

PART I

*Robert*

# One

I wish I could clear my mind and focus on my imminent American future. I am twelve kilometers up in the air—forty thousand feet, according to the new, nonmetric system I have yet to learn. Every time I glance at the overhead television screen that shows the position of my Aeroflot flight, this future is getting closer. The miniature airplane is like a needle over the Atlantic, stitching the two hemispheres together with the thread of our route. I wish I could get ready and dredge my mind of all the silt of my previous life. But I can't. I can't help but think of my mother's crumpled face back in Leningrad airport, of her gaze, open, like a fresh wound, of her smells of the apple jam from our dacha mixed with the sharp odor of formaldehyde she'd brought home from the medical school where she teaches anatomy. I can't help but think of my sister Marina's tight embrace and her hair the color of apricots, one fruit that failed to grow in our dacha garden my grandfather planted. Ten hours earlier, I said good-bye to both of them.

In my Leningrad courtyard, where a taxi was waiting to take us to the airport, a small girl with braids had crouched on the ledge of a sandbox: green eyes, slightly slanted, betraying the drop of Tatar ancestry in every Russian; faint freckles, as if someone had splashed

muddy water onto her skin. As the plane taxied past evergreen forests and riveted itself into the low Russian sky, I longed to be that girl, not ready to leave, still comfortable on the ledge of her childhood sandbox.

When I am not watching the plane advance westward on the screen, I talk to my neighbor, a morose-looking American with thin-rimmed glasses and a plastic cup of vodka in his hand. He has just warned me, between sips of Stolichnaya, that I will never find a teaching job in the United States. He is a former professor of Russian literature, bitter and disillusioned, and, as we glide over Greenland, he dismisses my approaching American future with a single wave of his hand. “You should go back home,” he says, staring into his glass and rattling the ice cubes. “It’s 1980, and what you’re looking for in the U.S. no longer exists. You’ll be happier with your family in Russia.”

My family in Russia would applaud this statement—especially my mother, who thinks I’ll be begging on the streets and sleeping under a bridge, as *Pravda* has informed her.

I know I should tell this Russian expert that my new American husband is waiting for me at the airport, probably with a list of teaching jobs in his pocket. I should tell him to mind his own business. I should tell him that no one in Russia puts ice in drinks or ever sips vodka. But I don’t. I am a docile ex-Young Pioneer who only this morning left the Soviet Union, a ravaged suitcase on the KGB inspector’s table with twenty kilograms of what used to be my life.



In the sterile maze of Washington Dulles International Airport, an official pulls me into a little room, tells me to sit down, and points a camera at my face. A flash goes off and I blink. Another man in uniform dips my index finger in ink and presses it to paper. “Sign and date here.” He points to a line, and I write my name and the

date, August 10, 1980. “Here is your green card,” he says and hands me a small rectangular piece of plastic. I don’t know why he calls it a green card. It is white, with a fingerprint in the middle to certify that the bewildered face is mine.

I feel as if I were inside an aquarium, sensing everything through layers of water, clear and still and deeper than I know, with real life happening to other people behind the glass. They are pulling suitcases that roll magically behind them; they are waiting for their flights in docile, passive lines—all without color or sound, like a silent film. With a new identity bestowed on me by the card between my fingers, I float out of the immigration office, the weight of my suitcase strangely diminished, as though the value of my Russian possessions has instantly shrunk with the strike of the immigration stamp. The sign in front of me points an arrow to something called RESTROOM, although I can see it is not going to dispense any rest. The floor gleams here, the hand dryers whir, and the faucets sparkle—*restroom* is a perfect word for this luxury that seems to have emerged straight from the spotless future of science fiction. I think of the rusty toilets of Pulkovo International Airport I just left, of their corroded pipes and sad, hanging pull chains that never release enough water to wash away the lowly feeling of barely being human.

In the waiting crowd I make out Robert, my new American husband, a man I barely know. He is peering in my direction through his thick glasses, not yet able to see me among the exiting passengers. It feels odd to apply the word *husband* to a tall stranger in corduroy jeans and tight springs of black hair around his waiting face. And what about me? Do I want to be a wife, the word that in Russia mostly conjures standing: on lines, at bus stops, by the stove?

Five months earlier, Robert came to Leningrad to marry me, to my mother’s horror. We stood in the wedding hall of the Acts of Marriage Palace on the Neva embankment—a small flock of my mortified relatives and close friends—in front of a woman in a red

dress with a wide red ribbon across her chest, who recited a speech about the creation of a new society cell. The speech was modified for international marriages: there was no reference to our future contributions to the Soviet cause or to the bright dawn of communism.

To be honest, the possibility of leaving Russia was never as thrilling as the prospect of leaving my mother. My mother, a mirror image of my Motherland—overbearing and protective, controlling and nurturing—had spun a tangle of conflicted feelings as interlaced as the nerves and muscles in her anatomy charts I'd copied since I was eight. Our apartment on Maklina Prospekt was the seat of the politburo; my mother, its permanent chairman. She presided in our kitchen over a pot of borsch, ordering me to eat in the same voice that made her anatomy students quiver. She sheltered me from dangers, experience, and life itself by an embrace so tight that it left me innocent and gasping for air and that sent me fumbling through the first ordeals of adulthood. She had survived the famine, Stalin's terror, and the Great Patriotic War, and she controlled and protected, ferociously. What had happened to her was not going to happen to Marina and me.

Robert and I met last summer, during the six-week Russian program for American students at Leningrad University, where I was teaching. For the last two weeks of classes—the time we spent walking around the city—I showed him my real hometown, those places too ordinary to be included among the glossy snapshots of bronze statues and golden domes. We walked along the cracked asphalt side streets where crumbling arches lead into mazes of courtyards, those wells out of Dostoyevsky that depress the spirit and twist the soul into a truly miserable Russian knot. If the director of the program, or her KGB husband, had known I was spending time with an American, I wouldn't now be gawking at the splendor of the airport in Washington, DC. After four months of letters, Robert came back to Leningrad in December to offer to marry me if I wanted to leave the country—on one

condition: I had to understand that he wasn't ready to get married.

He wasn't ready to settle down with one person, Robert said. He wanted to continue seeing other women, particularly his colleague Karen, who taught Russian in Austin, where he was working on his PhD in physics. We would have an open marriage, he said. "An open marriage?" I repeated as we were walking toward my apartment building in Leningrad. It was minus twenty-five degrees Celsius and the air was so cold it felt like shards of glass scraping inside my throat as we clutched onto each other because the sidewalk was solid ice.

I didn't know *marriage* could be paired with an adjective gutting the essence of the word's meaning, but then I didn't know lots of things. I didn't know, for example, that my mother, who has always been in love with propriety and order, had two marriages before she met my father—two short-lived, hasty unions, of which neither one seemed perfect or even good. I didn't know, before my university friends told me, that it was legal to marry a foreigner and leave the country. My mother had diligently sheltered me from the realities of Russian life; my Motherland had kept all other ways of life away from everyone within its borders. We were crowded on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain, clad in ill-fitting garb and ignorant about the rest of the world.

"I understand," I said to Robert on that frosty day in Leningrad—words that hung in the air in a small cloud of frozen breath—although I really didn't.

## *Two*

Robert and I are walking around the airy rooms of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The Air and Space Museum is full of planes suspended from the ceiling, boasting their antiquated, propeller innocence. We are staring at space capsules where you can sit in a cosmonaut's chair and pretend you are flying through space. "I'm Yuri Gagarin," says Robert in Russian and pushes the buttons on the dashboard, making me giggle.

This morning, as the plane was descending over the unfamiliar contours of my new country's capital, I tried to conjure up my husband, a word that sounds strange when applied to the man showing me all these space wonders. What if he had been absent from the crowd at the airport? What if he'd come to his senses and realized, as the surly Russian literature professor on the plane informed me, that my prospects here are not very promising?

For a week before our wedding in March, Robert and I had stayed at the apartment of Galya, my half sister from my father's earlier marriage, not without the silent comment of compressed lips from my mother, who pointed out how inappropriate it was for two people to live in one place prior to the moment the state pronounces them officially married. I loved that week of being away from my family, of pretending to be married to someone so exotic

and unknown. I even thought I loved Robert. When we first found ourselves in bed, we were both tentative, as if afraid to discover in each other something alien and ghastly. But the only foreign part of American sex turned out to be a supply of prophylactics.

Back in Leningrad, I loved Robert's foreignness. I loved that he represented the forbidden and the unknown, that his nationality made people gasp. I loved that Robert had lifted me above the collective and I could be the opposite of what we all were in Russia, cynical and meek. The opposite of what our souls had become, cleaved and schizophrenic. I could heal and fuse the two parts of me together, I thought. I would no longer be a yearning Soviet teenage Pioneer vying for state-sanctioned approval, or a little sister begging Marina to take me backstage, or a docile grown-up marching in step with everybody else.

The air of the museum is cool and odorless. The cool, I know, comes from air-conditioning, a capitalist invention I read about in an American novel, but why are there no smells? Russia assaults you in your nostrils: milk always on the verge of turning sour, the wet wool of winter coats we wear every day for five months, rubber phone booth tiles buckled with urine, exhaust from trucks that run on leaded gasoline, mothballs, yesterday's soup. Here, despite thirty-four degrees Celsius outside (ninety-three Fahrenheit, says Robert)—a temperature I know only from books on the Soviet republics of Central Asia—it smells of nothing. People who pass by don't trail the odor of unwashed clothes, and the museum cafeteria where we stop to have lunch doesn't reek of boiled cabbage and dishrags made from old stockings crisscrossed by runs beyond repair.

I don't even know if I should call the antiseptic space with the sparkly floor and smiling cashiers a cafeteria. Where are the bread crumbs and the dried puddles of cabbage soup? Where are the empty napkin holders—napkins stolen for toilet paper—and where are the flies? And what is a gleaming ketchup bottle doing on every table, open to anyone's cravings?



“What would you like?” asks Robert, a simple question I can’t answer since the menu on the wall contains no words I recognize. I stand in front of the counter, dumb and mute and wishing for a miraculous hand to pluck me out of this awkward silence. I squeeze out a mousy “I don’t know,” as if this were my first American test and I have instantly failed it. Should I admit to Robert that I’ve never heard of burgers, hot dogs, or French fries? Should I say I’m not hungry and simply ask for tea? Robert shrugs and says something to the girl behind the counter. A few minutes later, she hands him two paper boxes and he motions for me to sit at one of the spotless tables. We haven’t yet eaten together, just the two of us, and I am hoping for this to be good, the first meal of our marriage, even if it isn’t quite a real marriage.

Robert opens the packages and they reveal something that looks like a small loaf of bread stuffed with layers of meat and salad. I don’t know how to approach this bread concoction, so I stare at it without moving.

“It’s a hamburger,” says Robert. “You eat it like a sandwich.”

“Like a ham sandwich,” I say, happy to finally understand something.

“No, not like a ham sandwich,” says Robert and shakes his head. “That’s just its name, a hamburger. Try it.”

I don’t know how to try it. It looks so imposing sitting there in its own container, staring back at me as I try to figure out how to wrap my mouth around it. I cast a furtive glance to see if anyone is using a knife and a fork. No one is. Robert takes his hamburger out of its box, presses the bread down with his fingers, and takes a bite. When I do the same, a rivulet of ketchup squirts out and pulls with it some bits of lettuce, which land on my sundress. A woman at the next table stops eating and gives me a pitiful glance.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble with my mouth full, not knowing what else to say, not knowing whether I should say anything at all, as I get up and head for the restroom to wash off the ketchup. I am wearing the only dress I own, and I can’t afford to have it stained.

When I come back, after scrubbing the stains off with hand soap and then holding my skirt up to the dryer, Robert has already finished his hamburger and asks me if I want to finish mine. I weigh in my mind if a few bites of food are worth risking another round of scrubbing and drying. They aren't, so I shake my head. He scoops up our boxes, his empty one and mine with most of my hamburger still in, and drops them into a trash bin. Our table is as gleaming as it was before we sat down. I look back at the perfectly aligned chairs painted in light blue and rust colors, at a young man in uniform sliding a mop around the immaculate tile floor. A tide of questions swirls in my head, stupid questions I'll never have the nerve to ask. Is every hamburger here so special that it deserves its own individual container? What else in this country is as disposable as these paper boxes? Why would anyone toss perfectly good food into the trash?



On my first full day in the United States, I wake up to unreality, emerging from a dream about my father's funeral. He died fourteen years ago, when I was ten. "Smoked since he was nine," my mother lamented to a neighbor on that day. "So what do you expect?" I didn't know what she'd hoped for, but I expected him to stay alive. In our neighbor's apartment, after the funeral, his friends from the Leningrad Technical School drank vodka toasts to his shining memory, to his party leadership, to my mother, my sisters, and me. Uncle Volodya, my father's driver, asked everyone to drink to my father's fishing. "The greatest happiness of his life was sitting in a boat with his line cast," he said, long bags under his eyes making his face even sadder as my mother pursed her lips because she probably considered herself to have been the greatest happiness of his life.

I thought of the Renaissance paintings in the Hermitage, where our third-grade teacher, Vera Pavlovna, had taken our class the previous spring, of souls fluttering in the clouds alongside harp-playing angels. "We no longer believe in heaven," she announced, standing

next to an icon, and a week later, as if to make the point, arranged a school trip to the Museum of Religion and Atheism at Kazan Cathedral. As we stood in front of the gilded altar, Vera Pavlovna condemned the atavisms of the tsarist past as backward beliefs about heaven and afterlife.

“Heaven is church mythology made up in an effort to suppress the populace,” she said. “To distract their attention from everyday struggles.”

I liked the Hermitage elongated angels and Leonardo da Vinci’s Madonna with a fat baby in her arms. But our teacher told us to think of all those floating souls in the densely populated skies as nothing but symbols, the way a snake under the feet of Peter the Great’s horse in the Bronze Horseman monument on the Neva River was a symbol of all the tsar’s enemies who didn’t want him to build a city on a cold swamp infested with mosquitoes. The same way Pushkin’s poems teemed with speaking souls and fiery prophets. And though I hated to agree with our teacher who demanded that we marched in step with the school collective, I found it difficult to believe that anyone could still hope to rise to heaven after death. You died in a hospital, like my father, and then you were buried in the ground.

In a dream I had about my father’s funeral, Uncle Volodya announced he was leaving. I got up and lurked in the doorway between the living room and the entrance hallway so he would notice me, because in my mind he was directly linked to my father.

“He was a good man,” said Uncle Volodya and patted me on the cheek.

I wondered if I would ever see Uncle Volodya again, and that thought suddenly made me so sad that I could feel the tears rising, but I swallowed hard and pretended I was coughing. Uncle Volodya put on a raincoat and a hat, his skin hanging under his eyes and around his mouth as if tired of holding on to his face. Then the heavy double doors locked behind him and he was gone.

I tried not to think about Uncle Volodya anymore; I tried not

to think about my father. I stood in the hallway's soft dusk under a coatrack, trying not to think at all, but thoughts marched in, like columns of the suppressed populace protesting the church's mythology of heaven. I thought of the only time I went fishing with my father: a slippery perch glistening in my hands, a purple worm squiggling in an inch of water on the bottom of the boat, my father's fingers, black from dirt, hooking it onto the end of my fishing rod.



As I wake up, unfamiliar images float in through gummy eyes: a bulky dresser with a giant television, a floor covered with something soft and beige, a wool blanket without a duvet cover. The walls are naked, too, not sheathed with wallpaper.

I can almost smell the woody musk of our Leningrad armoire in the room where my mother and I slept, the dusty air of Marina's room with the two pieces of furniture required for every respectable home: a cupboard filled with cut crystal and a piano called Red October. I hated dusting the cupboard and the piano. I hated practicing the piano, too, and this double aversion kept me away from my sister's room, which suited us both. But now my Leningrad bed next to my mother's, with its white duvet and square pillow, floats in my memory, feathery and warm, next to an undusted sideboard full of porcelain ballerinas and a bottle of my mother's sweet perfume called Red Moscow. I used to sit in front of her triple mirror, where nothing interesting was ever reflected, and wonder whether I could ever leave. And now, half a world away, I can smell that perfume.

It takes a few minutes for alien objects to come into focus, until one thing becomes sharp and real: I am no longer home.



It is early morning, and we go down to the kitchen full of strange bottles on the counter and cardboard boxes in the cabinets. The

house belongs to a former professor of Robert's, who let us stay here for two days before we drive to New Jersey, where Robert's mother lives. The professor is round and balding and doesn't look at all professorial.

Robert asks him something, and the professor launches into what sounds like a lecture, most of which I don't understand. The words stream out of his mouth—words that sound vaguely familiar, yet distorted with the yawning vowels and the *r*'s that have broken out of control in their mad attempt to take over other sounds. And the unseemly intonation: a wild rhythm galloping in all directions, like unbroken horses in Westerns I have yet to see. American English—all wrong, as my British-trained professors warned me back home. I spent fifteen years trying to master proper British English—the language no one seems to speak here.

In my family, no one spoke a foreign language, especially one as foreign as English. My mother knew the names of all the body parts in Latin, but Latin wasn't exotic; it was ancient and dead. My father spoke nothing but Russian. Marina studied French at her Moscow drama school, but French was so ingrained in Russian history that even my provincial aunt Muza sometimes said, "*Merci beaucoup.*" English was regal and mesmerizing, unknown and rarely heard. It was my way out of the ordinary life—the same escape my sister found in theater and acting. When I was ten, the year my father died, I insisted on learning English the same way Marina had earlier insisted on auditioning for the Moscow drama school.

Every day, for the three months of summer, I took a streetcar to a tutor's apartment to contort my mouth around unfamiliar sounds until it hurt, to learn the twelve tricky tenses, to make the bewildering discovery that Russian had no word for *privacy*. Thirteen years of English classes later, I'd been selected to teach Russian to visiting American students at the Leningrad University summer program. Robert was in my friend Nina's class. That was exactly a year ago.

I look around Robert's professor's kitchen as if it were another museum. "Would you like some cereal?" asks his wife, tall and broad-boned, not interested in her husband's lecture.

I imagine a pot with steaming farina, *mannaya kasha*, the cereal my sister refused to swallow when she was little. Marina would hold the kasha in her mouth for hours, her cheeks bulging, not letting even a drop slide down her throat. Unlike my sister, I've always liked farina, hot and gooey, made with milk and lots of sugar, a cube of butter slowly dissolving in the center of a steaming heap. But the professor's wife reaches for a cardboard box with a picture of brown flakes and raisins, and the mixture rattles into my bowl with the same sound you'd hear if you poured a handful of nails.



This is our last day in the capital of my new country because this evening we are driving to Robert's mother's house in New Jersey. The car Robert used to pick me up at the airport belongs to his father, he said with a glimmer of pride in his eyes at being the only American who doesn't own a vehicle.

The Washington air trembles with heat as we walk along a rectangular pool that seems to be steaming. Low, uniform buildings, a tall obelisk, huge expanses of space so strange in a major city. Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument. I should've brushed up on American history, as my university dean told me to do during his harangue about my betrayal of Leningrad University and the entire Soviet Union because I married an American.

I compare what I see to our capital, Moscow, where the scale of everything is so much grander. I think of our May 1, Labor Day, marches and Victory Day parades that are supposed to energize us with their rows of tanks and lines of rockets rolling past the Lenin Mausoleum; of endless lines for Czech mascara, bologna, and Pol-

ish boots. We cannot afford to smile at every customer in Russia or wrap each sandwich, even if we had the meat or the paper, even if we had a word for *service*.

“Let’s stop for iced tea,” says Robert and points to a café entrance.

I am stunned that you can simply stop for a drink here—a random detour, a result of an individual’s whim—and no one is going to yell at you for trying to be special, for standing out from the collective. But I am even more astonished at the notion of iced tea. What kind of sacrilege is this? Everyone knows that tea must be served scalding hot. I don’t say anything to Robert as I consider this just American ignorance. But I also think of the waitress who didn’t scowl at us as we sat at her table and who pretended that our order of iced tea was exactly what she’d been waiting for. It was so utterly un-Soviet in its cheeriness that it made me giggle.

“Life’s a kopek,” my mother would always say, and now I think I am beginning to understand what our most popular proverb really means.

How am I going to get used to all this sudden worthiness?

## Three

My new mother-in-law lives in a *pomestie* nestled in the woods called Princeton, New Jersey. A *pomestie* is a sprawling country house with land, a kind of dwelling surrounded by an orchard as thick as a forest, where many of Chekhov's characters lamented their lives and yearned for Moscow. At first glance, my mother-in-law didn't seem to lament anything. She pressed me to her soft T-shirt that said WOMEN UNITE and we had sweet drinks made from a dark cordial I'd never seen. My tongue wouldn't contort to calling the woman I'd just met *mother*, so I call her Millie.

As I explored the vast premises of Millie's estate, I knew my real mother was fretting in our Leningrad kitchen across from my older sister, wondering if I'd already settled down to live under a bridge or was begging on the street, like most Americans. We all saw a recent Soviet documentary shot in New York and broadcast on our TV at least three times before I left. *A Man from Fifth Ave.* showed men and women sleeping on the pavement amid a crowd of indifferent capitalists on their way to restaurants and stores. I haven't yet seen the real Fifth Avenue, with half its population begging for scraps, so what I can write back home has no relevance to anyone in Leningrad. What can I possibly tell my family that they



would understand? That roads in New Jersey are jammed with cars they've never seen? That supermarkets nearby are the size of stadiums, brimming with foods they couldn't even dream up? That no matter how hard I look, I haven't seen even one line?

I wrote in my letter that Robert had caught a cold and I was treating him with tea and honey, in the absence of raspberry jam from the dacha. I wrote that Millie appreciated the set of painted spoons and the shawl with roses my mother had procured through her medical connections. I wrote nothing about the aquarium feeling of unreality that has settled inside me since I stepped off the plane in Washington.

Millie is a psychotherapist, said Robert, a profession mysterious to everyone raised on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In a second house that hides behind thick rhododendron bushes, she runs something called the Academy for Experiential Development. I know about rhododendrons from a Fitzgerald novel, but I've never seen the word *experiential* before, so I thought that the sign said "experimental development." It makes me wonder, as I look across the lawn trying to peer through the thicket of branches, what kinds of psychological experiments Millie carries out there on her patients. I could ask Robert about the experiments, but I don't want to sound more clueless than I must already seem. I don't want to pester him to explain psychotherapy, in addition to everything else he has to explain to me. Back home we had physical therapists and medical therapists to deal with various malfunctions of the body, but our psyches—the products of our bright future and heroic past—were all supposed to be uniform and healthy. When they were not, we called our friends and sat in their kitchens until the blackness behind the window became diluted with the first rays of gray dawn. We talked about love and parents, drinking acidic wine and exchanging homegrown advice not based on any theories, especially those of Freud, whose books were safely locked away in secret vaults of the Central Library, away from most readers' eyes.

With her professional power to analyze the human mind, Millie

has quickly figured out that I need a new pair of shoes. The only pair I brought with me, the best shoes I've ever owned—thanks to a friend with connections—is Hungarian and made of real leather. They have black laces in the front and thick rubber soles perfect for April in Leningrad, when the snow turns into dirty porridge and walking becomes wading. But now it is August in Princeton, and with the sun melting the asphalt behind the window, they look out of place.

On the third day after our arrival at her house, Millie takes me to a shoe store. Alarmingly, it is full of shoes. Loafers, espadrilles, ballerina slippers, pumps, clogs, flip-flops, sandals—in colors that bring to mind Matisse paintings hanging in the Hermitage; with heels, skinny and solid, high and low, and with no heels at all—are perched on gleaming plastic stands that radiate from the center of the room for as far as my eyes can see.

“What do you like?” Millie asks and smiles from above her glasses. She is shorter than I am, with a haircut that would look boyish if her hair weren't graying. As she patiently waits, pretending to examine a pair of pumps with stiletto heels no one could possibly walk on, I realize she wants me to make a choice. My heart sinks. I desperately look around, and a saleswoman promptly sidles up to us. “How may I help you?” she asks in a syrupy voice that makes my stomach queasy. They are both looking at me now, waiting for an answer with the same frustration Robert must have felt when he ordered me a hamburger, expecting me to choose one perfect drop in a glittering ocean of footwear. They wait and wait as the ocean rises to my nostrils and threatens to drown me. I take a deep breath as if it were my last. What can I possibly say to them? That Leningrad shoe stores had two models on the floor, both made from rubberized plastic that mangles feet, both produced by the Bolshevik Woman factory in Minsk? That I have no idea how much any of these shimmering shoes cost and how their prices correlate with my new mother-in-law's budget? That I don't even know what American shoe size I wear?

Millie finally says something to the saleswoman, who vanishes and then reappears holding a hefty metal gauge with end pieces that look like teeth. The word *torture* rushes to the surface of my mind and freezes there. The woman motions for me to take off my Hungarian shoes and step onto the cold surface of her metal instrument. I cringe as I unlace, baring my hot, sweaty foot. The teeth lurch forward, then stop. Seven and a half, says the woman and grins. Back home I wore size thirty-six, which makes me think of my sister's joke: the Soviet Union proudly announced to the world that it produced the biggest of everything—the largest microchip, the tallest dwarf. I see Millie holding a pair of sandals—a half-inch sole with an elegant band across the instep—that wrap perfectly around my feet. The saleswoman curls her lips in a smile and nods her head in satisfaction, as if she was the one who cobbled those sandals together and made them fit.

“Why don't you wear them out of the store?” suggests Millie, a question I don't understand. Wear them out? They are brand-new, American, leather, perfectly fitting sandals that have to be revered. How can I wear them out? How can I trivialize a pair of shoes that are going to replace my Hungarian wonders? These are shoes that have to be celebrated, tried on in front of a mirror at home, admired, and exalted before I can slip my feet into their perfect straps and announce them to the world.

“No, let's take them with us,” I say, putting back on my old shoes, which suddenly begin to pinch. I can't see the saleswoman's face, but I am sure she is bemused. As Millie pays, I glance in the mirror, conveniently attached to one of the shoe pedestals. What I see is sorrowful and depressing: my previously glamorous Hungarian shoes have instantly lost their luster; the words *BOLSHEVIK WOMAN* might as well be scrawled all over their surface. I hobble out of the store with the boxed sandals in my hands, Millie trotting behind me, probably questioning her son's sanity as I am questioning my own. Why, despite all logical reasons, couldn't I bring myself to take the new sandals out of the box and wear them, as people

here obviously do, as I should have done if I ever want to learn to fit in? Why am I so stubborn, so foolish, so unable to conform? Why am I so utterly un-American? My old shoes pull on my feet like lead weights as I walk out into the foreign heat, doubting my whole future in this glimmering land of glut.



On Wednesday a woman in her early forties spends most of the day in Millie's house vacuuming, dusting, and scrubbing. I don't know her first name because Millie calls her Mrs. Conover.

Mrs. Conover is the first black person I have ever met. Back in Leningrad, a handful of students from African nations studied at our universities, attracting astonished stares that quickly turned to mild disgust on the faces of passersby who had never seen a live person with skin so much darker than their own. Among the foreign students in my mother's anatomy class was Amir, a young man from Kenya, who spent his school vacations on trips to Paris to stock up on a new wardrobe. "He just took off for France, for two days," my mother used to say with reproach that seemed to apply more to the trips' brevity than to their destination. I'd never seen Amir, and when I tried to conjure him up, there was nothing to anchor the image. I had no idea what good clothes looked like, so all I could think of was a university poster where a muscular Negro in chains was trampled on by a tiny fat white man in a top hat. My aunt Muza from the provinces couldn't understand why a black man who, according to *Pravda*, is supposed to be ruthlessly exploited by societies that—unlike us—haven't yet tasted equality, was flying twice a year to France to buy suits.

"He is a prince," explained my mother, repeating Amir's words. "Related to the king of his country."

"Related to the king of the jungle, maybe," said my provincial aunt, more attuned to what most Russians thought about nonwhites. "And where in the jungle could he even learn about

Paris?” My aunt Muza, an obstetrician in a small town on the Volga River, delivered these words with unquestionable certainty that filled every corner of our kitchen. Although my aunt herself would never be allowed to cross the border to visit any European capital, even one in the Soviet bloc, she undoubtedly knew more about Paris than some brazen African prince who had the arrogance to get on an intercontinental flight to replenish his wardrobe on the Champs-Élysées.

Mrs. Conover, as I sense, is far from going on shopping sprees in Paris. She arrives by bus, wearing a plaid shirt and pants with an elastic waist, reticent and efficient in what she’s been doing every week for probably longer than I’ve been learning English.

“So how are you?” she asks me when she enters. I am surprised by her desire to know about the life of someone she’d never met, but I dutifully recite what we did this past week: a bus trip to New York and a walk along Fifth Avenue, where no one was begging, a stroll around the Gothic towers of Princeton, my first horror film on television, where a fifteen-foot-tall bear kept popping out of the woods to terrorize a summer camp. I loved that movie, I say, proud of the newly acquired American word for what I knew as *film*.

“Here is a can of tuna if you’d like some lunch, Mrs. Conover,” Millie murmurs, interrupting me. “And coffee, and a Danish, although it’s a little stale.” She smiles apologetically at her failure to run to the store this morning for a fresh piece of pastry.

Robert says he’s never seen Mrs. Conover take a sip of coffee or open a tuna can, but Millie is persistent. She wants to be fair to the domestic help, he says, and that’s why she calls her cleaning lady by her last name. He also tells me I don’t have to answer the simple question of “How are you?” with a story of my life.

Robert sits on a kitchen stool next to me, watching in amazement as I shake a bottle of ketchup over a bar of cream cheese. I am on a tasting spree of all the foods I’ve never had. Yesterday I gobbled spoonfuls of whipped cream, and the day before I fished out olives from a tall, thin jar I found in the door of Millie’s refrigerator.

Mrs. Conover is bending over a vacuum cleaner, pulling it up the stairs in vigorous spasms, making me think of the poster that hung in the Leningrad University hallway.

“Yet another example of capitalist exploitation,” I say to Robert, scooping a spoonful of cream cheese into my mouth, nodding toward Mrs. Conover, who is jerking the vacuum cleaner up to the second floor.

Robert squints at me, confused. He silently regards the cream cheese with ketchup I’ve been eating, the same way he earlier looked at the old Hungarian shoes I wore in ninety-five-degree heat.

“She’s paid well for this work,” he says finally, thinking that I’m serious, that he needs to vouch for his mother’s social integrity.

I wonder if my mother ever thought of buying fresh pastry for the woman who used to help around our apartment when I was little. She called her Nelka, a diminutive of Nelly, and I am sure the thought of using her patronymic for respect never crossed my mother’s mind. The formality of Nelly Ivanovna or Nelly Petrovna would sound preposterous in our dilapidated kitchen, not nearly big enough for such magnanimity. Every day except Sunday, Nelka stayed with me in our apartment until I turned five and was admitted to nursery school. All day, while my mother taught anatomy at her medical institute, Nelka shuttled between our refrigerator and our stove, whipping up panfuls of fried potatoes with onions and buckets of cabbage soup, pouring kettles of hot water over the dishes in the sink before she washed them with an old stocking. She boiled milk in a dented, blackened pot and made me drink a cup with breakfast and lunch. As it cooled, the milk would form a film on top, like a layer of skin, and I would beg Nelka to skim it off because its grainy, papery texture would make me gag. “I hate boiled milk! I hate the skin on top!” I wailed, knowing that Nelka would always relent.

Of course, my mother, who is hard to fool, quickly figured out her own truth. “Nelka taught you to hate it on purpose. She skimmed it off and ate it herself,” my mother said, her fists on her

hips. “You can’t trust those know-nothing plumbers’ offspring,” she added. “You have to watch their every step.”

I didn’t remember Nelka ever eating the skimmed-off skin, so I couldn’t argue with my mother about my nanny’s milk transgressions, as I normally would have. My mother has always been suspicious of other people’s intentions, always weary of all those *chuzhoi*, those not part of the family. There were only so many soup bones, or beets, or bottles of milk to go around, and if you didn’t make sure that your own, *svoi*, had hoarded enough for today and tomorrow, you might as well skim the top off every pot of milk and serve it to every Nelka on a silver platter.

“When I was little, my mother had a *domrabortnitsa*,” I say to Robert. “She didn’t like her much.”

He looks at me quizzically, and I realize he has never heard the word.

“*Domrabortnitsa* means a domestic worker, the feminine form. You know that nouns have a gender, right?” I ask as he nods, annoyed that I am questioning his knowledge of such basic grammar. “It’s always the feminine form,” I say, giving him a little Russian lesson, trying to make myself useful beyond reducing the supplies of cream cheese and ketchup in Millie’s kitchen.

“*Domrabortnitsa*,” Robert repeats, and I know he has filed the word into his brain. “When we get to Texas, you must give me some more lessons.”

“Sure,” I say, although I am not sure at all, because I think of other lessons he may get from Karen the Russian professor, the woman in Austin who is keeping the door of this marriage open.

## *Four*

I sit on the floor in front of a fan in Austin, Texas. It is the end of August, the hottest August people around here say they remember, and the house where we live has no air-conditioning. Robert and I flew here last week from New Jersey, my first flight on an American airline, where smiling flight attendants walked around the cabin, offering drinks and serving salad topped with raw mushrooms. Two weeks earlier, I came from the mushroom capital of the world, our dacha thirty kilometers away from Leningrad, where everyone knew that mushrooms must always be cooked. I stared at the tray in front of me, white mushroom slices glaring up from the bowl, menacing in their rawness. No one else seemed alarmed at the prospect of sudden death. A passenger across the aisle leisurely poked at his salad with a plastic fork, and Robert was busy tearing a corner off the small rectangle of oil, ready to pour it onto his mound of poison.

“Can you really eat mushrooms uncooked?” I whispered, not to alarm the other passengers.

Robert turned his head, his stare revealing that my question made no sense to him. “Why not?” he said, shrugging. It was a dismissive shrug, unworthy of someone who had been to our stores and eaten at the Leningrad University cafeteria, with its smells of



steamed cabbage and burned sunflower oil, someone who said he understood Russia. But Robert was home now, back in the land of smiling salesclerks and strawberries in December.

I thought—with a sudden sadness—of all those baskets full of wild mushrooms Marina, my mother, and I used to bring from the woods to our dacha every August and September. We would lay the mushrooms out on newspaper spread all over the kitchen floor: the best chocolate brown caps to be sautéed with sour cream or hung over the stove to dry for the winter, long-legged gray caps with slimy tops to use in soups, and purplish second-rate mushrooms with wheel spokes under their caps, only good for salting. Everyone—even the worst hooligan and failing *dvoechnik* in my school—knew you couldn't eat any of them raw.

I turned around to look at the doomed planeload of people, unconcerned about the hazards speared onto the tines of their forks. They were cheerfully thumbing through newspapers and books, chatting. A stewardess was already clearing trays from the front rows, where not a single person was doubled over with pain or beginning to spasm with convulsions. Everyone was still alive.

I poked at the shreds of salad leaves, aiming my fork between the mushroom slices. It was obvious everyone around me knew something I didn't, something they probably learned along with their first letters of the English alphabet. They were all privy to the knowledge that these mushrooms were altogether different—perhaps artificially grown in a hothouse or manufactured in a factory from capitalist synthetics. The only one who didn't know this was me.

But there was another, more depressing truth staring back at me from the bowl with raw mushrooms. I realized that what may have seemed interesting to Robert in Russia—my exotic ignorance—was now silly and annoying, a liability rather than a charm.

Every day, Robert goes to the university, where he researches black holes and teaches math to freshmen. I stay in the house we share with a roommate and sit in front of a fan. Our roommate, Sagar, is in Robert's PhD program, and they leave the house together in Sagar's little Volkswagen when their teaching schedules coincide. Sagar is Indian, born in Bombay, and this makes me think of a typewritten yoga manual I borrowed, when I was eighteen, from tall, blond Anton, who designed posters at the Leningrad House of Friendship and Peace, where I was a secretary. For two years after I met him, I practiced yoga poses in our apartment on a rug in front of an armoire, thinking that I was intrigued by Eastern philosophy and its connection between mind and body, while I was really intrigued by Anton. Dreaming of mastering all the asanas, I imagined traveling to India with him to get close to the yoga teachings and, I hoped, to Anton himself. When I announced I was no longer eating meat, my mother launched into a story of standing on an hour-long line for a stick of bologna—after six hours of teaching anatomy—which was supposed to make me feel guilty for rejecting such a hard-earned offering. For two years I ignored her calls for sanity, picking gristle out of my cabbage soup, until one morning, passing my desk, Anton casually told me that he was leaving for a Crimean vacation with his new friend Raisa. "But what about the yoga?" I wanted to ask, as the air in the room seemed to have turned to lead. Anton, oblivious to my mute question, waved and muttered "so long" while I sat there with my spine stiff and my mouth open, a pose for which my yoga manual had yet to find a name.

Sagar doesn't resemble Anton in any way. He is not tall or blond, and he wears glasses that often slide to the middle of his nose. He speaks with an intonation that rises and falls like the little ripples of ocean surf, and his consonants are all soft, like the fine sand underneath. I don't know if he is interested in yoga or if he eats meat. Except for a bowl of cereal in the morning, he and Robert eat at the university, between their freshman math classes and whatever else they do to advance cosmic research. There, at the

university, in addition to the research, Robert writes science fiction books and takes Russian lessons from Karen, whose name he hasn't mentioned even once.

Yesterday Sagar showed me photographs spilling out of an envelope covered with colorful Indian stamps that had arrived in the mail earlier that day. Young women with red dots on their foreheads, serious and coquettish, with deep black eyes, wearing gold-threaded saris, stared from the pictures as if in a beauty contest, waiting to be judged.

"It's my mother," said Sagar. "She has nothing better to do. She sits in her house, trying to find me a wife."

"Really?" I said. I couldn't believe that there were still marriages arranged by parents at the end of the twentieth century, as I couldn't believe that Sagar's mother had managed to occupy a greater area of control than mine.

"She wants me to marry an Indian girl from a good family," said Sagar and smirked. "She thinks I'll be more comfortable with one of our own."

"That's what my mother wanted me to do," I said. "Marry a Russian boy, a nice university graduate. Our own." *Svoi*.

"I'm already too spoiled for one of my own," said Sagar. "My life has moved on, I'm too Western. I wouldn't know what I'd do with any of these girls."

I wondered if Sagar was a bit too cavalier dismissing his Indian-ness, pegging himself so unquestionably into a Western lifestyle. But maybe he wasn't. Maybe, in his years of graduate school, he had already gone through whatever it takes to become American, his brain cells boasting new strings of DNA that didn't relate to women wrapped in saris. Maybe I should ask him for a lesson or two.

"My mother's going to be crushed," he said and shook his head. His glasses sat in the middle of his nose, and his eyes above them glistened with sadness.

"Look at this one," I said, lifting a picture out of the beauty pageant display. "She's ravishing." I turned the picture over and

read what was written on the other side. “ ‘Dipti Kumar. Graduating from Oxford in May.’ Graduating from Oxford! You wouldn’t know what to do with *her*?”

“You sound like my mother,” said Sagar, and it just then hit me that I probably did. Even worse, I sounded like *my* mother, and—because I simultaneously missed and resented my mother—the thought irked me and also made me grin.



In the afternoon I walk to the supermarket, where it is cool, and stare at the endless shelves that climb all the way to the ceiling, parading an infinite number of different brands of frozen pizza, pasta sauce, and flavored yogurts I never knew existed. I have always lived with my family, so I never had to shop for food, or cook, or stretch ten rubles until payday to make five more meals. Back in Leningrad, there was always a pot of something waiting under a pot warmer Marina had sewn from the remnants of cotton she’d collected over the years of making clothes. The pot warmer was made to look like a chicken, with a head and body stuffed with old rags, and underneath I always found sour cabbage soup, or macaroni with ground beef, or grated carrots stewed in tomato sauce, waiting patiently for me to remove the lid and scoop up whatever was there onto a plate my mother had left on the kitchen table, a spoon and fork next to it. Dinners in my kitchen had always been there, like water gurgling out of the faucet, like heat hissing through the radiators under the windows. They were simply a part of life, and it never occurred to me, in the twenty-four years I lived there, to think of where they came from.

Without my mother and sister, the job of shopping and cooking falls on me. I creep past shelves of cut-up beef and pork and poultry sheathed in plastic, feeling I am inside the aquarium again, gazing at the real life through the glass. All that meat—chopped in pieces for your convenience, big and small, displayed on plastic trays

called Styrofoam, for soup, or stew, or other recipes I don't know how to make. It was easier to shop in Leningrad: lines always led to food available at the moment, eliminating the necessity of making a choice.

Among all these packages one attracts my attention. It looks like what I once saw under a glass display in Leningrad, although this meat is neatly arranged under plastic, fat and bones removed, rather than tossed onto a bloody sheet of paper hanging off a butcher's scale. It looks luxuriously expensive, although it isn't—something you would normally see at a special Party store if you were a high-ranking official with a pass to get in. I don't know what I am going to do with this hunk of meat, but it looks familiar, so I buy it.

Back in the house, Robert looks at the package I brought. "What is this?" he asks, regarding the meat from above his glasses. "It's chuck or something . . ." he says, wrinkling his nose.

I am not sure if I should feel guilty for not knowing what to buy or if I should tell Robert that at a supermarket the size of the Hermitage I was lucky to have found the meat section at all. Or maybe I should muster up some courage and announce that chuck, whatever it is, was precisely what I had in mind. Should I have asked Robert what he wanted from the supermarket, what he wanted for dinner tonight? Is this what married people—or those pretending to be married—do?

Yet it is clear that Robert saw right to the core of the matter: I have no idea what to do with this meat. I am as inept a shopper as I am a cook—and this might as well be burnt into my forehead. I bought something alien and awful, something only ignorant immigrants could try to turn into a meal in the twilight of their basements.

"What was I supposed to buy?" I ask.

"Minute steak," he says.

At first I'm not sure I heard him right. I'm not sure if he said "minute" or "mini steak." I don't know if he wants a tiny piece of

steak or steak that is somehow connected to the clock. The truth, as my mother warned me, is staring me in the face: I've always been *egoistka*, always busy typing banned poetry through four sheets of carbon paper—so that five friends could read books my country wouldn't sanction—instead of learning how to keep house and make *blini*.

I wish Robert, instead of telling me what I should have bought, had gone to the supermarket with me to shed light on all those mysterious cuts of meat. I wish he could tell me about the exhibits in the supermarket Hermitage and the department store Hermitage, the way Nina taught him about Russian verbs, the way I showed him Leningrad courtyards. I wish he would stop practicing his violin, descend from his university lectern, and look at me the same way he used to look at me in Leningrad.

## *Five*

I am at the kitchen table writing a letter home, telling my mother and sister about my roommate's bride candidates from India, when the front door opens and Sagar walks in with a girl. "Roxana," she says as she extends her hand, strong and assertive. Roxana is tall, at least as tall as Sagar, with long, dark hair that falls down her shoulder blades in big, lazy curls. She is definitely not Indian, but not American, either. She speaks with a sharp accent that is different from Sagar's—gliding vowels and harsh *r*'s—an intonation I can't place.

They linger in the living room, and I don't know if I should offer them something to drink. I don't know if I should welcome Roxana into our house or be an indifferent roommate and go back to the room I share with Robert and shut the door. I know what my mother would do—hover over the visitors so she could later complain that they have left dirty footprints all over the hallway or haven't hung up their coats on the hook by the door—so I do the opposite and go to my room. But then I remember Sagar's expression when I saw him standing in the doorway next to Roxana, an expression of his wanting me to see her. As if she were a bride candidate and I were his mother evaluating his choice.

I go back, pretending that I was simply taking a detour on my way to the kitchen to offer them tea. But the idea of tea, something

I would offer guests back home, seems absurd in this heat, and a quick survey of the refrigerator results in my finding only little dregs on the bottom of an orange juice container and a bottle of something called root beer. Cold beer would be all right, I decide, and bring out the bottle and three glasses.

“Would you like some beer?” I ask Sagar and Roxana, who are sitting on the couch leafing through a brochure of the weekly sales I brought from the supermarket. They seem awkward around each other, as if they’ve just met and don’t yet have enough to share.

They nod and I pour. The beer foams in the glasses, as beer should do, but when I take a drink, it is pure formaldehyde rushing up my nostrils, my mother’s anatomy department with its organs, bones, and cadavers, distilled into a glass. I gag, spew it back with a noise unworthy of a hostess, and run into the kitchen for paper towels.

When I return, Sagar and Roxana are on their feet, looking bewildered.

“I thought it was beer,” I say, feeling like an idiot. “But it smells like formaldehyde.”

They smile, smelling their drinks, not finding anything unusual about root beer. It occurs to me that they have never come in contact with formaldehyde, that no one but me could have such a visceral dislike of root beer, that our reactions are triggered by bits of memory that float under the radar of consciousness, moving us still further apart from one another.

“Where are you from?” I ask Roxana as I wipe the table and the floor.

“Cuba,” she says. “Havana, the capital,” she adds. When she says “Havana,” a spark of pride glints in her eyes, the same little flame that burns in my throat when I say “Leningrad.”

“See,” I tell Sagar, who can’t stop staring at Roxana with a soft, unprotected gaze. “Cuba and Russia. This is a plot. You’re surrounded by communists.”





My mother would be happy, I think, to find all this order, *poryadok*, here. No one jumps in front of you on a line because there are no lines. Buses course along their routes, with no passengers hanging out of their doors. Stores are brimming with products and all you need to do is buy them.

Yet everything was more understandable back home. All emotions were out in the open, from salespeople's resentment to bureaucrats' indifference. With the absence of social courtesy, you knew when a cashier had had a bad day because she gave you a stony stare and angrily tossed the change into a plastic tray when it took you longer than a second to open your wallet. You knew that a saleswoman in a stained white gown thought you brazenly overstepped your bounds when she glared at your request to slice your half a kilo of bologna. "Slice it?" she would repeat to the people waiting on line, inviting them to join in teaching you a lesson. "Would you also like me to wash your dirty underwear?" she would ask, fists on her hips. You got the message that a wiry babushka behind you on a bus was getting off when her elbow knifed into your kidney. Things were clearly delineated so we always knew what to expect. We felt happy when we were handed the log of bologna we would wrap in newspaper and carefully place in a string bag next to a loaf of black bread, still warm. We could easily slice them both at home, after all.

Rudeness was ordinary and familiar, a way of life adopted by people who were continuously deprived of the most basic things. Salesclerks glowered and customers cowered. Bureaucrats ordered and the rest of us complied. Life was predictable if you played the pretending game called *vranyo*, the game I learned in nursery school from Aunt Polya, who was in charge of the kitchen and who wasn't really my aunt. She loomed over us with a pitcher of warm milk and slices of buttered bread that had absorbed all the rancid smells of the kitchen, watching closely to make sure we ate and drank

properly. We all knew she was watching us, she knew that we knew, and we knew she knew that we knew. She gave us surprise glances, and we chewed diligently, pretending we didn't expect her to look.

We all played the game: my parents played it at work and my sister Marina played it at school. We all pretended to do something, and those who watched us pretended that they were seriously watching us and didn't know we were only pretending. Life was simple if you sliced your soul in half, as you were supposed to. One half—for yourself, your family, and your close friends; the other—for all the salesclerks, teachers, and officials, who didn't need to know what you thought.

I have a sense that there is a different reality here simmering underneath all this sterility and order, a life bubbling under the courtesy and politeness. This liquid center, red and hot, is the heart that pumps blood to make it all work, to motivate what people do here. That heart is still months away, hidden deep under protective layers of tissue and bone, and I am not at all sure if I'll ever see it.



I am in a pizzeria, standing next to Sagar and Roxana. Slices behind the counter are hot, cheesy, and cheap, and the toppings kept in metal containers personalize every order, making me think I am eating something different from what I had yesterday. Sagar's eyes are also fixed on the onions and peppers behind the glass, but I know he is thinking about something else because his glasses are down at the tip of his nose and his eyebrows are mashed together in a frown. A letter arrived from India yesterday and, instead of sending more bride pictures, his mother announced that she was coming to Austin to see him and discuss the matter in person. "She's already bought a ticket," said Sagar in a grave voice. "She still thinks I'm twelve."

The only two people interested in pizza toppings are Roxana and a three-year-old girl in front of us, whose mother has picked

her up so the girl can see the containers. “What do you want on your pizza, sweetie?” asks the woman. “Olives? Pepperoni? Mushrooms?” she says, pointing to each one.

I don’t know why the woman is asking a three-year-old what she wants to eat. I don’t know what a three-year-old can possibly know about pizza toppings. Isn’t it up to her mother to make these decisions? Back in Leningrad, I ate what was left for me under the chicken pot warmer. I think of my nursery school again and of Aunt Polya, her eyebrows penciled in carbon, who made us sit at tables pushed together and drink warm milk out of thick ribbed glasses. “Eat your soup, Gorokhova, or you’ll die!” she shouted in her kitchen voice you could hear all the way on the street.

“Do olives look good?” the mother in the pizzeria line persists. “Or would you rather have sausage?”

I sympathize with the girl, who leans over the counter, peering through the glass, trying to figure out if green peppers trump meatballs. Wouldn’t she be happier with toppings her mother ordered, not burdened with having to examine the containers, safe in the knowledge that her mother knows what she needs?

I think of my own mother, an apron with flowers over her housedress, cranking the metal handle of a meat grinder until its face erupts in red twists of beef squeezing into a bowl underneath. She adds egg and stale bread softened in water, mashes the mixture with a fork, and from her palms come perfect ovals of *kotlety* she drops into a frying pan, where they begin to brown and sizzle. Now I know why I bought that package of meat Robert hated: it looked like what my mother used to stuff down the throat of the meat grinder for *kotlety*, infrequently available and juicy, stored in a red pot on the refrigerator’s top shelf, one per person for the next three days.

“Mushrooms,” the girl says. “And pepperoni. And olives. And extra cheese.”

The mother orders, and I can hear in her voice that she knows her daughter won’t eat all the toppings she says she wants.

“Did your mother give you all these choices?” I whisper to Roxana.

She shakes her head and sighs. “I wish she was here now to choose the toppings for me. She would choose meatballs, I think. Just like the ones she used to make.” The self-confidence I’ve been envying in Roxana has evaporated, and her eyes have turned fragile, pooled with sadness. Roxana and Sagar are both pensive and serious now, for reasons that are diametrically opposite. One is dreading his mother’s visit; the other longs for her mother to be close.

And what about me? I am here because I married Robert—someone I knew for a total of four weeks, someone I thought I was in love with—to escape both my mother and my Motherland.

When my turn comes, I don’t ask for any toppings. Plain, I say. Plain as our Leningrad kitchen, as our store counters, as our food. Plain as my realization that I am—and will always be—a stranger here.