

# VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL

VOICES  
FROM

# C H E R N O B Y L

SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

TRANSLATION AND PREFACE BY KEITH GESSEN

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# CONTENTS

<i>Translator's Preface</i>	vii
<i>Historical Note</i>	1
<i>Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice</i>	5

## PART ONE: THE LAND OF THE DEAD

On Why We Remember	25
About What Can Be Talked about with the Living and the Dead	27
About a Whole Life Written down on Doors By Those Who Returned	34
About What Radiation Looks Like	36
About a Song without Words	50
About a Homeland	53
About How a Person Is Only Clever and Refined in Evil	54
Soldiers' Chorus	64
	67

## PART TWO: THE LAND OF THE LIVING

About Old Prophecies	85
About a Moonlit Landscape	88

About a Man Whose Tooth Was Hurting When He Saw Christ Fall	90
About a Single Bullet	96
About How We Can't Live without Chekhov and Tolstoy	104
About War Movies	109
A Scream	118
About a New Nation	119
About Writing Chernobyl	126
About Lies and Truths	133
People's Chorus	143

PART THREE: AMAZED BY SADNESS

About What We Didn't Know: Death Can Be So Beautiful	155
About the Shovel and the Atom	158
About Taking Measurements	165
About How the Frightening Things in Life Happen Quietly and Naturally	167
About Answers	174
About Memories	177
About Loving Physics	179
About Expensive Salami	185
About Freedom and the Dream of an Ordinary Death	187
About the Shadow of Death	193
About a Damaged Child	197
About Political Strategy	199
By a Defender of the Soviet Government	205
About Instructions	206
About the Limitless Power One Person Can Have over Another	210
About Why We Love Chernobyl	217
Children's Chorus	221
A Solitary Human Voice	225

*In Place of an Epilogue* 239

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

**O**n September 11, 2001, after the first hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center, emergency triage stations were set up throughout New York City. Doctors and nurses rushed to their hospitals for extra shifts, and many individuals came to donate blood. These were touching acts of generosity and solidarity. The shocking thing about them was that the blood and triage stations turned out to be unnecessary. There were few survivors of the collapse of the two towers.

The effects of the explosion and nuclear fire at the Chernobyl power plant in 1986 were the exact opposite. The initial blast killed just one plant worker, Valeriy Khodomchuk, and in the next few weeks fewer than thirty workers and firemen died from acute radiation poisoning. But tens of thousands received extremely high doses of radiation—it was an accident that produced, in a way, more survivors than victims—and this book is about them.

Much of the material collected here is obscene. In the very first interview, Lyudmilla Ignatenko, the wife of a fireman whose brigade was the first to arrive at the reactor, talks about the total degeneration of her husband's very skin in the week before his death, describing a process so unnatural we should

never have had to witness it. "Any little knot [in his bedding], that was already a wound on him," she says. "I clipped my nails down till they bled so I wouldn't accidentally cut him."

Some of the interviews are macabre. Viktor Iosifovich Verzhikovskiy, head of the Khoyniki Society of Volunteer Hunters and Fisherman, recalls his meeting with the regional Party bosses a few months after the explosion. They explained that the Zone of Exclusion, as the Soviets termed the land within thirty kilometers of the Chernobyl power plant, evacuated of humans, was still filled with household pets. But the dogs and cats had absorbed heavy doses of radiation in their fur, and were liable, presumably, to wander out of the Zone. The hunters had to go in and shoot them all. Several other accounts, particularly those about the "deactivation" of the physical landscape in the Zone—the digging up of earth and trees and houses and their (haphazard) burial as nuclear waste—also have this quasi-Gogolian sense: they are ordinary human activities gone terribly berserk.

But in the end it's the very quotidian ordinariness of these testimonies that makes them such a unique human document. "I know you're curious," says Arkady Filin, impressed into Chernobyl service as a "liquidator," or clean-up crew member. "People who weren't there are always curious. But it was still a world of people. The men drank vodka. They played cards, tried to get girls." Or, in the words of one of the hunters: "If you ran over a turtle with your jeep, the shell held up. It didn't crack. Of course we only did this when we were drunk." Even the most desperate cases are still very much part of this "world of people," with its people problems and people worries. "When I die," Valentina Timofeevna Panasevich's husband, also a "liquidator," tells her as he succumbs to cancer several years after his stint at Chernobyl, "sell the car and the spare



## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

tire. And don't marry Tolik." Tolik is his brother. Valentina does not marry him.

Svetlana Alexievich collected these interviews in 1996—a time when anti-Communism still had some currency as a political idea in the post-Soviet space. And it's certainly true that Chernobyl, while an accident in the sense that no one intentionally set it off, was also the deliberate product of a culture of cronyism, laziness, and a deep-seated indifference toward the general population. The literature on the subject is pretty unanimous in its opinion that the Soviet system had taken a poorly designed reactor and then staffed it with a group of incompetents. It then proceeded, as the interviews in this book attest, to lie about the disaster in the most criminal way. In the crucial first ten days, when the reactor core was burning and releasing a steady stream of highly radioactive material into the surrounding area, the authorities repeatedly claimed that the situation was under control. "If I'd known he'd get sick I'd have closed all the doors," one of the Chernobyl war widows tells Alexievich about her husband, who went to Chernobyl as a liquidator. "I'd have stood in the doorway. I'd have locked the doors with all the locks we had." But no one knew.

And yet, as these testimonies also make all too clear, it wasn't as if the Soviets simply let Chernobyl burn. This is the remarkable thing. On the one hand, total incompetence, indifference, and out-and-out lies. On the other, a genuinely frantic effort to deal with the consequences. In the week after the accident, while refusing to admit to the world that anything really serious had gone wrong, the Soviets poured thousands of men into the breach. They dropped bags of

sand onto the reactor fire from the open doors of helicopters (analysts now think this did more harm than good). When the fire stopped, they climbed onto the roof and cleared the radioactive debris. The machines they brought broke down because of the radiation. The humans wouldn't break down until weeks or months later, at which point they'd die horribly. In 1986 the Soviets threw untrained and unprotected men at the reactor just as in 1941 they'd thrown untrained, unarmed men at the *Wehrmacht*, hoping the Germans would at least have to stop long enough to shoot them. But as the curator of the Chernobyl Museum correctly explains, had this effort not been made, the catastrophe might have been a lot worse.

In Belarus, very little has changed since these interviews were conducted. Back in 1996, Aleksandr Lukashenka was the lesser-known of Europe's "last two dictators." Now Slobodan Milosevic is on trial at The Hague and Lukashenka has pride of place. He stifles any attempt at free speech and his political opponents continue to "disappear." On the Chernobyl front, Lukashenka has encouraged studies arguing that the land is increasingly safe and that more and more of it should be brought back into agricultural rotation. In 1999, the physicist Yuri Bandazhevsky, a friend and colleague of Vasily Borisovich Nesterenko (interviewed on page 210), authored a report criticizing this tendency in government policy and suggesting that Belarus was knowingly exporting contaminated food. He has been in jail ever since.

—Keith Gessen, 2005

# VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL



## HISTORICAL NOTE

**T**here are no nuclear power stations in Belarus. Of the functioning stations in the territory of the former USSR, the ones closest to Belarus are of the old Soviet-designed RBMK type. To the north, the Ignalinsk station, to the east, the Smolensk station, and to the south, Chernobyl.

On April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58, a series of explosions destroyed the reactor in the building that housed Energy Block #4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. The catastrophe at Chernobyl became the largest technological disaster of the twentieth century.

For tiny Belarus (population: 10 million), it was a national disaster. During the Second World War, the Nazis destroyed 619 Belarussian villages along with their inhabitants. As a result of Chernobyl, the country lost 485 villages and settlements. Of these, 70 have been forever buried underground. During the war, one out of every four Belarussians was killed; today, one out of every five Belarussians lives on contaminated land. This amounts to 2.1 million people, of whom 700,000 are children. Among the demographic factors responsible for the depopulation of Belarus, radiation is number one. In the Gomel and Mogilev regions, which suffered the most from Chernobyl, mortality rates exceed birth rates by 20%.

As a result of the accident, 50 million Ci of radionuclides were released into the atmosphere. Seventy percent of these descended on Belarus; fully 23% of its territory is contaminated by cesium-137 radionuclides with a density of over 1 Ci/km<sup>2</sup>. Ukraine on the other hand has 4.8% of its territory contaminated, and Russia, 0.5%. The area of arable land with a density of more than 1 Ci/km<sup>2</sup> is over 18 million hectares; 2.4 thousand hectares have been taken out of the agricultural economy. Belarus is a land of forests. But 26% of all forests and a large part of all marshes near the rivers Pripyat, Dniepr, and Sozh are considered part of the radioactive zone. As a result of the perpetual presence of small doses of radiation, the number of people with cancer, mental retardation, neurological disorders, and genetic mutations increases with each year.

—"Chernobyl." *Eelaruskaya entsiklopedia*

On April 29, 1986, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria, and Romania. On April 30, in Switzerland and northern Italy. On May 1 and 2, in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and northern Greece. On May 3, in Israel, Kuwait, and Turkey. . . . Gaseous airborne particles traveled around the globe: on May 2 they were registered in Japan, on May 5 in India, on May 5 and 6 in the U.S. and Canada. It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world.

—"The Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident in Belarus."

Minsk, Sakharov International College on Radioecology

The fourth reactor, now known as the Cover, still holds about twenty tons of nuclear fuel in its lead-and-metal core. No one knows what is happening with it.

The sarcophagus was well made, uniquely constructed, and the design engineers from St. Petersburg should probably be proud. But it was constructed in absentia, the plates were put together with the aid of robots and helicopters, and as a result there are fissures. According to some figures, there are now over 200 square meters of spaces and cracks, and radioactive particles continue to escape through them . . .

Might the sarcophagus collapse? No one can answer that question, since it's still impossible to reach many of the connections and constructions in order to see if they're sturdy. But everyone knows that if the Cover were to collapse, the consequences would be even more dire than they were in 1986.

—*Ogonyok* magazine, No. 17, April 1996





PROLOGUE  
A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

We are air, we are not earth . . .

—M. Mamardashvili

I don't know what I should talk about—about death or about love? Or are they the same? Which one should I talk about?

We were newlyweds. We still walked around holding hands, even if we were just going to the store. I would say to him, "I love you." But I didn't know then how much. I had no idea . . . We lived in the dormitory of the fire station where he worked. On the second floor. There were three other young couples, we all shared a kitchen. On the first floor they kept the trucks. The red fire trucks. That was his job. I always knew what was happening—where he was, how he was.

One night I heard a noise. I looked out the window. He saw me. "Close the window and go back to sleep. There's a fire at the reactor. I'll be back soon."

I didn't see the explosion itself. Just the flames. Everything was radiant. The whole sky. A tall flame. And smoke. The heat was awful. And he's still not back.

The smoke was from the burning bitumen, which had covered the roof. He said later it was like walking on tar. They tried to beat down the flames. They kicked at the burning graphite with their feet. . . . They weren't wearing their canvas gear. They went off just as they were, in their

shirt sleeves. No one told them. They had been called for a fire, that was it.

Four o'clock. Five. Six. At six we were supposed to go to his parents' house. To plant potatoes. It's forty kilometers from Pripyat to Sperizhye, where his parents live. Sowing, plowing—he loved to do that. His mother always told me how they didn't want him to move to the city, they'd even built a new house for him. He was drafted into the army. He served in the fire brigade in Moscow and when he came out, he wanted to be a fireman. And nothing else! *[Silence.]*

Sometimes it's as though I hear his voice. Alive. Even photographs don't have the same effect on me as that voice. But he never calls to me . . . not even in my dreams. I'm the one who calls to him.

Seven o'clock. At seven I was told he was in the hospital. I ran there, but the police had already encircled it, and they weren't letting anyone through. Only ambulances. The policemen shouted: the ambulances are radioactive, stay away! I wasn't the only one there, all the wives whose husbands were at the reactor that night had come. I started looking for a friend, she was a doctor at that hospital. I grabbed her white coat when she came out of an ambulance. "Get me inside!" "I can't. He's bad. They all are." I held on to her. "Just to see him!" "All right," she said. "Come with me. Just for fifteen or twenty minutes."

I saw him. He was all swollen and puffed up. You could barely see his eyes.

"He needs milk. Lots of milk," my friend said. "They should drink at least three liters each." "But he doesn't like milk." "He'll drink it now." Many of the doctors and nurses in that hospital, and especially the orderlies, would get sick themselves and die. But we didn't know that then.

At ten in the morning, the cameraman Shishenok died. He was the first. On the first day. We learned that another one was left under the debris—Valera Khodemchuk. They never did reach him. They buried him under the concrete. And we didn't know then that they were just the first ones.

I said, "Vasya, what should I do?" "Get out of here! Go! You have our child." But how can I leave him? He's telling me: "Go! Leave! Save the baby." "First I need to bring you some milk, then we'll decide what to do." My friend Tanya Kibenok comes running in—her husband's in the same room. Her father's with her, he has a car. We get in and drive to the nearest village for some milk. It's about three kilometers from the town. We buy a bunch of three-liter bottles, six, so it's enough for everyone. But they started throwing up from the milk. They kept passing out, they got put on TVs. The doctors kept telling them they'd been poisoned by gas. No one said anything about radiation. And the town was inundated right away with military vehicles, they closed off all the roads. The trolleys stopped running, and the trains. They were washing the streets with some white powder. I worried about how I'd get to the village the next day to buy some more fresh milk. No one talked about the radiation. Only the military people wore surgical masks. The people in town were carrying bread from the stores, just open sacks with the loaves in them. People were eating cupcakes on plates.

I couldn't get into the hospital that evening. There was a sea of people. I stood under his window, he came over and yelled something to me. It was so desperate! Someone in the crowd heard him—they were being taken to Moscow that night. All the wives got together in one group. We decided we'd go with them. Let us go with our husbands! You have no right! We punched and clawed. The soldiers—there were

already soldiers—they pushed us back. Then the doctor came out and said, yes, they were flying to Moscow, but we needed to bring them their clothes. The clothes they'd worn at the station had been burned. The buses had stopped running already and we ran across the city. We came running back with their bags, but the plane was already gone. They tricked us. So that we wouldn't be there yelling and crying.

It's night. On one side of the street there are buses, hundreds of buses, they're already preparing the town for evacuation, and on the other side, hundreds of fire trucks. They came from all over. And the whole street covered in white foam. We're walking on it, just cursing and crying. Over the radio they tell us they might evacuate the city for three to five days, take your warm clothes with you, you'll be living in the forest. In tents. People were even glad—a camping trip! We'll celebrate May Day like that, a break from routine. People got barbecues ready. They took their guitars with them, their radios. Only the women whose husbands had been at the reactor were crying.

I can't remember the trip out to my parents' village. It was like I woke up when I saw my mother. "Mama. Vasya's in Moscow. They flew him out on a special plane!" But we finished planting the garden. *[A week later the village was evacuated.]* Who knew? Who knew that then? Later in the day I started throwing up. I was six months pregnant. I felt awful. That night I dreamed he was calling out to me in his sleep: "Lyusya! Lyusenka!" But after he died, he didn't call out in my dreams anymore. Not once. *[She starts crying]* I got up in the morning thinking I have to get to Moscow. By myself. My mother's crying: "Where are you going, the way you are?" So I took my father with me. He went to the bank and took out all the money they had.

I can't remember the trip. The trip just isn't in my memory. In Moscow we asked the first police officer we saw, Where

did they put the Chernobyl firemen, and he told us. We were surprised, too, everyone was scaring us that it was top secret. "Hospital number 6. At the Shchukinskaya stop."

It was a special hospital, for radiology, and you couldn't get in without a pass. I gave some money to the woman at the door, and she said, "Go ahead." Then I had to ask someone else, beg. Finally I'm sitting in the office of the head radiologist, Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova. But I didn't know that yet, what her name was, I didn't remember anything. I just knew I had to see him. Right away she asked: "Do you have kids?"

What should I tell her? I can see already I need to hide that I'm pregnant. They won't let me see him! It's good I'm thin, you can't really tell anything.

"Yes," I say.

"How many?"

I'm thinking, "I need to tell her two. If it's just one, she won't let me in."

"A boy and a girl."

"So you don't need to have anymore. All right, listen: his central nervous system is completely compromised, his skull is completely compromised."

Okay, I'm thinking, so he'll be a little fidgety.

"And listen: if you start crying, I'll kick you out right away. No hugging or kissing. Don't even get near him. You have half an hour."

But I knew already that I wasn't leaving. If I leave, then it'll be with him. I swore to myself! I come in, they're sitting on the bed, playing cards and laughing.

"Vasya!" they call out.

He turns around:

"Oh, well, now it's over! Even here she found me!"

He looks so funny, he's got pajamas on for a size 48, and he's a size 52. The sleeves are too short, the pants are too short. But his face isn't swollen anymore. They were given some sort of fluid.

I say, "Where'd you run off to?"

He wants to hug me.

The doctor won't let him. "Sit, sit," she says. "No hugging in here."

We turned it into a joke somehow. And then everyone comes over, from the other rooms too, everyone from Pripjat. There were twenty-eight of them on the plane. What's going on? How are things in town? I tell them they've begun evacuating everyone, the whole town is being cleared out for three or five days. None of the guys says anything, and then one of the women, there were two women, she was on duty at the factory the day of the accident, she starts crying.

"Oh God! My kids are there. What's happening with them?"

I wanted to be with him alone, if only for a minute. The guys felt it, and each of them thought of some excuse, and they all went out into the hall. Then I hugged and kissed him. He moved away.

"Don't sit near me. Get a chair."

"That's just silly," I said, waving it away. "Did you see the explosion? Did you see what happened? You were the first ones there."

"It was probably sabotage. Someone set it up. All the guys think so."

That's what people were saying then. That's what they thought.

The next day, they were lying by themselves, each in his own room. They were banned from going in the hallway, from talking to each other. They knocked on the walls with their knuckles. Dash-dot, dash-dot. The doctors explained that everyone's body

## VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL

reacts differently to radiation, and one person can handle what another can't. They even measured the radiation of the walls where they had them. To the right, left, and the floor beneath. They moved out all the sick people from the floor below and the floor above. There was no one left in the place.

For three days I lived with my friends in Moscow. They kept saying: Take the pot, take the plate, take whatever you need. I made turkey soup for six. For six of our boys. Firemen. From the same shift. They were all on duty that night: Bashuk, Kibenok, Titenok, Pravik, Tischura. I went to the store and bought them toothpaste and toothbrushes and soap. They didn't have any of that at the hospital. I bought them little towels. Looking back, I'm surprised by my friends: they were afraid, of course, how could they not be, there were rumors already, but still they kept saying: Take whatever you need, take it! How is he? How are they all? Will they live? Live. *[She is silent.]* I met a lot of good people then, I don't remember all of them. I remember an old woman janitor, who taught me: "There are sicknesses that can't be cured. You just have to sit and watch them."

Early in the morning I go to the market, then to my friends' place, where I make the soup. I have to grate everything and grind it. Someone said, "Bring me some apple juice." So I come with six half-liter cans, always for six! I race to the hospital, then I sit there until evening. In the evening, I go back across the city. How much longer could I have kept that up? After three days they told me I could stay in the dorm for medical workers, it's on hospital grounds. God, how wonderful!

"But there's no kitchen. How am I going to cook?"

"You don't need to cook anymore. They can't digest the food."

He started to change—every day I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his

tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as white film . . . the color of his face . . . his body . . . blue . . . red . . . gray-brown. And it's all so very mine! It's impossible to describe! It's impossible to write down! And even to get over. The only thing that saved me was it happened so fast; there wasn't any time to think, there wasn't any time to cry.

I loved him! I had no idea how much! We'd just gotten married. We're walking down the street—he'd grab my hands and whirl me around. And kiss me, kiss me. People are walking by and smiling.

It was a hospital for people with serious radiation poisoning. Fourteen days. In fourteen days a person dies.

On the very first day in the dormitory they measured me with a dosimeter. My clothes, bag, purse, shoes—they were all "hot." And they took that all away from me right there. Even my underthings. The only thing they left was my money. In exchange they gave me a hospital robe—a size 56—and some size 43 slippers. They said they'd return the clothes, maybe, or maybe they wouldn't, since they might not be possible to "launder" at this point. That is how I looked when I came to visit him. I frightened him. "Woman, what's wrong with you?" But I was still able to make him some soup. I boiled the water in a glass jar, and then I threw pieces of chicken in there—tiny, tiny pieces. Then someone gave me her pot, I think it was the cleaning woman or the guard. Someone else gave me a cutting board, for chopping my parsley. I couldn't go to the market in my hospital robe, people would bring me the vegetables. But it was all useless, he couldn't even drink anything. He couldn't even swallow a raw egg. But I wanted to get something tasty! As if it mattered. I ran to the post office. "Girls," I told them, "I need to call my parents in Ivano-Frankovsk right away! My



husband is dying." They understood right away where I was from and who my husband was, and they connected me. My father, sister, and brother flew out that very day to Moscow. They brought me my things. And money. It was the ninth of May. He always used to say to me: "You have no idea how beautiful Moscow is! Especially on V-Day, when they set off the fireworks. I want you to see it."

I'm sitting with him in the room, he opens his eyes. "Is it day or night?"

"It's nine at night."

"Open the window! They're going to set off the fireworks!"

I opened the window. We're on the eighth floor, and the whole city's there before us! There was a bouquet of fire exploding in the air.

"Look at that!" I said.

"I told you I'd show you Moscow. And I told you I'd always give you flowers on holidays . . ."

I look over, and he's getting three carnations from under his pillow. He gave the nurse money, and she bought them.

I run over to him and I kiss him.

"My love! My one and only!"

He starts growling. "What did the doctors tell you? No hugging me. And no kissing!"

They wouldn't let me hug him. But I . . . I lifted him and sat him up. I made his bed. I placed the thermometer. I picked up and brought back the sanitation dish. I stayed up with him all night.

It's a good thing that it was in the hallway, not the room, that my head started spinning, I grabbed onto the windowsill. A doctor was walking by, he took me by the arm. And then suddenly: "Are you pregnant?"

"No, no!" I was so scared someone would hear us.

"Don't lie," he sighed.

The next day I get called to the head doctor's office.

"Why did you lie to me?" she says.

"There was no other way. If I'd told you, you'd send me home. It was a sacred lie!"

"What have you done?"

"But I was with him . . ."

I'll be grateful to Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova my whole life. My whole life! Other wives also came, but they weren't allowed in. Their mothers were with me. Volodya Pravik's mother kept begging God: "Take me instead." An American professor, Dr. Gale—he's the one who did the bone marrow operation—tried to comfort me. There's a tiny ray of hope, he said, not much, but a little. Such a powerful organism, such a strong guy! They called for all his relatives. Two of his sisters came from Belarus, his brother from Leningrad, he was in the army there. The younger one, Natasha, she was fourteen, she was very scared and cried a lot. But her bone marrow was the best fit. [*Silent.*] Now I can talk about this. Before I couldn't. I didn't talk about it for ten years. [*Silent.*]

When he found out they'd be taking the bone marrow from his little sister, he flat-out refused. "I'd rather die. She's so small. Don't touch her." His older sister Lyuda was twenty-eight, she was a nurse herself, she knew what she was getting into. "As long as he lives," she said. I watched the operation. They were lying next to each other on the tables. There was a big window onto the operating room. It took two hours. When they were done, Lyuda was worse off than he was, she had eighteen punctures in her chest, it was very difficult for her to come out from under the anesthesia. Now she's sick, she's an invalid. She was a strong, pretty girl. She never got married. So then I was running from

one room to the other, from his room to hers. He wasn't in an ordinary room anymore, he was in a special bio-chamber, behind a transparent curtain. No one was allowed inside.

They have instruments there, so that without going through the curtain they can give him shots, place the catheter. The curtains are held together by Velcro, and I've learned to use them. But I push them aside and go inside to him. There was a little chair next to his bed. He got so bad that I couldn't leave him now even for a second. He was calling me constantly: "Lyusya, where are you? Lyusya!" He called and called. The other bio-chambers, where our boys were, were being tended to by soldiers, because the orderlies on staff refused, they demanded protective clothing. The soldiers carried the sanitary vessels. They wiped the floors down, changed the bedding. They did everything. Where did they get those soldiers? We didn't ask. But he—he—every day I would hear: Dead. Dead. Tischura is dead. Titenok is dead. Dead. It was like a sledgehammer to my brain.

He was producing stool 25 to 30 times a day. With blood and mucous. His skin started cracking on his arms and legs. He became covered with boils. When he turned his head, there'd be a clump of hair left on the pillow. I tried joking: "It's convenient, you don't need a comb." Soon they cut all their hair. I did it for him myself. I wanted to do everything for him myself. If it had been physically possible I would have stayed with him all twenty-four hours. I couldn't spare a minute. [*Longsilence.*] My brother came and he got scared. "I won't let you in there!" But my father said to him: "You think you can stop her? She'll go through the window! She'll get up through the fire escape!"

I go back to the hospital and there's an orange on the bedside table. A big one, and pink. He's smiling: "I got a gift. Take it." Meanwhile the nurse is gesturing through the film that I can't eat it. It's been near him a while, so not only can you not

eat it, you shouldn't even touch it. "Come on, eat it," he says. "You like oranges." I take the orange in my hand. Meanwhile he shuts his eyes and goes to sleep. They were always giving him shots to put him to sleep. The nurse is looking at me in horror. And me? I'm ready to do whatever it takes so that he doesn't think about death. And about the fact that his death is horrible, that I'm afraid of him. There's a fragment of some conversation, I'm remembering it. Someone is saying: "You have to understand: this is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You're not suicidal. Get ahold of yourself." And I'm like someone who's lost her mind: "But I love him! I love him!" He's sleeping, and I'm whispering: "I love you!" Walking in the hospital courtyard, "I love you." Carrying his sanitary tray, "I love you." I remembered how we used to live at home. He only fell asleep at night after he'd taken my hand. That was a habit of his—to hold my hand while he slept. All night. So in the hospital I take his hand and don't let go.

One night, everything's quiet. We're all alone. He looked at me very, very carefully and suddenly he said:

"I want to see our child so much. How is he?"

"What are we going to name him?"

"You'll decide that yourself."

"Why myself, when there's two of us?"

"In that case, if it's a boy, he should be Vasya, and if it's a girl, Natasha."

I had no idea then how much I loved him! Him . . . just him. I was like a blind person! I couldn't even feel the little pounding underneath my heart. Even though I was six months in. I thought that my little one was inside me, that he was protected.

None of the doctors knew I was staying with him at night in the bio-chamber. The nurses let me in. At first they pleaded

with me, too: "You're young. Why are you doing this? That's not a person anymore, that's a nuclear reactor. You'll just burn together." I was like a dog, running after them. I'd stand for hours at their doors, begging and pleading. And then they'd say: "All right! The hell with you! You're not normal!" In the mornings, just before eight, when the doctors started their rounds, they'd be there on the other side of the film: "Run!" So I'd go to the dorm for an hour. Then from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. I have a pass to come in. My legs were blue below the knee, blue and swollen, that's how tired I was.

While I was there with him, they wouldn't, but when I left—they photographed him. Without any clothes. Naked. One thin little sheet on top of him. I changed that little sheet every day, and every day by evening it was covered in blood. I pick him up, and there are pieces of his skin on my hand, they stick to my hands. I ask him: "Love. Help me. Prop yourself up on your arm, your elbow, as much as you can, I'll smooth out your bedding, get the knots and folds out." Any little knot, that was already a wound on him. I clipped my nails down till they bled so I wouldn't accidentally cut him. None of the nurses could approach him; if they needed anything they'd call me.

And they photographed him. For science, they said. I'd have pushed them all out of there! I'd have yelled! And hit them! How dare they? It's all mine—it's my love—if only I'd been able to keep them out of there.

I'm walking out of the room into the hallway. And I'm walking toward the couch, because I don't see them. I tell the nurse on duty: "He's dying." And she says to me: "What did you expect? He got 1,600 roentgen. Four hundred is a lethal dose. You're sitting next to a nuclear reactor." It's all mine . . . it's my love. When they all died, they did a *remont* at the hospital. They scraped down the walls and dug up the parquet.

And then—the last thing. I remember it in flashes, all broken up.

I'm sitting on my little chair next to him at night. At eight I say: "Vasenka, I'm going to go for a little walk." He opens his eyes and closes them, lets me go. I just walk to the dorm, go up to my room, lie down on the floor, I couldn't lie on the bed, everything hurt too much, when already the cleaning lady is knocking on the door. "Go! Run to him! He's calling for you like mad!" That morning Tanya Kibenok pleaded with me: "Come to the cemetery, I can't go there alone." They were burying Vitya Kibenok and Volodya Pravik. They were friends of my Vasya. Our families were friends. There's a photo of us all in the building the day before the explosion. Our husbands are so handsome! And happy! It was the last day of that life. We were all so happy!

I came back from the cemetery and called the nurse's post right away. "How is he?" "He died fifteen minutes ago." What? I was there all night. I was gone for three hours! I came up to the window and started shouting: "Why? Why?" I looked up at the sky and yelled. The whole building could hear me. They were afraid to come up to me. Then I came to: I'll see him one more time! Once more! I run down the stairs. He was still in his bio-chamber, they hadn't taken him away yet. His last words were "Lyusya! Lyusenka!" "She's just stepped away for a bit, she'll be right back," the nurse told him. He sighed and went quiet. I didn't leave him anymore after that. I escorted him all the way to the grave site. Although the thing I remember isn't the grave, it's the plastic bag. That bag.

At the morgue they said, "Want to see what we'll dress him in?" I do! They dressed him up in formal wear, with his service cap. They couldn't get shoes on him because his feet had

swelled up. They had to cut up the formal wear, too, because they couldn't get it on him, there wasn't a whole body to put it on. It was all—wounds. The last two days in the hospital—I'd lift his arm, and meanwhile the bone is shaking, just sort of dangling, the body has gone away from it. Pieces of his lungs, of his liver, were coming out of his mouth. He was choking on his internal organs. I'd wrap my hand in a bandage and put it in his mouth, take out all that stuff. It's impossible to talk about. It's impossible to write about. And even to live through. It was all mine. My love. They couldn't get a single pair of shoes to fit him. They buried him barefoot.

Right before my eyes—in his formal wear—they just took him and put him in that cellophane bag of theirs and tied it up. And then they put this bag in the wooden coffin. And they tied the coffin with another bag. The plastic is transparent, but thick, like a tablecloth. And then they put all that into a zinc coffin. They squeezed it in. Only the cap didn't fit.

Everyone came—his parents, my parents. They bought black handkerchiefs in Moscow. The Extraordinary Commission met with us. They told everyone the same thing: it's impossible for us to give you the bodies of your husbands, your sons, they are very radioactive and will be buried in a Moscow cemetery in a special way. In sealed zinc caskets, under cement tiles. And you need to sign this document here.

If anyone got indignant and wanted to take the coffin back home, they were told that the dead were now, you know, heroes, and that they no longer belonged to their families. They were heroes of the State. They belonged to the State.

We sat in the hearse. The relatives and some sort of military people. A colonel and his regiment. They tell the regiment: "Await your orders!" We drive around Moscow for two or three hours, around the beltway. We're going back to Moscow

again. They tell the regiment: "We're not allowing anyone into the cemetery. The cemetery's being attacked by foreign correspondents. Wait some more." The parents don't say anything. Mom has a black handkerchief. I sense I'm about to black out. "Why are they hiding my husband? He's—what? A murderer? A criminal? Who are we burying?" My mom: "Quiet. Quiet, daughter." She's petting me on the head. The colonel calls in: "Let's enter the cemetery. The wife is getting hysterical." At the cemetery we were surrounded by soldiers. We had a convoy. And they were carrying the coffin. No one was allowed in. It was just us. They covered him with earth in a minute. "Faster! Faster!" the officer was yelling. They didn't even let me hug the coffin. And—onto the bus. Everything on the sly.

Right away they bought us plane tickets back home. For the next day. The whole time there was someone with us in plainclothes with a military bearing. He wouldn't even let us out of the dorm to buy some food for the trip. God forbid we might talk with someone—especially me. As if I could talk by then. I couldn't even cry. When we were leaving, the woman on duty counted all the towels and all the sheets. She folded them right away and put them into a polyethylene bag. They probably burnt them. We paid for the dormitory ourselves. For fourteen nights. It was a hospital for radiation poisoning. Fourteen nights. That's how long it takes a person to die.

At home I fell asleep. I walked into the place and just fell onto the bed. I slept for three days. An ambulance came. "No," said the doctor, "she'll wake up. It's just a terrible sleep."

I was twenty-three.

I remember the dream I had. My dead grandmother comes to me in the clothes that we buried her in. She's dressing up the New Year's tree. "Grandma, why do we have a New Year's tree? It's



summertime." "Because your Vasenka is going to join me soon." And he grew up in the forest. I remember the dream—Vasya comes in a white robe and calls for Natasha. That's our girl, who I haven't given birth to yet. She's already grown up. He throws her up to the ceiling, and they laugh. And I'm watching them and thinking that happiness—it's so simple. I'm sleeping. We're walking along the water. Walking and walking. He probably asked me not to cry. Gave me a sign. From up there.

*[She is silent for a long time.]*

Two months later I went to Moscow. From the train station straight to the cemetery. To him! And at the cemetery I start going into labor. Just as I started talking to him—they called the ambulance. It was at the same Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova's that I gave birth. She'd said to me back then: "You need to come here to give birth." It was two weeks before I was due.

They showed her to me—a girl. "Natashenka," I called out. "Your father named you Natashenka." She looked healthy. Arms, legs. But she had cirrhosis of the liver. Her liver had twenty-eight roentgen. Congenital heart disease. Four hours later they told me she was dead. And again: we won't give her to you. What do you mean you won't give her to me? It's me who won't give her to you! You want to take her for science. I hate your science! I hate it!

*[She is silent.]*

I keep saying the wrong thing to you. The wrong thing. I'm not supposed to yell after my stroke. And I'm not supposed to cry. That's why the words are all wrong. But I'll say this. No one knows this. When they brought me the little wooden box and said, "She's in there," I looked. She'd been cremated. She was ashes. And I started crying. "Put her at his feet," I requested.

There, at the cemetery, it doesn't say Natasha Ignatenko. There's only his name. She didn't have a name yet, she didn't

have anything. Just a soul. That's what I buried there. I always go there with two bouquets: one for him, and the other I put in the corner for her. I crawl around the grave on my knees. Always on my knees. *[She becomes incomprehensible.]* I killed her. I. She. Saved. My little girl saved me, she took the whole radioactive shock into herself, she was like the lightning rod for it. She was so small. She was a little tiny thing. *[She has trouble breathing.]* She saved . . . But I loved them both. Because—because you can't kill something with love, right? With such love! Why are these things together—love and death. Together. Who's going to explain this to me? I crawl around the grave on my knees.

*[She is silent for a long time]*

In Kiev they gave me an apartment. It was in a large building, where they put everyone from the atomic station. It's a big apartment, with two rooms, the kind Vasya and I had dreamed of. And I was going crazy in it!

I found a husband eventually. I told him everything—the whole truth—that I have one love, for my whole life. I told him everything. We'd meet, but I'd never invite him to my home, that's where Vasya was.

I worked in a candy shop. I'd be making cake, and tears would be rolling down my cheeks. I'm not crying, but there are tears rolling down.

I gave birth to a boy, Andrei. Andreika. My friends tried to stop me. "You can't have a baby." And the doctors tried to scare me: "Your body won't be able to handle it." Then, later—later they told me that he'd be missing an arm. His right arm. The instrument showed it. "Well, so what?" I thought. "I'll teach him to write with his left hand." But he came out fine. A beautiful boy. He's in school now, he gets good grades. Now I have someone—I can live and breathe him. He's the light in my life. He understands everything perfectly. "Mom, if I go visit

grandma for two days, will you be able to breathe?" I won't! I fear the day I'll have to leave him. One day we're walking down the street. And I feel that I'm falling. That's when I had my first stroke. Right on the street. "Mom, do you need some water?" "No, just stand here next to me. Don't go anywhere." And I grabbed his arm. I don't remember what happened next. I came to in the hospital. But I grabbed him so hard that the doctors were barely able to pry my fingers open. His arm was blue for a long time. Now we walk out of the house, he says, "Mommie, just don't grab my arm. I won't go anywhere." He's also sick: two weeks in school, two weeks at home with a doctor. That's how we live.

*[She stands up, goes over to the window.]*

There are many of us here. A whole street. That's what it's called—Chernobylskaya. These people worked at the station their whole lives. A lot of them still go there to work on a provisional basis, that's how they work there now, no one lives there anymore. They have bad diseases, they're invalids, but they don't leave their jobs, they're scared to even think of the reactor closing down. Who needs them now anywhere else? Often they die. In an instant. They just drop—someone will be walking, he falls down, goes to sleep, never wakes up. He was carrying flowers for his nurse and his heart stopped. They die, but no one's really asked us. No one's asked what we've been through. What we saw. No one wants to hear about death. About what scares them.

But I was telling you about love. About my love . . .

*Lyudmilla Ignatenko, wife of deceased  
fireman Vastly Ignatenko*



PART ONE  
THE LAND OF THE DEAD

MONOLOGUE ON WHY WE REMEMBER

**Y**bu've decided to write about this? About *this*? But I wouldn't want people to know this about me, what I went through there. On the one hand, there's the desire to open up, to say everything, and on the other—I feel like I'm exposing myself, and I wouldn't want to do that.

Do you remember how it was in Tolstoy? Pierre Bezukhov is so shocked by the war, he thinks that he and the whole world have changed forever. But then some time passes, and he says to himself: "I'm going to keep yelling at the coach-driver just like before, I'm going to keep growling like before." Then why do people remember? So that they can determine the truth? For fairness? So they can free themselves and forget? Is it because they understand they're part of a grand event? Or are they looking into the past for cover? And all this despite the fact that memories are very fragile things, ephemeral things, this is not exact knowledge, but a guess that a person makes about himself. It isn't even knowledge, it's more like a set of emotions.

My emotions . . . I struggled, I dug into my memory and I remembered.

The scariest thing for me was during my childhood—that was the war.

I remember how we boys played "mom and dad"—we'd take the clothes off the little ones and put them on top of one another. These were the first kids born after the war, because during the war kids were forgotten. We waited for life to appear. We played "mom and dad." We wanted to see how life would appear. We were eight, ten years old.

I saw a woman trying to kill herself. In the bushes by the river. She had a brick and she was hitting herself in the head with it. She was pregnant from an occupying soldier whom the whole village hated. Also, as a boy, I saw a litter of kittens being born. I helped my mother pull a calf from its mother, I led our pig to meet up with a boar. I remember—I remember how they brought my father's body, he had on a sweater, my mother had knit it herself, and he'd been shot by a machine gun, and bloody pieces of something were coming out of that sweater. He lay on our only bed, there was nowhere else to put him. Later he was buried in front of the house. And the earth wasn't cotton, it was heavy clay. From the beds for beetroot. There were battles going on all around. The street was filled with dead people and horses.

For me, those memories are so personal, I've never spoken of them out loud.

Back then I thought of death just as I did of birth. I had the same feeling when I saw a calf come out of a cow—and the kittens were born—as when I saw that woman with the brick in the bushes killing herself. For some reason these seemed to me to be the same things—birth and death.

I remember from my childhood how a house smells when a boar is being cut up. You've just touched me, and I'm already falling into there, falling—into that nightmare. That terror. I'm flying into it. I also remember how, when we were little, the women would take us with them to the sauna. And we saw

that all the women's uteruses (this we could understand even then) were falling out, they were tying them up with rags. I saw this. They were falling out because of hard labor. There were no men, they were at the front, or with the partisans, there were no horses, the women carried all the loads themselves. They ploughed over the gardens themselves, and the kolkhoz fields. When I was older, and I was intimate with a woman, I would remember this—what I saw in the sauna.

I wanted to forget. Forget everything. And I did forget. I thought the most horrible things had already happened. The war. And that I was protected now, that I was protected.

But then I traveled to the Chernobyl Zone. I've been there many times now. And understood how powerless I am. I'm falling apart. My past no longer protects me. There aren't any answers there. They were there before, but now they're not. The future is destroying me, not the past.

*Pyotr S., psychologist*

MONOLOGUE ABOUT WHAT CAN BE TALKED ABOUT  
WITH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

The wolf came into the yard at night. I look out the window and there he is, eyes shining, like headlights. Now I'm used to everything. I've been living alone for seven years, seven years since the people left. Sometimes at night I'll just be sitting here thinking, thinking, until it's lights out again. So on this day I was up all night, sitting on my bed, and then I went out to look at how the sun was. What should I tell you? Death is the fairest thing in the world. No one's ever gotten out of it. The earth takes everyone—the kind, the cruel, the sinners. Aside from

that, there's no fairness on earth. I worked hard and honestly my whole life. But I didn't get any fairness. God was dividing things up somewhere, and by the time the line came to me there was nothing left. A young person can die, an old person has to die . . . At first, I waited for people to come—I thought they'd come back. No one said they were leaving forever, they said they were leaving for a while. But now I'm just waiting for death. Dying isn't hard, but it is scary. There's no church. The priest doesn't come. There's no one to tell my sins to.

The first time they told us we had radiation, we thought: it's a sort of a sickness, and whoever gets it dies right away. No, they said, it's this thing that lies on the ground, and gets into the ground, but you can't see it. Animals might be able to see it and hear it, but people can't. But that's not true! I saw it. This cesium was lying in my yard, until it got wet with rain. It was an ink-black color. It was lying there and sort of dripping into pieces. I ran home from the kolkhoz and went into my garden. And there's another piece, it's blue. And 200 meters over, there's another one. About the size of the kerchief on my head. I called over to my neighbor, the other women, we all ran around looking. All the gardens, and the field nearby—about two hectares—we found maybe four big chunks. One was red. The next day it rained early, and by lunchtime they were gone. The police came but there was nothing to show them. We could just tell them. The chunks were like this. *[She indicates the size with her hands.]* Like my kerchief. Blue and red . . .

We weren't too afraid of this radiation. When we couldn't see it, and we didn't know what it was, maybe we were a little afraid, but once we'd seen it, we weren't so afraid. The police and the soldiers put up these signs. Some were next to people's houses, some were in the street—they'd write, 70 curie, 60 curie. We'd always lived off our potatoes, and then suddenly—we're



not allowed to! For some people it was real bad, for others it was funny. They advised us to work in our gardens in masks and rubber gloves. And then another big scientist came to the meeting hall and told us that we needed to wash our yards. Come on! I couldn't believe what I was hearing! They ordered us to wash our sheets, our blankets, our curtains. But they're in storage! In closets and trunks. There's no radiation in there! Behind glass? Behind closed doors! Come on! It's in the forest, in the field. They closed the wells, locked them up, wrapped them in cellophane. Said the water was "dirty." How can it be dirty when it's so clean? They told us a bunch of nonsense. You'll die. You need to leave. Evacuate.

People got scared. They got filled up with fear. At night people started packing up their things. I also got my clothes, folded them up. My red badges for my honest labor, and my lucky kopeika that I had. Such sadness! It filled my heart. Let me be struck down right here if I'm lying. And then I hear about how the soldiers were evacuating one village, and this old man and woman stayed. Until then, when people were roused up and put on buses, they'd take their cow and go into the forest. They'd wait there. Like during the war, when they were burning down the villages. Why would our soldiers chase us? *[Starts crying.]* It's not stable, our life. I don't want to cry.

Oh! Look there—a crow. I don't chase them away. Although sometimes a crow will steal eggs from the barn. I still don't chase them away. I don't chase anyone away! Yesterday a little rabbit came over. There's a village nearby, also there's one woman living there, I said, come by. Maybe it'll help, maybe it won't, but at least there'll be someone to talk to. At night everything hurts. My legs are spinning, like there are little ants running through them, that's my nerve running through me. It's like that when I pick something up. Like wheat being

crushed. Crunch, crunch. Then the nerve calms down. I've already worked enough in my life, been sad enough. I've had enough of everything and I don't want anything more.

I have daughters, and sons . . . They're all in the city. But I'm not going anywhere! God gave me years, but he didn't give me a fair share. I know that an old person gets annoying, that the younger generation will run out of patience. I haven't had much joy from my children. The women, the ones who've gone into the city, are always crying. Either their daughter-in-law is hurting their feelings, or their daughter is. They want to come back. My husband is here. He's buried here. If he wasn't lying here, he'd be living in some other place. And I'd be with him. *[Cheers up suddenly]* And why should I leave? It's nice here! Everything grows, everything blooming. From the littlest fly to the animals, everything's living.

I'll remember everything for you. The planes are flying and flying. Every day. They fly real-real low right over our heads. They're flying to the reactor. To the station. One after the other. While here we have the evacuation. They're moving us out. Storming the houses. People have covered up, they're hiding. The livestock is moaning, the kids are crying. It's war! And the sun's out . . . I sat down and didn't come out of the hut, though it's true I didn't lock up either. The soldiers knocked. "Ma'am, have you packed up?" And I said: "Are you going to tie my hands and feet?" They didn't say anything, didn't say anything, and then they left. They were young. They were kids! Old women were crawling on their knees in front of the houses, begging. The soldiers picked them up under their arms and into the car. But I told them, whoever touched me was going to get it. I cursed at them! I cursed good. I didn't cry. That day I didn't cry. I sat in my house. One minute there's yelling. Yelling! And then it's quiet. Very quiet. On that day—that first day I didn't leave the house.

They told me later that there was a column of people walking. And next to that there was a column of livestock. It was war! My husband liked to say that people shoot, but it's God who delivers the bullet. Everyone has his own fate. The young ones who left, some of them have already died. In their new place. Whereas me, I'm still walking around. Slowing down, sure. Sometimes it's boring, and I cry. The whole village is empty. There's all kinds of birds here. They fly around. And there's elk here, all you want. *[Starts crying.]*

I remember everything. Everyone up and left, but they left their dogs and cats. The first few days I went around pouring milk for all the cats, and I'd give the dogs a piece of bread. They were standing in their yards waiting for their masters. They waited for them a long time. The hungry cats ate cucumbers. They ate tomatoes. Until the fall I took care of my neighbor's lawn, up to the fence. Her fence fell down, I hammered it back up again. I waited for the people. My neighbor had a dog named Zhuchok. "Zhuchok," I'd say, "if you see the people first, give me a shout."

One night I dreamt I was getting evacuated. The officer yells, "Lady! We're going to burn everything down and bury it. Come out!" And they drive me somewhere, to some unknown place. Not clear where. It's not the town, it's not the village. It's not even Earth.

One time—I had a nice little kitty. Vaska. One winter the rats were really hungry and they were attacking. There was nowhere to go. They'd crawl under the covers. I had some grain in a barrel, they put a hole in the barrel. But Vaska saved me. I'd have died without him. We'd talk, me and him, and eat dinner. Then Vaska disappeared. The hungry dogs ate him, maybe, I don't know. They were always running around hungry, until they died. The cats were so hungry they ate their kittens. Not

during the summer, but during the winter they would. God, forgive me!

Sometimes now I can't even make it all the way through the house. For an old woman even the stove is cold during the summer. The police come here sometimes, check things out, they bring me bread. But what are they checking for?

It's me and the cat. This is a different cat. When we hear the police, we're happy. We run over. They bring him a bone. Me they'll ask: "What if the bandits come?" "What'll they get off me? What'll they take? My soul? Because that's all I have." They're good boys. They laugh. They brought me some batteries for my radio, now I listen to it. I like Lyudmilla Zykina, but she's not singing as much anymore. Maybe she's old now, like me. My man used to say—he used to say, "The dance is over, put the violin back in the case."

I'll tell you how I found my kitty. I lost my Vaska. I waited a day, two days, then a month. So that was that. I was all alone. No one even to talk to. I walked around the village, going into other people's yards, calling out: Vaska. Murka. Vaska! Murka! At first there were a lot of them running around, and then they disappeared somewhere. Death doesn't care. The earth takes everyone. So I'm walking, and walking. For two days. On the third day I see him under the store. We exchange glances. He's happy, I'm happy. But he doesn't say anything. "All right," I say, "let's go home." But he sits there, meowing. So then I say: "What'll you do here by yourself? The wolves will eat you. They'll tear you apart. Let's go. I have eggs, I have some lard." But how do I explain it to him? Cats don't understand human language, then how come he understood me? I walk ahead, and he runs behind me. Meowing. "I'll cut you off some lard." Meow. "We'll live together the two of us." Meow. "I'll call you Vaska, too." Meow. And we've been living together two winters now.

At night I'll dream that someone's been calling me. The neighbor's voice: "Zina!" Then it's quiet. And again: "Zina!"

I get bored sometimes, and then I cry.

I go to the cemetery. My mom's there. My little daughter. She burned up with typhus during the war. Right after we took her to the cemetery, buried her, the sun came out from the clouds. And shone and shone. Like: you should go and dig her up. My husband is there. Fedya. I sit with them all. I sigh a little. You can talk to the dead just like you can talk to the living. Makes no difference to me. I can hear the one and the other. When you're alone . . . And when you're sad. When you're very sad.

Ivan Prohorovich Gavrilenko, he was a teacher, he lived right next to the cemetery. He moved to the Crimea, his son was there. Next to him was Pyotr Ivanovich Miuskiy. He drove a tractor. He was a Stakhanovite, back then everyone was aching to be a Stakhanovite. He had magic hands. He could make lace out of wood. His house, it was the size of the whole village. Oh, I felt so bad, and my blood boiled, when they tore it down. They buried it. The officer was yelling: "Don't think of it, grandma! It's on a hot-spot!" Meanwhile he's drunk. I come over—Pyotr's crying. "Go on, grandma, it's all right." He told me to go. And the next house is Misha Mikhalev's, he heated the kettles on the farm. He died fast. Left here, and died right away. Next to his house was Stepa Bykhov's, he was a zoologist. It burned down! Bad people burned it down at night. Stepa didn't live long. He's buried somewhere in the Mogilev region. During the war—we lost so many people! Vassily Makarovich Kovalev. Maksim Nikoforenko. They used to live, they were happy. On holidays they'd sing, dance. Play the harmonica. And now, it's like a prison. Sometimes I'll close my eyes and go through the village—well, I say to them, what radiation?

There's a butterfly flying, and bees are buzzing. And my Vaska's catching mice. [*Starts crying.*]

Oh Lyubochka, do you understand what I'm telling you, my sorrow? You'll carry it to people, maybe I won't be here anymore. I'll be in the ground. Under the roots . . .

*Zinaida Yevdokimovna Kovalenko, re-settler*

MONOLOGUE ABOUT A WHOLE LIFE  
WRITTEN DOWN ON DOORS

I want to bear witness . . .

It happened ten years ago, and it happens to me again every day.

We lived in the town of Pripyat. In that town.

I'm not a writer. I won't be able to describe it. My mind is not capable of understanding it. And neither is my university degree. There you are: a normal person. A little person. You're just like everyone else—you go to work, you return from work. You get an average salary. Once a year you go on vacation. You're a normal person! And then one day you're suddenly turned into a Chernobyl person. Into an animal, something that everyone's interested in, and that no one knows anything about. You want to be like everyone else, and now you can't. People look at you differently. They ask you: was it scary? How did the station burn? What did you see? And, you know, can you have children? Did your wife leave you? At first we were all turned into animals. The very word "Chernobyl" is like a signal. Everyone turns their head to look at you. He's from there!

That's how it was in the beginning. We didn't just lose a town, we lost our whole lives. We left on the third day. The

reactor was on fire. I remember one of my friends saying, "It smells of reactor." It was an indescribable smell. But the papers were already writing about that. They turned Chernobyl into a house of horrors, although actually they just turned it into a cartoon. I'm only going to tell about what's really mine. My own truth.

It was like this: They announced over the radio that you couldn't take your cats. So we put her in the suitcase. But she didn't want to go, she climbed out. Scratched everyone. You can't take your belongings! All right, I won't take all my belongings, I'll take just one belonging. Just one! I need to take my door off the apartment and take it with me. I can't leave the door. I'll cover the entrance with some boards. Our door—it's our talisman, it's a family relic. My father lay on this door. I don't know whose tradition this is, it's not like that everywhere, but my mother told me that the deceased must be placed to lie on the door of his home. He lies there until they bring the coffin. I sat by my father all night, he lay on this door. The house was open. All night. And this door has little etch-marks on it. That's me growing up. It's marked there: first grade, second grade. Seventh. Before the army. And next to that: how my son grew. And my daughter. My whole life is written down on this door. How am I supposed to leave it?

I asked my neighbor, he had a car: "Help me." He gestured toward his head, like, You're not quite right, are you? But I took it with me, that door. At night. On a motorcycle. Through the woods. It was two years later, when our apartment had already been looted and emptied. The police were chasing me. "We'll shoot! We'll shoot!" They thought I was a thief. That's how I stole the door from my own home.

I took my daughter and my wife to the hospital. They had black spots all over their bodies. These spots would appear,

then disappear. About the size of a five-kopek coin. But nothing hurt. They did some tests on them. I asked for the results. "It's not for you," they said. I said, "Then for who?"

Back then everyone was saying: "We're going to die, we're going to die. By the year 2000, there won't be any Belarussians left." My daughter was six years old. I'm putting her to bed, and she whispers in my ear: "Daddy, I want to live, I'm still little." And I had thought she didn't understand anything.

Can you picture seven little girls shaved bald in one room? There were seven of them in the hospital room . . . But enough! That's it! When I talk about it, I have this feeling, my heart tells me—you're betraying them. Because I need to describe it like I'm a stranger. My wife came home from the hospital. She couldn't take it. "It'd be better for her to die than to suffer like this. Or for me to die, so that I don't have to watch anymore." No, enough! That's it! I'm not in any condition. No.

We put her on the door . . . on the door that my father lay on. Until they brought a little coffin. It was small, like the box for a large doll.

I want to bear witness: my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us to forget about it.

*Nikolai Fomich Kalugin, father*

#### MONOLOGUES BY THOSE WHO RETURNED

*The village of Eely Eereg, in the Narovlyansk region, in the Gomel oblast.*

*Speaking: Anna Pavlovna Artyushenko, Eva Adamovna Artyushenko, Vastly Nikolaevich Artyushenko, Sojya Nikolaevna Moroz, Nadezhda*



*Borisovna Nikolaenko, Aleksandr Fedorovich Nikolaenko, Mikhail Martynovich Lis.*

"And we lived through everything, survived everything . . ."

"Oh, I don't even want to remember it. It's scary. They chased us out, the soldiers chased us. The big military machines rolled in. The all-terrain ones. One old man—he was already on the ground. Dying. Where was he going to go? 'Til just get up,' he was crying, 'and walk to the cemetery. I'll do it myself.' What'd they pay us for our homes? What? Look at how pretty it is here! Who's going to pay us for this beauty? It's a resort zone!"

"Planes, helicopters—there was so much noise. The trucks with trailers. Soldiers. Well, I thought, the war's begun. With the Chinese or the Americans."

"My husband came home from the kolkhoz meeting, he says, 'Tomorrow we get evacuated.' And I say: 'What about the potatoes? We didn't dig them out yet. We didn't get a chance.' Our neighbor knocks on the door, and we sit down for a drink. We have a drink and they start cursing the kolkhoz chairman. 'We're not going, period. We lived through the war, now it's radiation.' Even if we have to bury ourselves, we're not going!"

"At first we thought, we're all going to die in two to three months. That's what they told us. They propagandized us. Scared us. Thank God—we're alive."

"Thank God! Thank God!"

"No one knows what's in the other world. It's better here. More familiar."

"We were leaving—I took some earth from my mother's grave, put it in a little sack. Got down on my knees: 'Forgive us for leaving you.' I went there at night and I wasn't scared. People were writing their names on the houses. On the wood. On the fences. On the asphalt."

"The soldiers killed the dogs. Just shot them. Bakh-bakh! After that I can't listen to something that's alive and screaming."

"I was a brigade leader at the kolkhoz. Forty-five years old. I felt sorry for people. We took our deer to Moscow for an exhibition, the kolkhoz sent us. We brought a pin back and a red certificate. People spoke to me with respect. 'Vasily Nikolaevich. Nikoleavich.' And who am I here? Just an old man in a little house. I'll die here, the women will bring me water, they'll heat the house. I felt sorry for people. I saw women walking from the fields at night singing, and I knew they wouldn't get anything. Just some sticks on payday. But they're singing . . ."

"Even if it's poisoned with radiation, it's still my home. There's no place else they need us. Even a bird loves its nest . . ."

"I'll say more: I lived at my son's on the seventh floor. I'd come up to the window, look down, and cross myself. I thought I heard a horse. A rooster. I felt terrible. Sometimes I'd dream about my yard: I'd tie the cow up and milk it and milk it. I wake up. I don't want to get up. I'm still there. Sometimes I'm here, sometimes there."

"During the day we lived in the new place, and at night we lived at home—in our dreams."

"The nights are very long here in the winter. We'll sit, sometimes, and count: who's died?"

"My husband was in bed for two months. He didn't say anything, didn't answer me. He was mad. I'd walk around the yard, come back: 'Old man, how are you?' He looks up at my voice, and that's already better. As long as he was in the house. When a person's dying, you can't cry. You'll interrupt his dying, he'll have to keep struggling. I took a candle from the closet and put it in his hand. He took it and he was breathing. I can see his eyes are dull. I didn't cry. I asked for just one thing: 'Say hello to our daughter and to my dear mother.' I prayed that we'd go together. Some gods would have done it, but He didn't let me die. I'm alive . . ."

"Girls! Don't cry. We were always on the front lines. We were Stakhanovites. We lived through Stalin, through the war! If I didn't laugh and comfort myself, I'd have hanged myself long ago."

"My mother taught me once—you take an icon and turn it upside-down, so that it hangs like that three days. No matter where you are, you'll always come home. I had two cows and two calves, five pigs, geese, chicken. A dog. I'll take my head in my hands and just walk around the yard. And apples, so many apples! Everything's gone, all of it, like that, gone!"

"I washed the house, bleached the stove. You need to leave some bread on the table and some salt, a little plate and three spoons."

As many spoons as there are souls in the house. All so we could come back."

"And the chickens had black cockscombs, not red ones, because of the radiation. And you couldn't make cheese. We lived a month without cheese and cottage cheese. The milk didn't go sour—it curdled into powder, white powder. Because of the radiation."

"I had that radiation in my garden. The whole garden went white, white as white can be, like it was covered with something. Chunks of something. I thought maybe someone brought it from the forest."

"We didn't want to leave. The men were all drunk, they were throwing themselves under cars. The big Party bosses were walking to all the houses and begging people to go. Orders: 'Don't take your belongings!'"

"The cattle hadn't had water in three days. No feed. That's it! A reporter came from the paper. The drunken milkmaids almost killed him."

"The chief is walking around my house with the soldiers. Trying to scare me: 'Come out or we'll burn it down! Boys! Give me the gas can.' I was running around—grabbing a blanket, grabbing a pillow."

"During the war you hear the guns all night hammering, rattling. We dug a hole in the forest. They'd bomb and bomb. Burned everything—not just the houses, but the gardens, the cherry trees, everything. Just as long as there's no war. That's what I'm scared of."

"They asked the Armenian broadcaster: 'Maybe there are Chernobyl apples?' 'Sure, but you have to bury the core really deep.'"

"They gave us a new house. Made of stone. But, you know, we didn't hammer in a single nail in seven years. It wasn't ours. It was foreign. My husband cried and cried. All week he works on the kolkhoz on the tractor, waits for Sunday, then on Sunday he lies against the wall and wails away . . ."

"No one's going to fool us anymore, we're not moving anywhere. There's no store, no hospital. No electricity. We sit next to a kerosene lamp and under the moonlight. And we like it! Because we're home."

"In town my daughter-in-law followed me around the apartment and wiped down the door handle, the chair. And it was all bought with my money, all the furniture and the Zhiguli, too, with the money the government gave me for the house and the cow. As soon as the money's finished, Mom's not needed anymore."

"Our kids took the money. Inflation took the rest. You can buy a kilo of nice candy with the money they gave us for our homes, although maybe now it wouldn't be enough."

"I walked for two weeks. I had my cow with me. They wouldn't let me in the house. I slept in the forest."

"They're afraid of us. They say we're infectious. Why did God punish us? He's mad? We don't live like people, we don't live according to His laws anymore. That's why people are killing one another."

"My nephews would come during the summer. The first summer they didn't come, they were afraid. But now they come. They take food, too, whatever you give them. 'Grandma,' they say, 'did you read the book about Robinson Crusoe?' He lived alone like us. Without people around. I brought half a pack of matches with me. An axe and a shovel. And now I have lard, and eggs, and milk—it's all mine. The only thing is sugar—can't plant that. But we have all the land we want! You can plow 100 hectares if you want. And no government, no bosses. No one gets in your way."

"The cats came back with us too. And the dogs. We all came back together. The soldiers didn't want to let us in. The riot troops. So at night—through the forest—like the partisans."

"We don't need anything from the government. Just leave us alone, is all we want. We don't need a store, we don't need a bus. We walk to get our bread. Twenty kilometers. Just leave us alone. We're all right by ourselves."

"We came back all together, three families. And everything here is looted: the stove is smashed, the windows, they took the doors off. The lamps, light switches, outlets—they took everything. Nothing left. I put everything back together with these hands. How else!"

"When the wild geese scream, that means spring is here. Time to sow the fields. And we're sitting in empty houses. At least the roofs are solid."

"The police were yelling. They'd come in cars, and we'd run into the forest. Like we did from the Germans. One time

they came with the prosecutor, he huffed and puffed, they were going to put us up on Article 10. I said: 'Let them give me a year in jail. I'll serve it and come back here.' Their job is to yell, ours is to stay quiet. I have a medal—I was the best harvester on the kolkhoz. And he's scaring me with Article 10."

"Every day I'd dream of my house. I'm coming back to it: digging in the garden, or making my bed. And every time I find something: a shoe, or a little chick. And everything was for the best, it made me happy. I'd be home soon . . ."

"At night we pray to God, during the day to the police. If you ask me, 'Why are you crying?' I don't know why I'm crying. I'm happy to be living in my own house."

"We lived through everything, survived everything . . ."

"I got in to see a doctor. 'Sweetie,' I say, 'my legs don't move. The joints hurt.' 'You need to give up your cow, grandma. The milk's poisoned.' 'Oh, no,' I say, 'my legs hurt, my knees hurt, but I won't give up the cow. She feeds me.'"

"I have seven children. They all live in cities. I'm alone here. I get lonely, I'll sit under their photographs. I'll talk a little. Just by myself. All by myself. I painted the house myself, it took six cans of paint. And that's how I live. I raised four sons and three daughters. And my husband died young. Now I'm alone."

"I met a wolf one time. He stood there, I stood there. We looked at each other. He went over to the side of the road, and I ran. My hat rose up I was so scared."

"Any animal is afraid of a human. If you don't touch him, he'll walk around you. Used to be, you'd be in the forest and you'd hear human voices, you'd run toward them. Now people hide from one another. God save me from meeting a person in the forest!"

"Everything that's written in the Bible comes to pass. It's written there about our kolkhoz, too. And about Gorbachev. That there'll be a big boss with a birthmark and that a great empire will crumble. And then the Day of Judgment will come. Everyone who lives in cities, they'll die, and one person from the village will remain. This person will be happy to find a human footprint! Not the person himself, but just his footprints."

"We have a lamp for light. A kerosene lamp. Ah-a. The women already told you. If we kill a wild boar, we take it to the basement or bury it ourselves. Meat can last for three days underground. The vodka we make ourselves."

"I have two bags of salt. We'll be all right without the government! Plenty of logs—there's a whole forest around us. The house is warm. The lamp is burning. It's nice! I have a goat, a kid, three pigs, fourteen chickens. Land—as much as I want; grass—as much as I want. There's water in the well. And freedom! We're happy. This isn't a kolkhoz anymore, it's a commune. We need to buy another horse. And then we won't need anyone at all. Just one horsey."

"This one reporter said, We didn't just return home, we went back a hundred years. We use a hammer for reaping, and a sickle for mowing. We flail wheat right on the asphalt."



"During the war they burned us, and we lived underground. In bunkers. They killed my brother and two nephews. All told, in my family we lost seventeen people. My mom was crying and crying. There was an old lady walking through the villages, scavenging. 'You're mourning?' she asked my mom. 'Don't mourn. A person who gives his life for others, that person is holy.' And I can do anything for my Motherland. Only killing I can't do. I'm a teacher, and I taught my kids to love others. That's how I taught them: 'Good will always triumph.' Kids are little, their souls are pure."

"Chernobyl is like the war of all wars. There's nowhere to hide. Not underground, not underwater, not in the air."

"We turned off the radio right away. We don't know any of the news, but life is peaceful. We don't get upset. People come, they tell us the stories—there's war everywhere. And like that socialism is finished and we live under capitalism. And the Tsar is coming back. Is that true?"

"Sometimes a wild boar will come into the garden, sometimes a fox. But people only rarely. Just police."

"You should come see my house, too."

"And mine. It's been a while since I had guests."

"I cross myself and pray: Dear God! Two times the police came and broke my stove. They took me away on a tractor. And me, I came back! They should let people in—they'd all come crawling back on their knees. They scattered our sorrow all over the globe. Only the dead come back now. The dead

are allowed to. But the living can only come at night, through the forest."

"Everyone's rearing to get back for the harvest. That's it. Everyone wants to have his own back. The police have lists of people they'll let back, but kids under eighteen can't come. People will come and they're so glad just to stand next to their house. In their own yard next to the apple tree. At first they'll go cry at the cemetery, then they go to their yards. And they cry there, too, and pray. They leave candles. They hang them on their fences. Like on the little fences at the cemetery. Sometimes they'll even leave a wreath at the house. A white towel on the gate. The old woman reads a prayer: 'Brothers and sisters! Have patience!'"

"People take eggs, and rolls, and whatever else, to the cemetery. Everyone sits with their families. They call them: 'Sis, I've come to see you. Come have lunch.' Or: 'Mom, dear mom. Dad, dead dad.' They call the souls down from heaven. Those who had people die this year cry, and those whose people died earlier, don't. They talk, they remember. Everyone prays. And those who don't know how to pray, also pray."

"The only time I don't cry is at night. You can't cry about the dead at night. When the sun goes down, I stop crying. Remember their souls, oh Lord. And let their kingdom come."

"If you don't play, you lose. There was a Ukrainian woman at the market selling big red apples. 'Come get your apples! Chernobyl apples!' Someone told her not to advertise that, no one will buy them. 'Don't worry!' she says. 'They buy them anyway. Some need them for their mother-in-law, some for their boss.'"

"There was one guy, he came back here from jail. Under the amnesty. He lived in the next village. His mother died, the house was buried. He came over to us. 'Lady, give me some bread and some lard. I'll chop wood for you.' He gets by."

"The country is a mess—and people come back here. They run from the others. From the law. And they live alone. Even strangers. They're tough, there's no friendliness in their eyes. If they get drunk, they're liable to burn something down. At night we sleep with axes and pitchforks under our beds. In the kitchen next to the door, there's a hammer."

"There was a rabid fox here during the spring—when they're rabid they become tender, real tender. But they can't look at water. Just put a bucket of water in your yard, and you're fine. She'll run away."

"There's no television. No movies. There's one thing to do—look out the window. Well, and to pray, of course. There used to be Communism instead of God, but now there's just God. So we pray."

"We're people who've served our time. I'm a partisan, I was with the partisans a year. And when we beat back the Germans, I was on the front. I wrote my name on the Reichstag: Artyushenko. I took off my overcoat to build Communism. And where is this Communism?"

"We have Communism here—we live like brothers and sisters . . ."

"The year the war started, there weren't any mushrooms or any berries. Can you believe that? The earth itself felt the

catastrophe. 1941. Oh, how I remember it! I've never forgotten the war. There was a rumor that they'd brought over all the POWs, if you recognized yours you could take him. All our women ran over! That night some brought home their men, and others brought home other men. But there was one scoundrel . . . He lived like everyone else, he was married, had two kids—he told the commandant that we'd taken in Ukrainians. Vasko, Sashko. The next day the Germans come on their motorcycles. We beg them, we get down on our knees. But they took them out of the village and shot them with their automatics. Nine men. And they were young, they were so good! Vasko, Sashko . . ."

"The boss-men come, they yell and yell, but we're deaf and mute. And we've lived through everything, survived everything . . ."

"But I'm talking about something else—I think about it a lot. At the cemetery. Some people pray loudly, others quietly. And some people say: 'Open up, yellow sand. Open up, dark night.' The forest might do it, but the sand never will. I'll ask gently: 'Ivan. Ivan, how should I live?' But he doesn't answer me anything, one way or the other."

"I don't have my own to cry about, so I cry about everyone. For strangers. I'll go to the graves, I'll talk to them."

"I'm not afraid of anyone—not the dead, not the animals, no one. My son comes in from the city, he gets mad at me. 'Why are you sitting here! What if some looter tries to kill you?' But what would he want from me? There's some pillows. In a simple house, pillows are your main furniture. If a thief tries to come in, the minute he peaks his head through the window, I'll chop

it off with the axe. That's how we do it here. Maybe there is no God, or maybe there's someone else, but there's someone up there. And I'm alive."

"Why did that Chernobyl break down? Some people say, It was the scientists' fault. They grabbed God by the beard, and now he's laughing. But we're the ones who pay for it."

"We never did live well. Or in peace. We were always afraid. Just before the war they'd grab people. They came in black cars and took three of our men right off the fields, and they still haven't returned. We were always afraid."

"But now we're free. The harvest is rich. We live like barons."

"The only thing I have is a cow. I'd hand her in, if only they don't make another war. How I hate war!"

"Here we have the war of wars—Chernobyl."

"And the cuckoo is cuckooing, the magpies are chattering, roes are running. Will they reproduce—who knows? One morning I looked out in the garden, the boars were digging. They were wild. You can resettle people, but the elk and the boar, you can't. And water doesn't listen to borders, it goes along the earth, and under the earth."

"It hurts, girls. Oh, it hurts! Let's be quiet. They bring your coffin quietly. Careful. Don't want to bang against the door or the bed, don't want to touch anything or knock it over. Otherwise you have to wait for the next dead person. Remember their souls, oh Lord. May their kingdom come."

And let prayers be said for them where they're buried. We have everything here—graves. Graves everywhere. The dump trucks are working, and the bulldozers. The houses are falling. The gravediggers are toiling away. They buried the school, the headquarters, the baths. It's the same world, but the people are different. One thing I don't know is, Do people have souls? What kind? And how do they all fit in the next world? My grandpa took two days to die, I was hiding behind the stove and waiting: how's it going to fly out of his body? I went to milk the cow—I come back in, call him, he's lying there with his eyes open. His soul fled already. Or did nothing happen? And then how will we meet?"

"One old woman, she promises that we're immortal. We pray. Oh Lord, give us the strength to survive the weariness of our lives."

#### MONOLOGUE ABOUT WHAT RADIATION LOOKS LIKE

My first scare was—some mornings in the garden and the yard we'd find these strangled moles. Who strangled them? Usually they don't come out from underground. Something was chasing them out. I swear on the Cross!

My son calls from Gomel: "Are the May bugs out?"

"No bugs, there aren't even any maggots. They're hiding."

"What about worms?"

"If you'd find a worm in the rain, your chicken'd be happy. But there aren't any."

"That's the first sign. If there aren't any May bugs and no worms, that means strong radiation."

"What's radiation?"

"Mom, that's a kind of death. Tell Grandma you need to leave. You'll stay with us."

"But we haven't even planted the garden."

If everyone was smart, then who'd be the dumb ones? It's on fire—so it's on fire. A fire is temporary, no one was scared of it then. They didn't know about the atom. I swear on the Cross! And we were living next door to the nuclear plant, thirty kilometers as the bird flies, forty on the highway. We were satisfied. You could buy a ticket and go there—they had everything, like in Moscow. Cheap salami, and always meat in the stores. Whatever you want. Those were good times!

Sometimes I turn on the radio. They scare us and scare us with the radiation. But our lives have gotten better since the radiation came. I swear! Look around: they brought oranges, three kinds of salami, whatever you want. And to the village! My grandchildren have been all over the world. The littlest just came back from France, that's where Napoleon attacked from once—"Grandma, I saw a pineapple!" My nephew, her brother, they took him to Berlin for the doctors. That's where Hitler started from on his tanks. It's a new world. Everything's different. Is that the radiation's fault, or what?

What's it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? What color is it? Some people say it has no color and no smell, and other people say that it's black. Like earth. But if it's colorless, then it's like God. God is everywhere, but you can't see Him. They scare us! The apples are hanging in the garden, the leaves are on the trees, the potatoes are in the fields. I don't think there was any Chernobyl, they made it up. They tricked people. My sister left with her husband. Not far from here, twenty kilometers. They lived there two months, and the neighbor comes running: "Your cow sent radiation to my cow! She's falling down."

"How'd she send it?" "Through the air, that's how, like dust. It flies." Just fairy tales! Stories and more stories.

But here's what did happen. My grandfather kept bees, five nests of them. They didn't come out for two days, not a single one. They just stayed in their nests. They were waiting. My grandfather didn't know about the explosion, he was running all over the yard: what is this? What's going on? Something's happened to nature. And their system, as our neighbor told us, he's a teacher, it's better than ours, better tuned, because they heard it right away. The radio wasn't saying anything, and the papers weren't either, but the bees knew. They came out on the third day. Now, wasps—we had wasps, we had a wasps' nest above our porch, no one touched it, and then that morning they weren't there anymore—not dead, not alive. They came back six years later. Radiation: it scares people and it scares animals. And birds. And the trees are scared, too, but they're quiet. They won't say anything. It's one big catastrophe, for everyone. But the Colorado beetles are out and about, just as they always were, eating our potatoes, they scarf it down to the leaf, they're used to poison. Just like us.

But if I think about it—in every house, someone's died. On that street, on the other side of the river—all the women are without men, there aren't any men, all the men are dead. On my street, my grandfather's still alive, and there's one more. God takes the men earlier. Why? No one can tell us. But if you think about it—if only the men were left, without any of us, that wouldn't be any good either. They drink, oh do they drink! From sadness. And all our women are empty, their female parts are ruined in one in three of them, they say. In the old and the young, too. Not all of them managed to give birth in time. If I think about it—it just went by, like it never was.

What else will I say? You have to live. That's all.



And also this. Before, we churned our butter ourselves, our cream, made cottage cheese, regular cheese. We boiled milk dough. Do they eat that in town? You pour water on some flour and mix it in, you get these torn bits of dough, then you put these in the pot with some boiled water. You boil that and pour in some milk. My mom showed it to me and she'd say: "And you, children, will learn this. I learned it from my mother." We drank juice from birch and maple trees. We steamed beans on the stove. We made sugared cranberries. And during the war we gathered stinging-nettle and goose-foot. We got fat from hunger, but we didn't die. There were berries in the forest, and mushrooms. But now that's all gone. I always thought that what was boiling in your pot would never change, but it's not like that. You can't have the milk, and the beans either. They don't let you eat the mushrooms or the berries. They say you have to put the meat in water for three hours. And that you have to pour off the water twice from the potatoes when you're boiling them. Well, you can't wrestle with God. You have to live. They scare us, that even our water you can't drink. But how can you do without water? Every person has water inside her. There's no one without water. Even rocks have water in them. So, maybe, water is eternal? All life comes from water. Who can you ask? No one will say. People pray to God, but they don't ask him. You just have to live.

*Anna Petrovna Eadaeva, re-settler*

#### MONOLOGUE ABOUT A SONG WITHOUT WORDS

I'll get down on my knees to beg you—please, find our Anna Sushko. She lived in our village. In Kozhushki. Her name is Anna Sushko. I'll tell you how she looked, and you'll type it

up. She has a hump, and she was mute from birth. She lived by herself. She was sixty. During the time of the transfer they put her in an ambulance and drove her off somewhere. She never learned how to read, so we never got any letters from her. The lonely and the sick were put in special places. They hid them. But no one knows where. Write this down . . .

The whole village felt sorry for her. We took care of her, like she was a little girl. Someone would chop wood for her, someone else would bring milk. Someone would sit in the house with her of an evening, heat the stove. Two years we all lived in other places, then we came back to our houses. Tell her that her house is still there. The roof is still there, the windows. Everything that's broken or been stolen, we can fix. If you just tell us her address, where she's living and suffering, we'll go there and bring her back. So that she won't die of sorrow. I beg you. An innocent spirit is suffering among strangers . . .

There's one other thing about her, I forgot. When something hurts, she sings this song. There aren't any words, it's just her voice. She can't talk. When something hurts, she just sings: a-a-a. It makes you feel sorry.

*Mariya Volchok, neighbor*

### THREE MONOLOGUES ABOUT A HOMELAND

*Speaking: The K. family—mother and daughter, plus a man who doesn't speak a word (the daughter's husband).*

*Daughter:*

At first I cried day and night. I wanted to cry and talk. We're from Tajikistan, from Dushanbe. There's a war there.

I shouldn't be talking about this now. I'm expecting—I'm pregnant. But I'll tell you. They come onto the bus one day to check our passports. Just regular people, except with automatic weapons. They look through the documents and then push the men out of the bus. And then, right there, right outside the door, they shoot them. They don't even take them aside. I would never have believed it. But I saw it. I saw how they took out two men, one was so young, handsome, and he was yelling something at them. In Tajik, in Russian. He was yelling that his wife just gave birth, he has three little kids at home. But they just laughed, they were young, too, very young. Just regular people, except with automatic weapons. He fell. He kissed their sneakers. Everyone was quiet, the whole bus. Then we drove off, and we heard: ta-ta-ta. I was afraid to look back. *[Starts crying.]*

I'm not supposed to be talking about this. I'm expecting a baby. But I'll tell you. Just one thing, though: don't write my last name. I'm Svetlana. We still have relatives there. They'll kill them. I used to think we'd never have any more wars. Such a big country, I thought, my beloved country. The biggest! During Soviet times they'd tell us that we were living poorly and humbly because there had been a big war, and the people suffered, but now that we have a mighty army, no one will ever touch us again. No one will defeat us! But then we started shooting one another. It's not a war like there used to be, like my grandfather remembered, he marched all the way to Germany. Now it's a neighbor shooting his neighbor, boys who went to school together, and now they kill each other, and rape girls that they sat next to in school. Everyone's gone crazy.

Our husbands are silent. The men here are silent. They won't say anything to you. People yelled at them as they were leaving, that they were running away just like women. That they were cowards, betraying their motherland. But is that bad?

Is it a bad thing not to be able to shoot? My husband is a Tajik, he was supposed to go and kill people. But he said: "Let's leave. I don't want to go to war. I don't need an automatic." That's his land, but he left, because he doesn't want to kill another Tajik, the same kind of Tajik as he is. But he's lonely here, his brothers are all still there, fighting. One already got killed. His mother lives there. His sisters. We rode here on the Dushanbe train, the windows were broken, it was cold and unheated. No one was shooting, but they threw rocks at the train, broke the windows. "Russians, get out! Occupiers! Quit robbing us!" But he's a Tajik, and he had to listen to all this. And our kids heard it. Our daughter was in first grade, she was in love with a boy, a Tajik. She came home from school: "Mom, what am I, a Tajik or Russian?" How do you explain?

I'm not supposed to be talking about this . . . but I'll tell you. The Pamir Tajiks are fighting the Kulyab Tajiks. They're all Tajiks, they have the same Koran, the same faith, but the Kulyabs kill the Pamirs, and the Pamirs kill the Kulyabs. First they'd go out into the city square, yelling, praying. I wanted to understand what was happening, so I went too. I asked one of the old men: "What are you protesting against?" They said: "Against the Parliament. They told us this was a very bad person, this Parliament." Then the square emptied and they started shooting. All of a sudden it became a different country, an unrecognizable country. The East! And before that we thought we were living on our own land. By Soviet laws. There are so many Russian graves there, but there's no one to cry at them. They graze livestock on the Russian cemeteries. And goats. Old Russian men wander around, going through trash cans . . .

I worked in a maternity ward as a nurse. I had night duty. This woman is giving birth, it's a difficult birth, and she's yelling—suddenly an orderly runs in, she's not wearing gloves, no

robe. What's going on? To come into the maternity ward like that? "Girls, there are people! They're wearing masks, they have guns." Then they come in: "Give us the drugs! And the alcohol!" "There aren't any drugs or alcohol." They put the doctor up against the wall—give it here! And then the woman who's giving birth yells with relief, happily. And the baby starts crying, it's just—just come out. I lean over it to look, I can't even remember now whether it was a boy or a girl. It didn't have a name or anything yet. And these robbers say to us: what is it, a Kulyab or a Pamir? Not, boy or girl, but *Kulyab* or *Pamir*! We don't say anything. They start yelling: "What is it?" We don't say anything. So they grab the little baby, it's been on this earth for maybe five, ten minutes, and they throw it out the window. I'm a nurse, I'd never seen a baby die before. And here—I'm not supposed to remember this now. [*Starts crying.*] How are you supposed to live after that? How are you supposed to give birth? [*Cries.*]

After that, in the maternity ward, the skin started coming off my hands. My veins swelled up. And I was so indifferent to everything. I didn't want to get out of bed. [*Cries*] I'd get to the hospital and then turn around. By then I was pregnant myself. I couldn't give birth there. So we came here. To Belarus. To Narovlya. Small, quiet town. And don't ask me anything else. I've told you everything. [*Cries*] Wait. I want you to know. I'm not afraid of God. I'm afraid of man. At first we asked people: "Where is the radiation?" "See where you're standing? That's where it is." So it's everywhere? [*Cries.*] There are many empty houses. People left. They were scared.

But I'm not scared here the way I was there. We were left without a homeland, we're no-one's. The Germans all went back to Germany, the Tatars to the Crimea, when they were allowed to, but no one needs Russians. What are we supposed to hope for? What do we wait for? Russia never saved

its people, because it's so big, it's endless. And to be honest, I don't feel like Russia is my homeland. We were raised differently, our homeland is the Soviet Union. Now it's impossible to know how you're supposed to save yourself. At least here no one's playing with guns, and that's good. Here they gave us a house, and they gave my husband a job. We wrote a letter to our friends back home, and they came yesterday. For good. They came at night and they were afraid to come out of the train station, they stayed there all night, sitting on their suitcases, not letting their kids out. And then they see: people are walking down the street, laughing, smoking. They showed them our street, escorted them right to our house. They couldn't believe it, because back there we stopped living normal lives. Here they got up in the morning and went to the store, they saw butter, and cream—and right there, in the store, they told us this themselves, they bought five bottles of cream and drank them right there. People were looking at them like they were crazy. But they hadn't seen cream or butter in two years. You can't buy bread in Tajikistan. There's a war. It's impossible to explain to someone who hasn't seen what it's like.

My soul was dead there. I would have given birth to something without a soul. There aren't many people here, and the houses are empty. We live near the forest. I don't like it when there are a lot of people. Like at the train station. Or during the war. *[Breaks into tears completely and stops talking.]*

*Mother:*

The war—that's the only thing I can talk about. Why did we come here? To Chernobyl? Because no one's going to chase us out of here. No one will kick us off this land. It's not anyone's land now. God took it back. People left it.

In Dushanbe I was deputy chief of the train station. There was one other deputy, a Tajik. Our kids grew up together, went to school, we all got together on the holidays: New Year's, May Day. We drank beer together, ate/>0/together. He'd call me "sister, my sister, my Russian sister." And then one day he comes in, we sat in the same office, and he stops in front of my desk and yells:

"When are you going back to your Russia, huh? This is our land!"

I thought I'd go crazy. I jumped up at him.

"Where's your coat from?"

"Leningrad," he said. He was surprised.

"Take off that Russian coat, you son-of-a-bitch!" And I tore the coat off him. "Where's your hat from? You bragged to me they sent it from Siberia! Off with it, you! And the shirt! The pants! Those were made in Moscow! They're Russian, too!"

I'd have stripped him to his underwear. He was a big guy, I came up to his shoulder, but I'd have torn everything off him. People were already gathering around. He's crying: "Get away from me, you're crazy!"

"No, give me back everything that's mine, that's Russian! I'll take it all!"

I almost went crazy.

"Give me your socks! Your shoes!"

We worked at night and during the day. Trains were leaving overfilled. People were running. Many Russians left—thousands, tens of thousands. There's still one Russia. I see the Moscow train off at two in the morning, and there are still some kids in the hall from the town of Kurgan-Tyube, they didn't make it to the train. I covered them up, I hid them. Two men come over to me, they've got automatics.

"Oh, boys, what are you doing here?" Meanwhile my heart's beating.

"It's your own fault, all your doors are wide open."

"I was sending off a train. I didn't get a chance to close them."

"Who are those kids over there?"

"Those are ours, from Dushanbe."

"Maybe they're from Kurgan? They're Kulyabs?"

"No, no. They're ours."

So they left. And if they'd opened the hall? They'd have . . . And me, too, while they were at it, a bullet to the head. There's only one government there—the man with the gun. In the morning I put the kids on the train to Astrakhan, I told the conductors to transport them like they do watermelons, to not open the door. [*Silent. Then cries for a long time.*] Is there anything more frightening than people? [*Silent again.*]

One time, when I was here already, I was walking down the street and I started looking back, because I thought someone was following me. Not a day went by there when I didn't think of death. I always left the house wearing clean clothes, a freshly laundered blouse, skirt, underthings. Just in case I got killed. Now I walk through the forest by myself and I'm not afraid of anyone. There aren't any people in the forest, not a soul. I walk and wonder whether all of that really happened to me or not? Sometimes I'll run into some hunters: they have rifles, a dog, and a dosimeter. They also have guns, but they're not like the others, they don't hunt people. If I hear gunfire, I know they're shooting some crows or chasing off a rabbit. [*Silent*] So I'm not scared here. I can't be afraid of the earth, the water. I'm afraid of people. Over there he goes to the market and buys an automatic weapon for a hundred dollars.

I remember one guy, a Tajik, I saw him chasing this other guy. He was chasing another person! The way he was running, the way he was breathing, I could tell he wanted to



kill him. But the other one got away. He hid. And this one comes back, he walks past me and says, "Ma'am, where do I get some water around here?" He's so casual about it, like nothing happened. We had a bucket of water at the station, I showed it to him. Then I looked him in the eye and I said: "Why are you chasing one another? Why are you killing?" And he looked like he felt ashamed. "All right, ma'am, not so loud." But when they're together, they're different. If there'd been three of them, or even two, they'd have put me up against the wall. When you're one-on-one you can still talk to a person.

We got to Tashkent from Dushanbe, but we had to go further, to Minsk. There weren't any tickets—none! It's very clever the way they have it set up, until you've given someone a bribe and you're on the plane, there are endless problems: it's too heavy, or too much volume, you can't have this, you have to put that away. They made me put everything on the scale twice, until I realized what was happening and gave them some money. "Should have done that from the start, instead of arguing so much." Everything's so simple! Our container, it weighed two tons, they made us unload it. "You're coming from a war zone, maybe you've got some firearms in there? Marijuana?" They kept us there two nights. I went to the station boss but in the waiting room I met a good woman, she explained things to me: "You won't get anywhere here, you'll demand fairness, meanwhile they'll throw your container in a field and take everything you own." So what do we do? We spent the whole night picking through it: clothes, some mattresses, an old refrigerator, two bags of books. "You're shipping valuable books?" We looked: Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*. We laughed. "How many refrigerators do you have?" "Just one, and that one's been

broken." "Why didn't you bring declarations?" "How were we supposed to know? It's the first time we've run away from a war." We lost two homelands at once—Tajikistan and the Soviet Union.

I walk through the forest and think. Everyone else is always watching television—what's happening there? How is everyone? But I don't want to.

We had a life . . . a different life. I was considered an important person, I had a military rank, lieutenant colonel of train-based troops. Here I was unemployed until I found work cleaning up at the town council. I wash the floors. This life has passed, and I don't have enough strength for another. Some people here feel sorry for us, others are unhappy—"the refugees are stealing the potatoes, they dig them up at night." My mother said that during the big war people felt sorry for each other more. Recently they found a horse in the forest that had gone wild. It was dead. In another place they found a rabbit. They hadn't been killed, but they were dead. This made everyone worried. But when they found a dead bum, no one worried about that. For some reason everyone's grown used to dead people.

*Lena M.—from Kyrgyzstan. She sits at the entrance to her home as if posing for a photograph. Her five children sit near her, as does their cat, Metelitsa, whom they brought with them: We left like we were leaving a war. We grabbed everything, and the cat followed us to the train station, so we took him, too. We were on the train for twelve days. The last two days all we had left was some canned cabbage salad and boiled water. We guarded the door—with a crowbar, and an axe, and a hammer. I'll put it this way—one night some looters attacked us. They almost killed us. They'll kill you now*

for a television or refrigerator. It was like we were leaving a war, although they're not shooting yet in Kyrgyzstan. There were massacres, even under Gorbachev, in Osh, the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks—but it settled down somehow. But we're Russian, though the Kyrgyz are afraid of it too. You'd be in line for bread and they'd start yelling, "Russians, go home! Kyrgyzstan for the Kyrgyz!" And they'd push you out of line. And then they'd add something in Kyrgyz, like, Here we are, there's not even enough bread for us, and we have to feed them? I don't really know their language very well, I just learned a few words so I could haggle at the market, buy something.

We had a motherland, and now it's gone. What am I? My mother's Ukrainian, my father's Russian. I was born and raised in Kyrgyzstan, and I married a Tatar. So what are my kids? What is their nationality? We're all mixed up, our blood is all mixed together. On our passports, my kids and mine, it says "Russian," but we're not Russian. We're Soviet! But that country—where I was born—no longer exists. The place we called our motherland doesn't exist, and neither does that time, which was also our motherland. We're like bats now. I have five children. The oldest is in eighth grade, and the youngest is in kindergarten. I brought them here. Our country no longer exists, but we do.

I was born there. I grew up there. I helped build a factory, then I worked at the factory. "Go back where you're from; this is all ours." They didn't let me take anything but my kids. "This is all ours." And where is mine? People are fleeing. All the Russians are. The Soviets. No one needs them, and no one is waiting for them.

And I was happy once. All my children were born of love. I gave birth like this: boy, boy boy, and then girl,

girl. I don't want to talk anymore. I'll start crying. [*But she adds a bit more*] We'll wait in Chernobyl. This is our home now. Chernobyl is our home, our motherland. [*She smiles suddenly.*] The birds here are the same as everywhere. And there's still a Lenin statue. [*When we're already at the gate, saying goodbye, she says some more.*] Early one morning the neighbors are hammering away on the house, taking the boards off the windows. I see a woman. I say, "Where are you from?" "From Chechnya." She doesn't say anything more, just starts crying . . .

People ask me, they're surprised, they don't understand. "Why are you killing your children?" Oh, God, where do you find the strength to meet the things that the next day is going to bring? I'm not killing them, I'm saving them. Here I am, forty years old and completely gray. And they're surprised. They don't understand. They say: "Would you bring your kids to a place where there was cholera or the plague?" But that's the plague and that's cholera. This fear that they have here in Chernobyl, I don't know about it. It's not part of my memory.