

Mountain Climbers

Irina Brown squeezes into the booth next to her daughter, Sascha, in the Twin Oaks Diner. Her ex-husband, David sits across from them wearing his standard short sleeve white button down shirt. David and Sascha have hardly touched their scrambled eggs.

“You can’t find your soul? What kind of nonsense is that?” David says to Sascha.

“I need to clear out the rubble in my mind, Papa. I’m having some sort of writer’s block.” Sascha is solid girl, sitting straight-backed, husky like Irina. Three months ago, during a routine pre-college physical she was diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia. For now she is symptom free but has developed an exuberance for life that Irina finds both marvelous and appalling.

“You can’t stop me from going. I’m 18. Nobody can stop me,” says Sascha, talking sideways to David and flashing a tiny private smile at Irina behind her glasses. Last week she cut her blonde hair short, dyed it black and pierced both eyebrows.

“Your white blood count was through the roof. Taking a year off from college to spend six months hiking some Appalachian trail. You’re sick! It’s ludicrous.” Irina rubs her daughter’s thigh. He doesn’t know that she has made the impossible choice to respect Sascha’s wishes not to discuss treatment until after the climb. He’s buried himself in medical research-- chemotherapy, Hydroxyurea, acupuncture, macrobiotics, bone marrow transplants.

As a joke, Sascha, orders a glass of wine with a fake ID. She swears she doesn’t really drink, that she traded the ID for a pair of striped leggings a few weeks ago. When the wine arrives, she takes a cautious sip. Her fingernails are cut to the quick, painted black, the sleeves of her sweater are unraveling.

“Blayt!” She pushes the glass away.

“Just because your mama has a gutter mouth is no excuse for you to do the same.” says David.

“It means mud. Right, Mama?”

“Sure it does.” David turns his gaze to Irina. “She’s being completely unrealistic. She needs to start treatment now, not go on some insane hike.”

“I’m right here, Papa. Talk to me.”

“Your white blood cells will multiply. You’ll go into Blast stage. Sooner or later you won’t be able to fight off infections. A cold becomes pneumonia. Your spleen and liver swell up.”

“Molly and I have been planning this for over a year. Both of you know that.”

David’s eyes suddenly seem wet. “There are alternatives, if you don’t want the chemo.”

“I’m going,” barks Sascha.

Irina grabs her daughter’s forearm and glares at her, the words of the previous fight between David and Sascha, still circling around in her head.

They had been on Irina’s front stoop when Sascha told David that she couldn’t take his crying all the time. David called her unreasonable and the fight escalated . “Why the hell should I care that my daughter is going to die!” he’d yelled. Then Sascha looked at David and said, “Fuck you,” right to his face.

Irina doesn’t know if she’s angrier with Sascha out of sympathy for David, or with David out of sympathy for Sascha. She rubs her arthritic knees.

“Papa,” says Sascha, pleadingly. “I promise if I start feeling sick I’ll take myself off the trail.”

Irina sighs and waves down the waitress. “Please bring my daughter a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream? Her wine is sour.” After 44 years in the states her accent remains.

According to her teachers, Sascha is an extraordinary poet. She has published in two poetry journals, has won high school awards for her poems, and a full scholarship to the University of Iowa. Irina doesn’t understand the half dozen poems that Sascha has shown her. In all honesty, she prefers her mysteries, though she acknowledges her daughter’s talent.

“We’re just asking you to think about it. You’ve never been on a mountain. You’ve never even been camping,” says David.

Irina wants to tell David that Sascha has decorated her bedroom wall with pictures of red blood cells in bright red magic marker (clusters of circles as small as peas and as big as Ritz crackers), but that would be a betrayal. The waitress delivers the hot chocolate.

Sascha nudges her mother to move over. “Mama, it was nice of you to order this, but I have to go. Molly’s meeting me in the parking lot. There are a few last minute supplies we need.”

“What about your hot chocolate? You’ll just let it go to waste?”

“We all know how much you love hot chocolate, Mama.”

Irina shimmies to the end of the booth, leans on the table to stand up.

Sascha swings her backpack over her shoulder. She kisses Irina, then David. “You are my king and I am your princess. Remember, Papa, a king must be brave,” she says.

David looks up at Irina with his hooded puppy eyes. She sits back down. Her knees ache and what Sascha says about David is true. He’s really crying now, tears running down his long thin face.

He was always a man who walked with his head down, hands crammed deep into his pockets. When they met their senior year at Stevens Institute, her name was Irina Nataliya Propkopenko. It took ten years to get pregnant and stay pregnant and another six before David confessed to a one month affair, which gave her the perfect excuse to back out of the marriage and admit to herself she'd married David Brown to escape her own war-saddened parents.

“Why didn't you back me up, Kitty?”

“I promised her I wouldn't discuss the disease, not until the climb is over.”

“You what!”

“Our daughter is remarkably mature. She's arrived at the stage where she doesn't care what other people think, a stage people don't often reach until well into their thirties. She isn't a helpless little girl.”

“Survival rate 85% in adults. 50% in children.”

Irina reassures herself that in the eyes of the medical community Sascha is an adult. She reaches into her pocket to make sure she has the bottle of Percocet, debates whether or not to take another half. David puts his bony elbows on the table and offers his hands.

“I know you're suffering, Kitty. We can be a comfort to each other. We can do this together.”

“I don't want your sentimentality. It doesn't help,” she says. “Here.” She hands him a napkin.

“You and your goddamn nerves of steel,” he says wiping his eyes. He throws some money on the table and skulks away.

Irina sips the hot chocolate and licks the mustache of whipped cream off her lips. “I won't lose her before she's actually gone,” she says aloud but he is already too far away to hear.

It is an 8-hour drive from Ridgewood, New Jersey to Baxter, Maine. In the front seat of their new 2003 SUV, Molly's parents, Howie and Rhonda Blum are engrossed in a steady stream of conversation. Mrs. Blum is a gaunt woman with painted nails and puffy hair streaked every possible shade of red blonde and gray. Mr. Blum is bald with tufts of gray hair around his ears, springing in all directions.

Irina dozes with her head against the car window, imagining the rolling blue hills on an inspirational poster, like the ones on the walls in the waiting room of the hospital where she works. Next to her, Sascha writes in her cloth-covered journal. Molly has her leg draped across Sascha's thigh, earphones clapped over her head. When Irina awakens, Mr. Blum is telling a joke.

Sadie, an elderly Jewish lady, is leaving the garment district to go home from work. Suddenly a man who has been walking towards her stands in front of her, blocks her path, opens up his raincoat and flashes his wares in all their sordid glory. Unruffled, Sadie takes a look and remarks, "This, you call a lining?"

The girls groan.

Still against the window pane Irina spots an antlered deer dart into a forest of sugar maple and chestnut trees. She waits for it to reappear but sees nothing. The thought of her daughter leaving terrifies her. Climbing mountains or tumbling into the arms of a deadly disease? It doesn't matter which. Irina yearns to be taken along.

Though most people hike from Georgia to Maine, the girls are doing it in reverse because they are starting in summer, which means they will encounter the most challenging parts of the hike first. Even with their so-called training (they have been running stairs in Molly's house) they aren't properly prepared. What if one of them breaks an ankle? What if Sascha, in one of her dark moods, has a fight with Molly and storms off on her own? Which is worse? Being

mauled by a brown bear or a pony-tailed backpacker? Irina's worries beat down on her like a blazing sun and she falls back into a hot, fitful sleep.

When her knee brushes against the seat back a jolt of pain awakens her. The sky is the color of bluebells. Purple wildflowers on the side of the road flicker by. The mountains are a shocking blue black, the leafy road winds, rises, falls, curves and gently rises up again. Sascha tilts her head back and looks out the rear window.

"We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here," sing the Blums. Molly lifts her head off Sascha's lap. Sascha straightens her glasses. Her inch long tight little braids are frayed, rounding her head with a halo of fine black baby hair. She and Molly consult their Appalachian Trail data book (Irina has bought them all the books for the 11 trails). Mr. Blum glides into an overlook rest area the shape of a smile and the girls spring out of the car to look for a trail, Irina and the Blums following, stretching and shuddering in the blue air.

"We can hop on the trail right over there," says Molly breathlessly.

"Listen, the wind is singing." Sascha's smile is radiant.

"Don't you want lunch?" says Mrs. Blum. "Andover is only a few miles from here and we read about a nice place. What was the name of that place, Howie?"

Mr. Blum searches for binoculars. "Didn't I put them in here first thing, darling?" he says from under the lid of the trunk. Irina is already dreading the ride home.

"It's time to go, Rhonda," says Sascha, smiling gently at Mrs. Blum, like a patient parent.

"Picture time," says Mr. Blum. Mrs. Blum takes over, gathering them all together and then separating them into every conceivable combination while Mr. Blum snaps away. Sascha borrows the camera to take a close up of a Wendy's wrapper pinned against an azalea bush. Then outstretches her arm reverses the camera, and shoots several funny-faced pictures of herself.

Molly's father squeezes Sascha's hands in both of his. Her own papa is away on business in Europe. Irina has an image of Sascha cuddled in David's lap reciting the periodic table backwards on command or entertaining adults with made-up skits and songs, a real father/daughter act. Perhaps because she arrived so late in their lives, she was always David's lucky charm.

"Mollybear," says Mr. Blum, trading places with Irina.

Irina steps toward Sascha, kisses her cheek. This isn't a week away at drama camp. She gives her daughter a ferocious hug until Sascha slips out of the embrace, her face flushed pink with anticipation. The girls tie up their new hiking bootlaces and sling their monstrous backpacks on.

"You have your cell, right?" she says and lunges for Sascha again. With the pack on, it's like hugging a cabinet.

"Yes, Mama, but don't call me. We've discussed this. Please. I won't have coverage in the mountains and it'll just get you upset."

"Write to me? Not just email but some real letters and postcards."

"You're so old-school."

Irina grimaces.

"Oh, come on. You know I love you so much, Mama."

Words catch in her throat and she is unable to speak.

From behind, all that is visible are the girl's blue-jeaned legs. They totter across the road under the weight of their backpacks, shrinking into a forest of dew-drenched trees. Irina thinks of that first day, the two of them alone in the examining room waiting for the doctor with Sascha

saying, “I’m *not* sick. I’m frustrated and cranky. I want to leave my head. I’m *well*. Tell them not to prick me with such a metallic, sharp and pointed object. It bothers my soul.”

“I don’t hear the wind singing. Do you, Howie?” says Mrs. Blum.

When she gets the call a week later she is flat on her back, wearing a bathrobe, icepacks on both knees, reading a trashy mystery. The girls have hiked Mt. Katahdin. They have walked and slipped, crept on all fours with the goal of simply getting from one boulder to the next. Sascha hasn’t been sleeping well. They’ve eaten trail mix and peanut butter and crawled into their sleeping bags without bothering to set up camp.

“I’ve got blisters and bruises, and cold sores,” says Sascha.

“Come home,” says Irina.

“Are you delirious? I’m having the most amazing experience of my life.”

Irina smiles ruefully into the phone. “How are you two girls getting along?”

“I’m slower, less strong. But Molly understands.”

Fatigue. Fever. Easy bruising. Irina swallows the lump in her throat. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I need another cap and more Snickers, more Pop Tarts.”

“Keep calling me.”

“I’ll try. Make sure the cap is plain. No stripes or dumb designs.”

After her work as a biochemist at Lenox Hill Hospital, Irina rides both the subway and New Jersey Transit bus without getting a seat. At home she heats up a bowl of cabbage borscht and settles on the sofa with her mystery. When there is nothing left to eat, she climbs the half

dozen steps to the second floor, shuffles through the trail of wrappers from flashlights, batteries, and wool socks and stops at the entrance to Sascha's tiny room. On the long wall, above the twin bed two colorful oil paintings hang side by side— a field of sunflowers stretching across both canvases; a gift from an African American boy Sascha dated her senior year before dumping him. "I'm too young to be tied down," she'd said to Irina. On the adjacent wall big blocky numbers are written in red marker. *104,000. 190,000. 85,000!* Below the numbers, the words, *SEE IT & BE IT*, all of it surrounded by red circles looping up near the ceiling and cascading down behind the bed. Irina gets light-headed from staring so long and circles crowd around her in an optical illusion. She stumbles over to the desk and pushes aside the stacks of poetry books written by Bishop and Collins, and poets she's never heard of until she uncovers the notebook. She reads the entry dated two days before the girls took off.

How quickly I have mood swings. My despair and depression when I experience them feel endless like these emotions alone are the way I always feel. But I am more up and enthusiastic about the days ahead. I AM HOPEFUL THAT this trip will give ME RENEWED ENERGY. My knowledge of the ramification of a worst case scenario can never just disappear. It is a scary sleeping lion that stretches and flexes when I least expect it. But my life force I must try not to forget is very strong and my will to live is great. I am hoping this pattern (confidence/strength...fear/depression) is not a circle but a positively direct spiral getting smaller and smaller til I know only joy.

She snaps the notebook shut.

In bed, Irina watches the 10 o'clock news until the first commercial comes. Her last thought before she takes her sleeping pill is that Sascha may achieve greatness by the age of 25, if she lives to 25.

The second call comes two weeks later just as she emerges from the supermarket into the July heat. Irina claws the contents in her purse for her new cell phone.

“Hello hello, Are you there? How are you?” she screams. Though Sascha’s voice is clear, it is small and far away. They have hiked Shelbourne Pass and the mountains people ski on in Vermont. Irina listens to Sascha describe the thrill of summiting, sitting above the tree lines, above the clouds, looking out on vistas that spread for miles. Irina’s blocking the exit to the supermarket. People are swerving around her. She can’t make out all the words.

“Call me back,” she shouts into the *blayt* piece of plastic cupped in her hand. She tries to straighten out her shopping cart. One of the wheels keeps spinning in place.

One evening, during the second week of August she sinks onto the couch with a container of leftover borsht and her laptop. When Sascha was 9, she refused to taste borsht, at 10, she wouldn’t be in the same room with it. On the coffee table, next to the laptop lies an ancient photo album, and a postcard from Mount Washington. After supper, she will email Sascha. She flips over the postcard. The first line is written in a tight slanted print. “At the tops of the White Mountains the weather completely changes.” The rest of card is covered with the words SLEET, SNOW and HIGH WINDS in zigzagging letters.

My Lyobov’ Moya, People have died. Irina pauses over the keyboard. *People have died on Mount Washington in severe weather.* She is feeling almost too maudlin to write. She deletes everything and begins again. *While you were holed up in Crawford Notch Hostel waiting on my mail drop, I spent two entire days on the phone with the post office trying to locate the freeze dried food and candy. Today I found out the package was there all the time, in the way back with discarded boxes. Those inefficient idiots...*” She sips her tea. The sugar aches on a cavity.

In her rush to grab the phone Irina knocks over the photo album. An avalanche of baby pictures slides out from under the cellophane wrappers. It’s Mrs. Blum calling to invite her over

to see the slides of the girls taken at the foot of Katahdin. Irina scoops up a handful of pictures.-- Sascha at 4 on the beach, white-blond hair whipping around her head, her paunchy little belly protruding between the top and bottom half of her bathing suit, in Kindergarten with a paper plate hat on her head and a sailor suit, reading a poem at high school graduation ceremony.

“They’re digital. You’ll see Sascha’s every pore,” says Mrs. Blum.

She pulls into the Blum’s driveway, shifts into park, cuts the engine. Her phone dings.

David has forwarded an email from Sascha.

The apple doesn’t far fall from the tree, Kitty. Get your knees taken care of. Maybe it’s the pain that’s making you so crazy. Also, we need to get our bone marrow tested ASAP. D

Dear Papa, Finally a site with electricity. We’re at the Upper Goose Pond Cabin in the Berkshires with a bunch of stoned hipsters and one of them has an iPad! Ironically, what I’m thinking about right now is how similar we are. I think it’s safe to say that all of us, you, me and Mama (especially Mama) are stubborn people. We have our own particular way (you, left brain, empirical, scientific, Western, me, right brain, intuitive, artistic, Eastern) of doing things and we don’t budge. I suppose I’ve been too busy looking at you through my own eyes and you see me through your eyes. Yes, it would be simpler for you if I was a child but this is just not the case. With an open mind I am going to continue to make my own decisions. So what am I (we) left with? I know you’re obsessed with delaying my death. How about playing the biggest trick on death that we can by squeezing out as much joy as we can here on earth while we are still together? Don’t worry, I’m not giving in, it’s just right now I am 110 percent alive and I just don’t have it in me to be sad or afraid. I love you so much.

Her heart stutters scared at the thought that by allowing her daughter to go, she has failed as a protector and mother. The AC has been off for a few minutes and already her thighs are stuck to the seat of the car and her face is sweaty.

“My, oh my,” says Mrs. Blum when she sees Irina standing at the open front door leaning on a cane. Mrs. Blum wears a patterned silk dress and glossy patent leather pumps. Irina realizes she is still in her jeans and sneakers. “Come in, sit down. Take a load off. I had no idea you were incapacitated.”

“I’m fine,” says Irina, though today her knees are stiff and swollen.

A few steps and they are in a too bright living room with a big flowery sectional and a pair of mismatched Queen Anne chairs. Mr. Blum ambles in and gives her a hearty handshake while patting her shoulder. He offers her a seat on the sectional. “The chair is better for me.” She props the cane on its arm. The Blums sit on the sectional, holding hands. “Sascha said you’re a biochemist. That must be quite interesting work,” says Mr. Blum.

“In-vitro.” The Blums look puzzled. Greedy yuppies, she thinks, clambering for multiple fertile eggs, wanting 3 and 4 and 5 babies. Isn’t one healthy child enough?

“Let’s not talk about me,” she says in an attempt to be friendly.

“You must be so proud of Sascha. Can you imagine having a poet for a daughter? Wouldn’t that be wonderful? I love to read. I love when a writer uses metaphor.”

“Rhonda belongs to three book groups,” says Mr. Blum.

“Oh, that’s a marvelous idea, Howie. You really must send me some of Sascha’s poetry. We could do her in our book group.”

“I’m not sure she’d like that. My daughter is a very private person,” says Irina emphatically.

As soon as the words leave her mouth, she sees by the Blums twin stricken looks, she’s given the impression that she and her daughter are snobs. Last time one of Sascha’s poems was published in some web magazine, Irina found out from a coworker whose husband was an English professor. She understood when Sascha told her the poem wasn’t very good and didn’t seem worth showing her, but finding out that way was so shameful and shocking.

What is there to say to these dull happy people? That she aches to have her daughter back, and yes, they are private people. Should she shock and shame them and say that Sascha

may not be around to experience the most exciting part of her life. She could cruelly blurt it out the way that doctor did. “Your daughter has 3-5 years to live.”

Mrs. Blum claps her hands and smiles. “Do you want to play a game?”

“A game?” says Irina, shaking her head in disbelief. What about the slides, she wonders?

“Rhonda loves games,” says Mr. Blum.

“Do you know Association? It’s the easiest one. I’ll go first. You say the first word that comes into your head. That’s all. That’s the game. Blue.”

“Red, now you go,” says Mr. Blum. “Okay, are you in?”

Irina wonders if they are putting her on. “Green,” she mutters.

“Mountains,” says Mrs. Blum. “Daughters,” says Mr. Blum. “Life,” says Irina.

“Nature,” says Mrs. Blum. “Wings of a bird,” says Mr. Blum. “That’s too many words, but it’s very good, dear. “Clipped,” says Irina. “She thinks like a poet’s mother,” says Mr. Blum.

Irina can play without bothering to listen. She thinks of the email *she* got earlier today, the tiny circle of words.

The dark silent woods. The mama and papa. The needles, reevaluation, dis-ease, justification, diet, belief, worry, pain, weight, hate, fate, disgust, lust, outright emotional outburst.

Is that supposed to be *poetry*?

“Acorn,” says Mrs. Blum. “Apple,” says Mr. Blum. Her daughter is losing her soul and she is too far away to do anything. “Agony,” she says, under her breath.

“Drinks. We forgot to offer you a drink. How thoughtless! There’s Rum Punch and a plate of cheese and crackers in the fridge. Howie, dearest, would you?”

“I’m not much of a drinker,” says Irina.

“The problem with the world is that everyone is a few drinks behind,” says Mr. Blum tapping a pretend cigar.

“That’s Humphrey Bogart. You should hear Howie do Liberace. It’s wonderful,” says Mrs. Blum as her husband shambles into the kitchen.

While Mr. Blum is gone, Mrs. Blum recounts the story of the time Sascha and Molly insisted on taking the train home from a Cold Play concert in the city and got lost. She doesn’t know the real story, which is that Sascha took Molly to Coney Island to ride the Cyclone and Irina had to ground her for a month. She glances across the room at the dozens of framed photos of Molly and her brothers on the oak credenza. Her eyes alight on one of the girls with their high school prom dates, standing in front of the hedges on the Blum’s lawn. Sascha’s bare shoulders are as round as her face, the gown is neon blue, her beautiful hair, still blonde. The handsome boy who paints like Matisse is holding her hand. In that moment, she understands why her daughter has chopped it all off. She’s going to lose it anyway.

A loud grinding noise erupts in the kitchen. Mr. Blum cries out.

“He’s hurt!” screams Mrs. Blum rushing into the kitchen with flailing arms. Mr. Blum is clutching his bleeding hand.

“Oh my God, Howie. What happened?” Mrs. Blum takes his hand and holds it under the running faucet while Mr. Blum explains that the cheese knife fell in the sink disposal so he tried to pull it out.

“It won’t stop bleeding!” cries Mrs. Blum. Irina suggests that Mr. Blum be brought to the emergency room. Mrs. Blum wraps his hand in a towel which instantly turns red. Mr. Blum is visibly trembling. “Let’s go. Let’s go already,” says Mrs. Blum, clasping her arms around his elbows.

In the hospital Mr. Blum is seen immediately. Irina sits in the waiting room on a hard orange chair, glad to be alone. She flips through a tattered Redbook and swallows a Percocet with a bottle of water she keeps in her bag. Mrs. Blum appears from the swinging doors behind the receptionist's desk. She slumps over in a chair next to Irina. "Not my husband's smartest move, huh? I keep telling him if he dies, I'm going to kill him." She turns to Irina with an embarrassed smile, then her eyes disconnect. "He's a very good photographer, you know. Oh, you should see the pictures of the girls. You could eat them up with the bones and all."

It's obvious to Irina Mrs. Blum is a nervous wreck. "I keep Sascha's first letter in my bag. Would you like to see it?" she says handing it over. "Go ahead, it'll help to think of the girls." Irina looks over Mrs. Blum's shoulder as she reads aloud, inhaling the sweet heavy perfume rising off the woman's neck.

"Mama, Molly and I are thru hikers. We average close to 20 miles. We can feel in the bottom of our feet how steep the climb will be. I write less and less in my journal everyday. We finished Mahoosic Notch, a mile long stretch of boulders that took three hours. Crawling most of the way. Constantly tripping. I had to remove my pack just to get under and around the rocks caves whose pits were thigh high. But we laughed a lot too."
P.S. Can you call U. of I. for me. Find out if they got my holdover papers.
P.S.S. We are dumping everything non-essential in our packs as soon as we reach the next town, wherever the F! it is"

Mrs. Blum abruptly stops reading. She stands up and looks around the waiting room. "Oh God," she suddenly wails. "How could he do this to himself? What if he loses his hand?" Irina's pulse quickens. Sadness bubbles up and panics her. She catches Mrs. Blum before she falls to the floor and holds her, as her body quakes. What a foolish woman, she tells herself, but her heart won't stop pounding as she helps Mrs. Blum back into her seat. She strokes Mrs. Blum's back. The heat from the friction of her hand on the silk seems to float up her arm into her face. It's going to be fine, she whispers, stroking and stroking, scared that if she stops, the feelings inside will blow her apart.

The nurse calls, “Mrs. Blum” and she jumps up and disappears into the exam room. Irina’s eyes are stinging with tears. She braces her hands on the edge of the seat, unhinges her knees, stands, and lurches towards the glass door. Outside, she catches her breath and looks up at the moon, high and bright, protected in its delicate shell. She spots the car, wobbles toward it, fumbling for her keys. She yanks the car door open, slams it shut and collapses just as the first howl escapes from her. She bangs her fists on the dashboard. “Blayt blayt blayt,” she screams, drops her head, and falls apart, sobbing.

There’s a light tapping on the window. Irina lifts her head and sees Mr. Blum in a wheelchair. Behind him, Mrs. Blum is flapping her hand, signaling Irina to open the window. She wipes her eyes with her palm and rolls it down.

“Oh. Why, hello there,” says Mr. Blum, absentmindedly. Even in the darkness his face shines and bulges, white as snow. Calmer now, Irina reaches behind her and clicks the door latch.

Mrs. Blum opens it. “Could you help me get him into the car?” she says, without seeming to notice the tears streaming down Irina’s cheeks.

“He’s going to be just fine. He’s as high as a kite.” “You’re as high as a kite, aren’t you, dear?”

“I certainly am, Toots,” says Mr. Blum.

Irina glances around the car. Her cane is back in the hospital waiting room. She readies herself to stand.

Then they grab hold of his arms and struggle with his weight.

THE END