

# POPLARS

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It happened a very long time ago, in another century, another country. Cell phones hadn't been invented yet or color TVs, and to own a city apartment was the same as to own a plane or a ship. We lived in the heart of Moscow back then, in a communal flat, with high ceilings and decorative wooden moldings that resembled garlands of laurel leaves. Before the revolution, the entire three-story structure had belonged to a famous doctor, who, fearing the imminent socialist slaughter, had escaped to Europe. The building was then divided into flats, flats into rooms, rooms into sleeping nooks housing total strangers, who were forced to cohabit, and who knew all the secrets breeding in the darkness of their neighbors' dens.

The original oak floors in our flat were burned for heat during the war, and five years later all but a small patch in the kitchen had been replaced with smooth, pale boards that resembled skin. Stepping on them made me think of naked bodies piled in ravines or gas chambers, and how two of those bodies had been my parents. When my grandmother learned the truth, she didn't speak for a year. Her hair turned to ash overnight; her gait slowed, and her shoulders drooped, as though she were carrying two sacks of bones. But I wasn't yet old enough to understand loss or grief, how it's like a fire burning through everything it touches.

After the war, she worked interminable hours in a shoe factory. My grandfather remained missing. There was little hope of his return, but every time the doorbell rang, my grandmother tensed, abandoning whatever she was doing, and rushed through the dark hallway, only to shuffle back disappointed. That would never change, not until her hearing, as well as her mind, deteriorated and she didn't understand that decades had passed since the last Nazi plane had dropped bombs on our motherland, or that Stalin was dead, or that the USSR no longer existed.

In the spring of 1950, however, Soviet citizens cared about only four things: the rebirth of our nation, Stalin's health, American aggression, and the possibility of nuclear attack. Any personal woes were secondary to communal.

Three other people occupied our flat. Baba Katya and Baba Masha shared a room. During the war, they'd built tanks, and now they worked at the same shoe factory as my grandmother. They were both widows, short, gaunt, gray-haired, with sad eyes and sunken mouths. They talked little, ate even less, and still believed that their husbands and sons might come back to them.

The third woman, Angelina, lived alone—unmarried and childless. A nurse during and after the war, she was twenty-eight, tall, big-boned, and beautiful, with plump cheeks and braided hair that dangled to her waist. Her teeth were exceptionally straight, with a yellowish tint, perhaps from smoking. But otherwise, she appeared hefty and healthy, like a fine horse. Her hips swayed strong and wide, and her breasts rose under her shirts when she talked. She had a warm, trusting smile, which reminded me of flowers—snowdrops or crocuses—those first breaths of life sprouting through the dead earth in early spring. Her hands, too, were soft, slim, delicate, her nails short and filed even with the tips of her fingers; it seemed impossible to imagine those hands tending to raw wounds or dressings amputated limbs.

The building where she'd lived before the war had been hit by a bomb. Everyone else had died, her parents, grandparents, and younger sisters, and so she'd moved from one distant relative to another until she was given a room with us. I remembered very well the day she'd first arrived, with a brown suitcase and a scuffed tarp knapsack, from which later that evening she pulled long-forgotten delicacies: butter, kielbasa, chocolate, herring, canned beef, a slab of *salo*, and one red-cheeked apple that she passed to me. The rest she left in our communal kitchen, to be shared at dinner or breakfast. At the end of every month, she would bring us more food, and also soap, matches, cigarettes, salt, sugar. If she was late returning from work, I'd grow anxious, worrying she might be robbed, walking the streets in the dark, enveloped by shadows.

On Wednesday afternoons, a man visited Angelina. The other women worked long, inflexible hours, but as a nurse, she could switch shifts. I usually returned from school around three o'clock, unless there happened to be an emergency Komsomol assembly or city recycling, which required students to scavenge dumpsters for newspapers, bottles, or scrap metal. I never saw the man's face, so I couldn't guess his age, but he was tall, with straight, brown hair brushed behind his ears and thick hands. From the doorway of my room, I watched him adjust his uniform.

Many men wore soldiers' uniforms in the years after the war, some stolen or bought on the black market—thieves posing as heroes, plucking trust from lonely women. But perhaps the man served in the army or worked for one of the ministries: Internal Affairs or State Security.

When Angelina and her guest disappeared into her room, they always locked the door and left the key in the hole, so I couldn't spy. The man kept silent—that is, I never heard him talk to her, even when I pressed my ear to the wood, hoping to discern sighs or moans, the sounds of sweaty, willing flesh. Or maybe they didn't need to talk, playing some strange adult game I couldn't yet understand.

After the man left, Angelina would take a bath, and I would creep into her room and bury my face in her pillows, inhaling the man's cologne, deep and musky, like tar mixed with gunpowder. Her window would be open, and poplar fluff would drift in and settle on every surface. An alley of young, healthy trees flanked our building, so in late spring, all was coated in white downy clusters—floors and sills, books and blankets, and even her clothes draped over chairbacks. Upon emerging from the bathroom—her satin robe loose about her hips, her voluminous hair unbraided and spilling past her shoulders—Angelina would pour a glass of the wine the man had left and offer me a sip, but also candy or chocolate, or a puff of her cigarette,

which she smoked one after another while staring out the window, into the darkening silhouettes of the trees.

At sixteen, I hadn't even been kissed, so when Angelina asked me about sex one afternoon, I laughed a nervous laugh that told her everything she needed to know about my chaste existence in a country where the war had claimed twenty-four million lives, two thirds of them men. Every household had lost a father, a grandfather, a son, a brother, an uncle, a husband, a boyfriend. In my class, girls outnumbered boys by half, and each worried that she wouldn't find a man to marry. Back then, marriage was the only way for a girl to claim her womanhood, to assert her worth and pride.

Angelina bent over the nightstand and brushed her lips against mine, prying them open with her tongue. She tasted like grapes and ashes. I closed my eyes and pretend that she was a man. My body heaved toward hers. I longed for her to touch me the way her lover had touched her. I imagined his lips all over her body, and hers all over mine. As her soft hands cupped my breasts, I felt them swell, pushing against my housedress. She licked my ear, then traced it with the tip of her finger.

“Do you know that the inner shape of your ear resembles a fetus?”

“Not true.”

“See for yourself.”

We stumbled to the bathroom. A tarnished, pockmarked mirror revealed our flushed faces. Angelina rubbed her lips, stained purple at the corners. I turned my head sideways and examined my ear.

“Some ugly fetus,” I said. “Let me see yours.” I tried to kiss her neck, where it connected to her earlobe.

“Next time,” she said. “I need to go to work.”

That next time would never come, although I would dream about Angelina for years, my teenage reveries replaced by a dull, empty yearning.

She got arrested late the following night, and at first, I thought that it was due to our lustful behavior, that the government had found out. When the doorbell rang, my grandmother sat up in bed, and I did too. She didn't rush to the door, however, but pressed her finger to her lips. We heard voices: dry, hushed, male. We heard Angelina apologizing for not being dressed. We heard coughing, a shuffle of booted feet, and after that—nothing. When all the sounds had faded away, I tiptoed to the window, looking for her, but the poplars ambushed the view to the street. Behind me, my grandmother prayed quietly, swallowing words and drawing crosses in the air. Something terrible was about to happen to Angelina, and we couldn't help her. We were single women, whose lives had been ravaged by war, loss, hunger; if we disappeared tomorrow, no one would remember we'd even existed.

A day dragged by, and then a week. Silence pressed at the walls of our flat. We avoided talking about Angelina or about anything at all, and I saw Baba Katya and Baba Masha only during breakfast and for no more than a few minutes before they scurried out the door.

That morning no one breathed a word, not even about the weather, the all-night downpour, the gray, omnipresent sky that bulged over the city like a sodden sheet. In the kitchen, Baba Katya and Baba Masha sucked on cubes of raw brown sugar they dipped in and out of their black tea. My grandmother spooned lumps of oatmeal into my bowl, and I scraped the last of the margarine from a saucer that was missing a chunk, as though some animal had taken a bite. The women seemed calm yet restless, their eyes rimmed in purple. They weren't that old, sixty at most, but to me they looked as ancient and barren as tundra. One by one, all three finished the tea, stood, and walked down the hallway, dragging their trenches behind them like flattened tails.

I usually left for school right after, but that day, I'd decided to skip classes and stay at home. It was Wednesday, and my hope was that the man in the uniform would show up and I could reveal to him the dreadful truth of Angelina's disappearance and ask for his help. For a while, I tried to read, sitting by the open window. The rain had stopped, and the air smelled of wet dirt and new, healthy grass pushing between the poplars. An idea spooled in my head. A flicker of light that pulsed brighter and brighter.

In the hallway, I stood before Angelina's door, burning with curiosity. Not a soul had gone into that room since her arrest; a thin strip of tape sealed the door against the frame. Licking my fingers, I moistened the tape and lifted it away. My throat tightened, and I felt cold and dizzy, as though I were about to cross into another world. I forced the door open.

To my surprise, Angelina's room wasn't in disarray. Her bed had been made, her clothes folded and stowed in her wardrobe, that crippled, bulky box leaning against the wall. A leg was missing, and Angelina had replaced it with a fat book. Her slippers had been tucked under her chair, one that was usually covered with blouses and skirts and hosiery. She must've walked barefoot to the hallway before putting on her shoes. On a small, ink-stained desk sat a nearly empty bottle of wine, and I poured what remained into my mouth. A delicious warmth spilled down my chest, making me think of Angelina's tongue and how she'd kissed me. I opened her wardrobe and fingered her dresses, her shirts, her underwear in a neat stack. Everything smelled of her favorite lilac soap, and when I dug in deeper, I discovered two last slivers at the back of the shelf.

It only took a moment to shed my clothes and slip on hers—her blouse, her skirt, her stockings, even her panties, but not her bra, which was large and floppy. In a pocket of her satin robe, draped across the metal headboard, I found a lipstick and a pack of cigarettes, and the next thirty minutes were spent lazing on her bed, smoking and imagining the man in the uniform unbuttoning my blouse, unhooking my stockings.

The doorbell cut through the silence. I rammed the cigarette in the ashtray, the filter red and glossy from the lipstick, and jumped from the bed, trying to determine what to do next—change clothes or open the door, or pretend that no one was home. The ringing persisted, and my breathing quickened, my heart slammed against my ribcage. I ran out of the room, kicking off Angelina's shoes, which flew from my feet, one landing in the hallway, the other on the doormat.

It was indeed him, although I couldn't be sure because I'd never seen his face, and because all men in uniform look somewhat alike. The man was freshly shaven, with taut skin and

high cheekbones. His eyes were the color of a cool summer sky, washed blue. He didn't seem surprised. He'd brought wine, chocolate, and a small envelope that he tucked back inside his pocket as he ogled me. I was tall for my age, but not as tall as Angelina, and skinnier, so her skirt nearly reached my ankles and billowed like a velvety curtain. Unbraided, my bushy brown hair rested on my shoulders.

"Hello," he said in a low, warm, reticent voice that made me think of a frayed blanket. "Anyone home?"

I shook my head.

He stepped closer, and I trembled, all of me. I could smell his breath. He set the wine and the chocolate on a narrow bench next to the coatrack, then grabbed my head with both hands and pulled me in, his mouth eating away Angelina's lipstick. I didn't try to fight or free myself, seized with terror and desire, when he picked me up and carried me to Angelina's room.

On her bed, he began to undress me, freeing my breasts and my hips from the clutter of her clothes. When I was completely naked, shaking under his gaze, he pulled off his uniform, his long, loose cotton underpants wrapping his legs like pillowcases.

I shut my eyes, and the man turned me over. He wedged himself between my legs and told me to breathe, the tip of him poking around like a thick finger. He raised me to my knees, and for a moment, he didn't move or say anything. His breathing quickened. He wetted me with his saliva and pushed through me. I collapsed from pain, and he collapsed on top. I struggled to get away, to buck him off, but he continued to thrust and jerk until tears ran down my face and blood down my legs. Still, he didn't stop, shaking harder and harder, pouring in his moans. Under his weight, my body went limp.

When he finished, he balled up Angelina's robe and wiped himself, then tossed it on the bed.

"Don't cry," he said. "It had to happen sometime." From his pants on the floor, he took out the envelope and placed it on the pillow next to my face. "Be smart, or things might get difficult."

Before he left, he rummaged inside Angelina's nightstand, her desk, and the wardrobe. I lay on my side and watched him pull out her clothes, her hats, her meager jewelry, which he stuffed into his pockets. A pile rose on the floor, and he kicked it with his boot a few times.

"Do you know where she is?" I mouthed through tears.

"Do you?"

"No."

"I wouldn't worry. People come; people go. That's life." He lit two cigarettes and passed me one. On the bed, he continued to smoke, stroking my hair and shedding ashes. "I had a good time," he said, then dragged me off the bed and groped under the mattress, where he found a small stack of papers tied with a string.

As the door closed behind him with a loud thud, I sat naked on the floor, touching my cigarette to her bras, setting them aflame.

Everything burned that afternoon—Angelina’s clothes, her room, our flat, the laurel leaves on the ceiling, the last patch of oak floors. I spent a week in the hospital, receiving treatment for minor injuries and searching among the nurses for Angelina. They were mostly older women with sorrowful, wrinkled faces, changing my bandages, bringing me food, the leftover bread and fruit compote other patients couldn’t eat. One nurse gave me her dead daughter’s clothes saved from the war. She wept as she watched me pull on a short-sleeve cotton dress and a long, wooly cardigan riddled with tiny holes.

While in the hospital, I was interrogated twice by militia, and before being discharged, I was visited by two men in gray suits, with lean, serious faces that made me think of trees stripped of leaves yet alive, twitching at the slightest wind. The men pelted me with questions over and over again, their voices low and echoless. They smiled and patted my head and wrote in their thin notebooks. They gave me chocolate, then threatened to take it away if I didn’t confess about the fire, how I’d started it and why. Still, I stuck to my story: about not feeling well that day, missing school, putting a teakettle on the stove, falling asleep, waking up from the smoke, jumping out of the window, nearly breaking my leg. I sounded dumb yet truthful. I was let go.

Baba Katya and Baba Masha had been assigned new rooms on the outskirts of the city. We, on the other hand, were placed with another family temporarily. They were sullen and tight-lipped, locked their room and hid food. Forbidden to use their fridge, we couldn’t keep anything perishable and had to eat everything as soon as we’d cooked it. In the fall, when my pregnancy ballooned out of my dress, I was expelled from school and switched to night classes. My old friends abandoned me. As painful as that was, I couldn’t blame them; a girl’s chastity remained her only virtue. My condition, my ruin shamed and frightened them, like a war they couldn’t win but would be obliged to fight, protecting their own innocence, their homes and their families. My grandmother agonized and urged me to confess about the baby’s father, but I was afraid that if I did, I might be arrested and disappear, too.

At night, head under the blanket, I would sob inconsolably, my breasts engorged and leaking, the memory of that dark afternoon searing through my heart, leaving ashy trails. I would chew on the pillow and think about Angelina, her gentle smile, her soft hands, the hushed flutter of her bare feet over the floorboards.

We moved a lot after the baby was born, eschewing people and their tireless curiosity, finally settling in a small provincial town where kids played in mud unsupervised and my grandmother and I found jobs in a fish cannery. Our room was in another communal flat, with an older, childless couple who didn’t ask many questions and kept mostly to themselves, but who bothered to leave extra food or warm clothes by our door. Bit by bit, the joy of raising a daughter overlaid the pain of her conception, all the loss. It seemed impossible that something so tender and pure and forgiving could be born out of such darkness, flooding the world with love and hope. For hours after work, I would curl on the floor and watch the baby scoot and inch her way to my face, belly, breasts. Her warmth; her sticky, ticklish fingers; her wet lips and bursts of unrestrained laughter—all stitched together into a cozy quilt. I wrapped myself in it day and night, my breaths kindling next to my daughter’s.

Time marched on; gulags turned to stones. After Stalin's death in 1953, millions of political prisoners were released and rehabilitated. Millions more had starved on slave ships or perished in labor camps. Where bodies lay buried in permafrost, cities rose. Flats transformed into apartments with balconies and roof gardens. Unlike me, my daughter, Mira, graduated from college, became a doctor, fell in love, and married another doctor. After the collapse of the USSR, they traveled abroad and then immigrated to America, where they bought a house in Brighton Beach and indulged in all the foods they'd been denied as children, and where the sound of the ocean subdued histories. My only grandchild, Regina, grew up proud and fearless, unharmed by wars and revolutions. She never learned to speak Russian, and I never learned to speak English, so there wasn't any real way for us to communicate. I'd regretted that at first but later came to regard it as fortunate. After all, what could I possibly teach her that she didn't know already? The last I heard, she'd shaved her head, burned her bra, and was marching on Washington with her friends.

My grandmother lived to be a hundred. By that time, she'd grown a large hump, which from a distance resembled a bloated knapsack. I imagined it was filled with her memories, stored away from people and old age. When she died, I discovered—inside a scuffed winter boot, in a shoebox—my grandfather's letters sent to her from the labor camp. The last letter had arrived in March of 1950, only months before the fire. Reading those letters, I understood that my grandmother never answered them, perhaps fearing that she, too, would be exiled to Siberia. Afraid that our flat could have been searched, she must have carried the letters with her to work, which was how they'd survived the fire. But denied her replies, my grandfather couldn't have known where we'd moved or how to find us. Or maybe he'd already died, erecting the Kolyma Highway, his bones paved over with rocks and asphalt.

One late spring, years after my grandmother's death, I returned to Moscow, to the street where our building of flats had become a posh restaurant overlooking the alley of old poplars. Through tinted windows, I glimpsed well-dressed men and women gathered around candlelit tables, lips curled into vague, satiated smiles. My gaze drifted up to the second floor, where our communal kitchen had been—and where Angelina, like a magician, had pulled foods from her tarp knapsack—and then to her bedroom, where, swallowing smoke from her cigarette, she'd first kissed me.

The day was warm yet breezy, a sheet of clouds overhead. The poplars trembled and shook, spitting soft, white fluff. The wind picked it up and carried it forward, from one window to another, from that street to the next.