

NATASHA MANCUSO

## Incurable Fate

*Disease can be cured, fate is incurable. (Chinese proverb)*

1. Marina woke up from a strange sensation. She reached around her belly and felt it with the palm of her hand. Tight, very tight. She lay motionless for a minute, waiting. Familiar contours of the objects in her room started to take shape as her eyes adjusted to darkness. A desk, a lamp, three stocked bookshelves. A patch of moonlight lay across the white starched linens on her side of the bed. She felt a dull pain growing between her hips, resonating into her back. A small mechanical clock ticking on the desk showed ten past two. As her mother predicted, it was happening in the middle of the night.

She tapped her sleeping husband on the shoulder.

“Zhenya, I think it’s time.”

Two sets of blankets, diapers, little hats and socks were packed weeks ago. One set in pale blue, one in pink. She reached for the blue set first.

She thought she’d name the baby Grey, like the young captain in *the Red Sails*, which she read ages ago. Grey is a beautiful name, full of promise and masculinity. Stop that! To name the baby before he’s born was a bad omen. Mother told her so. She folded the pink set in half, placed it into the bag. She lingered. She wasn’t sure what she wanted a girl to be named. Maybe Yula after her great-grandmother. But a boy would definitely be Grey.

As she took the packed bag into the corridor, Marina saw her mother-in-law emerge from her room. An old robe, worn inside out, enveloped Antonina’s round figure. Pieces of red thread hung from under her arms and off the ends of her sleeves. Ruffles of her white flannel nightgown, covered by the robe, peeked out unevenly in unexpected places.

“I heard noise,” she said.

“It’s time. I’m taking Marina to the hospital,” Zhenya said, squeezing his temples.

Antonina pursed her lips, forming deep wrinkles on her not-yet-old face. She ran her hand through tight curls of her short slightly gray hair. Then she turned around and hurried back to her room.

“Marina is in labor,” her loud whisper reached the room.

“What?” an annoyed grunt blended with a squeak of the tired, old bed.

“They are going to the hospital right now,” Antonina continued.

“Tell her to bring me back a grandson,” the grunt was turning into mumble, “to carry on my name.”

Marina glanced at her husband and rolled her eyes. Antonina reappeared from her room. Over the flannel nightshirt and the inside-out robe, she was now wearing a winter coat. She clenched an old, ripped purse with one hand and closed the bedroom door with the other.

Marina froze at the sight of her mother-in-law. She’s not going with us, is she? Quickly figuring out what to do, she stepped into the hallway, where Zhenya was tying his shoes, and tugged on his sleeve.

“What?” he said standing up.

Without turning to face the room, Marina motioned with her eyes toward Antonina, who was now digging for house keys in her bottomless purse.

He glanced at his mother and repeated: "What?"

Marina made a panicked face, nodded towards the room and shook her head 'no.'

"Mom," Zhenya called into the room, "where are you going?"

"To the hospital," Antonina replied.

"There is no need," he said gently, "I'll take Marina, no need for all of us to go. And don't wake up father."

"But what if it happens on the way?" His mother protested. "I'm a nurse."

"Zhenya is right," Marina chimed in. "We'll make it just fine, Antonina Yosifovna. Go back to sleep."

Mechanically, Antonina pulled out a chair from behind the dining table. She lowered herself without taking her blinking, nervous eyes off her children. The disheveled layers of her coat, her robe and her nightshirt settled like leaves of multicolored cabbage.

"We better hurry," Marina said feeling another contraction. "It will take me all of thirty minutes to walk to Krasnoarmeyskaya (Red Army) Hospital."

"I'll call a taxi," Zhenya offered.

"At this hour of the night it will take longer," she said. "Let's go."

Stepping out of the door, Marina glanced back at the dimly lit room where her dazed mother-in-law was still clutching her purse. Unaware of being watched, Antonina raised her free hand and made the sign of the Cross in the direction of her children.

2. The streets were covered with hard, squeaky snow, the kind that, in the Ukraine, comes in early November and stays until March. Zhenya led the way slowly, silently. Uphill, past the school, then across a square with the new cinema.

Every few steps Marina stopped, held her breath, then blew it out through a small opening of her tightened mouth. The warm air unrolled from her lips as a stream of thick, visible steam, widening and thinning into cold air.

"Are you all right?" Zhenya asked slowing his pace. "Want to sit?"

"No," she replied. "I don't want to have this baby out on a street."

Looking at his back she longed for his touch. Ever since he got drafted, two months after the wedding, she wished he was near, touching, holding, speaking to her in his kind, gentle manner.

"Zhenya," she called out. "Wait."

He stopped under a street light. She saw his breath puff out. His hands moved anxiously inside his pockets. She heard the quiet snapping of his fingers - a nervous habit she just recently discovered. She caught up to him and slid her gloved hand under his arm.

"Did you forget your gloves?" she asked knowing the answer.

"Yes," he said somewhat apologetically.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"Are you happy?"

He looked at her and tried to smile.

"I hope it's a boy," she said. "Do you think it's a boy?"

"I don't know," he said.

"All that time while you were gone, I was picturing a little boy, looking just like you. A little Zhenechka."

"Maybe it's a boy." He nodded.

3. “You have plenty of time, mamasha,” the nurse said at the check in.

She was a tall woman with a low voice and short hair colored in many shades of blond. Her white uniform girdled her ample parts into a solid authoritative figure. Having completed admission paperwork, she turned to Zhenya with a commanding look.

“No men beyond these doors,” she said.

Marina turned to look at her husband one last time. He was still wearing his coat; his hat, the one she knitted, was clenched in his hand. He was pale but smiled discreetly and waved good-bye with the fingers of his free hand.

In the maternity ward, Marina was to share a small room with two others - a teacher from Kiev and a young girl from Mohnochka, a village close to the city.

“The teacher is about your age. What are you, twenty-five?” the nurse chatted as they walked down the murky hospital corridors. “Educated woman, a bit snobby. The other one is barely seventeen. What’s the hurry with these peasant girls, I don’t know.”

She looked at Marina inquisitively.

“Your husband looks young,” she said.

“He’s twenty-two,” Marina said. “A year younger than I. We’ve been married almost a year.”

“I’ll have to check you and then, to your room to rest. Take off your clothes. I’ll give you a gown.”

“I brought my own,” Marina responded, reaching for her bag. She pulled out a pressed nightshirt and a robe with a bright pattern of pink and red geometric flowers.

“The hospital stuff is not good enough for you?”

“I prefer my own,” Marina said firmly and began to pull off her sweater.

“What’s this?” she heard the nurse’s voice before she emerged from her sweater.

“What’s what?”

“This?” the nurse pointed to her belly.

“Oh, I forgot,” Marina said feeling a wave of embarrassment fill her face. In the last month she had grown beyond the size she ever expected. Her skin that seemed ready to burst at any moment was pushing her belly button out of its cavity and it sat there, atop her enormous belly, like a wet pebble on a beach ball. Two weeks ago she decided to tape it back in place, so it wouldn’t poke through her clothes. The nurse removed a piece of stubborn tape off her skin.

“Sorry,” Marina whispered.

“Sorry? I’ve never seen anything like this,” the nurse said laughing.

“I didn’t know what to do with it,” Marina defended.

“Did your mother see this? She wouldn’t let you do a stupid thing like this.”

Marina thought of her mother. No she didn’t see it. Nobody did. She started to open her mouth to offer the nurse an explanation: my mother is far away, I got pregnant only a month into my marriage to a man I had dated only for two months. I live with my in-laws in a tiny apartment, and our relationship is not what you’d call smooth. I wish my mother was with me. Instead, I have my mother-in-law. She’s clumsy, always in the wrong place at the wrong time. She’s always in a hurry even when she has no place to be. I can’t talk to her, not about this sort of things.

The words almost came out. Marina stopped herself. There was no sense in telling her life story to a stranger. No use.

4. It was nearly five o'clock. The gray light of the Ukrainian winter sun was creeping toward the east end of the sleeping city. Four beds in the maternity room were placed symmetrically along the perimeter of the room. Two were empty.

"You can take the one by the window," the nurse said. "It gets hot in the other one. The radiator is just behind it."

In her bed, the teacher lay quietly facing a naked white wall.

"Nuuuurse," a deep, throaty moan reached them from a dark corner of the room.

"What you want, Yula?" the nurse said with no traceable compassion.

"I'm in pain, nurse, give me something, I'm in paaaaain."

"Of course you are in pain. You're in labor. Everybody here is in pain."

The nurse showed Marina to her bed by the window.

"Didn't the doctor give you something?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Yes, those candies he gave me, nasty things, I ate them all, but they don't help me nothing," the voice grew strong and angry from the dark.

"Quiet, quiet, there. You'll wake the whole hospital. What candy?"

The nurse stepped toward Yula's bed and picked up an empty package from her night stand.

"You ate these?" she screamed, "These are rectal suppositories! You dumb thing you, I'll be back." She ran out of the room.

Dumbfounded, Marina slipped under covers. She promised herself that no matter what, no matter how much it hurts she wouldn't be like that. How embarrassing. No control, no shame.

"Nurse," the peasant girl was yelling into the hallway. "Nuuuurse!"

Following the teacher's example, Marina turned to her side. She felt like crying. She thought of Zhenya and wished she could see him one more time before baby comes. She propped herself on her elbow, grabbed a hold of the windowsill and pulled herself up to her knees. Springs squeaked beneath her. She felt the glass of the window with her hand. It was cold reflecting the cold outside. From the window on the second floor of a four-story hospital building, she looked at the street below. A bench stood frozen just across a walkway. A street light shed yellow beam onto the hospital's corner and a naked tree.

A figure stepped forward from the light. She recognized the shape of his coat and the knitted hat.

He didn't see her right away. Dull hospital lights barely lit the hallways and rooms. She waved, trying to get his attention. But he kept looking up, higher than where she was and more to the left. Then finally, he turned and looked right at her window. When their eyes met, she waved again. And then, waved him away. Go home, she mouthed into the glass. Go home, you'll catch a cold. He shrugged. Go, she tried again, and then spelled it with the sign language alphabet she had made up and taught him for just such an occasion.

"G-O\_H-O-M-E."

He nodded.

She watched him walk away into the street where the first morning traffic was emerging. The contractions seemed to subside. She lowered herself back into the bed and closed her eyes.

5. Overnight the winter blew white, sparkling powder onto the world. Meticulously it detailed the curves of iron fence around the hospital, highlighted branches of the naked tree outside of Marina's window and fixed in place the carpet of leaves underneath the bench. Bright sun crept through the frosted glass, onto the painted wood window frame, down the wall and on Marina's pillow, blinding her in her sleep.

Awakening, Marina felt her belly. False alarm? Maybe they'll send me home, she thought.

She looked over her shoulder into the room. The teacher on her right was awake. She was an attractive woman with short brown hair and a pair of reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose. Noticing Marina's movement, she looked over the rims of her glasses, taking her gaze away from *Zdorovye* (Health) magazine propped on her belly.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," Marina replied and looked farther into the corner from which Yula had been moaning and calling a nurse the night before.

Yula was eating from a plate of hot cereal. The flushed cheeks of her round face showed no sign of a sleepless night. Her red lips moved rhythmically as she shoved spoon after spoon of milky buckwheat into her mouth. Heavy dark red hair, woven into a waist-length braid, hung off her head like a rope. Milk dripped off her spoon onto her fleshy, freckled chest half-exposed from the hospital gown.

"She's only quiet when she eats," the teacher whispered to Marina now looking over her glasses at Yula's chewing face. "I'm Rita, by the way."

"I'm Marina."

"I know, I heard you come in last night."

"My contractions stopped," Marina said.

"That doesn't mean anything. I've been here two days now. Mine seem to come and go. They said if it doesn't happen by tonight, they will induce me. When it's time, it's time."

"So, they won't let me go home?"

"I wouldn't count on it."

The spoon clinked on the empty dish as Yula finished her breakfast. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, burped and, satisfied, fell back on her pillow.

"Nurse!" She yelled out. Her voice carried with it new energy.

"Here we go again," the teacher said with an irritated grimace and looked back at her magazine.

Marina rolled onto her side, pushed herself up with her right hand as she once saw a pregnant woman do at a doctor's office. Her body felt heavy and achy. To the bathroom, she thought, then back to bed. If only she'd stop yelling, maybe I could sleep a bit more.

When she came back, the room was full of men and women in white coats. A doctor in the center, with Yula behind him, was addressing the group.

"You remember our friend Yula. She didn't like those 'nasty candies' we prescribed for her last night." The group shuffled; some heads turned away concealing suppressed chuckles.

"Yula, I think you have caused enough trouble," he said with a smile. "Nurse, transfer her to the delivery room."

Rita raised an eyebrow and mouthed 'thank you.'

While the doctor was examining Rita, Marina looked out the window. Cars rushed past the hospital down the busy Krasnoarmeykiy Prospect. The iron fence stretched to the far corners of the square surrounding the hospital. Vertical aspens and pine trees, planted along the fence and covered with snow, protected the building from the clamor of the city.

"And how are you doing?" she heard the doctor's voice behind her.

"Fine, thank you," she said. "I don't feel any contractions. Not since 5 o'clock."

"We'll have to do something about that, won't we," he said feeling her belly.

She reclined on her pillow. He held her wrist with his long fingers and looked at his watch.

“There is not much to you,” he said looking at her stick thin arm. “If it wasn’t for that belly, you’d weigh nothing at all,” he chuckled. “Maybe we have twins here. Are you ready for that?”

“I brought two baby sets,” she said. “One for boy, one for girl.”

“Good,” he nodded reaching for his stethoscope.

From the hallway, Yula’s wailing was reaching the open door as if from the bottom of a ceramic jar.

“She’s a screamer, that one,” doctor remarked. “I don’t get country girls here very often, but when I do, the whole hospital knows.”

Marina felt his hands examine her. When it’s my turn, she thought, I’ll just clench my teeth and fists. I won’t cause any trouble to anyone. No screaming. How embarrassing. Not a peep. I can do it with dignity.

“Everything is looking fine,” the doctor said. “Nurse, let’s give Marina some chocolate. The bitter Army chocolate. It helps induce labor,” he explained. “We need to help it along, or you’ll be here until spring. And, you’ll have to eat something.”

“Thank you doctor. I’m not hungry,” she said.

“No matter,” he said. “You need your strength.”

**6.** The chocolate worked. By ten o’clock the next morning, her contractions were strong and regular. The doctor came and ordered Marina into the delivery room.

She braced herself, repeating her promises: be strong, maintain dignity, no screaming. She pushed, clenching her teeth, gripping the sheets. In short moments of rest she thought of Zhenya: Only two weeks after we met he proposed. Love at first sight. Even though his parents didn’t want me, he stood by our love. He insisted. He was strong. And I’ll be strong. For him.

She pushed again.

“The baby is breech,” the doctor stated. “It’s going to take a while.”

She felt heavy drops of sweat roll into her hair, down her neck and back. The thin cotton of her gown, pushed up to her waist and, soaked in sweat, was clinging to her body like an armor of wet autumn leaves. The time seemed to have stopped.

Every part of Marina’s body seemed engaged in a sort of pushing, pulling or straining. She thought of Yula. She wished she was Yula: free, without pretense, without stupid promises and useless pride. She’d open her mouth and fill the room with a high pitch yelp. The thought of it made her blush.

Just after four o’clock Marina felt some relief. The doctor’s head emerged from behind the washed-out hospital sheets.

“It’s a girl,” he said.

Marina dropped her head on the pillow. Thank God, it’s over.

She felt blood rush out of her face. She opened her eyes, stared at the ceiling. She listened.

A flock of nurses clustered at the foot of her bed. She looked beside her. Everyone left.

Exhausted eyelids begged to close. She gave in. She listened.

Instruments clinked in a sterile dish. Feet shuffled. Voices muttered under surgical masks. Something was missing. She listened closer. A big clock on the wall counted seconds. Tick-tack, tick-tack. Fatigue was settling in. She started to feel like she was slipping away. Tick-tack. Something’s missing, she thought. I can’t hear her. She should be crying. I can’t hear her.

“Why can’t I hear her?” she yelled into the ceiling above her. Her eyes opened wide, a jolt of energy pulled her off the pillow. “Doctor!”

Another head emerged from beyond the sheets. Nurse’s eyes met Marina’s.

“Easy, easy,” she said. “Doctor is working on it.”

Straining to pull up her tired body, she stretched her neck like a wounded swan, her gaze reaching the end of the bed. Amidst a messy pile of sheets and towels, she was hoping to see a pink, squirming baby.

She saw the doctor’s hands. They cradled a motionless, pale little body. Little legs and arms hung heavy and lifeless like those of a rag doll. Marina gasped with horror.

“Hot water,” the doctor commanded. He lifted the baby and turned away. As the nurses parted to let him through, Marina saw a baby tub, just like the one she asked Zhenya to buy after the baby was born. Steam rose from the tub. The white coats hovered over it and enveloped the doctor.

She felt something build inside her chest. A force she knew she could not control. It was pressing, hurting more than the labor pains, draining her of the last bit of strength. It moved up her throat to her mouth and she let out a despairing cry. Her first cry. Tears came at once, flooding her face and her chest.

A nurse’s hand caught her, as she, slipping into unconsciousness, nearly hit the railing of the bed.

7. It must have been the pungent scent of salts that brought her back. Or, perhaps, a sound. As if waking from a dream, Marina opened her eyes, moved her fingers. Her feet were cold and tingly. She turned to see if she was still in the delivery room. She wasn’t.

She recognized the feel of her bed and the window of the maternity ward. The nurse stood over her holding a small glass bottle.

“That’s better,” she said. “You can’t be so sensitive.”

“What happened?” Marina mouthed, unable to produce a sound from her dry throat. She swallowed hard. “What happened to my baby?” she asked again.

“Oh, what happened? The doctor had to dip her three times, to get the blood going, you know. You screamed. I didn’t know who to help - you or the doctor. What are you going to do when she starts running and bruising her knees?”

“Is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” the nurse said. “Once she started crying she wouldn’t stop. She’s a wailer, that one.”

“I want to see her.”

“You’ll see her in a few days,” the nurse said. “Quarantine - hospital policy, to avoid infection. When your milk comes in we’ll bring her to feed. Until then, sleep, eat and rest. And take these. You’ll need it.”

“What is it?”

“For pain, and to help you sleep,” nurse said.

Marina swallowed the pills. She felt them go down one by one slowly and reluctantly, threatening to stick to the walls of her throat. Was I screaming? She thought. Was I?

She closed her eyes. The pounding in her head was giving way to a dull, monotone throbbing. Must be the drugs. She felt a stirring in her stomach. She reached down. It was soft and empty. Her baby was gone from inside her.

She realized suddenly that she had lost track of time. Was it still January 8th or was it a day later? She reached mechanically for the clock on her night table. I’m not home, she remembered. There is no alarm clock. My watch? I gave it to Zhenya.

“Is that your husband over there?” she heard the nurse’s voice. “In a gray coat and knitted hat?”

“Yes,” Marina tried to sit up.

“No, no,” the nurse waived her down. “Don’t get up. You’ll bleed. I don’t need a bleeder on my hands. You stay in bed. I’ll send somebody down to tell him you are all right and to come back in the morning. Anything you need?” She glanced at Marina and left without waiting for an answer.

8. Marina dreamed she came home. Sunshine poured through the windows. Bouquets of flowers were placed in her room. Daisies. Lots of them. Where did they get daisies in the middle of winter, she thought.

Her mother came and took the baby in her arms, rocking it gently, humming an old Ukrainian song. Her mother smiled, passed the baby to Zhenya. He seemed bigger in her dream. The rolled up sleeves of his shirt revealed muscular arms. He tickled the cocoon of blankets in his arms. Smiled with approval at Marina. Passed the baby to his parents.

“Yuuuuuula!” Marina heard in her dreams. “Yuuuula!” The name echoed.

Her mother-in-law held the baby, her hands were shaking and for a second it seemed like the little body was going to tip over. Marina’s heart skipped a beat. “Hold the head!” Marina said. “Don’t let the head drop!” But all was well. Antonina propped the head with her elbow. “Don’t worry,” she said looking up at Marina. Her eyes were moist. Her thin lips stretched in a smile, smoothing the skin over her cheekbones.

“A fine soldier you brought home,” Marina heard the voice of her father-in-law. “My name will live on.”

Marina opened her eyes. Her forehead was moist.

“Yuuuula!” she heard a man’s voice coming from a distance.

She looked around the room. The teacher’s bed was unmade but empty. Farther in the corner, Yula was sleeping with her face to the wall. Her back was moving up and down, producing a satisfied snort on each exhale.

“Yuuuuuuula!” the voice was coming from the window.

Marina raised herself and looked out. A man was standing by the bench, where her husband usually stood. He was dressed in a thick farmer’s jacket. A huge fur hat was propped atop his small head. With it, he must have been all of five feet tall.

Having noticed Marina in the window, he choked on the “Yuuuuu...” and swallowed the “...la”.

“Where is my wife?” he demanded as if there was a party going on and he wasn’t invited.

Marina put her hands together and placed them under her cheek.

“Wake her up!” the little man demanded. His cheeks were red with frost bite. His legs dug into the snow beneath him like roots of a tree.

Marina shook her head ‘no.’

“I want to talk to her! Is she in there?” he was persistent. “Where is she, that woman!” He spit on the ground. “Wake her up!”

Marina shook her head again and lowered herself back into bed.

“Yuuuuuula!”

“He’s at it again,” Rita’s voice came from behind.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” Marina said.

“The nurse said you have a girl.”

“Yes.”

“Me too. 50 cm, 3kg 100g. We’ll name her Raya. Like my mother.”

“That’s nice,” Marina nodded.

“They brought a package for you while you were sleeping. Here,” Rita reached to her nightstand. “Oh, and here are the stats on your girl.” She picked up a sheet of paper and read out loud: “Marina Shmarova, a girl, born at 4:10pm, January 8th, 1973, 49 cm, 3kg 300g.”

“They said I won’t see her for three days,” Marina remembered.

“They say that to everybody. Hospital policy. But if everybody’s doing well, no infection in the room, they’ll bring the babies sooner for feeding. Assuming your milk comes.”

Marina pulled the collar of her robe open and looked inside. Two wet round circles appeared on her nightgown. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem,” she said.

“It might be for me,” Rita said. “When her brother was born, my milk didn’t come for three days. And even so, not for a long.” She smiled. “You slept almost a full day.”

“Did I?”

“Yula had a boy. Her husband has been yelling at that window for half a day now.”

“Yes, he doesn’t seem to understand what’s going on here.”

“No, he doesn’t. He might have been celebrating too, you know,” Rita said and clicked her index finger under her jaw producing a hollow sound. “Drinking,” she explained.

“I’ll go talk to the nurse. Maybe they can talk some sense into him.”

When Rita left, Marina reached for her package. It was a plastic bag, warm to the touch. She looked in and found a thermos and another plastic bag. It smelled of chicken cutlets. She suddenly realized she was starving. She dug deeper and found prunes, cottage cheese and a folded sheet of paper. “2nd Floor, Room 12” was written in big letters on the face of it.

She recognized the familiar string of bead-like letters. For months, her husband’s handwriting was the only part of him that was reachable.

“Marina! Congratulations! We have a daughter! I love you, kisses and hugs from the family. How did everything go? How do you feel? I made broth from canned chicken (in the thermos). Found prunes and good cheese at Besarabka Market (mother said that’s what you’d need). Maybe you want something else? You can write me a note and give it to the nurse. She’ll bring it to me. Mother bribed her with some deficit chocolates and a bottle of good vodka. Can’t wait to take you home.”

The words made her lightheaded. Eager to see him, to love him, she wanted to run downstairs, find him in the big snowy city, press against him. She trembled with anticipation.

“Good news from home?” Rita said walking into the room.

“Just a letter from my husband,” Marina said blushing like a teenager.

**9.** Next morning the nurse brought the babies for feeding. She wheeled in a metal table with high borders on top of which lay three bundles of blankets. One of the bundles fussed and was getting red in the face. Another crinkled its nose and produced a cough-like sound. The third seemed content sleeping.

“Room #12” was written on the side of the table.

The nurse picked up one baby, unwrapped it and checked the writing on a piece of soft, blue plastic square attached to the baby’s right arm by a string rolled out of medical gauze.

“Marinotchka, golubushka, this is your little girl,” the nurse said bringing the baby to Marina before addressing the others. Out of the corner of her eye, Marina noticed Rita’s brows lift: What’s with all the tenderness?

Nurse placed the baby face down on Marina’s chest. “Skin to skin is best,” she said. “To keep the baby warm.”

The little bundle moved in Marina's arms and looked up at her for a fraction of a second before closing its eyes and tucking its face into Marina's chest.

She looks just like him, Marina thought. The same line of lips, same eyes, same massive forehead. Only different somehow. She studied her baby's face. The little nose crinkled and moved side to side.

"What are you going to name her, mama?" the nurse asked.

"Baby Girl, for now," Marina replied. "We didn't want to pick a name before she was born."

The nurse nodded. "Bad luck," she said.

The girl yawned, reached out her arms, yawned again, took a deep breath and produced a sound much louder than Marina anticipated to hear from such an angel.

Surprised, Marina looked up at the nurse.

"She's hungry," the nurse said.

Feeding was not a problem. Like a flashlight in a dark room, baby's mouth was moving side to side in search of a nipple. When she found what she wanted, she latched on and sucked vigorously, inhaling and exhaling with satisfaction through the two little holes of her button shaped nose.

"Ten minutes on one side, ten on the other," nurse instructed and walked away.

She'll have curly hair, Marina thought looking at the patch of fuzzy hair. It came together just above the forehead, curled up and out. Her cheeks were full and round. Her mouth closed tightly around the nipple forming tiny wrinkles. Looks like Antonina when she purses her lips, Marina thought.

In the corner opposite Marina's bed, Yula was feeding her baby boy. She propped herself on her pillow, rolled to her side. The baby lay beside her on the bed.

"You need to sit up," the nurse said. "Don't fall asleep, you don't want to smother him."

How can you fall asleep, Marina thought, with such miracle in your arms.

Rita was struggling. There was no milk. She tried to give her empty breast to her child, but the disappointed baby was turning red in the face and starting to cry.

"We can wait till tomorrow," the nurse said.

Rita nodded. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She shook it off. "That makes sense," she said. Her voice was strong and decisive, as if she was addressing a class full of students. "Same happened with my firstborn."

"Unless," the nurse looked over at Yula. "You want to ask one of your roommates to help you out."

"No, it won't be necessary," Rita protested. "I wouldn't want to impose."

"I read in Dr. Spock's book that milk production increases with demand," Marina said quietly. "The more you feed, the more milk your body will produce." Rita looked up uncertain of what Marina was offering.

"I'll feed Rayechka," Marina said, "if you want me to."

"Yula would be a better," the nurse started to interrupt.

"Marina will feed her," Rita said and gave a look indicating the end of discussion.

The nurse sighed. "You are so educated, you think you know better than me," she mumbled. She helped switch babies. Marina's girl was now snoozing, smacking her lips in her sleep as if savoring a tasty treat.

"Are you sure?" Rita whispered sitting down on the side of Marina's bed. "There is barely anything to you."

"I'm sure, I'm sure."

"Thank you," Rita said. She looked over her shoulder at Yula. "I didn't want..."

"I know," Marina interrupted. "I wouldn't either."

**10.** Raya had dark skin and dark straight hair. Her eyes, shiny olives, were framed by long, black eyelashes. Resentfully, she turned toward Marina. With a little help she started suckling.

“You are beautiful,” Marina said to the baby and knocked on wood.

“She’s a copy of her grandmother,” Rita said. “We are from Alma-Ata, Soviet Middle East.”

“Far from home,” Marina said.

“Kiev’s been home for many years. My father is from here.”

“My family is in Southern Ukraine. I came here to go to the Kiev University and met my husband.”

“Did you finish?”

“One year left. My mother said she’ll come and take care of the baby when it’s time for final exams. I’m still writing my thesis.”

“In what?”

“Russian language and literature.”

“That’s what I did,” Rita said. “I teach school now. Where do you live?”

“Not far from here. By the new cinema.”

“That’s where we are. Just moved six months ago. Did you get a flat in one of the new buildings?”

“No,” Marina sighed. “We live with his parents.”

“Tough?”

“Yes, we don’t get along very well,” Marina said and then added reluctantly. “They didn’t want him to marry a provincial girl. That’s what I am to them - provincial, not from Kiev.”

“I see,” Rita said.

“They had a girl picked out for him. A neighbor’s daughter with a big new apartment, oriental rugs and crystal. And he met me at a wedding and proposed two weeks later - messed up their plans.” Marina surprised herself. Sharing such private, such intimate details about her life with a woman she barely knew was not like her. She looked down at Raya.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” she said.

“Oh, don’t worry. Your story is not much different from mine,” Rita said. “We lived with my in-laws for a while. They are nice people, but there can be too much of a good thing,” she smiled. “I had to fight for my territory, make them respect me. Each woman has to.”

“I guess.”

Raya was slowing down. She pulled away, swallowed slowly, lazily.

“I think she’s falling asleep,” Marina said.

“I think she is,” Rita took her in her arms.

“Now my baby has a milk-sister,” Marina smiled.

“Thank you for that,” Rita patted her on the leg.

“Any time.”

**11.** The hospital was molding Marina’s usually chaotic student life into a routine. She was getting used to waking up at the same time, feeding her baby, eating breakfast, taking a walk with Rita.

“I can’t sleep at night,” Rita complained during one of their after-breakfast walks. “These night sweats, I wake up drenched in sweat as if someone just poured a bucket of water over me.”

“I thought that doesn’t happen until menopause,” Marina said.

“After childbirth it does. All the hormones are adjusting,” Rita explained. She was knowledgeable about being a woman and things medical in nature. Her sharp mind retained all information she read in magazines and books or saw on TV. Marina was getting used to taking her word as a fact.

“Last night,” Rita continued, “I barely slept an hour. And in that hour I had a bad dream. I was in my hospital bed and I felt a tooth loose in my mouth. I opened my mouth and it just rolled out onto my hand. Just like that,” Rita demonstrated.

“That’s a bad dream,” Marina offered.

“Yes, someone will die,” Rita interpreted. “Someone I know.”

“Was there any blood?” Marina asked.

“No, it won’t be a blood relative.”

Rita stared into the long corridor before them.

“I can’t think of anyone who’s ill or old enough,” she concluded.

“I’ve been sleeping like a baby,” Marina shared. “I feel so tired all the time.”

“You need vitamins,” Rita suggested. “Tell your husband to buy you some fruit.”

“Fruit in January?”

“Well, he won’t find any at the store, except for maybe some rotten apples. But on Besarabka, the farmers market, they’ll have some. They bring apples and pears and sometimes even melons from Georgia this time of year. Any fruit that’s harvested late in the fall is still available in January. Tell him.”

“We can’t afford anything from Besarabka,” Marina confessed. “Especially fruit. Their prices are enormous.”

Marina didn’t think of herself as poor. Zhenya and she were students. Students never had any money. They went half hungry most of time. Her parents sent her money once a month, plus they received a stipend. Until she got pregnant, she chose to spend most of it on bell-bottom pants and platform shoes. In the dorm, where she lived before she met Zhenya, she had a reputation of a reliable borrower. Money borrowed for a pair of shoes was always repaid on time and in full. When hunger struck, Marina and her roommate went around the dorm gathering a couple of potatoes from one room, an onion and an egg or two from another. They made a skillet of Polish hash - fried potatoes with onion and scrambled eggs - and invited everybody to share.

Having met Rita, Marina realized that there were young women, students like herself, that lived in relative comfort. They had money to buy fruit in January and clothes and shoes. They didn’t have to choose one or the other. The thought left her sad. She wondered if her daughter, someday a student, would have to make such choices.

At the end of the corridor, Rita stopped at the nursing station.

“I was wondering,” she said to the nurse on duty. “What do I need to do to get discharged earlier?”

“Why?” the nurse looked up from the paperwork.

“I feel well and my baby is fine too,” Rita explained.

“Hospital policy is mandatory stay of seven days after normal delivery, ten days after delivery with complications and two weeks after C-section,” the nurse reported.

“I know that,” Rita said. “But what if I don’t want to stay the whole week. What do I need to do?”

“If you leave earlier, you will lose your maternity benefits,” the nurse was beginning to get irritated. “You know, free baby food, check-ups, home visits from a hospital nurse.”

The conversation was taking an unpleasant turn.

“I’ll see you back in the room,” Marina whispered to Rita and walked back alone.

It was quiet in the room. Behind the window, snow waltzed down the deserted street. Led by the wind, it twirled and flirted with the rays of pale winter sun. She lingered by the window for a few minutes. She too wanted to go home.

A white taxi cab passed by the hospital flashing the checkered light at Marina. "I'll have to tell Zhenya to call a cab to take us home," she thought. "I won't be able to carry her all the way home and a stroller won't make it in this snow." She wondered if there even was a stroller.

A familiar snort reached Marina's ear. Yula preferred a morning nap to a morning walk.

Marina took a step toward her night stand. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Yula sprawled out on her bed. Embarrassed to catch the sight of Yula's exposed breast, Marina lowered her eyes, but something in the picture was odd. Marina looked again.

Yula lay on her side. Her head, crowned by the heavy braided hair, was tucked inside the corner of her right elbow. Her mouth was opened slightly as if she fell asleep in a middle of a sentence. Her freckled chest rose rhythmically, softly like a buoy rocking to waves of the sea on a calm day. Her right breast was exposed. Under it Marina saw the blue blanket which usually enveloped her baby boy.

Marina felt her knees weaken. It couldn't be, she thought and took a step closer. She saw part of his cheek, much smaller compared to Yula's full breast. There was no movement, no sound coming from the baby.

Marina's mouth opened to call out Yula's name. The air she inhaled collided with the word and she swallowed it along with the sound of her own voice.

"What's the matter?" she heard Rita's voice.

"Help," she said and pointed to Yula.

In the following minutes Marina heard Rita's voice calling for help. She saw, as if in slow motion, nurses rushing in, Yula waking up and starting to wail, the blue blanket with the baby whisked away. Marina felt nauseous. She sat on the side of her bed and tried not to get sick.

When it was all over, Yula was gone, so was the baby. Rita was crying silently, biting her lip.

The nurse walked in and started to change sheets on Yula's bed.

"What happened to the baby?" Marina dared to ask.

"What's it to you?" barked the nurse. She ripped the old sheets off the bed and threw them on the floor. Hastily she tucked the fresh linens around the mattress and punched the pillow into a triangular shape. "Worry about your own," she hissed walking out.

Marina stared at the empty bed and the new sheets. She knew that this was one of those things that in her memory would seem untrue, as something that couldn't possibly happen. Even at this very moment, Marina felt divided as to which was the reality - Yula sprawled over her baby or the freshly made bed. Both were definite, present and unforgiving.

"Did this just really happen?" she said to Rita.

Rita looked away. There was nothing to say.

Still in trance, Marina reached for her nightstand. She picked up a pen and tore a sheet of paper out of her notebook. With wide defiant strokes she wrote: "Get me out of here. NOW!" She folded the paper in quarters and ran downstairs to pass it on to Zhenya.

**12.** The day was bright. A white city cab plowed its way through a zigzag of Kiev's cobblestoned streets. Inhibited by the grip of winter, the city was holding its breath till spring. Where do the birds go in these cold of cold days? Marina thought gazing out of the window. She recalled writing to a dictation by her first grade teacher. *Trees and shrubs are wearing white coats and hats.* Just like today.

In her arms, wrapped in a down blanket with a laced corner, rested her baby girl. The blanket miraculously appeared in her “going home” package. Antonina must have pulled one of her strings, Marina thought admiring the fancy stitching.

On her left, Antonina was gazing out of the cab window. Her coat, snugly buttoned, confined the layers of wool, silk and cotton which, Marina knew, were going to sprout in multi colors given an inch of freedom.

“Thank you,” Marina said.

Antonina turned in surprise. “For what?”

“For the blanket,” Marina said.

“You are welcome,” Antonina replied. “I only want good for you, for your baby.”

Marina nodded. Zhenya, on her right, was consumed by his thoughts.

“I washed the ceiling in your room with whitewash,” Antonina was now rattling off. “I changed the wallpaper, too. It had to be done, you know. A mother and baby have to come home to new, clean start. You’ll like the wallpaper. It’s green with pink roses.”

Inside, Marina cringed picturing the wallpaper, but she didn’t move a muscle.

“Thank you, Antonina Yosifovna,” Marina said and, then, surprised herself. “How about we name our girl after you?”

“Antonina?” Zhenya perked up.

“Yes, or Nina for short?”

“I like it,” Zhenya said.

“How about you?” Marina turned to her mother-in-law.

Antonina said nothing. She covered her mouth with her capped hand as if she was worried that the words would come out all at once.

“I would like that,” she said after a minute.

The cab rushed away from the Krasnoarmeyskaya Hospital, away from room 12 on the second floor. Stirred by the tires, snow flipped up and fell back on the road covering the tracks.