

The background of the entire cover is a composite image. It features a vintage-style map of the United States in a sepia or tan color. Overlaid on this map is a large, detailed image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in a realistic, slightly wavy manner. The flag's colors are vibrant, with a deep blue field for the stars and bright red and white stripes. The map shows state boundaries and some major cities, with a dashed line representing the Tropic of Cancer. The overall composition suggests a theme of American history, geography, or immigration.

TATIANA SHYMANOVA

MY 20+ YEARS IN AMERICA

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

Tatiana Shymanova

**My 20+ Years In America.
Based on a true story**

«Издательские решения»

Shymanova T.

My 20+ Years In America. Based on a true story /
T. Shymanova — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-743844-9

Tatiana Shymanova's novel My 20+ Years In America includes moving, sometimes joyous, sometimes harrowing stories of her childhood and coming of age in Siberia and Ukraine. Follow her dedication to studying and teaching piano, growing up and falling in love, her marriage and children, and her journey to the United States, in which a fateful decision changed her and her younger son's lives forever...

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My 20+ Years In America

Based on a true story

Tatiana Shymanova

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ISBN 978-5-4474-3844-9

Created with intellectual publishing system Ridero

My 20+ Years In America

In the West, today, the popular imagination has bent Eastern Europe into a barbarous, backwards swath of contested land forever haunted by the histories of the Soviet Bloc. But these geographies hold homes, hold loves, hold lives; no matter the pain or torments, countries like Ukraine and Siberia were and are the scenes of childhood— replete with all the joys and grief of existence itself. Tatyana Shimanova's autobiographical novel, *My 20+ Years In America*, paints this dynamic picture, placing her homeland front and center and subjecting it to both leveled criticism and beautiful nostalgia, creating a melancholic and moving narrative out of her own struggles and successes.

My 20+ Years In America trembles with arresting prose, thoughtful meditations, and a universality essential to any and all autobiographies. The specificities of time and place allow for lush detail and a poetic verisimilitude, but the essence of Ms. Shimanova's story is as primal as any bildungsroman— from Goethe to Sedaris. *My 20+ Years In America*, however, with its pertinence to the current global stage, functions just as well as a contemporary allegory, as a humanizing symbol of the ontology of the late 20th century, the intertwining narratives and circumstances of the marginalized that shaped our society today.

But, throughout it all, Ms. Shimanova stays true to herself, true to her own truth, if you will. Beyond the evocativeness of the writing and the nuance of the characters, the clear honesty of the hand penning these pages shines through, underpins every word, like confession, or salvation. This is the true task of the autobiographer— and Tatyana Shimanova has achieved this arduous task with flying colors.

– Charles Asher, *PBK Reviews*

Clarion Review

Memoirs dealing with immigration and the prevailing belief that people can better their lives and the lives of their children are often sentimental and hold the sympathy of the reader with vivid, emotional descriptions of events. However, Tatyana Shimanova's writing is spare, mirroring the physical coldness of her surroundings growing up in Siberia and the Ukraine as well as the cold shoulder she encounters when she finally reaches America.

My 20+ Years In America begins in present-day America with Tonya (a character based on the author) driving to work and remembering her sister and mother. The story flashes back and forth from past to present without purpose, making it difficult to follow at times. When the narrator digs into an event or a relationship, however, readers will be invested. Unfortunately, the challenge of maintaining that investment is not always met.

Tonya's childhood and adolescence are explained quickly at the beginning of the book; by page twenty-seven, she is already leaving for college. Readers are given only a cursory view of the incredible pain and grief that have shaped Tonya's young life. As Tonya ages and she navigates love, career, marriage, and motherhood in a climate of political and economic hardship, the book's pace changes, and the quality of the narrative voice improves. Tonya struggles between her need for help and the pride that keeps her from asking for it. Even when her son is in the hospital, she struggles to ask a doctor for help. That pride may explain why the narrator has difficulty giving voice to so many of the emotions Tonya must be feeling. When Tonya decides to move to America with her youngest son, she risks forging a passport. In doing so, she creates a bureaucratic nightmare for herself. She travels for hours to appear in court, only to be told to return another day. She asks for asylum, but the changing laws don't protect her. The hope that Tonya will find community, employment, and a home of her own propel the reader through a thick forest of new hardships that, frankly, don't seem like an improvement over her life in the Ukraine. As she settles into her life as a caregiver, at the same time dodging red tape and worrying about her sons, there is one last story Tonya has to tell. This is probably the most heartfelt and well-written chapter in the book. Tonya has had a lifelong love affair with the piano, and when she becomes caregiver to the aging musician John Leiberman, the two forge a unique and beautiful friendship. Unfortunately, the sun doesn't stay out long for Tonya. With so little power and position in her new country, it seems that she is fated to always be struggling against the wind. Shimlec clearly has a powerful story to tell, and the book's cover makes the protagonist's lonely struggle evident from the start. Readers would better connect emotionally with Tonya's hardships had the author written at a more even pace and with a less disjointed chronology.

Sara Hartley

My 20+ Years In America Based on a true story

Summary

Tatyana Shymanova's novel My 20+ Years In America, based on a true story, includes moving, sometimes joyous, sometimes harrowing stories of her childhood and coming of age in Siberia and Ukraine. Follow her dedication to studying and teaching piano, growing up and falling in love, her marriage and children, and her journey to the United States, in which a fateful decision changed her and her younger son's lives forever. The author's struggle for survival on two continents alternately inspires hope, admiration, and outrage.

Dedicated to my grandchildren
Jane-Alexandra and Johnathan

Many thanks to my editor Anita Gallers and all of the people without whom this book would not have been written: Ksenia and Yevgeniya Luzanov, Faye Minsky, Helena McCone and the man entrusted with the task of translating the poetry, Benjamin Phinney

Chapter 1

The alarm was about to stop ringing when Tonya's¹ mind gradually returned from the fuzzy realm of her dreams back to reality. She had no idea how long the alarm had been on before she awoke, but now as she lay fully conscious, the unrelenting buzz jarred the stillness of the early morning, urging her to begin her day. She hadn't slept well that night, tossing and turning in the sheets and blanket that now lay crumpled in a heap at the foot of the bed. Gazing out the window, she could just make out the streaks of orange and yellow that colored the sky before the sun finally broke through into morning. She slowly reached out to the clock, fumbled around for the snooze button and enjoyed a few more seconds of silence. It always took a fighting effort to get herself out of bed, but she knew that she could not trust her body to stay there a minute longer.

Arriving late to work was certainly never an option, no matter how much her body yearned for those extra minutes of rest. Tonya was used to this life by now: for the last 7 years she had worked as a private CNA in the Boston area, finding jobs by word of mouth. She had tried to fit her entire life perfectly into this unrelenting schedule for the majority of her existence. She finally pulled herself up into a seated position on the edge of the bed while her feet blindly stroked the floor, searching in the darkness for the slippers she was sure she had left there the night before. The wooden floor felt cold to her feet, and she was relieved when she found the first shoe, then the second, and felt the warmth envelop her. She stood slowly, still in the haze of sleep, and made her way to the bathroom. It was already 5:00 a.m. when Tonya turned on the shower and felt the cool drops of water fall onto her face, awakening herself in preparation for the upcoming day. She thought ahead to the fast-approaching drive to work.

While most people would balk at an hour and a half roundtrip commute, Tonya relished these hours; it was the only time when she belonged completely to herself. On most days her mind would wander back in time through her memories, settling on her hometown where she was born and raised with her parents and only sister, Ludmila. Wistfully, she imagined her sister's beautiful face and what she might have looked like today. She would have been sixty years old this year if she had lived, but instead, this year commemorated the thirty-seventh anniversary of her death. How unfair it had been for her to die in the prime of her life at the young age of twenty-three, eight months pregnant with her first and only child, who was never given a chance to experience life!

Tonya checked the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of her face, her features so similar to those of her sister. The grief of her loss never completely went away. It came and went like the waves of the ocean tide. She thought again of her sister, and how everyone who came into contact with her admired her beauty, artistic talents and academic excellence. She had graduated high school with a silver medal, earning only a single B in physical education, then attended the Institute of Technology, where she was accepted after passing a test in mathematics with an A. (Students who graduated High School with medals had the privilege of taking a test in only one subject, and if they got an A, they were automatically accepted.)

Tonya's mother, Frola, had passed away one year before Ludmila at the young age of 50. Tonya often struggled to recall a happy memory of her childhood and of a time when she could have possibly bonded or shared a special moment with her mother, but they always escaped her. Although she could never remember a time when her mother was affectionate toward her, showering her with hugs and kisses as the mothers of other children had done, she came to have a reserved respect for her. As the years went on and Tonya experienced the trials of womanhood for herself, she realized that her mother had been an unhappy woman. She had reluctantly married her father after tragically losing the true love of her life, as well as the only child that they had together. Did she

¹ Some names and locations have been changed for privacy protection.

love Tonya's father? Her marriage was probably like the final straw that someone desperately grabs onto to survive and continue on with her life. Tonya and her mother did not part well before her death, and every time Tonya looked back in her memory, she was filled with regret.

Frola was merely a baby when her own mother brought her to Siberia to escape the tribulations of the Russian Civil War between the Bolshevik Red Army and the loosely formed anti-Bolshevik White Army. Their fighting plagued the entire country, but it was an exceptional hardship to a woman who also happened to be the wife of a White Army officer. After her husband was killed, her life and those of her children were in grave danger, and in her haste and frantic attempt to shield her children from such horrors, she fled with only the possessions that she could efficiently carry in a small baby carriage and in her hands. A few well-tailored dresses, a small icon of Saint Nicholas that could fit in the palm of your hand, and a few silver spoons, which she later traded for bread, were the only items of value that she managed to hide during her expropriation. She carried on with her two little children and left behind the only life that she had known in the hopes of garnering a better future in the unknown lands of the north.

Frola's mother eventually found herself journeying with a group of refugees who were moving farther East to the barren lands of Siberia for various reasons; some were trying to escape to alter their identity, and others were attempting to escape famine, which had settled all over the Ukraine. Her status as the wife of a White Army officer brought with it the potential for danger wherever she traveled, so she discarded all of her documents and lived anonymously when she eventually settled down in the Krasnoyarsk region.

Before the Russian Revolution, political as well as criminal exiles had been banished there. Its barren landscape made planting particularly difficult, and its inhabitants constantly worried about the availability of sustenance.

Frola's mother was able to obtain new documentation under a falsely assumed last name. Her birth name, Alexandra, was the only portion of her identity that she was able to carry with her from her past. In a moment of desperation, Alexandra used her survivor's instinct and quickly discovered a way to ensure that her past identity would never be found out. During her journey from her hometown to Siberia, Alexandra and the other refugees had passed a small village that had burned completely to the ground. She kept the name of this village in her memory as they once again assumed their travels. The records and vital statistics that were stored by the authorities were completely destroyed by the fire, making verification impossible. When the authorities attempted to verify her identification upon her arrival to Siberia, the request was returned as negative, and they had no choice but to trust that she was telling the truth about her place of origin.

In Tonya's recollection, her grandmother was a tall, slim woman who could crochet beautifully. She was well known for her work making countless items such as tablecloths, handkerchiefs, dress collars, and manettes, the beautiful embroidery that adorned the sleeves of the finest dresses. Despite her talents, she lived the life of a peasant woman, just as those around her. She blended into the Siberian lifestyle well enough and by all accounts was considered one of the townspeople, despite her unknown origins. She was always soft spoken and kind to Tonya and her sister, Ludmila.

Tonya often fondly remembered the first gifts that her grandmother had bestowed upon her and her sister. She gave them an alphabet primer and two dolls that she made by hand from tiny pieces of fabric with cotton stuffed inside. She also gave them a loaf of homemade bread along with carrots. She then proceeded to delight them with a story about how she had met a rabbit on her way to their home and he had given the gifts to take to them. With the simple mind of a child, Tonya wondered how a rabbit could have possibly carried around all of the goods; however, if her grandmother had said it was so, then it must be.

While the time with her grandmother was remembered fondly, it was sadly short-lived, as Tonya's grandmother died when she was only in the 6th grade. Tonya remembered how she and

Ludmila cried together with their mother. Frola frequently talked about her mother even long after her death.

The relationship between Tonya's mother and her grandmother, Alexandra, had always been a bit of a mystery to Tonya. When Tonya and Ludmila were teenagers, their mother finally explained why her relationship with their grandmother had been so contentious – she did not want her to have children, and consequently, Frola felt terribly hurt.

The last time she saw her mother alive, Frola remembered her saying, "I am going to die soon, so I have prepared everything. My clothes will be folded here on the table along with my documents and a little money that I have saved."

Tonya's mother couldn't believe that she had heard her mother correctly. Why would a woman who was still in good health suddenly speak of death?

"What would make you think such thoughts?" Frola asked her carefully, as she studied her face for any type of clue to help her interpret these words.

"I think your father wants me to join him. He came for me twice already during the night. There was such a loud, demanding knock on my window. Of course, I wondered who on earth could be knocking at so late an hour and ran out the door into my yard. Each time when I arrived to the front of the yard to open the door, there was no one, but for some reason I knew it was him."

Alexandra died one week later. She died a peaceful death, but alone, as she had been most of her life. She kept herself isolated from people and only randomly exchanged a few words with her neighbors. Thinking back on her grandmother's life, Tonya could only guess what the true reason was for her to stay in the country when many people managed to emigrate as soon as the revolution began. She did not know if she had any relatives at all, alive or dead, besides her grandfather.

After the funeral, Tonya's mother visited Alexandra's now vacant home and spoke to her neighbor. She had been the one to find Alexandra, outside of her home, when she glanced over into the next yard. She had known Alexandra since the time she initially came to Siberia, and for the first time in all of those years she had seen her neighbor sitting on the lone bench in front of the house. Thinking Alexandra had simply come outside to enjoy the crisp, morning air, she called out to her, yet strangely received no response. The silence stunned her, and she felt a cool chill come over her as she watched and waited for some type of response: nothing. As she walked closer, the aged, yet still soft and beautiful features of her neighbor came into focus; however, they were lifeless, and she realized that she was dead.

Alexandra had always taken such great care to attend to the few possessions that she was afforded. Before dying, she had come outside to water her garden, the house inside was immaculately clean and the clothes she had chosen to be buried in were on the table along with the documents and a little money she had saved for a rainy day. Alexandra had left everything in order, just as she had promised her daughter only a week earlier.

It took a long time for Frola to understand why her mother did not want her to have children. Alexandra herself had raised two children; why would she not want the same gifts for her own? She finally connected it with what her mother had once mentioned was the biggest mistake of her life: given the opportunity to leave Russia once and for all, she had stayed in the country. One can only guess why she did not leave, although she never fully offered an explanation. Perhaps she did not want to leave her homeland, or maybe deep down she believed that the war would work out in favor of her social class. She took her secrets to her grave, and now no one can know for sure. She was not a proud woman; however, she did her best to save her children and brought them through shameful poverty and famine.

Frola rarely spoke openly of their poverty. Tonya could only recall one occasion when she had not wanted to eat something that her mother had cooked.

Frola burst out, “You do not like it? If you had ever tried to dig through frozen winter soil to find some mistakenly left grain, potato or some vegetables, you would like everything that is edible.”

Whenever Tonya did not like a food, she recalled her mother’s words: “It’s edible.” In general Tonya developed a good appetite and enjoyed most foods. She grew up a very healthy child compared to Ludmila, who was always in poor health and easily became sick.

Tonya was in the 7th grade when she overheard the story about her grandmother from a conversation between her mother and her closest girlfriend. She was shocked to find out about her heritage and that she had a grandfather who was affiliated with the enemy, the White Army. It was a heavy load on her shoulders, and it seemed impossible to carry on normally. She had to keep it a secret for the rest of her life. Would she be able to do that?

The secret was out just before she was to become a member of the Komsomol Party.² To pass the test necessary to join, she needed to be a good and honest student, have respect for teachers and elders, be helpful to people who were less fortunate and defend those who were younger. Each student was called upon to do everything that was asked of them by the elder members of the Komsomol Party and its central community. In short, they only wanted the best of the best.

Tonya fit all of these qualities, but she could never be truly honest because she could never expose her deepest secret. She was afraid. She had to pretend she didn’t know about her heritage, at least so her mother would be satisfied in thinking that she didn’t know. She became a member of the Komsomol Party like most of her classmates, but she always felt the contradiction between her conscience and her secret. It was too much for her and began to eat away at her inside.

However, during the summer after Tonya finished the 7th grade, she had an experience that changed her feelings about her family secret. The children from her neighborhood would often go to the river to swim together. Her mother only allowed her to go if she took a safety flotation device, which just happened to be the inner tube from a car tire. A group of children from her neighborhood walked together for more than an hour to reach the river. The portion of the river in which the children swam was not dangerous; it was a slow-flowing, calm river which then entered the much more dangerous mountain river, with its hazardous frigid temperatures, fast flow, and dangerous undercurrents beneath the surface.

Every summer there were always a few tragic accidents where someone drowned. The idea came spontaneously to Tonya that she should attempt to cross the mountain river as a test. She knew an approximate place that was slightly safer, where a few adults had managed to swim across. If she survived, she would forget about her secret. If not, she would take it to her grave, but either way she would not suffer anymore.

She began boasting to her girlfriends about how she would try to cross the mountain river.

She asked, “Who will go with me?”

The girls starting yelling at her, “Are you crazy? Do you want us to bury you?”

She became worried they would never let her try, so she replied; “Don’t worry, if I lose my strength, I will turn back.”

She walked confidently to the fork where the calm river rushed into the mountain river. It was Sunday, one of the hottest days in the middle of July. Tonya looked at the groups of people along the river and felt a little bit jealous of all of them. They lived their lives without secrets; how good that must feel for them. Everywhere people were joking and laughing; some were singing or playing cards or chess, and some were playing with balls. There were groups of drunken people. Most important, she told herself, was not to hesitate, but to be confident.

The cold water crippled Tonya for a few seconds. She had to move fast and not let the cold water paralyze her muscles. In one or two minutes she felt better, and she worked fast with her

² The Communist Union of Youth

hands, peacefully breathing in and out to prevent herself from tiring and to keep her breathing in balance. Tonya got a few feet from the riverbank when she heard, “Where is that stupid girl going?”

She was still far away from the middle of the river. Tonya worked hard with her hands to fight the flow of the water. She tried her best to keep herself on a safe path through the current. When she glanced back at the riverbank, she realized that the current had swept her farther down the river, away from the calm area where she would have been able to safely cross. She wanted to survive, but obviously it was not possible: she was losing her strength very quickly. She dove in and out of the water in order to get a few quick breaths of air.

In her mind she continued to hear the words, “stupid girl, stupid girl.” She immediately regretted this idea. She wanted to live, but it was now too late. Tonya struggled to keep her head out of the water for air. It was her last breath.

She had no strength to fight anymore when she felt a strong hand grab onto her and pull her out of the water. She could not hear what the man was screaming. She was choking heavily and coughing up water. The man was behind her, and he kept her head above the water by grabbing onto her hair. When Tonya was finally pulled out of the water, the man screamed and swore at her worse than she had ever heard before.

The man spit out the water that had filled his mouth and told her, “If you had gotten even a few feet farther, I would not have bothered to go after you. You have to thank God that you are lucky. God caught you by the palm of His hand.”

Tonya was still coughing heavily, trying to rid her system of the water. Her girlfriend and another woman ran to her asking, “Are you all right?”

With no strength left, she fell on the ground and started to cry hysterically. Someone tried to comfort her, but she did not know what she was crying about. Whether it was her happiness or relief over still being alive she couldn't be sure, but she knew that she would never suffer from her secret anymore. Yes, she was reborn and she was a different Tonya now. Her girlfriend continued to scold her for such a stupid act, but Tonya was relieved that never again would she have to walk down that painful road. She shook her shoulders and left behind the heavy weight that she had carried for months. She would no longer return in her thoughts to the fact that her family had kept from her the secret of their history.

* * *

Tonya's father, Stepan, worked all the time and saw little of his precious girls, but it was always the happiest time when he was home. He was a soft, quiet man who worked hard to provide for his family but never hid his love toward his daughters. He always stood up for them, no matter what the circumstances. Tonya thought that there was no one in the whole world kinder than her father. He not only showed kindness to his own family, but everyone around Stepan at one point or another experienced his kind and giving heart. Any neighbors who needed help were immediately assisted without hesitation and without thought of reimbursement.

Very often after a hard day's work Stepan would take his daughters and bring them with him to drop off his pick-up truck at work, after which they would take the bus home. One of these times when they were driving, a man flagged down her father and asked which way he was headed. Stepan avoided the man's question, instead asking him, “Where do you need to go?” After the man answered, Stepan laughed and said, “Well that's in the same direction I'm going!” and proceeded to drive the man to his destination. After dropping him off, he turned the truck around to go drop off the truck at work. Tonya asked her father, “Papa, why did you lie to that man? We were going the opposite way,” and Stepan replied, “When you lie for something good, it is not a sin. I did not want that man to feel obligated to repay me or feel badly that I went out of my way.”

Years later, when Tonya was married and living in a house with her own family, she learned that her neighbor was a coworker of her father's. In one of their conversations, he told Tonya, "Your father was a fool. Everyone who worked with him was able to buy their own car, but he never was able to collect enough money even for a motorcycle." She did not answer, but came to the conclusion that if the world were filled with "fools" like her father, the world would be a much better place to live in.

Sometimes Tonya wondered how her father could still be so kind, particularly after experiencing the horrors of World War II. Every day during the war, he had been sure that he would lose his life, either today or tomorrow. He had always imagined that each day might be his last. In short breaks between the fighting, he never dreamed or made plans for the future when the war would be over. He witnessed several comrades who would speak of their dreams during one moment and then be killed the very same day. He did not focus on the future, but rather lived his days in the present, fully expecting to be killed. The only wish that he would allow himself before entertaining thoughts of death was to sleep on his own bed, on clean sheets and in clean pajamas.

At night during relocation, he and his comrades devised a method to sleep while walking, with two people in the middle and two others on the sides, linked arm in arm at the elbows. The two people on the sides acted as guides so the two in the middle could continue their march with closed eyes. They could change places every thirty to forty minutes. It was not a perfect method, but it was the only way that they could get any rest.

Tonya's father lost five brothers during World War II. Three of them were killed, and two were declared MIA. Their neighbor, who had been serving in the same battalion as one of his brothers, was captured, sent to a concentration camp and later escaped. He witnessed how Stepan's brother, Nicholas, was killed. When he returned home, Stepan's mother relentlessly pursued this information until he gave in and told her how it had occurred.

Her son had been badly wounded and lay on the ground motionless when the German soldiers came around to check the bodies for signs of life. When they reached Nicholas, they saw that he was still breathing and moaning from pain, so they stuck the ends of their bayonets into each of his eyes. Then they pierced his heart with the sharp end to ensure that he was indeed dead.

This information proved to be much more than Stepan's mother could handle, and she collapsed after hearing of how her son had suffered. After the loss of her children, she lost pieces of her life along with them, paralyzed by grief. It was not long after that she died.

Since childhood, Tonya remembered her father often talking of his brothers, recalling the things they liked to do and his favorite memory of each of them.

Every family in Russia had experienced the loss of loved ones during the war, and people everywhere worked hard to overcome their grief and rebuild what remained of their lives. They looked forward to happier times in their lives and regained their dreams of building families and their hopes of a better future for their children.

* * *

When Ludmila was born, Frola still continued to work as a cashier at a convenience store. At the end of the day, it was her responsibility to report to her manager and give him the key and the profits for the day. One day she left Ludmila home sick with the neighbor girl. She worried about her child's well-being, making her anxious all day. All she could think about was how to get home to her faster. After her job was complete, she could not find the manager who was supposed to be on duty at this time. She waited for him another 40 minutes after closing, but she still could not find him. Unable to locate him, she closed and locked the store, taking the responsibility upon herself in order to return home to her child.

Ironically, the store was robbed that night, and Frola was blamed for what happened. Frola was positive that the manager who was supposed to close the store that evening was behind the robbery because he never showed up at his designated time. He knew her child was sick because she had informed him of her predicament at the start of the day, so he presumed that she would be in a hurry to get home, making her the perfect scapegoat for his crime. Nevertheless, the authorities needed someone to blame, so Frola was accused of robbing the store. She was found guilty, so her only options were to go to prison or pay for the stolen items.

Everything of value in Frola and Stepan's home was sold, along with all the goods that Stepan had brought home from Berlin after the war ended on May 9, 1945. With Berlin completely occupied, each soldier had been allowed to take anything they liked back to their home in a carriage. Stepan had amassed a sizeable amount of goods from this event. Stepan and Frola were lucky to be able to pay off her debt, and Stepan never allowed her to work again.

All of Stepan's happiness rested in his daughter, Ludmila, but he longed for a boy. When Frola learned that she would be having another child, she wanted to have an abortion, but he insisted that she continue with the pregnancy in hopes that she would bear a son. Frola felt that it was too soon to have another child because she would not be able to give them each the attention that they needed. It was difficult to bring up children in the severe Siberian climate, especially in a house without any modern conveniences. Nevertheless, Tonya was born 1 year and 9 months after Ludmila.

When Tonya was born, her father was so upset that she wasn't a boy that for the first time he drank himself to the point where he could hardly walk. He wanted nothing to do with the baby and ignored Tonya for 9 months. One day when he was ready to pick her up with his hands, she was so scared that she started screaming. She did not want him to come close to her. It took some time for him to earn Tonya's trust and for her to accept him.

As Tonya grew, she became her father's "boy." She did all kinds of work outside with him, and he taught her many skills that usually only boys would learn. He taught her to be a survivor, and she tried her best to be who her father wanted her to be. It was total affection between her father and his daughters, and he lived and breathed for them.

* * *

When Tonya was ten years old and in the fourth grade, she first learned about the nearby school of music. One of her classmates was enrolled in the school, and he often talked about his experiences there. Being the curious child that she was, Tonya dreamed of attending herself. She begged her parents to let her enroll, but her dreams were soon dashed with her mother's talks of money. Nevertheless, Tonya's father, who always stood up for his daughter, won this battle, and she was allowed to audition. Her mother relented, thinking she would not be accepted and talk of the school would soon be forgotten.

The school of music was a small structure, housing only three practice rooms and a director's office. Three talented musicians who were in exile during Stalin's repression, all from the Moscow Conservatory, founded the school. Pianist Georgi Georgievich Struve and violinists Saryan Nicholas Kaprelovich and Anna Vasilevna Dizendor all played a role in the beginnings of the school. After serving time in labor camps under Stalin, they were not allowed to return to their original home regions, but were restricted to living in Siberia.

The school offered classes in piano, violin, and accordion, as well as classes in musical theory. The director's office also doubled as a classroom for the violinists. Despite its small size, the school of music was exceptionally well regarded and extremely exclusive in its selection of students. Every year, over one hundred children applied, yet only eight to ten of the brightest students were accepted due to its small size.

In spite of these daunting prospects, Tonya was chosen along with seven other children who had been accepted. She was eleven years old at that time and had been accepted only for the accordion class. After completing two years of study, the students begin to learn piano; however, the lessons were only for twenty minutes a week as they were designed to only cover general knowledge.

One Sunday when Tonya was walking downtown, she heard the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata playing loudly over the radio. She was stunned by its beautiful melody, frozen in place as she listened. The music touched a deep part of her soul; at 14 years old, she didn't know such joy even existed. She fell in love with the piano, and it became her purest source of happiness.

She often stopped on her way to the school of music in an office supply store where pianos were sold. She would wait for a customer to come and open the lid so she could catch a glimpse of its black and white keys. Her heart would leap to her throat, and she was thrilled as she watched their fingers dance over each note; she dreamed that the piano was her own.

Much to Tonya's happiness, the school of music was moved to a new building in the center of downtown. It became one of the most significant buildings in the area due to its large size and striking architecture. There was plenty of room for instruments, so she would remain at the school in one of its many music rooms to continue practicing, even after formal lessons were finished. Every waking moment was spent sitting at a piano, and the school of music became her home.

The last year of high school, before Tonya's 10th grade graduation, her father talked her mother into renting a piano so she would be able to practice at home. Despite having such immediate access to the piano, her mother never let her practice more than two hours straight when she was more than willing to stay at the piano all day. It was never enough time. During a parent-teacher conference, the mathematics and physics teacher told Tonya's parents that she was a candidate to graduate with a gold medal, and that she had good mathematics and physics abilities. After hearing this, Tonya's mother wanted her to study in school and spend far less time on the piano.

However, Tonya was so enthralled with learning piano that she often tricked her mother, skipping her academic classes and going instead to the school of music. At times she would hide her schoolbooks behind her bed, replacing them with her sheet music in her book bag just before leaving for school. While her mother stood and watched her, she would head in the direction of school, but after one block, when she was certain that her mother could no longer see her, she would turn around and head in the direction of the school of music.

When some of the music teachers asked her, "How come you are not in school?" Tonya would smile and reply that the teachers did not show up. They would smile back at her. Everyone knew that her love of music far outweighed her love of academics, and they allowed her to stay and practice. Instead of graduating with an academic gold medal, she graduated the piano class in only two years instead of the seven years it took students on average.

Tonya never attempted to attend nighttime holiday celebrations and dances with her classmates because she preferred to go to the school to practice her piano. Tonya remembered one occasion when her mother had assumed that she and Ludmila were attending a dance together. Wishing as always for more time to rehearse, she did not attend the dance and instead traveled to the school to practice piano without informing her mother. She had assumed that the dance would end at approximately 9:00 p.m., so she planned accordingly to be home by that time. Unfortunately, the dance ended a half hour earlier than originally expected, and Ludmila returned home without her sister.

When Tonya finally reached her front door, her mother gave her the most severe beating she had ever experienced. Despite the pain, Tonya took this beating in silence and with pride, for

she was willing to brave any punishment, accepting the fact that there might be consequences for devoting her life to only one passion.

* * *

Before leaving for college, Tonya had never been away from her home for more than a few days at a time. She enjoyed the rigor of her studies, but after just two months, she longed for her home, her parents and the many friends she had left behind. She missed the people she had known her whole life, starting from the first time she could remember, the very beginnings of her memory. The extensive train ride back to her home was costly; however, Tonya didn't think that her mother would mind. When she saw the love and attention that the mothers of her classmates showered upon their children, she reasoned that surely she would be welcomed home with open arms. This did not come to pass: her mother proceeded to scold her for recklessly wasting money in making the trip.

Unwilling to remain in a home of such hostility, Tonya decided to take a brisk walk through her town in hopes that it would help calm her down. Everything around her was the same, the same narrow streets and sidewalks made of wood and embellishments of stone and brick. She liked walking down the street, meeting the familiar faces of people she walked past everyday. Even the "mayors" of the town were still at their duties! She was glad to see them. She thought back in her mind to the jokes she used to share with her girlfriends as they walked past these men while on their way to school. The "mayors" of the town were actually three mentally challenged men who would spend their time in the center of downtown. No matter the season or the hour, they would be there. Neither the scorching rays of the sun nor the blistering cold seemed to bother them.

The three men had steadfastly remained at their posts, two inside the grocery store and the other just outside the door. The men inside the grocery store often masqueraded as inspectors, watching every customer who walked past them, peering into their bags as they left the store. The customers usually laughed and simply played along the best they knew how. The other "mayor" acted as a policeman. He always had a pencil and a small notepad of paper, and would walk around the cars of the customers, stopping, staring and pretending to write something down. Occasionally he would babble something unintelligible in a demanding tone to one of his "offenders," but this was always shrugged off and laughed about later. They were essentially harmless, and the townspeople regarded them as fixtures of the town. Like well-loved pets, everyone nurtured them.

Seeing the "mayors" reminded Tonya of her two best high school girlfriends, Natalie and Nina. High school in Russia continues only until the tenth grade, and the girls enjoyed every minute of it. They had been nicknamed the "trio" by their classmates, an inseparable group of friends bound together by their commonalities and their love for one another. They were always full of fun and laughter, sharing jokes and lightening the spirits of everyone around them. Nina was considered the jokester of the trio and delighted in gently poking fun at them all.

On one occasion she said, "Tonya, yesterday I saw your future husband, but he was out of his usual place."

Tonya asked, "Who was he?"

She jokingly replied, "Don't pretend you don't know! He's a 'mayor' of course! A policeman!"

The girls doubled over with laughter, and Tonya joked back, "But your husband was so annoyed with his customers this morning. I'm afraid he might lose his job and won't be able to support you!"

This type of joking continued on until the "mayor" assigned to Natalie was brutally murdered one week before they graduated high school. Somehow, their jokes had lost their appeal with his death, and they never again commented on the men as they walked past them.

The loud babbling of the “mayors” brought Tonya back to her present reality, and she surveyed the busy scene around her. As she walked on, she thought to herself that she was glad to see that the other two were still alive.

The workings of the town continued on as usual, as people went about their daily business struggling to survive. Soon after, she came upon Natalie’s house and thought of the many happy times she had experienced there. She was always happy to visit with her girlfriends, and sometimes she thought that their mothers loved her the same way as they loved their own daughters, but their kindnesses only extended so far and never fully filled the place of emptiness between Tonya and her own mother. She had wanted to knock at the door, but she would never dream of telling them of her mother’s scolding and of their argument over finances. Tonya hated money, even talk of it. Money, or rather the absence of it, had brought so many problems to Tonya’s life that it was enough to make her mind shut down. There was never enough to make ends meet, and it seemed to be the root of all hostility between her and her mother.

Dusk was quickly approaching. Although Tonya was used to the darkness of night, the increasingly cold air chilled her to the bone, and she reluctantly made her way back to her parents’ house and to the stillness that awaited her there.

* * *

Tonya was a junior in college when she decided to travel home on the weekend before the First of May, the most important holiday in Russia. Everyone had traveled home to be with their loved ones, and she did not want to remain at the college alone. She wanted to be near those she loved most on this holiday. Although Tonya was looking forward to the upcoming vacation, she had no idea that this visit would turn out to be one of the most devastating visits in her memory.

She had just found out that her friend, Ivan, who had been her classmate from first grade through graduation and was lovingly known by everyone as Vano, was brutally murdered by a gang of teenagers. He was returning from his girlfriend’s home late at night and ran into a group of eight or ten teenagers. They had asked him for matches to light their cigarettes.

He answered, “I’m sorry, boys, but I’m not a smoker.”

After he said these words, they began to beat him with the hard, flat knuckles of their fists. They kicked him with their boots and then knocked him to the ground, nearly unconscious. The outer fence of the school of music was next to them, and when the strength of their own bodies began to fail them, they pulled wooden stakes from a nearby fence with the nails still protruding from the wood. They beat Vano with the fence posts until he stopped attempting to defend himself and lay motionless on the ground.

When Vano regained consciousness, there was nobody around. The teenagers had left him in the street to fend for himself or to die. He somehow managed to crawl nearly one hundred feet back to his girlfriend’s apartment and all the way back up to the fifth floor. He could not stand tall enough to reach the button for the doorbell, so he used the remainder of his strength to knock on the door.

There were very few people in the town who had working telephones in their home, so it took quite some time for Vano’s girlfriend to find a telephone and call an ambulance. Despite the ambulance, Vano’s injuries proved to be too great, and he died on the way to the hospital. He only had enough strength left to tell the paramedics that he had never met anyone from that group before. His single mother worked so hard to bring up her three sons, and she lost two of her boys. Vano’s oldest brother had been killed two years earlier. He was a talented artist. No one was ever charged with those crimes.

Ironically, Vano was killed next to the school of music, the dearest place in the entire town to Tonya. When Tonya used to sneak out to the school of music, she had been sure that nobody

knew about her secret practice sessions, but one day Vano's friend had come to Tonya during a class break and asked her, "Why don't you ever come to the dance? Vano is always very sad about it. Don't you notice at all that he is in love with you?"

Tonya studied his face for signs of teasing, but deciding to herself that he was inquiring seriously, she replied, "I'm just busy with practicing the piano."

"He knows it too; sometimes he waits and follows you until you get home safely. He knows all your tricks to lose strangers. If he did not know where you lived, he would not have been able to follow you. Vano said that even if you do not pay attention to him, at least you do not pay attention to anyone else. So he said he will wait for the day when you leave your black box of keys and join his company."

Tonya was very upset to hear about Vano's unrequited affections toward her. If he liked her so much, he could have told her himself, without the need of a messenger.

"I don't want anyone to pick on me about his love towards me."

Tonya quickly recalled the long year of fourth grade when one boy had come up to her during class and kissed her on her cheek. All of the children had started to laugh hysterically and teased her about it mercilessly, particularly the boys, until it reached a point where she no longer wanted to attend school. As if they could not find enough hours during the school day, they teased her whenever they met her on the street, even outside the school, walking with her parents. She had the strength and courage to handle it in public, but when she was left alone at night to her own musings, she cried. Since then, she had never let any boys come close to her.

Tonya had fought for this independence to the point where it became problematic at school. After one parent-teacher meeting at the school, her mother came home and punished her.

"How long will I feel ashamed from hearing that you are always fighting with boys?" her mother had said.

The tables in Tonya's classroom were grouped in pairs with two students seated at each table. At Tonya's desk, there was a boy who was assigned the seat next to her at the table, and his mother asked the teacher to move her son away from Tonya. After this parent-teacher meeting, her mother punished her by forcing her to kneel in a corner of her bedroom. She told her to apologize and give her word that she would not fight anymore with boys. Tonya refused to do so, because she had not started the fight, she had only fought back in defense. When those boys tried to push her, pull her braids or pinch her, she only did what she needed to protect herself. She had no idea whether or not the boys would leave her alone, so she could not give her word that she would not fight anymore.

Tonya's mother had been furious at her refusal, so she sternly told her, "Then you will stay here on your knees and think about your behavior until you are ready to apologize, even if it takes you the entire night."

Tonya stayed there for a long time, and when her knees gave out, she began to lean on the wall. She thought that at least this way, she might be able to get some sleep. During the night, her father had eventually picked her up with his strong hands, rubbed her legs to get some feeling into them and put her to bed...

Vano's friend, noticing the look of worry in Tonya's eyes, answered, "Don't worry, I told you without Vano's permission. Nobody knows about his love for you but me. I just feel sorry for him, to see him so lovesick."

Tonya replied, "All right then, let's forget about it. I do not know either, and you did not mention it. If he wants to wait for me, let him wait."

Vano was the most intelligent boy in Tonya's class; maybe one day they would get together, but she had not yet experienced being in love. That would come later.

So Tonya took Vano's death very hard. She could not forgive herself that she never found the time for him, even when he was in the hospital with pneumonia and she knew that her mere presence would have meant so much to him. Their high school graduation marked three years since

Tonya first knew of his love towards her. He now had a girlfriend and Tonya only hoped that he had been happy. Perhaps he had forgotten about Tonya a long time ago, maybe he was in love with his girlfriend, even happy for a short time before his death. The loss of him brought an awful pain of helplessness. She could not change anything: she could not turn back time and could not save him. The pain was intolerable. The school of music had been like a bad omen for Vano. Not only had he lost his first love to it, but he had also lost his very life right outside of its doors.

Vano was buried on May first. The beginning of May is usually a warm period for Siberia, but on this day, the weather was particularly cold and windy, matching the mood of those who had come to pay their respects to the young life that was lost.

After the burial, Tonya returned home and shifted listlessly for the remainder of the day until her mother called her for dinner. They were sharing a bit of small talk while eating when Frola stopped eating and unexpectedly said to her daughter, "I am going to die soon."

Tonya answered, "What are you talking about? Don't talk about death. Where did you get this idea from? Out of the blue? Stop it."

Her mother replied, "I know it from my dream. Some men were chasing me, and I knew that they were dangerous people and I had to get away from them. I tried to run as fast as I could, and in front of me I saw a new, small white house. I ran inside, and there, right in front of me, was my mother. I was so surprised to see her, and I asked her what she was doing there. She answered, 'This is my home.' I heard footsteps coming up the stairs to the house, men rapidly approaching, so I quickly locked the door. Then I woke up. It was about five o'clock in the morning, but this dream was so clear. I know that I do not have much time left in this world."

Frola knew about her death the same way that her own mother had known about hers. She was so positively sure that it was going to happen. In the same way, Tonya had first realized the power of her dreams when she was in 10th grade and had her first dream that did not just vanish with the morning sun. It stayed in her mind, surprisingly even coming true the next day.

Tonya had dreamt that as she arrived at school, her classmate Oleg ran in and excitedly shouted, "Guys, let's go to physics class – it's starting now!" Since Tonya was always busy practicing her beloved piano, she habitually put off working on academics and relied on all the breaks between classes to do the work she had neglected to do the night before. So when Oleg said this, Tonya felt her heart drop, knowing she had not even begun the complicated physics problems that she had expected to do during the breaks between classes. But somehow she had felt great relief in her dream, knowing that she would receive full credit.

Tonya awoke with a feeling of worry, because this situation was all too realistic. Getting dressed for school, Tonya remembered that once again she had not even given her homework a second glance. She was hoping for the break time before 5th period physics to do her work. Yet as she arrived to her first class, she experienced a strong sense of déjà vu. The same classmate Oleg ran in, yelling in the same tone, and verbatim shouted, "Guys, let's go to physics class – it's starting now!" Tonya was extremely shocked. She turned to her girlfriends and exclaimed, "I saw this very situation in my dream last night, and I received full credit!" They laughed and said, "Well you'd better expect an F!" When the class began, the teacher asked the students, "Who completed their homework?" When his question was met with silence, he looked at his grade book and called out Tonya's name to do a problem on the board. She quickly looked at her homework assignment and somehow knew exactly how to complete it. She confidently went up to the board, wrote out the solution, and returned to her desk, receiving full credit. Smugly, she looked over at her disbelieving girlfriends and smiled, making an A with her fingers.

So Tonya took her mother's dream seriously. Indeed, she had had her own portentous dream about her mother three years earlier, when she was about to leave home for college for the first time. In her dream she had seen her father beat her mother with a rope and then leave her there, lying on a rag on fresh black soil, all alone and naked. When Tonya awoke, it was such a bizarre

feeling, but the dream stayed clear in her mind, and she thought about it for the rest of the day. She had an ominous feeling about it. Across the street from their home lived an elderly woman who was known for her gift of dream interpretation. When she asked the old woman to explain the meaning of her dream, she told her that the dream meant that her mother would be the first to die.

Trying to avoid these thoughts, Tonya steered the topic of conversation with her mother away from death, and the conversation turned once again to the issue of money. Normally Tonya would sit quietly, allow her mother to say her piece, and attempt to quietly defend herself, but she had experienced far too much bad news in the past day and had reached her boiling point. Whenever she came home, her conversations with her mother were always about money, and it seemed to her that her mother cared more about money than about their relationship. This time was the last straw. It was the last time that she would come home, because in her mind she had no home and she had no mother.

The train was to depart at midnight, so Tonya packed a few things in her bag and left the house at 11:00 p.m. Her parents were already in bed. It was not safe to walk alone at night, but from early childhood Tonya had learned to be wary of strangers rather than being afraid of the dark corners in the room. Her developed sixth sense kept her safe through her childhood and into her youth. Tonya's mother had heard her when she left, and, along with her father, followed her. Tonya noticed her parents only at the train station. Her mother tried to give her some money, but Tonya refused to take it. Her mother's swollen, red eyes glistened in the moonlight, but Tonya was defiant and left anyway, vowing in her heart to never return... Her mother died two weeks later from an aneurysm of the aorta.

* * *

When Frola passed away, Tonya's father became lost and helpless, but the women around town were very anxious about his widowed status. Tonya recalled one particular afternoon when two women came to their house and asked if Stepan was home. Tonya answered that he would soon return from work and asked them to wait for him. She then prepared a light snack and tea for them. When Stepan came, he showed the same hospitality as Tonya, and they talked and walked around the house.

When they left, Stepan asked Tonya, "Who were they?"

Tonya was surprised, as she thought they were her father's acquaintances. Her father answered that this was his first time seeing them.

Very soon, one woman from their neighborhood took a close interest in him. Tonya wanted him to be happy and not to spend the rest of his days alone. She doubted that her mother had been capable of making him happy, so she approved of his decision to be remarried...

* * *

Tonya noticed at the last moment that she had nearly missed her exit and took a sharp turn to the right onto exit 41 B. After the exit, there was still a ten- to fifteen-minute drive to the nursing home, depending on the traffic and lights. She had driven there almost every day for the past 2 years working as a private nursing assistant for John Leberman.

Tonya parked her car and rushed into the nursing home. In the hallway close to the main entrance she met the same people as always, sitting there every morning from the time they awoke. Some of them were waiting for their children to arrive, others observing the new arrivals out of curiosity. Tonya took the elevator to the second floor and entered John's room.

"Oh, thank God you are here! Why are you so late?"

He was anxious, and the nurse who was with him said, “Ok, John, now you are all set” and left the room.

“John, why did you say I am late? It is still five minutes before seven,” Tonya asked him.

John looked at Tonya with a guilty smile and said, “But you should come earlier.”

Tonya understood that if he could, he would never let her leave his room, day or night.

Tonya had worked as a nursing assistant at the VNA and hospice agencies for three years before she went to work privately. She was given the most difficult cases because of her reputation of being able to handle every situation and to get along with every one of her patients and their families.

Her co-workers would come once and leave if the patient was too difficult to deal with, but Tonya was always able to win them over. John Leberman proved to be the most difficult and toughest task for her. But it had been a long journey that had brought Tonya to America and her job with John.

Chapter 2

Tonya got off the bus at the Kiev train station and looked around for a free bench where she could finally rest peacefully. She was exhausted from being on her feet all day, standing in line waiting at the American embassy and then again on the bus, which was filled to capacity with travelers.

This was the third time she had come to Kiev to try to purchase tickets to America. Tonya had barely scraped together enough money for two round-trip tickets. She had enough for herself and for her younger son, Vlad, who was 15 years old. She desperately wanted to bring her 19-year-old son, Dan, along as well, but his ticket would have been impossible to pay for. The price of the tickets was raised on a daily basis, often just as Tonya arrived at the station. Each time she would call in advance before she left for Kiev to inquire about the price of the tickets, but she was always given one price over the phone and a different price once she reached the station. Every time this happened, she was forced to return home in order to borrow additional money for the trip.

After this scenario had occurred twice, Tonya was about to admit defeat and return home when she miraculously met a teller who was willing to make a deal with her. The teller studied Tonya intently, wondering if she could trust her to deliver a letter. Her eyes bore the tired look of perseverance and desperation, but there was an immediate recognition of genuine kindness. She ultimately decided that Tonya was trustworthy, and they decided to help each other. The teller agreed that she would keep the ticket price the same for Tonya if Tonya would in return drop off a letter for her to a marriage agency in the United States.

When Tonya returned to Kiev for the third time, she now had enough money to purchase her tickets. Just as the teller had promised, the ticket price had remained the same. Tonya breathed a sigh of relief as she completed the transaction and studied the two ordinary-looking tickets that had been given to her. When traveling to America, citizens of the former Soviet Union were required to purchase a round-trip ticket to ensure that they would eventually return to their country of origin, but as Tonya studied the intricately printed wording, she thought of her own plans.

Finally, Tonya spotted a light post with a large concrete slab and hurried there to rest herself. She felt as if all of the tension that she had been crippled with for the last week had been taken off of her. Not far from the entrance to the train station, a wind ensemble played pop music from the 1970s. It was so cheerful and energetic that the contrast between the sounds of the music and the players' surroundings was ironic.

Next to the sidewalks, beggars begged for anything that you could give them, food or money. The pavilion was constructed simply, and underneath it vendors sold many items, from secondhand shoes to homemade clothes. There were also shirts, jackets, hats, and any other item that a person might need. Pedestrians walked around with troubled expressions on their faces, some with frustration, and others with hopelessness and emptiness. Most of them were wearing clothing that was ready to be thrown out. With "perestroika" even the streets in the town were neglected. The sidewalks were filled with papers and trash. Inside the train station cashier window, cockroaches roamed freely. Some of the people standing in line told Tonya that at night one could see rats jumping from the wall.

While Tonya was taking this all in, one musician in the band met her eyes and smiled, winking at her as if to say, "Keep your head up."

Tonya was crying as she took in the people around her. She was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. She felt happiness that she finally possessed two tickets to America, but she felt sadness and love for all those around her, just strangers, but still close to her heart. She felt so much connection with them, her countrymen and countrywomen. The scene of the band against these surroundings reminded her of a painting, "Feast during Plague."

Tonya also felt fear for what she had done with her travel passport. The visa for Vlad had been denied. Tonya had swallowed her pride and spoken to a consulate member, begging for an approved visa for her son. She told him her life story through her tears, in hopes that he might have some compassion for her situation. She explained to him that she was not leaving the country for her sake, but for the sake of her two children. Although Daniel was not traveling to America as well, Tonya was confident that by being in the “land of freedom,” she would swiftly bring Daniel over; besides, the task of paying back his mother and brother’s tickets fell upon his shoulders.

The consulate member confided to her that he was powerless to do anything. He told her, “You cannot imagine how much money the Ukrainian government pays to the consulate to purposely deny visas to young citizens. The government does not want anyone to leave the country. They consider children to be their future.” Then he looked at Tonya attentively and said, “I remember one case similar to yours when the consulate mistakenly didn’t mark the travel passport as ‘Denied.’ When the family arrived in America, they simply let them go through because the mistake wasn’t their fault.”

Tonya’s ultimate decision was to alter her visa. She did it on the street, just after she walked out of the embassy. She did it quickly because she was afraid that she would have second thoughts and change her mind. She was afraid that her current bravery would fail her, so she acted with haste. It was easier than she imagined it would be. She only had to erase a simple cross mark that denoted who would accompany her on the trip, but she was not sure that it would help her make it through the checkpoint before boarding the airplane. Should she tell her boys what she had done? She had too much on her mind, too much tension to let herself be relieved with tears...

When Tonya returned home, she told Vlad to get ready for a trip and to keep it a secret from everyone. She was anxious to see and talk to Dan, who was at his workplace. Dan had barely gotten over the threshold when Tonya ran over to him and asked him to help her with something in the cellar. He looked very tired and glanced at her with surprise, but she let him know that it was urgent. When they got to the cellar, Tonya told him about her trip to Kiev and about the changes that she had made to her passport. He appeared frustrated and did not know what to say, but his mother needed his approval to go ahead with her plan.

After a minute of silence he answered, “If it was your first instinct to do it and you did it, maybe it was the right thing to do.”

They both understood that there was no other option, no other chance, and decided to risk everything. Dan agreed with Tonya’s decision not to tell Vlad about the fraud. Vlad was always a very obedient child, and this knowledge would be too large a load to put on his shoulders.

Twelve days before their departure, Tonya wrote an absence note for one week to the school of music where she had worked as a piano teacher. She also let the counselor at Vlad’s school know that he would not be in school for a few days.

The train departed late in the evening on September 28, 1992. It was the 22nd anniversary of her sister’s death. Dan was helping to carry two suitcases that Tonya had prepared for the trip. There were sets of clothes for both warm and cold weather, a book with music, two forks, two spoons, one pot, two pillows, blankets, a couple of sheets and pillowcases. Besides those possessions, Tonya had only \$150 in her wallet.

The train slowly arrived at the platform and then stopped. It was time for them to say their goodbyes.

Tonya hugged Dan and said, “Stay strong. Take care of yourself. I hope we will see you soon.”

Dan took Vlad by the elbow, guiding him away from Tonya, and whispered something in his ear.

“What are you whispering about?” asked Tonya.

“Nothing important,” answered Dan as he hugged Vlad.

They held each other for a long time, as if they had foreseen that they would not see one another again for many, many years...

After arriving at the airport, they discovered that they still had three hours before departure. A series of flashbacks brought Tonya to a different time in her life....

She was back at her high school graduation with her two closest girlfriends. The girls in the inseparable trio were the only ones crying from a sudden, instinctual understanding that the best part of their lives was coming to a close. Never again would they be able to spend so much time together; never again would they be so young and carefree....

She was crying and begging her mother to let her audition at a nearby college for music. When her mother finally relented, with her father's intervention, Tonya left home with her mother's final words ringing in her ears: "I hope you never pass the exams and get rejected." Contrary to her mother's "curse," Tonya was accepted after a second interview of playing for an instructor, well before the entrance examinations, and with the instructor's most sincere compliments.

The instructor, Ludmila Innokentievna Ivanova, had graduated from the Moscow Conservatory and proudly claimed herself the artistic granddaughter of Rimski-Korsakov. (Her teacher at the Moscow Conservatory was a direct pupil of Rimski-Korsakov). She therefore wanted her pupils to be proud of being the great-grandchildren of Rimski-Korsakov. Ludmila Innokentievna had been a second prize winner of the International Piano Competition in Warsaw as a sophomore at the Conservatory. Two years of studying with her gave Tonya the mastery of piano that would have otherwise cost others a lifetime of learning.

Tonya and the other students understood that they were lucky to have Ludmila Innokentievna as a teacher. It was no secret that a master such as Ludmila Innokentievna would not come to Siberia for any reason other than the fact that the salary was higher there than in any other part of the country. Teachers were thus able to improve their financial situations by going further north. Ludmila Innokentievna had the privilege to have as many students as she wanted; however, after a few months, the work took its toll on her. She had no patience for many of her students, and very often, in the middle of a session, students would hurriedly exit her classroom only to have a music book thrown after them into the hallway. It did not matter, as the students worshipped her, particularly Tonya, who was her favorite.

At the beginning of the school year, Ludmila Innokentievna gave a repertoire for every student to look over and familiarize himself or herself with; each student received one Sonata, one Etude and one Invention by J.S. Bach. Along with studying this repertoire, at the same time each student was obligated to fulfill two weeks of free labor in the agricultural field that they were sent to. At the end of the two weeks, Ludmila Innokentievna met with all her students and asked them how they liked their repertoires and if anyone knew them by heart. No one answered, but instead they smiled and looked around the class at each other. Ludmila Innokentievna then said, "All right, let us make a class schedule."

Every student was required to have individual lessons with the teacher, and Ludmila Innokentievna had to fit two lessons per student a week for fifteen to sixteen students.

Tonya came to her first class shaking slightly; she was extremely worried about the quality of her playing. Nothing was as important to her existence as her studying piano and becoming an accomplished pianist. She wanted to look perfect for the occasion. She dressed in her favorite blouse and skirt. It was not new; however, it was immaculately clean and ironed. She was overwhelmed with her emotions like a girl on her first date with her beloved...

After knocking on the door at the exact start time of the class, she hesitantly stepped into the room.

"Come in, come in," said Ludmila Innokentievna. Tonya took her music books from her bag, put them on the table and sat down at the piano.

"So, what pieces were you able to familiarize yourself with?" Ludmila Innokentievna asked.

“All of them” Tonya answered.

“Interesting. Well, what piece would you like to start with?”

“I don’t know – any.”

“So, let’s start with the Sonata,” said Ludmila Innokentievna, taking a music book from the table.

Tonya looked at her with surprise and said, “Do you want me to play by looking at the music?”

“What are you trying to tell me, that you know the Sonata by heart? And the rest of them?”

“Yes.”

“What modesty! Why didn’t you tell me this during the student’s meeting when I asked if someone knew their repertoire by heart?”

“I was sure that everyone knew theirs by heart.”

“Congratulations, then, you have the memory of an international piano competition winner.”

From that first class onward, Tonya received much more attention from her teacher than the rest of her classmates. Whenever Ludmila Innokentievna took a day off from teaching, she would call and invite Tonya over to her apartment for piano lessons. Sometimes she would give Tonya the keys to her apartment and allow her to go there while she taught at the college. This happened during the winter and greatly alleviated Tonya’s plight as a student from out of town. Students in her predicament only had the chance to practice at night, after classes were done for the day or early morning. Also, the temperature in the classrooms was so low that one could barely move a finger. A student could only play for ten to fifteen minutes before running to the stove to warm up.

The college was a truly ugly, wooden building with two wings that were poorly insulated. A few elderly women managed the upkeep of heating the classroom; the ancient round stove was heated with coal, and they would have to bring in heavy pails from outside twice a day, in the morning and afternoon. This was completely insufficient to warm the classrooms, and it was still always so cold.

In addition to the women’s daily heating chores, Tonya brought her own pails of coal during the day, and even after the coal was put in, two or three steps away from the stove it was still so cold that students were able to see their breath. Tonya sometimes wondered how her beloved teacher tolerated those two cold winters in Siberia. Most of the time during class, Ludmila Innokentievna stood next to the stove and justified her position by joking that she was “trying to prevent herself from becoming an icicle.”

For the most part, Tonya’s memories of college were masked by the intense Siberian cold. When it became intolerable and her body craved warmth, Tonya and her girlfriends would spend their last pennies to visit the beauty salon. That and the cafeteria were the two warmest places near the college, and the students flocked there most faithfully. Until they were caught and not allowed to enter the salon anymore, the girls would stand in line, as if waiting for their turn, but at the last minute before having to accept a service would pretend to check their watches and excuse themselves with being late for class. Although the cafeteria was also utilized as a place to warm up, it was impossible to spend as much time there because someone would undoubtedly stand behind those lucky enough to have finally gotten a seat and wait for their turn to eat and warm up.

Tonya lived in a single house without any modern conveniences. It had two adjoining rooms and a separate single room. She lived with four girls and two boys, three of the girls in the bigger room and two more in the adjoining room. The boys lived in the separate room by themselves. Tonya was the oldest at the time, 16 years old and straight out of high school. The others were fourteen years old, having had just finished the eighth grade. They were all from one town and from the same school of music. Tonya was the only pianist; two of the girls were violinists, the other two were choir masters and the boys were percussionists. Tonya’s house was cold as well, and in the winter, everyone took turns bringing water and coal from the barn into the house. There wasn’t really time to cook, and if someone was hungry, they would make tea and have either bread

or a bun with the tea. A small convenience store was located right across the street, and the women who kept the store would often give away some food on credit. The students would pay the store back upon receiving their student stipend.

Tonya, however, never borrowed anything. She abided by her mother's strict rule: "Live according to your means, and learn to make ends meet."

Tonya never bothered with strict budgeting and often would find herself without money for two or three days. She preferred having a drink of water to borrowing money to be able to eat. It was not that big a deal to her, but simply a matter of temporary inconvenience. Actually, many students found themselves in the same circumstance and joked with one another by asking if one was "drinking or eating today."

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