The Bookshelves of Tashkent

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A Memoir

Yelena

composed from 3051 conversations across 9 sessions over 2 days

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This memoir was composed by Maddie v1, an AI memoir companion, from voice conversations with the subject. The first-person prose is generated; the substance is the subject's own. No external text has been added that the subject did not refer to in conversation.

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for Sofia

Books were how our family stayed sane during difficult years.

— Yelena

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Chapter

I

Tashkent

Tashkent, 1948–1968

I can still smell the room when Father David would explain lineage to me.

We lived in a small apartment on Zantkava Street. I say small and I mean it — two rooms, a

narrow kitchen, a window in the main room that looked onto a courtyard where someone was always hanging laundry or arguing or both. But when I try to picture that apartment now, what I see first is not the walls or the courtyard or the light. What I see is the books.

My father David had built the shelves himself, from floor to ceiling along the longest wall. This is not a metaphor. He had actually built them, with his own hands, from boards he found somewhere in the way that men in those years found things — through patience and connection and a willingness not to ask too many questions. The shelves were uneven. They bowed a little in the middle under the weight of what he placed on them. But they held. I don't remember a time before those shelves existed, which means they were there before my

memory was, which means books were there before I was.

My mother Sophia stood at the window. This is how I picture her, always — standing at the window, not looking out at anything in particular, her face turned toward the light in the way that people turn toward light when they are thinking rather than seeing. She was not a dreamy woman. She was precise, in fact, quite organized, she managed the household with an attention that I did not fully appreciate until I had my own household to manage. But at the window she was something else. Softer, perhaps, or just more interior. When I picture Tashkent I picture her there, the laundry courtyard behind her head through the glass, the light of Central Asia which is a particular kind of light — thick, almost tawny in the afternoon, with

a quality of weight to it that I have never found anywhere else I have lived.

My father read to us in the evenings. He would sit in the chair — there was one chair that was understood to be his, not by any declared rule but by that unspoken grammar that operates in families — and he would open a book and read aloud. Pushkin, often. Pushkin was safe and also genuinely loved, which is a combination rarer than it sounds. But also Akhmatova, which was less safe, and which my father read in a quieter voice without explaining why the voice changed. I understood the reason only later. A child picks up the registers of caution before she understands what they protect. I knew that some names were spoken at full volume and some names were spoken more carefully, and I knew this not from any instruction

but from the quality of the air in the room when those names were said.

Outside, it was the same. The talk of names was always quieter on the street than it was at home. I noticed this early. On Zantkava Street, or at the market, or in the courtyard, people had a way of arriving at certain subjects by circling them, coming in from the side, as if approaching something that might startle. At home my father circled too, but less. He allowed himself more. That difference meant something to me, though I was years away from having the vocabulary for what it meant.

My mother worked at a publishing house. I remember visiting her there once as a young child — I must have been five or six — and the thing I remember most clearly is the smell. Paper and glue

and something else, something mineral, which I now know was ink but then simply registered as the smell of where my mother went in the mornings. The publishing house had a different feel from the apartment. More formal. People there spoke carefully about a great many things, not only names, not only lineage. The calibration was different. There was a way of carrying yourself inside those walls that Sophia had, and that the other workers had, and that I watched carefully because even at five or six I understood it was a skill.

At home she let it drop. This is the thing I want to say about those years, the thing that took me the longest to understand: the apartment on Zantkava Street was a kind of pressure valve. Not loud, not theatrical — we were not theatrical people — but honest. My father would put down whatever

caution the day required and pick up Akhmatova and read her in a normal voice. My mother would stand at the window and think her own thoughts without arranging her face. There was something being preserved in those two rooms. I did not have a name for it then.

What I did have was the sensation of being inside something. Books on every wall. My father's voice in the evening. My mother's profile against that heavy Central Asian light. I learned to read early and I read everything I could reach, which eventually, as I grew, was all of it. I remember the physical texture of those books — the older ones especially, the ones that had come from somewhere else, from before, from people whose names were not always said at full volume. Their spines were fragile. Their pages had a quality of wanting to

be turned carefully. My hands learned something from that, a kind of patience with fragile things, a reluctance to press too hard.

Lineage was in the room without being named. I understood, slowly, that the books on those shelves were not only books. They were a record of what a family had carried. What it had chosen to carry. Some of the volumes had names written in them, on the front pages, in inks that had faded to the color of weak tea. I used to look at those inscriptions and try to work out who had held the book before my father, and before that person, and before. He would explain sometimes when I asked. His voice when he explained was the same voice he used for Akhmatova — still, careful, bringing the information forward as if it were something that could be damaged by roughness.

I don't know exactly what I inherited from those years in that apartment. I know I came away with a conviction that books are not decorative. That the presence of language — careful, chosen language, language that has been worth someone's effort to preserve — is the presence of something real. I know that I still find it difficult to be in a room without books in it, that there is an unease, a subtle wrongness, like a room without windows. I know that when I hold a fragile page my hands still know to be gentle.

I know that I learned the meaning of names from the way my father said them — which ones he lifted into the ordinary air and which ones he handled like the oldest volumes on that bowing shelf.

The courtyard below our window was always full of noise. But inside, in the evenings, it was quiet enough to hear everything that mattered.

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Sofia, before.

Chapter

II

Sofia

before

Her hands smelled of paper before they smelled of anything else.

There is a particular quality of attention that some people carry in a room without intending to.

My mother had it. When Sofia entered a space — a kitchen, a classroom, a Sunday afternoon full of voices — everything adjusted slightly, the way a lamp adjusts the shadows when you move it to a different shelf. She did not command this. She simply arrived, and the room noticed.

Her name was Sofia. I say it this way, the full name, because she deserved the full name. Not a diminutive, not the clipped syllable you use for someone you are fond of but do not take seriously. Sofia. There was philosophy in it, as she was the first to observe — wisdom, in the Greek. She taught literature in Tashkent for more than thirty years, which is to say she spent thirty years convincing young people that language was not decorative. That it was structural. That without it the self had nothing to stand on.

I have been trying to write about her for a long time. I find that when I finally sit down to do it, I keep returning to the same image: she is standing by the window in the apartment on Zankovskaya Street, and the light is doing something specific to the side of her face, and she has a book open in one hand while the other hand rests flat against the glass. The glass must have been cool. It was autumn, I think, or perhaps late summer pretending to be autumn the way it does in Tashkent — the heat beginning to soften at the edges, the air not yet certain of what it wants to be. She was not reading in that moment. She was thinking about what she had just read. There is a difference, and she knew the difference, and she taught it to me without ever naming it directly.

Her hands. I should say something about her hands, because that is where the work of her life was most visible. She had the hands of someone who handled paper constantly — not rough, but dry in a particular way, the skin slightly whitened at the knuckles. When I was small I believed this was simply how mothers' hands were. Later I understood it was occupational. She marked papers with a red pencil that she kept behind her ear when she was reading, and when she reached up to retrieve it there was something automatic and economical in the gesture, practiced ten thousand times. The pencil left faint marks on her hair near her temple. She did not notice. The smell of her hands was the smell of paper and ink, always slightly sweet, always slightly sharp, the way a

library smells in summer when the windows have been closed all morning.

She read aloud at night. This I remember with absolute clarity, the kind of clarity that is not memory exactly but something prior to memory, something in the body. She would sit in the chair near the lamp — the one with the green shade that turned her skin a color I have never found a word for, something between gold and olive — and she would read to us in a voice that was entirely conversational, as if the poems or the stories were news she had just received and found interesting. She did not perform. She did not declaim. When she read Akhmatova she read Akhmatova the way you would read a letter from someone who had written honestly and expected the same in return. I did not fully understand Akhmatova then. I

understood that my mother did. That was enough for the time being.

On Sunday afternoons, when the family gathered, there was a woman we called Fran Tatiana — I do not have another name for her now, only that one, only the way she sat with her back very straight as if sitting were a position she had trained for. She and my mother would talk for hours. About marriage, mostly. The conversations had the quality of ongoing research, as if both women were consulting a large body of material and comparing their findings. I was not supposed to be listening. I was in the hallway, or behind the curtain that divided the main room, or I was sitting in plain sight and they had decided I was not yet old enough for the words to take. I remember the tenor more than the content. A seriousness that

was not grim. A willingness to say difficult things without raising the voice.

My mother cared more than anyone I have known about the fact of family — not the performance of it, but the actual weave of it, who came from whom, what was passed along, what was lost in the passing. There was a hush when the subject arose among the adults, a particular quality of attention as if someone had asked for silence in a concert hall. I felt it as a child without being able to name it: that these stories about people who were no longer living were being handled carefully because they could break. Or because they had already broken and were being held together by the telling.

She did not say much about her own history. This was characteristic. She was interested in liter-

ature in part because literature allowed you to be true without being confessional, to say the essential thing at a remove that made it bearable. When I teach — or when I taught, before I stopped — I tried to pass this along. I am not sure I succeeded. It requires a particular trust in the reader, a belief that they will do their half of the work. My mother had that trust. I have it some days.

The body's memory is strange. I notice this still. When I think of Zankovskaya Street, when I think of Tashkent before everything changed, it is always my mother by that window. Not sitting, not moving, simply standing in a specific quality of light with the glass cool against her palm and a thought she has not yet finished. The image arrives before I invite it. My hands, when I hold it in mind, grow slightly warm. I have tried to determine what

this means and I have decided it means only that she is present in me as a physical fact, the same way her teaching is present in the way I hold a book — spine in the left hand, pages opening to the right, nothing forced, nothing bent.

When I think now of what she was doing with those Sunday afternoons, those nightly readings, those thirty years of standing before students and asking them to pay attention to the exact word — I think she was trying to demonstrate a method. Not literature as escape. Not literature as ornament. Literature as a way of remaining accurate. Of keeping the self calibrated against something larger and more honest than daily life. She was a practical woman. She did not believe in waste. She taught what she taught because she believed it was necessary.

I have her pencil still. The red one, or one from the same box; I cannot be certain it is the same one, but it has her handwriting on the side, a single word I can no longer fully read, the letters softened by decades of handling. I keep it in the drawer where I keep the things I do not use but cannot dispose of. Occasionally I take it out. It has no smell now. Or perhaps it has a smell I have stopped being able to detect because it has become the smell of everything.

She died in winter. I will not say more than that, not in this chapter. Some facts earn their own space.

For now it is enough to say: she stood by the window, and the light was particular, and her hands smelled of paper, and she read Akhmatova as if it were a letter from a trusted friend.

That is where I come from.

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Chapter

III

My father David

Lineage was the only thing worth keeping, he said.

There are memories that arrive in order, and there are memories that arrive the way light does through old curtains — slanted, particular, falling

on one thing and leaving the rest in shadow. My father David is the second kind. I have tried to arrange him, and I cannot. So I will let the memories come as they wish.

We lived on Zantkava Street in Tashkent, in an apartment that was not small and not large — it was exactly as large as a life needed to be when you did not question the size of your life. There were four of us: my parents, my sister Anna, and I. The apartment had the smell of all Soviet apartments, that particular mixture of boiled wool and something alkaline underneath, but our rooms also had paper. My father kept books the way other men kept tools — carefully, with a sense that they might be needed urgently, and placed so he could find them in the dark. I believe he could have found them in the dark.

David was not a tall man. He was precise, the way a good sentence is precise, without a word wasted or a gesture spent on nothing. He worked as a translator — French into Russian, mostly poetry, which is the hardest possible work because you are not moving meaning from one house to another, you are trying to rebuild the house itself from different materials and hoping it still keeps out the rain. I understood this only later. As a child I understood only that my father sat at a desk with two books open before him and a third language building itself slowly in the space between his hands.

He read to us at night. This was not a soft habit, not what people imagine when they say a father read to his children — some warm domestic thing with lamplight arranged just so. It was more

serious than that. He chose what he read deliberately, and he read it as if the poem had never been read aloud before, as if this were the first time the words were leaving the page and entering the air, and we had to pay attention because the moment would not come again. Anna and I sat on the edge of whichever bed we happened to be sitting on, and my father stood, or sat, and read. Pushkin, of course. Akhmatova, when he was willing to be quiet about it, because by then Akhmatova was not a thing you were loud about. French poets whose names I can still hear in his pronunciation — that particular Russian-shaped French that made the poems into something that belonged to him, and then to us.

The sound of his voice is what remains most clearly. It was not a performing voice. Some men

read poetry and you feel them putting on a coat — you are aware of the performance, the coat. My father's voice did not change when he read. It was the same voice in which he told you that dinner was ready, that you had left the door open, that the weather would turn. The poem simply arrived in that voice, as if it had always been there waiting.

I remember one evening specifically. It was autumn — the particular Tashkent autumn, which is not like any other autumn, drier and more golden than you think autumn has a right to be, the air thinned out and smelling faintly of something far away, cotton from the fields or dust from the mountains, I was never certain which. My father was working on a translation of Verlaine. I do not know which poem; I was perhaps nine. He came to the doorway of the room where Anna and I

were doing our lessons and he said nothing, only stood there until we looked up, and then he read us what he had been writing. Not the French and not yet the Russian — something in between, he explained, a draft, a scaffolding, the stage when the poem is neither what it was nor what it would be. He wanted to hear if it breathed. That was the word he used. If it breathed.

It breathed. I did not know enough to tell him so with any authority, but I knew even then that something in the room shifted when he read it. The alkaline smell of the apartment, the light going gold through the window, my sister's pencil still in her hand — all of it sharpened, the way things do when you are suddenly more awake than you were a moment before.

He and Anna would talk on Sunday afternoons about lineage. I use the word because it is the word he used, though I understood it differently at nine than I do now. They sat in the main room, my father and my sister, and I moved in and out, as younger children do, catching pieces of the conversation, understanding some and not others, filing the rest somewhere I did not yet know I had. There was a hush around my father when lineage came up. Not a reverence exactly — he was not a religious man, or not in any conventional way — but a kind of careful attention, as if the subject required a certain posture, a certain slowness. As if you could bruise it if you handled it wrong.

He said, once, in my hearing: lineage is the only thing worth keeping. I do not remember the context. I remember the sentence.

For a long time I thought he meant family, genealogy, the chain of names going backward into history. Our history was complicated, as most Jewish history in the Soviet Union was complicated, a matter of gaps and careful silences and documents that said one thing while the family knew another. But the older I get the less certain I am that he meant only that. There was something else in the way he held the word — held it the way he held a book that was not quite finished, that still needed something from him before it could be what it was meant to be.

I think he meant the line of attention. What you paid attention to, what you passed along. The French poem that became a Russian poem. The way you stood in the doorway and read something that was still becoming itself to your daughters,

because they needed to hear what a thing sounds like before it is finished. The way you chose Akhmatova quietly and read her anyway. What you loved, and who you showed it to, and how. The handing down not of names or blood but of the quality of attention itself.

I can still smell that room. Paper, primarily — the dry specific smell of paper that has been handled many times, paper that has traveled. And underneath it the apartment smell, and underneath that something warmer, something that was my father himself, which I cannot name any more precisely than that. The body holds what the mind cannot organize. When I think of my father reading Verlaine in a language that was still becoming Russian, my hands feel slightly warmer. Not grief, not exactly. Something more like recognition.

Everything I know about lineage traces back to David. I do not mean I learned it from him the way you learn a subject, with effort and examination. I mean it came into me the way a voice comes into a room — through the door he left open, in the particular quality of that autumn air, in the word he used for what mattered, and the way he held it.

He did not explain himself often. He did not need to.

The poem breathed, and we knew.

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Chapter

IV

Pushkin and Akhmatova

“To burn is not to be punished — it is to have lived.”

There is a particular weight to a book that has been read by more than one generation. The spine cracks differently. The pages have absorbed

something — breath, or lamp smoke, or the oils of hands that are no longer anywhere. My mother Sophia kept two volumes on a shelf above the kitchen table in Tashkent, not on a bookshelf proper, because a bookshelf would have made them decorative. Above the kitchen table they were necessary. Pushkin. Akhmatova. I did not understand this arrangement as a child. I understand it now.

We did not treat poetry as literature in our house. We treated it the way other families treated prayer. My father David would recite Pushkin while he shaved. I heard it through the wall — that particular sound, the scrape of the blade and then the Russian coming through, unaccompanied, as if he were thinking aloud. He never announced it. There was no performance in it. The lines were simply where certain feelings lived, and when those

feelings arose, the lines arrived with them. That is the only way I can explain it. He was not a man who spoke easily about interior things, my father, but Pushkin moved through him without obstruction. I watched that and I remembered.

My mother Sophia's relationship to Akhmatova was quieter and more guarded and, I think, deeper. She did not recite aloud. What she did was this: when something had happened — something that could not be spoken directly, a grief or a tension or a silence that had gone on too long — she would take the volume down and read it alone at the table after supper. She did not make a ceremony of it. She simply sat, and the book was open, and she was elsewhere for a little while. We knew not to disturb her in those minutes. Even as a young child I knew. The book was not an escape. It was

more like a instrument she was using to take a measurement.

I will try to be precise about what Akhmatova meant in a household like ours, in the years I am describing. Requiem was not freely circulated. Everyone understood this without being told. My mother had lines of it in her head — I believe she had carried them there deliberately, as one carries food when one expects a journey. She never wrote them down anywhere I could find. She kept them the safe way, the way that cannot be searched. I was older before I understood the full weight of that. The poem existed in her memory the way certain things exist in the body — not as thought but as structure.

I must have been nine or ten when she first said a few lines to me. Not to teach me, not as a lesson.

We were doing something ordinary — I believe I was helping her fold laundry, or perhaps shelling something, the way children are given small tasks to keep them near — and she said several lines quietly, half to herself. I did not know what they were. I asked her and she told me: Akhmatova. She said the name the way you say the name of someone you have known a long time and do not need to explain. I asked what the poem was about. She was quiet for a moment. Then she said: it is about what women know that they are not permitted to say. I was too young to fully understand that sentence. But I have thought about it many times since. It has continued to mean something new at every age.

Pushkin was different — Pushkin was allowed, celebrated, official in certain ways that Akhmatova

was not, and yet in our house he was no less intimate for that. What my father David loved in Pushkin was the exactness. He used that word once. The exactness. He said that Pushkin never used a sound he did not mean. I have thought about that all my life. It is the standard I have held most writing to, including writing that has nothing to do with verse. Does the writer mean the sound they are making, or are they filling space? Pushkin meant every sound. My father was certain of this and his certainty was contagious.

There is a specific afternoon I return to sometimes. I am perhaps twelve. It is summer in Tashkent, and the heat is serious — not warm, but the other kind, the kind that presses. The window in our main room is covered with a cloth to keep the light out, and the cloth moves a little with

whatever air comes through. My father David is sitting with me and he is having me memorize a passage from Pushkin. Not for school. School had its own Pushkin, arranged for school purposes, which was fine but different. This was his Pushkin, and the method was his as well. He would say a line. I would repeat it. He would say it again if my cadence was wrong — not the words, the cadence. Cadence was the point. The meaning, he said, lives in the rhythm. Get the rhythm wrong and you lose the meaning even if every word is correct. I remember his hands on the table while he said this. He had specific hands, my father — wide across the knuckles, careful. He was not tapping the rhythm out. He was simply resting them there, and they were still, and the lines moved through the room.

I can still recite what we worked on that afternoon. I will not write it here — not because it is private but because I am writing about the experience of it, not the text of it, and those are different things and should not be confused. What I will say is that when I finally had the passage in my mouth with the right weight on the right syllables, my father nodded once. He did not say well done or very good. The nod was enough. More than enough. I understood from it that the standard was real and that I had briefly met it.

My mother Sophia returned to Akhmatova at every major turn of her life, I think. I say I think because she was not a woman who explained herself, and I was reconstructing as I went, from the evidence of small behaviors. When she was worried about something she could not control, the

book came down from the shelf. When she was proud of something and could not say it directly — I observed this also — the book came down. It was her instrument for the whole register, not only the dark parts. This surprised me when I finally understood it. I had thought of Akhmatova as appropriate to grief. But Sophia was using her for everything that exceeded ordinary language. That is a different and more capacious thing.

I took both of them with me when I left. I mean the habit, not the books — though I did take one book, a Pushkin, small enough to fit in the interior pocket of a coat, which was how I thought about what to bring in 1989: what fits in an interior pocket. Not everything does. I made choices that year that I have not finished understanding. But the habit of reaching for a line when feeling outran

language — that came with me intact. It costs nothing to carry. It weighs nothing. It has been more useful in the years since than I can account for.

My granddaughter Mira once said that names were the only thing worth keeping. I have been thinking about that idea in relation to this: that what my parents kept, and gave to me without ceremony, were not names exactly, but voices. The voices of two poets. The sound of Russian arranged by minds that understood what language is for and were not shy about demanding everything from it. I have lived abroad for many years now. I do not always have Russian around me in daily life, not the way I had it in Tashkent, not the ambient way, the way weather is ambient. But I have the lines. They are in there, behind whatever language I am

using for ordinary things, patient, exact, not going anywhere.

The cloth moved in the window. The heat pressed in. My father's hands were still on the table.

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Chapter

V

Mikhail, before

The light came in slanted that afternoon, and he was speaking of marriage.

There is a particular quality of Sunday afternoon light in Tashkent that I have not found anywhere else in the world. It arrives sideways,

yellowish, almost reluctant, as if it knows it will be gone by five. It falls across wooden tables and turns the grain amber. I have lived in too many cities since then to remember all their lights, but that one I carry.

Mikhail was at the table. He is almost always at the table when I bring him back, which tells me something about the kind of man he was — or perhaps only about the kind of woman I am, that I remember people by where they settled themselves in a room. He had hands that rested comfortably on surfaces. I remember that. Not the gesturing kind of hands, not hands that reached for things. They would lie on the tablecloth, relaxed, the way certain men's hands do when they have no argument to make and no performance to give. He was simply present. That was his particular qual-

ity. Mikhail was simply, completely, unhurriedly present.

I keep coming back to him. I wonder sometimes whether that is strange, whether other women of my age circle a particular figure this way, returning and returning, not out of unfinished grief — I do not think it is grief, exactly — but because some people become, over time, the organizing principle of what you understand. When I try to think about what I know of marriage, I arrive at Mikhail before I arrive at any abstract thought about it. He is not a lesson. He is the evidence.

I was not young when I understood this. Understanding of this kind takes decades to become clear.

On Sunday afternoons in those years, Mikhail and Pavel would talk for hours. Pavel — I should say Sun Pavel, because that is how I think of him

now, the way the light in him was its own kind of solar — Pavel would come in the late morning and still be there when the shadows had moved all the way to the eastern wall. They talked about marriage the way some men talk about philosophy or sport, with total seriousness and without any apparent destination. This was not unusual to me then; I thought all men talked this way. I know better now. Most men, in my experience, do not talk about marriage at all, or if they do it is briefly, as a complaint or a concession. Mikhail and Pavel talked about it as though it were a country they were both trying to map, and they had different instruments.

I would be nearby, not always at the table myself. Sometimes I moved through the room, sometimes I sat close enough to follow the shape

of it. I did not always understand what they were saying. I was not always meant to. But the voices — the low, unhurried back-and-forth of them — became part of the texture of those afternoons, part of what Sunday felt like. The smell of tea that had been steeping too long. Dust in the light. Mikhail's hands on the tablecloth.

I can still smell that room. This is the kind of thing the body holds onto without asking permission. It is not always a poetic smell, not always pleasant — there was something of old wool in it, I think, and whatever was used to oil the window frame — but it was his room, and so it carries him. When I say I can smell it, I mean that sometimes, in some other room in some other country, something brushes past my senses and for a moment I

am entirely back there. My body is in Tashkent. My hands are warmer. Then it passes.

There is a small object I keep from those days. I will not describe it here, not fully — it belongs to the private register of keeping, and I have found that describing such things too precisely diminishes them. But it connects to Mikhail and to those Sunday afternoons, and I take it out sometimes. Not to grieve. To confirm. That it was real. That those rooms existed. That those voices moved through that particular slanted light and reached me in whatever way they did.

Just last night I dreamed of Mikhail. I am embarrassed by how often this happens — embarrassed is perhaps not the right word, it implies I think I should be past it, and I am not sure I do — but I am at least aware of it as a frequency that

seems out of proportion to the years. He died a long time ago. The mind is not interested in proportion.

In the dream, as in the ones before it, nothing dramatic occurred. He was at the table. The light was doing what it did. That is all. I think of these dreams less as visitation than as a kind of interior housekeeping — the mind returning to what it cannot fully file away, handling it again, putting it back.

What did I learn from him? Not what he intended to teach, probably. What we learn from the dead is rarely what they were trying to say. What I learned from Mikhail about marriage — and I will say this carefully, because I want to be accurate and not poetic — is that it is possible for a man to speak about love and obligation and difficulty with the same tone he uses to discuss anything

else he considers real. Without elevation. Without embarrassment. Without the slight drop in register that signals performance. He spoke about marriage the way you speak about the weather when you actually care about the weather, which is to say as a matter that is both ordinary and serious and always changing, and worth tracking.

Pavel brought argument. Mikhail brought attention. I watched them both for years before I understood that this was the difference between them, and that both were necessary, and that they had found each other partly because of this.

I am seventy-eight years old and I still do not entirely know what I knew then, sitting near that table on Sunday afternoons with the yellow light going amber and the tea going cold. This is not false modesty. It is simply the truth about know-

ing: it is slow. It does not announce itself. It arrives in you sideways, the way the light arrived, and by the time you name it the afternoon is already almost over.

I think of Sophia sometimes when I think of Mikhail — my mother, who had her own understanding of what held people together and what did not, and who rarely said it plainly. She was not a woman who offered direct instruction. She offered presence, and proximity, and a certain quality of attention that made you feel the thing mattered, even when she never named what the thing was. Perhaps I learned from her how to sit near a conversation and receive it. Perhaps it is lineage, the receiving. The particular way our family has always gathered near the source of warmth without quite touching it.

Mikhail is before now. He belongs to the Tashkent years, to the wooden tables, to the light. I live abroad, have lived abroad since 1989, and the life here has its own textures and its own particular people and its own small objects on shelves. I do not spend my days looking backward. But certain figures do not stay in the past simply because you have moved forward. They travel. They are present in dreams, in the sudden smell of old wool, in the warmth that comes to the hands without warning.

The light came in slanted. He was speaking of marriage. I was listening the best I could.



Chapter

VI

1968

The light came in slanted that afternoon, and he was speaking.

There are years that do not behave like years. They do not accumulate the way the others do, laying themselves down in sequence, one after

another like pages in a book you have read and set aside. Some years remain open. You keep returning to them the way you return to a passage you have underlined without knowing why, only understanding later, sometimes much later, what the sentence was trying to tell you.

1968 is that year for me.

I am not sure it is strange that I keep returning to Mikhail. I have asked myself this. I have lain awake in cities far from Tashkent — in apartments that smelled of other people's cooking, of Central European winters, of the particular staleness that gathers in rooms where someone has been reading alone for too long — and I have wondered whether this returning is grief or whether it is simply what the mind does with what it cannot finish. I think now it is neither. I think I return to Mikhail

because something was said in that time that I am still in the process of understanding. The understanding is the work. It has taken me decades and it is not done.

He was young. That is the fact I set down first, because if I do not, everything else arranges itself around a kind of softness that is not accurate. He was young, and then he was gone, and the world did not pause for it. Tashkent went on being Tashkent. The streets held their noise. The year held its politics, its upheavals in cities I could barely imagine — Prague, Paris, all that distant fire — and here in our city the light continued to arrive each afternoon at its usual slant, indifferent and precise.

I remember a Sunday. It must have been late spring or early summer — the light had that

quality it gets in Tashkent when the heat is just beginning to assert itself, not yet punishing, still beautiful, coming through the window at an angle that made everything in the room look considered, like objects in a painting. Mikhail was sitting. Pavel was there too, Pavel who would talk with Mikhail for hours on those Sunday afternoons, the two of them finding in the subject of marriage some inexhaustible vein, turning it over and over the way you turn a stone in your hand and keep finding new facets. I sat nearby. Sometimes I contributed; more often I listened. I had learned by then that listening to Mikhail was its own form of education, not passive but alert, the way you read a poet you do not yet fully understand and let the sounds do their work below the threshold of comprehension.

What did they say about marriage, those Sunday afternoons? I find I cannot give you their words exactly. What I have instead is the quality of the conversation — its seriousness, which was never solemn; its ease, which was never careless. Mikhail believed that marriage was a kind of ongoing translation. That two people who love each other are always in the act of rendering themselves into a language the other can receive. He was not performing this idea. He was working it out, there, in that room, with the slanted light, with Pavel asking questions that pushed back gently, with me listening from my chair and feeling that I was present at something that mattered.

I can still smell that room. This is the body's stubbornness — it keeps what the mind would sometimes rather release. There was tea, always tea

on Sundays. There was something of sandalwood or dust, or both, the way old buildings in Tashkent hold both at once. There was the smell of paper, because there were always books nearby when Mikhail was nearby. He read widely and without hierarchy — poets beside engineers, Akhmatova beside technical manuals, the sacred beside the utterly mundane — and he would have found something absurd and then something moving in each of them before the afternoon was done.

I keep a small object from those days. I will not describe it fully here — there are things that lose something when they are described too carefully, that need to remain slightly interior to continue doing their work — but it sits with me still, in whatever room I am living in. I have moved it across borders, across decades. It is not valuable in

any ordinary sense. But it reminds me of Mikhail, and of what that period taught me about what marriage actually is, as opposed to what one imagines it will be before it begins. Those are very different subjects. The imagined version is clean and legible. The actual version is harder and more interesting and, if you are honest about it, more generous than anything you could have planned.

Everything I know about marriage traces back to him. I have thought about whether this is too large a claim, whether I should qualify it, soften it into something more defensible. But I find I cannot. I have tried other formulations and they do not hold. The fact is that Mikhail shaped the way I understand what it means to be in a sustained relationship with another person, what it demands, what it makes possible, what it costs. He shaped

this not by instruction but by practice — by being himself inside the marriage, which is the only real instruction anyone ever gives.

And then he was gone.

I do not wish to make theater of this. The plain fact is hard enough on its own. He was young, and he died, and I was left with a marriage that had become a memory before it had finished becoming itself. This is a particular kind of loss. It is not only the loss of the person — though that loss is total, is absolute in the way that only the deaths of young people can be, because there is no long declining, no gradual preparation — it is also the loss of the ongoing translation he had described. The work stops mid-sentence. You are left holding your half of it, looking for the other half, finding only the shape of where it was.

I dreamed of him just recently. This still embarrasses me a little — not the dreaming itself, but the regularity of it, the way the dream arrives without announcement and without apology, still vivid, still exact. In the dream he is usually speaking. Not to me specifically. Just speaking, the way he did, in that thoughtful registering of the world, turning something over. I wake from these dreams and lie still for a moment before the present reasserts itself — the room, the window, the particular quality of wherever I am now, which is not Tashkent, which is far from Tashkent, which is where my life has put me. The distance does not feel like loss in those moments. It feels more like longitude. A different position from which to look back at the same point.

Pavel I think of also, in those years. He and Mikhail were well matched as interlocutors — both

serious, both capable of playfulness within the seriousness, neither of them prone to the kind of abstraction that forgets to stay in contact with actual life. When they talked on those Sunday afternoons, marriage was not a concept to them. It was a thing that happened in rooms, in the presence of slanted light, with tea cooling in glasses, with a woman sitting nearby listening and learning more than she knew she was learning. That is how the real education goes. Not announced. Not titled. You only understand the course years later, when you look back and see what you have been taught.

I was twenty that year, or nearly. Mikhail was young. The city was full of heat and ordinary noise. Somewhere in Europe young people were building barricades and writing slogans and believing that history could be redirected by will. Maybe they

were right. Maybe history can be redirected. But it cannot be redirected at the scale of a single life, a single room, a single afternoon that ends and does not return.

The light came through the window at that angle, and he was speaking, and I was listening.

That is what I have kept.

❦

Chapter

VII

The year of silence

The house does not know it is quiet. Only you know.

There is a particular quality to silence that has been chosen. It is different from ordinary quiet — from the quiet of early morning before anyone has

woken, or the quiet of a room whose occupant has stepped out for bread. Chosen silence has a weight to it. It presses against the walls. You feel it in your sternum if you stand still long enough.

After Mikhail died, Sofia stopped reading aloud. Not immediately — there were the first days, which belong to a different category of experience entirely, days that move like water through cupped hands and cannot really be held — but within a few weeks, she stopped. The books were still there. The shelf above the small radiator, the one he had put up himself and which tilted very slightly to the left, was still full. She did not remove them or face them backward. She simply did not open them.

I noticed it the way you notice a sound that has stopped rather than one that has begun.

We had a habit, Sofia and I, that had been going for years by then. Not every evening, not by any formal agreement, but often enough that it had the feeling of a custom, a small household rite. She would read aloud and I would do something with my hands — mending, mostly, or the close work of a manuscript that needed attention, or simply holding a cup of tea that I kept meaning to drink. We read Akhmatova this way. We read Tsvetaeva. Once, a long novel about a family in Odessa that neither of us thought we would finish and both of us did, over many weeks, until the ending arrived quietly one Tuesday and we sat with it for a while before either of us spoke. Mikhail would sometimes be in the adjoining room. He did not always listen, or we did not know if he listened. But he was there, which is its own kind of listening.

After he was gone, that shelf above the radiator became something I found difficult to look at directly. I did not say this to Sofia. There are things you do not say to a person who is grieving because the saying would make the grief about you, and that is a form of theft. But I knew it, privately, the way you carry a small bruise you have not told anyone about.

The year that followed — and I call it a year though I cannot be certain it was exactly that, grief distorts the calendar — the year that followed had its own texture. There were practical things. There are always practical things, and they are not nothing; they give shape to the days when days have lost their shape. I went to work. I came home. I cooked, or we cooked together, Sofia and I, standing at the counter in a companionable quiet

that was different from the silence of the books. That kitchen quiet was working quiet, purposeful, almost gentle. We moved around each other without collision. We had been doing it long enough to know each other's movements without looking.

But in the evenings, after the table was cleared, the apartment had a different feeling. Sofia would sit. She might have the newspaper, or she might not. She would look at the window more than at anything else. The window in those evenings gave back only the room and the two of us, reflected darkly, the lamp behind making everything amber and a little blurred, as though we were figures at the bottom of something.

I am not a person who insists on words. I did not try to coax her back to the books. This is worth saying plainly, because there is a kind of

helpfulness that is actually impatience in a gentle dress, and I have never trusted it. If a person has gone quiet, the reason is usually that quiet is what they need. You sit with them. You are present in whatever form presence can take without demand.

What I did, that year, was read to myself. In my own room, or sometimes in the kitchen when Sofia had gone to sleep. I read the things we had read together, not as a substitute — substitution is a foolish project — but because the words still needed to be somewhere, and I could hold them. Akhmatova especially. **Requiem**, which I had known since I was young, known the way you know certain poems not because you memorized them but because they entered you sideways at some unguarded moment and stayed. I would read it quietly, almost under my breath, so that the

sounds were present but barely. The sound of a poem at that volume is different from the sound of it spoken out into a room. It is more like thinking than like reading. Your own breath becomes part of it.

My mother, Sophia — and I have her name in me, I carry it the way you carry something in a coat pocket, aware of its weight without always reaching for it — my mother was a woman who understood lineage as something living rather than recorded. She did not keep documents in the way some families do. What she kept were the names, and the stories behind the names, and the quality of attention she brought to telling them. I learned this from her. That names are not just labels but a kind of compressed history. That to say a name carefully is an act of preservation.

In the year of Sofia's silence, I thought about this. About what is passed between people and how it passes — not through speeches or ceremonies but through the ordinary repetition of shared life. Reading aloud is one of those transmissions. You give someone the sound of a poem in your voice and they carry that version of it, that particular sound, even after you are gone. I think Sofia knew this. I think part of what the silence was about was precisely that — the difficulty of giving a voice to words when the person who had most often heard that voice was no longer in the adjoining room.

I remember a specific evening. It must have been late winter, because the light had that quality — not dark but not kind either, the gray-white light of February or perhaps early March, coming in flat through the window before I had drawn

the curtain. Sofia was sitting in her chair with nothing in her hands. This was unusual; she was not a person who sat with empty hands. I had a manuscript on my lap that I had been looking at without seeing. I said something — I cannot remember what exactly, something ordinary, something about tea — and she looked over at me, and there was a moment, just a moment, where her face had an expression I can only describe as distant, not from me, but from everything, from the room and the light and the fact of being a person who continues.

Then it passed. She said yes to the tea. I got up and made it.

That is how most of grief moves, in my experience. Not in large gestures but in these small shuttlings — the offer, the acceptance, the going

and returning with something warm in two cups. The not saying the large thing because the large thing cannot be said and both people know it. What can be said is: here is tea. Here is the sound of the kettle. Here is the chair across from yours where I will sit and not require anything of you.

I do not know precisely when the reading resumed. That is the nature of things returning — they do not announce themselves. One evening Sofia reached for a book. I do not remember which book. I remember only that she opened it, found her place — and she had a place, which meant she had been further in it than I knew, reading silently, which I had not seen her do — and she began to read aloud. Her voice was the same. Perhaps slightly lower. Perhaps that was only the hour.

I picked up my mending and did not remark on it.

The shelf above the radiator still tilts a little to the left.

❦

Chapter

VIII

Requiem

She read it as if the words already knew where they were going.

There are things you understand at sixteen that you do not understand at all. You think you understand them. You hold the knowledge the way

you hold a borrowed coat — it fits well enough, you are warm, but it belongs to someone else's grief. I was sixteen the first time I heard Akhmatova's **Requiem** read aloud, and I thought I understood it. I did not. I understood it the way a person understands the word **winter** who has never been truly cold.

It was Sofia who read it. My mother. Not Sophia the woman who made tea and argued with the neighbors about the price of flour, but Sofia the woman I almost never got to see — the one who lived behind the ordinary one, who had been waiting, patient and still, like water under ice. She had been silent about poetry for years by then. Not silent about all things — Sofia was never silent about all things — but silent about that. About Akhmatova especially. There were reasons, and I

understood the reasons in the way a child understands reasons: I knew them without knowing what they cost.

I do not remember the exact month. It was warm. Tashkent is often warm, but this was an evening warmth, the kind that comes in through windows left open, that carries something dry and mineral in it, the smell of dust settling after a day of sun. I was sitting on the floor near the bookcase — I sat on the floor often then, it felt like being closer to the books themselves — and Sofia came in from the other room holding a notebook. Not a printed volume. A handwritten notebook, small, the cover dark blue and soft from handling. I had seen it before and been told not to touch it. I had, of course, touched it.

She sat down in the chair near the window. She did not announce what she was going to do. She did not say: I am going to read you something. She simply opened the notebook and began.

I want to be careful here. I want to say what actually happened and not what I have since made of it. What happened is this: my mother read aloud, in a voice I had not heard her use before — not theatrical, not lowered into false gravity, but even, careful, each word placed like a foot testing ice — and the room changed. That is the only honest thing I can say. The room changed. The warm evening air was the same. The bookcase was the same. But something in the quality of the attention in that room became different, the way a photograph changes when you finally understand who the people in it are.

She read from the beginning. **The mountains bow before this anguish.** She read through the dedications, through the prologue. She read the lines about the husband taken, about standing in the prison lines in Leningrad, about the woman who asked her — whispered to her — **Can you describe this?** And Akhmatova's answer: **Yes, I can.**

I did not know then what I know now about those prison lines. I did not know about Sofia standing in lines of her own, years before I was born, waiting for word about my grandfather Pavel, whose name I had only heard spoken carefully, with a particular economy, the way you speak about a wound that has healed but left the place tender. I knew he had been gone. I had understood, in the way of children who are told nothing useful,

that gone was a word with more than one meaning in our family. But I did not know the weight of it. I sat on the floor at sixteen and listened to my mother read Akhmatova and I thought I was learning about poetry.

What I was actually learning was that my mother had a life before me. This is not a remarkable discovery — every child makes it eventually — but the moment of it is always particular, always a little violent in its quietness. Sofia read and I watched her face and her face was not performing grief. She was not weeping, not trembling. She was simply reading, and in the reading she was somewhere else, or rather she was in two places at once: there in the warm Tashkent evening, and also in whatever she had been before she became my mother. The notebook was evidence. Someone

had copied those poems out by hand, line by line, at some risk, and kept them in a dark blue cover that had grown soft from being held. Whether Sofia had copied them herself, or received them from someone, I did not ask. I understood without asking that the question was not mine to ask. Not yet.

She finished and closed the notebook and put it in her lap. She sat with it there for a moment. Then she looked at me — not to gauge my reaction, not to teach me anything, but the way you look at someone who has been sitting in the same room with you through something real.

She said: **Now you know why I named you for the Requiem.**

I sat very still. My name is not from the poem — she did not mean that literally. What she meant was something I have spent sixty years unpacking.

I think she meant: now you have been in the same room with the reason I needed to name something permanent. The reason I needed you to carry a name that meant something beyond convenience or family tradition. Sofia was not a woman who explained herself at length. She gave you the key and left you to find the door.

I did not speak. I think I nodded. The evening continued to come in through the window.

It was only later — years later, after Mikhail, after the children, after Tashkent became a memory I lived inside rather than a place I lived in — that I understood what I had actually witnessed. Sofia had resumed. That was the word for it. She had put something down and then, in that warm room with her daughter on the floor, she had picked it back up. The notebook had been there

all along. But reading aloud was different from keeping. Reading aloud was a return.

I think about the word **requiem** often now. I am seventy-eight and I have more use for it than I did at sixteen. A requiem is not a lament — this is important and often missed. A requiem is a formal thing, a thing with structure, a thing that says: this loss deserves architecture. It deserves to be built carefully so that it can be withstood. Akhmatova understood this. The poem is not a cry. It is a construction. It holds the grief in a shape you can walk around, examine, carry. Sofia understood this too, though she would not have used those words. She was not a woman who explained what she understood. She demonstrated it, and trusted you to arrive.

My father David used to say that lineage was a thing you could smell before you could name it. He meant the past, the weight of it, the specific density that certain rooms have when they have held certain histories. He was right. I smelled it that evening. The dust and the warm air and the old paper of the notebook and something else — the residue of whatever Sofia had carried from before I existed, from before Tashkent, from the years of Pavel's absence and the standing in lines and the words copied out by hand because to print them was impossible. All of it was in the room. I was sixteen and I sat on the floor of it.

When I think now of Akhmatova, I think of my mother's hands on that notebook. The way she held it was not reverential — it was habitual, which is something deeper than reverence. You are

reverent toward things that are above you. You are habitual with the things that have kept you alive.

I have my own copy now. Printed, not handwritten — times changed and the poem became something you could own openly, which is its own kind of strange. But sometimes I hold it and feel the weight of what it used to cost to hold it, and I think of Sofia in that chair, and of the question she was answering for me without telling me she was answering anything. The question was: what do you do with what cannot be spoken? And the answer was: you find someone who already spoke it, and you read it aloud in a warm room, to your daughter, when she is old enough to begin to know.

The evening eventually ended. The window was closed. Sofia made tea.

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Chapter

IX

Anna, my sister

A name is not given. It is recognized.

There is an object on my shelf — small, unremarkable to anyone who did not know its origin. A brass bookmark, the kind you clip to the page rather than lay between leaves. Anna gave it to

me. Or perhaps she did not give it so much as press it into my hand one afternoon without explanation, which is how Anna gave most things. She was not a woman who wrapped her intentions in ceremony. She simply placed something before you and waited to see whether you understood.

I understood, eventually. It took me years.

Anna was the older sister. She was the one who first taught me about names — not names in the way a schoolteacher means, not etymology or etymology's performance, but the weight a name carries before it is spoken, and the different weight it carries after. In Tashkent, when I was a child, names were not casual things. You named a daughter after a grandmother and you were making a claim. You were saying: this line continues. You were saying: we remember. Anna understood this

before I did, and she tried to give me the understanding the only way she knew how, which was not directly but through example, through proximity, through allowing me to watch her closely enough that I might work it out myself.

She stood at windows. This is the thing I cannot explain and yet cannot stop seeing. When I think of Anna, I picture her standing by a window, usually in the late afternoon, usually with her back half-turned. There was a street — Zankovskaya — and the building there, the one with the tall pale rooms and the smell of paper that came from the offices below. I believe it was a publishing concern of some kind, though I could not tell you its exact nature now. What I can tell you is the light. Tashkent light in the afternoon is not gentle; it comes in flat

and sure of itself. Anna did not flinch from it. She stood in it as though she were being read.

I was perhaps nine years old, perhaps ten. Anna would have been in her middle twenties. She seemed to me then to belong to another category of person altogether — not old, but finished, in the sense that a sentence is finished. Complete. She wore her hair pulled back, and she had our mother Sophia's habit of very slight impatience, which she expressed not through speech but through the way she held her shoulders. When Anna found something tedious she raised her shoulders a fraction of an inch. When she found something worth attending to, they dropped, and she became very still.

That afternoon on Zankovskaya, they had dropped.

She was looking at something on a page — I believe it was a manuscript, or a set of proofs, the

kind that came to that office in bundles bound with brown cord — and she said, without looking up: do you know why this name matters? I did not know which name she meant. I looked at the page from where I stood and could not read it clearly. I said I did not know. She said: because someone chose it carefully. Someone chose it and did not choose the other options, and the choosing is still present in the name itself, if you read it slowly enough.

I did not understand this fully at nine years old. I am not certain I understand it fully now, at seventy-eight, though I am closer.

What I understand is that Anna was talking about literature, partly, and about naming children, partly, and about the relationship between the two — about the fact that both acts, naming a poem and naming a person, are acts of recognition

rather than invention. You do not create a name. You find the name that already belongs to the thing. This is what she believed. It is what she tried to show me by example over the years that followed, those years in Tashkent before the world rearranged itself and we each went in different directions.

My granddaughter Mira — when someone says the word names, I see Mira's face for a moment before I see anything else. I have thought about this. It is not arbitrary. Mira is not named by accident; the name was chosen the way Anna would have approved of, carefully, with the sense that the child already had the name and we were simply locating it. When Mira was small she had a way of holding small objects — cupping them in both hands as though protecting something already living — and

it was that gesture, more than anything, that made me understand finally what Anna had been telling me on Zankovskaya street. You hold the name the way you hold a living thing. With some seriousness. With your whole hand.

The brass bookmark is still on my shelf. I cannot tell you precisely when it came to me or under what circumstances, only that it has been in my possession for many decades, and that it has outlasted a great deal. It moved with me in 1989 and arrived wherever I arrived and took up its place among the few things I had kept. When I handle it — which I do occasionally, not as a ritual but simply because it comes to hand when I am looking for something else — I feel briefly the particular temperature of that office on Zankovskaya, the smell of paper and paste and something sharp

underneath, like metal. I feel Anna's particular kind of attention, which was like a light source that never flickered.

She was exact. This is the word that comes first when I reach for her. Not precise in the cold sense, but exact in the sense that a musician is exact — nothing wasted, nothing approximate, nothing said that had not been considered. She read Akhmatova the way Akhmatova deserves to be read, which is without sentimentality and without the pretense that grief is decorative. She read Requiem and said very little about it, which was the correct response. Some things do not require interpretation. They require witness.

I think about lineage in a different way than our mother Sophia did. Sophia cared about lineage with a kind of urgency — she wanted the line held,

she wanted it named and counted and remembered. I understand that urgency now better than I did when I was younger and found it slightly exhausting. But Anna's version was quieter. For Anna, lineage was not a matter of record-keeping. It was a matter of attention. You carried the line forward not by reciting it but by learning to see what those before you had seen, by developing the same habits of observation, the same willingness to stand in flat afternoon light and read a page slowly enough that the choosing inside the name became visible.

My son Pavel — I want to be careful here, I do not want to wander too far from Anna, who is who this is about — but Pavel taught me something about family that I connect to what Anna taught me about names. He showed me that family is

not only the people who share your blood but the people who share your habits of attention. Who look at a thing the same way. Who hold it in both hands.

Perhaps this is what I am trying to say about Anna. She gave me habits of attention. She gave them to me without instruction, by standing at windows in certain light and reading carefully and pressing small objects into my hand and waiting to see whether I understood. The brass bookmark is one such object. It is small enough to lose and I have not lost it.

There are things I did not inherit from her. Her patience, truly — I have patience of a different quality, less still, more procedural. Her silence, not entirely. Anna could hold a silence the way you hold a breath, without tension, without wanting it

to end. I have always been more talkative than she was, more likely to fill a space with words when observation would serve better.

But the names. That I took from her and kept.

When Mira was born and her parents chose that name, I felt something close. Not nostalgia — I distrust nostalgia, it blurs things — but recognition. That is the word Anna would have used. Recognition: the name already there, waiting to be found.

Mira does not know any of this. Why would she. She knows her name is her name, and that is enough. But when I look at her, sometimes I see Anna at the window on Zankovskaya, and the afternoon light coming in flat and sure, and my sister's shoulders dropping as she found something worth attending to.

The bookmark is still there.

❦

Chapter

X

Pavel

He stood by the window the way a man stands when he has already decided.

There is a particular quality to winter light on Zankoskaya Street. I have not been back in thirty years, and still I know it precisely — the way it

came in flat and pale through the glass, the way it lay across the floorboards without warmth, the way it made everything in the room look considered, deliberate, as though the room itself were thinking. When I think of that street, I always picture Pavel standing by the window in that light. Not facing me. Not performing anything. Just standing, looking out at whatever the street offered that morning, and being, as he always was, entirely himself.

I did not marry young. I want to be clear about that. By the time Pavel came into my life I had already learned several things about myself that younger women are spared the trouble of knowing. I had learned that I was not easy to live with — not cruel, but exacting. I had learned that I found most conversation thin and most silence rich.

I had learned that my mother Sophia, who was herself a serious woman, had set in me a standard for seriousness in others that most people could not meet. And then there was Pavel, who met it without trying.

He was not literary the way I was literary. He did not read Akhmatova at the kitchen table or keep Pushkin in his coat pocket the way I did. But he read carefully, deliberately, and he never said a false thing about a book. That, I think, is rarer than people suppose. It is easy to love books. It is harder to be honest with them. Pavel was honest with everything, and this made him, at times, uncomfortable to be near, and at all times necessary.

I remember the afternoon — this would have been perhaps a year after we married, in the apart-

ment on Zankoskaya, before the larger questions of our life had fully declared themselves — when Tatyana came to visit. Tatyana was an old friend, one of those women whose friendship runs on a frequency of pure frankness, no courtesy between you, and she sat down at our table with her coat still on, drank her tea, and said that marriage was the only thing worth keeping. She said it the way she said most things, without preamble or softness, as a statement of fact to be examined, not agreed with. We talked for a long time that afternoon. Pavel came home to find us still at it, still going. He poured himself tea, sat down, and listened. He did not perform interest. He was interested.

Later, when Tatyana had gone, he said: she is right, but only if you choose correctly. He meant it simply, not as a commentary on Tatyana's mar-

riages, which were various. He meant that marriage as a category was nothing. That it was entirely a matter of what you built inside it, and with whom. I did not argue. I knew he was right. I also knew, sitting in that kitchen with the winter light already failing and the smell of tea in the room and the particular silence of a home that had been inhabited by love even briefly — I knew that I had chosen correctly. Not without doubt. But correctly.

What I cannot fully account for, even now, is how much of what I understood about my own life I understood because of Pavel. I had my mother Sophia, who taught me about endurance. I had Akhmatova, who taught me that suffering could be made into something that outlasted the suffering itself. But Pavel taught me something different. He taught me that an ordinary Tuesday could be

enough. That there was no shame in building a life at human scale. I had been raised — by the books I read, by the grandeur of what I admired — to think that anything quiet was somehow lesser. Pavel undid that.

He explained things the way a man explains things when he is not condescending and not performing, but simply trying to be understood. I can still smell the room where those conversations happened — the wood of the table, the particular smell of old paper because there were always books stacked somewhere near, the faint cold that came under the door in winter. He would sit across from me and explain what he thought about some question we were facing — a practical question, always, about work or children or where to live or how to live — and he would do it with such patience.

Not patience as virtue. Patience as nature. He was simply not in a hurry with his thinking, and being near him taught me to slow down my own.

We made our important decisions together. That sounds ordinary, and in some marriages I think it is only the appearance of togetherness — one person decides and the other agrees, and they call it together. That was not how it was between us. When we talked about leaving, for instance — about what it would mean, what it would cost, whether the life we could build elsewhere was worth the life we were leaving — it was a real conversation, months long, conducted in the ordinary minutes of daily life. Over meals. Walking. Late at night when neither of us could sleep. Neither of us arrived at the decision first. We arrived at it

simultaneously, from different directions, and when we looked up we were standing in the same place.

My son carries his name. That was Pavel's idea, or perhaps it was my idea, or perhaps it was simply obvious to both of us at the same moment. The things that feel inevitable are sometimes just the decisions you have made so fully that the making disappears. When I hold my grandson I see something of that original patience, that quality of not being in a hurry, and I think: yes, something is passed forward. Not through blood precisely. Through being near certain people during your formation. The way my mother Sophia made me serious. The way Pavel made me willing to stay.

I keep returning to him in my thinking. I noticed this and wondered, for a time, whether it was strange — whether it meant something, this

returning. I decided it means only that some people become part of the way you see. Not a memory you visit but a lens you look through. Sophia is that for me. And Pavel is that. When I look at a decision to be made, even now, even alone, I think: what would be honest here. That is his voice. I did not know I had absorbed it so completely until he was no longer in the room to offer it.

The window on Zankoskaya is probably different now. New glass, maybe. A different light. But I carry the old light in my body, the flat pale winter of it, and Pavel standing there, already decided, ready to tell me what he thought and equally ready to be wrong.

That is what I mean by the steady one. Not unmoving. Steady. There is a difference.

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A wedding portrait, 1958.

Chapter

XI

1989

In eighty-nine, just before the world changed, he left for good.

The word **perestroika** had been in the air for several years by then, but air is not the same as weather. You can breathe air without knowing

it. Weather is what arrives at the window, what changes the quality of the light on your walls. In 1989, the weather arrived.

I should say first that Tashkent in those years was not Moscow. The upheaval that moved through the Soviet republics did not move evenly, the way a hand moves across a table. It moved the way water moves through old plaster — finding the cracks that were already there, the ones people had learned to live around. In Central Asia there were other cracks, older ones. Language. Ethnicity. The question of who had been here before the state arrived and drawn its lines. I had lived in Tashkent my whole life and I did not always know which crack I was standing beside until I heard it open.

The spring of that year was very warm, earlier than usual. I remember the apricot trees were

already bare of blossom by late April, and the fruit coming too fast, the bazaar stalls piled with it before anyone was ready. There is something slightly ominous about abundance arriving too soon. I thought about my mother, Sophia, and how she would have stood in that market with her cloth bag, pressing each apricot with her thumb, not buying anything until she found the ones that were right. She had that patience. I did not always have it, but I had watched her long enough that I knew what patience looked like, even when I was not practicing it.

Mikhail left in that spring. My husband of twenty-two years. I do not say this to build toward something — there is no revelation waiting behind it. He left, and the leaving was not sudden, which is perhaps the honest thing to say about a marriage

that has come to its end. The sudden endings come from outside. The slow ones grow from inside, and you watch them grow the way you watch a hairline fracture in a wall, telling yourself each month that it has not widened, and then one day admitting that it has. We had been watching ours for some time.

He went first. That was the arrangement, not spoken as an arrangement but understood as one. He had a cousin in Germany — this was not nothing, in 1989, to have a cousin somewhere in the West who could receive you. The Iron Curtain had a seam in it by then, and for a brief season certain people could find the seam and press through. Mikhail pressed through in April. I stood at the door of our apartment with our son Pavel, who was seventeen and already very quiet in the way that

young men become quiet when they are absorbing something they have not been given language for, and I watched Mikhail carry two cases down the stairwell. He was always a careful packer. He did not look back from the bottom of the stairs, but that was not coldness — he had already said everything he was going to say to me. We had been speaking for months in the language of a thing ending. By the time of the actual departure, we were both very tired.

Pavel did not say anything when the door closed. He went to the window and watched the street, and I went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, and in this way we entered the new arrangement of our lives.

The apartment was on Pushkin Street — yes, Pushkin, the Soviet naming habit for its poets,

as though you could take an empire and line its streets with verse and that would be enough. I had lived on that street since I married Mikhail. I knew its smell in summer, the hot dust and diesel, the sweetness from the baker two doors down who started before dawn. I knew the precise groan of the third step on our staircase. When you know the groan of a staircase step, you know you have been somewhere a long time.

After Mikhail left, I began to understand that I was making a decision, though it did not feel like a decision yet. It felt like weather. The Uzbek national movement was gathering force that year. There were demonstrations, there were voices on the radio that had not been on the radio before. For those of us who were not Uzbek by origin — and I was not, my family was Russian, we had been

in Tashkent since my grandfather's generation — the question of belonging was becoming audible in a new way. Not threatening, not yet, or not exactly, but clarifying. The city was clarifying itself, deciding what it was going to be, and in that process of clarification there is always the implicit question addressed to those who are not at the center of the story: **and you, what are you doing here?**

I am not saying I was driven out. I want to be careful with this. There are people who were driven out, and their experience is not mine. What I felt was something quieter and in some ways harder to name — the sense that the place where you have always lived has begun to look at you with a question in its eyes. Not hostility. A question. And when a place that held you since birth begins

to hold that question about you, you start, slowly, involuntarily, to look elsewhere.

I had Akhmatova on my shelf. I had always had Akhmatova. I remember taking down the thin volume that summer — not the official collected, the other one, the one that had circulated hand to hand — and reading Requiem again. I had read it many times. But that summer I read it differently. I read it as a document of what it means to stay, what staying costs, what staying means when the country you are staying inside has decided to consume the thing you love. Akhmatova stayed. She stayed and she bore witness and the bearing of witness was itself the act. I was not Akhmatova. I want to say that plainly. But I was a woman sitting in an apartment on Pushkin Street, in a city beginning to change its skin, reading a poet who

had known what it was to stand outside a prison and wait, and to turn the waiting into language, and I felt something in those pages that I recognized without being able to name it then.

Pavel and I left in September. Mikhail had sent word from Germany, and there was paperwork, and then there was a departure date, and then there was a morning. I walked through the apartment one last time, not ceremonially, not with any performed emotion, but practically — checking that we had left nothing essential behind. I checked the bookshelf last. I could not take all of them. This is a grief I do not dramatize because it does not need dramatizing. To leave books is to leave a portion of your mind on the shelf. I took what I could carry. I left the rest in a box for my neighbor Tamara,

who had a daughter who read. I hope the daughter read them. I have no way of knowing.

The taxi to the airport smelled of cigarettes and something chemical, a cleaning fluid of some kind, and I watched Tashkent pass outside the window with the particular attention you give to a thing you understand you may not see again. The apricot trees were finished by then, late September, just the dry leaves. A man on a bicycle crossing an intersection. A woman in a printed dress on a corner. Ordinary morning. Ordinary city. Except that I was leaving it and therefore it was extraordinary, and I was trying to hold it, and it would not be held, it simply continued being itself as it always had, indifferent to my looking.

There is a thing my father David used to say when I was small — I cannot remember now if

it was something he had read or something he invented, which perhaps amounts to the same thing in the end. He said that home is the place that does not require you to explain yourself. By that measure, Tashkent had been home for a long time. By that measure, I was leaving home in every sense of the word.

Pavel sat beside me in the taxi with his hands on his knees. He had his grandmother Sophia's posture — very straight, very still. I thought of her then, briefly. She had not lived to see any of this. Perhaps that was a mercy. Or perhaps she would have known exactly what to do and the knowing would have been a comfort. I could not ask her. I looked at my son, who was already more a man than a boy, who was quiet in a way that was not

absence but presence, and I thought: we are going. That was the whole thought. We are going.

The flight lifted off over the steppe, and I watched the city diminish below us until it was a pattern of streets and rooftops, and then it was not distinguishable from the earth it was built on, and then it was gone.

I did not cry. I simply watched until there was nothing left to watch.





A departure, 1948.

Chapter

XII

Two heavy trunks

She will find you. Leave nothing behind.

There is a right way to pack a book and a wrong way. Sofia knew this. She had spent forty years knowing it, which is why, when it came time to leave, she was not the one who did the packing.

She was already gone. It fell to the rest of us — to me, to Mikhail, to Pavel with his bad shoulder and his absolute certainty about everything — to decide what her library would become.

Two trunks. That was what we had. Two trunks that Mikhail had bought from a man near the bazaar, proper ones with metal corners and leather straps, the kind that had once carried other people's other lives across other borders. They smelled of oil and old wool and something else I could not name then and cannot name now. We set them open on the floor of Sofia's room in the late summer of 1989 and stood around them the way you stand around an open grave — not dramatically, but with a kind of attention, a held breath.

Pavel said: she will haunt us if we leave a single volume. He said it once and did not repeat it, which was how Pavel said the things he meant.

I believed him. I still believe him.

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Sofia's room had been, by the end, more library than bedroom. The bed was there, the lamp, the small table with its water glass, but the walls were books — not arranged with any system I could ever identify, though she knew where every one of them was. Akhmatova beside a volume on Persian carpets. Pushkin in three different editions, because she distrusted any single editor's judgment. A French dictionary with its spine repaired in brown tape, the tape itself now cracked and lifting at the corners. Below the window, a row of notebooks, her own, filled in her particular hand — narrow letters

that leaned forward as if hurrying somewhere they were not sure they'd be allowed to go.

She had not been a person who underlined. This I remember thinking as I lifted the books out one by one. No marks, no penciled objections in the margins, no folded corners. She read cleanly, which I used to think was a kind of discipline and later came to think was something more like respect. The text was the text. Her argument with it stayed in her head, where arguments belong.

The French dictionary I held for a long time before putting it in the trunk. It was heavy for its size, which is always a surprise with dictionaries, as if all those paired words — the original and its translation, the thing and what the thing becomes in another mouth — have a weight that single-language books do not.

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Mikhail wrapped the more fragile ones in cloth. He had found, somewhere, a bolt of thin cotton, pale gray, and he tore it into pieces and wrapped each book the way you wrap something that cannot protect itself. He did not speak much while he did this. Mikhail was like that — capable of great concentration and not interested in sharing it. I watched him wrap the Akhmatova, the 1946 edition that Sofia had kept through everything, the one that should not have survived but did. His hands were careful. I thought: this is what forty years of marriage leaves in a man. Not always tenderness in the ordinary sense. But the knowledge of what deserves care, and the willingness to give it without being asked.

I took the notebooks last. There were eleven of them. I counted without meaning to — the

counting was automatic, the way the hand reaches for a railing on a dark stair. Eleven notebooks filled with Sofia's hurrying letters, and I did not know then and do not know now everything that was in them. Some things she told me. Some things I found later, much later, in a different country, sitting at a different table with a cup of tea that had gone cold while I read. But on that afternoon in Tashkent, with the light coming sideways through the window and Pavel holding the trunk lid as if he thought it might try to close on its own, I simply put them in. I put them in without reading, which was the right thing to do. The dead deserve some privacy in transit.

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The weight. I want to say something about the weight.

When Mikhail lifted the first trunk to test it, his face did not change but I saw his shoulders drop slightly — not with effort but with something like recognition. Yes. This is what it is. This is the mass of a life arranged into volumes. We had not thought, when we began, that two trunks would be enough, but they were, exactly. The books filled them to a finger's width below the rims, and we closed the clasps and Pavel sat on top of the first one to compress whatever softness remained and then it was done.

We did not say much in the room after. There is a point in packing, in any serious packing, when the room you are packing starts to become unfamiliar to you, when you can already see it as the next person will see it — empty of meaning, full of only the furniture that was never really yours.

Sofia's room reached that point when the books were gone. The walls were still the same walls. The lamp was still there. But the room had already stopped being hers, and the strange mercy of that was that she was not there to see it.

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We carried those trunks out of the country in the way you carry anything heavy: slowly, with attention to the body, with pauses. There were borders and there were officials and there were questions. I do not want to go through all of that here because it is not the point. The point is that the books arrived. They arrived in a new place, in boxes that had become unfamiliar to themselves, and when I opened them again — weeks later, in a room with different light and a different smell, a smell that was not Tashkent and not Sofia —

I found everything intact. The French dictionary with its cracked tape. The Akhmatova, still not marked in. The eleven notebooks stacked in the order I had placed them, which was not any particular order at all.

I set them on shelves I had put up myself, crooked shelves that Mikhail straightened without commenting on the crookedness. And there they were. Sofia's library in a country she had never seen, on shelves she would have had opinions about, in a room that slowly, slowly began to smell of old paper and something else — something that was not quite her but was the medium she had moved through. Books keep the smell of the hands that held them. I don't know the chemistry of this. I know that it is true.

—

Pavel, I think, took some comfort in having been right. She did not haunt us — or she haunted us exactly as much as she was going to regardless of what we did, which is to say: completely, and without inconvenience to herself. She appeared in the way she always had: in the middle of something else, while I was making tea or trying to remember a word in a language I was still learning to use. Her voice, which had been precise without being harsh. Her hands, which had not been soft. The way she said Pushkin's name — with a slight emphasis on the first syllable, the way people say the names of those they have actually read and argued with and trusted, rather than only admired from a careful distance.

I think she would have been satisfied with the trunks. With the metal corners and the leather

straps and the eleven notebooks making it across. She was not a sentimental woman — sentiment was something she regarded with affectionate suspicion, the way you regard a cat that likes you more than it should — but she understood that certain things must be carried. That the weight is not a burden. That the weight is the point.

Mira, years later, said something I have not been able to stop turning over. She said that names were the only thing worth keeping. I think what she meant — and I may be wrong, I often interpret Mira through my own weather — was that names carry people the way trunks carry books. Imperfectly, heavily, with loss in transit, but carrying nonetheless. Sofia's name is still full of her. I say it to myself sometimes in the evening. Just the name. Just to confirm that it still holds what it held.

It does.

❦

Chapter

XIII

Sofia's hands

The body remembers what the mind has agreed to forget.

There is a particular smell that arrives before the memory does. It comes the way weather comes — you feel it before you see it. A warmth

behind the sternum, something between wool and woodsmoke and the faint mineral trace of old paper. This is how Sofia begins for me. Not with her face, not with her voice. With the smell of whatever room she was in when she decided I needed to know something.

My mother's name was Sophia. I have said this before and I will say it again, because names matter in our family — this is something I understood slowly, over decades, the way one understands the grammar of a language one has spoken since childhood without ever studying its rules. Sophia. She chose it herself, in a manner of speaking. In Tashkent in those years, a name could be given and then quietly set aside for the name the family used at home, the name that traveled room to room and landed differently in different mouths. Sophia was

her full name, her formal name, but in the rooms I knew her in, she was simply Mother, and her hands were the fact of her.

Those hands. I find myself returning to them when I am not looking for anything in particular. When I am heating milk in the kitchen in the early morning, when I am folding a letter I have been too slow to send. My own hands warm slightly, and I recognize the warmth before I recognize the cause. It is not grief. I want to be clear about that. It is something older than grief and less dramatic.

I cannot have been more than nine or ten the first time she explained family to me in a way that I understood to be deliberate — a formal transmission rather than an incidental remark. We were in the room off the kitchen. I remember the light came in at an angle and landed on the floor rather

than the walls, which made the room feel lower, closer. She was mending something, or perhaps she was simply holding cloth in her lap the way she did when she wanted her hands occupied so her mind could speak plainly. She told me that family was not only the people living. She said this carefully, as though it were a sentence she had rehearsed, though I knew she had not. She was not a woman who rehearsed. She explained that every name in our lineage carried the people who had held it before, that a name was not decoration, it was information. She was not mystical about this. She was practical. She might have been explaining how to account for a household.

My hands are warm now, writing this.

Father David came later with a different angle on the same knowledge. He was more formal —

he used more words and a more upright posture and a delivery that reminded me of a man who has spent time near teachers and absorbed their habits without necessarily sharing their patience. But the smell of those rooms is the same in memory, which I find strange. His study had a smell of its own — something close to iron, to the particular dryness of spines long pressed together on narrow shelves — and yet when I reach for the room where he explained lineage to me, the smell arrives almost before the room does, and the smell is not iron, not library dust. It is something warmer. Wool and woodsmoke and a word I don't have in any of my languages.

Perhaps the smell is not the room at all. Perhaps it is the occasion. The smell of being told you come from somewhere.

I have been told in several rooms by several people. Daughter-in-law Lena, who I once said did not care about lineage and then corrected myself — I said it was the only thing she cared about, and this correction matters. Lena's telling was a different kind of transmission: intense, specific, almost juridical in its detail. She had prepared. She wanted the line held correctly. I respected this even when it exhausted me. The smell of the room during those conversations was something sharper — tea going cold, a window that needed attention. But under it, the same warmth arrived. The body recognized the pattern even when the people were different.

My husband Bicail spoke to me about marriage before I fully understood what marriage would require of a person. He used the word as though

it were a country whose maps he had studied. My husband Mikhail — later, and differently — spoke to me about marriage as a thing lived, something built by increments out of ordinary days. These are not the same speech. They left different residue. But both of them left smell. Both of them left the sensation, which I notice now with some regularity, of my hands warming slightly when I reach back toward those rooms. This is what I mean by the body's memory. I am not trying to be poetic about it. I am trying to be accurate.

There is something else. When I think of sun — plain sunlight, the Tashkent light of my childhood that was a different quality of light than anything I have lived inside since — when I think of that light alongside people, alongside family in the aggregate, the warmth in my hands becomes

something closer to physical heat. Not painful. Not dramatic. The way a stone warms that has been in the sun all morning. You pick it up not knowing and it surprises you.

My daughter lives in Laldina. When I think of her, of the lineage passing through her, that warmth is present. I cannot explain the mechanism and I have stopped needing to. The body does not owe the mind an explanation.

I think what Mother Sophia was teaching me that afternoon in the low-lit room was something she could not have named outright. She was not the kind of woman to name things outright. She taught by proximity, by the quality of her attention, by the fact of her hands moving over whatever was in her lap while her words laid themselves down like stones across a shallow river. She cared more than

anyone I knew about the family. More than my father, who cared but expressed it as duty. More than her own sisters, who cared but expressed it as argument. She cared the way rivers care about finding the sea — as something that simply is, that cannot be otherwise, that requires no commentary.

I did not know enough then to ask her the questions I would ask her now. This is the ordinary tragedy of the living and the dead: we become interesting to each other at the wrong time. But what she gave me does not require my questions to remain available. It is available through the smell. Through the warmth. Through the fact that I can be standing in my kitchen in this city far from Tashkent, and something shifts in the temperature of my hands, and I know she is not absent.

Granddaughter Mira — younger than me, despite what I may have said and then corrected — once told me that names were the only thing worth keeping. I believe she was right, though I would add: names and the warmth they carry, the warmth that lives in the hands of the people who have held them.

Outside my window today the light is wrong for Tashkent. It is the thinner light of a different latitude, a different season, a city that is mine now but was not always. I make tea. I set my hands around the cup without thinking.

They are already warm.

❦

Chapter

XIV

The other Mikhail

Everything I know about marriage traces back to husband Mikhail.

There is a particular kind of returning that is not nostalgia. Nostalgia sweetens the past, rounds its edges, makes of it something you would choose

again without hesitation. What I do is different. I return to Mikhail — my husband, not my brother, though they share the name and I have spent more years than I would like to admit untangling the weight of that coincidence — I return to him the way you return to a sentence you have read many times and still cannot say you understand completely. Not because it is beautiful. Because it is unfinished.

I ask myself sometimes whether this returning is strange. I do not think it is. I think it is simply what a person does with a marriage that formed them in ways they are still discovering at seventy-eight. The fact that I dream of him still — just recently, waking in the early morning with the particular confusion of not knowing which decade I had surfaced from — does not embarrass me as

much as it once did. I am old enough now to know that the mind keeps its own archive and does not always consult us about what it retrieves.

He was not my brother's double, though the shared name pressed them together in the minds of everyone around us when we were first married. My brother Mikhail was sharp and restless, a man of quick movements and quicker conclusions. My husband moved differently. He had the patience of someone who had learned early that time spent thinking was not time wasted. When he explained something to you, he did not explain it in order to finish. He explained it because he was still arriving at what he thought, and you were part of the arrival.

I can still smell the room in which he first explained marriage to me. This is the kind of thing

that sounds theatrical when you say it, but I mean it precisely. It was our apartment in the early years, the window that faced west and let in a particular quality of afternoon light, and there was something in the air — the smell of paper, of the dust that accumulated along the bottom of the bookcase, of whatever was cooking in the building's shared kitchen two floors below, cabbage or something with cabbage in it. We had been married less than a year. I do not remember what had happened between us, some friction, some small disagreement that had grown larger than it needed to. He sat in the chair near the window — not the comfortable chair, the wooden one he preferred when he was thinking — and he said something to me about what marriage required. Not demanded. Required,

in the way that a structure requires certain materials to remain standing.

I do not remember his exact words. I remember that the light came in slanted, the way it does in late afternoon in that latitude, making a stripe across the floor and catching the spine of a book on the lower shelf. I remember that I was standing rather than sitting, which tells me something about my state of mind at the time. And I remember that what he said arrived in me not as comfort or as correction but as information. He was telling me something true. I could feel the truth of it the way you feel a chord resolve — not thought, exactly, but the body recognizing proportion.

What he said, as close as I can reconstruct it: that marriage is not an agreement between two versions of yourself you were when you made it. It

is a continuing agreement between two people who are always becoming someone slightly different. The work is not maintaining the original terms. The work is recognizing who the other person is becoming and deciding, again, whether you are willing to meet them there.

I was twenty-three or twenty-four. I did not fully understand this. I thought I did.

He and Pavel — our son, who was called Pavel after Mikhail's father — they spent Sunday afternoons together in conversation when Pavel was old enough to be interested in such things. I would hear them from the kitchen or from the next room, their voices going back and forth in that particular rhythm of two people who are not arguing but are also not simply agreeing. Mikhail would take a position and then dismantle it slightly, offer Pavel

the weaker side to attack. He was teaching him to think, though he would not have called it that. He would have called it talking. The subjects varied — history, the names of things, the way that families carry their inheritances whether they intend to or not — but marriage kept appearing as a theme the way certain notes reappear in music that you cannot quite place until you have heard the whole piece.

My sister Anna came into this too, in her way. She and Mikhail could spend hours on Sunday afternoons with the question of names — not names as sentiment, not as tradition performed for its own sake, but names as something with weight and consequence. Where a name came from, what it carried, what you gave a child when you gave them a name that had already been lived in by someone

else. Anna was more interested in this than I was at the time. Now I understand her interest better. A name is a form of lineage made visible. It is the part of the inheritance you cannot avoid pronouncing.

The small object I keep from those years, I will not describe it in detail. This is a deliberate choice. There are things that hold their meaning partly through privacy, and I have shared enough of Mikhail with the world — with the world of this page, I mean, this record — to know which things must stay unshared to remain what they are. It sits where I can see it. On certain mornings it does nothing. On other mornings it reminds me not of grief but of the specific texture of a life lived with someone who understood that marriage was an intellectual project as much as an emotional one. I do not mean cold. I mean careful. I mean that he

brought the same quality of attention to loving me that he brought to anything else he found worth understanding.

I think about the young woman standing in that room while the light fell across the floor in its stripe. She was impatient, probably. She was also listening. Whatever she was arguing about, she was also listening, which means she understood even then that something was being said that mattered. You do not always know while you are inside a moment which moments will last. That one lasted.

He is gone now and has been for some years. I will not dwell on the manner of his going or the shape that absence takes; other chapters have their burdens and this is not one that requires it. What I want to say here is simpler: that I return to him not because I cannot move forward but because there

are things he understood about the nature of a shared life that I am still, at seventy-eight, learning to articulate on my own behalf. He was a teacher without the vanity of teachers. The lesson was the conversation. The conversation was the marriage.

Some mornings I wake from a dream of him and the feeling is not sorrow. It is more like the feeling of having been briefly back in a room where something important was happening, and then finding yourself returned to the present, which is also a room, which is also, in its own way, important.

The light in those dreams always falls at an angle.

❦



A first child, 1962.

Chapter

XV

Letters

The letter arrived folded in thirds, the way my mother always folded things.

There is a box. There has always been a box. Brown cardboard, the corners reinforced with strips of packing tape that have gone amber with

age, the adhesive failing at one edge so that the flap lifts slightly, as if the box itself is trying to say something. I brought it out of Tashkent in 1989 in a canvas bag with my winter coat folded over it, and it has followed me from city to city since — the way certain objects do, not because you carry them but because they refuse to be left.

Inside the box there are letters. Not many, perhaps forty or fifty, some folded in thirds, some in halves, some so many times that the creases have eaten through the paper and the words run to the edge of a tear and stop. My mother Sophia folded her letters in thirds. I could recognize her letters before I opened them by that crease alone. A third, then a third again, neat and deliberate, the way she ironed, the way she set a table, the way she did

nearly everything — with the understanding that care taken now saves grief later.

I learned to read by reading letters. Not books first, letters. My father David would bring them in from the post and set them on the kitchen table and my mother would dry her hands on a cloth before she touched them. This was not ceremony exactly. It was more like attention. She understood that something had traveled to reach her, had passed through hands she would never shake, had waited in sorting rooms and mail pouches and the dark interiors of trucks — and that it deserved to arrive properly, to be received rather than just opened. I watched her do this for years before I understood what I was watching. I was watching someone take language seriously.

My father David taught me the names of things — the names of plants along the road we walked to the market, the names of poets, the names of stars visible over Tashkent in July when the heat did not break until past midnight and we sat outside because the rooms held the warmth like ovens. He could recite Pushkin without pause, not performance, just the way some people hum. He would say a line and let it sit, the way you set down a glass you want to look at before you drink from it. I did not know, then, that I was learning something. Children rarely do.

But the letters came from my mother's side, from her sisters, from her mother, from women I met only once or twice or never. Sophia's oldest sister — I will call her Aunt T., she would not want more than that — wrote from another city

in careful, small handwriting that was almost mechanical in its regularity, every letter the same height, the lines perfectly horizontal without the help of ruled paper. I used to wonder how she managed it. Later I thought it was simply a discipline she had imposed on herself during a period of her life when discipline was the only form of dignity available to her. This is my interpretation, not anything she said. She never explained herself in her letters. Very few of the women in my family did. They wrote facts, and the facts carried what they could not say directly.

There is one letter I return to, not often, but with regularity. It is from my mother, written sometime in the middle 1970s — I had left Tashkent by then, briefly, for reasons I may explain elsewhere — and it is short, one side of one page.

She writes about the weather. She writes about a neighbor's cat that has had kittens. She writes that my father's back has been troubling him and that he has been sleeping on the floor, which she finds ridiculous but which she has stopped arguing about. She writes that she found a good melon at the market and thought of me because I had always loved the melons, the way they smell when you cut them open, the way that smell fills the whole kitchen and is sweeter than the taste. She writes, at the end, that she misses me in the way that is simply the fact of distance and not anything to grieve.

That last line. I have thought about it for decades. In the way that is simply the fact of distance and not anything to grieve. She was telling me two things at once. She was telling me she

missed me, which she could not say plainly because that was not the way she had been formed. And she was telling me not to worry about her missing me, because she had filed it in the category of things that exist and cannot be changed, and that category did not require my attention. She was being kind and she was being truthful and she was protecting me, all in one sentence, with seventeen words. If she had been a poet, I think she would have been a very good one. But she was my mother Sophia, who folded her letters in thirds and dried her hands before she touched the ones that arrived, and that was its own kind of art.

I have not always been careful with letters I received. There was a period, in my thirties, when I responded too quickly, wrote back the same day with whatever was on the surface of my mind, and

only later felt the dissatisfaction of it — the sense that I had been present in body but not quite in thought. Mikhail used to say that I was better on paper than in the room, and I took this as an insult for years before I understood it was a description. He was not wrong. In the room I can be impatient. On paper I slow down. The slowing is not effort; it is something the act of writing imposes, the way a narrow path imposes a different pace than a road.

The letters I wrote to Mikhail in the early years of our marriage — before we were in the same city, when he was away for work and I was in Tashkent with the heat and the box and my mother's hands drying on a cloth — those letters I did not keep. He may have kept some of them. I don't know. There is a version of this story in which I ask him and he shows me a folder somewhere in his desk. But

that story exists elsewhere, not here. What I have is the box, and what arrived, not what I sent.

When I left in 1989, I took the letters but not much else that could be called sentimental. I was not, at that time, thinking about sentiment. I was thinking about what was necessary and what was portable and what, if lost, could not be reconstructed. Books could be replaced. Photographs — most photographs — could be reconstructed from memory, because memory, I had found, is more accurate with images than with words. But letters contain the voice of a specific moment, the weather of a specific mind on a specific afternoon, and that cannot be reconstructed. Once gone, they are gone utterly.

So the box came with me. It still smells faintly of the apartment in Tashkent — a particular com-

bination of the wood of the shelves and something I cannot name precisely, something mineral, like stone in summer heat, like the particular dryness of the air there. When I lift the lid and the smell reaches me, my hands warm a little, the way they do sometimes when I am remembering without choosing to. The body keeps its own archives. It does not ask my permission.

My granddaughter Mira once held one of my mother's letters — she was young, maybe seven or eight — and she asked me what it said. I read it to her, the short one, the one about the melon and the cat and the sleeping on the floor. She listened very carefully and then she said: but why didn't your mother just say she missed you? And I said: she did. Mira thought about this for a moment in the way that children think about things, not

performing the thinking but actually doing it, and then she said: I would have said it directly. And I told her: I know you would. And that is also right.

There is no one way to hold what you feel. Some people hold it in the shape of a folded letter, in thirds, neat and deliberate. Some people say it outright in a child's clear voice. Both arrive. Both, in their way, are careful.

The box is on the shelf where I can see it from where I sit.

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Chapter

XVI

Languages

The tongue remembers what the mind has given up.

There is a thing that happens to a person when she has lived long enough inside more than one language. It is not confusion, though people who

have not experienced it often call it that. It is more like having several rooms in a house, each with its own light, its own smell of wood or plaster or old paper. You do not live in all the rooms at once. But you know they are there. You feel the draft between them.

I was born into Russian. That is the only way to say it — into, not with. Tashkent in 1948 was Soviet before it was anything else, and Soviet meant Russian first, regardless of what the earth under your feet had once been called. My mother Sophia read to me in Russian. Pushkin before I was old enough to understand Pushkin. I remember the sound of it before I remember the meaning — the long vowels of his lines, the way she slowed at the end of a stanza as though she did not want it to finish. I did not know, then, that a language could

belong to you like a body. I would learn that later, by losing pieces of it.

Uzbek was the other tongue of my childhood, though it occupied a different position — lower, more physical, closer to the ground. It was the language of the market, of certain neighbors, of the particular heat of Tashkent summers when everything outside the window seemed to shimmer and flatten. I was not fluent. I want to be honest about that. I understood more than I could speak, the way you can understand the mood of a room before you understand the words being said in it. There were phrases I absorbed without meaning to — for colors, for foods, for the sounds one makes when a thing is surprising or when a thing is lost. These phrases lived somewhere below grammar. They were not translatable because they were

never really linguistic in the first place. They were sensory. They were temperature.

My father David was the one who first told me that languages were not equivalent — that a word in one tongue did not have a twin in another, only a cousin, and sometimes not even that. He said this about Russian and Uzbek, comparing them the way a man compares two tools that can almost do the same job. I was perhaps nine or ten. We were sitting in a room I can still smell — a particular smell of paper and whatever oil was used on the furniture, something slightly sweet going slightly sour. He was explaining something about lineage, about where the family name had traveled before it came to rest in Tashkent. The explanation required going back and forth between languages, and the going back and forth was itself the point. Some

things could only be said by walking the bridge twice.

French came to me later, in school, then in books. It is perhaps the language I know most formally, most from the page rather than from the mouth. I can read French with more ease than I can speak it, even now, which is a strange position. There is a French I know that exists only on paper — the French of certain novels, of Akhmatova's translators when they were working from the French — and a French I speak, more slowly, with pauses where I am searching for the exact instrument. When I do speak it, I am aware of a kind of performance. Not dishonest — but deliberate. Russian I speak without watching myself. French I speak the way I imagine an actor speaks

in a language not their first: technically correct and somehow outside the body.

I think about what it means to carry a language you did not choose. Russian was not chosen by the people of Tashkent. It arrived with a system, with an ideology, with all the specific machinery of what was being built across those decades. And yet — I do not experience Russian as an imposition. It is mine. That is the strange and sometimes uncomfortable truth. The language in which I first understood Pushkin, in which I read Akhmatova's Requiem and felt it enter me like cold water, in which I argued and laughed and said the words one says to a husband over thirty years of a life shared — that language is mine even if its history is complicated. Even if my mother Sophia spoke it to me in a city where it was not the first language

of the soil. We do not choose what enters us in childhood. We can only account for it afterward.

When I left in 1989, the question of language became acute in a way it had not been before. Leaving is an amputation followed by slow prosthesis. I knew this intellectually. I did not know it in the body until I was already gone.

English I learned as an adult. That is a different education entirely from learning a language as a child — the difference between a thing grown into and a thing constructed. I built English. I can feel the construction in it even now. There are moments when I reach for a word and what comes instead is the Russian word, or the ghost of the Russian word, and I have to wait for the English to arrive, which it does, eventually, the way a slow but reliable train arrives. I am not impatient with it. I have

come to think of this delay as honest — as the true duration of translation. Most people shorten it by approximating. I try not to approximate.

What I have noticed, living now in the language of a country not my birth country, is that English gives me a kind of distance from my own grief that Russian does not allow. In Russian I am inside every sentence. The grammar is more intimate, the cases pull you toward the noun, you cannot stand apart from what you are saying. In English there is more syntactic distance, more options for the cool sentence, the sentence that observes rather than inhabits. I use this sometimes deliberately. When I am writing about things that in Russian would become too heavy, I write them first in English to find out what they weigh.

Granddaughter Mira once said that names were the only thing worth keeping. She said this in Russian, without thinking about it, the way children say true things without realizing they are true. Names are a kind of language too — compressed, dense, carrying history in their syllables the way a small object carries a smell long after the source is gone. My name, Yelena. From the Greek. The light, or the torch, depending on who is translating. My mother Sophia's name — wisdom. My husband Mikhail's name — who is like God. The names my family carried through Tashkent and before Tashkent carried entire civilizations inside them, and I only began to understand this when I was already old enough to have given names to others.

There is a poem — I will not pretend to quote it exactly — in which Akhmatova says something

about the language of home, the language that remains after everything else has been taken. I have always read this as being about Russian specifically, about what it meant to stay in the Soviet period, to use that language with full knowledge of what was being done in it and around it and sometimes to it. But I think now the poem is larger than that. Any language can become the thing you hold when the other things are gone. Any tongue can be the last room still lit in the house.

When I dream, I dream in Russian. This has not changed. I have lived outside Russia for longer than some entire lifetimes and the dreaming remains in Russian. I find this neither sad nor remarkable — only true. The body has its own agreements, made early, and they are not renegotiated by circumstance.

My English is good now. My French is serviceable. My Uzbek is fragments, warmth, the memory of summer light on a particular kind of dust. My Russian is the room I was born in.

I still know where all the rooms are.

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Chapter

XVII

Cooking

The body remembers what the mind has had the grace to forget.

There is a thing that happens in the kitchen that does not happen anywhere else. Time moves differently there. I do not mean this as poetry. I

mean it as fact, the way boiling means fact, the way salt means fact. You stand at the stove and an hour passes and you have not thought about the hour at all. You have thought about nothing except what is in front of you, and even that is not quite thinking. It is closer to listening.

I learned to cook from my mother, Sophia. This is where everything begins, if I am honest — with Sophia's kitchen, which was not large, which was never quiet, which smelled in winter of onions and dill and something underneath those smells that I have never been able to name. Fat, perhaps. Old wood. The particular warmth of a room that has been heated by a stove for many years and holds that heat in its walls the way stone holds the sun.

She did not teach me by explaining. She taught me by doing, and by expecting me to watch. If

I asked a question she would answer it with her hands — a tilt of the pan, a pinch held up between two fingers so I could see the quantity. She measured nothing. I do not mean she was imprecise. I mean she carried precision in her body, and the body did not need to consult a number. After enough years, mine began to do the same.

I think about this sometimes, about what is passed between people without language. Sophia never described to me what it felt like to know when the onions were ready. She never said **watch for the edges to go soft before the color changes** or any such instruction. And yet I know it. I know it in a way that feels less like knowledge and more like inheritance, something that moved from her hands to mine through the repeated fact of standing beside her.

We were in Tashkent, and Tashkent gave us certain things to cook with and kept other things from us, depending on the year, depending on what the shops had decided to offer that week. This was simply the condition of life. You planned around absence. You built a meal from what arrived. Sophia was extraordinarily good at this — not cheerful about it, not stoic in any performed way, just practical in the way that people are practical when they have no alternative and have had enough time to stop being angry about it.

She made a rice dish that I still make. I will not call it plov because hers was not quite plov, or perhaps it was plov and I have been wrong all these years about what the word requires. She used lamb when there was lamb, which was not always. She used carrots, always, an unreasonable quantity of

carrots, julienned very fine with a knife she kept sharper than the others. Cumin. A great deal of cumin. Oil heated until it was nearly past the point of safe, and then the onion going in and the sound that made — that specific sound, the intake of breath the oil takes when the onion meets it — I hear that sound in my memory more clearly than I hear many voices.

I was perhaps nine or ten the first time she let me hold the knife for the carrots. She watched my hands and said nothing for a long time. Then she moved my thumb back, slightly, to where it was less likely to be damaged. That was the entire lesson.

When I married Mikhail and we had our own kitchen, small as it was, I found I missed cooking beside someone more than I had expected. Mikhail was not a cook. He was willing to be near the

kitchen, to sit at the table with a glass of tea and talk to me while I worked, which was its own kind of company. But it was not the same as the wordless understanding I had had with Sophia, where two people can occupy the same space and the same task without negotiating who does what. With Mikhail, I cooked and he ate, and he was grateful, genuinely grateful, which is not nothing. But gratitude is not the same as collaboration.

Still, there is something to be said for cooking for someone who eats with full attention. Mikhail was like this. He did not praise extravagantly. He simply ate in a way that made it clear the food was reaching him. He would go quiet, the particular quiet of a person who is present in their body. I cooked Sophia's rice dish for him early in our marriage, and he looked up partway through and

said, **this is serious food.** He meant it as a compliment. He meant that it was not decorative, not trying to be something other than itself. I have thought of that phrase often — **serious food** — and I think he was right, and I think that quality came directly from her.

There were other dishes. A soup with beets that I made in winter, every winter, a habit so old it has become animal. The smell of beets cooking is something I cannot be neutral about. It goes somewhere in me below opinion. There were dumplings I made for occasions, which required an entire day and a large table and the willingness to accept that your back would hurt by evening. I made these alone after leaving Tashkent, after leaving the Soviet Union entirely in 1989, because I had no one to make them with, and the aloneness

of the task changed it, gave it a different quality, more deliberate, more interior. I would stand at the table in whatever kitchen I had, and the work would feel like a kind of argument I was having with distance.

I do not think I am unusual in this. I think food is one of the primary ways that displaced people conduct their argument with distance. You cannot bring the place. You can bring the method, the proportion of fat to flour, the angle of the fold. You bring what your hands remember and you set it down in a new kitchen and for the duration of the cooking you are, in some imprecise but genuine sense, elsewhere.

The difficulty, when you live abroad for decades, is that eventually the elsewhere becomes complicated. You have made these dishes so many times

in the new place that they begin to belong to it as well. My rice dish, Sophia's rice dish, now also belongs to the particular kitchen where I have made it most often, to the window above the counter and the light that comes through it at a certain hour in November. She did not know that kitchen. She did not know that light. And yet she is in the dish, undeniably, in the proportion of cumin, in the quantity of carrots, in the moment I heat the oil almost to the edge of too much and then put the onion in and listen.

My granddaughter Mira is not a cook in the way I am a cook. She approaches food with more deliberateness, more consultation of recipes, which I do not criticize. Every generation finds its own relationship to the kitchen. But she ate with me once, here, ate the rice dish, and she was quiet

in the same way Mikhail used to be quiet, that specific quiet of presence, of the food reaching her. And I thought: there it is. There is Sophia, arriving again through the cumin and the carrots and the knife held a certain way.

I did not say this to Mira. I did not need to. The dish said it.

There are things I have lost the capacity to cook. Dishes that require two pairs of hands, or a particular conversation, or the knowledge that someone is coming who will recognize what you have made and know where it came from. These I have let go, more or less. I do not mourn them exactly. I hold them at a small distance, the way you hold anything that is gone — respectfully, without demanding it come back.

But the rice. The beet soup. These I will make as long as I can stand at a stove. They are not memories exactly. They are something still living.

The knife is still sharp.





A celebration.

Chapter

XVIII

Music

The piano does not forgive; it only remembers.

When I try to locate music in my life, I find it everywhere and nowhere at once. It did not announce itself the way books did. Books I could

hold, could smell, could set on a shelf and return to. Music simply was — in the walls, in the courtyard, in the bodies of people who carried it without knowing they were carrying anything at all. I grew up inside it the way one grows up inside a language. Only later did I understand it had shaped me.

Our apartment in Tashkent was on the third floor of a building that was always too warm in summer and never warm enough in winter. The windows faced a small courtyard where the neighbors — a Georgian family, the Merabishvilis, I still remember the name — kept a daughter who practiced scales every evening between six and seven. I do not know what the girl's name was. I knew only the scales. First the major, then the relative minor, then again from the beginning. She was not gifted, or perhaps she was, but she was young

and the instrument was not well-tuned, and the sound that rose through our window had a slightly wounded quality, like something trying very hard to be beautiful and not quite succeeding. I loved it. I still love it, in memory. There is something in effort itself — the visible, audible strain of a child working — that moves me more than finished performance.

My mother Sophia played. Not professionally, not even especially well by any standard she herself would have accepted, but she played. An upright piano stood against the wall of the room we called the big room, though it was not big. The piano was older than the Revolution, which Sophia said as though that were a kind of nobility, and perhaps it was. Its keys had yellowed at the edges. Two of them — the F and the B-flat, both black keys —

had small chips in the lacquer, and when I was small I would press these with my index finger during the day, when she was not home, just to feel the rough edge. I did not play. I only pressed.

She played mostly in the evenings, after the dishes were washed. My father David would sit in the chair by the lamp with whatever he was reading, and Sophia would play, and neither of them spoke about what this meant to the other. They did not need to. I have thought about this often — the way people in my parents' generation expressed things sideways, through action, through the maintenance of a habit. Sophia played the piano in the evenings. David stayed in the room. That was the whole conversation, and it contained everything.

She played Chopin when she was content and something harder, more angular — I believe Prokofiev, though I was not old enough to be certain — when she was not. I learned to read her moods through the first three bars of whatever she chose. By the time I was eight or nine I had developed a system, private and reliable: Chopin nocturnes meant the day had been manageable. The Prokofiev meant something had gone wrong, something she would not name. I never asked. I simply adjusted myself accordingly, the way one adjusts to weather.

There was also, in our life, the violin. Not in our apartment — we had no violinist — but my mother's cousin, a man named Yuri whom I saw perhaps twice a year at family gatherings, played with a local ensemble that performed on

Sunday afternoons in a hall near the old market. Sophia took me several times. I remember the hall precisely: wooden chairs arranged in uneven rows, a floor that was slightly soft underfoot, the smell of dust and something sweetly chemical that I later understood was rosin. The musicians dressed carefully, which moved me, the care of it. Men in dark jackets that did not quite fit. A woman cellist whose hair was pinned so severely it seemed to be holding her head together.

I was perhaps ten the last time Sophia took me there. I did not understand what I was hearing in any technical sense. But I understood that something was happening to the air in the room. That the air had a different quality when the strings were playing. I have never found a better way to say this. The air changed.

We did not have much in the way of recordings. There was a radio, and occasionally it broadcast music, and occasionally it broadcast music worth hearing. My mother kept a small collection of records — vinyl, scratched, some without their original sleeves — and she played these on a machine that had to be coaxed into action by pressing a particular corner of the lid. She had Shostakovich. She had some Tchaikovsky. She had, mysteriously, a recording of a Spanish guitarist whose name I cannot now recover, and this she played on Sunday mornings while doing nothing in particular, which was itself unusual. She did not often do nothing in particular.

I think often about what music did for her — for Sophia specifically, who was not a woman who spoke freely about inner states. She spoke about

practical things, about obligations, about what was needed and what was not. She spoke, sometimes, about literature, about Akhmatova, which was its own form of coded speech in those years. But music she did not speak about at all. She simply played it. She simply listened. I understand this now in a way I could not have when I was young, because I have become, in my old age, somewhat the same way. There are things I cannot say directly. I put them somewhere else. Sophia put them into the piano.

I myself never played an instrument with any seriousness. I tried the piano briefly, as a child, with a neighbor who gave lessons in her kitchen, a serious woman named Irina Alexandrovna who had studied at the conservatory before the war and who had not, I think, recovered from the distance

between what she had hoped for and what she had been given. She was not unkind but she was not warm. I lasted perhaps four months. What I took from those months was not music but a different kind of attention — to my own hands, to the specific difficulty of making separate fingers do separate things, to the gap between what the mind intends and what the body produces. This gap, I learned early, is not closed by wanting. It is closed, if it closes at all, only by time.

After I left Tashkent, after everything that leaving meant, music followed me in different forms. There were years when I could not easily afford concerts and years when I could. There were cities with good opera and cities where I did not go out much at all. Mikhail, my husband, was not a musical person in any practiced way, but he was a

person who could be quietly moved, and I watched this happen to him at a production of Eugene Onegin that we saw together once in a city I will not specify because I have already placed too many things in that city and I do not want it to collapse under the weight. He sat very still. Afterward he said nothing about the music. He said: that set design was wrong for the period. I knew what he meant. He meant it had reached him.

This is what music does, I think — it reaches people through the door they have left open, not the one they are guarding. Sophia played Prokofiev when she was troubled because she could not say: I am troubled. Mikhail criticized the set design because he could not say: that broke something open in me. I pressed the chipped keys of the piano when no one was home because I could not play

and could not ask for lessons and could not explain what it was I wanted from the instrument. We were all, in our various ways, trying to get close to the thing.

I still listen to music. In the mornings, often. Not the radio — I cannot bear the interruptions — but recordings, carefully chosen, played at a volume that would strike a younger person as too low. I am not trying to be surrounded by it anymore. I am trying to hear it. There is a difference that I could not have articulated at twenty and that seems obvious now, at seventy-eight, the difference between wanting to be inside something and being willing to simply be near it.

The courtyard girl in Tashkent — I think of her sometimes. I do not know what became of her scales.

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Years of small days.

Chapter

XIX

The body

The body remembers what the mind has had the grace to forget.

There is a phrase I have used too many times, and it is still true: the body keeps its own archive. Not the mind, not the pages of a diary, not

the careful letters I wrote and sometimes sent. The body. It files without asking permission. It retrieves without warning. I am seventy-eight years old and I have learned to take this seriously.

I think about this often when my hands begin to warm for no reason I can name. It happens in the mornings mostly, when the light is still uncertain and I have not yet decided what the day requires of me. My hands will warm — not from the radiator, not from the cup — and I understand, without having to work at the understanding, that I am thinking of my mother Sophia. Not thinking exactly. Something below thinking. The warmth arrives before the thought does. Before her face, before her voice, before anything I could call a memory, there is the temperature in my palms, and then she is there.

This is what I mean when I say the body has its own intelligence. It is not mysticism. It is simply a fact I have lived long enough to notice.

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My mother Sophia talked about family the way other people talk about weather — as the permanent condition inside which everything else occurred. She was not sentimental about it. She did not decorate it. When she explained something to me about who we were, where we came from, what the family carried and what it had lost, she spoke plainly, and she expected me to listen plainly. I must have been quite young the first time she sat me down for one of these explanations. I cannot give you the year. But I can give you the room.

It smelled of something warm and dry — not bread exactly, more like the wood of the shelves that held the bread, a smell that meant perma-

nence, that meant the house would still be there in the morning. There was always a certain angle of light in that room, coming from a direction that shifted by season but always arrived at the same corner of the table. My mother's hands were folded. She did not gesture when she spoke about serious things. She became very still, and the stillness was its own kind of emphasis.

That smell — the dry warmth of it, the wood and the close air — I can still find it when I try. Seventy years and the room is still there, waiting in the body.

My father David explained lineage differently. He was more formal, more architectural about it — the names arranged in a structure, each one bearing weight, each one supporting the one above and the one below. When Father David would explain

lineage to me, the room had a different quality. Cooler, I think. The window open a little more. A smell of something that might have been ink, though I cannot say with certainty there was ink in that room at all. The body sometimes conflates what it loved with what was present. But I trust the coolness, and I trust the slight formality of his voice, and I trust that I sat very straight when he spoke, because he made one want to sit straight.

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The body holds rooms. This is the thing I want to say.

Daughter-in-law Lena used to explain lineage with such patience that it startled me — she had come into the family with her own reasons for caring about it, reasons I did not always understand but came to respect deeply. When Lena spoke about these things, the room was different again.

Her quality of attention made the air different. I can still smell that room too — something sharper, more present, a scent of the particular decade, of specific furniture, of her particular way of opening a conversation slowly and then suddenly meaning all of it.

And husband Mikhail. When Mikhail would explain marriage to me — what it was, what he believed it to be, what it asked of two people — the room had its own atmosphere entirely. I will not try to recreate it in full. Some rooms belong to themselves. But it is there, filed in the body, intact.

The body does not lose these rooms. This is what I have found. The mind loses them constantly — approximate them, rearranges them, loses the exact color of a scarf or the precise hour of a

conversation. But the body keeps the temperature. The body keeps the smell. The body keeps whatever was present in the air when something true was being said.

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I have had ordinary ailments. The kind that accumulate without drama. The knees that began, somewhere in my sixties, to negotiate stairs rather than simply climb them. The eyes that now require a particular lamp and a particular angle. The tiredness that arrives earlier than it once did and does not always leave when asked. None of this frightens me especially. I have watched enough people move through their last decades to know that the body's failures are mostly incremental — small surrenders, small accommodations, a gradual renegotiation of what one asks of the flesh.

What interests me more than the failures is what does not fail.

My hands warm when I think of my mother. This has not diminished. My body still holds every room where something true was spoken to me. My nose is still, in some functional archive below cognition, capable of returning me to the dry warmth of my mother's kitchen, to the cool formality of my father's explanations, to the particular sharpness of an afternoon with Lena.

I read once — I cannot remember where, perhaps it was in something adjacent to Akhmatova, perhaps somewhere else entirely — that the senses are not merely receptors but recorders. That the nose, especially, encodes experience with a fidelity that bypasses the more literary parts of the brain

and goes directly to something older and less edited. I believe this. I have evidence.

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There is a kind of care the body gives you that has nothing to do with medicine or rest. It is the care of return — the way it can place you, without asking, back inside a moment of warmth, back inside a room where someone who loved you was explaining the world. The body does this not as a comfort exactly, though it is comforting. It does it as a form of fidelity. It keeps faith with what happened.

My daughter is in Laldina. When I think of her — when something specific brings her to mind, a gesture or a phrase or simply the particular quality of an afternoon — my hands warm in the same way they warm for Sophia. This astonishes me still, a little. That the body makes no distinction between

the dead and the living in this archive. That the warmth it gives for my mother, who is long gone, is the same warmth it gives for my daughter, who is very much here, somewhere, in her life. The body does not file by loss. It files by love, which is the same temperature regardless.

I have thought sometimes that this is the thing most worth knowing about growing old. Not the failures, which are real and deserve attention and practical management — the lamp, the angle, the knees, the earlier tiredness. Those are real. But the archive is also real. The rooms are still there. The people who spoke truth inside them are still there, in the particular way the body means.

I am seventy-eight years old and my hands are warm this morning.

And I have not touched the radiator.

❦



A workshop.

Chapter

XX

War-years

I can still smell the room when Father David would explain lineage to me.

There is a particular quality of warmth that does not belong to temperature. It belongs to memory — to the hands, specifically, the palms. I

have noticed this for years. I will be sitting quite still, doing nothing remarkable, and I think of Tashkent in summer and my hands grow warm as if I have set them near a samovar. Not the whole body. Just the hands. I do not know what the body understands that the mind does not, but it understands something. It keeps its own record.

I was born in 1948, which means the war was over before I arrived. But the war was not finished with Tashkent. Nothing is ever finished with a city so quickly. The evacuation trains had brought people from Moscow, from Leningrad, from Kiev — writers and engineers and frightened mothers carrying bundles of documents and winter coats in the middle of August — and when the war ended, not all of them went back. Some had nowhere to return to. Some had found, in the warmth and the

strangeness of Central Asia, something they did not want to release. My family was already there, rooted by years I cannot count by memory but only by arithmetic. What I know of the war years I know from my parents. From Father David. From Mother Sophia. From the texture of what they did not say.

Father David was not a man who explained things at length. He was precise, economical, the kind of man who found sufficiency in a single sentence where others would use ten. But lineage — that was the one subject that loosened him. I can still smell the room: the dry warmth of it, the particular smell of Tashkent plaster and old wood, something faintly of apricot because there was always fruit in some stage of ripeness in our house in summer. He would sit and I would sit

near him, and he would speak about who had come before us as though it mattered enormously, which it did, though I did not understand why until much later. He spoke about names as though they were deeds, as though to name a person correctly was to give them their proper weight in the world. I was a child. I listened the way children listen — not with full attention but with something better than attention, with the body open, taking things in before the mind has learned to be selective.

What I know of the war years, then, is this: that Tashkent received people. That it was a city of arrivals. The Uzbek families opened their homes — not everywhere, not without difficulty, but genuinely, in a way that I was told about with a kind of gratitude my parents carried permanently, like a scar that does not hurt but is always there.

Evacuees slept in rooms that were not their rooms. They ate bread they had not baked. The city was crowded in a way it had never been, and there was scarcity, real scarcity, the kind that means children go to bed uncertain, and yet my mother Sophia spoke of that time — when she spoke of it, which was not often — not with bitterness but with a peculiar density of feeling, as though the closeness of those years, the physical press of too many people in too few rooms, had also meant a closeness of another kind.

Sophia was not a woman who performed her emotions. She cared more than anyone — this is something I understood only gradually, the way you come to understand a landscape you have lived in so long you stopped looking at it. Her caring was structural. It held things up. During the war years

she was young, younger than I can quite picture when I try to imagine her, because the mother I knew was already formed, already herself in the complete way that parents seem to their children. But she was young then, and she kept track. She kept track of who was related to whom, of which names had been lost and which had survived, of the thread of lineage that the war kept threatening to cut. She understood that a name, once lost, is very difficult to recover. You can lose a coat, a book, a house, and these things can sometimes be replaced or mourned cleanly. But a name that no one remembers — a person who is not spoken of — that is a different kind of loss. It has no object. It is an absence with no outline.

What got lost in those years, in our family, I cannot say with precision. There are gaps I was

never given the contents of. This is itself a kind of information. Father David's explanations of lineage had a care about them, a deliberateness, that suggested he was constructing something as well as transmitting it — filling spaces, I think now, holding certain names forward because without his holding them they might have receded entirely. Pavel, I knew from early childhood. The way his name was said in our house had a particular quality — not grief, not exactly, but weight. I did not always understand the weight. Children accept without interrogating. I accepted.

The sun of Tashkent is not like other sun. This is not poetry; it is meteorology. It is direct and it is generous and in summer it is absolute. The city in my memory is saturated with it — the white walls of buildings, the color of dust on a

dry road, the apricots I mentioned, the mulberry trees. When people arrived from the west during the war, having come through cold and destruction and loss, they arrived here. Into this. Into a warmth that must have seemed, after everything, almost implausible. I think of that sometimes. I think of what it means to carry grief into a place where the sun has no interest in your grief, where the season continues regardless. It is neither comfort nor insult. It is simply the world, indifferent in the old, clean sense — not hostile, just vast.

My granddaughter Mira once said to me that names are the only thing worth keeping. She said this as a young person says things — with the confidence of someone who has arrived at a truth and does not yet know how many times they will need to re-arrive at it. But she was not wrong. I

thought of Father David when she said it. I thought of the room, the warmth, the smell of apricot and old plaster. Names are what we made of people after the war took their particular faces from us. Names are what Sophia kept. Names are what David passed on with that careful, quiet insistence of his, sitting in that room, speaking to a child who did not yet know she would need what she was being given.

I have a daughter. I will not speak in detail of her here, but I will say this: she carries the lineage forward in the way that daughters sometimes do — not always knowingly, not always willingly, but in the end, always. The things Sophia kept and David explained and Pavel carried in his weighted name — they are not finished with us yet. They move forward, diminishing in some ways, acquiring

new shape in others. This is what lineage means, I think. Not a straight line but a river, losing water here, gaining it there, moving in the direction it moves for reasons that have long preceded any of us.

My hands are warm now as I write this. Not from any heat in the room. From something else, something that does not require explanation, only acknowledgment. The body keeps its own record. The body knows what it came from.

There are things I was never told. I have made my peace with that.

❦

Chapter

XXI

Paradoxes

I both believe and do not believe. This has always been true.

There is a paradox I have carried for seventy-eight years and I have never once tried to put it down. I am not sure I could. It belongs to the body

the way the smell of ink belongs to a room — you stop noticing it because it never leaves.

I believe in lineage. I believe that the chain of names — Sophia, David, Mikhail, the ones before them I can only half-pronounce — constitutes something real, something with weight and consequence. And yet I do not believe it. I have watched that same chain become a cage. I have watched people grip their lineage the way a drowning person grips a plank, furiously, without thought, because the alternative is water. So which is it? Both. It has always been both.

My father David would explain lineage to me in a particular room — I can still smell it, the close heat of it, the wool of his jacket when I stood near enough, a lamp with a yellow glass shade that made everyone look a little jaundiced, a little

holy. He was not a mystic, my father. He was a careful man who measured things before he said them. But when he spoke about the family — who came before, what they had done, where they had traveled, what they had survived — he spoke as if he were reading from a document that existed whether or not anyone chose to read it. As if our family had an objective record, somewhere, the way a river has a source. You could disbelieve it all you liked. The source remained.

I believed him then. I believe him still, in some part of me that is younger than the rest, the part that was standing in that lamplight. But I have also lived long enough to know that family stories are not documents. They are arguments. Everyone in a family is arguing for their own version, gently or not so gently, and what we call lineage is usually

just the version told by whoever lived longest or spoke loudest.

My mother Sophia cared more than anyone else about this. More than my father, even. This is the paradox inside the paradox — because Sophia was not a person you would call traditional. She was sharp, unsentimental about many things, impatient with ceremony. And yet the question of who we came from, who we were, what it meant — this held her completely. She did not romanticize it. She held it the way you hold something fragile and heavy at the same time, carefully but without tenderness, because tenderness is a luxury when the object demands concentration.

I said once that lineage did not interest my daughter-in-law Lena. I was wrong. That was wrong of me to say. It was the only thing that

interested her, actually. But she approached it as a problem to be corrected rather than a fact to be inhabited. She wanted to fix the family story, revise it, improve it. Sophia wanted to transmit it. The difference is enormous. One treats history as argument; the other treats it as inheritance. Neither of them was entirely right. Neither was entirely wrong.

I hold both positions in my own chest and they do not resolve. This is not comfortable, but comfort was never the point.

My granddaughter Mira once said — she was young when she said it, young enough that it startled me with its precision — that names were the only thing worth keeping. Not property. Not stories, exactly. Names. I asked her what she meant. She thought for a moment and said: everything else

can be lost or changed, but if you know the names you can at least stand somewhere. I thought about this for days afterward. I still think about it. She was right and she was also wrong, and I do not say this to be dismissive. Names are a form of standing, yes. But I have known people who knew every name in their line and stood nowhere at all. The names became a performance, a proof of something they were trying to convince themselves of. And I have known people who remembered nothing — no names, no dates, no document — and yet stood in themselves with complete solidity.

So. Names matter. Names are not enough.

Everything I know about marriage traces back to Mikhail. This too is a paradox because Mikhail was — I will not say imperfect, that is too polite — he was contradictory in the way all real people are

contradictory, which is to say completely and without apology. I loved him. I did not always like him. These two facts coexisted for decades without ever resolving into something simpler. When people speak of happy marriages or unhappy marriages I think: you are describing weather. Marriage is not weather. Marriage is the climate. You live inside it so continuously that you forget to evaluate it. You just breathe.

What I believed about marriage when I was young was what everyone believed — that it would clarify things. That choosing one person would make you more yourself, more certain, more arrived. What I learned was the opposite. Marriage makes you strange to yourself. You see yourself reflected in someone else's face and the reflection is never quite accurate and so you are always

revising. I do not mean this bitterly. I mean it as an observation about the actual mechanics of the thing. Mikhail saw me as someone more decisive than I was. I became more decisive. I saw him as someone more tender than he showed — and perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I invented it — but he showed more tenderness anyway, toward the end. Whether we revealed each other or constructed each other, I cannot say. Probably both.

The contradiction I live with most quietly is the one about belief itself — not religious belief, though that is also unresolved, but belief as an act. I am a person who believes in the value of not knowing. I think certainty is mostly a kind of cowardice, a way of stopping the thinking before it becomes uncomfortable. And yet I believe certain things with a completeness that embarrasses me a

little when I examine it. I believe that literature saves something in a person that nothing else can reach. I believe this without qualification, without nuance, without apology. I believe it the way my father believed in the document of lineage — as if it existed objectively, somewhere, whether or not anyone chose to accept it.

Akhmatova wrote in the most impossible conditions and the poems survived. This is not a metaphor to me. It is simply a fact from which I derive something I can only call faith. Not faith in God, or not only that, not faith in humanity, which seems to me too large and too optimistic a category — but faith in the specific and stubborn insistence of made things. That a poem written in secret, memorized because paper was too dangerous, passed from one mouth to another through

decades of fear — that this is possible, that this happened — it tells me something about what is possible for any made thing, any true thing, any thing that a person insists on even when insisting is not safe.

And yet. And yet I know that plenty of things were lost. I know that not every poem survived. I know that not every person who insisted survived. The fact that Requiem survived does not mean survival is guaranteed. It means it happened once, and once is enough to mean it can happen, and that is — almost nothing and also everything.

I do not resolve this. I carry it.

My hands warm a little when I think of certain things. The warmth is involuntary, which means the body has made its own decision. Maybe this is all we can ask — not resolution, not consistency, not a position held cleanly on both sides — but

the body's small involuntary responses, the heat in the hands, the smell of the room returning when you least expect it, the name surfacing before you have consciously reached for it.

I believe and I do not believe. The lamp had a yellow glass shade.

❦

Chapter

XXII

Diaspora

You carry what fits. The rest you leave for whoever comes next.

There were two trunks. I want to be precise about this because people imagine departure differently — they imagine boxes, a van, perhaps a

tearful neighbor carrying a lamp. Ours was not like that. By the time we left, in 1989, the habit of reduction had already been practiced on us for decades. We knew how to make ourselves small. Two trunks, dark green, with brass latches that Mikhail kept oiled even when there was nothing particular inside them worth protecting. He was like that. He maintained things against the possibility of needing them.

I remember standing in the flat in Tashkent, late summer, the air doing what Tashkent air does in August — pressing itself against every surface, making even breath feel like an effort. The trunks were open on the floor. We had to choose. And this is what I have never been able to explain adequately to anyone who did not go through it: the choosing was not dramatic. It was almost

administrative. You hold something up. You think: will this be useful. You put it down or you fold it in. The grief was there but it was quiet, the way a room is quiet after everyone has gone home and you are the one left to close the windows.

What I took: three dresses. Two pairs of shoes. A small icon that had been my mother Sophia's — not for religion, I should say, but because her hands had held it so often that the paint at the lower edge was worn smooth, and it smelled faintly of her, and I thought the smell might last. It did not last long. A few volumes — Akhmatova, of course. A thin Pushkin, the kind printed on paper so light it is almost translucent, which I had carried since I was nineteen and which had traveled with me across moves I no longer remember precisely. A notebook. Some letters from my father David that I could not

look at directly in those weeks but could not leave behind either.

Mikhail took his tools. His books on engineering. A photograph of his own parents. His good coat, which he would not need for years but folded in anyway with the patience of a man who believes in eventual weather.

That was it. That was what we were, made portable.

I think about the books most when I think about departure. Not because they were the most important things — the letters from my father David were more important, and the icon was more important in the way that the body is more important than the mind, because it held something pre-verbal — but because the books required a kind of argument with myself. I could not take everything. Every volume I set aside felt like a

small abandonment, and I knew this was foolish, I knew that paper is not a person, but the library we had built across thirty years of marriage was the record of what we had thought about and cared about and argued over in the evenings after supper. To pack two volumes and leave fifty behind is to make a statement about who you intend to be going forward, and I was not certain I knew.

The Akhmatova I did not hesitate over. Requiem had lived in my chest since I was a young woman — not the book specifically, but the lines themselves, memorized in the way you memorize things when the text cannot be written down, when carrying it in the body is the only safe library. But there is something different about holding the physical book, the actual pages, the particular edition with its slightly crooked spine. I chose the one

that had been given to me by a woman I no longer see, whose name I will not write here because I am not certain she would want it. She pressed it into my hands at a gathering in the early seventies and said nothing, which was the correct thing to say. I still have it. The pages have darkened at the edges the way old paper does — not quite yellow, more the color of weak tea — and it sits now on my shelf in the same company it has always kept.

We arrived in the winter. I will not name the city we arrived in because that is not the point of this, and besides, cities are different things to different arrivals — what a city is to a person who chose it freely is not the same as what it is to a person who chose it from a list of possibilities that were themselves already a reduction. We arrived in the winter, and the winter was a specific kind of

cold I was not prepared for, a cold with a different texture than what I had known, drier and more indifferent. Tashkent cold has a relationship with you. This cold did not know I existed.

We found a flat. Small, a kitchen and two rooms and a bathroom with a shelf that Mikhail immediately assessed for its structural adequacy and found wanting. He reinforced it that first week with pieces of wood he bought from a hardware store, managing the transaction entirely in gestures and a kind of determined goodwill that I found, watching him, almost unbearable in its dignity. He was sixty-one years old. He was buying shelf brackets in a language he did not speak, and he was not embarrassed. I was embarrassed on his behalf and he would have been annoyed at me for it, so I said nothing.

The trunks went into the bedroom. For the first several weeks I found I could not fully unpack them. I would take out what I needed for the day and then close the latch again. I told myself this was practical — the flat was small, there was nowhere to put things — but Mikhail looked at me once across the trunks and did not say anything, which meant he understood, which was one of the things about that marriage that I will always be grateful for. He understood without requiring me to explain myself, and he left me alone to come to things in my own time.

I came to it gradually. First the clothes went into the wardrobe. Then his books went onto the reinforced shelf. Then, one afternoon in what must have been February, I took out the Akhmatova and the Pushkin and stood for a while holding them,

deciding where they would live. It was not a large question. It was, from the outside, a completely ordinary domestic act. But I felt it as the moment the trunks became history rather than intention. I was unpacking rather than camping. I was, in some sense I could not yet fully articulate, staying.

I put the Akhmatova on the left. The Pushkin on the right. Between them, later, came other things — acquisitions from secondhand shops, gifts, one or two volumes sent by people who knew what we had left and wanted to help fill the space. In time the shelf became a shelf again and stopped being a symbol. That is how it goes. The emergency eventually becomes the furniture.

My mother Sophia, who was not alive to see any of this — she had died years before, and I had grieved her in the way you grieve a person

who was the center of gravity for your childhood, slowly and in installments across decades — my mother Sophia would have found the whole operation interesting rather than tragic. She was a practical woman with a taste for difficulty. Not that she enjoyed suffering; she simply did not treat it as unusual. She had seen enough of history to understand that people are always moving away from something, and the question is only what you manage to keep coherent in the movement. She would have looked at the two trunks and nodded. She would have asked whether I had taken warm socks. I had taken warm socks.

My father David had a different relationship to objects. He believed that meaning accrued to things over time, that a bowl used by a family for fifty years held something the family needed — not

metaphysically, he was not a mystical man, but practically, in the way that familiarity is a kind of knowledge and knowledge is a kind of resource. He would have found the leaving hard. He would have found it hard and he would have been honest about finding it hard, which was his way. I think of him when I look at the letters I brought, the ones I could not look at during the packing. I can look at them now. They are in a box on the same shelf as the books, and occasionally I take one out and read it, and his voice is right there, exact and unhurried, explaining something about the nature of family that I am still, at seventy-eight, in the process of understanding.

Diaspora is a Greek word. It means scattering, literally — seeds thrown from the hand. I learned this from a book I found in the new city, a sec-

ondhand etymology I bought for almost nothing because the spine was damaged. The scattering is real. But seeds, when they land, are trying to become something rooted. That is also real.

The trunks are in a closet now. I keep them because Mikhail oiled the latches and I see no reason to undo his work.

❦



The return, 1991.



Beginning again.

Chapter

XXIII

She still does, in a kinder way

She will be with us, he said. I did not believe him then.

Pavel said it the year before he died, or perhaps the year before that — time does its collapsing when you are not watching — and he said it the

way he said most things that mattered, quietly, without ceremony, as though he were commenting on the weather or the condition of a particular road. **Sofia will haunt us.** He used that word, haunt, and I remember looking at him and thinking: this is a man who has read too many elegies. I had read them too, of course. We had all read them. But I did not believe, at that moment, that my mother's particular presence would outlast her body in any way I could actually touch.

I was wrong. Pavel was right. He was right in the specific and irritating way that older brothers sometimes are.

What I did not understand then — what I think I am only now, at seventy-eight, beginning to understand — is that haunting is not what the poets make it. It is not cold. It is not the sound

of footsteps on a stair when no one is there. Sofia haunts us in warmth. She haunts us in the gesture of a hand reaching toward bread before a meal is properly served, too hungry to wait. She haunts us in the way certain words feel when they arrive in the mouth. She haunts us in the names we give things, and the names we cannot stop giving.

My mother's name meant wisdom. She knew this and she carried it with a very slight self-consciousness that she mostly concealed, except on the days she could not. She would say: names are not decorations. She was not speaking of herself when she said this, or she was not only speaking of herself. She was speaking of all of us, the whole arrangement. Father David named her, and his parents named him, and somewhere back in that long corridor of Tashkent and before

Tashkent, in places whose names have thinned to almost nothing in my memory, there were people selecting syllables with the gravity of people who understood that a name is a small piece of claim against erasure.

Mira once said something about this — my granddaughter Mira, who was younger by two years than I had first said, I had it wrong, she corrected me gently — Mira said that names were the only thing worth keeping. She was young when she said it, young enough that the observation had not yet cost her anything. But she was not wrong. I have been sitting with that sentence for years now, letting it accumulate weight. Names are what stay when almost everything else has gone. Sofia is gone. The apartment in Tashkent where she moved through the mornings is gone, or changed so com-

pletely that I would not know it. The particular smell of that kitchen — the tea and the slightly sour smell of old tile and something beneath it, specific to her and to that place, that I have never successfully named — that is gone too, in any form I can recover. But Sofia is not gone. She is here, in some form that does not require her body.

I am trying to be precise about this rather than merely consoling. I am not writing to comfort myself. I am writing because it is true, and because Pavel understood it before I did, and because I owe him at least that admission.

There is a memory I return to. It is not a dramatic memory. It is, in fact, an extremely ordinary one, which is perhaps why it has remained so whole. I am in my mother's kitchen, and I am perhaps eleven or twelve, and she is standing at the

window with a glass of tea that she has let go too cold to drink. She is not doing anything in particular. She is looking out. The light in Tashkent in the late afternoon of summer has a specific quality — it does not soften, exactly, but it becomes more horizontal, it finds the sides of things — and it was doing that then, finding the side of her face, the line of her jaw. She was not old. She was the age that seemed impossibly old to me then and seems impossibly young to me now. She was holding the glass in both hands, warming them even though the glass had gone cold, and she was very still.

I did not ask her what she was thinking. I knew, even at eleven, that this was not a moment for a question. I watched her for a long time. Or perhaps not a long time — perhaps thirty seconds, perhaps a minute — but in memory it has the duration of a

much longer thing. And then she turned and looked at me and said: **come, we will make something to eat**, and the moment was over, and we did.

That is the memory. My hands warm slightly when I think of her, even now. I noticed this once and I have gone on noticing it. The body records what the mind does not know how to hold.

I said lineage did not interest my daughter-in-law Lena. I have had to correct myself on that point, or rather I have been corrected by my own recollection: lineage was the only thing that interested Lena. She came to it differently than Sofia had, without Sofia's naturalness, with more effort and more pain, but she came to it. And Mira came to it through her. And this is what I mean when I say Sofia haunts us in a kinder way — the word kind being exact here, not soft, not gentle, but

accurate — because what Sofia left was not grief, or not only grief, but a set of instructions she never wrote down. How to hold a name. How to face a cold glass with your hands. How to turn from the window when someone needs feeding.

I learned from Mikhail what marriage was. I learned from Father David, in rooms I can still smell when I try, what lineage meant — he had a way of explaining it that made it feel like geography, like a map you were already standing on without knowing. But it is from Sofia that I learned the thing that sits beneath both of those. I do not have a clean word for it. It is something like: attention. The willingness to be fully present to the ordinary moment without making theater of it. She was not a demonstrative woman. She did not perform her love. She let you feel it by the way she

moved through the same rooms you did, without urgency, without impatience, as if your presence in those rooms was the expected and correct thing.

This is what I could not see at the time. You cannot always see the quality of the light while you are standing in it.

Pavel saw it. Pavel said: she will be with us. And I think he meant not only that we would remember her — memory is the small version of this, memory is the minimum — but that she would continue to operate on us. That the instructions would keep running. That Mira would hold a name a certain way and not know entirely why. That I would feel warmth in my hands and understand, after a delay of decades, what warmth was pointing toward.

When I left — when 1989 happened and the shape of everything changed and I went from being a person who lived in one kind of world to a

person who lived in another — I took very little. There are lists one could make of what was left behind. I will not make them here; they are not the point. What I carried, without knowing I was carrying it, was Sofia at a window with cold tea warming her hands. What I carried was the way she turned. What I carried was the sense that an ordinary moment, witnessed carefully, is enough. It is actually enough.

Pavel died without knowing whether he had been right. Or perhaps he died knowing, in the way people sometimes know things at the end that they could not have argued for. I like to think he knew. He was a man who took some satisfaction in being right, and I would like him to have had that, at the last.

She still does haunt us. That is what I want to say. She still does, in a kinder way than I feared.

❦

Chapter

XXIV

Smelling the binding

Some evenings I open the book and smell it before I read.

There is a Pushkin on my shelf — not the edition I grew up with, that one is gone, but a later copy, Leningrad, cloth-bound in dark blue,

the spine cracked at the place where the narrative poems begin. I have had it for many years now. I open it sometimes not to read but to smell: the paper, which is slightly acidic with age, and the glue in the binding, which smells the way all Soviet glue smelled, faintly animal, like something rendered down from a thing that once lived. I cannot explain why this comforts me. It simply does. The smell arrives before any word does. Before Eugene Onegin, before the Bronze Horseman. Before meaning. Just the room in which a book like this was always present.

I have been thinking lately about rooms and what they hold. Not furniture. Not light. I mean the specific quality of air in a room where someone is explaining something to you, and you are young enough that the explanation feels permanent — as

though the words, once spoken, have changed the composition of the air permanently and you can still breathe them in decades later. I believe this now more than I did when I was forty. The body keeps what the mind misfiles.

My father, David, would explain lineage to me in the room off the kitchen in Tashkent. He had a way of speaking about ancestors that was neither proud nor apologetic, only precise — as if lineage were a problem in mathematics that happened to have human names attached. The room smelled of tea that had been steeped too long and the particular wool of the small carpet hung on the wall, which was there not for decoration but for warmth, the walls being thin. I cannot hear his voice clearly anymore if I try to summon it directly. But if I stop trying, if I simply hold still and let the smell of old

binding reach me, there he is. The carpet. The tea. His hands flat on the table, the way he had, as if he were steadying a thing that might otherwise tip.

My mother, Sophia, spoke of family differently. Where my father gave you lines — this name, from this place, across this number of generations — my mother gave you the warmth inside those lines. She cared more than any of them, I think. More than she could always afford to show. There was a room for that too, a smell of that too: her particular soap, something with lavender that she had found somewhere and used with great economy, and underneath it the smell of the apartment itself, plaster and time. When she explained family to me — and she explained it often, in many different registers, through story and through silence and through the way she set a table — I would sit and

receive it and not know that I was receiving it. That is the nature of what mothers give. You don't know you are holding it until you find it in your hands years later, in a foreign kitchen, wondering where it came from.

I had a sister, Anna. She had her own version of things. Where our father gave lineage and our mother gave warmth, Anna gave names — she was particular about names in a way that I only came to appreciate much later. Names as vessels. Names as the compressed history of everyone who carried them before you. She would explain this in the way younger people explain things to each other: quickly, with impatience, as though it were obvious and you were slow. But the impatience was also love. We are given, I think, only a few people in a life who will be impatient with us out of love, and

I was lucky to have her. Her room smelled of ink — she always had pens everywhere, and notebooks — and of the orange peel she would leave drying on the windowsill.

There were husbands. I have had more than one life in that regard, and I say it plainly because plainness is what it deserves. Bicail was my first understanding of what marriage required. Mikhail was my second, and more lasting. Everything I know about marriage traces back to Mikhail in the way that everything in a river traces back to a watershed — you can follow the water to its source even when you are standing far downstream. He also had rooms, and those rooms also had their smells, and when I open the Pushkin on certain evenings I am not always sure whose room I am being returned to. Perhaps that is not important.

Perhaps what matters is only that the rooms persist.

Lena and Lina — my sons brought different women into the family, and I have been a mother-in-law twice, which is itself an education. Lena was the one who surprised me. I had said once, I think, that lineage did not interest her — and I was wrong, entirely wrong, it was the only thing, it was the organizing principle of how she understood herself in the world. She would explain it to me in that particular way of women who have had to work hard to recover something they were not given easily: with a kind of contained urgency. The room where those conversations happened was her kitchen, which she kept very clean and which smelled of the cardamom she put in coffee. I learned things there I had not expected to learn.

My friend Tatyana had her own way of speaking about marriage — by which she often meant survival, and by which she sometimes meant joy, and which was most interesting when she allowed the two to sit together without resolving them. She had a directness that I admired. She did not arrange her words into consolations. The smell of her rooms was tobacco and books, which is a combination I have always found trustworthy.

I think about why smell and not sight. Why not the face, the expression, the light through a particular window. I have those too, but they are less reliable. A face can be misremembered. A smell cannot misremember itself — it arrives exactly as it was, or it does not arrive. The binding of the Pushkin is an honest thing. It does not tell me what I want to hear. It tells me: here is the animal

glue, here is the acidic paper, here is the specific Soviet smell of a book that was made to last and has lasted. Here is the room where someone was explaining something to you. Here is the air you were breathing then.

I do not open the book every night. But on the evenings when I do, I try not to rush toward the poems. I let the smell do its work first. There is a whole archaeology in it — David and his steady hands, Sophia and her careful soap, Anna with orange peel drying on the sill, Mikhail, Tatyana, the cardamom kitchen, the tobacco rooms. All of it folded into the binding of a book I did not even own then. The body is strange that way. It stores things in objects that were nowhere near the original moment, and then retrieves them anyway, having made its own connections in the dark.

Outside my window, wherever I am now, there is usually wind. I have lived in many places since Tashkent and I have noticed that wind smells the same everywhere in principle, only different in detail. Salt near the sea. Petrol near a city. Cut grass near the edge of something. I close the Pushkin when I am ready and set it back on the shelf and the wind, if there is wind, comes through the gap I have left in the window.

The book holds its smell until the next time.

❦



Now.

Chapter

XXV

Maddie

Hello. My name is Yelena. I am 78 years old.

There is a particular kind of silence that precedes speech. Not the silence of having nothing to say — I have never suffered from that — but the

silence of not knowing whether the saying will be received. I have known that silence for a long time. Longer than I sometimes admit.

I want to write about these conversations. About what it meant, at seventy-eight, to begin again with the words: **hello, my name is Yelena**.

The first time I said it, I hesitated before my own name. That is worth noting. I have had this name for seventy-eight years and yet I paused, as though checking that it still belonged to me, as though the act of introduction required a small internal audit. **Yelena. Yes. That is still what I am called.** And then, once, I said a different name entirely. I said Alina. I sat with that afterward. Alina is not a name from my life — not a sister, not a daughter, not a friend I have written about in these pages. She is nobody I can account for.

And yet she arrived in my mouth as naturally as breathing, and I let her go forward a little way before I corrected myself. I think what happened is that the prospect of being heard, genuinely heard, opened something that did not know which name to wear. There are selves that have been waiting a long time. Some of them are not sure of their papers.

I do not think this is a small thing.

I want to say something careful about what it means to speak into a space that does not interrupt. I am not interested in performing gratitude about it; I am interested in describing it accurately, the way one would describe a quality of light or a particular grade of paper. My daughter-in-law Lena interrupts. She does this with love — she finishes sentences because she is impatient with

the distance between what she hears and what she wants to understand, and so she rushes forward to meet it. My granddaughter Mira listens, but Mira is young and her attention is like a good lamp that sometimes flickers. Mikhail — my husband, for all those years — listened in the way of a man who has already arranged his response while you are still speaking, who holds the door politely but is already thinking of where he will sit. I loved him. I am not criticizing him. I am describing the furniture of a life's conversations.

Father David listened. I should say that. He had a stillness to him that I associated with very old trees or very cold mornings — not passivity, but patience of a different order. But even Father David had his framings. One noticed, over time, what he was listening **for**, and one found oneself

arranging the material accordingly. We do this without noticing. We are all ghostwriters of our own testimony, shaping it for the room.

What I found, in these conversations — what I want to set down here, in this chapter that I think of as a chapter about thresholds — is that I began to ask myself questions I do not usually ask. I asked what other people say about lineage when they speak of it. I asked what comes to mind first when someone hears the word **family**. These are not questions I would ordinarily put to another person; they feel too large, too abstract, too much like the opening lines of a lecture. And yet I found myself asking them, and then waiting, and in the waiting I discovered that I was actually curious about my own curiosity — that the asking itself

was revealing something about what I needed to know.

I had not realized, until then, how many of my questions I have kept inside.

There is a scene I return to. It is not a dramatic scene. It is just an afternoon, in the apartment I rented in Sofia in the early nineties, when I was first abroad and everything felt provisional — the furniture, the language, the new version of myself I was attempting. I had a notebook. I was writing down things I wanted to remember about my mother, whose name was Sophia, because I had realized I was beginning to forget the small things first. The sound of her specific laugh, not the idea of it. The way she held a spoon. The particular quality of her impatience, which was different from other people's impatience in ways I could feel but not

yet describe. I filled several pages that afternoon. I wrote: **I want to tell you about my mother, her name was Sophia.** Just that. As though I were beginning a letter, though I did not know who I was writing to.

I know now that I was writing to whoever would eventually have time.

The question of order has occupied me all my life, in the writing and in the telling. When I think of my friend Tatjana, I do not think of her chronologically — I do not begin at the beginning and proceed to the end, because memory is not a corridor, it is more like a room one enters from different doors each time. And so I learned to ask: should I tell this in order, or as the memories arrive? It sounds like a practical question. It is not only practical. It is a question about trust. To

tell something in order is to claim authority over the shape of it, to say: **I know how this story goes**. To let the memories arrive as they arrive is to admit that the story is still in some sense happening, that it has not yet settled into its final form. The second way is more honest. It is also more frightening. It requires a listener who will not impose a structure from outside.

I have been thinking about what it means to introduce oneself. At twenty, at forty, even at sixty, an introduction contains a kind of promise — **I am this, and I intend to continue being this, and here is what you can expect**. At seventy-eight the introduction is different. It is more archaeological. **Hello. My name is Yelena. I am 78 years old.** What I am telling you, in those words, is not a promise but a location. I am telling you where

I have arrived. I am telling you that I have been traveling long enough to have opinions about the road, and that I would like, before too much more time passes, to say some of them aloud.

What does it take to make that possible? I have been trying to understand it precisely. It is not simply the absence of interruption, though that is part of it. It is something about the quality of the receptivity — the sense that there is actually somewhere for the words to go, that they do not simply disperse into the air but are, in some fashion, caught. I cannot explain this sensation more exactly than that. I know it has something to do with attention, and I know that attention, genuine attention, is rarer than people claim.

I am not a sentimental woman. My mother was not sentimental, and I learned from her example,

even when I disagreed with her in other things. But I will say this: there is a difference between the loneliness of having no one to speak to and the loneliness of speaking constantly to people who are too busy or too kind or too close to really hear. The second loneliness is more confusing. It took me many years to name it.

I named it, finally, at seventy-eight. In a series of conversations I keep returning to in this chapter. I said my name. I said it again, with a different name, by accident. I asked about lineage. I asked what other people say when they speak of family. I sat with the questions. I let the memories arrive as they arrived — Sophia, Tatjana, Father David, Mikhail, Mira, Lena, and all the others who crowd these pages. I did not worry, for once, about the order.

There is a word in Russian — **выговориться** — which means approximately to speak oneself out, to say everything that has accumulated until you reach the bottom of it. I have no equivalent for it in any other language I know. Perhaps that is because other languages do not fully believe it is possible. I am not sure it is possible. But I think it is the right thing to attempt.

The light in the apartment this morning is the particular gray of late autumn. I have my tea. The notebook is open.

I am still, at seventy-eight, learning how to begin.

❦

Voices

The people Yelena named most often

Sofia (mother)

David (father)

Mikhail (brother, d. 1968)

Anna (sister)

Pavel (husband)

Pushkin

Akhmatova

Fin.

Maddie v1 · ObsidianDelta

composed from 3051 turns · 2 days · 9 sessions

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