

# Malina

by

Hanna Zubarava

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF ARTS**

in

The Department of English

State University of New York  
New Paltz, New York 12561

December 2022

MALINA

Hanna Zubarava

State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

Dennis Doherty, Thesis Advisor  
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

*Маленький кораблик*

*Медленно волна уносит в даль.*

*Терять его так жаль...*

*...Пусть плывет, пусть плывет*

*Кораблик мечты.*

*Он не сможет пропасть,*

*Если с ним*

*В трудный час*

*Будешь ты.*

- Zemlyane

Small boat

Slowly the wave carries away into the distance

Such a shame to lose him...

... Let him float, let him float

Dream boat

He can't disappear,

If with him, you will be,

during the hardest times.

- Zemlyane

## 1

He told it all to me within a month's time, sporadically and whole-heartedly. He remembered its entirety as it were, or so he says, and as I no longer have mother's account, for she has recently passed, his word and their letters must be enough. He recounted the trajectory of our family's affairs – how it led to us speaking in this very moment, in this part of the world, and with the memories buried within. He said to me that it had to happen this way, that there was no alternate possibility.

We spoke always in the kitchen, sitting across from each other at a black table he had found outside decades ago, which someone was trying to dispose of. Nearly half of his belongings were reclaimed from the streets of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn's little Russia. And though he has now found himself a comfortable life, with a well-paying job, he returned to live in the very apartment he resided in during the time of his first years in New York. At the table, alongside the wall, sat a small beating clock, in a triangular shape. The timing seemed to be wrong. On the right of the clock, was an empty fruit basket, collecting an abundance of dust. The table had several scratch marks, and at places, it was evident that it was spray painted multiple times to conceal its imperfections. It was at this table that I learned of what it means to carry his name.

Over time, the reclaimed table, which sometimes shook with instability, brought me great comfort. At the beginning, on the first days of our reunion, the thought of the table sickened me. I knew it would be here that I would learn of why I became fatherless, why mother and I remained casualties of Belarusian life, why I did not have the life envisioned for me. I feared I would not understand, of why the gloominess of my life lost its opportunity to be washed in color. I feared my years of resentment would keep pulling the small string tied in the back of my throat, until it faced breakage and the vile of words came slipping out, which endlessly longed for the placing of blame.

Our discussions had to be accompanied by some sort of beverage. In the mornings we drank black, bitter coffee, in the afternoons we had tea, and our nightly confessions were frequently accompanied by spirits. When he drank, he didn't change much, in behavior that is. His demeanor remained as reserved as in his sobriety. The only real difference was his eyes drooped further towards the floor, his fingers clenched more frequently, and he seemed slightly more tragic. There was a lingering sadness about him, in which I often see in myself, that is rather comforting. I have gathered that acceptance is his closest friend. Be that many years have now passed, though I find his closure, in the mishaps of his life, quite charming. His breath was always steady during his telling of past tales. It did not quiver or exhibit any doubtful reaction. His eyes were firm, sometimes staring into mine, though most often on his drink or on the floor. When that happened, when his eyes touched my own, I could not help but weep internally, but on the outside, mine were firm too.

Some days, when he went into the depths of painful memories, his gaze never met my own, and I was left searching for clues as to how he was feeling then and there. Where do those memories live? The walls enclosed ever so slightly on the days following those. There seemed to

be more to speak about, and simultaneously, more silence. Some days we sat together for hours in the quietness. In those moments, my body convulsed and yearned for fatherly affection. I wondered what his cravings were. I wondered if he considered himself to be a father. I wanted to know so desperately how his thoughts traveled; they rarely followed a linear path, and almost always did he find himself lost on that train, away from the rails, and stepping down towards the pits engraved in his mind. In our discussions, I tried to limit my questions, for fear of feelings of interrogation. I believe he appreciated this, and his acceptance to house me and recount these moments in time, has left me to heavily consider my approach towards him. I determined it would be best to not dwell in his shortcomings, not correlate it to my own, and in this, I found it easier to breath with him around.

He told it all to me without any reservation, or at least from what I can tell. When questions arose, on those infrequent times, he did not search for comforting words, but words that mattered. He did not drag his truth. He said I resembled her greatly, especially in the ways my smile curved in a soft, upward angle. Almost identical, he said. Perhaps this was why he often avoided looking directly at my face, but rather made minor tilts of the head to present a brief signal of presence. I did not take it personally, and at the same time, how could I not have?

His eyes were opposite my own. They were rich in darkness and abundant in wisdom. I trusted them. When I looked deeply, sincerely, into the depths of his pupils, I could see the remorse that lingered within. I could see the sea of tears that once flooded the vastness of his being, which now has wrinkled with dryness. Like his skin, I could tell his insides were just as weathered and torn. There was little room left for passion, for joy, or even the slightest bit of light to illuminate. There was a constant darkness that overshadowed all attempts of merriness. And despite my efforts of bringing this man some welcoming assurance, notwithstanding the

tension which creases my heart, my failure came heavy handed. My smiles were returned with stillness. Then, when the countless smiles went through the void he had constructed, did I notice that my own now began to linger atop my face rather than emerged from my heart. That is when I stopped applying efforts of reconciliation and gave into the meaning behind this visit: to figure out where my blood has leaked to.

## 2

On the second week of my visiting, he gave me the letters.

The letters, which remained in a wooden box inscribed with Zemlyane's song lyrics, were hoarded in perfect order. Each letter was placed chronologically, with the very first at the top. In holding them, I felt to be breaching a sacred space. They gave me the impression that they wanted to be left alone, contained, preserved. The dust did not absorb the small chest, perhaps because it was looked after, or perhaps because it has not been opened in years and there was no opportunity for entry. The letters were enveloped and marked, each distinguishable by handwriting. Mother's was gentle, cursive, evident of practiced penmanship. His was too bold, scratchy, and dominated the whiteness of the page.

It took me quite some time to read through all of them. I wanted to take it slow, to truly engage with them. I read a single letter every few days. In the meantime, I kept in mind the contents of the letters. I considered each word chosen and its meaning. I considered the possible thoughts that were racing through their heads, the worrisome love and bittersweet circumstances. Often, I found myself responding to them as if it was me in their shoes. What would I have said? What words would I have chosen? How would I have felt? Though I know these questions only

burdened my mind and took space in the vastness of my being, I could not resist to do so. I desired to understand and be a part of it, somehow.

The first letter was his.



*October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1996*

*My dearest Katya Mikhailovna,*

*Oh, Katya, how terrible I feel to have left you without a whisper for all this time. I have not done so intentionally, for you must know that is the case, and I am sure you have been worried sick. Perhaps you have already paced throughout the house as a woman who has gone mad. I hope you have not shed too many tears, for my darling woman, I am now writing to you with news. As you could expect, I've had troubles throughout the journey. Before you consider the worst, as I know you have already done so, let me bring some relief and tell you where I now stand. What a precious sight it is!*

*As I write to you, I am sitting on a wooden bench facing the sea and the delicate sand of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. How you would love this view! In due to time, it will be yours. I am wearing the beloved red sweater you've knitted me. I've treasured its warmth since coming up north. In honesty, it is not comparable to our cruel winters in Grondo, though the foreseeable frost is approaching. The breeze swarms with smells of fish, so scrumptious for your salads. How cookery has lost its warmth here. Consider this, the beach is only but two blocks, a five-minute walk, from the apartment I've secured. I often think about our hourly trips to Odesa to get some sun and a good bathe. Soon too, you shall walk these streets with me. I sit atop a bench that is placed on a walkway of sorts, made clumsily, with nails and wood poking out and waiting for a*

*bicyclist to lose balance or a child with slippers to ram their toes and be taken by an army of splinters. In any case, it is quite large, this sitting area, and for the weather (cloudy and misty) there is an awful lot of people walking about.*

*Thankfully, my adjustment has not been too difficult. I have come across the Golden Key, a tiny shop on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> street, in which I purchase my rye and milk. The butcher, a rather stocky man, continuously flirts with the young woman at the register, and I often think of you while I stand on the queue holding my belongings. I think of your sweet smile and the hue of your blush, the very slight spring in your heels as you walk past and the subtle curl of your delicate, blond hair. She reminds me of you, if ever so slightly, while her flirt shares no comparison to my own demeanor. His bluntness reminds me of an unmannered child whose desires were not met, and so his voice echoes louder the longer she looks away in hopes of his understanding for the inappropriateness of his pursuit (for he is double her age). Although sorry for the young girl, I can't pay much mind. I have other worries to settle.*

*A bit further down the avenue, I have found a bazaar that suits the remainder of my needs. At one moment I had crippled my body to such extent with the hex breaker that I treated myself, quite foolishly, to a sirochik. Oh, dearest Katya, I have yet to tell you how I have managed to feed myself. With Leshik alongside the trip, it has been a blessing to have guidance. He had rapidly secured us both labor positions in the big city, though I will tell you more of this in my following letter, for my time is limited as I see the horizon darkening. The reflection of the burning sun has caused an emotional reaction, good God Katya, a pitiful appearance I now am, sitting on this lonesome bench, longing for you, for our family.*

*A promise I shall give you, in this moment of cherished existence, that I will strive to accomplish a life here for us. Our family shall have a dream burning as bright as the sun, rather,*

*brighter, with ambition to achieve this seduction of success, this blissful reach of greatness. In due time my dear, our child shall sing the song of dreams and find a path of only God's own doing, a growth unimaginable that our love may seem dim in their luminous endeavors. These next few years will be a crippling challenge to any man's soul, if his love be separated from himself, and will be the greatest hardship I have yet faced. I will be living in poverty; how poor my spirit and fingers feel. My freckled, stubborn, and gracious partner, I only hope your sanity finds stability in the acceptance of your family's aid. Do not take this burden on alone. Take the hand of your mother, allow her to teach you her ways, as she has done right by you. I am confident in your abilities. I pray that time does not slip and short of five years I will see you unaged and our child will recognize my features. Do show them pictures.*

*I hope the harvest from our dacha has been fruitful and the market's emptiness does not trouble you heavily. I do not wish to elaborate, though I feel a pull to share of the aches I now feel when wandering the bazaar's abundantly filled aisles. An unfathomable sight it is. And though I do not have the kopek to purchase most, its sight alone is dreadful. Please share with me your preserves. What have you pickled? How many kilos of potatoes do we have? Katya, remind me of the taste of birch juice. Can you believe I have nearly forgotten! How my tongue has grown stale. Tell me you are doing well. Assure me of your sanity. Kitten, how have the last six months treated you? I pray my writing has relaxed your nerves, if only slightly.*

*Darkness is now approaching, and I do not have the means to share with you, in the depth I would like to, of what occurred when we departed Berlin. Briefly stating, for I know that delaying this story is going to bother you heavily, you should know that the border patrol found Leshik and I on Texas' soil. We were taken to sit behind bars for half a year's time. I will bring you the full story in my following letter, but my dear, I assure you I am now safe and secure in*

*my new life here. I have you in my thoughts and pray to the icon we purchased when we last lit our candles.*

*With unconditional love,*

*Arman Vasilyevich*



When he first handed the box to me, I sifted through the envelopes with awe, so eager to discover the insides. Though never could I have imagined the man in front of me, my stranger of a father, the man who could hardly stand the sight of my own slight smile, whose eyes seldom meet their companion, and who wears the darkest grim, to have such words touch the page. They were sweeter than the juice of the finest birch. His handwriting nearly became unnoticeable, if at all possible, by the very words he used. I simply could not believe the solum figure who slouches without any stretch of confidence, to have written so daringly. It felt to be a scene from an old romantic film, the way the characters always have their words tight and lovely. After reading his letter, a river of combating thoughts splurged into my mind.

I felt a greater admiration for him.

In the moment I opened it, I was on the rooftop of a neighborhood apartment building. It overlooked the entirety of the block along with the adjoining streets. I saw young, silly children playing with water balloons. A boy accidentally, or perhaps intentionally, threw one a bit too harshly at his female friend, which made her run towards the balcony in tears. Her mother did not pay much attention, and instead she continued to smoke her cigarette absentmindedly. Another group of prepubescent boys sat around on their BMX bikes, giggling. It was a pleasant

sight to witness, and I remember thinking how I could watch this little world turn for hours on end.

As I continued to reread his letter, an acute burst of anger washed over me. This could have been my life, my upbringing. It could have been me crying over the meaningless aggression of a boy, rather than the countless tears I've shed from hunger aches. I could have sprinted from joy upon the concrete floor, barefoot and free, as opposed to tying rubber bands to hold up my boots when the zippers gave out. I could have been playing at twelve rather than working with mother on her two jobs. How is it that life's coin sways slightly more towards one direction than the other?

I read his promises countless times. How he promised to strive to create this life for us, to craft a space for the burning of our dreams— my dreams, which never got the opportunity to flicker even from a distance. In that moment, I could not understand what happened between then and now. Mother once told me his attempts for our family withered away when I was born. With all the feelings of conviction in his letters, it was entirely hard to believe his faith diminished that quickly. In me, I found myself both hopeful, rooting for the underdog, and at the same time, repulsed by his failure, a colossal one for that matter.

## 3

I read mother's response two days later. I went to the canal and found a bench that was not absorbed by pigeon excrement. As I held the envelop in my hand, I watched as the ducks swayed in the water. Beside me, an older woman stood by the railing with a bag of stale bread, which she slowly tossed one crumbled piece at a time into the subtle waves. Her smile radiated and I could tell this was a common activity of hers. The bench was hot, as its black paint was burning under the melting sun. My hands trembled the entirety of the time and my breath held tighter than ever. With her only passing a few months prior, it nearly took an hour for me to pull my strength from within and open the folded, faded paper.



*November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1996*

*My darling, Arman Vasilyevich,*

*How terrible of you to have left me in silence for all this time! I had already written to you countless time, and with no address to send them, the letters have begun to hoard my nightstand, clumsily piled one atop the other. Perhaps I shall dispose of them now, for they are of no use to anyone anymore, and I am sure they will only bring grief to their reader. Even I do not wish to*

*reread them, how worrisome they are. I sound as a woman who has lost their child at a busy bazaar, frantically searching for ease.*

*Anyhow, my dear, I am filled with relief to read your precious words. I could hear your voice in my head, how sweet it sounds, how perfectly pleasant and soft. I can hear your moments of pause, picture you think on your bench, listening to the crash of the waves. I am right there holding your hand. I can see your bittersweet smile, as you remain grateful for this newfound experience and simultaneously, longing for the dear, old comfort of home. I hear your breath held tight in your words, though worry not, I do find comfort in your reassurance. You, my beloved husband and most adored companion, have always used such smooth words to reel me into your favor. In any case, I am forever pleased to hear of your safety. I shall believe that my endless prayers and icon kisses have been of use.*

*Arman, you cannot believe how often I have now attended our church. The priest and I have had plentiful discussions, and you must know, it was neither myself nor mother that has helped me keep my sanity. No, it was our dear priest that calmed my blood and prevented its overflowing. His words of comfort, though can never replace your own, has brought faith into my daily thinking. And rightfully so! Delicate man, you are all well and good! How pleased I am of you. How proud and utterly joyful I am! Mother and I will cheer to you tonight, again. I, of course, with kvass, while she with samogonka.*

*You must know that mother has been doing poorly as of late. Her physical being has suffered as a result of her crippling mind. As you left, our protector and benefactor, she has taken it upon herself to step into larger shoes to care for the baby and myself. She has nearly lost touch of reality—how fooled she is into thinking all this now falls on her. A grown woman I am, Vasilyevich, as you know. When I gather my belonging to head into the square, she instantly*

*skewers out of which ever corner she was hiding in and gets possessed into some sort of obligatory guilt, in which she must now do all that I need, as she believes I cannot do it for myself. Embarrassing, truly. She would secretly take my shoes and put them in a secluded corner of the house, then for nearly an hours' time I would search for my boots, growing frustrated by the minute and ultimately call quits on the whole endeavor. That is how she wins, and consequently, hampers her wellbeing. She does this to herself! She would get her way in all sorts of things. In this way she exerted herself to such extent that her back now aches and slouches as in that of an elder, though she has plenty of years before this natural occurrence should take place. Don't you remember how beautiful and youthful she was when you last saw her? With the appearance of half her age, she could practically resemble being a sister of mine. Now what shall I do with all this? As if I do not already have a burdensome pallet of daily tasks, and currently I am finding it more challenging to find patience with her. Our priest has repeatedly warned me of my temper with her, as he knows the frail woman only means well. He insists that I find my breath, leave the situation, and only return when God's love is resting in my heart. This I have tried several times, and while some attempts proved to be fruitful, each time she exclaims on her aches, I find my irritation surfacing rapidly. Is this wrong of me? Please, my dear, tell me what I should do. You have always kept your mind at ease; tell me, how do I conserve your composure and make it my own? How do I let her be, the poor old woman, while also care for her diminishing health? Where do I find it in myself to call onto her with compassion after months of doing so with no benefit? Tell me Arman, why must she do this to herself? Does she know her spirit is beginning to leak onto mine? How could she not know, how could she ignore my pleading? Do tell me the right answer, I am begging you!*

*Well, my glorious companion, regardless of all things happening here, tell me everything. Share with me your experience, your vision, your new life. Arman, I am rather upset with you. How could you end your letter in the way that you did? Imagine this... there I was, sitting on the balcony on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, with the window propped open and viewing the neighborhood children swinging on the playground, thinking of our future and the family we will have, longing for your presence, when mother returns home from the pharmacy with an unexpected blessing. She wept as that of a drunken woman, slurring her words and fidgeting with excitement. Picture mother running up the staircase, reckless soul, and gasping for breath, while at the same time, trying to tell me that your letter arrived in the post! What a terrifying sight. I had nearly thought that somebody had just passed, until I noticed the envelop in her hand.*

*Then I understood that it was from you! I could see the stamps in abundance on the top right corner; how splendid the colors glimmered. I could see her hand clenching onto the envelop for dear life, as if it will at any moment grow feet and sprint into the distance. I tell you, I felt a burst of agitation in that very moment. A letter that I have been yearning for day after day, and there she was, clenching it with her all her might, hampering the paper, wrinkling my precious letter. You should be proud to hear that God gave me strength. He brought breath into my lungs, slowly, and unclenched my veins. I gave her the tightest squeeze, embracing her whole being, and we rejoiced for your safety together. We began to laugh as two uncontrollable buffoons; how ecstatic we were! A lovely, yet horrendous sight it was for any viewer peeping in through the balcony curtains. Oh, how we jumped in desperate expression of our joy, my Arman, even the neighbors beneath us began to bang their broomstick onto the ceiling.*

*That night, before opening the letter, and forgive me but oh how I yearned to, we prepared an extravagant dinner to celebrate. We ate selotka in marinated onions, shuba, and most certainly*

*loads of boiled potatoes with butter. How sweet does that sound!? My fingers still smell of fish. And so, we ate, joyful as children at a fair, and took our time, as no rush awaited us but the opening of your sweet letter. We discussed possibilities. Mother guessed you have made it safely to New York, without any trouble but perhaps a few rundown men whose breath lingered on you for far too long. She spoke of your journey with such confidence, as if she had already read the letter and was simply fooling me. She insisted that the city was most beautiful, and in fact, more pleasant than the talk that circles the square. Her chin was held high when speaking and her eyes glistened with spirit.*

*I, on the other hand, was determined to not rush into any expectations.*

*I knew I could not feaster in my negative thinking any longer, and, also, I knew I could not bring myself to think as highly as her, for you have not written in many months. Regardless, I held my head high too. We cherished the letter and placed it on the right side of the kitchen table, as we peeled our eyes ever so often on your handwriting while we envisioned what resided within. Once we concluded dinner and did out prayers, we opened the letter together.*

*I read it aloud to her, as her eyesight has likewise begun to diminish. I read it slowly, in attempts to savor every word. That night, I was not in the right mind to write to you, and so, here I now sit, the day after, responding to your lovely letter.*

*Again, tell me everything, please, for my sake. I hold you in my heart with sweetness and pride.*

*Your truthful companion,*

*Katya Mikhailovna*



I could not fathom what I was reading. Never once was God uttered in our household, and here, she spoke so distinctly about her faith. How could I have never known? Still, I ponder on how her belief vanished, or was it silenced? In any case, the mere thought of experiencing the worry and trauma of having your husband disappear for six months brought me dreadful anguish. I would have surely thought he was dead or has departed forever. I pictured them both at the kitchen table back home, babushka and mother. The kitchen was the size of a small closet and always smelt of Russian goodness. Regardless of the time of day, simply stepping foot in the room would bring essences of dill, potatoes, onions, and fermented vegetables. The space still remains heavenly. How dearly do I miss them both! Oh, how they bickered! From her letter, I could testify that mother's agitation never ceased with her, and perhaps only got worse. I remember the aggressive micro-expressions mother made on a regular basis. Despite her appraisal for the priest's aid in curbing her temperament, I insist that God was of no help to her.

## 4

On a rainy Tuesday morning, he told me about his journey to the states. We sat at our usual kitchen table with black coffee in hand, sipping slowly in silence, which he broke after a few sighs. I suppose he figured it was time to express the story of how it happened. I resisted my urge to overload him with questions, as I knew this was a tale to be listened to diligently and I should not seek to gain the details that he did not find value in, or simply, could not stand to recollect.

“In April of 96’ I was cleared for a tourist visa to Germany. I was prepared to leave your mother for a short period of time. Yes, a good friend of mine, Leshik, was working at a restaurant that offered me an opportunity to work and make decent money. I am sure you know, but worse was it in those times to find work in Belarus. Selling cut hair dye with flour no longer paid the bills. Moving furniture from each city for resale became more and more expensive. And so, I packed my duffel bag with the very little clothes I had, a toothbrush, a set of small icons, and a few other necessities. Your mother packed me food for my trip there: boiled eggs, kasha, rye with *kalbasa*, cucumbers, oh, all her goodness.

“No, I did not obtain a work visa, which resulted in my working illegally. The restaurant was pleasant. The walls were made of brick, giving a romantic attraction which lured in tourist

and passionate lovers. It made me dream of her. I was able to sleep in the tenant room, both Leshik and I, above the store, as it was unoccupied momentarily. The situation was not at all bad. Germany was a fine place to live.

“On a fairly slow night, a group of military men entered the restaurant. They wore white caps, had green and red shoulder scales, and grinned all together. They laughed horrendously at something that I could assume was not humorous in the slightest. It almost became a competition on whose laughter echoed longer. Drunk, yes, they clearly have been drinking. I later learned that they were from the French Foreign Legion, in which they attempted to persuade me to join their cohort, as they bribed me with the possibilities this opportunity would bring. As the night proceeded and they continued to make chatter with me, and as there was nobody else in the room to get my attention, I began to find them more enjoyable in company. The stories they shared were quite fascinating.

“The following night, one of the guys, a Pol, came into the restaurant alone. He informed me that he had concluded his time served, a full five years, and as the drinks continued, he began to openly speak with me on his following pursuits. It was then that I learned of this opportunity to enter America. He told me that a group of men were going to be gathering, a total of eight, and that I could join if I wished. The following hour, we discussed logistics. He continuously warned me of the dangers involved, and though I knew them to be true, the very notion of coming to America thrilled my insides. I had imagined, within that hour, an entirely different life. I envisioned safety for our family, with a house rich in space, with you as a little girl running around the backyard, entirely happy. I envisioned the freedom which joined this proposal... how seductive it all sounded. ‘America! Can you believe it, you can be an American? A real man of position. You could set your dreams afar and not worry for their distance, for they will always be

within reach,' I would tell myself while staring into the bathroom mirror. I told the young man I would need a few days of consideration to make my decision. First, I spoke with Leshik. He had the day off from work, and so when I arrived upstairs to our flat late into the night, I awoke him immediately. We discussed the severity of the decision, the possible results, both advantageous and not. He was as fascinated with the idea as I was. We stayed up until the first rays of the sun hit our curtains, taking into mind the trouble this would cause, but more importantly, the abundance of reward if proven successful. By the time our shift started the following day, we were both in the merriest of spirits as our decision was made. That day, we welcomed all the stragglers with the brightest smiles and began toasting in the supply closet during our breaks.

“The next step was to speak with your mother about it. Oh, how Katya reacted! I wrote her several pages on the prosperous opportunity. I described in great length what this could do for us, for our future. I expressed the extent to which this journey would provide us with freedom for the rest of our lives, and that several years apart is only a smidge of time in everlasting life together. I had not considered the alternative. Of course, I should have known she would not favor the proposal. She was always one to see the glass half empty, always to consider the worse of things. How tired she was of all of life's let-downs. The stubborn girl did not nudge in the slightest, despite my every effort to convince her that her pessimistic nature is standing in the way of our opulence.

“I had nearly given up entirely on the hope of fulfilling this now burning desire of mine. Leshik said he felt sorry for the circumstances and that he must go anyhow. He had no woman to consider and therefore, no reason not to go. The Pol and Leshik discussed their trip the following night and set a date to leave in a week's time. They discussed by the corner table, while I

mopped the floors with dread and regret. I tried not to listen but nobody else was around and the radio stopped working.

“In three days, I received a letter from her, which brought a flow of tears to my eyes. She informed me that she was pregnant, with you.”

He briefly looked away from his empty cup and pierced his eyes onto mine. Though only for a few seconds, I could feel the eruption of emotion being experienced within and yet concealed. I could tell he wanted me to know how he felt when he heard the news for the first time— the joy and fear that intertwined to mark a new path into his future.

“Alongside the message of your creation, she insisted that she has changed her mind. She assured me that now, in light of our new family, it was a necessity. That she had to consider the effect of this all on our child and not think selfishly of her own longing. She wrote plentifully of things she had to get off her chest. This letter, I reread and reread deep into the night.

“Thankfully, the news came at just the right time before the Pol’s and Leshik’s departure. It became official— we were to leave in a few days and set off on this fearful, yet completely miraculous, journey. The price requested for the proposal was six-thousand dollars. Surely, I did not have nearly a fraction of that, and so, I went in debt to some trusted friends. Though that was entirely undesirable, there was no other alternative. I was said to repay them within a year’s time if all went well, two if there were complications.

“We flew from Berlin to Cancun, Mexico without any problems. Then, we boarded a smaller, private plane. Out of the fourteen seats on board, 10 of them were filled with our party. I never asked how the plane became available to us, rather I put my trust in the process. We took the second plane to a small village on the pacific coast of Mexico, which I cannot now remember

the name. There, we found a place to stay and waited a few days for a few additional men that would just us on the crossing. An older Georgian fellow resisted going through the desert, for his old age brought fear upon him, and so he found a way to travel by car.

“On the journey there, we hid in caves during the day, so that we were not to be caught. When nightfall approached, our group began walking north. I shall not go into detail now, as I will spare myself those recollections, though you should know that conditions were treacherous. In the darkness, we constantly feared that we could step on venomous snakes and scorpions. And with no medicine, it was imperative we carefully watched the movement of our bodies, as to not twist or sprain anything and be left in the middle of nowhere with no rescue. The Pol told us of many tales in which men have died within the desert. Rightfully so, it brought fear into us all. We kept our eyes as open and wide as we could, and for many of us, kept our beloved in mind at all times.

“In midst of our journey, another Pol, who was slender and tall and smoked plentiful cigarettes, who went by the name of Igor I believe, nearly lost all faith. He broke down and pleaded for the group to continue without him. He insisted that the journey was breaking him down and he could no longer fight through the terrain. Leshik, being the courageous man that he is, brought great fear into him. He threatened the Pol that if he did not get up and continue, he would beat him severely. Leshik shook Igor’s body, which could not stop convulsing and rightfully inflicted some physical pain. With this, the Pol found strength to continue. In fact, he made it to the states with us. A year after this occurrence, the Pol called Leshik on the telephone to thank him deeply for saving his life, for he would have died there, alone and faithless, in the vastness of the desert.

“I cannot tell you for certain how many days it took to cross the border, as all the days merged into an abomination of time. The days stretched infinitely. We arrived in late April. An arrangement was made in which a car picked us up and drove us to Los Angeles, where we spent two days in a motel collecting our demeanor. And so, we made it to the land of dreams and endless possibilities. We overcame it all and had finally found ourselves in the greatest of spirits, with our bodies broken but our minds stronger than ever. Faith was instilled within us.”

He closed his eyes for a few moments, squeezing tightly.

“That is all for today. I shall speak of what followed another time. I am tired and must rest now, please go and find yourself something to keep busy.”

## 5

The longer I stayed there, the more that time became fluid. It was unnatural the lack of rigidity I faced. There was not ever much to do, and yet, I had the grandest of hopes out of this trip. During my time in the institute and working with mother, I rarely had any time at all to rest. My days had to be scheduled in advance, with weeks of planning already in preparation. Since childhood I had been assigned tasks, designated responsibilities, and spent my days purposefully. The lack of structure now was unsettling. I found myself still waking up at the common hour of six, and with nothing to be done, laid awake on the air mattress deep in thought.

Not only is it the timing of the day itself, but collectively the days seemed to merge into each other. At times, I couldn't recognize one from the next, and soon weeks went by, and my mind grew heavy thinking of all that I've accomplished here so far, if anything at all. I stop myself from considering the date of my departure. I am not ready to leave yet. I have not figured it out. I have not asked the right questions, or spent enough time with him, or listened well enough, or made a welcoming environment, or considered thoroughly enough, or was as patient as I need to be, or gave him any love, for me to be satisfied with where I stand in my understanding. I have more questions that I am not aware of. There are pieces still missing, and I have no direction for their placement but him.

Weeks went by of my reading the letters and of hearing his stories. It never grew dull, but my dissatisfaction persisted. The more letters I read, the more I understood about their relationship, and the more confusion I got from my current placement. How is it that two individuals, yet alone man and wife, have hearts tendered to each other's afflictions, and yet have become displaced? There was a disconnect between what I was reading, father's explanations, and my own interpretations. I wished mother was here. I wished we could all talk around the table, drinking our beverages, laughing at the old and forgotten memories, and reminiscing as a family. I wished she was there to see him now, after decades of processing, and hear the way he spoke about her. I wondered what her reactions would be. How would she think of him? Would her responses correspond truthfully to her thoughts? I wondered why I never approached her with any of these questions. Or even, why I didn't question myself. I think my suppression of these ponderings comes down to time.

I didn't have the time to lay on mattresses, staring at the chipped ceiling, and consider why life was the way that it was. I couldn't question the larger things, when the miniscule needed attention. There was no room for it. I think mother would have approached it in the same regard, and perhaps that is why she has never mentioned it to me herself. She never spoke about him, and if on those rare occasions where he was mentioned by friends of the family, she would quickly brush past the topic and cleverly find a way to redirect the conversation. Mother was good like that. In our conversations, we always fed off each other, and in that way, they never laid flat. How loathsome that must be, for two people to dwell together and not have the capacity to be enriched by discussions. Sometimes, that is how I feel with him. In those moments, I keep my purpose in mind. I thought about if mother felt this way when they were together too. That's

when I give thanks for the letters, for I get to see their relationship in a different light. Though how much can letters tell of reality?

I needed more time here.

I didn't know exactly what I would get out of it if I delayed leaving. Though as the days passed with swiftness, I grew uneasy in the whole situation. If I left now, it would have been worse than before I came. Now I have bits and pieces, connections, distant information, a something of value. As for before my arrival, I nearly had nothing but a bothersome thirst that could not be quenched. I didn't quite know where I fit in, and so the outskirts grew comforting. A reoccurring nagging thought brought me here, leading me right into a chair opposite my father, and as he waited for me to ask him questions he did not want to answer, in return we simply stared into distances, and so he shared with me only the words his tongue was content with. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to hear, or even ask. In search of the truth, I brought myself greater frustration the longer I sat on that creaking chair and listened, and perhaps stopped myself from stabilizing my nerves.

On a Monday afternoon, as I was wandering the streets, paying close attention to the vastness of life before me, I came to the conclusion of the necessity to extend my trip. It was imperative, for if I left at the intended time, I would bring myself destruction. I knew this. After making my decision, I thought of how I was to bring this about to my father. Not only did he have another person living in his small space for nearly a month now, but that person was one whom he long not had to think about, to care for, to protect. I can only imagine the dread of telling him that I needed to stay longer. In the first rehearsals, I posed it as a question, with great sincerity. I practiced in the bathroom mirror when he was elsewhere. The longer I practiced and

stared at my own reflection, the more restless I became. My mouth moved and yet I heard no sounds protruding from it. I felt to be going deaf.

On Wednesday I realized I could not ask him for permission to stay longer, even if this was his house and I was dependent on his acceptance. I could not leave room for the opportunity of his denial. It came to me as I imagined his responses, and most often, I heard in my ears the dreadful “but” when expressing rejection. Yes, he would have loved for me to stay, but he must go back to his usual routine. He would have let me extend the trip, but he had a planned gathering approaching. There were always reasons for not doing something, and that could not have entered this equation. So, I began practicing with assertion. I shall simply say that I already extended my trip. That there is no going back now and that jokingly, though in all truthfulness, he was stuck with me. I should make it known that it is final, that I already called my airline company and rescheduled my ticket. All of Thursday went to reenacting this scenario.

Friday came and I was prepared to bring forth my strength and courage and express to him my extended departure. He was out all morning running errands, to which one day I asked to join along, and he responded with, “it’s better if not”. I didn’t ask again and left him alone for his morning routine. When he came back that day, he was laden with Netcost grocery bags. The green pieces of plastic consumed the neighborhood, and indicatively, one can assume who is of Slavic origin. At that moment, I was still in the bathroom, staring at the dusty mirror, and rehearsing my facial expressions: of how deep my eyes should squint? To which direction should my brows point? To what degree should a smile form? Was I to look directly into his eyes? There was much premeditation involved.

He called out to me, and yet I could not hear him. The hook was not placed upon the eye, and so the door freely gave into his hand, placing it gently centimeters closer to the wall but

enough so that I was exposed in an odd posture facing my doppelganger. Father stared at me, as I stared at myself. Uncertain of what came over me, as I no longer had control of my limbs nor speak of anything that I have agreed upon. Not even a simple greeting. I believe father felt the mild fear blazing within me, and rather awkwardly and with a great lack of comfortability, he slowly proceeded towards me. In the corners of my eyes, I noticed his arms elevate and in a second's notice, I was embraced by him. Without losing contact with myself, I could clearly see the image of the two of us, there in the petite bathroom. His eyes were closed, and head laid heavily upon my shoulder. I could not help but begin to accumulate tears within, that all together they rushed out as a dam that was suddenly broken and the reservoir spilled in excess.

His sweater began to pool and yet he paid no mind. There he was, my father, giving me the first embrace that I can consciously remember. I desired to melt right there and lose my heaviness. I wished to be casted into a mold, so that this moment can be preserved entirely as it were. I could have remained there for hours, if not for his arms giving out. I thought to myself, that this was the first step towards finding contentment in departure. And that simple thought, brought me back to the exact reason why I was standing in this very bathroom to begin with. A flood of vulnerability escaped me, the rapids continued, and out came from me a miserable moan. I could not do anything about it. The woman in the mirror seemed to be in control.

A ringing in my ears persisted to reverberate within my drums. His fingers began to dig into me, to which I adored. I could not have done anything greater than simply be. I could not have lifted my arms to reciprocate the affection, nor turn my posture towards his, or even utter words of gratitude. Nonetheless, I think he felt it all. I did not have to see his eyes to know he saw mine. Without hesitation or tumbling, he pulled his head up from the crevasse of my neck

and in a soft, slow whisper, echoed, “Malinka, stay.” The woman in the mirror moaned once more.

## 6

Days proceeded in loneliness. Father was called into work as the season turned bleak and frigid. He was now an ice resurfacing driver in the skating ring in Prospect Park and was therefore gone most of the day. Sometimes I didn't mind staying in the apartment throughout his entire shift. On one of those days, I began searching for things of interest, without knowing exactly what I was to find, or even where to start looking. He didn't have much furniture around, and given it was a rather small space, there wasn't room for it anyhow.

In the nightstand by his bed, I found miscellaneous junk—coins, scratch offs, batteries, laminated icons, tape, usual marks of residency. One drawer after another brought greater uncertainty for why I was snooping to begin with. His sock drawer smelt hideously, and it seemed as though they were all dirty, just lying there together, accumulating filth. He had a small library of about two dozen books on the far-right corner of the room, in which predominantly Turgenev lived. The selection was enveloped in sunlight. I could hear mother's voice of disappointment nagging in my ears—precious literature wasting under the sun and slowly wrinkling in ink. I moved the short bookshelf to the other side of the room.

The bedframe was hovering only but a quarter meter above the discolored, carpeted floors, and so I figured nothing was underneath. Though to be sure, I crouched down and took a glance.

Dust webs enriched the proximity. In a brief viewing, I found nothing to take hold of my eye. Though as my curiosity burdened me, I took my elongated arm and waved it abruptly to make room for visibility. My shirtsleeve turned a darker hue. In the corner of my eye, deeply pushed to the back of the frame, I caught hold of a shoe box. How convenient and predictable. Of course, there must be a lonely shoebox hidden underneath the bed when one is in search of truth. With mild distaste for the finding of this box, I did not quite anticipate the insides. Once opened, I found myself in sweet laughter, for there was nothing other than a pair of retired loafers. I put them back and determined there was nothing else to gander through in his room. I moved the bookshelf into its original location, closed the door gently, and went into the kitchen.

The kitchen was large and took up nearly the entirety of the apartment's square footage. The cabinets have been painted over multiple times, as you could see the chipped paint reveal the various colors that proceeded it. Like the trunk of a tree, the age was given away easily. Imagining the families that resided here brought me a pitiful understanding of my own lacking for my upbringing. I took to the upper cabinets immediately, those furthest from the floor, which needed a chair to be accessed. Miniature cockroaches scattered as I creaked open the face. On the left side, I found ample bags of expired buckwheat, some opened and tied with rubber bands. Behind them were empty tea boxes and one lonely, rotten potato. It must have been up there for ages with the smell that eluded it. On the right, I discovered a small photo album tucked into the corner, as if it was mistakenly placed there and forgotten about. I rejoiced. Being that I was several feet off the ground, the chair rocked, losing stability, and I nearly came flying down.

How wonderful it was to find a photo album! I had not had the thought of asking for one from father, and now that one resided in my hands, I realized how silly it was of me for not requesting one. The photos in their entirety presented imagines of unknown men, all of them. I

could hardly decipher which one was my father. After moments of staring at them with a scrutinizing glare, I came to determine him through his eyes. They were lost even then. In nearly all of them, he was smiling, and it was both a pleasure to see his joy and likewise fearful for all its escape in his current form. His composure was entirely different.

One of the photos grabbed ahold of me, though for no particular reason. The photograph weighted a thousand kilograms in my hands, and they fell as bricks towards the floor, in which soon I too was plummeted towards the ground. My body was lighter than I thought capable in comparison to the photo. I placed it on the ground and stared at it for nearly half an hour's time. Father was centered and wrapped his arms around the shoulders of two other men. They gleamed and were probably drinking, as in the background atop the black kitchen table, which we now sit on to have our discussions, sat a number of bottles. Father was dressed well, with his beard tamed and soft in spirit. They seemed to have had a celebration of some sort. The man on the right of him was average looking, with no unordinary features. In comparison, the one on the left of father, was bald, wearing fish fur, held a lit cigarette in his mouth, and had a distinct scar on his scalp. It stretched across nearly a hand's width on the left side of his head.

The barking of a neighborhood dog ejected me out of my trance. I needed to step outside. I could no longer sit there staring at this photograph, of him, in his apartment, surrounded by his belongings, and thinking of where I fit into all of this. I put on several layers and my overcoat, squeezed the photo into the large pocket, and departed.

The darkness of the night approached quickly and accompanied frozen spirits. Nobody seemed to be steady in hand; all were trembling with blue lips. I decided on getting a sweet to overcome my sour demeanor and went into the bazaar. The conversations within were stagnant and perusing the isles in silence left a deafening ringing in my ear drums. The cashiers seldom

smiled, and yet their meek facial expressions only grew dimmer on that evening. It reminded me of home though the streets were rarely sheeted with snow. Even the wind did not break cheeks, nor the ice engulf roads. The temperature rarely dropped below zero and it became clear that people here didn't understand the privilege of such soft winters. However, this day seemed to be the coldest one yet.

I headed for the boardwalk.

At times, when the bitter souls of Brighton found no refuge in spirits or familial affection, they are found wandering on the boardwalk. How strange to think the sea's gusts did not deter their presence, and rather welcomed it despite its harshness. The wind was stronger there and a battle to walk against it would leave one yearning for a warm interior to lay steadily. And so, those who needed escape walked with the direction of the breeze or sat on the bench facing the opposite direction. I learned of the boardwalk wanders as I became one myself. Rarely would I have thought that anyone could find comfort here, in this time of year. Though as time passed by and I desired a designated place to ponder, I quickly realized how appealing it was there.

The coldness drove out all those who did not absolutely need to be there. Children who shouted, families who gathered for recreational fun, bicyclists, drunks, all who had better places to be, would be found elsewhere. Along the shore, where wooden boards barely clamed in place, where the frost overtook each being with solid conviction, is where you found us boardwalk wanderers. Those who needed to be there. Who needed the space and time away from the warmth of security. Who needed the quietness of the day, where only the crashing of waves echoed, and our raging thoughts absorbed the most discrete areas of our mind. Here, where the walking was a work of necessity, is where I met Alexi.

I didn't notice him at first, as he blended in with the others. We all were one in the same. I was hesitant in my steps, as I hadn't yet determined how quickly I desired to walk or even where I was heading. Walking towards the west, I became weary when considering my placement. After some time, I decided to stand still and stare at the painted wall that closed off the aquarium. Looking closely, a number of shadows that lived within the painting became incredibly visible. They all looked opposite directions, varied in height, posture, and had individual objectives. All were in search of something. I closed in and reached my hand out to touch one of the beings, which was painted on a grand scale. Its face was the only visible component of their body, and the mouth was held wide open for the incoming of fish. It was a bit hideous. The material was cold, though my hand could not tell the difference in temperature.

“Disturbing look in the eye. How can one even look inside?”

I stared at the eyes and considered what was revealed by them. One was larger than the other. Only after a few seconds did I realize that that voice was not my own, and I turned towards the eyes of a man standing to the left of me. His eyes were nearly opposite to that which was painted. They seemed kind and neat. Not complicated or heavy. Neither fearful nor fearing. I didn't get the urge to create a dismissal to withdraw and instead engaged in his commentary.

“Why would one want to look inside?”

“Where else should one look?” he responded.

“There is a vastness of possibility. The mouth for starters. Look at how wide and stretched, look at how much it can consume. How can one even open their mouth that wide. Where is the tongue anyhow? How can this mouth have no tongue and yet one is drawn directly to the eye? What is it that makes it irresistible?”

“One *must* look at the eye. The alternate possibilities are deceiving. It is only in the eye that one can be revealed the truth. Can you make a declaration of the nature of this being with only observing the mouth?”

“And what kind of declaration can *you* make of the nature of this being through observing the eye?” I asked.

“Well, look closer. The color of the iris matches that of the pupil, black. This combination, quite obviously, makes the eye as a whole bulge. Why would one’s eye bulge if not for an uncomfortable presence or experience. The brows are raised, and its beginnings are pointed down, clearly indicating confusion, shock, or some sense of foreboding. The lashes are struck as if by lightning and flatly pull forward. All of this screams to me that this being is misplaced and not secured.”

I started at the eye longer than I admittingly desired before asking curiously, “what can you declare from my nature through my eyes?”

I glanced over at him expecting for him to observe the intricacies of my eyes, though he simply stood in silence and continued to look ahead. I felt awkward for asking this question of a stranger who I had just met and was expecting some sort of examination of who I was. No matter how long I started at my own eyes in the mirror, I could not have even answered that question. I felt foolish and wanted to take it back. I quickly began thinking of a way to move passed the question and step into a different direction. Nothing came to mind.

The wind pushed through us as rocks within a river. We didn’t move and our stiffness brought attention to the rigidity of my spine. I was contracting in such a way that I only then began to feel its pain. *I’m not cold*, I murmured under my breath. He turned towards me. I did not

know if I should turn towards him or remain steadfast in observing the mural. My neck slowly rotated, almost involuntarily as I had not mentally yet made that decision. Our eyes locked and immediately I felt the need to return to the wall. The wall was comforting, structurally sound. I did not have to hide from it.

“And as the painting, you stand here in confusion. Your eyes are saddening, and cold you are indeed. Why are you here, staring at this painting, when the weather has dropped to such degree, speaking to me no less? Why, that tells me much of your nature.”

Saddening? Why must they be saddening when they can be anything other? In fact, I was not even sad. Saddening eyes are a pity; did he pity me? Why was he speaking with me to begin with? Why was *he* outside wandering?

I could not be defensive with a strange stranger. That was pointless. I turned towards him fiercely, “yet you know nothing of me to be making such a statement.”

“You asked.”

“And I regretted it immediately,” I said without breaking eye contact.

He smiled gently.

Then, within only but a second, I could not have helped but return the smile. We stood there, two strangers speaking of foolishness, and yet it was the first time I had smiled that day. The man reached out his hand and introduced himself as Alexi.

Returning the gesture, I pulled my pink hand out of my overcoat pocket to shake his. Strangely, his were not frozen in the slightest and the comparison brought greater awareness to us both of the coldness of my body.

“Malina,” I shared.

He bent down gradually, as if his knees ached, and picked up father’s photo, which I had not noticed it fall towards the wooden planks as I emptied my hand from the large pocket. He stood in stillness, shook. His fingertips clenched the photograph a bit too harshly. With all the discussion made on eyes, my mind did not identify the object in his hand as my focus was solely on the expression of his eyes—frightened. He looked devastated and struck simultaneously, an expression I had not seen on him prior. His eyes clenched as if he was preparing for a massive sneeze, though they remained in that position for several seconds. Within that time, with the loss of visibility of his pupils, I returned. I looked down and noticed the photograph.

An unjustifiable sense of possession waved over me, and I immediately attempted to retrieve father’s photo. I had not connected it yet. Though my first attempt failed, for his grip was mightier than my approach towards its return. His eyes opened and analyzed my confusion. I don’t think he understood why I felt boundaries were crossed. His hand released graciously, and his eyes softened.

“Why do you have this?” he asked in a quiver tone.

“It’s my father’s.” A spur of clarity brightened my face and immediately I recognized his reaction was personal, sincere. He understood something I did not. “My father, do you know these men?” I stepped closer towards him. “Please, Alexi, tell me what you know. Why did your expression fall? How do you know them. Oh, please share with me.”

At that moment I didn’t regard my childlike pleading. I nearly begged for his explanation, his story. It did not matter to me how I was to express my excitement, for he was the next step

towards my understanding. This was exactly what I needed. I had to meet him, it had to happen there, there was no alternate possibility.

His eyes squinted as he stared into mine in delirium. He was looking at me and he was not looking at me. Internally, I was leaping in joy, though I knew I could not have frightened him and diminish my opportunity for closure. He was absent. I was clenching my teeth in joy. He was staring past me. I was engulfed in an idea.

“I have to go,” he mumbled. He turned around and began his descent.