

A GIRL FROM THE METROPOL HOTEL

By Ludmilla Petrushevskaya

When we leave this life, our memories and accumulated knowledge leave with us, but some traits and habits may pass to the next generation. Extreme, often unreasonable stubbornness; a conviction that food must be Spartan (despite unbridled gluttony during holidays) and showers cold; indiscriminate hatred for the authorities; loyalty to one's principles, even if one's family must suffer; a sentimental fondness for music and poetry and unseemly squabbling over trifles; a fierce honesty and failure to get anywhere on time; love for humanity and acute hatred for the next-door neighbor; need for both silence and constant screaming; the ability to survive on nothing most of the time and mad spending on presents; a terrible mess in the house, while insisting on everyone else's cleanliness; and endless love for the little ones, especially when they are asleep in all their glory.

My great grandmother Asya died from sepsis at thirty-seven, leaving six children. Her husband Ilya walked down to the river, to drown himself—he was a doctor and held himself responsible. The five children ran after him, carrying the baby; they stopped him on the bank. When Asya was being buried, one daughter, Valentina, my future grandmother, followed her father like a shadow, mumbling, “I’ll always follow in your steps.”

And she did—she became a revolutionary, a member of a Bolshevik underground cell, just like him. He was an erstwhile defender of the oppressed and worked among the poor all his life, usually as a doctor at some factory, treating all the sick from the surrounding villages. He never accepted money for his services, living only on his salary. He would see every patient, as a matter of principle, although he was only paid to treat the factory personnel. He was regularly fired and would usually find his next job in an area struck by some epidemic, like cholera, where all medics who applied were hired, even the ones with a criminal record.

As soon as I could talk, I called him “Dedya.”

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

I was born in Moscow's most famed residential building—Hotel Metropol. It was also called the Second House of Soviets, because its rooms were occupied by the old Bolsheviks, such as my great-grandfather, “Dedya,” Ilya Sergeevich Veger, a member of the Bolshevik party since 1898. In the same building, after her divorce, lived his daughter, my grandmother Valentina, a Bolshevik since 1912, with her two daughters: my Aunt Vava and my mother, also Valentina.

All three, as it happens in fairy tales, were wonderful beauties. Vava, with her dark-blue eyes, long braid, and snowy smile was the prettiest student of the Armored Forces Academy; my mother, who was tall for her age, attracted attention early on, especially from soldiers, and innocently answered their questions about her name and address (though not her age--fourteen), which upset her mother and older sister. A hard-working student, she consumed mountains of books (she was majoring in literary studies) and took literature so seriously that simple reading for pleasure she considered a sacrilege. Secretly, she was in love with young Gorky. And this naïve, serious-minded and completely innocent girl became pregnant on her twenty-first birthday, on August 23, 1937. As a child, I heard her say laughingly to our heavily pregnant janitor that to her "it" happened the very first time—and she pointed at me.

During that summer, my future family lived in Silver Forest, Moscow's dacha area. In May of that cursed year, my grandmother's younger brother, Zhenya, two sisters, Asya and Lena, and their spouses, all prominent Bolsheviks, were arrested and, with the exception of Asya, never seen again. Their official sentence was "ten years of hard labor without the right to correspondence"—a euphemism for the firing squad.

My grandmother was left to wait for her turn. Every night she heard the gate open and footsteps rustle on the gravel. But nobody came in. She couldn't sleep and went to see a psychiatrist, who told her to stay at the clinic where she would be safe. She did, and this probably saved her life—they were arresting everyone except for certified psychotics. When the young wife of her arrested brother lost her mind from nightly interrogations, they let her go.

But my grandmother was completely healthy. Stefan, my future father, visited my mother at the dacha that summer. It was Stefan's footsteps that my grandmother heard, when he tiptoed over the gravel to my mother's window, to summon her outside. Later that fall, at an all-school meeting, Stefan disowned us (my mother and me, in her belly), because we were relatives of the arrested "enemies of the people." Later he changed his mind and married us, though not for long.

Approximately two years after these events, on coming home to their apartment at the Metropol, my grandmother and her daughters found their doors sealed by the NKVD. My grandmother began to open it, then stopped, turned on her heel and walked away without a word. Aunt Vava, who followed her, saw that the door handles were encircled with a wire, and on the wire hung a lead seal. If they had returned an hour earlier they would have been taken. But my family is always late. With nothing—clothes, utensils, bedding, books, let alone furniture and paintings stayed in the sealed apartment—they knocked on Dedy'a's door in the same building and stayed to live in his room. But I do retain a fragile memory of my first home: two adjacent rooms and an exquisite portrait over the connecting door—my maternal great-grandmother.

I was born on May 26, 1938, nine months after my mother's birthday. I was lucky. I wasn't left behind in a sealed apartment, as it often happened to the infants of the

arrested; I grew up by my grandmother's side, to the sound of Russian classics—but of this later.

THE WAR

My uninterrupted memories begin with the war, summer of 1941. Mama is carrying me to a bomb shelter, a designated subway station after hours. I'm watching the night sky crisscrossed by light beams; they look like fireworks. In reality, they are plane detectors. I remember not wanting to go underground, stretching my neck toward the festive sky, demanding to stay and watch the lights. But down we go, and spend the night on sheets of plywood over the tracks. My mother always carried with her a bag with blankets. I can see the arching ceiling of the black tunnel—it's an adventure!

In October 1941, Dedy, my grandmother Valya, my mother and my aunt left Moscow for Kuibyshev (Samara before and after the Soviet Union), in a cattle car. According to my aunt, people were pressed to evacuate, especially children and the elderly.

My aunt went to the station to see our train. It consisted of new, shiny trolleys, mounted on train wheels, and at the very end a cattle car, very dirty, with a thick layer of what looked like chalk all over the floor. My aunt knew that enemies of the people like us would not be put on a clean new bus and at once proceeded to sweep the cattle car. The next day my mother joined her, and for many hours they scrubbed, using pieces of plywood for shovels. When everything was clean, they brought the rest of us: Dedy, my grandmother, and me, and also our luggage, which consisted mainly of blankets. The weather was extremely cold; it was the beginning of the terrible winter of 1941. My family spread one blanket over the floor, covered themselves with the rest, and sat like this for several days, waiting for the train's departure. At the last moment, they were joined by the train's superintendent, with his wife and child. He must have realized that the metal trolleys were virtual iceboxes and wisely chose our cattle car, though it too was freezing.

We were lucky that he did: at the very first stop he resourcefully procured a small cast-iron furnace that looked like a barrel with a chimney. He had noticed neat rows of coal along the tracks, for the train's engine. During stops, the grown-ups jumped off the car and picked up the coal to feed our furnace. As a result, it was almost warm, and there were two kettles bubbling cozily. (That feeling of coziness, of home, when a match strikes and a tiny circle of light appears, always returned when I had to settle in a new place. Never have I been frightened by circumstances – a little warmth, a little bread, my little ones with me, and life begins, happiness begins.)

I remember living inside Dedy's coyote coat, watching the fire in the furnace through the crack. Dedy spent that journey like a kangaroo, letting me out only occasionally.

At night, the train would halt in the steppe, letting Moscow-bound military trains pass. They carried fresh troops from Siberia, well-fed, well-dressed and well-armed. Moscow's own defenders had no rifles or winter coats; they were clerks, factory workers and high

school students, and they were dying en masse among the frozen summerhouses. The authorities had no time to think about them. In November it was already snowing. The terrible winter was upon us.

I was let off the train to stretch my legs in the snowbanks along the tracks. I remember that at one stop my mother fed me “pastry”—a slice of white bread. I had poor appetite and was thought to have TB like my father and so many others in Moscow. But at that moment, looking over the white horizon under the black sky, I must have felt something, some foreboding of the coming hunger, and licked up every crumb.

KUIBYSHEV

At one of the stops, Dedya passed me over to the women, walked out on the platform, and disappeared. He boarded a faster passenger train, to get there first and find housing.

In Kuibyshev, as an old Bolshevik and civil war hero, he was assigned a separate hotel room. By the time we reached Kuibyshev, Dedya had found us a room: a narrow shoebox with two beds and a small table. Dedya and I slept in one bed, and my grandmother with two daughters in the other, with extra chairs for the feet.

Despite these conditions, Dedya took a cold bath every day (a bowl of water and a rag) and performed Muller exercises. My grandmother, his daughter, barely left the bed: the result of a contusion she sustained during a terrorist bombing at the Moscow Party Committee.

Presently, the government offices also evacuated from Moscow to Kuibyshev. The Bolshoi Theater came, followed by the Durov Animal Theater. A munitions plant arrived, too. My mother was sent to work there at the packaging department; Aunt Vava also found work as an engineer with an unfinished diploma. Mama moonlighted reading poetry to the wounded soldiers and also wrote about art for the local paper. One of her subjects was a huge canvas that adorned the waiting room at Kuibyshev’s train station. A fascist soldier dying alone in the winter steppe, watched over by a grey wolf. This shocking artifact I remember to the slightest detail, having spent many hours staring at it during our later “wanderings.” My mother wrote a long article about it.

Eventually, Dedya moved us to a communal apartment in a residential building for army officers, where the four of us occupied two rooms connected by a door. Even though his children had been sentenced for political crimes, Dedya carried respect among Party members and received some assistance. Devoted colleagues and pupils brought him food gifts; I even remember a bunch of grapes on a saucer. I spent a lot of time in Dedya’s room; he fed me and took care of me. But he had to return to Moscow, and at the same time my mother received a letter of acceptance from the revived Institute of Theatrical Arts, also in Moscow.

It was a miracle. My mother had left the Literary Institute after the memorable all-school meeting, while she was pregnant with me, but it is possible that she was never officially

expelled. She didn't mention any of it in her application, didn't mention her executed relatives, enemies of the state, just put down four years of studies and was accepted. (Until the Thaw, she concealed the truth about her family, disliked talking about the past and avoided the word "repressions." During her last year, when she couldn't leave the bed, I asked her, "Let's try to remember happy times," but she only moved her fingers, as if brushing something off.)

Still, there were some happy moments—that letter, for example. My mother passionately loved studying; her dream was to finish college. On receiving the letter, she tried to obtain a train ticket to Moscow, but that was impossible. Train tickets didn't exist in wartime.

She even asked our neighbor Rahil, the horror of my childhood, for help, because her husband worked for the railway. Rahil told me that herself decades later, when I was visiting Samara with my play and located our old apartment. Rahil still lived in her room, alone. I informed her that my aunt and grandmother had been rehabilitated and that my mother had died, but that Vava, my aunt, lived in a private apartment in the center of Moscow and received a state pension. Solemnly, Rahil explained to the curious neighbors that during the war she had to hide all the food from us, had to keep everything under lock. "But I was five, I was starving, we had nothing to eat," I said and broke into tears. The neighbors' eyes bulged: not to give a crumb to a starving child! Rahil quickly retreated to her room, an impoverished ancient hag.

My mother left by sheer accident. On the way from the store, she detoured to the station to look at the departing Moscow train, walked up to the drivers and, without any hope, asked for a lift. The drivers agreed. They let her stand on the engine; she wasn't allowed in the cabin. All she had with her was a bottle of cooking oil and a week's salary, which she gave to the drivers. There was no time to run home, and she was probably afraid, too. I don't know if it was a freight train or a passenger; a freight train could easily take a week.

What was she thinking of, standing for days on the exposed engine in her sundress? She was thinking of me, most likely. She probably tried to convince herself that I would be okay, that she was leaving me with her mother and sister, that I was in day care, and that we would manage somehow. She needed to get her diploma, first and foremost, and then bring the child.

I imagine how her heart pounded when the train started moving. She was going to Moscow, to study! She was twenty-seven years old.

On arriving in Moscow, she settled in her father's room in the communal apartment on Chekhov Street. The room was crowded with bookcases. She lived under the dinner table. Immediately, she sent us a letter and a money transfer: she managed to obtain child support from my father, her former husband. She wore her father's old army coat over the sundress to classes. She had no other clothes.

Back in Kuibyshev, her mother and sister accepted her disappearance without much joy. Her name was never mentioned again. On the other hand, so many people had vanished from their lives. At that time it was common—people disappeared without a trace, like the character in Daniil Kharm's famous poem about a man who walked out of his house and was never seen again. Later, the poet himself vanished.

I waited for my mother day and night. She returned four years later.

She used to tell me again and again that it was for me, for my sake that she left, that she couldn't have supported us without a college degree. For the rest of her life my poor mother justified herself.

KUIBYSHEV: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

There we were, the three of us: my grandmother, my aunt, and me. Aunt Vava was fired from her job at the munitions plant after an all-night interrogation. She was a dangerous element: her relatives had been executed as enemies of the state. We lived on what my mother sent us: my child support, courtesy of my father, a young philosophy professor.

Then real hunger set in.

During the war, one could purchase food only with ration cards. We received rations for one child and two dependents. With ration cards we bought black bread. With each purchase, the store cut out coupons from our cards. Before the end of the month, all our bread would be "cut out."

The bread line formed early, before dawn, among the pillowy snowdrifts. It ended before the heavy white metal door. The formula "who's the last in line, I'll get behind you" saved lives in the chaos of wartime. Clinging to the person ahead of us, we found ourselves in the realm of order and justice, with a nominal right to survive. People guarded their spots with their lives, were ready to shed blood if someone tried to cheat and jump the line. In those days one couldn't step away "for just a moment."

After hours of waiting, we are inside the little store, where it's warm. The smell of bread is dizzying; it makes our jaws ache and stomachs churn. Hunger is consuming our insides, forcing us to stretch our necks and take mincing steps from side to side, to create an illusion of progress. The thick line sways without moving.

Finally, our turn comes. The weight of the loaf is always less than required, and the saleswoman drops an extra piece that makes the metal scale go down for a split second—and immediately the bread is taken off the scale. It is the simplest racket. Still, that extra piece is valued immensely and usually goes to the child. I suck mine on the spot. The rest of the bread we divide "fairly" into three parts. I gobble mine the same night, breaking little pieces under the pillow. Then my aunt and grandmother feed me their shares. Later, when I asked my aunt how we survived, she shrugged and smiled bewilderedly, "I don't know..."

I did attend day care for a short while. There, the underage population lived its own life, ate glue in secret because of the rumor that it was flavored with real cherries--we dipped our fingers in the jar during arts and crafts and licked them. We also believed that the witch Baba Yaga resided in the hallway, as the custodian wanted us to believe, especially after she washed the floors there. Then there was a ritual: when a military plane passed overhead, the child was expected to look up solemnly and name a family member fighting at the front, as though it was him flying on that plane. It was a matter of pride, but I couldn't name anyone. Humiliated, I demanded names from my aunt. She thought long and hard; all the men in our family had been shot or jailed, if you didn't count my consumptive father. Still, she scraped up two names. From then on I proudly announced, "There's my Uncle Volodya (or Uncle Serezha) flying!" I didn't know who they were. Later I learned that mysterious Volodya was my aunt's ex-husband, and Serezha turned out to be my own grandfather! He was only seventeen years older than I. (I met him sixty years later at the family banquet to celebrate the 140th anniversary of Dedy's birth. Serezha was his youngest son, fathered with his third wife when Dedy was in his fifties. And he actually was a pilot during the war.)

But I had to stop going to the day care: we couldn't pay, and there was the problem of shoes. In the north, the lack of shoes for the poor is the biggest hardship. In the villages, peasants make shoes from tree bark. From April to October I ran barefoot—from last snow to first. No one mentioned TB any more—I never even had a runny nose.

HOW I WAS RESCUED

There was a whole pack of us children, and we spent our days on the Volga. I didn't know how to swim, but that wasn't necessary: our bank was shallow and descended gently. But when spring came and the Volga flooded, my clumsiness and irresponsibility nearly cost me my life.

In May, the Volga flooded to the size of an ocean. Our bank was completely underwater; the opposite shore was barely visible. Together with another little girl, I decided to explore that mysterious side, so we squirreled our way onto the ferry and crossed without tickets.

We arrived and took a look around: their side seemed almost like ours, only it didn't slope gradually and had a drop-off, like a step. I sat on the grass, on the edge of that step, lowered my feet but couldn't reach the water. So I jumped, and immediately submerged, going blind and deaf. Then I opened my eyes and continued to sink, noticing little bubbles, like in boiling water, and tall swaying blades of grass like feathers. I touched the bottom, pushed off lightly and went back up. The surface was very close, I could see the daylight; I stretched out my neck to gulp some air but suddenly fell to the bottom again, with terrifying ease.

Interestingly, I could see myself from above as a curled little form sinking face down. If I'd known the word I'd have told myself that I resembled an embryo. Again I pushed off and rose to the surface, but this time I didn't dare lift my head and continued to bob on the water, staring helplessly into the slightly muddy darkness. I understood by then that I shouldn't try to lift my head. I was very light and floated easily but only if I didn't try to breathe. I was craving air, my ears filled with the deafening noise of running water. And then out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed an object dangling right next to me, like a willow branch. I pushed my hand out, grabbed it and flew out like a cork.

It turned out that a young woman came to the bank to get water, leaned over to fill her buckets, saw something struggling underwater, thought it was a puppy and wanted to hook it up with the yoke. Suddenly a child's hand shot out and grabbed it. The woman actually stepped back in fear, but too late: her catch stuck to the yoke like glue.

As for my friend, as soon as she saw that I wasn't coming up, she fled, like all children do when they are scared.

Shaking with cold, I tried to air dry in an abandoned kiosk in the company of my reappeared friend. Local brats were circling us, sniggering—look, a girl without clothes. My wet sundress clung to my skin. I was only seven or eight but I knew that it was suggestive of something improper and dirty. I tried to hide behind my friend. Courtyard laws are worse than sharia.

It wasn't just my wetness. Like all severely malnourished children, I sported matchstick limbs and a swollen belly. Some brat pointed at me once in the street, "Look, a gal knocked up!" I believed him immediately. I didn't know how that happens, how long it takes, and how it ends, but I did know that it was a secret and a disgrace and only prayed, God, dear God, save me, save me. I overheard this bit once; I didn't know any real prayers.

This imaginary pregnancy was the nightmare of my childhood. Who's hiding inside me? Is it a snake? A baby? Sometimes it growled, sometimes squeaked, sometimes bubbled. Oh, horror.

My friend and I got on the ferry; it was growing dark. Before going home I walked around the park clucking my teeth, trying to get a little drier—at home they forbade us categorically to go in the water...

THE DUROV THEATER

In that park, near the water, we spent our summers. It was called Strukov Park, it was huge and overgrown, like a forest, and descended all the way to the Volga. There we looked for little round growths, like baby ferns, considered edible, and for anything else we could put in our bellies. Sometimes it was our only meal all day. Berries didn't grow in that park.

On Sundays and Saturdays music played in the park's bandshell.

When the Durov Animal Theater was visiting Kuibyshev, they set up a tent in Strukov; our job was to get inside without tickets. The trick was to crawl into the tent on hands and knees, together with the crowd--people stumbled on our backs, but didn't look down, wanting only to get in. It was important not lose balance, or else one could be crushed. Once inside, I had to sidle up to some couple and strike a conversation, so the ushers would think that we were one family and I was their shaggy daughter.

That's how I got to see Durov's famous act with the elephant. In the arena, they had erected an enormous bed with a gigantic pillow. The elephant sat on the bed, wound up the huge alarm clock, and it rang! Then the elephant lay down on its side, to the music of a lullaby. With some prodding from Durov, the elephant stood up slowly, lifted the pillow and revealed a bedbug the size of a kettle. The elephant dropped the bedbug on the floor and stomped it out with an enormous foot. The bedbug exploded to everyone's furious clapping. Durov reached up and placed a treat in the elephant's mouth—it was like placing something on a top shelf.

Then there were monkeys. One, dressed in a black suit, leafed furiously through a thick volume, moving its fingers chaotically and greedily—there must have been treats hidden between pages. The monkey shoved them into its mouth, glancing nervously over its shoulder, blinking and scratching. Its frenzied chewing and scratching resembled the motions of a hungry, lice-ridden boy.

Or girl.

SEARCHING FOR FOOD

Like stray puppies, we rooted everywhere, looking for something to eat. One time I climbed into the cabin of an idling truck, looked into the compartment over the window and saw three rubles! I showed them to the rest of the gang: "In here, inside the cabin!" They all climbed in, but found nothing. I felt triumphant. Naturally that money was taken from me by usual methods.

"Show us what you got!"

"I won't!"

"How about a kiss from my fist?"

"Just leave me alone, you morons."

"Let's go, guys. She got nothing, whore's daughter."

"Hell I don't. Here, look!"

I open my hand, someone slaps it from below, the money falls out and disappears.

Late in the fall I returned to winter headquarters, that is, to my aunt and grandmother. One can't run in the snow barefoot. We had no winter boots, no clothes of any kind. No food either.

I didn't attend school. But in September, I stood on our balcony and watched the children walk to school swinging their satchels. Along our Frunze Street, a girl walked every morning dressed in a bright blue coat with large white buttons. How well I remember it! (When my son Kirill turned two, I managed to buy for him and for his little cousin Serezha blue flannel coats with white buttons. At that time it was extremely difficult to get anything at the store, and these were very simple flannel garments, but I was so happy to find them!)

Aunt Vava took home potato peels from the compost heap outside the Officer's Club. Granny baked them on a primus stove without oil. I can still recall the stench of burning peel.

The primus stove stood on the window in our room. Neighbors banished us from the shared kitchen.

We also looked for food in our neighbors' garbage. They were people of means. In Dedy's former room now lived an army major who owned a gramophone with a single record. Pressing my ear against the boarded-up door between our rooms, I memorized Beethoven's Scottish Drinking Song (*Come, fill, fill my good fellow!*) and an aria from the operetta *Silva* (*Beautiful dancers of a lovely cabaret, you were created for pleasure alone*). Our other neighbor was Rahil, the principal at the school for the railroad workers. My grandmother gave her a beautiful nickname—Fury. Fury had two daughters, older than me, and an equally scary husband, also a railroad boss.

The shared bathroom was heated with firewood, which we couldn't buy. Next to the wood stood an ax. We weren't allowed to use the bathroom and bathed with cold water in our room. One night, we heard screams in the hallway. My poor old grandmother lay in a pool of blood outside the bathroom door. Fury's husband, on finding my grandmother in the bathroom, struck her with the ax on the head, to teach her a lesson. Vava summoned an ambulance; the medics wrapped Granny's injured head in gauze—the only time anything white touched her skin in the fifteen years she lived in Kuibyshev. Naturally no one filed charges. The husband's nickname was Cretin. The whole family was called simply "crooks."

The major, Cretin, and Fury left thick potato peels in their garbage, along with herring bones and sometimes cabbage leaves. Never any bread crusts. But obtaining even these riches, we had to avoid insults and humiliation, so we foraged while the neighbors slept. If we had a little kerosene for the primus stove, Granny made soup.

DOLLS

One night, the usual moment came when the house quieted down. Hunger had completely devoured our insides, and after waiting the control period of time the adults sent me to retrieve the neighbors' trashcan. Remembering the ax, I tiptoed into the kitchen.

On a stool by the trashcan reclined two large dolls, stripped of their clothes. They must have been discarded by Fury's daughters. Their noses were chipped and they didn't have any hair; their soiled limbs and torsos were stuffed with rags.

I had a doll, but it was small, made of celluloid and missed a leg. In addition, I owned a toy horse, which I had made from cardboard and painted with my only crayon, purple—I gave it an eye. The horse didn't seem very real, so I tried to flesh it out by wrapping a rag around its middle.

And here were two such incredible beauties!

Now I know what a doll means to a girl: it is her tame goddess. It inspires worshipful adoration, furious possessiveness, and also certain ferocity—it is mine, I can do what I want with it. Dolls are clutched to the breast and force-fed—and then abandoned without a glance. One can paint a doll's face, then scrub it off along with the factory paint. Shave its head. Perform surgeries on it. (One must take care to keep it away from boys—they will tear it apart.) At same time, dolls are pitied and adored beyond words. Nothing surpasses a girl's passion for her doll—only her love for mama, papa, and grandparents.

I didn't do any of that. I froze. I was staring at the discarded dolls, not believing my happiness. I knew we had no future together, that we'd have to part. I knelt before them, sat them up, and folded their poor soiled hands in their laps. Then I leaned my head against their soft torsos. They gradually filled my heart and my soul, as a child fills its mother's whole body when they embrace. They were so beautiful, so tall, so obedient.

I'm not sure how long this continued, maybe until dawn. Before departing to work, Rahil stopped by the kitchen to check on her trash. Soon her girls sailed in, collected their dolls vengefully, and left.

VICTORY NIGHT

And now the happiness, the Victory Night, for it was definitely night, not day, though no one slept.

Every hour the announcement was expected, people kept repeating the magical formula, "unconditional surrender." I was woken up by the noise outside, as though an enormous crowd was pushing through the street like a train. It was still dark, and we didn't have a clock, but I think it was around four, because the sun came out at five.

I ran out outside as I was, in my sundress and barefoot, and spent the day running around the city.

Soldiers were being bounced everywhere, even the lazybones from our Officer's Club and, gently, the wounded from the military hospitals; on every corner gramophones, accordions, and balalaikas were playing; in Strukov Park, a dance was organized; women were selling bunches of snowdrops at the gate.

A new life was beginning and with it the great hunger of the postwar years.

THE OFFICER'S CLUB

I spent more and more time in the streets.

The first time I ran away I must have been seven, soon after the Victory.

In early June I spent several days in the wild. I didn't sleep in Strukov Park: around there, all the usable spots had been defiled; through the cracks in the bandshell I could see feces and mould. But I did find a spot—in the director's office at the Officer's Club.

Along with other kids, I had long ago learned to get in past the guards to watch movies; learned to collect bread crumbs from the Club's wagon after the driver and the cook took the last crate to the kitchen and the horse was resting with one hoof on the tiptoe—that's when we, hungry children, climbed inside the wagon, where the smell of bread was indescribable, and scooped up crumbs off the floor.

The Club's inner yard and main building were surrounded by sheds and garages. Guards chased away pigeons from the yard by throwing them bread crusts that landed on the tin roof of the shed and got stuck there. Children from the nearby courtyards climbed on that burning hot roof to look for dried crusts.

The only way to get there was by standing on tiptoes on the edge of a huge barrel of tar. I don't know who had left it there—it was a perfect trap for the hungry children. The bread crusts! For me, hunger was stronger than danger and I always waited for the moment when the boys were not circling the barrel.

In the summer the tar melted, seeped through the cracks, and formed an ugly black puddle around the barrel. Naturally I landed in it—somebody had pushed me.

I sat in the disgusting mess trying not to cry. On all sides brats were squealing with laughter. I couldn't get up and only waved my hands slowly, watching them turn into black glass. A passerby finally unglued me with much swearing. Accompanied by wild laughter I dragged myself home, trying not touch my hair. There, my poor relatives scrubbed me off, more or less. But my panties were ruined, and it was my only pair. I learned to tie my camisole between my legs.

All in all, by the standards of the time I had a relatively normal childhood. Courtyard friendships; hide-and-seek; cops-and-robbers. When we weren't running around wildly, we buried "treasures": placed shards of colored glass into a hole in the ground, covered them with a piece of clear glass and then piled some dirty courtyard sand on top. We hunted for other kids' "treasures," guarding our own. In the courtyard, I was mocked for my Moscow expressions, all those "the fact is" and "as you can see."

My closest and dearest companion was the dog Damka. We would roll around, I would hug her skinny neck, or we would jump and chase each other, or I would throw her a stick. But one day she ran away from me at a fantastic speed, dragging what looked like a bloodied hair comb: the kitchen workers at the Club must have thrown away a rack of ribs. I ran after her, but she snarled at me in warning, for the first time. The time for jokes was over; Damka took food seriously, like the rest of us.

I tried to convince my aunt and grandmother to “give birth to at least a puppy, or at the very least a kitten.”

One winter, my dream came true, and I brought home, into our room, a famished cat, it was New Year’s Eve. It was sitting on the landing, waiting, meowing, and I let her in. Our kerosene lamp was burning on that special occasion, and the light was indescribably festive and beautiful. I was hugging my little Mura, who was meowing timidly. We waited till midnight to fetch the neighbors’ trash, then celebrated on what they had discarded. The cat ate everything, it turned out, even herring heads and potato peels. After the meal, Mura and I walked in a circle around our tree: a fir branch stuck in a tin can. The cat walked clumsily on her skinny hind legs and I held her by front paws and belted out “Beautiful dancers of a lovely cabaret” in harmony with the army major’s gramophone.

We had a holiday!

Then she asked to be let out and ran off.

My whole life took place in the summer. Several times I actually managed to climb on that cursed roof and find a bread crust. I couldn’t jump down because of the barrel, so I dashed through the Club’s courtyard, past the guards. For us, the Club offered an irresistible draw: in the evenings, they showed trophy American movies with Errol Flynn and Deanna Durbin.

In the summer there was a lot of happiness.

We watched every movie, hiding behind the doors and especially in the drapes between the showings. By the same method, I hid after the last show one night and stayed until everyone left. Then I flew down empty hallways, as though in a dream, looking for a place to sleep, and found one: the director’s office, where the felt couch scratched my cheek all night. I was about to fall asleep, but the night was very light, it was June, and suddenly my sleepy eyes fell on the picture on the opposite wall: Marshal Voroshilov and Stalin reviewing the troops in Red Square. For the first time I was terrified by a work of art.

THE COURTIERS’ LANGUAGE

During the day, like many unsupervised children, I begged in the streets. I tolerated hunger reasonably well; we’d been starving for a long time. Granny lay in bed swollen

like a mountain, although according to my aunt she did go to the port occasionally to unload cargo ships, for which she received a bottle of raw spirits that could be exchanged for bread. Aunt Vava once brought home a handful of beet salad; another time it was plum jam, which I licked off her palm like a little animal all at once, understanding that it was my one and only chance to try it. For decades the smell of plums made me ill.

Our power had been shut off, but from time to time we managed to buy kerosene for the lamp and primus stove. At the store, we were served after everyone else, for some reason, and had to wait for hours. Since then, I associate the smell of kerosene with light and happiness. We could cook something on our stove. We could light the lamp, and the solemn, golden light flooded our room from the back of the couch.

I could tolerate hunger, but I couldn't tolerate lack of freedom. Fearing for me—a little girl from an educated family out and about in a city full of riffraff, plus a completely wild life in the courtyard—my aunt and grandmother explained that gypsies had stolen a child and under this pretext forbade me to go out. I immediately disappeared and returned days later with an innocent explanation: I had been stolen by gypsies and recovered by the police.

Aunt and Grandmother exchanged worried remarks over my head, using the so-called “courtiers’ language,” the secret code of the underground revolutionaries. They didn't know that I had long ago deciphered it. In that code, consonants were divided into two groups and letters from the first group were substituted for letters from the second group, same with the vowels. So I could understand all their worries and fears, their plans and intentions, their bitter laments. But I didn't care, didn't believe them, and ignored their fears; my goal was to escape outside.

And that is how I spent the warm months of the war—flying about the city, begging, posing as an orphan: “No mommy, no daddy, please help.”

THE BOLSHOI THEATER

One evening I was circling the Opera House. Inside, the lights were shining, a festive crowd was flowing in, I could hear beautiful music. Plus, it was warm inside. I couldn't get in through the main entrance, but I noticed a steep metal ladder that hugged the Opera's wall—it must have been used by the light technicians and other staff.

Outside, it was drizzling and getting dark, black clouds filled the sky. I started climbing the slippery ladder, barefoot, trying not to look down. Reaching the top, at least five floors above the ground, I scraped on the metal door: “No mommy, no daddy, please Comrade, take pity on an orphan! I'm so cold, just five little minutes, just to listen to the music, please dear Comrade...” The dark abyss and freezing wind must have added a note of genuine despair to my stock number: the door opened up and the kindly lights technician allowed me into the warm darkness, full of orchestra sounds.

I found myself on a little balcony next to the hot, smelly lights. Right below me, so close I could touch it, something magical, bright, and colorful was taking place—a palace among fake lilac bushes with a balcony directly underneath mine, and on that balcony a beautiful pink lady was singing in a gentle voice, “My dear friend, I’m listening…” That night I listened to Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, performed by the evacuated Bolshoi Theater. The next night I climbed the ladder again and scraped on the metal door; howled and froze in my sundress, but wasn’t let in.

I crawled back home like a punished dog. At least it was warm there. My whole life I remembered that duet of Rosina and Count Almaviva.

Later, when I came home from my excursions, Granny and Aunt no longer interrogated me and pretended to believe my fables about gypsies. They were probably relieved that I was alive and didn’t want to scare me away for good with questioning. Some nights they fed me cabbage soup made from crushed leaves that Vava picked off the ground at the market place at the end of the day. “That’s for your goat, right?” the seller women were asking her. My aunt, a recent student of the military academy, burst into tears over those dirty, crushed cabbage leaves. Late at night, as usual, I was sent to the kitchen, to retrieve our neighbors’ garbage.

DOWN THE LADDER

But one day I must have spun such wild tales that after a whispered conversation in their secret language, Aunt and Granny came to a decision and immediately enforced it, locking the door on the inside.

They did it for a good reason. Every girl on growing up had to take her place in the courtyard’s hierarchy. That usually involved going through a lot of hands behind the sheds. The older girls didn’t discuss the process openly, only exchanged hints, pointing with their chins in that fearful direction.

I understood nothing. I didn’t yet sense the danger. Thin as a skeleton, I was beaten regularly but not yet used in that way. But that future wouldn’t have missed me, even if only to teach me a lesson, so that I would learn my place.

Suddenly denied freedom, I danced and sang across the room over to the door, ostensibly to demonstrate my prowess to the bedridden grandmother, and tried to grab the key—but was stopped by a pair of loving hands.

I thought for a bit, then stepped out on the balcony and looked down. We lived on the third floor--I couldn’t jump. Terribly scared, I reached for the next balcony and then for the fire escape—a rickety worm-eaten ladder with missing rungs. Hanging by the fingertips, I felt my way down to the last rung. Five feet above the ground the ladder ended. I flopped on my backside, then sprung back up. I was free! It was a sunny, green day. I was prepared: I had my entire wardrobe on--camisole, sundress, plus a cotton vest, given to me by a kindly neighbor who also occasionally fed me bread.

Trembling with happiness, I strolled under our balcony, until I saw my aunt's completely gray head (she was thirty-two). I stared into her huge dark-blue eyes. "How did you get down?" she shouted, trying to gain some time, hoping that Granny would crawl down the stairs on her swollen legs and catch me, somehow. "Jumped off the balcony!" I lied, just in case, and skipped off.

For good, it turned out. I saw them again nine years later, I was eighteen, they didn't recognize me. "Who is it?" my tiny grandmother whispered.

The terrible guilt I felt.

LITERARY SLEEP-INS

In the winters before my escape, my grandmother was educating and keeping me from running away with her special talent: she could recount from memory Russian classics, word for word.

My grandmother was a graduate of the elite Bestuzhev Institute for Young Ladies, and possessed a fantastic memory. Her former husband, my grandfather Nikolai Yakovlev, was a famous professor of linguistics and knew eleven languages. I, their progeny, didn't even attend grade school for lack of shoes. From April to October I ran barefoot, and winters I stayed indoors. Still, I learned how to read from the newspapers that our neighbors left in the trash. I could recite from memory excerpts from my grandmother's favorite bedside tome: *The Short History of The Russian Communist Party*, where she had underlined the most obnoxious lies. The whole book was full of red pencil.

There were two other books in the house: *A Room in the Attic* by Vanda Vasilevskaya, which left no memory, and a biography of Cervantes by Bruno Frank. In that book, there was a description of a crystal decanter with red wine standing on a table in what I remember as a prison cell. Red shadows fell on the white cloth. Nothing like that existed in my world. There was no red and no white. But still it was present in my childhood life, that's what matters. I remember those shadows! And that tablecloth, white and thick like old snow, with heavy folds along the corners. I could see that scene as though I lived in it. The room with thick wooden beams. Small low windows filled with the setting sun. Green fields outside. That's how I imagined, for some reason, a Spanish prison.

Also, my grandmother owned a volume of Mayakovsky's poems--probably, in the memory of his courtship, of his youthful love for her, when he called her baroquely the Blue Duchess, in the spirit of the Silver Age. Roman Jakobson brought Mayakovsky to the Moscow Linguistic Circle, introducing him as a genius he had discovered. There, he met with my grandmother for the second time. Before that he had courted her when they were both teenage members of the Party. At the Circle, according to a family legend, Mayakovsky proposed, and my grandmother refused him. And in 1914 she and Nikolai Yakovlev already had a daughter, my aunt Vava.

When Grandmother returned to Moscow in 1956, after her rehabilitation, her sister Asya, who had also returned from the labor camp and exile, asked her: “So, you refused to marry a poet and married a professor instead, and how did that work out?”

Our literary sleep-ins took place in the wintertime.

Our usual position was in bed, together, Grandmother towering over my bone-thin body like a mountain—she was swollen from hunger. We covered ourselves with every rag we owned, and for days on end she recited classics from memory, primarily Gogol--*Dead Souls*, *Evenings at Dikanka*. She had one weakness: she lavished too much attention on the descriptions of meals and innocently inserted items like borsht and bacon, unknown to me. When she explained what they were, I salivated like a Pavlov dog.

She also read Gogol’s *Portrait* and *Viy*, which scares me to this day. The *Portrait*, a story of a young artist compelled by a mysterious portrait to sell his talent, left me dazzled.

Our literary sleep-ins occurred because we were weakened by hunger.

MY PERFORMANCES. GREEN SWEATER.

In the summertime I begged. I didn’t beg by holding out a hand on street corners, no. I performed, like Edith Piaf.

Usually I looked for a quiet spot near the sheds, where children and grandmas liked to congregate, and then began my program. They were cheesy, lowbrow numbers beloved by washerwomen and lumpen proletarians: *In a clearing near school*; *Along the dewy track*; *On Berlin’s cobblestones*. Tango tunes I skipped; the most popular tango of the time, *The tired sun is setting*, I hated with a passion. Every night they played that record in Strukov Park; to its sound, the wounded shuffled over to the dance floor, the village women peddled flowers at the gate, the endless sunsets finished burning, the tired sun indeed set behind the Volga, and later we would step over flower heads stuck on a wire. For a long time I racked my brain—why the wire? That’s how they kept broken daisies together.

(I was so fed up with *The tired sun* that I wrote it into the script for an animated film by Yuri Norshtein, “The Tale of Tales,” about our shared postwar childhood. That film runs every year on Victory Day.)

Then, like a parrot, I rattled off the record our neighbor, the army major, played every night in his room. First the Drinking Song, “Come fill, fill, my good fellow” followed by the finale, the potpourri from the musical *Silva*,

*Beautiful dancers of a lovely cabaret,
You exist for pleasure alone.
To you the doubts of love are unknown.*

I usually stumbled on “unknown,” but still.

If my repertory ran out but the circle of children and grandmas seemed thick enough, I quickly switched gears to Gogol’s *Portrait*. The children were stunned. One time, someone gave me a slice of black bread. Another, a shy little boy approached me and said that his mama wanted to see me. Instinct warned me against visiting strange apartments, but the other children were curious too and talked me into going. We all walked up the dark stairs, a door opened, and a woman with a wet face offered me a green knit cardigan that I put on immediately. Everyone rejoiced at my acquisition and looked me over with pride, as if I were their successful creation.

I never “toured” that courtyard again. We avoid places where we’ve endured pain, but the opposite is true, too. Extreme kindness can be repaid only with ingratitude. What if the miracle won’t repeat itself and life’s greatest consolation—remembering the kindness shown to us—will disappear? Those little faces won’t be there, and the green sweater won’t be offered. This way, they are always with me. The crowd of hungry children, the dark stairs, the open door, the outstretched hand, and someone’s mother, crying, her face invisible against the light.

THE PORTRAIT

And so, after a day of reciting Gogol’s *Portrait* in the courtyards, I found myself in the director’s room at the Officer’s Club’s, on a scratchy couch, and, resting my head on my arm for a pillow, saw in the light of an endless sunset that particular portrait, in which Stalin seemed ready to turn around and fix me with his beady black eyes. Terrified, I quickly turned on the other side and covered my eyes.

The figure in the painting exuded malice. After that, I always slept in other offices. Who knows what the artist must have felt when he was working on that picture? He may have been fearing for his life, hoping for mercy.

After receiving the green sweater, I developed a strange shyness and couldn’t perform any more. I had to move my begging act indoors, into a store. My artistic career stalled until I found myself in a children’s home.

STORY OF A LITTLE SAILOR

But begging in a store is much harder! You tap someone on the shoulder, “Please, Comrade, give us a kopeck.” And they give you a kopeck, but the smallest ice cream costs three rubles. You mumble and edit your request, and they reasonably object that this is what you asked for. The formula “spare a kopeck” must have survived from before the Revolution, when kopeck was actually worth something

My debut took place in a large grocery store. Beggars formed an honor guard next to the cash register. Customers passed through our double ranks on their way to pay, then turned around to face a human wall of misery.

As I remember it, that store was almost empty of customers; its high shelves were empty of goods, too. In those days, goods were delivered unpredictably and then “tossed out” onto the shelves: the customers rushed inside, quickly formed a line, and in the end “obtained” something or other.

I took my place at the end of the long line of beggars. There was zero hope.

Suddenly, the situation changed. The honor guard had annoyed the cashier long enough; she yelled at them from her little window and they meekly crawled over to the back wall. But I stayed. Right below the cash register was a little ledge, to catch the change, and I squeezed myself under it, away from the angry cashier’s eyes. I was too tall and had to bend my neck painfully.

My God, people stampeded to shower me with change, the pocket of my sundress under the green sweater ballooned. I couldn’t understand what was happening and felt a little scared. Why were they giving me all this money?

Then I understood: my crooked neck looked like an exotic injury. My face, I suppose, expressed genuine suffering: to remain in one position, with a crooked neck, is unbearable for a child. But I endured--after getting lucky with my little nook I couldn’t just abandon it. I must have looked like a little martyr. All other beggars were seen there every day and lost their appeal. Now, here was something different, a new sample of misery, a little crippled girl.

The last straw was a boy beggar, who solemnly gave me his penny, then returned meekly to his legless father by the far wall. When I realized what was happening, I felt a burning shame. My heart stopped. What disgrace awaited me if they found out I wasn’t crippled! My face turned even redder. People approached me, asked me questions. Keeping my neck even more crooked, I unglued myself from my nook and shuffled past the beggars to the door. Outside, I continued my act a little longer. Finally, I snuck into a courtyard and counted my riches. Fourteen rubles!

I could buy an ice cream. The smallest portion cost three rubles, the medium nine, the large twelve. But I nurtured a dream about a doll. It lived in my imagination, tall and beautiful. I flew over to the little stationary that sold toys. I visited it often, just to stare at the toys, and was regularly expelled, but this time was different—I had money. In emotional agony, I scooped out my change and dumped it on the counter. The seller counted the money sternly: my riches could buy me only the cheapest item in that store. Under the glass counter lay a little boy sailor with a celluloid head and stuffed limbs. The more expensive girl was beyond my means. My tears unspent, my hopes dashed, I accepted the toy sailor and stuffed it under the green sweater next to my heart.

But then I paused. Then I thought for a bit. Then I hugged the doll tightly. He was mine. My own little baby. I took off down the street jumping with happiness. I had my own little boy!

When I ran into our courtyard the little sailor wasn't under my sweater. I had dropped it running. My luck ran out. I knew it was justice. I had deceived everyone and God punished me. My little sailor had warmed my breast for a very short time.