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Tyubik

a novel by
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Dear reader, you can read this book from any chapter, in any order, just like when you ride the train, meet people at random, and listen to their stories that don't seem to be connected, yet the moment you get off the train, they come together in your mind and become one whole. Welcome aboard.

1.

"It's the penis of my dead father, you know?" Olesya rolled Tyubik on the table, back and forth, back and forth. Her puckered lips made small tooting noises, mimicking a train engine, and for a moment her face was the face of a little girl lost in play. "It's the same size, about the same shape. And by now, I'd imagine, the same color. How do you put something like this inside a five-year-old? Tell me."

She looked up at Dima.

He sat motionless on the berth across, his armpits prickled with sweat, his mouth opened slightly. The empty tea glasses by his elbow rattled in their nickel holders every time the car passed over a switch. He grabbed them. The rattling stopped.

"Not that it matters now." Olesya shrugged. "Not that any of it ever mattered, really."

She turned Tyubik onto its back, spun the wheels, stroked the green shiny hide, touched the headlamp with the tip of her

finger. It looked like a giant roach knocked over, helpless. She smiled and flicked it. It spun around and around, and she suddenly snatched it and squeezed it until her knuckles went white, then set it back on the table, started rolling it again.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Dima allowed himself a breath. "Do you...want to tell me more about it?"

Her hand stopped and she looked at him like she saw him for the first time. "Tell you more about what?"

"About what you just said."

"What did I just say?"

"You said that...I thought..." He looked at Tyubik. "I thought you said that it's—"

"What about it? It's just a toy. I should really throw it away already. Enough holding on to it, like it means something. It means *nothing*." She dropped it in her lap, folded her hands over it, and looked out the window.

The wind whined like a crying child and the wheels clicked away the kilometers. They were racing down a steep ravine, its walls dark and tall and pitted, the sky above it grey, the air cold, the snow blackened and frozen.

"Tanechka came to see me yesterday."

Dima gave a little start. "Who?"

Olesya looked at him without blinking. "You asked me to

tell you what happened last night, so I'm telling you. Tanechka came to see me."

"Tanechka? Who's Tanechka?"

"My dead sister."

"I didn't...know you had a sister. You never told me."

Olesya shrugged. "There's nothing to tell, really. She died before I was born."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, *please*. What's there to be sorry about? I never knew her. I only saw her in photographs."

Dima lifted the tea glasses from the holders, stacked them, set them on the table, smoothed the tablecloth and watched his hands for some time sitting perfectly flat, his fingers long and slender. "You mean, she came to see you in a dream?"

"No." Olesya gave him a long look. "No. I mean, she came to see me."

"But, you said—"

"Listen. You asked me to tell you what happened, and I'm telling you. If you're not interested in listening, then I'm not interested in continuing this conversation. Really, it's easier not to say anything. No one ever listens, anyway. Or they do, but they don't believe me. So what's the point in talking? Tell me." Her eyes opened wide, and Dima noticed they were the same grey as the nickel holders, maybe a little more blue in them, the pupils dark holes.

"I *am* listening."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Are you, *really*?" She waited.

"Yes, I am."

"All right."

2.

Soft scratching at the door.

Scratch-scratch. Stop. Scratch-scratch. Stop.

Olesya sat up with a start.

The train stood still, and the window was solid black. A reddish glow from a distant semaphore pulsed every few seconds, and the naked birches swam up from the night and sunk back into it like so many ghosts. Olesya clasped the edge of the table, pulled herself to the window, pressed her cheek to the glass. It was cold, frosted. They have stopped not too far from the station, perhaps to let another train pass, perhaps held back by the dispatcher, waiting for the green signal. Olesya stared at the darkness until she could pick out separate branches. She forgot why she woke up, then the scratching started again, more urgent now, insistent.

She looked at the door. Her stomach filled with ice.

Someone stood on the other side of it, demanding to be let

in.

She threw back the blankets, tucked her hair behind her ears, swung her legs off the berth, and stepped on the threadbare carpet. The sound of her woolen socks touching it joined another sound, the sound of breathing, her own and someone else's, rapid. She made a cautious step, another, reached for the security latch—

Smack!

She jumped.

Smack! Smack!

A small hand was repeatedly slapping the door at the height of her chest.

She took a deep breath and let it all out, shaking her head, almost laughing. It was just a child, probably lost on the way back from the toilet, must have mixed up the doors or else was too sleepy to walk all the way down the car. Olesya's compartment was the first on the right, thanks to Alla Borisovna who managed to convince the administration to splurge on *firmenny* train, complaining in her shrill authoritative voice that on the last tour her dancers got no sleep, jammed into second-class four-berth compartments, the beds as hard as boards, the food terrible, the windows drafty, and a million other reasons. They all huddled by the studio door, listening to the dying echoes, knowing she got what she wanted before she stormed in and told them, her ratty face splotchy, her lips

white.

Two weeks later at Kazansky terminal, forcing her way through the crowd, Alla Borisovna clasped Olesya's shoulder and casually informed her that as their future prima she's getting the *lux* treatment, her own personal compartment. This drew jealous stares from Egor and Milena, and later, when they finally boarded, triumphant looks of pity. It turned out Olesya was to occupy the first compartment at the head of the car, and since the moment the train departed she was forced to listen to the constant flushing preceded by the gurgle of piss or, in one special case, the resounding splatter of diarrhea. As if that weren't enough, Natasha was put together with Lyuba, and the boys stacked Olesya's second berth with bags of costumes, pointes and headpieces, and other Swan Lake paraphernalia to avoid the embarrassment they had suffered in Ufa when the theater director announced that they'd have to dance on an empty stage as there was no money for props, and no amount of Alla Borisovna's screaming changed that.

Olesya glanced at the dark outlines of the boxes and tried to remember if she heard the toilet flush. Did she? But her hand was already lifting the latch and sliding the door.

"Olesya?" The voice of the girl was bright and chipper, and it sounded oddly familiar. "What took you so long?" She unceremoniously walked aside and plopped on the bed. "Didn't you hear me?"

Olesya automatically closed the door behind her, staring at the girl. "I'm sorry, who are you?" And then, "How do you know my name?"

The girl shrugged, and something in the movement of her shoulders made Olesya uneasy. "Papa told me." Then she lowered her voice and curved her hand around her mouth. "But don't tell him I told you, okay? Or he'll *kill* me."

"Papa? Whose papa?"

"Shhh!"

The girl was up on her feet, listening hard, her hands slack, her mouth open. The semaphore glow switched from pulsing red to streaming green, and Olesya got a good look at her face. It was freckled, eyes big and round, hair wavy, tied in pigtails with satin ribbons.

The train jerked and started moving. The lights switched on. Olesya froze.

She was looking in the mirror.

She was five, and she wore a red summer dress crocheted for her by baba Zina. On her feet were white cotton socks and red slingback sandals to match the dress, but the shade was off. Mama was lucky to get red shoes at all. She lied that she had two daughters and got two pairs, the second pair three sizes bigger, to the envy of the women in the line behind her (they were the last red pairs, the rest of the sandals were brown), and baba Zina picked out the cotton yarn as close to the shoe

color as possible, to make a new dress for her birthday. Uncle Sasha was coming over with his camera to take pictures of them all, and of her in particular. She wanted to go to the ballet school the very next day. They didn't accept girls younger than five, and Papa said he'd take her to the Bolshoi Theatre to see Swan Lake, to celebrate, they'd go first thing in the morning, take the train—

“Tanechka?”

It was the girl from the photographs standing on Mama's desk, the girl who never smiled in any of them, the girl who was run over by a train on her fifth birthday.

“He's here,” Tanechka said, her eyes getting wide. “It's about to start, Olesya. It's about to start!” She grabbed the hem of her skirt and lifted it. She wore no panties. Her flat little belly stretched over her hipbones like the skin on a drum, below it a soft, plump swell that Tanechka protectively cupped with her hand. “Don't let him do it, Olesya. Please. Please, don't let him. Please! He's coming!” She shook her head from side to side, pigtailed flapping. The train lurched, added speed, and something heavy slammed in the door.

Bang!

The entire compartment shook, and Tanechka's mouth made a round O. “No! No-no-no! I don't want to! Go away! Go away!” Her voice rose to a hysterical shriek, and Olesya threw herself at the door. “Open the window!” she screamed.

Tanechka nodded, scrambled up the berth onto the table and tugged on the handle, trying to pull it down. "It won't move! It's stuck!" She grabbed it with both hands and hung on it, then jerked it. The frame rattled.

"The cord!" Olesya pointed at the rubber channel running around the window. "Pull on the cord!" The door shook underneath her, the security latch jiggled.

"What cord? Where?" Tanechka looked around.

"The emergency cord!" Olesya let go of the door, crossed the compartment in two steps and felt with her fingers along the casement, looking for a break, for some gap to stick in her fingernails and pick at the end of the rubber and-

"It's no use, Olesya. You can't stop him." Tanechka put her hand on Olesya's arm, and it lost all feeling. It was a hunk of ice somehow attached to her body, the numbness slowly spreading to her chest, her belly, her legs. She couldn't move, couldn't open her mouth, she could only watch.

A kind of deathly fear twisted Tanechka's features, the fear of a child who knows she will die and can do nothing to prevent it. The blood drained out of her face, and the fear got replaced with agony, the need to self-destruct on her own terms, before being destroyed by another. She turned to the window, took hold of the handle with both hands and hit her face on the glass. Again. And again. And again. Then she stopped, looked at Olesya and smiled the way she never smiled in the photographs.

It was the smile of a child who was told to smile to look happy, to be thought happy by those looking at the photographs later. She turned away and rammed her face in the window with such force, for a moment Olesya thought she broke the glass, but she didn't. She broke her face instead. There was the snap of a bone. Blood squirted from Tanechka nostrils. She drew back and bashed her head repeatedly until it became a dripping mess, so when the latch gave up and the door slid open, it wasn't Tanechka who faced her Papa, it was—

3.

"And...?"

"And nothing. I fainted. Or at least I think I fainted. I woke up in the morning, when Natasha knocked on my door." Olesya put her hands on the table, her fingertips almost touching Dima's.

"How do you know if—" he cut himself off. "Oh, *shit*. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

He touched Olesya's hands. She tore them away, put them back in her lap, looked down at Tyubik. "See? This is why I didn't want to tell you. It's why I don't usually tell anyone. You want to know if it was real, you want some kind of a proof. Everyone always wants some proof, as though my words alone aren't proof enough. As though it doesn't matter what I say, what matters is what they want to hear, and nobody wants to hear it, Dima, it's uncomfortable. It's the kind of stuff that gets swept under the rug and kept quiet, and if you dare to pull it

out, you get punished. They stop talking to you, they ignore you, like what you say is not words, it's shaking air, and if you keep at it, if you *dare* keep at it, you know what they do?" She looked up at him.

He shook his head.

"They blame you. You. You're the one at fault, you see? You shouldn't have ventured there in the first place. It's in the past, it's forgotten. They've worked so hard to bury it, and here you come digging it up, and it stinks, you know? It stinks to high heaven." Olesya's lower lip trembled. She bit on it hard, drew blood.

"Hey," Dima reached out.

She shrunk back.

"Hey, hey. Stop that. Stop—"

"What do you care?" her voice caught. "What do you *care*?"

"I do. I do care. I love you. Do you hear me? I love you. I'll tell you this as many times as it takes for you to believe me. It doesn't matter to me how long—"

"Well, guess what." She leaned over the table, the edge of it painfully digging in her breasts, her face centimeters away from Dima's. "I got proof this time. I got it."

The car bumped over a switch, and the stacked glasses toppled, rolled off the table, clonked on the carpet. Olesya held Dima's eyes, never glancing away, never blinking. "Here." She reached under her woolen sweater, one of many baba Zina's

birthday presents, and pulled out a wad of something white, tossed it on the table.

"What is it?"

"I found it under my berth this morning, when I was looking for my slippers."

Dima studied it, his brow creased.

"Go on. See for yourself."

He smoothed it flat. A pair of white cotton little-girl panties, the elastic stretched out, poking through the hole in the seam in a crudely tied knot, the crotch greyish-yellow with wear, the leg openings fraying.

"It could be...anybody's. Somebody could've lost it."

"You're not done looking." Olesya's voice was low, chocking, and Dima knew.

Before his mother hung herself and left him alone with his alcoholic father who used him as an outlet for his frustrations, before he forgot that little things could be beautiful simply because someone did them with love, before any of it his mother's touch was everywhere, in the way she stacked the plates in the cupboards just right, the way she hung his coat on the hook by the door, the collar folded down, the sleeves straightened, the way she ironed his little shirts and shorts, rolled up his socks, sewn the labels on every pair of his underwear.

Dima folded the front of the panties down, and there it

was, a thin strip of cotton affixed to the back of the waist seam in neat short stitches, and on it written in blue ballpoint pen: "Tatyana Belaya."

He stared at it for a very long time.

The bells did their dinging, and the train whistled and hissed and slowed down to a stop. The sliding doors swished, the footsteps walked down the aisle, the voices, the station announcements.

A knock on the door.

"Olesya? Do want to come out with me? Stretch the legs? Come on. They're selling homemade piroshky. Crazy women, I tell you! It's almost night."

Dima raised his eyes at Olesya.

She looked at the door.

"Olesya? Olesya, you there?"

"Yes, Natasha. I'm here. Just a moment, okay? I'm changing."

"Well, I'll be outside. Come join me!"

"Will do."

The footsteps went away.

"What are you going to do?" Dima asked.

Olesya glanced away quickly. "What's there to do?"

"Well, I mean, if she comes back..."

"So what? Let her come back. I guess I'll listen to her. What else can I do? See what she wants to show me."

Dima's hand hovered over Olesya's. "May I?"

"Sure."

He took it between his hands, kissed it. "What can I do to help?"

"Help with what?"

He closed his eyes, opened them. "Olesya...please. Why are you doing this?"

She sat up straight. "Why am I doing *what*? I'm not doing anything. I told you, if you don't want to listen—"

He put a finger across her lips, quickly took it away. "Sorry. Sorry. I don't know how else to...I mean, it's not something...when you hear something like this for the first time—"

"You don't have to explain." She abruptly stood, Tyubik clenched in her hand. "I get it. Listen, I want to get out. It's stuffy in here. They must've cranked up the heat all the way, the idiots. In the hard sleeper you freeze, in the soft one you cook. I suppose it's to remind you of the extra rubles you had to fork out to ride the *firmenny* train like some party bigwig." She grabbed a handful of her sweater on her chest and flapped it, blew air up her face. Her cheeks turned rosy-pink, and tiny droplets of perspiration glistened over her lip.

"You're beautiful," Dima said.

She flinched as if slapped. "What?"

"You're beautiful."

"No, Dima. There's nothing beautiful about me. You're coming or what?" She stepped in her winter boots, pulled on her duffel coat, pressed the hat down to her eyes, and stood looking at him.

Dima glanced at her hand, still clutching Tyubik.

"Yes. I'm coming with you. I'm coming."

4.

The corps de ballet girls huddled by the entrance to the station building, smoking and laughing and hopping from foot to foot, passing around a small bottle, knocking it back. A few of the soloists smoked a short distance off in the yellow pool of the streetlamp. The platform was swept with fresh snow, and the bundled-up vendors walked from car to car like some dark shapeless forms, offering their steaming wares.

"Hot corn! Hot corn with salt!"

"Smoked fish! Homemade piroshky!"

"Soap! Toilet paper! Toothpaste!"

Toothpaste. Olesya flinched, gripped Dima's hand and jumped out of the car.

"Getting some fresh air, eh?" The conductor beamed at them his two golden teeth, his nose frozen red, small eyes tearing. He snorted, hawked up his snot and spat it out with gusto, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, pushed his *ushanka* down.

"Boy, I tell you, this February is nothing like I remember. The devil take me. It's supposed to be minus thirty-two degrees this night! Now that's cold or what? That'll freeze your balls right off! Make them ring like some goddamned church bells, eh?" He cackled. "You make sure you warm them up for your husband, sweetheart. You hear me? You make sure—"

Olesya tore her hand out of Dima's and quickly walked away. She heard him say something short and harsh to the conductor, heard the conductor swear. Her face was on fire.

Toothpaste.

She squeezed Tyubik in her pocket, thinking that maybe she shouldn't wait, maybe she should do it now. But no. She waited this long, didn't she? And two more days wouldn't make a difference, would they? She walked on without looking where she was going. The little hairs in her nostrils stuck together with every inhale, and it felt like her nose has shrunk and her eyeballs froze solid. She blinked, stopped, caught her breath. It burst out of her mouth in white curling puffs.

"Olesya? Olesya! Wait up!"

Natasha was running along the platform, her copper hair streaming behind her. She never wore a hat, no matter how cold it got. She never wore gloves or mittens for that matter either. Her hands always stayed warm and china-white, unlike Olesya's that turned red at the first drop of temperature, like she dipped them in scalding water.

"Why didn't you wait for me? I was right over there, with the girls. I was waving at you, and you marched right off."

Natasha shook out her hair and tucked it under her fur collar.

She looked like one of baba Zina's porcelain ballerinas, so lovely, so sweet, so perfect. It was hard to look at her sometimes, hard to be reminded that there were girls out there who never knew what Olesya knew, whose mothers and fathers loved them, who were alive and together, and who listened and sympathized and understood—not that she ever told them anything. She never told anyone anything...it was easier that way. If she could, she'd spend every night at Natasha's cozy first-floor apartment, eating homemade *pelmeni* in the kitchen, listening to her mother joke and knock back her head and laugh with a wide-open mouth, watching her father kiss her, his wrinkled face young, his eyes lit up with adoration, stealing a piece of Natasha's life, pretending it could be hers. But it couldn't, of course. And she couldn't invite herself over, so she patiently waited for Natasha to drag her with her after class, or after performance, never telling her what those visits meant for her, how they carried her for weeks and months afterwards, how—

"Where were you going?"

Olesya looked away. "Nowhere."

"Are you all right?" Natasha touched her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"You look like you were crying."

"No. No, I wasn't. It's nothing. It's just...I haven't slept all that well, so my eyes must be all puffy." She dabbed at them. "Do they look that bad?"

Natasha turned Olesya's face up to the light. "No, they're okay. Maybe a little red, but that's nothing makeup can't fix. Besides, we have a whole day tomorrow, so I wouldn't fret if I were you." She let go of her chin and sighed. "All right, Olesya. That's enough pretending. Out with it."

"What do you mean, out with it? Out with *what*?"

"You're asking *me*?" Natasha raised her eyebrows. "I don't know. Whatever it is that's bothering you, because something is clearly bothering you, I can see it. And don't you try telling me otherwise, because it won't work." She pressed her lips together, her nostrils flaring.

Olesya was silent.

"What? What is it? Did something happen?" Natasha's face softened. "Why are you so sad? You look so sad, I can't bear looking at you. What is it?"

"There is no way I can tell quickly." Olesya glanced over Natasha's head. Dima was walking to them in his ballet duck walk, feet turned out, back straight.

Natasha followed her gaze. "Ohhh. Did something happened between you two? Did you have a fight?"

"No. No, it's not that."

"Then what *is* it?"

"I'm sorry. I have to go."

Olesya turned around and ran to the head of the train.

5.

"It's just like a *tyubik* of toothpaste, see?"

"Can it squeeze out the toothpaste, Papa?"

"Of course it can, silly. Do you want to do it?"

Olesya looked at the flabby penis hanging over the elastic of the striped pajama pants. It was a strange looking thing. It both revolted and fascinated her. She wanted to touch it, and she was afraid to. "How do I do it?"

"Just like you squeeze out your toothpaste every morning when you brush your teeth. Go on. Don't be afraid. It won't bite you." Grigory Vasilievich leaned back on the pillow, his sunburned face handsome. A lock of black curly hair fell on his tall forehead, and he smiled at her encouragingly.

The mosquitoes whined around the net that hung over their bed, and outside Olesya could hear the first sounds of morning. The tiny *babushka* who rented them the room last night at the railway station was bustling around in the yard, making them

breakfast, and her fat dog Vita barked lazily at the passersby who walked down the street to the sea, their flip-flops slapping the cobblestones, their voices rising and falling, rising and falling.

It was warm. It felt safe.

Olesya lifted her hand and stopped.

It didn't look like her *tyubik* of toothpaste. Her *tyubik* was white with a wide green label on it, spelling out *Myatnaya* in bold letters, and it smelled like mint, too, but this thing didn't smell like mint, it had a strange nauseating odor. It smelled like the medicine baba Zina gave her when she was sick, in a spoon mixed with water and sugar.

Papa took her hand and wrapped her fingers around it. Olesya gasped. It wasn't hard and cool like she imagined it would be, it was soft and warm, and it started growing the moment she touched it. She froze, her eyes opening wide, watching it swell. The skin at the tip opened, and a large head emerged from it, pink and shiny like the pointe shoes the older girls wore at the ballet school.

"What's it doing, Papa?" she whispered.

Grigory Vasilievich opened his eyes and looked down at Olesya as if he forgot all about her. "It's getting ready to squeeze." His voice was low and raspy, his breathing fast. Olesya had never heard him talk like that before, and she took her hand away, frightened. He put it back around the thing that

was now thick and hard like a *tyubik* of toothpaste all right, and she relaxed a little. Maybe it did squeeze out toothpaste after all. She was curious to see if it were true.

"Now you move it like this." He pushed her hand up and down, up and down.

Olesya shook her head. "No, papa. That's not right. That's not how I squeeze out the toothpaste. I squeeze it out like this." She curled her fingers around it, trying to close them all the way, but they were too short. She placed her other hand on top of the first and squeezed as hard as she could. Nothing came out of the tip.

She pouted. "Why isn't it squeezing, Papa?"

Papa's face sharpened. "Because you're doing it wrong. Here. Let's do this. Pretend like your hands are a tunnel—remember the tunnel we passed?—and this is the train engine, okay? It's coming out, and then back in again. Out and in. Can you do that for me?"

Olesya stared. "But why would it go back in?"

"Because it wants to."

"That's silly. Why would it want something like that?"

"Just *do it*."

It was a command, not a request, and Papa's face turned dark and scary, like it did when he spanked her.

Olesya's heart thudded in her little chest. She started moving her hands like he showed her, up and down, up and down.

"That's my girl, that's my little ballerina. Keep going like this." Papa rolled up his eyes and closed them.

Olesya suddenly stopped. "What should I call it?"

"What?" His eyes flew open. They were bulging from their sockets.

Olesya shrunk back. "I just wanted to know what I should call it."

"Call it however you want."

"How about Tyubik?"

"Fine. Tyubik it is. Now move your hand, will you? Go on. We need to do this before breakfast."

Olesya did, and in a short while hot white stuff squirted out of the little hole on the top. It smelled like bad cheese, and Papa grabbed the pillow from under his head and pressed his face into it, moaning, his whole body shuddering.

Olesya tore her hands away. "Papa? Papa, are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine. Get dressed now. I need to use the bathroom."

He was off the bed and gone before Olesya could ask him why he was so mad at her. What did she do wrong? She heard it in his voice, saw it in his face. She did what he asked her to! She must try again, and she must do a better job next time. She nodded to herself, wiped her hands on the sheets, and slipped her feet into her new summer sandals.

6.

"I never knew I wasn't the only one—"

The train whistled. The restaurant car lurched around the bend, and the cups rattled in their saucers.

Dima patiently waited.

Olesya picked up her fork and poked around at her Olivye salad, speared a bit of creamy potato stuck together with a bit of carrot and bologna, put it in her mouth, chewed slowly. The food had no taste, the mayonnaise bland, the vegetables overcooked, soft and soggy.

Dima sipped his tea, set the cup down. Behind him a gaggle of soldiers laughed at some joke and clinked glasses, drinking to something. A waitress in a frilly white apron walked by with a full tray of dirty plates, her gait rolling like that of a sailor, body swaying, the tray balanced precariously on her outstretched hand.

Someone called to her, slurring. "Hey, beautiful!"

Beautiful! Over here."

"I can't stand it." Olesya set the fork down.

"Maybe it's not the best place to talk?" Dima said. "Do you want to go to my compartment? Egor is over at Milena's, and I'm alone for the evening. Who knows, maybe for a whole night."

Olesya tensed.

"That's not what I meant," Dima said quickly. "Please, don't take it the wrong way, I was only saying that—"

"I'd like that...actually."

"You would? Really?"

"I'm scared." She reached for his hand across the table, and he clasped it with both his hands.

"My God, Olesya. Your hands are ice-cold. Are you cold? Do you want my jacket?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. No, I'm fine. I'm..." She looked up at him. "What am I saying? I'm not fine, Dima. I'm not fine at all. I'm scared." Her eyes brimmed with tears. She blinked them back. "I'm scared to go to sleep. I'm scared to be alone. He comes to me every night. Every night he comes, and every night it's the same, over and over and over again...it's like he hasn't died at all, like he's always there. It's worse than when he was alive, it's a thousand times worse. If he were alive, at least I could do something, I could hit him, I don't know, try to hurt him back, fight him. I'm not a little girl anymore, I bet I'd be as strong as he, if not stronger, but I

can't do it, Dima! I can't! I can't touch him. There's nothing to touch. There's nothing...except this." She set Tyubik on the table, and the green of its hide glistened in the passing lights. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "I can't stand it anymore. I just want to die sometimes."

His mouth opened. "Don't. Don't say that."

"Why? Why not? It's the truth."

"You *can* fight him."

"Oh, I can, can't I? How? Tell me. *How?*" Her last word rang out loudly in a momentary pocket of silence. Some heads turned their way, and Olesya looked out the window, flustered.

The waitress walked up to them, her hands in her apron pockets. "We're closing. You're going to order something else or what?" She looked at Olesya's half-eaten salad plate and the corners of her pink lipsticked mouth turned down. "You're going to finish that?"

"No," Olesya pushed the plate away. "It tastes awful. Go ahead and try it yourself, tell me this is Olivye salad. This is not Olivye salad, this is some poor parody on Olivye salad. Even a child could cook it better."

"*Parody*, is it?" The waitress snorted. "You want to cook it yourself? You be my guest." She snatched the plate from under Olesya's nose and stormed off, muttering under her breath.

"Why did you insult her like that?" Dima said. "That's not like you to insult—"

"Leave me alone." Olesya pulled out a wad of rubles, dropped it on the table without counting, grabbed Tyubik and stood up.

Dima stood up with her, picked up his jacket from the seat, started slipping his arm in the sleeve, but Olesya was already three tables away from him, walking fast. He tucked the jacket under his arm and followed her.

"Hey, Olesya."

She didn't turn.

"Olesya, hang on a minute!" He grasped her arm above the elbow, and she stopped, looking at him. "We're blocking the way."

"All right."

He opened the restaurant door, and they entered the vestibule. It was cold and drafty here, and it stunk of smoke and urine, the clicking of the wheels louder, punctuated with bangs and screeches of the coupling between the cars and the squeaking of the gangway bellows.

Dima held Olesya by the shoulders. "It's hard for me when you're like this. It seems like it doesn't matter what I say, it aggravates you in some fashion, but not saying anything doesn't do any good either. You just clamp up shut and go inside yourself, and I don't know how to get you out of this state. I don't know—"

"Why do you need to get me out of this state? I didn't ask

you to, did I? I'm fine on my own." She wiggled out of his hold and opened the door to the gangway.

Dima grabbed at his hair, pulled it upright. "What do you want me to do, Olesya?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "I don't want you to do anything."

"But I thought you wanted to...spend the night together. I mean, stay in the same compartment. At least this night. Isn't that what you wanted? I can talk to Alla Borisovna, see if she's—"

"You know she'll never approve anything like that." Olesya hung her head, smiled sadly. "God forbid. She'll have a heart attack. Her dancers sleeping together? A boy and a girl, unmarried? Why, that's just not something that ever happens! I bet she's convinced even after you *do* get married, all your babies get delivered by storks, at least all the Soviet babies. Since we have no sex in our country. No rape. No prostitution. It's the disease of the West, of the rotting capitalism."

She pushed the gangway door open with too much force. It banged off the wall.

They entered the sleeper.

"If we do it, Dima, we'll have to do it secretly. And I hate secrets. I've had enough secrets. I hate them. I hate them. I *hate* them." She curled her hands in fists.

"There you are!" Natasha edged along the corridor. "I was

looking all over for you. Where did you guys go? Did you have dinner already? I didn't see you at the restaurant car."

"We came in later, after you left," Dima said.

"Ah. That explains it." She glanced from Dima to Olesya and back. "I suppose you're not going to tell me what's going on, are you? Because something is."

Olesya shrugged.

"Fine. I was looking for you because Krysa wants to talk to you."

"I don't like it when you call her like that," Olesya said.

"Everybody calls her like that, you do too."

"Not recently. No, I don't."

"Well, what else do you want me to call her? A fairy godmother?" Natasha shook the hair out of her face, gathered it in her hand and twisted it. "Stop being such a prude, Olesya. What's gotten into you? I don't recognize you. Ever since we got on this train, you're not yourself."

"That's right, I'm not." Olesya suddenly snatched Dima's arm. "Listen. You were right. I can. I can fight him. With this." She raised her hand, palm up, Tyubik sitting on it, glistening dully.

Natasha lifted her eyebrows. "Fight who? Who're you talking about?"

Olesya looked at her. "My dead father."

7.

That night Egor's hands slipped off of Olesya's waist mid-lift, and she landed on her toes crooked. Her expression never changed, her smile never faltered. She danced the rest of the act flawlessly, as always, and the audience never guessed the tremendous amount of pain she was in. The music ended. They erupted in applause.

"Bravo! Bravo, Belaya! Bravo! Bravo!"

They kept clapping, calling for encore.

Egor turned his strong, narrow face to her and started raising his arm, his foot pointed for a step, but she gave him a quick, barely noticeable shake of a head, bowed, waved, and flitted off into the wings where as soon as she was out of sight she collapsed to the floor like a downtrodden horse, gasping and heaving, sweat streaming down her face, her neck, her naked back, her right leg folded under her snow-white tutu, the foot twisted at an unnatural angle.

The stagehands were busy checking the cables and didn't notice her right away. The corps girls who stood close to the drapes threw worried glances at her, but they couldn't leave. They were about to start their swan dance. Dima was the first to figure out that something was terribly wrong. On his off nights he always waited for Olesya, to walk her to the metro, and with luck, ride with her all the way to her station, walk her home to her communal entrance, steal a goodbye kiss.

He rushed to her side. "What is it? What?"

"The ankle," she rasped. "I think."

"Oh, *shit*. Are you sure?" He dabbed at her face with the sleeve of his white shirt.

She drew back. "What are you *doing*? Are you out of your mind? You'll stain it!"

"I don't care. Let me take a look." He touched her ankle and she cried out, clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes huge. The music for the dance of the four cygnets started almost simultaneously, and her cry went unnoticed. She put her hand down, let out the air.

"I'm never dancing with him again. Never. He did it on purpose."

"You don't know it."

"I don't need to know it, Dima. I saw it in his eyes."

Dima looked over her head, over the heads of the twirling prancing bodies, to the opposite wings where Egor stood with his

arms folded, staring at them, his face unreadable.

"Can you stand?"

Dima turned around.

Alla Borisovna peered down at Olesya. "Well, can you? You need to clear the way." She flicked her beady eyes at Dima. "And you? What are you looking at? Don't just sit there like an idiot. Help her. Get her to her dressing room."

Dima helped Olesya up without a word. This was not the time, not the place to argue, and he tucked his anger deep down, like he did when his father smacked him upside the head.

"I'll go fetch some ice." Alla Borisovna spun on her heels and strode away, her grey sensible skirt melting with the grey of the shadows.

They hobbled to Olesya's dressing room down the corridors, and on the last turn her injured leg caught on the edge of the rug and folded under her. Her arm slipped off Dima's shoulder, and she sunk to the floor. He stooped, hoisted her up and carried her the rest of the way, kicked the door open and set her carefully in the chair by the vanity table.

Behind him the door clicked shut, then flew open again.

Alla Borisovna arrived with a plastic bag of ice. "I asked Milena to step in. It's our luck that she was here today at all. She wasn't planning on coming back from her *dacha* until tomorrow, as far as I know. So. She's going to finish for you Act Two. I hope nothing is broken, Olesya. We can't afford you

being injured, not before the tour."

Olesya glanced up at Dima. There was a question in her eyes, a confirmation. He understood. He shook his head a little and looked down, shoved his hands in his pant pockets. "I'm going to call the ambulance, Alla Borisovna. I'll be right back."

"Hang on. Let me take a look first. I don't trust those *butchers*." She crouched down in front of Olesya and probed around her swollen ankle with surprising tenderness. It wasn't her usual touch they all endured in class, the angry clasp of their arms or shoulders to make them straighten their backs, the smack on their buttocks to tighten them, the fist in their bellies to make them suck them in, make them flat, make them non-existent.

Olesya watched Alla Borisovna's deft slender fingers walk up and down her leg like naked rattails, the knuckles small knots, the skin papery, mottled with age spots, the fingernails clipped down to the pink flesh, scrubbed clean and buffed to a sheen. Alla Borisovna never applied nail polish, never wore any makeup, no jewelry of any kind. The only exceptions she made were for the new production premieres, when she'd show up in her black velvet dress smuggled home from abroad, with pearls in her ears and around her neck, and on those days she looked almost beautiful, her asceticism and severity softened by the light in her eyes that seemed to open wider, grow bigger, watching her

pupils exert themselves on the stage like a proud mother watches her children take their first steps, learn balance, conquer gravity.

"Nothing is broken, thank God. I'll have a talk with Egor about this. He's been rather careless lately." She let go of Olesya's leg and stood up, brushed down her skirt, smoothed her already smooth and lacquered hair all the way to the bun, checked every pin to make sure none were out of place, and only then resumed her talking. "I'm moving you to the first cast, Dima. You're going to partner with Olesya for the rest of the season, and then, depending on your performance, I might schedule you together permanently. It will depend on you, of course. *Both* of you. I take it you're not going to disappoint me."

It wasn't a question, and it wasn't a promotion to celebrate, but before Dima could control himself, he bounced up on his feet, his breath short, his heart thudding. He would've jumped if he could. He fought the urge to scoop up Krysa and twirl her, kiss her leathery cheeks, her tight-pressed lips, her veiny, elegant hands. It was what he promised himself he'd do with his mother after his debut premiere on the Bolshoi stage. He pictured it so many times, it was almost real, her shining eyes, her smile, her joy, all the years of saving for his ballet school, the lies they told his father, the secret practice trips to Yulia's apartment across the landing.

It was all cut short one cloudy September afternoon when he came home from school and found his mother hanging off their kitchen doorjamb. She used his father's army belt that has already left countless bruises on Dima's buttocks, and after her suicide ravaged his tender, soft baby-skin so raw, he couldn't sit for days. And so he stood silent, his mouth closed, only his flaring nostrils betraying his excitement.

Alla Borisovna walked up to the vanity table and rummaged through the brushes, lipstick tubes, powder cases, creams, lotions. "Don't you have a piece of paper here?"

Olesya slowly uncurled her fists. Little red half-moons etched into her palms where she dug in her fingernails. The inner lining of her lower lip was bleeding. She swallowed the coppery taste and pointed to the chair by the window.

"Over there, Alla Borisovna. In my purse. An address book, it's in the side pocket. You can tear out a blank page."

Alla Borisovna fetched it, took an eyeliner pencil from the table, scribbled something, gave it to Olesya. "Call this number and tell Mikhail Ilyich he needs to see you *today*. Tell him Alla Borisovna Krysanova sent you. He's the best orthopedic surgeon in Moscow, treats all Olympic stars. He owes me a favor."

"Will do, Alla Borisovna."

"Good. You take care of that ankle, you hear me? Call me as soon as you have any news. I want you back onstage pronto." She spun around and walked out.

"Alla Borisovna!" Dima called.

She halted at the door and turned around.

"I wanted to..." He clasped his hands together. "I wanted to thank you. I'm...stunned. It's such an honor. I can't believe—"

"Don't thank me yet, Rumyantsev. Officially nothing has happened, do you understand? I didn't tell you anything, you didn't hear anything."

"Of course. Of course. I—"

But she was gone, in her place a group of corps girls rushing into the room in one body, their chatter drowning Dima's thoughts, their eyes darting up and down Olesya, assessing the damage, calculating their chances of being promoted in case she had to be replaced, only two of them feeling genuinely sorry for her, Natasha and Lyuba.

8.

It took a little over two months for Olesya's ankle to heal. She feared a fractured knee, a ripped tendon. She was lucky. It was only a sprained ankle. She was back to rehearsing just in time for their February tour to Simferopol, the sea resort of her childhood. She was torn. One day she wanted to go, the next she changed her mind and walked all the way to Alla Borisovna's office, a written resignation clutched in her ice-cold fingers, but every time she got within reaching distance of the door, she turned around and fled, sprinting along the corridors like a spooked gazelle.

This continued until Dima intercepted her on one of her escapades and asked her what was wrong. She said nothing, but from that day on she threw herself into practice. They danced their parts to exhaustion, long after the last class was over, long after the theater closed, and often had to be chased out by Klava, the short boorish cleaning woman who was a pushed-around

yelled-at nonentity by day, and who took out her revenge on the dancers by night, jangling the keys in their faces and threatening to write a complaint to the director himself, reporting them for an act of sexual intercourse committed right in the middle of the studio floor. It always had the desired effect on them, and she watched them quickly change, stuff their sweat-soaked clothes in their dance bags and scramble out the building in the matter of minutes, her mean eyes flashing.

Dima took an exquisite pleasure in slamming the front door in her face when she attempted to follow them outside. He looked at Olesya, shaking. "That woman! I can't believe it. Whatever did we do, for her to hate our guts like this?"

Olesya shrugged. "We didn't do anything. She's just unhappy."

Behind them the key turned in the lock and the bolt slid home, a little too loud.

Dima blew out the air, and it turned white. He touched Olesya's shoulder. "Hey. Don't worry. She's not going to do it. It's just empty threats, that's all it is. She's enjoying her little bit of power while nobody is looking. Maybe we should write a complaint about *her*, what do you think?"

"I'm not worried." Olesya's voice was distant.

Dima followed her eyes. "Oh, look! It's snowing! I haven't even noticed..."

"Yeah. Isn't it pretty?"

They stood in silence, watching huge clumps of snow fall hard and thick, hushing the noises of the street, covering the asphalt in a white smooth layer that sparkled in the yellow pools of streetlamps.

"I always thought that snowflakes were tiny ballerinas, you know? When I was little. So silly."

"Silly? It's not silly. It's wonderful. Why do you think it's silly?"

"I don't know." Olesya looked down, drew a line in the fresh snow with the tip of her boot, another line crossing it, and two more. "They just...looked like that. I'd catch them on my mitten, and I'd think they hid in their beautiful tutus from the shame of being caught. And I always cried when they melted. I thought they died because of me, because I hurt them."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? It's ridiculous. What's there to be sorry about? Melted snowflakes?"

"I'm sorry you thought they died because of you. It must've been disheartening."

Olesya quickly looked away. "Listen. The metro is closing soon, I need to go. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Can I walk you to the station?"

"You have no hat on. Your ears will freeze off." Her hands twitched. She took them out of her pockets, and Dima was certain she'd reach out and cover his ears, feel them, rub them to warm

them up, but she stuffed her hands back in the pockets and turned away.

He felt himself shrink. "Ah, to hell with my ears. I don't need ears to dance, do I? I can dance without ears just fine."

Olesya smiled. "You're funny. I'm sure Alla Borisovna would be thrilled if you showed up in class earless. Dima, listen, I really got to go. I'll miss the last train if I don't go now. It's almost one in the morning."

Dima shivered, tucked his head deeper into the collar of his jacket. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"I'm sure."

"What about your gloves?"

Olesya blinked. "My gloves? What about them?"

"You have no gloves."

"Oh. Oh, it's okay. I forgot them at home, I guess. It's no big deal. I have warm pockets."

"Here. Take mine." He took out his leather gloves and stuffed them down Olesya's pocket before she could protest. "Go. Go. You'll be late." He stepped back.

"Thank you. These are...nice." She put them on, comically big on her smallish hands, pressed her hat down to her eyebrows, waved to him. "Bye, Dima! Good night!"

"Good night!"

She took off at a run.

"Be safe!"

"I will!"

He waited for her to turn the corner, and then he followed her, as he did every night, flitting from shadow to shadow, hoping she wouldn't look back.

9.

"He raped me."

Milena's breath caught in the telephone receiver. "He didn't rape you. What are you, insane?"

"How do you know?" Olesya's palms broke into sweat. She pressed the handset harder against her ear. "Why would you say something like this?"

"That's crazy! A grown man can't stick his dick inside a five-year-old's vagina! That's impossible! You need to go see a shrink, Olesya!"

"But—"

"Things like that just don't happen!"

"Milena. Milena, please..."

The line went dead.

Olesya listened to the beeps for some time, unconscious of anything around her, then slowly lowered the handset into her lap, her face burning. The round plastic earpiece was wet with

her sweat, or maybe tears, or both. It took another minute for her to remember that she had to put the handset back in the cradle. Her hands refused to move and for some time she simply sat immobile, staring at nothing, then a thought occurred to her. Milena might try calling back, after cooling off, and the line would be busy!

Olesya set the handset back in place and looked at the telephone. She sat like this for the next hour, if not longer. Every time she felt like getting up, the hope would flare anew, and she'd decide to wait another couple minutes, and another, and another.

Milena never called back.

In class the next day, whenever Olesya tried to catch her eye, she looked over her head or through her, as though she didn't exist, as though she were invisible, empty air. She didn't return her greeting when they all filed out of the studio, sweaty and tired.

"What happened?" Natasha whispered.

Olesya turned around. "What?"

"Why isn't Milena talking to you?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"I don't buy that for a second."

"It's nothing, really." Olesya hurried to the bathroom. Natasha walked right behind her, keeping pace, their pointes tapping the wooden floor in sync, their arms swinging. Olesya

pushed the bathroom door open, and they went into separate stalls, did their business, came out. More girls filed in, talking, complaining of Krysa being especially nasty this morning, discussing the dress rehearsal coming up in five hours, who invited whom, what were they doing after, going out to dinner or going home. The taps opened, the water flowed, the doors slammed shut, the toilets flushed and gurgled. Olesya did her best to participate, smiling, nodding, answering, "Hi, Lyuba. Yeah, I'm fine. You? Did you get that new camera you wanted? Oh, you did? Great! Hi, Veronika! Galka, hi!"

When they were gone, Olesya splashed her face with cold water, propped her hands on the edge of the sink, closed her eyes.

"You don't just stop talking to your favorite cousin for no reason," Natasha said, patting her face with a towel. "So it's not nothing. You don't look yourself, Olesya. Look in the mirror. You're pale as a ghost. Are you going to tell me what happened, or do I have to drag it out of you?"

"I'm sorry. I can't talk about this right now." Olesya opened her eyes. Her reflection stared back at her, somehow flat and colorless. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Natasha touched her shoulder. "Don't be. It's okay. I get it. I want you to know, you can always talk to me. Do you hear me? If you ever change your mind, call me. You can call me any time."

"But what about your father? He goes to bed so early. I'm always afraid I'll wake him up."

"Oh, he's not going to hear it. He sleeps like the dead. You have to fire a rifle next to his ear to wake him up."

"Then how does he get up for work at four in the morning?"

"Mama wakes him. She has her way."

"Oh. And what's that?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "You won't believe it, Olesya. With *kisses*. They still do it, you know. They think I don't hear them through the wall, but I hear them really well. It's funny to hear them discuss it later. I keep explaining to them that I'm not terribly interested in the details of their sex life, thank you very much. You know what they tell me?"

"What?"

"They're saying they're educating me, showing me what it's supposed to look like when two people are in love. There is not enough of it in Soviet families, apparently, kissing, hugging, showing affection. And they're right, of course, it's true, but I kind of prefer not to imagine my own parents screwing each other. Wouldn't you agree? I mean, just yesterday—"

The door opened. Milena walked in, saw Olesya, and for a fraction of a moment she halted, then continued to the stall, her large blue eyes fixed on Natasha. "Krysa is raging. You better go back, Natasha. She's pissed, says it takes one minute for her to pee and she doesn't see how it takes us ten. If I

were you, I wouldn't tempt her." She locked the door, and Olesya rushed out of the bathroom in quick mincing steps.

"Olesya, wait up." Natasha raced after her.

"Sorry, it's just...I don't understand why she's doing it. Why? Why would she think me a liar? I just wanted to ask her some questions, that's all. I was worried about her. It wasn't even about me."

They rounded the corner, walked up to the studio door. Behind it Alla Borisovna's shrill voice reprimanded someone in the shameful silence. The dancers stood around her in a loose group, their heads down.

Olesya grabbed the knob.

Natasha placed her hand on Olesya's. "What questions?"

"Oh, just...about what she remembers, if anything. From when we were little. If uncle Sasha ever told her anything. If she ever noticed anything. If she's...if when she came over to stay at our *dacha*, if my father..."

"If your father what?"

Olesya shook her head, swung the door open.

10.

"Maybe she feels threatened because she *does* remember something. And because you stirred it up with your questions, she doesn't want to face it. So it's easier to just shut it off, pretend like you're lying." Natasha tucked a lock of her copper hair behind her ear.

"I don't know." Olesya shrugged. "I can't ask her. She wouldn't talk to me."

"I can ask her, if you want."

"No!"

"Why not?" Dima said. "I think it's a good idea."

Olesya looked out the window, at the rolling night. The glass was black, and she saw her own faint reflection jittering like a scared rabbit. "Only please don't tell her I told you."

"I won't," Natasha said. "Of course I won't. Are you kidding? You don't even have to ask."

Olesya looked at Dima.

He zipped his finger along his lips. "Silent as the grave."

Olesya sighed. "The first thing she did was tell Egor, and then they together went to see uncle Sasha and aunt Karina and told *them*. Then uncle Sasha called Mama, and, well...it went downhill from there. They all think I'm crazy. Their reasoning is, if anything *did* really happen, if he really did hurt me in this horrible way, I would've spoken up when we got back to Moscow from Simferopol. I would've told someone, I would've at least told my mother. But I didn't understand it back then! I thought it was a game! I thought it was normal, that all daughters do it with their fathers. It never crossed my mind that anything was wrong. I tried to please him. He was so sweet and affectionate after. He told me he loved me, over and over again. What girl wouldn't want to hear that from her father? He'd kiss the top of my head and hold me and stroke my hair, and I wanted nothing but more of it. It felt so good. I was willing to go through any amount of pain to get it. I even initiated it myself a couple times, for which he beat me. And after he beat me...well..." She bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling.

Dima clasped her hand. "Hey. I think it's enough. We've heard enough. You don't have to continue."

"Oh, but I want to. I *want* to. I've been carrying it inside me for so long, I'm afraid it's eaten holes in me, you know? I'm afraid I'm bleeding. I can feel it! It's like something is torn and it wouldn't heal, no matter what I do. No matter how hard I

try to push it down and forget! It just won't let me!" Her voice broke, and she dropped her face in her hands.

Natasha glanced at Dima. He held her eyes. She raised her eyebrows, flicked her eyes at Olesya. He shrugged, nodded.

"So," she said quietly, "you think going back to where it all started will help you get rid of it somehow?"

Olesya lifted her face. It was wet. "Yes. Yes, I think so. I hope so. I don't know. I only know that it's a chance for me to get some kind of a closure. I thought it'd be over after he died, but no, it only got worse. He started visiting me every night, and...I just thought...I thought maybe if I go see it again, that street, that house, that room we rented, maybe the people who live there will let me inside, I thought, maybe I can relive it, reprocess it in some way, and he'd let me go. I haven't been there for over ten years, and—"

"Hold on, hold on." Natasha placed a hand over Olesya's. "That's your problem, right there."

"What is?"

"It's not him who has to let you go, Olesya. He's dead. Dead. He's gone, rotten. There are hardly any bones left of him. It's you. You're the one who has to let him go."

Olesya stared down at Tyubik clenched in her hand.

"She's right," Dima said.

"I hate you," Olesya whispered.

Natasha laughed. "You hate us both, or is it just me?"

"Tape my mouth shut, please, before I say anything else, and then you'll both denounce me, like everybody else did already."

"Tough luck," Dima said. "It'll take more than that to push me away. I love you, Olesya. I love you very much. I mean it."

Natasha put her hands on her knees, sat up straight. Her cheeks grew rosy. The memory of walking in on her boyfriend Ruslan thrashing about with that slut Lenka was still fresh in her mind. Oh, how she wanted to close her hands around her scrawny neck and squeeze until her pale eyes bulged out of their sockets and her tongue fell out of her mouth, blue from asphyxiation! She shrugged off the vision.

Dima stretched the sleeve of his sweater over his hand and wiped Olesya's tears, tenderly.

Natasha took a deep breath and let it out. "I love you too, you brainless idiot. Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. No, I need to go alone."

"Well, if you change your mind—"

Something heavy hit the door.

Whack!

Olesya jumped. The door slid open, and there stood Grigory Vasilievich, dressed the way he was dressed on the last day she saw him, his brown work pants, his warm beige sweater, the collar of his shirt folded neatly over the neck opening, on his feet his winter leather boots that he changed to plaid slippers

when he drove the engine, and to woolen felt boots when he had to leave the cab, venture outside in the snow, check the wheels, or the coupling, or the tracks.

11.

Papa buttoned up his sheepskin greatcoat, grabbed his *ushanka* off the shelf, pushed it down on his head, and picked up his briefcase. "Don't fret, my little ballerina. I won't be long."

Olesya clasped her hands together, her eyes pleading. "But Papa! What if you'll be late? What if you'll miss it? It's only one minute and twenty-six seconds!"

"One minute and twenty-six seconds, huh? Not a second more, not a second less?" He chuckled.

"It's not funny. I timed it. I timed it *exactly*. It's important to me. I want you to see it!"

"I will, silly. I will. I won't be late, I promise."

"But what if..."

"What if what?"

"What if the train derails? Or there's an accident? Or—"

"Then you'll play with Tyubik and have something to remember me by." He winked, his face hardened, and his tired

eyes came alive, electrified with hidden, pulsing excitement.

Olesya froze. She looked in the direction of the kitchen where Mama was banging the pots, preparing the food for tomorrow's feast, her big celebration.

"What do you say?"

"Yes, I will play with Tyubik."

"Yes *what?*"

"Yes, Papa."

"That's my girl." He patted her on the head, ruffled her hair a bit, and went to the door.

"Wait!" Olesya ran up to him, grabbed his arm. "Please, stay. Call in sick. You can call in sick, can't you? Please. I have a bad feeling."

Papa shook her off, but she clung to him for dear life.

"Let go, Olesya! Don't hang on me. You know I don't like it."

"Olesya!" Mama's voice called from the kitchen. "Leave your father alone. He needs to get to work, and you need to come in here and help me."

Olesya released his arm, stepped back.

Grigory Vasilievich opened the door, and the cold musty air smelling of old potatoes and flying onions drifted into the apartment, the echo of the elevator whine, the muffled television noises seeping through the door of their neighbors, their fat spoiled lapdog Kinka barking.

Papa stepped over the threshold and halted, turned his head, looked back at Olesya. "See you at the recital. You better put on a good show for me, all right?"

"I will, Papa."

"Remember, I love you."

"I love you too."

"Be a good girl." He shut the door.

Olesya locked it.

12.

"Did you see him?"

"Who?"

"My father. Did you see him?"

"When?"

"*Just now!*"

Dima glanced at Natasha, her expression as bewildered as his. He squeezed his eyes shut, pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he understood. "I see my mother like this all the time, Olesya."

"You do?" She deflated, sunk back on the berth.

Natasha stood up. "I'll...uh...I'll go get ready for bed. Come by to say good night, okay?" And she was out of the compartment.

Olesya hardly noticed her departure. "How do you see her?"

"Who, my mother?" Dima looked down at his hands, turned them palms up, flexed them, turned them back down and clasped

his knees. "With the belt around her neck. Some nights. Others she comes at me with the belt in her hands, aiming to strangle me. It hasn't happened in a while, though. I think it's been over a year since the last time I saw her. And it's...different from how you see your father. She never showed up in the middle of the day, it was always when I was...asleep." He wanted to say "dreaming," but held his tongue.

"How did you get rid of her?"

"I'm not sure. I woke up one morning, and I told myself that it's not my fault, her death. She chose to die because she chose to die. Whatever her reason. It wasn't anything I did or didn't do. And ever since then she stopped coming."

"You're lucky."

They sat quietly for some time, the gentle swaying of the car and the rhythmic clicking soothing, and Olesya yawned, covered her mouth. Her eyes watered. She blinked a few times, crossed and uncrossed her legs.

"You still want me to stay?" Dima said.

"Yes, please."

"But what about—"

"To hell with her." Olesya looked at him fiercely. "Let her find out. What's she going to do, fire me? On tour?"

"She can."

"Fine. Let her. Let Milena dance both casts, that'll grind her feet into a bloody mess. If that's what she wants, so be it.

I'm not going to stop her."

Dima stared at her. "You don't mean this."

"Sure I do."

"You're just angry."

"So what?" Olesya's voice rose to a shriek. "Why can't I be angry? Why is it that everyone around me can be angry, and I can't? How is that fair?"

"I'm not saying you can't be angry, I'm just saying—"

"Why is it that everyone can express whatever the hell they feel, and I have to keep everything down? I'm tired of it!" She snatched Tyubik from her lap and started banging its tail on the table. "I'm tired of it! Tired! Tired! *Tired!*" She threw it at the wall. It bounced, dropped on the floor, and rolled under the berth. Olesya drew up her legs, rested her cheek on her knees, looked out the window.

Dima didn't move, didn't say anything.

Olesya's breathing slowed. She lifted her head, glanced under the berth where Tyubik lay on its side, then up at Dima.

He met her eyes. "I hear you."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do. If it helps you, please, shout. Scream. Cry. Throw things. It doesn't bother me. Well, no, that's not quite true." He shifted his gaze to the floor. "I'd be lying if I told you it doesn't bother me at all. It *does* bother me. I get edgy and defensive, I think maybe I've done something wrong and

you're lashing out at me, and I need to fight you. But I know that's not it. I know it's not me you're angry at, I know you need it. You were probably never allowed to have any kinds of tantrums, were you?"

Olesya was silent.

Dima raised his eyes.

She was crying. Her face didn't change, it was smooth and calm and neutral, as always, only her lips were trembling a little, and the tears rolled down her cheeks like someone spilled water under her eyes, like they weren't her tears at all, just some excess moisture discharged by her body, her mind elsewhere.

"Would it help if I held you?"

Olesya flinched, focused on Dima. "Held me?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean, if I sat next to you and held you. Would that be okay? Would that help?"

"Help with what?"

Dima sighed. "Let me paraphrase it. Would it be okay if I sat next to you and took you into my arms?"

"Oh." Understanding washed over Olesya. She relaxed her shoulders, slumped a little. "Sure." She shifted closer to the window, and Dima sat down next to her, opened his arms, carefully scooped up her shoulders, pressed her to his chest, her thin frame shivering like a small wild animal caught in the net, her teeth chattering faintly, her skin goosy.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

"You're shaking all over."

"Am I?" It was a genuine question. She looked at him, perplexed, and he saw that she wasn't mocking him, she was simply unaware of what her body was doing. It wasn't the cold that made her shake. He could bundle her up in all the blankets there were on this train and then some, it wouldn't have made the slightest bit of a difference. It wasn't the blankets that she needed. It was something else.

Dima thought hard, back to the time when he was so scared he turned numb, when he felt nothing. It came at him fast. It always did when he called it, a dim yawning doorway, inviting him to step inside. Oh, how he didn't want to go there. How he resisted. He was over it. Over it! He had moved on! Was it really necessary? Couldn't he do something else? Did he absolutely *have* to?

He looked at Olesya. Her profile was etched against the black of the window like an engraving, silvery white. Her forehead curved down to a small upturned nose that gave her a youthful, childlike appearance, her small lips parted, her prominent chin a little too heavy for her face, her neck long and delicate, like the neck of a swan. She felt him looking, turned her head, her eyes glassy, absent, then she saw him. A man. Right next to her. *Danger*. Her pupils contracted, face

closed off, and she shrunk back into her shell, but she didn't do it fast enough, something made her hesitate, and in that fraction of a second Dima managed to glimpse something new, something he hasn't seen before. He wasn't entirely sure what it was. Trust? Longing? Tenderness? Love?

Could it be true? Dare he hope?

He couldn't ask her, and he knew that he lost her. The moment was gone, but he had found his answer.

Yes, he had to go there. He went.

13.

"Mama? I'm home!" Dima closed the door behind him, locked it, threw the keys on the shelf next to the telephone, kicked off his shoes. "Mama?"

It was strange for her not to answer. Dima frowned, unzipped his jacket, quietly set his schoolbag down. He didn't know what made him afraid of making noise. He looked the length of the corridor. It was dim, the door to his parents' room closed. That was strange. Mama hated closed doors, she said they suffocated her. His father would close the doors, and she would walk right behind him and open them, and they would quarrel, then fight, then—

Dima shivered, tried again. "Mama! It's me. Where are you?"

He suddenly despised their two-room apartment, a luxury most kids in his class didn't enjoy. Many of them lived in communal flats where they had to share the bathroom and the kitchen with their neighbors, the rooms and the long narrow

corridor buzzing with constant noise. His friend Ivan told him once how he coveted to have a room of his own like Dima's, his green slanted eyes dancing with barely concealed envy, but Dima failed to understand him. He never viewed his solitude as an advantage. He was an only child, and he missed having a brother, or if not a brother than a friend next door, whom he could visit any time it struck his fancy.

Now he stood alone, and the fear spread in him like deadly poison. He looked down at his schoolbag with contempt, suppressing the urge to kick it. It was made of ugly brown imitation leather, the metallic clasps scuffed, brassy, the interior still stinking of urine no matter how many times he scrubbed it with a brush lathered in *Hozyaystvennoe* soap, the strongest there was. It's been almost six months since Kolyan Rasturgaev nicknamed Ambal for his unprecedented height and weight and his sidekick Arturchik, the dumbest boy in their class who spoke with fists rather than with words, tripped up Dima on the stairway and sent him flying down at least a dozen steps, if not more. He landed painfully on his tail bone, scrambled to his feet, but they were already on top of him, beating him bloody, chanting, "*Gomik! Gomik!*" then snatched up his schoolbag and were off, ululating like madmen.

Dima found his bag behind the school trash bins, the books strewn around in a heap, the imitation leather soaked. It appeared that Kolyan and Arturchik took turns pissing in it, and

he could just imagine them aiming their little peckers, betting on whose jet would reach it first. It was the game all boys have played at one time or another. They asked him to join them, but Dima always refused. He considered it vulgar and he told them so, which only added to the already speculating gossip that Dima Rumyantsev was gay. Of course he was! Only gay boys went to ballet school, everyone knew that. Normal boys played soccer or hockey, stole food from the stores, threw eggs from the balconies at the unsuspecting passersby, set cats on fire, or frogs, if no cats were around, fought past first blood.

Dima sighed, picked up his schoolbag and walked to his room, forgetting to put on his slippers, deciding that maybe Mama left to go to the store after all and didn't wait for him to come home first. It could happen. Why not? Maybe they ran out of bread or milk unexpectedly.

Unexpectedly.

Dima didn't like the sound of this word.

It was only out of the corner of his eye that he saw something that made him stop. It wasn't anything in particular. In fact, he would've missed it entirely, if not for his acute perception of detail. The lighting was wrong. That was the first conscious thought that entered his mind. It was always light in the beginning of the corridor. Papa took off the kitchen door the day they moved in, to Mama's immense joy. It was in the way, he said, they'd never use it anyway. He regretted it later and

wanted to install it back, just to spite her, but by then his binge drinking prevented him from following up on his threats, and so the door never made it back. Dima liked it open like this. The daylight streamed through the kitchen window and reached all the way to the corridor, making it not as gloomy, but now it was blocked. Something was blocking it.

Then Dima knew. He knew it instinctively, before his mind grasped it. The shadow had a shape, and that shape wasn't moving. Dima wanted to look, couldn't. His neck wouldn't turn. His mouth went dry, his hands cold and clammy. He didn't know for how long he stood like this. It was Irina Mikhailovna's voice, Yulia's mother, that brought him out of his stupor. She was shouting last-minute directions to her daughter before banging the door shut and pushing the elevator button. Dima waited for the cabin to arrive with its characteristic squeak, the doors slide open, swish shut, the whine to start descending. It was quiet again. He gradually, slowly rotated his whole body.

The schoolbag slipped out of his hands. His legs folded, and he fell.

Alexandra Ivanovna appeared to be frozen in the act of performing a plié, her knees half-bent, her feet turned out, the heels not quite touching the polished parquet floor, her arms hanging loose, head cocked at an angle, eyes half-open, the tip of her tongue protruding from her mouth like a dirty kitchen rag their cook Nina wiped the tables with in the school cafeteria.

For a while Dima couldn't understand how she stayed upright, then he saw the army belt looped around her neck, trailing up to the doorjamb, to the iron bar affixed right in front of it, a crude homemade contraption that Nikolay Ignatievich proudly called his *trenazhor*, which he painstakingly installed over the course of several weeks for doing pull-ups every morning. He hasn't used it once, nor would he ever use it in the future, horrified by the terrible purpose it served his wife.

Dima stared up at his asphyxiated mother in a stunned paralysis. His leg muscles cramped and his stomach flipped, pushing the school lunch of herring and boiled potatoes upward. But he was so weak that he couldn't even throw up, and after a while he knew what it was that alerted him when he first entered the apartment. The smell. It wasn't the smell of urine from his schoolbag, it was his mother. She voided herself. The crotch of her navy slacks was dark, almost black, the stain spreading down inner thighs, stopping just above her knees.

She has always dressed tastefully, classy, unlike any other Soviet women Dima knew, the exception being Tamara Georgievna, his ballet teacher, but her elegance was old-fashioned, glitzy, heavily perfumed. By contrast his mother's style seemed effortless, light and airy. She hardly ever wore dresses. Her style was a silk blouse and a pair of slacks with flats, and it was the indignity of seeing his mother soiled in this manner that bothered Dima. He didn't understand that she was dead. It

wasn't until the afternoon when Yulia took his virginity and started massaging his long slender fingers, admiring them, while they lay on the divan in her room, stunned by their adolescent dare, that he broke down and started weeping.

"What's wrong?" Yulia kept asking.

He finally extricated himself from her embrace and rushed out of her apartment, leaned his forehead on the cold concrete wall and gave himself to his grief. She was dead. She wasn't coming back. And the worst part of it was, the loop of the belt. The loop was big and open. He knew she must've wanted to die so badly, she controlled her body's struggle to live to the very end. She could've slipped out of the noose easily. She chose not to. And it was his fault. Of course. It was all his fault.

14.

The fingers. He can start with the fingers.

Dima picked up Olesya's cold limp hand and pressed it between his warm hands. They were always warm, no matter the weather. He never wore gloves or mittens, not since he was a little boy, and succumbed to buying a pair of fine leather gloves only after being accepted into the Bolshoi Ballet and observing the way the other male dancers dressed. He wanted to blend in, to shed his image of a simpleton from a military family, but he never actually wore them and carried them in his pockets until the day he gave them to Olesya and she forgot to return them.

He pressed a little harder, enclosing her hand completely. It felt like holding a lump of ice that refused to melt. Her fingernails turned purplish blue. All blood seemed to have drained out of her flesh. It looked colorless, waxen, the skin so pale it was almost translucent. He started rubbing her

fingers one by one, going from the fingernail to the joints, the little phalanges in between, then the palm, the wrist, and back to the fingernail, his strokes long and fluid, pressure even. He did the pinky, the ring finger, moved on to the middle finger. She watched him dispassionately, as though from a distance, but she didn't push him away and she didn't tell him to stop. He continued without saying a word, picked up her thumb, pinched the tip of it, released it. The fingernail turned white, then the blood returned to it and the purplish hue was gone, it was rosy. Dima smiled, set her hand in her lap and picked up the other one, noting the subtle difference in the temperature. This hand was much colder. He set to massaging it just like the first.

"I feel nothing," Olesya whispered.

He stopped, looked up at her.

"I mean, I see you holding my hand and rubbing it, but it's like...it's like it's not mine, you know? Like it doesn't belong to me. Like it belongs to someone else."

"It does belong to someone else," he said.

Olesya's mouth opened slightly. "What do you mean? Who does it belong to?"

"It's not a *who*, Olesya, it's a *what*." He held up her hand in front of her face. "See this? This is not you. It's your shell. You're inside of it, safely protected. So of course you feel nothing, that's what your shell is supposed to do, feel

nothing. Doesn't it?"

Olesya sat quiet.

Dima laid her hand down and picked up the first one again, brought it to his mouth, blew on it, rubbed it all over. It seemed to be filling out, coming back to life, its color returning slowly, the yellowish waxen paleness leaving it in favor of rosy pink.

Dima knew what he had to do next but he hesitated. Instead of a step forward it might take him two steps back, and he couldn't afford it, not now, not when—

The train gave an angry whistle, and the car jolted, ripping Olesya's hand out of his hold. Tyubik rolled from under the berth onto the carpet runner and sat there on its wheels like a hungry critter, about to dart to Dima's feet, crawl up his legs, hop on Olesya's lap and start burrowing into her crotch. She caught her breath, jerked her legs upward, scooted back into the corner, trying to make herself small, to shrink, to disappear.

Dima bent and picked it up. Maybe because he unconsciously dragged it along the runner before picking it up, or maybe because its wheels got loose with wear, they were spinning, though Olesya took out the batteries years ago.

Her eyes widened. "Take it away from me. Take it away from me!"

"Of course. Of course. Where do you want me to put it?"

"Anywhere. I don't care. Just put it somewhere where I can't see it!"

The wheels stopped spinning. Tyubik looked like an ordinary toy engine, a little scuffed with wear, but still perfectly suitable for play. Olesya blew air through her pressed lips. Her heart hammered, shaking her whole body. She must've imagined it. It was just a toy, just an old toy. She watched Dima first put Tyubik in her dance bag, then change his mind and stuff it into one of the costume boxes stacked on the berth across, pushing it in through the slit between the flaps.

"There. Is that better?"

"Yes. Yes, thank you. For a moment I thought..." Olesya bent her head down. Her hair fell over her face, and she spoke from behind it like from behind a curtain. "I thought it *moved*. I thought I saw it move on its own." She pushed her hair back and looked up again. "It can't, Dima. It has no batteries."

He frowned. "Hmmm. I thought I felt it twitch a little, but I thought it was my hand that twitched, not Tyubik. That's strange. Maybe you *have* put them in a long time ago and forgot about it? Maybe there is a loose contact and it connected for a second, then disconnected again."

"No." Olesya shook her head adamantly. "No, Dima. No way. No way I would forget something like that."

"Well, maybe somebody else did? Put in the batteries, I mean."

"Who? I always carry it in my pocket. Nobody has touched it in the last ten years, not since Papa died. I just...I don't want to think what I'm thinking."

"Do you want me to check? I can check."

"No!" Olesya made to get up, but Dima's hand was already rooting in the box, his face puzzled. "I can't feel it. I'm sure I have put it right there. Hang on." He lifted the box from the stack and set it down on the floor, rousing a little puff of dust, pried open the cardboard flaps. They both looked in. There were several dozen pointes tied with elastic, packets of ribbons, tights, leg warmers, and no Tyubik.

Dima rummaged around. "Where did it go?"

Olesya paled. "It's like with Tanechka, like with her panties." She caught hold of his upper arm. "Oh God, Dima. Oh God. Oh God."

"What?"

He followed her gaze and froze.

Tyubik sat at the end of the runner. It's like it was waiting for them to look at it. It switched on its tiny headlamp and rolled to the side of the door, rooting into the threshold with its nose like a pet left alone at home, rooting for its master, smelling him on the other side, knowing he came to release it from its hateful confinement, to pick it up, to stroke it, shower it with affection.

Olesya and Dima exchanged glances.

The latch flipped up and the door crept open a few centimeters, enough for Tyubik to squeeze through. It shot into the opening and in the same instant the door rolled shut and the latch fell back into place.

"You bastard!" Olesya was up on her feet, wrestling with the latch, but it wouldn't move. "Give it back! Give it *back!*" She beat on the door with her fists. Then, realizing the futility of it, turned around to Dima. "Do you see what he's doing? Do you see? Oh, I knew it." She leaned back on the door. "I knew it was coming, but I was too afraid to trust myself. Damn it. I should've held on it. I should've never let it out of my sight. He has it now, and he's complete. It's like he's got his weapon back, you know?"

Dima gaped at her. "What weapon? Weapon for what?"

"For killing me, of course. What else? He can't stand the idea of me living, being happy, enjoying myself, and him rotting in his grave. So he decided to take me with him, that's what he did. And somehow Tanechka found out about it and came to warn me."

"You realize...you're talking about dead people, right?"

Olesya crossed her arms. "Did you just see Tyubik move on its own? Turns its light on its own? Did you?"

"Yes?"

"And did you see the door open? Did you see it escape and the door close?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now go ahead and try opening it."

She stepped away.

Dima struggled to his feet. They felt rubbery. He pushed his finger under the knob of the latch. When it didn't budge, he gripped it with both hands and tugged upward. After a minute of this he stopped. "Olesya?"

She raised her eyebrows, waiting for him to continue.

"Please forgive me for asking you all these questions, for doubting what I see, for...for doubting you. It's not my intention. I'm just...I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around it. It's inconceivable. It defies everything I know."

She sighed. "It's okay. I understand. If I were in your place, I'd feel the same way. Thank you for trying to understand, for not simply dismissing me like some crazy but listening, actually *listening*. And seeing. Seeing it with me. I don't feel so lonely anymore, Dima, when I'm with you. I feel like...I feel like I belong." The audacity of what she said stunned her, and she fell silent.

Dima shifted his shoulders awkwardly, clasped his hands. "Well, now that we're stuck here, do you want to help me make it suitable for the night? So we can both get some sleep? Provided we manage to fall asleep, of course. I don't know about you, but I'm a little apprehensive to close my eyes now."

"Oh." Olesya smiled. "Oh, sure. Absolutely."

They threw themselves into rearranging the boxes, clearing the second berth, shaking out the bedding, fluffing up the pillow, and little by little they got carried away by this simple task, talking, even joking and laughing, and they didn't hear the rasping, didn't notice the latch slowly slide up and the door open a crack, enough for an eye to look through, watch them with envy.

15.

Where the music came from she couldn't tell. It seemed to be coming from everywhere around her and from inside her at the same time, the two streams merging into a familiar melody. What was it? She couldn't quite grasp it. Her mind was sluggish with sleep, and it was not until the clarinet soared to a piercing high that she woke up fully.

Papa. Papa used to play the clarinet in the army orchestra.

Olesya sat up and squinted. The door to her compartment was open. Bright sunlight filtered through the dirty glass, throwing dusty shadows on the threadbare carpet. She glanced at Dima's berth. He was gone, the pillow still bearing the imprint of his head, the blanket crumpled, kicked to the side. The music streamed in from the passageway, and with it came a draft of warm fragrant air smelling like tar, hot metal, and grass.

The train was standing.

"The Dance of the Cygnets," Olesya whispered. "He's playing

the Dance of the Cygnets." Her blood ran cold. She slid off the bed, stepped into her slippers, and dashed out the door.

"Dima? Dima, are you there?"

"Olesya! Hurry up! You'll *miss* it!"

"Tanechka..."

Olesya pressed her nose to the glass and peered outside.

It was summer. The sky was blindingly bright, the air dry and hot, humming with insects. Directly in front of the tracks stood a birch grove that was so beautiful, it seemed unreal. The birches were perfect, one prettier than the next, their trunks tall, straight and slender, the bark a kind of a shimmering, silvery color, the leaves translucent like they were pale-green silk. The ground was blanketed with soft grass, clumps of wild strawberries nestling here and there. Olesya spotted them with her trained eye even from this distance.

Right underneath the window stood Tanechka. She saw Olesya looking and beckoned to her, bouncing up and down on her heels. "Come on. I want to show you something. Quick! *Quick!*"

Olesya tore her gaze away from the scenery, passed a hand over her eyes, looked out again. It was still summer, the birch grove still there. Only Tanechka was gone. Then she saw her sprinting away from the tracks, her pigtails flapping, the red of her dress clearly visible in all that green. In the space of seconds Olesya was out of the car, running after her, calling her, "Tanechka! Tanechka, wait!" The gravel crunched under her

feet, then she crossed onto the grass, and the worn soles of her slippers skidded on it, making her stumble. She stopped, kicked them off and continued running barefoot, her ankles sprayed with a fine mist of dew, the moisture feeling pleasantly cool on her skin, the earth warm and solid.

Two voices trailed from a clearing a little ways off, arguing about something. Olesya slowed down, walking quietly, then she saw two silhouettes in the greenish haze and stopped, gripped the trunk of the closest tree, hid behind it.

"But you said we could pick some wild strawberries before we go, Papa! You *promised!*"

"I know. I know, my sweet. But this is more important. It'll be quick, you'll see."

"I don't want to," Tanechka whined. "Why do I have to?"

"Because I ask you to. Because it makes Papa happy. You want to make Papa happy, don't you?"

Silence, then rustling noises.

Olesya studied her feet. She stood right by a sprawling patch of wild strawberries, and she couldn't help herself. She stooped and picked up a few berries, plump and red, tossed them in her mouth. The sweetness burst on her tongue. She savored it, picked a few more.

"I don't like it."

Olesya straightened, berries in her hand.

"Just pretend like you're drinking *kefir* from the bottle.

Remember how you do it? You wrap your lips around it, like this, all the way, Tanechka...all the way. No, not like this. Open your mouth wider. Wider, I said! There you go. See? You can do it. I knew you can do it. Now drink it, drink from it. Can you do that for me?"

Can you do that for me?

Olesya's mouth went dry.

Tanechka said something muffled, like her mouth was full, and Olesya dug her fingernails into her palms, pressed her back into the tree as if she wanted to fall into it, to fade, to vanish. The rough edges of the bark cut into her skin through the thin fabric of her nightgown. She didn't feel it. She didn't know how she stood upright. Her senses left her, all but one.

She heard them.

She screwed her eyes shut, covered her ears with her hands, pressed them in. Still, she heard them. The rhythmic sucking noises interrupted by gagging, and once a bout of coughing and heaving, then sucking again, faster.

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore. She had forgotten that her father was dead, that Tanechka was dead, that the birch grove didn't exist in the present. Her eyes flew open, and she tumbled out from behind the tree, picking herself up, running, screaming. "Stop it! Stop it right this second! I will kill you if you won't stop! You hear me? I will *kill* you!"

She staggered into the clearing, and what she saw there

burned into her mind like with the brand of a hot iron.

Grigory Vasilievich stood looking down, his face younger than she remembered, his hair not thinning yet, sitting on top of his head in thick, luxurious waves like a peaked Karakul cap, rich brown in color. He wore one of his staple summer shirts, short sleeves with rolled-up cuffs sewn no doubt by baba Zina from fine creamy cotton. As far as Olesya could remember, she made all Papa's clothes, shirts, pants, woolen socks, scarves, sweaters. Papa looked dashing in her creations, perhaps too dashing for a common engine driver, *mashinist*, wearing things nobody else had, which made women turn their heads despite his somewhat repulsive appearance: his ears stuck out like the handles of a soup tureen on a head too large for his puny body.

He had slender elegant hands and long fingers that Olesya inherited, and his feet were very small, almost dainty, his proportions that of a ballet dancer, if not for what was sitting on top of his neck. Olesya's body was very much like that of Grigory Vasilievich, as Alla Borisovna told her shortly after hiring her, she had a classic ballet figure, slim as a birch. And that's where the resemblance stopped. Her childish face, fair and smooth, never a blemish, never a single pimple, to the endless jealousy of her classmates, her light-brown hair, and her small, doll-like head were her mother's. She managed to borrow the best of her parents' looks, as did Tanechka, who looked very much like her sister, only a little sturdier,

broader in the shoulders, and not as fair. And then, she had freckles. They stood out prominently on her flushed contorted face, her father's swollen penis pushing deep into her throat, her lips stretched to breaking, her breath rasping in and out of her nose together with snot. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and it wasn't clear if she was crying or if her eyes were watering from the strain of keeping her mouth open while suffocating on a hunk of flesh that she couldn't swallow or bite as her instincts told her. She was kneeling on the glass in front of Grigory Vasilievich, his pants pooled around his ankles, his hairless legs bluish pale, rising up to his flabby buttocks.

Olesya kept moving forward, shouting, and when she was almost upon him, her fists raised high, he brushed her arm with his fingers, and she froze, rendered immobile. From that moment on all she could do was watch, and she inwardly cursed herself for being so stupid. She could've been quiet, she could've snuck up on them and do what Tanechka no doubt wanted her to do. That's why she led her here. That's why her eyes looked at her with such accusatory, painful disappointment.

And then Grigory Vasilievich exploded.

His buttocks clenched, his head dipped back, and he rolled up his eyes like he always did, half-closing them, his whites showing underneath his long, curly lashes. He made a weak mewling noise, then went slack and released Tanechka's head from his hold, pulled himself out. And it was just what Olesya knew

it would be.

Tyubik.

She stared at it, willing herself to move.

Papa didn't glance at her once. He stuffed Tyubik in his white cotton briefs, hitched up his pants, and, holding them up with one hand, tucked in his shirttails with another, then zipped them up, buttoned them, fastened his belt, and ran his palms flat over his hair, smoothing it.

"Well, that wasn't so bad now, was it?"

Tanechka still stood on her knees, looking down.

"What is it with you? What's wrong? Come on, get up. We need to go, or we'll miss our train."

She shook her head. "I don't want to go."

"What do you mean, you don't want to go? It's my birthday present for you. Real ballerinas dancing on the real theater stage. You were dreaming about. You know how hard it was for me to get the tickets? You can't just buy them, silly, it's impossible. Your Papa had to do a huge favor for some special people, and they had to work really hard to get me two tickets, and not just anywhere, but in parterre. In parterre! You'll be sitting so close to the stage, you'll see the gems on their tutus. So we can't miss it, you see? We simply can't." He glanced at his watch. "Come on. Get up now."

"I don't want to go anywhere," Tanechka said stubbornly. "I want to go home. I want my Mama."

"All right. It looks like I'll have to carry you."

He bent down, his arms open, and Tanechka drew back, her eyes round with terror. "No!"

"Then get up!"

"I will, Papa! I will! Only don't beat me. Please, don't beat me." She scrambled up to standing, lifted the hem of her dress to wipe her mouth, and Olesya saw that she wore no panties, just like the first time she visited her.

"Papa?"

"Yes? What now?"

"I need to go pee-pee."

"Oh, good God." He threw up his hands. "All right, but be quick about it!"

"Can I do it behind that tree? I'll be quick, I promise."

"Fine." He waved at her dismissively, and then Olesya knew what was coming, and she cursed herself again, only this time not out of anger but out of fear, crippling numbing fear.

16.

"What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"I thought you were gone. I thought you left me!"

"I went to use the toilet, that's all. I was only gone for a few minutes. Why? Did something happen while I was gone?"

Olesya reeled. Her bed covers were soaked through with her sweat, nightgown clung to her like it was dipped in water. "I almost saw it. Almost."

"You almost saw what?"

"Tanechka's death. And something else. Something else I *did* see. She showed me."

Dima sat down next to her, drew his brows together.

Olesya worked her mouth, as if trying to come up with words to say, and Dima suddenly gasped. "You cut yourself. Olesya! You're bleeding!" He took her hand curled in a fist. Dark liquid dripped from it on the blanket. Olesya opened it, and there they sat, the crushed wild strawberries that she picked in the birch

grove.

Dima's face relaxed. "Oh...wild strawberries. Wow. Where did you get them, in the middle of winter? They smell good." He reached to take one.

Olesya withdrew her hand.

"Wait, how come...I mean, you were sleeping...you didn't have them in your hand when you went to sleep. I distinctly remember—" he broke off, his eyes rounded. "Where would you get them from, anyway? Is it...is it like—"

"I'm not crazy," Olesya whispered.

"What? I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." He leaned closer.

"I'm not crazy," she repeated louder. "Please, don't tell me I'm crazy, because I'm not. And I know I'm not."

"I wasn't going to."

"No?"

"Never." He shook his head. "I don't believe you're crazy. If anyone is crazy, it's the people who choose not to believe you. But you, Olesya...you...how do I put it—well, it's simple—you're the sanest person I've ever met. You don't pretend, you don't lie, and you don't lose your mind when...just this, take this for example." He gestured to her hand. "This kind of thing. The kinds of things that happened since we got on the train, think about it. That would seriously mess up someone else's mind. I mean, a dead sister coming to visit you? Leaving behind an article of her clothing to make sure you know it wasn't a

nightmare? Hell, that would make someone else hysterical, make them doubt everything they know and then either decide that it's not happening and try to forget it, or start raving some mad nonsense, or get to drinking, or whatever. I don't know. People do all sorts of stuff just to avoid facing what they don't want to face. Especially if it contradicts their view of the world. It's a danger to their equilibrium. If they accepted it as real, it would force them to rethink what they grew comfortable with, and who wants to do that? It's so much easier to tell yourself a lie, some pretty sugar-coated story—this doesn't ever happen to me, oh no, not me! Someone else, sure, but not me! Nope—and then they live in it, ignorant of everything else, and defend it, too. With foam at their mouths. Of course they would. Then here you come, telling them how it is, bursting their little bubble. I bet that's what your family is doing, isn't it?"

Olesya nodded. "I guess." Her voice sounded small and distant, lost in the drone of the train.

"I know," Dima put his hand over hers. It was cold and clammy. "I've had my share of it. Unfortunately. And I'm sorry. I'm really sorry you have to deal with this...this idiocy, this blind pigheadedness, this...ah, to hell with it. I don't even want to talk about it. Listen. Listen to me, Olesya. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"This is important. I want you to hear me, okay? I want you

to hear what I'm saying. Never doubt yourself. Please, I'm asking you...no, I'm *begging* you, never ever doubt yourself."

She snorted dismissively. "It's kind of hard not to, you know?" She opened her palm. The berries clumped into a sticky mass, black in the bluish moonlight.

"Yes, I know, but please—"

The warning bells burst through the night, followed by the piercing whistle, and they both looked out at window, at the lights of a small rural station passing by, small shimmering halos, the platform and the roof of the yellow stucco building covered with snow, then it all fell away, and the window was dark again.

Olesya yawned.

"You're tired."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Do you want to try to go to sleep? Or, maybe...can you tell me what happened? If you're willing to share, that is."

"Can you hold me?" She looked up at him.

"Absolutely." He put his arm around her shoulder. "You're soaked. You...sweated through your nightgown."

Olesya wiggled out of his hold, moved back. "Does that disgust you?"

"No, not at all. Do you want to change? Should we go sit on my berth? It's dry."

"I—" Olesya halted. "I—can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"This may sound strange."

"I don't care."

"Well..." she hung her head. "I'm scared to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because...because you might take it the wrong way."

"I'll try my best not to. If that helps any."

"Well..." she poked at the sticky mess on her palm with her finger, flattening it. "I need...something, but I'm afraid to ask for it."

"I'm listening."

She raised her eyes at him, and he saw fear hovering in them, fear and longing. "Do you mind...holding me...naked? Just holding, nothing else."

Dima gulped. "Uh...sure. Yes. I'll hold you. Don't worry, I won't do anything you're uncomfortable with. If you tell me how exactly you want me to hold you, or tell me where to place my hands, or—"

"I want to feel *loved*," Olesya said. "I want to feel the touch that's loving, that's—that has nothing else in it—it's like the touch—it's like when your mother holds you, like when you're little and you need comforting, and the simple act of holding, skin on skin—when you're not afraid, when you know you're safe, you feel it through the touch, and..." Olesya stopped. Her eyes filmed over.

"Hey." Dima stroked her cheek with the tips of his fingers. "Hey, I understand. Will you forgive me, if..." he glanced down at himself.

"If you get hard, you mean?"

Dima turned crimson. "Yes. I can control it, but there comes a point when I can't—"

"It's fine." She smiled. "You're blushing."

"Well, it's embarrassing."

"Why is it embarrassing?"

"I don't know. It just is."

Olesya quickly kissed him on the cheek. Dima stared at her, aghast. She kissed him again, touching her lips to the corner of his mouth, the tip of his nose. "I love you," she said. "Make love to me. I want you to make love to me."

Dima sat stock-still. His eyes flared wide.

"I want to get it out of my head, at least for a little while." She grabbed the empty tea glass from the table and dropped the mashed berries into it, scraped her palm clean with the rim of the glass, then wiped her hand on the tablecloth and went rigid, staring at the dark smear on the starched white cotton. "He made her perform oral sex on him." She turned to Dima. "She was five. *Five*. He made her suck him off. She showed me. She took me to the birch grove where it happened. I know exactly where it is, it's by baba Zina's apartment in the suburbs. They used to live there before I was born, and I have

visited it a thousand times, but I was forbidden to go there, forbidden to go to the tracks alone, only if one of them accompanied me, so I saw it from a distance, from the platform. Baba Zina told me Papa took Tanechka there often on walks, to pick some wild strawberries or mushrooms or just to walk around. Now I know why he took her there, but when I was running after her, I didn't...I didn't know, so I couldn't help myself, I picked some and ate some."

"How did she die? If you don't mind my asking."

Olesya stared into distance, seeing nothing. "She got hit by a train. Died instantly."

"I'm sorry. That's terrible. Where did it happen?"

She turned to look at him. "By the birch grove."

17.

Her name was Yulia Tsvetkova. The one and only Tsvetkova from 10 'B.' Every boy old enough to feel the urge of the hormones lusted after her. She took money or gifts, sweets mostly, since her father already provided her with everything she could possibly wish her, imported delicacies from the special store for the party elite, smuggled home clothes and shoes, a private *Volga* with a chauffeur who dropped her off at school every morning at exactly the same time and stood idling at the curb, waiting for her after the last bell. She even had a place reserved for her already at the Moscow State University, eliminating the need for admission exams.

It was no secret, everyone knew it, and she didn't try to conceal it nor boast about it. It just was what it was. It gave her an added aura of mystique, this atypical behavior, this indifference to the privileges that someone else would stick in everybody's face to savor their expressions of black jealousy,

hatred, powerlessness.

So it was crumpled rubles clutched in a hot sweaty hand, or chocolates, or gum, or milk shakes. She particularly liked vanilla milk shakes that you could get for ten kopecks at any grocery store, the cool frothy goodness poured into the faceted glass. You weren't supposed to take the glass with you, but some boys managed. They could never show their faces at that particular store again. They didn't care. The reward was worth it.

Dima didn't possess the adroitness nor the cunning needed for such a feat, nor did he have any money or ways to obtain sweets for free. He lost count of how many times he found himself standing in the candy isle, staring at the glazed fruits, marmalade, chocolate bars *Alyonka*, or the fancy dark-blue box of *Vdohonovenie* pralines with nuts, the lid adorned with two ballet dancers striking a pose on the background of the Bolshoi Theater. He always walked out without touching any of it. He didn't want to steal—the idea of stealing made his stomach lurch. It was dishonest. He'd get mad at himself, at his body, at his inability to control it. It only took for Yulia to appear at the far end of the hallway for him to feel the rush of the blood to his groin and the traitor sitting in his pants starting to harden. He'd round the corner and sprint to the boys' toilet, stick his face under cold water.

Nothing helped.

He couldn't figure out what it was. Her scent? Her ample behind that had this particular way of jiggling under her brown uniform dress as she walked? Her breasts that pushed up her pinafore like two ripe melons? Her sly, sidelong glances? Or maybe it was the fact that she wore makeup and golden earrings so openly and without fear when the rest of the girls were dragged into the director's office and ordered to wash their faces, their jewelry confiscated?

He didn't know, and analyzing it didn't help any. He couldn't escape her. If he managed to avoid her at school, it was no relief. He was bound to bump into her in their communal entrance, or on their landing, or in the elevator. The elevator was the worst. It was capricious, a small pre-revolutionary cabin with two inner flapping doors and a metal-grate outer door that you had to operate yourself. The ride was bumpy and shaky, and Dima avoided it if he could, using the stairs, but Yulia was two years older than him and quite experienced in the affairs of seduction. She lured him into the cabin on the pretext of helping her carry grocery bags, and once there, she would press her hot pliable body to his as though by accident, and Dima would get an instant erection, his face turning crimson.

In the end he didn't need any chocolates. After his mother's funeral service, while the rest of the guests were munching on piroshky and knocking back vodka, Irina Mikhailovna gripped his shoulder with her manicured fingers, led him aside

and informed him in a loud whisper smelling of alcohol that according to the wishes of his late mother Alexandra Ivanovna, God rest her soul, she'll take over watching him in times of need. Dima understood she meant Nikolay Ignatievich's drinking binges.

It didn't take long. One week after this conversation took place, his father nearly broke the door down, chasing Dima out of the apartment, and he flew across the landing from one door to another straight into Yulia's welcoming arms. She was instructed to feed the poor boy and help him with homework.

Instead, she took his virginity.

To give her credit, she did try to feed him, but he was so overwhelmed by her presence, the milky skin of her breasts pulsing with her heartbeat, the soft flesh of them threatening to spill out of her housecoat that she deliberately unbuttoned at the top, the dark cleft between her thighs when she uncrossed her legs and leaned back on the chair, tapping the floor with one of her slippers. He sat there staring at the little squares of caviar sandwiches, smoked beluga, slices of salami, and he couldn't make himself pick up the fork.

"Well, if you're not hungry, " she said, twirling the lock of her hair around her finger, "we can go sit on the sofa, watch some television." She abruptly got up, and from this sudden, no doubt calculated motion the third button on her housecoat popped open, and Dima glimpsed one of her pink round nipples. His

breath caught in his throat.

"Oops!" She buttoned it back up and giggled. "They always do it. Stupid buttons." There was a hint of desperation in her voice, a certain truth. The adolescent Soviet clothes didn't allow for a fully developed bust in girls her age, and she had to stuff herself into the hated brown dress every morning, struggling with the zipper in the back, hoping it wouldn't come undone in the middle of the class.

Dima willed his heart to stop hammering. His vision blurred, and he saw white spots spinning around like snowflakes.

"Come on." Her hand was on his wrist, and he on his feet and trudging behind her before his mind registered what was happening, and after she sat him down on the sofa and said, "I know you've been wanting it for a long time, there is no need to pretend. I know you can't afford to pay me. It's okay, Dima. Don't fret. You don't need to. I'll do it for you for fun. Because I like you. You're cute. A little sullen and boorish for my taste, but still cute. I like it that you're going to the ballet school. I like looking at your body. The way you move. It's very graceful."

When Dima didn't answer, sitting stiff as a rod, she continued, her hand slowly creeping up his pants, her slanted eyes holding him hostage. "I've decided to culture you. Yes, that's right. You need it, Dima, for your professional future. You're not going to get anywhere with this simple-boy attitude

of yours, especially not in the world of ballet—”

Her voice faded into indiscernible garble. Her fingers were inside his briefs, and the moment she grasped him, he shuddered all over and came so hard, a moan of pain escaped his lips. He slumped back, dizzy. Strange hiccupping noises startled him. At first he couldn't understand where they came from, then he saw Yulia laughing. Her head was tipped back, her mouth wide-open. Tears streamed down the sides of her face. She pressed her hands to her breasts to stop them from jiggling, gasping for air, and in that moment she looked hideous.

Dima boiled with shame. His hands shook so hard, it took him three tries to zip up his trousers. He vowed to himself to never see her again and rushed out of the apartment, but two days later he came over again, and three more times the next week, and the week after that.

Their affair lasted four months, until the evening Irina Mikhailovna forgot her wallet, returned home and found Dima sprawled on the sofa, Yulia riding him, and banished Dima from their home for good, but by then Yulia has casually told Ninka Ugolnikova that Dima sported “a huge cock, slightly curved, too” and that he could last “forever,” and then Ninka, in turn, told this delicious bit of news to Dasha, and what Dasha knew, the entire school knew in the matter of hours, and so the week Yulia broke off their arrangement Dima found himself deluged with folded paper notes inviting him over to parties, and after the

last class was over, as soon as he exited the building, one girl or another would accost him demanding he carry her bag, walk her home, or some other such pretense to get into his pants.

After some internal deliberations, he decided it was better than drinking.

18.

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

"And Yulia?"

"Yulia? Yulia was fifteen, almost sixteen. But she looked all twenty."

"Did you...like it? At least a little bit?"

"*Like* it?" Dima let out a soft laugh. "I was enamored. I was absolutely smitten. And it wasn't just the sex, it was everything. Their apartment was a mirrored image of ours, but the difference was enormous. It was inconceivable that something like this could exist in the walls of a pre-stalinist apartment building. You wouldn't believe what they did. They replaced every ceiling lamp with a crystal chandelier. Granted, the ceilings were four meters tall, but still, Olesya, I tell you, it looked *ridiculous*. The wallpaper had this golden hue, and the rugs and the furniture were red plush or velvet, with golden

tassels everywhere, cushions, throws...and there were paintings on every wall, plates with landscapes on them. Hell, there wasn't a spot that wasn't decorated somehow, even the kitchen had this fancy *samovar* that they didn't use...at least I've never seen them use it. It just stood there, gathering dust."

"Did you ever meet her father?"

"A couple times. He was always very business-like. He'd shake my hand, ask how my father was, and then it's like I wasn't there anymore. Once he was done with niceties, he'd be silent. He adored Yulia. I was jealous, watching him ask her how her day was, how things were at school. I think his relationship with his wife by then was already strained, and he took pleasure in annoying her with all this attention to his daughter. They competed spoiling her. It was their war."

"Are they still there?"

"You mean, do they still live there?"

"Yes."

"No, they moved to Leningrad shortly after Irina Mikhailovna walked in on us. They divorced. Yulia called me to tell me. I told her, I saw it coming, and she hung up on me. That's the last I've heard from her. A new family lives there now. From Kiev, I think. Three children. She's a teacher, he's an engineer. They're quiet. I once got a glimpse inside the hall, and it's all gone, the golden wallpaper, the chandeliers, everything. It looks now more or less like our apartment, drab

and grey, no color."

Olesya shifted her head on Dima's arm. He pulled her in closer. His face nestled in her hair, his lips so close to her ear that they almost touched it.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, yes, I am. Please. Tell me more. This is all very interesting."

"Is it?"

"Yes, of course. I get to know you finally. You never told me any of this."

"Well, I didn't think you'd listen."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. This is private, personal stuff. Nobody likes to hear you talk about your mother committing suicide, your father drinking himself into a stupor and beating you bloody, your neighbor seducing you. It's not something people like to hear. People like to hear happy things."

"Didn't I tell you the same thing, and you told me I should stop trying to push you away?"

"Oh, right. Right. Sorry."

They were quiet for some time, contemplating.

"Did you love her?"

"Well, I thought that I did, but no. No, I didn't love her. I didn't know what love meant back then. I loved the glitz around her, the *idea* of her—she was like nobody else I met

before—but not her. I never really knew her, nor did I ever try to get to know her. You might say I was both aloof and arrogant. I didn't understand what it required of me, to love someone, and I didn't want to find out. I shied away from it. I was hurt, and I liked nursing my hurt. It was something I knew well, and parting with it would've forced me to change my ways."

Olesya got up on an elbow and rested her cheek on her palm, studying at Dima. "So what made you change?"

He caught her eyes and held them. "You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"But...how? I don't understand. I didn't do anything special, or—"

Dima's eyes became animated. The car swayed, and the shadows moved across his face, making his outlines blurry. He suddenly beamed. "Remember the first time you came to class?"

"Uh...sort of?"

"You were late."

"Oh, that. Yeah. Yeah, I remember that very well. I just opened the door, I mean, I didn't even open it all the way yet, and Alla Borisovna turns around and screams at me, 'Belaya! You're late again, you're out of here! I'm not repeating this a second time for you. Take your place. Quick. You're disrupting the class.' I wasn't even all that late, was I?"

"No, only a couple minutes."

"Right. The train was packed, and I had to wait for the next one. I was so terrified of being late on my first day, I got out of the metro and ran like crazy, without looking. A car nearly hit me at the crosswalk. I thought my heart would jump out of my chest. So I had to stop and rest, catch my breath before I could go on."

"I didn't know that."

"Yeah. It was scary."

"Well, that's exactly what I'm talking about. That's what impressed me right away."

"What?"

"Your face. You were flushed from running, and your eyes were glittery with something, I could tell it was something unpleasant, and then Alla Borisovna yelling at you only added to that, but you didn't...crumble. It was strange to watch. You didn't lose yourself. There was no change in your expression, in your posture. It's like it washed over you like water, it didn't touch you. Or...no, that's not right—how do I put it—you *made* it not touch you. That's it. You still somehow found it in you to smile."

"I *smiled*?"

"You did! You don't remember?"

"No."

"You smiled this big happy smile, like she gave you the best compliment ever. She was taken aback. I remember her face."

It suddenly got very long, like she didn't know how to react to you. I was shocked. I think all of us were shocked. I mean, you don't *smile* at Alla Borisovna chewing your ass out in front of everybody, it's supposed to shame you. And there you were, beaming, taking your place like nothing happened."

"I never really thought of it this way. I mean, I just did what she hired me to do."

"That's exactly my point. I've never seen such strength in anyone. It didn't bother you. She insulted you for the rest of the class, and you didn't even—"

Olesya snorted. "Yeah. What was it she called me? A lame goat. Something about belonging in a stable and not on the stage."

"Well, I knew it the moment I saw you. I knew I wanted to be with you, that you're my kind of people, and I knew I had to let go of my hurt to even start talking to you. You...intimidated me. I've never been intimidated by a woman before. I've been with many women, more than I can count, but I've never *truly* been with them, never opened to a single one. My body was there, all right, but my head was a couple steps away, observing, making sure there was no danger of being laughed at, and my heart...well, my heart wasn't there at all. I'd forgotten about it. And then you...in that moment when you smiled, you looked at me...and you changed all that."

"I did?"

"Yes." He stroked her hair, took her fingers between his hands, brought them to his lips, and kissed them.

Olesya shifted uncomfortably. The covers slipped off her naked shoulder, exposing her breast, and Dima stared at it, quickly tucked the covers around her and froze, blushing, then moved away and nearly fell off the berth. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, no. Please. Don't be. It's okay. Really, it is. It doesn't bother me. I haven't changed my mind, you know? I still want you to make love to me."

"I know, but I'm...terrified."

"Terrified of what?"

"Of hurting you. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I know you won't."

"But I can tell you're uncomfortable, Olesya. You're all tense."

"Oh, it's just..." She shrugged. "It's just something I have to work on."

"Well, I don't want to do something that will make it even worse. I want to help you."

She sighed. "I hate this. I *hate* this, Dima. I want it to go away. I want to get rid of it. I'm so tired of my brain preventing me from enjoying myself! I'm just—" She suddenly sat up and threw the covers off, her skin alabaster in the bluish light, so white it seemed to be glowing, her breasts small, the size of a palm, nipples stiff with cold, centered precisely,

like two berries placed in the center of two china saucers. "Can I hold it?"

Dima didn't hear her, his heart pounding. "What?"

"Your penis. Can I hold it?"

"Uh. Uh, sure..." He struggled with the button, his fingers clumsy, unzipped the fly, wiggled out of the pant seat, pulled down his briefs.

Olesya's eyes widened. "It *is*...curved." She wrapped her fingers around it. "Warm, too."

Dima uttered a small gasp.

"I'll never do it, Dima. *Never*. I promise you. I'm not going to laugh."

He nodded, looked at her. "Thank you."

19.

They were only one year apart, but to those who didn't know them Milena appeared much older than Olesya, more serious, more mature. They got their first period at the same time, Olesya at thirteen and Milena at twelve, but that's where Olesya's development seemed to have frozen. Her figure didn't change much, and she stayed about the same height, whereas Milena shot up and grew six centimeters taller. Her breasts swelled into hard tight fists, her striking features became ever more bold, high cheekbones, straight nose, huge round eyes of brilliantly blue color. Standing next to her Olesya looked washed out with her light-brown hair, gray eyes, and doll-like face. Milena commanded attention, Olesya shied away from it. Milena was shrewd, calculating, and practical. Olesya was yielding and tended to cry easily, which irritated Milena to no end.

"Don't just stand there, you idiot. Get your shoes off, before baba Zina yells at both of us."

"Oh. Right."

Olesya stooped, unzipped her boots and pulled out her feet, her woolen socks sliding down. She pulled the socks back up, carefully set her boots under the coatrack and started rearranging the rest of the shoes there, straightening them.

Milena elbowed her from behind. "What're you doing that for? Nobody cares for that. You going to take off your coat or what?"

"Oh, yeah." Olesya took off her coat and hung it.

They were visiting baba Zina to celebrate New Year's Eve, a family tradition that used to be a loud and festive gathering and now came to be a sad affair that continued on inertia. It wasn't the same without Grigory Vasilievich's jokes, his grossly exaggerated faces to illustrate them, his endless stories, always something new, something entertaining, something funny. There was no end to them, and no end to his energy, first fueled with the rapt attention of open-mouthed faces, then with food, then with vodka. They all rolled with laughter, wiped their tears, hiccuped, gulped for air. Grigory Vasilievich's cheeks grew flushed, his eyes glittered. He moved his arms about wildly, accentuating his words. When that wasn't enough, he jumped up off his chair and wagged his big head and twitched and wiggled his entire body. His animation was contagious. They clapped. They hollered. They stomped their feet. All, except Olesya.

She rarely participated. She knew there was a fake underlining to all this baffoonery, ever since their trip to Simferopol. She wanted to tell them about it, but she couldn't articulate it in words, so she drew a picture.

They played a game of Head, Bodies, and Legs. The first person drew a head on a piece of paper, folded it down so only the neck was showing, and passed it on to the next person at the table, for drawing the torso, then the next person drew the legs. When done, yet another person unfolded the drawing for all to see. Some of them ended up hysterical, others not so much. When it came Olesya's turn, she had to draw the legs. She did, and between them she drew a large erect penis with little droplets dripping from the tip of it all the way to the ground. She worked hard, and it came out looking quite accurate. She felt very proud of herself and handed it over to baba Zina with a big smile.

Without looking at it, baba Zina unfolded it and showed it to everyone at the table. It was part of the game, to see their reactions first.

"Well? What have we here?"

It was suddenly quiet. They all stared at it, and it took her a moment to realize that something was wrong. She turned the paper around. Her broad, pasty face adorned with red lipstick and rouge that was no longer appropriate at her age turned white, then chalky. Her chin trembled. She clapped a hand to her

breast, her ruby earrings jittering like miniature hearts experiencing an attack.

"What is this? Who drew this?" She passed her eyes around.

Milena dutifully pointed at Olesya.

It was a scandal.

Olesya couldn't remember what happened after, how she was punished, only that since then she was being called a naughty, difficult, stubborn child and in general was pecked at and ridiculed and laughed at by her cousins, Milena especially.

So it was today, almost two years since Papa died, with uncle Sasha desperately trying to fill his older bother's shoes and failing, his jokes falling flat. He compensated by taking pictures of everyone present which he later sent to them in fat envelopes addressed in neat, slanted handwriting, with stacks of glossy black-and-white photographs depicting smiling faces that did their best to look happy, fooling no one.

Baba Zina was cooking and baking since morning, and she ushered the girls into the parlor where the table was already set, the television was showing the traditional Swan Lake ballet at the Bolshoi Theater, and a scraggly fir tree in the corner twinkled with colorful lights, an abundance of mismatched glass balls, cones, icicles, strands of silver tinsel, and a red Soviet star on top that was supposed to light up but didn't. There was no Grigory Vasilievich to fix it, and baba Zina kept it as is.

Milena rushed to the tree and fell to her knees, poking around in the presents. Olesya walked to the imposing china cabinet squeezed in the corner between the couch and the armchair, and picked up one of the porcelain ballerina figurines.

"Put it back!" Milena hissed.

"Why?"

"You're not supposed to touch it."

"I only want to look. I won't break it."

"They're not dolls to play with, Olesya." Milena's voice acquired the tone of her mother when she scolded her and her brother, hands on her hips. From the kitchen came a peal of laughter. The adults were enjoying themselves, toasting, clinking glasses.

"They're real Meissen porcelain, painted by hand, you idiot," Milena continued knowledgably. "Baba Zina brought them back from Germany after the war, and they cost a fortune!"

"I know. She told me a thousand times."

"Then put it back!"

"I only want to look."

"You're so stubborn! Why do you always have to be so stubborn? Can't you follow the rules? You know what she will do to you if she sees that you're playing with it?" Milena lowered her voice. "She will *kill* you."

The voices from the kitchen moved in the direction of the

parlor, and a moment later baba Zina walked in, followed by uncle Sasha, his balding head shining like it was polished, his wife Karina Lvovna whose little eyes darted left and right from behind her thick over-sized glasses, Milena's older brother Lyonya, gaunt and lanky, and Olesya's mother, Olga Afanasievna, dressed in a pencil skirt and a stylish imported sweater, her thin fly-away hair cut to a bob and bleached platinum, the color she maintained by dousing her head every week in an aluminum basin filled with bluing, to leech out the yellow.

Olesya went rigid.

"What is this?" baba Zina exclaimed. "What do you think you're doing? Who gave you permission to touch my figurines?"

"I told her not to touch it," Milena said with a nod, "but she wouldn't listen."

"I'll show you," baba Zina wagged a finger at Olesya, her lips curling up, revealing the tips of irregular teeth smeared with lipstick. "I'll show you how to disobey me."

She labored around the festive table in Olesya's direction, her ruby earrings swaying, and Olesya jerked, intending to place the ballerina back on its shelf, but either because her fingers were too cold to obey her, which happened often, or because her sudden movement upset her balance, she bumped into the cabinet, and her hand opened reflexively. The ballerina flew out of her hand in a liquid, graceful arc, and hit the big crystalline bowl of Olivier salad, the delicate, extremely fragile lace of her

tutu smashing in a shower of fine white powder, bits of her porcelain limbs landing in every dish on the table, the head coming to a rest on baba Zina's empty plate.

A stunned silence settled over the room, interrupted only by the majestic Swan Lake music issuing from the television speaker and Olesya's rapid breathing. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She couldn't believe she has destroyed this elegant, exquisite creation with her clumsiness. She wanted to die from shame.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Baba Zina's ring-encrusted fingers found her ear and twisted it painfully. "You're like your father, bent on destroying everything of value I own. He was like you, always poking his fingers where he shouldn't."

20.

"It was the truest thing she ever told me about him."

"What a heartless, callous woman." Natasha shook her head.

"Is she still alive?"

"Oh yes. Very much so. Just celebrated her eighty-sixth birthday. I do visit her from time to time, but we never talk about my father. It's something we don't mention. I've learned that every time I try to say something, she turns deaf and changes the subject. She's so good at it, she believes she's fooling me. I play along, of course. Her heart is weak. The last time she got upset we had to call the ambulance, thought she was having a heart attack."

"What happened?"

"Oh, the usual. Milena snapped at her after she tried to scold her for wearing a skirt *too skimpy* in her opinion. So Milena yelled at her, called her a 'senile, brainless idiot' who doesn't understand fashion, or something like that. I can't

remember now. In any case, she clutched her heart and stopped breathing—

“That’s horrible!”

“—they told us to pick her up the same day, though. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with her, that she’s as healthy as a bull. Go figure. I suspect she’s just playing us to get her way. It’s sad, really.” Olesya sighed. “I wish she wouldn’t do that.”

They reached the end of the passageway, and Natasha opened the vestibule door. Cold air breathed in their faces. They entered, went through the gangway, and stopped at the entrance to the restaurant.

“So...” Natasha halted. “Did you do it?”

“What?”

Natasha rolled her eyes, glanced around, leaned over to Olesya’s ear, lowered her voice to a whisper. “I mean, you and Dima. Did you, you know...”

“Oh.” Olesya looked down. “You mean, did we have sex? No. No, we didn’t.”

“What? Why not? How long are you going to tease him like that?”

“I’m not teasing him, Natasha. I’m really not.”

“Well, what’s stopping you then?”

The restaurant door opened, and they jumped apart, letting a squat, burly man walk by. He barely gave them a glance and

disappeared into the squeaking gangway, slamming the door behind him.

"Well?"

"I don't want to talk about this right now."

Natasha let out air. "All right. All right. Don't be mad at me. I only want what's good for you, and Dima *is* good for you, Olesya. He's the best thing that's happened to you since you've been hired by Bolshoi. Honestly. When you're together...oh, I wish you could see yourself. It's like there is this light coming from you, it's like, I don't know...like you're *blooming*."

"Really?"

"*Really!* When are you going to believe it? He's in love with you up to his ears! You should see how he's watching you when you dance. He's completely smitten! And you're cold like a fish. He tries to hold on to you, and you slip through his fingers. I tell you, if you lose this boy, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. This is coming from your best friend, by the way, not just some stranger. I don't say these things lightly, Olesya, and you know this."

"Yes, I do."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What do you mean, *what?* What are you going to do about it? Just stand there and watch it pass by and do nothing?"

Olesya shrugged. "I don't know. What do you suggest I do?"

"Let him in."

"How?"

"Trust him."

A group of corps girls burst into the vestibule, and
Natasha and Olesya walked into the restaurant with them.

21.

"Did you hear the great news?"

Olesya started, spun around.

Milena scanned her up and down, a hand on her hip. She looked her finest this morning. Her long hair the color of ash with golden highlights was pulled back into a bun. She wore just enough makeup to accentuate her striking features. A pale-blue cashmere sweater that Olesya knew Egor got for her through his parents' connections hugged her tight. And then she wore jeans, real *firmenny* jeans, properly boiled and scuffed in all the right places, not some Soviet imitation. Olesya stared at them, and when she lifted her eyes, Grigory Vasilievich stood right behind Milena, smiling.

The floor fell out from under Olesya's feet. Her legs flounced, and she grabbed on to the doorjamb. "What news?" Her voice came to her from a distance. Her vision blurred at the edges, and the restaurant car started revolving around her in

slow circles.

She closed her eyes, opened them.

The spinning stopped, but now her heart was beating so hard it shook her chest, and her ears were ringing.

"Oh, you don't know?" Milena beamed. "Then I won't spoil it for you. Krysa will tell you."

Grigory Vasilievich nodded as though he knew what she was talking about, plunged his hands into his pant pockets, fiddled with something, and started rocking on the balls of his feet. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Olesya, you coming?" Natasha's voice floated up to Olesya as if from the far end of a tunnel.

A harried waitress with a loaded tray in her hands stopped behind Milena and Grigory Vasilievich. The corners of her lips turned down, and when she saw Milena's jeans, her sweaty face grew long, and she snapped, "You're blocking the aisle. Move."

Milena slowly turned her head and looked the waitress up and down. "Well, if you would've hurried up and found a place for me to sit, then I wouldn't be standing here, would I?"

"What?" The waitress narrowed her eyes. "Who do you think you are, lady? You think you're so special? If you don't like it here, nobody is asking you to eat here." And she rudely pushed her aside, nearly knocking her off her feet.

Milena gasped, reached back to hold on to something, and nearly sat on the lap of the man who was eating breakfast with

his wife and two children. He dropped his fork and caught her hand just in time, righting her.

"Thank you," Milena said. "What an insolence. I will complain about this. I'll make sure she gets *fired*."

"Ah, don't mind her, miss," the man said amiably. "She's just busy is all." And he picked up his fork and shoveled the runny eggs from his plate into his mouth like nothing happened, moving his jaw with deliberate, mechanical regularity.

His wife shook her curly head, stuck her spoon back into the oatmeal, pulled up a spoonful of the grey, gooey mass, blew on it and slurped it up. The children, a boy and a girl of about eight, looked at Milena, then at their mother, and followed her example.

Milena wrinkled her nose. "I'm not eating this filth. It doesn't even look like food." And without another glance at Olesya she spun around and stalked out of the car.

"Gee," the wife shook her head. "She's a good one, she is. Some princess. What did she expect them to serve? Pancakes with *caviar*?"

The children exchanged a glance and giggled. The husband said something, but it didn't reach Olesya. An elderly couple rose from the table across, and she sunk into the empty seat the moment they departed, watching Grigory Vasilievich watch her.

Natasha took her by the shoulder.

Olesya flinched.

"What? What is it? What are you doing here? Come on. Krysa is waiting for us."

Olesya tore her eyes away from Grigory Vasilievich.

"Natasha? Can you do something for me?"

"Right now?"

"Right now."

"Can it wait until later? Come on, Olesya. You know she doesn't like waiting. It doesn't look like it's good news, whatever it is, I tell you. The look on her face, you should see it. It's as if—"

Olesya seized Natasha's hand. "Please. Listen to me. Can you look in that direction?"

"What direction?"

"Over there. Can you look over there?"

Natasha looked up. "Okay. And?"

"Do you see anything strange? Anything...out of place?"

"No."

Olesya shrunk. "It's just as I thought."

"What was it?" Suddenly Natasha stopped breathing. She shrunk out of the waitress's way, pressing her body to Olesya's shoulder, and Olesya felt her stiffen all over. She looked back to where Grigory Vasilievich stood, at the end of the car, out of everyone's way. He saw both girls look at him, smiled and pulled his hand out of his pocket. It was holding Tyubik. Grigory Vasilievich puckered his lips and made small tooting

noises, mimicking a train, like he did when they were playing with Olesya's toy engine, and as if in answer the train gave a long, mournful whistle, the car rocked and swayed, and the dishes rattled across the tables. The constant hum of the talking voices and the scraping of the cutlery momentarily ceased, then resumed.

"Do you see him?"

"I see him."

"But you didn't see him before, did you? When he came to Dima's compartment?"

"No. No, I didn't. What is he? A ghost?"

"I suppose. What else could he be?"

"Jesus." Natasha placed her hand on the table, leaned over, her face pale. Olesya moved back to make room for her. Natasha sat down.

Grigory Vasilievich seemed to be delighting at the attention he was getting. He passed Tyubik from hand to hand, stroking it, rolling its wheels, his dark eyes never wavering, never leaving their table.

Natasha gripped Olesya by the arm. "You know what? If you told me that I'm insane, right now, right this moment, I'd believe you."

Olesya sighed. "Now you know how I feel. He was coming to me like this since his funeral. Every night, Natasha. Every single night."

"I...I can't imagine how that must feel like. That's horrible! You must be terrified of going to sleep."

"I am."

"What do you think he wants?"

Olesya shrugged. "What do the dead want? Something they haven't gotten while they were alive? I don't know. I've tried everything. I mean, he missed my first recital, so I thought maybe that's it. I danced my part for him, but he kept coming. The only time I got any relief was when I was traveling, so I thought maybe it's somehow connected to our apartment, to my room. I decided to move out."

"Move out? Where? Where would you go?"

"I'm not sure yet. I thought maybe I could rent half a room from Nadezhda Petrovna. She's my old ballet school teacher. She's always been nice to me, but she's getting old now, and she told me she could use some help, with buying groceries, cooking, doing laundry, that kind of thing, and I thought...anyway, it doesn't matter. I've been saving up for this last year, and I think I have enough for a couple months' rent, but since we got on the train, and Papa surfaced here...it's like, there's no escape. I don't know what to think anymore. This is the first time he followed me, and the first time he's showing up in the middle of the day. I do know one thing, though."

"What is it?"

"I know what he doesn't want." Olesya took a deep breath.

"He doesn't want me to have sex with anyone. I haven't been unable to...well, I've tried hooking up with some guys over the years, before I met Dima, and every time we'd get close to doing it, you know, get naked and all, he'd appear and I just couldn't go on. I just couldn't. I'd grab my clothes and run out."

"Is that why you and Dima—"

"I'm listening!"

Natasha and Olesya looked up.

"I'm listening," the waitress repeated. "Eggs or oatmeal?"

"Uh...are those our only choices?" Olesya asked.

"We're out of cream of wheat, if that's what you want. You should've come earlier. We always run out of it. Well?"

"Can I just have some coffee?"

Alla Borisovna's ratty face floated up from behind the waitress. Her lips were compressed into a line, and her nostrils were flaring. "Olesya Belaya."

Olesya nearly jumped.

"I will see you in my compartment after you're done with your breakfast," and she was off without waiting for an answer.

"I told you," Natasha hissed.

Olesya shook her head. "Damn it. *Damn it.*" She looked to the end of the car. Grigory Vasilievich was gone, but in his place stood Tanechka. She waved to Olesya and took off after Alla Borisovna, skipping and clapping her hands.

22.

Olesya rapped on the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Alla Borisovna."

"Who is this *me*?"

"Olesya. Olesya Belaya. You asked me to—"

"Come in. It's unlocked."

Olesya tugged on the latch and rolled the door open.

Alla Borisovna was reclining on the berth with her back to the window, propped up on two pillows, a foreign dance magazine lying in her lap, open on a glossy two-page spread, a photograph of a ballerina swathed in a cloud of gauze. This was the kind of a magazine that Olesya dreamed about getting her hands on. A few of them circulated among the Bolshoi dancers, but the copies were outdated, years old, the pages frayed and smudged from constant handling, many of them ripped out. This magazine was brand new. Olesya could almost smell the ink. She cautiously

stepped inside and looked around.

It seemed that this compartment didn't belong to this car, nor to this train, for that matter. It was neat as a pin, not a sign of dust or dirt anywhere. The cotton curtains were starched, blindingly white, pulled back into perfect folds. The bedding was freshly pressed, the luggage stowed away, the tablecloth without a stain, a lonely cup of black coffee, now cold, sitting in the middle of the table. Alla Borisovna's shoes were stacked on the floor in a straight line, and her grey wool coat hung off a hanger, buttoned up all the way, a fuzzy scarf and hat draped over it as though for display in a glass case.

"Close the door behind you. You're letting in the cold air."

"Oh. Of course." Olesya rolled the door shut. "Sorry about that."

"Lock it."

Olesya locked it.

"Sit down."

Olesya tiptoed to the opposite berth and perched on the very edge of it, hands folded in her lap.

Alla Borisovna closed the magazine, set it aside and swung her legs down, peering at Olesya across the table. She picked up the cup and took a small sip. Olesya shuddered. The coffee was cold, without cream or sugar, and it must've tasted nasty. It didn't bother Alla Borisovna. She drunk the rest of it in small

unhurried sips without making a noise, not a slurp, nothing, like she was inhaling it, then she set the cup down on the saucer with a soft clink, pushed it aside, and steepled her fingers. "I hear you have spent the night with Rummyantsev."

Olesya drew in breath.

Alla Borisovna silenced her with a wave of her hand. "I don't need your explanations. You're not here to talk, you're here to *listen*. When I need you to talk, I'll ask you to. Is that clear?"

Olesya nodded.

"Good. Now, as I recall, I asked you and Natasha to join me for breakfast this morning. Not only did you choose to ignore my invitation, you had enough audacity to show up and sit at a table in my direct view, mocking me in front of my dancers. I confess to you, Olesya, I was shocked. I couldn't believe my eyes! It took me a while to understand that what I was seeing wasn't some kind of a...vision. Needless to say, this is unacceptable behavior, and you know it perfectly well." She looked out the window and her eyes flicked back and forth, following the dark clumps of woods that flashed by, their branches drenched in snow, then her eyes found Olesya again. "At this point it doesn't really matter what it was that motivated you. You're a smart girl. I imagine you had perfectly valid reasons for your actions. Regardless of what they were, you have to understand that this isn't a game. Bolshoi Ballet isn't just

about dancing. It's a matter of state. Only the best of the best get picked to become prima ballerinas. They're the faces of the Soviet people, the faces we present to the West. We don't want you defecting on your first tour abroad. You must possess an unshakeable character, a flawless reputation. But unfortunately, based on what has transpired in the last twenty-four hours it's clear to me that you've lost your aspirations to become a prima-

"

Olesya's heart dropped to her stomach.

"—and I regret to inform you that I've chosen Milena to step in your place. She's a prima as of this morning, and she's going on our next Swan Lake tour. To America." She bore her beady eyes into Olesya's pallid, motionless face.

Olesya lost all feeling in her body. All she could do was sit and stare.

Something softened in Alla Borisovna's eyes, and she reached, placed her dry papery hand on Olesya's shoulder.

"I had high hopes for you, Olesya. You don't know how incredibly talented you are. No, talented doesn't even come close to it. You're every choreographer's dream. You have an ideal ballet body. You're quiet, hard-working, disciplined. Your technique is one of the best I've seen, and your stage presence...well, you know all about it. I don't need to tell you. You get standing ovations at every performance. *Every* performance. Dress rehearsals, too. Injured, not injured, sick.

It doesn't matter, it doesn't seem to affect you. Even I can't tell the difference. You're always radiant, always giving it your all. What can I say? You're my best dancer, but you have to understand that this isn't my decision alone." She pulled her hand away.

Olesya sat as still as stone, hardly breathing.

Alla Borisovna picked up the cup, saw that it was empty, and put it back down. "Do you have anything you want to say?"

Olesya opened her mouth, cleared her throat. "Does this mean..." her voice came out as a whisper.

"Can you speak up? I can't hear you."

"Does this mean...that I'm fired?"

"Fired? No, goodness, no. Whatever gave you this idea? No. I'm simply doing you a favor. These things are done quietly. You understand that, yes? I'm telling you all this because I want you to succeed. You have another year to prove yourself worthy. Two at the most."

"Worthy...of what, exactly?"

"Of the state's trust."

"So I can't..." A hot ball of salt rolled up Olesya's throat. She swallowed it down. "I can't...see Dima?"

"That's nonsense. You're dancing partners. You can spend as much time together as you want. However, if you choose to be intimate, you have to do it outside of Bolshoi walls. That includes the walls we occupy while traveling, Olesya. Take your

cousin Milena for example. I have never seen her cross that line with Egor, and they're married. Married! You're not even married! Whatever gave you the idea that you have permission to rub your little affair it in my face?" Her facial expression didn't change, but her nostrils were flaring, and little reddish spots crawled up her neck.

"But why, Alla Borisovna? *Why?* Why do you think I'm rubbing something in your face? I'm not. I'm really not."

"Enough! You've tired me out. From this point on, I don't want to see any more of your...slobbering over each other, is that clear?"

"No." Olesya said quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, no. It's not clear."

"I beg your pardon. Explain yourself."

Olesya stood, her hands in fists. "I don't have to, Alla Borisovna. I don't have to explain myself to you, nor to anybody. You're forcing me to make a decision between my career and my happiness, and you're trying to impress on me that giving up my happiness for the benefit of the state is something I should be striving for, that the grand fulfillment of an idea is more important than a moment of small, individual pleasure. A kiss. A holding of a hand. A gazing in the eyes. Do you understand what you're asking of me? You're essentially asking me to give up my *life*. I would think this is probably a

sacrifice you've made yourself, years and years ago, and where did it get you. Are you happy, Alla Borisovna?"

"What? What kind of a question is this?"

"A very simple one. Are you happy?"

She gaped at her, speechless.

"Have you ever loved in your life? Truly loved. Have you?"

A shadow passed over Alla Borisovna's face, her eyes grew dull and distant, and she said sharply, "You know nothing of love. You're but a child. Get out of here." When Olesya didn't move, she jumped up, rushed to the door and violently rolled it open. The door bounced back. Alla Borisovna slammed it into the slot, her trembling finger pointing to the passageway.

"Out-out-out!"

Olesya walked out.

23.

It was especially cold that day, the kind of cold that seems to penetrate your bones the moment you walk out the door.

Olesya woke up early and glanced at the window. It was still dark, and the snow was falling thick and hard, like a white theater curtain forever floating down. She kicked off the covers, found her slippers on the floor, slid her naked feet inside them, and shuffled to the window.

They lived on the sixth floor, and the streetlamps floated below like furry halos, the light failing to reach the ground, getting lost somewhere in the snowfall. Every shape in the courtyard was blanketed with whiteness, and none of them were recognizable. The cars, the playground, the roofs of the garages. It all blended into a kind of a breathless, wooly silence that expanded until it reached Olesya though the frosted glass and filled her to the core.

She smiled a big smile.

"It's going to be perfect, Papa," she whispered. "You'll see. It's going to be *perfect*."

She got to work.

Her dance bag sat on the chair by her desk. She took it down and unzipped it. She had already packed it the night before with her pointes, tights, costume, and a cosmetic bag with everything she needed and didn't, reasoning that extra things were good to have in case one of the girls asked for an extra hairpin, or the nail polish to fix the run on the tights, or more hairspray—and someone always asked Olesya, knowing she had everything—but that was yesterday. And today was a new day. She had already double-checked that everything was in place, and still she reached in and took out every item, then put it back with a satisfied sigh. Next was the question of the hair. Should she do it now and then redo it right before leaving? Or should she do it only once before leaving? But that was dangerous. There was no telling how long the cooking would take, and she didn't want to take chances of getting stuck in the kitchen and doing a sloppy job because she didn't have enough time left. She'd have to do it now.

Olesya took out her hairbrush...

Note: I have stopped writing Draft 4 here, and decided to plot it out, after which the story changed once again so much that I have abandoned this draft and started Draft 5.