WHEN RUSSIA CAME TO STAY

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Thesis

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Mom, you are always my first reader. Through you, I believe.
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1. Author’s in-laws from Russia, Tatyana and Viktor Povozhaev, with grandson, Viktor Jr.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family—past, present, and to come. May we eternally abide builders in the legacy of faith.

2. Author and husband Dima.
“[M]emories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. . . . If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.”


4. Author’s wedding; beginning in front and moving clockwise: author’s grandparents, parents, Dima’s host parents, Russian friend, Russian parents, host family’s grandmother.
“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” ⁵

PROLOGUE

When Russia came to stay, she nested in my heart by chance. And she gathered there—in thin blue days, Dima’s hand warming mine; in frozen awe as I tread St. Petersburg’s crystal snow to her ancient Church; in Grandma’s thick arms spilling over the small wooden rocker, as she rocked and sewed, rocked and sewed, our small home becoming a deeper fold of past and future. Ours was one life, woven with disparate strands—Dima’s Russian childhood and family, my American; his Orthodox culture, my Protestant; his restful nature, my sharp passions. Like a bird coursing through Ohio air, the journey became our life.

Faith is red like blood and anger, passion and fire.

“Are you seriously going to burn that entire Christmas tree? Dima! You’re freaking me out. The thing’s blazing. Put the gasoline down!” A fury of arms slapped the night cracking above the tin roof of the garage. “You are definitely a pyromaniac,” a smile pulled the corners of my thin lips. Hugging bare legs close to my chest, the fire raged against the shins. He stoked the blaze with his old hockey stick.

“I can’t believe my parents and Grandma will be here in three days.” His wide eyes glowed in the firelight, “It’s going to be crazy for them to be here, especially Grandma. They might have to drug her to get her on the plane.”

“Wonder what they’ll think of our neck of the woods. You think they get that the Holmeses are rich and we’re not?” I said.

He looked up from the dancing fire, “Oh yeah, they understand. They know exactly how it is for us.” Nodding my head, I doubted they could.

He had come to America at thirteen to play hockey, leaving his mother and father for nine years. Grandma was issued a visa and visited us in high school, but his parents came to the States for the first time to celebrate our wedding. His father, clad in his red and black checked robe softly climbing the mound of his belly, leaned a full face over Dima and cupped his large head in his hands. He breathed deeply the sweet-flesh scent of his boy’s scalp. I backed out of the Holmes’s bedroom and left for home, my parents’ house.

We were to be married in days. His parents’ first visit, a stretch of six weeks, was almost up. The mantra repeated: appreciate this time. Think of Dima and his family instead of yourself. It’s been eight years since he saw them.

The internal argument came easy, visceral: they hang sheets over windows, slurp soup, refrigerate peanut butter. Tatyana inhales jellybeans with wine.
“I don’t know,” my voice broke. “Mrs. Holmes, I love Dima—and his parents. But. This is so hard—” Susan squeezed a close-pin over the wet shorts, her face concentrated.

“How long did you stay at Sea World?” Always calculating.

“We were there from eleven till eight. Honestly, I was really trying to be patient. I mean, we stared at the seals for two hours! It wasn’t so bad until around six. That’s when I started hinting we needed to leave. But he would not speak up! He’s driving me crazy.”

“Maybe he didn’t see a reason to. You weren’t there all that long—” she sifted through the utility room for a clothes basket.

“Well, by eight we were. And I said so. Tatyana was mad at me. She wouldn’t look at me or talk. I could tell, she was thinking I was a selfish American.”

“How do you know that? Maybe she was just tired?”

“No. When we got into the van, she was actually pouting. And when we stopped for gas and I was alone with them, I couldn’t handle it. As soon as Dima got back, I made him translate. I told them I was sorry, but it was getting late and stuff.”

“It wasn’t that late.”

“I know. But his mother actually said that I have childhood playing in my butt, whatever that means.” A subtle smile rested over Susan’s plain features.

“Do you want a glass of wine?” she asked.

*
Five years later, Dima and I faced the back of our boxy home sharing the last bonfire of the summer—alone. Stillness cloaked the guest room of our bungalow where wedding pictures and pale cylinder candles rewrote my childhood dressers. A tall iron lamp, left as trash by the past homeowner, crowded in a corner by the bed. In the thick of summer, with skin like melting wax, we’d trade our bedroom upstairs for the saggy-bed of the guest room. We lay naked in comfortable silence, summer pushing through old windows open and unlocked through the night.

For three years we lived as newlyweds among warm colors and wood. We absorbed quiet moments in the crimson bedroom, dreaming of filling the “Baby’s nook,” a pinched space with bleached wood and Noah’s Arc. Old-fashioned Christmas lights lined the bar in the basement. A tattered plaid quilt draped the futon beneath pillows that smelled faintly of Dima’s scalp and cinnamon. Knobby antiques were gifts from Aunt Caroline’s house sales.

Before the family came, he watered house plants and I made coffee and oatmeal on Saturday mornings. There was always a phone call to Russia, Marc’s 500-minute calling card turning in his square fingers, long legs crossed, chords of Russian playing through the kitchen. I loved the sharp sounds spoken in his soft voice. I was transported back to my travels in Russia, reminded of the longing I’d had. And had still.

It was eleven years since Dima and I first met. It was easy to return to that late spring night facing his host family’s brick mansion. It had seemed a fairytale, his Russian past hardly figuring in then. I was sixteen.
Ivy spilled over the earth and front stairwell. An American flag hung between white pillars. Waiting for the door to open, my stomach tightened, face burned. The doorbell chimed classical music; I had never heard anything but a bell before. When the door finally opened, oily Chinese vegetables wafted from the belly of the home.

“Come on in. The boys are upstairs.” Susan Holmes reminded me of Martha Stewart, except she wasn’t quite as put together. Her face was kind but reserved. She wore little make-up and small wire-rimmed eyeglasses. Wiping her hands over her wide apron, she motioned us upstairs. An enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling. Pink and silver wallpaper flowered behind Oriental statues of birds, monkeys, and lions. Red ribbons and orange dragons sprawled shelves. A basket of dark walking canes rested under a dull-bronze icon of Christ.

Steam and Dove soap hovered in the hall and seeped into the three boys’ rooms. Dima stood there, tall and thin, an un-tucked Grateful Dead tee-shirt over khaki cut-offs frayed just above pale knees. His face was hidden in the shadow of a baseball cap.

We weren’t supposed to meet. The odds were against it from the start. But fate has a way of turning the slickest corners, landing us where we would never expect. From then on, our lives would collect in the other’s: my studies in Russia, the birth of our son, his American citizenship, the family’s visit to the States. Our days would grow thick with real-life drama.

Months before we met, I stared out my bedroom window at the dulling oranges of sunset. I whispered, “God, if you are here, if you are really part of my life, I need a
sign.” Nothing changed. I barely breathed. There were no mountains to move. Only postage stamp yards, empty sidewalks curling the cul-de-sac, and silent street lamps. Across the street was a long yellow light in the shape of a cross. Just a porch light. The dark of night blanketed the earthy smells of grass and dying heat. Just the end of a day. And yet hovering inexplicably near was the sense that all of this was God. I drew my breath, still as the old tree across the street.

Telling the stories of our life swayed me to see the hand of God—to sense, again, his realness. When I traveled to Russia in college as an Evangelical Christian, visiting the Orthodox Church was like visiting a museum, strangely peaceful and interesting sometimes, and then, one after the other, little more than ornate marble, antiquated wood, restored paint.

I spent twelve weeks studying in Nizhny Novgorod, compelled to return to dark Orthodox parishes—places so unlike the many churches I had experienced growing up Protestant. I slipped behind wool coats and covered heads that mysteriously bowed. Fingers crossing chests, lips softly chanting, I stood in the shadow. I grew as quiet as melting ice drawing behind their rings of prayer candles, my eyes closing, heart slowing. There were deep, rolling prayers and the smell of baking bread. I felt the cold from a woman’s coat, smelled a man’s body odor. We were so close. So quiet. My nose warmed in the murky dark as I drew breath. A young girl bowed to touch the hem of the priest’s vestment as he continued down the church, spreading incense in a bronze ball the size of an egg.
After years and a slip of fate, this tradition, this historic spirituality began to fill a still and quiet place within me.

*I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant.* The words rattled for months, even still. I always knew I wanted to be a mother and sensed there’d be complications.

“I believe it will happen, Lea. I don’t know when or how. But I have faith.” I thought it was easier for Dima. After all, it had been seven months of infertility specialists prodding my flesh, drawing my blood, rushing his “top” sperm into the cavity of my womb.

“Your chances of conceiving on your own are less than one percent. Even with artificial insemination, it will be difficult. Probably a seven, eight percent chance,” the doctor said.

I lay back on the stiff white paper, closed my eyes to see the pain I felt. The timer, a black sperm on its face, was set for ten minutes. “Just relax. Are you cold?”

“I’m okay.” The doctor draped my spring jacket over bare legs and left the room. Soft music, footsteps on the other side of the door, the pounding of my heart—all went quiet. Completely still and unfeeling. At first, thoughts of unfinished graduate school and the barren bank account. But then the idea of a child—the smell of soft, the touch of need, the nuance of pushing past myself. Flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, it all seemed like the greatest ambition, the highest calling. Without knowing why, I knew I had to have a child.
Above all else, dear God, I beg your mercy. If it’s your will, give us a child. I didn’t sense the cross had been taken. I might never conceive, but rare peace replaced fear.

Midway through our two weeks of waiting, I was dusting the basement and on the phone with my sister when she said, “I’m just really tired. I, ah, don’t feel that great.” My heart flushed nauseating heat to my cheeks, fingers grew icy.

“What? Are you pregnant or something?” I was half-joking.

“Well, actually, I am.” Silence. It had been so easy for her. So natural. My mind went blank, face felt stiff.

“Oh—Melanie, that’s wonderful! I—I,” a sob lodged the words.

“I’m so sorry. I feel awful. Me and Mom didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Oh, please don’t. Please don’t ever keep anything from me. It’s really hard right now for us, that’s all. I’m happy for you, really. A baby—”

There was anger and jealousy alternating hope and love, and emotions moved as quickly as turning a switch on, off. On, I hoped to be pregnant too, though there was little faith, and a glimmer of natural joy met my sister’s. Off, I’d ruminate, anger and self-pity drawing darkness through me.

Our mother said, “I’m proud of yours and Dima’s attitude,” I flicked the light on, almost believing I had been as positive as Dima that things were all right, that we’d conceive, too. I pushed back the hurt. Maybe it would have returned, mutated into the score of emotions one with the inability to conceive experiences. Thankfully, I had a very short time before we celebrated the blessing of two grandbabies on the way.
“You’re pregnant!” I heard over and over as I slipped outside pain and longing and numbly drifted with the news. A physical sensation of sinking past myself to a tenderness just outside carried past my lips into the silent car. Thank you, Lord.

As our son drew from my blood, gathered in my flesh, as Dima’s foreign strand of DNA joined to mine in perfect unity, we began the endless path to becoming parents.

“You’re pregnant!” Dima entered the computer room where I was typing. He held a yellow and red paperback, tapping the cover with his forefinger. “It’s on the differences between Russian and American childrearing.”

“I haven’t had time. Besides, I’m exhausted. I don’t even want to think about all that.” There was graduate school, three baby showers, teaching; there were bathrooms to clean, furniture to dust, meatloaf to make at ten in the morning when I was starving. All piled like a blurring mound of responsibility that I might have chucked for the sake of long hours of rest. The more to do, the more I felt I had to push myself faster, harder. There was no time for patience with Dima.

“I’m telling you, it’s really good. I think we should both read it before Baby comes,” he said.

“Look. After you read it, then I’ll read it.” I figured it would be behind our bed collecting dust alongside his Russian war memoir, Michael Savage’s <em>Liberalism is a Mental Disorder</em>, and Tom Clancey’s <em>The Bear and the Dragon</em>. He cocked his head to the side, straight-faced, and charged me. His fingers wedged under my arms as he tickled me. “Stop! Sssstop,” I laughed.
“You have little-woman syndrome, you know that? I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again—Balls said the Queen! If I had them, I’d be the King!” I slipped from the office chair onto the old carpet.

“Come on. Please, stop or I’ll—”

“What, what can you do?” Laughing, he pinned me down.

“You’re hurting the baby.”

With the swelling of my womb, hope and possibility seemed endless, enough to swallow any differences, any obstacles.

Nana had come from Florida to visit, and we drove an hour north to Melanie’s brick ranch for a pool-party and cookout. The family circled the pool, while Nana reminisced.

“I remember when your mother told me that Melanie was stealing your blankey. I had said, ‘surely, Diane, she’s too little for such antagonistic behavior,’ unable to believe it! And, sure enough, she was just seven months old and you, Lea, just nineteen months, but she’d scoot over, wiggle herself on top your bee, and laugh. Why, I’d never seen anything like it!”

I smiled, moved my painted toenails through the cool water. Melanie and I had always been close, and being pregnant only two weeks apart seemed nothing short of a miracle.

“Are you going to come into the water?” Melanie asked.
“You’re a total fish. I’m not in the mood to swim.” I felt cold, hungry, tired.

Even pregnant, she seemed so carefree. She wore her plaid two piece, small belly beginning to show.

“Do I look fat?”

“Well, fatter. I mean, we are pregnant,” I said. She had always been thick.

When we were little, I used to worry about her stomach sticking out. “Suck it in,” I’d tell her when we shared baths, but she’d arch her back and let it go, not paying attention.

“Have you been taking it easy,” my mother asked me, chewing the inside of her cheek as she did when she concentrated or worried, which often went hand in hand for my mother and me.

She leaned forward, “Nono!” She grabbed the beagle’s collar and pulled him from her burger. He whined and snapped at her hand.

“Ponch! Bad dog!” Melanie lifted herself out of the pool. “Are you okay, Mom?” Our mother just smiled, biting back any comment that might upset Melanie and her husband Joe. Always the peacemaker.

“You have to get rid of that monster before the babies come,” I said. Joe’s brown eyes met mine from across the pool, and though his face was blank, I felt his anger.

“You know, Reverend Leroy Zimkey told me you would become pregnant,” Nana said, shifting her round body clad in golf shorts. “He said that once you were still and relaxed it would happen.” I wanted to believe someone could tell the future.

My father sipped his bottled Budweiser and looked at me with a weak smile. His dark hair was peppered with white, but he still had a youthful body, strong and healthy
like his father’s. He looked on the brink of boredom and irritation. I was sure he was itching to walk the block home and paint a plaster fish.

Fish mounted his basement walls—Rainbow Trout, Small-mouth Bass, Perch. “It’s my showroom,” he’d say, pushing the old couch further from the wall to hang a speckled fish. He was up at five and could spend full days in his faded Lincoln Electric shop coat, reading glasses half-way down his long nose, bowed over a stained table. He’d have a cup of weak coffee beside old canisters of Metamucil and Folgers Coffee refilled with plaster and paint.

“Your mother doesn’t understand, and maybe I am crazy. Who knows? But you understand. It’s something you just have to keep working on. You’re driven like I am,” he’d tell me. And after years, my father and I would reconnect through art. And faith. In such feathery moments, I was no longer the catalyst of his irritations. My soul seemed peeled from his.

Summer fed into fall and finally winter as love took shape in a tiny poke of an elbow that rippled my taut flesh. Hope persisted in lazy evenings leaning against Dima on the futon in the basement. Boxes of baby “necessities” collected by the bar: diaper genie, bouncy seat, high-chair—most of which needed to be assembled.

“But when are you going to do it? We don’t have that much longer, honey. I really want everything set so there’s less stress when Viktor is actually here.”

“I’ll do it soon, okay? This weekend.” I wondered if our son would have a still and patient nature, veering on lazy at times, or live on the edge of his seat, jumping to the
next thing. Would he be tall and quiet like his father—or small and dark like me? Would he learn Russian, sharing Saturday phone calls with Daddy? Would he be convinced that colds came from cool air against one’s neck, that garlic was the cure-all, that only boiled water was safe to drink—even in America? How would Russia separate me from my son? And how would our son change the dynamics of our family?

I had heard the stories. “My father left home when he was fourteen, after eighth grade,” Dima would say. “He was on his own, like me. It’s in our blood, woman.” But my blood would rush stronger, harder through the sinewy fabric of our son.

His parents and Grandma returned five years after our wedding for a month of the most oppressive summer. He drove a borrowed minivan from Stow, Ohio to New York City to fetch the family, flying in from St. Petersburg. I couldn’t sleep. Instead, I lay on squirrel sheets damp with waxy heat, mind filled with the five of us sitting at the kitchen table clinking champagne flutes.

The clock chimed 2:00 a.m. when the Povozhaev Express finally rumbled up the drive to our fifty year-old home, the American flag flapping against the white post, waving hello in the breath of night.

Dima’s father Viktor stepped out of the van first, hugging me tightly but careful not to press my chest against him. His face was less full than it had been five years ago. He stood straight, hands down by his sides, and looked at me with a playfully serious expression, modeling his fifty-three pound weight loss. I told him “hodasho,” that he looked good. His chin had lost a few layers, but there was still a hearty belly to fill.
As I wiggled myself into the stuffy vehicle, past her cane and bags, Grandma’s dry lips pressed my cheek. She was shaking slightly as I embraced her soft age and natural scent. Tatyana, Dima’s mother, squeezed my bare arm from the backseat, “Leea, Leea, Previet!” We strained toward each other. Grandma slowly stepped down from the van, gripping Viktor’s arm. Gray slacks slid past her swollen ankles, tops of feet like pink fish. Tatyana followed, warm night moving her fuzzy hair and mismatched clothes. I approached her and cuddled against the mass of her bosom like a child.

I ran to the back of the van to help unload, but Dima and his father took all of the bags, shooing me away. I led them through the polished kitchen, past the coffee table we had salvaged from the neighbor’s trash three years ago, and into their bedrooms. Grandma set her plastic bags down in what had been my office. She ferreted through bags for a yellow and red tea set. “Beautiful, Babushka. Very beautiful.”

I silently asked, What about my gift to you, Grandma? An Orthodox cross was embroidered on a thick cloth above her bed.

Before they came, my mother had asked, “Where will they sleep, honey? Won’t it be too crowded?”

“Mom, they are used to cramped spaces. They live in one bedroom apartments. It’s totally different. They can’t expect what Americans might.” It seemed to slip my mind that I was, in fact, quite American. One kitchen and two bathrooms would not be enough.

From the fridge, stocked with four times our typical amount of food, Dima helped me pull shrimp cocktail with lemon and crackers and cheddar cheese arranged on a china
dish. Heavy smells of body odor sifted through the essence of our small home, overpowering the lemony scent of Murphy’s Oil Soap.

Tatyana emerged in her tiger-print bathrobe, and Dima’s father whistled. Grandma shuffled into the kitchen, short gray hair brushed back in an owl-like puff. Viktor opened the pantry and then a closet, seemingly interested in what lay beneath our lives in this quiet town. He sighed and sat down at the table, silver cross on his bare chest. Dima mumbled behind us at the sink.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Champagne’s flat.”

“Neechevo.” Grandma insisted on drinking it flat, but we filled our wine goblets with boxed Cabernet Sauvignon. I was still expecting a Russian-style celebration: robust toasting, eating, joking. Silence hung in the room like the heat, even though it had been fourteen years since Dima, Grandma, and his parents had all been together. My family talked excessively about everything from bowel movements to how we imagined heaven, and after years of separation, there’d be surging conversation.

I left the loud silence to wake eight month old Viktor. Thoughts mounted with each step. Maybe I’m keeping them from speaking Russian. Viktor’s arms hung limply on my chest, his soft breath on my neck. “Hey, little guy. Are you ready to meet the family,” I whispered. He stirred and opened wide eyes his face was slowly growing into.

Stealing him into the kitchen, Dima’s mother jumped out of her skin. “Leea, nyet,” she shook her head and frowned.
“Lea, why’d you do that? Put him back to bed. Why would you wake him?”

Dima said.

“I just thought it was a special—”


I buckled him into the highchair with shaking hands. Our baby laughed and reached out to his grandfather over the tray. I warmed a bottle as Grandma smiled, touched a warm palm to his tender cheek, “Oui.”

Tatyana called, “Vitka?” scrunching her nose, puckering her lips, as big blue eyes roamed over the party.

Within days, the family had our eight-month-old rolling around the crumb-laden floor, sipping tea from unwashed spoons, and sucking lemons from their tea.

Dima’s father stood beside our bed, a big smile stretching his face. “Dima, hey, baby? It’s time to get up,” I whispered, looking up at his father.

I’d leave—go running, go writing, go crazy one minute longer under their foreign gaze. “You sure your mother’s okay watching Viktor until three?” I was leaving for The University of Akron, whittling afternoon hours away in quiet work.

“She’ll be fine,” he threw a butter and cheese sandwich on the passenger side seat and folded himself into our Camry.

“Listen, be home as soon as possible. I don’t know what to do with your parents.”
“They don’t expect to be entertained.” His keys rattled in the ignition.

“Sorry you have to go to work.”

He had planned on staying home the whole month, but our bank account faced unexpected demands. He had recently begun to work for Jerry Holmes at Gotech Electronics, drifting through the small office making copies and sales calls or filling boxes in the warehouse with small electronics. He didn’t complain, though such a job seemed beyond boring to me. He hoped to prove himself to Jerry, to earn a position in the company. I hoped but feared, unsure of Jerry’s intentions with Dima and desperate for security. Though the job had given us more flexibility than we’d have had if he was still bouncing odd job to the next, we weren’t given unearned breaks from the Holmeses this time.

“What do you mean they couldn’t borrow enough money for Grandma’s plane ticket?” He didn’t answer but continued subtracting from the thousand dollars we had saved for their visit. Half had gone to a car repair, the other half was Grandma’s. The mortgage was due, and there was nothing in the bank. When his pay-check came, it was one-hundred-eighty-two dollars. He had used up all his paid time off.

“I don’t know what he was thinking!” I raged on the phone to the accountant at Gotech. “He’ll be in on Monday.”

The book bag twisted around my wrist as I grabbed bottled water, peanut-butter bread, and my sunglasses, glancing Grandma’s enormous underwear sprawled over the kitchen chairs. Somewhere between laughter and disgust, I pressed hard on the gas pedal.
Tatyana and Grandma took to sipping Labatt Blue beer while chopping fish, chicken, and cabbage dishes. It wasn’t said until his mother had had a few beers: “What does Lea cook? You look thin, Dimka.”

After a quiet dinner, red dish cloth in hand, I’d face the kitchen bombed with grease and shavings of carrots and potatoes.

“So much for Thanksgiving dinner, huh?” I said. Dima’s eyes were glossed. Maybe it was the shot of Vodka, snuck from the freezer; the physical closeness of his family; the tension between our life and theirs. He was theirs. He was mine. I stared in his gray eyes.

“Look at the kitchen. There’s no way I can get in here and put together a turkey and stuffing and all that crap.” Besides, I didn’t know how to stuff a turkey, and it didn’t seem important to learn anymore. I leaned against the dark countertop before launching into scrubbing the refrigerator handle, stovetop, sink; before putting the clean dishes away from the dishwasher, scraping the crust from the newly dirtied and reloading. I shot a dirty look over Dima as he yawned.

“Russians know hospitality better than Americans,” he said to me on more than one occasion as the family lived with us. I came up short this time.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My voice was steel. Locked in a cage. He didn’t explain, but he didn’t have to. By the side door, a minimum of twelve shoes and slippers cluttered a quarter of the kitchen. Fish stained the counters, even after scrubbing
at six in the morning before the family awoke to catch my “quirky” cleanliness. Used tea
cups and tea bags, chunks of cheese, salami, and dark bread littered the kitchen table.
The bathroom became unusable, indescribably foreign. At one point, yellow liquid
pooled in the once Comet-scrubbed bathtub.

I may have been more malleable had I not been raised to dust the stair-rail and put
the milk away the second after pouring it over raisin bran. I couldn’t live in a pig-sty.
And they couldn’t live in a pharmacy.

The vacuum roared under the kitchen table and chairs. It was ten at night. The
parents and Grandma shuffled new bags into their bedrooms filled with “deals” from
another bout of shopping—a winter coat from Salvation Army, extra wide shoes for
Grandma’s swelling foot, a fake spider on clearance from last year’s Halloween—“I love
spiders!” Tatyana had said, crawling through the park days earlier. I stopped the
vacuum, nudging the cat away from my leg.

“Does your mother think I’m crazy?” He leaned over the kitchen table, arranging
tea cups.

“She said everyone has his or her quirks.” I stared at his back. “She’s asking you
to please not clean until they arrive back home once they leave.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“In Russia it’s bad omen to clean before guests arrive home. I know you won’t
believe this, but it’s for real.” The plane flight itself was twelve hours long. She was
asking me to wait days! My knuckles were a white cord on the vacuum’s metal handle.
I would clean the minute they stepped over the threshold. Why didn’t she think about this not being Russia?

It had only been three days since they arrived when the first drama occurred. Each time something was started, like making our son breakfast, looking for the keys, or gathering the laundry, it was soon interrupted. Viktor Jr. is cold. The “ventilator” is on his neck—it had been ninety plus degrees in our home. Or, Viktor is hiccupping. He’s coming down with cold.

I was collapsed at the table one evening just before the ordeal, when Dima’s father asked, “Leea, why drink sooo much water?” His face wrinkled with the question.

“It’s good to drink eight glasses a day,” I swallowed from the tall cup, later wondering if I averaged twelve.

“No. Bad for body when drink so much. Very difficult for organs.” Dima explained his father’s concern over my kidneys processing all that fluid, as he and his father sipped tea, cup six of the day.

Instead of rubbing his back, I wanted to pinch him, and hard enough to bruise his creamy flesh. Instead of relaxing beside the bonfire with his family, I wrote in my journal, worrying about my American inhospitality. Instead of accepting my status as mute, agreeable wife, I constantly harangued him for translations and sulked when these weren’t complete.

“What did you your family say about Susan’s party?”
“Nothing. My mom absolutely thinks you should go to class instead of the party.”

“It’s your citizenship party, though. I mean, Susan even said it was in yours and my honor, but that’s stupid. It’s your party, your parents’ even. It’s not mine, not really. Besides, it’s the first class of the semester.”

“I’m telling you, my mother agrees. You should go to school.”

“What exactly did she say, Dima?” He was gathering a tray with tea and crackers for his father and Grandma at the picnic table.

“I don’t know. Just go to class.”

“You piss me off. I swear. You’re my only way to know them, and you never tell me everything. How am I going to really know what they think?” He was silent. Tired eyes swept over me. He pushed the side door open with his elbow and left the kitchen. The sun was setting through the sagging dusk. Sighing deeply like a wounded animal, I grabbed my running shoes.

I darted around Silver Lake, freeing blood, fire, passion in a five mile frenzy of movement. Dream homes lined the lake, open and airy, clean and silver-knobbed. My body grew weightless, numb. There were moments I just wanted to be comfortable—for days at a time.

I cracked at my niece’s baptism. We arrived at Advent Lutheran Church at five. The air was sick with screaming humidity, and the church was without air conditioning. The young priest greeted us in a traditional black clergy shirt stuffed into khaki shorts...
and a multicolored scarf draping his neck. He shook our hands. I looked down at his sandals.

“Pastor Kovlash, Prevet!” he said. The family was silent, un-smiling, as though they hadn’t understood his Russian greeting, which had been mispronounced, but give the man a bone. It grew unbearably hot. Contemporary Christian music played in the sanctuary.

“Make yourselves at home. You can take Communion. We have ‘open’ Communion here,” Pastor Kovlash ushered us through the doors to the wide sanctuary of plain blond wood. Nobody crossed themselves, bowed, or lit a candle before worship—as was the custom in Orthodox churches. Blood boiled in my cheeks, neck, chest. I imagined how offensive all of this would seem to Orthodox believers.

The pastor turned to me. “This might be weird if they’re Orthodox.”

“Yeah,” my voice was flat.

“Saturday night is our contemporary service. It’s all very different Sunday morning.” The pastor’s voice softened.

At the front of the sanctuary, a handful of men and women were dressed in jeans and singing off-key. Two worship leaders slapped tambourines in front of a black statue frozen in a dance. There were no icons, no communal chalice, no incense. Instead, it might have appeared an audience and a band; an average man, far too comfortable, leading a congregation, much too at-ease. I pulled my eyes from the plain windows to the people slouching in the shiny pews. The family pressed together in the pew and passed the small plastic cups of grape juice down the row.

xxx
“The statue’s a demon,” Grandma whispered, vigilantly eying the thin black wave of metal she referred to. Tatyana and Viktor were perfectly quiet. Unbreakable.

I laughed inside. The Orthodox Church had many “statues:” icons, candles, a “show-case” of the church’s patron saint. How could they mind one lone symbol of celebration? What made their symbols anything more?

We filed into the church and the ceremony proceeded. Dima and I were sponsoring our niece. At the front of the shellacked sanctuary, my sister stood in a bright dress above the knees holding her child, asleep like a limp doll. Pastor placed an open prayer book in my hands. Dima was mute as I vowed to teach our niece of God.

Suddenly, Viktor shrieked in the middle of the ceremony. Tatyana rummaged through the diaper bag looking in vain for a bottle of water. Pastor Kovlash dipped his small hand into the baptismal font and sprinkled my niece’s delicate head. Water trickled down her forehead onto the dress with a small pink bow. She didn’t stir.

Tatyana muffled our son’s cries against her bosom, rustling the diaper bag and Grandma’s elbow from the sanctuary. Viktor and my mother followed them to the lobby. After our vows, Dima and I slipped from the sanctuary.

“Dima? Where’s the water bottle,” his mother asked.

I said, “I didn’t bring it. The doctor specifically told me to feed Viktor formula if he was thirsty or hungry. These sensations are the same for a baby, and he needs the vitamins in the formula.”

Grandma pushed her bottom lip even further out from the top and looked crippled with worry. Dima’s father drifted to the windows at the side of the lobby.
“The child is thirsty. He needs water.” Tatyana said.

“I won’t be told how to raise my son. I know what he needs. He’s thriving. I’ve handled it fine this far! Dima, just tell them, tell them what the doctor said.”


Dagger-eyes pierced me from all angles, pinning me to the wall—the neglectful American wife. Nothing could convince them. I walked away from the bench, Grandma and Tatyana crumpled mounds of concern. Dima’s father followed me. He put his arm around my shoulders, and I started to cry.

“I am Momma,” I sobbed. Do you understand? He chuckled. My mother and Dima followed us outside. Clouds were swollen and gray.

“Viktor is thirsty. Think about it. Are you thirsty? I don’t know why you’re acting like this.”

“It is not about the bottle, Dima. Are you listening to me? It’s about being told what to do—”

“No one’s telling you what to do. They don’t understand why the doctor would say that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t matter if they understand. It only matters that they don’t interfere like this when I decide something with our son!”

My mother said, “I understand how you both are looking at things, but listen to me. Your marriage has to be priority. You have to put each other first and work together. Lea, you need to calm down. Dima, your mother needs to back off a little bit.”

But the conversation ran on and on with no resolution, despite my mother’s best efforts.
Straight-faced, Dima stared at the cement as I studied him as though he wore the reason we were falling apart.

Viktor held our son and slowly paced. Us—door—us—door—us. He began to speak.

“Dad said that they are still trying to figure out why Viktor is always in Pampers. He shouldn’t have the plastic around his genitals so often or he might become infertile,” Dima nodded with his father. I was doomed. His family was impossible.

We drifted back into church as it began to rain. Grandma said, “I can tell with the way Lea is acting that when we leave America, we will consider each other enemies.” I was aghast. Weren’t family fights the first steps toward resolutions? This experience grew the seed of my greatest fear. The family would be inflexible, proudly Russian-grown.

Back in the minivan for the short ride to my sister’s, Viktor asked, “How old are you?” He craned his thick neck around the passenger seat. His eyes were kind, loving; he had no idea that he offended me again. To him, I was just a young girl, foolish and naïve. He could forgive a child. But maybe to Tatyana I was a threat, a woman with a mind and body wedged between her and her son and grandson.

Night was falling and clouds were moving in. The breezy dark sluiced the bright echo of day. Family clustered inside the home according to kind. There were my sister’s Jewish in-laws talking around the kitchen table, small women with graying hair in neat piles on their heads. My sister, Mom, and dark-lipped Aunt Vicki gathered in the kitchen munching from the veggie tray.
“You doing okay, honey?” my aunt asked. I met her blue-green stare and rolled my eyes. “Well, darling, this time too shall pass,” she laughed a deep-throat chuckle and pushed dark hair behind her ears, leaning a tall body over the tray for a carrot. Viktor Jr. and my sister’s little girl squealed in the living room as they circled the coffee table on familiar laps. Dima’s family was outside sitting by the pool under an old maple. Tatyana and Grandma were drinking Labatts, and Viktor sipped a glass of red wine. Dima and I flitted around the party, free.

Every face looked so appealing. Jerry Holmes had just returned from a trip to the Far East. He appeared on the patio wearing a baseball cap and Dockers, a belt just bellow his healthy belly.

“Mr. Holmes is here, Dima,” I called across the kitchen.

“Hey, Mr. Holmes. How are you?” He kissed my cheek and shook Dima’s hand, looking beyond him.

“Not bad, not bad. Quite a night. Man, we’re in for a storm.” He spoke to me.

“Yup. It’s needed, though. I can’t take this heat much longer.”

“How was the trip, Mr. Holmes?” Dima peered into Jerry’s beady eyes.

“Ah, pretty good. There’s a few aspects with purchasing I plan to change in the office—” I swigged the water, dropped the broccoli drenched in Ranch. I had to make a move. I wasn’t angry, numb instead, and wanted to hurry up and act before anger reminded me what to feel.

I walked, unsure what to do with my eyes, and reached the family. Arms about Tatyana’s full shoulders, I asked her pardon, “Ezveneetya.” And I was sorry for allowing
myself to break. I had no intentions of this disagreement ruining the rest of the month we would share. She hugged me back with strong arms—crushing arms.

Again, we loaded into the minivan, finally on our way home for the night. Though emotionally exhausted, a part of me liked the craziness of it all. Peace settled, like a good dose of endorphins after a long, hard run. I would run for the family, as long as everyone was working to blend Russia and America. And if not, I’d fly like a bat out of hell through the sultriest summer imaginable.

On the way home, Viktor began to wail as he often did his first year when exhausted. “Dima, stop the car. Deeeeem! He’s crying,” his father pressed. They were not used to Viktor’s red-faced shrieks, his little body writhing in the car seat.

“I have to pull over, Lea.”

“We just need to get home. There’s no point in stopping. He’ll cry again when we start.”

We stopped.

“Whatever,” I mumbled unbuckling our infant and jerking us from the minivan. At the side of the highway, tall grass tickled my sandled feet. Viktor fell asleep against the pounding of my heart.

“He’s sleeping,” I whispered gingerly strapping him into his car seat. Tatyana wouldn’t meet my eyes.

We spilled out of the minivan onto the broken driveway. “I’m putting him to sleep,” Dima mouthed, shuffling into the house. His family and I stood in the fresh night air, quiet until Dima rejoined us to translate stories of healing.

xxxv
“You should walk on the morning dew because it heals blisters. Dad was in the army and had to wear boots for entire days and nights. When his feet became so raw with blisters he could barely walk, someone told him about the cool morning dew. When he began doing this each morning, his feet healed.” Maybe it was just the time spent out of the boots? But I was quiet.

Grandma shared a story about her father, who had been an officer in the navy. I had heard of him before, how he was brave and strong. Dima had been afraid of him after dreaming his ghost was chasing him. When he told his mother and Grandma, they took him to his great-grandfather’s grave and said he was haunted because he hadn’t said goodbye. After the graveside visit, the spirit didn’t return.

Grandma told of her father when he was alive. He was a Communist (so an atheist), but he had been sick when a doctor told him to visit an Old Believer, an aged Russian woman said to have healing powers because of her faith in God. Because he was so ill, he was willing to try anything. So he went to an Old Believer who prayed over a dish of holy water and blessed him. She told him to place his arm into the water as she said another blessing over his arm. With this, a long skinny “hair-fish” emerged from his arm. He watched as the creature wiggled in the water. As she spoke, she drifted into the distance, slight tremors of emotion rippling her flesh.

“Orthodoxy will connect the dots, I really believe this,” Dima told me late one night rustling into bed, his father still downstairs slurping tea. I didn’t believe him. His
parents hadn’t gone to church until recently. They didn’t talk about God, or pray, or seem devout.

I flipped through the strange prayer books they brought and stared into the forlorn faces of icons in our “guest” room that had begun to feel like it would remain stained by Dima’s parents. I stashed the three silver crosses they had given us for “after our baptism” in a velvet-lined box with my hair pins. How in the world would this work? I curled into a fetal position desperate for nothing but sleep.

Living with the family would pass at the end of the summer when they returned to Russia. Yet our home would continue changing, growing, as we became family all over again.

Dima found a hummingbird’s nest shortly after Grandma and his parents had left. It had been safe, tucked in the hollow of a tree stump. He held the bits of powder blue shell in his palm. “Look. The beast next door got her.” I followed him out the flimsy side door of our kitchen. Airy tufts of nest sprinkled the earth behind our gray bungalow in late afternoon sun. A deep summer breeze swept through my hair.

I looked at the gnarled cherry tree couched in our shallow backyard. “She’ll just have to re-make the nest.”
I

FAMILY

“[S]tories are not memoirs but are life itself; they are the living source that gives you the strength to believe and to renew your ability to live . . . .”¹

¹ Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father, Vera Bouteneff, tr., (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 205.
2. Dima and his mother in Kolpino, Russia.
CHAPTER ONE

Pictures of Dima’s family’s past unfolded in my mind like a rose leaning to the side of a glass caught in afternoon light. In the quiet ease of imagination, memories brought them to life.

On a gray afternoon in Leningrad in 1976, people gathered by the Izhora River for the city’s outdoor dance. Seventeen-year-old Tatyana wore a red coat, a thick braid between her shoulder blades. At twenty-three, Viktor had just finished his time in the military. He pushed his shoulders back and, slightly pigeon-toed, ambled to the shapely girl across the dance square.

“Excuse me. My name is Viktor Povozaev.” He offered her his arm. “Would you kindly accept a dance?” Her dark eyes seared through the folk music and hazy day as though concentrating on something just beyond it all. She offered an unsmiling nod and carefully looped her arm through his.

Tatyana’s mother, Grandma, promised to never forgive her if she married Viktor. Tatyana had planned on continuing her education, becoming a chemist or biologist.

“I can’t change your mind. That is sure, Tonya. Your will is steel. But I won’t come to the wedding!” Viktor cocked his dark head to the side, listening as his lover and her mother carried on. His laughter was like marbles rolling through Grandma’s apartment.
He kissed Grandma’s cheek, “Forgive me—I beg you,” he said dramatically. It wasn’t long before she fell in love with Viktor just as her daughter had. Viktor and Tatyana were married that year with a reception at Grandma’s apartment afterward.

Dima’s parents lived in a typical Soviet apartment, concrete and old but made cozy with rugs and lived-in furniture. The apartment had one bathroom where Tatyana hand-washed their clothes in a black ceramic tub. The only bedroom was Dima’s, a cerulean sliver across from the entranceway. Skating ribbons lined his wall. Two cats curled behind trophies on the top of a wardrobe.

The indelible aroma of bread and sausage clung to pale flowers wallpapering the young family’s kitchen where they and their closest friends sipped tea and ate cabbage-stuffed dough, close enough to share in each other’s body heat. On holidays, his mother set a card-table in the living room with mix-matched china and lace linens. The living room also served as Viktor and Tatyana’s bedroom. They slept on a foldout couch below

3. Viktor and Tatyana.
a Persian rug with cranberry and ivory swirls. The home was small but not tight. Straightened but not cleaned. Welcoming but not open.

Dima was born in July of 1978. As a baby, he often stayed with Grandma. His mother worked at a factory in the city and Viktor drove a bus, sometimes traveling as long as two months to cover routes many hours south of Leningrad near Moscow. Grandma’s soul and body were a stubborn line of defense. I imagine her bowing before an icon in her dresser drawer, pinching forefinger and middle to thumb, deftly gathering her will. “Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal, have mercy on me,” she would say. She would sign the cross over Dimka, “Mother of God, protect him always,” as he scuttled from her soft yet iron-strong arms.

One time when Dima was four, he and Grandma took a typical excursion to the market by bus. Grandma distractedly handled tubs of cheese, as he snuck from the kiosk and sidled over to an elderly woman eating bread. “Excuse me, ma’am? Please, can you spare some bread for a hungry little boy?” his full lips pushed an innocent half-smile as he looked down.

“Why, you poor thing!” The woman’s fingers dug into the powdered crust as Grandma loped over and swooped Dimka into her wool arms.

“Excuse my grandson. Forgive him, please!” Plugging his mouth with a wad from her own new loaf, she shook her head back and forth. The other old woman’s cane made small circles in the snow as she walked from Grandma’s glowing face.

Grandma turned to him. “Dimka! How could you shame us like that?” He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “We have food, son. You have not been without bread.” She
crossed herself and glared down at him. But he looked near tears, and her anger melted. Suddenly, the entire situation struck her funny and laughter floated from her full body like snow flakes in the air.

While it was easier to see Grandma’s faith, Dima always thought his parents believed in God too, though religion and faith were never discussed. In Soviet times, religion was against the law. Though many people continued secretly worshipping, faith was quieted for seventy-three years (1919-1991). While Dima’s parents might not have practiced faith in secret rooms, they did secretly listen to the Beatles.

Western music was a threat—individualistic, unpatriotic—and forbidden by the Communist Party. “Hey Tatyana, turn the water on a little harder,” Viktor whispered, flushed with Vodka and excitement. After tip-toeing the tape player into the tiny apartment bathroom, his parents and another couple huddled around the Beatles, ears inches from the speakers.

“It’s not too loud?” Viktor stammered—tipsy but still nervous, always nervous.

“Move over, you big clown!” Tatyana laughed, nudging his full body closer against the bathtub and leaning into the music. He reached out and grabbed her thickening waist. She tripped over her girlfriend’s foot and fell into the tub under him. Their bodies shook with stifled laughter.

“Are you okay?” The girlfriend squeaked, shoulders bobbing. Viktor’s leg draped Tatyana’s shoulder, “imagine all the people living in the world” a feather-hum in the background. His parents had always found ways to laugh and celebrate, and in the years that would follow, joy despite loss would prove the necessary balm.
Dima stretched into a boy with skinny legs, a ball of a belly, and full cheeks. His gray eyes expressed emotions he never spoke. He began figure skating at four in the Kolpino Stadium, a government sponsored sports club with an Olympic-sized pool, full basketball and tennis courts, and gymnastics equipment. The city hosted annual sports competitions, filling the wooden bleachers with growling competitors—mostly parents.

Dima won first place in the city’s four year olds’ figure skating competition. And the next year, he carelessly threw a blue forth-place ribbon into his tote bag. His mother was quiet on the metro ride home, staring straight ahead at her round face reflecting in the black window.

“Dima, why didn’t you win first place?” she asked. They walked to their apartment, passing a small grocery with trash carelessly scattering in the cool breeze of an autumn night.

“I thought I’d let someone else have a turn,” he said, staring down at his black sports shoes and numbly stepping forward. He didn’t want to disappoint his mother, but the truth was, he didn’t care about figure skating, the way he didn’t care about school, or his mother’s chemistry texts from which she would sometimes try to explain the simplest components. But he didn’t ask his parents not to skate. There was something fun in the sport, something that made wearing tights worthwhile. He loved the ice, the feel of gliding through the world with speed and abandon.

He wouldn’t have to ask his parents to quit figure skating, a near tragedy turned his fate—the way life would continue moving him unexpectedly, even as he remained quiet.
Children played tag-on-ice at the end of a skating practice. He shifted his weight and lunged for a girl who had just tagged him. He tripped over her skate and fell to the ice, head to her heel. When she pushed off, her blade sliced his face. Hot blood pooled on the ice.

His mother’s face drained of color as the doctor explained, “The blade has just barely missed the eye. The boy is very, very lucky.” Viktor’s arm circled her full shoulders.

Later, his father would introduce hockey, easily winning against his mother’s fears, “Look what *your* figure skating lessons almost did—”

Dima was seven when Mikhail Gorbachev ushered in political openness (glasnost) and economic restructuring (perestroika). His parents had food stamps, but the markets were without food. Women stood hours with their children for green bananas and bread. The Soviet Union was swept with the need for fast economic development—for westernization—which communism had stinted. Russia became a culture of corruption as people grabbed what they could find.

Even though Dima’s parents were painfully aware of the danger, as young as seven, Dima stayed alone in the apartment while his parents worked. His father’s words frightened him. “Don’t open the door to anybody. Keep the door locked at all times, and stay in this apartment. You are to trust nobody.” Dima glanced around the living room, listened to the silence, and double checked the locks. Black and white cartoons kept his fears at bay. He hunched over a small tray of hot tea and buttered bread and cheese.
“God?” Silence. Eyes skid the room. “Please let another cartoon come on.” Bouncing across the screen was Noo Pogodi, an animated tale with a wolf chasing a rabbit, similar to Tom and Jerry. It ended too soon. On his knees inches from the thin dust on the T.V., he closed his eyes, “Pleeeeesee. Please give me another cartoon.” Children flung un-shaped bodies into a life-size Bible, The Magic Book. It was then he believed in miracles.

It was warm enough by April to run miles around the edge of the park just outside the apartment. “Look, Dima, if you want to play hockey you’ve got to train,” his father said.

4. Dima’s Kolpina hockey team.
“I’m tired today, Dad. Can I—”

“No. I’m leaving for work. Bring me lunch and don’t forget the rubber ball. If you forget, you’ll have to come back for it.”

Later, with a thermos of hot soup and black bread, Dima stood on the metro and walked the short way to his father’s bus station. Viktor sloshed tea in his mouth as Dima bounced the tennis ball against a wall. Squat—extend left leg, up-catch-ball. Squat—extend right leg, up-catch-ball. Legs burned, thighs turned gelatin. He silenced his complaints, pushed back his desire to play with his friends. But he wondered when his father would be leaving next for a bus route in Moscow. When was summer camp?

The government sponsored summer hockey camps in rural Russia where boys became brothers for two weeks of training. Camp was two days by bus from families and homes. At the end of Dima’s last summer camp in Russia, he was caught missing in action.

“Dima?” the coach bellowed. Twenty-five ten year olds lined like dominoes to the entrance of the cafeteria when he materialized at the edge of the woods with mud-caked shoes and hands. No one said a word through their lunch of apples, bread, and soup, but Dima knew the damage was done.

The train smelled metallic as the team was absorbed by army blankets, coarse against baby-soft faces. Coach filled Dima’s doorway, hockey stick in hand. “Do not fool around like that again, do you understand? Hockey must be your priority—always. Where were you?” Dima shrugged and looked down. Maybe he imagined himself a sniper, on the prowl for the enemy. He might have been waiting to see a squirrel, a
chipmunk—these animals weren’t in his small industrial town of Kolpino. He leaned over the bed in his sweatpants, grimacing as the hockey stick cracked his bottom.

Yet, I imagined he thought it had all been worth it. Dima was an explorer by nature. Better to have Coach upset with him than Dad.

After a time, I stopped contesting when Dima told me he got spinal meningitis from the open window on the bus ride home from hockey camp. Though it didn’t seem a likely medical reason, I finally learned the story was too set in his mind.

After a month in the hospital, his father sternly told him to stop complaining. “You almost died. We will work hard to get you in shape again. First, you must rest.”

He fell back against the pillow in the hospital room. After months of waiting, gray fluid cleared from his spinal cord, and within a year he was back on the ice. Ambition reached through him like tentacles. At first, he was weak and lost the position as starting goalie, but as he often told me, “I’m at the top of my game when the odds are against me. I love being the underdog; no one expects anything.”

In 1990, Mentor’s Youth Hockey Program invited Dima’s Russian team to the States for an international tournament minutes from my home. This seemed unreasonable on many levels. Though St. Petersburg had a more renowned team, Dima’s Kolpino team had been invited instead. The city of Mentor had a relatively small hockey program, yet hosted a team all the way from Russia. And though Dima played well in the tournament, he was small, not yet thirteen, the youngest on the team. Yet, in 1991, the
year President Boris Yeltsin officially dissolved communism, Dima turned thirteen in America.

Before he left for America, life at home seemed as it always had. He had lived the way children do, unaware that life would ever radically change. After a day of seventh grade at Kolpino’s city school, he threw his book bag on the couch. His mother said, “We need to shop. Grandma called. There’s meat at the kiosk today. You can get the bread while I buy the meat. We’ll go for the tomatoes together. Empty your school bag. Let’s go before the meat sells out.” They often split up, meeting at home with assigned goods. He followed his mother into the orange elevator where graffiti sprawled the walls. A plastic cup and a few paper bags were in the corner, and the acrid odor of urine permeated the small lift. Though Dima was used to these things, he enjoyed reading the vulgarities over and over. His mother’s dark eyes stared ahead.

Weeks before leaving, he held his mother’s hand in silence as they filed off the rickety train and walked to St. Isaac’s Cathedral in the center of St. Petersburg. Dima would remember it as the largest church in the city. It was one of the biggest domed buildings in the world. He felt tiny and inched closer against his mother’s wool jacket. Her face was statuesque as they entered the “museum.” She didn’t cross herself or wear a head covering, they were merely visiting a museum. After all, worship was a crime, so why had she brought him? To impress him with Russian culture, history—the peoples’ unquenchable faith? Or, was it just another place to go like the Summer Palace or their apartment or the sports complex, a place available and open, welcoming them from the cold?
“Dima, this church took forty years to construct,” she said. He felt her awe.

“And was open from 1818 to 1858.” She roamed her eyes over the elaborate icons at the front of the church. He watched her, frozen in concentration. They stood before an icon of the Mother of God as other woman and children quietly milled about them. It may have been here that Tatyana prayed her son out of Russia—aching prayers, unfurling from a deep place in a mother who has learned to love her son more than her own life.

They had five years before Dima would be drafted to the army, which was a breeding ground for demoralizing the very soul of a mother’s son. Tatyana would sell their apartment, bribe the military, go hungry. She would find a way out.
CHAPTER TWO

Dima and his parents slept at the airport the night before leaving St. Petersburg, Russia for Cleveland, Ohio. After seventeen hours coursing through the sky and into a time zone eight hours behind his parents’, he was called to customs at New York’s JFK Airport. An officer rattled through English as Dima shook his head, “uh-huh, uh-huh,” clueless.

He shuffled through the terminal, duffle bag filled with all he owned: three pairs of socks, underwear, and tee-shirts; one pair of jeans and sweatpants, hockey pads and a stick. Underwear was worn a couple days before changing, and socks could withstand

1. The Holmeses’.
nearly a week’s use before his mother had to wash them. Crusted in dried sweat from the
practice the day before, he’d shake them limber and put them on.

He had five hours before the flight to Cleveland, but time had ceased to exist for him—on the plane, off the plane, on the shuttle, off the shuttle. It was all the same. He
would be in America for a whole year!

Just over five feet tall in warm-up pants and a Kolpino hockey tee-shirt, he
seemed already a nondescript part of Cleveland’s airport. He watched closely as a maze
of burgers and french-fries, soft cookies and pretzels, revealed to him a delicious
America.

“Jerry Holmes,” said the short man, wire-rimmed glasses perched on a smooth
face. He stood straight, back nearly arching back, and extended his hand. His words
were blank sounds rushing past Dima’s ears. He followed Jerry in silence to a blue
Mercedes, choking on the thought that he might ride inside of this. He had never been in
a new car and had only ridden in a car at all a few times back home, always in the
backseat. He opened the car door, but Jerry shook his head and motioned with stocky
hand to sit upfront. Two days ago, Dima had bragged about chewing bubble gum to his
friends, he couldn’t believe this was happening to him. He thought of all he already had
to tell.

After a quick half hour coasting through Cleveland and into suburban Willoughby
Hills, they rolled up to a brick mailbox at the bottom of a winding driveway that
mimicked the enormous red-brick home at the top of the hill. The car climbed the steep
drive, glided under a canopy of autumn leaves partially illumined by the glow of the lit
driveway. A stairwell led to ridged pillars guarding a carved white door. Jerry curled around an island of ivy, Lily of the Valley, and ferns and into the garage underneath the castle. There was a basketball hoop on what looked like an extra garage just behind the house. Mr. Holmes backed the Mercedes next to Susan’s maroon one, and he and Dima walked into the house through the basement door.

Dima thought they were remodeling. Starched cloths and various ceramics, ornaments, and glass figurines spanned the basement. A round, middle aged woman, gray braid over her shoulder, looked up from her novel. She uncrossed bare ankles stretched out to the end of the couch.

“Oh. Hi Jerry.”

“Where’s Sue? And what’s all this crap still doing here?” Susan’s sister, Caroline, lived and breathed her antique shop. She lived in her parents’ old bungalow, but had long ago outgrown it. During the seasons Jerry was traveling the Far East, she camped out in his basement. Susan knew this drove Jerry crazy, and it seemed to make her mad as well. But Caroline always stayed. Time and again Jerry argued her belongings out of his house, but somehow Aunt Caroline always found a way back to the basement, back to a seat around the dining room table at holiday meals, back to a distance violating relationship with Jerry.

She and Susan were lovers of many things. They fought for the weak, for the silent. They shunned the neighbor when he cut down the pine trees dividing their property. They petitioned to save the old neighborhood bridge as the city tore it down. They salvaged stray cats, nursed crippled birds.
When Dima and I began dating, my family was invited for holiday meals at the Holmeses’. Once, Aunt Caroline asked my father, “What have geese ever done to anybody? They are kinder than human beings!” Typically, my father honked his horn and cursed the beasts as they sauntered across the street. Dad smiled and nodded, chuckling at Caroline the way more “normal” people often did.

But when Dima first arrived at the Holmeses’, their lives had been as unknown to him as the country in which he would spend the rest of his years. He thought they might be sleeping downstairs with the many cloths strewing the basement, which was larger than his parents’ apartment. He followed Mr. Holmes upstairs.

Jerry gestured around the kitchen, “Are you hungry?” he spoke slowly. Dima shook his head, and they walked past a bathroom into the front vestibule. To the side, a grand piano shelved two boys’ pictures, just a few years younger than him. They mounted steps to a hallway of bedrooms—Jerry’s and Susan’s to the right, Jason’s, Jeremy’s, and now Dima’s on the left of the stairwell. He hauled his bag over the bare wood floor and glided his palm over English books stacked on a dresser. He looked in empty drawers, breathed the woody scent of the empty closet, and eventually pulled back the covers for his first night at the Holmeses’.

I would often ask, “Don’t you remember what it was like when you first came? Can’t you remember what they did, what you thought?”
“I have no idea. It’s a blur. You have to understand, I couldn’t speak English and everything was so different. I mean, it was like another world. There was so much to do. It was sweet—until I got in trouble.”

I imagine the beginning.

His first morning in the States would have been momentous for the Holmes family—they never missed a reason to celebrate. Mr. Holmes’ pancakes sizzled in the iron pan; Mrs. Holmes peeled grapefruit into a pale bowl. News rattled from the T.V. behind the counter.

The older boy, Jason, was talking fast, intense eyes on Dima. “Hey! How do you like it here? Is this different from Russia? Do you want to play hockey after school—we can buy some ice time.” Dima was silent and still, spreading homemade elderberry jam over pancakes.

“Jeremy, get up! Time to go to school,” Jerry called, only once this morning. Jeremy sauntered into the kitchen with a gentle smile, blond hair everywhere.

“Hi Dima,” he said shyly.

“Morning Jeremy,” Susan said, moving through the kitchen with cool black coffee. Jerry left the pancake batter and greasy spatula on the stove and leaned against the counter.

“Watch this!” Jerry said, demonstrating a card trick. Dima followed the cards slipping easily from Jerry’s short fingers and issued a tight smile. Mr. Holmes collected the cards and placed them in his windbreaker to take to Gotech Electronics.
“Sue, I’ll meet you at Imperial Dragon with the boys at seven-thirty. I’m heading to the office. Let’s do before the trip to Hong Kong.”

“Why do you need to leave right now? It’s still early. Can’t you wait until the boys leave for school?” The boys switched the news to a cartoon, their father creaking down the basement steps.

Dima spent the Holmeses’ private eighth grade education studying Game Boy in the back of class. He had been issued a student visa, and the plan was for one year in the States. When he returned to Russia at the end of the year, his education in the States wouldn’t count. He realized the need to know English once he had to understand what all the laughing was about.

“Look at the Russian goalie! Hey, man, can you play?” He didn’t understand the words, but there was something in the kid’s tone that stiffened his grip on the hockey stick. He slid his blades back and forth, back and forth, giving the smooth ice behind the net traction. Before he was done warming up, the small blond boy with an endless mouth shot the puck, slamming it into the side of the goalie box. The ring echoed through the white and blue ice arena.

“Shto ti delayesh?” Dima asked what the kid was doing. In Russia, the team respected the goalie the same way younger players honored their older peers. As more players began shooting on him before he was ready, he quickly threw his body into motion. Slam! The puck met his chest protector, thigh pad, skate; it rang off the metal cage of the goalie box; it was stopped cold, hard.
In the locker room after practice, the blond boy, Mike, swaggered over to Dima. “Hey, dude, you can really play hockey! How do you like it here?” The boy stood before him in leg pads and skates, sweaty shirt balled in his fist. Though Mike was a small boy, he appeared taller in his skates. Dima shook his head with a mix of irritation and embarrassment. He wondered what Mike was saying. Dima continued dressing in his new team warm-ups. Mike melted into the chaos of boys, neither of them knowing they would become close friends in those first years.

During hockey season, the team traveled every weekend for eight months, played two to three local games during the week, and practiced each morning before school. Dima’s American peers seemed nice, even helpful. When he asked how to say “pass the pizza,” someone would slowly pronounce: “Go screw yourself.” So he would try to pronounce these foreign sounding words and say things like, “Pound salt lady.”

Before coming to the States, he had never been out to eat. In the beginning, it was awkward when the server approached. He got his burger and french-fry order down, and, with little exception, this remained his selection. These foods weren’t unlike the fried potatoes his mother made at home or the catletta, beef patties, fried with butter and onions, that he had often eaten. The buns in the States, warm and chewy, were sweeter than the dark bread he was used to. McDonald’s easily became his favorite restaurant—on account of its best burgers and no servers.

The team was at McDonald’s after a game. “Hey, Dima! Do you know what ‘fry’ means?” Jason jeered. Dima continued doodling his fry in ketchup. But anger swelled. He was older. He had done nothing disrespectful to the kid. He was tired of
Jason’s relentless mouth, and everyone else’s who he assumed had been making fun of him.

He threw the salty fry onto the wrapper and lunged for Jason who was still laughing like a joker. Dima squeezed his hands into tight balls and swung a fist into Jason’s glasses. As his son fell from the chair crying, glasses crooked, Mr. Holmes’ red face seemed to appear from the air. He grabbed Dima’s shirt and gathered him against the wall. As he stared at his new Converse shoes, stern words gliding over him, Dima understood he had crossed an invisible line.

The team and parents went out to eat what must have seemed constantly to a boy from a family that never had. On Fridays, thirty people would go to Lucio’s for pizza and iceberg lettuce under a blanket of mozzarella. Big Boy’s was the favored destination while traveling; they had the best burgers. The Holmeses took the team to a Samurai restaurant where Asian chefs flipped shrimp in the air and caught them in a sizzling skillet—red peppers, scallops, and mushrooms hissing. Sodas came with little umbrellas and American and Canadian flags, which Dima collected for his new baseball cap.

Going out to eat became familiar, in ways the Holmes family wouldn’t. Even after eleven years, the ways of a family as dynamic as theirs would be difficult for a host-child to understand. Many times, the lifestyle the Holmeses provided for Dima was so exciting he hardly had time or attention for anything other than the sheer fun of it. As he grew, learning English and when to be quiet and still—no matter who might be laughing at him—the Holmeses must have been satisfied in all they could do for him. They must have been intrigued to see their own world through the eyes of a boy such as Dima.
* 

Life seemed beyond description that first year. He could eat anything he wanted and was even forced to eat broccoli, spinach, squash—there seemed a limitless source of food. He could play videogames for hours. And his father was 8,000 miles across the world with no way to hound him. When he concentrated on the way things had been, forgetting for a time where he was and all that replaced the old, he could nearly hear his father. “Come on, you can run two miles in less than thirteen minutes. Squat lower, you’ve got to build up your skinny legs, son.” Though he hadn’t known it, his father was missing him to the point of physical pain. He’d stop in Kolpino’s Sports Complex, other fathers and sons engaged in drills, and blink away tears.

While things went from one ripe banana to the next (bananas were second only to burgers), there were times he was homesick. Sometimes he wished to hear his father’s words, remembering when these had been more balm than rankling: “It doesn’t matter if you let one in, roll it in your mustache.”

“I miss you,” he cried to his mother on the phone in the Holmeses’ den room, huddled against the liquor cabinet.

“This is no time for tears; there’s nothing to cry about. You must work hard, and make us proud. You are not a child—you have to grow up now.” His mother’s voice was sharp, belying the tears that wet her pillow many nights. We had an answer to our prayers, she dared not say.

At the end of the first year, perhaps his parents called to ask if Jerry and Susan would keep Dima for another year. It might sound odd, but the decision was never
explained. As a child, Dima hadn’t thought too long or too hard about it. It was simply the way things happened. Even grown, he often believed that there was little need to figure it out.

After Dima had lived at the Holmeses’ eight years, I was over for steak and asparagus and, of course, Jerry’s travel stories. He spoke of his trip to St. Petersburg and meeting Dima’s parents the first year he was in the States. When he spoke of Russia, his eyes narrowed, voice lowered. The underlying praise that bulged with tales of Hong Kong seemed dampened. His excitement seemed edged with trepidation.

“I had to urinate in a Coke bottle! What else could I do? I was stuck on the train! The bodyguards had cautioned me not to leave my room until the train stopped in St. Petersburg and they came for me. I could have been pick-pocketed, or worse.” A nervous smile played on my face.

2. The Holmeses, left to right: Jerry, Susan, Aunt Caroline, Jason, Dima, author, Jeremy.
“No, I’m serious,” he said. I shook my head in agreement. “Oh, this is really amazing, listen to this. I was in the city late one night after dinner, making my way back to the hotel. There were some men huddled behind a car. It was dark. I couldn’t make out exactly what was going on. But I swear it looked like they were loading a body bag into the trunk!” My eyes popped.

“Are you kidding?” I asked.

“Oh no. No. I tell you what. I’m in no hurry to go back to Russia.” He speared his asparagus.

Though Dima had grown tall, almost six feet, his face was still, as always, childlike. In eighth and ninth grade, shyness kept his eyes down and his fly up. Though older sisters of hockey friends often flirted with him, commenting he had “sexy feet” or

3. Dima in high school.
that he would be cute when he grew up, his soft voice and steady hands were still—for a time.

Dima attended four different schools from eighth to eleventh grade, moving around for hockey or on account of the Holmeses’ decisions, which often went unexplained. In any case, there was plenty of room to breeze through serendipitous relationships and gain experience for the next. Yet given the chance, he might have stayed with his first girlfriend. She lived down the street and attended the same middle school. They spent lazy afternoons shooting pool, talking about school, watching movies. After eight months, she ended their relationship. He later assumed he was too gentle, too shy, too good.

By tenth grade, hormones must have encouraged him to meet girls’ eyes with his honest gray study. Something seemed to happen, nearly out of his hands, when he was near the opposite sex, and often he was caught in action. Mr. Holmes might have thought he was on his way to parenthood or HIV.

By tenth grade, Dima attended St. Ed’s High School and played for the best hockey team in the Ohio. During a tournament in Toledo just before Thanksgiving, the team found a room of girls at the hotel. The girls had been drinking, and the boys helped them finish their beers. Dima among the generous gentlemen. The expected happened. Later, a girl later accused Dima of “unwanted touching,” the term offered by the police officer.

The Holmeses took him for an HIV test, which returned negative, and eyed his every quiet move. Dima continued to feel differently than other children who routinely
tested their parents. After all, the Holmeses weren’t his mother and father. He was always conscious that they didn’t have to keep him. Though they never acted as though they would not, they didn’t tell him what they thought or felt about his living with them. After being accused of “unwanted touching,” Dima no longer felt any freedom to wrestle with his guardians’ rules or requests. He did what was asked. And snuck what he felt had to be his.

“Jason, Dima? The leaf blowers are in the shed. Take care of the leaves before you play basketball!” Susan called through the family room window above them.

“Ah, dude. I don’t feel like it,” Jason complained, pushing his eyeglasses up his nose and kicking a bunch of leaves that scattered in the gray day.

“Let’s just do it and get it over with, man,” Dima mumbled. He pulled the blowers from the shed and strapped one over his back. After a bit, Jason yawned, slid the blower off, and snuck into the playroom through the sliding glass door. Dima finished blowing the leaves from the mountainous driveway. He thought people in the States didn’t have any concept of team, and he missed his old friends from Russia.

Later, Mr. Holmes poked his head in the playroom and said to Jason, “The driveway looks nice.”

“Thanks, Dad, it took forever!”

*  
The line between work and home continued to blur when the Holmeses’ hosted Tammy, the eleven-year-old daughter of Jerry’s business partner from Taiwan. Dima’s
room was offered to her, and he stayed in a sequestered room on the other side of the house where Susan kept her sewing.

Susan paused by the sliding glass door. “Dima, Tammy is in her room reading. Make sure you check in on her if she stays in there past six.” The handcrafted clock read five past five. Though the end of November, the breeze through the windows felt like early autumn. He moved his back against the pillow on his daybed and glanced at the T.V. The house seemed still. The Nintendo game was paused, and a repetitious melody played in the background.

“No problem, Mrs. Holmes.” The black cordless was between his legs, safely awaiting his girlfriend Jaycee’s call.

“I’m taking Jason to hockey practice, and Jerry’s leaving shortly for the Cavalier’s game. I have my cell. Call me if there’s any problem, or if you need anything.” The garage door rattled closed. Calm settled over him just as the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“It’s me. Is it safe to come?”

“Hey, Jaycee. Yeah. Head on over. Come through the back door of my room.” They hadn’t always dealt with one another in a covert operational manner, but they both knew tonight was rule-breaking. His eyes fell to the clock: 6:15. There was plenty of time. He leaned back into the couch, stretched, and rolled his neck. He stood up and closed the sliding glass door that separated his room from the balcony over the pool. He drifted into the bathroom and washed his face with cool water. He brushed his teeth,
wiped his mouth on the lime green towel, and pulled a baseball cap over his chin-length hair, returning to the couch.

Jaycee slipped in, quietly closing the screen door. She snuck up behind him and kissed his neck. The controller fell, “You scared me,” Dima said. She laughed, sitting next to him in a black shirt cropped just above the top of her jean cut-offs. Her dark hair was pulled back in a loose braid, and she didn’t wear make-up. A sweet natural smell drew him. He took her hand in his.

“How was your day? Did you see Jason’s game?” she asked.

“Nah. Remember, I’m babysitting.” He smiled. She laughed, turning her body to his on the daybed. He turned the game off. “Want to watch a movie?” He hoped she didn’t think he had only wanted her to come over to fool around. That was only part of it. He really liked her, liked the way she laughed, the way she looked at him. She made him feel secure. They watched a *Rocky* movie just to pass time. He held her against him, inhaling the scent of peaches on her damp hair.

A plum sky fed the dark room as movie credits rolled. She stood. He desperately hoped she wasn’t leaving. She turned to the open back door, “Do you mind if I close this? It’s getting cold.” He turned off the TV and rose from the bed. She slid her slender arms around his back, delicate fingers crawled through his hair. “I love your hair,” she whispered in a husky voice. He kissed her neck, chin, lips. He felt passion pull down his guard as she led him onto the daybed.

He should check on Tammy. He tried not to worry about it, about anything. He was naked with Jaycee. But a nervous, uncomfortable sensation slighted his intensity.
What time was it anyway? When had Mrs. Holmes said she’d be home? The questions started, and he knew they weren’t going to stop. He returned Jaycee’s kisses, but he was ready to get dressed.

She wrapped her legs around him and flipped him to his back. Suddenly he was lost in passion once again, nothing but her mattered. She kissed his neck, and he rubbed her warm back. Her hands melted into his, their fingers lacing. He whispered Russian in her ear, “Ti craseevya,” and she giggled. The world fell away.

A screech and sharp light pierced the darkness as Mr. Holmes stepped through the sliding glass door. “Oh, come on you guys!” He closed the door, stepped back into the hallway.

She flew up from the bed, “I’m so embarrassed! I’m so mortified!” She grabbed at her shorts with shaking hands and dressed. “Good luck, Dima. Sorry.” She fled through the back door.

He sat on the bed, head in his hands. “How could I have been so stupid? What was I thinking?” He didn’t know what to do, didn’t know what Mr. Holmes would say. He could only imagine what he might think.

He put his shirt on and stepped into the balcony, nearly running into Mr. Holmes. “It isn’t what it looks like. We weren’t doing it.” Mr. Holmes held up his hand and turned his head.

“I know exactly what you were doing and it certainly wasn’t babysitting Tammy.” He contained the fury in his tone. “Where’s the cordless? I need to make a call.”
Desperation shot through Dima like fire. He wanted to talk, but Mr. Holmes refused him another word and took the phone to the kitchen.

He slumped onto his bed. “What was I thinking?”

A week later, Jerry told him he had until school was out in June to find another host family. Otherwise, he would have to make arrangements and return home. Anger had left Mr. Holmes’ tone, and what had replaced it was a resignation that frightened Dima more than anything had since he arrived in America. He had crossed a clearly drawn line, and this time he had known it when he chose to. He knew there was no one to blame, nothing worth saying. He would never redeem himself.

There were times his heart burned. He would never tell his parents. They’d kill him. His mother’s sharp words drifted through him: “This is not the time for tears. An opportunity like this won’t come again.” He knew. He wouldn’t leave the States without a fight—regret would crush him.

He doubted the possibility of a second chance with the Holmeses. Jerry avoided him, and when they happened to pass in the hall, shame washed through Dima. He avoided the living room when Jerry was there, longing for their once simple banter on the Cavaliers or the Red Wings.

If anybody might keep him, it would be Mike’s father. After all, they had been friends the longest. After explaining, Mike said, “Boy. That sucks, dude. I’ll ask my Pops and call you back.” He sat by the phone, staring blankly at a Cheech and Chong movie.
“D., you know I love you, and so does my Pops. But I don’t think it’s going to work.” Mike’s family, like the others Dima would call, was busy traversing rocky roads of their own. Ultimately, he ran out of people he could even consider.

Mrs. Holmes and Aunt Caroline had promised him they were working on Jerry. “When do you want to go to the store for your new hockey pads? You’ll need them before next season,” Susan looked up from the lower oven, roast wafting through the kitchen. Caroline plodded up the basement stairs.

“Hi, Dima. I was hoping you could help me load my van? The antique show in Burton is next week, and I have more stuff than I can possibly manage on my own,” she said. He followed her to the basement and loaded baskets, chairs, and lace cloths as quiet as glass.

She thanked him, and he turned for the garage with a fragile smile. Her hand brushed his arm and lingered there.

“You okay?” she asked. He shook his head. “You aren’t going anywhere—so don’t worry about anything.”

He wondered where he should go first. It was a hot afternoon in late May as he stuffed the U.S.A. hockey bag with underwear, socks, two pairs of khaki shorts, and tee-shirts. He knew it was silly to bother packing his old hockey pads, but he laid them over his boxers and zipped the bag anyway. He hoisted the black strap around his shoulder and ran his palm over his forehead. The room was bright with afternoon as he reached
for the backdoor. He paused. He couldn’t leave without a note for Mrs. Holmes and Aunt Caroline. He set his bag down, pulled back the curtain to the sliding glass door.

Mr. Holmes was walking toward him and met his eyes with a weary glance. He spoke to him for the first time in months.

“Ah, hello Mr. Holmes.”

“So, you need hockey pads for next season?”

“I—I do. Mine are shot.”

“Tell you what. Why don’t we split the cost? I’ll take it out of your pay this summer when you work for me in the warehouse.” Dima couldn’t speak. He wasn’t sure he was hearing Mr. Holmes right. He stared at a spot on the carpet and bit his lip, mumbling okay.

“Agreed upon, then.” Mr. Holmes delivered a firm handshake and turned and walked away. Dima exhaled slowly, deeply, what had seemed to him everything left in his soul.
CHAPTER THREE

In high school I started to sense my grandmother near me like an invisible drift diffusing through the air. I stared into the stillness, “Are you there?” afraid to say her name, a picture of her high cheekbones and narrow hazel eyes appearing in my mind. She had died before I was two, but her image seemed more real than photographs and my mother’s likeness to her. It didn’t matter that I’d not talked with her, remembered her warm embrace or gentle gaze, her eyes felt familiarly on me in the quiet pause of afternoon. What did she see in the school books scattering my single bed, the bowl of

1. Author and sister.
Doritos in my lap, in the lazy discontent of my teenaged self? I was embarrassed in her presence.

My parents and sister and I were in the living room watching T.V. Voices brushed the air, “Lea, Lea, Lea,” like wings fanning a mystery.

“Did you hear that, Melanie?” She narrowed her green-yellow eyes, the same color as mine, and told me no.

“Why, what do you hear?” she asked, looking at me as though willing me to convince her of the mystery.

“Stop imagining things and watch the movie,” my father said, turning the volume up on the Lifetime special.

One night, a little man with dark hair and a red flannel floated from the stairs into my parents’ bedroom. “Dad! Mom? I saw something!” My heart pounded. I had never seen a ghost before.

“Lea, just go to sleep. You’re fine. No one’s here. We looked all around the house,” my mother promised. She smoothed my hair. I tried to sleep, but continued seeing outlines of witches sneering between the wallpapered ducks on the border galloping around my bedroom.

The more my parents dismissed my ethereal musings, the more I cleaved to their realness. Even then, I had been willing to admit the possibility that I wasn’t certain about things—about ghosts, or about bodies clutching the edge of a ravine. One fall afternoon my father maneuvered the minivan through winding back roads on the way home from church when I thought, maybe, “I saw an arm!”
“What are you talking about, Lea?” my father asked.

“I’m not kidding! There was an arm—I think someone was hanging onto the bank above the ravine!” I wasn’t positive. I would have admitted this had anyone asked. But with my father’s unbelief, I insisted an arm, with a hand, nails clawing into the earth, was mere feet away from us. Though my father continued to insist nothing was there, he turned the minivan around. We scanned the bank of colored leaves from the windows.

“Well, he must have already fallen,” I said in defense of my parents’ mutual head-shaking. Melanie nudged me, asked what I thought might have been there. I grabbed the V.C. Andrews novel and mumbled my usual, “Leave me alone.”

It was almost twenty years later as my mother and I chatted at her and my father’s small kitchen table. We laughed at my childish drama. “What did you and Dad think?” I asked.

“We didn’t want to encourage you. At first we didn’t believe you, but—” she set a mug of coffee before me—“the attic door in our closet ceiling was open after you saw the ‘little man.’”

“Are you kidding?”

“No,” she laughed. But goose bumps crawled up the backs of my arms. I knew I’d be afraid to sleep on their couch downstairs, alone, as I sometimes would when Dima and I stayed the night. Sharing my sister’s old bedroom with him and our son made me feel claustrophobic. It was too hot, Viktor was too loud rustling in the small port-a-crib, and Dima’s long legs were like tentacles snarling me.
“It was probably from Dad’s fishing rods—”

“Are you sure, Mom? Don’t you think maybe I was right?” She sipped the coffee and shrugged her shoulders, the firm knob of her shoulder bone visible through her cotton top. The usual middle-age pounds had not escaped my mother. She was no longer long and thin as she’d been, but her body was firm and healthy. She and my sister resembled one another. I was of my father’s likeness, smaller and darker than my blond sister and mother.

I turned to the sliding glass door, wondering how my mother’s never had streaks or little fingerprints, even though she routinely had grandbabies pawing through the home. My father was chuckling, shaking his oval head and leaning down to knee-high Viktor who had a ball of mulch clenched in his fleshy hands. I smiled, grateful for my parents in ways I hadn’t been as a child. Still, I was relieved to be grown, and to be living an hour from Dad’s obsessively Tiledxed shower. I had learned to bend and avoid the fights that used to come like breathing, but I was thankful to make a mess in my own computer room with no one but myself to answer to. When I borrowed time in my father’s, I tried to keep it as he had left it—stacks of fish orders neatly held under an old magnifying glass, a dusty dictionary, a chewed nub of pencil in a Popsicle-stick art project. Even still, when Dima and I returned for weekend visits and I plopped my book bag in my old room—turned my father’s E-bay headquarters where he sold two-hundred dollar Rainbow Trout—the mark of irritation pulled down the edges of my father’s lips.

“I’m not going to print anything, Dad,” I’d promise. He’d act incredulous, say he didn’t care. I understood, he couldn’t help but be the way he and my mother had always
been. He tried, though, especially in the years that followed. Perimeters slackened: dinners that had once been at five o’clock sharp and eaten all together, were served anytime through the night and whenever someone new arrived hungry (or a child woke from a nap). Bath-times slipped into sloppy playtimes with rubber toys and bubble-bath. Holidays became broken hours scattered among an ever-increasing web of family.

I looked back to my mother, wondering if maybe the little man still lived in their attic. “Maybe as adults we close our minds to the spiritual world. I mean, there’s enough to handle in the real world.”

Viktor’s hands and face were dusted in dirt as he came running into the kitchen ahead of Dima. “What happened? He’s a mess,” I said. Dima picked him up and leaned over the sink, planting his enormous hiking shoes caked with spring mud on my mother’s rug. “Look at your shoes! I’m sorry, Mom.” She was already up and wiping the floor.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s no big deal.” This was a different mother than the one who hadn’t let me bake cookies a few years back because the flour would dust the entire kitchen.

“Sorry, Diane. I can clean it up—” he reached for the rag.

“Oh no, that’s okay. I got it.” Dima’s legs stretched long and lean from khaki cut-offs. Black socks, honey?

“You still want to?” he whispered in my ear. Viktor was staying with my mother for the night. I laughed and nudged him away. My mother sipped her coffee, silently asking if our mother daughter time had expired.
“Hey, baby, can you take Viktor around the block? I just want to talk a little longer with Mom.” He folded our child in his long arms, Viktor’s large eyes and broad face reflecting his father’s. Dima’s eyes met mine with a tired glimmer.

Mom and I settled against the hardwood chairs. I didn’t want the moment to be over, to divert to babies, school, husbands, or how-long-before-we-retire conversation.

“I really think if we believe in the spirit world we can see it. Did you ever see your mother after she died?” I asked.

“Well, I definitely believed she was in heaven from the very beginning,” her eyes misted. No matter how many years passed, my mother continued to weep when she talked about her mother. “I don’t remember a lot of the details—it was a very stressful time. You were only six months, and I was pregnant with Melanie.” I had heard this before, but I was determined to probe deeper.

“Were you there when she died?” I asked.

“The day she died, your Dad and me and you were at the nursing home for hours. We left for home with my Dad. Just when we were sitting down to pork chops, the phone rang. It was the hospital—” she sniffled. “Mom had died,” she said softly. “She was cremated. At the memorial service, there were over two-hundred people. Everyone who knew Mom loved her—friends from church, the family, the neighborhood.”

I didn’t doubt it. My mother was from a family of people who would have garage sales on summer afternoons as an excuse to visit with the neighbors. Some of Mom’s family was involved with church, some with cards, but they all loved people in an open, easy way that didn’t seem to come naturally for my father’s side of the family.
“You never doubted where she was?” I asked, wondering how she could have been so certain.

“Right after she died, I was numb. It wasn’t until a couple weeks afterward that I was so sad I was panicked. I worried your sister would have emotional problems when she was born,” she paused. Melanie was the most even tempered of us all. “Anyway, I called a good friend of Mom’s who told me she believed she was in heaven. She assured me of Mom’s faith in Jesus.”

“Do you remember what you thought about all that at the time?”

“I don’t think I knew what to think. You want more coffee?”

“Sure.” I downed the last tepid swallow.

“I remember when Mom was sick. Her church friends really upset me. You were tiny at the time, just a few months old. We were over Mom’s and they were ‘praying her well.’ I was trying to get you to sleep, but you kept screaming. Mom’s friends were holding hands and praying, and praying and praying. They wouldn’t stop, so I had to just leave the group and get you.” She shook her head, the crease between her eyes deepening. “They ended up telling Mom she wasn’t getting healed because she was around too much ‘unbelief.’

“I was so hurt. That was when Mom started to really get into church. But after Mom had died—your sister was almost due, and I was worried sick about money and not having my mother—I sobbed myself to sleep. I begged God for help.” She poured the coffee into my mug, passing the cream.

“I thought you didn’t believe—”
“Honey, I always believed in God. I always prayed, it was just different. I just hadn’t thought church was that big of a deal. Praying had been something done before bed and sometimes before holiday meals. But then, with Mom sick and everything we had gone through with you—well my praying became constant pleading with God.”

“Did you and Dad pray together?”

“No, we didn’t pray together. It was different then, you know. I’m sure he was pleading with God on his own.” I wondered what made her assume my father’s faith. Maybe it was natural to assume the deep recesses of another’s spirit were like a person’s own.

“I hoped God was real—” She looked past me, lost in a past I could never fully know. She refocused on me. “That night, I dreamt the family was on a walk after dinner. We were laughing and talking, the way we always did. But Mom fell behind us kids and Dad, and she seemed upset.

“‘What’s the matter, Mom? Aren’t you glad to see us? We’ve missed you so much,’ I said to her.

“‘Oh, honey. I love you. I love all of you. It’s just—’” my mother wiped her face with the back of her pink sleeve, “it’s just so beautiful there,’ she told me. When I woke up, there was a great sense of peace in my spirit. And I asked your father what he thought happened after we died.

“He said, ‘I think it’s time we start going to church.’” My mother paused, smiled sardonically.

“We know the long ride that’s been,” I said.
“I still think church is the hardest thing. We really have to remember to love each other and just accept wherever we are.”

My mother is one day older than my father. They were raised in Cleveland Heights, Ohio and trotted off to the same third grade. “Don Patton” had become a household name at my mother’s, the crush that lasted through the years, even though the sum of their dating had been a few weeks in eighth grade.

Growing up, family had been my mother’s “religion.” She was the youngest of five children in an average 1950s household. Her mother worked the home, sold Avon, and volunteered at the local Protestant church. Her father worked at Arthur Pontiac and

2. Author, mother and sister.
gave my grandmother a generous allowance for groceries—she kept the change and
snuck the children tens, sometimes twenties.

It was the seventies. My mother’s blond hair parted down the middle, poker
straight. Polyester bellbottoms clung to her long bones, hugging a fresh rose tattoo on
her hip. She smiled broad and easy. Diane Bishop, the nice girl in the back row of class.

Home from school, she grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl and straightened
the sections of the newspaper splaying the dining room table. She longed for her siblings
who had married and begun families of their own. She sighed deeply, loneliness like
sand shifting through her limbs.

“How’s Mom?” she called to her father, reading the paper on the porch of their
new apartment.

“She’s at Bible study, honey,” he said without looking up. “How was your day?”

“I don’t care about school,” she said. He smiled, head buried in the news.

“That’s all right, De-de.” My mother’s parents hadn’t thought it necessary for
their four girls to go to college and prepare for a career. Having a family had been their
expected occupation. A good husband was objective number one.

My father’s draft card expired in 1973, the year my parents graduated high
school. As Vietnam trickled on for two more years, my parents found their ways back
together. It was after high school graduation when my father needed a date to a New
Year’s Eve party and thought to call my mother. I count this a miracle in itself. When
my mother announced she would be going out with my father, “Don Patton’s from a good family,” was all my grandfather said as he lowered his comb-over back to the newspaper.

My mother had been dating a boy from Hungry through high school, the kind of relationship that started with vague interest and continued until there had been a reason to stop it. Once my mother’s boyfriend demanded she not see her friends and only spend time with him, once he threatened to hurt her and her family, once my mother feared his temper when he was high—she finally broke up with him. Because of the years they’d shared and my mother’s tendency to give a person the benefit of the doubt, it took my grandfather meeting her in their apartment garage after she was home from work (a butcher knife up his sleeve) to convince my mother the relationship was over. When Don came onto the scene, my grandfather was likely relieved there would be someone there to protect my mother, someone in addition to him.

My grandmother folded my mother against her polyester blouse, Pond’s Cold Cream and Noxzema tempering my mother’s dizzy excitement. “Oh, honey. I’m so happy he called. The Lord’s timing, the good Lord’s timing.”

My father took her to a movie, a bar, and they continued musing over high school and friends back at my mother’s apartment. At three in the morning, my grandfather walked into the living room, eying the couch where they sat talking. My mother thought he was going to kill her.

“Just keep it down,” was all he said. My parents were married within two years, and before long, it became hard to imagine they had ever been without one another.

*
I could almost taste the salt from photos of my parents as newlyweds, barely twenty-one, in Boca Raton, Florida. The nylon of my mother’s faded bikini almost covered the rose crawling across her hip. Her thighs were straight and long, the gray day a sliver between her legs. Pulled by a mist of sea-storm, her hair flared past narrow eyes and a ridge of cheekbone. My father’s hair was dark then, like a helmet lining his bright face.

My father’s caution rang through my mind: “Listen, we’d take bike rides in the middle of the night when we lived in Florida, and it was gorgeous. But, nooo, I had to bring your mother back to her family. I tell you, you marry the entire family. Mark my words.”

My mother would add, “Donny, we didn’t have a cent to our name. Don’t you remember those night shifts at Moe’s restaurant? It’s easy to romanticize those earlier days—”

“It wasn’t so bad, Diane. We were in Florida.” He seemed to drift from Ohio winter with the memory of palm trees, beach, and ocean. The trace of a scowl returned. “Working in the shop back in Ohio was no picnic. Ten hours on my feet, handling screaming metal, blaring heat—”

My father would often say that life had never been what he had expected, not at any time along the way, but he never explained what he’d thought his life would be like. I wondered, had he wished they stayed in Florida, away from the family scattering Ohio like autumn leaves? Had he wished for more years as young newlyweds without children? Maybe he wished they’d not had us at all. Did he think life as a single man
would have been more satisfying—maybe out west, a small log home with lots of land separating him from neighbors? The way he talked, it seemed relationships had interfered with my father’s life.

Pop-pop helped my father into a job in the factory at Lincoln Electric, where my grandfather had worked years as an engineer in a cool office. My mother’s father loaned them money for a down-payment on a ranch in Mentor Headlands. Jimmy Carter was president when I was born on December 17, 1978. The world seemed marked by strained optimism. My parents spread orange shag carpet through their ranch. They covered the kitchen walls with mushroom contact paper.

“Hi, Donny,” my mother called from their new kitchen as he folded his shop jacket over the laundry machine. He washed his hands and slumped behind the table. She scooped a yellow mound of rice next to Beef Sizzlers. My father quietly ate, absorbing problems and food, and once he had finished and my mother’s small talk fell to silence, my father breathed deeply.

“Diane, I’m enrolling in the draftsman’s apprenticeship. We’ll just have to buckle down and do it. I can’t work in the shop my whole life.” Lincoln offered the apprenticeship, which my father would earn while working full-time over the next few years. Even less money. Even less time. My mother lost her appetite, bit her cheek, worry creeping up her throat like acid.

*
My grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer in her mid-sixties, a month before my birth. While the news was shocking, the family held out hope that my grandmother would beat the disease. She was healthy, strong. My mother had little time to mull over the tragedy in the beginning. Her water broke three months earlier than the doctors had expected. Evidently, I was weary of the wait, which would remain a mark of my character through the years.

The doctor said, “There’s a fifty-fifty chance we’ll lose the baby. But we’ll do everything we can for you, Diane.” After the emergency cesarean, I was the size of a palm and weighed four pounds. The first week of my life was spent in the hospital. I was a fragile swaddle of pink balancing on my mother’s lap when my father drove us home in the old Nova.

My grandmother was waiting at my parents’. “Oh, honey! Are you feeling all right?” she asked. My mother shook her head yes and weakly smiled, gingerly setting the diaper bag in the corner. My grandfather appeared from the kitchen, dark pants belted high around his long middle. He shook my father’s hand and kissed my mother.

“Me and Donny were planning to run up to the store, if you’d watch Lea—”

“Oh, we’d love to, sweetie. Hey little baby,” my grandmother cooed.

“Here’s her bottle. Just feed her real slow, support her head like this,” my mother took me back into her arms. “You know, she should be fine. I just changed her pants, but fresh cloth diapers are folded in the left of the bag. You have to be very careful when you set her down and—”
“De-de, honey, I promise to take perfect care of her. Don’t worry about a thing. Go ahead to the store. Me and Dad are just fine.” My mother flushed.

“Sorry, Mom. I know you’ll take care of her. She’s just so small—and I’m scared.” She nestled into her mother’s arms, cradling me.

At the first baby well-check the doctor carefully told my mother, “She has a heart murmur.” My mother was rigid. “It’s likely she has a hole in her heart,” the doctor said, probing my chest. “Often when the infant comes early like this, she hasn’t had enough time to develop fully in the womb. She just needs some extra attention outside of it,” he looked into my mother’s crumpling face. They shuttled us over to Rainbows Babies and Children’s Hospital in Cleveland. My mother leaned over my jaundice face, wiping her cheeks with the edge of the blankey swaddling me.

“You’ll never know dear how much I love you, please don’t take my sunshine away,” she sang. I can only imagine the fear which rampaged through my mother.

In the very first moments when a mother held a child, a thin bond spun as complex and beautiful as a gossamer spider web. The connection, something so fragile, was protective and awful, terrifying and simple. Alone with a child in the wee hours of night-time feedings, the world dark and down, a mother’s was warm, growing rapidly into a steely mesh of love and protection. My mother had spent two weeks with me at home before the doctor’s news, time enough to feel the sharp reality of being without me. She refused to let go. Where I went, she would go.
Throughout this time of waiting, of anticipating how my tiny body would respond to treatments for the heart murmur, my grandmother didn’t ask my mother to pray with her. But I believed she never stopped. She told my mother I was on a prayer chain at her church. I imagined my grandmother was grateful but not surprised when my heart healed without surgery. But my parents needed a way to express the mystery.

To my mother, my grandmother’s faith had seemed another extension of her nature, akin to psychic readers from years earlier. Her belief had been as zany, as overboard, as healthified cookies, cod liver and orange juice, and dishes of vitamin C instead of chocolate. Like a spiritual health-kick.

My grandmother left room for others’ mistakes and assumed they would for hers.

“I know I’m doing something wrong,” she said, raising her hands in the air and meekly smiling. “And if you just tell me what it is, I’ll fix it,” she cried to livid faces behind sixty-style automobiles.

“Come on, lady! Drive on the right side of the road, for Christ’s sake!”

To her family, her faith was like her voting. “Why are you voting for Nixon?” an aunt asked.

“Because your father told me to,” she smiled.

At the same time, a streak of defiance drew through her. Not unlike the time she pricked holes in the condoms, becoming pregnant with my Aunt Vicki and then my mother in her forties.
When my grandmother was dying, she continued the same as she always had—as asking the family how they were feeling, listening to the details of her grandchildren’s lives, laughing with her children, when she wasn’t in debilitating pain or exhaustion from the cancer treatments. She tended to the family’s worries repeating that she was fine, silently confident in the Lord’s plan—even if it meant death. Yet, her voice must have been heavy as she pleaded with my grandfather.

“Leonard please, please accept Jesus as your personal Savior.” It was the first and last time in over forty years of marriage that she had pushed the issue of faith.

“Oh, Matty. I’ve always believed in God. Why—”

“I know, I know,” the words rolled slowly. She was always calm, always believing the good Lord would save her family. “Will you say a prayer with me?” And my grandfather echoed her in the “Sinner’s Prayer.”

When my grandfather passed away ten years later, my mother clung to hope for his salvation on account of this prayer. She studied his drained face, a bleached shadow of the man whom she had believed in her whole life. Her father stared ahead, focused on something she couldn’t see. And as his eyes drifted into death, my mother believed he saw something—something more than she and the family could.

My mother’s parents’ deaths unhinged the togetherness of the family. Her siblings dispersed. As my mother’s own young family grew, holidays and family gettogethers were spent with my father’s family. My sister and I were small when the
golden rule burned in the atmosphere of steak and potatoes at Nana’s: No political or religious talk. Inevitably, there were lapses.

“Oh that’s ludicrous!” Aunt Lorri laughed, small hands folded in her lap, silk back hot against the fire. “You can’t expect your girls to wait until they’re married! Think about you and Diane, for God’s sake.” Her laugh came in deep shortles now. “I couldn’t walk upstairs at all when I knew you two would be up there! Reckless!” Her deep-set eyes sparkled manically.

“Lorri,” Dad halted. “That was then. We weren’t born again Christians.”

The smile sagged from her face.

“We will teach Lea and Melanie what the Bible says about premarital sex.”

“What does it say, really?” My aunt sipped White Zinfandel.

“Look, sexual immorality is not right—” he said.

“Wouldn’t you prefer to educate the girls? Teach them to protect themselves from diseases? They should know things, Donny.”

“They’ll know plenty!” Mom was red.


The room was frozen. Nana and Lorri began chatting about the sale at Beachwood after the holidays.

“Why are you so quiet, Diane?” Pop-pop asked, stout glass chinking against the coaster. It was the first comment he’d made in hours.

“I don’t know.” She looked down. “I don’t mean—”
“Diane, why don’t you just tell them?” My father urged.

“I don’t want to ruin Christmas! I hate this! Why can’t we all just stop it!” She ran from the room. The front door made a sucking sound as it opened and closed with a heavy muffled nose.

“Oh, God. Donny, what’s wrong with her? What did we do?” Nana asked.

“She doesn’t like the way you celebrate Christmas. She feels like the meaning is stripped with all the drinking, eating, and presents,” he said.

Aunt Lorri stood and went for my mother.

“That little ingrate,” Pop-pop said.

“Come on, Diane. Come inside, it’s cold,” my mother stared up at my aunt who loomed even taller in heeled boots. “I’m sorry. Let’s make amends, Diane.” My mother pushed the tears from her face, ran them across her jeans.

“I’m sorry, too.” She edged between Lorri and the door to finish rounds of gift-giving.

It was too hot in the living room, and I snuck into the bathroom to devour a chocolate before dinner, silently praying my mother wouldn’t catch me.

“Donny left another one of those Christian tracks in the bathroom,” my aunt whispered to Nana in the bedroom steps away from the bathroom. I looked to the back of the toilet under the framed picture of a naked girl in an old iron tub, no track.

“Can you help me zip this,” Nana asked. She must have been trying on her new evening dress. “I don’t know what to do about Donny. I mean, he grew up in church.
Why does he feel the need to ‘save’ us?” Nana’s voice was raw, no sing-song carrying her words.

“This isn’t very becoming. I think a darker color would work much better with my shape, don’t you agree?”

Lorri said, “Maybe their religious fervor will die down a bit in time. I think they need to leave that church. They’re being brainwashed if you ask me.”

My parents had tried a church like Nana’s. But when I bit another child in the nursery at the Episcopal church, the Sunday-school teacher gave my mother a book on childrearing, stammering, “Teach your child to behave!” It was not long before she and my father decided it was time for a new church.

We always found one. A family with a girl my age named Sarah lived a few houses down. One afternoon, Sarah’s mother trailed an entourage of children on bikes from their blue square ranch to our white one and extended an invitation to New Testament Fellowship where Sarah’s father was the pastor. Church became more than a Sunday morning affair with the family down the street. A band of young families developed friendships that changed our lives that summer. Children and parents gathered in Sarah’s basement for small group meetings on hazy Wednesdays. My father played the guitar and read sheet music written in a red pen that made the lyrics look magical.

I was sitting next to Dad just before the closing prayer on a bone-dry summer evening. Sarah’s father cleared his throat, “Are there any prayer requests? Or, how about some praise reports, huh?” My heart leapt.
"I have one, Dad." I whispered, elbowing his forearm. He didn’t look down, though I was staring up, waiting. Sarah’s father began to bow his head.

"Wait. There’s something that happened the other day."

"Go on, Lea. What happened?" Blood rushed to my cheeks.

"I couldn’t find my Cabbage Patch Doll’s shoe. I looked everywhere. And so did Mom. I asked Jesus to please help me find the shoe. Guess what?" My wide eyes of conviction scanned the basement. "It was on the bed! Out of nowhere it was there!"

Chuckles like balloons popped in the air.

"Well, praise God!" Sarah’s father said.

Later, Pastor and the group discussed their latest plan for protection during Armageddon. "Don, you can do the fishing in the End. You’ll have to get a deep freezer and save all the catch because we don’t know how long we’ll have before Christ returns."

At first, Dad liked the idea. It put a whole new dimension on the need to fish. And he was even honored to be the lead fisherman. But it wasn’t long before the idea struck him as sort of odd. Who knew when the End would come? Didn’t it say in the Bible that no man knew the times and seasons the Lord had planned?

Sarah’s Dad continued, “We’re going to plant zucchini and tomatoes, lima beans——”

“We should have some strawberries,” a woman mentioned. My father squirmed in the metal chair, shifted his acoustic guitar from his lap.
“We’ll need a strong fence, to protect the food from animals—and who knows what else,” Pastor continued, looking beyond the handful of trusting faces staring up at him.

“So what if someone who’s not a part of our remnant jumps the fence for the vegetables?” my father jeered.

On the walk home, my mother was livid. “What’s wrong with you? Why were you so belligerent? What’s your problem?” Rage piled.

“This is beginning to feel real funny. I don’t think I agree with half of what’s happening at these meetings,” he said.

“These are our friends. Can’t you think of someone other than yourself? You drive me crazy.” She slapped her hands against her jeans and walked ahead of him. But my father couldn’t stand it and refused to stay at New Testament. My mother would have to tell Sarah’s parents. If she hoped to salvage a relationship at all, she would be the one to balance, to make peace in the wake of divide.

She explained with a heavy voice before she led Melanie and me down the street under a canopy of aged trees. “There’s nothing wrong with Sarah or her family. It’s just not where we need to be right now.” We loved summer days at the Civic Center with Sarah’s mother and all the kids. We savored vacations at the beach in North Carolina where my father and Sarah’s fished. It seemed unfair, even sneaky for my parents to pull us away. It felt the way it had when they took our pet squirrel, rescued from the trunk of Nana’s Oldsmobile, and freed him in the middle of the night—unreasonable, cruel.
My mother held our hands, and we drifted down the street to Sarah’s. We were quiet. We were too young to imagine the implications we’d face in leaving a church built with our friends. I’d thought we’d have less time to hang out if we didn’t share Bible school, small group meetings, and Sunday mornings, but with a child’s simple acceptance I’d assumed we’d be the same otherwise.

“But I really hope we can still be friends. We love you guys,” my mother said in the pale kitchen. Sarah’s father’s heels dug into the kitchen floor as he pounded from the room duck-like.

He mumbled under his breath, “That’s impossible, Diane.” My mother’s eyes misted.

“He’s just worked up. Of course we’ll still be friends,” Sarah’s mother promised, turning from the teakettle to hug my mother.

Things would never be the same with Sarah and her family or with other friends that would remain pillars of New Testament. Instead, distance oozed between them and us, my family and others who would leave their midst. We began drifting through churches, my parents distrusting tight Evangelical communities that imitated the instant love and affection that had ultimately felt too cliquish at Sarah’s church.

We moved to a new neighborhood where friends from New Testament, Peter and Sharon Georges, lived down the street in a matching house—split-level on a postage-stamp lawn. The Georgeses had left the church as well and somehow ended up Orthodox, which seemed bizarre and too far-fetched to my parents. Peter and Sharon
home-schooled, played the piano, and seemed cultured in ways my family didn’t. It seemed their new church was an extension of a classical way of life. I savored the starchy smell of their home, the slick piano in the corner, the books lining their basement walls, but for years I wouldn’t even think twice about their church. The Orthodox tradition had seemed long, heavy, and too traditional for my taste.

The Georgeses sat at our new kitchen table underneath a plastic loaf of bread with the “Our Father” prayer. Dad said, “You guys really like the Orthodox Church?” Peter looked up from my mother’s date bread and shook his head.

“I’ll tell you what, we made a list of churches to try. The Orthodox Church was one on the list. I was raised Greek Orthodox, so why not go back and just retest the waters—right? Growing up, the parish had seemed an ethnic community—you were Greek, so you were Orthodox. It hadn’t seemed about faith to me. I’m sure there were many for whom it was about faith, but I hadn’t sensed that at the time. But the Divine Liturgy was in English at St. Nicholas, and there was just something that felt real there.”

Sharon’s eyes glowed. “We knew we’d be back,” she said.

“It’s true. It was like a light when on. I knew the Orthodox Church would be a place to stay,” Peter said.

Sharon smiled at my mother. “I felt the reverence that had been lacking at New Testament. It felt more complete. Diane, you’d love it if you just gave it a chance.”

My mother pulled coffee mugs from the cupboard and poured boiling water over instant coffee. The Orthodox Church was for foreigners, she thought.
Without my parents knowing it, the Georgeses began praying for my parents to draw into the Church.
II

FALLING IN LOVE

Love is a patchwork of days. Patterned and colored, mended and promised with gentle hands of hope. Love is unexpected—turning corners, treading paths where Lilies of the Valley breathe. Love is acceptance and peace. The soul becomes in her embrace.

1. Author and husband, Dima.
2. Tatyana and Grandma preparing author’s first meal at their home.

3. American group in Red Square (Moscow).
CHAPTER FOUR

“Joe, don’t you know anybody that will go out with my sister?” After Melanie and I were home from Mentor High and her boyfriend was through with hockey practices at Lake Catholic, he practically lived at our house. It wasn’t unusual for Joe to watch me bug-eyed and wild: singing, dancing, jumping on my sister’s bed.

After my look of what-are-you-implying, she clarified, “I mean, someone that she would work with?” He thought a boy from his hockey team, Vince, would be a good match.

* 

“Hey, tell Melanie I’m on my way over. I just want to call Vince and make sure he can meet us for laser tag,” Joe said in one breath. I outlined my lips in brown, filled in dark lipstick, and chewed my cheek.

4. Dima and author, Melanie and Joe before a high school dance.
Meanwhile, Dima sat on his daybed with the cordless in his lap. Vince was supposed to call back, let him know it was cool to come along for laser tag with Joe’s girlfriend and sister. He couldn’t wait to get out of the Holmeses’ house—finally un-grounded.

Joe called. “Lea, I can’t get a hold of Vince.”

It figured. Whatever, I had to wait until college for a real relationship. I wondered why in the largest high school in the state of Ohio, with nearly 3,000 peers, there seemed not one decent boy. Some were attractive, and there had been the typical fooling around without commitment—especially after a few beers. But I felt empty, lost, lonely. I wished to just go with the flow, to care less about everything.

My closest girlfriend was quiet and funny, she never let on to feeling sensitive or hurt. Boys seemed to like this. They also liked the fact that she would have sex. I couldn’t shake my icy nerves or the sense that sex was wrong before marriage. I couldn’t laugh as long as it seemed I needed to, and I had the sheltered belief (thanks to my mother) that others genuinely cared when I was hurt. My girlfriend would fight with her boyfriend, mainly being quiet and moody, and somehow the guys seemed to play with this—as though a game of hard to get. I always wanted to talk, to resolve.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t care. I don’t feel like going out anyway,” I told Joe, hanging up the phone and staring out my bedroom window into the dusk.

Dima grew impatient after playing Nintendo for almost two hours. He called Vince, but there was no answer. He walked a half mile to the edge of the ravine in the Holmeses’ backyard. As the day fed into night, an eggshell hope encased him.
“God, please bring the right person into my life.” He shrugged his shoulders and kept walking. Even if there wasn’t a girl, he’d play hockey until he dropped. Maybe this would remain his ticket to citizenship.

Mr. Holmes paused in the semi-dark kitchen and reached behind him to flick on the bright overhead light. Dima squinted and rubbed his eyes. He pushed palms against his forehead and over the sides of wavy hair. Jerry seemed to quizzically look at him.

“You feeling okay?”

I’m not stoned. I’m not stoned. I’m not stoned. “Fine.”

“I talked to Georgie earlier today,” Jerry said. Georgie was from Dima’s hometown and had come to America shortly after Dima to help coach the international team in the States. Once in America, Georgie became certified to teach high school gym. Schools wanting to launch a new hockey program, like Lake Catholic, were eager to hire him.

“He’s looking for a goalie and asked me if we knew where you were playing next year. I told him you were hoping to play for Junior Barons, but I think that’s too much.”

Dima curled his toes in his Nikes. “Oh.”

“Georgie asked if you would consider playing for Lake Catholic’s team. I told him we’d talk it over. But frankly, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Okay,” Dima mumbled, numb with disappointment.
Dima and I were on a date night in our kitchen ten years later, our Orthodox baptismal candle burned in the center of the dark wood table. The kitchen curtains were parted to the backdrop of night. A knotty Succulent plant, waxy and dark green, hung between them. He wore his hockey warm-up pants, now with a hole in the crotch, and a black Guinness tee-shirt. I had tried for sexy, a negligee (from our wedding six years earlier) but felt chilled and threw on the traditional robe. Dinner was grilled: squash, corn, chewy blocks of steak from Aldi’s.

Dima sipped from a yellow wine glass, grimacing with a too hearty swig. “I will never tell my parents the opportunity that was passed. Dad would crap himself—a choice between being scouted, or playing for a new team—it’s a no brainer.” At the end of his sophomore year at St. Ed’s, he was trying out for Junior Barons, from which scouts recruited players for professional teams or full athletic scholarships to division one universities.

His teeth looked darkened by the red wine. I knew the story by heart, but it felt good to watch him air it out again.

“I was at the top of my game,” he refilled his glass with our boxed Cabernet Sauvignon, date night in full stride. “I got a letter. I was on the team!”

“But we met. Isn’t it funny how things shake out?” I smiled, not thinking about hockey.

“We might have met anyway,” he said. I kept smiling and sipped the wine.

It was after Dima had made the team when Mr. Holmes pointed out he wouldn’t have time for school. The team would travel Thursdays and play in tournaments across
the United States Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In addition, the players would practice Monday through Wednesday and play one or two local games in the beginning of the week. When would Dima have time to learn about Moby Dick, or how to dissect a crawfish, or who had won Homecoming Queen?

At first it had seemed an absurdity to Dima. Hadn’t he come over to play hockey? School had always been secondary. Always in the back of his mind was the cold reality that if he ever returned home, he would be considered an eighth grader—no matter how good his grades in the States had been (or, more likely, had not been). Because he had already nearly been sent home, for reasons he took full responsibility for, he didn’t feel strong enough to argue. Staying in America was always objective one.

In the locker room the next week at hockey practice, Joe sat next to Dima.

“Where’s Vince, man? He’s not been to practice all week,” Dima said.

“Dude, Vince was in a car accident,” someone behind them said. As the days rolled on, word spread that Vince was in a coma. Years would pass with no change for the better.

“You want to hook up with my girlfriend’s sister, D.?“ Joe asked.

“She’s not loose is she?”

“Nah, man. She’s cool. You’ll like her.”

*
Before we met, I was in Mentor High’s cafeteria chatting with a girlfriend and dragging a bagel through a cup of cream cheese. “His name’s neat—Dima, like the beer Zima with a ‘D’.” A hockey player at the table looked up.

“The goalie from Russia?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Why, do you know him?”

“Sure. The kid was accused of rape.”

“What?” I lost my appetite.

“Don’t worry. Deem gets along with anyone. You’ll like him. He’s a nice guy.”

“Well—what do you mean, rape?”

“Oh, it was a scandal, really. He’s cool, I swear.”

“Is he cute?”

“Oh yeah. Girls think so.” I chewed the bagel in concentration. What would meeting him hurt?

Joe drove my sister and me to the Holmeses’, Dave Matthews pulsing through the minivan. We lurched to the side, swinging along the country roads.

“Lea, I’m telling you the Holmeses’ place is amazing. They have a pool in their house!” Joe said. Anxiety fluttered. What would Dima be like? He was nice, got along with anyone, was accused of rape. My stomach flipped.

The minivan lumbered up the drive to the house on the hill, a great expanse of red brick and white pillars. I melted with excitement.
Dima and I sat next to each other in the dark minivan as Joe drove to Bob Evans. We looked out the window, at the backs of Melanie’s and Joe’s heads, at our hands—anywhere but each other. Yet I sensed something still and steady about him, and ease slowly inched over me.

“Can you believe the Red Wings lost? They had it in the bag, man,” Joe said.

“Yeah, it’s unbelievable! They lost their defense at the bottom of the first,” Dima added. I stopped listening to their words, mesmerized by his slight accent. His body seemed fluid, graceful even. He didn’t fidget or waste any movement. He hunched over, resting elbows on long thighs, hands on knees.

Joe pulled open the heavy side door, and Dima’s long body folded out. I bent from the van into the spring night, eyes on Dima’s soccer shoes. The air was light and almost cool. I wiped clammy hands on my stonewashed jeans and pulled the cropped top to just above my waist as we walked into Bob Evans.

Melanie asked, “You’re not getting anything, Lea?”

“I’ll have a few bites of your lemon meringue pie.” She silenced her protest, no doubt because the boys were listening.

“I’ll take a Coke,” Joe said.

“Same here,” Dima said.

It was quiet. Melanie nudged me. “Look at this pie,” she whispered. Yellow filling spilled from her fork.

“Think we’ll beat Shaker Heights?” Dima said.

“Dude, we’ve got a strong defense.”
I wondered why he didn’t talk to me, why he seemed unwilling to meet my eyes. He was shadowed in the baseball cap, as though his face was a secret. The top of his cap faced me as he leaned over to sip from a straw. His arms were white and slender but not skinny, hands neat and angular. I guessed his eyes were light.

Melanie faintly moaned, a wisp of saliva webbing her chin. We giggled, stifling peals of laughter.

“Good pie, huh Melanie.”

“Shut up, Joe!”

Dima smiled at me.

Melanie and Joe held hands and spoke softly in the front of the van. “How long have you played hockey?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ve played since I was five.”

“Wow. Did you ever want to play other sports?”

“I played soccer. We trained for hockey with other sports back home. What about you?”

“I was in gymnastics for awhile. I played soccer, too, took ballet, stuff when I was a kid. I cheer now, so I’m pretty involved during football season. And then there’s track in the spring. Do you run?”

“Sometimes,” he smiled. He seemed so sincere, even respectful.

That night, climbing into my childhood bed under old Packman sheets, I felt a surge of hope. Dima was different, and that alone was appealing.
The next day, Joe called Melanie. “I have lifeguard training. Want to go with Joe and Dima to the rib cook-off in downtown Cleveland?” she asked me.

“Why not?” I said, slipping the bagel into the toaster.

We filed out of Joe’s van, and I felt exceptionally light and happy. I threw my arm around Joe’s shoulders. “So, will I like Ekoostik Hookah?” Dima stood like he was ready to stoop into goalie stance at any given moment, feet shoulder width apart, shoulders slightly hunched. He flipped his cap around, ran his fingers over eyebrows arching a protruding forehead.

“Want a beer, Lea?” Joe called from the stand.

“I’ll take one,” Dima said, nodding his chin, blue eyes meeting mine. Grease hissed in the cool air. Guitar music strummed faintly in the background. The beer tickled my throat. Rhythm pulsed, upbeat, clear—hitt-ta-ta-hitt-ta-ta—we swayed easy as the early summer day.

“Joe, nature’s calling. I mean, I’ve got to pee,” I said. A blue port-a-pot was across the street, a mammoth line curling before it. I scanned the horizon—we were too far from the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame or Tower City. The van was a few steps away.

“Will you guys just wait here for a second?” I ran to the side of the van, thanked the Lord that I couldn’t see anyone (hoping they couldn’t see me), and relieved myself.

“Did you just pee by the van?” Joe asked, laughing. Dima didn’t say anything, or even crack a condescending smile with his buddy, the way I expected he would. He pretended he didn’t notice, and I was moved by his consideration, his sensitivity. I liked Dima—the way he laughed noiselessly with the bob of his shoulders, mouth open. I
liked the way his thumbs slid into his pockets, hands relaxed on his thighs; the way he almost looked at me, reserving his full attention. I sensed a protected distance that made me want to draw nearer.

I had never known people who had spent years of their lives in other countries, people who didn’t consider America home. What was out there—beyond Ohio, America, my family and friends?

Georgie hovered over the side of the ice, standing on the bench in the timeout box. He smacked his balding head, Russian curses trailing wide lips. His eyes were ice. Some parents talked. “He shouldn’t be so stern. He needs to lighten up.” But the Holmeses liked Georgie. They often invited him over for Vodka and dirty jokes, which he delivered with unyielding intensity.

Dima and I huddled together, holding hands on the leather couch. Jerry demonstrated another card trick, and Georgie laughed along.

“Lea, you and Dima fool around before practice? He not good today. Hands off.” Georgie narrowed his twinkling eyes and tilted his head back for a shot of Vodka. “Hey, D, take shot?” he said.

Jerry nodded. “You aren’t driving anywhere.” Dima rose from the couch, meekly smiling as Georgie’s elbow poked him in the ribs under his Grateful Dead tie-dye.

The Holmeses’ parties never ceased. There were special dinners with Jerry’s business partner from Hong Kong, Chinese New Year parties, and gift-giving
extravaganzas over Chinese take-out after Jerry’s trips to the Far East. We celebrated Christmas the entire day, gifts opened into the evening, Jeremy and Jason still in their pajamas (Dima changed for my benefit). There was Easter with Georgie and his family, and an Easter egg hunt. Dollars and silver were stashed in plastic eggs tucked behind flower pots, in bird’s nests, lining fence ledges.

It seemed Jerry and Susan trusted me from the beginning. Some of what had been forbidden on account of Dima’s trouble-potential, became allowable. He got his license. When the snow was fierce, I stayed overnight. If we weren’t driving, we drank along with the party. Susan and I went to church, to a teacher convention, to a Russian tea house. She drove me through Amish Country where we stopped at shops held in barns, the feel of wood and quilt and old-new everywhere.

Dima learned what a middleclass, sheltered, close-knit American family was like as he entered mine. Every time he ate over, my mother happened to be warming up leftover casseroles, which seemed the perfect compliment to the differences between the Holmeses’ extravagance and the Patton’s simplicity. My mother worried, asked him if he thought dinner was awful, vowed to cook his favorite meal, but he quietly said dinner was good, he liked to eat anything, and slipped from the center of attention as easily as he had entered into it.

After leftover chicken tetrazzini, the noodles baked crunchy at the ends, we left my mother’s embarrassed apologies for a walk to the lake down the street. It was the spring of our junior year in high school, and the evening had the familiar feel of a gentle
breeze scented with charcoal and fish that would grow stronger with summer. We strolled in quiet, our hands clasped.

I broke from his hold, “Race you!” He caught up and nudged me.

“Don’t make me pick you up and throw you into the lake,” he said.

“Go ahead and try, muscle man!” He strolled toward a long piece of driftwood. I followed. We leaned against the smooth white wood. He cupped sand over my raised knee, and it trickled down the inside of my thigh.

“Lea, where are we going with this?”

“What do you mean?” We had something as real as the breeze moving over the lake.

“I like you a lot. And I want to know how you feel about us?” he said.

“I like you a lot, too. I’m glad we’re together.”

“So, we’re taking this seriously, our relationship. Right?”

“Yeah.”

P.J. Murphy became Dima’s closest friend at Lake Catholic. He was the grandson to Murlan Murphy, owner of Murphy’s Oil Soap Company, and lived in an old mansion in Shaker Heights. We always just barely escaped questionable adventures when we went out with P.J. and his girlfriend. On a few occasions, we met at a Cleveland bus station to drink beer and take the rapids to the Indian’s game.

“Hey, dude! Want to get off here at Tower City? I got to pee,” P.J. said.

“Sure. We can do that, man,” Dima said.
“What’s going on? Where are we?”

“Lea, don’t worry about it. It’s cool,” P.J. said.

Dima sat on a chair outside the restrooms in Tower City, and I sat on his lap.

“Where’d P.J. and his girlfriend go?” I asked, pulling my mouth from Dima’s neck.

“They’re in the bathroom,” he said.

I stood up, dizzy from the three beers I’d downed before making it to Tower City.

“Come on. I’m not going in there without you.”

“Woman, it’s a women’s restroom. I can’t go in there,” Dima said.

“Yes. You can. Who knows what they’re doing, and I’m not going in alone.”

We stumbled into the quiet bathroom.

“Hey, P.J.?” Dima said. “It’s late—”

“Look,” I whispered, pointing to four feet in one stall. “They’re here.”

“We need to leave you guys. We missed the game,” I said, annoyed by Dima’s patience. My mother wanted me home soon, and, more importantly, I wanted to be home.

P.J. and his girlfriend emerged from the stall with red-purple blotches on their necks. P.J. looked white as a ghost with a hint of green, and I knew we were in for a long ride back home. I hoped Dima would sober up by the time we reached his minivan. Otherwise, I would be carting everyone home.

I white-knuckled the steering wheel, Dima and P.J. and the girl sickly silent. Someone mumbled they might hurl, and that I should pull over. At the same time, a police officer’s sirens led me to the side of the road.
“Just wanted to let you know, your lights aren’t on,” the female officer said and shined a light through the window. “Everything all right in here?” I nodded, told her we were heading home. By the grace of God, she didn’t keep us. I pulled back onto the highway, driving under the speed limit and grateful not to have Dima telling me to speed up. Someone in the backseat threw up.

“Oh crap. Where did that go?” I asked.

“Oh no, man, you just puked on Aunt Caroline’s linens,” Dima said. As usual, Aunt Caroline’s antiques had spread to every available corner.

My mother was sitting on the couch when I stumbled through the front door.

“Were you drinking, Lea?”

“I’m just really tired,” I mumbled, tripping on a stair. She followed me into my pink room and sat on the bed. She was unnervingly quiet as I unzipped my jeans and slipped into boxer shorts.

“Yes. I was drinking.” I sighed, leaned my head to a flaccid shoulder. My head throbbed thoughtless. I had no energy to fight. If I was grounded, fine.

“Lea, I love you. Please be careful. Think about what you do—” I stared blankly at my mother, feeling oddly out of control and in control at the same time. She sat on my bed, her flushed cheeks matched the soft pinks of my room. She waited until I sat beside her and told her about the night.

*
The following Christmas of our senior year, Dima’s grandmother visited America. Dima and I had been dating a year and a half and were on the brink of something close to love. I was excited to meet Grandma.

Tatyana, Viktor, and Grandma had all applied for visas to visit, but only Grandma’s dramatic plea had won over the authorities.

“I’m old and might never have another chance to visit my grandson,” she had said. She was barely sixty when they issued her a visa—much to her dismay.

“I’m not going to America! Not without you, Tatyana. I refuse. Absolutely not.” Her mouth was set, eyes closed. “I am too old to travel across the world by myself. And who knows what might happen in America. No, Russia is my home.” Viktor paced the living room.

“Mom, you have to go. It’s our only chance to see Dimka. A person does not know what she wants until she has it. Once you are in America you will like it. You will see our boy!” Tatyana said.

*
Grandma arrived at the Holmeses’ shortly before their holiday open house. Dima carried her suitcase to his room. It remained a tight bundle from which she pulled what was needed, looking over her shoulder when her back was to the door. She slept with her visa in her bloomers, her money in her bra. On the infrequent occasions she bathed, one could only imagine what she did with her essentials. She was rigid about keeping them on her at all times.

The first night she was there, her arm laced Dima’s as she cried, “Please, gather the family. I have gifts.” We circled her in the yellow kitchen as she tried to form words through violent weeping. Her under-bite quivered, silver-gray head slightly nodded.

Dima translated. “Our family loves you. You have given Dima more than we can ever repay. And for this, eternal gratefulness,” she bowed. “We wish you health and happiness. We wish you blessings and long life.” She hiked her purple housedress up and pulled a silver spoon from stockings rolled around a doughy leg. “A Povozhaev family heirloom, the spoon has been passed from generation to generation three times

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5. Grandma’s arrival at Cleveland’s JFK airport, weeping against Dima. Jerry taking a picture.
now. We would like you to accept it as a gift from our family to yours.” I handed her a tissue as Susan accepted the spoon, kissed Grandma’s wet cheek, and loudly said, “Thank you.”

Dima’s Russian-ness became tangible through Grandma: her buttery eggs and fish soups, her strong scent and stubborn pride; her quiet, her love, her strangeness. Dima seemed to think it was all quite natural, at least in the beginning. For two and a half weeks, being with Grandma was like a field trip through Dima’s past. There were photo albums that smelled old, endless stories only sometimes translated, and silent hours in the hum of the Holmeses’ T.V. Sometimes, Grandma cooked, but only when Susan wasn’t in the kitchen. After spending time with Dima and Grandma, going home was relief. I could eat what I liked, speak the same language with my sister, walk with my parents, things so easy and natural.

Dima wanted me at the Holmeses’ more often than usual. Before, we hadn’t spent our every-days together. “You just don’t want to hang out with me and Grandma,” he said on the phone one Saturday afternoon.

“It’s not that. I’m going shopping for a formal dress. They’re on clearance at Dillard’s.”

“Why don’t you stop over on your way home from the mall, it’s on the way?”

“I’ll try.” But the truth was, Grandma slowed things down to a crawl. How long could we smile without talking? How much could I eat before tapping my foot, twisting my wristwatch? I added, “But you’re coming over for my birthday tonight—”
Dima drove Grandma twenty minutes from the Holmeses’ to my parents’ in Susan’s red convertible, the wind pushing fiercely against the black leather top that we had down only months ago on the way to summer parties.

For my nineteenth birthday, I sat like a large doll on Grandma’s lap. I was conscious of my small body against her soft bosom, the feel of her thin cotton pants under my legs, the smell of her plain flesh. We ate spaghetti as my family began the inquisition.

“Dima, ask her how she likes America,” my mother said, smiling at Grandma.

“She likes it, but it is very different from Russia.”

“Does she like the food?” Melanie said.

“Yeah. The food’s all right. The people are a lot different. It’s very difficult for her to adjust because she’s an older person. She’s used to the life she has back home.”

Little of this could be adequately explained over meatballs and garlic bread. It was a world of difference just beginning to emerge. And we were all simultaneously quieted and provoked by it.

Grandma locked herself in her bedroom at the Holmeses’ holiday open house, refusing to see anybody but Dima and me. “Come on, Grandma. Just come down and get a plate of food at least. There aren’t that many people. Everyone’s friendly, I promise,” Dima said. We huddled outside the room, listening as she shuffled from the bed and unlocked the door. Thick eyeglasses clouded her swollen face. She slumped
into the small rocking chair in the corner, breathing heavily. I stooped down to hug her and inhaled fishy body odor.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” I said.

“I feel like a spectacle. Everyone stares at me like I’m an animal in a cage. I can’t go down there. I can’t do this.” Grandma wept into Dima’s flannel shirt.

We brought her finger foods on a china dish and told Mrs. Holmes she wasn’t feeling well.

“Oh no. What’s wrong?”

“Mrs. Holmes, she is totally uncomfortable. She wants to go home,” I said.

Though Susan changed Grandma’s flight so she could leave two weeks earlier, Grandma didn’t escape Christmas. And the gifts left her sick with regret.

Grandma sat on the edge of the bed in her striped cotton pants and gray sweater, bags tightly packed. “Susan told me I could work off my gifts,” her eyes widened, “I’ll never leave the States!”

“She was only joking, Grandma. Really, she wouldn’t make you work—I promise.” Dima tried to convince her, but she wouldn’t listen. I imagined that she had never fathomed such a plush lifestyle with so much at one’s fingertips. Perhaps she had felt too filled. At five, she nearly died of starvation, and it seemed desperation never left her spirit. During WWII, her family had been starving when her uncle returned home and gave them a crust of bread. As a small girl, Grandma didn’t understand why her uncle wouldn’t give them more food. She ran after him, begging for more bread. Later,
she realized that he hadn’t given them any more for fear they’d eat too much, too quickly and die.

When Grandma left, it was a sort of sad relief. It was a quick and easy shift from the responsibilities of Russian family. Dima and I picked up where we had left off as soon as we turned our backs from Cleveland’s airport, Grandma safely on her way home.

“You know what Grandma told me?” he said.

“What?” I yawned.

“She made me promise to marry for love.” He stared ahead at the busy road.

Dima picked me up for Senior Prom and shuttled us back to the Holmeses’ for steak and candlelight before the dance. Mr. Holmes opened the front door dressed in black and white server attire.

“Greetings, sweet lady,” he kissed my hand. I followed him into the dining room on black heels, Dima trailing us in a tuxedo. Mr. Holmes offered me a seat and left, separating the kitchen and dining room with cream doors that I had never seen closed before. The room was flesh toned in the candlelight.

“This is amazing,” I mouthed across the table. Salad and soup emerged in the hands of our familiar maître d’. He planted a steaming bowl of cream potato soup between the silver spoon and forks and slipped through the doors. I scooted my chair back, gathered the food, and walked over to Dima. “Can I sit next to you?” He rose from the table and pulled out my seat. My hand roamed his thigh, lips grazed his neck.

“Not here,” he said.
“I know. I just want to be close with you. This is all so nice. I feel so lucky, so blessed.” Mrs. Holmes cleared our soup and salad dishes. We quietly swallowed steak and asparagus. It was Prom. I had to get energized. But I was tired and serious. I couldn’t lighten my spirit. Where would we be next year? Would we stay together? This was love—I thought.

After the dance, we hid in the laundry room at my girlfriend’s house. My hair was a sticky mess from hairsprayed curls. “Feels like a bee hive,” Dima said.

“Hey! You said you liked it earlier. Didn’t you?”

“I like your hair normal.”

“I can’t go to Prom with my hair straight against my shoulders.”

“Why not?” I kissed his neck as he lifted me onto the dryer and slipped his body between my legs. His hands ran down my arms.

“I love you, Lea.”

“I love you too, Dima.”

A blinding light filled the room. “Oh! Sorry!” my girlfriend’s mother stammered.

“How embarrassing!” I whispered. Dima was quiet. “Should we go somewhere else? Maybe a bedroom? We can’t stay in here. I think her mom wants to do laundry.”

“It’s one in the morning,” he said.

“I know, but she’s like my mom. She’s really fussy and stuff. We can go under the dining room table?” We knocked on the closed door of the computer room by the foyer. No one answered. He cracked the door—empty. We snuck in.
“We’re safe here,” Dima promised. I smiled in the dark against his smooth cheek. We stood with our bare chests together. Moonlight spilled through the window, writing our silhouettes against the wall. I tensed with desire, wrapping my arms around his middle. We eased to the floor, our shadows disappearing. Our bodies met where night folds into day. There existed no space, no difference, just the fluid melt of one to another. Time paused. All we had was each other for what seemed infinity.

Dima and P.J. played hoops on a lazy summer afternoon just before high school graduation. Dima dribbled the ball between his long legs and reached up for a layout. He missed.

“What are you doing about school?” P.J. asked, taking the ball.

Dima was on a student visa and had to be in school, but as a Russian citizen he had to pay out of state tuition to any school in America. Otherwise, he needed a new visa or permanent residency to remain legal. “I’m going to Lakeland for an Associate’s Degree. Going to work part-time and save up for my Bachelor’s,” Dima said.

“That kind of sucks man. I mean, don’t you want to go away for school? I can’t wait to get out of here—meet some girls at John Carroll.”

“Sure, that’d be cool. But I don’t really have that option right now.” Dima swiped the ball and dribbled to the back of the driveway. He set for a shot. The ball swooshed through the net.

“Yeah, well my Grandpa might be able to help you out, Deem. No joke. My old man talked to him.”
I was set to go to Malone College in the fall. Though I worried about the hour south that would separate Dima and me, I longed for change. For a life that forced me beyond my family and Dima, and especially for a community of young Christians. High school had become exasperating. The drinking, the superficial concerns, the artificial relationships—the only thing that seemed true and good was Dima. I imagined we’d make a long distance relationship work. And if we didn’t, then we weren’t meant to be. I was secretly excited to see what other boys, other Christian boys, might be like.

The wicker chairs on the Holmeses’ porch creaked under my weight. I traced the shapes in the wood. “Dima, we’ll stay close. We have something special that I don’t want to let go of.” He agreed, looking into the distance. His eyes matched the sky. I wondered if it was going to rain.

“It might not be so bad to go to Lakeland. You don’t have to worry about new friends or anything,” I said.

Dima picked his hangnail.

“I’m going to call Mr. Murphy. What do I have to lose? Seriously, I’ve got to give it a shot,” Dima said.

P.J.’s father answered on the third ring in his soft-spoken voice. Dima paused after small talk, not knowing how to bring it up. “Mr. Murphy, forgive me if I’m wrong, but P.J. mentioned Grandpa Murlan might be willing to help me pay for school.”
“That’s true. I spoke with my father a short while ago, and he is willing to loan you tuition money.” Dima tightened his grip on the receiver. Was he hearing this correctly? His heart pound—pound—pounded in his ears.

“You need to find the university or college, and we’ll take care of tuition, son.”

He numbly put the receiver down and sank into the sofa in the Holmeses’ den room.

He walked into the kitchen where Mrs. Holmes was chopping onions for beef sizzling in a skillet. “I just talked to Mr. Murphy.”

“Oh yeah? What’d he have to say?”

“He told me that Grandpa Murlan is willing to loan me tuition money.” She looked up, set down the knife.

“He said that?”

“I swear, Mrs. Holmes, I just got off the phone with him.” She wiped her hands on her apron, her face serious and controlled.

“Don’t ever forget their generosity, Dima.”
CHAPTER FIVE

A representative from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities came to Malone fall semester my sophomore year of college. She was white and plain, like the window-less classroom. Our professor was the only black man I had seen on campus (aside from guest preachers) with a boxer’s stocky build and evangelist’s smile. “I’ll just move on out of the way,” he said, teeth glowing through the smile. He slipped to the corner of the room, opening his briefcase to appear busy. The woman’s thin hands fixed on a stack of brochures.

1. American students in Moscow metro station.
“We have study programs for Australia, China, Latin America, the Middle East, Oxford, Uganda, and Russia.” I knew before she said so, there would be a program in Russia. And like “mushroom rain,” as Dima called drizzle on a bright day, going to Russia seemed natural but strange. Going seemed a reflex, beyond choice, like scratching an itch, wiping a tear, placing a cool hand to burning cheek. The woman’s soft voice was slow-moving through colorless lips. I willed her to move over and let me at the information, but she took her time explaining details I couldn’t comprehend until alone.

“The programs are funded through tuition costs of students’ home colleges and universities. The university you attend abroad then becomes your extension campus. Most students bring spending money, but, depending on where you go, the cost of living is likely much less than in the States—”

Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. I thought of my escape to the handicap restroom stall with the program spelled out in black ink. I would race through it once, eyes swooping over the details like a hawk gliding through the sky, propelled by the sheer force its own momentum. Then, I would flip back to the first detail, calculate obstacles.

I could earn the spending cash at Red Lobster as a server over Christmas break. I’d worked there in the summers through high school. My parents would have to let me, I was an adult now. Mom would be scared, but they would be proud of me. I felt certain my father would think my travels abroad a wise investment. While he and I had begun to share late night talks on my frequent gallivants back home, he was always asking me, “Why are we paying for you to live at Malone when you come home every weekend?” I
reminded him it wasn’t every weekend, many alternating weekends were spent in Findlay, at the university where Dima studied, but my father was right—I didn’t want to live at Malone.

I didn’t feel comfortable when there were open hours to mill around the small campus, to hang out and watch the soccer games, to go shopping with girlfriends. I had tried these things, but always longed for my family and Dima. Even though I hadn’t pushed myself to develop relationships, I had expected that closeness should somehow materialize. I couldn’t explain this to my father. It hadn’t made sense to keep such distance.

I hadn’t expected to feel like a misfit at Malone. After all, I had wanted to be around other Christians. The atmosphere was cleaner than anything I’d experienced before. At orientation, students swept the manicured lawn like dimming beacons in the gold-blue sunset. A cross loomed at the top of the chapel as a straight silhouette against the dying day. I inhaled the smell of grass and summer heat passing with a breeze of autumn. As the season changed, I continued self-consciously imagining Malone’s homogeneity.

Relationships seemed to gel for most in the initial days, but I stayed on the periphery. People at Malone were from more than sheltered families, they were from small towns that made me feel I was from a big city. Many were single. There were acquaintances, invites to roller skating, to Milk and Honey Ice cream Parlor, to girls’ nights at the movies. I tried. Usually, I made an excuse to leave early and return to the dorm room where Deana Carter’s *Strawberry Wine* billowed like full clouds between
cement walls. I cried into my journal, wondering why I felt so alienated. Instead of focusing on what we shared in common, youth, faith, college, I divided myself—quick escape.

Malone had seemed a cross-cultural experience before going to Russia was on the horizon. “Jesus Freaks” (as they branded themselves in black letters sprawling bright tee-shirts, un-tucked over khaki cut-offs) strolled the campus, some with acoustic guitars under their arms. I hadn’t wanted to wear the tee-shirts, or the new bracelets that said, “What would Jesus do?” I didn’t wear my hair in braids or pigtails, nor did I sport jean over-alls, also en vogue in the late nineties at Malone. Embarrassed because I didn’t assimilate the culture in full, I blamed Dima. Though he didn’t say so, I thought he thought it was weird. Sometimes I had been unwilling to “go there,” like the occasion the skinny black boy preached.

We gathered in the barn, Malone’s central meeting hall. “Close your eyes and feel the Spirit move!” the young preacher bellowed. My eyes almost closed as he approached me. I instantly squeezed out the flutter of light. The smell of sweat and the whine of the microphone poured over me as his hand landed on my shoulder with a cry, “The spirits of evil will leave you!” As he moved away, I opened my eyes and slithered from the shellacked wood barn.

Other times, I was swept away by the blond boy who led praise and worship on Thursday evenings. He strummed the guitar and softly sang about Jesus. When he paused to pray, he seemed foreign. It might have been his southern accent. Or the way his prayers were more expressive than my father’s had ever been. He never spoke for all,
but stayed particular and personal. I always sensed he was sincerely crying out to the
Lord as he confessed his pride, vanity, and shame. He asked Jesus to free him by grace,
and I silently prayed the same. I would leave worship imagining life married to the blond
boy—and believing it would be absolutely delicious.

My first roommate was a fan of punk rock and Christian rock, like Korn and
Audio Adrenaline. She had a soft body and acne, but a smile that pulled her into pleasant
harmony. We had spoken on the phone the summer before we met. We were both
English majors, shared the same middle name, May, and the same favorite color,
lavender. We both assumed we’d be a good pair. But when I spied the Korn C.D. on the
old dresser we’d share our first year, I knew. In high school, I liked nineties pop songs—
nothing too hard-core. Malone brought me quickly into contemporary Christian pop,
Classical and Celtic music, and sometimes country. I hated noise like Korn. The sharp
sounds clanging from her headphones made me nervous.

The first night at Malone, my roommate and I stayed up talking. She told me she
had been home-schooled until her senior year when she “finally” went public (a small
country school with a class of twelve). She’d never had a boyfriend and blamed her
mother.

“She got pregnant when she was sixteen, so she assumes I will, too,” she rolled
her eyes. I hugged my pillow to my chest and tried to make my face blank, which I knew
was impossible. She looked away and asked me about Dima. I didn’t know how to
explain our relationship to her. It was easy to tell in that first night that I’d need to learn
to be silent.
Weeks passed and the gulf between my roommate and me deepened. We avoided sharing time in the room together, but when we would, she stuffed earphones under short hair and jerked to Korn.

I pulled the spandex from my hips and thighs and squatted just above the toilet seat, spying my roommate’s long, uneven toes in the stall beside mine. I closed my eyes and told myself to relax, but anxiety made me feel nauseous. I wanted to be alone, but also felt lonely. “Integrity,” typed in bold font, was taped to the back of the stall door. I silently vowed to look the word up and escaped from the bathroom before my roommate left her stall. I traipsed blanket and pillow to the end of the dormitory to sleep on a girlfriend’s dorm floor, expecting our usual late night talks about new friends and cute boys.

Wendy had a bag of Twizzlers couched in her full lap underneath a high school yearbook, red nail tapping a picture of her boyfriend. I asked to borrow her roommate’s dictionary and stepped on a wrinkled skirt to a neat stack of books on the bed. The Webster College Dictionary opened stiffly in my clammy hands: “1, fidelity to moral principles; honesty. 2, soundness; completeness.” I asked my friend what she thought the word meant before I read the definition aloud.

“Doing what you say you’ll do, I guess,” she said. I figured integrity was a one word statement that echoed the trend raging our campus, “What would Jesus do?” It was easy to imagine my friends from high school, and even myself from that short time ago, retorting “What would he do?” I didn’t know.
We ate licorice and talked about the blond worship leader and our boyfriends. Sexual energy jolted through us like electricity. The hallway light shined through the crack at the bottom of the door as we lay silent, wondering how much to trust each other. I mulled over Wendy’s tragic past and wondered how God could have let a nine year old crouch behind the sofa and watch her father shoot and kill her mother.

“I’m sleeping with him,” she whispered. I wanted to ask her if she felt guilty, but it didn’t feel appropriate. I mumbled uh-huh, waiting for her to continue. She was like me, she would open up and tell you more than you would ever ask. Sometimes she told too much, too fast, such as when she had first told me about her father killing her mother. She seemed to need it out, and telling the horror again and again might have become her way of escape. But it left me stunned quiet. There were few with whom I actually felt more reserved. She was one.

“I’m not ready to stop,” she said. I peered into the semi-dark, Wendy lying on her broad back, full lips still, painted nails raking through her hair. I wondered how God could expect us to wait until we were old to be intimate. It seemed impossible to avoid sexual immorality, even unreasonable. Yet, I felt guilty.

The next day in the cafeteria for dinner, I piled my plate with lettuce, peas, mushrooms, carrots, broccoli, celery and peanut-butter bread. I held my breath and shuffled behind the football team as body odor overpowered the cafeteria pizza. It was quiet, glasses clanked under the soda fountain. I stood behind a boy with a cut-off tee-shirt and red bandana wrapped tight to his head. His thick hands gripped a glass, set it under the Coke. When he turned his head, I realized he was in my New Testament class.
He smiled, and we small talked about the up-coming exam. His eyes floated past me as he repeated, “It’s going to be impossible, man.” Malone offered free-rides to more than a few football players. Division three in football, Malone wasn’t the kind of school many would otherwise have selected. The players had a reputation for being less serious about academics and the Christian rules enforced on campus. Whenever there was rumor of a “real” party—alcohol and sex—it was off campus at the players’ apartments. I kept my distance from those that did little more than remind me of long high school days and nights.

“Good luck on the exam. You’ll be fine,” I smiled without extending an invite to the study group meeting that night. Wendy waved, and I pulled my gaze from the blond worship leader sitting at the front table. It was almost six, and the blue-aproned cafeteria workers wove through the dining hall. The soft-serve frozen yogurt machine would be turned off in fifteen minutes. As the place thinned out, we hurried through our salads. The sun softened the room, seeping through the panel of windows. I wondered why my friend was so quiet and asked if she was okay. With a full mouth, she explained that she needed chocolate low-fat frozen yogurt. We had to hurry before the machines were turned off.

As we walked to the front of the cafeteria for dessert, I tried again, “What’s wrong?”

“You’re probably going to Russia,” she said flatly. I grabbed a red apple and almost ripe banana from the fruit basket, hardly thinking about the abundance of healthy
food at my fingertips. I began to realize that my friend couldn’t handle another person leaving her, and I knew our friendship was shallow enough to disappear.

My professor stood in the corner of the classroom at Malone, closing his briefcase. Dark arms crossed his chest, his head high and straight above round shoulders. I wiped my hands over my jeans, wondering how Dima would react if I actually went to his homeland. He rarely anticipated things as early as I did, but seeing his country and meeting his parents would surely seem more important than anything else we’d had the chance to do. A semester of separation would be hard, but he’d understand—we’d manage our relationship somehow, the way we had the past three years.

Personal concerns spun through my mind as the representative continued talking about the various programs. How would I work out? I was used to running four times a week and doing aerobics at a church just off campus twice a week. It had become routine, which was another concern. I liked structure, perimeters around the hours in a day. When time was planned out, I could lose myself in thoughts, worries, or the fullness of an emotion, still going through the motions of a day: class, exercise, work. In Russia, controlling the pace of life would be impossible. How would I study, pluck my eyebrows, and crap? I’d find a way—plot things out during long walks along the brick roads wrapping Malone’s campus. In the wake of impulsive excitement, I’d sort through the details, sketch flexible solutions. I could jump rope, instead of jog. Eat grapefruit, instead of salad. Become a temporary vegetarian, if the meat was unbearable.
The greatest concern was learning the Russian language. How would I ever survive without the words for simple conversation? It seemed ludicrous, on one hand, to want to meet Dima’s parents without him. If they didn’t like me, or I offended them, how could I explain? It might have been easier to wait until Dima was a citizen and could freely travel back home. Then, I would go with him and we’d both face his family—already together, no matter what. Yet it hadn’t mattered to me what made more sense, what seemed easier, what might be. The only thing that resounded over and over like a gong was the thrill of traveling to Russia.

The impulse to go quickened me. I could never wait until I thought things through. For now, the possibility was enough. I needed to grab the information and run away. Come on, come on, come on, my eyes pleaded as the representative continued.

Her hands were limp at the ends of motionless arms, like loaves of French bread beside her belted khakis. Her dress and reserved manner matched the girls’ on either side of me. I felt my face flush over cheeks still sun-tanned from the summer. My eyes latched to hers, then her hands, and finally the clock as she took fifteen minutes more to cover details that sailed past the drumbeat pounding in my ears.

I oozed out of my seat, floated to the front of the room, grabbed an application and brochure. The overview and objectives flushed a nauseating heat in my gut.

“A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” I read. “You must breathe in the incense that hangs in the air of every Orthodox church. Experience the eeriness of Lenin’s tomb. Savor rich, creamy borsht. Feel the rumble of Moscow’s subway trains.” I pinched the edge of the leaflet, afraid to lose my grip.
“As a program sponsored by the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, the Russian Studies Program is academically grounded in a Christian liberal arts context.” Fifteen weeks studying religion, culture, politics, and economics—traveling through Moscow, Nizhny, and finally St. Petersburg. With Protestant Americans. Are you kidding, I had to go.

“Oh Lord, I want this.”

In months of blind passion, I didn’t bring myself to pray God’s will be done. As my impatience mounted, my heart didn’t settle. Waiting had seemed slow torture as Ohio began to appear a bland dot on my mind’s map of the world. Acute desire to leave kept me from boredom but led me to impatience, which seemed in the middle of the spectrum of my temperament and smack dab at the center of all my problems.

Dima and I talked on the phone most evenings, softly breathing words in young lover ways. Our relationship had always been long-distanced, I continued reminding myself—though two and a half hours between The University of Findlay and Malone seemed nothing compared to eight thousand miles and an ocean.

After getting the approval from Mr. Murphy, Susan drove Dima in her red convertible two hours southwest to Findlay, Ohio, two weeks before fall semester. They drove back in quiet anticipation. Under The University of Findlay logo, promises were stuffed in an orange and black folder. The school’s varsity team was set for the fall. While the coach encouraged Dima to try out next season, hockey continued to become less important in his life. His passion for the game would never falter, but for years
hockey had seemed a means to an end. Now, our lives didn’t seem to ultimately include
the game, at least not on the same intense level.

Dima couldn’t travel across the country playing hockey without sacrificing long
weekends. Given the chance, I think he would have thrown all caution to the still,
Findlay air and gone for it. For reasons I didn’t think either of us completely understood,
he didn’t go for it. Instead, he played on the club team his first year—and continued as
their goalie throughout his four years at the university.

Dima met a boy from Moscow. Not only did they share a past, they were
compatible—Dima reserved and calm, his friend expressive and easily excited. Russian-
English interlaced their conversations. I often heard “dude” and “man” along with a
firing of sharp sounds indecipherable to me: “Shto ti deleash, dude?!”. They played
videogames, watched slap-stick comedy (Russian and American). Their common past
became a touchstone that seemed both a source of pride and determination. They wanted
to become successful in America and contrived future plans that extended their Western
world to the East: buying potato peelers in bulk for their parents to sell back home,
translating for Russian immigrants, opening a Russian restaurant.

Findlay was a refreshing break from Malone. The disheveled way of life was
exciting. We talked about religion, politics, and culture, considering the world beyond
the U.S. My own worldview began to look extraordinarily narrow. Dima’s friend’s
family was Christian and Muslim, he told me during one late night conversation. I began
to wonder about other faiths, like Islam, and the people and places where such systems of
belief were as important to others as Christianity was to me.
At the Moscow boy’s apartment, we drank room temperature soda from chipped mugs. We ate “breakfasts” of fried dough and cabbage in the afternoons. We returned from parties late at night, making sandwiches with generic Myers’ bread and slices of meat left on a greasy dish.

When Dima’s friend’s mother came, she stayed with her son in the apartment for at least a month. She kept the beds made, but not cleaned. Dark hairs wound the bar of soap in the bathroom. Dishes weren’t washed, but at least rinsed when she was there, and though the place always had the acrid smell of cabbage, she sprayed deodorizers throughout the tall rooms to freshen it up a bit. It wasn’t long before she called Dima “son” and me “daughter.”

Later, I wondered if such quick intimacy was authentic. Russians would seem more skeptical of outsiders than this family had ever been with us. Were they eager to develop relationship with us based solely on Dima’s Russian heritage, or had they hoped for U.S. citizenship through Dima’s American family? In a more generous vein, the family from Moscow seemed to simply understand the power of love to draw unlike people together.

Dima spent full days and nights with his friend, but I routinely pleaded for shorter visits. The mother sighed often, shaking her head and mumbling “life difficult,” an expression she knew in English. I didn’t know what to offer, so I’d smile meekly and agree. Sometimes we strolled to the store, and she’d link her arm through mine as we ambled slowly through the old town for milk and hotdogs. She’d peruse the nearly
spoiled produce on clearance and usually leave with something rotten I couldn’t imagine
how she’d fix. I liked leaving. But I liked returning.

The mother would greet me with a kiss, a throaty chuckle emanating from her
soul, sausage on her breath. Her flesh smelled sweet from cheap body spray. She was an
attractive woman with dark Uzbek skin and eyes. Unlike Grandma, she seemed more
aware of the differences and possible offenses a Russian could present to Americans.
She learned English from watching T.V. and baked tortes, drizzled with condensed milk
and caramel, to sell at the small store around the corner. She seemed very willing to
embrace America, as she often squeezed me tightly in her small, strong arms. “I luv
yoo,” she’d flash a gold-toothed smile.

She repeatedly told me, “Dima, good boy,” a possessive smile folding into her
soft cheeks. He became serious about school. He began courses in International
Business and Marketing, and it seemed to his advantage that he was a foreigner, and
fairly Americanized, as his professors took interest in him. One time at a local bar where
Dima’s Russian friend worked, his Composition instructor hung out with us, sipping beer
with a straw. She appeared an aged hippy, wispy hair draping a round shoulder, plain
face full on Dima. With her back to me, my eyes roamed the flower pattern curling the
thin cotton over her flesh. The bar was dim, a votive candle lit and floating in a glass
bowl beside a jar of biscotti. I took a chocolate cookie, smiling at Dima’s Russian friend
as he paused from wiping the glass bottle of rum. The instructor’s sandaled foot was still
and made me conscious of my own tapping against the bar stool. I didn’t feel jealous as
the woman laughed with Dima, instead I was proud. But I stopped wondering why he
stayed after class to ask questions. For once, it seemed others wanted to know and understand him beyond his ability to play hockey. College was opening Dima, and me, to a greater sense of the world and the opportunities we could find in it.

Dima maintained a “B” average through college. He and his Russian friend attended the school’s International Fair, first preparing Russian beet salad—Dima mixing and chopping, his buddy laughing and talking between shots of Vodka. Dima kept his hair cut short and bought a leather vest at Salvation Army, which he wore over a pale green button-down to the International Fair. There, students from India, China, Latin America, and the Middle East offered dishes of their homeland’s traditional foods. I stood behind the “Russia” sign scooping the bright beet salad onto passing plates. Heavy spices and heat settled as thin oil on our skin. Peers and staff ambled through the open gymnasium sampling foods on small paper plates. Languages of the indigenous lands drifted in and out as groups of like students collected bites of India, China, Latin America, and so on. The aroma of particular lands floated together.

On the way back to the apartment, I whispered to Dima to have his friend stop at Myer’s Grocery for carrots and Ranch dressing. “We’re ordering pizza. Why do you need carrots—” But at this early stage in our relationship, my peculiarities hadn’t seemed to bother him, at least not to the point of refusing me. I tickled his forearm.

“Dude, Lea needs vegetables.” They chuckled.

Dima changed into his tie-dye and cut-offs while his buddy ordered pizza, and I felt glad to be among Americanized Russians, to be “home.” While I dipped their crusts and my carrots in Ranch and read, they played videogames long into the night.
*  

One of Dima’s hockey teammates loaned us his “car” for emergency visits. Oftentimes, I bummed a ride with peers from Malone who lived in Findlay and left for home on the weekends. But when there seemed no other way to be together, Dima chanced it with the “car.” It was a Nova from the eighties, aged yellowish-white, the bottom ravaged by rust. As long as the heat was on high, Dima said the engine shouldn’t overheat (even though the gauge indicated it was severely overheated). We couldn’t open the doors from the outside without particular jiggling, and the interior smelled slightly like manure, we guessed from years of transporting stale hockey equipment. We would begin to save our money for a Toyota Corolla to share.

When Dima rumbled into Malone’s parking lot, I’d run out to see him, wrap my arms around his neck and inhale Dove soap and his sweet breath—almost oblivious to the beater we leaned against.

Being on campus with Dima was a precarious event at best. In the beginning, I’d taken him to “celebration” in the barn (an hour of contemporary Christian praise and worship songs and a small sermon delivered by one of the student band members). Dima had stood statue-still among the rest of us clapping and singing. I couldn’t understand why he was so apathetic. Even if the culture was different from any he’d known, he believed in the Lord. Why couldn’t he act like it?

“I don’t know what you expect me to do,” he’d said.

“I try in all the strange situations you put me in,” I’d argued. He hadn’t argued back, but said he was sorry and waited. I had decided not to stay mad. After all, we had
the whole weekend together, and I was too excited to ruin it. But by the end of weekends spent at Malone, trips to Findlay seemed the better alternative.

While in Findlay one weekend, Dima and his Russian friend and I ate dinner at a small Greek restaurant. Our server was a beautiful girl from India, petite and dark with rich, intimidating eyes. The guys knew her from International Club. Dima’s friend asked her to join us at a party down the street after her shift.

The four of us gathered in the back of a dark room, almost unable to breathe in the haze of cigarette smoke and body heat. We escaped to the porch and keg of beer. Dima filled our plastic cups, and I blew on the froth at the top of mine. We were quiet, laughter and Rusted Root pulsating from the rickety house. The night was clear, and stars splattered the sky, as if the painter of the full moon delivered them as an after thought.

Dima’s friend asked about the turquoise cross draping my collar. The smooth stones looked like a Native American rune, which was why I had liked it so well. It didn’t feel simple or plain, but extraordinary and unique.

“What do you believe?” I asked him, glancing down at my beer, the foam now dissipated. He said he was Muslim but wondered about the difference between our faiths.

“It’s the same God,” he said, looking up at the stars. I didn’t know what to say. Dima agreed, which set me on the defensive. I wanted Dima to be strong and clear. He might be the only one who could explain Christ to his friend.

“It’s not, though. Muslims don’t consider Jesus the Savior—right?” I said.
“You’re a Christian, Lea?” The girl from India suddenly asked. Her dark eyes danced as she invited me to Bible study at her house.

At first, the lived-in feel of the old home suggested comfort and familiarity. The soft music, dim lights and pale walls, the wooden cross hanging above a wrap around couch, it all felt warm. The wide glass table with lit candles was pleasant, until I thought it might seem cultic to Dima. He wasn’t there, yet he always felt sort of with me. I sat cross-legged on the couch, Study Bible in my lap, and waited for others to arrive.

The owner of the home had been my Indian friend’s spiritual mentor, and they had met at church. She was in her late thirties, and the years seemed to crawl like a shadow over her taut face. Almost as a greeting, she had offered her life’s story the way one does when it has become like an old keepsake, a battle scar crystallizing into a medallion. She had been divorced, addicted to drugs, and living on the streets, before she “found the Lord.” Deep wrinkles played on her heavily made-up forehead as she concentrated, licking dark lips, eyes almost misting. She suddenly stood, her long body drifting into the bright kitchen.

Two high school girls opened the front door without knocking and joined our “study.” The woman reappeared from the kitchen, blue bowls in hand, and smiled at the girls, explaining they all attended the same Evangelical church. I easily fell in to the role of trying to make the group work as everyone acted shy. I echoed the woman’s life story with my own. “I’ve been saved since I was three,” I began and continued through Malone and my hope that Dima would “grow” with me.
Dima rode his mountain bike to the house when we were wrapping up with a prayer, ringing the doorbell just in time to join us. “Would you like to say a prayer?” our leader asked, roaming her strained blue eyes over his soccer shoes, cut-offs, and angular face. I flinched and squeezed his hand as we settled again onto the couch.

“Lord, thank you for this day and for keeping everyone safe,” I knew he wanted to pass the puck, his palm sweating in mine. I chimed in.

“We pray you guide and protect us, Father. Help us to grow in you and carry out your will,” the words dribbled stale from my lips. I was too uncomfortable with Dima there, too aware of his discomfort.

Afterward, the woman invited me for breakfast the following weekend. I agreed, and Dima and I slipped from the candlelit room. I asked him what he thought about the Bible study. He never said anything critical of the Evangelical tradition, and at the time I took this as affirmation that he was open to it, just not making progress right then.

When I returned for breakfast, I brought yogurt and strawberries to top my pancakes, which seemed to offend the hostess as she told me she had strawberry jam if I liked.

“Can you not fry mine in so much butter?” I asked. A look of pain shot across her colorful face, and I wished to swallow my words. Over breakfast, there seemed little to say, which felt odd compared to the emotional rush that had gushed our words—our lives—so easily on the first visit. She invited Dima and me to a birthday party she was hosting for someone at her church in a few weeks, which seemed to suggest she wanted
to be friends. I said we’d come and strained to find something to talk about over greasy pancakes and yogurt. Luckily, the doorbell rang.

An attractive vacuum salesman, dark-haired and small framed, stood in the middle of the living room demonstrating the easy glide of the “new and improved” Hoover. The hostess laughed flirtatiously. She seemed to have an insatiable appetite for new people, maybe all people, and I wondered if she ever craved alone time the way I did then.

The birthday party was after church on Sunday, and it seemed our new friends’ entire church had come to celebrate. Dima and I stood in the back of the crowded living room mutely nibbling pizza and salad from red plastic plates. Colored balloons matched vibrant people wearing easy smiles. I hated feeling like an outsider and began to resent that Dima had joined me. Without him, I could have been more a part of the party.

A middle-aged man asked us where we were from. His three young girls giggled and passed a balloon between them, grabbing chips from their mother’s full plate.

“Are you saved?” he asked, nonchalantly taking a bite of cake. I looked at Dima’s straight face wishing color wouldn’t spread my cheeks. I told him we were, and he nodded, smiling as though we were suddenly close. “I’m Pastor Jiggs,” he extended his hand. “Come on by the church sometime,” he told Dima.
CHAPTER SIX

As weeks came and went, locked in waiting to know if I’d go to Russia, not-knowing cycled its usual exhausting pattern: determination and intense interest, obsessive worry spiraling into anxiety, and finally, the need to let go—just a bit—and pray God help me balance. In the beginning, Dima and I talked about the chance I had to meet his family, but it had always seemed so far away that he didn’t take the opportunity outside the realm of a dream. Maybe he had been afraid that if he got his hopes up, they’d fall, shattering with the reality that his parents were becoming a distant memory and so was his homeland. Maybe he was afraid if I went to Russia and experienced the culture, I’d feel differently about him—less willing to make us work in the face of more realized cultural differences. Maybe he was simply afraid of wanting something we might not get.

His parents had told him about some of the changes in the “democratic” or New Russia. He knew that in these post-Soviet times there were rich and poor, and that his family was of the less fortunate group. He had been told that communism had provided less but allowed the commoner to partake of more. Now, the rich had control over everything from the finest food, medical care, and cars, to the law. His father had told him that Russia was unsafe and dirty. The people didn’t have any moral support from the government and few had found their way back into the Church from pre-Soviet times. Maybe Dima was afraid for me to go there—a place he feared he barely knew.
Finally, wearied by my silent longing to leave for Russia, I prayed God’s will be done, even if it didn’t match mine. Just when unexpected peace began to unfold inside my spirit, the answer came.

I called Dima with the news of traveling to Russia riveting through me. “I was accepted into the program. I’m going! Can you believe this?”

He was silent.

“Are you there? Honey?”

“Lea, Lea calm down. I’m happy. This is good news. Really good news. Wow. I’ve got some pictures and stuff for you to take to my parents. Holy crap, I can’t believe you’re going to see them.” His voice was even, the reality not yet working its way into his consciousness. His calm was unfathomable to me. So steady, still, so reserved, reigned in.

“Aren’t you excited?” Though he said he was, his calm made it seem he wasn’t sure.

I wanted to run ahead, full speed, despite constant underlying worries over my ability to learn the language and find a way around what had seemed a mysterious dreamland. Despite the intermittent worries others added, like academic advisors warning I might not be able to graduate on time. Like Mom pushing an extra Christmas cookie on my plate, “You’ll need a little extra on your bones for Russia.” Like Dima’s reiterated: “Trust no one.” I felt more determined as others’ fears quieted my own and kindled a fiery resolve.
I wondered about living without my family, without Dima. But I generalized these worries. Without them, I could experience independence I never had. I could change, really change, on my own. Lofty ambitions propelled me. The idea of meeting Dima’s parents and homeland, of sleeping in his bed, of strolling through his old sports complex, it all seemed like someone else’s story. I could do it. And in the middle of the night as I lay awake imagining, there was the sense that God would guide me. I was stilled, able to rest, despite the fire inside.

I wanted to go to Russia with desperate, reckless certitude.

It was the end of an extreme Christmas break. Most of the month had been spent working at Red Lobster and tearfully saying goodbye to Dima, over and over again.

“The semester will go by fast,” I said blowing down my red polo that smelled of “all you can eat” crab legs. We went swimming in the Holmeses’ pool, made out in the deep end, and floated somewhere between joy and sadness, fear and excitement.

At the end of the month, my family loaded a Carnival cruise ship and sailed through the Bahamas. Despite a vacation of sunshine, reggae, coconut and shrimp, it seemed one more thing to endure before I left for Russia.

There were moments when the atmosphere of relaxation jostled me beyond anticipation. I draped a white towel over the plastic chair, kicked off flip-flops, and pushed large sunglasses up my nose. As the ship cut through the tropical air and sun warmed my back, the world of Russia, of building myself up to endure Russia, melted.
The ship glided glassy water toward Nassau Island as I sipped my first pine colada and futilely glanced over the Russian alphabet.

Sunday afternoon before leaving for New York City (where I’d meet the American group traveling through Russia), Mom and Dad helped me squeeze necessities into Dima’s enormous hockey bag. With my knees bent, broad strap looping a shoulder as arms bear-hugged the mass, I tensed and pulled. Throwing the strap from my shoulder, I slumped to the ground.

“It’s all these stupid gifts!” My clothes took up a third of the bag: three sweaters, long-johns, a week’s worth of underwear, a pair of jeans and a skirt. The rest was filled with candies, photo albums, socks and boxers, waterproof mascara, postcards, and Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame snow-globes. I didn’t understand some of the requests Dima’s parents had made after his friend from Moscow told me that in Russia the people had many western goods. Make-up and candy and clothes were in western shops, he had said. Dima’s parents had explained that these things were exorbitantly priced, and few Russians could afford them. In addition, they believed that products from the West were better made (even if they seemed exactly the same). Tatyana had even said American tea was much better than Russian, and that children could drink tea in Russia because it was so weak. I laughed to myself, thinking of the popular “Chai” (Russian tea) that cost three dollars at Starbucks.

“I don’t know what to do!”
“Calm down, Lea. You need to get rid of some of this stuff—” my father’s words softened with a chuckle as he carried an old suitcase up the steps to replace Dima’s unwieldy hockey bag.

_i am going to Russia_ replayed over and over like a heartbeat. While uncertainty flowered in the pit of my stomach, believing God had opened the door conditioned the fear. “Don’t worry,” I whispered as much to myself as to Mom standing in the doorway of my room.

I ran down the steps to the kitchen and grabbed the phone. “I have a sweater for you to take as a gift for Tatyana,” Mrs. Holmes said.

“Mrs. Holmes, I honestly can’t fit even a strand of hair in the suitcase at this point.” A squirrel nibbled a piece of peanut-butter bread Dad had placed outside the sliding glass door. A colorless day.

“Well, it’s such a nice sweater. I know she’d really appreciate it. If you really don’t have room—” I pulled the phone cord.

“I seriously don’t. I’m sorry, but there’s just no way—”

“I’m at the church,” she said. She had choir practice, and we said our goodbyes quickly. I worried that I had offended her. She would have taken as many sweaters as she was asked, that was Susan’s way. She made possibilities, but my family never had. It seemed I was crossing an invisible line in leaving America for Russia, and no one in my family expected extra favors.

Unsettled, I pulled the chocolate frozen yogurt from the freezer thinking there wouldn’t be such delicacies in Russia.
I answered the phone. “Hello?”

“It’s me again. Listen, why don’t you wear the sweater? That way you’ll stay warm and get it there.”

“I’m already wearing an extra one.”

“It’s a large sweater; I bet you could wear it over all your clothes.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Holmes.”

I was tired of being pushed and feeling out of control. I was desperate to be on my way, moving from everyone that made the journey more complicated.

It seemed as long as I moved, packing, scurrying, thoughts sped through the mass of changing feelings, and I wasn’t trapped. I had just turned twenty—it seemed time to grow up. But doubts weaved through ambition: You got a C in Spanish—What are you doing? From Findlay, you drove to Indiana instead of Ohio—What are you thinking?

“Why are you headed to New York?” An attractive flight attendant asked me. I mentioned the trip, and he handed me a small bag of pretzels, eyes narrowing, half-smiling as he moved to the next passenger. In the hum of passengers’ gentle chaos, unusual calm seeped through me. Carryons were shoved in overhead cabinets, a mother urged twin boys to settle down, a teenaged boy with tattoos crawling the back of his neck ferreted in his bag for headphones. A buzz inside of me began. An exhilarating energy, an easy joy.

Twenty-four hours of stillness laid ahead as I silently prayed. Please be with me Lord. You are my strength and my rock. Be my calm.

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Had it been adrenaline, hormones? (For unknown reasons, many of us began our periods upon arriving in Russia, even though for most it hadn’t been the expected time of our cycles.) Had it been the touch of God, or the neurological calm after the storm of fear and doubt? I didn’t know how, but it seemed I could feel God’s will for my life.

When I first arrived in New York, I was lost. No one seemed to be traveling to Russia—at least no one looked like me in the blur of running to the Lufthansa terminal where the group would meet. We would take the airline into Germany, then switch to Aeroflot and fly into Moscow. It was afternoon, and there were fewer people than I had expected for the city of New York, which I entered for the first time that day. There were business men and women in suits, rolling new briefcases. There were vacationers, some who appeared to be coming home with tanned faces and stiff tropical shirts. Others, less colorful and more eager, appeared to be leaving for a trip. Families from China, India, the Middle East shuffled bags and suitcases under effervescent lights, many dressed in western clothing. One beautiful woman was wrapped in a mustard sari, holding a swaddled baby. The relative newness and cleanliness as well as the diversity of peoples in the western world were unremarkable. Until it was thousands of miles away.

My neon boots, heavy coat, and reindeer hat didn’t suggest a trip to Florida. I ambled down the Lufthansa terminal to two girls and a boy sitting on the linoleum with boxy suitcases before them, heavy jackets unzipped. Wool hats were balled in hands or stuffed in a jacket pocket. Suddenly, the rest of the world around me melted away, and I
thought only of how I fit in to the group before me. I sat beside a tall boy with huge boots.

“Hi. I’m Tom,” my hand felt small in his large palm. He had electrifying blue eyes and a broad face that seemed used to laughing. His hair was perfectly cut to his scalp, and his smile was familiar and intoxicating. The two girls were plain. One was blond with red-rimmed glasses, and the other was smooth-skinned with naturally red lips. I felt too made up and licked off my lipstick. My hair had just been cut, long layers brushing the tops of my slight shoulders. I wore tight, flared jeans and two small wool sweaters, my turquoise cross underneath.

“Want some ice cream?” the blond asked me.

“That’s okay,” I smiled, more interested in Tom than roaming the terminal for an ice cream stand. I was flushed before we began to talk, maybe not from the heat. I slipped my jacket off and asked if Tom was nervous to go to Russia.

“Not really. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now. My best friend studied abroad last semester.” He seemed to study me, and I grew confident in his attention. “He liked it a lot,” he laughed. “Well, he met his fiancé on the trip.” His smile was magnetic.

More of the group arrived, and it seemed we were an eclectic assortment—no one appeared like another. As we shared our lives, we seemed an even more sundry collection of Protestant Americans. We were from different parts of the country, some from very wealthy families, and others from missionary parents. Some had never left urban homes, and others had lived in places as remote as Papua New Guinea. A few had
studied abroad before. One girl had lived in Russia. Everyone seemed brilliant, aware of
Russian culture and world politics in ways I was not. I silently cursed my family for not
being more political, more educated, and less personal. I wished to reserve myself, even
as I easily offered my feelings as they came and went.

Tom came from a suburban family and had a sister with whom he was very close.
His family teased each other. They easily fought and made up, he said. He seemed open
and trusting. I was comforted as he was slow to learn Russian, and slow to care too
much. While I studied, passing on card games and lazy evening chats with the group,
Tom often led whoever was willing into the last hand of Rummy. He built things, even
owned his own summer construction company, and seemed the kind of man to play
football rather than read a book.

Of course, I knew none of this as I followed Tom’s long gait into the plane, drawn
to him by physical attraction and the sense that he was familiar, as soon nothing else
would be.

The plane was new—crisp gray interior, tall seats, the air not yet stale. There
were small television sets mounted at the front of the plane, and a petite stewardess with
a heavy German accent said there would be a movie after dinner. As we were lifted into
the air, I thought how my parents always gripped the armrests, eyes fluttering shut, with
the plane’s takeoff. I wasn’t scared as the runway became a long cement line among the
many rectangular plots of earth below.

From our over-stuffed carryons, we pulled journals, headphones, and our pre-
semester homework, a slim book by Yale Richmond titled From Nyet to Da:
Everyone seemed to bury himself in something to do, which made me think that either I was among studious individuals, or we were all looking for a way to hide from one another. I didn’t mind. I opened Richmond’s book to page twenty-six and read, “A man who was not Orthodox could not be Russian,” quoted from Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*. I read on, wondering about the nation’s identity and religion so braided together. “The consensus of the Orthodox congregation was regarded as the truth—a singularity of truth in which there was no room for a pluralism of opinion.” How stifling.

“The United States, in contrast to Russia, has had neither a state church, an official ideology, nor a single truth. Rather, it has known a pluralism of beliefs and truths and has tolerated, if not encouraged, dissenters from these truths. . . . Indeed, the very right to be different has been respected.” Of course Christianity had changed over time. Why would Russians object to this? As the airplane glided beyond our country, I flipped through the book to more interesting chapters, like food and friendship.

“Have you been to Russia before?” the girl next to me asked, pulling her hair back in a tight ponytail. Her face was perfectly oval with narrow lips and full eyebrows. Intensity pooled her hazel eyes. I told her about Dima, about going to meet his parents, and unlike others who had always seemed to follow our story with questions, she nodded in a matter-of-fact way. She had been there before, and she and her fiancé had plans to live in Moscow. She didn’t wear her engagement ring, said it was dangerous to walk around with valuables. She said many Russians didn’t wear wedding rings, but those


2. Ibid., 30.
who did wore them on their right ring finger. Would everything be so reversed from the ways of the West?

She and her husband would be missionaries in Russia after she graduated, she said. I was captivated. She was only two years older than me but seemed many more years ahead. She wasn’t the kind to small talk, and we resorted to our books before long. As I unfolded the Russian alphabet Dima had written for me, I rolled her name through my mind: Michelle. I had the feeling she really would become a missionary and live in Russia. She seemed serious and strong.

My stomach rumbled as a blond stewardess with tan hands rolled the dinner cart up the plane. The salty smell of chicken and sweet corn wafted in the air. A soft chatter broke among the group, and I felt joyful and strangely calm swallowing the last of a tortilla wrap.

We landed in the Munich Airport International in the morning, though it seemed the middle of the night, as we had mysteriously lost six hours in the time change. The corner of the airport terminal where we gathered was dim. A gray day filtered through the windows. The airport was under construction and few passengers seemed there, or at least near the terminal where we were, adding to the effect that we had been swallowed in a time warp. We slumped into orange plastic chairs. I scanned the German on overhead signs.

“There’s payphones if any one wants to call home,” Tom said. I thought my parents were probably sleeping—maybe not Mom, she’d be up worrying. I decided to call collect. A delicate girl from our group with an exaggerated under-bite stood from the
chair, hugging her purse to her small chest. As we shuffled to the payphones, a child in black and red skirt-overalls and knee-socks skipped past with a mangy stuffed animal hanging from one hand. Blond hair bounced against her small back as she led an elderly woman around the bend. She must be wearing a costume, I guessed. In America, little girls wore gossamer princess dresses. Who would dress up as a pilgrim, I wondered.

“They aren’t working for me,” I told Tom, holding the flat line against my ear. A German sign was taped on the bottom of the booth, which we imagined said the phones were out of order.

“No big deal,” Tom smiled.

“Germans look so serious,” I said to the quiet girl next to me, her eyes swollen, pointy lip trembling. “You okay?”

“Oh, yes,” she said with alarm. “Why?” she asked, fidgeting with a headband severely set in mousy hair. There were live plants in the corners of the terminal, which added life to an otherwise dank setting. Strange muffled sounds shot from the intercom, which none but the newest arrival to the group understood.

The German boy-man smiled, hair gelled and face without the film of oil that had glazed the rest of ours hours ago. He stepped in front of the group that had sprawled over the terminal chairs and introduced himself. His name was Lon, and his eyes were small and dark, unfocused as he explained he was joining us from Frankfurt. He appeared old, maybe thirty. He had a large nose, and when he smiled his face actually wrinkled. The rest of us still tended to lingering pimples.
“I’m Lea. Nice to meet you,” I shook his hand as he set his army duffle bag on the empty chair next to mine. He offered a brittle laugh, like tinkling glass, and turned to talk with the nervous girl beside me.

My only hope was in Tom. The rest, especially Lon, seemed too different. My assumption rested on vague generalizations: No one looked preppy, more alternative-like. Everyone seemed serious and intellectual. They were from missionary backgrounds, or other exotic travels that made them infinitely worldlier. And I thought Tom was the cutest.

As we boarded our flight into Moscow, my expectations soared. I was overcome with blind joy. Things were paused, and there lived a fragile sense that the journey became our life.
CHAPTER SEVEN

If St. Petersburg is Russia’s head, then Moscow is its heart and Nizhny Novgorod, its pocketbook.¹

Black night coiled outside the brightly lit Sheremet’evo International Airport couched below 488 Western-styled hotel rooms, complete with amenities one expected in America: swimming pool and sauna, fitness and massage centers, fine dining and sparkling toilet seats. Above us in the hotel, Russian as well as international dishes were served at Cote Jardin where the heavy aroma of onion and garlic, fish and fried beef rose from portions half the size of an American’s expectation. However, an American could easily leave full after dinner at Don Pepe Steak House, where fine cuts of beef were served with french-fries and Coka-Cola.

The Moscow airport was not as foreign as I had imagined. Many of the signs were in English and Russian, such as one advertising a souvenir shop in the “V.I.P. Lounge.” The pitch read: “Escape the ordinary and come shopping in Canada.” How strange to think Russian dolls, perfumes, and travel maps weren’t exotic and romantic. They seemed anything but ordinary.

My body awakened as we walked toward a smaller man in a wool coat, gracefully moving in our direction with an expressionless face. He wore dark shoes and pants, a

¹. Nineteenth century Russian proverb.
Russian fur hat in hand. His face was smooth and pale below a shiny scalp with sparsely combed-over hair. A look of gentle concentration was etched under soft brown eyes. He appeared either exhausted or sad. He became a picture of a Soviet intellectual in my mind. Background information from one of our program handouts said that our program director, Henry, had lived twenty years in Russia. Many summers and semester holidays were spent in his hometown of Kansas.

Henry didn’t speak but waved his hand for the group to follow. After moving quickly through passport and visa checks, the group trailed Henry, halting next to a cluster of militia leaning against a smudged wall and laughing. They straightened, smiles melting from gruff faces, as Henry pointed ahead to the Bureau de Change Facility. “You’ll need to convert your currency,” he began in a soft tone. He couldn’t have competed with the noises firing through the airport. He turned to the guards and spoke in Russian. I finally felt I was in another country.

“We’ll take the express to Ismailovo Hotel,” he stretched his thin voice over the measured steps of the passing militia. Unlike in the States, Russian people didn’t smile at passersby, and I thought the people were rude and didn’t talk much at all.

An elderly woman had strategically set goods in front of the exit from Sheremet’evo International Airport. She peered at us straight-faced and nodded to the Russian dolls, perfumes, and maps displayed on a cheap metal table. “Buy?” she said, her papery face breaking with a toothless grin.

Lon pulled his new rubles from a tight pocket, and in loud English explained, “I want a map, please. Thank you.” I winced, irritated already.
Wind and bitter snow slapped my cheeks as the group loaded the bus to Ismailovo Hotel. The driver swayed to a melancholic American pop song from the fifties. A romantic smile held at the edge of his dark eyes, and I realized he was the first Russian to smile upon meeting us. A fur hat plopped above his worn face. He swiped a thick hand over an aging forehead, creasing with a smile. Miniature international flags hung above the front window, the USA flag in the middle. As the bus rumbled through night, a yellow light glowed under the flags: Afghanistan, Australia, Belarus, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Israel—too many unidentifiable. I shook my head to clear a budding sense of shame and doubt. A tingle of adrenaline fueled joy. I flashed a smile at the driver as we filed off, imagining Dima’s father behind the wheel.

My teeth chattered and my face burned strangely cold-hot as I trudged through the Moscow night. Henry stooped to the slushy street and wrestled duffle bags and western suitcases from the belly of the bus, the driver tossing our luggage with a stern face.

“Go on to the hotel!” Henry ordered, though we could only read his hands motioning us across the street above the din of speeding cars and hollering taxi drivers. I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to balance a bag around my shoulder, purse around my neck, as I rolled the suitcase through the slush. No one could carry my load. I had to do this. Mom was far from my side.

“Need some help?” Tom shouted as an old-fashioned car rumbled inches in front of him. Cars sped haphazard and dangerously close as the group scattered through the street.
“Trust no one,” Dima had said, and his words resounded over and over as I struggled through the loud darkness and past the taxis.

I thanked Tom and pushed the Student Bible, notebook, and hairbrush deeper into my carryon with shaking hands. I offered him the suitcase as honks and sharp words shot through gasoline and exhaust. I thought Russia seemed less a romantic mystery and more an action-packed thriller. I tore through the slush, silently praying I’d live to experience Russia.

Even in Russia, night turned to day. Even in Russia, dawn was fresh and silent. Especially in Russia, newness and hope filled me as I lay in a small bed in a Moscow hotel thousands of miles from home.

Through a large window, the gray city was strangely still. Smoke billowed from factories on perfect squares of frozen earth. High rise apartments appeared dank shades of cold and contrasted with the cozy room, one of two thousand in the massive hotel. Unlike Russian apartments set with a small table of homemade borscht and pickles, warm rugs hung on walls, and the worn space of lifetimes, the hotel had been renovated the year before. The place had the feel of a tidy, basic hotel in the States—other than the black ceramic tub and the complicated bedding. The sheets were brightly patterned and covered by a floral spread encased in a sort of large pillow case. A square, removed from the center, revealed the top blanket. I learned it was considered unsanitary in Russia for the blanket to be kept outside the protective bed cover, which seemed ironically fussy.
It was the world outside the hotel that was most striking. In the course of ten luscious days, we strolled Red Square, snapping photographs of a bride and groom standing before the Cathedral of St. Basil. The couple appeared part of a fairytale, as unreal and beautiful as the busy geometric designs of the cathedral.

“This church was built to commemorate Ivan the Terrible’s conquest of Kazan in 1551. St. Basil was a Holy Fool, from that beautiful Russian tradition of asceticism and piety,” Henry began. The sun was bright, the sky as blue as an onion dome behind the bride. She tilted her head, dark hair spilling over lace-covered shoulders, and it seemed impossible not to be swept away by sentimentality. I had been warned of culture shock, but in those initial days I was high as a kite. Anything seemed possible, including a wedding in Moscow with Tom.

Once in the center of the Kremlin, Henry motioned around the six buildings, including three enormous cathedrals, edging the square. “If the heart of Russia is the Kremlin, then its soul is the oldest area within the Kremlin, Cathedral Square, the so-called ‘City of God,’” he said. I felt miniscule at the center of the massive architecture, at once understanding why Dima thought churches in the West didn’t look like the “house of God.”

Henry motioned outside the massive limestone Cathedral of the Assumption, icons seemingly floating just below five proportioned gilt domes that held Orthodox crosses. “For centuries, this church served as the central cathedral of Russia and the place where czars were crowned,” Henry spoke so softly we strained our ears to hear. The church looked stern, less ornate than the other cathedrals inside the Kremlin. As we

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stepped inside, Henry explained, “The church was designed by Italian Aristotle Fioravante, but in the style of traditional Russian architecture from ancient cities.”

The group seemed stunned to silence once inside the first of many such parades through Orthodox cathedrals. Figures of saints and martyrs sprawled pillars, window jambs, and reinforcing arches. Depictions of Jesus Christ and Mary as well as ancient scenes from the Bible glowed.

“The Bolshevik Government transferred to Moscow in 1918, and for the next seven decades the church was closed. Rumor had it that Stalin allowed an Easter service at the Cathedral of the Assumption in 1941 to pray for the country’s salvation when the Nazis were fast approaching,” Henry said. His eyes lifted to the upper tiers of the north and south walls where scenes from Mary’s life were painted.

I wondered—had she doubted the angels when they told her she would give birth to Christ? She had responded as God’s servant, completely obedient to his will. The greatest mystery of faith seemed the fact that the allure was impossible to remove. Doubting was easy, akin to human nature. Even in communism, the rumor of Lenin’s act of faith echoed the human need for God.

Todd stood in front of me in a fluffy Columbia jacket, snapping a picture of the Apocalypse fresco on the west wall. Saints flanked Christ and sinners mourned beneath him in hell. The faces in the icons were similarly proportioned with wide-set eyes, long noses, delicate closed mouths. Light and dark washed through the scenes like good and evil. Todd’s bright hat bobbed in front of me. We looked totally out of place among the ancient work.
“Much of this dates back to the seventeenth century,” Henry explained pointing to twelve gilt bronze chandeliers and several multi-tiered candelabra overhead. I found it impossible to imagine people, even Russians, in 1999 worshipping among such antiquity.

As we toured the “City of God,” the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was being rebuilt. “By 1931, Stalin destroyed the church with plans to re-make the building into a palace of Soviets. Atop the remade building, larger than the Empire State Building, he intended to resurrect a colossal statue of Lenin. But after several attempts to construct and stabilize the foundations, frustrated by the shifting earth from the Moscow River, the construction was abandoned and replaced by a public swimming pool,” Henry said. I almost expected him to laugh aloud at the absurdity of communism, but his face was sober.

As the group reflected Henry’s seriousness, I bit back my smile. Tom nudged me and grinned, and I suddenly felt warm. I thought it only made sense that God would keep Lenin from the construction of his idol.

We slowly moved from the center of the Kremlin, and Henry told us it was a symbol of Russia and the oldest part of the city. It was easy to recognize the importance people here placed on grandeur. An enormous chipped bell, the largest in the world at two-hundred-ton, and a forty-ton cannon, both created in the sixteenth century for the tsar, weighed upon the frozen earth—unused. Neither had ever been used. Russians were obsessed with magnificence to the exclusion of purpose.

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At the end of the week and a half in Moscow, we visited a circus one evening. I had looked forward to the change of pace from countless churches and museums. We bought oily popcorn and ice cream bars, and slipped into the bleachers. We snapped pictures as acrobats mounted one another in a human pyramid. The entire place was blinding red: the carpet oval below the bleachers, the painted cement walls, the trampoline, even bowties wrapping the fat necks of tigers. I sat next to the future missionary to Russia, stealing an occasional sideways glance as she laughed at the clown show, and I wished to feel as easy. The performances, even the clowns, flipped around the stage in precise tumbling patterns. It had been ten years since Melanie and I had munched animal crackers and mad-clapped the looser performances of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and I suddenly missed my sister terribly.

We continued on excursions through countless churches. I was often more interested in Tom’s warm body near mine than anything else. I was beginning to tire of endless “looking” and was ready to find a quiet place alone and make sense of all we had seen. It was way too early to let the group know I was weary of sightseeing. I imagined they were from families that visited national monuments and toured historical sights, so I kept my complaints to myself. In Russia, the churches, museums, even the circus seemed similarly weird. Raw. More extreme. And I thought about Dima—how he wouldn’t take vitamins, calling them “pills,” but would drink honey and garlic in steaming whole milk. “What? It’s natural,” he’d explain. It made more sense to me after spending time in Russia—a world that took drastic measures to avoid western balance.
Art in Russia—the rich, soul-wrenching chants of the Church; the enormous grandeur of the buildings, especially the churches, cave-like and majestic at once; the somber melodies of folksongs weaving a land and people back through centuries of mystery and heartache, celebration and mourning—could all seem superfluous to my young American eyes. As one who had dropped Fine Art at the start of high school, too busy to devote the time and concentration to the hobby, I often marveled that a nation so impoverished and disciplined could be so flamboyant and beautiful.

I branched off from the group as we explored the Tretiakov Gallery of Fine Art and stood before the “Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God.” Somber colors depicted Christ’s mother holding him in her right arm, her head bowed to his cheek, his arm around her neck. Her left hand reached up to her child, showing all the way to God. I sensed great love and tenderness from the painting. The love of a mother began to emerge as a symbol to me of the love of God. While the veiled mother seemed fiercely feeling, she was yet strangely reserved. I had never prayed to Mary, but my soul responded to her in those few moments of calm. I longed for her careful affection, her steadying touch.

A Russian prince took the icon of the Mother of God to Vladimir where it was rumored miracles began occurring. The Tatars were threatening Moscow, and with hopes to pray protection over the city, the icon was placed in a cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin. The enemy retreated. Miracles continued to occur from the icon. The Mother of God was said to have appeared to some in dreams. Some have traveled great distances
to see the icon weep myrrh, and stories of healing and protection from prayers to the icon continued to inspire many.

At a small kiosk I bought a C.D. of the *All Night Service to the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God*,\(^2\) sung by the choir of a St. Nicholas church in Tolmachi. I had no idea what it would sound like, but the icon on the cover drew me—stilling, spell-binding. I didn’t consider praying to anyone but Jesus. But like all loving mothers who need not be asked to pray for a child, it was possible Theotokos’ entreaties to her son encouraged an opening of my spirit.

I added five postcards, a poster and book to the counter. A young woman in a miniskirt and high boots, hair and lips as bright as her sweater, rang my total—“Ten dollars, please,” she spoke in English.

Russia was amazing. Feeling light and joyful, I slipped into a restroom. A *toilet seat* (often a hole in the ground sufficed). The day was simply blessed. But there was no toilet paper.

“Excuse me, ah, is there any tissue?” I asked an elderly woman in the most polite Russian I could manage. After a moment, coarse brown paper appeared in a solid hand. I forgot how to say “thank you,” hoping the woman might be at the sink so I could smile at her.

“Ztrastvtya,” I smiled proudly. She was rigid, silent. I studied the warm water running over my hands, wondering if I mispronounced the formal hello.

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2. Alexei Pouzakov, conductor, (St. Nicholas Church, November 1996).
Some of my peers engaged in heated discussions with Henry at the start of the day (after he translated the news and we had prayed), or over soup and black bread in the afternoons, or in very warm hotel rooms after very long days. But I found myself distracted—thinking about the thin strawberry yogurt for breakfast, wondering when Dima’s father would call, missing Dima and just as quickly catching Tom’s eye.

I didn’t understand Russia through Henry’s explanations, and he seemed to prefer the group experience the culture rather than simply taking his word for it. But we only had one semester, and many times Henry did fill in the historical and cultural blanks. Yet even after years of experiences with Russians, as an American, Henry couldn’t convey a people he was not.

Though we were within walking distance of the Novodevichii Convent, Pomorskaya Old Believers Commune, and the Cathedral of the Annunciation, the group gathered in Henry’s hotel room for contemporary Christian praise and worship.

The room was hot, as many buildings in Russia would feel through bitter winter months. My mother was always keeping our electric heat below sixty-nine degrees, and the old-fashioned hot water pipes heating many of Russia’s buildings made my cheeks flame. So did singing with Tom. The group harmonized in pop Christian songs, a small boy with wire-rimmed glasses strummed an acoustic guitar, his sock tapping against the cover on the hotel comforter. We passed dried fruit and chocolate and bowed our heads to pray for Russia: the presidential elections, the tension with Chechnya, the new market economy. We prayed for peace at home with President Clinton. When we had left for Russia, there had been talk of impeachment (because of the Monica Lewinsky scandal).
We had been in Moscow almost six days, and the group wouldn’t travel to St. Petersburg until the end of the trip. Dima’s father couldn’t wait any longer and boarded the train for an overnight trip to meet me.

The night before we met, I wrestled the blanket out of the complicated folds and leaned a stiff back against the sheets. The alarm was set for seven, an hour and a half before Viktor was supposed to arrive. I thought of Dima—his quiet, shoulder-bobbing laugh, his full lips and gentle hands caressing my back. I wondered what he was doing, and if he was tempted by girls. I knew he was loyal and there was no reason to worry. I thought of touching him.

I couldn’t sleep, and the overhead thumping and muffled Russian drew me into longing, then irritation. “Will they never be quiet?” I pulled a pillow over my head, muffling a woman’s laughter—fading to a moan, bed creaking. My stomach was a knot, heart racing. Sleep was hopeless. My bowels were awry, and the toilet in our room was out of order. The phone rang. “Crap!”

“Well?”

“Leeeea. It’s me, Veeektor. Ah, get Henry.” It was barely six-thirty.

I pulled a sweater from my bag and stepped into the jeans I’d worn all week. I knocked over the brush, picked it up and moved it through my hair. He was early, I reminded myself, wondering if my time versus Russia’s would continue at odds. I ran down the hall to get Henry.

“I’m sorry to wake you. Ah—Dima’s father’s here. I need you to translate.”
“Just a minute.” He closed the cracked door and soon after emerged with a meek smile, smelling like grapefruit, and briskly led the way to the cafeteria in his black tennis shoes.

The dining hall was empty but for the workers, and music played softly as ladies rolled buffet carts: hotdogs, cups of thin yogurt, dumplings, and fruit. A small Christmas tree wedged in the corner of the room, and ornaments hung from the ceiling. Unlike in the States, there were no bright and smiling Santa Clauses or Christmas tree napkins or spice cakes at the buffet. The holiday seemed down-sized in Russia, hardly noticeable once people filed into the bright cafeteria.

A full bodied man with a shadowy face approached us. “Ztrastvtya,” Viktor said and shook Henry’s hand. In a flash, his heavy arms engulfed me like a giant inner tube. His cold sweat and body odor squeezed me. I froze. Tried to feel something.

At the table, Viktor’s narrow lips rested in a half smile, the corner of his mouth twitching. Soft lines splintered at the corners of his eyes. He had Dima’s triangular nose, full eyebrows, but an extra sixty pounds blanketed his father’s smaller frame.

Sharp sounds curled from the side of his lips, head cocked, eyes on me as Henry began to translate.

“Viktor asks about your family,” Henry said.

“My family is well. They’re nervous I’m here for the semester,” I laughed. “But they know how much I wanted to see Russia.” I straightened my back against the chair, smiled self-consciously into Viktor’s weary eyes, and imagined he saw me as a confident young woman serious about his son—enough so to come here.
For some reason, as he watched me, my father’s face emerged in my mind, dark and oval, green eyes charged. My father’s was a contagious energy, as I knew my own could be. My joy seemed reflected in Viktor’s glassy eyes. But despite my smile, nod, my inching further and further onto the edge of the seat, I was somehow unable to move the conversation along. I was as impatient as my father, I thought.

Viktor asked, “How is Dima?” and began speaking to Henry before I responded. Henry appeared skeptical, or maybe I read this into his face washed clear of expression. Viktor’s words were left un-translated.

Once Viktor paused, I said, “Great! He’ll be calling. He sends his love.” Viktor’s hazel eyes fixed on me. Was he wondering what the English words meant from me instead of Henry, if some manner of my speech contained hidden passageways to his son?

I escaped to a large metal pot of tea, filled three cups and set one before Henry and Viktor, leaning against the table with my own and hoping to appear adjusted to Russia, comfortable with our director, and wifely in my serving-spirit. Henry’s voice was soft but firm, and Viktor’s gruff but calm as “Putin” and “Yeltsin” popped in their conversation. The following year, 2000, marked Russian history as the first transfer of power from one leader to the next by a constitution. Some citizens were hopeful. Yeltsin’s passing of the presidential torch to Putin without a revolution, and the new President’s promise for fewer taxes, more work, and a stabilized economy encouraged the optimists, according to Viktor. However, Putin was young, and others like Viktor and Tatyana doubted a man they’d not heard of one year ago.
“Dima’s father wonders if the people are better off under communism. They had food coupons then. Now, the people work harder and harder, hoping for their pay. Sometimes it comes after three months.” Viktor interrupted, and Henry shook his head in agreement.

“He wants me to tell you that if you were a teacher in Russia right now, you would only make twelve dollars a month. Not enough to live on with the cost of inflation. He thinks this is why the average worker is turning corrupt.” Again, the mask fell with a simple nod, and Henry appeared to agree with Viktor—or at least empathize with his view. Henry said Dima’s parents’ perception was common for the average worker caught between two worlds. In one, the government provided everything. In the other, the government provided next to nothing. Many blamed Gorbachev and his successor Boris Yeltsin for giving the country to foreign investors (whom most considered criminals).

Viktor patted the sweat-dampened tee-shirt between his un-zipped jacket flaps. He looked into the distance as Henry said, “He wants to be sure you’re safe. Wear your money under your clothing—” It was almost frightening how little confidence Dima’s father appeared to have in his country.

“Oh, tell him not to worry. I’m safe!” Viktor sipped his tea. Henry excused himself. Didn’t Henry think we were safe? I thought we would never have been permitted to study here if things were that unsafe. We were fine. I was sure of it.
“Viktor, ah, kag de la? I will learn po-rusky yazeek soon.” His face was straight, eyes far-off. Did he hear me? Understand? What was he thinking that made him suddenly seem so distant?

“Leea, I ahh, kak po-Engleske yazeek? I call scora. Ya boodo robotayet.” I laughed nervously. Sighed. The silence was pregnant. He was slow to speak, seemingly rolling thoughts and words through his mind. And painfully slow to leave. I forced myself not to look down at the watch. The group would arrive by eight for breakfast. Either Viktor would be gone by then, or the others would help soften the tension. I could speak, at least, and showoff my ability to relate to normal Americans. I was a natural conversationalist, a people person, and not the dumb fool I felt with Viktor.

Henry returned with his plate of food. Viktor spoke to him in Russian, and Henry’s face seemed to flinch ever so slightly as he lifted a cup of plain kafir to his slight lips.

Viktor slowly raised his heavy body from the table, and looked down to me. He left just in time to make his shift driving the bus through Kolpino. No one would snatch even a moment of time from him. Though we shared less than a half hour that morning, it was clear Viktor was like Dima—persistent and passive-aggressive. He was also loving and kind. I stood, and he circled to my side of the table. I linked my arm through his puffy jacket. He stood straight, feet together as if in military attention, and smiled down at me. We walked to the entrance of the cafeteria. He wrapped me in his arms, “I luv you, Leea,” he said in deliberate strokes of English.
“I love you, too, Viktor.” I found it hard to believe he had ever been brusque, but couldn’t help recalling the scars on Dima’s thighs from his father’s belt. I couldn’t see him on a Vodka-induced rage—not with the Russian embassy, not with Dima. There was no way this man, humble to the point of meekness, would find himself on the government’s “black list” (as we had heard from Dima’s hockey coach). I imagined getting to know the family might become a mystery caught between what seemed one way but could truly be another.

Back at the table, Henry asked, “Are you engaged?”

“No. Why?” His brown eyes peered into mine, reserved of expression. He didn’t look concerned but concentrated. I hated not knowing what he was thinking. What had Viktor said to him? Dima and I were close. We’d probably be married someday, but Dima wasn’t the type to conjecture. We weren’t engaged, and I was sure Viktor knew that.

The metro system in Moscow was a field trip in and of itself. Trains ran every two minutes in the well-kept stations. Many of the subway stations had been painted in honor of the Communist Party. Some had Red Army Art décor, and hammer-and-sickle modern murals spanned others. I had never imagined underground subways with bright stained glass and antique chandeliers, with framed mosaics, and arches of marble and gold curlicues pushing toward the earth. Under communism, whenever authorities had rewritten history, workers had removed all public references. I was infinitely grateful

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that the new government couldn’t afford to paint over the rich history housed in these stations.

A woman just past middle-age looked off in the distance while selling tickets behind a booth in the metro station. I asked for a ticket, please, in Russian. At first, I wondered if she was hard of hearing. I spoke up, but she didn’t flinch. I tried to reword my request, wondering incredulously what else she’d think I wanted. She didn’t budge. Finally, Henry shimmied to the front of the line and gently spoke to the woman.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I would like to purchase twenty metro passes for my group of students. Please forgive me for inconveniencing you.” She nodded and issued the tickets to Henry without delay. I watched her, willing she might turn to me, but she didn’t.

The metro was packed on the way to Monument Park. A man, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, wore a black fur hat (shapka) and a scarf crossed tightly at his throat. His face was etched in deep concentration. Everyone seemed focused on something other than each other, a newspaper, a book, the cement floor. It was odd the way Russians kept their eyes from wandering. While the older people appeared rigid, those not much older than us looked up, even spoke in English. Many of us were approached by interested Russians. One time when Tom had been walking to McDonald’s to meet the group, a middle-aged woman in fishnet stockings offered to show him “a real Russian woman.” He told us he had to practically run to escape her.

I again marveled that Henry didn’t explain the desperation around us. Did he think we might become too frightened? Did he no longer see the way Russian people
seemed either too hungry for us, or repelled? Was he waiting, watching as we took
Russia in on our own—like a father who would explain when the time was deemed
appropriate?

We packed the metro, practically hugging whoever happened to be in front of us.
I felt Tom behind me, his body pressed to mine. A young man turned and faced me,
eyeing my face, jacket, boots. I wondered if it was my jacket and boots or my face that
he seemed to like. He spoke in English and asked my name and how I liked Russia. His
body odor mixed with the smell of new leather, and he smiled without showing his teeth.
I was conscious of Tom behind me, Henry to our side, and I backed tighter against Tom.
The Russian boy asked what I was doing that evening, and I nervously laughed, said I
was busy with the group. He slipped a scrap of paper in my hand with a telephone
number and his name written in Russian and English. He grinned as he filed off the bus.

The nervous girl was wedged between Lon and a woman in front of us.
Suddenly, she gave a high-pitched yelp.

“Are you okay?” Henry asked. She waved her hands by her face.

“I—can’t—breathe,” she said wide-eyed.

“Let’s get off here,” Henry announced as the metro stopped. We were a mile
from the park. The girl almost fell off the bus, and our group huddled around her.

“Okay. Let’s go, let her be—” Henry briskly walked to the park, and we sped ahead
following him. He was right, she needed space—we all did.

Pale statues of literary heroes blended with the bright snow and contrasted with
the looming communists, dark and positioned to feel as though they oversaw the other
monuments in the park. Wooden structures appeared as submissive people, arms bent over thin bodies, heads turned, legs tight together. They appeared to be stretching, flexible but perfectly straight, as though controlled by the communists twice their size. Some of the wooden structures had children carved at their sides, unnaturally blended into their legs and torsos.

“Hey Lea, want a picture next to Alexander Pushkin?” Tom motioned to the frozen nineteenth century writer sitting on a stool at the edge of the park. Pushkin had been the first to combine Old Slavonic with vernacular Russian, bringing together the past and the present. I wondered if his blank face, perfectly proportioned with wide almond eyes, shadows of irises looking to the side, was a deliberate illustration of a person always watching in the periphery. What would it be like to fear exile because of my writing and beliefs? What would it be like to be in exile as Pushkin had been?

“Look at that, Tom!” I pointed to the brightest spot on the snow. A garbage can, like an upside down cup wrapped in a Coca-Cola advertisement, appeared strangely western in the park of Russia’s monuments. He leaned against the can, turned his square jaw to the side, and offered an exaggerated model-like pose. Was he serious? I snapped a photograph.

“You two need time alone?” a girl from the group called back. Tom stooped to the ground, gathered a snowball, and threw it at her purple jacket. We laughed as it grazed her fiery hair. “Hey!” she shrieked.

Snowballs ignited under the frowning communists.

*
The Izmailovo weekend market was next to our hotel, and Tom and I became part of the thrum of humanity there during an open afternoon. It would have been embarrassing, had we not been together, to be the flashy western tourist eager to purchase souvenirs with wads of spending cash. Our bright jackets, boots, hats, and jeans clearly set us apart from the more dressed up Europeans. Women wore form-fitted, fur-trimmed coats, skirts and high boots. Men wore leather, and baggy was apparently not in style for the Russians (even the men’s pants were slick against them). There were others like us at the market, and the sellers seemed used to our kind and eager to receive us with their smiles, waves, and heavily accented English appeals.

Most of the group had brought twice the amount of money the Coalition’s form letter had indicated was necessary, but I had just four-hundred dollars for a semester-long shopping spree. Despite the fact that many of the goods were exorbitantly priced for Russians, I bought gloves, whittled bears, marble keepsakes, a St. Basil music box, hardly denting my stash of bills.

“You can probably have your parents wire you money,” Tom said posing with the tenth Russian fur hat the dirty vendor had handed him.

“That’s a cool shapka!” I said, much to urge him past the countless hats offered by the determined hands of the seller. “You should definitely buy that one.” It was gray and thick and made his square face and light eyes appear very Russian. I wondered what nationality he was. He said he was German, Swedish, and other stuff he didn’t know about. A typical American, I thought. I was German, Irish, Native American—just like
him, a conglomerate of time and people from all over the world. He bought the hat and led us to the next kiosk.

Plain wooden bears of all sizes balanced on a flimsy table. Some were shellacked, others raw, but they looked more or less alike. The old man behind the table smelled of Vodka, and I thought Tom could negotiate the price once he finally selected a bear to buy. “You should ask for that one,” I nudged him, pointing to a bear and cub the size of Tom’s hand. “And bargain,” I whispered in his ear, almost tasting his skin.

“It’s too small,” he said, and followed each of my selections with similar disapproval—the wrong size, shape, look. I began to pity his future wife, if ever there would be one. I thought he might be impossible to please. At long last, he pointed to gloves on display a stand over.

A teenage boy was selling gloves, some looked like limp animals. “Your hands have been ‘freezing,’ right?” he laughed. “Here, these would fit under your gloves from home.” He picked up a pair of gray “rats.”

“Those are kinda ugly, but sure. I don’t really care. You’re right they’ll fit under my gloves.” I wanted to be as fast as he was slow and show him his selections need not take an hour.

Four hours at the market melted by easily, and we were laughing at my new gloves when Lon rounded the corner.

“You guys mind if I join you?” he asked with a sly grin.
“No dude. Hang out with us, but we’ve got to meet up with the group soon. Free
time’s up, man.” I liked the way Tom was assertive and friendly. Dima always left it up
to me to break us away from others.

In the late afternoon, the group followed Henry from the metro toward a plain
building. We drifted down stone steps to an unfinished basement with orange chairs.

“Make selves at home—please,” a young blond man spoke with a microphone on
a make-shift stage, a cardboard slab elevated from the cement floor with blocks. He
wore jeans and a sweatshirt and carried a black Bible. Less than a handful of Russians
sat on the other side of the room.

“This is Andrei,” Henry said mounting the stage and accepting the microphone.
“He is training to be an Evangelical preacher,” a whistle came from the crowd. Henry
smiled. “He is going to share a sermon with us and afterward lead us in praise and
worship.” There was applause, and the show began.

The preacher’s accent was rich and mixed with Russian. He seemed nervous as
he paced the stage with an occasional stomp of his foot to bring home a point I couldn’t
understand. I tried to follow him, then to imagine what he might be saying. But my
stomach was tight. I needed to find a restroom. Quickly.

“Henry?” He leaned down, “I have to use the bathroom, but I don’t have any
tissue.” He stood straight, eying the young pastor up front, and reached into his pocket.
He handed me four thin napkins. I scooted in front of Tom, and he squeezed my arm.

“You okay?” he asked.
“I think it’s that stomach thing we’re passing along,” I whispered.

I climbed the stairs and ambled through a long hallway that reminded me of an empty high school. A yellowish light came from behind me, but the hallway was otherwise dim. The walls were smooth stone, hot water pipes hugged heat to the wall. The bathroom was pale green and typically old. There were no toilet seats, soap, or paper towels, but I didn’t expect these commodities any longer. I crouched over a cement hole, looking straight ahead for fear of what could be underneath me.

Back in the hallway, I continued to feel ill but again marveled at the surreal calm that filled me. I shivered and slowly moved to the end of the hall, not wanting to pass Tom and Henry for shame of what they knew I had just been doing. There was no pressing desire to see Andrei preach either, not that I didn’t wish him luck. It was important that Christianity spread through Russia, of course. But for some reason, I didn’t feel confident in his imitation of western Protestantism. The basement set-up had felt strangely reminiscent of New Testament Fellowship from my parents’ early days as Christians.

It seemed impossible that one man and his interpretation of the Bible could become the source of revival in Russia. Yet, I felt guilty that I doubted. Wasn’t anything possible through the Lord? On the floor hugging a warm water pipe, I cried out to God feeling weak and exhausted. “Lord, be with me. Father, protect me. Please guide me and teach me.”

I felt absolutely held.
That evening, the group gathered once again in Henry’s hotel room. We had stopped for “dinner” at a small store, similar to a western Convenience shop. Pear nectar, smoked sausage, dense, slightly sweet cookies, and a jar of cheap caviar with rolls became the dinner entrées that evening. I sat cross-legged on the hotel bed slowly chewing a poppy-seed roll. Lon was closest to the front of the room where Henry stood facing the dark window. Lon leaned forward from the small chair, eagerly catching Henry’s words.

“It is imperative that we support the Evangelical Movement in Russia now. Otherwise, these young Russians won’t survive in a predominantly Orthodox country.” I agreed, thinking how terrible life in a cold, dark place might be—especially without hope in Jesus Christ.

I drifted back to the time spent with my family on the cruise months earlier. We had been sitting around a sparkling table. Our maître d’ was pin-striped and dark as he bent to my sister and me for a photograph. The picture was warm and bright, his arms around our bare shoulders, but even then I had felt that without hope in a greater place—a perfect place free of all worry, doubt, and sadness—I’d be lost.

In our silent concern, the group agreed with Henry. We had to help the lost.

*
Before settling in Nizhny Novgorod for the twelve week routine at the university, we visited the “Golden Ring,” a circle of ancient Russian towns situated to the northwest of Moscow. Henry spoke above the din of the group engaged in breakfast. “You will see ancient Russian architecture of the twelfth through seventeenth centuries as we visit cathedrals in Suzdal and Vladimir. The history of ancient Russian towns, their culture and their traditions are now considered ‘museums in the open air.’”

“You look like a nice lady, Tom,” I laughed as he delicately held his tea cup, pinky finger extended.

“Why, thank you,” he batted his long lashes as he brought the chipped china cup to his pink lips. The breakfast table was animated with conversation and new day energy.

3. Author and Tom before a church in Suzdal.
In general, the group seemed to be loosening up. Physical discomforts had intimately revealed us to one another. One girl suffered with a desperate yeast infection, which she had tried to heal with strawberry kafir, only to realize this exasperated her condition. Monistat was flown in. Many of us were caught between a rock or a way-too soft place—keeled over cement holes in bowel irritation. We talked: was it the foreign cheeses, the beet and cabbage soups, the “unsafe” water we used to brush our teeth? We joked about getting fat on the Russian diet, about wearing our pajamas to the theatre, and about the impossible language. At this stage, we were light and such matters were more entertaining than bothersome. It was early.

“Please gather your things quickly,” Henry said swallowing his tea and standing in one fluid motion. He never told us what to pack or how to do things—so unlike my mother—and I wondered if this was deliberate on his part, or some secret skill lost in parenthood. He didn’t mention his family, and I assumed his time and energy was spent leading groups of students through Russia instead of tending a family of his own. I wondered what woman would ever have the capacity to handle such a life. Maybe a Russian. Definitely not an American.

I was excited to listen to my new C.D. in Tom’s player and hoped for a long, quiet ride.

“Hey,” Tom said bumping my shoulder on the way to the bus.

“You ready for another adventure?” I asked.

“Of course. How are you feeling?” He laughed, pulling the wool hat over my eyes. I giggled and pushed against his coat.
The group was beginning to separate into cliques as we grew closer. A guitar player hung out with a tiny, blond girl and her over-six-foot, soft bellied boy-friend. He had wispy hair below his eyebrows. He was always talking politics with Henry, silenced by the gentle tones of our director the way he never seemed to be by his soft-spoken girlfriend. Lon and the nervous girl began to pair up. I wasn’t the only one to consider Tom more than a little interesting. Michelle admitted her attraction, and we became a group of our own—like Tom’s harem, we joked.

Tom and I loaded a bus with gray upholstered seats and green carpet. It was clean and roomy, not unlike a new Greyhound in the States.

“You guys sitting here?” Michelle and another girl asked. Tom and I shook our heads, and they filed in behind us.

“The ‘Golden Ring’ has become a tourist route in the northeastern part of what used to be the State of Muskovy,” Henry said at the front of the bus. Heat from Tom’s forearm radiated to mine, our arms side by side on the arm rest.

“By the 1950s, much of Russian architecture was in danger of complete disintegration, but many of the buildings were restored after World War II,” Henry’s voice was a mix of pride and sadness. We rode in silence—scribbling postcards home, ferreting through bags for music or photo albums. Tom pulled an album from his bag and pointed to a photograph of his family in their living room. His father was tall, full belly tucked into khakis. His mother and sister were dark and thin and wearing lipstick and jeans. He said he missed his sister, and I thought it was cute the way he held to the picture far past my interest.
“Mind if I borrow the C.D. player?” He passed it to me with a distracting smile. I moved down and lifted my knees to the back of the seat in front of me, closing my eyes as Orthodox Church music rolled through the headphones. Deep sounds, unexplainably comforting, filled me. Eyelids eased closed, heart slowed.

It was the music of silence, of timeless prayers that kneaded tension gathering in my shoulders. It was possible to cross-over, to drift from the rumble of the bus, the soft laugh from someone nearby, the annoying tingle of a fresh pimple burgeoning in the corner of my nose. It was within me—this gentle lull past all thoughts of home and future, of doubt and passion. It was like sleep, but conscious, as tangible as the swipe of my palm against the cool metal of the seat. So different from the excitement that often fluttered my heart and made words gush, thoughts run, feelings pool—peace was still.

The group gathered inside another church. “Vladimir was the capital of Russia before Moscow. This cathedral is in the center of the city and is also called the Uspenskii Sobor (Church of the Nativity of God), like the one in Moscow. In fact, it was the model for the church in the Kremlin.” Henry pointed to the frescoes on the walls of the cathedral. “These were painted by Andrei Rublev. Some say they’re comparable to the ‘Last Supper’ by Leonardo De Vinci in Milan.” The icons were somber faced—long suffering and terrifically sad.

We continued sightseeing—church to beautiful church. I grew bored. Each church became more a museum than the last, and my sense of reverence expired. There were no worshippers, no ornate priests or resonant choirs. No candles, no incense, no
mood. And the frozen flavor of Russian asceticism and piety would beg the question:
Why was all this architecture, iconography, and ancient tradition necessary to worship the
Lord? But this was Russia’s ways, not mine. I didn’t have to understand. The cathedrals
seemed Christian museums, inactive, outdated and outnumbered by the many Protestant
Christians I knew. How could Christianity be so different one place to another?

At The Church of the Intercession on the Nerl River, we stood before a field of
unmarked crystal. Henry began, “As we walk to this pearl of a little church, pay attention
to its architectural perfection. It was built in 1165—” We traipsed through the cold, my
toes and fingers almost frozen, but I didn’t care. The sun was so bright, the sky so blue,
the church so white. At the top of the church was a silver dove. I had the overwhelming
urge to pray. I imagined only heaven might be so breathtaking.

On the outskirts of Suzdal, we ate lunch in a hut with red-checkered cloths. Men
and women in bright costumes filled tea-cups and carried baskets of bread under their
arms to our rough, wooden tables.

“Ready to dance?” Henry asked Tom.

“No way, man. I can’t dance!”

Ladies began twirling like red and white pinwheels in a folkdance called Barynya
(ladylike). Traditionally, the song and dance was used by simple folk to address ladies of
higher class. Skirts swirled, hands clapped, feet stomped. Russian men in the front rows
began singing and squatting low to the ground. Some played small stringed instruments
like a banjo and tambourine. In the frenzy, I could barely hear myself laughing.
“I can’t dance,” Tom whispered in my ear as a woman with bright lips sashayed closer and closer. She extended her hand and led him to the center of the floor, twirling under his arm. He stepped on her feet, missed her hand as she spun him around, and bent his knees to a beat of his own. Finally, he stopped dancing and stood clapping, his face as flushed as her lips.

Heat rose like spirits from fresh baked bread, tea, and a clay-pot of stew. The edges of the potatoes and beef sizzled. Tom was quiet as he ate, shoulders bobbing with silenced laughter after a few bites.

“How’d you like dancing?” I nudged his elbow with mine. He looked at me, as if to say “What?”

Sightseeing was over, and we loaded the bus for our hotel in Moscow. We dragged ourselves back to our rooms.

“How’d you like dancing?” I asked.

“It was fun, I guess.”

“Fun? I thought you looked pretty mortified. What do you do at school dances—do you dance with your dates?”

“I usually go with a group of guys. I don’t take dates.”

“What do you mean? Haven’t you ever taken a girl to a dance, Tom?” He paused before turning toward his room. The hallway light was bright, and the start of a worry line marked his forehead. His nose was small and drew out his large eyes.

“No.” The word rolled smooth and easy from his perfect lips. There was no hint of insincerity. His eyes were so intense.
He turned his head to the rustle of bags at a door nearby, nodding to the small blond girl from our group.

“So, do you kiss your buddies at the end of your date? I mean seriously—” I laughed. “Don’t you ever want to take a girl? It’s not like you’ve never kissed or something—is it?” I turned toward my hotel room.

“No, I haven’t.” I faced him in disbelief.

“You have never kissed a girl before? I don’t believe you.” My heart beat faster.

“I haven’t,” he said.

I felt like Jezebel. I was even more attracted to him. I felt worse than Jezebel, tossing and turning that night with thoughts of Tom’s broad lips against my own.
CHAPTER EIGHT

The train that would glide us into Nizhny Novgorod was a picture of the past. A line of square windows shot down the army green aluminum. The rounded front of the train appeared a face set in fierce determination, bright lights like eyes searing through the bitter dark. We seeped through the cavernous night and into the train for our overnight ride to Nizhny.

It was almost seven when the heavy heat of the train thawed the tip of my nose and fingers. Small yellow lights lined the musty hall feeding into cabins with opened sliding doors. By four the next morning, we would arrive in the old city where we’d stay for twelve weeks. I had no idea what the Soviet dormitory would look like, what the

1. Cooks at the dormitory in Nizhny Novgorod.
school might feel like, or who might be there, waiting to meet us. But I anticipated these things, longing for a routine where our days were more than endless bouts of sightseeing. I slid my luggage next to a folded blanket and sheet on a lower bunk. Two beds the size and feel of a bench were wedged against the wall. A nightstand squatted under a small window with a pinkish light. I felt tucked into a fairytale.

“You hungry?” Tom asked passing with Lon. I pulled open the velcroed pouch around my neck to check my rubles, visa, and passport. Still there. A photograph of Dima peered back, a close-up of his profile as he drove. He was so cute. I wanted to linger with the picture, but they were waiting.

“Anyone sleeping here yet?” I nodded no, and Michelle squeezed through the doorway with her bag. She half smiled and set her tight bundle on the upper bunk. If I had to share a room, she was my first choice. I told her we were getting some food and to come along.

The café was brighter than the rest of the train, illumining every smudge of grease and scuffed wall. A round man was stuffed behind a red booth smoking a cigar, the butt moving in and out of his wide mouth like a fat beetle. A beef patty and braid of bread were on his plate. Michelle explained the menu, the only one able to read the dry erase board at the side of the counter.

“Everything comes a’ la carte. You want salad, buy bread separately. Shashlik, like shish-kabobs, if you’re in the mood for meat, or herring. They close in an hour, and I’d buy something other than fish.” I decided on hot tea and bread, Tom and Lon tried the shashlik, and Michelle ordered juice and a prianik, or honey and rye cookie. It was
hard not to goggle at the only guest other than us, especially because he didn’t look up from his book as we stared.

“Think he’s from the Russian mafiya?” Tom asked half joking.

“Shhh—you really do need to be careful,” Michelle whispered. She sipped her juice. My tea was served in a glass nested inside a silver holder. I blew ripples.

“Ready to begin studying?” she asked Tom. Before he could answer, Lon shrugged his shoulders, and with a mouthful of beef said he didn’t mind, was always up for a challenge. I sighed. I had to learn Russian.

We packed into Tom and Lon’s cabin to play cards, and it was no time before I forgot studies, mafiya, Dima’s parents, and every other serious matter. I didn’t even like cards, but it felt good to be held together in the magic of a train ride through Russia. The experience seemed like a movie as we laughed close enough to smell each other’s breath and brush against each other’s hands in a card shuffle. Joy carried me through another night.

But as I lay against the sheet listening to the train, anxiety awakened me once again.

“Lea?” Michelle said.

“I’m still up. Can’t sleep at all, can you?” I said.

“I’m thinking about Tom.” My heart beat faster as her words dropped from the top bunk. “You know, I’m engaged. I really should not be so attracted to him,” she said. I froze. Before thinking what to say, I responded.
“Oh, he’s really cool. I mean, he’s good-looking, fun, and best of all a strong Christian. Everything about him is likeable—” I said.

“But I’m engaged.” I understood her confusion. I planned on marrying Dima—wasn’t that why I was here?

“You can’t control what you feel, only what you do—right?” It was just a suggestion, weak and pitiful. I was as anguished as she seemed.

“What’s Dima like?”

I thought how to put him in words. He wasn’t the stereotypical Russian that friends in the States had joked about before they knew him. He wasn’t a Vodka feign. If anyone had gotten drunk, it had been me. He wasn’t rough, the way some thought a hockey goalie might be. He didn’t have the attitude of a sleeping bear, I didn’t think. And if he did, I’d not seen him wake. His kiss was perfect, sweet.

“He’s really nice and not that big.” I thought of Dima’s gentle hands holding mine as tenderly as he held his kitten. “He’s funny—sometimes he means to be, and sometimes he just is.” It felt good to talk about him, to fall in love with him. I asked her about her boyfriend and listened to the story of their engagement. We fell asleep with stories on our lips.

Russian students from the Nizhny Novgorod State University met us at the train station and led us to the dormitory. Unlike in the States, few Russian students stayed in the dorms. Instead, they lived in nearby apartments with their families. The sick or
elderly or people without an apartment of their own stayed in the dormitory for months at a time. It was more like a shelter in the States than a university’s dormitory.

When the group arrived at the entrance of the old Soviet building, a tiny woman with eyeglasses circling half her face threw a curt smile in our direction. “Boys, here! Move bags here!” She pointed toward the tall cement building, shaking her thin face and whispering “cold” in Russian, a word we knew well by then.

“Hello, Henry. Good group here, huh?” He hugged the gray woman as we slipped by, following boys dressed in black leather jackets and tight pants. Once inside a living room area with a dusty T.V. and dark couches, the woman began official introductions.

“I Vera. Work with Henry many years. Very good man, very good.” Her smile reached the bottom of her glasses. “I lead International Program at university. Too bad not summer. Here, Oka and Volga Rivers very beautiful—” she looked far-off, glasses sloping her button-nose, and sighed. “No problem. International student, Sasha,” she nodded to a dark-haired boy with a clear face and broad shoulders, his waist as small as mine, “he show you around. Still much to do, even in winter season.” Shasha’s smile hinted that he would be our first glimpse of a Russian “Romeo.” A few girls from our group were cast under his spell, but to me he seemed effeminate.

Henry said, “Nizhny will offer you the experience of the average Russian person.” As he spoke, Vera passed out gray sweatshirts with a logo of the city: a red deer in a white field with black horns and hoofs, the city’s coat of arms. In Russian, “Nizhny
Novogord State University,” sprawled the backs of the one-size-fits-all sweatshirts. I touched the letters, sounded out the shapes, and balled it into the corner of my suitcase.

“Go to dorm rooms. Boys help with bags. Any problems and I help. Okay?” she almost smiled, then quickly pivoted to Henry and began speaking in Russian.

The dorm was red with thin carpet and pale walls looming three times as high as my dorm in the States. There were two thin cots on either side of a wide desk, which quickly hosted a smorgasbord of American life in Russia: an English-Russian dictionary and flashcards, a jump-rose and rag, bottles of boiled water and grapefruit, deodorant and sea-mist body spray. There was one closet with a cement ledge and a bent rail to hang clothes. Mainly, we continued to live out of our suitcases. Without windows, the room veiled late January’s descent into February days of “General Winter.” Despite three weeks without a peek of sunlight, we existed in collective hibernation in the dormitory where it was warm and bright.

From the start, Nizhny Novgorod felt different than Moscow and the other cities we had toured. As Russia’s third largest city and a center of trade and culture, I expected it to be busier. But when the hot water shut off, it wasn’t turned on sometimes for days. Even when things worked, they moved infinitely slow by an American’s standards. In Henry’s apartment, the group shared one old computer couched between boxes and a single bed. The room was crammed with stacks of books, a few dusty blown glass animals, and Soviet dolls. We had fifteen minutes a week to e-mail home, but the
computer booted up so slowly it left us with more time to stare around the dusty room than actually write loved ones.

A walk down Bolshaya Pokrovskaya Street to Minin Square offered the fullest taste of city life in Nizhny: McDonald’s, a closet-like film development shop, and a general market stocked with packets of American instant coffee, Russian music, and French perfume. The square was fringed with frantic gypsies, dark-skinned woman and children with dirty faces crying, “Pajolista” (please) over and over. We passed with our rubles tucked under our shirts. Sections of the boardwalk were under construction and covered with rickety floorboards. Yellow bulldozers became fixtures next to the holes in the earth. Wires dangled from phone poles—and yet few workers were seen fixing things. Apparently, winter became a respite for all. The city was frozen silent. Frozen still. Churches, museums, and nameless shops were half un-done: plastic taped windows, broken door hinges, dilapidated wood siding. The entire city often seemed out of order.

As I walked the city, breathed the biting air that swept past the red bricks of the Kremlin, being in Russia became less a thrill and more a test of endurance. Grand Prince Yuri established Nizhny on the confluence of the Oka and Volga rivers. Because of its location, the city was predetermined for two main things: a place of protection against the Tatar invaders and a center of international trade. Ultimately, the city preserved the Russian way of life and the great wealth of the land because of the determination of the people. It was destroyed by Tatar invaders and rebuilt seven times in its first 150 years. Built in 1511, the massive Kremlin still stood before Minin Square in 1999 as the city’s strongest and oldest structure.
A digital thermometer across from the university read a temperature below freezing. The cold was less romantic, sometimes even unbearable for the brief periods we had to be out in it. I pushed myself to get serious about the main reason I was here. Which seemed to change direction like the wind.

“Upon entering this institution, young people will not hear any empty thoughtless words or any sounds without a meaning. Here, they will be taught the things that actually exist.”

Michelle and I squished-squashed in our flip-flops down the stairs to the showers. The stalls were gray cement, and the steamy water shot out so forcefully it was almost painful. My mother had insisted on water-savers at home, a trickling of water compared to the power-blast in Russia. A line already trailed the men’s room, close enough to ours to hear Lon belting his German “morning song.”

“I thought we were early,” I whispered to Michelle who shrugged and stood behind a few girls. Before long, Tom and Lon slipped past us in tee-shirts and towels rolled at their wastes.

“What a voice,” Michelle said. I smiled at Tom, a chord of water rolling down his forehead.

After showering, we were back in our room, wrestling jeans over still damp legs when there was a knock on the door. “You know who that is,” I mouthed to Michelle as she told Tom we were almost dressed and to hold on.

2. Quote from Nikolai Lobachevsky, a famous mathematician from Nizhny.
“How are you guys,” Tom asked. He opened the door and settled onto my bed in khakis and tucked-in flannel.

“Starving,” I said, throwing my head upside down for a quick blow-dry.

“Is that really necessary,” he said over the roar of the dryer. I rolled my eyes and ran the brush through my hair. Michelle sat on her bed, waiting with a book.

“Book worm,” Tom said.

“What, should I just waste my time like you do making fun of people?” She gave her half-smile. We slid our book bags around Tom’s broad shoulder and walked to the cafeteria downstairs.

A few middle aged Russians interspersed our group in line for breakfast. I wondered from where they came and if anyone who showed up was offered a free meal. A woman with dyed blond hair and eyes smudged with liner set bowls of casha, like cream of wheat, and a slice of white bread with butter and cheese on our trays. The cafeteria was painted apricot with matching striped curtains. Paper placemats were rolled longwise in waxy-red cups in the center of the table. Lights like glass tulips hung from the ceiling. Two rows of wooden tables crammed the small room.

“Want me to pray?” Michelle asked, and Tom and I bowed our heads as she blessed our day and meal. She always had words a notch above mine. Her insights seemed sharper, wiser, and as Tom raised his head and thanked her, envy crouched deep inside.
We walked to the university. The day was blank: gray sky, dirty-white snow crunching under our steps. Icicles two feet long cut through the air suspended from birch trees. A creaking sound moaned through the spindly branches and wind nipped our faces.

“Let me guess, you’re frozen?” Tom said.

“Not really. This Triple Fat Goose coat is awesome.” A flash of Dima’s Christmas gift wrapped under the Holmeses’ Christmas tree channeled a wave of nostalgia through me. I slowed down to blow my nose, which had become a faucet in the frigid air. Tom and Michelle kept walking when a sharp clunk struck the back of my head and knocked me down. “What the—” I rubbed my wool hat and glanced down at a chipped spear of ice beside me. I wanted to go back to bed as Michelle’s laughter bounced through the air.

I shuffled to language class and slumped in my chair, anticipating anxiety with the first lesson. I rubbed the back of my coat dusted by salt, dreading the three hours before tea. The class usually began with the teacher leading us in the Russian alphabet, a birthday song or folksong, which I couldn’t learn quickly enough.

Our language teacher wore a small skirt on her curvy figure. A floral shawl wrapped her petite shoulders, which I imagined she slipped over her pinkish bob if she went to church.

“Leeea, tsk, tsk, tsk,” she said with wide eyes, accented by thin brows. I wanted to ask what the problem was, but she scampered out of the room and returned with a dampened handkerchief. “Daviy, daviy,” she motioned for me to give her the coat. I hesitated.
“Nyet, nyet, Lena. Ya buido,” evidently, there was no use telling her I would do it. She shook her head and gently reached for the jacket.

“I am Mother,” she spoke in English, a cross between a shy smile and pout playing over her full lips.

Folding my cleaned coat over the chair, she smoothed her skirt, pressed her pink lips and proceeded to the front of the classroom. She picked up a stick and pointed to laminated pictures corresponding with a letter from the alphabet. I didn’t feel sick anymore.

We had two language teachers, and each represented Russian women in my mind. There was the feminine instructor who had cleaned my coat. She laughed, wore lipstick, and called on girls and boys equally. There was the scent of Lilacs and peppermint when she bowed close to my cheek. She was over thirty but still beautiful. She had a child but had not become the Russian square. She smiled, giggled, like a child.

Our other teacher was more reserved and seemed to hide from my direct gaze. She was older with dark hair streaked with gray and forced back with bobby pins. When she spoke, her jaw set crooked and stayed in that unnatural position until she was finished with her train of thought. I wondered if she had been hit. Was she married? She said nothing of her personal life. She wore dark colors, and the only shine on her face came from an occasional smile that unveiled her one gold eye-tooth. She was a dry woman, a controlled woman. What irritated me most was that she never called on the girls. I would wag my hand under her nose, but she would point to Tom, who had slouched as far down into his seat as possible. He never had the answer.
I imagined this might have been a result of the Soviet era she had grown up in. She had probably been in her forties when New Russia (post 1991) hit—no doubt already set in her ways. In tsarist Russia, women were considered inferior to men. Peasant women as well as wives of landowners were mistreated by husbands, parents and in-laws. Women were expected to take care of the home, the husband, and the extended family that often lived with the family. Most women had not been educated. Women that had worked outside of the home typically worked in textile and clothing factories. They were paid little and worked nearly to death.

After the 1917 Revolution, women were encouraged to have jobs and offered childcare and welfare opportunities. But communism and unemployment made change very difficult. Stalin made a movement for “new women.” And during World War II, fifty-six percent of the workforces became Russian women. Some of these jobs were even “high” status (dangerous or important) like mine workers and farmers. Some women joined the armed forces and commanded male troops. But when the men returned from war, women lost their jobs. The government began issuing “motherhood medals” to redirect woman back into their homes and out of men’s jobs, despite the fact that many woman had been taking care of their homes as well as full-time jobs before the war, without medals.

There was a clear distinction between older and younger Russian women. Those under thirty when communism fell seemed to combat a society which placed them second by working exceedingly hard at school, at careers, and at home with their children. They

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seemed not only proud but confident, like my colorful language teacher. But similar to the drab and standoffish appearance of my other instructor, older Russian women could be impossible to relate to as a young American woman.

Language class offered a glimpse into what it would be like teaching in Russia. Even when I wasn’t picking up on the unending verb tenses, it became a game to imagine life as a woman in Russia. Teaching appeared a role of mothering and training youth how to survive in Russia. Depending on one’s worldview, one might teach opportunity and growth, or rigidity and sameness—acquiescence to a system corrupt and unfair in many ways, especially for women.

“Take a short break for tea, but remember we still have much to review,” our teacher said in Russian. We went to the International Office for tea and crackers. The tea was strong and sweet, served in ornamental pots. Tom and Sasha talked in the back of the room pointing to a large map of Europe.

“What do you see?” I asked Tom, sipping my tea.

“Russia’s like three times the size of China,” Tom said. He said he wanted to go to China someday, but it was hard to believe him. He wasn’t even trying to learn Russian, and sometimes I wondered why he’d come. He would stand out among the Chinese, not only in appearance with his large frame, blue eyes, and full beard prickling his face by teatime, but simply in his manner. He wasn’t quiet, ever, or meditative, the way I pictured the Chinese.

“Yeah. I’d go there,” I said.
After too many crackers and more sitting, I was hardly hungry for lunch. But the group walked to the cafeteria and sat through servings of beet soup, black bread, and fried meat and potatoes. On the way out of the cafeteria, we bought waxy chocolate wrapped in blue aluminum.

The second half of the day demanded chocolate as Henry lectured. Our days were divided into lessons on the History and Sociology of Religion in Russia, Russian Peoples, Culture and Literature, and Russia in Transition. Classes were sometimes indecipherable for me. Henry’s long lectures on politics became boring. At the time, it was over my head. At Malone, the classes had been small, personal, and predominantly female instructors and peers had talked easily about such things as Victorian women writers. In Henry’s class, fewer spoke than listened to him, and the few brazened enough to speak, argued. From what I gathered, the quarrels were about Russia’s place in the global market, about Russia’s natural resources, and especially about war. Some peers wanted to know how Russians perceived ethics of war, and if they were a nuclear threat.

We were college students—none of us had been in the military. I wondered if we understood such complicated responsibilities in our own country. Henry shrugged his shoulders, clearly not expressing everything he thought. Had he told us stories of exile to Siberia, molestation in Soviet gulags; had he painted pictures of the bribery between a policeman and Russian driving a coveted BMW, about the outbreak of gonorrhea, hepatitis, and AIDS, Russia’s socio-political affairs would have become stories and life.

*
The American group was assigned field experiences as part of our coursework while in Nizhni. I taught English at the Philological Institute. Before I spoke to a classroom of Russian students, I had worried about what to say to a room full of people nearly my age. I felt better once the strawberry-blond teacher pulled me into her “office” (a closet-sized storage room) to ask questions about the pronunciation of English words. At once, the atmosphere was curious and inviting.

“What music do you listen to?”

“What pets do you have?”

“How do young Americans make money?”

With each question, students seemed to strain to understand. Some leaned forward, others sat straight as steel. No heads were in hands or resting on desks. Some giggled at the strange sounds of rapid English, not the British they were taught but American English. And then, a turn in conversation.

“Why do Americans care what the President does in his private life?” a dark boy asked, waving a lock of hair from his broad forehead. “President’s sex life is not for public concern, no?” I stared at this young man, who had moments ago led the class in a traditional Russian love song, and wondered how to answer his pointed question. These young people worried about receiving paychecks to buy bread, about working somewhere other than the local factories, about avoiding the abusive conditions of the army or prison. Our President’s sex life did seem a ridiculous concern.

But to many Americans, it felt a direct violation of moral responsibility. He had lied to the people and become a symbol of infidelity. To some, this was a breach of trust,
not merely in one man but in the law under which our country was governed. In principle, no man was above or below the law in America. I remembered a lawyer on the news back home saying that law protects us from the midnight fire on our roof or the three a.m. knock on our door. Not so in Russia. There, people expected leaders to lie. There, people waited fearfully for the fire and the knock.

“Our culture was founded on Christianity, and many believe our leaders should be moral. We expect our President to be faithful to his wife, and to us,” I said. But it was more than foreign language that closed our dialogue.

A student asked about the music cassettes splaying the white table in front of me (Dima’s Smashing Pumpkins, Grateful Dead, and Titanic soundtrack and Tom’s Garth Brooks), and the conversation shifted. Had it continued, I was sure to have expounded on America’s Christian culture—ignorant to theirs.

Russian peers offered glimpses of the superstitions, traditions, and aspirations of the youth. The name Olga had at first struck me as very unattractive. Maybe because it was reminiscent of ogre and ogle, which were ugly words. The first Olga I met was a student at the university. Contrary to her name, she was a fair-skinned Russian beauty. She was tall and thin with a straight, regal grace about her. She wore leather boots to her knees and a bright top that clung to her small chest. She was studying to be an English teacher and often visited us during teatime in the International Office. She told the group that she would like to lead us in aerobics. Tom asked if boys could come, but she gave
him a wink and said that he’d never be able to handle her workout. I was impressed. She was tough and feminine.

By four, the group straggled back to the dormitory for an hour of our own time before the last meal of the day. Michelle was studying in the living room, and it was freeing to have alone time. I stretched my arms over my head and considered jumping rope before dinner but remembered the workout later that evening. Still, I couldn’t sit another second—head rolled, arms circled in the air.

“Hey,” Tom filled the doorway. “Can I come in?”

“Want to jump rope?” I smiled, glad to have him to myself. He faked a punch to my stomach, tightened against the brush of his knuckles. I pushed him, and he acted afraid. He gripped my shoulders, swung me around. With all my weight I bulldozed him to the cot, then stepped back feeling too close and wishing to be closer at the same time. The bottoms of his socks were brown as he sat on my bed and leaned against the wall.

We were quiet.

He inched to the edge of the bed and planted his socks on the floor. “Here,” he said, patting a space between his legs. My back, a sliver from the cot, stiffened between him. He kneaded thumbs and forefingers into my tight shoulders. The silence we never shared was pin-prickling.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, shooting to my feet and grabbing empty water bottles from the desk. He looked at me with an expression I couldn’t read—was it a smirk, an almost smile? Was I reading into him what I felt? I left the room without looking back, even though I wanted to.

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The cook’s face and neck blended together like a thumb puppet. She reached for my bottles. Her chef’s hat ballooned into the hot kitchen. The plastic bottle slid from under my arm, and I stooped to the ground. She turned and clapped her hands at the cats scrounging the counter.

“No! Bad cats. For shame!” she spat. Her tone was fierce, and I wondered if she was concerned the cats would contaminate our soup, or if she worried the cats would be scalded by the gas stove. She turned to me with a smile in her narrow eyes, and I handed over my bottles.

Few in the group were there yet, and I sat down next to Lon and the nervous girl. Her hair fell forward like a cape protecting her face. In class, she had looked paler, her cheeks even more hollow. I wanted to see her face, but she remained cocooned. I pushed a piece of barley and chicken under oil bubbles. I picked the egg-glaze on the roll, feeling responsible to make small talk—which had come so easily during our initial days in Moscow but no longer did. The jangle of words, especially my own, was the last thing I could stand just then. When I was a child, Mom and Dad had to tell me to stop talking and eat nearly every night, until puberty. Suddenly, to my sister’s dismay, I couldn’t gush the words anymore. Thoughts became weightier, less certain, more complicated. I was tired.

“How are you feeling?” I asked the girl. She lifted her hair and offered a weak smile.

“Not so good.”
“How’s it going?” Lon asked from the side of a filled mouth. He didn’t look up from his soup. I said fine and dunked the roll in the soup.

“I’ll see you guys later,” I said and moved to the counter with my uneaten meal. I grabbed the filled bottles and tried to ignore Tom’s voice laced by Michelle’s laugh in the back of the cafeteria. I forced myself not to turn around.

“Thank you,” I smiled at the cook rinsing the enormous cauldron and left. You’ll feel better after the workout, I promised myself.

I had in mind the aerobics classes at Malone: bright, spacious, and high-impact, which was nothing like Olga’s class. She wore a too-small pink and purple leotard. She leaned over eighties-style warm-up socks and scrunched the thick pink into perfect cringles down to her slippers. I waited for her to bust out her Nikes, or the equivalent, but her slow, poised motions suggested she wouldn’t. Her hair was curled and piled on top of her head.

Her pink lips smiled at the handful of us gathered in the dormitory’s antiquated weight room. A mirror spanned one wall, reflecting thin benches and red and black weights. The equipment was cheap and outdated but tidy, if only from lack of use. On the floor was an Oriental rug, which we would spend most of the hour “stretching” on.

“Welcome. I am so pleased you have come,” her English sounded too precise. I almost started laughing. She plugged a samovar into the outlet and asked us to get comfortable, to relax. “We will begin with meditative series of exercises. Very, very good for the heart.” She told us to breathe slowly, to release all “spirits of hardness.”
I almost stood to leave, but my peers, cross-legged on the mats “breathing,” made leaving too obvious a distraction. Olga arranged mix-match tea-cups and said that after our workout we would have tea.

After a series of mild stretches, she said, “Sweating bad for body,” make-up intact, purple hand weights to the side of her mat.

I chugged my bottle. “Not cold water, Lea?” she asked.

“Ah, not really,” I said, forcing my eyes not to roll. In the future, exercise would continue to be jumping rope, now in this new nook seemingly used for little more than Russian yoga.

“That was awesome!” I said landing on my feet, Tom’s hands still on my waist. “Try to lift me higher like Patrick Swayze in Dirty Dancing.” Again, I scrambled to the end of the hall and ran to him, soaring above his head.

“Spread your arms. I’ve got you!” he said.

“I can’t. You might drop me,” I laughed, shooting out my arms like wings.

“So, you want to see how this looks in the mirrors?” he asked. I breathlessly agreed. We ran downstairs for the key to the weight room, giggling with thoughts of last Saturday there. While I had jumped rope, Tom pulled a metal bar with a string attached to a stack of weights. With a snap, the metal bar smacked him in the forehead. We laughed till we cried. The humor was easily re-ignited with a peek at Tom’s forehead, now a colored egg with a small scab.
The dorm keeper, as we called her, lived behind the yellow door at the entrance of the dormitory, at least she seemed to. If she had an apartment of her own I wondered why she never seemed to leave the secret space behind the yellow door. She appeared a typical babushka, old and square, eerily still. I wondered what she could possibly do all day besides greet us as we left for and returned from class. I thought she had too much time on her hands and that was why she was overly concerned if we forgot our hats or gloves. I didn’t realize to be underdressed for General Winter was a serious offense to all Russians.

I knocked, desperate for her answer.

“Maybe she’s not there,” Tom said.

“No, she’s in there. She’s always in there.” No answer.

We drifted back upstairs, and my heart began to slow, to sink. The group hung out, dorm doors opened. Clusters of Russian and American peers sprawled the beds reading or writing. They sat in circles on rugs singing or talking. They played cards through the night.

Michelle was writing in a journal when I came in for bed. We didn’t talk, and it was nice not to have to explain my moods to her. It seemed she too preferred quiet sometimes. The desk lamp was a soft glow, and I hoped she kept writing—for the silence, for the soft scratch of the pen, for the calming light that reminded me of the lamp my father turned on in the early morning before the sun was up. I closed my eyes and tried to force the melt of the day—to fast-forward thoughts and concerns and hide away in sleep, but I couldn’t calm down. Or pray.
Lord, help me pray—a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Michelle said.

“Hey guys.” Tom sat on the end of my cot, his feet by my hip. I sat up and grabbed my journal.

“We were snorkeling, right. And my dad threw the corn at me, instead of the fish. Then! The fish started attacking me. So, I saw an old woman and decided to throw corn at her.” I was trying to zone out. “The fish attacked her, and an ambulance had to come!” A little laugh escaped. This was ridiculous—Tom, his story, our situation. Yet, we were laughing, tears streaming down our faces. How easy it was for things to dive past thought, free and light.

He scrunched a sweatshirt under his head. Michelle asked if we minded she turn off the light, she had a headache. Tom moved from my cot to the floor.

“I like my landscaping job in the summers, and it makes good money. But I’ll get the Engineering Degree just to have options,” he said.

“I definitely want to be an English teacher. I think. It’ll be tough to go back to school after being here, don’t you think so?” I said.

“Oh yeah. Henry says we shouldn’t expect people to understand our experiences in Russia. I know they’ll never understand. Only we will,” he said.

Dima would. A moment of silence. Let’s just go to sleep. With Tom there never seemed a way to be quiet.

“It’s most important that we try to understand the experience ourselves,” Michelle said. “The first time I came, I thought it would be so hard to explain it all to my
mother—but, really, it was hardest just to gather what all it meant to me.” Tom and I didn’t quite understand where she was coming from. Yet, I sensed Michelle was right, somehow. I felt that there was something happening that would take a long time for me to sort through.

“You think it’d be cool to honeymoon in Russia, like that couple we saw in Red Square?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. But probably anywhere would seem euphoric once you’re married. I mean—”

“Sex will be awesome!” he said.

“I swear. I will do it in the limo on the way to the reception! Why not?” I added.

“Lea, think about that. You won’t want to rush it. You say this now, but you’ll change your mind. You’ll want it to be special,” he said. My shame crouched in the dark room.

“No. I think I really will.” I hugged my pillow with deep longing.

Michelle and I were walking to the kiosk for instant coffee. “Henry wanted to talk with you,” she said. “At lunch yesterday he asked me about your relationship with Dima.”

“That’s strange. What did you say?” I began to feel uncomfortable that Henry would talk about me with another student. Why wouldn’t he just ask me about my relationship?
“I told him it seemed like you really liked him, and that—” I was glad the wind was hard against my cheeks, glad to have an excuse for the flush that ran over my nose.

“What?” I turned my head, but her face was hidden behind the hood of her jacket.

“Why didn’t he just ask me about it? What else did he say to you?” I should have been quiet, let her explain her thoughts. But in a way, I didn’t want to hear her opinion on my relationship with Dima. He wasn’t just another Russian. She didn’t know him, and neither did Henry.

“Nothing really, but he knows how Russian men can be trouble—he’s lived here for years. He knows the people,” she said.

“But he doesn’t know Dima. He’s not like the typical Russian,” I said. Not quite knowing what “typical” meant.

I knocked on Tom’s door. “Come in,” he mumbled lying on the bed in faded jeans and a tee-shirt.

“Hey. Can I borrow your plaid button-down?” I asked.

“What can I borrow of yours?”

“I’ve got a really cute skirt you can wear—wait. I better not say that, you probably will!” We laughed, but it felt strained. Something was off.

“I wanted to talk to you,” he said moving toward the closet, keeping his back to me. “Are you and Dima engaged?”

“No. Why?” He busied himself with a pile of shirts as guilt choked me. He turned to me with a blank face.
“Really, we’re not engaged, Tom.”

“His father told Henry you are. Just be careful—” Shame ripped inside me. I was here for Dima—for us. Tom was fun, but what was I thinking?

“Yeah. I feel confused.” If only he was here—just one look, one touch, and confusion would fade like the frozen earth with the warmth of spring. I had to protect our relationship, to guard myself.

“I’ve been praying for you,” Tom said. He didn’t smile. His face was serious and open. I believed him.

“Tom, I don’t know. I’m nervous about his family. I don’t know what they expect of me, or even what I expect of them.” He nodded.

“Thank you for your prayers. I’m just so far away from him, and—” Did he sense my attraction? I looked down—“I love him. In many ways, being here reminds me of him.”

He handed me the shirt.

“The language is killing me—I can’t learn it quickly enough, and I’m going to make a fool of myself with his parents. I can’t talk to them! And there’s so much to say!”

“It’ll be all right,” he said, lying back on the bed, hands behind his head, eyes to the ceiling.

Tom was a captivating person, but time made him less mythical. His laugh was still contagious, his touch on my arm, my shoulder still electric, but in fragmented moments I felt his aggression, his perfectionism. I began to understand how he had
pushed himself so hard on the football field that he had nose-bleeds after practice. I didn’t like the way I began to see myself in him. He rolled his eyes and told me he didn’t want water or grapefruit when I tried to healthify our greasy meals. I felt like a nag, like a wispy woman, like an anal-retentive nuisance. I doubted he’d be the type to be partners with his wife. He would be the leader, always, and his woman would have to learn to acquiesce, even when he was in the wrong.

On his birthday, Michelle, Tom, and I took a metro to a small café for the closest thing to American fast-food, Gardina Restaurant. We ordered “pizza” (thin cracker-like dough and strong cheese slathered with pepperoni). I added a dill and cucumber salad to my tray. He talked with Michelle most of the night. On the way back to the dormitory, we stood holding onto the metal bars at the top of the metro. The bus rolled through the night with a muffling roar. I pulled my eyes from Tom’s stare and gazed at a dark window. Reflecting Tom. He still stared, as though he was forcing me to face him, to speak to him through my eyes.

I’m sorry. This isn’t right. You’re amazing—but. Please stop. Look away.

I began to realize Dima’s gentleness. He could be shy, quiet, and I could wish he’d speak up, be assertive. But there was something in the ways we worked together. He needed me and I needed him, beyond physical attraction. I began to imagine Dima’s touch, a whisper of Russian in my ear, a silent, shoulder-bobbing laugh. Flashes of his full mouth on a bottled Heineken, square jaw raised, knees bent with frayed khakis—easy and still on the bar stool. He would peer at me, engaged in conversation with his Russian friend, offer a slight nod, easy smile.
“Deem,” his friend would say, “Lea’s like my sister, man.” Dima would nod, grin, not a trace of jealousy on his face.

Shame curled around my heart. I didn’t deserve his loyalty. I brainstormed Christian friends from Malone that I could set Tom up with. It felt like a line was drawing between us. I wanted to keep the separation, to distance our flirtations. If he was praying for me, I would pray for him, I thought with mixed feelings of relief and sadness. He was just so cute, so Christian, so strong. And I was just so disgusting.

“Are you and Tom okay?” Michelle asked once we were back in our room.

“Uh-huh. Why?” I strained to sound nonchalant and grabbed Dima’s white bear.

“Nothing, really. Just seemed like there was tension tonight—you guys usually laugh more—” I wondered what she really wanted to say. Her words seemed as tensile as her face.

“Michelle, tell me honestly, are you still attracted to Tom?” What a relief just to say it, but I worried she might not be willing to open up. She hesitated, pulled a Bible from her side of the desk, and looked across the room at me as I changed into sweats and Dima’s tee-shirt.

“No. Not really,” she wasn’t going to open up, “I’m over that. Are you?” I wanted to hold back, to keep from spelling out my every passing feeling, but it seemed the first time in a long time that we had actually talked openly.

“I don’t know. He’s a great guy—” A steely look shadowed her face.
“Lea, you’re practically engaged. You really shouldn’t be flirting with Tom—” I nodded my head, looked down, tried to get a bearing on what had just happened. I sensed it clearly. We were webbed in jealousy.

In Russia, cats lived in corners: under the stairways, tucked into the dorm’s dilapidated bathroom (drawn in by the cooks offering of left over chicken), huddled in a discarded Panasonic box on Minin and Pozharsky Square. They were wild cats, with claws and reproductive organs left functioning.

I loved cats, but clean, domestic, shiny-coated cats. One Sunday evening in the bathroom of our dorm, a litter of marble kittens clustered around a mangy mother-cat. Though the cooks had left food earlier, only raw bones remained. I wondered where to buy cat chow and then the awful thought, they were probably feeding on mice. It was a natural conclusion with a glance around. The bathroom walls were chipped tile, as was the floor, and filthy floor boards covered a rectangular hole underneath the hot water pipes, now aged brownish. I gingerly stepped to the sink and brushed my teeth. I splashed water on my face and hoped to look better than I felt, but there were no mirrors to check.

I sped down the hall, grossed out and wondering how I could avoid the bathroom, or ask someone to clean it. Tom’s door was open, and he asked if I was ready to leave for Henry’s.

“Sure, let me just grab my coat—you guys have mice in the men’s room?” He laughed, but I didn’t. I was sick of living so uncomfortably. “Seriously. I think mice are
in the women’s bathroom. What can we do?” He said we could ask Henry about traps, but I didn’t want to. I felt uncomfortable with Henry ever since I learned he had been asking about my relationship with Dima. It seemed he didn’t trust me, and I didn’t want him to think I was squeamish over a few little creatures sharing my space. After all, he lived in Russia. I felt certain he wouldn’t complain, especially if he only had four measly months to handle the differences between an immaculate America and more rustic Russia.

Tom and I walked into the dark evening and shuffled onto the metro. Henry’s apartment was separated from the main road by a snowy field and old factory. We strolled by yellow barrels outside the lifeless shop, wondering aloud if this was another building in the throes of renovation.

Tom opened the iron door to the apartment and warm smells of cabbage and noodles floated in the air. “Can’t wait to see what sweets Henry bought today,” he said, mounting the stairwell. Tom loved chocolate, which I found girly.

Above us on the stairs, a rustling sound interrupted the dark. We paused. Side by side. Tom breathed against my cheek.

A blinding light rained down on us. “What the—Tom?”

“Who’s there?” he asked. The light fell over our torsos, legs, and boots, and an old woman’s voice apologized in Russian. Two other women clicked their tongues as we blindly peered into the dark. The babushkas wrangled and finally scuttled by. I felt Tom’s arm around me. He gripped my shoulder, protective or possessive I couldn’t tell.
“Are you okay?” I wasn’t sure how to answer. As my eyes readjusted, bright spots speckled the air. My heart pounded with excitement and my skin was numb. I could have run faster than ever before. Instead, paralyzed in place, all the energy, all the possibility burned like a fire in the frigid air.

“I’m fine,” I said and stepped away from Tom.

“Come in,” Henry said in his deliberate, soft way. His face shined like wax as thin lips held a toothless grin. He turned from the door to the kitchen, one of three small rooms in his apartment. I wanted to study his soft eyes where emotions often pooled. His eyes were less cautious than his measured words. Sugar and cinnamon wafted from the kitchen where small pots and tea cups hung from silver racks on blue walls. We untied our boots and slid our coats off.

“I’m making bread. Like dates?” Thoughts of my mother’s date bread made my mouth water. Bowls of ice cream bars, popcorn, dried apricots, crackers, and nuts spread the kitchen. Tom and I filled plastic plates and joined the group that was clustered together on a braided rug, dark futon, and folding chairs.

“You have a phone call, Lea,” Henry said. I stood from the futon and stepped over jean legs and feet in worn socks, shimmying into the closet-like computer room.

“Hello?” I said, hoping it was Dima and fearing it could be his father, for whom I hadn’t prepared a Russian conversation.

“Lea. How are you?” Dima’s voice felt like honey in dark tea.

“Okay. I was just thinking about you.”

“Oh yeah? What were you thinking?”
“Just how I miss you and this distance apart is really tough.”

“I know. But if we survive this, we can survive anything—right?” His voice was always steady, emotions rarely raised the inflection, quickened the pace. But there was something in the way he said “right” that made me pause. Was he doubting? I needed him to be strong. To believe everything would work out and we’d be together before we knew it. I told him everything would be fine, we’d make this work the way we had made our hectic high school schedules fit together—even though the distance between Lake Catholic and Mentor High was a mere skip.

I was quiet. Near resenting having to be the cheerleader. Please, just let me know everything’s okay, I silently begged.

“You know, we might get married sooner than you think,” he said.

“You can’t keep a secret to save your life, Dima! You know I’m waiting. Your dad seems to think I already am your fiancé—”

“Hey, I told him he could call you that. That’s okay, right—”

“I guess so, but Henry has concerns because you’re a ‘Russian.’”

“Are you being careful?” he asked.

“Oh totally. I promise there’s nothing to worry about. The group sticks together.” I had always told Dima everything. He always listened. When I told him which of his friends I found cute, he’d keep driving, eyes peeled to the road, pale fingers adjusting the volume on Neil Young.

“Are you listening to ‘Like a Hurricane,’ Dima?” The lyrics drifted, pulled me back to him: “I am just a dreamer, but you are just a dream, you could have been anyone
to me. Before that moment you touched my lips, that perfect feeling when time just slips away between us on our foggy trip.” I tapped a hand against my thigh. “You are like a hurricane; there's calm in your eye. And I'm gettin’ blown away to somewhere safer where the feeling stays. I want to love you but I'm getting blown away.”

“How’s everything in Findlay?” I asked trying not to waste time in silence. Every minute cost a dollar—luckily from Gotech’s account, which Mr. Holmes had let us tap for the semester.

“Okay, I guess. I miss you. Life is horrible without you.” This didn’t sound like him.

“Oh, baby, I know it seems like a long time, but it will fly by. Really. I mean, I feel bad because there’s so much happening here that I don’t have as much time to feel sad. It’s not that I don’t miss you—”

“So, are the people in the group cool?”

“Oh, Dima, there’s one kid I know you’d like. His name’s Tom. He’s a lot of fun.” The group laughed at the black and white Russian comedy. I picked the paint chipping on the window sill. Why had I said that? I didn’t want him to worry, and there was nothing to worry about. Then, I did want him to worry because there was something to worry about, and maybe if he worried he’d take me back to where we’d been, to where we’d be.

“What’s so funny?” he asked as the group laughed in the one large room of the apartment.
“We’re watching a movie here. But it’s only two in the morning there, huh?” We were truly in different worlds, and I began to realize that it was easier to be on an adventure in Russia than at home waiting. I couldn’t even fathom if the roles were reversed, if Dima was to see my parents after years of my separation from them.

We hung up after “I love yous,” and a heaviness swamped my heart. It would be a week before another brief phone call.

A tiny saccharin voice laughed in the living room. Henry was standing beside his three-year-old godchild, whispering in her delicate ear. She wore a pink dress over her tiny chest and legs, perched perfectly straight on a stool in the center of the room. Her blue eyes glued to the rug hanging on the wall behind the group as she recited a Russian poem. Midway through, she looked down. Henry stooped again to her soft hair, brushed it from the side of her face, and whispered the ending to the poem. She finished to a roomful of applause that drew red to her already pink cheeks. She hid behind Henry’s dark legs as he seemed to absorb her, glowing with pride, eyes misting over.

The godchild ran to the nervous girl sitting on a chair across the room, who resembled her mother, plain, frail, sad-looking. The child drew her arms around our peer’s neck and yelped when she realized the girl was not her mother. Henry laughed so hard he wept, mingling his tears with the child’s as he scooped her up and delivered her to her mother.

The child was intentionally fatherless. Her mother had wanted a child, had gone to great lengths to use a smart, attractive, and good-hearted Russian man to serve her
purpose. Henry seemed to support the mother’s decision, as he had agreed to serve as the godfather.

Secretly, I imagined Henry and the child’s mother falling in love and becoming a “real” family. Whenever he talked about the child and her mother, he did so with nearly painful tenderness. His smile was so deep that it seemed the cold, harsh confusion of Russia, and maybe his own lonely life, was swallowed by his love. I searched his face, his eyes lingering somewhere else, and imagined he was forlorn because he was wildly in love.

Did I think that was the way of love? Believed that falling in love continued to snowball with intensity? Maybe only that it should. And I wondered about Dima. Would our love be kinetic, free-falling, enigmatic?

Henry never told me what he feared about my relationship with Dima, but I began to think his fear might have been related to the accounts of Russian men from his godchild’s mother. If none had been suitable for marriage in her eyes, the fact that a naïve American might marry a Russian man could very well be alarming.
CHAPTER NINE

A family of folksingers in washed out peasant dress visited Henry’s lecture at the university. I was surprised at their plainness, comparing the vivid colors from folksingers in Moscow. The family spoke comfortably, intimating details of their culture and traditions with Henry as though the nineteen of us ogling up at them were invisible. Why did they seem afraid to look at us?

“We are fortunate enough to have a family from the traditional Semeiskii Old Believer community here with us today. Folksingers originated when the schism occurred in the Orthodox Church and many believers were exiled. In fact, entire families and religious communities were sent to Siberia. Folksongs became a way the people shared their life stories,” Henry began.

1. Folksingers in Nizhny.
I wondered if Americans were too busy for each other’s “life stories.” Too on the go to sing and dance and remember. As the mother of the group spoke in a monotone voice, her floral dress made her appear a full garden.

Henry translated, “Spouses were chosen for life. In early times, parents even chose mates for their children. An old saying goes: ‘The wife is not a shoe. You cannot throw her off your foot.’ When a couple planned to marry, the bridegroom sent a matchmaker to the girl’s home. The match-maker tied a poker and a twig-broom together as a symbol of good luck. She would try to get a hold of the maiden’s long braid, believing the feel of her hair could determine if the match would succeed. If the match was a success, the bridegroom’s parents went to the girl’s house for a formal party.

“The Russians would not come to the point at once. The man’s parents might say that it had reached their ears there were goods for sale and they had a buyer. The girl’s parents would understand what was meant and respond they had nothing to sell. The boy’s family might argue saying they knew there were goods for sale and that they were perishable, best to sell. After a time, the conversation would switch to an open discussion of the marriage, and, if agreed upon, the fathers would shake hands under the flaps of their coats.

“Girlfriends of the bride would sing songs, and the bride would weep—even if she had loved the man and wanted to marry. It was tradition to lament and sob before the wedding so that in married life she wouldn’t need to.

“On the wedding day, the bride woke first and cried that she would lose three things: freedom of girlhood, ribbon from her braid, and her home. She was to wear her
hair down and uncovered before the marriage. This was the only time acceptable for a woman to have her head uncovered. Evil spirits were believed to enter through the hair.

“The groom would come to his bride’s home in a car decorated with colored ribbons. He would be greeted by her relatives, friends, and neighbors who would demand ransom for her hand.

“In early times, newlyweds would consummate their marriage in public.” My eyes met Tom’s across the room. “A consummation bed was prepared on sheaves of wheat and rye to encourage the fertility of the grain. The sheet was displayed, and if the girl had not been a virgin she disgraced her family.

“Old Russian wedding rituals went out of existence by the 1930s when villages were forcibly collectivized and churches were closed down. The government denounced past wedding rituals as harmful. And during the war and post-war years in Russia, people simply had their marriages registered, if they cared to, and began living together.

“In the 1960s, a campaign was launched to re-institute wedding rituals. Newlyweds were congratulated by city administrators and paid their respects to war veterans, Lenin’s tomb, churches or museums.”

Henry’s hand rested on the mother’s shoulder as she continued with personal anecdotes about the old wedding traditions. Michelle asked about divorce in Russia. The mother answered with a shoulder shrug, explaining she couldn’t speak for modern Russians, but for traditional Russian people divorce was unheard of. I thought the family preferred to revel in the good old days.
Henry said, “The folksingers will perform a Russian wedding song for us. Pay attention to the sound of unity. The Orthodox Church preferred the sound to be as one united voice instead of complex polyphony,” Henry said.

The folksong was rich and sad, a chord of uncertainty coiling through the story. As the family stood together and sang, the song blended their voices, as though the sound was an echo from combined hearts. I imagined a bride weeping as she faced an unknown future with her husband and his family.

The nervous girl abruptly left class with a nose bleed, and Lon followed her into the hallway with a wad of tissue from his book bag. Later that evening, Lon’s arm protectively around her narrow shoulders, we learned the girl was leaving to return home. It suddenly struck me, were they falling in love? Lon seemed less ostentatious, and his kindness toward the nervous girl made him likeable.

I wondered how it might feel to simply escape Russia. Guilt and regret, surely, but wouldn’t it fade in time? These weren’t reasons to stay with Dima. What would it mean to marry him? Were any of Henry’s concerns valid for us? How much of Russia would seep into our lives? There was still time to let go, to turn down another path. But the thought was a shadow, a fearful echo.

I began waking early on Sunday mornings to walk the city when group excursions weren’t planned. I passed kiosks with wool-bundled workers behind stands of potatoes, fruit, or pockets of hot bread filled with spinach or apples. I hiked down Prospekt Gagarina feeling light and happy as my black corduroys sliced the cold air. I recalled
Henry explaining the layout of the city and tried to piece together where I was and what I passed. To little avail. Mostly, the buildings looked similar, many in disrepair, dark wood or cement complexes reaching for the blanket of morning sky.

I passed the Dmitrovkaya Tower and a military museum, and thought about how the Great Patriotic War had affected the Russian people. Nearly every family had lost a blood relative. Why had my family rarely talked about World War II? I knew my father’s parents had been poor growing up, but who had they lost as a result of the war? What had they been without? I remembered my father loved pork and beans slathered with mustard. It had been a meal from his father’s childhood. While my grandparents had had less food, had they ever been without food, like Dima’s grandmother?

Once at the center of the city, Minin and Pozharsky Square, I marveled at the quiet of Sundays stretching like a fog over the elaborate nineteenth century French Baroque. On Bolshaya Pokrovskaya (the main pedestrian walkway through the square), buildings appeared stronger, less weathered, and served as picturesque backdrop for art shows that slated the pedestrian walkway later in the spring. Traffic was closed from the square, and it felt like I entered an outdoor museum. Every building: library, teachers’ institute, Chinese restaurant, had the otherworldly feel of ornamental design—of Russian pride.

The walkway led to Gorky Park, named for the famous writer Maxim Gorky who was born in the city. Until 1991, the city was closed to foreigners for security of Soviet military research. It was unbelievable to think my gloves brushed snow from the top of an iron gate, my lungs filled with the bite of winter, my eyes scanned the statue of
Gorky—all of which had been closed to someone like me when Dima left home. It was frightening and exhilarating to feel small and alive in a changing world.

Sunday explorations of the city eventually led me into the Orthodox churches. At first, this only seemed a cultural experience. I didn’t know the names of the churches, but a somber beauty became familiar in each. I huddled nearby a ring of candles, unaware that the golden tapers were prayers rising to God. Without intention, my own prayers joined with the lifting of the priest’s rich chanting and incense.

Early Christian churches in the East, prior to the Mongolian invasions, had been basic. Simple wooden structures with small domes. Icons were gradually added. Elaborate stone churches designed in European Baroque: golds, frescos, and enormous arches, were constructed after many of the earliest churches were destroyed by the Mongols. As the Turks swept through Moscow, icons were taken to the protected stone churches in Nizhny Novgorod and escaped ruination there. Because the city remained miraculously protected, there was money to build massive churches. Thus, Nizhny Novgorod would remain home to some of the most impressive Orthodox churches in Russia.

One Sunday morning as the cold bore past my jeans and tights to numb flesh, I entered the Stroganov Church of the Nativity. It felt as though I walked into a dark wooden belly. A purse-lipped woman stood guard behind a cardboard box of rubles and another of candles. Her eyes drifted with me like smoke curling through the dark. I had never had to buy a candle in church when we used them during Christmas Eve services. Why should a person pay for a tool of worship?
Russians crossed their chests and bowed as heavy sounds from the priest stirred the thick atmosphere. I felt weightless. An elderly woman breathed, “Lord have mercy,” over and over. A red silk covered the top of a young woman’s blond hair, cascading over narrow shoulders. Next to her, a young man bowed deeply as the priest emerged from the sanctuary doors. The priest’s reddish beard matched the bronze and crimson frescos covering the doors at the front of the sanctuary. A spirit of warmth and light stirred inside me as I fed from a circle of prayer candles. A woman rocked on her knees moaning prayers, a baby in a burlap sling on her back. The roll of Slavonic chanting drew us together—as though covered in a wave. It seemed as though I floated just above the ground, buoyed in the silver melody of Russia.

Eyes closed, palms turned up, my spirit broke like a gentle whisper. “Lord, what an amazing place you’ve brought me to. Please fill me with your Holy Spirit. Help me let go of all that is around me, to give myself back to you. I am yours.”

There was a tug on my arm, and I opened my eyes to the old woman who had been selling candles. Her face twisted in disapproval with the tap of her covered head, the pinch of her skirt. She fiercely eyed my uncovered head and jeans and pulled me away from the ring of candles. I numbly pushed open the heavy door, a slice of light pouring into the dark. The woman’s back faced me as she guarded the entrance to the church.

A beggar slumped in the snow a few steps from the church with his gnarled hand gripping a walking stick. His eyes were milky blue. My rubles clinked into his dirty cup. He nodded a craggy face. How did life become misery? Anger grew hot and tight inside.
God, what is this life—a joke? Why such suffering? Where are you when we reject each other, even in your name?

Russia seemed messy, disabled, and impossible to enter.

I wasn’t going to worship in an Orthodox church on subsequent Sundays. I could pray in my dorm room, read my Bible, write in my journal. It would be a good time to catch up on schoolwork. But Tom would be around. Michelle would be studying. The group would be floating through the hall, stopping by to chat, to borrow a shirt, to swap class notes. So I left for Sunday walks to McDonald’s, to study in the immaculate, bun-perfect, french-fry-crisp haven of the West. And when I walked past Minin Square, continuing down Pedestrian Street and through the doors of another Orthodox church, and when I slipped a new silk scarf from my book bag over my head, I thought I’d stop in one more time. Just to see.

And it was what I couldn’t see that pulled me back in, again and again.

*
The group returned to Moscow for a weekend. We cours through another round of sightseeing, culminating with a romantic evening at The Bolshoi (Grand) Theatre. Behind eight columns, soft light illumined the massive building. The theatre was huge, red and gold, and elegantly designed in gilt stucco molding. The theatre’s prestige and sustained magnificence didn’t strike me as forcefully as Tom’s laugh. I was awed by his body close to mine in one of the two-thousand plush seats. Above us, was a box where czars, commissars and presidents had sat. Before us, one of the largest stages in the world where, despite renovations, antique hand cranks still raised and lowered ballerinas—but it was Tom’s eyes on the side of my face that shot tingles through me.

“This place’s amazing, huh?” I said and followed the gold chandeliers past the layers of balconies circling overhead. Tom agreed, asked if I liked ballet. I shrugged my shoulders and said it was okay. I thought back to The Nutcracker Nana had taken Melanie and me to for our birthdays as children. We would have preferred Cabbage

2. Folksingers in Moscow.
Patch Dolls to a few hours in Cleveland’s Playhouse Square. Yet there had been moments when the magic hit, when I no longer felt Nana’s hand holding mine, when the intensity of Tchaikovsky’s composition swept me into a world beyond.

Tom cupped his hand against my cheek and whispered, “My sister took ballet lessons, but she couldn’t dig the slippers.” As *Romeo and Juliet* began, his hand fell to the armrest, grazing the side of mine.

He turned my arm over and placed his hand on mine. “Look how much bigger my hand is than yours—twice the size.” His body was warm. My fingers laced his. We peered at each other in the dark as questions wrangled through the orchestra. We unlocked our hands. He’d never kissed a girl. It thrilled me, challenged me, attracted me. Ballerina’s pirouetted gracefully and sauntered to one another—feet aimed outward, hands roaming the air, bodies tightening with emotion. As the gentle music frenzied to climax and back down again, my skin crawled with anticipation.

Just because I *felt* like holding his hand, didn’t mean I should. Just because I *felt* like drawing him to me, didn’t mean I had any right to. The thought came for the first time that maybe he was just playing a game with me. Maybe he didn’t really have a vested interest in us as much as the drive to win the game.

“I’m going back to the room. I just need to sleep,” I said at intermission.

“I’ll take you back,” he said.

“Don’t you want to stay and watch the ballet?” He cocked his head, do I look like the ballet-type, clearly on his face.
“I don’t think you girls should be walking around Moscow alone. I’ll tell Henry we’re leaving.”

The night was murky and freezing as we made our way to the Belorusskaya Subway Station. We briskly passed Muscovites darting under the subway’s arching marble ceiling. Russian men milled the subway station in expensive leather, stylish women linking their arms. The glint of Moscow was even more striking having lived in Nizhny.

On one hand, Tom made me feel less alienated. On the other hand, our foreignness seemed multiplied by two as we shuffled past frescos in dirty jeans. Maybe because we were obviously Americans, Russians checked us out. Women swept their eyes over Tom’s long body and then stared straight ahead—as if an invitation for him to look them over. Instead, he quickly peered at his reflection in the dark window of the bus.

The metro roared as we skated underground to our Marriott Hotel on Tverskaya Street. Tom asked if I wanted to grab something to eat, but I opted for a hot shower in the strange tub with no curtain or showerhead holder. The bathroom grew steamy, water spraying accidentally over the mirror and toilet. At first, the situation was irritating, but then it seemed everything was crazy here, even a simple shower, and I laughed.

*
I was grateful for the return to routine back in Nizhny—up by seven, jump rope, shower (with holders), breakfast, and class. The structure helped divide attention, concentrate energy, and integrate us with Russia. As students, we became more than gawkers of foreign museums, toilets, and ballets. We became accountable for our studies: oral language exams, research papers (without computers!), and essays. All required response to the world around us. Often, in order to complete an assignment, we had to get to know Russians. I interviewed Russian women about family and work for my final paper. Our final exam for language was a class conversation between Russian and American students. I hoped our studies prepared me to meet Dima’s family, at least as well as anything could.

3. Shrovetide celebration in Nizhny.
As the group strolled along Minin Square on a Saturday in late February, spring prematurely teased the air and interrupted the span of gray that had entrenched the past three weeks. A young woman passed us on the street with her face nestling in a small bunch of yellow flowers. Spring flowers had never seemed lovelier. We unzipped jackets, bought sunglasses from a kiosk, and savored the day’s thaw. Soon, winter would return as though we had imagined this respite.

The week before Orthodox Lent, Russians celebrated a pancake festival called Shrovetide that remained from the pagan traditions of old. In Russia’s typical spirit of celebration, it was said a person would endure a bitter year if he refused to engage in the festivities. The first day of the week was “forgiven day,” and people kissed each other three times in honor of forgiveness. In Protestantism, we thought to do what Jesus would do every day, not on days mandated by a church. It seemed Russian pride was formed in part by traditions that held one responsible only on occasions. But on the other hand, I wondered what such days of recognition and seasons of self-awareness might be like.

Traditionally, the first pancake of Shrovetide was given to the poor or was put on the dormer-window to be taken by the souls of the dead relatives. A newly wedded couple was visited by the mother-in-law who came to teach her daughter to bake pancakes. I imagined Tatyana and me in Dima’s and my kitchen—flour dusting the table, a cassette of Russian folksongs playing in our record player, laughing as we pantomimed our way through conversation. But the picture was hazy, too unreal, and it seemed something possible only in another time, another place.
The park was busy with folksingers and dancers in bright costumes, music pulsing through the air as onlookers clapped along. The people looked happier: smiles spanned white faces, eyes softened—maybe from a little Vodka? Horses pulled sleighs, and troika rides could be bought for a few rubles. Russian fairytale characters paraded the streets: animals and fools, princes and princesses.

“These round pancakes,” Henry explained, leading Michelle and me to a kiosk, “symbolize the sun.” He parted from the counter with sour cream and caviar slathering the thin cake.

“I’ll have honey on mine,” I said, mimicking Michelle’s perfect Russian. Tom came up behind us and asked what we were eating. Balls of greasy meat lined on a kabob steamed before his lips. He proudly told us he was eating shashlik. Michelle said Pascha would blow us away, that this celebration was nothing by comparison.

“Just wait until you see the amount of food everyone eats on that day. Who knows, we’ll be living with families by then, but I bet our families will take us to their church. Even if they don’t go to church, they’ll celebrate. Trust me, no one in Russia misses an opportunity to party,” she laughed and bit into her pancake. It was easy to see how passionate Russians were. I wondered why their church seemed so somber. Why the people didn’t talk about their faith like we did? After years of atheism, was it precautionary? Did Orthodox Christians have deep, personal faith?

“Holy cow!” Tom said. “Look at that!” Down Sverdlovka Street, a group of men, stripped to their briefs, were shouting around what appeared a small pool.
“I’m getting a picture of this!” I said laughing. “Otherwise, my family will never believe me.” Party time in Russia made me wonder how things might have been different had we been allowed to drink. The program strictly forbade alcohol, and most our hosts obliged by keeping their Vodka, wine, and Champagne from celebrations while we were there. But on occasion, we experienced Russian Vodka—if only vicariously.

A group of children held hands and circled a life-sized doll erected on a wooden pole. The straw-stuffed doll symbolized winter as well as sins from the previous year. It would be torched at the end of the week, marking the end of sin and the Shrovetide festivities. The little ones screeched with excitement, their faces as bright as the pink dress on the doll. I inhaled the sweet joy around me, silently praying Dima and I would someday have a child who would shake with laughter.

Walking back to the dormitory, Henry said Russian superstitions lived side by side with Christian Orthodoxy.

“When Christianity was introduced in 988 by Grand Duke Vladimir, the people didn’t accept it for a time. And even when Russia became predominantly Orthodox, many pagan beliefs co-existed. For centuries, far longer than the United States has been in existence, Russia has been a ritualistic land. Many of the people’s fears are tied to these superstitions—”

Maybe the Evangelical Movement struggled in Russia because it seemed too easy. One prayed to Jesus, direct. One read the Bible and interpreted it. Emotions and life experiences swayed one to a deeper faith in Jesus. It was little wonder why Russians, trained to think and live communally, would balk at personalizing faith. It seemed they
could hide from what they really felt, really believed, in pride for the splendor of Orthodoxy.

One Russian superstition was that homes had a master-spirit called Domovoy, a gnome-like creature that could take the form of men or animals. With Christianity, spirits of the home became demons or saints. The people believed in maintaining good terms with the spirits by sticking to certain rules of behavior. Dima told me that whenever he thought of Domovoy, he talked to him or thought positively about him so the spirit wouldn’t make his home cold or cause unrest there. It seemed the spirit world was among the living to Russians. When family or friends died, some believed the steam rising from the earth in the springtime was the breath of dead ancestors waking after winter sleep. The Orthodox prayed for the deceased as those asleep in the faith. What a strange extension of superstition.

Pagans and Christians believed in the power of magic words. For example, when driving a cow to pasture for the first time in spring, a woman might have thrown her sash on the ground and made the cow step over it. “Like a sash always clinging to its owner, you stay with your mistress too.” This was to make the cow return home after grazing. If one was hurt and bleeding, she might have said: “Our Lady is sitting on a velvet-covered chair. She is sewing up the wounds of God’s servant and stops the bleeding.” And when depressed, one might have washed his face in the river. “Tsarina-river, wash my grief and misery away to the sea as you wash things off your banks.”

Proverbs, sayings, and phrases from pagan traditions remained common notions in the Russian language.

Henry said Russia was an ascetic and pious culture, which seemed the opposite of ours that seemed always hungering for progress. Personal satisfaction drummed the rhythm of our lives. America had been blessed: four-hundred years of wealth: top medical care, employment opportunities, and a government more just than most throughout the world. Of course, poverty, illness, and unlawful activity were in the States, but considering living conditions worldwide, it seemed America had done something right. Something to deserve such favor. Maybe in Russia the people needed their traditions and superstitions to allow for mystery over reason. Their suffering had been so great.

Some believed the Orthodox Church tried to break pagan superstitions and rites through the beauty of the temple, Henry said. The icons, priests’ clothes, fine landscapes, and the Divine Liturgy were deliberately beautiful to draw people from their tragic lives to the Church. It was aesthetic appeal which drew many together in the name of Christ.

Orthodoxy was an old fairytale.
CHAPTER TEN

I was glad to leave the dormitory. The latest resident was a man with graying hair and a small waist, distinctive for Russians after middle-age. In a brown bathrobe and slippers, he shambled down the hall to the stairwell where he chain-smoked every morning. On my way to jump-rope, he greeted me with an expression between sneer and grin. We’d meet again after my shower when he smoked in front of the window on the landing of the stairway. His whistle floated up the stairs with thinning smoke. There were other things about dorm life that made leaving a pleasant idea, most related to not having privacy. Tom continued to practically live in our room, and he and Michelle had begun to play cards late into the night. Ear-plugs drowned their noise, but nothing stopped my attraction. Jealousy and guilt came in alternating strokes.

1. Natasha and her father in their apartment.

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After six weeks in the dormitory, the American group was assigned to live with students from the International Program. As families selected the American they wanted, there was a strange feeling that we were being bought—live toys from the West. But, in fact, the Russian Studies Program paid the Russian families to host us. They were supposed to use the generous stipends for food. Some would. Mine wouldn’t.

We gathered in the International Office one evening before selections, as Vera and Henry set a long table with fruit, cut in segments, crackers and tea. Michelle and I flipped through Sasha’s photo album from a vacation on the Baltic Sea. In one photo, he stood on the deck of a large ship, sun-tanned and shirtless wearing sandals and a bright Speedo.

“Do European men prefer briefs to boxers?” It escaped before I could hold it back. Sasha shook his head yes, not catching my sarcasm at first.


“Yeah, dude.” Tom glanced the picture as I held up the album to make my point. He laughed. “Not like that—” Sasha playfully snatched the pictures from me and stuffed them in his book bag. He reached for my shoulders like he was going to shake me and embraced them instead.

“It’s okay. Americans have no style, we know,” Sasha said. Tom gently punched my arm. Michelle and Sasha continued debating whose country had the better fashion sense.
“Seriously, you guys,” I said untangling my neck from under Tom’s arm, “I do think Russian women dress better than we do. I mean, I’m leaving these stupid jeans when we go—”

Natasha, a dark girl with long hair, approached us. “What you guys talking about?” Her voice was deep, sexy. She wore a tight skirt and high leather boots.

“Look, her boots are a perfect example.” I pointed down to my clunky boots. Russian ladies wore things that accentuated their femininity—high boots under short skirts, tighter sweaters, brighter lipstick. Most of the women in our group didn’t wear make-up. We all wore too-big sweatshirts and jeans. Having a limited wardrobe was a partial excuse, but we admitted that even when we were at home, the style was grunge.

The evening continued light and fun. I felt excited. Soon, Tom and I wouldn’t have a third of the opportunity to flirt that we’d had. It was easy to sit by him, joke with him, and it seemed a mood of anticipated change fed through the atmosphere in general.

At first, I was honored there were a few Russian students with dibs on hosting me, but before long, I wondered if Natasha regretted her selection. I slipped from extraverted to withdrawn, growing laden with thoughts of meeting the family, missing Dima, and worrying about not learning Russian well enough. Thoughts of spring in Ohio, the sweet buds on my mother’s cherry tree, the milky sky, made prolonged winter in Nizhny hard to stomach. My hair was overgrown, jeans over-dirtied, and flirtations with Tom on a stand-still.
I lived down the street from the university with Natasha and her father in an apartment with old things tucked into walls, wedged into corners, and slipped under furniture. Books and old postcards from other American students were among the dusty keepsakes. A grimy window lined in homemade curtains reminded me of the kind of place that had once been touched with care. There were plants under the window that looked between death and life. When a bright sunrise streamed through the old room, the place felt full and homey. Other times, especially on gray mornings after Natasha and her father had left for the day, the place was cold and hollow. When the home seemed darkly sad, I felt the lack of her mother who had recently passed away from cancer.

Between the university and the apartment complex, a chain fence with barbed-wire guarded a drab brick prison. Walking by, I often wondered who was inside, what they did there, and if one might escape. Like most cities, the buildings were close together, too close. There were kiosks for groceries, beer, and non-food items like soap, but what seemed unusual was the lack of business offices. It appeared selling goods at a kiosk, teaching at the university, driving a bus or working construction were the only means of making a living in Nizhny.

“I am a dancer,” Natasha said in English as she stepped long legs into a dark leather skirt. She practiced her foreign language on me, which made conversation easy—unfortunately. There were only six weeks left to master Russian.

What kind of dancer?
“I won’t be home until the morning, but my father will make dinner.” I stood in the hallway as she posed before the mirror, almost laughing at the old robe tied around my waist.

“You all right, Lea? Need anything before I go?” Her strong perfume wrapped the tiny apartment. “Every thing here, I think. Rest. I will be home soon.” She kissed my cheek and slipped through the metal door, turning the lock with her key.

She had given me her room, a narrow space with crimson curtains and old stuffed animals. A deep bookshelf matched her dark-wood floor. A full-length mirror stretched the back of her bedroom door. I closed the door, surprised by my own drawn face, and turned to the window. It was already dark at six, and as I sat cross-legged on the bed it felt nice to be in a sort of home—one uninterrupted by visitors. Viktor Zsoy’s mellow, seventies-sounding music piped through the old recorder, head rolled, shoulders eased. I wondered if Dima would like the tape he had requested. The longer it played, the more it seemed Dima was near.

Natasha’s father shuffled past my room to the kitchen in his slippers. The icebox opened. Glass clinked glass—Vodka. His drink laid next to pickled cabbage, canned vegetable spread, and a can of sardines, opened and uncovered. I dreamed of mixed greens with avocado, tomatoes, slivered almonds, croutons, and grilled chicken drizzled in balsamic vinaigrette. But in Russia, there didn’t seem to be lettuce. I began to wonder if they chose me because I was a small person.

The father knocked on my door.

“Yes?— I mean—da?”
“Lea, soup? Ti hochesh?” Yes, food!

“Thank you.” I opened my door with a closed-mouth smile. He walked to his room, full head of silver hair above strong shoulders. He looked healthy and attractive, and I hoped he would marry again. I waited until he was tucked in his room listening to a sad record before moving to the kitchen.

Salty smells of a whole chicken and vegetables bubbled in an enormous pot. The chicken’s feet were rubber-banded, bobbing at the foamy top. I ladled some broth and vegetables, sneaking back to my room like a hermit.

With all the alone time I wanted at Natasha’s, sluggish loneliness crept in. I reminded myself how I’d longed for this time, and tried to appreciate it. I slurped the hot soup and daydreamed of Tom in his new home. Were both parents there? What was Sasha really like? Sasha had become quite a ladies man; many of the girls from the group continued falling in love (or lust) with him. He drizzled heavily accented poetry through cherry lips. I wondered if he had introduced Tom to Russian girls. I hoped so. I wanted to hear Tom had kissed a girl—he would seem less unconquerable. And also, Tom needed a little lip-action. He was twenty-two!

Natasha came home past midnight, but I couldn’t sleep and finally gave up trying. I peeked in the bathroom where she filled the bathtub with a bit of water and laid long-stem roses.

“Hey, Natasha.” She wore a large leather jacket I hadn’t recalled her leaving in. She turned to me, eye make-up streaking her face. “Are you okay—” She shrugged with a brittle laugh, and splashed her face with water from the tub.
“Flowers very beautiful, I think.” She sounded as sad as she looked. I wanted to reach out and hold her, talk with her openly, but there seemed an invisible line dividing us. Did she trust me? Think I was too naïve, too young, too sheltered to listen? Did she think because I was an American my life was easier than hers? Was it?

Natasha was the kind of person who craved attention and affirmation, which she found as a dancer. She told me she danced for “officers.” These weren’t the clean policemen I had imagined. I wanted to embrace her but felt afraid. I kept myself in the corner of the bathroom.

Her hand slipped into the pocket of the jacket. “This was present tonight, too.” She flapped the sides of the jacket with her hands still in the pockets. I tried to think what to say to her and arrived at food. She slid off the coat and reached for a wool sweater. I followed her to the kitchen where she boiled milk and added cereal.

“I was just wondering if we could get some different food, maybe do some cooking together?” She held her dark hair back with one hand and ate her casha at the table with the other.

“I on casha diet, Lea. We will purchase food for you. What you want?”

“Oh, you know—fruit, vegetables, whatever.”

That week apples, fish, and rice were added to the fridge. Even with the additional food, I realized that it wasn’t only food I needed. I really missed home, the smell of my mother’s Noxzema and Casual perfume. I craved a bowl of Ruggle’s chocolate frozen yogurt with Melanie, and an after Lifetime talk with Dad. Time felt frozen and bitter.
A Russian girlfriend invited me to her apartment after class. I waited by the entrance of the university for the petite blond girl to meet me. A young woman sold pencils, pens, and spiral notebooks by the door. She bustled through a cloth bag, retied her hair in a bright bow, and flipped through a textbook for sale, apparently to keep busy. She didn’t look at me, which seemed odd as I was staring, hoping she’d offer a practice conversation in Russian.

Dusk pushed through the doors as a man stumbled in. He cradled a brown paper-bag against his jacket and walked toward me. The heavy bite of Vodka moved with him. As he ambled closer, a yellow toothed sneer parted the dirty beard hiding his face. I backed into the stairs and almost fell against them. My heart pounded.

“Nyet! Otoidi ot suda. Ostav yeyo v pokoye.” The woman from behind the school supplies scampered around her table and shooed the man away. I thanked the woman with my eyes as the man hobbled from me, chuckling mirthlessly.

The wind blew fierce against my girlfriend’s delicate cheekbones and small nose. She shielded her blue eyes from the needle-sharp slap of snow and shouted, “You okay?” in English. I told her I was fine, and we hurried to her apartment, ten minutes by metro across town. I told her about the man at the university, and she apologized as though he had somehow been her fault. I told her not to worry, but she shook her head.

“Russian men very—um—very ploho, bad.” She was not as comfortable with English as Natasha, which I hoped would make us speak Russian. She nodded to a boy at the end of the metro gripping the metal handrail and smiling at us. In my ear she
whispered that he was “beautiful.” She giggled and proceeded in Russian saying something about having dated him before and hoping to marry him someday. I guessed Russian men weren’t too bad.

Her mother served us warm mashed potatoes and pickled tomatoes and mushrooms in an almost dark kitchen. It was very quiet. The metal spoon scraped the dish of potatoes. The canned vegetables popped open in her small hands. She didn’t smile or small talk. I asked if I could help with anything, but my friend said of course not, that I was the guest. We finished eating in heavy silence.

“Do you play music?” my friend asked.

“No. I sing sometimes—” she stood from the table, took my hand and pulled me to the living room. She played the accordion while her mother played a small piano. They sang a Russian folksong about a lost girl and her grieving mother in soft trilling voices.

I clapped, beaming with joy and fire—the apartment was very warm. “What do you cook in America?” I felt progressively unladylike, not considering myself much good at this either.

“My favorite food is bread. I can make it pretty good in a bread machine. But I really like to write.” They had never heard of a bread machine. “It’s so awesome! You just throw the flour and yeast into a pan with a mechanical piece that kneads it to perfection.” They looked skeptical as I pantomimed with English. They didn’t seem to understand or trust the idea of it.

“So, you write poetry or novel?” my friend asked.
“I write more nonfiction, sometimes poetry. I read lots of novels, though. Like, I loved *The Master and Margarita*. Our group went to Mikhail Bulgakov’s apartment. Have you been there?”

“The apartment possessed by demons, but my sister and I visited apartment anyhow last summer on ferry trip to Moscow,” she said, slowly concentrating on her words. I eased into the dark couch. Her mother began ironing. She smoothed the skirt and dipped her light hands in a bowl of water, voicing concern over the weather as she pressed the fabric.

“You must sleep here tonight,” my friend insisted, translating her mother’s words. “It is too cold. You get sick,” her mother nodded her head and smiled for the first time.

“I will stay another night—”

“No, no. My mother will not let you leave. Catch cold, Lea.” I didn’t want to stay. It was easy to smile and listen to their song and eat a meal, but I was uncomfortable. There was no space for me there, and it took necessity to keep me tightly contained with others. I didn’t want to push my girlfriend away or offend her. I longed to know her. She helped me live Russia in different ways than Henry and Natasha could. She was a sweet girl, innocent and child-like.

“Oh, I’d love to stay but have too much homework to do before tomorrow,” I said, which was partly true.

Melting into my room at Natasha’s, grateful to be alone, I uncapped my bottled water and sipped it. Natasha was gone again. Maybe I should have stayed. My book bag was unzipped, a notebook stuffed with scraps of “research” (observations of Russian
women) jutting out the top. I could work on the paper, I told myself, but instead opened my journal to capture another day in Russia.

Some Russians became furious at Americans at the end of March. Korienko (Prime Minister of Russia) rode a plane to the U.S. to make an agreement with President Clinton against bombing Kosovo. On his way, the bombing was initiated and the plane was turned around. NATO continued heavily bombing Yugoslav targets, involving over thirty-thousand American militia. Chechnya and Russia had been conflicted over whether the Chechen Republic should remain within the Russian Federation or form an independent nation. The bombing involved us in their debate, which continued through the remainder of our time in Russia and into late June.

Dima’s father called Natasha’s one evening, “Lea, okay?” his voice was tense. I responded with carefully prepared Russian notes.

“Yes, fine, Viktor. Everything is safe. Henry has cautioned the group to be very careful. Please, don’t worry.” He sighed.

“Don’t go out alone. Always stay with Natasha or Henry. Russian people are very upset—” he spoke Russian carefully, asked me if I understood him. I told him I did, but thought he might feel better if he explained his fear to Natasha who sauntered into the hall from the couch. Jerry Springer, dubbed in Russian, hummed in the background. I handed her the receiver.
“Hello, Viktor. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yes, I promise to take good care of her. We go to the market together. I promise I will do that. Don’t worry, really.” I stood beside the rotary phone that had curves like a full-hipped woman.

“Dima’s father asked if you understand what is happening.”

“Henry explained—” I said.

She promised we would be careful, again. “Packa,” she said, mouthing, do you want to talk? I shook my head no.

“Do you want to bake a cake?” I asked, hoping to forget about everything for a while and have fun together. We hadn’t talked much, but I was still holding out hope that we would connect on a deeper level in time.

“I ruin my diet. Oh—all right,” she glided into the kitchen and began pulling flour from a dusty shelf.

Curled on the couch next to Natasha, I speared a bite of torte drizzled with condensed milk. On the news, the Russian army threw bombs at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

“You think we’re safe, right?” I asked.

“You fine. Promise.” She didn’t look up from her large slice of torte.

The next morning on the way to class, I waited to cross the street to the university next to a group of men wearing military outfits. Their boots were thick and dirty, their uniforms a crisp olive-color pinned with red metals. I tapped my gloved hand against my jeans, stared ahead, watching their eyes on me in the periphery. I shifted my weight from boot to boot as traffic sped past, spitting dirty snow and exhaust into the frigid morning.
The university would be warm and safe, I reminded myself. The men snickered and blew cigarette smoke and freezing breath into the air. A tall man spat on the snow. Chills ran up my arms. Vulnerable, echoed through my head.

I first learned that Easter was “Pascha” while in Russia, and that a mound of cheesecake sprinkled with raisins was called the same. It had been another new word with fuzzy connotations. It was Holy Saturday night, and Natasha and I rode the metro to Strelka Street. We were meeting Henry and others from the group at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral for Pascha as it dawned at midnight.

Before the church service began, the crowd stretched into the street where a man played the accordion and a woman sang in a throaty voice. A box to their side filled with coins and notes. There were so many people gathered around the church that it was impossible to make out faces until a familiar one was inches from me, illumined by the light of the moon.

“Tom, you scared me!”

“What, I can’t say hi?” He smiled. My heart raced with old excitement.

“No, of course you can. It’s good to see you. Here with your family?” He pointed to Sasha over by a group of other young people. Natasha turned to a Russian friend as I whispered, “How are things going at ‘home’?” We couldn’t talk about this at the university. Our free times were spent with Russian friends in the International Office or with them at lunch. Tom said things were okay, his eyes full on my face. I grew hot,
despite the bite of cold. Tom’s face looked fuller. I wondered how I looked in his eyes. I was probably just another dulling face with the stretch of winter.

“Look, I have to go. Sasha’s got someone special he wants me to meet,” he smiled wryly.

Natasha stood still beside me as Holy Saturday dissolved into the dawning of Pascha. My fingers wrapped the end of the smooth wax candle. “When do we light these?” I asked.

“Soon!” Natasha said. She leaned into my ear and told about the miracle of Holy Fire occurring on Calvary over the garden of Arimathaea. She said a fire appeared by itself every Holy Saturday when the Patriarch of Jerusalem entered the shrine. The Holy Fire was said to be mild, even safe to touch, and the people believed it was a material manifestation of the Divine’s presence.

“And when the fire doesn’t spontaneously ignite,” she paused, “it indicates the end of the world.”

I wondered if Natasha believed in God, if she believed in miracles—or was this just a story to her, as it at first seemed to me? Had she gone to church with her mother? Had she been secretly baptized?

The church doors opened and people passed their flickering flames to one another. The mystery of faith drifted through my spirit like the breeze in the dark, or like the spontaneous fire over Christ’s garden. From inside the church, to the steps of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and into the street, the fire of faith spread through the dark.
It was well after midnight when people began feeding into the large church chanting Christ is risen, “Christos voskrese! Voistinu voskrese!” Though we were occupying a tiny square of the earth, the entire world seemed aglow with faith. My breath held. A massive priest shined in white vestments, hands raised above his head.

“Christ is risen!” he spoke in Russian.

“Indeed, he is risen!” the people bellowed. I had the strangest thought then.

I knew nothing of the nature of God.

On Easter morning, I walked into Natasha’s kitchen with a nagging desire for my mother’s boiled eggs and gooey maple roll that had been our traditional Easter breakfast. Natasha’s apartment was still, the sun like dust floating through the window. There was a note on the table.

“We have gone to visit graves. Home very soon. Natasha.” I grabbed my boiled water from the fridge and showered for the day of feasting at Natasha’s grandmother’s.

The grandmother greeted Natasha with a red boiled egg and three kisses, one on each cheek and then her lips. With a bony hand, she pulled another egg from the pocket of her apron, planting kisses on my cheeks and lips as she slipped the egg into my hand. Her skin had the faint scent of Lilies of the Valley.

A few steps from the foyer, a long table spread with a crystal decanter of wine and ceramic mugs for tea. A mound of pale Pascha was in the center of the table, around which Natasha’s grandmother arranged mashed potatoes, sliced chicken, tomatoes and
cucumbers, shredded carrots in creamy dressing, smoked salmon, dark bread, and a glass jar of caviar.

Grandmother brought Natasha and me ice cream cones before we began our meal, her silver-blue eyes grinning with the excitement of giving children small treasures. She told us this was a day to feast, and Natasha shook her head in agreement. I thought it would be a night to jump rope. Natasha’s father had arrived after us, and I wondered if he had been longer at the grave of Natasha’s mother. He was slumped quietly behind the table, sipping Vodka from a stout glass. His eyes were unfocused and sad, a milky gray similar to his mother’s but lacking the luster that still lingered in hers.

The day was filled with food and stillness, not unlike holidays at home, but strangely quiet. We ate in silence. I sat across from the grandmother and later wondered if it was the language and cultural differences that kept her from meeting my eyes. After Dima’s Grandma’s episodes in the States—her steely pride and passionate conviction that people in the West were against her—I wondered if Soviet propaganda had seeded lasting prejudices in Natasha’s grandmother.

The family was grieving the loss of Natasha’s mother, and I wondered if I was in the way of this process. Something was missing, and though they celebrated, they reserved that empty place. Natasha and I took photographs of each other in goofy poses. We laughed with tensile smiles. Why did we fake it? Maybe Natasha hoped I served as a distraction to the grief they had suffered the past years. But being together and quiet, somber-faced and sad, was a way to be in Russia. A way I had to be sometimes. I hoped this wasn’t a disappointment.
Was it un-American, or just unlike my family, the way their pain seemed silent and bitter until it no longer was? No plastic smiles or filler conversation. Somehow, it made me content, and though I saw the family’s pain, they too seemed content in a way. In a very real way.

At the end of our stay in Nizhny, I tried to spend quality time with Natasha. She and I left for a movie on a Saturday evening with her friends.

“Natasha, bring a beer back for me, please?” Her father said. She agreed, and we slipped through the metal door. The cinema was cold cement. Cigarette smoke and alcohol lambasted us as we entered. There were raw walls and bleachers, and a section that had collapsed was roped off. Such an odd contrast to the museums and churches.

Natasha and her three friends and I sat boy-girl in the back. Natasha ferreted through her purse for a pack of Lucky Strike smokes, which she passed down the row to us. There were maybe twenty Russians in the dim theatre by the time a sentimental song opened the film (which was ironic for the kind of movie it would be). In the movie, a mob of tough-looking men with pretty wives fought another group of men. The cause of their disagreement eluded me. The shooting in the film seemed to ignite the crowd, and some cat-called or booed as the show continued. A few rows ahead of us, a woman suddenly stood and yelled at someone next to her. Before I knew what was happening, the woman threw her hands against her jacket and punched her neighbor in the face. Silence. No one budged from their seats. The glow from the film fell on an elderly woman crumpled in her seat, unmoving.
“I can’t believe she punched that old lady!” I said to Natasha.

“Who knows, they probably both drunk,” she said.

“What if she’s really hurt? Should we do something?” She shook her head, said there was nothing to do and this was normal. The younger woman staggered from the theatre.

It was odd the way things were so unexpected in Russia. I had imagined Natasha’s friends would ask me questions about America: what I did with friends, what were parties and college life like in the States. There weren’t any personal questions or meaningful talks that night. Natasha and her friends seemed cold, disinterested in me.

After the movie, we took an almost empty metro to Gorky Street and walked to the Oka Café for small servings of spaghetti with a bitter fishy sauce and cups of cucumbers loaded with dill and sour cream. Our meals came with one half slice of black bread. It seemed small, and the total was less than three dollars. I wasn’t hungry anyway. Natasha and her friends chatted with each other in Russian, and I began to think it really didn’t matter if I was there or not. I longed to escape.

We stood under a street lamp outside a beer kiosk on the corner of Natasha’s street. She handed me a bottle, asking if I wanted a beer as an after thought. The bottle was cold against my hand. “Baltika.” Dima would be so proud if I took a sip, just a sip, of his favorite beer of late (newly found at a Russian store nearby the Holmeses’). The beer was actually brewed in St. Petersburg, which somehow made it better alcohol than “weak American beer,” he and his Moscow friend agreed. Henry didn’t seem the kind of person that would be ridiculously staunch about any rule. I just didn’t want to take the
chance. My tolerance was low, and Dima said Russian beer was stronger. It wasn’t safe to drink here. Yet, I wanted to. I longed to unshackle the weight of responsibility. To be reckless and happy again.

Natasha’s friend threw her arm around the shoulders of the boy next to her, and like dominoes we all embraced. The friends stepped in close enough to smell each other’s breath as we swayed to a Russian pop song, which I knew from the radio Natasha played every morning before school. A large boy with a shiny face untwisted his friends’ bottle caps and reached for mine.

“Hey, Natasha? Your dad asked for a beer, remember?” She shrugged. “Why don’t I take it to him?” I said, knowing how clear it was I was running away.

“If you want to, I guess. But he can wait—” I told her it was getting late and that I was tired. I smiled at her friends, muttering a generic “nice to meet you” and jogged back to the apartment.

I passed the prison in the dark as fear rolled through me. I wondered how much of a mess one would have to make of their lives in order to be there. I ran hard. Desperate to escape—from Russians, from Russia, from being foreign.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

A sea of pink flooded my room on the last morning at Natasha’s. I slid my legs over a cool space on the sheets and opened heavy eyelids. In the stillness of the morning, birds chirped for the first time in months. I tried to be at ease, but my body felt sluggish and unwilling. It was another day of transition, and I felt absolutely nothing.

Today was farewell to Natasha. We both knew we’d likely never see one another again, despite my promise to look into inviting her to the States for school. We knew there’d be too many obstacles—money being the largest. I didn’t anticipate an overly

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1. Meeting Dima’s family at the St. Petersburg train station. From left to right: Tatyana, author, Viktor, Grandma.
emotional farewell. She’d been through host-student-separation before and didn’t seem that attached to me anyway. I was eager to leave, to be one step closer to home.

Over breakfast of boiled eggs and thick casha, she told me she didn’t think she’d host another student. At first, I flinched, wondering what I’d done wrong. Then she said she “fell in love with sister,” and she had to leave. I marveled. Did she love me?

“I miss you,” Natasha said before I boarded the split-pea train, its cold metal beckoning us for another journey to an unknown place. I hugged her, inhaling sweet perfume, and she kissed me on the lips. I gave her a Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame snow-globe, and she gave me a cassette of Russian pop songs. Her chin dimpled. Before I witnessed the tears, I threaded through my peers loading the train and hoped she took my hurriedness as emotion instead of escape.

Tom and Michelle were playing a game of cards on a tray-table folded out from under the window. “Hey guys,” I joined their game of war beside Tom. I was on high-alert: too pin-prickly sensitive. Just relax. What was the big deal?

“Ready for St. Petersburg?” Michelle asked.

“Ready for the family?” Tom added. I pulled on the ears of Dima’s white bear and shrugged. Tom unwrapped a submarine sandwich, and the smells of salami and cheese crowded the small room.

“I’m sorry—that’s making me sick,” I nodded at the salami flapping like a tongue at the side of the bread.

“Sorry,” he said brusquely and stuffed the sandwich into a bag. He grabbed my bear.
“Stop! Give me the bear.” He threw it at the window.

“What’s wrong with you? I’m just playing,” he said. But I couldn’t tell if that’s really all he was doing. Was it just the ridiculous spin of my emotions, or was he irritated with me? I moved to an empty train car and closed the door, sifting through my bag for Natasha’s music and my journal. Confusion and weariness tangled inside me.

“Oh God. I’m not ready for all this.”

The train stilled, exhaled. A man in a neon green windbreaker and cap stepped into the aisle carrying a bouquet of flowers. As he walked nearer, hazel eyes absorbed me. A half-smile twitched his lips, and he trembled in our embrace. He smelled of mint soap. As the group pressed to the exit, Viktor stepped back and motioned for me to go ahead of him. In egg-shell quiet, we joined Tatyana and Grandma waiting beside the train.

Tatyana swallowed me in her full chest, fuzzy hair tickling my nose, and Grandma pressed against me from behind. Viktor embraced our huddle. I didn’t look over at the group gathered yards from us, but I wondered—had Henry seen the homecoming? Had Tom? I felt embarrassed. Our very private moment had become a very public spectacle. I felt sheepish to receive so freely the family’s affection. I was undeserving.

“Welcome to St. Petersburg, Leeea,” Viktor said in English. “We love you.”

*
St. Petersburg was famous for Faberge Eggs. Alexander III had the first Faberge Egg made for his wife. The outside was white with enameled gold, and inside was a golden yolk. Like the popular Russian dolls with miniatures folded inside, the egg continued to open for the tsarina. She de-layered the egg: inside the yolk was a golden hen, inside the hen was a tiny crown, and inside the crown was a ruby. The gift was such a treasure to the tsarina that the Faberge Egg became a traditional gift. Fifty-seven eggs were made under the conditions they be unique and surprising.

Getting to know Russia, meant realizing Dima and his family—layer by layer. Would I eventually share in their pride of St. Petersburg, and all of Russia, as though I too shared a claim on the mysterious land? What would it mean to become a part of Dima’s parents’ love, as it seemed I already was? Standing beside them, a spirit of protection hovered over me, fed me, wrapped around me. I was falling in love, but the feelings weren’t there. They seemed ahead of me, somehow, like my body was in one place and my heart in another.

Henry counted the group, briskly weaved through suitcases and bags, and marched to the family huddle.

“Hey Henry, is it okay if I go to the hotel with Viktor?” I asked.

“Since we’re all going to the same place, we’ll go together. Just follow the group,” he said.

“Is it okay if I go to their apartment after we get to the hotel?” I didn’t know how much space I’d be allowed. Did Henry trust the family? Did he trust me?
Viktor interrupted, apparently to take care of matters, man to man. His calloused hands clenched the handle of my suitcase under his large belly. Henry spoke softly but decidedly. He wouldn’t relinquish me during these days in St. Petersburg, though he would allow me to spend much of the downtime with the family.

The group seemed deflated as we walked from the train and followed Henry to the Baltiyskaya Metro which would take us to the Sovetskaya Hotel. The group was used to Henry’s fast clip and picked up the pace. Dima’s father and I walked a few steps behind to be only a few more in front of Tatyana and Grandma, continuing in a pace of their own. I fell back with Dima’s mother and Grandma and laced my arms in theirs.

Tatyana looked different from what I had imagined. She was the same light color as Dima. Despite the cold, her cheeks were colorless. At first, she seemed plain and serious, unlike her melodic voice, but she was also obviously proud and womanly. It was in the way she stepped light on small feet, despite her full body. It was in her tight sweaters and enormous bosom, which she held high and straight, though she was no taller than I. She and Grandma had a similar body odor that contrasted with my floral body spray. Strolling between them, nervous energy fizzed inside. I was willing to do anything to bridge our gaps.

For the first time on the trip, the group had individual rooms in the enormous Sovetskaya Hotel. The family opened my hotel windows and cool air fed into the small cement room. Tatyana placed the flowers Viktor had given me in a paper cup on the nightstand, and Grandma pointed to her watch. She told me I had twenty minutes before the family would return to take me “home.” The word lost its sense after so many new
places. I realized theirs should feel different, that the experience should mean more, but I wasn’t sure it would. It might just be another foreign pit-stop. Viktor hugged me goodbye and Grandma meekly smiled and followed Tatyana to the hotel lobby.

Silk scarves, socks, underwear, and a stiff pair of jeans amassed on the bed. I tore off my black pants and wrapped a long floral skirt over dark tights. I smoothed the brown flowers that had been stashed deep in my suitcase. I tied a matching scarf around my neck and pushed my hair into an amber clip. I found the crumbling remains of Secret Powder Fresh and smeared some under my arms, grateful that Russians were used to more natural body odor.

The family returned as promised, and I wasn’t ready. My face felt greasy, and I had hoped to wash it when Grandma’s rapping continued at my door. I grabbed a stick of gum and face powder. As I opened the hotel room door, Viktor chuckled and shook his head, his body motions telling me there was no need to get all dolled up. I flushed. He offered some of his dark drink, Kvas, as we made our way to the metro and into Kolpino. The drink was rich and bitter, warm like backwash. Viktor’s arm circled my shoulders as we made the last leg of our trip by bus into their city.

“Okay?” he continued asking, which seemed a way for him to reassure Tatayana and Grandma that he was in control and I was taken care of. I smiled and nodded. I was anything but okay. I was on fire. But even then, it seemed clear that Viktor’s acceptance was as generous as my mother’s.
Viktor unlocked the heavy door to their apartment and stepped aside. Dima’s mother motioned for me to wear the red slippers in the corner. I sat on the floor to untie my boots.

“Nyet! Nyet!” Grandma shook her head, lower lip quivering. “Cold ground make infertile,” Viktor explained in broken English. I stood, peering into Dima’s Crayola blue room. It appeared unchanged—hockey ribbons and trophies frozen in time. A tall bottle of water on the nightstand was the only mark that it had become a guest room.

“Kioshka, Tmoshka?” The cats scampered to Tatyana as she leaned forward with a slice of chicken in the kitchen. She smiled, roamed her small hand across their orange coats.

“Lea! Tonya! Come living room,” Viktor called. A table in the center of the room had been set with blood-red roses and pale china. Grandma sat at the table, rubbing her ankle.

“Momma, juice?” Tatyana lifted the crystal decanter for her mother.

Viktor patted the old sofa and dust danced in the sun. I sat beside him. From a small balcony, a warming breeze fluttered, sucking in and billowing out rose-colored curtains. Viktor opened a children’s book written in English.

“Viktor, study?” I asked. He shook his head yes and smiled. He seemed as proud as Tatyana, but less afraid. Tatyana seemed more reserved and came across as uncomfortable, even rude, when she was uncomfortable.
“On bus. Home sometimes.” His words came slow, and he concentrated at length with each sound. I squirmed in our silence as he stared up at the ceiling with furrowed eyebrows, a line creasing his forehead. “Very difficult, very difficult,” he said. I imagined they didn’t watch after dinner sit-coms, as they worked long shifts, sometimes through the night. When did he have time to prepare for his dream of coming to the States?

He stepped over my crossed ankles and shuffled to a cabinet for a box of photographs. He scooted a pile of black and white against my thigh. In one, Tatyana wore a miniskirt and a long braid draped her shoulder. She stood next to a boat anchor at the Admiralty, a dockyard on the Neva River built by Peter-the-Great. It had been intended as extra defense against invasions after he first founded St. Petersburg, his “Venice of the North.” Tatyana’s beauty and youth fit there, femininity glowing from her deep eyes, soft face, and curvy figure.

“Here, Leea, me brother—” Two men in naval uniform stood before a black gate similarly dark-haired, square-faced, and lean. They were very attractive, and I realized how much Dima’s father was weighed down by extra pounds. Viktor’s arm was around the shoulders of his brother. Behind them was an old park decorated with marble statues and fountains, the Summer Palace. There was a small yellow home in the back of the palace, built by Peter-the-Great for summer parties. The park was over three-hundred years old, and it seemed astonishingly well preserved.
Viktor passed me a colored photograph of him and Tatyana at the entrance to Dima’s old sports complex. Their faces were statuesque. Dima’s mother’s arms were crossed behind her back, and Viktor leaned against her.

The cats gingerly sniffed my feet and darted under the table. I could only imagine the fragrance there.

“Take picture. Take picture for Dima.” Viktor said pointing to the cats. Thus, two rolls of family film from our first meal began.

The aroma of fried pork chops, mushroom soup, and mashed potatoes filled the air. The table was covered with bowls of bananas cut in thirds, cucumbers and tomatoes mixed with the usual dill and sour cream, and dark bread. Dima’s mother nodded her head, and Viktor left the photographs and immediately took his seat at the table. I sat between Grandma and Viktor, Tatyana sitting at the head of the table and serving the meal in courses. We ate in silence, forks scratching china, Grandma’s dentures clicking.

“Spasiba, Tatyana. Ochin vacoosney.” The food was delicious, but my stomach began to gurgle. Uh-oh. I gingerly rose. Tatyana and Grandma looked up from their plates heaped with seconds. I hadn’t learned the word for diarrhea, and it wasn’t the time for pantomiming. Wretchedly sick, I sat on the toilet in agony, body sweating. I studied the H-O-C-K-E-Y printed toilet paper from Mr. Holmeses’ visit years earlier, marveling that the paper had been saved for such an occasion.

Back at the table, Viktor rubbed his round stomach, “Lea, okay? Sick?” I took the large black pills he held in his palm, afraid what might be encapsulated but too sick to care. And with a glance at the concern etched in Viktor’s face, it was the least I could do.
“Priviet!” Igor, Dima’s cousin, announced, entering the apartment and walking past the bathroom I had just occupied. Igor was thirteen with silky blond hair he smoothed obsessively with a pink comb in his back pocket. His blue eyes and striking confidence spoke of unripe trouble. He approached the table and shook my hand.

“Is your homework done, Igor?” Grandma asked. He looked down, mumbling, “Grandma, I’ll go back to your apartment and finish it later.”

“Want to see some pictures?” I was anxious to get up from the table. He followed me into Dima’s room, flipping the album to Melanie and me jumping off the lighthouse at Mentor-Beach-Park.

He pointed to my hair, flying up like a straight brown parachute above my body, almost bare in a pink bikini. Melanie’s feet were just above the glassy water. I missed her. Wondered what she was doing right then—probably sleeping. In America, it was the middle of the night.

Igor giggled, face buried in the album. I snapped a picture. “Ooh! Klasna!” he said, pointing to the camera.

Tatyana stomped into Dima’s room laughing, “Leeea, Lea!” I followed her to the living room where the cats stretched thick orange bodies over the vase of roses. “Peeector! Peeector.” Her poor English and radiating joy made her seem more human.

Viktor called from the hall. He was posed under a small punching bag, fists in the air, half smile not quite reaching widened eyes. “Tell Dima,” he said with a hint of sadness in his tone.
Even there, in an apartment too small to be out of earshot, I felt pulled from one thing to the next at random. Their fragmented thoughts and feelings became a whirlwind I tried to understand. Their desperation was obvious, important. But also tiring. Why had they let Dima leave? Did they really love him the way my parents loved me? Would the questions never end—was there no way to understand them? Could I fathom their way of life, without opportunities I often took for granted: freedom, health care, a career within my reach?

Dima had become a young man, and in many ways an American one. The Dima I brought to them was changed. And the person I would be returning to him would also be changed. I sensed it like the soft breeze through their pink curtains. I wondered what his parents might notice in these days, about me, about the Dima I brought them, if only through photographs and my love. I wondered what Dima would notice in the photographs I would share from these months in his homeland. What would the differences and similarities mean to him—could he remember enough to really see? I felt a vacuous, nascent need in Dima’s parents, and for this short time I was something to lessen their emptiness. But what place would I occupy once they met?

Where would I fit into this family?

Tatyana refused to let Igor and I take a walk after dinner. Instead, Tatyana and Viktor decided the three of us would stroll through Kolpino, after walking Grandma and Igor back to Grandma’s apartment. The wind rippled the Izhora River. The river was a main tributary of the Neva that never froze all the way through, even in the heart of
winter. The river, the day, the walk with Dima’s parents, all felt unreal, magical even. Viktor draped an arm around Tatyana and posed for a picture by the river where they had first met twenty-three years earlier.

We ambled over an iron bridge to the city’s sports complex. “Viktor, do you like to fish?” I asked in Russian. Tatayana laughed and said he liked to eat fish. He didn’t object. Viktor pointed to a showcase outside the cement complex. In the center of it, a photograph of Dima in Findlay’s orange hockey jersey had been placed next to a photograph of the 1990 Russian hockey team. I wondered if the city still cared about Dima, or had his father’s pride preserved his presence there?

I smiled and peered at the photograph, pointing to a boy next to Dima and asking if this was the best friend, Sasha. It was. As families lived in apartments for lifetimes, Dima’s family continued to see his friends from the past. Dima’s father said Sasha had become an alcoholic. Another childhood friend was divorced and also heavily drinking. Another, who had hoped to play professional hockey, was in the army. I wondered where Dima might have been.

As we rounded the city back to their apartment, we stopped at Tatyana’s best friend’s apartment. Olga stooped over small pots of herbs. She practically jumped up and down as we approached, which gave the impression she was not as reserved as Dima’s mother. I hoped Tatyana was drawn to people more expressive.

“Friend Olga,” Viktor said as we entered the apartment. In Russia, friendships made in high school often lasted lifetimes. It seemed in America, people moved more. There were a series of events that separated friends: college, careers, families. To
someone like Tatyana, it might seem like Americans didn’t really care about
relationships. Why did I keep myself at arms-length from old friends? Even with
neighbors, why wasn’t there a deeper connection? There was the occasional real talk, if
one was ill or had experienced a tragedy, but mostly, stops on walks with Mom and Dad
around Mentor-on-the-Lake were abbreviated, topical. It seemed no one shared tea or a
cup of coffee the way my mother and other mother’s from the street once had. Maybe
Americans were too busy, too individualized, too ambitious to carve time out of their
schedules and truly be neighbors. Maybe I was.

Olga embraced me with fragile arms, slightly shaking, and it was striking how
different she felt from Tatyana. Viktor left for home, and Olga and Tatyana moved to the
kitchen and prepared tea, voices just above a whisper. I stood alone in the room, unsure
what to do with myself. Pale green curtains moved with a light breeze, as though spirits
dancing in the gold sunset. Behind the couch was a photograph of Dima and me in
Homecoming formals. For the first time, it dawned on me that I was a part of peoples’
lives that weren’t yet a part of mine.

Viktor and Henry had agreed, as long as I was back in the morning for a round of
sightseeing: the Hermitage and the Peter and Paul fortress, I could sleep at the family’s
apartment. It felt odd and comforting to be treated as a child while plans were made for
me. It would have angered me if the situation had not been temporary, but for over a
week I rested in the overprotection of Dima’s family. I was weary from long days
without my mother, from trying to find my own way. Less of a fight welled within me
when the parents forbade me from leaving their apartment without them. I bounced between reasons for their stifling care: they knew Russia and truly feared for me, too naïve to understand. They considered me as Dima had been when he left, a child. Though Dima had had freedom, even roaming the city as young as eight, I wondered if the years had given them time to reflect on all that they might have done differently with their only son. Maybe they perceived me as more vulnerable because I was a girl, or a temporary child, or an American.

In the shower at the family’s apartment, I scooted close underneath the hot water and away from the manual washing machine in the tub. My eyelids closed as water traced my body. Finally, I stepped out of the tub and wrapped my hair in a bright pink towel. Tensions vaporized in the steamy bathroom.

“Leea,” the parents called from the kitchen in unison. Tatyana’s voice rang sing-song against the playful gruff of Viktor’s. They stood behind three dishes of vanilla ice cream. Had such cares been taken for Dima? He had made his own dinners of fried potatoes and sour cream at seven while his parents worked, why all the fuss for me? As Dima’s parents and I ate ice cream in quiet, an air of togetherness and celebration held us. It was the beginning of another long week, but this time I was closer to Dima than I’d been in months. This time, the end was within sight.

Later that evening, I uncapped the enormous bottle of water Tatyana had set on the nightstand. Bubbles. How could anyone drink un-sugared pop? I tip-toed to the kitchen for boiled water. Don’t let them wake up, I prayed. Leftover potatoes, a pork chop, a lemon wedge, and a basket of eggs were in the fridge—but no water. Tatyana
appeared in a transparent nightgown. “Leea, no like bubbles?” The kitchen was dim, but for the yellow light from the refrigerator and a bright moon. I tried not to look at her thick flesh through the gown. I didn’t know how to answer without making a big deal out of rejecting her gift.

“Oh. That’s okay. I just want a sip of normal water—” she shook her head, confused. “Tatyana, normalna, ya hodosho,” I tried to tell her everything was fine, but she continued bustling through the closet for her boots and jacket. She pulled these over her nightgown and left the apartment for the grocery around the corner.

My alarm clock pulsed 11:45 by the time I slipped into bed to write about the first day with the parents. The sheets were crisp and cool—a flash of hand washing them came to mind. I had hand washed my jeans twice while in Russia, and it had required such a work-out of scrubbing, wringing, and rinsing that I’d opted to throw them away rather than try washing again.

My thigh fell against peculiar wetness. The top comforter had a darker pink spot above my leg. Cat urine? The sharp odor confirmed it. I sighed, paced the floor, peered around the corner into the living room.

“Ah, Viktor?” Covers rustled.

“Lea? Shto?” He followed me.

“For shame, for shame!” he mumbled with a red face. Returning with a bucket of sudsy water, he peered up at me, rag in hand, and chuckled.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness in Dima’s room, and triangles of blue and red stared back at me from the walls. Hours burned by with shallow rest. Finally, I fell into
a dream where I had been Tatyana’s and Viktor’s daughter. I had been a gymnast and won the ribbons that had danced in my mind through the night.

It was hard to switch gears after a night spent at Dima’s, after hours living in the shadow of his past as it became the strange present. By the time the group moved through downtown St. Petersburg, touring along Nevsky Prospekt, an avenue of old buildings and newer shops, I was weighed down with thoughts of the family. Everything was colored by the family. Even the Hermitage Museum, nested inside the Winter Palace, became little more than a gold and marble dream as I imagined circling the open floor before a banquet table in Dima’s arms, as though we had been of the royal family in tsarist Russia. At this end of the journey anything seemed possible, including a wedding in the Hermitage with Dima.

Our hotel rooms were too small for a group meeting, so we met in a corner of the hotel lobby before a day exploring blocks of famous public monuments and tourist shops. Tom elbowed my side, and I giggled, excited for hours of English—and hours with Tom.

“You have most of the day to spend as you choose,” Henry said. “Make sure you stay with someone from the group and meet back here by eight. We’ll move to a conference room behind the lobby for praise and worship.”

“Hey, want to be buddies?” Tom asked.

“Why not?” I pulled his thick gray sweater. “Come on, get your coat. Let’s get out of here!” I wanted a full day of fun.
“What are we supposed to see?” I asked on the metro, dazed and mellow. There was nothing more I wanted to see. I needed to slow down and let all that had already passed before my eyes absorb.

“The Bronze Horseman’s at the center of Senate Square,” he said. We had read Pushkin’s mini-epic about the courageous and fierce Peter-the-Great. The protagonist, Eugene, was either a foolish mortal or crazy. He sought to mock the statue of Peter-the-Great. As a result, the statue came to life and chased Eugene through the streets. The poem immortalized the tsar. He continued to influence the people, which I loved. It was remarkable to me the way the past and the future were entwined by legends such as Pushkin’s.

But seeing a statue didn’t seem that grand by this time. “Thrilling,” I said sardonically. “Catherine-the-Great had it built for him after she succeeded him, did you know that?” I said.

“Yeah—well, not really. But the dude deserved it,” he laughed. “The guy crowned her Empress.”

“But he treated his first wife like crap! Didn’t Henry say that she was falsely tried with adultery and tortured? I can’t imagine living in a society where one man had the power to control everything.”

The sky hung overcast and heavy over Senate Square as we strode along Trade Union Boulevard. We snapped pictures of the former Senate and Holy Synod buildings where Peter-the-Great had gained control over all civil and religious matters. It had since become an archive of the Central State History. The two imposing buildings were
connected with a triumphal arch, angel statues and heavy stone columns at the entrance. Socialist revolutionaries (the Decembrists) fought Tsar Peter’s total control, and eventually the Bolshevik Revolution ended tsarist reign. That was when the Communist Party took over. Yet, despite changes in government, Peter-the-Great’s vision of beauty still marked the place. It seemed the rich history of Russia was miraculously sustained by the people. I wondered if downtown Cleveland just wasn’t old enough to have the dynamic architecture of a country over twice its years.

Tom and I moved slowly and quietly. I longed for the sound of his laughter, for the rattle of his never ending stories.

“Hey, I’ll get a picture of you in front of the Bronze Horseman?” I said.

Tom appeared miniscule underneath the enormous statue of Peter-the-Great. The monument depicted the tsar as a Roman hero, and the most prominent reformer of Russia. The pedestal was a single piece of red granite in a shape of a cliff. From atop the cliff, Peter showed the way for Russia. The horse stepped on a snake, which represented the enemies of Peter and his reforms. Ironically, the snake served as a third point of support for the statue. It seemed those against Peter were little more than used to show his power. Tom’s smile was dry.

I felt the power of the opportunity to move closer to Tom deep in my soul, in that unnamable place where faith and love rest precariously near doubt and fear. I was nervous looking into Tom’s eyes, as bright as his jacket. His face was unshaven, lips dry. His jeans had been worn soft. I stooped to the ground to get a full shot of the statue and Tom and asked him to smile for real. His lips forced a grin, which I imagined kissing.
Could I pull on the strings of magic? I zipped the camera case and reached for his arm, jostling him back and forth between gray mittens.

"Hey!" I said, bumping against him with my hip. "Let’s race!" I shot out in a sprint, and he ran after me. I felt him approaching, his jacket rustling, and I pushed harder. He caught up to me and long arms circled my middle.

"Even with a head-start you can’t win. There’s just no way!" He was out of breath, his arms still around me. Our bodies were close together, a matter of will from a full embrace. We breathed each other’s breath. My arms around his neck, lips against his warm kiss, musky scent of his flesh against my cheek—a fluid motion away. We froze for what seemed minutes, eyes showing all we felt. And when our bodies separated, it was impossible to tell who led the way apart.

2. Praise and worship at Henry’s.
The conference room was unavailable, said the gruff man behind the desk, cigar butt wagging from his blanched lips. Henry’s voice was hoarse, eyes heavy. We were all drained. We squeezed into Henry’s room, and he grabbed a grapefruit from his nightstand. As he peeled it, I wondered if he would spend more time with his goddaughter after we were gone. After talking with the mother for my final research paper the week earlier, I knew her child needed Henry. He would buy her a new dress, a dense apricot cookie, and sometimes milk and potatoes when the mother had nothing to offer. I watched Henry more carefully, and began to see his humility and patience. I continued to see myself childlike and vulnerable in his eyes.

It was going on nine that night, but Michelle, our assigned scripture reader, felt especially led to share some thoughts on the Word. And we still had worship. Tom sat crossed legged on the single bed across from me, plucking strings of the guitar. It felt like I was suffocating, couched between five people on the thin carpet. I tried to breathe deep, but the air felt hot and thick. Michelle looked so calm, staring off in the distance as her thoughts rolled smoothly.

Lord, please help me. The cry came deep, desperate.

“And so, I don’t think it’s about knowing where God will lead us. I think it’s always about believing that he is leading us. And that his hands are in our lives in ways we can’t even imagine. We’re going to be tested—all of us. But if we’re abiding in him, like John 15.7—8 says, and his Word is in us, we’ll ask the desires of our hearts and they will be given to us. Not for our glory but for his. I really think being in Russia, on this
trip with all of you, is showing me that my relationship with God is so much deeper when I consider that I am on his vine.”

I slipped off the bed and nodded to Henry, who I hoped understood without explanation that I had to leave. My hotel room was a calming shadow, city lights playing against the curtain. I held Dima’s bear against my chest. Viktor’s flowers drooped their heads, dry petals barely holding. My eyes closed. Soul whispered.

“I’m sorry Lord. I pray for forgiveness and guidance. Help me know your will for my life. I have been selfish and vain, and I don’t know how to change these feelings. I know I need you and pray for the wisdom to take the path you have for me. Please save me from losing my way.”

Though St. Petersburg was said to have only thirty days of sunshine a year, this week spent with the family there were four, and three in a row. When I returned for visits with the parents, Dima’s mother heaped my plate with fish and potatoes, she poured steaming tea into a blue and white china cup that had become mine, just as the red slippers by the door and Dima’s old bed had. We shared strawberry wafers before bed and morning dishes of cucumber and dill salad. (Dima had told them I liked salad, but for breakfast?)

Their apartment confined us, like calm before a silver sky. We hadn’t prayed before meals. We hadn’t asked hard questions. We hadn’t spoken fear, sadness, regret. We had only been there, together. Yet, I continued to need to say so many things: I love your home. Thank you for letting your son leave. How could you? Did you know it
would be so many years before you’d see him again? When will you see him again? Do you want to live in the States? Do you want Dima to move back here? Instead, silence.

Until the translator came for dinner.

A frail woman sat across from me. Sweat beaded Viktor’s forehead. Tatyana hadn’t smiled when the cats jumped on the counter for the raw chicken.

“What are your plans with Dima?” the translator asked. There was a pointed question—and no warm up? The translator stared, a look of seriousness fossilized on her shrunken face.

“I love him. I—I think we’ll get married.”

“What do your parents think about this?”

“They love Dima. They were worried when I said I was coming to Russia. They definitely don’t want me to live here. But they know how important Dima is to me. They see that we get along well—that we balance one another. They aren’t opposed to me marrying him, I don’t think.” I felt uncomfortable, unsure of what I should say. My parents and I hadn’t yet had this talk.

“My parents see he is a good man. They trust my decisions.” I wanted to explain my faith. In desperation, I said, “I am a Christian—I will love him. I will love you. I can’t explain how or when or why—”

Viktor’s voice was harsh and matched his steely face, jowls reddening as he cupped his chin and looked far-off. “Why would a group of American students want to come to Russia? What is in it for them?” the translator asked, crevices deepening in Viktor’s forehead.
“We want to learn about the country and the people.” I didn’t mention that some hoped to evangelize the Russians. “We want to grow in our faith.” But Dima’s father seemed skeptical and cold for the first time.

I was afraid, realizing how different our worlds were and how difficult it was to communicate my spiritual and emotional motivations. I was too naïve to what Dima’s parents had lived through under communism, too self-conscious and limited in my worldview to imagine why they seemed skeptical, hesitant. But I was filled with hope, joy, and love—passionately brimming with faith in God and family. I saw no reason not to be, and I wasn’t looking for one.

3. Author on telephone with Dima at his parents’ apartment.
Grandma escorted me from the hotel back home, as I was not allowed to travel on the metro to their apartment alone. She rapped on Dima’s parents’ door, and Tatyana opened with a full smile. After we had our slippers on, she motioned us into the living room. A video of Dima playing hockey at St. Ed’s High School shot across the screen. Grandma and Tatyana beamed, added Russian words to the English cheers. Grandma and I sat shoulder to shoulder on the couch. His mother disappeared into the kitchen to prepare bileeny for dinner.

Viktor walked through the door, bellowing, “Ellow?!?” Grandma turned her head, a smile over her under-bite, and made the sound she always did, sharp and owl-like. I hugged Viktor, his body odor strong as he embraced me. He hung his coat and reached into his pocket. Tatyana appeared from the kitchen, and he threw a piece of bubble gum at her chest, laughing as it hit her bosom and fell to the ground. She looked at him, unsmiling, which seemed to make him laugh harder. He leaned his head over his round body to her pouting lips and kissed her. She accepted the gum he picked up from the floor with a half smile.

As Grandma and Viktor watched T.V. and Tatyana cooked, being there was like being at home when I was little—the before dusk sun falling easy through the drapes, the sweet smells of pancakes for dinner, Russian style. My mother had made pancakes and sausage with fruit cocktail for dinner—we always loved a sweet dinner. It had been years since those days, and being close together with Dima’s family felt easy, natural, and even reminiscent of my early days at home.
Before Tatyana left for her night shift at the factory, she brought me her robe. “Lea, cold?” I smiled and slid my small body where her full figure had been, sitting down for dinner with Viktor. We ate in quiet. Nostalgia evaporated like steam billowing above my tea. Time ticked slowly. Viktor waded through a stack of pancakes four inches high, finally leaning back in his chair and sweating. I was grossed out and guilty that I should be so bothered with his eating habits. But would Dima eat like this someday?

“Music? I like Beatles,” he told me waddling into the living room for a tape player. We listened to The Beatles Greatest Hits and continued sitting at the table.

“Lea?”

“Da?”

“You, ah, um—doter. You are my daughter.” I smiled, pushed back my chair that screeched against the linoleum and hugged him.

“I vant boys. Five boys play hockey,” he said. I thought he deserved to someday have a grandson, but the nagging fear that I wouldn’t be able to have my own child surfaced again. I told myself that it was ridiculous to worry about, that I had no real reason.

“Ellow, ah Dimka!” Viktor motioned for me to pick up the phone in the living room.

“Dima?” I curled on the recliner in his mother’s flowered robe and stared at the rug hanging warmly on the wall.

“Lea, how are you, baby?”
“Good. I miss you so much,” I said.

“I miss you too. How are my parents? What have you guys been doing?” As we continued talking in sappy, young lover ways, he said that he’d been praying for me.

I said, “I can’t wait until we are together—forever!” I accepted his offer already. I thought we would someday make a very warm home together.

I gathered my pajamas from Dima’s bed and jammed them into the suitcase, mumbling under my breath, “How am I going to get this stuff home?” Tatyana tapped on the door and shuffled over to me. Her face was pale, eyes swollen. From behind her back, she offered me a small box. Oh, not another thing—please. I smiled and forced myself to conceal irritation. I opened the box.

“Viktor,” she paused, a hand covering her mouth, swiping her cheek. “Wedding ring to Dima,” she managed. A thick rose-gold band gleamed on top of gray tissue paper. Viktor wanted to begin a tradition of passing the wedding band through our family. A numbing weight pressed over me. I was quick to smile, to hug and thank her, but I didn’t know how to conceal the sense that too much was happening too quickly. What did it mean to become a bridge between Russia and America, between past and future, between love and family?

It was late April when our group left St. Petersburg. We met at the bus station at five in the morning. Most of us had stayed up through the night talking, saying farewell, preparing to return to the worlds we had left over four months ago. It seemed hard to
believe how much had changed in such a short time. Hard to imagine the group hadn’t
known one another before. We knew we would become memories, distancing like the
Atlantic Ocean as we flew into the United States. We hoped that we would remember the
way things had really been, the ways people had affected our lives. But it seemed even
then that the feelings from the experiences and people in Russia could never change.
Words could never convey the fullness of our memories. Yet, with our words we’d
change the realness of this time. We’d recreate what was and learn to believe.

We hadn’t parted yet—not from St. Petersburg or the Pulkovo International
Airport or from one another. We had fifteen minutes. I leaned my head against the dark
bus window when a soft knocking rattled in my ear. I lunged over Tom’s legs into the
aisle and St. Petersburg once again.

“I love you,” I said wrapping my arms around Dima’s parents’. My coat was
unzipped to the early morning chill on their jackets. Tatyana breathed warmly against
my neck. Viktor pinned an amber broach to my sweater. It looked like a leaf dipped in
honey. “Thank you, Viktor.” He shook his head and sadly smiled.

“Leka, tell Dimka we love him,” he said.

“I will. Ya boodo, ya boodo.” As I left them to rejoin the group for our journey
home, Viktor called out, “We miss you, Leka!”
CHAPTER TWELVE

When Dima proposed marriage, he slipped his arms around me from behind as we paused from a walk through the woods on the Fourth of July. Bright day filtered through a canopy of leaves, sprinkling the forest floor. It was comfortably warm, birds and squirrels sharing our hideaway in Upper Peninsula, Michigan where we were vacationing with the Holmeses at their summer house. With an accent that was usually barely pronounced, he said, “Honey-bunny, will you marry me?”

I thought about saying no. Since I’d stepped into his embrace at Cleveland’s International Airport four months ago, I’d been waiting. It had felt like forever before the question came.

“You know I will. Yes!” I could do without bended knee proposal. The Holmeses would roast a pig or orchestrate a champagne toast with dinner or set off

1. Aunt Vicki and cousin at author’s wedding.
firecrackers—with Dima and me, things could be simple. Calm. His kiss was tender, and he led me from the woods to the edge of Lake Huron, lapping coolly against warm sand. Not a soul was in sight as he held me. He took off his shirt and spread it on the sand. We moved together easily with the sound of the water, the feel of the sun.

Dima and I would be married the coming summer when we went skiing with my parents just before Christmas. The outing was small-scale compared to Dima’s past trips out west to hit the slopes with the Holmeses, but he nonetheless took on his vacation-mode-mentality. He devoured every hill available at Peak-n-Peak Ski Resort, seemingly with hardly a thought of me lagging behind with my parents. We folded into my parents’ car for the ride home, and silence made the air heavy. My mother and father stared ahead at the road.

Christmas morning, before Dima came to our house for a day at my aunt’s, my mother said, “Are you sure you want to marry him?” The question caught me by surprise. Melanie was in the kitchen rattling through a drawer for a knife to slice the applesauce cake, and she peered around the corner asking why, what happened.

Before I could respond, my father added, “He didn’t seem interested in being with you when we went skiing. He did his own thing the whole day.” I shook my head, certain I did want to marry him, that my parents didn’t understand. Hysteria came easily with the thought that my parents didn’t have confidence in my choice. I thanked them for ruining Christmas, in typical teenager fashion.
I calmly told Dima my parents’ concerns behind the punch bowl at my aunt’s. He looked at me and apologized. Then, he walked across the room to my parents nibbling crab dip and crackers on the couch. Mom and Dad looked up as Dima stooped to his haunches. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to act like I didn’t care about Lea. I care about her very much. I love her.”

I was as shocked as my parents by Dima’s humility. It seemed he was so easy to forgive, so willing to see another side of things. He admitted his wrongs so simply, dissolving misunderstandings like melting snow.

My mother’s long-time friend Sharon Georges was over weeks before Dima and I would be married. I was buzzing with adrenaline. I wasn’t hungry for months, but the smell of Mom’s homemade pizza, the ceiling fan circling it through the kitchen, wafting it up the stairs, drew me from my childhood room, still the pink box with a duck border. I was about to ask my mother when dinner would be but instead paused on the stairs and listened to Sharon.

“Maria is a saint. She has a heart of gold,” she told my mother. Maria was an elderly woman from the Georgeses’ church with knobby knuckles and ancient blue eyes the shape of crescent moons when she smiled, which was often. She had grown up in Belarus and was captured by Germans during the war. After the war, the Germans freed her and she migrated to America where she eventually learned a smidgen of heavily accented English. She had translated for Dima’s parents, who were staying with him at the Holmeses’ weeks before the wedding.
“I can’t believe she told them to go home and go to church!” Sharon smoothed her yellow blouse and straightened her back. She was always careful not to offend others. She must have wondered if Maria had crossed an invisible line of etiquette. Perhaps Sharon observed how Russians could be more direct than Americans.

I was glad Maria had spoken of God to them. I had pestered Dima the past four weeks to talk with his parents about the Lord, and he continued to say he would—when the time was right.

“She’s added them to her prayers. You know, she’s a very simple person. She’s lived the Faith her whole life.” Sharon shook her head and sipped her tea as my mother smiled and nodded with agreement.

“She seemed like a wonderful woman. And I’m glad she translated. Poor Dima really needed a break. It’s been hard on him to have to translate constantly between his parents and the rest of us,” my mother said. She was always trying to protect others from stress, but I wished she’d relax herself.

“I can imagine. It’s been eight years since they last saw each other?” Sharon asked. My mother nodded. “Diane, he’s still just a boy. Taking care of his parents is going to be a lot of responsibility. Do they plan to live in the States?”

“I don’t know. I hope they give Lea and Dima some time first. They need to get on their feet before any of that.”

“Sure,” Sharon said. I creaked down the steps and entered the kitchen, feeling the need to explain away the complications my mother and Sharon might concoct. Everything felt—perfect! It would all work out.
“Mom, I want Christian music in our wedding. I really like the praise songs we sing at Malone—”

Sharon looked to my mother, “You don’t want her to have contemporary music. You’re planning a beautiful traditional wedding. Don’t you want music that suits the occasion?” she said.

“I love the song Shout to the Lord. I was thinking about the trumpet player at Mrs. Holmes’ church playing it in our wedding.” My mother nodded.

“More tea, Sharon?” My mother filled her mug.

“Actually, Peter has an excellent voice,” Sharon offered.

Dima and I were married at Mrs. Holmes’ Lutheran church July 1, 2000. The church exploded with Lilacs and Easter Lilies, which Aunt Caroline frantically set around the sanctuary in her un-tucked tee-shirt and jeans.

When I first arrived and walked through the kitchen, the bridesmaids were arranging flowers in tee-shirts and jean shorts. I slipped by the metal island in a hot-pink tank top and cut-offs, giddy with excitement. My sister and childhood friend Sarah stood side by side wrapping flower stems in moist tissue. Sarah was swollen from having had her first child weeks ago. She squeezed me and made a growling noise in my ear as my sister laughed.

In the lobby, Dima’s mother and mine wore matching pale dresses. They seemed nervous as they stood together in silence. Both had teary eyes when I walked toward them in my white gown. Our fathers were in their tuxedos, appearing similarly reserved.
Viktor’s face was flushed and his body rigid. My father had already begun to pace, his face masked by a zoned out look. I knew he was waiting for the ceremony to begin—and to end. He didn’t like being the center of attention.

Susan and Caroline flitted through the church, arranging bells, ribbons, flowers, and waiting till the last minute to apply glossy lipstick and simple dresses. Mr. Holmes slipped into the sanctuary a step slower. He had been the host of our rehearsal dinner, animated with bottles of foreign liquors he served underneath umbrellas as dusk washed through the humid summer night. Aunt Vicki was the first to enter the bright sanctuary. She wore tiger-rimmed glasses around her neck, Bible in hand, marked to the passages she’d read in the ceremony. Others trickled in as Peter’s voice bellowed *Shout to the Lord*, slow and traditional, as I’d never heard it before.

So many pieces of our lives harmonized. It didn’t feel like a multicultural marriage—it seemed, instead, exclusively our-culture. Our family braided together with the sweet fragrance of the Easter Lilies and Lilacs.

“Congratulations!” Peter said shaking Dima’s hand. Sharon hugged me, her face radiating.

“Beautiful wedding,” she said.

I feared Aunt Caroline was ill when I saw her at the reception—mouth and teeth the color of crushed blueberries—until she wished us a happy life together, slurring words with Merlot heavy on her breath. Family and friends formed a circle at Mentor Harbor Yacht Club for the bride and groom dances, and I leaned my chin against my father’s shoulder.
Emotion welled up as the world slipped away. I closed my eyes and leaned against my Dad. I was trading the past for an unknown future. It was almost more than I could bear as I inhaled my father’s sporty aftershave and oily skin. I squeezed my eyes closed, imagining my father’s blank expression, bottom lip half sucked in, slight smirk defending any sign of emotion. I didn’t need to see it, I knew how he felt. He only had one daughter that was the spitting image of him, only one that could make him mad past words.

Days before the wedding, he had told me that my premature birth and the fear of losing me reminded him throughout my life how much he wanted me to live. He said it was a good test that never let him take my life for granted. There had been times when I wished my father could say his love more clearly, the way Mom could. But my father’s way was different. With this simple comment, the past twenty-one years were marked in love, despite his quiet, his frustration, his seeming disinterest at times I had thought so important.

I opened my eyes to Dima dancing with his mother. His eyes met mine, as his mother nestled her face in his chest. Her full shoulders bobbed in the expensive gown she had begged Susan to return. The sun was setting bright orange above the lake and seeped through the windows over dark wood.

I whispered, “I love you, Dad,” and moved to meet Dima.

*  

After our wedding, honeymoon in Maui, and college educations, I had imagined Dima and I would somehow have money. Likely, because everyone around us did. Even
my parents had more than we’d ever had growing up. Now, they took vacations to cabins in the woods with hot tubs and ski resorts. They bought almost new boats and cars.

Things quickly settled into a more realistic perspective. We spent our first summer together in my apartment nearby Malone, living on yams and spaghetti and leftovers from visits back home. Soon the semester began, and we endured weeks of separation. Dima finished his coursework at Findlay as I completed my days at Malone. We planned to buy a home after we’d begun our careers. With this in mind, we agreed to live at the Holmeses’ while we sifted through unexpected odd jobs and dry bank accounts.

We had been saving our paychecks, mine from teaching English at a private school and Dima’s from a construction job. We had just under ten-thousand dollars for a down payment on a home. But nine months had been too long to live with the Holmeses, too long to live with any family, as far as I could tell. It had cost us. I secretly cringed at the thought that we might someday have to live with his parents. I had learned that two women could never share a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom. Two women could never share a closet, a corner—a home.

Dima and I accidentally crashed a Mary Kay Party and found our home in Stow, Ohio, a small suburb south of Cleveland. It was late winter, typically dreary. Our bad moods boiled under the surface, snapping comments like breath. I told him I didn’t care where we lived so long as we finally moved from the Holmeses’ and into our own place. When we saw the “Open House” sign in the front yard, we stopped by to see the house.
“This is actually a party for cosmetics,” a full-bodied girl smiled, watching my face carefully. I hadn’t applied make-up, and I wondered what she thought I needed: a little blush? lipstick? I felt as bleak as the day.

“We are selling the house. My mother’s not in right now, but I’ll have her call you.” She let us look around the house, and other than the pea green carpet upstairs, it was a nice starter home. We were ready to take it. Dima thought it had potential. I didn’t care. It was a home.

The day we moved, I ran down the Holmeses’ driveway laughing with a sense of recklessness. I slipped through the passenger-side door of the U-haul. Dima told me to calm down, but he was giggling, too. We stopped at Cracker Barrel for dinner, and I ordered milk for the first time in years. I felt strangely like a child, and yet more grown up then ever before. I knew we were going home, finally.

Dima maneuvered the truck over our driveway, the backend as close as possible to the side door where wild roses crawled haphazardly to the kitchen window. We walked to the front door empty handed, but for each other’s palm, and Dima unlocked the door.

“I haven’t had the chance to do this,” he mumbled, stepping behind me and telling me to jump a little.

“What are you doing?” I laughed as he cradled me in his arms and moved us both over the threshold. We paused in the empty house before turning on the foyer light. Intuition seeped through my limbs like the faint smell of disinfectant and garlic still
clinging to the house. We huddled together by the front door and prayed. We asked God
to make our home a welcoming place, for us and for others.

There was a mess to sort through, piles of our separate lives that had yet to blend,
but that belonged to tomorrow. That night, we made love on a blow up mattress in our
new living room, boxes and bags everywhere put the square of space on which we lay.

We accidentally fell into a Christian community of friends. One Sunday, not long
after we had moved in, Dima drove through a nearby town and we stopped at an
Evangelical church next to McDonald’s.

“Shoot, Dima. There’s a breakfast,” I whispered. Pancakes and bacon drifted
through the morning. A sign welcoming visitors was taped to the glass door. “I don’t
really want to go, do you?”

“No. Want to stop at McDonald’s?” he asked.

“I really want to go to church. Let’s just keep driving a little longer.” We
meandered back into Stow, and Dima pulled into a parking lot around the corner from
where we lived. There were fewer cars than perfectly lined and unfilled parking spaces.
The church gleamed white against manicured flower beds. We sat next to a bright-faced
girl in the white sanctuary.

“Welcome to New Grace,” the girl said. “My name’s Kara. My father is the
Pastor,” she glowed. High heeled leather boots, a dress from the cover of *Vogue*, and
dark lipstick! She seemed a *normal* Christian girl.

“I’m Lea,” I shook her manicured hand.
“Dimitri,” Dima said with a straight face. Since when? I wanted to say. He seemed so uptight, so unnatural. Kara invited us to her parents’ after church, and I hungrily accepted. Dima pinched my side.

I babbled in the car as Dima drove home from Pastor’s. “It’s amazing. Like we come from exactly the same culture. It’s better than Malone. Because Kara and her family don’t come from a farm, and she seems more alive, you know?” He was subdued.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

“Don’t you like them?”

“They’re nice. But I think you fit in better than I do.”

I was irritated. Would we repeat the cultural divide that he had maintained at Malone and in Findlay—acting standoffish and mute in Evangelical circles?

Kara didn’t swear, didn’t talk about people, didn’t drink or smoke or watch rated-R movies. From her hairdresser and mechanic, to friends and family, her tight community was as homogenized as Malone College’s had seemed. Only in hers the people looked better, acted more rounded, better suited for the “real” world. It was like laughing with a sister as we listened to pop Christian music, ate low-fat pizza, and talked about our careers as teachers over the next three years.

Aunt Vicki and I grew closer as she prepared to move back to Ohio to be closer to the family. She looked for ourselves in each other. We drew lines connecting our personalities. We were leaders. We were bold in our faith. We were passionate about
the Lord. We began writing letters and calling one another. When in town, she visited our church. We shared morning coffee and Bible devotions on overnight stays.

She fit in with New Grace. It was more than her dark lipstick and exuberance, which matched my new friends’, more than her raised hands, closed eyes, and whispered “I love you, Jesus.” The Christian culture at Dima’s and my church matched what she had been a part of since saying the “Sinner’s Prayer” in her early twenties—Evangelical Protestantism. I had never doubted her belief in God and acceptance of Jesus, and I never would. I was excited to share such a close bond.

My parents were still seeking church—any Christian church unlike the Evangelical tradition: Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopal. My parents had been through the ringer—hopping church to church since New Testament Fellowship. The Methodist church was too small, too lax. The Friends church was too evangelical, too big. The Lutheran church was too liberal, too worldly. And by the time they had returned to the Episcopal church, they were ready to try really, really hard to make things work.

The priest was over my parents’ one evening when I was visiting. He was soft-spoken with neat white hair. He sat straight against the couch in a cardigan and slacks.

“There are worse sins than being a homosexual,” he said.

I didn’t know there were degrees to sin.

“It would be better if gays and lesbians chose to stay out of clergymen positions, but—”
He was hardly out my parents’ front door when I said, “Dad! Don’t you think he was a little off? Of course we are to love all people, homosexuals deserve respect and acceptance. But the act of homosexuality is a sin. It’s too easy to be confused in our world, let alone in church where distinctions between sinfulness and righteousness should be made—”

“I know that,” he spat. “Diane. I’m just about finished with church! That’s it.” My mother was silent as she cleared the chocolate chip cookies from the coffee table.

Once they decided church was “for the birds,” my parents seemed to be taking a spiritual hiatus. Melanie and Joe and Dima and I sat at Mom’s new dining room table. Dad’s fried fish steamed in the center. My father looked to me and said, “You guys are where we were years ago at New Testament—”

“Dad! It’s not like that. Our church is wonderful. It’s a great faith community.” But he zoned out. His face was dark. I felt crushed inside. In the glass quiet I wondered if we were praying before the meal.

“I guess I’ll say a prayer,” my father grumbled. “Lord, we thank you for this food and ask you bless it to our bodies. We pray for our loved ones. Amen.” I choked down the fish and pushed Dima out the door for home, which no longer felt like my parent’s house. On the drive to Stow, thoughts of Dad’s dry prayers made my throat thick.

My aunt and I pondered why my father refused to visit New Grace. My father would say, “These evangelical services are like going to concerts.” Yet such churches seemed alive to me. Animated people with bright faith. Communities like the one at
New Grace and my aunt’s church had energy that moved people from stagnant relationships with God, unlike in my father’s old Episcopal church. Sure, the stained glass was pretty. I tried to accept, though not to understand, that tradition and reverence made the liturgical services something more than boring. But there was a trickle of congregants, mostly old, and the services felt flat and meaningless.

My father seemed especially colicky at the time my aunt moved back to Ohio. My mother balanced between Dad’s budding irritations and my aunt’s excitement about living near family again. But unspoken tensions changed relationships in our family. My mother became a chain-link between my aunt and me, and my father. But I knew Dad was annoyed, and I was increasingly sensitive to his disapproval. It wasn’t as easy to cut up veggies in the kitchen for the dinner salad without a glass of wine.

I complained about my father’s reticence on the phone with my aunt one evening. “I think your Dad is a Christian—” What did she mean? I knew my father was saved, even though it was true he seemed on edge with things of the spirit these days. I hadn’t been able to talk to him about faith, and especially church, since weekends home from Malone. He seemed to be closed in ways that I couldn’t understand. Nonetheless, my father and I had prayed for Jesus to come into my heart when I was three years old. Beyond that, on an intuitive level I knew he believed. If abandoning the need to seek the Lord was possible, I doubted the belief had ever been grounded in the soul. My father had to be searching still—he was just angry. Yet, the darkness that hung over him, as a fog of cynicism and disgust, was physically painful to me. He was not open to talks about church. He thought he had tried them all, and they had all failed him. What was
going on? A heavy cloud threatened to pour over my father and drench us all, and there seemed little left to do.

After Dima and I had been at New Grace nearly three years, my parents came to the annual church picnic. Summer breathed through the pavilion—smells of crock-pot chicken, potato casseroles, and brownies overpowered the fragrance of nature, lake, and Lilacs.

The pastor’s wife said to my mother, “Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll take care of your daughter. We’re so happy Dimitri and Lea are at the church.” I continued to wonder why “Dimitri” didn’t seem willing to let down his guard, to just be Dima.

My mother smiled, her face glowing from a day on the boat with my father. She wore a salmon-colored blouse, her arms warm with sun. The Pastor’s wife looked tiny and pale next to her. Dad seemed somewhere else, staring at the paths leading into the woods. Yet, despite the inside of his bottom lip clamped in his teeth, he was bright like my mother. Maybe he was trying to give the picnic an open mind.

We finished eating and my father stood to leave. I whispered that we could go swimming or hiking through the woods, if he liked. He said he had some work to do in the yard, but my mother wasn’t ready to leave. “Donny, I’ll help you with that. Let’s take a walk before we go.”

As we walked in heavy silence, mosquitoes landed on our sticky legs. I looked up at Dima, but he stared ahead, as though there was something fascinating in the distance—like his cherished beavers, or deer, or squirrels.
“Do you like the people at our church?” I asked my father.

“Lea, they seem fine. Do you?” I didn’t like his answer. My father usually said what he really meant, no matter how obnoxious. This response was too controlled and too empty. It was fine if they wanted to just go home—I did.

Dinners after church with the pastor and his family continued as highlights in the weekend, at least for me. “I don’t understand why you don’t try harder with people at church. They’re trying with you. I can tell—” His face was weary with faint shadows under his eyes. He needed a haircut and hadn’t shaved, which hardly mattered as even a few days of stubble barely gave him a five o’clock shadow.

He said, “They like you. No one talks to me there. But I don’t care. Church is not supposed to be social club. I go to be with God. I’m not going to make friends.”

“Wait. Just think a minute. It is about God, always. But we’re to be the body of Christ. Believers are the family of God! The Lord expects us to love and support each other.” We pulled down Pastor’s cul-de-sac and parked. I slammed the car door.

Pastor’s house reminded me of my home growing up: flowered wallpaper, blond wood, white bowls of fruit—everything in scrupulous order and cleanliness. Roast and potatoes rotated the table. “Looks delicious,” I smiled at Pastor’s wife.

“Thank you,” she said in her soft voice, wiping small hands on her apron and moving into the kitchen for a pitcher of decaffeinated iced tea.

“Dimitri, we have something for you,” Pastor smiled, ready to clap his hands and full-out laugh. Kara’s husband set a bottle of pills in front of Dima. “Vitamins—men’s
vitamins. These are sure to make you virile!” Pastor said. Dima offered a tight-mouth chuckle. “Let’s pray,” Pastor continued, trying to calm himself.

“Dear Lord, we thank you for this food and our family and friends. We ask your blessing upon these. Lord, we pray you grow the family of God and especially bless Dimitri and Lea. In Jesus name, amen.” I was very warm, a little embarrassed but mostly enamored by the love these people offered us. I thought Kara and her husband might also be “trying,” but nothing official was said. I worried I had been too loud-mouthed.

After making love later that night, Dima and I lay against the cotton squirrels.

“Did you like being at Pastor’s today?” I asked.

“It was okay. Did you?”

“You know I always do. They’re really good people. They honestly seek the Lord.”

“I know. I can tell.”

“Were you embarrassed?”

“About what?”

“Don’t play dumb. The vitamins. You going to be take them?” I rolled over and pulled his single chest hair.

“I don’t think I need to,” he said.

*
While New Grace had become a close community of friends, it was at the same time a culture of protected distance. Many people didn’t share their depth. Sometimes, problems that didn’t go away in a timely fashion seemed kept from view so they wouldn’t hinder others from feeling “comfortable” at New Grace. But in truth, some might have felt more at ease in a more openly imperfect setting. There was a welcoming team at the church that was responsible for greeting people with confident handshakes and smooth smiles. Dima and I stood post once a month, but Dimitri found another job (working Pastor’s power-point presentation) on most of our assigned days.

We prayed and expected miracles, particularly in our “miracle year,” but there was something disconcerting about unanswered prayers. Had God not heard, not cared? Of course that wasn’t it, but no one could offer a reasonable explanation to why a woman with mental illness ended up in the hospital for months. And so no one said a word about her, or for her in prayer.

“This happens from time to time with her,” I was told after asking about the woman with mental illness. She seemed more or less forgotten. I didn’t doubt the prayer team had her on their list, along with a middle-aged woman who had lost her husband to cancer midway through the miracle year. In the beginning, meals had been sent with sympathy cards and flowers, but it seemed in a short time burdens were carried alone.

Perhaps the congregation’s resistance to longsuffering was because the average age was thirty. Maybe Pastor worried a somber first impression would keep visitors from returning. Yet few of us were visitors. And many there were perhaps less happy, less put together than we liked to seem.
We took our burdens to Jesus, one on one. The church taught people to behave as individuals, to maintain accountability to Christ alone. Our way to Jesus was through our understanding of the Bible and his will. It started to seem impossible. How could there be sustained responsibility to what a person perceived God expected? Wouldn’t there’d be times we got it wrong? And what if some of these times really mattered? What guided my faith?

A sentence from The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann encapsulated my fear during the miracle year at New Grace. “There is no point in converting people to Christ if they do not convert their vision of the world and of life, since Christ then becomes merely a symbol for all that we love and want already—without Him.”² If I really believed in God, I had to accept his will. I had to praise him—no matter what. Otherwise, he was merely a symbol. Otherwise, I considered myself on the same level. And I had no path for doing this—at least not a long-lasting, universal way. There was, of course the bright culture I was a part of. This could seem enough, but sometimes I wondered if there might be more.

Showers washed the quiet gray of Ohio winter when my Aunt Vicki came with us to New Grace on a Sunday morning. “We want to pray up front about fertility,” I told her. We were in the throes of treatment, countless internal exams and possible solutions that didn’t seem to be working. Hormonal imbalance made anxiety and sadness slick and

². Julianna Schmemman, trans., (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000). 264
physical. The doctor told me to be still. There would be no running, no aerobics, no way to alter my brain chemistry. Whirlwind-fear spun circles in my mind.

“Lord, what is your plan? What are you doing with me? Why such a desire for a child when the odds are against it?” It was months before the words to my prayer formed in my spirit. Instead, moment to moment I felt the questions and the agony of being completely out of control. I longed to go to church and be with others, to be around faith that encouraged my own.

Dima and my Aunt and I joined an elderly French man named Michael at the front of the church for prayer. He took a small bottle of oil from his pocket and mumbled that he wanted to anoint us with it. His fingers fumbled to unscrew the plastic top, and he crossed our foreheads with shaking fingers. I hadn’t seen the prayer team anoint people with oil before, but I believed in Michael’s faith. He placed his hands on our shoulders and Aunt Vicki held our hands as he began to pray.

His accent was thick, words came slowly. A prickling sensation moved up my spine. My aunt squeezed my hand and whispered pleas to Jesus as Michael spoke. Dima was pillar-still and silent. The heat from his hand burned in mine.

Afterward, we fell quiet and unmoving huddled together. Aunt Vicki lifted her head. “I believe they will have a son, and he will be an arrow in the heart of the enemy. Sweet Jesus, thank you. We believe.”

“That was powerful,” Michael said. I was trembling with emotion and faith.

Later, my aunt told me the words hadn’t come from her, that she felt the message was from the Lord. I wanted to believe her. Yet how did we differentiate what came
from the Lord and what welled up inside of us? Was it intuition, a thought, a feeling? Was it the Holy Spirit breathing truth inside of her? Maybe it was through all of who we were that God revealed truth to us. Maybe it was only emotional excitement that could be mistaken for truth.

The chances were slim, and I didn’t feel that different. Just sharp pains, like shots of fire, in the mornings. My abdomen had been swollen with the hormone injections, so I knew not to count on bloating as a sign. The doctor had been realistic, “It will be difficult, maybe a seven or eight percent chance, even with artificial insemination,” he had said. Laughter was hollow for weeks.

Dima and I returned to the advanced reproduction and gynecology office where other weathered faces expressed our longing. It was the end of April. There would be months of waiting as we followed through with In Vitro Insemination, or, rather, if we followed through with it. I was desperate, didn’t see an alternative. But the procedure would cost ten thousand dollars and there were ethical considerations. Embryos were made in petri dishes and placed in the uterus. More embryos were attempted than I would be able to host. What to do with the leftovers? I sighed. They could be frozen or donated or destroyed. I thought I would donate mine.

“Hey, we could take out a loan for In Vitro—”

“Just relax. We don’t even know if you’re pregnant or not yet.” But I thought Dima’s optimism was shallow. It didn’t make sense. I wasn’t going to get my hopes up. I’d rather prepare myself for the road ahead.
The doctor’s office was luxurious, which made me think of all the money he received from patients like us. He had two pictures on the wall of strawberry-blond children with their mother. His chair was enormous and loomed high above his balding head.

“I want to do surgery before we move on from here. Your uterus is shaped slightly abnormal.” He drew a picture of an upside down triangle with a nominal dip at the top. He ran through the other test results that had been “normal” and said we’d go ahead and do a pregnancy test today and then an exam. “Even though it’s a bit early, we’ll judge the test discriminately.”

“Dimitri, you’re welcome to join us in exam room two—”

Dima stood and said he was going to work. He had only taken an hour of paid time off. I kissed him, not at all minding that he was leaving. There was no need to draw all this out. I’d had enough poking and prodding to know the routine. I’d rather he leave. I felt strangely calm and accepting as I filled a plastic cup with urine and changed into a flimsy robe. I sat on the exam table and stared at a caricature of a woman with a toothpick waist and hips like two C shapes on either side. In pointy gloved hands she held a chained tiger. It was a sensual picture, I thought.

The nurse entered. “Lea, the consultation may have been for naught. You are pregnant.”

Everything went blank. I laughed, and shook, staring at the bright-faced nurse in disbelief. My head swayed back and forth. In the periphery, the picture stared at me and laughed. I felt something hot slide down my cheeks and realized I was crying.
The nurse handed me a plastic tube with two blue dots at the top. “It’s a clear positive. You can keep that.” She slipped out of the room. I was freezing and roasting at once.

“Oh, Lord? Oh, Lord.”

The doctor entered and said he was so happy for me. But his smile held carefully in the corners of his mouth. Did he believe it was true?

I hardly believed as I drove home, hands numb on the steering wheel. I slipped from the car and into the kitchen. In the warm afternoon light, I eased to the ground with a sensation of seeping past myself to a tenderness just outside, just barely.

“Lord have mercy,” I breathed.

It was late April and sunny. The bagel with butter and strawberry jam tasted as sweet and warm as the air. The day was light and breezy against my arms. I sat on the step outside our side door. The roses had bud, and an infusion of promised color spread across the side of our home. A squirrel, the strange black ones my mother thought were genetically engineered, scampered for an acorn that had found its way to a pothole in our driveway. A dove gracefully perched on the overhead wire. The cordless phone was beside me.

“How should I tell him, Lord?” Nothing dulled the deep peace and unrelenting joy. I had never lived a miracle such as this, had never desired something so far from my grasp. It was natural to fall into the game of questions—why me, Lord? Why would I become pregnant after merely seven months when for so many women it took years?
Life was greater than my plans. I tried to leave it at that. Life was beyond comprehension. Enjoy the sweet fruit, I thought. I knew that God had given us a child to share with his world. Joy was the strongest emotion, but a sense of responsibility began to surface. Our wills had matched, but I had to be careful not to limit God’s work to merely satisfying my desire for a baby. His plan was beyond me. Yet, I couldn’t help but believe he had taken me seriously. He had heard my cry and answered the desire of my heart. I wanted nothing more than to abide in him.

“Dima, yes, I’m positive—I am pregnant. And of course the doctor confirmed it. Why don’t you believe it?”
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“In the life of a man a miracle does not happen just by chance. It is given depending on spiritual necessity and on the influence it will have on that man’s inner world.”

Two days before Christmas, 2004, I delivered Viktor. My father leaned over the hospital bed peering at the closest thing he’d have to a son. “Look, Dad, he’s wrapping his fingers around my index finger. He’s strong.” A mix of emotions began to break from the mass of confusion inside.

1. Author and father and Dima after delivery.

“So. You want to do this again?” my father joked. I told him not for a while, glancing Dima heaped on the couch, chin cupped in his hands. “I bet Dima’s up for it?” Dad laughed.

“Nana says congratulations, and she can’t wait to see her great-grandchildren,” Melanie said, shuffling from the phone to my bedside, cradling her newborn against her sweater. She leaned down and wrapped an arm around my neck, hugging her baby between us.

“I love you Lea, you too Viktor.” Suddenly, my sister seemed older to me. Despite our parents and the Holmeses milling about the hospital room and vying for their first glimpse of Viktor, she and I, newborns in our arms, connected on a level shared with no one else.

“The snowflakes are beautiful—big and light. Make sure you write that in your journal. Viktor should know what a beautiful day today is,” Melanie said. Everything seemed surreal—from Melanie holding a baby of her own, to my child, to Christmas Eve the next day. Where in the world had the time gone?

In the beginning, the expected surge of love and motherliness eluded me. I hoped I was capable of becoming a mother. Nothing could have prepared me. Motherhood was more than endless laundry, sleepless nights, and harried days of slow-moving frustrations. It was unspoken devotion and selflessness, the way I had seen it manifest in my mother. I worried. I was different from my mother. The first month, I threw the lights and darks together in the laundry; I forced Dima up so I could run; I let the baby
whimper until he decided it was comfortable on Momma’s chest in the snugli as I typed on the computer. My mother would not have done these things, and she certainly wouldn’t have juggled school with a newborn. I doubted how I could be me and be a mother. I feared infertility was a sign that I was less capable of motherhood.

Other days, I was absolutely charged. I called Kara, who had recently had a baby boy also, and raved to her husband the day after delivery.

“I swear, it’s amazing! He’s perfect,” I laughed into the hospital room receiver. “The whole experience wasn’t really so bad,” I blurted in less than a second. “How’s Kara doing? I hope she’s okay. I’m thinking of you guys—”

“Glad to hear things went so well. Everything’s fine here. Kara’s all right,” he said.

“Having a child is truly the most amazing way to experience God—” I forced myself to stop talking. I knew I was flying but felt unable to control it.

“Here’s Kara, I’ll let her tell you all about things.”

I immediately sensed the strain in her voice. After I explained the hour and a half of pushing, the strangeness of being a mother, the thrill of not having a beach-ball in my abdomen, the energy I felt—I was silent. She and I had shared these long nine months, and I had thought after delivery our relationship would carry on as before. But gradually Kara seemed to be drifting away. Or maybe it was me. Something seemed to be growing increasingly uncomfortable between us. It was felt in pregnant silence that hadn’t been there before.
After a pause of quiet, “Well, I need to feed the baby,” Kara said. And I knew I had said way too much, way too quickly.

Five weeks later, I was dizzy with exhaustion and spiraling into a downswing. Furious red faded to shades of charcoal. Dima was finally home from work, and I handed him our son. “Look at him! He’s so cute.”

I rolled my eyes and mouthed “whatever” under my breath.

“I’m desperate for sleep. I mean it. Take your son downstairs, please. Feed him before you go to bed later—okay? Love you,” my lips brushed the top of Viktor’s smooth hair underneath Dima’s chin.

I sunk into the fresh scent of Downy, alone in our bed, and the knots in my back almost melted. I didn’t worry about Dima taking care of our newborn anymore than I worried at my own attempts to soothe his colicky cries. Everything was still so new. I longed to be free from feeding, from diaper changing, from being so careful in my every step. And I felt guilty.

There was a thumping noise. Like the cat fell down the steps. Dumb cat, she’d be fine.

My heart beat faster. It was nothing. Ignore it. Everything was fine. But my heart raced even faster. I moved to the top of the stairs.

Dima was folded over the bottom step. “What’s going on? You didn’t drop him—did you? You didn’t, right—” Dima was quiet. Everything was in slow motion.

“Yes, I did.” His voice was steady. “Call the number on the fridge—”
My body went cold. A woman confirmed my address, assured me that help was on the way, but nothing would make sense, fit together. Viktor’s shrieking wove through his cat-like cries. His face was red, lips purple. I violently prayed.

“Please God!”

Dima held Viktor burying his face in the top of his head.

“Oh my God,” he kept repeating, “Viktor, I’m so sorry, baby.” I watched him kiss our son as though they were unrelated to me, as though this was all someone else’s life.

“How did it happen?” the EMS guy asked. Three men unfolded equipment and checked his vitals. Wet shoes paraded through the living room. I stood frozen beside the couch as the EMS snapped him in the car seat.

“Did you have a normal pregnancy, no c-section or nothing?”

Whatever, whatever—help my son!

“No. It was normal.”

*What happened? Did he cry right away? Is everything off in the house? Do you need to grab anything?* Words fell like chunks of hail on a dying rose. Feet numbly circled the living room, head floated outside my body.

Inside the ambulance, I held oxygen beside Viktor’s puckered, five-week-old mouth, “Just in case,” the EMS said. In case of what?

*
For the first time since childhood, I was in a children’s exam room. The giraffe border galloped around the room. Lights burned my eyes. A bow-legged nurse said, “Go ahead and undress him, Mom. I’m Kathy. I’ll be your nurse for the next ten hours.”

How long were we staying? It was 10:15 p.m. Babies cried. Intercoms beeped. Steel stretchers and wheelchairs rolled across institutional linoleum. Mechanic voices sounded in the distance. Where was Viktor? I needed to blend his body to mine—to feel the wet of his tears, the quiver of his lip.

“He’s ten pounds and four ounces,” the nurse said, handing Viktor to me. “When the doctor checks him he’ll determine if they should do a CAT scan. He’ll check him out and probably admit you for the night.”

“Why wouldn’t they do a CAT scan? I want him completely checked out.” The baby sucked the hospital-blue pacifier—in, out, in, out. He seemed normal.

“They probably will. The doctor will do everything he can for him,” the nurse said without pausing from scribbling notes on her clipboard.

“I need a bottle. Do you have formula?” I said.

“Of course, let me go get some for you. What kind?”

“Enfamil,” I patted his diapered bottom and swayed back and forth, back and forth. His cries pierced. Was he in pain? Was he scared? I couldn’t read him. I rocked him, rocked me, rocked him, rocked me. Dima sat like stone, staring at the ground. He brushed his cheeks with a palm.

The ER doctor opened the door. He was tall with sunken eyes and a tight face. “How did this happen?” He looked at Dima closely.
“I lost my footing on the fourth step. I fell back on my right arm, and he fell from my arms.”

“Where did he land? What position was he in?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. It all happened so quick. I saw his legs in the air.”
Pause, deep breath, “Uh, I saw him at the bottom corner of the steps.” His voice broke.
The doctor took our son, pressed his stomach and rotated his arms and legs. He turned his head and ran a bony hand over Viktor’s warm scalp.

The steps were carpeted, Dima, explain our steps were—Was he okay? Come on, tell me he was okay?

“I feel some swelling on the right sphere of his head. We’ll probably do a CAT scan—there’s a small level of radiation, it’s much less than twenty years ago—”

What did that mean? Did the doctor think something was wrong? Could the radiation cause Viktor cancer or something?

“Now, do you understand what will happen tonight? You will have people asking you questions.” His pager beeped, and he swung his tired eyes from us to his belt.

“I have to take this call,” he said, stepping from the room.

“They’re going to be all over us for child abuse,” Dima said once the doctor had left.

“That’s absurd! There’s nothing to worry about. We know that isn’t the case. I’m not going to concern myself with that at all.”
“But I know they’re not going to make this easy.” Shadows circled his eyes. His hair was greasy, jeans worn soft. I sat on his lap holding Viktor. Dima’s palms covered mine like warm cotton.

“It’s okay, baby. You didn’t mean to do it,” I said. Something calmed inside as I comforted him.

“I know—” he turned to the wall. “You can’t imagine how bad I feel. When I let go, when he was out of my arms—I can’t explain the feeling. To lose control of him was—”

“It’s okay. Really, I think everything will be okay. All of the signs are good. He cried right away, never lost consciousness—he has an appetite. He’s acting normal, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

The X-rays were sent to Cincinnati and took hours to return to Akron General. Time passed like breath in the night as another miserable game of waiting played on. By the time the doctor returned, it was after one in the morning. I had determined everything was fine, that it had to be fine. Viktor was a miracle.

The doctor’s hand rested on the doorknob too long, and his face was uneasy as he pulled a swivel chair from the side of the room. I held Viktor tight against my chest.

“The patient, I’m sorry, what’s the baby’s name?”

”Viktor,” I breathed.

“Viktor has a skull fracture.”

Things grew black.
“Try to calm down, try to breathe deeply,” he said. “It runs around the top right of his skull,” he traced his own dark hair.

Faint and hot, I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed Viktor’s body to my hollow chest. I felt a touch on my shoulder, on my back.

The doctor spoke slowly, and his dark eyes poured into mine. “Viktor has a skull fracture and there appears to be a spot of bleeding. I’m not a neurologist and can’t advise you as well as he will,” he looked at Dima.

“We’ll keep you overnight on floor seven. Your baby—I’m sorry, Viktor, will be monitored and checked through the night.”

“What are the statistics, I mean, what are the chances of everything being all right—like brain development?” I asked. Dima sucked in a body-full of air.

“If there’s no bleeding, very good. If there’s some bleeding, still good. It’s going to be okay, Dad. If this was just an accident, you can’t beat yourself up. It will only make things worse. Viktor needs you two to be supportive of each other.” He looked at us with sincere but exhausted sympathy. “In the morning the ER surgeon and the neurologist will examine Viktor. Do you have any questions?”

“None you can answer,” I said. I looked into the still face of our baby as Dima silently wept.

I stood from Dima’s lap. My body was weightless. Dima wiped his tears with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. I faced the door. Battle raged inside. I wanted to forgive him. It wasn’t his fault. It could have been me. But heaviness swelled. I was silent. I didn’t
want to think, didn’t want to try, didn’t want to come to the moment or move beyond it. I would stay blank, empty, hollow.

I wanted to love Dima, no matter what. I wanted to believe everything was fine. I wanted to speed through whatever it was that was happening to us. But instead drifted backward, deep into myself and away from my weeping husband.

What if things weren’t okay with our baby?

I kissed Viktor, inhaling Johnson’s Baby Shampoo. Only hours ago, he had smiled and stretched arms and legs in surprise as I cupped warm water over his body. He had given me a crooked, eye-crinkling smile as I rubbed Baby Magic over his feet.

We were moved upstairs to a room the color of flesh. A small yellow light glowed behind the crib. Dima lay like a stone on the plastic couch. I held Viktor’s hands, ran my fingers over his soft feet, touched his turned up nose with mine. I rocked him—heart beat-beat-beating against my chest.

“Would you like to put Viktor to bed?” the nurse asked. I shook my head, unable to let go of him.

That night, I knew what it meant to love my child more than my own life. That night, I knew without reservation, Viktor’s life had always been, and would always be, out of my hands. I recalled the flood of peace I had felt fourteen months ago, laying still and silent the day we conceived. I thought how the Holy Spirit fell upon one in moments of life and death. As I held our miracle that night, unexplainable calm washed through me as surely as it had months earlier.
I cried against the warm body on my chest, “Even if we leave without you, baby, I will always love you.”

“Are you okay, Lea?” Dima asked.

“I’m all right. Are you?”

“Not really.”

“Want to pray?” I sat on his lap cradling Viktor.

“God, Viktor is yours—on loan to us. You made him, and you will sustain him. He was created for your purposes.” My soul gushed forth, “Jesus, heal him! Protect him! Be with us.”

Dima added, “I pray you guide all of the doctors and nurses. Please bless them with wisdom as they work with Viktor.”

“I believe he is protected. I believe you will sustain him God. Thank you.”

My death grip on Dima’s hand softened, and in that moment I forgave everything—whatever would happen. Love couldn’t feed doubt or ultimatums. Love was regenerative.

In the morning, Viktor slept in a bassinet with monitors assuring us he was well. “He’s precious. Really precious,” the nurse said through a full smile. “Viktor looks great, really good.” Her smile unfurled in the most natural way at the end of her comments. Hers was a face meant to console and reassure, but I had a hard time believing her. Terror seemed too quickly renamed “great” and “good.”
“I don’t know how you must feel, exactly,” she looked up at Dima, “but I was carrying my puppy Chihuahuas down the steps and I fell with them. They flew out of my hands!” The smile.

“Well Viktor didn’t fly out of his arms. He just rolled to the ground, right honey?” Dima nodded and looked down. The nurse paused, observing the difference, which made me self-conscious.

She shook her head and continued, “Sure, but the feeling is unexplainable—that losing control.”

“It happened so fast. I just saw his legs up in the air before I could do anything.” Dima said and gently rubbed Viktor’s bare leg. Her magic working on him.

“It’s okay. Everything looks good with your baby. The doctor looked at the x-ray and said there’s no bleeding or pressure on the brain. There is a fracture, but that will heal.”

“Will there be any problems with his brain?” I asked.

“Your baby will be completely fine.”

Morning bled into afternoon before we left the hospital. I bundled Viktor in an Indian-looking snugli, brown velvet with cream fur interior. He looked like a doll as we walked under the glaring sun to the car.

A fury of energy propelled me to call family and gush: Viktor’s fine, we’re fine, everything happens for a reason, God protected him, he is completely normal, there’s nothing to worry about. It was as though I was trying to speed through the whole
situation, to wrap it up the way I folded our son in his snugli. I wanted it over, but I would have to give it time to work through me. A near tragedy, and one we were supposed to heed for the next weeks, wouldn’t evaporate in the air, no matter how I wished to fast-forward.

That evening in the kitchen, my thoughts rattled out loud as I washed days-old dishes. “He’s not eating as much as usual. He’s sleeping more. Does he seem depressed to you?” Dima turned me from the sink and drew my arms around his neck, locking his around my waist.

“It’s okay. Everything’s fine,” he said.

I finished the dishes and vacuumed. I stuffed my feet in tennis shoes and slipped out the door. I ran and ran, over patches of late January snow. I ran and ran, from the realness of almost losing my son. I ran and ran, to replace doubt with blinding energy. I ran and ran and ran, exhausting myself completely. Enough.

But it never seemed to be.

Would winter never end? It was cold, our basement had flooded with melting snow, and sleeplessness contorted my emotions. I was writing a Master’s thesis on the physiological affects of creativity.

“Dima, listen to this,” I said leaning against him on the futon one evening. He pawed at The Midnight Disease, in the way of the Cavalier’s game.

“I don’t want to. I’m busy,” he said.
“Just listen. The author, Alice Flaherty, is a neurologist. She had twins and then this crazy episode of hypographia, she couldn’t stop writing. Dima?”

“What?” He swung his eyes from the screen.

“This is my life. Don’t you care? I mean, it’s fascinating. She says that people with severe mental illness aren’t productive; they’re debilitated by the disease—”

“You need to think of a beach, a sunny day,” he laughed.

“I’m serious, Dima.”

“I know.”

“She’s even talking about how religious impulse and creativity work together. Look, she says that some aspects of our thoughts seem to come from outside us, especially during creative inspiration! This is so true, baby.” But he wasn’t the type to plumb the depths. We felt. We believed. We lived. He was always the calm in my storm, wrapping me in his long arms, settling me back into the moment.

“Shhh. Do you hear Viktor?” I asked, moving to the stairs for another feed-time.

I was meeting my professor at one to discuss the first chapter of the thesis. Viktor was in the snugli strapped around my chest. His hair was soft against my face, “Love you, little guy,” I said climbing the stairs. Pride swelled—I was doing it all. I had my son and school. Thank you, Lord.

“Hi Dr. Svehla,” I said searching his full face for a sign of irritation that Viktor was in tote. Dr. Svehla wore his typical black tee-shirt and baggy pants. His acoustic guitar leaned against a chair in his office. The gray day spilled through his window over
walls of books. A bag of granola sat beside a photograph of his parents in shoulder pads and suits.

“Let me just grab some things and we’ll head to the table in the back,” he said.

“I had to bring Viktor, sorry,” I grinned.

“Not a problem.” Viktor started to whimper.

We sat side by side at the conference table holding drafts of my thesis and referring to Composition texts. “See, you need to ground the argument in the theories of Composition. You’ve got to find a way to establish a context for where you’re going—”

I smelled it. Oh crap. Oh, yes, crap.

“Sorry, I think he needs a diaper change.” Dr. Svehla continued talking, kindly trying not to pay attention to the problem. But as Viktor began to fuss and then wail, I knew I had to make a move. “He needs a bottle. I’ll be right back.” I ran down the hall holding Viktor’s head against my chest, diaper bag sliding off my shoulder. My cheeks burned like fire and my body was shaking.

“Okay. We should be all good now,” I held a bottle near Viktor’s mouth and looked at my professor, shaking my head with feigned understanding.

Please hurry up and stop talking, I silently pleaded, but it seemed he might have been truly un-phased by Viktor as he kept right on discussing theory. Two other professors came in the office, both women with whom I’d had classes.

“Hello, Lea. Ah, you’ve brought the baby. Let us see,” and as I glanced down I almost died. Formula smeared across Viktor’s red face, and he began to cry.
“Oh, my. Guess I missed his mouth,” an embarrassed laugh. I almost didn’t believe how awkward I was acting and was certain the entire English department would brand me an incompetent mother when I left. Finally, our meeting ended and Viktor and I descended the three flights of stairs slowly, entering back into our humble world of diaper genies and bouncy seats.

Maybe motherhood and school would be harder than I had anticipated.

Kara’s father stopped preaching four Sundays in a row, “vacation” the bulletin said. When Sunday mornings became hour-long testimonies from someone in the church, I began to wonder what church was supposed to be.

I had begun singing with the praise and worship team a few months earlier, hoping my involvement might revive the sense that our church was church. But I couldn’t shake the sense that something was truly off. I began to wonder what the Bible said about the structure of church. How were church leaders and the people supposed to live as the body of Christ?

Viktor was in his infant carrier wedged between Dima and me. I jostled the toy suspended above him, and his soft face broke with a smile. “I’ve not ever been a real good speaker,” the guy upfront began, “but Jesus will help get me through.” A rubbery smile stretched his loose face. I bit my lip, telling myself not to get annoyed. He was tall and washed-out in a wrinkled suit. He had been attending the church for a handful of years after taking divorce recovery classes with Pastor. He wasn’t one the pastor typically called on to share. There were a couple others—an attractive car salesman and
a witty pharmacist. They would lecture when Pastor was away. But on this Sunday in February, it seemed Sunday mornings had become a free-for-all. Any congregant could speak.

The speaker called his granddaughter, “Come on up her, darlin!” and a young girl flew forward like a white bird. He held her like a security blanket as he shared his testimony. After an hour of accounting his life, the congregation followed the worship team in *I have a friend in God*. The worship team’s harmonized melody overpowered the few humble voices singing in the sanctuary. We placed the sponge-topped microphones back in their stands, and I wondered if we were we putting on a show or worshipping the Lord? I hoped, at least, both.

Dima made a bee-line for the banquet room behind the sanctuary to help set up for the potluck dinner, and to escape.

I felt nervous whenever the compact worship leader approached me. She was passionate, determined, disciplined. She ran five miles a day. With her energy and mine combined, I feared explosion.

At a cookout our first summer at the church, I had commented on her strong legs. “I’ve never seen such leg muscles,” I spat, filling my mouth with hamburger, mortified after seeing the offense tightening her jaw. I swallowed. “I mean, they’re nice legs.” Shut up. She crossed her legs and turned to Kara as I melted into baked beans.

While Sundays had rolled on, we had continued to disconnect. No eye contact, no small talk. When Dima and I had taken our posts at the front door as “greeters,” she had
slipped in behind another’s vigorous handshake. One Sunday, she had unexpectedly lingered at my side.

“I feel the Lord has been asking me to ask you something, Lea.” I smiled, straining to show her kindness. “Do you sing?” she asked.

“Well, a little. I mean, I’m okay—not great.”

“I don’t know why God wants me to ask you to be a part of the worship team—but I continue to feel the need to ask you to sing with us. It’s been on my heart for weeks, but I keep putting it off. I’ve been praying about it, and he is leading me to ask.”

I hadn’t been sure if she was happy or unhappy about this. I hadn’t known if I was scared or flattered. I had opted to be flattered, even open to the possibility that God had a mysterious plan brewing.

Shortly after, I accepted a homemade cassette of worship music and an invitation to go to her house for dinner. After eating hamburgers and corn on the cob, we moseyed downstairs to her music haven. Piles of C.D.s surrounded her treadmill. Farther back in the finished basement, a computer was surrounded by stuffed animals, videogames, and a punching bag.

I told her about my father’s spiritual dry spell, and she offered to make him a Keith Greene C.D.

I said, “He’s just burned out with church. He used to love Keith Greene and talking about God and stuff—” Her summer-blue eyes studied me. “I’d love the C.D.” I smiled. I thought about giving it to Dad for Father’s Day, but decided to keep it. It
reminded me of Sunday afternoons in childhood, the smell of coffee and the jingle of Mom and Dad talking in the kitchen.

“Hey.” The worship leader marched over to me before the potluck. “So, you ready to sing the new songs next week?”

“Sort of. I will be. We have practice on Thursday, right?” The muscular angles of her face tightened with a nod.

“I’ve been praying for spirit and truth for our church. Make sure you do too, okay?” she said. I was. “Things have to change,” she whispered. “Look at how many people weren’t even here today! It’s unbelievable. Even the handful of people here, few sang with us.”

I moved to the potluck at the back of the church. There were more empty seats than usual. Why were people leaving? Even Kara hadn’t been attending regularly since the birth of her son. Things seemed to be slowing, deflating. It seemed the church really had been carried by the Pastor and his bright family. Without their energy, I didn’t want to be there. But that seemed too shallow. There had to be a deeper reason.

Dima lagged in the back of the fellowship hall waiting for Viktor and me. “Take Viktor and set him up at a table,” I handed him the infant carrier. “I need to use the restroom.” Pastor walked over to us.

“How are you, Dimitri?” He shook Dima’s hand and hugged me.

“Not too bad,” Dima said.

“Any news from your parents?”
“Yeah. I talked to them an other day.” It always irritated me when he said “an other” for the other.

“How are they?” Pastor asked.

“Okay.”

Okay? What was he talking about? “His father’s in the hospital,” I explained.

“They’re doing all kinds of testing. They think he might have had a stroke,” Pastor’s smile faded. “I mean, he’s only fifty, but men’s life expectancy is fifty-five in Russia.” He shook his head.

“Are your parents saved?”

“I don’t know,” Dima said. “We didn’t talk about religion growing up—”

“I think his grandmother is,” I offered. Pastor waited. Dima said nothing more. I cringed inside.

“Aren’t you glad you’re in America? Without Christianity, there is the greatest suffering. Russia is a prime example. I might have a Bible in Russian for your parents.”

During Pastor’s years in seminary, the Soviet Union was considered the country likely to destroy Israel. Some Protestant scholars even speculated Russia would be the land from which the Antichrist would arise. I often wondered what Pastor and his family thought about Dimitri, truly.

“Thanks! That would be awesome,” I said, squeezing Dima’s arm and leaving for the restroom. It was pink and berry and reminded me of Pastor’s home. Standing there in a spring dress, my face flushed, I seemed a fixture there.

*
I carried Viktor in the snugli and walked to worship practice, his small legs at the
top of my red shorts. Rain hung in the air as if hemmed in by a bulging net.

“You walked all the way here?” my friend asked with a taut smile.

“The car’s in the shop. Besides, it’s not that far,” I freed Viktor from the snugli.

“I’ve been thinking about the church, about why some people are leaving and everything.
Let’s make sure we pray after practice, okay?” I said.

“Oh absolutely. Let’s get started. Come on girls, let’s move up front and check
the sound.”

After practice, the five of us sat on the edge of the stage. A faint orange glow
stretched through the sanctuary from the front doors in the lobby. My heart beat fast. I
wanted to explain something that didn’t quite make sense to me. I needed to talk it
through anyway.

“I was reading I Thessalonians you guys. And thinking about how Paul set up the
first New Testament church. It seems like it was a lot different from what we call church
now. His churches thrived, and I started to see—maybe—why ours isn’t.” Where was I
going with this?

“I don’t know all he did to make church work, but like the pastor became the
spiritual father to his people. And he really cared for each of his people, the way a father
cares for his children. When he wasn’t able to be there, he sent a spiritual leader to take
care of his people—” They were staring at me, and I suddenly felt like I was condemning
Pastor for having run a one man show. It was true there were no deacons, no associate
pastors, and seemingly no hierarchical structure—but why should this matter if we were serving the Lord, not men?

I loved the Pastor and the church. I didn’t know what I was saying. I stopped.

“Maybe I’ll e-mail you the outline I made.” The girls nodded their heads, turned to the three babies wiggling around on the green carpet before us.

But I continued wondering why I hadn’t learned about the apostolic traditions and Jewish history that had been so integral to the success of the early Christian Church. Paul talked about the leaders of the church in a way I didn’t recognize at New Grace. It seemed we were cut off from Christianity in the past. There seemed to me a lacking, but I couldn’t name it. I’d been a Christian my whole life, why did something suddenly feel different about my understanding of church? Faith wasn’t about church. For reasons I didn’t understand, I began to crave more from church. There began a discomfort with where I was and a growing need to look deeper.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After five years of marriage, Dima’s paperwork finally processed through Cleveland’s immigration service. Our seven month old slept, and the morning rang with quiet. My breath rippled the coffee, steam licking chin and lips. Dima stood in a pin-striped suit studying the Naturalization papers filed in a bright folder, seemingly unaware of the cat rubbing against his slacks. He was heading downtown for the last step, an interview. Everything had been legal the past thirteen years that Dima had remained an alien of the United States. I found it hard to understand why he feared our government would deny him citizenship.

“Loosen up a little, there’s no reason you’ll be denied citizenship,” I half laughed.

“Nothing is for sure,” he said. I slipped my arms around him from behind, breathing in Dove soap.

1. Celebrating Dima’s U.S. citizenship with the Holmeses at Bob Evans.
“I love you. It’s going to be okay. One step at a time, babe, one step at a time.”

He turned, and I reached around his neck. The cherry-red clock ticked, the refrigerator buzzed. I whispered in his ear, “Thinking about your parents?” and felt his head nod against my shoulder. I felt the weight of his care. Lord, help us.

“Now that you’re a citizen, we can go to Russia,” I said with my head buried in dinner. “Chicken’s grilled to perfection, babe.”

“No. Can’t go till I deny Russian citizenship. And that costs money—Russian government so corrupt. I swear it’s disgusting. You really have to listen to a.m. radio. Savage was just talking about communism leading to death. It’s so true.”

“But Russia isn’t communist anymore,” I said.

“It’s still run by communists,” he said.

The chicken was sweet, the wine was strong; questions seemed remote—thought they were always lurking in the shadows of my mind: Would his family live with us? Would we financially support them? Would we find them jobs, friends, Russian community?

“Love You. Want to put Viktor to bed early?” I said. He grinned.

Despite the relief and joy of having become an American citizen, his parents’ summer visit became an umbrella under which nothing else compared. Saturday morning coffee and oatmeal, making love and limitless plans were traded with the endless responsibilities of work, school, and baby—life seemed a juggling act roving us into
machines. Dima was at work, and I was organizing our life—paying bills, making lists. I called Susan Holmes to confirm our trip to their place in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with Dima’s parents the next month. We tried to plan ahead, but more often then not, our day to day responsibilities muddled together. Everything seemed haphazard.

Church had become like a sandbox, granules of thoughts brushed here and there. Castles of confusion loomed. We’d knock them down and plan a visit to an Orthodox parish, only to rebuild towers of uncertainty after church. Even then, though, I’d sensed Orthodoxy wasn’t a place, any more than it seemed an idea, to visit. I almost tried not to hurry to understand.

One Saturday before they came, Dima sipped instant coffee at the table as I threw oatmeal together—like the good old days, only neither of us felt good at all. After his father’s stroke, the doctors feared he would have a heart attack. He was carrying seventy extra pounds, and stressed. He didn’t play racquet ball twice a week, walk after dinner, or limit his diet. He was nothing like my father.

“Is he going to be healthy enough to come? I mean, what if something happens while he’s here?” I said.

“I don’t know—don’t worry about it. It’ll work out, okay?”

“Well, will he have some sort of insurance?”

The phone rang. “Figures. Whatever.” I dumped oatmeal into the boiling water as Dima paced the kitchen with the cordless in the crook of his neck, mother and father
taking turns in his ear. I “listened” to their conversation by translating Dima’s tone, straining to recall some words and phrases I’d learned, watching his hands, his pace.

“We’re at New Grace. It’s ah—Lea?”

“Yeah?” I stirred the oatmeal, sprinkling raisins.

“What denomination is New Grace?” Were he and his parents finally talking God? Awesome.

“It’s an Assemblies of God church—why? Are you guys getting into it?” I turned to him grinning above my old robe. He waved his hand for me to be quiet and turned to the kitchen window.

His mother had asked where we were going to church. She had spoken with a priest in Russia and asked if the church was Protestant. The Orthodox priest wouldn’t pray for us if it was.

“That is totally rude,” I said once both of his ears were mine again. “Was your mother even baptized with your father at the monastery last week?” We knew little of their church life, issues of faith were still guarded as though top secret in Dima’s family. His father had called last week to tell Dima he was getting baptized, which had shocked and pleased us. His father had asked, for the first time, if we were “believers.” Dima had said we were, and, it seemed to me, he finally spoke to his father with an air of seriousness about God.

“I don’t know. Dad went alone.” His eyes fixed on his empty coffee cup.

“Want more?”

“Not really.” He looked distant.
“Aren’t you glad to talk to your parents about the Lord?”

“Yeah—but, it’s weird. We never talked about this stuff growing up.” I couldn’t imagine not having talked about faith through the years with my parents. I understood that they had kept quiet about their feelings and beliefs out of necessity, it had been against the law to speak of God in Soviet times. But I wondered how people raised under atheism might translate their faith now, in free Russia. How would his parents react to church in America?

Before his family came, we visited a nearby Orthodox parish on a Thursday evening. A curling drive took us a quarter of a mile from the road to a silver-domed church. It was not a church a person would accidentally find. It seemed tucked away from the world. It was big and old with the craggy feel of the Episcopal church my parents had recently left. The priest told me that once a month Liturgy was performed in Slavonic. I hoped this might work for Dima and his parents.

We slipped into an office couched in the basement of the church. A man two feet taller than Dima with a protruding forehead and ledge of bushy eyebrows greeted us from behind his desk. He wore a tee-shirt and warm-up pants. I had expected a different look. At least different clothes, a priest collar and jacket maybe. We introduced ourselves and the squirming Viktor and settled in chairs before his desk. He continued to look to Dima as the spokesperson, to ask about his past in Russia and his current situation. I felt somehow less as an American Protestant.

“Protestants are so confused, many don’t even believe in the Trinity,” the priest
said. “In grade school, my son’s Protestant friend told him Christmas was just a story—that the Christ child was make-believe,” he laughed. I was ice. By the end of the night, he handed us a rule of prayer, an Orthodox calendar, and an envelope for our yearly pledge.

“I’m sure you understand, before you are baptized you’ll need to give five-hundred dollars to the church,” he said without further explanation. I tried to understand, to roll with his assumption that we would be baptized. Otherwise, the entire evening seemed a waste. I could at least entertain the idea of becoming Orthodox.

We walked back to the car, fussing Viktor on my hip. I scuttled my sandaled foot against the dusty parking lot. “I just don’t know about all of this. Why should we have to pay in order to have Viktor baptized?” I said.

“They have to keep the church running. I think it makes sense.” Dima’s voice trailed off, and I think he too wondered. We had planned on tithing, but we didn’t have that much extra to dish out immediately. We were on a fifty-dollars-a-week budget for groceries. Half a grand would put us in the hole. Much more than this, I believed in the Christ child. And my Protestant friends and family did.

We returned for Divine Liturgy on Sunday. We rustled diaper bag, purse, bottle, and infant carrier in the back pew of the church. I took comfort in the familiarity of older members’ crossing and chanting as Dima and I passed Viktor back and forth, cooing, bouncing, rubbing, anything to keep him from before-nap-time fussing. To no avail. Concentration was impossible, and I took Viktor to an empty, soundproof room with a few chewed-on books. A young girl joined us and told me children sometimes came here
during Liturgy. I asked her if there was a Sunday school for the children, and she said Sunday school was before Liturgy. I calculated the length of Sunday mornings: hour-long Sunday school, hour and a half for Liturgy, and then coffee hour, an optional time of socializing. It seemed a little over the top to me.

Dima stood quiet, concentrated, even stoic. “What, you can’t hold my hand?” I whispered.

“Shhh. This isn’t time to cuddle,” he snapped. In the priest’s brief sermon, he encouraged the people to live the Faith through the upcoming fast. I wondered what people would be fasting for, and what fasting actually meant. Did people go without food? For how long and how often?

“What did the priest mean about fasting?” I asked a woman behind me after service.

“Oh, Father’s new here. I don’t know what he’s talking about.” I tried not to judge, tried not to surmise this early on that the people were only going through the ritualistic motions, not feeling the power of the Holy Spirit. But I had my doubts. We slipped down a narrow stairway into the dungeon-like basement of the church. People spilled out in a long line for coffee.

A young woman offered her name and asked ours, offering a handshake and plain smile. I babbled on with nervous energy, “I’m a Christian. I’ve been saved since I was three.” The young woman smiled, sipped her coffee.

She didn’t believe me. An attractive deacon a few years older than us weaved confidently through the parishioners.
“Welcome to our parish,” he shook my hand, a sheet of paper over a magazine, “May I get your names and address?”

“We’re just visiting. We go to a church in Stow right now,” I looked at Dima who appeared ready to offer all of our information for their records. “My husband’s family is coming from Russia for a visit this summer—”

“From Russia?” His eyes bulged. The paper that had been over the magazine fell to his side. I nodded matter of fact, less and less thrilled with the idea of it all.

“That’s the Georgeses,” I gawked. They stood on the cover of the magazine with African children.

“You know these Ugandan missionaries?” the deacon asked.

“They’ve been friends of my family’s for years,” I said.

“So,” he looked from Dima to me to our son in the carrier, smiling as big as a clown, “You must be Orthodox?” he said to Dima.

Outside in the sunshine, Viktor in my arms, we drifted through a field on the side of the parish. “This is it. This is where I want to go to church,” Dima said. I nodded and looked into the bright day. It was unexplainable to agree with him, and I wasn’t sure I did—but my spirit didn’t argue. Questions and doubts clouded my mind, but my heart seemed unnaturally patient. What if Orthodoxy attracted me only because it was so different? Would the novelty wear off? Was any one church more true than any other?

“We’re returning to Uganda at the end of the month, so any time before that we would love to have you over,” Sharon Georges told me days before Dima’s family came.
We had a million things to do: plant the tomatoes, cut the grass, buy shrimp and wine—and an immediate understanding of Orthodoxy would fit between one and four on Sunday afternoon.

“Thank you. Dima and I have questions. It would be so wonderful to get together. I know you guys are probably busy trying to see family and everything before you go back. Why don’t you just tell me a date that works for you? We’ll visit St. Nicholas and come over afterward?” I said.

“Let’s do it next weekend,” Sharon said.

The weekend before the family arrived, we dropped Viktor at my parents’ and walked down the street to the Georgeses’. Their home was familiar and warm. Peter and an African, from the Ugandan seminary where Sharon taught, sat on the deck under an umbrella. “Are you studying for the priesthood?” I asked. He said he was and in a heavy accent explained how the many Ugandan dialects limited the ministry.

“How are your parents?” Peter asked Dima.

“Excited to come.” I sensed Dima wasn’t in a talkative mood as his body stayed relaxed with a quick answer. I felt uneasy. I had known the Georgeses as a child, but not as an adult. I began to care what they thought of Dima and me and our families in ways I hadn’t though to as a child.

“May I use your restroom?” I said, as much to force Dima to rise to the occasion, as to escape and calm myself down.

“Come on in,” Sharon said through the screen door in the kitchen.
“Can I help you with anything?” I asked. She was washing her hands in the sink, nails a dark mauve.

“Oh no. During fasting seasons we eat simply. We were just going to have some pasta a little later, if that’s all right?”

“Sounds good.” I was starving. We had skipped breakfast and it was going on two. I returned to the porch where she offered Kool-Aid and set crackers and cheese under the umbrella.

“We’ve been praying for your parents for the past nineteen years, ever since we left New Testament,” Sharon began. “We never thought you would figure into this.”

“I didn’t expect to either,” I laughed, feeling shaky.

“Your mother seems hesitant, but your father is interested in Orthodoxy,” Peter said.

“Really? I don’t know. Dad’s been weird with religion for a while now. We had always talked about the Lord, but for the past few years we haven’t. It’s like he’s annoyed with me. I mean, for a while now my Dad’s prayers have seemed so—unheartfelt. It doesn’t even seem like he is praying at all—”

“Stop—stop,” Peter shook his head and looked away. A deep pang of regret seared through me. I hadn’t meant to disrespect my parents. I hadn’t realized how deep the Georgeses’ care for my parents was. I was mortified and instantly self-conscious, like a reprimanded child.

“I’m, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say anything bad about my Dad,” I knew it was unreasonable—but tears welled. Peter and the African talked about Uganda—the
language, the small dorms where they lived, mission work with the children and a local hospital. I was relieved to hear them talk, relieved to be quiet.

“Life is so easy here,” Peter said and sighed.

I looked at Dima, who remained mute, and begged him with my eyes to speak. Instead, I filled in the silence. “I like myself better when I’m pushed—I’m less self-absorbed. Like when I was in Russia. Someday, I would like to do mission work.” I was surprised by what I had said. I didn’t recall realizing this before. Sharon nodded with understanding.

“It was a challenge to leave everything here. Peter was making good money as a business man, and to let go of that opportunity took some time,” Sharon said.

“When we first left as missionaries, we had plans and goals that didn’t wind up as ‘planned.’ We had to realize that it would be God’s will working through us, not simply accomplishing our plans. That’s why we came back at first, unsure if we’d carry on as missionaries.” Sharon’s eyes glowed. She looked the same as she always had—powdery skin and soft hair, rounded features and intense smile. “It was perfect timing because when we came back to the States, we learned Peter was ill. If we hadn’t come home, he wouldn’t have had the care he needed. God’s plans are mysterious, that’s for certain.”

It might have been the same house and yard that made being with them reminiscent of spending time with my own parents. Maybe it was the familiarity of shared years, despite the lapses of time within those years. I could have stayed with them for hours, but Dima suddenly sat on the edge of his seat. Dima suddenly spoke of time, of having things to do, of leaving. Of all the times in our life that he had sat back and
made me the instigator of departure, I couldn’t believe that he was pulling us away from
the Georgeses. If it wasn’t that I was dying for a salad and my mother’s brown sugar
Pop-tarts, I would have weaseled us into at least another hour.

My parents were sipping instant coffee on the patio when we walked back to fetch
Viktor and lunch. “What did you think of their church,” my father asked, pulling the
screen door open and sitting at the kitchen table. He didn’t even pester me about
rummaging through his refrigerator, or “stealing” his favorite Pop-tarts.

“It was long—but, Dad, it wasn’t bad. I mean, it was weird with all the chest
crossing. I couldn’t follow the Liturgy, didn’t know what to say or anything. But, I
really like the way the sanctuary feels.” Unlike the parish we had tried a few Sundays
earlier in our town, St. Nicholas was more open, youthful, and comfortable. The people
seemed very active and alive, despite the ancient tradition and liturgical structure. The
music was beautiful—and most of the congregation participated in the chanting. The
priest was welcoming, though not pretentiously so. His smile reached the corners of his
almond eyes and his handshake was not loose or so tight it seemed he was trying to exert
a sense of power. He spoke to me as much as to Dima, and I sensed his love was sincere
and earnest.

“The people are really nice there,” my mother said.

“If it wasn’t so long, so involved, I think I’d go to St. Nicholas,” my father said to
my surprise.
I remained curious about Orthodoxy for the sake of Dima’s family, and with a bizarre sense that my father approved of it. I was confused by the differences between the Orthodox and Protestant traditions, as it had always seemed to me that a Christian wasn’t defined by a church. I defended Protestantism, to Dima, to myself. But a small piece of me was already accepting a sense of Orthodox Christianity. Still, I was parsing through spirituality, trying to measure the pieces and parts and make sense of a mystery.

The very first time I called Father Andrew from the Georgeses’ church, I asked him if he’d be willing to baptize our son.

“Yes. I will baptize your son. But the baptismal ceremony welcomes a child into the Church, and it becomes the task of the parents, along with the Church, to raise the child steeped in the tradition of Orthodoxy,” he began.

I was not planning on that.

“So unless you plan on raising him in the Church—”

“Oh yeah. I see what you’re saying,” I wanted to hang up and forget the whole thing. I would explain all this to the family, like it or not.

I had never believed baptism saved one. I had always thought salvation was in accepting Jesus into my heart. I didn’t believe in working my way to heaven.

I asked Father, “How does the Church interpret salvation?”

“The Church teaches that there is not a single moment when we become saved. Our lives are the life-long process of becoming saved, and in death we will be saved. Salvation’s a process. And baptism is a promise to live that process. The promise is important—but not a ticket into heaven.”
He said compared to the East, the West had a harder time embracing the mystery of faith because the culture had grown dependent on logic. We had learned to live more dependent on man and less so on God. Moving past our own understanding and into the realm of belief, which was inherently beyond comprehension, had become a consequence of our self-sufficiencies.

Though I was put off with the exclusivity of one Church, I couldn’t settle. I continued calling Fr. Andrew. And he talked with me, introducing Orthodoxy in small pieces.

“The Protestant tradition contains some Orthodox principles, though not all, and only through Orthodoxy is the fullness of Christianity experienced,” he spoke gently but his points were firm. His words were clear, and his confidence was reassuring. He didn’t try to persuade me. It seemed he knew the depth of the human soul could not be convinced but rather led by the spirit of truth. I trusted him. If I entered the Orthodox Church, it would be under a father who understood that my Protestant past was not null and void of Christian truth.

There was something different about Fr. Andrew and the Georgeses, something that encouraged me to continue seeking an understanding of Orthodoxy. Though words couldn’t define what marked them a part in my mind, they seemed to want to be more humble, more patient. They seemed to have a quiet confidence. Everything about the difference seemed interior. I had known many wonderful, believing people that looked perfect. I wasn’t interested in Christianity that appealed to the human eye (which might seem ironic considering the grandeur of Orthodoxy). And, in fact, Orthodoxy often times
did not appeal to me on a surface level—it was too foreign.

Days before Dima’s parents arrived, I told Kara we were leaving her father’s church. In an effort to show we still hoped to be friends, we invited Kara and her husband for dinner. The atmosphere in our kitchen was heavy.

The husband spoke, “We need to get the elephant out of the bag. We want to tell you, we don’t care where you go to church. As long as it’s a Christian church, it doesn’t matter at all to us.

“I looked online to find out what Orthodoxy is, and I found that they believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s the important thing.” He smiled and looked Dima and me in the eyes, and I knew his intention was good. He was a gentle man, giving and unassuming.

We all tried to be “normal.” The guys hung out in the computer room, scanning digital pictures; Kara and I held our babies in the kitchen, chatting about struggles to have time to brush our teeth and workout and feed the children. But by the time dinner was through and I leaned back against the couch, I wished the night would end. Before, it had always been easy to talk beyond superficialities with Kara.

“So, what have you been learning about Orthodoxy?” Kara looked away from me and down to her son grabbing a small ball above his head. I knew she was trying to appear nonchalant but wasn’t really feeling it, and neither was I. I was not in the mood to try to make sense. Confusion halted words—splattered them uneven, foolish: It makes sense because of Dima’s parents. It is the original Church. Orthodoxy puts my faith into
a context.

What might have happened had I said the truth: The Orthodox Church offers one a fuller Christian experience?

“I’m too new in all of this to give you the best explanation. I have some books I can give you later if you like. But, I mean—Mary, Theotokos, I’ve been thinking about her a lot lately. I never considered her as someone so special before. I never honored her enough, you know what I mean?”

“She’s just like us. Mary wasn’t divine, Lea.”

“Oh I know. She was only human, but the Orthodox Church says she was ever-virgin, that Christ never had brothers or sisters only cousins. I mean, she was the temple of the Lord! That seems to me pretty special. More important than anything I’ve done. And she’s in heaven with Jesus. I can actually ask her to pray to Christ for me!”

“We can just pray to him directly. Why would we need to pray through someone else?”

“I’m not explaining this well. Of course I can pray to him directly, but, like I might ask you to pray for me, I can ask her to pray for me too. The Church believes there’s a Church militant and a Church triumphant. In other words, those who have gone to sleep in the Faith and those who are on earth still. They don’t say it like we die, but like we fall asleep; through Christ we don’t ever die—”

She was hung up on the praying to Mary, even though I had meant to explain it as praying through Mary. Her face was unsmiling, tired.

“Dad asked if you guys don’t like him anymore,” she said.
“Oh no, of course that’s not it at all—” It was over. The divide was personal.

Both Kara and her husband had never veered from the Protestant tradition of their fathers, each a pastor in an Assemblies of God church. Their unfltering faith that had attracted me in the beginning began to distract me.

After they left, I turned to Dima. “Don’t you think it’s odd, their fathers are ministers and they had to look on line to find that Orthodoxy is a Christian tradition!?” I slipped off my jeans and sat on the bed.

“That’s how far the West is from the true Faith, Lea.” I sunk into our mattress and curled into a ball facing away from his warm body. I wanted to melt away. Things seemed too hard. I feared the judgments, the prejudices—the falsehoods in the name of Christ. What was the Truth, and could I ever know it?

At times, becoming Orthodox in twenty-first century America made me feel like I was pretending to be a foreigner, like I was merging with a culture that I wasn’t born with ethnic ties to. It was surprising to learn that the majority of Christians, from the time of Christ to the present and throughout the world, were Orthodox.

I taped Peter Georges’ e-mail from Uganda to a wall beside the computer:

“Orthodoxy is a descriptive the Church Fathers used to differentiate the true faith from the heresies that were with the church from the beginning.” It wasn’t about being “Orthodox,” it was about being Christian.

Our days always seemed packed, even as I was home fulltime on summer break from school. There was time for the weekly cleaning, the laundry, the crock-pot chicken.
There was time for long walks around the lake, strolling Viktor. There was time for reading, for milkshakes and Vanilla Wafers in the sunshine as Viktor napped. But there was almost no time with Dima. He was working endless hours—leaving by six or seven and home after seven at night. It took an hour to get to Gotech, which made forty-hour weeks fifty, and he was carving time from Saturdays, even stopping in the office Sunday after church since “we’re out here anyway.” It was too much, and I couldn’t see the point, especially since he was paid salary.

We had no money. Thirty-four thousand didn’t stretch as far as it might have. Cars kept breaking. The mortgage was barely possible from month to month. School was paid for through a teaching assistantship, but books and fees added up.

Worse than anything was the frustration Dima brought home from work. He hoped things would settle at Gotech, that people would respect him and that his job would be clearly defined by the only one the workers had ever listened to, Jerry. It seemed his co-workers saw him as Jerry’s son, like the other two boys who had also begun working there. Other employees seemed to think the boys had a free ticket. There seemed resentment over assumptions that the boys might someday have an opportunity to run the company. They didn’t seem to consider that Dima had earned a college degree in International Business and Marketing, that he’d worked a number of jobs before Gotech, and that he really didn’t have any guarantees. Everyday, Dima came home haggard by fruitless efforts to prove he could be the warehouse manager. I was tired of stories dealing with endless petty fights, which always seemed to center around Dima.

*
Looming on the to-do list before Dima’s parents and Grandma walked through our door was a phone call to the pastor from New Grace. I called Dima at work, annoyed that he’d still not called Pastor about our decision to leave the church. Things would only snowball when the family came.

“Go ahead. Call him, Lea. What do you want me to do? I’m at work.”

“You’re always at work. I want you to call him—as the man of our household. But who cares. I’m just getting it over with.” In typical fashion, I rushed ahead and took care of business that Dima would let linger undone.

Pastor knocked on the screen door. “Come on in,” I called from the kitchen, drying my hands on a towel.

“Hey, how are you buddy,” he stooped over our son playing in a bouncy seat—the “next generation” his church had prayed for. Sadness unsettled me like stones in the pit of my stomach. He seemed subdued—less smiley, voice flatter. He wore shorts and a Polo, tan with a fresh hair cut. His eyes felt different, less open, and he didn’t hug me or shake my hand.

“Here’s a gift from the church,” he extended a rectangular box.

“Thanks—I’m sorry to leave.” His eyes met mine, silently questioning. I didn’t continue, for fear I would repeat an insecure and still unrealized explanation.

“We’re sorry to see you leave.” His eyes swept the living room, our son, my face, and he turned to the door in silence. I listened to the ding of his car door, the roll of his engine, tires pressing over the drive. He faded from our home, from our lives. I continued to regret such division ever had to come. I opened the silver baby spoon, New
Grace scrolling the handle. I hid it in the back of the silverware drawer, hoping in time it wouldn’t make me sad.

“Lord, I pray you lead us by the spirit of truth. Have we made a mistake, Jesus?”

I hadn’t spoken to Kara in over half a year. One night I dreamt of her sitting on a swing with her son, laughing with the colorful joy I had always loved about her. Tension that had invisibly separated us blew like dust in another spring breeze.

In the dream, Pastor held the Bible and read Jn. 15.7—8: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”

Why is Orthodoxy necessary? I lay in bed, unwilling my eyes to open. I didn’t want to face another long summer day without my friend, without Dima. Emptiness and uncertainty made me weak.

It was not a choice. It was the undivided Church. The Apostles’ traditions. The Church in heaven.

How do I know Lord?

You believe.
III

CONVERSION

“[W]hen He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak . . .”¹


2. Author’s parents with Peter and Sharon Georges at wedding rehearsal dinner, hosted in Holmeses’ backyard.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was a breezy August night. Our bedroom window was open, inviting the sounds of crickets and owls. Dima was in the hall rocking Viktor and telling a story about a Russian fairytale character, Baba Yaga.

“She is a witch,” he said, rocking back and forth in the dark. “She eats little children who stray through the forest and into her hut built on chicken legs. She can be a mean grandmother when her little ones don’t fall asleep. She doesn’t cook well, even worse than Momma’s leftover casseroles.”

I chuckled. Peas and noodles and tomatoes with a little cream of mushroom soup, what was so wrong with that? Dima crawled into bed beside me.

“Thanks for putting him down, honey.” He looked at me with an expression asking what his good behavior might have earned him. I traced his forehead, cheek, jaw with my finger.

3. Dima’s father with his grandson.
“Don’t do that. It tickles.”

“You’re such a baby,” I laughed, turning the light off and moving against his body. He wrapped his arms around me, hands roaming my back.

“So, Mrs. Povozhaev, is this my reward?”

I began stashing questions in a notebook for when Dima’s parents would arrive in three days: How has communism affected your life? How did you feel about your son leaving home and staying in the States the past fourteen years? What do you think of the past Soviet leaders, about current President Putin? But once the minivan spilled the family onto our drive, it became clear as the night sky—no amount of preparation could have readied me. My questions were replaced with theirs: Where are the crackers with morning tea? What’s the temperature of the freezer? Do you have a bucket and scrub brush for hand-washing Grandma’s stockings? With the buzz of Russian, the fleshy smells, the slow roll of taped plastic bags and old suitcases, our home began its conversion.

The spaghetti boiled. “Shoot. Dima, your Dad can’t eat carbs, can he?” I had forgotten about his Russianized Atkin’s diet.

“It’s fine. He just won’t eat much of it,” Dima said.

“I made a ton! Great.” I stirred the chunky tomato sauce. I think there’s a lot of sugar in this—will it upset Grandma’s diabetes?

“Very delicious,” Viktor said at the picnic table, his plate swimming in sauce and a few worm-like noodles. My notebook, a life-line to sanity, was by my plate. I scanned
the scribbled questions and looked up at Dima for translation, but he was plowing through noodles. I interrupted his feasting, annoyed that he should be so absorbed when it was only through him that the family could speak with me.

“Right now?” he asked.

“When else, honey? So, how did you end up staying with the Holmeses longer than a year?”

Tatyana’s mouth was filled with sour cream and bread as she spoke. “You have to ask me that question,” he translated.

Try less personal, more political.

“What do you think of President Putin?” I said.

His father breathed deeply and looked off into the dusk. “Human life is not worth a dime. People are killed for a cigarette. Many are afraid of the police, maybe even more than criminals, because the police have the power to take things. If a police officer likes a car, he can make up an accusation and take it. The elderly are killed for pension money, which isn’t enough to live on. President Putin doesn’t have the power to change any of this or help the people—communists run the black market. The only way to have anything in Russia is through cheating.”

Did he see no hope in his country?

His mother added, “The Hermitage is very beautiful! You must visit in the summer, the flowers and fountains are breathtaking.” Her face glowed and her eyes were glassy, from the wine or emotion, it was hard to tell. Her lips were full like Dima’s, and
her face was relaxed soft the way his always was. Tatyana’s ease, her unwavering solidity, gave the impression that Russian culture couldn’t be topped.

“America is so young compared to Russia. And the Orthodox Church has only been here two hundred years! The Church has been in Russia since the eleven hundreds! During communism, many faithful were exiled to Siberia—some moved there to escape persecution,” Tatyana continued.

“Honey, your father’s family’s from there, right?” I asked Dima. He nodded, leaned over the table and looked at his mother.

“Well, were they believers?” I interrupted before he pulled the conversation another direction and left me out of it.

“I don’t want to get into that right now,” he said. But I longed to know the family—specifically. I had an agenda that moved beyond patient observation of the family for endless hours. When there was an official question and answer session, it would be my questions that Dima translated.

“What did your mother think about you being baptized in Susan’s Lutheran church?” I asked. Susan had recently given me a cassette of Dima’s baptism. I had stuffed it in a box with a mess of other tapes in our basement. Dima hadn’t taken his baptism seriously at the time, which made it seem insignificant and hardly worth remembering. If his spirit hadn’t been open, willing, there was no point in the act. Even if Dima had been serious, it seemed to me that baptism was only a symbol.
“She was opposed to me being baptized outside of the Church. But glad I would be baptized in some kind of church rather than not at all,” he said and passed the cucumber salad to his father.

It was late. Grandma sighed and took a long sip of tea, looking beyond our driveway into the night sky. Her face was as smooth and calm as water. Her housedress was unbuttoned and folds of flesh hid under the rickety table.

I wanted to know the legacy of faith sitting around me. But their secrets were embedded in translations—locked inside years and faraway places. Our worlds wedged between us.

Our first excursion through town forewarned me of the endless battle I faced to be patient. “Where are we going?” I asked. The Povozhaev Express had already made stops at Rite-Aide, CVS, K-Mart, Marc’s, Famous Footwear, and Payless Shoes. Each place had seemed another exciting bargain for the family with possibilities such as finding Grandma the extra-wide shoes she “could never find in Russia.” According to Tatyana, they didn’t have the selection I took for granted, even avoided.

By the time we landed in the parking lot at Walgreen’s, Dima’s father insisted that Grandma rest in the van, and I stay, too, to watch her and Viktor. I resented the fact that I had been forced into a motherly role that presumed full watch over Viktor (never mind Grandma). We waited, sharing silence and vague smiles, humidity breathing us in.

After a half hour, Viktor ambled to the van, concern creasing his forehead. “He hot, Leeeea. Very, very hot,” he said pointing to the baby. What did he want me to do?
“It’s okay. I will give him his bottle. It’s almost feeding time.” Viktor shook his head with worry. I wondered what the appropriate remedy was to them. Too much air, from a fan or air-conditioner, and the baby would get sick, the family was convinced.

“What are we going?” I called from the backseat to the front of the van where Dima and his father sat.

“I have no idea. I’m totally confused,” Dima said. After some discussion I couldn’t understand, we drove the short distance back to what had been our home on Adaline Drive with the windows closed in the back of the van. We roasted as heavy summer rushed through the half-opened front windows.

Back home, I snapped Viktor into the highchair, made a bottle, and rummaged through the pantry. What can I make them? Quick. Easy. “Don’t worry about food,” Dima said. “I’m going to grill.” I was starving and pulled a box of instant mashed potatoes from the shelf. I sat at the table stirring a mess of microwaved potatoes and spinach.

“What are you eating?” Dima asked. Viktor stared at me sipping hot tea, sweat rolling at his temples. Dima gathered the lighter and cooking spray. “My parents are going to think we eat like crap!”

“Look, I’m living—not putting on a show,” I snapped as he slipped out the side door, letting it slam closed.

*
It was a new morning, but it felt like another hour to the day before. The family had stayed up late, Dima laughing and sharing their stories of the past. I had drifted off to bed before the rest of them, banking on the time alone I’d have the next morning.

“Get up! I can’t handle all this without a little time alone. I mean it. Please, Dima. I’m going running. When Viktor wakes, you have to get up—” he pulled a pillow over his head. I yanked it from the side of his long jawbone. “You idiot! Don’t you think it’s reasonable—I’m just asking for one hour to run and crap and pay the bills. Alone. In peace. Pleeeeeease?”

“Whatever,” he spat. I stomped from our room into another morning. I didn’t want to fight. At the very beginning of the family’s stay, the frenzy had been exhausting and strangely exhilarating, but it was quickly sizzling into fury. It began to feel like we were wasting away. In the first days, we had still laughed, rolled our eyes together behind his parents’ backs, grabbed each other in the upstairs bathroom. Until Dad interrupted. He had needed Dima to teach him how to cut the grass.

“What does ‘ATM Adjustment’ mean?” I mumbled at the computer screen. Dima was in the kitchen making a bottle. “Negative ninety-three dollars?”

I called my mother. She transferred one-hundred and fifty into our account.

“I’m glad I can help you guys out,” she always said. Yet it made me mad. Why couldn’t we handle life on our own? It was hard not to blame everything on Dima: his job, his family and their foreign ways. But with a glance at his tired eyes, my heart broke.

“Is everything else okay? You and Dima getting along?” my mother asked.
“I do not want his parents living with us. I know that already.”

“You’ve got to be patient, sweetie.” she said.

“Dima and I are all right. Don’t worry about anything, Mom. Everything’s fine, or it will be. I’m sure.” My mother’s quiet pronounced her overbearing care. I wished she took less of my life upon herself—yet, I always pushed things onto her.

The family claimed the kitchen: tea and lemons, cheese and sour cream, oatmeal and olive oil spread the counters and table. I gripped the handle to the refrigerator, sticky. I felt Dima in the room trying to ignore me. “This is disgusting,” I whispered as he leaned in for a generic Cola. I smelled Dove on his clean skin. His family laughed with Viktor Jr. in the living room.

“Dimka! Look, quick. He’s crawling for it—” Tatyana was on her full belly holding an empty can of Labatt Blue beer. Our son inched over to her, reaching out for the “toy.” I laughed with the family as my son stared up at me and smiled, as if to ask if all of this was all right. I gave in to my weary legs and sat on the green carpet behind Tatyana.

“Viktor, come on baby, come on,” I coed as he began to crawl.

As easy as it could be to laugh with the family it was to slide into frustrations, to unleash complaints: your parents need to pick up their messes; we need to communicate who’s cooking when; we can’t afford all these groceries; when are we going to discuss them not living with us?

At the center of it all was, of course, Dima. He seemed unwilling to communicate. Maybe he opted for silence because the family was dramatic. While my
mother had learned over the years to worry in silence, his parents, and especially Grandma, voiced their concerns loud and clear, over and over. They were used to sharing everything, including understanding, and I was the only division among the group. I insisted Dima understand me.

Dima and I escaped for a quick trip to Marc’s for more Labatt Blue. After my laden sighs and tip-of-the-iceberg complaints, Dima slammed his palms against the steering wheel and screamed.

“I can’t take this!”

I was shaking. This was not the man I married.

“It’s okay,” I touched his forearm. “I’m sorry,” I said, but he was mute. His face was granite. “Look. Let’s pray.”

“I can’t pray right now,” he said.

We were desperate, beside ourselves, crazier than ever. We had to pray—otherwise there was nothing to do, no hope.

When the family went shopping that evening, I busted out the rubber gloves. A quick clean. I strapped Viktor into his highchair, glad Tatyana couldn’t see. She would tell Dima we kept the baby too confined again. I wanted to run around the house and restore every room that had been ours. “Hey, little boy, how are you? Momma loves you,” I cooed into his cheek. “Just you and Momma—”

“Momma.” Our Einstein offered his first utterance. I ran to the baby’s first year journal wishing Dima was home and resenting that he wasn’t. By the time the family
returned a few hours and house cleaning later, I forgot to mention that our baby said his first word.

The family was happy, drinking and eating a late dinner of sour cream and bread and salads. Dima’s size eleven feet flapped over my green flip-flops as he shuffled to the bonfire and stoked the embers. Grandma smiled at me, and warmth spread like wine through my body.

“Grandma wants to make a statement,” Dima said. “She said she wants to take care of Viktor in the mornings. That we should put his crib in her room.” He turned to her and responded, “Thank you, Grandma. That is a good—”

“Wait. Dima, I’m not comfortable with that. First of all, the computer room is too small for the crib. And, Grandma’s not well. She shouldn’t have to get up at the crack of dawn with Viktor. You know he’s fussy and—”

“Grandma insists,” he said.

“No.”

“What do you mean? She’s doing us a favor?”

“Pleeese, can we talk about this in private?” His eyes rolled. Silence. I gulped my water and filled the teakettle, re-emerging with notebook and pen.

“Dad says he will volunteer information for your ‘novel,’” Dima said.

“It’s a memoir,” I corrected.

“He said when his great-great grandfather gave his daughter away he was afraid she’d come back home to Siberia ‘new school.’” His father’s pointer finger lingered at the edge of his nostril while he spoke.
“In Siberia, people are open, straightforward. If someone’s a decent person, they’re accepted. If not, the people reject him. See, many criminals sent to Siberia for exile. Dad’s friends started getting into trouble when he left for St. Petersburg. He wanted a better life. He was always looking for good people to befriend.”

“What did your parents think about you marrying me?” I tried to reign in the conversation. There were so many things I had to know before these extra details. I imagined my agenda more important, but the family only shared what was in them to share. Their stories were theirs. And what they offered, a gift.

“My parents asked me, ‘Do you love her’?” Dima said.

Tatyana interrupted. “Mom says she’d disown me if I married for the wrong reasons.” Which seemed anything other than love, I guessed. She stared intensely at me when she spoke.

“She says American women seek emancipation from men. They want to be independent, do what they want. Liberal women are ruining the family unit. American women don’t think they need a man; they can do everything on their own. But they’re separating their lives from their husband’s—”

What was she talking about?

He saw the questioning look on my face and thought an example would make his mother’s words of wisdom all very clear and accurate. “Mom passed up education for love. She could have gone to university. She’s very intelligent, Lea.” I’d heard this many times. Tatyana’s face looked hard, defensive, but beyond anything, proud.
Recently, a Russian woman at St. Nicholas told me the divorce rate was high in Russia now, though not as high as in the States. My friend was tall, dark eyes and hair, an oval face that made her appear childish despite her womanly body. She and I talked over coffee and bagels in the banquet hall after Divine Liturgy, her young girl clinging to her side while her eleven year old held Viktor like a natural mother already.

“I’ve been divorced for a year and a half,” she said through full lips. “In Russia, people marry young. Twenty-two and already married, quite normal. If woman has child, or she is past twenty-five, very difficult to find another partner.” She sipped her coffee. I asked her why a Russian woman might divorce her husband, and she explained that the top reasons for divorce are not unlike in the States: unfaithfulness and abuse or neglect.

“But in Russia,” her voice rose, “roles still traditional. Wife cooks, husband fixes things, and few Russians can afford help. Many marriages last for convenience.

“Very many time, when man is unfaithful or even abusive, he also do no helping with housework or children. And he expects wife to work,” she gave a bitter laugh and hugged her child to her side.

When I asked about her ex-husband, she ran a broad hand through her short hair. “He think I no fun anymore. I go to church. That is no fun for him. I too serious, expect too much from him, he think.”

She continued, saying that in Russia divorce was a last means. Russian people were more used to being dependent on one another—even under less than favorable circumstances. On the other hand, in the States she saw that people were more
accustomed to independence. She didn’t say whether this was good or bad. She didn’t seem to perceive American women as not needing their husbands but as having a stronger sense of themselves.

Dima’s father began speaking. “What he say?” I asked. But Dima entered a long conversation with his father, and without me.

“Dad just said he feels bad about being too harsh with me as a child. But I deserved it.” I thought about the scars on his thighs from his father’s belt. I didn’t know how parenting worked in Russia, but my parents had never left scars from spankings. At most, Mom’s pink slipper had left stinging red swells. I didn’t want Dima to spank Viktor. I would. Maybe.

The family schlepped into the kitchen and piled the sink with teacups. I squirted pink soap on a washcloth. “Grandma’s concerned about the color of the soap—”

“What do you mean?” I asked rinsing the dishes.

“She thinks you shouldn’t use the dishwashing liquid on the cloth. It might dye it.”

It was more than the smear of crap on the toilet, more than the flies buzzing through the kitchen with the family’s insistence of fresh air, more than their strange icons offered to us as gifts and taken back to their room. It was the pigeonhole swallowing me, the constant sense that everything was out of my hands—from my baby, to my husband, to my own existence. All of life seemed a mere reflection of the family’s will.
The evening of my niece’s baptism, Dima and I raged upstairs as I gave Viktor a bath. It was the first time in five years of marriage that the “D” word was uttered.

“You’re lucky to have me!” I hissed.

“I don’t even know who you are,” he said.

“You have your citizenship. Go ahead and divorce me. But I get Viktor,” I spat through clenched teeth. I had silenced him. He kicked the closet door. No doubt the parents heard that.

“Your parents don’t ask. They come into our home and overtake—Viktor, kitchen, you, the whole downstairs! Two women can’t live in the same house together. At least not two strong women like your mother and me!”

“You’re so selfish!” he said.

“Why don’t you say something else to hurt me? You disgust me—” I said. I rinsed the soap from our statue-quiet son and dried him with a towel. His little hands gripped my shoulders as I carried him to our bed to dress. With each flaming word, burning thought, I wondered if we would ever recover. I continued to worry we were self-destructing. I wanted to talk things through with his parents, but maybe it was better the words were silenced. Only what I did counted.

Had I no choice? Was my own life really not my own at all? Maybe infertility had been in preparation for the family—to show me how beyond control life really was. What was God doing, and why did it all seem so intrusive? I had imagined things would be challenging, but why so impossible? Was my faith really so shallow, my love for others so weak, that I would break already?
I didn’t want to live with the parents, but maybe wanting had nothing to do with anything but my sinful human nature. I was killing Dima—ruining his joy. I was not honoring God. I was desperate to help myself, but the more I tried, the more I destroyed. I feared hypocrisy would ruin my faith.

Lord, help me. Mother of God, strengthen me.

What was choice? One way or another—what was the difference? I could adjust. Our son needed his father.

By the time we were home from my niece’s baptism, exhaustion oppressed us. Viktor was at the highchair chewing on a rubber nipple, bottle filled with water. The family fight over the baby drinking water still echoed in the silence as we sipped tea and Dima set a plate of stale butter crackers on the kitchen table, ceiling fan humming.

“Americans are gluttons—selfish. They only care about themselves,” Tatyana said, roaming a hand through her fuzzy hair and reaching for a cracker.

“What does she mean, Dima?”

“They don’t care for each other. They don’t sacrifice for another person. She’s right, woman.” I wondered what she had seen among our family that night to offer such a pretty picture.

“Does she want to live here?” There was power in the question, passive-aggression. I would take the insult of my parents, of all Americans, if it made Tatyana realize that she didn’t want to move here. Could she never move past her prejudice? Or was she reacting defensively to a people she felt excluded from?
Was she doing what I often would, seeking the differences that marked her apart—struggling to somehow protect herself from painful change?

“She doesn’t know,” Dima said.

“My father asks if we’ll fight if they live here.”

“I don’t know,” I said. Tatyana began talking, but he didn’t translate. She asked about me. “Come on, tell me.”

“She just said that she hopes you’re not a typical American.”

Anything seemed easier than living with the parents.

The family assumed their seats in the van, Grandma up front with driver Dima, Tatyana and Viktor in the back, baby and I in the middle. We were on our way to visit an Orthodox parish in our neighborhood. The day drizzled with sloppy rain, and everything felt wet. I held Viktor’s hand in the car seat, and he giggled.

“We’ve decided to baptize Viktor in a separate service, not just before Liturgy,” Grandma said.

“What? Who’s decided? Dima, we don’t even have an Orthodox church we’re going to.”

“It’s okay. That’s why we’re going to St. Elia the Prophet.”

“We don’t know that this is the church,” I said.

We unloaded from the van and ambled up the cement stairs. The church was old with an iron gate curling protectively over the entrance. I leaned in for the door as the family backed away and performed a series of bows and crosses, finally entering the
sanctuary with their heads covered, eyes to the ground. Viktor told Dima to have me spit my gum. I swallowed it with a too-loud gulp, looping my arm through the infant carrier and taking it from Viktor. I stooped to the ground just outside the sanctuary and unbundled the baby from the blanket Grandma had wrapped him in. If I was sweating, he had to be warm.

The parish was gray and quiet. Viktor was one of the only children. A small circle of faithful sang at the back of the church like delicate bells. The service felt impossibly long and foreign. I took Viktor into the foyer midway through for a bottle and watched the quiet room from a distance. It was not a place I wanted to be—too still, too washed out, despite the icons and priest’s fancy vestment. After Liturgy, the family spoke with the priest—common introductions, the usual story of Dima-hockey-life-in-the-States. And then, to my surprise, Dima told the priest we wanted to baptize Viktor the following week. The priest took our phone number and promised to get back in touch with us to explain a few things.

Once we returned to the van, I derailed the family’s plans. I would not baptize Viktor at that church. I had been willing to test the waters of Orthodoxy, but the family would have to be willing to move at my pace. This might have seemed natural to them, the universal Church, but to me it seemed weird—standoffish, closed, empty.

“Why did we talk to the priest if we aren’t going to baptize Viktor there?” Grandma asked staring out the window with a quivering bottom lip.

“I told you we were rushing this,” I mumbled.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I realized that we had a steady balance of two dollars in our bank account while online minutes before leaving for the Upper Peninsula, Michigan. A week with the Holmeses—gourmet food (and free), nature walks, another home to fill and undo. I was relieved to be leaving. Grandma entered the computer room.

“Got everything?” I said as she stooped for her plastic bag of clothes. We would drive eight hours there, and as Dima had said “on the way home,” (which seemed more out of the way home) we would stop in Chicago to meet an old friend of Grandma’s, one of the main selling points in convincing her to return to the States. With the hope of a new place to live, I glossed over the reality of over twenty hours in the van with the family and an eight month old.

Our excursion began well. All seemed happy, despite the humid drizzle. We were leaving, together, for a vacation. “The family wants to plan a bank robbery,” Dima said. “I’ll be the driver, Mom and Dad will do the deed, Grandma will scan the scene. Lea, you’ll count the money,” Tatyana’s eyes danced. I laughed with them.

Stays with the Holmeses hinged on two games: food and toys. I knew there’d be plenty of entertainment. The family would add an element of drama. The Holmeses had been around many different kinds of people, and I counted on their worldliness to accept the oddities of the family.
But the family didn’t seem to feel as comfortable at Susan’s—Mom and Grandma didn’t cook (this was Susan’s domain), and the home remained distinctly the Holmeses’. But even there, the family couldn’t relinquish particular habits.

“The bathroom smelled like fish because Mom and Grandma didn’t know you could flush the toilet paper down the toilet,” Dima explained to Susan and me hiding in the kitchen one morning, discussing things. “Grandma’s diabetic and can’t eat the oatmeal that says ‘Quaker’ because there’s sugar in it—” he continued.

“No. There’s less than two grams of sugar. And it’s exactly the same as the generic brand she eats every morning,” I argued.

“But that one says one gram—look,” he pointed to the label. “It’s not the same.”

Yes it was.

I said, “I’m worried about Grandma. She’s eating lots of sugar. That ice cream that says ‘no sugar added’ doesn’t mean there’s no sugar. There’s like eight grams in one serving, and she’s had half the gallon! That’s why she has a nose bleed.” Susan added blueberries to the Quaker oatmeal and offered to watch Viktor before his afternoon nap.

The family finished breakfast and weaved through a slope of pine trees in the backyard to the lake.

“The wet suit fits you well,” I told Dima from the dock in my red bikini. I felt embarrassed as the family stared at me, especially his father. The day was overcast and Lake Huron was always cold until late August. I dipped a toe in the water.

“Come on Dimka! Let’s go!” Tatyana plopped on her ski doo. Grandma clung to Dima in her black bikini, full body partially concealed by the life jacket.
“Whoooo!” His mother cried as they zoomed around the lake. “Now I know how bikers feel!” she screeched.

Viktor slowly waded through the water to a ski doo of his own. “Hey, Dima! Dima! Stay closer! Hey, closer!” He yelled in Russian.

“My Dad’s a wimp,” Dima whispered as he helped Grandma onto the deck beside me. “Guess what he asked me? He asked if you and I were going to the woods or something—”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“To, you know—”

Was nothing to be private ever again?

That night we crossed the Mackinaw bridge from the Upper Peninsula to the Lower Peninsula as Lake Huron rolled alive underneath us. Dima drove the family and Susan into Sault Ste. Marie for “all you can eat” crab legs. Susan and I squeezed together on the seat next to Viktor. Her hands were tan, nails uneven and rounded, and her wedding ring sparkled with the soft light of sunset. Throughout our time Up North, Susan and I shared an ease that we had lost through the years. It seemed our differences, which were many, melted in the waxing gulf between the Russians and Americans. Susan let go of her edge. We liked each other again, and I rested in our closeness.

Grandma had never tasted crab, and she filled up on bread and overdone chicken because the crab meat was “too bland.” Tatyana and Viktor laughed, piled their plates with salty crab. Native American décor covered the wooden walls: paintings of nature, rugs, manikins with rich black hair in braids, high cheekbones, animal hides around their
plastic shoulders. I thought of the six percent of Native American blood coursing through me. This had been shameful generations ago. My grandfather’s father had even denied the ancestry to Pop-pop, but it was easy to see the Indian blood in my grandfather’s russet skin.

After dinner, Susan gave us twenty dollars each to gamble at the casino in the restaurant. Tatyana and Viktor looked down as Susan zipped her purse. Grandma shook her head side to side and looked in the distance. I smiled at Dima, and he smiled back. We were used to the Holmeses. This kind of generosity didn’t surprise us. Susan and I strolled Viktor to the side of the entranceway and fed him a bottle, talking about nothing in particular. Time slipped by as the family laced through the casino and Susan and I shared mutual American-ness. We were quiet for a time, and my real thoughts were paralyzed from words. It was ironic to be able to share an entire language and yet still be limited in conversation, as Susan and I were. With Dima and his parents and Grandma, it was easier to pin the problem on language and not worldview—although I realized if the words had been available it might only have been a way to realize the great disparity between our perceptions.

“Look,” Dima pulled the edge of two hundred-dollar bills from his khaki pockets.

“Dad gave this to me. He felt bad that Susan had to give us money.”

“How’d he get money? Thought we were all at nada?” I said.

It was just after six in the morning and no one was up; the quiet and easiness of being alone was an extraordinary gift. Mornings were crystal. The day seemed paused,
offered by God, unaffected by the needs of the world. “Please fill me with light,” I prayed, running past tall evergreens on an open road beside the forest. God’s creation was uninterrupted, his plans in perfect harmony. Nature, in all its differences, was one—and beautiful. “Help me be your creation.” The cloud-covered sun rained liquid peace.

After praying with my new Prayer Book, still wondering why one needed to read prayers, peace settled my spirit. I had the urge to call my mother. Was she through her first cup of morning coffee?

She answered on the second ring. “Oh honey! How are you? I’ve been thinking about all of you. Is Viktor all right?”

“Everything’s fine, really. I actually feel so good right now. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I know it. I just keep thinking about the way Tatyana and Grandma treated you at the baptism. That was tough—” I hoped my sister hadn’t been bothered. It was her baby’s day. I hoped not to have tainted it with the family. We talked about the prejudice we sensed from Tatyana toward American women and the need for all of us to be willing to change, to learn through each other. I wondered about the limits in this, but was feeling too optimistic to bring anything up that would spiral us both into worry.

“I want to do the Lord’s will,” I began.

“I understand wanting to do what’s right, but there needs to be limits—”

“Who’s, Mom? There’s no guidebook here. I’m trying to follow the Spirit—as airy as that sounds. But, it’s the kind of situation that might go a million different ways.”

“Me and your Dad are praying for you.”
“Thanks Mom. Do you want to now?” We had never “read” prayers before. I tapped the book beside a basket of bananas and peaches. She agreed, and I read.

“O Lord, grant that I may meet all that this coming day brings to me with spiritual tranquility. Grant that I may fully surrender myself to thy holy will.

“At every hour of this day, direct and support me in all things. whatsoever news may reach me in the course of the day, teach me to accept it with a calm soul and the firm conviction that all is subject to thy holy will.

“Direct my thoughts and feelings in all my words and actions. In all unexpected occurrences, do not let me forget that all is sent down from thee.

“Grant that I may deal straightforwardly and wisely with every member of my family, neither embarrassing nor saddening anyone.

“O Lord, grant me the strength to endure the fatigue of the coming day and all the events that take place during it. Direct my will and teach me to pray, to believe, to hope, to be patient, to forgive, and to love. Amen.”

“That was really beautiful,” she said.

Mr. Holmes made pancakes for breakfast, the aroma of sweet and coffee washing through the open rooms. The family laughed as Viktor sat on a quilt in Jerry’s baseball cap and reading glasses. The news broadcasted thunderstorms. Viktor wore a lopsided grin as he reached for the eyeglasses on his head. It would be a day of slow smiles and aimless strolls. A day when Leshiy, the forest devil, according to Russian superstition, seemed on the prowl. As the story went, Leshiy had village girls cook for him and in
exchange he provided dowries and successful marriages. But it was said he could also take women deep into the woods forever.

The thunderstorm raged. “Viktor! Viktor! Tatyana? Where are you?” I called, jogging down the road. Dima ran to the house to get a bicycle and ride up and down the island until he found them. My feet squished in the cold water filling my shoes. What would she do with him in the cold rain? Why would she take him walking when a storm was brewing?

Tatyana appeared in her cream bra, waving at the edge of the woods. “Lea! Lea!” I ran to her enormous bosom and threw my arms around her. She laughed in my ear and motioned for me to follow her into the forest where a tiger-printed shirt draped my son.

“He’s laughing!” I cried holding him to my chest and smoothing his dark ringlets. As we walked back to the house in the downpour, I wondered if Dima’s father would have a conniption that Viktor Jr.’s hair was wet and uncovered in the cold—surely he’d be sick by morning.

We slipped through the open front door. Susan, Jerry, and Viktor only laughed and asked where we’d been. They said Dima was still looking for us, and I hoped he’d be home soon. I needed to feel his arms around me again. I took our son upstairs and changed our clothes.

Tatyana leaned over the bar in her tiger robe, her hair in wet curls around her face. “Dima, Kahlua?” She sounded out the word as he poured it into her coffee. His father was shooting pool.
“Dimka play?” he said. I stood at the side of the room, sipping hot water with lemon.

“Dad wants to know if you’ve ever been drunk. He has a hard time imagining it,” he said. His mother motioned me over to the bar for a shot. “I told him how you drank three beers on one of our first dates and fell into Mike’s pool—remember that?” he laughed.

“That seems like another lifetime.” I was at peace watching the family happy. Tatyana always seemed happy before dinner time, whether with Labatt or Kahlua and coffee.

“It is difficult to picture you drunk,” Viktor repeated, all of them laughing. I chuckled along.

“Hey, I’ll go get your dad and me red wine,” I said.

“Nyet! No wine, no water—Leeea need,” Tatyana lifted the whiskey bottle. I sat down for a shot.

“In English, there’s only one way to say things,” she began. “The language is nothing like Russian—”

She didn’t know English. Dima was a man of few words. His translations didn’t represent the full English language. I grew faint and dizzy, longing for a bowl of oatmeal and bed. But dinners were late and long, and food began to blur into the most meaningless activity. Silence, as steak circled the wood table. Silence, as salad tongs filled bowls. Silence, as my thoughts spun wild. I didn’t eat dinner that night.

“Why aren’t you eating,” Susan asked.
“I don’t feel well.”

“You should eat a little—” Susan’s words pushed through the still room. Tatyana finished and went to bed. Grandma yawned and inched over to the freezer for “no sugar added” ice cream.

“I think there’s sugar in that,” I said in Russian. But she acted as though she couldn’t understand me.

In the morning, Grandma was at the table eating generic oatmeal with olive oil and growling back and forth with Viktor Jr. He screamed, smiling with surprise at the power of his voice.

“He’s going to wake up Susan,” I said, stretching my legs in the living room in front of the news. I walked over to Viktor, whispered, “Shhh, honey, eat your casha,” and kissed his cheek. Grandma gave a toothless grin. It was odd when her lips crumbled against her gums without the teeth.

I strolled to the end of the driveway with my journal, sunlight seeping into me, and sat on the warm asphalt. I heard the front door open, and wondered which of the family was coming. Grandma’s concerned face ambled down the drive. She wore her housedress layered with Dima’s sweatshirt.

“Lea, Lea!” She continued talking slowly, indecipherably, and pantomiming for me to rise from the ground.

Oh yeah, the infertility thing. To the side of the drive, she sprinkled corn on the patch of grass under old trees where we had seen deer earlier.
“Come on agent number fifty-seven,” Dima called from the house, his father by his side. His father had joked that I was a spy, which was the reason I wrote *everything* down. “We’re going on a ‘field trip’ with Jerry—” Grandma dropped the last of the corn and we walked up the drive together for another day of crawling like a snail with the whole crew—this time hosted by Mr. Holmes.

He was used to foreigners. He was good with them. He bought us fried fish and filled the silence with slow explanations of tourist attractions. Though I felt ready to bust pressed under yet another hand leading us through slow hours, I was grateful for his infinite patience. He didn’t seem to mind Grandma pulling money from her black bra, or the photographs taken at every stop, or even the heavy silence he alone penetrated. Sometimes Tatyana spoke in such a biting tone, like pins scraping the air, and Dima wouldn’t translate. Of course, Russian always sounded sharp, even when they were only discussing making dumplings.

“His mother’s difficult,” Jerry told me, walking ahead of the family to the minivan, which he drove instead of Dima. “Dad’s more easygoing.” It seemed America’s general consensus.

We were leaving for Chicago the following morning to visit Grandma’s childhood friend. He was a Jew and had immigrated to the States on a religious asylum passport twenty years earlier. I wondered what the relationship between Grandma’s Soviet family and his Jewish family had been like. What had people talked about over dinners and tea when so many meaningful topics: religion, politics, other cultures, had been against the
law? What kept Grandma and the man connected all these years living so far away and in such different worlds? Had it been enough to have been born in the same city, as Grandma and her friend had been? The circle of life seemed so small and intimate for Dima’s family.

The day was endless before the release of night and a new destination. Susan had been especially kind with me—understanding smiles, questions in softer tones. She seemed to sense my need to walk the island and find a routine to deal with our family dynamics, though in the past my routines had often annoyed her. She made me vegetable soup.

“I’m going to the store. Soup’s on the stove, Lea.”

I thanked her from the computer, tucked to the side of the pool table, where I was e-mailing. Dima and his father played pool. I had typed a long letter to the worship leader at New Grace explaining our break from New Grace and advent with Orthodoxy. “It’s exactly what you’re looking for,” I re-read. There were many questions, still. I hoped she and I would talk these through together. I thought I’d have an e-mail response when we got back from Chicago. In the meantime, I offered her titles of Orthodox books.

Dima and his father set the pool sticks down, and his mother and Grandma followed from behind the bar as we gathered around the table for a late lunch. The sun spread mellow light through the antlers hanging on the wall and over the bread and butter on the table.
“My Mom said she’s going to put three hundred in our account,” I told Dima. He shook his head and looked down. I felt his shame. We were desperate for physical intimacy. It had been days, weeks? “But you still need to go into work. We can’t survive without income—”

“I know that,” he said looking up with a steely gaze.

“But I still don’t know why you would think we could get by if you didn’t work while your family was here?”

“I wasn’t thinking, okay?” No, it was not okay. Grandma looked at the soup, under bite quivering, and I suddenly felt remorse. Don’t worry, Grandma. Don’t worry.

“Can we say a prayer?” I asked. His father said something and rose from the table.

“Dad says he’ll say one.” His father returned to the table with a rule of prayer in Russian. We crossed ourselves and Viktor mumbled an indiscernible strand of words. The family crossed themselves, and I followed.

“Thanks,” I said looking away from his father with tears in my eyes. Windows were open and cool air filled the open room. I blew on the soup, steam warming my cheeks, softening the tension in my face. After a meal of deep silence, Grandma excused herself to her room. Dima and I and his parents strolled Viktor to the marsh at the end of the island. The day was beautiful—the sounds of birds calling and breeze rustling through the cattails, the soft melt of sun on my skin, the fresh smell of lake and open air.

We stopped. Dima turned to his mother. She cried against his shoulder as he said, “Mom doesn’t want to burden us. Tough times can calcify the foundation of our
relationship. But, if they last too long they will destroy us. And this is her concern,” he rubbed his mother’s broad back. The sun fell against the lake.

“Tell her we won’t be ‘destroyed.’ We have a strong relationship. We always have,” I told him.

“She feels awful that they had to borrow money from us for Grandma’s plane ticket. She never would have if there had been any other way—”

“Baby, I don’t care about that. Money is the least of it for me. I just don’t want to live together forever,” or even temporarily. Dima didn’t translate. In the silence, I sensed God wanted me to be open to the possibility—it was in the warm of the sun, the calm of the breeze, the swaying of the cattails. How could I deny them a home and their son? Would anyone be able to take my son from me?

“Tell your mother I like the sound of her voice. It’s strong and sexy.” She smiled and we kept walking, my arm strewn through his father’s, hers through Dima’s as he pushed the stroller.

Dima called from the hallway where he sifted through a box for beach shoes. “Hey, we’re going down to the dock, riding the ski doos one more time!” I looked up from the bowl of cherries, which I had been biting in half and sharing with Viktor. I guess the family assumed I’d be babysitting. Dima’s mother trailed him in her bathing suit with Viktor’s sandals flapping from her feet.

I chewed the cherry half slowly. I wanted to go, too. It was a calm evening, only an hour or so left before the dark would settle in and we’d have to dock the ski doos.
Susan turned from the sink. “Why don’t you go with them? I’ll watch Viktor for a bit.”
I agreed, kissed Viktor’s cheek, and slid into the six dollar flip-flops Susan had bought me at the grocery store.

I didn’t have my bathing suit on and still wasn’t sure about getting in the frigid water, but we were leaving in the morning. It was a shame not to at least ride the ski doo once. “Here, Lea, there’s room on the back of mine,” Mr. Holmes said, scooting forward on the ski doo.

“I have my shorts on—”

“Here,” he waded through the water to the dock and piggy-backed me to his ski doo. “Ready?”

We flew over glass-like water through the beginning of sunset. It felt like racing into the clouds. The wind pushed my face, carried my screams into the open air. I squeezed my arms around Jerry’s middle as he pushed the machine as fast as it would go into the center of Lake Huron. Small waves knocked under us. He circled around to ride our wake, swelling and crashing over the face of the world. The shoreline looked even, light against the dark forest. The sky’s golds bled through shallow blues. Where are we going? My body tensed behind Jerry. God, please protect us.

It was nine that night. Way too late for salmon. I picked at nuts in the kitchen with Susan, trying to piece together the next part of our journey—even though by then I knew better than to try and plan things out with the family. The strategy was to leave
early so Viktor could sleep hours of our trip away, but I thought we’d be lucky to leave by eight or nine. I would get up by six, plenty of time to jog and pack.

“So tell me about your new church,” Susan said. We had always talked freely about God—when Jerry and the boys weren’t around—but recently our conversations had been muted.

“There’s a lot of stuff I’m trying to figure out. Like, what do you want to talk about?” I asked.

She said, “I think when people grow more mature with their faith they want a more traditional church. I know you take your faith seriously. There are two problems I have with the Orthodox Church. Praying to the saints and closed Communion. What’s the point in praying for people who have died?” She filled the pan with water, plunked in the corn on the cob.

“I really hope I don’t misspeak. It’s confusing for me, too, Susan. But the Church says there’s one heavenly kingdom—those alive in the Faith and those who have fallen asleep in the Faith. And when we pray, we ask God for mercy for those we love if they are here or passed.”

“But what difference would it make if you pray for someone who is already dead? We can’t change their free will. They either chose God or rejected him,” she said.

“I’m not sure. But if our prayers affect people on earth, maybe they also affect those not here with us? I don’t know right now.” I could feel the desire rising inside me to make things clear, but just as surely I knew I couldn’t, that there was so much I too was questioning.
“Don’t you think it is every individual’s right to take Communion? No one has a right to judge another person’s heart—”

“I know what you’re saying. It was strange to be denied Communion when I know I’m a Christian. But, the whole experience seems so much more reverent. I don’t necessarily feel it’s right to only take Communion once a month, like we did at our old church, or for just anyone off the street to partake in what’s supposed to be—at least—a symbol of the body and blood of Christ.” Jerry passed the kitchen.

“Shhh. Let’s talk about this later,” Susan said.

I agreed with Susan. It was every individual’s right to take Communion, to partake of the body of Christ. This was the sole reason our Lord was crucified—he wanted all people to come to him. But not everyone chose the Lord, and if a person had not given themselves over to abiding in him, how could Communion be partaken of? Before drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ, the priest prayed that we be made the body of Christ, that we become his nature and he become ours. What business did a person who didn’t confess belief in this experience have in participating with those who did?
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The morning had unfolded easier than I had dared imagine. Aside from Tatyana losing her roll of film, Dima spilling a cup of coffee, and Viktor refusing to settle back in the car seat, let alone sleep, the morning had come and gone. Thankfully, we were back in the Povozhaev Express and off to Chicago, loaded with crackers and smoked whitefish spread that Susan had care-packaged. “Grandma’s diabetes,” the family insisted when they opened the odorous container at ten in the morning. I hoped Dima sped, just a little.

We didn’t know where we’d be sleeping that night. Grandma had called her childhood friend a handful of times, but, in typical Russian style, the plans would be relayed once we were there. Grandma and Dima chatted at the front of the van, WWII stories I thought, and Viktor and Tatyana napped in the back. I wrote in my journal and read, groggy but too uncomfortable for sleep, body stiff, mind abuzz. I wondered what the family we were staying with would be like. It was odd to be traveling hours to stay with strangers.

When Grandma’s friend met us at the corner of his Chicago neighborhood in a Lexus, the situation only seemed more bizarre. He was a small man with a large nose. “I pay eighty-thousand dollars for car,” he told me as we walked around his vehicle and back into the borrowed minivan to follow him home. He didn’t seem humble like
Grandma, and I had concerns about the families relating to one another after such distancing lives.

The houses on his narrow street were small brick boxes pressed close together. The sidewalk was narrow under large trees. The home was clean and light with fake gold and black décor, out-dated modern in the style of the early 1990s. A bowl of sparkly fruit sat at the center of the glass table, a zebra patterned rug circled the wood floor. Glossy pictures of the family with tremendous hairdos covered a wall. An old stuffed animal, the size of our son, sat in the corner.

“He play?” the man’s wife asked, pointing to the tattered lion.

“Ah, he’s still too small. But thank you.” I smiled and held Viktor tight against his squirming. I helped the woman spread a stained tablecloth and set china. She was shaking, and I couldn’t tell if it was because of her age or nerves. She was well kept, painted nails even. But her eyes were old, skin aged. She spoke in a husky, accented voice and told how her family had come from St. Petersburg to Chicago a generation ago.

“Can I help you with the food?” I asked. She seemed pleased that I would offer to slip into a daughterly role. I realized how desperately I wanted to do this, and how easy it seemed with her on this temporary basis. She seemed less fierce, maybe only because our relationship was a less critical venture.

We began a strange version of Thanksgiving dinner: cold slices of turkey and cranberry sauce, crab salad, smoked salmon on rye bread, breaded cauliflower, and caviar and blackberry wine. We had just sat down and sipped the warm wine when Viktor Jr.
fussed. Dima and his mother and I set up a port-a-crib and tried to calm him to sleep—to no avail.

“Here. Put him in here,” Dima said patting the port-a-crib.

“He’s not going to sleep. This place is foreign to him,” I said.

“Dima? Come eat!” Grandma’s friend called in a booming voice. Tatyana reached for Viktor, but he cried for me.

“Lea, eat?” the voice called again.

“Okay.” I hid behind Viktor Jr. and shoveled dark bread and salmon into my mouth while Russian sprinkled the table. Viktor wouldn’t stop fussing.

“I’m going to take him down the street,” I whispered to Dima. The table went quiet, eyes focused on me.

“Ah, I’ll be right back,” I slipped from the table before the general consensus was pronounced. Dima’s mother followed me out the front door. We crawled down the street, Viktor in my arms. The air was still and locusts buzzed in the trees as loud as a small roar.

“Listen to that,” I pointed up. I didn’t recall that I had heard locusts so loudly before. It made me think of the story from Joel when the people were turning away from God, and Joel told them swarms of locusts would cover their land and eat all their plants.

“Bugz.” I wanted to laugh at the sound of her English.

“Do you like Chicago and Grandma’s friends?” I asked in Russian.

“I like Adaline Drive,” she said in English. But in Chicago there was public transportation! Russian community! six hours separation!
“I think it’s lovely here,” I said.

The Chicago family offered to put Dima and me and Viktor in a hotel room. It felt like divine intervention. Tatyana’s face remained blank but her dark eyes looked down, then past Dima. I knew she wanted to stay with us. When she whispered to Dima that she wished she was coming too, he told her we really needed time together. She let it go completely. It seemed with the slightest comment from her son she easily conceded.

“My parents have to live in Chicago when they come,” Dima said as we fell against the cool comforter on the hotel bed. “I’ll tell them. There’s much more opportunity for them here.”

“Just make sure you explain exactly what you mean.” I didn’t need to hear his reasons. I had my own etched in granite. “I really think your mother wants to live with us.”

“No. She understands everything—” he said.

“You keep saying that, but I don’t get that impression at all.” He rolled over and wrapped me in his arms.

“This hotel room is a total godsend,” he said.

“No kidding. I’m so glad your mother didn’t actually come too.”

“That’s only because she felt uncomfortable staying with people she doesn’t know. She’s a shy person,” he said. Viktor was silent in the crib at the end of our bed.

“I’ll go to the bar—” he said.
“With what money? Look, buy the cheapest red wine they’ve got.” I peeled the banana from the doggie bag the Russians had insisted we take, after carrying our bags to the hotel room, which was paid for with their credit card. It seemed there were many generous people in our lives. I wondered if this was to teach me the same—to give the way I’d been given to. I gulped down the banana and rubbed my aching stomach as Dima returned with glasses of Merlot. A half smile pulled at the corner of his lips.

The families called Dima’s cell phone over breakfast to announce the day’s plan. Dima took the call into the lobby, which annoyed me. Would he give in? I unwrapped the silverware and leaned down to Viktor in his red umbrella stroller. I jiggled a spoon to distract him from writhing in the stroller.

“What did they say?” I asked, pausing from my egg sandwich as Dima approached the table.

“They’ve decided I should watch Viktor and you should go with Grandma’s friends to sightsee city.”

“What? Who decided? Why would they think that?” I asked gulping the coffee.

“No way—”

“Calm down, I already told them that just the three of us are going downtown,” he said. I was surprised. Hopeful. Maybe he would stand up for us. A sly smile rolled across his face.

We took the el into downtown Chicago and walked for hours, strolling Viktor through Millenium Park and along the Navy Pier and finally down the Magnificent Mile,
eight blocks of shopping along North Michigan Avenue. We passed expensive souvenir shops and restaurants and finally couldn’t not stop. “Let’s just get an appetizer and share it?” I finally decided. Because Dima was always lunging for a chance to go out to eat, we had silently agreed that I had to be the one to break down. We stepped into an almost empty Oriental restaurant and parked Viktor’s tiny stroller at a far back booth where I could more discreetly change his “poopy.” After small meals and Cokes, we finally left for our hotel.

Sweat masked my suntanned skin as we shuffled into the sparsely peopled el. Dima sat on the other side of the aisle from the baby and me so we could all have breathing space. Viktor smiled as a blond boy carrying a portfolio approached us.

“Mind if I sit here,” the boy asked. His eyes were the brightest blue I’d ever seen, alarmingly intense. I wondered why he hadn’t sat in an empty seat ahead.

“Sure,” I scooted the baby closer to me as he lunged for the boy’s portfolio.

“Hey, little guy. How are you today,” the boy’s voice was unusually easy, familiar even. He had artist’s hands. Viktor reached for him; the boy gently clapped his hands to my son’s.

“I’m an artist,” he said nodding to his portfolio. “But I’m headed to a money-job right now.” Money job? I liked that. “Something to give me a little food,” he smiled.

“I understand. I’m a writer.” It felt cool to say that, as though I wasn’t a student, a teacher, a mother—but an artist. There was something mythical in the sound of it, the thought of it. Something green stuck between the boy’s front teeth.

“Must have been a real shock to come into this world,” he said to Viktor.
“The first three months, all he did was scream. We think he had a little colic—” I said.

“That’s a shorter time than most of us take adjusting to being here,” he grinned.

I said, “Maybe life’s a long cycle of readjustment?” I liked this. It seemed natural to skip small talk.

“Things never stay the same,” he added. I stared at him and wondered what his life had been like, if he was married, had children.

“I think when you have a family you realize what life’s all about again. I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this,” I said, looking down at Viktor.

“I’ve heard that. My friends tell me it really changes guys. They don’t have to carry the child for nine months, so maybe they’re even less expecting? Friends tell me having a family changes your ambitions.” So he didn’t have a family. What had changed in his life? I couldn’t imagine a greater transition from being alone to finding yourself committed to a family, your own family, that challenged who you thought you were.

“You know, family sometimes makes ambition even more realized,” I said.

Our time in Chicago was fleeting. For the first time in weeks, we spent two nights separated from the family. It renewed us. Grandma’s friend’s son invited us to a cookout—steak and slushy Heineken from an ice-packed cooler. The family owned a diamond company. The home was spread with granite tabletops. Matching china was displayed in a buffet (though we used paper plates “American” style), and the four-story home was as clean as typical in America. Their style was Russian, outdated modern, but
blended with real hardwood floors and leather furniture, big screen televisions and classical paintings. The young wife took us on a tour, mentioning they’d be adding a Jacuzzi and sauna to the back of the house. Tatyana was big-eyed.

Tatyana asked me, “Like this?” as we filed back outside to eat and talk about life in Russia versus Chicago. I told her it was all right. In truth, not all that impressed with any of it. It seemed Russians could be extremely materialistic, as though starved for the finer things in life. Maybe it was only that in the midst of our own financial struggles, seeing young people with so much made me feel less. But I didn’t want to want such things.

Grandma’s friend’s son said that they could live again in Russia, if they had to. He said they could return to the dormitories, where I had lived while studying in Nizhny Novgorod. I wondered how a family with two boys could live in a one room dormitory, but he seemed to want to make clear that though they had wealth, he knew the superficiality of it. He had lived in Russia half his life. He knew the transience of having.

When we left Chicago, Grandma’s friends gave us gifts: Chicago tee-shirts, the stuffed lion for Viktor, and two-dollar bills. A bag of food had been prepared for Grandma, and contact information had been exchanged between the friends and Dima and his parents. I couldn’t believe how well the family cared for us, though they hardly knew us. I sensed what Dima meant about hospitality Russian style versus American.

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As Dima maneuvered the Povozhaev Express along another endless highway, silence rested in the minivan and made soft all that could seem so sharp. His mother leaned against the window staring at an endless stretch of gray sky while his father snored softly against her shoulder. Grandma seemed lost in a past the rest of us couldn’t even imagine, perhaps her childhood. As we worked our way back home, I again sensed that Dima’s and my home had become the family’s this past month. Even then, it seemed sure that home would remain changed after the family left. I wondered how Grandma had remained friends with the Jewish man and couldn’t see what they had in common, other than having been born in the same small town outside of St. Petersburg. There was no need to think long on this, like so many things with the family, I would never understand, never make sense of it. I rather liked the idea that Grandma was loyal, no matter what the reason.

I felt ready to take on the last of the visit—maybe even cook a bit more, definitely try to be more patient. I considered making the Thanksgiving turkey Dima had wanted, even though it would be three months early.

“Dima, ask your family if they’re glad to be going back to our house,” I said.

“You can say that.” He wore my sunglasses, too small black ovals reflecting in the rearview mirror. I was certain he’d misplaced his again and soon mine would be lost, too. Tatyana exhaled deeply and leaned forward with an empty plastic bottle to give to our son as a toy. Dima said his mother was glad to be going home. Chicago was nice, but it was difficult to stay with people she didn’t know. I guessed that meant she knew me.

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“But they received us better than my own brother does,” his father said with a
groggy voice, bunching the pink jacket from Salvation Army behind his back. Grandma
sat in the passenger seat beside Dima, the back of her head silver with strands of darker
gray. She didn’t turn around or speak but stared at the windshield. For a moment, as I
followed her silent stare through the window, it felt as though we were trapped in a fish
bowl.

“Grandma, do you feel all right?” I asked. She shook her profile no and pointed
to her swollen ankles.

“Grandma needs to eat. Bust open the cooler,” Dima ordered. I rummaged
through my purse for hand sanitizer and offered some to the family. Viktor hesitated and
said, “little bit.” Grandma shook her head fiercely as though I offered poison.

“Explain to Grandma that Purell is safe, honey. It’s good to kill the junk on our
hands—”

“We don’t know what’s in that stuff. I’m not so sure—”

“Do not be ridiculous, Dima!” I snapped the bottle closed and tore a handful of
dark bread from our loaf. “Here, Grandma.” Tatyana passed watermelon to me, the
plastic container sticky in my hands, and I gave it to Dima with a shove.

“In Russia,” Grandma began, “people can’t sell their potatoes without paying
foreigners from the Caucasus Mountains. And if we don’t pay the foreigners, they pour
gasoline over our produce.” She shook her silver head.

“If I was back home, I wouldn’t let anyone do that to you. Where’s the respect
for the elderly?” Dima said.
His mother nodded vigorously and began a long tirade about youth and their disrespect. I imagined she might add that in America she saw it was even worse than in Russia, but she only added, “You can not imagine how things have changed in Russia. There is no respect. Young people want to be like the West.”

We rolled up our driveway by ten that night. And by eleven, after a solid hour of our baby’s screaming, “Viktor’s asleep,” I whispered to the family, reemerging in the kitchen where they sat picking at cheese and shrimp and slurping tea.

“What’s all this?” I asked Dima.

“We didn’t have anything else to eat.” I rolled my eyes. Who cares about food right now? Can we please clean up!

New dishes added to the week old ones in the sink; bags, suitcases, and dirty clothes spread over the living room, kitchen, and trailed to their rooms. We had forgotten to feed the cat and she retaliated by spitting clumps of black and white fur over the carpet.

“What are you doing?” Dima’s voice cut through my fury of movement into the computer room for the vacuum.

“Vacuuming.” I didn’t look at him, there wasn’t time. Move out of my way.

“That is totally ridiculous! It’s going on midnight,” he said.

“Dima, I am vacuuming. This place has become a complete pigsty. I can’t live like this—I just can’t.”
“You can’t vacuum; Viktor just fell asleep. You’ll wake him up. Think about it.”

The family was quiet in the kitchen, no doubt listening to us fight again.

“Let’s take this outside,” I said filling a plastic cup with cold water. The screen door slammed.

“You’re acting crazy,” he began.

“I’ll tell you what’s crazy! This situation is crazy! I don’t care, Dima, I can’t do this. You are totally impossible with your parents here. You act like you haven’t lived in America the past fourteen years. What’s happened to you?” I couldn’t stop, didn’t try to stop. I felt like a yo-yo unraveling.

“I’ve not cleaned the house since they came, but there’s cat hair everywhere, and Viktor crawls on the floor, and I can’t sleep with boxes unpacked let alone the tornado of crap we have in there now!”

“They can hear us,” he said.

“I don’t care!” I threw the cup of water at him. He silently turned from me, the keys jiggling in his hand, and walked to the van.

“Where are you going?” I asked. No answer. “Dima, where are you going?” The engine turned. Exhaust spewed. Tires rolled backward, and he turned down the street. I stormed past our driveway and into the night in the opposite direction.

The stars were bright, like pieces of a broken moon. “God, what do I do? With everything in me, I do not want them to live with us. What are you asking of me? How can we handle this? I want to die. Oh God, help me!” I continued around the block, the usual calm from physical release barely making an inroad through great agony. I thought
about going to Kara’s or driving to my mother’s, but this was my life. I knew my mother would never sleep, never relax if she knew what we were going through—the extent of it. I told myself not to do it, not to call her and complain the way I always would. I knew there had to be a better way. “God help me!”

There was nowhere to go but home. Shaky with nerves and hunger, I pulled raisin bran from the shelf and slumped over the table. Viktor turned the teakettle off and filled his mug, sitting down at the table with me. Suddenly, it was all too much. My anger broke as tears dripped into the cereal.

“Viktor, I’m sorry. I—I. This is just hard. I love you. It’s just—” I didn’t know what it was. He was silent, stared ahead, sipped tea. I lost my appetite.

Was he mad at me? What could I do?

At some point, Dima returned, though time completely ceased to matter. I wouldn’t see him for hours anyway, I knew. He and his father were in the kitchen talking. I didn’t care what they were talking about. There was nothing more I could do to even try to redeem myself. I was an absolute idiot in their way—I was sure this had become the general consensus.

I was reading in our bedroom, waiting, when Dima slipped his leg against mine under the sheet. My anger was dormant with the heat of his body and generous silence. He had gone to the gas station, he said—I wondered if he’d bought a lighter for a joint, a kickback to an old habit that had always bothered me. I didn’t ask. His voice was deep and soft as he told me what his father had said.
“Is Lea a jealous person? We think she’s acting like this to let us know that we can’t live with you. Son, we don’t want to put pressure on you. But you and Lea and Viktor are our best shot at a functional family. Our parents are elderly, and my brother is an alcoholic. We have no one else.”

“He said that?” Dima shook his head. I turned off the light, set the book behind the bed, and curled on my side. I expected he would grab the pillow and stomp to the couch, but I couldn’t respond. Didn’t trust myself to. Numb.

His hand brushed my back. “It’s going to be all right,” he said. “I don’t know how. But it is. Orthodoxy will connect the dots in our family.”

What was he talking about?

“What do you mean?” I said.

“What?”

“You said Orthodoxy will connect the dots, but how? How in the world is that possible? I didn’t see the connection—”

“I just have faith,” he breathed.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We worried about Grandma. The nose bleeds didn’t stop, and her entire leg swelled to twice its normal size. It had been pink, scaly, fish-like. It turned crimson, shiny, raw. She began to go to sleep earlier and stay in bed longer.

I held Viktor on the side of our house, breathing in the fresh summer night and calming us to sleep. Grandma shambled onto the driveway with a cup of water. She grinned, barely meeting my eyes, and dipped her fingers into the plastic cup. She

1. Grandma with Viktor.
sprinkled the baby’s hair, my hair, and signed a cross over us. She hobbled up the chipped cement step to the side door, not saying a word, crossed herself and splashed water over the door handle.

Soon she was back in bed, this time moaning with fever. I signed a cross over her bare back. She gripped the sheet and pulled it over her loose flesh. “I feel naked in America, like everyone is goggling at me,” she had said. Shame cloaked me—disgusted with the shallow, unloving ways I had allowed myself. How could I judge her at all when all she did was love me? Though her room smelled strongly of body odor and her undergarments sprawled the portable crib in the corner, I knew it could be cleaned. It was only a place. I wanted to hold Grandma the way she held my son, her soft body against my small chest. I wanted to soothe her pain, to prevent her from suffering again. Hadn’t nearly starving to death in World War II been enough? Hadn’t a life of poverty, insecurity, and communism been sufficient? Didn’t a person have a threshold of pain—hadn’t Grandma’s been reached?

I wanted to hold her.

Grandma stopped wearing dentures and combing her hair. Her cane didn’t help enough as she inched from place to place, particularly in regards to the toilet. Since she didn’t close the bathroom door, there was more than one occasion I glanced her straddling the toilet seat.

“I understand Grandma can’t help it,” I said to Dima one morning. “So, since she’s unable to hit the toilet, it’s your job to clean their bathroom. It’s making the entire downstairs reek,” my voice was calm, resolved.
“I understand. It’s bad. I’ll do it,” Dima said.

Tatyana sat at the kitchen table with Dima. Her voice trilled in the breakfast nook, and I felt light, happy. I chopped onions for the crock-pot roast, tears streaming from my eyes. They were leaving in a week and a half, and we all seemed ready for the return to “normalcy,” all but Dima’s father. His sighs were almost unbearable—deep, laden.

“Everything’s such a big deal,” had become Dima’s running complaint.

His mother’s silent anger, which I had feared was like a lioness resting before her attack, seemed to really be an inner frustration. One contingent on America’s inaccessibility. She wanted conversation. She wanted familiarity with everything from the temperature of the freezer to what could be purchased at Marc’s. She wanted to busy her hands for her son, in a kitchen of her own.

“Mom, you were a very good mother,” Dima told her. “You had to work, but that was fine. I’m glad I learned how to take care of myself,” he said. I heartily agreed. She shut her eyes as he embraced her, the morning sun filling the breakfast nook.

Viktor schlepped into the kitchen with Viktor Jr. clinging to his bare shoulder. Sigh. “Remember when your uncle forgot you at the beer kiosk?” he asked Dima. He shook his head no and seemed to regret the moment his father had interrupted between him and his mother.

“You were only three. My brother took you into the city and forgot about you after a few beers!” Viktor’s chuckle was deep, soft. “A lady found you near the kiosk
and asked where you lived. You said you didn’t know the name of the street or city, but you showed her where to take you home.”

“Actually, I sort of remember that now,” Dima said.

“The onions burn Lea’s eyes because she doesn’t cook enough,” Tatyana said, half smiling. Tears streamed my face. I rinsed the knife and my hands. I was glad the family seemed nostalgic this morning. Hearing their memories connected me to their past and seemed to draw them together again—despite the anticipated distance and time that would wedge between them again for years yet to come.

I couldn’t stop worrying about Grandma and wondered why Dima’s parents seemed to treat her lethargy as a matter of course. Maybe they had known she wanted to go home and imagined she was sleeping away the time. Maybe they were used to diabetes getting the best of her from time to time, but she had been in bed for days and emerged only for meals and tea, usually mute and for the least amount of time possible.

“Is Grandma depressed or sick,” I asked. Tatyana and Viktor said this was normal, that Grandma would eat too much sugar and then have to rest. It felt like an excuse, but because they didn’t seem all that concerned, I tried not to be. I tried to shake the feeling that I had done something wrong, something to cause her pain.

She suffered quietly. Listening by the bedroom door, low moans mumbled into the pillow like an autumn breeze. She wouldn’t complain. “Grandma, are you all right?” Her lip folded between her gums, eyes focused. She endured in her trained way. Nonetheless, suffering was a collective experience—for Russians and Americans. We ached together as Grandma’s condition became serious.
The dinner roast was dry, the onions and garlic potent. Dima’s father was the first

to crack a joke, breathing like a dragon and slicing off the top of the peppered meat.

Dima asked where I came up with this recipe, and I tried to explain that I hadn’t realized

the meat was already seasoned and had added pepper. It seemed I was destined to be

branded a lousy cook, and I was ready to give up trying.

Cooler air had finally replaced the humidity, and it felt pleasant outside at the

picnic table. Everyone seemed eager to give a smile or offer a story, to make a memory

that Dima and I might share when they were again twelve thousand miles across the

world. Grandma sipped tea and gummed dry toast.

Dima translated her story as words rolled soft from her mouth. “Russians are

loyal people. In WWI, we marched to the Winter Palace in the middle of St. Petersburg

with posters and icons to beg for help from the tsar. ‘He’s not home,’ the guards said, but

the people didn’t believe them and demanded to see the tsar.

“The guards opened fire on the people, but the people refused to leave and instead

pleaded for mercy. This became Bloody Sunday.” Grandma shook her head and winced,

thick hand on crimson knee.

“Today’s young Russians are dishonoring their families and all that was done for

them. They are ignoring their Orthodox heritage,” she continued.

I felt grateful the family encouraged Dima to remember his peoples’ stories. To

live the present in light of the past. And yet, in our own home it seemed Russian

collectivity excluded the American-ness of our place, our time. Was it possible to merge

such different lives? To remember the past, but not to the exclusion of the present?
Viktor asked me about the semester I’d spent in their homeland six years ago.

“How did you perceive people in Russia?”

“The older people seem quiet, introverted, and unfriendly. The younger people seemed interested in me and in America,” I said.

Viktor shook his head with understanding. “The older generation was brainwashed to believe America was responsible for the problems in Russia. When I was in the army, there were posters with American soldiers that said ‘number one enemy.’ The people were told that poverty and problems in the government were all on account of the U.S.,” he said.

“Ask your father how this makes sense! How did the people believe this?” I said to Dima.

“He would never consider that. I can’t translate that question,” Dima said. I felt again kept from understanding his family, his people.

His father continued, “I didn’t believe the propaganda because it was stereotypical. Why would simple folk, like an American farmer, care about destroying a simple Russian farmer? I believed there were simple people everywhere, and I couldn’t believe that all Americans were bad.”

Did he think those who weren’t “simple” were bad? What did he consider me, my family, and the Holmeses?

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The next afternoon, the worship leader from New Grace called. “I’ve been thinking about you,” she began. I slipped on my sandals and stepped through the side
door. Our roses had shriveled and drooped at the side of the home. “How are things with
church?” she asked.

Did you read the books? Did you learn about Orthodoxy?

“Good. It’s foreign still, but I feel drawn to the Orthodox Church. I just keep
going back to the fact that it hasn’t splintered to different denominations.”

“Just make sure you’re not worshipping man. It’s all about Jesus and a personal
relationship with him,” she said.

“Oh absolutely. But, I mean, do you know the Church actually came before the
Bible? That’s important, right? The body of believers—is undivided!” She was silent. I
continued. “Church is totally important. Why would our individual interpretations of the
Bible be more credible than the Church Fathers”? I don’t know, I think we should pay
more attention to the context of our faith—the history of Christianity and the Apostolic
traditions.”

“You need to be careful, Lea—”

“When you learn about the Church, you’ll be very surprised—something’s there
we’re looking for!” I said.

“Just keep praying about it. Ask Jesus to guide you,” her voice was flat. I tore a
cluster of brittle roses from the bush and threw them to the ground. I knew she wouldn’t
call again. I hated losing friends, disconnecting from other believers. I knew it wasn’t
supposed to be this way. It was division that was wrong with the Protestant tradition, and
yet here I was dividing. Yet, I couldn’t deny what I began to believe: If the Church was
the body and blood of the Lord, its nature had not changed. What was, remained what is,
and what would be. The Faith was timeless. Unfortunately, people and traditions and *all* churches would continue to change. But the teachings of Orthodoxy were rooted in the past and intended for the future. This continued as the sustaining power of it.

After our visit to St. Elia the Prophet, the family remained silent concerning Viktor’s baptism. The issue pressed me. It was important to them, and before they left it seemed my responsibility to concoct a plan with all in agreement. I called Father Andrew and told him the family would be coming to Divine Liturgy that Sunday. We would talk with him after service.

My parents had agreed to come to St. Nicholas that Sunday as well, and I hoped having my family there would provide a sense of balance. That Sunday, the church didn’t feel exclusively foreign—instead, with the Georgeses and my family and many others that appeared American, the sanctuary felt more welcoming than others we’d visited. Father had told me that many in the parish were ethnics—Greek, Russian, Romanian, but many were also Americans, formerly Protestant—Evangelical, Lutheran. The mix of peoples gave the distinct impression that the past and present, the East and West, were gathered together to worship the Lord.

Though still the unusual crossing and chanting, incense and icons, many people smiled and talked with us before and after Liturgy, and they seemed down to earth. My mother loved that a woman left the lobby after service to smoke (my mother had been a closet smoker for years). She said it seemed the people were less concerned about appearing “good” and seemed more natural. Yet, there were still many, many things that
were foreign. Much of the Liturgy seemed others’ traditions that could never become our own.

My mother and I slipped from Liturgy with the baby fussing. She seemed slower than usual as we passed Viktor between us in the lobby. Though she never wore much make-up, this morning she didn’t have any on. She looked older than she had before.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“I’m all right. I’m not happy anymore. Your father and I have nothing in common,” she looked away. They must have fought on the way to church. Probably over coming to St. Nicholas. They had been visiting the Lutheran church down the street from my sister, and Mom was hesitant to leave my sister and her family. Not to mention that she and my father doubted themselves when it came to expectations for church. Dad wanted to go to the Georgeses’ church. It was his last stop, his last bit of patience, his last hope.

“I’m all right,” she said again.

“No. Talk to me.”

“I just think every church is the hardest thing. Not one will be perfect. We have to just love Jesus and each other—I don’t know.” I didn’t know what to say to her. They had struggled for so many years with church. I didn’t have full confidence in Orthodoxy, and I doubted my own jump from New Grace to St. Nicholas. But I believed there was more to the Christian life. And it seemed we were moving in the right direction—but how could I know?
“I really like Fr. Andrew. He is honest, open, and clear—” Viktor squirmed in my arms. “Let’s try to go back in the sanctuary. Hopefully he’ll be quiet,” I said, looking down at the baby. I didn’t want to talk. We were there to experience the mystery. I wanted to hold onto my thoughts longer, to breathe with them on my own first.

The church was bright. Icons spanned the walls and ceiling, and nearly two hundred bodies filled the sanctuary. The Georgeses had explained that icons were like pictures of loved ones who had passed away. They had said the depictions were not idols, but loved as representing whom we loved. I tried to see this in the somber faces of Christ. I felt nothing. They weren’t familiar. They weren’t depictions of what I had always imagined Christ looked like. They were pictures, only. Yet unlike some of my Protestant family and friends who found the icons offensive and even insulting, they didn’t strike me in this way either. I felt I should be reverent of them somehow, and even believed I would be in time.

After service, Peter Georges hugged me, and I softly asked for his prayers for the family. His face was thin and serious, and I knew he and Sharon would be praying for all of us. He and my parents talked until Fr. Andrew quickly slipped into the pew in front of my family and Dima’s. He shook Dima’s hand, then mine, saying he felt we already knew each other from earlier phone conversations. Viktor extended his arm and bowed. His mother stood as unflinching as a pillar. Grandma’s back pushed straight against the pew.

Dima explained, “Father, we want to baptize Viktor next weekend. My family is
returning to St. Petersburg, and they want to see him enter the Church.” The priest’s dark hair was parted down the middle, bangs carefully in place above intense eyes. He listened without interrupting, though I imagined he wanted to. He seemed completely concentrated, though his face did not display what he felt or thought. He turned to me.

“Lea, how do you feel?”

Gratitude swelled. The family hadn’t often enough asked for my thoughts, certainly not my opinion.

“Confused,” I wept. “And I think we need to let our journey into Orthodoxy ‘ferment,’ as you had mentioned to me on the phone—” I lowered my eyes from his, studied the bluish veins rising on the back of my hand. I was strangely hesitant in the face of the family’s insistence that we save our son’s soul without delay.

“I know Dima and his family want the baptism now. But I want us to be baptized as a family, and I don’t know if I’m ready. I’m trying to understand,” I felt like a glass jar slowly cracking. Tatyana’s eyes didn’t waver from the icons at the front of the church. “I think we should wait,” I finished, biting my cheek.

“When do you see Viktor being baptized?” Father asked.

“Christmastime,” I said without even thinking, the word escaping as breath.

After church, we drove to my aunt’s house. The atmosphere in the minivan felt plastic—phony yet opaque.
“Make a list of Russian words so I can talk to them,” Aunt Vicki had said weeks before Dima’s family arrived. “I can’t wait until they’re here. What a neat experience. I want to have them over for dinner—” And so we had come at the end of Russia’s stay.

Grandma and Tatyana were exchanging looks at my aunt’s kitchen table where Dima and I, my mother and father and aunt, and Melanie and her family nibbled nuts and tortilla chips from a wooden tray. I warmed a mug of water in the microwave to thaw my insides. The air conditioner was turned to a temperature pleasant only for the menopausal women in the family. After the heat we’d experienced through the past month, it was impossible to adjust. Tatyana’s round shoulders were pushed back, and she and Grandma offered no smiles, no attempts at communicating with my family. After a string of fast syllables and Tatyana shaking her head back and forth, back and forth, I asked Dima, “What, exactly, are they talking about?” I knew it was about the baby. About something I was doing wrong.

As he hesitated, my heart raced. In a monotone voice he said, “They’re talking about Viktor and why he isn’t clapping yet. They think he’s developmentally behind because he’s not stimulated enough.” Fluid, unthinking, I scooped Viktor off the floor and walked out the front door. Viktor had said his first word, was making all sorts of word-like sounds, was crawling like a pro, standing up and nearly walking—developmentally behind? Behind what, their ridiculous Russian ideas?

The sun pierced the day like fire searing the top of my head. Barefoot, I tread past square lawns and uniform houses, breathing in the heat. I rubbed Viktor’s tiny back with icy hands. “Strength, dear God, to deal with the family.” I made it half way around
the block and turned back for my aunt’s. There was no point running away, and I felt calmer. I decided to tell them myself. We could not live together.

Tatyana, Viktor, and Dima lined the garage door as though a unified front. I wondered where Grandma was as my steps quickened. I didn’t feel embarrassed. They had been way out of line. They needed to try. They needed to change. I wasn’t alone here—my family was feet away.

I walked up to them and looked Dima in the eyes, then the parents. “I understand that your parents love us. But you need to translate this. I don’t care that it is going to be very difficult to say. You can blame it on me, I don’t care.

“I do not want them living with us when they move here. There will be many occasions when we don’t understand each other. Many episodes when we feel angry and confused. We need time to adjust, without the added pressure of living together. They need to adjust to the culture without living under our roof.” I stared straight into Tatyana’s dark eyes. She stared back without flinching.

After Dima translated, his father quickly said, “We never planned on living with you.” He paused and Russian flew from Tatyana’s tongue, un-manicured hands pushing fuzzy hair from her forehead.

I studied her face as Dima relayed her words. “When we were growing up, I didn’t believe what elders told me. I didn’t think they understood me, or my situations. I would only pretend to listen, but secretly I decided to do things my way. Now I see what my elders had said is true. Now, I understand.” She laughed, perhaps this new perspective satisfied her. But I saw it differently.
“Yes, we are young. But there are cultural differences that you have to adjust to. Do you want to move here and live differently?” No answer.

Dima said, “Stop bringing up ‘cultural differences.’ They will learn English—”

“I realize you did. But you were thirteen. It’s got to be harder for them, and impossible if your mother doesn’t want to. And Dima, it’s not just the language I’m talking about.” I couldn’t begin to name all that was implied: from family expectations to social conditions, from eating habits to spending tendencies, from friendships to womanhood in America—everything. I knew my words would have fallen on deaf ears. It was too early. They were somewhere between denial and blame, and it seemed it would be a long time before anything could be understandable between us.

His father had only one concern. “Are you going to let my Dad coach Viktor in hockey?” His father’s smirk was easy to forgive, his green eyes soft and glassy. I laughed.

“Of course.”

“But will you be watching over his shoulder?” I stared at Dima’s father.

“Of course,” I said. His smile dropped, and he shook his head in disagreement. He and Tatyana spoke at once, and Dima had to slow them down and translate in his condensed way.

“They are concerned this fight will upset our relationship—”

“Dima, you have to explain how it is in my family. We fight and make-up. There won’t be any grudges on my part. I’ll have a harder time if we don’t talk, if we don’t get out what’s bothering us. Then I’ll obsess with the what-ifs and the problems will grow.”

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Under the shade of my aunt’s garage, we had become a triangle—Dima and his parents facing me. Viktor threw his arm around Tatyana and squeezed Dima’s shoulder. I fell into the embrace.

My aunt’s house was silent. Grandma sat at the dining room table weeping and blowing her nose in an old kerchief. The dog licked her swollen toes, until I moved it away and kneeled before her. “Please, forgive me.” I reached for her hand, but she shooed me away with her kerchief and wouldn’t look at me, chin quivering, thick spectacles in her hand.

On rubbery legs I scooped the shrimp stir-fry, my mother rubbing my back. Did Grandma blame everything on me?—I felt it like an iron pressing my back. It was me, only me, that seemed to interfere with Russia living in America.

Would Dima understand? Would he still love me?

Back home again, Dima and I put Viktor down for a late afternoon nap. We huddled together over the baby, and I whispered, “Are you disappointed with me?”

“No.”

“He’s sleeping. Let’s go for a walk. Alone,” I said.

We weaseled out of the house before his father began hunting for Dima’s old shoes. The air was sweet with cherry blossoms.

“What’s your problem? I can’t stand it when you’re totally mute,” I said, compassion blown away in thin summer air.
“I’m falling! You might not think so, but I am.” We stopped at the end of the street. “Everybody wants me to listen to them, but no one will listen to me. They are my parents. I love them, Lea. Imagine if you hadn’t seen your parents in six years? I need you to understand what this means to all of us. Grandma might never see us again—”

The dam broke.

I’d never felt him shake before. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, Dima. I’ll catch you.” We embraced by the cherry blossom tree, my chin on his shoulder, inches from crimson leaves and delicate flowers.

“Who cares if a piece of bread falls out of Grandma’s mouth? Or if they take things from the fridge and ‘mess it up’? Maybe you think they are overstepping their bounds—which I understand—but why can’t you accept them doing that? I want them to be comfortable, to feel at home. They don’t in any way mean to be rude.”

“Do you think I make them feel uncomfortable?” I said.

“What makes them uncomfortable is our constant fighting,” he said.

“It feels like you and your family are on one side of the battle ground, and I’m on another, in a different war. It feels like ‘us’ and ‘you.’ I know we’re both feeling emotionally bruised, almost unable to control our actions and words. But our marriage is uncomfortable,” I stopped.

His family was blood. But it seemed they diluted the lines that drew us together. He stared into the sky.

“Does your family surprise you? Or do you remember the way it was in Russia and understand?”
“I can’t say I’m used to it. I was surprised by some things. Completely forgot we didn’t throw toilet paper down the toilet, completely forgot that.”

“What other things bothered you?” I asked.

“Well, if you think about it, everything bothers you. From the toilet, to rearing Viktor, to how I act. You can’t deal with being told what to do, especially with the baby. Like, when they said that we should free his balls from the Pampers, I still think we should, too, or feed him homemade soup instead of jarred baby-food—I mean, it’s better to give the kid real food.”

But I thought of how I had been told these things— instructed as though a child and not a mother and a wife. Be quiet. That was all he needed, for me to listen and hold him. To let go of everything for a moment. It healed me to love him again, and it seemed there was a way to make everything work. It wouldn’t be through figuring it out. It wouldn’t be through mutual understanding. I still wasn’t sure how, but I suddenly believed there would be a way. We’d find it in time.

“We have to take Grandma to the hospital,” he said storming into our bedroom a couple days before the end. I set aside my book, glanced the time: 10:00 p.m.

“What’s wrong? Is she feeling worse?” I said.

“I called the doctor, told him her leg’s purple in spots. He said she has an infection and needs to go the emergency room immediately.” He stormed from the bed to the hallway. I sat in limbo. It seemed I should do something. I followed him into the closet.
“What should I do?” I said.

“Just stay here and answer the phone. Mom and I are going to the hospital. I might be there all night—”

“What about work?”

“I’m going.” It felt wrong, but I breathed a sigh of relief. We couldn’t afford even an emergency of unpaid time off.

After they left, I sat at the kitchen table with my Bible and journal open next to a soggy bowl of cereal. I closed both books as Dima’s father sauntered into the kitchen for tea and fell into a chair at the table. Instead of being still and silent, I got the Russian-English dictionary from the bookshelf and tried to ask Viktor if Grandma had health insurance.

“I no understand,” he said. I shook my head and repeated how difficult this was. We tried a few more times to understand each other and finally fell silent. I got up for tea. We had unearthed a packet of study materials Dima’s host family had bought years ago, and Viktor went to his room to practice English.

The phone rang. “What’s going on?” I asked Dima.

“Grandma has a severe infection from a fungus in her toenails. It’s not healing because of diabetes. The doctors put I.V. drip in her arm and gave her morphine,” he said.

“Is she going to be all right?” I asked. His father slumped in the kitchen chair, chin cradled in his hands.
“They can’t say. The doctor’s really nice, she’s doing everything for Grandma—but the infection is really bad.” Tatyana counted it a miracle to get a “good” doctor. She seemed to assume medical care in the States was as unpredictable as in Russia. Depending on one’s physician, one was either cared for or neglected—oftentimes severely. While his parents didn’t often say they had prayed for one thing or another, Tatyana admitted to praying for a good doctor for Grandma.


“Totally out of it.”

Dima never came home that night. I called Gotech Electronics the next morning on my way to teach at The University of Akron.

“May I speak with Dima, please?” I asked the secretary, wondering what kind of a spectacle the family had become in light of all that was happening. I knew Dima wouldn’t have said much, but Mr. Holmes and the boys would ask, and Dima would tell them. Stories would leak through the small company.

“What’s going on?” I asked Dima.

“The hospital just called. Grandma pulled her I.V. out. She won’t let anyone come near her. They connected me to her room, and I heard her in the background repeating that she won’t talk to anyone but her daughter or me. They tried to give her the phone, but she refused. ‘Only in person,’ she kept screaming in Russian. I have to go back to the hospital. I’m picking Mom up and going back.” I was speechless, near laughter or tears, or both.

“Does Jerry understand?” I asked.
“I think so, but what can I do?” I knew he was right, he had to leave Gotech. We’d have to borrow money from my mother again.

Later, Dima shared the story of Grandma in the hospital, which became a vivid picture of hysteria in my mind.

“He’s not Russian anymore! I’ll only talk to Tatyana. She’s still Russian,” Grandma raged. “He’s Americanized! He can’t understand!” Her arms flailed about her, head shaking.

“What drugs is she on?” Dima asked a doctor.

“We haven’t been able to give her anything aside from the morphine last night and a bit of antibiotic through the I.V. before she tore it from her arm,” the doctor said.

“The spies are in the outlet under the clock. I see them, Tonya. I know the nurses changed the time to confuse me. The clock’s an hour ahead, I know!” Grandma said.

“Mom, it’s okay. They are trying to help you—”

“Tonya! Everyone’s talking about me and plotting to kill me! I want out of here right now,” she kicked her one leg, the sheets flying like ghosts.

“Dima, we can’t keep her here. We have to take her home. The morphine has her disillusioned. Please, ask the doctors what she can take orally. We must leave,” his mother said.

Grandma returned to the small bed in the computer room, keeping her bottle of antibiotics on the windowsill behind her bed. She feared someone might tamper with them if out of her sight. She only ate food prepared by Tatayana and only trusted her
daughter to serve it. No one said it straight out, but it was me she feared. At least the most. Since Dima had married me, she trusted him less. Because Viktor was angry with her for upsetting all of us, she also feared him.

“Why did you buy more oatmeal and bread? We have a full loaf of the dark bread Grandma likes?” I asked Dima.

“She won’t eat that. She made us stop for new groceries before we came home. The medicine has her really whacked out,” he said.

“This is what communism does to a person,” Viktor said, staring out the kitchen window.

“Can we pray?” I asked, feeling overcome with sadness.

“We need to find a prayer for Grandma’s head,” Viktor said.

So let’s pray for that?

“We’ve already been praying,” Tatyana said, jiggling her leg under the table.

“We are past prayer.”

The night before they left early in September, Dima’s body stretched out long and thin, the fan blowing on his backside. I slid into bed with him as he read aloud a line from the novel *The Bear and the Dragon*. Turning off the light behind our bed, I cuddled next to my bare Dima and allowed my body to be drawn tight to his.

We again packed the minivan, praying Grandma would make it home to her hospital without further complications. Dima drove the family to New York, walked them through JFK’s airport, and waited until they boarded the twelve hour flight home.
Before they had left, for a while still afterward, emotions were frozen, thawed with a touch, frozen again. I wondered if we ever would release the pool of meanings from when Russia came to stay.

Our home seemed an empty shell that first night without the family. I sensed Grandma in the computer room. “Are you all right, Babushka?” I whispered into the heavy air. Dima’s sweatshirt and towels were crumpled in the port-a-crib, bed sheets stained and tangled. The internet was connected, the monitor showing where Dima had found the cheapest hotel rate between New York and Stow.

It was over.

It felt like someone had died.

Things were still spinning.

Tatyana was the mother of my son’s father. I loved her for this alone. In my mind, she still strolled Viktor up and down our street in red and white clogs. She still ladled our plates with onions and fish covered in a heavy blanket of shredded carrots. I cherished her passion—sharp sounds resonating with pride.

I continued to see Viktor signing the cross over his round body, pasty legs jutting out of Dima’s khaki shorts. He waved goodbye beside the barren rose bushes, hand on his heart, as I backed out of the driveway for the university that last morning.

No amount of scrubbing could remove the film they had left. Our marriage seemed shrouded with unspoken expectations. The weight of responsibility was more than words could bear. And so we kept quiet.
Like shuffling down a winding path, almost unconscious, we continued attending Divine Liturgy at St. Nicholas. Sundays were spent learning the Liturgy and the times to cross ourselves. My parents stood beside us, and we imitated the Georgeses’ grown girls with their families, a pew ahead. It wasn’t long before we began to sense the order of things. It would take longer, though, to understand the meanings for them. Peter and Sharon were in Uganda but would return in time to welcome my parents into the Church at Pascha. Dima and I would be baptized with Viktor in December.

Sitting on the lid of the toilet in my old robe, I sifted through my hair pins and exhumed the crosses Dima’s parents had brought for after our baptisms. The Orthodox cross seemed too big, the chain too long for my small frame.

“You’re not supposed to touch it until the baptism,” Dima breathed. I pinched the cold chain between my thumb and forefinger. The price tag knotted around the inch-long, half-inch wide silver cross. The icon was rounded on all four angles, and beside Jesus’ palms was the Russian abbreviation for Jesus Christ.

“How does it look?” I asked, chain around my neck. He rolled his eyes, turning to the cat and stroking her shiny coat, tongue pushed against the inside of his lip.

“It’s a sin to take it off once it’s on,” he said.

“Did you read that in the catechumen book your mother brought?” He shook his head yes. “You put it back on the bookshelf, right?” I had placed the green book of rules next to the tall picture book of St. Petersburg. There was a glossy picture of the Church of the Spilled Blood on its cover—onion domes prickled an azure sky and countless windows peered forth darkly, like a kaleidoscope with wild splays of color and texture.

I bowed my head, “What’s it say here?” A prickly sensation crept up the backs of my arms. I imagined the cross nearly weightless on the calloused palm of the Russian priest as he had blessed it with a roll of Slavonic prayers. It felt cool, like an un-boiled egg.

“Save and protect,” he said, arching over me. I sounded out the letters, “spasi y sokhrani.”
After his parents had left, I hung their gift of an icon of the Mother of God above the phone in our bedroom with dental floss. I still had trouble imagining Christ and his mother in our home through the golden picture. Theotokos’ face peered into mine when I played the answering machine messages. And I felt strange, uncomfortable.

I began to think becoming Orthodox was less a “conversion” than a developed understanding. I had never consciously eliminated mystery from Christianity. I would have admitted there was much that escaped explanation and reason in my faith, at any time along the way. What I had begun to realize, though, was that the choice had been made by the tradition I followed, which had dismissed the saints, the liturgy, the calendar, and the mystery of Holy Communion as the body and blood of Christ. If these elements were in the way of a relationship with Christ, why would they have ever been in practice by the apostles of Christ?

Still, what bothered me most, what seemed most bizarre, was the great divide between the East and the West when both claimed the title “Christian.”

Many things about Orthodoxy colored a fuller picture of the faith I’d always had. According to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, the Incarnation of Christ, God becoming man, represented the purpose of art. “Art is, by definition, the use of material things as the medium for the revelation of God. So for the Orthodox, art is not icing on the cake; it is something very central to what we know of how God has revealed himself to us.”2 As Dima and I drew into Orthodoxy, elevating the purpose of beauty and art

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appealed to me. There was so much beauty in the world—another’s open face, a plain
wash of blue sky, a healthy baby. God seemed beyond, yet within, beauty.

In the Protestant tradition, the deliberate plainness of the church was a symbol of
full attention on Christ. It remained hard to imagine the many plainer Protestant churches
I had been a part of as revealing less of God. And maybe it wasn’t that they did. Instead,
the absence of the depictions seemed like so many of the forgotten traditions and rituals
that I was beginning to learn—simply less of the fullness our faith had always
maintained, and always would. I hoped the icons at St. Nicholas would eventually reveal
God to me, but I continued to pause uncomfortably bowed before the depiction of St.
Nicholas at the front of the church.

I took Viktor on a walk under a mixed sky. “Hi, Melanie. Are you changing the
baby?” My niece cried. I pushed the stroller faster, cell phone against my ear.

“Mary fell from the wall this morning,” I said.

“What?” she laughed.

“You know the icon I hung in our bedroom? Well the floss broke, and I found her
on the ground. I seriously wondered if maybe it was a sign. I mean, what if it is
idolatrous?” Clouds gathered, and I hoped it wouldn’t rain before we got home. Melanie
and I had always shared our thoughts, but I didn’t want to confuse her about Orthodoxy.
I didn’t want her to take my uncertainties too seriously, but I also didn’t want to feel
separated in any way from my sister.
“I don’t think so, though. I have sensed her, Melanie. Really. It’s odd that we never thought about her before.”

“Do you pray to her now?” she asked.

“You know, I do. I ask her to pray to Jesus for us. She’s his mother! She offers us help and protection. It’s strange to really believe this. The other day when I was walking with Viktor, I felt her so strong that I actually cried. Don’t laugh,” I chuckled with her. “I know this all sounds strange—but,” Help me Mother of God. “Words don’t mean much without experience behind them. If the Georgeses had tried to explain Orthodoxy before I felt something was off at New Grace, I wouldn’t have been interested.”

“I know what you mean,” she began.

“You still like the praise and worship videos Aunt Vicki got the kids, right?” she asked.

“I like pop Christian music; I just don’t see it like church music so much anymore. Aunt Vicki thinks I’m more excited about my church than God.”

“You and Dad do seem extremely excited—”

“But that’s because it’s so much more than just another church. It actually changes the way we see living out our faith. Like, it’s not about a style of worship we prefer. I don’t prefer it. It’s hard and strange. But, it’s the undivided Church, the body of Christ.”

“Are you saying that everyone has to go there? Like we’re not saved if we go to another church?” she asked.
“No! Like I said, this is impossible to explain. And I still don’t know much about it. But, the Orthodox Church is the best place for all believers. I think a person should be where they can best serve the Lord.”

“Joe and I are happy at the Lutheran church. I don’t think he would go anywhere else. Why is that bad?”

“It’s not Melanie. It’s not. No one knows—only God will judge how we have served Him. There’s fullness in Orthodoxy, that’s all.”

I continued to wonder if the Orthodox Church was the only church. I doubted I would ever reach a definitive answer when I stumbled upon a page in Father Arseny: A Cloud of Witnesses later that night in bed. “All believers are members of the Church of Christ. Without the Church, it is difficult for one person alone to find the way of salvation, the right way to act in this earthly life. Outside the Church, a person ails” (214).

I wanted to call Melanie back, but I still didn’t know what to say to make sense of a mystery. It still sounded exclusive, narrow, one-way-only. I hated to believe something that began to seem so inflexible.

At the same time, I loved believing in something life experiences told me was true.

Dima and I were sleeping over my parents’ on a Saturday. We’d all gone to catechumen class at St. Nicholas, and Mom seemed too quiet, too serious.

“I’ve got to finish some work at Gotech,” Dima said. Instead of arguing that he
was working too hard, that he could spend time with my family the way I had with his, I waved goodbye. I wanted to be alone with Mom and Dad. We had just finished a late dinner of meatloaf, salad, and cookies. Dad and I were engaged in church talk, again, and my mother bustled the dishes to the sink.

“Are you going to eat your cookie?” she interrupted.

“Who cares about the cookie?”

“Who cares about church!” she said. I stormed upstairs to brush my teeth and stifle my tears. I hated that she wouldn’t just come around, just think about it. It was finally the church where we could stay, forever.

“Lea. Are you upset?” she asked and settled on the landing outside the bathroom. Thankfully, the toothbrush was sticking out of my sudsy mouth.

Spitting and mumbling “I’m fine,” I wiped my mouth on the Christmas towel that smelled of cinnamon candles. Dad walked upstairs into his room, rattling in his change cup for the Chapstick. My parents and I settled into the hallway, just as we had so many times growing up. Little Viktor crawled over my mother’s pink sweatpants.

My mother began, “I agree with the stance of the Orthodox Church. I really do. It’s—”

“Diane, it’s undivided. You aren’t going to get a church more the way Christ intended outside of Orthodox. Trust me,” my father said.

“I agree. I just—I feel judged.”

“From who?” Dad asked.

“From Father, from people at church, everyone.”
“Mom, I know how you feel. I’ve felt that way, too. It’s like you have to explain you’re a Christian even though you’re not Orthodox.”

“Yeah, and I don’t like that. I don’t like the exclusivity of the church. It feels cold and too foreign. I hate the bells, and it’s so hot in there. I just don’t like it, and I don’t know why I’m the only one who feels this way.” My father stared at a patch of carpet.

He said, “But the Church doesn’t judge those outside of Orthodoxy. We don’t know anyone’s heart but our own. We’re not supposed to determine who’s saved. In fact, that’s part of what bothers me about the Protestant tradition. We’ve been going to all these protesting congregations searching for the undivided Church for years!”

“So, are you telling me that there won’t be differences among Orthodox churches?” Mom said.

“I don’t know why you’re fighting so hard against all of this. You’re usually the most saintly of us all. But you’re so stubborn on this one.” I smiled at my father. Mom was the first to pass up dinner to watch Viktor so I could eat, the first to apologize and insist on hugs and kisses before anyone left, the first to smile and ask how we were, listening and rarely complaining.

I fell into the couch downstairs, Dima asleep upstairs. Thoughts rolled cold under my skin. “I pray, O Virgin: dispel the storm of my sorrows and spiritual turmoil. You are the bride of God who bore the origin of stillness and alone are most pure.”

It was a roller coaster ride: certainty, doubt; fear, peace; longing, despair—and finally the decision to trust and obey what I continued to believe was the Lord’s mercy in
drawing us into his Church.

But it bothered me relentlessly that my family would be dividing because of Orthodoxy, not connecting. Sunday, after Divine Liturgy, I hunted for Father. He and I talked in the corner of the banquet hall as people buzzed with coffee and bagels and my mother fed Viktor peaches. I sat next to him certain my faith was as it had always been—regardless of the church I attended—about my relationship with Jesus Christ.

“The Orthodox tradition uses rituals as tools that draw one into the Christian experience. If you can understand the language, the mood, and the atmosphere, then you are drawn into it and the mystery comes. It’s not a science,” he smiled. “It’s all about the unchanging nature of Jesus Christ.”

“I guess we change, but he doesn’t. Maybe we live our lives realizing his unchanging nature only if we are willing to change,” I said.

This past Christmas at my first confession just before our baptisms, I took my journal and weathered NIV Student Bible, stuffed with scraps of scribbled-on bulletins from New Grace. Only the catechumens were confessing. There were a few couples besides us, which gave the distinct feel of our newness. The sanctuary was dark, cold, silent, and we waited in perfectly rigid silence. A deacon illumined the icons with votive candles, and a woman chanted the gospel at the front of the sanctuary, opposite to where the confessor and priest would be. Despite the soft colors and chanting, deep chills settled inside me that had little to do with the cool sanctuary.
Why did I need to confess my sins to Father? Couldn’t I just talk things over with God on my own? People said we’d feel so much better. I didn’t want to ask how so, or why, or what if I didn’t really have all that many big sins to confess? Instead, I went expecting a deeper peace and understanding of my faith.

I faced the icon of Christ above the golden Bible, placed on a podium that reached my shoulders. I didn’t know where to direct my eyes and stared straight ahead. Was I talking to God? To Father? I wasn’t sure. Just confess, I reminded myself, but standing there I was suddenly too self-conscious.

“I confess that I put my routine before my family.”

“What do you mean ‘routine,’” Father asked.

“Like my morning jog and writing. I can’t seem to settle or appreciate Dima and my Mom when they interrupt my routine.”

“It’s not bad to be disciplined,” Fr. Andrew began. But I wanted to start over and say I was frantic, consumed, constantly pushing, impatient, furious with nervous energy. I was afraid.

That first confession, I left more confused than comforted. Change couldn’t be easy, or it would be more of the same.

I set two alarms the December morning of our baptism. They both went off, despite warnings that Satan might complicate things. Little Viktor was hysterical—bottom as red as a chimpanzee’s.

“Great. Dima? Please help me over here. I can’t do this without you!” I grew
frantic as Viktor’s wailing climaxed. I cupped a poopy diaper in one hand, in the other, his squirming legs held at the ankles like a raw chicken. A groggy Dima emerged from the corner.

“Oh great. His butt is raw. This is ridiculous. What are we going to do? I told you we should have let him sleep without the diaper. My Mom was right. The plastic diapers are terrible for him. Think about it,” he said.

“No, you not changing him yesterday and his sitting in crap made this worse!” Viktor’s little arms flailed and he twisted onto his stomach. “Just grab the cream on the dresser. We’ve only got twenty minutes. Come on, we have to go,” I said.

After a whirlwind of bags, bottles, purse, and cameras, we were in the Camry for the stretch to St. Nicholas. Sun fell on the salt streaked windshield. I closed my eyes, silence like honey. Dima put his hand on my thigh.

“It’s okay. We’ll get to church on time. Everything’s fine.” I was determined to be silent until my words were civil. We had agreed to give ourselves plenty of time, to actually not race out of the house. To be ready for our baptisms—spirits, minds, bodies. But as usual, we had left with clothes strewn over the couch, Viktor’s uneaten oatmeal on a plate without Saran Wrap, and knots drawn tight inside.

My shoulders eased, head rolled—Viktor shrieked. “Okay. It’s okay.” Dima mumbled as much to himself as to Viktor and me. “I’m going to turn Neal Young on. It’ll help, trust me.” I really wasn’t in the mood for his music. I would have preferred slow Christmas melodies or nothing at all, but good old Neal Young’s steady guitar silenced our son every time.
We pulled into the parking lot at nine-thirty. “How do you feel, Dima?”

“I’m good. This feels right,” he said.

“It really does,” I agreed.

The foyer was packed with our family, much to my surprise. I hadn’t extended official invitations, figuring our family would rather not directly endure the strangeness of our break from Protestantism. I approached Susan, wrapping my arms around her black mink. She was rigid, and her eyes seemed to look past me.

“I’m glad you could make it with the holiday open house today and everything.”

I hugged Jerry, grazing his cheek with a kiss.

“We wouldn’t miss Viktor’s baptism,” she pursed pink lips. My heart fluttered. Why was she here?

I hung our coats, Dima stuffing Viktor’s into the sleeve of his. My face was hot. Aunt Vicki stood against the cool window next to my sister’s family. “Hey, guys! I’m so happy you’re here.” Aunt Vicki’s velvet scarf smelled like her—powdery musk.

Somewhere almost behind my heart the words I had prayed wedged and splintered. I sensed in the stilling of my nerves, the steadiness of my hands, God was in control. Be in the moment, I told myself.

Father roamed his short fingers over Viktor in the sign of a cross. I stared at a patch of red carpet. Father breathed gently in my face, signed the cross over me, and laid his right hand upon my head.

“I lay my hand upon your servant, Lea, who has been found worthy to flee unto
your holy name, and to take refuge under the shelter of your wings.”

I breathed deeply as he continued praying over Viktor. “Be gone, and depart from this sealed, newly-enlisted warrior of Christ our God. For I charge you by him who rides upon the wings of the wind, and makes his angels spirits, and his ministers a flaming fire: be gone, and depart from this created one, with all your powers and your angels.”

Father breathed blessings in the form of a cross over our mouths, brows and breasts. Our voices were a tight chord. Chills raced up my arms.

“Do you unite yourself to Christ?”

“We do unite ourselves to Christ.”

“Have you united yourselves to Christ?”

“We have united ourselves to Christ.”

“Do you believe in him?”

“We believe in him as King and God.”

After the baptism, Viktor and I stood before the bathroom mirror, our crosses gleaming. Holy water dripped onto the shoulders of my robe, rolled down my neck. Sweet oil glistened above my lips—Lord Jesus, be upon me forever. I wanted to always see the commitment I had made to the Lord. I wanted to feel the heavenly peace and joy alive in those moments. I hadn’t felt so beautiful since the day Dima and I married.

Viktor’s hands shook as he grabbed Cheerios from a wrinkled baggie. He giggled as I kissed his forehead, inhaling his soft skin. My eyes were moist with emotion as a woman from the parish entered.

“Do you need some help, honey?”
“That would be great. I just want to run out and get my purse. I think I left it with my coat.” Susan and Jerry were slipping out of Liturgy.

“We have to go. There are still things we need to do for the party,” Mrs. Holmes said.

“I’m glad you guys could come,” I said.

The rest of the family spilled from the sanctuary. “We just want to leave before Communion,” my mother said with a meek smile. Dad’s face was blank. Aunt Vicki didn’t meet my eyes.

After Liturgy, parish members hugged and kissed us; they stuffed cards and icons in my purse. The Georgeses’ girls ordered cake and pizza for the coffee hour in our honor.

I never wanted to leave that morning at St. Nicholas.

Growing up in the Soviet Union, “Christmas” had been Winter Solstice celebrated on the seventh of January. Stashed in one of our Russia photo albums was a snapshot of Dimka clad in party-hat and old fashioned bloomers suspended halfway up his belly. Grandpa Frost and the Snow Queen sat by his side.

“Is Grandpa Frost like St. Nicholas?” I asked as we wound the roads to Susan’s for the holiday open house.

“Yeah. Nothing could change the people’s traditions. The communists just changed names and destroyed churches. They couldn’t take Orthodoxy out of the country, no matter how hard they tried.”
“How did your family celebrate Christmas back home?” I asked.

“We didn’t, really.”

People would always affect our faith—encouraging it or dashing it.

The Holmeses’ open house was thick with wine and oil, perfume and laughter. Picking at a plateful of small egg rolls and shrimp cocktail, I told Susan, “I didn’t know so much of the family would want to come to the baptisms. I didn’t think my family was interested in the Orthodox Church—”

“Lea, it’s just a church,” she said.

Mr. Holmes gestured for followers to the living room. He offered shots of Tequila, live worm at the bottom of the green bottle. He pulled nuts from his pockets, spread them on the coffee table, and curled his fingers to his palm, hammering his fist over the nut. “Ha! Look at this!” Condoms crawled from the smithereens.

Eventually, people glassed-over, scanned the foyer for their coats.

“Tea anyone?” He served green tea in tiny wooden cups. It seemed no one could overstay the Holmeses’ welcome. He called me into the foyer.

“I bought this in Russia,” he nodded to a bronze icon of Christ hanging eye-level next to the Grandfather clock.

“That’s beautiful,” I said, feeling my own silver Orthodox cross on my chest for the first time. Heaviness sagged in their foyer, dark and commanding.

Life seemed a land of contradictions, inexhaustibly wonderful.

*
We shuffled a zombified Viktor to bed, and fell into the kitchen. Dima grabbed the cordless to call his parents while I un-wrapped our new icons. Russian. I smiled with the familiar sounds. The jangle of the language moved through the kitchen.

My mind flashed back to hours ago when Viktor had been in the arms of Father. He offered our son to Dima who carried him around the sacred alter. Afterward, I gathered Vitka from the step at the front of the church—his small fingers pressing my shoulders. Joy filled me in a very quiet way. Life seemed somehow right, and beautiful.

“What’d your parents have to say?”

“Mom said she’s glad we’ve reached this conclusion. Come here.” I stepped into his embrace, still and warm, faith as real and heaven sent as the man who held me.
EPILOGUE

Four months after Dima, Viktor, and I had been baptized, it was a bright Holy Saturday afternoon, hours before our first Pascha in the Church. Sharon Georges motioned over the long table at Eden Park. “Both our families, here together after nearly twenty years of prayer! Can you even believe we’ve come from New Testament Fellowship into Orthodoxy? I am so joyful.” My mother looked tranquil, but I wasn’t sure if she was happy. I wanted to get her alone, ask her what she was thinking.

She and Dad had become the servants of God, Hannah and Michael, that morning. The Georgeses had become our family’s spiritual sponsors—the responsibility they’d assumed for years, now with an official title.

“You know what my namesake means, Lea?” Dad asked.

“No.”

“Well, Satan was jealous of man’s humanity. See, he was a fallen angel, of course, and didn’t have flesh as we do. Anyway, he asked ‘Who is man?’ but God asked him: ‘Who is God?’” He was excited, and it felt so wonderful to see my father passionate about his faith.

“Satan can inhabit the flesh, but the Lord has power over all—he alone is spirit and truth!” my father said. I sipped my coffee, bubbling inside, almost too happy.

The car was warm and Viktor slipped into sleep almost as soon as we belted him into the car seat. “What are you thinking, woman?” Dima asked.
“I’m floating. I feel dizzy and don’t want to crash. I mean, you’re sure about all this Orthodox stuff, right?”

“I am,” he said.

“I guess I just don’t want to be all into it for the sake of the Georgeses. I mean, I love the family. But I loved Kara and Pastor, too. I don’t want to become Orthodox for the people in the church, you know?” He shook his head, but he hadn’t cared for Kara the way I had. And he didn’t have the same history with the Georgeses as my family had. Maybe he just saw church as more separate from the people. But I didn’t. I wouldn’t.

We were staying at my parents’ before Pascha that night. They were napping. Dima and I lay in my sister’s old room—turned guestroom—breathless and half dressed.

“We are supposed to ‘quiet the flesh’ on Holy Saturday—right?” I said.

“Yeah, well,” he said.

“Next year, I’m handling the Lenten season totally different. I feel guilty and fake,” I said.

“It’s okay,” he turned and embraced me. “This is all brand new for us. We’ll figure it out in time.” I stared into the yellow room, heavy.

“Are your parents going to church tonight?” I said.

“I’m sure. Grandma saw Grandfather’s spirit another day. She was in the kitchen when the T.V. in the other room turned on. She turned it off, and it turned on again—by itself. She said she felt someone there with her. She asked Grandfather, ‘Are you here?’ and it happened again.”
I said, “Remember Domovoy, the house spirit? Doesn’t he visit before Pascha?”

He shook his head yes. “He can be felt but not seen. But if he is seen, then the one who saw him is said to be near death.”

I wondered if Grandma was breathing her last days on earth, if seeing the spirit of her husband was a sign. There seemed so much mystery in life and death, so much imagination that even in childhood I had sensed but somehow learned to distrust.

“Grandma is a believer. She’s really sensitive to the spirit world,” he said.

Food baskets crowded the banquet hall at St. Nicholas on Pascha night, the clock nearing midnight. People were diffused—unusually so. My heart beat fast, eyes felt dry, stretched.

“We’ll get started pretty soon,” Peter said to us.

“Dima, do you need to go get the cross, or something?” I asked. He would be leading the midnight processional around the church.

“I don’t know,” he said. My mother was still, my father clamped the inside of his bottom lip and looked around anxiously.

“Maybe we should find Father?” Dad said.

“No, here. Let’s just set down our basket. Peter said things will start soon,” my mother said. She set our food next to the Georgeses’.

Dima led the Paschal processional around St. Nicholas, clenching the bottom of a gold cross the length of his face. Behind him, my father held the Bible. My mother was
assigned the “artos” (blessed bread). I held a candle, midnight snuffing the flickering flame.

“Here, scoot the plastic up,” a man inched the guard around my flame, lighting my candle with his. Incense and voices rinsed the night with eerie beauty.

“What is that thing?” I asked my mother.

“Bread with an icon on top,” she said.

“No. I mean, what’s it represent?” I said.

“I have no idea, but it’s killing my arms. The thing’s like a brick!” We giggled.

Two hundred of us stood before the entrance of the church as Father banged on the door to the sanctuary.

“Let the King of Glory in!” he said.

“Who is the King of Glory?” bellowed a boy’s voice from inside the church.

“The Lord Almighty!” We floated into the bright church singing in Russian, Romanian, Greek, and English.

My family and I balanced in the front row of the unusually bright Church. It was close to two in the morning. Fr. Andrew’s eyes were glassy, his face flushed. His words penetrated the sanctuary filled with light: licking above skinny prayer candles, gleaming off the chandelier, and glowing under the painted face of Christ covering the ceiling.

“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life!” we sang.

“Christ is risen!” Father said.

“Indeed he is risen!” all replied.
“Dad,” I whispered, “it’s like we’re trampling death standing for all these hours!” He chuckled. My mother’s hand was on her lower back, and she peered over her reading glasses.

“You okay, Mom?”

“No.”

I couldn’t catch the melody, or remember the words. Eyes scanned the endless pages of unfamiliar songs and liturgy—would I have the oven fried chicken or the grilled chicken? Did we bring cookies? I wonder if Viktor will sleep in tomorrow?

What was wrong with me that in the midst of the most central experience to my faith, I thought of my flesh? Where was my spirit?

I couldn’t get into this.

In the banquet hall after service, Father dipped a brush into holy water and spattered food baskets with blessing, leaning under the table to reach the last one. Again and again he proclaimed, “Christ is risen!” in the languages of the people.

“Indeed he is risen!” The response sang through the place. I turned from the drinking fountain and met Father’s eyes—witnessing his smile of amazing joy and celebration.

My mother drove me home a handful of hours after Pascha. The sky was blue with finger-tip-smears of cloud. It felt warm hemmed in behind the windshield of her car. It was after three in the afternoon, and I had long ago wanted to be home writing through the strangest Easter I’d ever spent. Mom just wanted more time together.
“Are you tired, honey?” she asked.

“No. Just confused. I guess I expected last night to be divine—not just otherworldly. Maybe I built the whole thing up in my head. I didn’t feel as enraptured as everyone said we would,” I said.

“I didn’t like it. For me, I’d still rather just go to the Lutheran church with your sister. But I know your father won’t,” she said.

“Wait. We have to give this time. I know what you’re saying, though. The thought of living Orthodox for all my years—terrifies me. How many Paschas can I endure?”

Thoughts of Dima and his parents played in the periphery of my mind. This would “connect the dots” for our family?

“Last night I thought about twenty more of these all night services and almost couldn’t stand it. The ritual drives me crazy,” Mom said.

“But it’s a fuller Christian experience—it’s what it means to live our faith,” I offered. She was quiet. We were treading uneven ground.

“I remember one time when I was at Vicki’s,” she began, “and she was telling me about feeling moved by the Holy Spirit. If I could concentrate and really pay attention, I thought I’d feel what she felt. I thought there was something wrong that I couldn’t. I worried that I wasn’t really saved because it seemed she had these powers that I didn’t.” I shook my head staring at her even profile. She was the most beautiful woman, undiminished by the worry lines around her eyes and the small sag under her chin.
“Maybe I don’t pay attention to details like you and your father. But I don’t feel what you guys do,” she said.

“Mom, I know what you’re saying. And it’s not that I feel anything special, that’s not what I mean by fullness. I mean, I felt like a fool last night, like I was pretending. I felt conscious of anyone looking at me as I crossed myself wrong, or noticed I wasn’t singing and didn’t know the words. I was as embarrassed as you were when we busted out our fried chicken and beer at two-thirty in the morning for the grand feast, while everyone had their homemade bread and cheeses.” We laughed again, recalling how we were the foreigners in our own country.

“But if we think about it, until the split with the Catholic Church, over a thousand years after Christ, the Orthodox Church was the only church. There were no denominations—it was the apostles’ church.” She kept her eyes from mine to the road. I knew I wasn’t saying anything that moved her. Times changed, traditions changed—what was the point?

She said, “Why would God care whether we recited a liturgy or listened to a sermon and prayed in our own words? It’s about loving him, accepting him as Savior and Lord.”

“Maybe the fullness comes in doing what the Church has done since the beginning. I think the Apostolic Traditions will teach us to serve and obey the Lord. If we believe the Orthodox Church is the first New Testament church, it’s the way Jesus wants us to serve. Are we supposed to understand?
“Maybe it’s not about personally feeling a particular way. I think we will feel things, but it’s too new,” I said.

“How did you feel last summer when you started to go to the Orthodox Church with Dima’s parents?”

It seemed there was no else on the bright road leading me back home. “Oh, I didn’t buy it. I certainly didn’t think there was only one Church. The tradition is no less foreign for me now, Mom. I don’t like it. But I believe in the Church.” My heart felt dizzy, and I wondered if in trying to convince my mother I was trying to convince myself. In the words of Saint Ileana, Princess of Romania, I silently prayed: Help me, O Lord, you who are love and mercy and know not evil, to be silent even before those I love most.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t stop talking—couldn’t stop intellectualizing Orthodoxy. And I spun with the need to share something so amazing, so complete that I continued to become aware of how small I really was.

At the end of the Paschal season, Dima and I were on our way to St. Nicholas. “I know you won’t read Savage,” he said.

“Come on. I have enough to read for school. I don’t have time to read to you right now.” Viktor was in the backseat nodding off to sleep. “We have to keep it down. I want him to sleep until we get to church. He’s going to be awful if he doesn’t nap.” Our baby was almost eighteen months old, each day more energized: climbing the couch,
bobbing to country music floating from the living room record player, jetting over the sidewalk like an ostrich—giggles as light as bells.

“Besides, this book far surpasses Michael Savage’s *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*. Listen to this! The priests were corrupt in Russia, and Fr. Arseny says the communists weren’t to blame, the ‘believers’ themselves were,” I said.

Dima said, “Have you ever heard of a guy named Rasputin? He was a ‘holy man’ for the court of Czar Nicholas II. He helped the Czarina’s son stop bleeding from hemophilia. After that, she supported him—even though he was really corrupt. He tried to convince the people to have orgies and stuff,” he said.

“Are you kidding?” I said.

“No. The Czar went to war in 1915, and Rasputin had the Czarina’s support to do all kinds of messed up crap. It didn’t last because Prince Yussupov and the czar’s cousin, Grand Duke Dimitri, tried to assassinate him,” he said.

“Dimitri, huh?”

“That’s what all the good guys are named. They tried to poison him, but nothing happened. Then they shot him, but he still didn’t die right away. They ended up throwing his body into the freezing Neva River.”

“That’s unbelievable. It says here the priesthood became a profession, that the priests were actually atheists and alcoholics! Only five or six monasteries were ‘beacons of light,’ while many were communities with no faith. Dima, can you imagine?”

“Oh yeah. I’m telling you, I don’t trust just any church—you never know.”

“Sometimes I think you’re too hesitant to trust, though,” I said.
“Maybe I’m like my Mom. She was nicknamed ‘The Prosecutor’ when she was in school.” I laughed, imagining his stubborn-eyed mother leading a classroom debate, strong and certain in the face of opposition. Her steely face flashed in my mind—I feared she would be a very effective prosecutor.

“I wonder if your mother really believes?” I said.

“She believes, trust me.” In Soviet times, anti-religious propaganda made believing seem an irrational, uneducated, weakness. These were not attributes of Tatyana’s character. Yet, Grandma believed.

A humid fog of memories from the past summer with the family swelled my mind as we entered St. Nicholas. The guest book was still opened to the page with Grandma’s signature.

“Hey, Mom,” she hugged me, Viktor in my arms.

“I know why my mother had me in her forties,” she kissed the baby’s cheek. “I miss you guys,” she said.

“Come on,” Dad said, Dima tossing a dollar in the basket and collecting two prayer candles. “Service is starting.”

Viktor rummaged through my purse and shook a bottle of Os-cal. “You want me to take him out in the lobby?” Mom asked.

“Wait. I want you to hear the Cherubic hymn. We’ll take him out if he gets loud.” She shook her head in easy agreement.
Didn’t she want to experience Divine Liturgy? I stuffed the Os-cal into my purse, pulling Viktor against my chest.

It was the beginning of Pentecost. I had been trying to piece together the seasons, to understand the mystery. But more often than not, I was swept up in tending to Viktor, or trying to understand the people surrounding me and evaluate my place among them.

The scripture reader began chanting Acts 2.1—11: “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.”¹ The people understood the mystery of the Holy Spirit. It seemed impossible to understand Dima’s parents with our cultural divide, yet surely there was an even bigger gulf between the heavenly and earthly realms. But these different people were in mutual understanding through the Holy Spirit. What a marvelous mystery.

“We need to know ourselves and we need to know God,” Father Andrew said. He often began with something so simple, and so true. The green vestment fanned out with his arms, “The Holy Spirit is a river within us. A river has power—it moves and acts upon the world.”

God was in us. If we knew ourselves, we knew God. But a mystery could never be known—“What can I make of this, Lord?”

Father continued, sharing from an article written by Fr. Chris Metropolis. “How does an ancient Church live in a modern world like this? A world where the vast majority of Americans are shaped, influenced, and educated by easy answers and sound bite news reporting. A culture that wants its religion packaged to taste like its entertainment.” He continued sharing the importance of knowing our Faith and sharing it with the cultures we’re in. “The easy path, whether of withdrawal or uncritical embrace, has never been the Christian path,” he read.

My mother ran her hand under her cross necklace, a pink rash beginning to emerge. “You can get another chain.” I had said earlier.

“I don’t want to; your father spent eighty dollars on new clasps for this one. I’m just not going to wear it all the time.”

Lord, help her. Mother of God, pray for her.

Mom scooted behind me holding our fussing Viktor. “This is okay, right?” she whispered slipping from the sanctuary.

“Let us who mystically represent the cherubim, and who sing the thrice holy hymn to the Life-Creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares.” The Cherubic Hymn rolled from my tongue. I closed my eyes, turned my palms up at my waist.

It had been a long weekend, concluding with little Viktor vomiting all over me and the crib. In bed that night, the fan pushed air over Dima’s and my bare feet. “I don’t want to miss enjoying life more—” I said. Summer was once again here, and it seemed impossible to relinquish fear for the future.
“Life is stress,” he said staring at the ceiling.

After making love, it didn’t seem quite so bad. I lay inches from Dima’s warm body.

Faith—in God, in family—was mystery. And I was hopeful, the ineffaceable touch of God like a feather on my skin.
WORKS CITED


