

Father Looks to the West

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Excerpt 1

The grim three-story building where Maratik was born and where he had died resembled a funeral home. In the pre-dawn hours, its façade seemed nearly black. Only the first rays of sunlight brought out the building's true color: deep burgundy, the color of brick darkened by time.

Flowerbeds in front of the entrance, with its still waxy blooms, looked like funeral wreaths. To complete the picture, all the windows had a gloomy expression as if the sun never peeked inside them.

About once a month, the villagers gathered in front of the building to bid farewell to a friend, a relative, or a neighbor. As a rule, the men stood nearby, while the women crowded around the raised entrance in silence, looking up at the windows of the apartment where someone had passed the day before. The women's faces were filled with fear and reverence.

Buying or inheriting an apartment in this building was considered a rare stroke of luck. Compared to the crooked shacks coming apart at the seams, this three-story structure looked so solid that even the most superstitious old hags ignored how frequently the deceased were carried out of the building, rolled up in rugs.

To the surprise of the Muslims, Maratik was carried out in a coffin. Adorned with red frilly ribbons, the box as small as a baby's cradle was placed with the head facing west. Covered with inky-blue, pink, and white asters, the little coffin resembled a flower bed, the kind usually planted near an Eternal Flame memorial or by the monument at the city entrance. The long dusty patch of asphalt in front of the building was as hot as an oven.

The men in their skullcaps winced and shrunk from the scorching sunlight. In the dappled yellow shade of elm trees, the women gathered behind Maratik's mother, the thirty-year-old Naina. She looked very tall in her long black dress made of fine cloth. Her pale face shone with disconnected sorrow. Blonde hair, as light as fiberglass, stuck out of her loosely tied dark scarf.

Three black-eyed *suyekshi*, the women charged with the ritual washing of the body, glared at the mother of the three-year-old deceased. All three of them were short, with fatty humps on the back of the necks, leathery faces, and strangely colorless hands. The husband's sister, Amanbeke, brought them in to perform the last ablution. Amanbeke told Naina that if she didn't allow for the tradition to be observed, Maratik would get bored and come back for his sister.

Naina handed a bag of Maratik's clothes to the youngest *suyeksha* and suddenly began to howl, stretching her dry, cracked lips. Some of the clothes had never been worn. The men exchanged glances but continued praying. Only Serikbai, Maratik's father, froze in his spot. He glanced at his wife's face, hoping to see tears. Naina's reddened eyes remained dry. Only her hand gave away her grief; the three fingers she raised to her forehead dropped helplessly, never completing the sign of the cross.

Serikbai couldn't stop crying. His tears flowed into the drops of sweat on his cheeks, shiny from the heat, and dissolved inside his black beard, leaving a faint trace of salt. He was shaking; with his wet wrinkles and trembling hands, he looked old and feeble that morning, despite being not even forty.

Once the imam had finished his prayer, Serikbai shuffled over to the coffin and stood there, trying to control his unruly hands. His partner, also a long-distance truck driver, came to his assistance. Broad-shouldered and tall, he picked up the coffin like a doll in a box and stepped toward the hearse. Serikbai nodded gratefully and walked by his side in silence.

Tradition dictates that only men go to the cemetery, but no one in the village was surprised when Naina said she had to see her son off. Holding Naina's arm, Amanbeke stepped out of the shade into the blazing sunshine. Slim, with bright dark eyes and a fidgety, bird-like head, she appeared to be the most lively in the yard. Climbing into the hearse, she quickly glanced back, located her niece, and winked at her.

Katya hadn't taken her eyes off her mother and aunt, and so she immediately caught Amanbeke's glance; it made her flinch awkwardly. This was the first time anyone noticed her since Maratik's death. She wiped her moist palms on her warm velvet robe that just this morning was decidedly black in the dimly lit room and now shimmered in green and violet; she put her hand to her forehead, hiding from the sun.

Katya wanted to leap out of her stifling dress and run to the river wearing nothing but her underwear. Or climb on top of an elm tree and watch everything: her father in pain, her mother shuffling toward the hearse, the elders whispering to each other. More than anything, Katya wanted to hear Maratik's special voice. Her parents never got to hear their son speak normally. The fact that Maratik sang rather than spoke upset them so much that they never noticed the beauty of his voice; they never realized how flawlessly he sang out the grown-up words as if he were ten, not three years of age. Only Katya gasped once upon hearing Robertino Loretto on the radio, shocked by the mystical likeness of their angelic voices.

When the hearse disappeared from sight, the women hurried to the apartment to prepare the post-funeral repast. Katya pretended to go as well, but once she was sure no one was looking at her, she ran toward the river. Normally, it took her about five minutes to get there; she knew it for sure because she'd run there many times on a bet with the village boys. Now, Katya felt she was barely moving her feet. Dogs barked from behind the fences. They threw themselves at the wooden planks and rattled their chains, and Katya was terrified they would reach out and grab her by the heels. Viscous dust rose from the road as if in a dream, slowing her down.

Diving into the river from the suspension bridge was strictly forbidden by the grown-ups. From above, the river looked no deeper than a rusty rainwater barrel in Amanbeke's vegetable garden. Responsible for taking several lives every year, the undertows swirled lazily into wide flat funnels.

Katya shook off her dress, leaving it under a sprawling willow tree that glowed silver in the sunlight, and stepped into the water. The river was warm, the color of chicken broth; Katya felt slowly cooked rather than cooled off. She splashed around for a bit and then walked out onto the muddy bank. Only now, all alone, the little girl had a chance to think about Maratik's death. She squeezed the water out of her rope-like braids and lay down on her velvet robe, letting the sun wash over her freckled face. Rainbow sports swam under her scarlet eyelids, and Katya began to recall yesterday's morning.

Maratik whined, spreading snot all over his olive-skinned face and pushing his wet nose up with his fist, making it twitch like a rubber toy. Maratik wanted to sneak into his parents' bedroom and find out whether his father brought him a gift from his trip, but every time he'd inhale and get ready to sing, Katya would grab him like a puppy and press her hand against his mouth. She spread her favorite patchwork *korpe* next to the TV set and patted the patterned fabric by her side.

"Come here, Maratik!"

"Commmmmeeee heeeereeee," Maratik sang out. From somewhere behind his back, he pulled an ocarina and prepared to blow.

Maratik hadn't parted with the wooden toy in six months. Father brought the ocarina from one of his long trips, hoping that playing a musical instrument would replace singing and the boy would start talking, but that didn't happen.

"What are you doing?" Katya shouted; she took away the toy and giggled, pressing her hand to her mouth.

Maratik smiled back, baring a row of rounded baby teeth.

Katya lay on the *korpe* and began to trace the colorful patterns of the fabric.

"Look, Maratik, this is a *tabarik*. They gave it to us when *Ataka* died. Do you remember *ataka*?"

Maratik shook his head and smiled again.

Katya jumped up, tucked her T-shirt into her shorts, grabbed onto her lower back, and hobbled around the room, imitating their grandfather.

"Do you see this whip?" Katya frowned and picked up the belt from her mother's robe left on the sofa.

The boy didn't understand.

"Just imagine it's a whip!" Katya raised the belt as if herding cattle.

"It's a whip! A whip! Your husband, I mean, your wife is going to beat you with it! Because you just can't be so naughty!" Katya hissed the last sentence and fell noisily onto her

skinned knees. “And this piece Dad brought home from that gross whatshisname’s birthday, Kairat or whatever. The blue one is from *Azheka*’s funeral, and the red one is from the funeral of the whatshisname, kkeh-kkeh.” Katya pretended to cough and choke.

A round-shouldered Virgin Mary with the same bags under her eyes as Katya’s art teacher watched Katya’s amateur performance from a cracked wooden board in a dark frame. Katya felt her stern gaze and forced an annoying giggle.

“You’re so sweet, Maratik. I could just eat you, my little *baursak!*” She wrapped herself into the *korpe*, pulled it over her head, and pretended to be a ghost. “I’m the blanket of death, I’m going to eat you!”

“I’m deeeeeeeaaath,” Maratik sang out, louder than usual.

“Stop, stop, stop,” Katya said, quickly pressing her hand over Maratik’s mouth. “Shhhh, be quiet, wait for the cartoons.”

Katya glanced at the Virgin Mary above the TV, as if looking for permission, and switched on the heavy old *Record* screen. The TV crackled loudly. The black-and-white image required a lot of manipulation to appear relatively crisp. The television set hissed and resisted until one antenna rested against the mouth of the baby Jesus depicted on the icon as if Jesus was giving an interview.

Finally, a cartoon woodpecker materialized on the screen, dissolving in hysterical giggles. Katya reached for the volume handle but remembered that Maratik had been playing with the knob the day before. He had fully unscrewed it, leaving behind a metal pin that Katya’s fingers couldn’t grasp.

“Maratik, where...”

Katya didn’t have a chance to ask the question or to stop her brother. Holding the ocarina tightly in his little hands, he blew into it with all his might. The woodpecker’s laughter and Maratik’s whistle filled the room. Katya threw herself at the door hoping to contain the noise in the living room, but her sleepy father already appeared at the threshold of the bedroom. His eyes stared right through her, and his movements were jerky and haphazard.

“Why can’t you let me sleep? Katya, why aren’t you watching Maratik?”

Serikbai raised his hand to slap her upside the head, but Katya deftly dodged it and leaped to the other side of the room.

“*Psmilya!*” Father said grimly.

Unsteady on his feet, he shuffled over to the TV. His large frame looked gigantic and sinister next to the tiny Maratik on the floor. Father felt around for the volume switch, glancing at Maratik from beneath his furrowed brow. Maratik smiled at his father and continued to whistle. The cartoon laughter and Maratik’s whistle merged into one in Serikbai’s sleepy consciousness. He mumbled some Kazakh curses under his breath and looked behind the cabinet, pulling the “mic” away from baby Jesus’s face and reaching for the outlet to unplug the TV. The cabinet tilted forward.

In an instant, the whistling stopped.

The hissing, giggling *Record* fell on Maratik as if in slow motion. Katya thought Father would catch the TV, but, like a drunk, he swayed and collapsed on his knees. Katya heard a loud crack: the ocarina and something else. Maratik’s little arm stuck out from beneath the TV. Katya shrieked in terror and ran to her brother.

“Quiet!” Father said, grabbing her by the shoulder and shaking her violently. “Help me.”

For the first time ever, father and daughter did something together. Carefully, they lifted the TV; Katya saw the cracked ocarina on Maratik’s wet red face.

“Daddy!”

“Shh!”

Blood slowly leaked from the tiny ear onto the velvet square of the quilt. The blood was thick and also kind of velvety. The woodpecker continued to rage on the TV that now stood on the floor. Serikbai pulled ocarina shards out of his son’s mouth and placed his large curly head on the tiny chest.

“Maybe it’s still a dream,” Serikbai murmured and began to sob like a child.

Excerpt 2

Askhut, the foreman at the construction site founded by Ainagul's father, was a slender man of about forty, with graying hair and pale wrinkles on a dark face. The migrant builders worked around the clock. The two-story cottage, the only one in the village, was coming up quickly. While Ainagul's father was traveling, her mother spent her whole days in the kitchen. No one looked after Ainagul, and so she felt especially grown up. Her only chores were spreading the *korpe* around the table in the summer kitchen and pouring tea for the workers. If her mother wasn't there, the workers goggled at the young beauty and cracked jokes in the dialect Ainagul didn't understand. Only Askhut remained serious. He furrowed his eyebrows menacingly and stared at the workers with his ultra-black eyes, making them shut up in an instant. Ainagul noticed that in these moments, Askhut resembled her father, his face just as stern.

Except that when Askhut looked at her, his eyes took on an oily sheen that was decidedly not fatherly.

By the end of the construction, Askhut and Ainagul became so close that he could afford to lie around in the shade while everyone else toiled in the summer heat. By the time her father noticed, it was too late: Ainagul was pregnant.

Perhaps it was a good thing that it happened this way because now she had a son, she reasoned, chasing away the thoughts of her unrequited love to avoid losing her milk. But the more she admired her son, the angrier she felt toward her failed groom who turned out to be married and toward her parents who suggested a way of dealing with an illegitimate child. Only her old sick grandmother did not turn away from her and let Ainagul and her baby stay at her house.

At first, they were happy together. A tall fence protected them from the outside world. The old woman watched the baby in his carriage, and the baby slept soundly while his great-grandmother softly hummed lullabies. Ainagul kept the house and went to the store and to the post office to pick up her grandmother's pension.

Eventually, her grandmother became sick and ended up in the hospital. Ainagul didn't want to go out in public with the baby, so she stopped shopping for groceries. She made do with the canned food stashed in the cellar and milk from the neighbor's cow. That day, when her son fell asleep, she put him into the carriage and quietly left the house. The air outside felt cool.

“Please don’t wake up until I get back!” Ainagul begged silently.

If she walked fast, she’d be at her neighbor’s house in exactly six minutes. Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she noticed an unfamiliar car parked across the street. She heard the sound of the slowly moving tires and the crunch of the gravel but didn’t pay any attention. Only a few steps remained to Sagnaika’s house when someone threw a bag over her head and tied her hands behind her back, painfully twisting her wrists.

She smelled alcohol fumes and gasoline.

“What’s happening?” Ainagul screamed. “Let me go!”

“Stay quiet, or we’ll have to gag you!” A man’s voice hissed into her ear.

“Be quiet, I’m going to marry you,” Another voice, young and pleasant, said calmly.

“I have a child!” Ainagul shouted, then immediately added: “And a husband!”

“Now you’re just making things up,” The pleasant voice said. The man pressed down on the back of her head, making her bend down, pushed her into the car, and sat next to her. “Let’s go, quickly!”

The car sped up. Ainagul clutched her massive house key and hit the kidnapper sitting next to her as hard as she could. The man squealed like a piglet, snatched the key away from her, and slammed his fist into her side. Ainagul cried out.

“My baby is alone at home! He’s not even six months old! I swear! Please let me go,” Ainagul pleaded, choking from pain and the stink of the old bag. “I won’t tell anyone anything. Just let me go back to my son.”

“It’s not your baby, why are you lying?” A rough voice asked from the direction of the driver’s seat.

“He’s mine, I swear!”

“And your husband, you swear about him, too?” The voice that promised to marry her asked.

“I don’t have a husband, but the child is really mine. He’s just a baby, at home all alone, please let me go. I just ran out to get some milk.”

“Well, well,” The man in the driver’s seat giggled. The man next to her painfully pinched her nipple.

“Maybe she can give you some of her milk,” The man in the driver’s seat said.

Ainagul took a deep breath and began to scream. Immediately, her voice was drowned in the music coming from the car speakers. Helplessly, she fell silent, twisting her mouth, but the tears wouldn’t come, as if they had dried up along with her milk on a sleepless night. Suddenly, a high, thin child’s voice sang into her ear, breaking through the Kazakh pop music blaring from the speakers. Surprised, Ainagul flinched and hit her head on the glass.

“Sweet ainallayin Ainagul has a baby son sleeping at home!”

The voice seemed to be coming not from the speakers, but from everywhere.

“Fucking hell, Tulin! What the fuck?” The driver asked. He switched off the radio and stopped the car.

“Tulin! Are you Tulin? Please let me go, please!” Ainagul turned her head from side to side, trying to understand who was speaking with her and who was singing.”

“Good job! Why don’t you give her my last name, too?” Tulin barked. He opened the door, letting in the lowing of cattle, and spat copiously onto the ground.

“Why, were you going to wait until your wedding to get introduced?”

“Yes!” Tulin said angrily. He spat again and slammed the door shut. “Why the fuck did you stop the car?”

“Didn’t you hear him?”

“Sweet ainallayin Ainagul has a baby son sleeping at home!” the child’s voice sang louder.

“Sure I heard him,” Tulin said, a hint of shame in his voice.

“So what are we going to do?” The driver said, refusing to let it go.

“We’re almost there. I’ll ask my mother.”

“Please, please, let me go,” Ainagul begged. “Let me get back to my son! Why me? I’m not even a virgin!”

“I don’t give a shit if you’re a virgin or not. Not living in the Stone Age, are we? And your son? Got one today, none tomorrow.”

Ainagul threw herself at Tulin hoping to bite through the bag and sink her teeth into his flesh.

“Let’s do this: you stay calm, and we’ll figure out what to do, OK?” Tulin asked, grabbing her by the throat as if she was his property. “If you do have a son, he’ll be fine for a couple of hours.”

Ainagul felt nauseated, just like the day her father dragged her by the scruff of her neck to get an abortion. She nodded her bagged head and began to pray for her boy.

Excerpt 3

The darkness came quickly. Just as this asshole had promised, a cemetery appeared from behind the hills. From the distance, it resembled a miniature town, with diminutive structures of gray and red brick with rusty crescents of weathervanes. A few crypts, mostly children’s, had names laid out in brick: Erlan, Venera, Karylgash. Katya realized she had never been to the local Russian cemetery and had no idea where Maratik was buried. No one ever took her to visit Maratik’s grave. She was the only one of the villagers who’d never heard Maratik sing after his death.

Tulin parked his Zhiguli at an awkward angle to a dilapidated wall and walked confidently across the scorched fragile grass. Katya picked up her backpack and trotted behind him, trying to memorize the path. She suddenly thought that, after all that had happened, this jerk might want to leave her behind. She wasn’t interested in wandering amidst the graves in the middle of the night.

Finally, Tulin stopped. Three burial sites lay ahead. A brand new crypt made of yellow stone, with a large dome topped with a golden crescent, as if sawn off Amanbeke’s earrings. A tall structure built of a motley collection of brick, with a few broken pieces; the whole thing resembled an ugly box. And a deserted grave with a crooked fence and a young elm tree that grew directly in the middle, as if it was the tree’s personal plot rather than a forgotten burial site.

Katya stepped toward the stone crypt that reminded her of a tiny copy of a palace from Middle Eastern fairy tales.

Tulin cleared his throat and glanced at the huge brick box.

“That one is Uncle’s.”

Katya took a few hesitant steps. It was impossible to imagine her father lying in that sealed box. Tulin politely held open the iron, prison-like, door. A familiar peppery odor of dust and something nauseatingly sweet filled her nostrils.

“Go see your daddy, maybe drop a tear or two,” Tulin advised, pushing Katya forward.

Her cousin’s touch made her shoulder blades feel foreign. Katya snorted with contempt and took a step onto the trampled earthen floor. Something light floated in the middle of the brick box; in the semidarkness, it looked gray and almost alive. It crackled and rustled. Tulin switched on a flashlight, and the pale beam darted along the rough walls and slid along a shroud covering the stone table.

“He didn’t want to be put underground,” Tulin said behind Katya’s back. “No one uses this kind of crypts anymore. But we did everything properly, with his head toward the west, according to the custom.”

“May I have the flashlight?” Katya asked, reaching back without looking.

Tulin handed her the flashlight, crossed his arms on his chest, and immediately melted into the semi-darkness of the crypt. Now only a sharp animal odor betrayed his presence. Katya took another half a step toward her father’s mummy.

She recalled how big he was, how full of good health. How he would doze off after his trips, and if she lay by his side and put her head onto his chest, his measured breath would lull her into sleep. Her childhood no longer seemed abbreviated and scant but rather smooth and dreamy. She remembered her mother’s confident moves and her calm voice, not yet full of stern piety. Katya and her father walking across a suspension bridge that no longer scared her. The narrow river with its soft clay bed. She thought of her father climbing into the tall cabin of his truck, picking up little Katya, placing her into her lap, and letting her hold onto the gigantic steering wheel of the mechanical beast. She thought of her father’s powerful arms tossing the giggling Maratik up to the ceiling.

Katya closed her eyes and lowered the hand that held the flashlight. She felt as if the second she opened her eyes, all the memories would be erased. Suddenly, she sensed the emptiness behind her back, as if taking one step back would plunge her into the abyss.

What a nasty, two-faced jerk Tulin was. After what he had done, he was probably going to pray on the dirt floor, without as much as washing his hands. She thought of his tongue and his foul breath. She didn't get a chance to give in to anxiety or fear. The prison-like door groaned and slammed shut. There was a clanging sound as the padlock was closed from the outside. For a few seconds, Katya felt confused. The flashlight illuminated a circle on the tramped earthen floor, like the bottom of a glass.

Katya shook herself off and pointed the flashlight at the metal door that Tulin had disappeared behind.

"Idiot, let me out!" She shouted, banging her fist on the metal. "It's not funny! Enough with your stupid jokes!"

She fell silent and listened. For a while, there was nothing. Eventually, she heard the *Zhiguli* spattering. The rumbling of the engine faded, as the car drove off. Katya listened intently; finally, the distant rumbling felt like a hallucination. She leaned against the door, kicked it a few times, and slid down on the floor helplessly, scraping the metal with her backpack.

"We're no longer in high school," she said softly.

She wanted to cry, but there were no tears.

He'll come back, he'll definitely come back. Tulin is an asshole, but he's not a murderer. He just wants to scare me. He thinks I'm going to re-register the apartment in his name. Fat chance! If he couldn't break me when we were in high school, he definitely can't do it now. Once I get out of here, I'm going to file a report. This is kidnapping and a criminal offense. It can't be his first time, he must have stolen his wife. She doesn't look like someone who enjoys humiliation and beatings.

She had to do something. Kathya struggled to get up onto her unsteady feet, picked up the flashlight, and moved to the right, running her hand along the uneven wall of the crypt. She tried to keep her back to her dead father. When the flashlight illuminated the corners of the brick structure, she could see a wide spider web full of dried-up dead insects. The heat subsided, and she found it easier to breathe.

Eventually, Katya looked toward her father and quietly, as if trying not to wake him, approached his deathbed. Tulin said there would be no connection, but it was worth a try. Katya held the backpack between her legs, trying not to lose it in the dark. She opened it quickly, making crumpled items of clothing fall onto the earthen floor: a cardigan, a few pieces of underwear, and some other things. Katya picked up her things and placed them carefully at her father's feet. She rummaged through the backpack until she found the smooth elusive cell phone on the very bottom. This phone was now Katya's most precious treasure.

The screen lit up. The cold light hurt Katya's eyes. The display showed no missed calls and no network connection symbol. To save the battery, Katya switched off the flashlight and carefully placed it next to the contents of her backpack. If the phone lost power and the flashlight rolled away, she would be left in complete, utter darkness. She walked around the crypt, holding the phone above her head, but the only thing that changed on the display was the time indicator. Soon it would be midnight. Just this morning, she imagined taking over her parents' apartment: placing her clothes into her old wardrobe, taking a shower, settling down to sleep in her parents' bed.

Katya opened WhatsApp and, using the very top chat, wrote that she came to visit her old village but was abducted and locked in a crypt at a Muslim cemetery. She was hesitant to send it to her colleagues, imagining this story sticking to her for years. It seemed like dying would be easier.

She copied the message and began scrolling through her contacts. She didn't expect help from Amanbeke, Yurok, or his mother. Her own mother would not be useful either. The only one left was the realtor. Taking a deep breath, Katya pasted the message into the chat and pressed Send.

The phone displayed a red exclamation mark. The message was not sent. Katya stood on tiptoes, jumped up and down, pressed Send again and again, but nothing worked. There was only one option: to get higher.

Holding her breath, Katya climbed up on the table, first with one knee, then another; she straightened up using both legs and froze. It was very important not to look at her father. Her memory served up an image of his dark face with its twitchy muscles. Now, they were probably as sharp as knives in leather sheaves. Katya raised the phone to the ceiling and pressed Send again. Another exclamation mark. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught some movement on

the table. Had she imagined it? The shroud stretched under Katya's sneakers, and in place of her father's face, she saw something like a death mask. Katya shrieked and jumped off awkwardly, hitting her forehead on the edge of the table, then rolled back to the wall.

Afraid to open her eyes, she decided not to try anything else until morning. She stuffed the crumpled clothes into her backpack, found her flashlight, turned off her phone, and hid this treasure in her side pocket. She tried to use the backpack as a pillow, but something hard pushed painfully into her temple. It was her voice recorder. She recalled her childhood tape recorder. It had recorded so many sounds. Katya's entire life. The new digital one had a much bigger memory, but it also lost power pretty quickly. She pulled out the tiny device and shuffled through the tracks, finally choosing the most recent one, recorded at her mother's monastery. The church bells rang out in the cramped, stuffy crypt. Inappropriate at a Muslim cemetery, the sound nevertheless brought solace and comfort. Katya felt sleepy; she switched off the recorder. She had to be frugal about everything: batteries in the flashlight and recorder, power of her cell phone. Drowsiness came in waves, the backpack felt soft and comfortable. Falling asleep, Katya ran her fingers over her face. Her cheekbones felt hard and angular. Did she look like her father now?

...Gentle sunlight tickles her eyelids.

Katya sees the silhouette of her father; he is walking toward her along the paved monastery path. What is he doing here? Is he here to see Mother Agafya? Katya's still wearing her linen dress, but it's clean, still smelling pleasantly of soap; for some reason, she is wearing Ainagul's bracelet on her wrist. She wants to see it closer, but at that moment she notices a little boy by her side. Is it Ainagul's son? The child looks up, and Katya immediately recognizes her late brother. His eyes are shaped like their mother's, but the color is their father's. Katya falls to her knees in front of Maratik. Gazing at each other, they hug, topple over, and laugh. Maratik hasn't changed a bit.

Katya looks at his tiny fingers and cries. Sand crunches on her teeth.

"I had many questions myself, for my mother, for my father, and for God," Naina says somewhere close.

This is a dream. More than anything in the world Katya wants to stay asleep. Suddenly, Father grows pale and melts into thin air; something doughy covers Katya and Maratik as if they are pie filling. The dough had risen way too much, Katya thinks. Maratik is saying something,

but she can't understand anything because of all the noise made by this goddamn trinket, Ainagul's bracelet. Far away, the cartoon woodpecker giggles idiotically. Sticky white dough turns into a shroud.

"Wake u-uuu-up!" Maratik sang out. "Wake u-uuuu-uup!"

Katya opened her eyes. Her dead brother's song--was it a dream or reality? Was it even his voice? She recognized Maratik instantly in her dream, but now she realized that her memory was not of his little face, but rather of the photograph on her parents' credenza. Studying the mental image of that photograph, she saw a white spot where Maratik's face should have been.

It was unbearably hot again in the crypt. Here and there, a few slim rays of sun broke through the darkness. She heard voices somewhere in the distance.

"Yo, you sure there is something in there? The crypt doesn't look all that hot."

"They say he was saving up a lot, but they couldn't find the stash. Where else would it be, if not here?"

"Did his family bury it with him, is that the deal?"

"Come on, of course not. He bought the plot for the crypt when he was still alive. Clearly, he was planning something. He must have buried it inside."

Fully awake now, Katya wanted to scream, to call for help. Almost immediately, she knew these people didn't come to the cemetery for altruistic reasons. Most likely, they were degenerates, grave robbers. She heard dull clanging, as the visitors tugged on the padlock. Just in case, Katya crawled under the table and positioned herself parallel to her father, with her head facing west. With horror, she realized her backpack was left by the wall. If the vandals broke the door, would she be able to escape? Would they figure out someone was there, with the backpack serving as evidence? However, the padlock did not budge. The men outside spoke again.

"The stash must be in there. Otherwise, what's the point of the fucking padlock?"

"Because of the dogs?"

"Nah, I got a gut feeling for things like that."

"So what are we going to do? Want to try the pliers?"

“Are you kidding me? Who the hell knows when the family stops by for a visit? We should wait until tonight. We can get a Dremel from my garage.”

The two men kept chatting, now and then breaking into agitated laughter. Eventually, they moved on, and Katya no longer heard them.

She had to do something. They would come back at night, and that would be the end. Katya crawled over to her backpack. She was so thirsty everything around her seemed unbearably dry. The gray earthen floor under her feet felt like trampled ashes. The porous bricks of the crypt exuded heat like crackers just taken out of the oven. Even her father’s shroud, sliced up by the rays of sun, resembled parchment paper.

Katya emptied the backpack, spilling its contents onto the ground. Dust rose in a cloud, making her sneeze. Hunger pangs twisted her gut, and immediately she saw a glint of silver from a bar of chocolate she had since the train ride. Katya pounced on her half-melted discovery. She meant to take one bite and leave the sweet treasure for later, but she couldn’t stop. Licking the foil clean, she cut the tip of her tongue. The chocolate made her even thirstier. Katya continued the inventory. There was no water, but she found a half-full bottle of facial moisturizing spray. She sprayed a little into her mouth. The tip of her tongue stung, and her mouth filled with bitterness. She sprayed her forehead and cheeks, pulled off her underwear, and used it as a towel to wipe her face, armpits, and between her legs, then put on a fresh pair. She put the dirty pair into the backpack pocket, where she kept all sorts of paper trash, the proof of Katya’s existence: a subway receipt from when she lost her monthly pass, a crumpled museum ticket wrapped around something resembling a small stone. Katya unwrapped the paper and immediately put the blue lump of chewing gum into her mouth. She was surprised by the faint taste of mint.

The food and the pseudo washing up gave her a little boost of energy.

Now she was convinced that, since Maratik woke her up, he would help her get out of the crypt before the robbers returned. The most important thing was not to give up.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Katya said, climbing up on the table with determination.

She tried to step along the edge, holding her phone high and keeping her eyes on the screen. Something changed on the blue display. Katya narrowed her eyes, not quite believing what she saw. There was one bar!

“Oh my god! Yes! Oh, thank god!” Katya mumbled through her tears.

She stood on tiptoes and tapped the call log, then tapped the speaker icon, and lifted her arm as high as she could. She heard silence, then crackling, then finally the beeps.

“Hello?” The realtor’s voice echoed through the crypt.

“Hello! This is Katya, your client, help me please! They are trying to kill me...”

“Hello? I can’t hear you! Who is this?”

Impatiently, Katya shifted her feet, took herself off speaker, and brought the phone to her ear. She heard nothing but silence. She glanced at the screen--the connection was gone. She swore, put herself back on speaker, and lifted the phone to the ceiling. She felt herself stepping onto something dense.

“Hello! Can you hear me?” Katya gingerly stepped from foot to foot, trying not to think of what lay under. Something was moving and cracking under her weight.

“Katya?” The voice on the other end said finally.

“I don’t know how to call the police, please save me!” Katya shouted, raising herself higher just in case. She stepped onto something round.

There was a wet crunch under her feet. Simultaneously, her phone went dead, as if it was the phone that crunched and not something below. No matter how much she danced and gyrated on the table, ignoring the cracking and squelching under her shoes, not a single bar came back. Katya lowered herself from the table, sliding down to the floor. Dark wet spots appeared on the white shroud, in the spot she was standing. It smelled of a pot with remains of burned borshch soaking in the sink.

A wave of nausea washed over her and she felt a chill; she vomited chocolate and bile. She wiped her mouth with the hem of her dress, rubbing the sand off her lips. The nausea did not subside, and now she had a headache. Katya poked the ground with the tip of her sneaker. The puddle of vomit would give up her presence in the crypt; it needed to be buried, but the hard earthen floor would not budge. At some point, she even thought of using one of her father’s bones as a shovel, but immediately chased away the thought as pure nonsense. She remembered the key from Yurok’s apartment in her backpack’s pocket. The key to the metal front door was a long, drill-like pin. Katya pulled the keys out and began to poke the ground with

the long key, thinking she could probably use it as a weapon. She could try hiding under the shroud, and if the robbers looked under it, she could stick the key into the vandal's eye and run, while they were recovering from shock.

This was her only chance at survival, assuming the realtor wouldn't take any action.

Katya smirked at her thoughts. Just recently, her reputation was more important than life to her, and she was debating whether to send pleas for help to her colleagues. And now she was stepping all over her father's corpse and was even considering lying on top of him and covering herself with his funeral shroud. What would her mother say? More precisely, what would Mother Agafya say?

Exhausted, Katya crawled under the table, put her heavy head on top of her backpack, and turned on the recorder. Her mother's business-like voice, recorded at the notary's office, filled the crypt. Katya frowned and pressed Pause.

"The whole family in attendance," she said into the microphone of the tiny silver device. "Just need to record Marat."

She decided that she would talk to herself for whatever time she had left: record her thoughts and her memories to avoid losing her mind and to leave at least something behind. She would talk of the three-story building she grew up in, and how much it resembled a funeral home.

She used to think people died too often, and now she was locked up inside a crypt, praying for someone to die and be brought here to be buried. She'd scream, and they would find and free her.

"My cousin Tulin locked me inside this crypt. On the way here, he assaulted me. He pulled me onto the ground and began kissing me and rubbing against me," Katya dictated into the mic.

A dog barked in the distance. Katya paused, then continued recording. There was no one out there; if there was a person outside, they would tell the dog to shut up. *Hush, stop it, calm down, shut up.* People don't normally tolerate random dogs barking. The barking grew polyphonic. The dogs sounded hungry and vicious. She wondered if they were gathering near the crypt because of the odor of her dead father, wincing at the thought. The village outside

Moscow came to her mind and her neighbor's wolfhound whose growl she recorded for the school theater. She recalled Pashka Postnikov and wondered what he was like these days.

"If I ever get out of here, I'll find him," she promised herself. A sudden puppy cry pierced the barking and growling, making her flinch. Pitiful, like a child's, the cry turned into a shriek, then into soft whining. The barking stopped. The pack growled and slurped; they must have been ripping the poor dog into pieces.

