When my brother died in the winter of 1998, the snow fell all night and all day and all the following week, so they didn’t find him right away, the contour of his body barely delineated but otherwise indistinguishable from the shrouded, ice-etched forms. Out the window of my brother’s luxurious apartment, the Moskva River appeared frozen, layered in white as though bandaged with strips of gauze. But if you stared at it long enough, if you let your eyes adjust to the ossifying whiteness all around, you could see the river tremble and shift underneath the snow wet and sunken and hollow in the middle like a puncture wound.

“We need to find your father,” my mother said, filling her cup with more coffee. “He can help carry the casket.”

“You need to eat something, Mom,” I said, turning away from the window that still held the misty imprint of my hand. “Really. You don’t sleep, you don’t eat. You’ll get sick.”

She peered in her coffee, her forehead strained with wrinkles, eyes squinting hard as though she was trying to read her fortune in the impervious blackness of the cup.

Our father left us two months before my birth. He didn’t find another woman, and he didn’t hate our mother or his two-year-old son, who was always sick and crying and not sleeping. But our father wanted to be free, free like birds. If he had wings, he’d told my mother, he would fly away. But he had legs, and so he walked and didn’t come back, his fate a mystery.
“Somewhere, in the old phone book, there’s his parents’ number and address. Perhaps he’s there,” my mother said.

“What will I say to him? Your older son is dead, and even though you haven’t seen him for twenty-six years, asshole, we need you to be a pallbearer? And what about me, Mom? Technically, he’s my father too.”

She didn’t respond, her face buried in her hands. She wasn’t old, although right there and then, she could’ve been a grandmother, dressed in a stretched dark-brown sweater, with her gray hair swept behind her ears, frail, sunless skin, shoulders weighed low from the years of servitude—to her parents, to us, to my brother.

“It isn’t about you, Leova,” she breathed out the words.

“It’s never about me. But always about him. Tell you what, Mom, he didn’t care about us. He preferred the city, the streets, to his family. He was just like our father.”

Again, she didn’t respond, her eyes tracing after a covey of flurries spinning webs behind the window glass. Somewhere, in the yard, there was my brother’s shoe, buried under a heap of snow.

The year is 1980; I’m eight and my brother Konstantin is ten. It’s one of the hottest summers we’ve had. There’s no rain and there’s no wind. The sun is a pyre in the sky, a blazing vessel of ceaseless heat. The air is dry and brittle, it tingles on your lips. Every living thing, every bug, every leaf pines for rain. The grass sighs and turns to dust, the flowers shrivel by mid-morning; the trees offer little shade and no reprieve. They don’t move or sway their branches or rustle their leavers but stand still as though painted on a piece of paper, the colors waver and melt away.

We’re swimming in the Moskva River, my brother and I, and he teaches me how to float on my back. Dragonflies dapple the surface, pinpricks of golden light, and for a moment, Konstantin disappears and I’m left alone, drifting softly, limbs akimbo. I feel his arms wrap around my chest and yank me underwater so quickly the sun shrinks to the size of a fist, and then all is dark and murky, a pillar of silt rising from the bottom. I hold my breath for as long as I can, until Konstantin lets go and I push through the water, climbing higher and higher, guided by the trembling rings of light.
“Fight for your life, little brother,” he says as soon as I shoot out. “Because no one else will.”

I flounder and suck air and paddle ashore with all my strength.

Our mother is home, doing laundry or frying fish; she doesn’t know we’ve gone to the river or that I’ve almost drowned. She worries about Konstantin being too thin, squirming like a worm out of her loving arms. I’m too heavy for my age, thick and sturdy, a stump of a boy.

On the day of the funeral, the cemetery was a giant cocoon of snow, with monuments poking here and there and tall three-barred crosses. From afar, they resembled crippled frozen birds caught midflight. The gaunt trees stood crystalized-white, the limbs gave out an impression of being broken and soldered to the trunks at odd angles. It was impossible to detect where snow ended and clouds began, all fused together, the sky and the earth and the thin whitish air like a muslin cloth suspended on trees and threaded through our fingers. The four of us agreed to be pallbearers—me, our neighbor, and two of Konstantin’s friends. The casket felt heavy, heavier than I’d expected, as though the snow, too, had added to the weight of Konstantin’s body. My father didn’t wish to attend the funeral or speak to my mother, and he didn’t call me by my name during our short conversation. Right before hanging up, he said, “Your brother, was he mean to you? You two must’ve gotten into a lot of fights.”

“Some,” I had replied. “Some fights.”

The grave wasn’t long enough, and we waited, shivering but otherwise not moving as the gravediggers hacked and chopped away. The sounds of their shovels and pickaxes shook the dumb earth and my mother’s shoulders. Every now and then, I would glance at her stooping under the weight of the sheepskin coat Konstantin had bought for her last year. The coat seemed two sizes too big, or she two sizes too small, wilted inside its dyed-black fur so that only the tips of her ungloved fingers were left visible and her face, like a frost-bitten apple, dark and lonely. Once, she’d seemed tall and proud to us, indomitable, with a broad, sturdy back eager to support our weight and carry us into the future. But with years, as we thrived, she withered, as though she had given us not only her energy and her labor, but her skin, her hair, her blood, all of her vital powers. We were like vampires who couldn’t control their urges,
seduced by the sight and smell of such tender, familiar flesh, and who kept gorging on her life to sustain their own.

My mother had decided not to cremate the body and not to open the casket, even though Konstantin’s face wasn’t mangled, the first bullet had entered his heart and the second the back of his head, becoming trapped, permanently lodged inside his brain. For years afterward, I would dream about it—him sauntering down the street, whistling a Beatles’ song, “All the Lonely People” or “Yellow Submarine,” shooting spit between his teeth and raising the collar of his leather coat like an American-movie gangster, like someone for whom death meant no more than a change of scenery or a new costume. I imagined the hit-man too, screwing a silencer onto his gun, loitering behind a building, aiming the gun first at the distant sprawl of trees, then at my brother’s back, then at his head, his broom- bristle hair always cropped so short. Occasionally, in my dreams, it would be me trudging toward Konstantin’s apartment complex, awaiting the bullet to enter my skull and tear into the cerebral cortex, and I would feel it tunnel through the lobes—occipital, parietal, frontal, temporal—nestling into my thalamus or even not sinking that deep, segueing into the furrow between the two hemispheres. I would wake up drenched in cold sweat, cradling the back of my head, expecting to find the bullet hole, the raw ugly edges of the wound.

The year is 1984, the last winter before perestroika. We’re twelve and fourteen, and we’re shopping for groceries—milk, eggs, beef cutlets rolled in breadcrumbs that crunch between our teeth after our mother has fried them in butter, or rather sunflower oil, but we don’t know it then because everything tastes like butter, rich, delicious. The grocery store is invaded by people who scour the half-empty aisles, foraging for food, plucking off the shelves anything they can spot, be it a soup-pack of bones and gamy meat or sprouted purple-eyed potatoes. We’ve been warned that the country’s supply of flour will peter out in less than a month. But as boys, we don’t really know how long a month is, how short. Konstantin strays off in hopes to procure beef cutlets while I’m ordered to guard two bottles of milk, a bag of millet, a can of herring, and a half a loaf of black bread.

It’s been a while since Konstantin has left, and my arms begin to tingle from heat. I untie my earflaps and take my rabbit hat off; my hair is wet, sticking to my scalp. Herds of
people jostle by, but Konstantin isn’t among them, and I begin to panic, a lump of fear swells in my stomach. I abandon the tote on the floor, just for a minute, I think, and scuttle toward the meat department; my brother isn’t there but a few older women haggling over pig feet to boil for xolodets. It suddenly occurs to me that perhaps Konstantin has already gone home, and I weave through the crowd, pushing between the heavy doors, a cloud of snow in my face.

I’m almost back to our dingy graffiti-scarred apartment building when I hear him whistle behind my back.

“Hey,” he says. “Dick-head, where you’re going? And where are all the groceries? Where’s the bag?”

I halt, my heart nudged tight between my ribs, and I think about my mother reaching into the chicken’s cavity that morning and yanking out the slimy pebble-shaped organ, then rinsing it in cold water and frying in oil.

“Quit being such a baby,” Konstantin says. “Stop the fuck crying and wipe that snot. Disgusting.” He’s tall and wiry, with a mean cleft in his chin he’s already began to shave and not because he has hair, but because he wants it to grow faster.

“You disappeared,” I say, sniffling, shielding my face with my sleeve. “You left me for an hour.”

“I said I was coming back. And I did, didn’t I?” He pulls a chekushka of vodka out of the pocket and unscrews the lid, takes a long hard swig; it’s the first time I see him doing something forbidden, something adult.

In a crowd of friends and family, I noticed a young woman with a little boy, three or four at the most, bundled up in a down coat and with a red scarf noosing his neck and mouth. He fidgeted with the scarf, pushing it down, but the mother pulled it back up, making sure the boy’s face stayed swaddled at all times. The young woman kept her eyes on the casket while the red-scarfed boy rolled a snow ball between his tiny gloved hands, both the mother and the child stood closer to the trees than to the grave and appeared separate from the rest of the mourners. After the burial, she didn’t follow the crowd toward the gates, but moved
behind the thickest of trees until all I could discern was a small patch of red flashing in the distance like a bullfinch or some other scarlet-breasted bird.

Weeks would pass before I would see them again, weeks filled with silence, more snow, and mounds of tedious paperwork concerning the inheritance. My father had contacted us a few times insisting on his share, but we ignored his impertinent demands. Soon Konstantin’s bank account became privy to us and also his ritzy apartment, where my mother and I relocated. She wanted to be as close to her son in death as she couldn’t in life. She moved about the five richly-furnished rooms of his home silently, like a ghost, fading into the forms and shapes of his life, the pearl-inlaid tables and curvy velour couches and solid-oak bookcases, with shelves upon shelves of American movies: The Godfather, Goodfellas, Prizzi’s Honor, Once Upon a Time in America, The Terminator, Die Hard. My mother sat in her son’s soft, cherry-suede chairs and lay in his field-wide bed, refusing to strip off his sheets. She fingered his clothes—jeans and cashmere sweaters and expensive leather jackets—and lingered by the tall velvet-draped windows, her quiet presence often unnoticed yet somehow palpable, like a sudden breath of warm air on the nape of your neck. I bought groceries and cooked most mornings before work, but she would forget to eat it, forget there was life after life, hers after Konstantin’s. She became so thin, threadbare, you could see through her, could see her heart pulsing slower and slower, enmeshed in silence and grief. I had her all to myself now, and yet she was slipping away, dissipating into the darkness.

As for me, I enjoyed living in my brother’s apartment. I put on his flamboyant, if a bit arrogant, lifestyle like an ill-fitted glove of oiled, supple leather—it stretched with wear and gave a nice shape to your hand. I could now continue my education, as opposed to managing a small food-and-liquor kiosk for the rest of my life, and enjoy the view of the city and the Moskva River while eating my meals, gazing dreamily out the snow-brushed window. There was darkness out there, and there was light, the city quilt patched with shadows. The outside world was like the river itself—treacherous and invisible, protected by snow that would soon melt, exposing deep cracks in the ice, through which the water would try to escape, gain a semblance of freedom.

When the doorbell rang, I was loading the dishwasher, and my mother had dozed off in Konstantin’s desk chair, a picture album hugged against her belly. I recognized the woman and the boy from the cemetery and felt obliged to ask them in, nodding and stooping, awkwardly,
as though I were the one who had appeared on their doorstep with a stern, urgent gaze and a clump of snow underfoot. The young woman had a smooth face, small inconspicuous features, except maybe for the mouth—too broad, too pulpy, intimidating. She said nothing while she undressed the boy, hanging his red scarf and coat on the hall tree. Squatting, she pulled off his boots one by one before producing a pair of fuzzy slippers from the backpack. She fitted them on his feet, set the boots next to mine by the door, then got up and squeezed the boy in her arms, his sweet scared face nuzzled into her fur coat.

“He’s your nephew,” she said and pushed the little guy toward me with such a force, he bumped against my hip.

“What do you mean he’s my nephew? Who are you?”

“Unimportant. But you must take care of him because I can’t, not at the moment.”

“No way. You fucking kidding me?”

With her sad, dark eyes she studied my sweater or rather Konstantin’s—gray with purple stripes. It was a little too snug yet long in the sleeves, but I loved how soft it felt against my chaffed, wintered skin. “I bought it for him,” she finally said.

“That doesn’t prove squat.”

“No?”

“Konstantin hated children. Compared them to asshole hairs, dirty and annoying.”

“I really must go. But I’ll be back. I promise.”

“When?”

She shrugged. “Soon. Be good to him. He’ll eat anything and he’s stranger-friendly.”

She opened the door and walked out, scurried down the steps with dull thuds. I stared at the puddle of water on the floor, and then at the boy. He didn’t move, half-leaned against me, his kitten-gray eyes brimming with tears.

“Shit,” I said.

“Shit,” he echoed.

The year is 1988; the day after my high-school graduation. The sky is drifting with clouds changing shapes—houses to cars, cars to wheels, wheels to breasts. Mountainous, doughy, with soft areolas and long sugary nipples. All of them are, of course, too high to reach, but
I keep tasting them, keep smacking my virgin lips while Konstantin is in the other room, having sex with one of his beautiful girlfriends. He’s never at home any more, comes to sleep occasionally or visits when our mother is out, so he doesn’t have to answer her questions: Where are you all day? What do you eat? Where did you get that leather jacket?

There are no sounds coming from the room, but as I press my palms and my face, my cheeks, my nose, my tongue, all of me to the wall, I imagine their bodily vibrations, gentle thrusts growing steadier and harder as my penis engorges with blood, about to spill. My hand reaches inside my shorts when the door swings open and my brother’s girlfriend appears like a nymph, transparent, draped in air and her long blond locks. Her feet are small, lovely, with scarlet toenails, a thin golden chain coils around her ankle.

As soon as she steps into the room, she’s enveloped in sunlight, and I tremble to touch her, such slim shoulders and perfect breasts. She doesn’t protest but guides my hands farther along her thighs; her skin mellows under my fingers. She has a shaved pussy, red and tender like her mouth. It opens and closes—a wet, living thing. I come inside her, she arches, buttocks raised, heels pounding at my back when she calls out my brother’s name.

“Happy fucking graduation,” Konstantin says and grins. In the doorway, his naked erect silhouette looms too far and too close.

Since high school, I’d dreamed of becoming a radiologist; I was convinced it was the best profession in the world because you were able to see the invisible, to see inside people. But I couldn’t afford medical school, or my own apartment, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask Konstantin for help because it would’ve meant that I’d conceded to his despicable behavior, endorsed his impudence. I could have never done that, stooping so low, humiliating myself to no end. So I worked long hours at the kiosk, every day and even on weekends, saving what little I could. My mother, however, had lost her job three years into _perestroika_ when it had become clear that only the young and the dodgy would lead Russia into the 21st century. Konstantin was one of them; he possessed no degree but plenty of talent, criminal talent. He had a nose of a blood hound, he smelled money and fortune, and he chased them to the death. He believed in the imminent success of his clandestine undertakings as other people believed in their government who kept robbing them of chance and hope, a desire to achieve.
Konstantin often said that socialism was about petty theft; perestroika was about grand larceny. One must adjust, and one must share. Years later, reading about ordered killings which would slowly become a routine, I understood that “sharing” had always been unwarranted and through sheer coercion. It was a continuous game of Russian roulette—each lucky, missed shot brought you closer to death.

Little Konstantin had moved into Big Konstantin’s apartment and my mother’s heart with ease and confidence, without doing much of anything other than curling on her lap and eating her food—beef cutlets, rassol’nik; fried fish. Just like Big Konstantin, he exuded restlessness and was a voracious eater yet remained skinny. Each time my mother picked him up, she worried about breaking him in half. He was almost five, but looked barely three. He was inquisitive and intrusive, and I compared him to a rescue pet too eager to trust any feeding hand. Unlike me, my mother had never questioned Konstantin’s paternity and embraced the boy with the kind of selfless love only a grandmother could bestow. And Little Konstantin indulged her, melting under her stroking hands like snow under the sun. He laughed when she bathed him, tickling his feet, and nestled with her on the couch, watching cartoons or an old TV show, In the World of Animals. Each day they went out for walks and returned with sweets and toys. They built Lego castles and race tracks, improvised a puppet theater from old gloves, and held imaginary tournaments while deeming themselves great warriors, fierce and fearless, protected by cardboard armor. My mother turned twenty-five again, with a life marked by promise and a kid’s touch. She gained weight, grew breasts, and colored her hair chestnut brown; she wore young-women’s clothes, tight and uncomfortable, but also low-cut and low-rise, hems dragging across the floor. Even her face filled in and blossomed, a touch of rosy glow on her cheeks. In just a week, Little Konstantin was calling her Big Mama.

“Konstantin means constant, everlasting,” my mother said once, during supper. She reached to touch the boy’s head, his pixie face fondled by long brown locks.

“And Leova?” he asked.

“Bold for his people. Lion,” she answered.

“King,” I said.

“You don’t look like a king. You’re too short.”

“Sorry.” I spooned dressed herring into my mouth, chewing steadily.

“If you have a son,” he continued, “will you call him Little Leova or Lion Prince?”
“You think you’re so fucking smart.”
“You think you’re so fucking smart.”
“Stop it. Both of you,” my mother said.
Little Konstantin focused his soft, woolly eyes on my face; I glanced out the window, at a large icicle that hung low over the sill, threatening to crush against its silver lip.

The year is 1995. It’s our mother’s 50th birthday, and Konstantin has ordered 50 burgundy roses to be delivered to our old flat. A stylist has been hired to pick out our mother’s dress and massive chest-crushing jewelry, a calf-hair purse and a matching pair of high-heeled shoes our mother has trouble wearing. She wobbles from the bathroom to the kitchen to the living room, pausing and ogling herself in a dim hallway mirror. A driver in a black Mercedes has been paid to chaperone her to a spa that morning, where she’s been transformed into someone with a Pompadour and flawless skin.

An Italian restaurant has been reserved months in advance, friends gathered, wines selected and paired with exotic seafood platters and hand-rolled pastas in rich blood-red sauces. In the background a band is playing “Yesterday,” and the guy impersonating Lennon shakes his long, stringy hair. Waitresses hover over the table, where our tall, rejuvenated mother resides between her sons. Konstantin pricks a shrimp and spools a fork-full of pasta, raises a wine glass. “If you wanted to punish a bad person, what would you do, Ma?” he asks, sucking the pasta off the fork, chewing with applied force.

“Me?” she asks, confused.

“Yes.” He dabs a napkin at his lips. “Would you kill him? Or would you make him suffer for the rest of his life?”

“Whose life? Who are you talking about? No one deserves to die,” she says, the confusion in her eyes has given way to fear. She blinks and rubs her cheek, her glowing complexion now smudged between her fingers.

“You’re too kind, Ma. Always have been—to all of us assholes,” he says and downs the wine, beckoning at the waitress, who obliges at once, a bottle of red in hand.

“Speak for yourself,” I say. “And stop interrogating our mother, you heartless jerk.”
“You heartless jerk. What did you ever do to care for her? What did you give her? I paid for everything, including your fucking suit.”

“Money is paper.”

“Money is freedom—freedom to do whatever I damn please.”

“Steal and murder?”

“Wow, some potent words, little brother. Be careful, someone may hear you.”

“Mom, is that true?” I turn sideways. “Did he buy my suit? You said it was your money, and I said I’d pay you back.”

She squints, hard, as though one of us were about to hit her. “Why do you always have to do this?” she grinds the words between her teeth like dry buckwheat. “Spoil everything?”

“I spoil everything? I’m the culprit of all your troubles?” My voice escalates, stomach churns with anger. A few guests snap their heads in our direction. “I’ll sing,” I say and acknowledge the empty stage, the instruments, like dead bodies, scattered on the floor. “It’s my gift to all of you.” I get up, the wine pulsing through my veins; my mother catches my hand, tries to hold me in place.

“Don’t embarrass yourself, asshole,” Konstantin smirks.

“Can you pay me not to?”

When, even before the funeral, the police asked my mother whether she was aware of the criminal activities her older son had been involved in, she shook her head and said, “It’s your job to know such things and prevent them from happening. My job is to love and protect my children. And sometimes we all fail.”

Oddly, I began feeling like that too. There was sad helplessness in everything I did, an unnerving importunate sense of paralysis, the inability to derive satisfaction from food or studies or even sex, albeit sporadic because I wasn’t in a relationship. I didn’t love anyone and no one loved me. I had money but no one special to spend it on; I lived in a beautiful apartment but couldn’t wait to escape in the morning. Worse even, I no longer desired to become a radiologist. I had lost all interest, all ambition to see inside people. They seemed no more
than a compilation of organs damaged by age or disease. They feared death and accidents, the unavoidable and the unknown. There was no cure for them and no hope.

It was early spring in the city, the roads a marsh of snow and dirt. Wet, murky air clung to faces, coated buildings and trees. The river had begun to thaw, and you could see a plexus of cracks sprawling out toward a dark spot in the middle, barely scabbed with ice. We still hadn’t heard anything from Little Konstantin’s mother, and by the time the big icicle broke off and crushed against the kitchen sill, he had stopped leaping from chairs or scampering to answer the phone. Occasionally, though, I would spot him by the window, quiet yet tense, his baby palms pressed against the cold, foggy glass. He would stand like that for a while, unperturbed by voices or house noise, a bug frozen in time.

“He’s gone,” my mother said as soon as I arrived from work that day. She stood by the kitchen window, her coat bunched at her feet. I could tell she’d been crying, her face blotched red, hairs adhered to puffy cheeks.

“What do you mean? His mother returned?”
She shook her head. “They took him.”

“Who took him? What the fuck happened?”

“We were rolling snow, what’s left of it. We had to move quickly to cover a larger territory. A taxi pulled over. I turned around and he was gone.” She sobbed in my sweater, and I lifted my arms around her.

“We have to get him back,” she said and wiped her face with the stretched sleeve.

“We have to pay ransom. They called. Konstantin owed a hundred thousand.”

“Dollars? No fucking way.”

“I can’t let them take my baby.”

“We go to the police.”

“They’re all corrupt. And what will we say? That Little Konstantin’s mother left him? We have no proof. He’ll be placed in a home. I can’t let that happen. He’s mine.”

“But he isn’t. Don’t you see?”

“No.” Her forehead strained in protest. “I love him. He belongs with me.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Don’t say that.”
“What if the trick is not to love someone so much that he doesn’t disappear or run away?”

She stared at me. “Are you making a joke? Because it isn’t funny. I’ve loved you equally, but he was the one who needed me most. Can’t you understand that?”

“No. Because in the end, it didn’t save him but made him do crazy, ugly things. So he could be the man our father wasn’t. So he could send you on posh vacations, buy you fancy duds, this apartment—” She slapped me, her hand just as quick and hard as eighteen years ago when I’d told her that I nearly drowned and Konstantin was responsible.

For the next two days we didn’t leave the apartment and we didn’t talk, passing a few cautious words like explosives, with nervous fear. On the third day, clouds blew over the city, gray like rocks, and it began to rain. The river darkened and swelled and was moving. Large, jagged floes drifted along the snow-fringed banks. Out the window, the floes resembled wrecked ships or parts of the buildings with the remnants of life stuck to their broken surfaces. We waited by the phone. We knew we didn’t have that much money in Konstantin’s account, and selling either apartment, old or new, would take time, but perhaps we could negotiate about transferring the property over to the kidnappers.

The caller turned out to be an older woman with a scratchy voice who coughed short, incomplete sentences into the receiver: Bring the money. Leave the money. Pick up the kid. No police or the kid dies. Her words penetrated the distance and my ear in quick forced jabs.

“Let me talk to the boy,” I said as soon as she stopped. “I want to make sure he’s alive.”

I heard a few muffled sounds as though someone were wrestling with the phone or conferring in a hurry. I switched to the loud speaker so my mother could hear the entire conversation, her pale face a tempest of emotions.

“Hello,” I said, then louder, “Hello?”

“Big Mama,” Little Konstantin said.

“I’m here,” she answered. “I’m here, baby.”

“Big Papa is—” and the line went dead, an echo of empty beeps spreading through the kitchen.

My mother started at the phone, then at me, her eyes wet like river pebbles.

The cab driver had no problem finding the neighborhood of shabby, piss-reeking five-story buildings—*khrushchevki*—about to be demolished like the rest. In the yard, as I got out of the taxi, I spotted a filthy tailless dog scrabbling about a pile of trash. He pulled out a chicken leg, scraps of skin on a dry bone, and began gnawing. I stood watching him, but for just a moment, a heresy of rain and snow in my eyes.

I ran up the steps, I found the door, I rang the bell. I pounded and threatened until I heard a sly shuffle, the chain being lifted, the bolt turned, that sound a wall-clock makes when it’s about to strike an hour.

As a boy, I must’ve imagined our meeting many times, only in reverse—I was the one standing behind the door, waiting to embrace the visitor, hoping him to be my father. I never imagined his face but compared him to a healthy tree, thick trunk, shapely outreaching limbs, lush brown hair rustling in the wind. When the door cracked open and pulled back by an invisible someone, I found myself facing a short middle-aged woman with yellowish skin and frightened eyes. She was like a bird plucked of all feathers, thin, humble, about to die.

“Where is he?” I asked, and she pointed along the dark narrow corridor, where amidst the junk shelves and coats I detected something moving, slinking along the wall. It was a man in a wheelchair, Little Konstantin on his lap.

“Lion King! Lion King!” The boy jumped off, scurrying in my direction. I bent down and picked him up. He was warm, soft, and smelled of baked apples. A streak of white crusted on his cheek. He was dressed in the same blue-mohair sweater and jeans as the day he’d disappeared, but the clothes seemed to have been washed, the jeans ironed. “Big Papa said you were coming to get me.”

“Oh, yeah? What else did Big Papa say? That he is a thief and liar? A goddamned motherfucking asshole?”

“Stop cussing in my home,” the man in the wheelchair said. He was almost bald with a cleft in his prickly jaw. His nose was crooked and his small eyes too close, wincing at the light the woman switched on. He was dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and gray sweatpants stretched at the ankles; he made me think of street beggars, those fetid bums in train stations and subway. I felt no pity toward him and, sadly, no anger.
“I’m Liya, Boris’s wife,” the woman said and I recognized her voice, so weak and raspy as though an animal had been clawing at her throat. She handed me the little coat and boots.

“We’re very sorry. Please, forgive us.”

I didn’t answer.

“Make a scary face and snarl at them,” Little Konstantin said. “Like when you study for your exams and I want to play.”

I patted his head, then sat him down and began threading his arms through the coat sleeves.

“Fucking assholes,” I finally said. “How could you?”

My father wheeled closer, his feet in green corduroy sleepers touched my shins. “He did this to me.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. “You don’t get to blame him.”

“Konstantin wanted me to go back to your mother. Offered me money and a new apartment. When I said no, those punks forced me to lie on the ground while he drove his car across my legs. She was there,” he pointed at Liya, who nodded, fighting tears.

“So you stole his child? That’s your piss-ass excuse? The fuck is wrong with you?”

“I need surgery. Abroad. I may be able to walk with prosthetics.”

“Did you pay someone to kill Konstantin?”

He shook his head, vigorously. “No, no. I’m not like that.”

“How would I know?”

“You’re my son.”

“Fuck off.”

“I sent money, when I could.”

“What’s my name?”

He didn’t answer but cupped his knees; the woman leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

I held Little Konstantin’s hand as we sauntered out of the apartment.

“I bet she didn’t love you like that,” my father yelled. “Did she? Did she?”

I stalled, reached into my pocket, and took out the money, all I had. “Here,” I said, turning and foisting a hefty stack into Liya’s hand. “Don’t buy him new legs, though. He
might walk away.” I laughed, a dry, choked laugh, the kind I imagined Konstantin laughed when the gun fired but before the bullet made it all dark and irrevocable.

It’s summer already. I got accepted into medical school and am veering toward cardiology, the science of the heart. Konstantin has been drawing and cutting them out of paper, so that hearts of various sizes and colors are scattered about the apartment—red, purple, deep-orange, the color of the bloody sun pulsing over the city. The Moskva River rushes, meanders along the grassy banks. Every now and then, large boats sail by, the water parts and closes, the circles diminish and finally disappear, one inside another.

It has taken a thick yellow envelope three weeks to travel from America to Russia, and I don’t show it to my mother at first. But when I do, she cries silently, hot tears streaming down her cheeks, falling into the pelmeni dough. She continues to roll it out thin, thinner than skin or hair. “We can still visit,” she says. “Can’t we? The mother won’t mind. How hard is it to get a visa?” I shrug and take her warm, sticky hands in mine, and she holds on to my thumbs like a child, with all her might.

The next day, Konstantin and I are dressed in shorts and old-fashioned matroskas, cotton sailors’ shirts our mother bought at the market. We look ridiculous but are hesitant to shed a smile or a word, standing low on the river bank so that our toes touch its wet lip. An armada of birds flies into the trees hooded with foliage. The limbs bounce and sway and finally settle, the birds concealed among the leaves.

In his hand, Konstantin holds a toy lion he arranges inside a warped black-leather shoe I found in the yard, when all the snow had melted.

“He won’t drown?” he asks. “Will he?”

I blink. “No. Of course not.”

“Are there lions in America?”

“Yes. Everywhere. Big lions, with thick manes and sharp teeth.” I shake my head and snarl at him; he lets out a shy giggle and leaps backward. We are silent, but just for a moment, observing a tremble of clouds on the water.

We lower the shoe into the river and push it downstream with a severed tree branch. We watch the shoe sail, reluctant at first, bobbing on waves and leaning to one side. When
it disappears from view, we climb up the bank and continue to watch it drift, straight ahead, unimpeded—oblivious to anything but water and wind.