

# Fourteen Hills

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## Tyosha

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The rain came down so hard, the droplets leapt from the pavement. It did not stop him. Yurik leaned into the storm as he walked. Trees thrashed, traffic lights bled, the sun—a far off patch of light diffused against the rain. The stoplight turned green and horns screamed at him to get a move on, but Yurik took his time crossing the seven lanes of traffic.

He knew he was in trouble, not just with God, but more importantly, with his manager at work. He should have been at the synagogue hours ago to clean the toilets and straighten the prayer books, to ready the place before the morning service. But it was his wife's birthday—occasion enough, he'd decided, to skip one scrub-down of the House of God.

His pajamas clung to his chest and thighs. Yurik was soaked but relieved to be alone. When he'd started his walk that morning, the Brooklyn boulevard brimmed with every stage of life: mothers pushing strollers, children running ahead of them, teenagers in roller skates, at least one or two old men doing arm aerobics on a shaded bench. But heaviness had hung all around as if to smother the light and once the first droplets fell, the sun recoiled, the sky sheeted rain, and the street emptied. A few people stood under awnings, waiting out the storm, otherwise, the street belonged to him.

His wife turned 25 today. Yurik tried to imagine what she might want for her birthday. A mop? Chocolate? He'd always been terrible at these things. He could have asked Mama that morning before he left the apartment, but he did not want to start his day by talking to her.

He called her *Mama*, but she wasn't his mother, and he didn't like her much. Liking each other hadn't been part of the arrangement when Yurik Milner and Vera Robinov decided they would leave Leningrad and move together to Brooklyn. She cooked his meals, changed his baby's diapers, slept on the pullout sofa in the living room. Everyone

assumed they were mother and son, though he knew of ugly whispers among the Russian émigrés on the Ocean Parkway benches. *Let them talk*, Vera would say. He was married to her daughter. Calling her Mama wasn't such a stretch.

A group of old women huddled under the canopy of a corner store, wrapping each other's hair in plastic bags. He shouldered past them and went inside.

Tinkling bells. Colors piled atop each other. The shelves overflowed with foil, shrink wrap, aerosol cans, kitty litter sacks; the narrow aisles stacked with unpacked inventory boxes: toilet paper, Jell-O, Frito Lay bags poking from splayed cardboard flaps. A wall of Hostess: Sno-Balls, Cup Cakes, Twinkies, Double Tender Finer Donuts. The cashier, a frail old woman in a clear bonnet, lifted her pale face from a crossword puzzle to acknowledge him.

Toward the back, Yurik found another room, just as full. StarKist Tuna, pretzel jugs, Flav-R straws in blue and white. Crates of Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, Tab. A humming freezer. Morton's Frozen Fish Sticks. Creamsicles. Bright orange Tang jars. Rows of Sloppy Joe cans, SPAM, Heinz Baked Beans. He examined the grains in a sack of rice, counted the slices in a package of white bread, bent a beef jerky stick back and forth between his hands.

His house slippers squished beneath him through a pathway of Windex and Clorox. A bald man with arched white eyebrows grinned at him from the labels of cleaning products. He knew the face from work, had pulled the bottle from the plastic bucket he wheeled down the synagogue halls. *Who the fuck are you laughing at Mr. Clean?* He almost said the words aloud.

"What you looking for?" a man's voice demanded and Yurik darted his eyes across the row of bald-headed faces as though he might find the speaker among them. A heavyset man with a charcoal mustache stood against the far back wall, studying Yurik. He scuffled deeper into the aisle, out of the man's sight. Bright sponges hung along the wall, packages of metal Brillo piled in a big bin, the kind Mama had scrubbed the dishes with that morning, her face contorted with effort, or anger—he could never tell anymore.

He'd left the apartment without saying a word to Mama that morning. He wondered if she remembered Ella's birthday. Of course, she did. She always reminded him of such things—to buy flowers, to wipe the child's mouth, to take the trash to the curb.

He lifted a heart-shaped Whitman's Sampler to his face and sniffed its clawing sweetness. He mouthed the names on candy wrappers: *Laffy Taffy*, *Pixy Stix*, *Jujubes*. The sounds of words and how they'd always felt in his mouth changed in English. He'd picked up the habit of practicing his reading wherever he could—examining billboards and store signs and leaflets stuffed into his hand on the street.

"Jimmy, get over here. I need you!" The old woman hollered from behind the register.

The man grunted. "All right Ma," he said. "Hold yer horses." He made his way to the front of the store, turning to Yurik as he passed. "This ain't no museum," he said.

The shelves suddenly shook around Yurik as a train sped by on the track overhead. He used to practice his English on that Q train, getting on at Coney Island, taking it all the way to Queens and back, moving from light to dark to light as the car dipped underground and rose again onto the elevated track. He would glimpse the magazines and books of nearby passengers, sounding out the names of train stops. He remembered that last long ride he took, how he sat in an empty car above ground when the doors opened and a pigeon flew inside. The bird flailed from ceiling to window to floor, searching for some way to break out. It slammed into windows and seats, nicking Yurik's head as he held very still. As they neared the station stop and the train shrieked along the tracks, the pigeon settled on a seat and cocked its head at Yurik. Its face gave off a purple and green sheen—he could remember it even now in that aisle of brightly colored candy. At the next stop, the bird disappeared into a small commotion on the platform and the car filled with silent slumping bodies as though none of it had happened. He'd felt suddenly and acutely alone with all those people in the car and decided he would not take those long rides anymore.

Now he liked the soothing numbness of stores best—their many items, ordered and labeled, aisle-by-aisle, piles and shelves and pyramids

of countless crackling colorful things. He could wander in a store for hours, lifting packages, sniffing them, turning them over in his hands, trying to put a taste and touch and scent to each one. Smooth words in Russian sounded harsh in English; sharp words were dulled, their spellings inexplicable: cantaloupe, pretzels, bologna. He had gone from Yurik to George. And there was *Tyosha*: mother-in-law, the most peculiar translation he'd seen yet. He'd first learned the term in the airport when they arrived—three words all strung together, lines connecting them as if to take up as much space as possible.

"Where are you staying?" the officer behind the Plexiglas in customs had asked that afternoon.

Yurik slipped the scrap with the Ocean Parkway address on it under the window slot.

The man studied their passports.

"What's your relation?"

Yurik wondered what it mattered, but decided not to argue now. Things would be different here. "Jew," he said. "My relation, Jew-itch."

As if there was a need to ask. Why else would they be there?

"Re-la-tion," the officer said slower now, nodding at Vera, Yurik shaking his head in regret.

"Who's she?" the man tried, flicking his chin at Vera.

"*Tyosha*," he said, and the man behind the glass narrowed his eyes. Sweat poured from the temples of his ruddy face.

"Mother?" he tried.

"No." Yurik shook his head.

"Wife?"

"Wife mother," Yurik said.

"Mother-in-law?"

A strange phrase.

"My wife mother," he repeated.

"That's mother-in-law, buddy," the officer said, his face expressionless.

Yurik stuffed the chocolate box back on its shelf and mouthed the phrase now as he had then—*mother-in-law, mother-in-law, mother-in-law*—wondering, what did the law have to do with it?

"Where's your wife?" the officer had asked him.

"No wife," Yurik said. "In Russia." And then not knowing the word for it, he pressed his palms together, lay his cheek against his hand and shut his eyes as if to mimic sleep.

Vera leaned toward the Plexiglas then. "Scuse me," she said and cleared her throat, enunciating each word slowly, "She. Iz. Dead."

Yurik studied the toes of his boots as she spoke. They were scuffed, his feet sweating fiercely inside. He hadn't wanted to waste their little luggage space on such a bulky item, but now—those salt stains and the caked-on dirt—how could he come to America in such shameful shoes?

"Can I help you?" The woman's voice came from behind him now, the cashier leaning on her hands over the counter top, blinking her watery eyes at him. Her son stood with his arms crossed behind her, his face a younger, harder version of her own. Yurik shook his head, looked down at his soaked house slippers, his face getting hot. He didn't want to speak to anyone. Not yet. He had woken this morning to the dream of his wife. He had turned on his side and pulled her close to him, pressed his cheek against the wings of her shoulders, kissed the softness of her arms, ran his hands along the curve of her hip, tracing the arc of smooth bone down the length of her thigh and up again. Their breath was perfectly aligned and her smell—a smell like kneaded dough and apples—surrounded him.

Then something crashed outside his door—a pot or pan—and Ella rolled away from him and the bed creaked noisily and the ceiling fan thrummed and a car outside honked its horn and Lucy began, as if on cue, to cry, and his wife was dead again, gone from his bed.

Yurik said nothing to the cashier and made his way to the open cooler against the wall.

*Skim milk. Semi-skim. Whole.* His lips curled around the sounds in his head, the bottles lined up behind a curtain of thick plastic strips in the refrigerated case—four full rows in plastic, glass, cardboard containers. Ella would not believe how much there was to choose from in this place.

The bells of the door jangled and when he turned his head, the old woman and man had disappeared from the counter.

“Sure I can’t help?” She stood beside him, slight, a thinning patch of hair visible beneath her translucent bonnet. She held her bony hands out, the thick lumpy fingers trembling, a network of wormy veins spreading beneath them.

Yurik shook his head again and ducked into another aisle, this one full of grinning toddlers. Disposable diapers. It was time to start using these American diapers—the kind you could wrap into a bundle and toss in the trash. Yet Vera stubbornly insisted her grandchild would not be wrapped in plastic like a loaf of Wonder Bread and continued to boil Lucy’s cloth diapers.

Vera gave him grief over everything. The baby could not eat from those disgusting little jars of paste he brought home. She mashed bananas and puréed boiled carrots with a fork. Thank God she’d decided to move with him or the baby would not have made it two weeks without her, she reminded him each day.

He and Ella had been married a little more than a year when Lucy was born in Leningrad, and eight days later the infection that found its way into his wife’s bloodstream killed her. His own mother had thought it foolish to abandon the life you knew, and when Yurik left Leningrad, so did she, moving back to the small Ukrainian town where he’d been born. It was Vera who chose to come along, even after Ella had died. She would care for the baby. And it was then Yurik decided he would call her *Mama*.

This morning he had overslept by more than an hour. He wasn’t sure how it happened. The alarm must have gone off. Mama must have knocked on his door. All he recalled was the milky stretch of early morning time when he nuzzled closer to his wife.

He tried to crawl in his mind back to where Ella slept, to reach her warmth, but it was impossible so far from his bed, under the twitching lights of that grocery store in his sopping pajamas. And then he thought of his job, wondered whether he would have one tomorrow.

The synagogue would be a mess by now. The services had already started for the day, the Rabbi rocking heel to toe in his pulpit, talking too fast for Yurik to follow. Meanwhile, his wife, dead nearly a year, had tumbled so far beyond his dreams that it would take another day and

night of waiting, waking at dawn and forcing himself to sleep again before she would come back, linger in his bed a while, then leave him as always to start his day.

He could never quite see the whole of her those mornings. Ella's face would be so close, yet turned away, and while parts of her pressed against him, others were impossible to grasp. Still, those mornings were the closest he could get to her now that she was gone. In Leningrad, it had been easier. There her smell remained in the sheets; her nightgown lay rumpled under her pillow; her slippers waited at the edge of the bed for her feet.

Rows of baby faces smiled at him, but he did not know which diaper brand to choose. These things—diapers, baby food—were meant to be Ella's matters. Still, he would buy a package of these American diapers. To hell with his mother-in-law. He had a right to wrap his child in whatever he pleased.

He couldn't imagine his life without Lucy now. He'd wake at night and lean over her tiny rising chest in the crib and thank God—the only time he ever did—that she had lived. It had not always been this way. For the first several weeks of Lucy's life, Yurik could not touch her. This wailing thing had grown inside his wife, he'd thought. It flailed its little arms. Gulped air.

On one of those evenings, when Lucy was a month old, Vera left Yurik alone with her for the first time. "Watch the child," she said. She went to the cemetery, as she often did, but this time she did not take Lucy along. Yurik kept to the far corner of the room, away from the wicker crib. Lucy whimpered. She wailed. The sound was unbearable. He gradually edged nearer until he saw her—mouth gaping, eyes crushed into her hot face, chin gathered into a hard red ball. He carried her at arm's length like a pot of boiling water and lay her on the mattress beside him. With the room turned on its side, a certain weight was lifted. He pulled the white gown from under Ella's pillow and draped its folds on Lucy's legs. He could not remember Vera shaking him awake and lifting the sleeping infant from his arms. The next morning he moved the bassinet to his side of the curtain.

Yurik settled on a package of Pampers, but when he reached for his



wallet at the counter, he realized he'd left it at home. The cashier's face creased into a wide grin, revealing her few crooked teeth. "Boy or girl?" she asked as she reached across the counter for the diapers.

Yurik jerked his hand away from her. *I have no dollars*, he thought to say, but that would break the spell of his silence.

"He giving you trouble, Ma?" the man called from behind him. Yurik dropped the package on the floor and, as if he'd stolen it, hurried out.

It was already past noon. Vera paced the tiny living room, counting. *Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.* At the end of the round, Yurik would appear, she told herself, but at the end of each round, he did not. He'd been gone nearly five hours and Vera had cycled through every permutation of his whereabouts: Yurik in a gutter, Yurik dragged behind a truck, Yurik floating in the East River.

She peered between the iron bars on the window. The apartment was sweltering, and her cheap polyester skirt plastered itself to the backs of her thighs. The rain had finally cleared and her neighbors filled the benches in their brightly printed housedresses. Vera could join them, but she'd ventured there once not long after moving in and decided never to go back. She'd sat with the women that morning as they talked about food stamps, and FICA, and the price of kvass at the market. Then they lowered their voices. *Did you hear about the one in 4C; her husband dumped her for a Mexican? The drunk from 8G who found his son drowned in the tub?* She left then, abruptly, startling them, imagining their voices turning to her story next—*that woman with the baby. Did you know that's not even her son?*

The metal grating outside the window was splattered in bird droppings. All that bird crap that she could not reach around the glass to clean drove her crazy. Vera hoisted the heavy window up and tried to chip away at the layers of crusted droppings she could get to with a knife. Before they'd left the Soviet Union, she had visited the cemetery

in Leningrad nearly every day to clean Ella's plot. Now she could not even put a stone beside her daughter's grave on her birthday. She needed to stay busy all day to keep her mind away from that plot covered in bird shit and mud, Ella alone in the cold earth.

The metal bars were rough and slimy, their rusted black paint flaking off in her hands. Vera would have left the apartment hours ago to take Lucy for a walk, but she worried Yurik would return, realize he'd locked himself out, and vanish again. He knew how to rattle her, running off for hours at a time, never explaining where he went or what he did. At first, she suspected he hid a woman from her, but it seemed unlikely the way he'd go days without washing himself and sulk silently around the apartment. What woman would want any part of that?

Earlier in the morning, she'd resisted pounding on his door, though he was late for work. "I'm a grown man," he'd said to her, indignantly, on more than one occasion when she reminded him of his responsibilities. "Do you think I need another mother?" She'd bitten the inside of her cheek all morning, clamoring around the kitchen, chopping apples as vigorously as she could, banging the pot onto the stove. But a full hour passed before his door opened and he scuffled by in house slippers and pajamas. The front door slammed behind him. His keys hung on their hook, his wallet beneath them. He disappeared down the street in the opposite direction of the synagogue. He'd only started the custodial job with Holy House Cleaners a few weeks before and already he was missing work. Vera had been the one to get him the job. She'd learned the Ukrainian man down the hall ran a cleaning company. *My son*, she'd called Yurik when she cornered the man in the stairwell one evening. It was simpler that way. *My son needs a job*, she'd said, and he'd started the very next week.

An alarm sounded behind her and when she reached her head back into the kitchen, Vera noticed a burning smell. She rushed to the oven, cursing her forgetfulness, finding the cake she'd put in that morning smoldering inside. She flung a rag through the air to silence the alarm and Lucy clapped and giggled at her grandmother's performance.

Birthday or not, what sense was there in baking a cake for a daughter who was dead? Vera scrubbed her hands, filled a bowl with apple-

sauce and set it down in front of Lucy. Normally, she would have fed the child, scraping up the bits of food that squirted from Lucy's lips, but Vera let her have her way with the bowl and spoon. The mess would give her something new to clean.

It was a shame they couldn't go outside. She thought of the streets in Rome, where they'd waited six months for their paperwork to continue to New York, when she'd filled her days with walking. That stretch of time after a rainfall when the cobbled roads were still damp had been her favorite—everything slick and newly cleaned.

Not long after they arrived, she'd befriended a young woman named Olga and together they circled the Piazza Navona, pushing their strollers. Olga had identical twin boys and Vera was drawn to her because of them.

She never told Olga that Lucy had also been a twin, her brother, a bundle of blue limbs delivered dead, moments before her. Some things you kept private.

Vera remembered one of their last walks now, how she and Olga held tightly to their strollers that afternoon, the cobbled street slippery from a heavy shower.

"Did you get along with your son's wife?" Olga had asked on that walk. "My husband's mother never liked me, not even after the babies were born."

"She was my daughter," Vera corrected her.

"You must have been close," Olga said. "Renata would never call me her daughter."

Vera understood then what others had assumed. Why else would Yurik leave Leningrad with her if he weren't her son?

"Yes. Very close," she said.

"Before we moved, my mother-in-law was always complaining I raised the twins all wrong," Olga said.

Vera felt the same regret now in her claustrophobic kitchen as she'd felt walking with Olga—the wish that she had defended Ella each time Yurik's mother criticized her. *Your daughter wears too much makeup; she talks to too many men; she can't cook.*

"Ella and I were very close," Vera said.

"How did she die?" Olga asked.

"An infection in her blood. I couldn't leave Yurik to raise Lucy alone."

"Of course. What mother would do such a thing?"

That was when Vera had decided it would be easiest to continue this way.

"No," she said. "I could never leave my son."

A bus hissed to a stop on Ocean Parkway, releasing a long metallic groan. Lucy squealed in her booster chair. *Babu babu babu*, she cried. Applesauce dribbled from her chin, coating her little fists and streaking her hair. Vera smiled at Lucy's obliviousness to the mess. She was so much like her mother had been at this age; same flushed full cheeks, same tuft of bronze curls, eyes that seemed to take in all the light. Vera sat Lucy at the edge of the sink and bathed her hands and face as she'd done with Ella all those years ago. She was fifty-one, and a new mother all over again.

*Big girl you are*, she said in Russian as she dried Lucy off and hoisted her on her hip. *Big. Bounce. Big. Bounce. Big.* She pressed her nose into the apple smell that lingered on Lucy's soft infant flesh. When she was born, Vera had held her like a tiny bird in her cupped hands. Now she was a sturdy baby, dimpled at her elbows and wrists.

*Chubby like your Mama was.* Lucy sniffled, froze, and knit her faint brows like a grown woman. *Ma. Ma. Ma*, she sang and reached for the floor to be let down. She gurgled and chattered in her made-up tongue. Some moments it seemed to Vera that Lucy could sense her brother nearby. She would talk as though to someone beside her, lay her toys on the ground as if to share, stare out as though listening to a voice only she could hear. It was absurd, Vera knew. This was the way children played, but she couldn't stop herself from imagining the little boy there some days, what it would have been like to have two.

Vera paced the room, checked her watch. 12:43. *How do they bury the dead here? Boxed up in cardboard like a carton of eggs? Do they eat McDonald's afterward? It must be expensive—the casket, the Rabbi, the guests.*

Vera scrubbed the table and counters once more. She dried the inside of the sink. Yurik drove her crazy but that aggravation filled the

space her memory would otherwise invade. They did that for each other—distracted grief with anger, frustration.

There was nothing left to keep her hands busy. Vera lifted Lucy, strapped her into her stroller. Ella was alone in the earth all those thousands of miles away. But Yurik, where was he? The not-knowing was too much. She had to get away from that apartment. She had to get out.

His feet were aching now. He must have been walking for hours, though he hadn't made it far from home. Time didn't move the way it ought to anymore. Just the other day, Ella showed up at his army base in Siberia. She'd worn a lavender silk dress, the green of her eyes brighter than he had ever seen before. The other men in his unit whistled and yelped when she arrived. "Hands off," he'd proudly announced. "That's my wife."

The sky had cleared but his house slippers were still soaked. The boulevard was busy again. At the corner, a busty woman with her hair wrapped in a violet-printed scarf knelt over a fire hydrant. When her body heaved, a spray of water shot across the street, a cluster of pigeons sprang up from the sidewalk, and Yurik froze at the curb, the water misting his arms with tiny crystals. Two small children in matching underpants shrieked and leaped across the foaming blast, and the woman reclined against a stoop, fanning herself with a newspaper. Her relief was a kind familiar to him since he'd become a father—those moments, Lucy fiddling with a spoon or sock, when he could untether his attention from her. But the children reminded him of another time, of dancing with Ella across the wet stones under the mushroom fountain in Petergof. He smiled at that memory of Ella—her damp curls pressed like vines to her back, her lithe figure spinning under a canopy of water.

Two figures stood in front of him, huddling close to one another. The children had stopped their hopping and studied him. Yurik realized what a sight he must be—his T-shirt had a hole the size of an apple just below the neckline and his pants clung to his legs. The woman on the stoop called the children over, placed a hand on each of their shoulders,

and stared at Yurik.

He rushed away. It was no use trying to find any calm here. He would go to the park. On the way, he passed a bum who slept on a bench, a dirty arm dangling to the ground. A young couple threw hunks of bread in the pond. Geese pecked at the fat white crumbs, and others scrambled toward them from the water, still others calling shrilly from the sky. A woman in a white uniform paced at the edge of the pond, spitting into the water, her hands on her hips. A group of teenaged black boys bounced a ball, darting on their feet. Their swift movements dizzied him.

Yurik picked a spot beneath a tree, curled on his side against the mossy roots that poked up from the dirt, and shut his eyes. He was eager to sleep, but that woman by the pond had reminded him of his mother. It wasn't just the uniform that resembled his mother's nursing clothes. It was the spitting—precisely the kind of inelegance that made her harshness more crass than Mama's. His mother had always been suspicious of the girls Yurik went with and was never shy about voicing her disapproval, a flaw that only deepened when he married.

When he went to Siberia for his army service not long after the wedding, his mother wrote him often. *Your wife does not always wear her wedding ring. I caught her smoking a cigarette with a man outside the apteka. She puts on red lipstick now. She bought lace underpants. Where does the money come from?*

He wrote to Ella. *What's all this my mother says?* A month later she arrived at his base, wearing that silk dress. Weeks later, when she wrote to tell him she was pregnant, he'd been thrilled.

But even that his mother had managed to spoil. *Your wife is getting too big, she wrote. When did she visit? May? She looks much farther along. What if it's not your child? A son can trust only his mother for the truth.*

Something was burning. Yurik opened his eyes. A bare-chested man stirred the coals in a nearby grill and the smoke wafted toward him. Yurik coughed and rolled onto his back. A mass of white clouds receded quickly, the sun breaking into view so that a maze of bright spots darted across his vision. He shut his eyes and the sun pressed like a purple bruise beneath his lids. Ella *had* visited just that one time in May. Once

you got a thought planted in your head, you couldn't drive it out. Only in the hospital months later, did he find out Ella had been so large because she had been carrying twins and then there was, of course, the guilt of having ever questioned her, the anger at his mother—all of it come too late.

It was impossible to be in love and see a person whole. His wife lived in that lavender dress now. She lived in the summer palace, on sidewalks in Leningrad, her hand hidden inside his coat pocket, or breathing close beside him in bed when it was dark enough only to feel, not see her there.

The ground thudded against the back of his head—the ball bouncing against the pavement between the boys' darting feet. The woman by the pond was gone. The geese had dispersed; the couple sat at the edge of the water; the bum on the bench shifted onto his side. Yurik closed his eyes again. The rhythmic thumping was almost soothing. It lulled him to sleep.

Ella lay there beside him, so much softness that he did not know where to put his hands. She shivered and he pulled her close. Her heart beat loudly through her back against his chest, as though an echo of his own heart outside of himself.

"The wind. There's so much wind," she whispered. He tried to keep her from shaking, laced his fingers between hers.

"I feel him," she said. She was feverish. "I feel our son still inside me. He's kicking. He just hasn't come out yet."

Her spine pressed close into him. "He's right here, Yurik." She glided his hand, against the soft loose flesh of her belly where the muscles were all gone, the skin so stretched from pregnancy that it felt nothing like the taut young body he'd once known.

Yurik's desire for her in that moment ached inside of him. He longed for this soft animal of his wife who writhed and panted against him. "Feel that? It's his heartbeat," she insisted. "He's right here."

Yurik ran his hand along that loose flesh and wanted to fold himself inside of her. Then he noticed something tiny and hot wriggling beside Ella's breasts. A little damp fist gripped his thumb. Lucy. He placed a hand gently on the baby's head, against the soft spot where the halves

of her skull did not yet meet. A small gasp rose from Ella. Yurik barely breathed, afraid to break the membrane of that moment, frail as a spider's web wavering against the wind.

And then there was a sudden stabbing at his stomach, a kick so swift it choked the air from his lungs. Ella's face was over him—the gray-green eyes, the curve of her lip—but as he blinked away his sleep, the face became an ugly thing, working itself into contortions. It shouted—not words but sounds, like some massive creature tugging hard and mad off the end of a chain collar—wanting to choke and run free all at once.

His breath returned to him. The trees and grass and sky around him came into focus, but he was not yet certain if he was awake. At his feet, sat his child. She kicked her legs like they might lift her out of her stroller, flapping her arms, scrunching her nose, her voice high and thin like a seagull's call, accompanying her grandmother's shouting.

Vera moved with something deep inside herself she could not still, a tiny buried throbbing thing. She had not thought as she'd plowed Lucy's stroller through the soft wet earth, had not thought as her foot caught against his gut, as the words not even she could make out poured from her. The feeling rose and knocked at the cage of her ribs, but when she tried to kick it back, it knotted in her throat. She'd first noticed it in the windowless hospital room where they'd spent Ella's last hours—a stretch of time unpunctured by the movement of the sun. Every night since then, she would lay awake and think what she'd thought when she had let Ella's hands loose that day: *tomorrow he'll be gone*. Every morning after Ella's death when they had lived in Leningrad, she would rise, pull the curtain between them back, expecting Yurik's bed to be abandoned. Each time she found him curled on his side, she fought the impulse to kneel beside him, take his hand. She loathed that need, would holler at him to drown it out.

Yurik did not scramble away from her or even recoil from her kick, but stared up, bewildered by the anger. Lucy stretched her plump hands out, shrieking. He lifted her from her seat and pressed her softness to him. She quieted in his arms, her breath quick and irregular.

The sight of his clumsy hands, so careful now with the child, silenced Vera. She thought of the moment that last day when she'd reached



across her daughter's corpse, allowing him to take hold of her hand. She shut her eyes and the feeling thrummed between her temples now—a need greater than the sum of her stubbornness and anger. She felt her knees like snapping twigs, the damp earth receiving her, the sturdiness of his frame at her side, and held still.

Yurik examined the angular bones; the raised purple veins forking across Vera's hands and rested his palm atop them. He was awake now and awake in him was the relief that she had brought his child, that he did not have to lay alone in the cold wet earth.

A skein of geese passed overhead, squawking at one another to stay close. Lucy's breath fluttered and caught at her throat, her arms and legs twitching against his chest. He touched his lips to her silky hair. "Sleep, sleep," he said softly into the top of her head. "I'm right here."