backpack with cars printed on the flap. Others held Tanya's place in the toy line on the ground level, while she held places for Zina and Denis in the snowsuits. The store was stuffy; in the thick of the lines it reeked of sweat and cologne. She ran downstairs and prized out a microscope for Borya, lettered blocks for Pavlik, and a box of toy soldiers for her friend's son.

Tanya returned to the snowsuits line, which had finally scaled the second floor, and waited for another hour. She could

already see the big brown box out of which fluttered the puffy aquamarine snowsuits. After a few more minutes of waiting she heard screams at the front of the line. A wave of people threw her back, and immediately she knew: They'd run out. They'd run out of Finnish snowsuits!

At first Tanya bobbed in the whirlpool of other anguished shoppers—elbows out, bags in—all hoping for a miracle. Her throat prickled with tears, and eventually she gave up. She knew that the clerks had stashed away extra pairs, but they would distribute them through their network of relatives and friends. There was no use begging.

She staggered out to the street. She didn't have time to waste, yet she couldn't bear leaving the store. She still had so much to find. When she returned home, Anton wouldn't go out of his way to praise her exertions. There was nothing heroic or special about these shopping expeditions, a common burden shared by hundreds of millions of her fellow *grazhdanki*. It seemed unbelievable that just a few hours before, Luciano had invited her to a hotel. What was he doing now? Training on a soccer field or sightseeing the best, cleanest, approved-for-foreigners parts of Moscow with the voluptuous Intourist spies?

Tfoo, *princessa*. Her mother and Auntie Roza had lived through the famine and war, and here she was—too good for lines. She looked at the Lubyanka building, where so many of Magadan's prisoners had started their journeys.

A babushka, her face yellow and wrinkled like a spoiled

apple, pulled Tanya down the street and around the corner. From prior shopping adventures, Tanya knew that the pensioners who lived close to the big stores often got up early to stockpile the most coveted items and resell them at a profit. As the babushka unzipped the suitcase with her knobby hands, Tanya prayed for the snowsuit.

"Bought something for my granddaughter, dearie, and it turned out the wrong size," the babushka said, twisting her head, on the lookout for the police.

She held up a pink rabbit coat with fur balls on the ends of the zippers.

"I have a son," Tanya said. Disappointment settled acridly in her stomach.

The toothless babushka proved to be a real shark when it came to persuasion, and in the end Tanya bought the coat. She could try to exchange it for something else in Magadan, although in all likelihood Pavlik would end up wearing it. Luckily, he was still too young to be teased.

At the National Department Store on Red Square, Tanya secured a lacy East German bra, which was so much more delicate than the gray, industrial Soviet make, built for sturdy kolkhoz girls. Also: a box of Polish toothpaste and lotion, stockings, and three Czechoslovakian shirts and a quality photo album for Anton. He would be so happy. A tube of French lipstick was passed to her over the heads of others in exchange for money. Its color was a mystery.

In a shopping frenzy, Tanya snapped up the last Yugoslavian silk dress without trying it on. Although its limited availability was its most important quality, she later discovered that it was also beautiful: the color of a lily pad with contours of large-petaled flowers embroidered in white thread at the shoulders and side seams. The neckline plunged bravely deep. She didn't know where she'd wear it: the dress was too light for Magadan, even in the summer. To a house party, maybe, with a shawl.

Tanya set out for her last shopping destination, the House of the Book on Arbat, stopping every twenty steps to rub her reddened palms and switch around the heavy bags. She imagined the headline in tomorrow's newspapers: "Woman Found Drowned in Moskva River, Still Clutching Bags."

She walked and thought. Despite the official State philosophy that the USSR was the best country in the world, Russians were always on the hunt for *importny* things. The best you could get was from the Warsaw Pact countries—especially Yugoslavia, which was almost half capitalist and bordered with Italy. Polish cosmetics were good but not comparable to French. Those you could get only in Moscow, only at the National Department Store. The appearance of Italian shoes was an event. People from the Eastern bloc looked better, too, and people from the capitalist West seemed to be made from higher-quality material altogether: whiter teeth, broader shoulders, happier faces.

Luciano had grown up surrounded by beauty. Tanya knew from studying art and from the travel programs on television that

Italy was full of well-preserved palazzos and facades decorated with paintings and stone cupids. Hundreds of nude sculptures sunbathed in the piazzas and cooled off in street fountains. Maybe Luciano's eyes were simply better trained to see a woman's beauty?

Why couldn't Anton see it? After all, he could appreciate a pair of three-hour-line shoes for their ordinary, magnificent shoeness. Had she succumbed to him too easily? They had dated during their last year of university, and Tanya didn't want to be the last unmarried girl at the graduation.

Auntie Roza opened the door and took some of the bags off Tanya's numb hands. One naked lightbulb in a row of five burned furiously in the hallway. Pea Soup's slouchy husband was smoking by the communal telephone. His hair was a violent red —a comical contrast to his straw-yellow eyebrows and eyelashes —as though his fiery crown had drawn out all the pigment from below. His sons (their hair the same Red Banner hue) rattled back and forth down the hallway, the elder on his indestructible bicycle and the younger, about Borya's age, with a saucepan helmet and a soccer ball. The Ivanovs' baby wailed. The poodle barked behind Sergeich's door. The hallway smelled of old cigarettes, fried meat, stewed cabbage, more pea soup, and something putrid —perhaps the dog's revenge on its neighbors.

"I'm just waiting for an intercity call. Do you need the phone? It should come any moment now," Pea Soup's husband muttered.

"Relax, Lyosha. I'm not your wife," Auntie Roza said. "Please tell your boys not to ride over the shoes."

When they reached the haven of Auntie Roza's room, Auntie Roza said, "*Shto,* got lucky?"

"Oh, yes. Now the shower."

"Not the best time, Tanechka. Everyone's cooking dinner, you see. We only have one heater between the kitchen and the washroom."

"You said it would be your turn in the evening."

"It is my turn, but—"

"You let them bully you?"

"What can I do? They've lived here longer than I. You could try tying a dishrag around the kitchen faucet—that's our sign for hot water needed in the bathroom—but I doubt it'll work."

"Oh, Auntie."

The kitchen was in midbattle. The laundry had been taken down from the ropes. The three female household heads and Sergeich, the lonesome penguin, were cutting, shredding, frying, boiling, meat grinding, and dough rolling at their stations. The oil hissed, the pans banged, the radio yowled like a frantic mother calling for her child in a crowd of strangers. Sergeich winked at Tanya. She tied the dishrag around the faucet and escaped to the bathroom. As she showered, the water went hot and cold every few minutes, then just as she was washing off, it shut off

completely.

"For your rendezvous?" Auntie Roza said when Tanya returned to her room. She was holding up the new dress to herself in front of the wall mirror.

"What rendezvous?" Tanya tried to keep her voice dispassionate. "I'm dog tired. I'd rather spend the evening with you." This, too, was true. "Tell me stories about when you and Mama were girls."

"You've heard all of our stories a million times, Tanechka," Auntie Roza said. "Straighten out your shoulders and try to make yourself a little happier. If you don't, no one will."

"I'm not sure this would make me happier. Honestly."

On the one hand, she didn't want to disturb the precarious balance of her life. On the other hand, there was the beautiful dress—a *defitsit* to everyone else and readily wearable to her. "I'll just try it on. If it's too big, I'll leave it for you."

Tanya slipped on the dress and looked at herself in the mirror. It fit as though tailor-made, accentuating her waist—not as small as in her youth but still workable—her narrow, sloping shoulders, her diminutive but adequately perky breasts.

"Look at you," Auntie Roza exclaimed, but Tanya had already grabbed her makeup bag and dashed out of the room.

The washroom was occupied. She couldn't go back to her aunt's room, not yet; she knew what Auntie Roza would say. She ran to the bathroom. Free! She switched on what she hoped was Auntie Roza's lightbulb, sat down on the toilet, and put her

makeup bag in her lap. Squinting into a hand mirror, Tanya put on some blue eye shadow and mascara. The new French lipstick turned out to be a clownish shade of orange, so she wrapped the tip of a match in a piece of cotton ball, something she always kept handy, and scraped out leftover coral paste from her old lipstick tube.

Someone hammered on the door. The bleary-eyed young father of the restless baby, clutching a roll of toilet paper to his chest. Tanya got out of his way.

Back in her aunt's room, she sat down at the table, from which she could see herself in the mirror. She put her hair up in a bun. The hairstyle showed off her small ears, the only part of her body she'd consistently liked.

Neither the makeup nor the hairstyle had altered her features, yet she hardly recognized herself. The exhaustion in her eyes lit up her face with a kind of wistful nobility. She wanted Luciano to see that he was right to pick her from a plane of other dusty people. Tipsy off this sudden metamorphosis, some romantic essence of her separated and floated above her tired body like those happy lovers in Chagall's paintings. She wouldn't get in trouble with the KGB for one time, would she?

"Go, Tanya. Go," Auntie Roza said. Before Tanya could duck, Auntie Roza spritzed her with the unfashionable Red Moscow perfume and made the sign of the cross.

It was seven o'clock. As Tanya skipped down the five flights of stairs, even the clicking of her heels seemed brighter.

"Ah, Tanechka, I forgot to feed you!" she heard her aunt yell from the top of the stairs, but her hunger had already evaporated, along with her shame and fatigue.

Tanya's skin tingled pleasantly in the evening cool that had descended on panting Moscow. The tram came right away, and she sailed the two stops humming quietly to herself. She was walking to the metro entrance when she saw that at the fruit stand by the station they were selling bananas.

Bananas! Golden crescents, honeyed smiles, the fruit of sun-soaked dreams. They were even more rare in Moscow than Italian shoes. Seven-year-old Borya had eaten bananas only twice in his life. Chomping off the thinnest disks one by one to prolong the pleasure, he ran around the apartment pretending to be a monkey on a whirlwind adventure. The bananas were right out of the cartoons about Africa, right out of Mowgli—evidence of a world beyond Magadan's snowy winters and cold summers. Pavlik had never tasted them.

The line curved around the block.

Tanya lingered, then took a few steps toward the metro, which made her feel like a criminal. She took her place at the end of the line. Maybe there would still be enough time, maybe Luciano would wait. She stood, pelting the backs of fellow line standers with all the anger and frustration accumulated in her line-standing life.

Thirty minutes passed. Her whole being itched with indecision. Flecks of her new beautiful skin, the ones blessed

with Auntie Roza's pungent Red Moscow, fluttered across the vast, indifferent city toward Hotel Rossiya, to Luciano, with his shiny hair and olive oil–rubbed lips. She understood that bananas would have a relatively small impact on the bright future she hoped for her sons. Yet, their future would begin when she returned home, and she had the power to make it a little sweeter. Gradually, the romantic kite of her soul descended back to her body. She felt tired and overdressed. Like herself.

When at last it was her turn, Tanya saw that the sales clerk was drawing bananas from two different boxes. One contained taut yellow bunches, while bananas from the other box were covered with brown spots.

"Excuse me, are you selling rotten bananas?" Tanya cried out.

"And what else am I supposed to do with them, *grazhdanka*? Throw them out? I have to move the product. If you don't want them, I have plenty of other customers who will take them with joy and be grateful."

Tanya bought three bunches—the allotment per person. Only one was in the early stages of rot. She looked at her watch: seven fifty. It would take her at least forty minutes to get to the hotel by metro. She could try catching a taxi, though she doubted there'd be any in this area. Surely someone would pick up a hitchhiker.

Twenty minutes later not a single car had stopped. Was her dress scaring people off? Clutching bananas to her chest, she turned the corner to a poplar-lined street and sat down on a bench. The pollen swirled around her like snow. There had been

a time when the distinctions between right and wrong seemed indisputable, and doing right felt good. When all the decisions had been premade and in her best interest. Back when she didn't need so much to be happy.

She remembered sitting once as a girl on the bank of the Volga River. She had just finished a shift of volunteering at the kolkhoz with her Young Pioneers brigade. Soon it would be dark, and the Pioneers would build bonfires and sing songs about loyalty, valor, and honor. Tanya remembered how her hands hurt from pulling carrots all day. She knelt and dipped them into the river. The water was so cold, a shudder ran up her arms and jolted her heart. She tried in vain to scrub the black soil from under her nails. She lifted up her eyes in time to see the last sunray strike a little fire on the golden cupola of a country church on the opposite bank. She felt at the center of her life then, separate from the world only in a way that could allow her to improve it. Although her future seemed vague, its every mysterious facet glimmered with light and possibility.

Early the next morning Tanya loaded up on several kinds of sausages and cheese, ham, smoked meat, good Hungarian wine and canned fruit, good vodka for Anton, and fresh produce at the grocery store near Auntie Roza's. She found two sturdy boxes sitting by the garbage dump in the courtyard. One of them,

Tanya was shocked to discover, was from a color TV, a *defitsit* unavailable in stores even in Moscow. Luckily, the foam forms were still intact—perfect for fruits and vegetables. She hurriedly repacked everything again for optimal transportability.

At the airport, the loudspeaker announced that the eight-hour nonstop flight to Magadan was delayed because of adverse weather. The terminal swarmed with passengers, stir-crazy from the foul-smelling bathrooms and insufficiency of places to sit. Various personages of questionable intent, particularly gypsies and persons of Caucasian nationality, trolled the waiting halls, panhandling, selling trinkets, and soliciting fortune readings.

Tanya had too many things to carry all at once. She dragged her suitcases up to the end of the check-in line and asked the woman in front of her to keep an eye on them. When she returned for the boxes mere seconds later, the one for the color TV was gone.

She lost her breath, as if punched in the stomach. The bananas. She spun around and around: thousands of people, thousands of boxes of every stripe in continuous movement like atoms. How could she have not foreseen this?

Tanya shuffled back to her place in line. Now she knew with absolute certainty that she'd been happy just a moment ago, steadily on her way home, with presents for everyone. She began to cry. And she couldn't stop, not when the woman in front of her asked her what was wrong, and not when, pushing her remaining luggage centimeter by centimeter, she reached the counter and

handed her passport and ticket to the check-in clerk.

Everything felt wrong, like she was living in a parallel universe, separated by one crucial degree from the one containing the life she was meant to have. This other, true life was visible to her, even palpable at certain instances—like during the births of her sons—but impossible to occupy. She cried from pity for herself, and because of the stupidity of such pity. She cried for Luciano and for Anton. She cried because she'd only loved one boy with the follow-you-over-the-edge-of-the-earth kind of love—at fifteen. She cried for her mother, who had died two years ago, and whom she still missed every day.

For the rest of her wait Tanya haunted the airport, looking in every corner for the missing box, in the weak hope that, upon opening it, the thieves had discovered no color TV and abandoned it. It was eight in the evening when the plane finally took off.

She landed the following afternoon. Wet snow fell in clumps from the chalky sky. After an hour on the washboard Kolyma Route—the infamous road built on the bones of Gulag prisoners—Tanya began to recognize familiar streets, decorated with red flags along the May Day parade route. Banners with noble yet unrealistic proclamations hung from the most important buildings. The snow kept falling and falling, covering muddy slush from the recent thaw, last year's yellow grass, and the garbage on the sidewalks—masking, for a short while, the old sins.

The taxi driver parked by Tanya's building and helped her carry the luggage up to the fourth floor. Their apartment was small, but all their own. Anton was supposed to be at work and the boys in kindergarten, but as she opened the door and right away stumbled over a vacuum cleaner in the hallway, she knew that everyone was home, waiting for her. It smelled deliciously of fried potatoes.

A soccer match played on TV in the living room. Various articles of clothing hung over the backs of chairs, and socks were piled in little nests on the floor. Anton and Pavlik were napping on the couch, Anton's face raw from a recent shave. She bent down to Pavlik's bottom: his pants appeared to be clean. She looked at them again. They were a perfect subject for Mary Cassatt, had she painted in Russia. Tanya felt a twinge of pleasure and shame.

She went into the boys' room. Borya sat on the floor, tinkering with his metal construction set. He wore his favorite orange flannel shirt and briefs. His feet were bare. He looked up at her, first startled, then astonished. His imagination winged back from the distant magical city he was building, and he smiled, baring a gap in his milk teeth. He jumped up and hung on Tanya's waist. She could feel the angularity of his knees through her coarse traveling pants. As she kissed his head, she noticed a cluster of new freckles on his nose.

"Borechka, put on some socks. The floor is cold."

"I'm hungry."

“Papa hasn’t fed you?”

“Papa said to wait for you. We cooked together. I cut a potato myself.”

Tanya pressed Borya to herself so tight that he cried out, but he didn’t try to wiggle free.

“Wait here, kitten.”

Before waking up Anton and Pavlik, she tiptoed into the hallway. The bananas were gone, as she’d suspected, along with the tomatoes, oranges, cheese, Anton’s favorite smoked meat and sausages, and the wine. She rummaged in the suitcase and pulled out the green Yugoslavian dress. Made of high-quality silk, it had hardly gathered any wrinkles on its long journey east.

Closed Fracture

2012

This morning, a phone call from an unfamiliar foreign number interrupted my game of golf. I winced, recognizing Russia's dialing code, and let it go to voice mail. I would have done the same with any unidentified caller. You never know what guise the past might put on to haunt you. I had my habitual postgame round of cocktails with my golf partners, all California retirees like me, and returned to the condo I shared with my sister, Angela. She wasn't home. I took a long, cool shower, then went to the patio and looked out for a long while at the red terra-cotta roofs of our condo community, which, if not for the palm trees that stuck out here and there among the old Cadillacs and swimming pools, almost succeeded in looking Florentine. I listened to the voice mail twice. The message was from my former best friend. We hadn't seen each other for twenty-eight years and hadn't spoken for twenty.

"Tolik, is it you or is it not you?" his message began. His voice was thin but cheerful; he must have been putting on airs. He'd gotten my number through an improbably coiled chain of acquaintances, he went on to explain. "How are things? Family?

It'd be nice to talk of our old adventures. Do you still play tennis? I'm in Voronezh, still." I waited to hear what he wanted, but perhaps this was something he was saving for the conversation proper. He gave his number with the country and city codes and hung up.

I went back to the living room, sat down on the couch, and took some deep breaths. Sputnik, my salt-and-pepper schnauzer, jumped up next to me, wagging his joystick tail. Then he hopped back down and planted his muzzle on my knee. Behind his bushy eyebrows his black eyes begged for a walk, and a snack, and love. For everything at once and right away.

Tolyan and I had been through the trenches of youth together, his loyal presence a watermark of authenticity on so many of my best memories. I should have been happy to hear from him. But what I felt was acute annoyance at this rather minimal invasion of my privacy. Maybe I've become too American. Or not yet American enough.

As I go about my long day, performing tasks I don't mind, thinking either about what I now have the time and mind space to notice—a beautiful flower or an intricate cloud formation—or the people who matter to me—my daughter, Sonya, my sister, Angela, my wife, Marina—I am sometimes shocked into a fleeting physical weakness by the realization of how fast the time has galloped by, each winter marked by the increasingly passionate moaning of my once broken shin. And by the fact that I am here and Tolyan is still there, whereas we started out

together and young.

We were both named Anatoly; I was Tolik for short, and he Tolyan. We were born a year before Stalin's death in a small town on the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk, in the northeast. Despite its isolation, every Russian of a certain age still shudders at the mention of our hometown, Magadan, which was once the gate to the most brutal Stalinist labor camps—the most remote island in the notorious Gulag Archipelago. Besides mining gold, tin, and uranium in the permafrost basin of the Kolyma River, the prisoners were engaged in extensive civil works, building the first roads and houses, as well as the Park of Culture and Leisure, the cinema, and the stadium, with its adjacent Palace of Sport. I still remember a brigade that worked on a five-story building across from mine. The construction site was blocked off by a fence —rows of barbed wire strung between eight-foot-high wooden beams. Several makeshift watchtowers were positioned around the perimeter. Canvas-top trucks brought the prisoners in the morning, when I was on my way to school, and carted them back to the camp at sunset. By then the security had been relaxed: the prisoners were not shackled, and the guards were not poking their napes with Kalashnikovs.

Although my mother had reprimanded Tolyan and me when she caught us talking to the prisoners through the fence, we

became friendly with many. The scent of the Khrushchev Thaw was in the air; their hopes for freedom were high. At night we snuck in through the spaces between the barbed wire and hid cigarettes in agreed-upon places. In return, the prisoners carved toy guns out of wood and left them for us in secret spots.

By the mid-sixties, half of the town's population consisted of ex-convicts, some living and working side by side with ex-guards. Many former prisoners were criminals, but there were equally many people with higher education who were not allowed to leave Magadan—doctors, teachers, geologists, engineers. My father knew and worked with many of them. He was in charge of the petroleum supply for the whole region. Whenever I asked him what those people had been imprisoned for, his response was: For having a long tongue. Writers, artists, and musicians of national fame had sat in the Magadan camps, and productions at the local theater were on par with those in Moscow and Leningrad, but back then we kids didn't understand. Schools until recently didn't teach this layer of history. Besides, our heads were crammed with mischief. There was no space for anything else.

Tolyan and I were unruly but quick-witted enough to get through school with minimum effort. And we were lucky. Our skinny backsides were forever saved by bells, snow days, and convenient illnesses—our teachers' or our own. We were called to the blackboard only on the days when we had, on a hunch, prepared our lesson. Everyone smoked in the bathroom, but only Tolyan and I never got caught. We skipped piano lessons and

went sledding on our folders, leaving our parents to puzzle over why our sheet music was always wet.

We crawled through the small underground tunnels by the old cinema, which we called "the catacombs." What with the mysterious trapdoor at the end of one tunnel—behind which there surely lay a chest of Kolyma gold guarded by the ghost of the first prospector, Bilibin—the risk of death by suffocation or drowning didn't enter our minds. We stole still-hot bread from the city bakery as the slow, fat baker loaded the trays into the truck bound for grocery stores. Tolyan was my upstairs neighbor, and I spent hours at his place watching music programs on TV and staring at the blurry black-market photographs of Swedish porn magazines that had been confiscated from the photo lab at the university by Tolyan's father, the senior detective at the police headquarters. We also played with his spare revolver, until one day it shot and shattered the crystal chandelier. Now that I think of it: that massive *defitsit* chandelier was probably a very serious bribe.

In eighth grade, we were suspended from the Young Pioneers brigade for bad behavior and, free of "volunteering" duties, spent the summer hiking and grilling *shashliks*. In those days, my big passion was zoology, and on weekends I helped out at the small zoo in the Park of Culture and Leisure. There was a yellowed polar bear named Yulka, an emaciated fox, a balding eagle, and a sad-eyed deer. Though Tolyan didn't care for such proximity to the creatures of the north (the cages were rather stinky) he

tagged along, unable to bear exclusion from any of my activities.

In the last year of school, all the girls in our grade, at once, gained weight and developed acne. Self-conscious and closed in, they were useless for either friendly or romantic purposes. On top of that, the stadium where we played soccer in the summer and hockey in the winter was put under yearlong renovation, leaving us with nothing else to do but study for university entrance exams.

In the spring, a recruiting commission from the Riga Red-Bannered Civil Aviation Engineers Institute of the Lenin Komsomol arrived in Magadan. Riga was not Paris, but it was as far west as any of us had dreamed of getting back then. "Civil" sounded good, patriotic without trying too hard. "Aviation" sounded even better—steel wings and navy-blue uniforms, an exhilarating touch of grandeur and freedom.

Five hundred students competed for thirty spots reserved for recruits from the Magadan region. There were several *facultets* at the Riga Institute, and everyone wanted to get into automatics, the precursor of computer science. No one knew what it entailed exactly, but everyone wanted to dive into the stream of progress. Tolyan and I had passed physics, mathematics, and chemistry with an identical number of points. Together we crammed for the last exam—literature—and could, as far as I remember, tell Dostoyevsky from Raskolnikov.

The weekend before the literature exam, my parents and my younger sister, Angela, went for a walk in the Park of Culture and

Leisure, the same park that used to house the now extinct zoo. There they ran into the head of the Riga recruiting commission, a Jewish fellow named Ginzburg. My father had already managed to meet him and mention me as a promising young aviator. So when this Ginzburg heard that I, along with the rest of the student herd, was storming the walls of the automatics *facultet,* he advised my parents that I should instead apply to be an economist. Next, he delivered the famous analogy that would change the course of my life.

"Here's the difference between economics and automatics." Ginzburg addressed my mother, a woman of rare beauty, with ashen hair, blue eyes, and the shapely yet sturdy figure of the *Venus de Milo.* "The economist sits in front of the calculating machine, while the automatics specialist sits behind it. With a screwdriver! Who do you think makes the decisions?"

My parents rushed home. Without taking off her astrakhan hat, my mother told me about the screwdriver. I hated screwdrivers. I associated them with my bike, which had to be fixed all the time as I rode the thing down hills, stairs, curbs, and through just about anything in my way. I took my mother's cold, velvety hands and warmed them with my breath. She laughed brightly. Her gold tooth gleamed in the back of her mouth like a little bell. Back then, I saw her as a conservative, middle-aged woman whom I had to beg to add one more centimeter of flare to the hem of my fake jeans. Now I am astounded at how young she had been that spring, only thirty-eight. "Don't worry,

Mamochka," I said, "I'll be all right." I passed the literature exam and, as a highly ranked candidate, had my first choice of the *facultets*. Ginzburg transferred my application from one pile to the other.

Tolyan's parents had also gone for a walk in the Park of Culture and Leisure that weekend, and his mother was just as beautiful as mine (gymnast's figure, curly blond hair, dimples). But they didn't run into Ginzburg. At the time I was still able to tamper with Tolyan's destiny. I told him to quit automatics and become an economist, like me.

We blazed into Riga in black trench coats. Pins with Magadan's coat of arms—a golden deer flying over the turbulent blue water against a scarlet background—burned on our lapels, just above our hearts. Right away we were sent to pick potatoes for a month at a local kolkhoz. Upon our return, we received navy-blue uniforms and caps and were made to cut our long hair and nascent mustaches.

At university we excelled in the economics of civil aviation, army logistics (our required military specialization), and caught up on sleep during the lectures on Marxism-Leninism. Our dorm room, which we shared with six other guys, stank so much of sweat, feet, cigarettes, vodka, and food we had forgotten to refrigerate that in order to fall asleep, we put handkerchiefs

soaked in cologne over our noses.

But outside was Riga, so European and clean, so different from Magadan and even Moscow. Only a fool would sleep all night in such a city. Around every corner were coffee shops with five-kopeck espressos and cheap restaurants decorated in grand style and named after Riga's sister cities: Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Dallas. Street kiosks sold Polish and East German newspapers full of pop music charts, photographs of beautiful models, and of the Beatles—our paper window into the West.

To supplement our student stipends, Tolyan and I worked part-time jobs. First, at the candy factory, which we were fired from for stealing candy. Then, at the vodka distillery, which we were fired from for getting massively drunk. Finally, I settled as a night guard at the glass container storage. While Riga, the captive European princess, slept dreaming of freedom, I listened to the Voice of America, the BBC, and Radio Liberty, broadcasting news from around the world in Russian. The container storage was located on the Daugava River, where reception was the clearest in the whole city. Tolyan worked on the chipping floor of a match factory, inhaling sawdust all day. For the damage to his lungs he was given a free bottle of milk daily. His lips were constantly coated with a film of fine sawdust, and at the most inopportune moments he would break out into a violent cough. But we made enough money to finance our modest student fancies: Elita cigarettes, *holodets* at a favorite café, an occasional ticket to a car race or an organ concert at the Dom Cathedral,

and copious amounts of vodka, wine, and the famous Riga Black Balsam.

Tall, blue-eyed, and wavy-haired, we were at the peak of our boyish handsomeness. Latvian girls looked at us with admiring fear of our seeming worldliness. So what if we got roughed up by the Latvian guys a few times? There were plenty of Russian girls in Riga, too. We barely noticed how five years of lectures, exams, dances with live bands, and standup comedy competitions clattered past and disappeared around the corner.

We graduated with red diplomas and the rank of junior lieutenant, having passed even the Marxism-Leninism exam, and received priority distribution back to Magadan because of our family roots. My family by then had moved west: my parents to Ukraine, the country of their birth, and Angela to study chemical engineering in Moscow. Through my father's connections, they left me the best thing a young bachelor could ask for: not just a room in a *kommunalka*—which would have been the allocation for a single person without children—but a private one-bedroom apartment with its own bathroom and kitchen. All this without having to wait in line!

We were glad to be back. Magadan, in those days, was the third-most coveted place of employment, after Moscow and Leningrad. Now that there were no Gulag prisoners, someone had to develop the region, and the government encouraged permanent migration with double salaries and benefits that increased every year. The town experienced a real boom as

young people streamed in to take advantage of the "long ruble" and the stores stocked better than those "on the continent," which is what we called the rest of Russia. I got a position as a schedule engineer at the Aviation Administration. Tolyan began working in the passenger relations department at the airport and moved to Sokol, the airport township fifty-four kilometers from Magadan's city center.

Our mustaches had finally asserted themselves. Mine approached the coarse bushiness of the "walrus," while Tolyan braved the slight curvature of the "petit horseshoe." With the cool Baltic wind still whistling in our heads, we set out to stretch the balloon of our reckless youth to its limits. We played tennis and went to the movies with the prettiest girls in town, quickly earning the nicknames "tennisists the penisists." In the winter, we sledded down the glaciers on oilcloth mats, then spent hours searching for lost hats, mittens, and boots. People in Magadan said about me: Tolik, he's a good guy, smart, handsome, reads books, has a good job. But he has this friend in Sokol, Tolyan, who will be the ruin of him. Tolyan's neighbors in Sokol said the same about the good, handsome, educated Tolyan and the bad influence of his debaucherous friend in Magadan—me.

Time rushed by slowly. Historians and journalists coined catchy terms: Khrushchev's Thaw, followed by Brezhnev's Stagnation. Tolyan and I still juggled the same activities: tennis, skiing, drinking, blurry days at work, and girls, with whom we broke up as soon as their slippers and bathrobes appeared in our

bachelor apartments. Minimal responsibilities, minimal rewards. By the time I was twenty-seven, a sense of my own stagnation began to nag at me. When will my real life begin, I wondered, and what was it, exactly, this real life, the one I'd spent so many years preparing for in school? I didn't share these thoughts with Tolyan; he was wholly in his element and happy.

One Saturday in March, when we were twenty-eight years old, Tolyan and I went skiing with several of our friends from the Aviation Administration. This particular slope, our favorite, was in the near wilderness and could only be reached by a rope lift. Over the years we had built a cabin up top and with every trip hauled food, alcohol, and gasoline from the bottom of the hill.

March was my favorite time to ski. The snow was still powdery, yet the sky was already bright blue and high. Compared to February's temperatures and ferocious winds, it seemed almost tropically warm. The deep-frozen dwarf birches and low spruce shrubs were beginning to straighten their shoulders and push through the dense icy crust, buzzing with the electricity of the new sun. We buzzed with them, drunk on the heady spring air. The town was visible from the top of the slope: a white matchbox labyrinth cradled in the snow leopard–colored mountains. As we conquered the hills and drop-offs and caught sight of Magadan during the brief moments we were airborne, it felt as though we were flying toward it. And a part of us, the young, dreamy part of our souls, escaped and beat in the wind awhile longer after our skis hit the ground.

By five o'clock, everybody was getting ready to leave. Tolyan and I skied down first to have the mountain to ourselves. I led the way.

The air was thickening fast. Unexpected bumps lurched from under my skis. Gangs of dwarf birches sprang up out of nowhere on the turns. My heavy backpack was disrupting my balance. Halfway down the slope an invisible force tripped me. Before I fell, I heard a crunch like splintering dry wood. My skis had snapped off. My left boot was facing backward. It wasn't pain, but the sight of that bizarre angle that made me nauseous. I pulled up my unharmed leg to my chest and began to moan.

Tolyan skidded by me a minute later. When he saw my leg, for a millisecond, a spark of anger animated his alarmed expression, the way he flicked the ice from his mustache and threw down his hat. (He had realized that we wouldn't make it to the dance that night.) Then, just as quickly, his face took on the noble grip of determination.

"Don't move." Tolyan picked up his hat and jammed it on my head with its woven visor backward. I'd lost mine during the fall. Then he took off his skis and began the trek up the slope to the cabin to alert the others.

It was quiet. The world was expressed solely in shades of gray, as though somebody had sketched the scraggy trees and slope curves on white paper with a graphite pencil. I felt a sharp pain in my elbow and my back was sore, but the leg didn't hurt. I barely perceived it as a part of my body. The snow Tolyan had picked up

with his hat was dripping slowly down my neck. I was dizzy, yet I also felt a feral, jealous ownership of my body. My blood rattled as if I'd been plugged into a giant central life support system. I was hot and unafraid.

Dark fog saturated the air. Suddenly, I became convinced that the encroaching shadows of the mountains were about to absorb me into their indifferent landscape, make me a flat, black figure —of a man or just a log—invisible to my rescue party. This thought made me tranquil. If only I could send my parents a message that they shouldn't worry, that I would continue my life, except not as Tolik but as an acorn or a little shard of ice.

I spotted a fallen cone next to a tuft of spruce bush needles. The composition looked remarkably like a miniature palm tree, and, for some reason, making this simple connection moved me to tears. I wanted to take a whiff of the spruce, a smell I associated with magic since childhood—probably because of the New Year tree—but I couldn't lean far enough to reach it. I stared at the petals of the cone until they began to quiver, drawers about to open into another world. I felt like I was about to faint and began to hum under my breath. "*Michelle, my belle …*" And then I heard the voices of my friends calling out my name as they descended the slope.

Somebody had already skied down to call the ambulance from the bus stop, they told me. They hoisted me onto a wooden board and tied me down with rope. Tolyan and tall Oleg picked up the front end, and the shorter Slava and Artyom picked up the back.

We inched down. When they ran out of war songs, they sang the discotheque anthems of the day, liberally interpreting the English lyrics: *Shizgara, yeah baby Shizgara* for Shocking Blue's "Venus" and *Just give me money, that pha-ra-on* for the Beatles' "Money." It was getting darker every moment. My pain came to from the shock and began to howl. Finally, I saw the headlights of the ambulance flash from the bottom of the hill.

The last thing I remember before the operation is pleading for the doctors not to cut my ski boot. My Yugoslavian skis and boots were my most prized possessions and had cost a month's salary. The diagnosis was closed fracture of the fibula and tibia, spiral, comminuted. Tolyan had stayed with me in the hospital late into the night.

This all happened on March 8, International Women's Day. We had planned to attend a big dance at the Palace of Prof Unions later that evening. While I was enjoying the post-bone-setting morphine haze, Tolyan tried to call our girlfriends to let them know what had happened. But they had already left for the dance.

Mine was Lily, a little hourglass-shaped Jewish olive, with amber-clear eyes and a bead of a birthmark above her lip that drove me crazy. She was engaged to a rising Jewish academic, which I didn't see as a problem at the time, at least not my problem. Lily ran to my apartment every other night. Who was I to stop her?

She visited me at the hospital three times. Each time the sight of me in bed with my broken leg in traction, supported by various

slings, weights, and levers, brought her to tears. Poor Lily would put her bag on the stand near the bed—although many of my other, less mindful visitors simply hung their bags right on the weight—and stand shyly by my side. Then, her hands would hover above my full-leg cast, brush against my arm, and land over her mouth. She would kiss my forehead so tenderly that a wave of itching sensations rushed down my broken leg. I would seize my metal scratcher, insert it down my cast, and poke about savagely, moaning from pleasure and pain, which would trigger another bout of tears from my beautiful Lily.

The fourth time, it wasn't Lily who came but her mother. Our affair had come out.

"You almost ruined my daughter's life," her mother yelled in a deep, operatic voice. She was fat, almost a perfect square—the kind of woman Lily would probably become in her older years, after having children. "I'd kill you if you didn't look so miserable. I'd make sure you're an outcast in this town."

Suddenly I wanted to laugh, though her threats were far from empty. Lily's father had a high position in the local Party Committee. In Magadan, where everyone knew everyone's business, reputation was important.

Lily's mother went on detailing my lack of morals, of sympathy for a young girl's heart, of respect for their family and my family, of respect for myself. Lack, lack, lack. But the blade had narrowly swung clear of both Lily's head and mine, and I wanted to celebrate. My broken leg had saved my

career. Moreover, it provided a blameless, romantic exit from my relationship with Lily. I knew all along that she wasn't the girl I'd marry even if her engagement broke up, and our inevitable separation, if protracted, could have taken a much uglier form.

Tolyan wasn't so lucky. He was smitten with Anya, an air-headed girl with a lean figure and a voice that went with campfire guitar as smoothly as vodka goes down with salted herring. While Tolyan nursed me at the hospital, Anya let herself be swayed by a former classmate of ours, a certain Seryoga, at the Women's Day dance.

"You didn't have to stay at the hospital. You could've just gone to the dance," I said when he told me the news.

"That didn't occur to me." Tolyan gave me a shaming look.

"Well, she showed her true nature. Why do you need a girl like that?" I said.

"It doesn't matter. There're always more. Seryoga will play with her and dump her soon enough. That's the way he is," he said, picking up my metal scratcher. "What's this for?" He put it in his mouth and chewed, making a disconcerting sound. "Brutal age, rough manners, *nyet romantismy,*" he concluded with a quote from one of our favorite films.

I spent another month at the hospital. Tolyan and I grew out our hair, mustaches, and beards, which made us look like nineteenth-century Russian merchants. When he visited, we drank tea in character—out of saucers—and flirted with the nurses. After I'd been moved home, friends and girls stopped by

to help with groceries and laundry, and to make sure I followed doctor's orders of three hundred drops of vodka daily. I enjoyed three more guilt-free months of reading. I was a big fan of Thornton Wilder then. While reading *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* I wondered, just like Brother Juniper does in the novel, whether there was any logic in who got into accidents or became the victim of various unfortunate events. Of course, breaking a leg was a disaster not on the same scale as dying in the collapse of a bridge. Still, maybe I'd been plunged into this parallel, slower life to learn a lesson. Maybe Lily's mother was right: it was time to grow up. That meant getting married. Surprisingly, this thought no longer threw me into panic.

But I don't want to give the impression that I suffered unduly in heavy self-reflection. Apart from a few physical inconveniences, I loved living in my favorite striped mohair robe, away from my job, which didn't prove to be as exciting as I'd imagined when I went off to the aviation institute in Riga. I was often awake at five in the morning after reading all night to hear the first birdsong of the day. The Eagles' "Hotel California" had just made its way to the northeast and played from the radio in every open window. Sometimes, when reading or watching soccer on TV, I'd forget about my white underwear boiling in a giant pot. The water and bleach would spill onto the stove and then the floor, and this way the whole kitchen would clean itself in minutes. Life was good.

In July, the doctors removed the cast. Later I'd find out that the fibula had grown back at a slight angle: the soles of my left

shoes would now forever develop holes before the right ones even showed signs of wear. I hobbled outside on crutches to exercise my legs. The stream of friends and well-wishers thinned. Everybody had gone on vacation. Tolyan and I played Battleship over the phone, unable to do any of the things that made the cold summer in Magadan bearable. (Tolyan couldn't, or wouldn't, find another tennis partner.) Finally, his father helped us obtain two-week passes to a sanatorium on the Black Sea and off we went to seek a cure for our bachelors' ennui.

It was there that I met my future wife, Marina, who was on vacation with her friend Lenka. I still remember my Marina's green bikini and the giant sagging straw hat, which was quite ridiculous, but on her seemed utterly stylish. Under the hat she had fantastic bangs. On top of it all, she was that mythical creature—an actual pianist and a piano teacher—whereas Tolyan and I, and everyone we knew then, had quit the fashionable, parent-ordered piano lessons after a year of family-wide suffering. A funny story: when I had first asked her what she did for a living, she said that she worked as an instructor. I, however, heard "on a tractor" and was considerably impressed, for days picturing her astride a tractor in the fields of golden wheat, her cheeks red and eyes shining.

Marina didn't take me seriously. I fell in love. While I crabbed after her through the toe-wrenching Crimean pebble beach, trying to impress her with my intelligence and wit, Tolyan was stuck with the plain Lenka. When he found out, though, that her

father was a high-ranking Party apparatchik in Voronezh, with money and connections, she at once became a lot less plain. I realize now that Lenka was the type of girl whose beauty would have been awakened by a truly great love, which Tolyan could neither give nor inspire.

At the close of two weeks we said good-bye to the girls and spent the following months clogging the phone lines with long-distance calls. As soon as my leg was strong enough to bear the weight of a bride, Tolyan and I decided to visit Marina and Lenka in Ulyanovsk, their and Lenin's hometown. I arrived in my most fashionable outfit: a blue plaid blazer, plaid shirt, and navy pants I still had from my European days in Riga. I told myself that as soon as I saw Marina again I'd know. And I did. She met me at the airport in a scarlet dress with white polka dots and giant horn-rimmed glasses, her chestnut hair in a thick schoolgirl braid. The now legendary welcome dinner awaited me at her apartment: meatballs that had congealed overnight into one pot-sized meatball mass and had to be cut with a steak knife.

We married the next month. Tolyan married Lenka because if one must have a wife, it might as well be an apparatchik's daughter, he had reasoned. Perhaps I should have foreseen trouble. But the little sense I possessed at twenty-eight was hopelessly drunk on Marina. I wanted Tolyan to have what I had —the wedding, the young wife. We, after all, had known our brides for the same amount of time: two weeks plus the phone calls. Our chances seemed equal.

The weddings took place on the same day. Back then it was a simple affair: you signed the book at the civil registry office (I remember a big oil portrait of Karl Marx on a whitewashed wall behind the officiant), took pictures next to the war memorials in town, and partied at a restaurant until morning. It was the first time my parents met Marina and I met Marina's mother, Olga, who was the chief doctor of a *polyclinika* in Syktyvkar, a city in the north. I remember being a little bit offended that she'd brought an extra pair of wedding rings, in case we'd forgotten to buy ours. She didn't trust me yet. She'd also brought a family album for me to catch up on my bride's family tree. They came from the Terek Cossacks, with a wild-card Mongolian babushka somewhere down the line. Marina didn't know her father; Olga had left him because of his gambling addiction when Marina wasn't yet two.

I still remember a particular photograph in that album. Marina's grandmother, a chubby, smiling woman in a floral dress, points out something in a book (her finger raised in a teasing, teacherly manner) to Marina's step-grandfather—a much skinnier, tired-looking man with a curly cowlick and linen pants pulled up high above his waist. And he looks at her with the most perfect mixture of attention, humorous suspicion, and love. Marina said she'd seen the ghost of this grandfather after his death—her grandmother's second husband; the first one had been accused of being a Japanese spy during Stalin's repressions and had sat in one of the camps close to Magadan.

What touched me most in that picture was Marina's grandmother's ear. It was the exact shape as Marina's: long and narrow, the lobe the same width as the top. It was then that I felt Marina and her whole lineage of feisty women, including the Mongolian babushka, were now my family.

After our honeymoons—mine in Bulgaria and Tolyan's back in Riga—we took our brides northeast. At first, Marina and Lenka complained about how far Magadan was from the continent, from their parents, and marveled at how close it was to Alaska—a fabled place that was once Russia and now inaccessible America. Soon they acclimated to the weather and began to love, like us, the quiet white days after the snowstorms. They noticed that despite Magadan's extreme remoteness, they were surrounded by intelligent, professional people, who were always willing to help. Survival in the harsh north, especially back in the Soviet times, was impossible without friends and reliable acquaintances.

Marina found work as a piano accompanist in the wind department at the local arts college. On the weekends, we all went mushroom and lingonberry picking, grilled *shashliks,* and sang songs, accompanied badly on the guitar by Tolyan. He'd learned a few chords back in his days of courting Anya. With the first big snowfall I was back on the slopes and teaching Marina, who had never skied before.

My newlywed life was not without surprises and discoveries. That happens even if one makes a proper acquaintance first and

then signs the marriage registration, but we were good candidates for getting used to each other. Tolyan and Lenka weren't so lucky. It was clear from the start that they were catastrophically incompatible. At first, they tolerated each other because of the novelty of marriage. Later, Lenka tolerated Tolyan because she wanted children. He was still a flirt and a heavy drinker. When he wasn't playing tennis with me, he lay on the couch and watched soccer. Sometimes Lenka called me to whine about Tolyan's behavior, as though I'd sold her a defective product. What could I do? I had lost my power over him; he was now her responsibility.

Three years later, Marina and Lenka gave birth, within weeks of each other. Perestroika was taking root in the country and at home. We named our daughter Sophia, after my grandmother, Sonya for short. Tolyan's son sustained an injury at birth and, the doctors said, would be severely disabled for the rest of his life.

Tolyan and Lenka were devastated, and so were Marina and I. We couldn't shuttle between Sokol and Magadan as often with the newborns. And when we did see each other or talk on the phone, Marina and I couldn't fully express our joy about our daughter, nor did we know how to sympathize properly with Tolyan and Lenka. How could we ever come up with the right proportion of understanding, concern, and encouragement? How could we ever truly relate?

When their son turned one, Tolyan and Lenka moved to Voronezh. I didn't try to talk Tolyan out of it, though I knew he would be unhappy there. It would have been me against Lenka and her family. And what could I offer him in practical terms? Now he would be unhappy anywhere. The few times I've thought back to our separation, I am always struck by how undramatic it was. I remember picking up Tolyan's skis at his place for safekeeping and how he had held on to them a moment too long. In the background, Lenka was screaming on the phone, and his son was wailing. I couldn't wait to get out of there. My real life had already begun and was waiting for me back at my apartment, whereas Tolyan's was slipping out of his hands.

In Voronezh, Lenka's father had arranged for a two-bedroom apartment, which by the standards of the day was shockingly spacious for a family of three. He helped Tolyan get accepted into the Party and found him a position at the local aviation agency. Tolyan, I could tell from our still-frequent phone conversations, was miserable. All of his life he'd lived in pursuit of his own pleasure. Now, the care of a sick child—a child, he said, he wasn't crazy about having to begin with—was like a second, more stressful and time-consuming job. It soon became apparent just how spoiled and selfish Lenka was. Her papa could solve only so many of her problems.

Tolyan's unraveling progressed quickly. He drank earlier and earlier in the day, slept at his desk at work. He and Lenka started having affairs. Eventually, their new paramours moved into the

separate bedrooms in their apartment, and the kitchen became a veritable battlefield. When the Union collapsed, Tolyan's father-in-law lost his Party power. Without his patronage, Tolyan and Lenka were both fired from their jobs. They exchanged their apartment for two smaller ones and finally divorced. Tolyan was picked up by a good woman, who, for some reason, decided to save him. (Oh, Russian women! Many of them still live by the principle "Doesn't matter what he is, as long as he's mine.") Lenka took on the custody of their son.

The last time I heard from Tolyan was by phone in '92, shortly before I moved to America. His second wife had sobered him up, and they tried to launch a business importing knockoff brand clothing from Poland. Tolyan refused to cooperate with the local mafia for his "protection" and was beaten up. The business folded. *Brutal age, rough manners*, indeed. On top of that, he got into a car accident and couldn't walk for a year.

I was surprised at how adamantly he interrogated me on the subject of tennis. Did I still play? At our old courts in the Park of Culture and Leisure or at the Palace of Sport? How often and with whom? Since my daughter's birth, tennis wasn't my tenth or hundredth priority, I said, though not dismissively, in honor of our good memories on the court. This seemed to disappoint him gravely. Then he asked after his skis and we talked about the skiing accident. How young, strong, and healthy we were then, with our whole lives ahead of us. In fact, looking back over his life, Tolyan said, he didn't know what it all had been for. He was

a failure at work, at being a husband and a father.

"What about your new wife? Aren't you at least a bit happy with her?" I asked.

"You're going to laugh. I keep thinking about Anya."

Anya, the one who got away and was caught in the memory like a fly in amber.

"You stupid old goat."

"Have you heard anything about her?"

"No." The lie jumped off my tongue instinctively. Anya was still in Magadan, with two daughters. The older one was Seryoga's, although neither he nor the father of her younger daughter, Asya, were around. Asya and my daughter, Sonya, attended a ballroom dance studio in the same Palace of Prof-Unions where Tolyan and I used to go to dances. I had recently run into Anya at one of the ballroom competitions. She was heavyset, her hair faded, her eyes tired and wet. We talked for a few minutes, mostly about our children. Her older daughter was studying piano, she told me with pride. She didn't ask about Tolyan.

I contemplated whether this information would make Tolyan feel better or worse. "Well," he said, "at least it worked out for one of us. Imagine if you hadn't broken your leg then?"

I could have told him that nothing was his fault or mine, that he was simply unlucky. I could have asked him whether there were any medications prescribed for all his bruises or anything else he couldn't get in Voronezh that I could try to procure for him

in America. I could have invited him for a visit. But something inside me turned cold and protective. I was wary of dragging so much bad luck into my new life, nervous about Tolyan's dormant alcoholism, the possibility of his wanting to involve me in some dubious business scheme. A good-for-nothing childhood friend was better left in childhood.

We exchanged a few more reminiscences and hung up.

It was a beautiful afternoon in Southern California, and I decided to take Sputnik to his favorite beach. As I drove, Sputnik breathing fast into my ear, I continued to think about how luck is distributed among the living—a subject I've been ruminating on often lately. I began to understand why Tolyan might be so eager to get in touch with me. For him, the years when our paths ran parallel to each other were the peak of his life. I could only imagine to what legendary proportions our youthful friendship had grown by now in his imagination. For me, however, those years were a takeoff strip, not the flight.

While Tolyan and Lenka hit each other over the head with frying pans in Voronezh, I was living out a happy routine in Magadan. Work, home, grocery stores, day care (then kindergarten and school). Marina cut her thick, dark hair into a bob, which sat on her head like a thatched roof. Sonya was growing up healthy, beautiful, and ambitious. She shined at

school, which in time would be converted into the English Lyceum, with an emphasis on learning English. She studied piano at the special section for gifted children at Marina's college (the poor child was not allowed to quit) and pursued passionately a hundred other interests from basketball and ballroom dancing to theater, figure skating, and astronomy. She often talked about becoming a doctor, like her grandmother Olya. I could never get her to love tennis as much as I did, but she liked to ski. When I showed her the fateful spot where I had fallen and broken my leg—the accident that led me to her mother—she bent down and whispered "thank you" into the snow.

In the summers, we took Sonya to the Black Sea or sent her to her grandparents, Marina's mother in Syktyvkar or my father in Ukraine. My mother died when Sonya was eight. Two years later my father met another woman and moved with her to a small village outside of Kiev called Milaya—"darling." He now had a vegetable plot, a chicken coop, and a goat.

By the time Sonya was born, I was vice president of the Department of Commercial Transportation. Due to my youthful misadventures with the Young Pioneers, political reservations, and, in large part, lack of desire to invest time and effort, I'd never joined the Party and that made further promotion unlikely. I developed good relationships with the head of my department, Vasily Lavrentiev, and the vice president of the Aviation Administration, Afanasy Prokhorov. I could barter my access to distribution of airline tickets for favors and *defitsit*

items. My hours were leisurely. I had plenty of time to spend with my daughter and to appease Marina in the kitchen by frying an occasional fish and potatoes.

In '85, a new man from Moscow, Davydenko, was appointed president of the Aviation Administration and immediately set about getting rid of the old guard. He stirred up half-fictitious criminal cases against a slew of heads of various departments, accusing them of faulty accounting. In those days, the economy was mostly on paper; it was easy to find evidence of just about anything. Prokhorov and Lavrentiev were sentenced to two years of "work for the development of the national economy." Prokhorov, a bear of a man, served out his term as a truck dispatcher, cramped all day in a tiny radio booth. Short and rotund Lavrentiev, on the other hand, was comically appropriate as a loader at the bakery, the same one from which Tolyan and I used to steal bread when we were boys. The town was outraged by the injustice, but we could do nothing.

In the end, the legal drama turned out for my benefit. When several of Davydenko's men, having no prior experience in Magadan aviation, failed to handle the position of the commercial transportation VP, I was appointed to fill it.

In '87, perestroika began in earnest. Food shortages started to occur even in Magadan. I stood in endless lines for meat, milk, and butter; then, just as my turn was coming up, I phoned Marina to bring Sonya to the store to show to the sales clerk. Three meat coupons, three family members accounted for. Marina got

a mushroom haircut and highlighted her hair with ashen streaks. Prokhorov and Lavrentiev were acquitted and restored to their former positions—and I had to give my post back to Lavrentiev. There were no job openings, so Prokhorov created a nominal position for me: director of special programs. I had no official duties and absorbed the overflow. In my free time I studied English. In '89 and '90, a passage to America opened via none other than Alaska. The first charter flights were organized to Anchorage, Juneau, and Seattle. Children's choirs and sports teams began exchange programs. Rotary and Lions Clubs and the Seventh-day Adventist Church descended on our backwater shores in a flurry of philanthropic and missionary activity. Americans wanted to invest in Magadan's gold and fisheries, and see the ruins of the ill-famed Gulag.

In time, the agency developed an international aviation department, and I happened to be just the right man to head it. After I had translated one or two short documents (looking up every word in a dictionary), I was hailed as the resident English-language expert. And, as I wasn't tied up in any other projects, I flew to Moscow to take a course in international aviation and then to Alaska to study the American side of the operation. For the first time in my career, the fact that I'd never belonged to the Party was beneficial; my work visa application was processed without a hitch. I think of my first encounter with America aromatically: the coffee and cinnamon of the hotel lobby, the lilacs of the bathrooms, the deodorant of people unadulterated

by sweat. Though, I must say, even the bright, smiling America could not eclipse the impressions of youth—the cobblestone streets of Riga, the view through my paper window.

In the fall of '92, I moved to Anchorage to become the airline's representative. Marina had grown out her hair into a bob again and dyed it red. This was shortly after I had talked on the phone with Tolyan for the last time, after his ridiculous intimation that my skiing accident had ruined his life. I was tempted to argue that I did well because I worked hard and planned far ahead. But I knew I'd been helped along by a string of coincidences, both personal and historical, which to this day continues to thread lucky pearls.

Marina and Sonya remained in Magadan. Since we didn't know how long I'd be in Anchorage, we decided it would be better not to interrupt Sonya's school and music education, friendships, and activities. At the time, Magadan was suffering a mass exodus to the continent. With the collapse of the Union, social and economic infrastructure also collapsed. Power outages occurred weekly, schools weren't heated, inflation soared. The shops were finally full of imports, but only the New Russians could afford them. For everyone else salary was delayed for months, and Marina was paid with a few coupons for the local grocery store. I thanked my fortune to be able to send a big box of food with the pilots on the short flights from Anchorage—a weekly Christmas for my family. Sonya was crazy about sushi, strawberry milk, cream-filled toaster strudels, yellow legal pads,

and highlighters.

In '96, just as I thought that my life couldn't get any better, there was another power shakeup at the Aviation Administration. As soon as I had finished setting up the business from scratch—every detail, from the American way of de-icing airplanes to the printing of tickets—the new bosses fired me. A few months after I returned to Magadan, Marina left me for a TV journalist of local semifame. Her hair was long and red. Sonya was thirteen, too old to lie to about certain things.

For a year I floundered. Then I decided to prove to Marina that leaving me was the biggest mistake of her life. I joined one of the young airlines that cropped up during the first fertile years of capitalism, contacted several investors I'd met in America, and worked with red-eyed determination. After a couple of years, we had a fleet of five planes. By '99, I was back in Anchorage on my own terms. So, in a way, I was fortunate that Marina left me, too.

I took Sonya with me so she could attend the last two years of high school in America. She catapulted to the top of her class and went to Princeton on a full scholarship. In college, she entertained ideas of becoming a film director, an actress, a photographer, and, briefly, even a fashion designer, but in the end she stuck with her childhood dream of following in her grandmother Olya's footsteps. She's twenty-eight now, an oncology resident in New York. When she finds the time, she dates. She is not the kind of girl who'd jump into marriage after two weeks. In America, young people are cautious, afraid of the

losses that may come with marriage and love. While in the USSR, most of us had nothing to lose but innocence—and even that we usually managed not to lose much of. Sonya is wiser than Marina and I were at her age. And if she makes a mistake, I hope that luck will come to her rescue, just as it has always come to mine.

Marina moved to Anchorage a year after Sonya. By then her relationship with the TV journalist had disintegrated. She let her hair grow out to her natural color and cut her bangs, which made her look so much younger. I hadn't divorced her because, having no official relations in America, she wouldn't have been able to immigrate, and Sonya needed her mother. We are still not divorced; there was never a hard-pressed need for it. Marina still lives in Alaska and is friends with many other Magadan expatriates. We often speak on the phone. She has almost forgiven me for the ways in which I had disappointed her, and I have almost forgiven her betrayal. After all, she'd been nothing but a positive influence in my life.

In 2011, our little airline company ceased flights between Anchorage and Magadan—there was no longer a market. Perhaps Americans had become disenchanted with the way Russians did business. I wouldn't blame them. The portal of friendly associations and opportunistic marriages had shut. Instead of taking a four-hour nonstop flight across the Bering Strait, those who wanted to visit relatives now had to connect through Seattle, Seoul, Vladivostok, or through Los Angeles and Moscow—all the way around the globe. In the summers, it would

probably be easier to paddle over in a canoe, fingers crossed and betting on the old Russian *avos*—"what if."

What if, what if.

My partners and I disbanded the company, paid our debts, and called it a good run. Then, after more than fifty years of snow, vicious winds, and icy nights, I moved to California, where Angela had been living for years and working as a manicurist. Hers is a whole other story. I live quietly now, minimally, in the golden land of dreams, which to Tolyan and me had once seemed farther than the moon. I manage a few properties. I try not to tax my luck.

I'd been walking on the beach for almost an hour—my exuberant Sputnik so wet and happy—thinking about how readily I always dismissed Tolyan's disabled child. I'd tucked that tragedy between a hapless first marriage and a failed career. But, surely, this misfortune had influenced his life in ways I couldn't imagine. How was the boy now? I almost didn't want to know.

On the other hand, knowing Tolyan, I could as easily see him as an emotionally and physically absent parent to a healthy child. Children were not one of his great interests, nor was his career. Though, how many blows on the head could one take until one finally decided it was safer to stay on the ground?

Perhaps I had misinterpreted Tolyan's comment back in '92,

and he didn't blame me for what had gone wrong in his life. He simply wanted to reconnect, and that was what today's phone call was about as well.

How much of my life did he know? What news, what rumors had reached him?

Or maybe he wanted to ask for a favor. If he had sought me out, the favor was probably big. Russian people had a notion that all Americans were rich and powerful, and definitely all Russians who had made it in America. First, it wasn't true. And second, he didn't know what it had really taken, all the dirty details. My family didn't know. He couldn't just show up and pick the fruits.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.