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The Long Gray Coat

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The Long Gray Coat

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Tess Malova

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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One, with immeasurable gratitude

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TIMELINE

1897: Alexander Saulovich Bernstein is born to a Jewish family in Saint Petersburg, the Russian Empire.

1914: Alexander Bernstein joins the Bolshevik party.

1917: The Revolution overthrows several discriminatory rules, including the Pale of Settlement, beyond which Jewish people had been forbidden to live.

1918: *Yevsektzia*, a Jewish section of the Communist party, was established to promote the assimilation of the Jewish people into the Soviet Union.

1919-1920: the beginning of violent persecution of various religious groups, including Judaism.

1921: Alexander Bernstein travels to Iran to spread the Communist agenda.

1922: Natalia Osipovna Kirilyuk is born in Balta, Ukraine.

Mid-1920-s: Joseph Stalin rises to power. Many leading Jewish writers and artists are imprisoned and killed in the campaign against the “rootless cosmopolitan.” Jewish people are denied access to education, science, art. Emigration is prohibited.

1931: Stalin officially condemns anti-Semitism.

1930s: the Great Terror. Millions of Soviet citizens are imprisoned, tortured, and murdered under orders from Stalin and his administration.

June 1941: Germany invades the Soviet Union.

May 1945: World War II ends.

1948: the State of Israel is founded.

1948: Elena Alexandrovna Bernstein is born in Leningrad, USSR.

1953: the Doctors' Plot, a campaign against many Jewish doctors who were accused of conspiring to assassinate Stalin, is launched by Stalin himself. It is considered a culmination of several similar cases in which Jewish people were prosecuted for crimes fabricated by the State to cover up its anti-Semitic agenda.

March 1953: Joseph Stalin dies in Moscow. Following his death, anti-Semitic practices become more discreet, yet do not disappear.

June 1967: the Six-Day War causes widespread desire to emigrate to Israel. Most applications to leave USSR are rejected.

1970s: the emigration quota is expanded, but many restrictions and taxes still apply.

1974: Margarita Davidovna Komarova is born in Leningrad, USSR.

1987: Leonid Brezhnev delivers a speech denouncing antisemitism in the Soviet Union.

1989: a record number of Jewish people are granted permission to leave the country.

1991: the collapse of the Soviet Union.

1994: Carina Victorovna Scheglova is born in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

PROLOGUE

My husband says it's funny that we throw Christmas parties. *You, the Russian Jews*, he says. *Ironic, don't you think?*

I don't really think about it. Some years, my relatives board planes in Tel Aviv, Moscow, New York, and land, at various hours of the same day, in the Seattle airport. Other years, we all go to New York. It just happens to be around Christmas time, I tell my husband. This year, we're hosting it at our house. My sister is bringing her wife, my mother her new boyfriend—I'm a little worried, but the party should be interesting.

A bunch of Russian Jews, a Christmas tree in the corner of the living room. My husband's cooking, the honey apple cake I bought at the nearest WholeFoods. Everyone had to agree on the cake: something traditionally Jewish, yet not too religious. I don't mind; I like apples.

My grandparents will stay until New Year's Eve; my parents might not be as patient. *It's just that we have lives to get back to, you understand. I love you so so much, Solntse. You must come and visit.*

I walk around the living room, refilling glasses. It is raining outside. It's silly of me to hope for snow in this climate, but I still do. When it snows, everything becomes a little more beautiful, a little more possible.

My husband waves at me from the other side of the room. He got cornered by my father, who never ceases to discuss American politics despite knowing virtually nothing about the subject. *I'm sorry*, I mouth silently, then raise my arms helplessly as he widens his eyes.

My father never brings his wife and daughter to these things; he says it's hard for them to get visas. I wonder if he is afraid of my mother. I lean over her to pour wine into her boyfriend's glass. He is a successful lawyer, twice divorced, no children. My mother asks me where I bought my dress, running her fingers along the hem. I shrug.

My grandmother is standing by the tree. "I remember this one," she says. The ornament she touches is spinning on its thread, an eerily mobile little spider made of glass beads and thin wire, with legs that sway with a quiet scraping sound.

"It's my favorite," I say.

"Mine, too," she says. "My mother got it for me when I was six, on the day of the tree."

ELENA

1

It was the twelfth of December, 1955—a cold, snowless day. Elena awoke in the morning thinking of miracles. She thought, first, about New Year’s Eve approaching; about Father Frost and his reindeer; and then: *Today is the day of the tree*. Elena had been alive for seven years, and every year the New Year’s tree appeared in the Bernsteins’ household on the twelfth of December.

In the next room, her parents were already awake, and thinking, too, about the day of the tree. More specifically, though, Alexander and Natalia were trying to find a way to tell Elena that the day had to be postponed; their daily concerns were overshadowed by unexpected trouble at work, and so they had lost their place in the queue for a tree.

The Bernsteins had recently moved into a new apartment. Natalia, a small, slim woman, had single-handedly taken on the bureaucracy of moving out of the communal apartment and, against all odds, succeeded. Aware of the way others regarded her tiny frame, Natalia made every attempt to take up more space: she held her head high and her spine straight. She wore high heels and black suits; her red hair was pulled up into a tight bun on the back of her head, and her nails were painted even in times when nail polish was scarce. She had trained her voice, naturally soft and mild, to fill auditoriums—the youngest woman to join the faculty of the Leningrad Military Mechanical Institute, she had fought to earn respect from her older male colleagues.

Alexander was a professor, too—he had been Natalia’s professor, some years before, and had then become her husband. He taught philosophy at the Leningrad University, in the regal salmon-colored building on the banks of Neva. Natalia had warned him against rising through the ranks, but Alexander had given in to tempting ambition: his lectures were famously provocative, concerning ideas the administration frowned upon.

Twenty-five years his wife’s senior, Alexander was a tall, broad man with salt-and-pepper hair and deep-set brown eyes. He was no longer handsome, a result of his life-long smoking habit; his skin was rough and wrinkled, and he was permanently out of breath. Yet, there was an impressive, compelling quality about him that showed in his erect posture and slow deliberation of every movement, in his quietly confident manner of speech and composure. Courteous and polite at home as at the University, he was just as demanding of others as himself. Often his calm, firm remarks frightened Elena. She couldn’t yet understand that it was not disappointment, but loving respect that caused him to set what seemed to her impossible standards.

Elena sat at the table in the new little kitchen, looking forlorn. She missed her friends from the communal apartment—Katya, a girl about Elena’s age who played with her, and the five women who had all thought her too skinny, and so had often given her homemade cookies at breakfast. Elena *was* small and slim, like her mother, and had inherited Natalia’s dark red hair. In spring, Elena’s cheeks would be covered in freckles. In December, though, her skin was pale, which made her father’s dark eyelashes and thick eyebrows stand out all the more.

“Here is your egg, Elena,” said Natalia, “do you want some milk or orange juice?”

“Juice, please,” Elena said. There was not enough milk left for a glass in the jug, anyway.

“Did you sleep well?” Alexander asked. He felt a headache coming on in anticipation of the stressful day ahead at the University. The Goldfarbs had escaped, seeking political asylum during a conference in Berlin with the intention of heading to America or, perhaps, Israel—it was better to not know exactly. The news had spread. Now the whole Philosophy Department was under scrutiny.

“Yes, Papa,” Elena said. She glanced over her shoulder, as though expecting the tree to magically appear behind her while she wasn’t looking.

“That’s great, Lenchka,” said Natalia, pouring the remaining milk into her coffee. During lunch, she would run to the store to make sure milk was still on the shelves, and then she would stay behind after the lectures to grade papers. The glass clinked against the counter as she put the empty bottle away.

“Don’t forget to do your homework, please,” Alexander said as Natalia went into the bedroom to gather her things. “We will be coming home late today. I asked Svetlana to stop by and make you lunch.”

Elena already knew this, of course: every day was just like the one before. “Thank you,” she said, and then she was left alone.

In the backseat of a taxi, Natalia took a small mirror from her purse and began to apply red lipstick as the car hurried along the narrow street.

“I think Elena is upset,” Alexander said. It would take a miracle for them to get a tree now, without a place in the queue, but he did not want to disappoint his daughter.

“Try not to worry about it,” Natalia said, putting the lipstick away. “You have too much on your mind.”

“The Goldfarbs are truly gone,” Alexander said. “Can you imagine it? Leaving this country. Leaving our birthplace.”

“Well, one might believe that Israel is our birthplace, don’t you think?” Natalia said, quietly and in German so the driver couldn’t eavesdrop. “One might believe it is nice to be wanted by his country.”

The sky looked heavy, as though preparing for a big snowfall. That would be lovely, Natalia thought; when it snowed, anything was possible.

“I need to write a speech,” Alexander said. “The assembly will be held tonight. Could you come, please?”

“I’ll try my best to be there.” Natalia glanced over at her husband’s face, but his expression gave nothing away. She considered these anti-emigration assemblies an insufferable waste of time, but that was a dangerous thought, and she was not sure Alexander shared her point of view. “I have a dozen drafts to go through.”

“I would love to see you there, that’s all.” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “I could use a friendly face in the crowd.”

Outside, a colorless morning was seamlessly turning into a colorless afternoon. From the windowsill in the kitchen, Elena watched people in long gray coats hurry this way and that, attending to their business. Wearing long gray coats, Elena knew, was part of living in the grown-up world—her parents wore theirs every day.

Eventually, people-watching began to bore her. She jumped off the windowsill and headed back to her bedroom. During the day, the room served as her father’s study, and he was often there, smoking and reading in his big leather chair, or writing at his glossy varnished desk

with drawers he locked with a tiny key. Elena imagined one day finding the key and learning about the hidden mysteries of her father's life.

Elena climbed into the desk chair, tapped her fingers on the smooth surface in front of her. Alexander was impeccably neat, and the desk was organized according to his special system. To Elena's left were his writing materials: a stack of crisp white paper, fountain pens, ink. Carefully she reached over and picked up a few sheets of paper—one, two, three, four—wondering if her father would mind, deciding that it was worth it. She carried the paper into the kitchen, and with a pair of scissors set about transforming the sheets into intricate snowflakes.

*

Alexander sat behind the desk in his small office, hands clasped together, his fingernails pressing into his skin. The Director of the Humanities' Faculty was here; he had ignored Alexander's invitation to take a seat and instead paced back and forth, making sharp turns just as he was about to run into a wall.

"This is unacceptable," the Director was saying, "absolutely unacceptable. This is your department, Alexander. I trusted you with it, despite some of your... qualities. I thought that I could depend on your loyalty to this University and this country. And what do we have here? Runaways! Traitors, under our own roof! Deserters!" He paused and leaned forward, facing Alexander. "This is a dark time for us, and there will be consequences." Another pause. "You will be leaving this office, of course."

Alexander knew better than to argue, knew better than to fight—he had lost this battle long ago. "Yes, I see," he said calmly.

“Professor Lesterov will take over your lectures for the rest of this semester,” the Director continued. “Serious consideration will be given to your future with this University. You are still to deliver the speech tonight—a perfect moment to announce your leave of absence. Then, after the holidays, we will talk again, providing that the investigation into the case of the Goldfarbs is complete.”

“I understand,” Alexander nodded. He needed a cigarette, but the Director wasn’t smoking.

“Well, then,” the Director said. “I look forward to your speech, and we will see each other again when the time comes.”

After the Director had left, Alexander lit a cigarette. The office was decorated sparsely: two wooden bookcases, a portrait of Lenin, a large brown hat rack. Alexander was not sorry to leave this place, he told himself. He was sorry to leave his books—he was so fond of their silent presence. Sometimes, books were enemies, but most often they were friends, old and new, familiar and strange... He had assembled this small collection himself, and there was no way the Institute would let him take them home. That was a shame.

He got up and pulled one of the books from the shelf. It was a collection of Dostoevsky’s lesser known works. Alexander did not agree with some of his political views, but the world of his characters, a dark, spiritually charged place filled with moral dilemmas and philosophical quandaries, fascinated him. Even though studying Dostoevsky was discouraged by the State, Alexander had become an expert on the subject, finding unexpected comfort in his writing; in the existential pessimism of his characters he saw a different way of looking at the world.

Alexander finished the cigarette, put on his gray coat, struck another match. Soon, it would be time to leave. For now, though, he could sit here in silence, read his Dostoevsky, and smoke.

*

The following morning, to Elena's surprise, her father had walked into his study after breakfast and did not emerge in time to go to work. Natalia kissed her daughter goodbye and left, as usual; Elena stood on the landing outside the apartment and listened to the lonesome sound of her mother's heels as she headed down the stairs.

Not quite alone at home, Elena felt out of place. Alexander had not given her homework, and Natalia had not left her sandwiches for lunch. Alexander, sequestered in his study, had been trying to read, but everything distracted him: sounds from the street, sunlight streaming in through the window, Elena's footsteps in the hallway.

Finally, there was a knock on the door, and he put away his book with an exasperated sigh. "Come in, come in," he said.

"Sorry, Papa," Elena said. "What am I to do?"

"What are you to do?"

Elena nodded. "Forgive me," Alexander said. "Give me a moment, and I will bring the pages to the kitchen."

"Thank you," Elena agreed. But still she lingered in the doorway. "Papa? Can you read to me, please?"

Alexander rubbed his temples. "Maybe later," he said.

Elena waited patiently, but Alexander did not come out of the study later, and when Svetlana, their downstairs neighbor, came over to make lunch, he told her he was not hungry. Elena carried a butter-and-cheese sandwich to him anyway, left it on his desk quietly, and as she turned to leave she heard him say, “Thank you, Lenochka.”

“I think Papa is sick,” Elena told her mother as Natalia set about preparing dinner.

“Do not worry,” Natalia said without turning away from the cutting board, “we just have to give your Papa some time. Things are changing, and he might have to work from home for a while. But everything is going to be perfectly fine.”

Elena nodded. She knew her mother wasn’t telling the whole truth, but she also knew not to question her. Adults lived in the world of gray coats and kept many secrets, and Elena had to wait until she would be allowed to know more. “I made paper snowflakes,” Elena said. “And my homework is all done.”

“Good job, Sunshine,” Natalia said. She swept the potatoes into the pot. “You know what? Saturday is only a day away, and we will go ice skating in the park. Does that sound good?”

“Okay,” Elena said.

“And tomorrow you are going over to Svetlana’s to play with your friends.”

If Elena were to speak her mind, she would have told her mother that she didn’t like playing with Svetlana’s kids, mean-spirited boys who liked to break things. But though her curiosity was not satisfied, Elena didn’t want to upset her mother, who seemed so tired in that moment, fragile like a porcelain doll. “I’m happy,” she said, “thank you.”

In her flannel pajamas, Elena lay awake in her narrow bed, thinking about the day of the tree. Her father knocked on the door softly before coming in.

“You’re not sleeping,” he said. “I thought you might not be sleeping.”

“I’m sorry.”

With visible strain, Alexander lowered himself into his leather chair. He wanted to tell his daughter that everything would be okay, but he had made a promise to himself to never lie to her. Looking into her eyes, he couldn’t bear to tell her the truth about the world they lived in. “I thought you might like to hear a story,” he said, “from one of my favorite books.” Elena nodded, and he began to read.

*

It was dark when Elena awoke in the night, as though disturbed by a mysterious noise. Filled with curiosity, she got up and slid her feet into her slippers.

The hallway was dark, but there was a faint light emanating from the kitchen behind the corner.

The tree was beautiful, tall and lush. Elena stepped closer, inspected the familiar decorations: some made from glass, some from paper, cardboard and cotton, all sparkling with glitter. Tinsel was draped over the branches, and when Elena pushed it aside she saw her favorite ornament, a black-and-white spider made out of glass beads, hidden in the dark as if it had crawled there on its own. The lights twinkled, festive and cheerful; on the top, right beneath the golden star, were Elena’s snowflakes, hung on silver threads by a careful hand.

2

In March of 1965, winter in Leningrad persisted. Snow lay in dirty piles on the ground, turning into sludge under the wheels of cars. Elena walked home from school through a winter

storm, barely paying attention to the freezing wind. She was excited: her class had just received the practice test results, and she now believed that she could pass the University's entrance exams with ease.

In the narrow hallway of the new apartment, Elena took off her wet coat, and headed into the study to share the news with her mother—but Natalia was not at her desk. She was in the kitchen, with Elena's aunt Lizzie who must have come from Saratov, her chemistry teacher Alexey Semenovich, and a man she didn't recognize. He was short and plump, dressed in a suit; when he saw Elena he smiled warmly, but she looked away.

Natalia was pouring tea into the good china. "Hi, Sunshine," she said. "This is Vladimir Ivanovich, Director of the Pedagogical Institute. He was just going over the curriculum in the Chemistry Department. I think you're going to love it there."

Elena nodded slowly. "I'm applying?" she said, only the slightest question in her intonation.

"Of course," Natalia said. "Would you like some tea, or do you have homework to get to?"

"Thank you, but I have a lot to do. Nice to meet you, Vladimir Ivanovich."

Elena closed the door to her room so the party in the kitchen wouldn't hear as she threw her notebooks at the wall. She picked them up right away, but it felt good to do something, for once. All her life, Elena had done the right things, said the right words. She had perfect grades; she was involved with the Pioneer organization; she was friends with girls from the block who, too, had perfect grades and were involved with the Pioneer organization. And yet she was not

going to the University. Her mother had decided to ruin her life. And her father? He was still at a conference in Moscow, even though he was supposed to return last Friday.

Elena arranged her textbooks on the desk, then rearranged them. Opening a notebook, she tried to read her notes, but couldn't focus on a single word. She worried about her father; she was no longer a small child, and she knew what it meant to be different in the world that depended on uniformity. She knew that her mother was not exactly Ukrainian, and her father not quite Russian. She was not sure, though, where that left her.

She folded a sheet of paper, picked up a pair of scissors and cut out a corner, a triangle, another corner, a semi-circle.

The guests had left, and Natalia began to clear away the dishes, carefully rinsing the good china. Elena's state of mind concerned her. Armed with her parents' intelligence and ambition, she was an excellent student, but Natalia did not know how to explain to her that it would not be sufficient.

"Sunshine, are you in here?" Natalia asked, placing her hand on the door handle.

"Where else would I be?" Elena said.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, Mama."

Elena was sitting at the desk, a textbook open in front of her. Natalia sat down on the edge of the bed and reached out to touch her daughter's shoulder. "I apologize," said Natalia. "I meant to talk to you first. But Vladimir is a good man, sympathetic to people like us, and he promised you a spot in the best class."

"In the teachers' school," Elena said bitterly.

“Yes, Love, in the teachers’ school. You only get one chance this year, and we can’t be sure you’ll pass the tests.”

“I know. It’s just not fair.”

“No, it’s not.”

Elena closed the textbook and turned around in her chair. “Papa isn’t really at a conference, is he?”

“Not anymore.”

“Is he coming home?”

“Yes, I hope. I mean, he is coming soon. Do not worry, Lenchka.”

“Do not worry? How am I supposed to do that?”

“I just—I have a feeling he will return soon.”

Elena stood up. “A feeling? I’m not seven years old anymore, Mama. I want to know what’s going on.”

Natalia sighed. How could she begin to explain to her daughter that no one truly knew what was going on. Knowing what was going on got people killed; one trusted only in the fact that no one could be trusted; people went away and came back; other people went away and stayed gone. And Elena was just a girl. Alexander would tell Elena the truth, but Alexander was not here. Alexander had left them alone.

“They can’t just take him away,” Elena whispered. “They can’t... He promised that he would help me with my essay.”

“I can help...” Natalia steadied herself, hardened her voice as though she was talking to one of her students. “Papa will be back before you know it, and you will show him the essay.”

Natalia was lying. Elena saw it, but she saw sadness in her mother’s face, too, and love. Elena picked up a paper snowflake from the desk, studied it carefully. “Do you think this one is too square?”

Natalia smiled. “Yes,” she said, “but that’s an easy fix.”

*

Alexander didn’t come back in time to help with Elena’s paper. He came back after she had already received the mark, and told her she should have done better.

“Four is a good mark,” Elena argued, “and besides, I had other things on my mind.”

“Talk to me,” Alexander said, exhaling smoke that floated up to the ceiling, a cloud of moths drawn to the light of the chandelier. Outside, snow was turning to freezing rain.

“I can’t go to the University because I’m Jewish,” Elena said. “You were held in Moscow because you’re Jewish. Mama can’t be on the admissions committee because she is Jewish. I don’t want to be Jewish. I want to go to the University.”

“It’s not as simple—”

“Yes, it is. Tell me why I can’t go to the University.”

Alexander sighed. “Because of the quota. You might not fit, and the risk is too high. You only got one shot this year. Vladimir Ivanovich is a friend. The decision has been made.”

Tears were welling up in Elena's eyes, but she was determined to hold them in. She pressed her fingertips into the armrest of the old couch, digging deeper into a hole in the upholstery.

"I'm sorry," Alexander said. "It used to be much worse, you know. When I was younger... No, I don't think you are ready to hear this story."

"I'm seventeen, Papa. I can handle it."

Alexander hesitated. Here she was, his daughter, bright-eyed and strong-willed. He did not want to be the one to break the walls that kept the world out of her life. But she was waiting for him to say something, and he could not lie.

"I was held in prison. For two years. They were told I was involved in a Jewish conspiracy, wanted me to give up the names of our leaders. I didn't know any names, because the conspiracy wasn't real. I thought I was going to die in prison. My—someone I knew died in prison that year. Then, when the war started, they released me. They had other things to worry about."

Elena rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. "I... why didn't anyone tell me?"

Her father had been in prison. He had been in prison, before she had been born. And now he was here, sitting in front of her, looking at her.

"The teaching college is a good fit," Alexander said softly. "I know it's not what you want. But you can do research there, too. It won't be so bad, you'll see."

That night, Elena had a dream she would remember for years. In the dream, her father was smiling. She had seen him smile before, of course, but never quite like this. Never quite this happy. He was smiling at her; there was glass between them, so clear it was almost invisible, yet unbreakable.

Elena pressed her hand against the glass. Her father was still smiling. He looked straight at Elena, nodded at her. She needed him to break out of the cage, but he did not seem to care. He was happy. He was smiling.

She wanted to ask him why he was so happy in the glass cube. But it was a dream, and she didn't speak. No one spoke. The glass was cold under her palms. Her father nodded again, began to turn away.

Elena was scared. Her father was in prison again, and he was happy.

The glass was cracking, patterns of jagged lines obscuring her father's face, trapping him in a brilliant spiderweb. She could not reach him, could not slip through the cracks.

"Why won't we leave?" Elena asked her mother in the morning. "I hate this country. Nothing is fair here." Natalia looked around anxiously.

When she asked her father, he said that this was their birthplace. "Capital *B*," he said. "Our home. We can't leave our beautiful home."

Elena didn't think it was beautiful. She thought it was unfair and violent. Natalia listened to their conversation, quiet as she worked on mending Elena's school dress.

"I don't want to go to the teaching college," Elena said. She had never heard of teachers winning the Nobel Prize.

"We shouldn't talk about this anymore. You know our thoughts, Elena, and we know yours."

A few months after her father died in December of 1974, Elena moved back into her parents' apartment; she told Natalia that she wanted to save on rent, but in fact she worried about her mother living all alone, with nobody to take care of and nobody to care for her. With Elena came David, loud and cheerful, with a sunny laugh and a voice that filled the entire apartment. Natalia, still lovely, had grown more stern and quiet, but she never expressed her grief in front of her granddaughter, Rita, whom she regarded with subdued admiration.

Spring was ending. Days grew longer, and nights were shrinking until there was only an hour of darkness. Every morning, Elena kissed David goodbye, left Rita in Natalia's care and walked to the public school a few blocks away, where she taught chemistry, having long since abandoned her dreams of scientific research. David worked on the other side of the city, drawing turbines for cargo airplanes and submarines. He could never get clearance to work on the prestigious military projects: although his name was Russian—Komarov—in the State's file, he was marked as Jewish.

It was late when Rita stopped crying. Sleepless but not quite awake, Elena sat at the desk in her bedroom and graded term papers. The sun had gone, but the night was sheer, the ghost of the day lingering in the air. Elena's hand slipped a little as she circled a misspelled word with red ink. David lay peacefully still, his face turned away from the lamp on the desk. She put the paper away, turned off the light.

In the other room, Natalia, too, was awake. She thought about her granddaughter, a chubby one-year old girl with wisps of thin black hair and inquisitive dark eyes that held the difficult promise of her family's intelligence. Natalia dreamed for her a life of freedom, a life of

happiness and joy. She could see her granddaughter basked in brilliant light—she could be a ballerina, Natalia thought. Then, she would travel, she would see the world... She thought about Rita's small hand holding on to Alexander's finger. She wished he were still alive, protecting them.

Elena had found Alexander. He was enclosed in glass, again, but this time access was not forbidden. She pushed the invisible door and walked in. Her father smiled. *Hello*, he greeted her. She reached out to him. The sun above the glass prison was growing painfully bright, its rays obscuring her father from view. She almost touched his hand, when—Rita began to cry. Elena blinked, eyes adjusting to the dim twilight.

She picked up her daughter. "Shh," she whispered, knowing it was not going to work. Rocking Rita in her arms, and not wanting to wake David, Elena went into the narrow hallway. For a moment, she worried about disturbing her mother, but through the opaque glass panel in the door she could see that the light in Natalia's bedroom was still on. She walked past the door and into the kitchen.

Natalia pulled her heavy mauve robe on over her nightgown and joined her daughter in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry if we woke you," Elena said. She found Rita's favorite pacifier, and the baby was quiet, blinking calmly as she peered at her mother's face.

"It's alright," Natalia said, sitting down at the table. "Would you make some tea, please?"

"You have to hold her, then."

"You let her sleep too much during the day," Natalia said. "If she were more tired, she would be sleeping."

Elena poured water into a kettle. “Mama, please. I know what I’m doing.”

“That’s not what I said. All I said was that you shouldn’t let her sleep as much during the day.”

“I’m not even here during the day,” said Elena. “You are.”

“And I don’t let her sleep for more than three hours. And then you come back home, and you put her down to sleep right after she eats.”

Elena’s head felt heavy, a headache coming on, and if a headache came she would not get any more sleep. She feared that the pressure would become so great that the whole world would disappear.

“Mama, I’m so tired. Can we do this some other time?”

“If you listened to me, you would not be this tired,” Natalia said quietly.

The kettle made a loud metallic noise as Elena slammed it onto the table. Startled, Rita opened her eyes, and began to cry once more. Elena pulled her from Natalia’s arms and left the kitchen.

*

“Is everything alright?” David muttered, rolling over with his eyes still closed.

“Yes, fine,” Elena said. Her eyes filled with tears. David sat up and reached out to her, but she ignored him. She was so angry. She was an adult, she wanted to make her own decisions. *Rita is my child*, she wanted to yell. But Rita was David’s, too, and Natalia’s, and Alexander’s. Nothing had ever been hers alone.

Slowly, she bent over to lower Rita into her crib. “Shh, it’s okay,” she whispered. “Everything’s okay.” David came up behind her and put his arms around her waist.

“She means well,” he said. Elena closed her eyes and relaxed into his arms, still feeling the anger in her hands, a hot current running into her fingertips.

“I want to have my own life,” she said. “I’ve never had my own life.”

David kissed the top of her head. “You’re tired,” he said. “Let’s go to bed. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

Elena was quiet for a moment. Alexander would have understood. He would not have agreed, but he would have understood.

“Yes, let’s go to bed.”

In her bed, Natalia closed her eyes and tried to rest, but sleep would not come. The thin lace curtains fluttered in the breeze; when had she opened the window? Natalia went to close it, but the air felt pleasantly cool on her skin. One by one, she removed the bobby pins that held her bun in place, letting her long hair, still vibrant red, spill down her back.

Times were changing. Natalia had been thinking about Israel, the United States, Canada... But the very thought of leaving made her feel guilty, as though she were betraying her husband’s memory. And she needed to consider Elena and Margarita—would she want to follow her to a strange place where she would have no friends, no job, no language? There was no use for these thoughts. Emigration was still prohibited. The angry, threatening world that she had tried so hard to keep out still came in every day, carried to the breakfast table by the newspapers, floating in with the sounds of the radio, shimmering on the small grainy screen of their

television. Natalia couldn't protect Elena from it, anymore, but sometimes it seemed to her that Elena failed to see it.

*

In the morning, Elena smiled at her mother as she set about preparing their usual breakfast, but the argument had increased the tension between them.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Elena said. "I just—"

"No, please. Sit down and listen," said Natalia. "I know you think all of this is my fault. I know you think you could have won the Nobel Prize by now. In a different world, you would have. But we have been born in this world. In this world, your father had lost his job seven times in five years, and I will remain a junior professor until I retire. We are the lucky ones, though. We are alive."

"Mama, I'm—"

"I had to protect you, and I had to protect your father. I wanted to keep you safe, and I didn't want you to know that being Jewish in this country made it impossible for us to ever be safe. I think now that I withheld too much from you, and I am sorry for that, but I did it all because I wanted to keep you safe."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," Elena said. "But how can I stop it? I can't let the same thing happen to Rita."

"The world might change," Natalia said. "The world is cruel, but it might change. All we can do is try to keep Rita safe, too."

"Do you really believe that?"

“Do you remember the winter when you were seven? You still believed in Father Frost, and I told you that his niece had brought you that tree? You were so happy. I wanted you to believe in magic a little longer, that’s all. I wanted you to believe in miracles.”

Elena remembered. She still thought it was the most beautiful tree she had ever seen. “Yes, Mama,” she said. “Yes, I remember.”

RITA

1

The bouquet Rita was holding was as big as her body, and just as heavy. She took her place in the line between two other First Year girls, shivering in the chilly September air. It was drizzling, but none of the upperclassmen had taken out their umbrellas, so Rita kept hers in her backpack. She was impressed by the ease with which the older kids interacted with each other—laughter, smiles, hands on each other’s shoulders—as if they were standing in an ordinary school yard. Intimidated by the sheer size of the Leningrad School of Ballet, Rita looked around; there was a bronze statue of a dancer in the center of a perfectly manicured lawn, a flowerbed of pansies, a wooden podium for the teachers.

The students formed a semicircle around the lawn, grouped by class year. Older girls on the other side were wearing the same uniform as everyone else, ugly brown dresses down to their knees and simple white blouses underneath—but they had on heels higher than any Rita had ever seen, and were all impossibly tall, slender and graceful.

“I want to be her when I grow up,” a girl on Rita’s left whispered, pointing discreetly at one of the senior girls.

“Who is she?” Rita asked.

“You don’t know? That’s Anastasia Smirnova, the daughter of the Headmistress!” another girl said. “She was Marie in *The Nutcracker* when she was only in sixth year!”

Soon, Rita would find out just how much that meant. Her mother, Elena, had been telling her that she could achieve anything if she worked hard and believed in herself, and so Rita applied to the best ballet school in Leningrad without really knowing what it would be like if she were accepted. She knew, however, that Granny Natalia had been dreaming about this day ever since Rita was born, and that she had been very proud to tell everyone her granddaughter was to become the next Galina Ulanova. After all, Granny insisted, ballet was the only thing Rita ever wanted to do. It was a miracle she had been accepted, but she had a flexible body trained by years of gymnastics, and a stubbornness the admissions committee had found promising.

“Do you even know what *The Nutcracker* is?” someone asked. “Who are you?”

“I’m Rita,” she said. “And I have seen *The Nutcracker* at Kirovsky!”

“My name is Anya,” said the girl on Rita’s right. She was smaller than Rita, with thin blond hair and sharp, birdlike features. “I think I have to be your friend.”

Rita didn’t get a chance to answer, because the Headmistress had come out to the podium and was starting her annual speech.

“Listen carefully, young dancers,” the Headmistress was saying, “because your future is the future of Soviet ballet, and it is in your hands, or should I say your feet...”

Rita tried to stay focused, but everything distracted her: the colorful balloons, the extravagant bouquets, the quiet chatter of the boys behind her. She watched the Headmistress, who kept touching her sleek, glossy hair, brushing a strand away from her eyes, then letting it fall back. Rita’s arms were getting tired. She wasn’t sure what she was meant to do with the heavy bouquet.

Suddenly, the speeches were over, and the form-teacher was herding the First Year class towards the main entrance. The form-teacher, Eugenia Valentinovna, was a plump woman in her late thirties. She had colorless hair and pink cheeks; there was something vaguely threatening about her, a hidden force that kept the First Years quiet and obedient. Rita held on tight to Anya's little hand as they hurried up the red-carpeted stairs. There were framed lists on the walls of the grand stairwell, a list of names for every year starting with 1739.

"One day, if you're lucky enough, your name will also be on this wall, up on the fourth floor," said the form-teacher, stopping for a few seconds. Rita closed her eyes and imagined herself standing in front of a list like that, tall in her high heels. She wanted to be older, more beautiful; wanted to straighten her dark curls, cover up her freckles. Maybe one day her mother would even let her dye her hair blond.

"Come on," Anya whispered, tugging on Rita's hand. "We have to get lockers next to each other."

*

Sitting with her back to her locker, Rita blinked quickly, hoping the girls wouldn't notice that she was about to cry. Casting lists for *The Nutcracker* had been posted last night. In the morning, Rita had awakened an hour too early, unable to contain her excitement. The subway ride to school had been excruciatingly long, despite her mother's attempts to distract Rita with conversation. Now, she wished the lists hadn't been there at all.

"What's wrong?" Anya asked.

"I'm in Soldiers, second cast," said Rita. "Nothing else!"

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Anya said. Rita didn’t want her compassion; she wanted her role as the Little Doll.

One of their classmates, Sveta, threw a sock into her locker and it sailed past Rita’s ear; on the Second Years’ side of the room a girl burst out laughing, and others joined in.

“Not even Soldiers on Horses, just Soldiers,” Rita continued, “like Eugene. *Eugene!*”

“No one gets to be on a horse until Third Year. Or, I guess, no one gets to be on a horse, period. The horses are a part of the costume,” Anya said in consolation. “Don’t worry, Rita, you’ll get a better part next year.”

That would be too long a wait. It was only the end of September—three months until the shows began. She was going to fix this mistake, Rita decided.

“What are you doing tonight after Historical Dance?” Rita asked.

Anya looked intrigued. “Do you have something in mind?”

“Yes, but it is very very dangerous. You have to swear to me that you will guard this secret with your life.”

“Seriously? Don’t tell me Mark talked you into helping him paint the bathroom walls.”

“I haven’t even heard about that,” Rita said, making a note to ask Mark about his plans.

“This is more dangerous... but more exciting, too.”

Anya considered the proposition. When she frowned, a little crease appeared between her pale eyebrows. “I’m in,” she finally said. “I swear on my mother’s grave.”

“Your mother is alive,” Rita said.

Anya grinned. “I know.”

*

The rehearsals for Party Guests were led by the supervising teacher, Regina Matveyevna. She had been a soloist dancer at Kirovskiy and so thought herself better than the other teachers. The students were nothing but clay for her to sculpt. Rita knew as much because Regina Matveyevna had swept into the first rehearsal, sizing up the group with an appraising eye and announcing, “You, children, are but clay for me to sculpt.” Then, she started reading names from her clipboard aloud, making sure everyone was present.

Any moment now, Rita’s name would be read, her fate decided. They hadn’t begun to practice yet, and already her thin cotton leotard was soaked with sweat. Anya stood on the other side of the studio, avoiding Rita’s stare. Rita blinked, remembering how fast her heart had been beating as she’d faced the bulletin board, picked up the pencil and traced the letters on the paper, trying to copy the curves and lines of someone else’s handwriting...

“Komarova, Margarita... Wait a second.” Regina Matveyevna squinted at the list. Rita felt like she might be sick. “Well, I guess. Do we have Rita?”

“Here,” Rita said, her voice unusually high. Regina Matveyevna regarded her for a long moment, but said nothing more and moved on. Rita gave Anya a slight nod. Anya’s smile was hidden in her eyes.

“Everyone is here. Marvellous. Let’s get in position. Ella, left column, Maria, right...”

Rita walked to her place in the formation when it was assigned to her, arms crossed to keep her hands from shaking. Her partner, Timofey, smiled at her. She smiled back. The hardest part, she hoped, was over.

Rita learned the steps, followed the directions, painstakingly accurate. She even earned a compliment from the teacher, a small remark about the way Rita pointed her feet.

“I wonder what made them change their mind about you,” Sveta whispered. The teacher had just paused the rehearsal and was explaining to the young, anxious pianist that she had to keep the pace even when the children failed to catch up.

“I wonder, too,” Rita said. “Maybe Marina Sergeyevna talked to the other teachers about my progress in Classical.”

“I doubt that,” Sveta frowned. “Well, I’m just glad you didn’t steal my spot.”

*

For a week, Rita walked around the school, feeling as though everyone’s eyes were on her. Yet, she knew it was all in her imagination; her secret was safe, she was doing well enough in rehearsals, and one morning in class Marina Sergeyevna had told her that her turnout was improving.

Her friendship with Anya grew stronger. They spent all their free time together, playing cards in the locker room, roaming the labyrinth-like hallways of the school, watching older boys in class through the glass doors of the studios. The only time when they had to part ways came after rehearsals: Rita took the subway home, while Anya only had to walk across the yard to get to the *internat*.

“Come on!” Anya was saying. “You know you can’t bail on me now.”

Rita hesitated: the promise of secret hallways and hidden stairwells was thrilling, but they were not allowed to loiter after hours, and her mother was waiting for her downstairs.

“We’ll be back in no time, trust me.”

“Okay,” Rita said. The truth was that she would have followed Anya anywhere.

They walked down the main hall on the third floor. Everything was quiet, the lush burgundy carpet rendering their footsteps silent; it was strange to see the hallway without a current of students talking in hushed voices as they hurried to their classrooms, watched by the form teachers who hovered in the doorways, wooden pointers in hand.

“Here it is!” Anya exclaimed. Before them was a door that did not look extraordinary.

“What is this?”

“Must be the forbidden room!”

Anya turned the doorknob slowly. Rita bit her lip, afraid that the door might be locked. But it was not. In a school so reliant on the sanctity of rules, breaking them was proving to be surprisingly easy.

Behind the door was a spacious dark room that must have once been a dance studio. Through an enormous window, streetlights gave enough light to make out shapes and silhouettes. The girls could see a large mirror, a piano, wooden lines of barre along the walls.

“There,” Rita whispered, pointing at a door behind the barre. “Where do you think that leads?”

“Let’s find out.”

This door, too, was unlocked. They ducked under the barre.

“Whoa,” Rita said. This room was smaller than the studio, and the space was not empty. It smelled like dust. In the orange glow of the streetlamps everything had an eerie tint to it.

“What is this place?” Rita asked.

“I think... I think it must have been a chapel,” Anya said.

In the center of the room was a cross that had once been gilded, the paint now chipped and peeled away. On the walls were paintings of saints in beautiful wooden frames, faded and withering; the biggest icon in the altar was of a young woman with her head bent delicately, slender hands crossed on her chest. With a start, Rita realized she was missing her gemstone eyes; she reached out and touched the holes, as if pulling down the eyelids of the dead. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s okay,” Anya said. She was holding a candle and a box of matches.

“What... where did you get those?”

“I want us to be friends forever,” Anya said solemnly. “And this place is perfect. We are going to have a ceremony.”

Rita hesitated. It felt wrong, somehow, to be here so late, to share this space with the eyeless saints, but she felt the same thrill she had felt writing her name into the lists. She belonged to this school now. She belonged here, with Anya.

“Let’s begin, then,” Rita said, stepping closer to Anya. She struck a match and lit the candle in Anya’s clasped hands. Rita held her breath as Anya began to speak.

“We, Margarita Komarova and Anna Lesnaya, shall be the best of friends forever. We shall love and cherish this bond. There shall never be secrets between us. We shall protect the secrets of one another as if they were our own. This shall become our sacred place of friendship. With the flame of this magic candle, I deem it so. I swear to be bound to you. Do you swear?”

“I swear,” Rita said.

“Good. And now, we strengthen it with a drop of blood.”

The flickering flame made their large shadows dance against the walls. The eyeless saints watched. “Yes,” Rita whispered as Anya took her hand.

2

“Rita! Rita!” Anya yelled, running across the courtyard. She was swinging her flowers through the air. Rita protected her bouquet carefully, because she was to give it to Marina Sergeevna, the most important teacher.

Rita hugged her friend, marveling at how much Anya had changed over the summer. Her blond hair was pulled into a sleek shiny ponytail, and the uniform fit her better than most, hugging tightly her slim waist and delicate shoulders. Rita had straightened her hair in the morning. She felt older now, and prettier. But Anya was more beautiful still.

The Third Years stood in the middle of the line with their heads held high, regarding the younger students with condescension. It was almost impossible to believe that only two years ago, Rita and Anya were as innocent as those little girls with their scared eyes and giant bouquets.

“Tell me everything about your summer,” Anya whispered, leaning on Rita’s shoulder. “Everything!”

“There isn’t much to tell,” Rita shrugged.

“Well, I had a wonderful time! I went away to camp, and they *begged* me to perform a variation I’d thought of myself. The stage was *tiny*, of course, nothing compared to Kirovsky—you know how it is, these little gatherings *en plein air*—but they were so *in love* with me!”

Rita pictured Anya there, in the center of the wooden stage, hair shining golden in the sun. She could see the white dresses and skirts that billowed in the wind as she danced.

Rita had gone away to Estonia with her mother, grandmother, and younger brother. As they did every year, they stayed with an elderly Jewish woman, an old family friend who charged a fair price for the two rooms they occupied. Granny Natalia, concerned that Rita would get out of shape, watched her stretch every morning and every night. Rita tried to stage a production of *Sleeping Beauty* once after dinner, but her Prince, also known as her brother Alec, declared he had better things to do and ran off to the water—and the moment was gone.

“Rita? Are you listening?”

“Oh, sorry. Yes, that sounds nice,” Rita said.

“Yes, yes. Now, how was Estonia? I’ve never gotten a letter from a different country before,” Anya said.

“My family is insufferable. Alec helped me with my little *spectacle*, though,” said Rita. “And the gulf is beautiful there.”

“Tell me more,” Anya begged, ignoring the Headmistress’ speech, and Rita told her all about the cold stream where she swam in the mornings, the endless fields of wild strawberries, the starry nights and the rainy afternoons.

*

Anya was not the only one who had changed over the summer. Mark returned to school two heads taller than every other boy in their class; the girls decided, as a group, to fall in love with him. Rita felt cheated: she had fallen in love with Mark *first*.

Anya didn’t share the obsession. “I refuse,” she told Rita during a break between Math and Etiquette, “to participate in this silliness.”

“Me too,” Rita said, “I don’t have time for boys. I have to audition for Pastorale.”

“Yes, yes. Listen: Marina Sergeyevna said I should learn the choreography for Little Marie. Little Marie!”

Rita told herself she was happy for her best friend. She was unfit to play Marie, anyway. “Marie is German,” Lana had said. She had been cast as the understudy. “It makes sense for her to be blonde.”

“Marie wears a wig,” said Rita.

“Well, if you’re a mouse, you wear a mask. That seems like a good idea, isn’t it?”

Everyone knew mice were played by boys. “I’m going to be in *Pastorale*,” Rita said, “just you wait.”

Anya was still talking: she would have to stay behind after hours for her special rehearsals, working so late, one on one with the teacher. At least she lived in the *internat*, no commute, but still...

“I believe in you. You can handle it.”

“Thank you,” Anya said, leaning in to give Rita a kiss on the cheek. “So can you.”

Over Anya’s shoulder Rita caught sight of Mark hovering in the corner, watching them. He crooked a finger at her in a beckoning gesture. “Be right back,” Rita said. She followed Mark into a closed-off part of the hallway, her heart beating so hard that she worried he would hear it.

“So, here’s the thing.” Mark was frowning. “I need you to help me with a math assignment, and I need you to keep it a secret.”

“Oh,” said Rita, “I see.” She didn’t know how he’d learned that she had good grades. Ordinary school subjects were a nuisance, a distraction on the path to greatness and fame—but

Granny Natalia was adamant. “Academic excellence,” she had said, “is what has kept our family here.” Rita did not quite know what she meant. “Where else would we be?” she had asked, but Granny Natalia just looked away.

In a different world, Mark could be asking her for help because he wanted to spend time with her. But here, she was not the right girl for him. He would fall for someone else, someone slender and pretty, someone who did not care about solving math problems.

“Please? My parents think I have been doing all my homework.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Rita said.

“Thank you,” he said, relieved. He clapped her on the shoulder. “You’re the best.”

“Yeah... no problem.”

*

Two days later, Mark got a four on the test, and Rita a five with a plus. “I got lucky,” she heard him say, “I just guessed the answers!”

“I can’t believe it!” Anya whispered into Rita’s ear. “He got a four? I studied all night and I got a four!”

“He did not guess.” Rita leaned her head on her friend’s shoulder. “I happen to know that he *was* prepared for the test.”

Anya slid Rita’s paper over to her side of the desk, traced the red ink of the check marks on the page with her pale fingers.

“Everything comes easy to you.” She sounded sincere. “I wish I could do that.”

“Four is a good grade. I have strict parents, that’s all.”

“My mother told my aunt I was in Fourth Year,” said Anya. “I think she forgets what I look like when I’m away.”

The teacher was approaching their desk, so the girls quickly bent their heads over the textbook.

Parents are overrated, Rita wrote in the margins of Anya’s notebook. Anya read the note and added, *you’re so right!!*

*

“You can’t tell Mark about this place,” Anya said, a sweeping gesture of her hand referring to the chapel. They had spread their mats on the floor, homework pushed aside; Rita rested her head in Anya’s lap, staring up at the tall dome-like ceiling.

“Why would I do that?”

Anya was coiling a strand of Rita’s hair around her finger. “Your curls are so beautiful,” she said.

“They’re annoying, and they make my head look big.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Anya laughed. “I saw the wig I’m going to wear as Marie. Such lovely white curls! And I get a pretty nightgown for the Christmas tree scene, too.”

“I know, An, I’ve seen the show.”

“Of course you have. But it will be so much more fun this year.”

Rita didn’t want to disagree. “We should sneak outside after Historical,” she said. “We can buy little pastries from the kiosk.”

“I can’t have pastries. I have to fit into my costume.”

“You’re so skinny, though.”

“You can always be better, do better. And I want to be the best.”

Everyone wanted to be the best. “You will be,” Rita said.

3

Rita wanted to rewind time and rewrite the story of her sixth year. It had started, wonderfully, with Mark waving at her from his place in the line, sunlight spilling over the cheerful courtyard, her friends complimenting Rita’s new bob haircut.

She’d been given a lovely variation to rehearse; she’d had a great partner for the *pas-de-deux* class; finally she’d begun to feel like she deserved her place at the school. And then—

“Komarova, would you be so kind as to pay attention to our activities?” Marina Sergeyevna was saying. “I know your mind must be more fascinating, but indulge us.”

“I’m sorry,” Rita muttered, stepping away from the barre. In the center of the studio, Marina Sergeyevna was pushing Lana’s leg up, stretching her arm in the other direction. “You see? That’s what it’s supposed to look like. Let’s go again, and you better not make me get up from my nice little chair.” Marina Sergeyevna walked over to the mirrored wall and sat down.

Rita knew exactly what had happened. She had broken the clear but unspoken rule that prohibited the students from taking private dance lessons, thus exhibiting, according to Marina Sergeyevna, a disregard of the school’s core principle: institutional purity.

Rita hadn’t meant to do that. She hadn’t meant to do anything. Granny Natalia had said that she needed to do better, and Rita’s mother had found her a teacher, and there she was

spending her free time in a poorly lit studio in a basement, practicing on a concrete floor covered only by a thin layer of linoleum.

After Classical, Rita changed into her school uniform, aware of the way the other girls talked around her. Merely a week ago she was one of them: laughing, swapping hair ties, passing the communal mascara to Anya and Lydia. She slid her feet into her high heeled shoes and winced at the pain in her knee as she stood up.

“You need to get that checked out,” Anya said quietly.

“Like you care,” Rita hissed; Anya began to say something quiet in response, but Rita hurried out of the locker room, heels clicking on the hard floor. If she were lucky, there would be a math quiz, and she would bring home another five in another worthless subject. If not, she would draw countless little dancers in the margins of her notebook, sitting alone since her best friend was now sharing a desk with Sveta.

The dancers had stick-thin legs that stretched up, up, up. Rita drew another one, giving her a long flowing skirt and a perfect *arabesque*. She knew that most of her classmates were guilty of the same crime, but they hadn’t been found out. Rita’s focus was slipping, vision going fuzzy at the edges; she was so, so tired. She couldn’t remember why becoming a ballerina was the most important thing in her life.

Outside, large snowflakes descended through the air, colliding with the frost-painted window panes. All Rita was going to be in *The Nutcracker* this year was a Snowflake, one of the thirty-two, perhaps in the second cast. She had been a Snowflake last year, too, the youngest—then it had been an honor, now another punishment. The snow kept falling.

Ripping off the corner of the page from her notebook, Rita wrote down a note and passed it to Anya. *Meet me after Russian*, it read.

*

The prospect of spending an hour in the corner of the dining hall and picking at lukewarm cutlets made Rita shudder. As soon as the other girls headed to lunch, she changed into her leotard, relaxing into the silence of the empty locker room, put on her leg warmers, and walked to the far end of the third floor. There, away from the glittering perfection of larger spaces, hid a small studio with walls painted a peachy shade of pink. There was a large rusty stain on the mirror, and the wooden floor left splinters in the feet of the less careful.

Rita curled her fingers around the barre and began her usual warm-up—*plié, tendu, battement jeté*... She had not done much in class in the morning; Marina Sergeyevna, seething with anger, had said she should not overwork herself. It felt good to stretch her legs, despite the soft but insistent reminder of pain in her knee.

Rita let go of the barre and moved towards the center of the studio. She closed her eyes and imagined a melody she'd once heard in class, letting her limbs flow through the air freely. So many things had become automatic—the rounded position of outstretched arms, the precise lines of an *arabesque*. Here, without the vengeful eye of Marina Sergeyevna, Rita didn't have to think about every move she made, and the dance came alive in her.

The pain in her knee became sharper, and she stopped. In the mirror she saw a red-cheeked, tired girl, dark hair slicked back with sweat. She looked down at her knee, which from the outside resembled any other knee. Her own body was betraying her.

Rita tried again, this time following the choreography of the Doll's variation—but every time she stepped on her right foot, pain lanced up her thigh. She lay down on her mat in the corner, spreading her legs into a comfortable split, and rested her forehead on her arms. Her class hadn't used this studio since they were First Years. Now they occupied the biggest room on the fifth floor, where younger kids flocked to the glass doors to watch the upperclassmen work. "It's like we're fish in a fishbowl," Anya had said once, but neither of them truly minded being watched.

What was it like to watch from the outside? Rita couldn't imagine a life where she didn't wake up every morning to head straight to the studio. She didn't know what happened to those who had gotten expelled. They never stayed in touch.

*

"I knew I'd find you here," said a quiet voice. Rita opened her eyes. Anya was standing in the doorway, behind the barre, peering anxiously into the chapel.

"Yeah, well. I was counting on it."

Bending down, Anya entered the room. Rita put her book down on the windowsill.

"How's your knee?"

"Cut it out," said Rita. She reminded herself to stay calm; she wanted to be the bigger person, to hide just how hurt she had been. "I know it was you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You told Marina Sergeyevna that I went to those lessons. No one else could have known."

Anya frowned. She wouldn't meet Rita's eyes.

Rita glanced at the Virgin Mary, her somber eyeless face glowing faintly. "Why would you do that?" she said.

Slowly, Anya crossed the dusty space between them; she was so close that Rita could reach out and touch the little crease between her eyebrows. "I'm sorry," Anya said quietly. "I wish I could take it back."

Wincing, Rita slid off the windowsill. Anya took a step back. "I hate you," Rita said, "you ruined my life."

"I'm sorry," Anya repeated. "I didn't want to, I swear. I just got so jealous."

"Jealous? Jealous of me? Look at you!"

"You have everything," Anya said. "Your family, your grades, Mark—"

"All Mark and I ever do is homework. You know that!"

"Yes, but—"

"No, stop! I can't do this. You are so perfect! Everyone is in love with you, and you—"

Anya began to cry, a sudden waterfall running down her white cheeks. She didn't look beautiful, then; she looked fragile and sad. "I'm so sorry," she was saying between sobs. "So, so sorry."

Rita raised her hand instinctively to touch Anya's shoulder, to give or even seek a remnant of comfort; hand frozen mid-air, she reconsidered, crossed her arms. "What do you want me to say? I can't just forgive you."

“I want us to be alright again,” Anya said, looking up at the icon. “Can we just be... *friends?*”

“No, we can’t. You should go... And Anya? Don’t talk to me anymore.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Anya grabbed Rita’s hand. “If you can’t forgive me, I understand, but I want you to know that I do wish I could take it back. I just don’t know how to fix it now that it’s done.”

Rita wrestled out of her grip. “You have to leave. This place isn’t for traitors.”

“And how much longer will *you* stay?” Anya asked as she turned to go. “I really am sorry, Rita. But some things just don’t belong.”

Rita followed her into the studio outside the chapel. “And what if I want to leave?” she asked. “I didn’t even want to go to this school in the first place!” This was the first time Rita allowed herself to say this aloud, to anyone. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Then why did you stay?”

“You know why. No one leaves this school without being pushed out...” Rita paused. “Nobody wants to leave. And why would we? Everyone tells us we’re all so very *special*. And of course, I believed it. Who would ever give that up?”

Anya stayed quiet. Rita knew that she agreed; everyone here thought the same things. For a long time, Rita had thought those things, too.

“If I left, would you still be my friend?”

“What do you think?”

For a moment, Anya seemed as if she was about to say more, but she didn't. She just walked away.

Sitting on the floor with her back to the wall, Rita stared up at the Virgin Mary. *If only she had eyes*, Rita thought, *she would cry with me.*

CAREN

1

“Happy Birthday, Caren,” my phone said in its cool, emotionless voice. I hadn’t known it had that feature. It was midnight, then. I had just turned twenty-four.

The house was bitterly cold; I wrapped the coat tighter around my body. I had found it in a closet, this long, ancient thing made of thick gray wool. “Thanks, phone,” I murmured as I turned it off.

I was sitting on the windowsill in my uncle’s old bedroom, watching the snow fall. Outside, everything was already thickly covered in white—the ground, the trees, the swings; inside, the room was filled with dark shapes and darker shadows.

I got up, put on a pair of boots, and walked out through the back door. There was no fence at the back of the house, and so the snow lay before me, outstretched all the way to the edge of the woods. I felt an inexplicable desire to run across it, run until I reached the trees, maybe farther. One second I was standing on the porch, intimidated by the perfect, smooth surface in front of me, and the next I was across the yard.

I stopped to catch my breath and turned around. From here, the house looked like a toy model, the snow play-pretend, artificial. There was something sinister about the dark hollows of the windows. A little to the right, I could see lights twinkling along the edge of the neighbors’ roof. The windows were dark there, too. In this suburban country, midnight was a late hour, reserved for sleep or, if one happened to suffer from insomnia, hushed reruns of TV sitcoms.

I tilted my head back and kept my eyes open, letting the snowflakes land on my face and melt on my skin, catching tiny drops of water in my eyelashes. It was quiet, except for an occasional bark of a dog in the distance, lonesome and wistful.

The spirit of my mother hovered just outside the edges of my vision. “You have snow in your boots,” she said solemnly.

“I know,” I whispered.

“You’re going to catch a cold.”

I said nothing.

“Happy Birthday, Caren,” she said.

“Thank you.”

*

I woke up in bed, still wearing the coat, cold but rested. Outside, the weather had turned brilliant: the temperature still far below freezing, the bright sun sparkling the snow.

I walked through the living room to the kitchen, put a pot of water on the stove. My fingers were numb and pale. I pulled the sleeves of my sweater over my hands and sat down at the table, waiting for the water to boil. The house was pierced by rays of sunshine coming in through every window, and in the clear morning light I saw everything as it was: covered in dust.

The spirit of my mother had nothing to say. I made tea in a big mug and took it back to my uncle’s bedroom. My phone lay on the windowsill, a piece of technology too modern for this house. I picked it up and turned it on, waited for the screen to light up.

There were no new messages from Ellis, but a few people had written to wish me a happy birthday.

Yesterday Ellis had said, “Running away to Russia right after I proposed to you was immature.” I should have apologized, but stayed quiet. “It’s an upsetting commentary on our relationship that I need time to process,” he continued in a measured voice, as though reciting a speech he had previously rehearsed. These evening calls were supposed to become our new ritual. *I didn’t run away*, I’d wanted to say, but he went on talking before I could protest.

I replayed the conversation in my head. Ellis had sounded like my father, quietly disappointed. I looked down on my hand, where the engagement ring sat on my finger, awkwardly large and foreign. It was beautiful—antique, intricate, with a lovely oval diamond—but I was always aware of its presence and anxious about losing it. I took it off and slid it onto the ring finger of my right hand. It fit a little better.

I finished my tea in bed, wrapped in the coat and a blanket. I was not shivering anymore; the sunlight had warmed the room. The walls were bare, but there was a stack of posters on a chair in the corner, images of race cars and swimsuit models. I flipped through them, then walked to the living room to search for thumbtacks. I found a half-full jar of them on a shelf in an antique cupboard, the one with a long, crescent-shaped crack in the opaque glass mosaic. My grandmother was always keeping little miscellaneous objects in glass jars, their labels rubbed off by years of use and reuse.

Back in the bedroom, I laid the posters out on the bed and began to put them up, one by one. There were tiny holes in the wallpaper, and I walked around the room, trying to recreate the initial placement. If the house were back to normal, I thought, maybe I would be, too.

When I was done, I looked around, imagining my mother here, scowling at her brother's choice of decoration. She'd adorned our first house upstate with lovely, stylish paintings; she had great taste, except for her habit of collecting apples in all shapes and forms: glass, crystal, wooden, painted on plates and mugs and cutting boards. I did not care for artificial apples, but loved the fruit itself. In college I could go an entire day eating nothing but apples I'd stolen from the cafeteria. Before the snowfall, I had gone out into the garden to pick the very last of the year's crop from the trees, and they were now sitting on the table in the kitchen in a salad bowl. I took one—it was ugly, spotty and imperfectly shaped—and sank my teeth into its yellow skin. Despite its appearance, the taste was wonderful, so deeply familiar as though I had eaten these apples in lives past.

It must have been a memory, though. It was strange to think that I had ever lived in this foreign place, existing but barely leaving a trace. I had been too young to remember much now, but some things triggered recollections. The toolshed behind the house, for one—my grandmother had told me that I used to take her there so I could count spiders which had woven their webs in the gaping doorway.

“One spider, two spiders, three spiders. There have been four before. One must have crawled away.”

My grandmother had looked at me and said, “Carina, you're not going to have an easy life.”

*

Ellis woke me with a call; it was a little after 4 A.M. My head felt heavy. The video froze

for a few seconds and caught Ellis disheveled, all flushed cheeks and messy hair, as if he had just gotten out of bed. I missed him, I realized, missed waking up next to him.

“Oh my god, how late is it there? I’m sorry,” he said.

“We have to stop apologizing to each other,” I said. “Also, it’s early, not late.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, and I let it hang in the air.

Picking up on our earlier conversation, he asked, “Have you decided when you’re coming back?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I still don’t know,” I said. “I just need more time.”

Ellis told me he would wait for me. This was frustrating; I wanted him to fight, to push back, to do something unexpected.

“I haven’t seen enough of the old city,” I said, “and there are all these museums my grandmother loves.”

“Well, then…” Ellis said. He ran his hand through his hair, and a couple of strands fell onto his forehead. “Caren… Are we going to be okay?”

“Of course,” I said, “look, El. I’m tired, I’ll talk to you later, alright?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” he echoed, then ended the call.

I rubbed my temples. My phone made a small noise: the memory function was reminding me that this time two years ago I was in New York City, and that Ellis had taken me to the Met for my birthday. In my mind, it was a pleasant, warm memory—wandering the halls hand in hand, trying to find each other’s reflections in the faces staring back at us from the paintings. As I

scrolled through the pictures again, I felt like I was forgetting something about it—my smile seemed a little too wide, his gaze a bit too distant.

I was about to turn off the light, but as I looked up I saw the spirit of my mother hovering in the doorway. She took a step forward, looked around, raised her hand as if to touch one of the posters.

“You always reminded me of Alec,” she said. “I didn’t know you liked Ferraris, though.”

She leaned against the wall, casual yet elegant, wearing one of her fine black sweaters. When we’d lived together, I used to sneak into her walk-in closet to borrow her clothes; sometimes, I would forget to return them.

“I don’t like Ferraris,” I said. “I like this *house*. Do you ever miss it?”

“You’re not wearing your engagement ring,” she said.

“I am.” I held my right hand up to the lamp on the bedside table. The diamonds gleamed in the light.

“That’s not the same.”

I knew what she would think: I was lucky to have a man like Ellis, and would make a life-ruining mistake if I didn’t marry him.

“It’s such a beautiful ring.”

I stood on the sidewalk, overwhelmed by the crowd around me. This was different from crowds in New York City, where everything was anonymous, impersonal. Here, I felt watched.

The buildings were only four or five stories tall, pastel-colored—yellow, blue, salmon. There were New Year’s decorations everywhere, elaborate plastic lighting fixtures hanging over the traffic. I pulled out my phone and took a couple of pictures. If I got the angle right—no people, no cars, no sludge and dirty snow—Nevsky Avenue looked truly magical on the tiny screen.

I walked down the sidewalk. On the other side of the street, the row of buildings gave way to a square, and behind it stood a large stone cathedral. I remembered it from photographs my grandmother had shown me—it was called Kazansky Sobor, a replica of a Catholic basilica the architect had seen somewhere in Italy. There was a projection of its most famous painting on the Cathedral’s dome, eerily colorful against the dark brown night sky. I’d never seen the Virgin Mary’s face quite so illuminated before; it was lovely, somber and earnest. It seemed peculiar for the beautiful icon to be exposed as though on a billboard advertising her latest film.

It was noon in New York. I scrolled through my recent calls until I saw my mother’s number. She picked up right away, saying, “Hey there, stranger, long time no see.” She laughed, and I felt instantly comforted by it, by the familiar casual cheer of her voice.

“Sorry, Mom. I’ve been busy.”

“Me too,” she said, then yelled, “Give me a minute!”

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, *Kotyа*, it’s just Preston, you remember Preston?”

“Sure,” I lied. It was hard to keep track of the men she’d been seeing, sometimes, especially since I rarely got to meet them. I didn’t mind it as long as she was happy, and started to worry only when she would call me late at night, lonely, close to tears.

“Well, Preston is making me lunch,” she said.

“That’s nice,” I said.

“Yes, he is.” A muffled noise distracted her again. “Actually, is this about something urgent? I could call you back really soon,” she said.

“*Izvinite*,” I muttered as a dark blur of a person pushed me out of their way. In front of the cathedral stood a large, brightly illuminated cone that barely resembled a Christmas tree.

“What?”

“Yes, call me back,” I said. “You sound happy.”

“Love you,” she said.

I crossed the road and walked towards the Cathedral. I was happy for my mother, I thought. I was glad she was no longer the person my sister and I would find locked up in her bedroom, refusing to eat or open the blinds. I had to take a train down from Boston once, summoned by a phone call from a distressed Talia. I caught her on her way out the building; she had to get back to school. “I wish you luck,” she said, getting into a yellow cab. “Text me.”

“What’s going on, Mom?” I turned on the overhead. My mother was in bed, under the covers, her black hair gathered, uncharacteristically, in two plain braids.

She brought her hand to her face to shield her eyes from the light. Her oblong nails were painted a glossy red.

“It’s Michael. He broke up with me.”

“Again?” I said. I would have felt relieved if I didn’t assume they would get back together soon. Michael was the only boyfriend of hers I’d met, and I could not say I liked him.

“For good this time.”

That’s what you say every time. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t mean it,” she said. “You never mean it! You never care.”

“I brought you that low fat ice cream you like. It’s in the freezer. Get out of bed or not, up to you, but I thought you might want to eat something. I’ll be in the living room.”

I turned to leave, but she sat up, reaching out to grab my sleeve. “Could you stay for a minute?”

“Sure thing, Mom.” I sat down next to her on the bed, let her lean her head on my shoulder.

“So comfortable,” she muttered, patting my arm. “Now I see why you don’t want to lose all that extra weight.”

I straightened my spine, sucking in my stomach.

“He really is gone, C.” I felt sorry for her. “I’m on my own again.”

I told her it was going to be alright. And indeed, soon she was back in the game, juggling a long-distance relationship with an Egyptian banker in Switzerland and countless short-lived romances in the City. We never talked about Michael again. We never talked about my father, either.

I wondered if I should have called my father, let him know I was spending a few weeks in Russia. I sat down on a bench by the ugly Christmas tree and lit a cigarette. My mother still didn’t know I smoked, even though it was never about rebellion. It was just a reminder that she couldn’t control me, couldn’t tell me what to wear, eat, enjoy.

“I’m sorry she—I’m sorry I didn’t call you back,” the spirit of my mother said, and I almost felt her hand on my shoulder. I needed to stop conversing with a phantom.

“It’s alright,” I said, exhaling smoke into her face. “Talia will get out of class soon. I haven’t told her about that movie I saw in Russian the other day.”

“You can tell me,” she said.

I thought about it, about how strange it was to sit alone in the movie theater full of families and couples, and about how strange it felt to hear Russian words spoken by American actors, lips moving at the wrong times.

“Maybe it’s time for me to come home,” I said instead.

“And where would that be?” said the spirit of my mother.

“I still have to figure that out.”

3

I stood on the porch, suitcase propped up against my leg, and waited for a sign that ringing the doorbell was the right thing to do. The house was bigger in real life than what I had expected from pictures; I knew he was doing alright for himself, but had no idea how well.

The sign didn’t come, but I couldn’t keep standing there and the cab was long gone, so I raised my arm and pressed my finger to the doorbell button.

I was about to press it again when the big white door swung open, and my father came out, saying, “Carina, you’re right on time!”

“*Privet, Papa,*” I said. I could’ve sworn that I recognized the shirt he was wearing, a stylish thing my mother had bought for him at a thrift store in Kingston years ago for next to nothing. It still looked good, though, and so did he, older but good.

“Veronica isn’t home, but you can meet the little one,” he was saying as I rolled my suitcase in and stepped out of the shoes that were beginning to hurt my feet. I’d dressed as though I needed to convince someone I was an adult: button-down shirt tucked into black jeans, high-heeled boots, the long gray coat I couldn’t forsake.

“The guest slippers are in there,” my father said, pointing at the mirrored doors of the wardrobe to my right. His Russian had a faint trace of American intonation, and I couldn’t decide whether or not I found it endearing.

His daughter, a quiet, shy two-year old, was too blonde to resemble me or Talia. “Say hi to your big sister, *Kotik,*” my father said twice, and then, giving up with a loud sigh, returned his attention to me. “How long are you in town for?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve finished everything that I needed to get done in St. Pete’s, so...”

He looked at me as though he could see through me; I knew for a fact that he could not. “That’s lovely,” he said. “Are you enjoying Moscow?”

“I haven’t seen any of it yet.” This was true.

“It’s decided, I’m going to show you around tomorrow. You’re going to love it here!”

“I’m sure I will, Papa,” I said. I hung my coat in the wardrobe.

“Oh my, that’s a big rock,” he said, catching my hand and lifting it up to his eyes.

“Birthday present?”

“Yeah. Ellis got it for me.”

“I need to meet that boy.”

*

I walked around the house while my father prepared tea. It was clear that Veronica had been in charge of the renovation, because I couldn't imagine him picking out the pink flowery wallpaper, or the plaster columns that framed arched doorways on the first floor. There were two painted portraits, one of her alone and one with my father, and a collage of pictures from a trip to Venice I hadn't heard about.

The music room was an exception—I didn't know if anyone had any use for it, but the space was marvelous: tall windows with sheer curtains and almost no furniture except for a long leather couch, a glass journal table and a large black piano. There was a small artificial Christmas tree in the corner, adorned only by simple clear string lights.

There was another, bigger tree in the dining room, this one decorated with all of the traditional ornaments and knick-knacks: tinsel, sparkling balls, painted glass figurines, a figure of Father Frost beneath the wide green boughs. It stood by the fireplace; on the mantel were more framed pictures. With surprise I realized that there was a picture of the four of us—Mom, Dad, my sister and me. I remembered that day so clearly. We were celebrating New Year's Eve, Talia and I in our matching sequined dresses. I still kept mine in the back of my closet.

“It's a good picture,” my father said.

“Yeah, I like it.”

He put his arm around my shoulders as he guided me to the kitchen, where a kettle whistled cheerfully. “You can stay as long as you like, okay?”

“Thanks, Papa,” I said. “I need to be back by Christmas, though.”

“You’ve become so American,” he said, shaking his head. “Christmas.”

I laughed. “No, it’s Ellis and my... I miss him.”

“Ah, I get it. In any case, I’m really glad you’re here. Have I told you that already?”

More almost-genuine laughter. “Yes, you have,” I said, “but I don’t mind if you keep saying it.”

*

My mother was not happy when I told her where I was. She hung up on me, blaming bad connection, and called back in ten minutes, armed with a new plan.

“So you take a Q-tip, and you stick it in his so-called daughter’s mouth, and you prove once and for all that this woman is using him for his money.”

“Mom, I really don’t think a paternity test—”

“It’s brilliant, *Kotya*, you’re brilliant. Coming to stay with him? A great idea!”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Mom, I love you, but you have to stop. We’ve been over this.”

“Well, you’re the one who flew all the way to Moscow and now you’re telling me you don’t want to spy on your father for me?”

“I flew for one hour and fifteen minutes,” I said. I was sitting at the piano, running my fingers along the smooth, cool keys. I had known how to play, once, but had forgotten most of it; I remembered Mrs. Kowalski’s fuchsia nails, way too long for a piano teacher’s hands, scratching

my skin whenever I would make a mistake, and my father bringing a bouquet of flowers to every one of my performances, even though I was never that good.

“Caren, it’s like you’re always putting your interests before your family’s,” my mother was saying.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I’d heard this speech before, every variation on the same theme.

“Yeah, well. Ellis called.”

“I know,” I said. “I talked to him about the Christmas party.”

“Does that mean you’re—”

“Yes, Mom.” I checked my watch; it was almost time for dinner. “I’ll see you all very soon.”

*

My father’s guest bedroom had a queen-sized bed and hotel-like crisp white sheets; I lay awake late into the night. I remembered the first night in our new apartment: Ellis, a stranger to our family-shared insomnia, was breathing evenly, his face peaceful. Feeling a little guilty, I reached out and took his hand; eyes half-opened, Ellis smiled at me. A strand of hair fell across his forehead. I brushed it aside.

“I love you,” he said. “Bad dreams?”

“No, can’t sleep.”

“Come here,” he said, “we can play that one game on your phone.”

I stayed awake after he’d fallen asleep hours later, still holding me close. Cars driving by on the street sent slanted shadows gliding across the ceiling. I was happy.

In my father's house, the window faced the backyard, and the shadows didn't move. I stared at the still surface of the ceiling, wishing Ellis were here, asleep or awake... Absentmindedly, I switched the ring from my left hand to the right, from the right to the left, again and again. I hadn't noticed the moment when its weight on my finger had become comforting.

Without turning on the light, I opened my laptop. Fifteen hours spent on planes and in airport waiting areas—and I would be home. I would see my fiancé, go to a Christmas party with my mother, take my sister shopping. My fingers hovered above the keyboard; the screen stared at me blankly, waiting with indifference for me to confirm the transaction that would put an end to indecision.

I tried to invite the spirit of my mother in, but she wouldn't appear. I was alone. *It is Talia's birthday today*, a social network told me through a message on my phone. *Let her know you are thinking about her.*