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Julia completed a Masters of Theatre Design at the University of Technology Sydney. While teaching set and costume design, she wrote short stories, and her short story 'E-Love' was acquired by Radio National.

The Girl from Moscow is her first novel. It was shortlisted for the ASA/HQ Commercial Fiction Prize for unpublished manuscripts. Julia lives in Sydney's eastern suburbs with her husband and their toy poodle, Honey.

JULIA LEVITINA

The
**GIRL
FROM
MOSCOW**



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For my family

A Note on Russian Names

The publisher has chosen to keep the names as they are used in the Russian language for only the main characters to avoid confusion for English readers. Traditionally, Russian names can change from a formal full name to the very personal diminutive one used for a close friend, a child or a loved one. The change occurs by using a suffix or by a name being shortened.

Ella Ashkenazi: Ellochka, El, Elka, Ella Gregorievna

Vladimir Zacharov: Vlad, Vladik, Vladechka

Roman Abramov: Romochka, Roma

Ilya Bezsmertniy: Ilusha, Ilya Pavlovich

Olga Ashkenazi: Olushka

General Ivan Lubov: Ivan Petrovich, Vanya

Gregory Ashkenazi: Grisha, Gregory Natanovich

Leonid Ashkenazi: Leon

Prologue

Moscow, USSR

1976

Ella and Vlad huddled together underneath the plaid blanket. The darkness smelt of the cigarette they'd shared at Patriarch's Ponds before creeping upstairs into Vlad's apartment. They hoped that Daria, the Zacharovs' housekeeper, wouldn't force them back to school.

Vlad's shoulder pressed into Ella's. The transistor radio that Vlad's father had brought back from Japan splattered and hissed on her friend's lap like an untamed animal. Still, it was better for listening to the enemies' broadcast than the Soviet Spidola.

Ella pulled the hem of her brown school uniform over her knees, aware of Daria's steps outside Vlad's bedroom door. They'd skipped the last class, which was sport anyway, so Daria shouldn't mind them being home a little early. As long as she didn't know, or pretended not to know, what they were doing – trying to catch the *Voice of America* through the clatter of KGB interference on the shortwave radio.

They had managed to capture the frequency on more than one occasion. *Radio Liberty* too, and BBC, if they were lucky.

'Do you think she knows?' Ella whispered. The radio's racket finally became intelligible. The announcer spoke about Solzhenitsyn and his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

‘I think she does,’ Vlad replied. ‘She thinks the neighbours might report us and my father will get in trouble. But he won’t. He never does.’

Under the red and green woollen canopy their breaths mixed. The illicit voices united them in a secret club. Ella felt her muscles tense. Every time they listened, she was scared, but she didn’t want Vlad to know.

‘Could we get hold of the book?’ Her whisper merged with the radio’s hissing and Vlad didn’t answer.

The transmission became muddled and she leaned closer to grasp the words. What Solzhenitsyn had written couldn’t be real. It was too horrible to be true.

‘Is this the kind of thing you talk about at your meetings?’ Ella asked.

A knock at the door made Vlad’s knee jolt and the radio lost the wavelength. Only the clunk of interference reached them and Daria’s polite but persistent knocking.

‘Ella. Vladik. The dinner is ready.’

Vlad sighed and climbed out from underneath their blanket-tent set on top of his bed. She could bet it was Daria who made it up every morning as well as cooked his breakfast. Ella scrambled off the bed too, her head full of Solzhenitsyn’s words.

The early afternoon light seeped through the lofty windows, harsh after their self-inflicted darkness. At the overhang, the icicles melted and the water dripped onto the ledge.

Vlad switched off the radio. ‘Don’t tell Daria anything. She’ll just worry.’

She held her index finger to her lips. The secret was safe with her. She only wished that Vlad would be more open with her and explain things.

What was the point of their conspiracies when nothing could be done to change the country they lived in? There

wouldn't be another revolution. Not according to Marx, who they studied at school.

The kitchen in the Zacharovs' apartment was the size of the living room in her parents' flat. Daria wore an apron and placed dinner plates with meatballs on the table. Ella's brain switched from the revolution to the more peaceful activity of having dinner with her best friend.

'Thank you, Daria. It smells delicious.'

Vlad winked at her and stuffed a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

The room with the *Voice of America* under the blanket was all but a dream.

1

Ella

Moscow, USSR

November 1982

Ella Ashkenazi watched her boot slide on icy asphalt. Her arms flayed. If she fell, she could kill this baby and no one would be any the wiser. She ran a few more steps and stopped on the unlit corner of Arkhipov Lane. The side street was empty, but the sound of people chanting came from the direction of the old synagogue, where Vlad had arranged for them to meet. She squinted into the darkness and wondered if she should turn back.

Vlad would help her. He had studied medicine and worked as a nurse. He would know some doctors. She held the collar of her sheepskin coat tighter at her throat and started walking towards the chanting voices.

Around her were merchants' houses built in the last century, lined in a row, connected by gateways.

The voices grew louder.

Only two months ago, trucks had blocked off all traffic for Simchat Torah. Their headlights had lit the street, turning the narrow lane into a once-a-year matchmaking fair. Dozens of Jewish youth gathered by the synagogue to dance and sing. But no crowds would be allowed here tonight.

And then she saw them. Forty or fifty people stood in tight groups on the footpath in front of the synagogue and on the steps of the portico.

All she'd told Vlad was that it was urgent, but she hadn't counted on meeting him near a pack of his dissident friends. Her eyes refused to focus on the placards above their heads. She had no idea what this rally was about and no desire to find out.

Like them, she listened to the enemies' voices and read illegal, clandestine books, but she declined to stick her neck out to fight the Soviet regime. They didn't stand a chance.

Ella edged closer, wary of being singled out by the protestors or seen mixing with them. Still, she was unsure how else she could find Vlad. After all, these people were his kind, and he had always been there for her ever since they'd met on the first day of primary school thirteen years ago.

Hesitant, she half-nodded to a woman in a hand-knitted headscarf who stood apart from a nearby group. 'Excuse me, do you know Vladimir Zacharov?' She felt stupid for asking. The chances that all dissidents knew each other's names or were willing to disclose them were slim.

The woman narrowed her eyes. 'And who are you?' She peered above Ella's head and turned to check behind her.

Ella peeked over her own shoulder, but no one seemed to be watching them or taking photos.

'A friend. He told me to meet him here.'

The others in the group whispered among themselves and threw sidelong glances.

The woman's gloved hand waved in the direction of the stairs, where a group of people stood holding a banner. 'He's over there.' She grabbed Ella's wrist and dragged her along towards the synagogue. 'I'll take you.'

Freedom for Sharansky. Ella read the banner and stopped walking.

Like them, she hated the country of her birth, the Soviet empire, hated it deeply and with a passion. The submissive drunkenness and arrogant rudeness of its slaves. The cunning ways of those in power. She loathed the necessity to lie, to hide, to pretend, all to become one with the crowd, invisible but safe. But risking her life for the cause was another matter entirely.

‘Elka!’ Vlad called from the stairs.

A few people turned towards her. Ella didn’t like the determination on their faces. Semite and gentile, they all had the same expression with shiny eyes and locked jaws. A man in a leather jacket held out his hand and helped her climb the stairs.

On the top step, Vlad smiled as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. He pulled her closer to stand next to him. ‘Friends, this is Ella.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Sorry. This wasn’t planned.’

He didn’t sound sorry at all. She wondered if it was a plot to get her involved.

From her vantage point, she could see the street below with terrifying clarity. Two *militzia* vans were parked at either end of the lane and a dozen or so uniformed guards lurked in the shadows, their faces half-hidden by walkie-talkies.

‘I can’t stay,’ Ella blurted out and moved to get down the steps.

The crowd pushed towards the synagogue and, following some invisible signal, started chanting again.

‘Freedom!’ they repeated in unison. ‘Freedom!’

She read the placards – *Follow the Helsinki Agreement; Freedom of Speech* – and felt her head spin. If she was seen at this protest, she would be marked a dissident like the others, like Vlad.

The protesters had caught the beat and, hypnotised by their own unity, chanted the one word, not loudly, but with persistence.

‘Freedom! Freedom!’

It was not a plea but a demand. She looked beyond them for a way to escape. Vlad placed his hands on her shoulders. They were warm and reassuring. ‘We’ll have a drink later, when we are done. You can tell me what happened.’

Ella shrugged him off. Around her, people swayed and repeated the chant.

‘Freedom! Freedom!’

She turned to Vlad and the flash of a camera blinded her. Then came another, and another. She ducked. People screamed and started running in all directions. The *militziamen* surrounded the group and pushed it towards the stairs. In their grey uniforms the guards pressed from the back through the middle and divided the crowd in two.

Militzia whistles and the thud of footsteps on the frozen ground kept her trapped. Below her, on the street, people dodged and scurried. It was too late to run. Then someone yanked at her hand. Vlad’s iron grip led her stumbling down a set of steps to the side. He squeezed her fingers and led her into a narrow passage between two buildings.

‘What do we do?’ she asked.

‘Just run! Towards the metro.’

*

Kropotkinskaya metro station looked clean and quiet and surprisingly empty. Rush hour was almost over. She stopped running and freed her numb fingers from Vlad’s grip.

‘Why the hell did you ask me to meet you there? I wanted to talk.’

Vlad collapsed onto a marble bench at the end of the platform. He smiled sheepishly and peered towards the tunnel.

‘Sit.’

She surveyed the platform but could see no other protesters. Had they been arrested on the spot or didn't dare to hide in the metro? They were probably right to avoid it.

'You can sit. I'm going. First you lure me to the synagogue promising to talk, then you get me involved in some stupid protest.'

She turned away, and he grasped her hand. 'We have to protest. If we don't fight them every step there will be no democracy in Russia. You know what they say: "There is no such thing as a little bit of freedom."'

Ella glared at him. 'But why get me involved? And why did they photograph us?'

'I'm sorry.' The glint in his eyes betrayed him. He must have enjoyed it, the fight and the flight.

'What will they do with those photos?'

He shrugged. 'What did you want to tell me?'

A yellow and blue train slid out of the tunnel and came to a stop. Vlad trailed her into the carriage, which was full of dour-faced men and women dressed in grey and brown winter coats on their way home from work. Ella held on to the rail. Vlad's body was jammed against hers, and she peered at her reflection in the carriage window above the heads of seated passengers. With her spare hand she unbuttoned her coat and wiped her brow.

In the reflection she caught her friend watching her. 'I need your help,' she said. Vlad leaned closer, his cheek almost touching hers. Blood rushed to her face. 'Could you help me to find a doctor?' Her voice was almost a whisper, but having finally said it, she exhaled.

He blushed. 'Does your boyfriend know?'

'Roman is planning to leave. For the States, I think, via Israel. I can't have a baby now. I'm too young, and what about my acting career? I want to play Natasha Rostova.' Her throat

tightened. She let go of the rail to wipe her sweaty palm on her coat and grabbed his arm for support.

Vlad kept staring at her in the glass. ‘You’ll have to find money. About three hundred roubles. You won’t change your mind?’

She looked away from the carriage window and he turned to face her. His eyes were shiny and feverish and too close.

‘Instead of wasting your life with Roman, you should join us. Amazing people. You know Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, don’t you? He won the Nobel Peace Prize.’ Vlad’s pale face glowed pink. ‘You saw how many of us were there tonight? We’ll get what we want. Just wait.’

The train door opened and closed. The crowd shifted around them.

Ella stood on tiptoes and stretched her neck to his cheek. ‘Russia is a colossus on clay legs.’ She mimicked his favourite expression and felt immediately guilty. It didn’t make her stop though. Her lips brushed his ear. ‘You told me this before, and look what happened. Those who made most of the noise were deported before the Olympics. Then the gates closed for good.’

She glanced over her shoulder, but no one was paying them any attention. Vlad tilted his chin in disagreement, but he didn’t argue. The train stopped again. A few people shuffled towards the exit and new passengers flooded the carriage.

He leaned closer. ‘Have you really decided? Maybe you should keep it.’

‘Are you mad? What would I do with the child when Roman leaves?’

She’d raised her voice without intending to, and an older woman with a fox pelt collar elbowed her.

‘We could get married.’ Vlad winked at the woman and squeezed to stand between her and Ella. His lips smiled but

his eyes were sombre. 'Would you accept me as a father?' He spoke louder, without caution, and a couple of other passengers turned their heads.

Ella almost choked. 'What sort of a father would you be?' She had to whisper it. 'They could arrest you at any moment.' She checked if anyone was still watching them, but people didn't seem to be listening anymore.

Vlad waved his hand and looked disappointed. 'You're right,' he breathed. 'We can't have children in captivity.'

2

Perched on a stool in the middle of a sparse rehearsal hall, Ella tried to concentrate on her lines and forget the doctor's verdict. The former ballroom of a Belle Époque mansion, the room was centrally heated, but still she shivered. She struggled to imagine what Natasha Rostova would feel, sixteen and carefree, as Tolstoy had envisioned her.

‘Start from the top, Ella.’

Podolski faced a group of young actors, her fellow students, who stood around him by the grand piano. With his straight actor's back and a lion's mane of white hair, he looked regal despite him being the same age as her grandmother.

She willed the words Tolstoy had written for Natasha to pervade her soul. ‘Sonya! Sonya! Oh, how can you sleep? Only look how glorious it is. Ah, how glorious!’ She tried to get the words to penetrate, but their joy eluded her. The doctor's question looped through her head: *Do you plan to have any children?*

Podolski gazed above her head at the arched windows of the Moscow Theatre Academy. ‘Tolstoy wrote that the one thing that is necessary, in life as in art, is to tell the truth.’ He lowered his eyes to peer at her furrowed brow, his famous expression full of distaste. Then he turned to his audience. ‘Natasha Rostova is naive and dreams of love, like any girl her age. It's not directed at Prince Andrei yet, but at everything around her. She is in love with the world.’

The other actors' eyes crawled over her face and her body, attempting to figure out what she'd done wrong. Her throat tightened. Natasha's soul, pure and innocent, evaded her. Would Natasha Rostova keep the baby if she got pregnant that young? Ella cursed at herself for having such stupid thoughts.

'May I try again?' she asked her teacher.

Podolski wasn't looking at her. 'Raya, would you please read Natasha's part?'

Raya smiled and edged forward. The room grew darker. Outside, snow fell in chunky flakes that plastered the glass. Ella lifted her head up to prevent her tears from spilling. The damp patches on the ceiling mapped the mansion's past. Natasha Rostova could have danced in this hall in her empire-line dress and ballroom slippers.

Raya took a deep breath. 'Do just come and see what a moon ... Oh, how lovely! Come here ... Darling, sweetheart, come here.' She said it very simply. Her face was turned up, her neck exposed, vulnerable. She *was* Natasha.

Ella dug her nails into her palms. Until this moment she'd thought the role was hers. Podolski loved her as an actress, more than he'd ever loved Raya.

Raya sat on the floor. 'There, you see? I feel like sitting down on my heels, putting my arms around my knees like this, straining tight, as tight as possible, and flying away. Like this ...' She opened her arms as if she was going to take flight.

Podolski clapped. 'Bravo, girl. This is the Natasha I wanted.'

Ella stopped breathing. Her blind faith in providence had been misplaced. Why had she decided that her will not to fall pregnant was enough to protect her? She would have to tell Roman.

'Everyone is dismissed,' Podolski said. 'Ella and Raya, please stay behind.'

The students rushed to the doors, throwing side glances at her and Raya. They had all been there before. An actor needed thick skin.

‘What’s going on, Ella?’ Podolski pursed his lips and clasped his hands. ‘I’m giving you both two weeks to learn the parts, Natasha’s and Sonya’s. Whoever does better at the dress rehearsal will play Natasha on the opening night. Do you understand?’

Ella nodded a few times and pretended to take no notice of Raya, whose face had lit up like the Central Telegraph facade on May Day. The artistic directors of most Moscow theatres attended each other’s premieres, especially if someone like Podolski was involved. The leading actress would be noticed and might be offered a job in a State theatre.

She strode out of the rehearsal hall. She couldn’t let a baby cost her this chance.

*

On the edge of the snowfield, a tiny church topped with green-coloured onion domes appeared dwarfed by the towers of identical high-rises. Ella’s heart twitched. It was as if anything spiritual or soul-searching was crushed by the State.

The seventh-floor balcony where she stood with her back to the stuffy room full of TV noise hung over the snow sludge. Fresh November fall turned into mud the moment it touched the ground. She rubbed her forehead, tingling from cold, and hunched her shoulders, warm and itchy under her coat.

Two hours had passed since she and Roman had arrived at this flat in Kolomenskoe, a newly built suburb where Ilya and Marina lived. Inside, Marina and two young women Ella had never met before lounged on the sofa, oblivious it seemed to the black and white movie on TV and tobacco fumes from the kitchen where their men played poker.

It was only the second time she'd met Ilya and his wife Marina, yet Roman had known them forever. The photograph in the living room of those three holding skis and smiling at the camera was the first thing she noticed after entering the handkerchief-sized bedsit. It stood on the bookshelf next to the few tomes Ella knew and loved: Pasternak, Bulgakov, Tsvetaeva. The same photo she'd seen in Roman's room in his parents' communal apartment. She wondered whose books those were – Ilya's or Marina's.

Her fingers squeezed the balcony's handrail. She tore her eyes off the forest that stretched out behind the church under a washed-out sky. They had to have this talk. And Roman had promised her a walk before she agreed to accompany him to his weekly poker game. Still, she stood there motionless, unable to force herself to join the girls or drag him away.

Both groups, the men in the kitchen and the women painting their nails on the sofa, talked politics – how Andropov's rule could turn out to be bloodier than Stalin's. The Butcher of Budapest, he'd been called, the KGB czar. Since Brezhnev's death and Andropov's seizure of power, all news channels spat out the same pro-communist slogans or otherwise faded into Swan Lake ballet re-runs.

Ella pushed the balcony door open, pinched her nose against the stink of nail polish, and stormed towards the kitchen. Delaying her confession didn't make sense. To have a baby instead of playing Natasha Rostova under Podolski's direction was out of the question, but she had to at least let Roman know. Besides, she didn't have money for the anaesthetic needed for a safe and painless abortion.

In the kitchen, she met Ilya's eyes. He grinned and Ella forgot what she was about to say. She smiled at Ilya, at his black eyes, shiny under the kitchen lamp, with fine wrinkles in the corners. He was likely the same age as Roman. Twenty-

eight. They were conscripted in the same year, she thought, before remembering her grievances.

‘Roman, I have a rehearsal tonight. Do you think we still have time for a short walk?’

The other two men measured her up and down, their eyes grim. Boris and Sasha. She always forgot which one was which. Cards at their chests, cigarettes in hand, they stared at her, the invader.

Roman lifted his head and looked through her. ‘Sorry, El, another hour or so.’

‘I’ll go then.’

Ilya got up. ‘Let’s have a break, guys. The girls must be bored.’

Ella nodded, grateful, but the three men at the table didn’t budge.

‘We need to finish.’ Roman looked down at his cards, his fingers tapping on the formica table.

‘Come on, El.’ It was either Sasha or Boris. ‘You can’t stop the game.’

She turned to go and felt Ilya’s fingers on her shoulder.

‘I am sorry, Ella, just a few more minutes. I’ll put on the kettle. We’ll have tea.’

Ella stepped out and bumped into Marina, who screwed up her face. The tall blonde, older than her, perhaps the same age as Roman and Ilya, squeezed past her into the kitchen and closed the door.

Unsure, Ella sat on the sofa next to the girls. ‘What are you watching?’

One of the girls shrugged and changed the channel. The Politburo news came on. ‘They don’t want us to think at all. We are like cattle for them. This man, Andropov, he is the one who sent tanks to Prague. That’s what I hear. The KGB chief.’

Ella perked up. ‘Sorry, I am Ella, and you are?’

‘Lena,’ the girl said. ‘Boris invited me.’

‘You know you can’t speak like this,’ said the other girl, who was younger, the same age as her, Ella thought.

Lena shrugged again. ‘Who can hear us, ah, Tanya?’

Tanya examined her nails. ‘Do you like the colour?’ she asked.

Ella nodded. ‘What do you do, Lena?’

‘Study art, and you?’

‘Acting.’

Both women sat up. ‘Where do you act?’

‘I am about to graduate from the Theatre Academy. Rehearsing Rostova.’ This much was true, but it wasn’t a fact that she would get to play the role.

Lena and Tanya looked impressed.

‘El, we’re going.’ Roman stumbled out of the kitchen. He stuffed his wallet into the pocket of his sheepskin jacket, which hung on the hook in the hallway.

‘Goodbye, girls. Ella has a rehearsal.’ He chuckled as if he shared a joke. ‘We have to go, no tea.’

Ella got up and joined him at the entrance door. Ilya came out too. They all crowded the hallway while Roman fussed with the lock.

Ilya’s handshake lingered and she regretted they couldn’t stay longer. ‘Say goodbye to Marina,’ she said and backed onto the landing.

3

Roman looked out of place on the futon in Ella's arty bedsit, with its chintz curtains and Vietnamese mat. Dressed in his beige poloneck and corduroy pants, he sat cross-legged and cradled a guitar. The quiet sounds of a ballad had started to lull Ella to sleep, but she sat up beside him and fought it.

'I asked Vlad to help with the doctor.'

Roman met her eyes, but he didn't stop plucking the guitar's strings. She pushed down her anger. The least he could do was offer to pay for painkillers.

'The doctor said I have three weeks to decide ... before the New Year.'

Her silly hope that he would beg her to reconsider dissolved when he averted his face to tune his guitar. The lamp lit a spot on the floor next to the futon, but it did not illuminate his expression. She moved to get up but Roman took hold of her upper arm. He put the guitar on the floor and lay on the futon.

She let him gently pull her onto the bed beside him. 'Do you want to have children at all?'

His body, warm and pliable only seconds ago, tensed. Ella propped herself up on her elbow to see his face.

Roman sighed. 'Maybe in a few years.' He leaned across her to pick up the guitar from the floor and fiddled with the strings. 'You know we're applying to emigrate. It could

take us six months to a year to get an exit permit and it's not a fact we'll get one at all. It might get worse with Andropov.'

Ella nodded. 'We' meant him and his parents – the Abramovs. She was optional. It didn't change her predicament. It was Roman's feelings towards her that mattered. She put her hand on his to stop him strumming. The expression on Roman's face softened, he let go of the guitar and held her fingers. 'You *do* want to keep it?'

Soothed by the feel of his skin, she allowed herself to relax. She could be mistaken but perhaps Roman did love her in his own weird way. 'Only if we both want it. But if you are thinking of leaving, I'd better not.'

She faked a laugh, and an image of a young woman with a pram in some foreign city that looked like New York invaded her mind. Not that she ever saw New York on TV.

He pulled her closer and put his arm around her. His hip pressed into hers. The heat of his body was too much to bear and she shifted away slightly. For a moment having his baby didn't feel so foolish, but like something akin to fate.

'Would you come with me, if we apply?' Roman's voice wavered and his hand slipped underneath her top. He toyed with the hooks of her bra.

Ella tried to think fast, distracted by his scent – a heady mix of cigarettes and aftershave. She flattened her back against the futon, trapping his fingers. He thought everything could be sorted out by making love. But how did his offer work? He'd take her along if she aborted the baby, but if she didn't, he'd leave his child behind in the Soviet Union?

'What would you do if I don't come with you but I have the baby?' She spoke as if she was teasing him, but she knew the answer.

His grip on her shoulders slackened and he shifted on the futon, creating a larger gap between them. It felt as if he'd abandoned her already.

'Will you tell your parents?' she asked.

'No.' He leaned even further back. 'I can't tell them. They are dying to have a grandchild. They'd marry us today.'

She forced out a laugh. 'And you would rather not?'

Roman shrugged. 'What are you talking about, El? We don't know each other well enough to get married.'

'Only enough to fuck.' She pulled away and sat up. She didn't regret what she'd said but it wasn't constructive.

Roman stared at her and she searched his eyes, honey-coloured with brown dots, only a few inches from her own. There was no way to guess his thoughts.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed her closer despite her resistance. 'Why are you asking me? You are a big girl, El. What do *you* want to do?'

*

The tram rocked and Ella rested her forehead on the frosted glass to clear her mind. Her gaze returned to the script with Natasha Rostova's lines marked in red pencil. She'd planned to study the role during the two-hour trip across the capital to her grandmother Olga's housing estate in Medvedkovo. But instead she kept mulling over her options.

The carriage jerked and her head hit the glass. Behind the fogged-up windows, the domes and minarets of the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy floated past. She squinted to see the famous fountain. As a child, she used to come here with Olga to play. The fifteen gilded statues, all female, that surrounded it represented the Soviet republics.

Ukraine was her favourite. The giant bronze woman held an armful of wheat to her bust while nursing a child.

Ella stretched her neck to get a glimpse, but her breath fogged the glass and the fountain disappeared from view.

The tram swayed.

If she had an abortion and stayed with Roman, he could still break up with her when his exit permit was granted. He hadn't promised her anything, he'd merely floated the idea of them leaving for Israel and then maybe going to America together. And he was right. Three months wasn't long enough to decide whether you wanted to spend a lifetime with someone. Or maybe it was.

She noticed that she'd pressed the script to her breast like an infant. Ella closed her eyes. She didn't want this baby, but she would love it if she had it. Heat rose up her neck and her arms became heavy, as if she were holding a child. She was Natasha Rostova when she found the meaning of life.

She looked at the script and searched for Natasha's monologue. The lines blurred. How was Tolstoy able to comprehend the soul of a young woman, to identify with her truth? She pictured the novel's finale, with down-to-earth Natasha happily changing nappies.

Ella was startled to realise that she'd imagined Natasha with Raya's face. It was impossible to believe that Podolski would give Raya her role. But Ella would never be the Natasha of the novel's ending. She wouldn't look for happiness in her children or in getting married, but inside herself, in her calling, in what made her different from the others, not the same. The irony was that if she wanted that for her future she'd have to nail this part, to connect with Tolstoy's Natasha and her family ways.

The tram doors opened and a gust of snowy mist chilled the carriage. Ella fastened her coat. Some semblance of insight

passed through her like a draught raising the snow dust from the ground. She shoved the script into her handbag. Her grandmother's stop was the next one.

*

Ella sat across from her grandmother in her kitchen, facing the window. The grey sky hung low, pierced by TV antennas from the neighbouring apartment blocks. The taste of freshly baked strudel, straight from her childhood, unnerved her, and her new-found certitude wavered under Olga's loving gaze. She wasn't sure her grandmother would approve of an abortion.

'Is there something wrong, Ellochka? You don't like the strudel?' Olga's eyes were the same chocolate brown as her own.

'I'm in trouble, Baba,' Ella blurted, though she'd planned to start with Roman's offer, however indirect, to follow him to America.

Olga propped her chin on her fist. Her polished nails gleamed. Somehow she always managed to appear well groomed, even at home, baking.

'What did Roman say?' She took Ella's hand. 'You told him you were pregnant, didn't you?'

Ella nodded. 'He wants to emigrate, on a family reunion visa. Or whatever it's called now.'

Olga squeezed her fingers. 'Do you love him?'

That was a question Ella hadn't asked herself, possibly because she didn't know the answer. 'I think I do.' She poked her fork at the strudel.

Behind the glass door that separated the kitchen from the corridor, her grandfather Natan shuffled towards the bathroom.

'Is *Dedushka* feeling better?'

Olga shrugged and got up. When Ella had arrived, Natan had retreated from the kitchen in haste, leaving his 'ladies to

their secrets', as he'd put it. Her grandfather was approaching eighty-six, but in the two weeks since she'd last seen him he'd grown older, turning into a withered child. She suddenly became frightened. If something happened to Natan, she wasn't sure how Olga would cope. She couldn't imagine her grandparents living without each other.

'Have you always loved my grandfather?'

Although they'd had their tea already, Olga put the kettle on the stove again. She wore her fire-red house dress, and her back looked unexpectedly stooped. 'I'll tell you a secret. Your heart has to make a decision, not your mind.'

Ella grimaced. It was easy to say, but her heart seemed ill-equipped to make this decision. One minute it screamed, *I want to perform*, and another it cried out, *Don't kill the baby*. What then should she do?

Olga sat back down, her forehead wrinkled. Ella imagined her grandmother as a young woman. She looked beautiful even now with her crown of silver hair that used to be curly and wild. Chestnut like her own. She wished she could just enjoy Olga's company and her baking, but she needed her wisdom.

'Have you ever had an abortion, Baba?' Ella asked as the kettle started to whistle. Shame prickled the back of her neck, but she stared at her grandmother, expecting to be either told off or told the truth.

Olga didn't respond. She looked away as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't bear to do it. Her grandparents never talked about the repressions, and who knows what had happened during the war years. Ella had never asked questions.

She got up to take the kettle off the boil and filled the empty tea glass that sat in front of Olga on the table. She was about to speak when Olga stood abruptly and turned on the tap. Over the running water, Ella could hear the quiet murmur of Natan's radio in the living room.

She stood behind Olga and embraced her, her chin resting on Olga's shoulder. Ella stroked her back, unsure what else she could do to make her grandmother less distraught. Olga turned to face her.

'Ask your heart.' She took both of Ella's hands into her own and Ella felt her grandmother's fingers tremble. 'Think. Is he the one?'

Ella bit her lip. She wished she knew the answer.

4

‘And one-two-three, one-two-three.’ A tiny weathered woman, the choreographer from the Bolshoi, punctuated her words with her hands.

‘Remember, Natasha’s first ball is an important scene – it opens the play. All eyes will be on you.’

Ella followed the direction of the choreographer’s gaze towards the lofty windows. The rehearsal studio was cold and Ella tugged the sleeves of her black poloneck over her numb fingers.

She curtsied to her dance partner, Oleg Plushkin, the only Communist Party member in her acting class. Five other girls curtsied to their partners at the same time, all of them reflected in the long mirror. The accompanist’s hands flew above the yellowish keys of the grand piano and the sweet sounds of a minuet swept the room.

Oleg bowed towards Ella. Then, barely touching her knuckles, he led her around with a scowl that distorted his handsome face. She wondered what it meant. Oleg Plushkin, the academy’s well-known informer, usually couldn’t wait for the dance class to get up close and personal with any girl he partnered.

She bit her lip to stop her teeth from chattering and imagined Natasha Rostova waltzing about this very room. What would she do if she found herself pregnant? Naive, carefree Natasha. Would she keep the baby?

Raya's eyes found hers in the mirror. Her friend and rival blushed. Ella beamed back but her mouth betrayed her. No one else in the studio was smiling. Oleg dropped her hand and moved on. Her next dance partner was a young man named Denis. He averted his gaze and almost lost his footing.

Ella curtsied. Maybe news had leaked that Podolski had confirmed her for the role of Rostova. That would explain Raya's awkwardness, but why were Oleg and Denis acting so weird?

'What's with everyone today?' she hissed.

Denis widened his eyes but he kept silent while they danced. Ella stepped on his toe and made him wince, her smile fixed in place.

The choreographer watched them. 'Ella, straighten your back, look your partner in the eye. And one-two-three.'

Oleg became her partner again. His expression was stony.

'What's wrong?' She clutched his hand and his bowl-like lips twisted. He waited until the choreographer was at the other end of the studio before he let go of her fingers.

It wasn't until the break in rehearsals that she got an answer to Plushkin's discomfort and Raya's flushed cheeks.

A copy of the *Komsomoletz* newspaper was pinned to the noticeboard out in the corridor beside the ballroom, locked behind the glass. Ella stared at her own face on its front page under a banner, *Freedom for ...* She re-read the bold letters of the article title: *Hooligans on the Loose*. In the photograph, her mouth was open as if she was shouting a slogan. She jammed her fist to her heart. A few students that had stopped behind her rushed away. This article made her a traitor.

She stopped herself from imagining the consequences. A traitor would have to be punished, prevented from corrupting others. A feeling of dread came over her. This could spell the end of everything she had dreamed of.

After the recess, Plushkin attempted to blend in with the other actors, his narrow back conveying his desire to avoid her more expressively than his face. He wouldn't want to get involved or appear too friendly. Still they all knew that he reported regularly to the party committee on the minds and souls of his classmates. He could find the best way out of this, if she convinced him to help her.

She managed to grab his sleeve. 'Oleg, I need your advice.' They stood at the doors to the rehearsal studio with acting students pouring past them. 'I was just meeting a friend there. I didn't even know about the rally.'

Oleg lifted one eyebrow. She let him lead her to a nook at the end of the hallway.

'And, the friend's name?' he said.

Ella didn't answer.

He folded his arms. 'Do you understand how you let us all down, mixing with the dissidents? Everyone in the acting department, me, Professor Podolski?'

Behind her back, Ella twisted her wrist. 'I didn't mean it, Oleg.'

As if her pregnancy was not enough to test her commitment, now there was this.

'Help me. I know you can. Tell them at the party bureau this was a mistake. I just happened to be near the synagogue at the wrong time.'

Oleg frowned down at her but he looked less angry, she thought. Being shamed was a low price to pay for his support.

'The party board meeting is at six tonight. Come up with a good excuse for your actions, Ashkenazi.'

*

The academy's Communist Party board met every Wednesday in the assembly hall, but today's special meeting had been called in response to her misconduct. Ella couldn't stop shaking. Void of daytime students, the corridor outside the hall looked different in semi-darkness. The single lamp at the far end made it seem like a stage with only a ghost light on.

The speech she'd been practising in her mind had long stopped making sense. Still, she went over the key points. She had nothing to do with the dissidents. She was meeting a friend at Arkhipov Lane when she got lost in the crowd and was photographed.

'Ashkenazi.' Plushkin had opened the hall door from the inside. Dressed in a suit and tie, he was not a colleague anymore but a Communist Party official. He stepped away to let her pass and shut the door behind her.

Inside the hall, the stage was illuminated and framed by a velvet curtain. On it was a long table covered by a red cloth. The set belonged to some performance about the victory of collectivisation, but what was happening to her was very real.

She walked towards the table and the four men in suits who sat around it. They squinted in her direction. She knew two of them: Colonel Sundukov, the Scientific Communism tutor hated by his students, and the Academy Director, Pyotr Ilyich Hrushev. The other two were strangers – a tall balding man in glasses and a shorter, younger one. The rest of the board members were absent, but whether this was a positive sign, she didn't know.

Oleg nudged her and she climbed onto the stage, feeling as if she'd never stepped on it during her three years at the academy.

The man in glasses seemed to be in charge. 'Sit down, Ashkenazi.'

Plushkin rushed to take his seat, leaving Ella a chair at the head of the table. She sat on the edge of it and clasped her hands.

The tall man in glasses turned to the shorter one. 'Nikita.'

Ella realised she'd met the younger man before. He'd been checking new students' documents at the enrolment. So, he wasn't a party board member but KGB. She pressed her knees together. If the KGB was involved, she could not expect to be spared. The Internal Security police usually acted behind the scenes, letting their foot soldiers, like Plushkin, do their menial work.

Nikita held out a folder. Her personal file, she guessed, and felt a chill rise from her feet to her heart. The man in glasses opened the dossier and perused its contents. She held her breath, her head vacant of all thoughts.

He pulled out the *Komsomoletz* article, which had been enlarged. Even from her side of the table and upside down she could read the placard above her head in the photo: *Freedom for ...*

The man took off his glasses. 'And how does the graduating student of Moscow Theatre Academy, a future actress, become involved in an anti-Soviet demonstration?'

She opened her mouth. The first sentence of her speech was on her tongue like a line from a role she hadn't rehearsed properly. But she didn't manage to speak it.

'Get up,' he yelled.

She stood. Her knees went soft and she had to grip the table for support.

The man turned to the academy director. 'Has this student been implicated in anything objectionable before?'

She glanced at Hrushev. His flabby body shook from his stomach to his cheeks and his fleshy lips moved wordlessly. Ella shivered. If the invincible director was scared, it meant there was something to be scared of. Hopefully they hadn't uncovered her grandfather's brother in Australia. Up to now, she'd managed to hide Leo Ashkenazi's existence from her Komsomol overseers, but nothing could be concealed from the KGB if they wanted to find it.

‘No signals, Comrade Surkov.’ Hrushev’s voice was quiet, but it gave her strength.

Surkov turned to Plushkin. ‘What’s the matter, Oleg? Your classmate gets mixed up with dissidents and we are the last to find out?’

‘I’m sorry, Comrade Surkov.’ Plushkin’s eyes filled with real tears. ‘She disguised her connections.’

Surkov put on his glasses and stared at her, his lenses gleaming. ‘Explain. Who did you meet? Who recruited you?’

Ella tried to recall her prepared speech. ‘I was there by accident. I didn’t know anyone. The photograph—’

Surkov held up his palm. ‘Nikita, what do we have on her?’
Nikita whispered something in his ear.

‘Hmm. Comrade Smertniy here says you are friendly with the dissident Zacharov. Any comments?’

Ella’s lip quivered. She could not deny being Vlad’s friend. ‘We went to school together.’

Sundukov banged on the table with his fist. ‘I demand: expel her. The Soviet actor needs clean hands. They are an example onstage. We don’t need friends of dissidents here.’

Plushkin sprang to his feet in support of his mentor. ‘What Colonel Sundukov means is that you let down your comrades.’

‘Irresponsible!’ Sundukov shouted. ‘Anti-Soviet.’

Surkov exchanged glances with Nikita. ‘That’s why we need to ensure this was a one-off incident, not preconceived anti-government activity.’ A smile crept across his face. ‘You’ll write a report, Ashkenazi, with the names of your dissident friends present at this rally to dissociate yourself from our enemies.’

Ella felt as if she might faint. She tried to object. But she caught the director’s glare and didn’t say a word.