

Beloveds

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It's Maslenitsa, or a blini week. The orphanage smells of butter and fruit preserves that volunteers brought in last Friday along with secondhand clothes, books, and old CDs. We stare out the windows at the other side of the street, where trees will soon swell with tender, green leaves. We dream about beautiful homes and perfect families—mothers, fathers, kids. Everyone is happy and cozy, snuggled in wool, lolling on couches or gathering for meals. Men read newspapers or paint walls; women bake pierogi or knit scarves, hats, sweaters. We dream our mothers still love us and that one day not too far into the future, they'll be knocking on our doors with armloads of toys and candy. Most of us don't remember what our mothers look like, but when we draw them, they appear tall and thin, dressed in white or pale-pink gowns, angels without wings.

Also, we aren't exactly sure how we got here—from a dark closet to a car to this building crowded with other scared, silent children. It's a mystery we must solve before we grow up and forget each other's smell, as we did our mothers'. Was it the smell of strawberries or meat cutlets or lilacs? Or was it that of vodka, cigarettes, or herring? We don't know. We don't remember. We don't remember our family names or what our mothers called us, what songs they sang or bedtime stories they told. We don't remember if we had beds before these hard metal ones with frayed cotton mattresses that reek of fish and other leftover food we hide underneath, squashed against the rusty springs of the bed frames.

We're all girls on this floor. Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Moldovan, Armenian, Georgian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, all or any combination. Our age is approximate—we measure our life not by birth years, but by the amount of luck that has befallen us since we were discovered: on a deserted street, in a car trunk, in a city dumpster, digging for food or just lying there, swaddled in bloody sheets or plastic bags, staring at the night sky. Or was it dawn already? A spring morning filled with birdsong and the smell of young leaves swaying over our puzzled newborn faces? We wish we knew.

Or maybe we don't, because we like to imagine. Our mothers' hands, for example, how they touch our cheeks or brush

our hair or give us a bath, all foam and bubbles. We imagine those hands large and soft, like scarves enveloping us, or small and chafed, grazing our shoulders. We try to catch them, to hold them in place, but they slip away like water. Sometimes we imagine our mothers as birds with large useless wings like those of peacocks or ostriches. They live on a faraway farm but can't get to us, can't make such a strenuous journey on those flat, skinny webbed feet. We want to help our mothers; we want to pick them up and carry them home, wherever that might be. We want to wash their hair and clip their toenails and sit them at a table and cook them a meal. But all we really want is to touch them, to know that they're real.

Try as we might, we can't imagine our fathers. We think of them as something volatile, fickle, inconstant. We think of them as March weather: rain, snow, wind. Even those of us who've seen them refuse to describe what they look like.

Once we get lucky, we get picked. We move to America, where we're adopted after years of paperwork. We live in a two-story house in Ohio, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia. There's a porch. There's a swing. A dog tied to a fence. Our foreign mother isn't at all what we imagined. She owns a truck and a turkey farm. She's big-boned and plump, wears oversized shirts, jeans or sweatpants, scuffed boots. Next to her, our foreign father isn't really visible. But he reads newspapers, makes coffee, feeds the dog. He drives to school and then to work and then back home. He washes dishes and laundry and throws steaks on the grill. He paints, he vacuums, he hangs lights and pictures. On Sundays he orders pizza, which he shares with us while watching basketball. He doesn't get drunk or beat our mother or sleep on the floor. He solves crosswords in bed. Occasionally he massages our feet or rubs sunscreen on our bodies, inspecting them for suspicious moles or sores that won't heal. We try to stand still as his fingers skim our shoulders, belly, back, the cheeks of our ass, where an old burn blossoms like a rose. He tickles us, and we giggle and poke him in the ribs. We know happiness when we feel it, and we describe it in our letters, which we mail diligently once a month.

Back home, in the communal kitchen, our supervisors read the letters out loud. They're all women—married, single, with or without children. They curse with verve and intention, bark orders, and slap our hands when we reach for more butter, sugar, or gooseberry preserves. They demand things of us: ironed sheets, scrubbed floors and commodes, washed windows. They steal from us too, cigarettes or candy, cute trinkets they find in a box of secondhand ruble: a hair clip, a brooch, a baby spoon. They're

as close to mothers as some of us will ever know. We're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, past the adoption age. We can't compete for love against our younger sisters and won't ever see America, but we're closer to getting out, to finding a job, a partner, a home. If life is a circle, we want ours to be as perfect as a blin on a hot skillet. We flip the blin with our bare fingers, then butter it and drizzle it with honey donated by a generous hand. We imagine that hand touching our hair, combing and recombining it, separating our locks and then braiding them together. We imagine our braids as beautiful as the stems of ripe, golden wheat on the old Soviet posters that hang on the walls, masking leaks and dirt. We pretend those stains are patterns drawn by artists, those who got away. We trace the patterns with our eyes and fingers because sometimes that's all we can do to entertain ourselves when we aren't at school, where we often get in trouble.

We aren't expected to enter colleges or universities but to become janitors, street sweepers, factory and construction workers, waitresses, dishwashers, saleswomen, hotel maids. It isn't that we're dumb or lazy, but we might not memorize as well or count as fast or understand the sentence completely—what's written and what's implied—and sometimes, when we're forced to recite poetry, we don't recognize our voices; words garble and drag and fade. Echoes fill our heads, as though we're being knocked against walls. We're trying hard not to faint.

Oh, but we're brilliant too! We know the multiplication table by heart and can duplicate Mendeleev's periodic chart in our sleep. We can add and subtract thousands, solve elaborate equations, all without paper. Once, in a school library, we discovered Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. We brought it up in class; we were the only ones who understood the complexity and simplicity of the premise, that *anything you can draw a circle around cannot explain itself without referring to something outside the circle—something you have to assume but cannot prove*. Like a line that can be extended indefinitely in both directions or having parents while being an orphan.

After supper, after the last blin disappears from our plates, we gather in front of the TV to watch our favorite show, a Brazilian telenovela, *Slave Isaura*. We sit on the edge of our chairs, empathizing with the smart, slender, petulant girl, her day-to-day escapades. The show is dubbed, but we can still catch those blissful foreign words slipping from Isaura's lips and floating about the room like tiny, warm clouds of breath. We dream about being transported to Rio de Janeiro, to the house of the Comendador, his kitchen, his bedroom, those silky sheets Isaura presses and stretches with her obedient hands. We've only watched eleven

episodes, but somehow, we know that after great suffering and injustices, Isaura will be saved and rewarded with a lifetime of happiness. We're convinced that in the end, those years of loss, grief, and servitude will be replaced with eternal freedom, with the love of a man who will break down the stone walls that keep her prisoner.

Or maybe she'll run away.

Like us.

One morning, we pack what little we have—a toothbrush, a clean T-shirt, panties and socks—and take off for the city, for the new life we hope to start on the streets. We walk in parks, smoke on benches, share crumbs of bread with mobs of pigeons. We go in and out of stores to get warm and to bum change. We are hungry. We are thirsty. At the mercy of strangers. We find a bar, a restaurant, where men buy us beer and vodka and viscid, spicy liqueur. Before long, our age is questioned. "Eighteen, nineteen, twenty," we lie and are ogled with cheerful suspicion, then patted on the cheeks, shoulders, between the knees. We feel smarter, taller, older, but also soft, like butter over hot blinis. We let men buy us food and pour us more drinks. We let them feel under our shirts, tug at the hooks of our bras until our breasts spill into their hands. Men hold our breasts like delicate, fragile orbs, eyes closed, lips pursed. Men give us money, clothes, makeup. They invite us to restrooms, cars, elevators, a dark flight of stairs in some apartment building on the outskirts of the city. They call us darling, baby, beauty, beloved, girl, and we shiver and moan in response. We've never been called so many kind names or been touched in so many sweet places. We know love when we feel it, deep inside, a dusting of tiny petals.

Days blur into weeks, dusks into dawns. Spring fades into summer. We find an empty basement, a construction site, a rooftop. A restaurant that stays open all night. We learn how to smoke weed, fake an orgasm, rip off a condom with our teeth, fall asleep on a commode. Once, in a public restroom, we discover a book, a novel without a cover. It's the story of a mother who loses her children to war and soldiers. She wants to be buried alive on top of her daughters. She refuses to part with them, to give them up. We feel tears drip from our eyes. We keep repeating the mother's name: Viktoria. Viktoria, the mother of Elena, Marina, Olga, Nina, Galina, Inna, Maria, Tatiana, Svetlana, Luidmila, Alina, Lailo, Karina, Polina, Natasha, Kristina, Sofia, Klavdia, Anastasia, Ella, Ekaterina.

We avoid the militia, although we know no one is looking for us. But we're underage, and we'll be punished for running away, for working the streets, for gathering city dust in our hands and

mouths. We'll be forced to return to school, to prove the unprovable theorems, to read more books. Something by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, something interminable and illuminating, lifelong.

One evening, as we're waiting on the corner of a busy intersection for the traffic light to change, we feel someone's eyes piercing us from a distance. It's a woman, stooping low, with a woven tote filled with empty milk bottles. Her hair stands in clumps, her face—a shriveled apple. She has a bruise on her cheek and a scratch on her neck; one of her front teeth is missing.

"Beloveds," she says and rushes toward us. "It's been so long. I thought I'd never see you again."

She opens her arms, and stupefied, we reach to hug her. We remember being told that all things happen for a reason, that when something has been taken from us, it's for a greater good that will reveal itself. We have to be patient, hardworking, sincere, for our mothers to return, to want us back. But as young girls, women, lovers, we also understand how tricky everything looks in the waning summer light, how unreliable, that if we'd had homes, beds, mothers, we wouldn't have been standing in the middle of a street, searching for a glimpse of recognition in a strange woman's face. We feel tired, in need of a shower and sleep, the touch of cool sheets against our nakedness.

We sleep for days, weeks, in a place that's no bigger than a closet and as dark as a womb. We sip hot broth made from cow bones, scratching out the marrow with our pinkies. The woman brushes our hair while we eat, smiling her toothless smile. We know she isn't our mother, but we can't admit that; we oblige her hunched back and her crooked, arthritic hands. She tells us stories that all begin, "When you were little—"

"Like that?" we ask and point at the walls, at the black-and-white pictures of a girl—three, five, seven years old.

"Yes, like that," the woman says. "When you were little, you loved to stand on the balcony and wave at people."

We nod, conjuring an image of a happy little person with braids and freckles. "What happened to us?" we ask. "Where did we go?"

The woman shrugs. "No idea. You disappeared. I came back from work, and you were gone."

"You left us alone while you went to work?" we ask, angry-like. "How many times? How often? You stupid old hag. We could've found matches and burnt ourselves. We could've fallen from the balcony. Opened the door to a stranger. We could've been stolen, raped, killed."

"But you're alive," the woman says. "You've been returned to me. And I won't let you leave. You're mine, mine, mine."

Her voice is soft, softer than rain that slithers down the window glass. She cries, and we feel pity—for her, for us, for the girl on the wall.

Time passes, but we don't know how much. Our beds are warm, and our bellies are full. We've stopped screaming in our dreams. We dust the shelves, wash the sheets, sweep the floor. We wear the old woman's clothes from back when she was young: short, square dresses with large collars and shoulder buttons, patent-leather shoes, high platforms two sizes too small. We apply her lipstick and her perfume. We smell like gardenias and look like our mothers, what we imagine they looked like before they had us. Every night, the woman reads to us—Marshak, Chukovsky, Mamin-Sibiriyak, Kipling's Mowgli—and we imagine ourselves naked, shivering inside a cave or running through the jungle amid a pack of wolves. We listen to her voice that stretches through the darkness pressing hard on our eyelids. We make her stop by pulling the book away and skimming her face with our hands. Her skin is tree bark against our fingers.

Finally, it's New Year's, and the woman drags a half-dead pine into the living room. It sheds snow and needles on the floor. The snow melts and turns to puddles, which we try to wipe with our socks. She's out of breath, and we're out of cigarettes, so we throw on her old coats and felt boots and scurry out to the store.

In the yard, all is white and merry. Trees are wrapped in snow as though in gauzy shawls; icicles like old men's beards hang off buildings. Children are rolling a snowman or sledding down an ice hill; a few are tracking the ground with their baby skis. The mothers hover close by, chirping and calling out the kids' names. Everywhere, holiday garlands sway and blink with lights. The roads are scraped but slick, and we slip a few times, fall and get up. As we turn the corner, searching for a grocery store or a cigarette kiosk, we peep in windows, behind which families have gathered for a festive meal. Everyone talks, laughs, eats, pressing starched napkins to warm mouths. For a moment, we stand still, mesmerized by these tender exchanges, these simple, uncomplicated ways.

It has gotten dark outside, streetlamps casting mean shadows on the snow. As we're paying for the cigarettes, pushing a wad of rubles through a narrow plastic opening, two militia men walk up to us. "What are your names?" they ask. "Age? Where do you live? Do your parents know that you smoke?"

We nod and feign innocence, raise our eyebrows, bat our frosted lashes. "Over there," we say and point at a dingy building of flats in the distance. "We live over there. The cigarettes are for our parents."

“You’re lying,” the men say and grab our elbows, the sleeves of the old woman’s coats.

“We’re lying,” we say. “Or not. The phrase is paradoxical. Since if it’s true, then we’re lying, and then it’s false. But if it’s false, and we aren’t lying, then it’s true. Gödel’s theorem. It’s neither provable nor disprovable. It’s outside the logic system.”

They slap us, pinch our cheeks, twist our arms.

And then we’re running.

Through the snow, through the backyards, through the trees.

We’re running.

Through strange streets and busy intersections, in and out of underground crossings.

We’re running.

Past buildings of flats, playgrounds, ice hills, holiday markets, bars and restaurants.

We’re running.

Past grocery stores, banks, post offices, and old churches, where sparrows huddle for warmth under hollow awnings.

We’re running.

And when we stop, it’s Maslenitsa again, and the orphanage smells of butter and fruit preserves that volunteers brought on Friday. In the kitchen, blinis slouch in tall stacks, while on TV, the Comendador’s son offers Isaura to either become his mistress or work on a plantation, cutting sugar cane. Sadness spreads over our hearts like batter over hot skilletts as we continue to stare out the windows and wait for tender, green leaves to unfurl on trees. Somewhere, across the street, is a perfect home, a perfect family, a perfect kid.

Somewhere—is our mother.