SOME WOMEN on my mother’s side of the family possessed magic powers – that is they could hear, see, and feel things other people couldn’t. For example, in June of 1941, right before the war broke out, my great grandmother, who’d just finished nursing her daughter, stretched in the grass and put her ear to the earth. She remained motionless for some time, but then jumped to her feet, scooped the baby in her arms, and ran through the field toward the village. As she reached her hut, she threw a blanket over the bed and started gathering her possessions, the few that she could carry. She piled shirts and underwear, cloth diapers and crib sheets, a small jar of land, and a hunk of soap. She was about to tie the ends of the blanket together when she spotted her wedding picture on the wall, her husband’s genial face next to hers. My great grandmother lifted the picture off the nail and added it to the hump of clothes on the bed. As she hoisted the bundle over her shoulder, she already knew that her husband, as well as the rest of the villagers, would be executed behind the old church, the village burnt to the ground.

Years later, when I asked my grandmother Grusha why her mother hadn’t warned the others, including her husband, who was at work on a collective farm that day, she said, “There was no time. The first German planes appeared in the sky just as she pushed the boat into the river. It was a crippled boat too, the bottom had rotted, and so your great grandmother had to dump the water out with her shoes. She’d also fitted a broken tree branch into one of the smaller holes, tying me inside an old pillow case to the raised end, away from the water. The boat didn’t have any oars and drifted downstream while my mother tried to steer it with her hands.”

“How long did they drift like that?” I asked.

“Who knows,” my grandmother shrugged. “Days, weeks. Until one morning she woke up and found herself on a muddy bank of the Volkhov River, near the great city of Novgorod. Hundred kilometers away from...
her village. The boat was beaten to smithereens, all but the place where the tree branch poked through the broken hull, with me still in the pillow case.”

While I was growing up, Grusha had told me the story many times, never missing a detail. She also told me that soon after her mother had crawled ashore, she was discovered by a group of partisans living in the underground vaults of Novgorod Kremlin. The Nazis had already occupied the city and were about to bomb St. Sofia Cathedral built around 1050 by the son of Prince Yaroslav the Wise. The cathedral was the oldest structure in the city and probably in all Russia, with its white stone walls and five golden helmet-like domes. Even from afar, starved and emaciated, in a state that was closer to death than it was to life, my great grandmother could see that the towers were missing the bells, the cathedral austere and silent behind the massive bronze gates. Later, as she joined the partisans, my great grandmother learned that the bells had been hidden, along with other monuments and relics of ancient architecture, precious icons and frescoes, crucifixes, birch-bark letters, and the oldest Slavic book. Many citizens would be tortured to death by the Nazis, but no one would reveal what the partisans had done with the bells. Every day, the Nazis would hang five people in the bell towers, waiting for others to confess. But they refused to talk, mute as the river.

My great grandmother was captured late one night when she emerged from the vaults to procure milk for the baby. The next morning, she was stripped naked and dragged across the city by her hair tied to a horse’s tail. She had endured hours and hours of interrogations, lost teeth, fingers, skin. In the end, they cut out her tongue and let her witness the bombing of the cathedral, where hundreds of terrified women and children had been herded like cattle. Within seconds after the explosion, the heavy oak doors crashed on the ground, revealing a heap of bodies in a pool of blood and smoke. Yet, the indomitable walls survived, so did the towers, and that was when my great grandmother knew that the Nazis would lose the war and they would never find the bells.

Grusha, of course, didn’t remember her mother, who’d died soon after the bombing. My grandmother heard the story from another woman in Novgorod, who’d lived in the vaults with the partisans and raised Grusha after the war. The woman had no idea what had happened to the bells, and no one was left to ask. When I was still a child, I kept barraging my grandmother, as well as my mother, with the same questions: “How could the partisans hide those massive bells, the largest weighing twenty-seven tons? How could they have lifted them? Brought them down?” And the women would shrug and say, “It’s a divine mystery, but it’s all true.”

We’ve always been close – the three of us – and I could never imagine leaving Grusha and my mother or that someday they wouldn’t be a part of my family. They were honest laboring women who’d endowed me with the kind of care and love that felt immortal. I reveled in that love and their ceaseless, heady nurturing. They talked about history and personal experiences, hunger and pain as though they continued living through them, as though nothing ever ended but coexisted in parallel worlds. They didn’t joke much, and when they laughed on occasion, they opened their mouths wide, their laughter like a gurgle of water in the back of their throats. They bathed me, dressed me, and fed me, smearing sunflower oil on my skin and braiding my hair, sending me to school every morning. They stuffed coin rubles and knitted toys in my slippers on my birthdays and added chamomile flowers to my tea when I had trouble sleeping, their voices growing soft like yarns of wool. They sewed my first bra that made my breasts poke out of dresses in a sensual adult way, and when I had my period, they fried calves’ livers to replenish my iron. Their cooking wasn’t too elaborate, yet the meals they prepared agreed with the season and the weather.

We lived in a small log house on the outskirts of the city, facing the Volkov River, where as a child I spent days swimming until my lips turned violet and my skin was prickly with goose bumps. Behind the house, there was a patch of land, where the women planted anything that would grow, including pumpkins and sunflowers that stretched toward the sky and could be seen from the road, beckoning at strangers. The arbor, the zeal with which Grusha and my mother worked on that land, grooming and combing it with their bare hands. From early spring until late fall, they hovered among the rows, their robust arms outlined by crude cotton shirts, strands of hair like pieces of straw clinging to their sweaty faces. In winter, Grusha fermented kraut in a squatty wooden barrel, and our pantry was stocked with jars of pickles, squash, and wild mushrooms like alien creatures preserved in vinegar. We owned chickens, pigs, rabbits, and one cow that produced enough milk to barter with the
neighbors or sell at the market, along with eggs and pork. We had a small orchard too; the women pruned it every fall and spread manure under the apple trees that had been planted after the war and still yielded bountiful crops. The fruit, though small and crunchy, was nonetheless sweet; it kept well, heaping in baskets, so that even in the dead of winter our cellar smelled like summer.

Until I moved away, I didn’t pay much attention to the women’s appearances, nor could I separate the two. They were coarse-skinned and rouged from being outdoors or cooking over open fire and had gray hair braided and pinned into heavy nests at the back of their heads. For women, they were tall, with splendid hips and bosoms that instilled comfort in babies and men. Both my grandfather and my father had died when I was still a baby, but the absence of a male figure in our household didn’t affect my upbringing or self-esteem, the feeling of happiness and completeness that grew around me like garden vines around the picket fence.

In 2003, when I was twenty-two and about to graduate from Novgorod State University, I attended a science fair in Moscow, where I met my future husband. Fred was tall, handsome, with tan skin and dark roomy eyes, and a kind pure expression of someone who belonged not only to a different country, but a different bygone era of medieval gallantries and courtship. He held doors open for me, warmed my shoulders with his jackets, and listened to me mispronounce English words without a flick of irritation. He was shy, studious, and trustworthy, if a bit sentimental. He radiated goodness and care, and his moods never depended on food or weather, the color of the sky. He was only two years older but had traveled extensively, ravenous for other cultures. We fell in love so quickly, irrevocably—a karmic gesture, you might say—that I didn’t have the time to comprehend my future, what it would mean to marry a foreigner. A week after the fair, Fred returned to America, but we exchanged long letters until my fiancé visa came through, and I began tossing things into my suitcase: books, clothes, CDs and photo albums, household trinkets, years’ worth of life to be carried overseas. Neither Grusha nor my mother objected to my marrying Fred, but they remained tightlipped while watching me pack, handing me a birch-wood comb or a faded icon painted on a piece of cardboard.

The next morning, before a bus took me to the airport, Grusha and my mother scurried to the garden, scooped some dirt into an old hand-knitted sock, tied it, and stuffed it inside my coat pocket. “Keep it close,” they said. “Always.” They didn’t cry even though I was about to, and they didn’t promise to visit even though I kept begging them and refused to get on the bus until I saw them nod—a vague gesture that, perhaps, in my longing and eagerness to see Fred, I imagined.

Though I’d never before traveled outside of Russia, I’d adjusted to my new immigrant and married status with little difficulty. At the beginning, everything appealed to me: food, people, TV shows, all swept in the afterglow of the honeymoon caresses. I didn’t have a language barrier either, although at first, I’d seemed immune to American jokes. And vice versa—they failed to laugh at mine. But I’d taken English classes both in high school and at the university, so I was able to communicate with Fred and his family without much effort, albeit with occasional confusion. For example, I wanted to buy potting soil but mixed up the words “soil” and “sand.” When I asked Fred, “Where can I buy some land?” He laughed and said, “How much land? And where at?” I looked miserably perplexed, and he brushed the hair away from my cheeks, smiling, tickling my jawline with his lips.

Months passed, and then years, but my mother and grandmother didn’t express any desire to travel to America, claiming that they couldn’t leave the garden, the house, the land that demanded their labor and protection. I suggested visiting one summer with Fred, but they remained silent, devoid of all curiosity, any urge to meet him. We still talked on the phone, but their persistent reticence became cumbersome; less and less I could relate to their lives, their self-imposed isolation from me and the rest of the world. I complained to Fred, and he tried to assuage me by driving to a Russian grocery store, for black bread and herring.

Five years into the marriage, Fred and I had been admitted to graduate school, both pursuing a degree in biochemistry, with a special interest in molecular biology. Fascinated with genes and gene expression, we studied the molecular underpinnings of the process of replication, transcription and translation of the genetic material, the interactions between the various systems of a cell, including the interactions between DNA, RNA and protein synthesis. At the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, we found part-time teaching positions and spent countless hours at their research lab.
Contrary to the dreadful prognosis, I fell asleep almost as soon as the plane became airborne and didn’t wake up until it was about to land, my body as though cocooned inside a soft invisible blanket. Once I stood up, however, I was sore, nauseated, and swollen. I wobbled through the airport terminal, hunched, the weight of my belly in my hands. Grusha and my mother met me at the doors, their heads draped with gray-wool shawls. From afar, they didn’t look any different than six years ago, the same tall, ample-hipped bodies, with tanned muscular arms and fierce bosoms. They pulled the duffle bag off my shoulder and my purse, draping a fuzzy shawl over my head, just like the one they wore.

“It might get chilly,” my mother said.

“The wind is stronger by the river,” Grusha added.

As we exited the airport, my surprise escalated when I spotted an old-fashioned carriage—a horse and a buggy covered with hay and old quilts.

“Are you serious?” I asked, shaking my head.

They didn’t answer but climbed into the buggy. Grusha grabbed the reins while my mother helped pulling me in. The horse snorted and took a slow step; Grusha goaded it, tightening and wrapping the reins around her fists. Cars and trucks screeched by, hands on horns, while our buggy crossed the two lanes of traffic and swerved on a deserted country road, rutted yet dry.

It was mid-July, clouds of heat and dust rising from the horse’s weighty hooves. The sky was blue, combed with feathery clouds. In the distance, the river shimmered, the sunlight trapped in its dark silky folds. Oddly enough, I no longer was nauseated, my body anointed by a thick smell of hay and the horse’s monotonous steps. My mother raised a basket on her knees and peeled away the layers of cheesecloth, revealing what was inside: hard-boiled eggs, herring, spikes of green onion, and a head of rye loaf. There was even a piece of gooseberry pie, tucked in a soft cotton napkin, and a bottle of water that somehow remained cool.

Instinctively, I drank and chewed, and my mother kept excavating more food from the basket.

“Eat,” she said. “Eat all you can.” Her voice came in gusts, tearing through the clatter of hooves and wheels. “And when the time comes, we’ll boil you hash.”

“Hash? What hash? When will I see a doctor, a gynecologist?” I asked.

“You are not. We’ll take care of you and the baby. The land will provide.”

My body shuddered and broke in heat waves, from all the food I’d ingested and also the wind that grew rebellious and unyielding as we approached Novgorod. The five golden domes of St. Sofia Cathedral burned in the late-afternoon sun. The bell towers were still empty, still silent, like mouths without tongues. All of a sudden, I began thinking about molecular genetics and how if a gene could be expressed, it could also be suppressed, silenced. My fingers probed the hump of my belly, which in a matter of just a few hours ripened, and I could see an islet of healthy pink skin where the T-shirt rolled up above my belly button.

In the course of the next weeks other transformations began to take place inside and outside of my body. Gone were the pains, the nausea, the feeling of tension and miserable displacement, the throbbing pressure in the lower abdomen. I could sleep through the night, my body in perfect alignment with my spirit. My breasts swelled even more, perched on top of my belly, which doubled its size. My hair was much thicker and shinier, lying braided across my shoulder, the old-peasant way. My cheeks grew plump and magenta-pink, as though rubbed with beets, which the women urged me to eat raw out of the garden. They made me work there too, waking up at dawn, before the heat began to scorch our backs. They allowed no gloves or shoes, only loose cotton garments and large straw hats. The three of us squatted between the rows, the soil cool and dewy underfoot. We pulled weeds, tied and retied tomato bushes disheveled by wind or birds. Plucking radish, carrots, cucumbers, and green onions, we carried the vegetables inside our skirts, hems folded. When I got hot or tired, I dipped water from the well and splashed it on my face and neck, the icy drops stinging my flesh, turning into rivulets.

Sometimes, when my back and feet ached from squatting or bending, I plowed in the grass and watched the women work in silence, the air thick, musty, sweet with pollen. Fields of wheat sprawled around, tall and bountiful; they rustled their silky stalks in the breeze, and nothing else could be heard for kilometers. The longer I sat, the more I could feel the earth sprouting its roots through me, binding me to the place of my birth.

“This soil,” Grusha said, “feel how rich it is, how fertile.” She patted some into my hand. “Your baby needs it. Just like you.”
“But we must return to America. The baby needs his father. I need him.” I’d been away for two months, calling Fred nearly every day. I missed him, his quiet assertive ways and soft lips, how he could add a romantic tremor to any rainy evening. Suddenly, I felt a pool of water spreading under me.

“It’s time,” Grusha said and beckoned at my mother, who carried an apron of wild mushrooms, shuffling through the grass. She paused, releasing the hem, the mushrooms spilled on the ground, but my mother didn’t bother to collect them.

I was in labor for three excruciating days, during which the women cooled my sweating body with wet cloth and brought to my lips clay mugs of bitter herbs. I wasn’t allowed to eat or drink anything else. Meanwhile, in a large cauldron, the women boiled cow legs, from the knees to the hooves, cleaned from bristle and cut up. The hash had been cooking for the last twenty-four hours, and they kept skimming gray sediment, until the broth became clear and the skin and ligaments tender, easily detached. The smell drifted through the house, swirled up my nostrils; my body heaved and shook. The pain continued to move lower, pulling at my womb with its fibrous tentacles. I felt my bones sever from my flesh, my muscles contracting with the force of a choking animal. The women raised me up and let me sip the concoction, whispering about its healing properties, the power of marrow and tendons. The broth was translucent, pure, without salt or pepper or any spices, but as soon as I swallowed the first spoon, my body convulsed with pain. I pushed up and vomited all over my belly, minuscule red cells regurgitated amidst the liquid mass.

When I opened my eyes again, the baby lay between my legs, purplish, shiny, squirming in a pool of blood and mucus. The women brought him to me – the umbilical cord dragging across the sheets – and pressed his scrunchied, fist-like face to my lips. He was no bigger than a lizard, those gluey eyes and lucent body; he writhed and opened his tiny mouth, where I placed my pinkie. He suckled, then spat, then pouted, and finally cried. The women cut the cord with a knife and tied the baby’s belly button like they would a balloon, then removed the afterbirth, from which they carved out an egg-shaped piece and ordered me to eat it. They pushed the bloody mass between my lips, their hot hands brushing my head and the baby’s.

“He needs your strength,” they said. “Now chew, chew.”

Six weeks after the delivery, I flew back to America, to be with my husband – the desire to see him and to show him the baby had become unbearable. Fred called twice a day and threatened to leave his job and fly over if I didn’t return. The women didn’t contradict my decision but accepted it as they accepted thunderstorms and blizzards, the inescapable strikes of nature. They filled another old sock with garden dirt and made potato dumplings for the trip. They were quiet, carrying the baby to the checkpoint and entrusting him into my arms, crossing the air in front of his sweet plump face. Tears as heavy as river pebbles fell from my eyes, but I couldn’t reach to wipe them and neither could Grusha or my mother. Slowly the women raised the collars of their weathered coats and trudged in the direction of the exit.

As soon as the plane took off, the baby woke up, ready to nurse. No one was sitting next to me, so I pulled up my gray sweater that resembled a warrior’s hauberk Grusha had finished knitting the night before. I brought the boy to my breast, and, while he suckled, peered out the window. The city of Novgorod sprawled below: the churches, the old Kremlin, St. Sofia Cathedral, Lake Ilmen and Lake Ladoga on the opposite ends of the Volkov river. Boats furrowed the water; from the distance, they appeared like tiny vectors binding to cell membranes.

The higher the plane climbed, the more the imprint of the city resembled a molecular structure of a living organism, the flow and exchange of genetic information within a biological system, the DNA spirals of bridges and groups of ancient buildings like cells collecting into the epithelium, the nervous, muscle, and connective tissues. For a moment, within that complex multicellular system of metabolic pathways, I thought I’d spotted a horse and a buggy on the rutted country road, plodding studiously along the river. The sun was red and low, half-sunken in the water, alloys of copper and tin in the dark bronze current. And just then I knew what the partisans had done with the church bells in 1941 and that the next time I would visit the place, years into the future, the women wouldn’t be there. I’d be telling my son about his great-great grandmother, the war, the missing bells, the story of his miraculous birth, and he’d be asking: “How could the partisans drowned the bells and nobody saw them do it? How could have Grusha and my grandmother saved my life when no doctor could?” And I’d be shrugging and saying, “It’s a divine mystery, but it’s all true.”