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## *1: Galina*

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SHE HAD LONG PALE FINGERS, TAPERED LIKE CANDLES AT the church. She swiped them through the flame of a match carefully at first, feeling nothing. Then she held them there longer, expecting them to drip and melt. Instead they turned red and blistered, and she withdrew carefully, watching the skin peel and stand in tiny transparent tents on her fingertips. She was already thinking of a lie to tell her coworkers to explain the blisters. Iron. Sizzling, spitting oil in the skillet. Napalm. She laughed at the thought. Napalm is never reassuring, and only reassuring things made for good lies—food, ironing, domesticity.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. “Galka, are you asleep in there?” Masha asked. “Come on, I have to go.”

She blew out the match. “Will be right out.”

“Are you smoking in there?”

“No,” she said, and opened the door.

Masha, pink and sweating, bustled past her, brushing her enormous pregnant belly against Galina, already hiking up her housecoat.

Galina exited hastily. Masha’s pregnancy bothered her—not just because she was only eighteen and not because Masha’s husband-to-be was still in the army, serving the last of his two draft years. The impending arrival of the squalling pink

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thing that would steal the remnants of her sister's affection away from her hurt more than she would dare to admit—their mother and grandmother were so excited about the baby. Galina pretended that she was, too, and burned herself with matches when nobody was watching as a punishment for being so selfish. She hoped she wouldn't get into trouble again.

She blew on her fingers and headed for the room she shared with her mother and grandmother; Masha now had a room of her own, all the more reason for resentment and consequent weeping at her own monstrosity. The grandmother was away, at the hospital again and perhaps not ever coming back home, and the mother was on the phone in the hallway. Galina relished the moments of solitude. She stretched on her bed and listened to the familiar noises of the railroad outside, and to the mumbling of her mother's voice in the hallway. Quite despite her intentions, she listened to her mother's words.

*Of course she's too young, the mother said. But better too early than too late, and you know Galina: she's an old maid and I doubt there would be any grandchildren out of her, and really, I wish she would just have one out of wedlock, nowadays who really cares. I know she won't find a husband and I've resigned to that. But if she would just have a baby . . . Oh, I know, I told her a million times. But she's stubborn like you wouldn't believe, and I doubt any man would put up with that for long.*

There was nothing there Galina hadn't heard before—her mother, men were rare and precious prey that had to be snared with cunning and artifice. Galina couldn't remember when last their conversation hadn't turned into a lesson in making herself attractive—how she should dress nicer, and

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mouth off less and smile more. Maybe this way she would hold someone's attention long enough to get knocked up. Neither mentioned the premise of these speeches—that Galina was unlovable without artifice and deception. She tried to avoid talking to her mother lately. But the voice in the hallway continued:

*I just don't want her to turn into a bitter man-hater, her mother said. Last time when she came home from the hospital (she could never bring herself to say 'mental institution') I had hope for a while. But now—I don't know if she should just go back or if there's nothing they can do to fix her.*

Galina remembered that day, when she had returned home, still swollen from the sulfazine-and-neuroleptics cocktails they had plied her with. The injection sites still hurt, and she resolved then to never do anything that would cause her to go back. She never told anyone about the things that flickered in the edges of her vision—strange creatures, awful sights. The mental institution was an extension of her mother, punishing her every time she disappointed. She chose her mother's dull torment over the acute pain of needles and the semiconscious nightmare of neuroleptics. She still felt guilty about her lies.

She pushed her face deeper into the pillow and pulled the pillow corners over her ears to block out the voice from the hallway. But it was too late—the fear had already kicked in, urging her to run, run far away, to protect herself. Like when she was a child (the only child), and there was a driving fear that the life she saw around her was all that awaited her in the future, and she wanted to run to avoid being trapped in the soul-killing routine of home and work, of TV, of acquiring

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things for the sake of it. How she longed to escape then; now, the desire was given a special urgency by her adult awareness that there wasn't anywhere to run to. The books she loved, the promises of secret worlds turned out to be lies.

And then there was a scream—she thought it was a cat at first, a neighbor's cat with a stepped-on tail complaining loudly of its bitter injury, and Galina wrapped the pillow tighter around her head. Then she realized that the cry was not feline at all but human. A baby.

She tossed the pillow aside and ran, her socks sliding on the smooth surface of hardwood floors. The cry was coming out of the bathroom, and Galina pounded on the locked door. No answer came.

Her mother, the phone abandoned dangling from the little table in the hallway, banged on the door too. A small woman, her fists struck the door with enough force to shake it. Galina stepped back.

“Don't just stand here,” her mother snapped.

Galina ran into the kitchen. There was an old chest of tools their father left before he departed for environs unknown, and she searched for it, slamming the cupboard doors, her panic growing with every little door opened and slammed shut in disappointment. She finally found the chest on top of the china cabinet, and grabbed the largest screwdriver there was. Armed, she rushed back to the bathroom door, where her mother was still banging and the baby still cried inside.

She pushed her mother out of the way and struck the door by the handle, chipping away long slivers of wood over the lock. When the lock was exposed, she pried it open.

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The baby, umbilical cord still attached, lay on the floor. A squirming purple thing her mother rushed to pick up and rubbed with a towel. Galina's gaze cast about, between the white porcelain of the toilet and the chipped rim of the tub. Vanity. Mirror. Window. The window is open. But no Masha.

Her mother was too preoccupied with the baby to notice her youngest daughter's disappearance. Galina looked out of the window, as if expecting to see Masha hovering by some miracle eight stories above the ground. The air in front of her was empty, save for a lone jackdaw that circled and circled.

She stood on tiptoes, half-hanging out of the window to see the ground below her, afraid to see it. Through vertigo and the waves of nascent nausea she saw the asphalt below—empty, save for a couple of stray cats and a clump of old ladies on the bench by the entrance. The jackdaw cawed and flapped its wings. It circled over Galina's head, demanding attention; it landed on the windowsill and cocked its head, looking at Galina with a shiny black eye, its beak half-open as if it were trying to talk. Its dull feathers looked like iron.

Galina felt the world careen under her feet, and the incessant crying of the baby and her mother's plaintive voice fell away, the jackdaw's eye trapping her in a bubble of silence and awe. "Masha?" she whispered with cold lips. "Is that really you?"

The jackdaw hopped closer and nodded its head as if saying, *yes it is me. It is me.*

"No," Galina said. "It cannot be. I don't believe you."

The bird cawed once and hopped off the window ledge. It fell like a stone until it almost hit the dead asphalt below; then

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it took wing and soared higher, obscuring the sun in the pale September sky.

The sounds intruded back, and Galina winced and pressed her fingers—blistered on her left hand but untouched on the right—to her ears, and turned around.

Her mother sat on the floor, the wailing baby cradled in the sagging folds of her housecoat, and cried. Her voice rose to a high-pitched scream, oddly matching that of the newborn infant, as the realization of her loss enveloped her. “Masha, Masha!” she cried, and the birds outside answered in angry shouts and caws.

“She’s gone, Mom,” Galina said. She never mentioned the jackdaw. She didn’t want to go back to the hospital.

THEY CALLED IT THE GOLDEN AUTUMN, AND THAT MONDAY morning Galina could see why. The poplars lining the road on her way to the bus station turned yellow overnight, shining like the gilded onions of the churches in the old city in the slanted rays of the morning sun. The air had just a hint of the autumnal bitter taste to it, and Galina smiled, squinting at the bright colors of the trees and the sky until she remembered.

She did not want to go to work today, not with the misery back home; she felt like a traitor this morning, leaving her mother, who looked startlingly frail, with the bundled baby, among the diapers that needed washing and bottles of formula.

“Just go,” her mother had said, her ire visible. “If you lose your job, what am I going to do with you then?”

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Galina realized then that her mother was angry that it was Masha who disappeared—the youngest one, the normal one. She got ready for work.

She worked in the center of the city, in the old part of it, where everything was historical and beautiful. Even there, though, new life in the shape of kiosks had sprung up on every corner—they sold magazines, cigarettes, books, Tampax, pins, film, booze, eyeglasses, school supplies, handbags and T-shirts, and were manned by loud people who wouldn't leave the passersby alone.

To get to her place of employment, a small science publisher, she had to navigate the underground crossing that used to be so wide and free but was now crammed with endless kiosks and beggars. In all her life Galina hadn't seen beggars until recently; she wondered where they came from, and left whatever money was in her pockets in paper cups extended to her by thin hands, on the homemade trolleys—board and four wheels taken off a child's abandoned toy truck—that carted about old men with no legs, dressed in torn, disintegrating army fatigues, as if they had existed like this since 1945. Some of the cripples were younger, and she guessed them for Afghan vets; she avoided meeting their eyes, as if the things they'd seen could pour into hers somehow, travel to her heart, and freeze it forever. She averted her face and tossed the loose change blindly, in a vain effort to assuage her guilt.

She emerged on the other side of Tverskaya and ran to the two-storied old building in the Gazetny Pereulok. The trees turned yellow and orange, and the first fallen leaves rustled under her sneakers. She could've made this trek with her eyes

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closed—she had worked for this publisher for the last three years, translating medical articles from English and German. She congratulated herself on having a job. Nowadays, there was simply no certainty in finding gainful employment. She frowned when she perused help-wanted ads in the newspapers—every time anyone mentioned foreign language skills, they also required that the owner of said skills doubled as a secretary and looked good in a miniskirt. It seemed that every day hundreds of new businesses sprang out of nowhere, like the beggars in the subways, and none of them were interested in a translator, just a good-looking entertainer for the eventual foreign investors. Yes, she was lucky to have a job; it didn't pay much, but she enjoyed it and, as a bonus, kept her dignity—a hard thing to find nowadays.

The cool entrance greeted her, the old stone breathing with the conserved cold of winters long past.

“Galka!” the voice of the senior editor named Velikanov, a man of gigantic stature matching his name, boomed. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Yes,” she said. “My sister gave birth last night, and now she's missing.”

“Wrong order, huh?” Velikanov grinned through his beard. He noticed her face and the grin faded back into the tangles of his facial vegetation. “God, you're serious. I'm so sorry. What are you doing at work then?”

She shrugged. “There's nothing else to do. I notified the police. My mom is taking care of the baby. I get to earn the money, I guess.”

Velikanov patted her shoulder, careful not to crush it in

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his meaty paw. "I'm sorry. I know you were close. How much younger was—I mean, is she now?"

"Ten years," Galina said.

Velikanov nodded and ushered her through the office to the kitchenette, where the kettle boiled perpetually. "Have some tea. Three sugars?"

She nodded and blew on the hot surface of the cup Velikanov handed to her. "Thanks. Anything urgent today?"

"Just a couple of news items from *Lancet*," he said. "Nothing urgent. You can take the afternoon off if you want."

"Thank you," Galina said. She wanted to add something else, to say that she was lucky to have Velikanov as her boss, but thought better of it. The giant man always looked at her with such helpless eyes that she worried that any kind word would make it worse. What was that story she used to love as a kid?

She sat at her desk and riffled the papers in a feeble ritual. She spotted the *Lancet* articles—two pages each, no big deal—and put them on top of her pile. She opened her notebook and thought of the story.

A children's book, large format, thin, with pictures on every page. Pictures of two children—a boy and a girl—cowering before an old, deformed woman with a large nose and a cruel cane in her hand. Then there were talking rabbits and fairies, and for the life of her she could not remember the plot; but she remembered the ending. On the last page, the old ugly woman stood transformed to her former youth and beauty, smiling at the eager children, as she explained that there had been a curse on her. She had been transmogrified into an ugly misshapen creature, and if she as much as breathed a kind

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word to them or offered the barest of comforts, the children would have turned to stone.

Galina raised the pages to her face to hide her tears from her coworkers—their desks crowded close together in this old room; Galina was the nearest to a large radiator by the window, so she would always be warm. Another one of Velikanov's many kindnesses that she could not return—she was afraid that if she did, his heart would be eventually turned to stone and be shattered by a false hope.

The picture stood in her mind and refused to be chased away by a valiant attempt to concentrate on the English words in front of her. When she was little, that story made so much sense—she was the only child, but the rest fit perfectly. Her haggard, angry mother who wanted to love her but was prohibited to do so by a curse, a mortal fear of expressing her love because it could kill.

When Masha was born, the curse theory went out of the window—their mother doted on the newborn, and nobody turned into stone, not even Galina. As Masha grew, Galina also learned to appreciate the affection her sister showed and that she missed so badly now. She swallowed her tears again, as she thought of her mother with Masha's baby in her lap, crying and rocking, and no radiant Masha around to comfort all of them.

Galina finished her tea, shook her head as if forcing out the devastating thoughts, and read the articles—a review of the new book on goiter (goiter? Did anyone even get that anymore?) and a conference report. She quickly jotted down a longhand translation, and tossed it on the typist's desk. "I'm taking a few hours off," she said, and left.

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It was strange being out of the office during the day, and she walked across Tverskaya teeming with tourists, and let her feet meander until she found herself on Herzen Street. Old like everything in this part of the city, the street was lined with old stone buildings, and Galina stood a while, trying to remember that one house she used to love as a teenager. She spotted the three-storied brownstone, and prayed that the tenants hadn't installed the security lock at the entrance.

They hadn't, and she ran up the stairs, guilty and quiet on her feet. She hoped that none of the tenants would emerge from their comfortable, expensive apartments with steel security doors and question her right to be here.

This stairwell was one of her treasures, one of the secrets nobody knew about—she collected them obsessively, and reveled in the knowledge of her riches. Few of them were tangible—a convex piece of green bottle glass, buried in a sandbox with a perfect autumn leaf and a dried daisy underneath it, so one could unearth it slowly, grain by grain, and revel in the miraculous crystalline beauty; others were less so—a hidden eddy on the river, a particular angle at which sunlight struck the gilded onion of a church, and that house on Herzen Street, which had an unguarded roof exit, where one could sit on the slanted metal roof, warm from the sun, and be in awe of the old city curled in a cradling embrace of the river.

There was no one else on the roof, nor had there been in all the years she came here. There was trash by the chimney, and she surmised that others came here too; perhaps some of the beggars in the underground tunnel slept here, away from the

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stray dogs and police patrols in the streets. She rested her back against the chimney and pressed her toes against the gutter, lest she slid off the steep incline, and looked.

There is a reason they call it the city of forty times forty churches. Splashes of gold dotted the landscape before her, unobscured by the tall modern buildings. Yellow of the poplars and gold of the churches and blue of the sky made her sigh happily, forgetting for a moment her acute misery. Then she noticed a dark cloud in the sky, and shielded her eyes from the sun. The cloud grew larger and closer, and Galina realized that it was composed of birds—jackdaws, crows, owls. Owls? She stared up at the soft soundless beats of softly feathered wings, and round yellow eyes stared back. The birds circled over her head and one of the jackdaws kept dipping lower, its wings almost brushing against her face, the wind of their beats ruffling her hair.

“What do you want?” Galina asked. There was no one around who would care that she talked to birds, who would decide to send her back. Alone, she did not have to fake normality.

The jackdaw landed on the edge of the gutter, tilting its head.

Masha, she wanted to say, but bit the word back. She might be ill, but she knew well enough to recognize a hallucination. Birds appearing out of nowhere and trying to talk to her, owls not at all bothered by the sunlight—it wasn’t true, it wasn’t happening to her. A good schizophrenic—a brave schizophrenic—knew that she was ill and that things that she saw were not necessarily there. A good schizophrenic should ignore a hallucination once she recognized it as such.

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“Go away,” she whispered fiercely. “You do not exist, so leave me alone.”

Her spirit in shambles, she rose and headed back to the hatch that would take her back to the world below. The birds grew agitated at her departure, and all of them drew closer, their wings raising a wind so strong she almost lost her footing. They mobbed her like the crows mobbed the cats who got too close to their nests, diving low, their claws pulling at her hair, their beaks opened wide. She fled to the safety of the hatch, her sneakers slipping on the suddenly too-smooth and dangerous metal. She grabbed at the boards framing the black square opening of her exit, splinters lodged in the weeping wounds on her fingertips, panicky, half-blinded by the black-and-gray movement in the air. She pulled herself into the dusty attic and ran for the stairs, the cawing and hooting finally left behind.

Too shaken to return to work, she walked along the New Arbat, recently converted to pedestrian traffic only and taken over by street artists. She looked as she passed; most exhibited landscapes of the city around them. She recognized the features as one would the corpse of a loved one—with features devoid of sparkling life and motion. Sketch artists called out to her, offering to draw her portrait, but she shook her head and watched the neat rectangles of the pavement. She passed several artisans exhibiting matryoshkas and painted jewelry boxes, imitating, more or less successfully, the traditional Palekh and Gzhel art. Several tourists haggled over the prices via their interpreter, and Galina shot the hassled man speaking in two languages at once a sympathetic look. She could never

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do that, she thought, to work for those people who descended upon the city like a plague—demanding, condescending, rude. But she wondered what it would be like, to believe that the world was created just for your pleasure and amusement.

She looked away, and stopped. A large painting propped against a storefront caught her eye and she stared at it, willing it to disappear. But it remained, the only painting that captured the spirit of its subject—the view from the roof she had just left, dotted with fat vivid strokes of gold and yellow, capped by a pale blue expanse of the sky. Worse, several birds, all beaks and claws, hung menacingly in the empty vastness of the sky.

The artist slouched by the painting, a dead cigarette in his slack lips. He eyed Galina with indifference and detached himself from the storefront. Unshaven, red-eyed, dirty. “Are you going to buy it?” he said.

Galina shook her head. “Sorry, no. But these birds . . . Can you see them too?”

The artist smiled, the stubble on his concave cheeks bristling. “Since last Friday. How about that! I thought it was the DTs.”

Galina smiled. Great, she thought, a schizophrenic and an alcoholic saw creepy birds together. “Have you seen the owls?”

“Since Sunday,” he confirmed.

“Where did they come from? Why are they here, now, during the day?”

The artist stretched and yawned, blasting Galina with the stench of stale smoke and alcohol. “Who the fuck knows?” he said philosophically. “But if you want my opinion, it’s probably the gypsies’ fault.”

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“Gypsies?”

“Or some other damn magic,” he conceded. “If you really want to know, come by some other day, after it gets dark, and I’ll show you.”

“My sister’s missing,” Galina said. “I think it has something to do with the birds. Can’t you explain now?”

“There ain’t no explaining it,” he said. “And I can’t show you until it’s dark.”

He spat out his cigarette, shoved his hands into his pockets, and indicated that he wasn’t going to say anything else.

Galina sighed, and turned to leave. “I’m Galina,” she said in the way of goodbye. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See that you do.” He gave a short nod. “Fyodor, that’s my name.”