Mamochka

March, 1945, Budapest, Hungary

Zoya fills my cup with hot water from the samovar. I watch her dunk the tea, her head resting on the palm of her hand, a countenance hungry for solace. She wants me to tell her that everything will be all right, and that her husband, Pista will return home from the war soon. But I can't do it. I can't give my daughter false hope and I can't say what I don't believe. She is not a child anymore; she is a wife. A mother. I was her age when I left Russia with two kids many years ago. Alone, seeking refuge in Budapest, no husband, no property, other than my Singer, I ran from another war. Nobody told me then, that everything was going to be all right.

My silence bothers Zoya. "Poor Mr. Pinter," she says, in an attempt to feel less sorry for herself. Mr. Pinter is our neighbor with whom we bunkered for weeks in the building's basement during the siege of Budapest. Zoya pops open the slender cigarette box with her thumb and slides one of the white cylinders between her lips. She doesn't smoke often, but the cigarettes remind her of Pista, who always kept cartons in the apartment. Smoke billows from her mouth as she exhales, drifting towards the ajar window. Even after two children and weeks of starvation, my daughter's beauty strikes me with a mix of pride and fear. During war, beauty is conspicuous; beauty is the unintentional inviter of peril. Zoya's hair embraces her face with softness, in contrast with the sharp angles of her jaw. The warmth of her eyes matches her waves—dimensional, like chestnuts in the fall. Delicate fingers lift the cigarette to full lips. "The old man has become a ghost

since he had to watch his wife die in such . . . awful circumstances," she says.

I slide a jar of apricot preserves in front of her. "Haven't we all become ghosts? At least his wife wasn't alone when she went." After Mrs. Pinter died in the dreary dampness of the underground shelter amid the sound of bombs, tanks, and gunfire, Zoya and I helped wrap her body in sheets and carried her outside, where we hoped the frigid air would keep her frozen. As soon as the weather warmed and temperatures no longer dove consistently below zero, we buried her in the common yard. Zoya ignores the preserves, while I scoop a spoonful of it into my tea and watch the dark, golden syrup unify with the black tea as I stir. The silver spoon's hitting against the wall of the china reminds me of the distant sound of an alarm. "There are worse things, Zoya."

My apathy for Mrs. Pinter shocks my daughter. She shoots me a disapproving glance. "That's horrible to say."

I rise from my seat and step closer to the kitchen window. "Mrs. Pinter died in the arms of a loved one. That's a luxury these days."

"She was sick for so long—" Zoya says, but I'm no longer paying attention.

"Shhh!" I jerk my hand through the air, and she immediately freezes, eyes widening.

Our second-floor kitchen window faces the front, allowing me a view of Pasareti Road. To the right, in the direction of the intersection, I see them. A group of uniformed men, walking in ragged fashion, split into several smaller cliques. Their voices offend the silence of the night, carrying down the street, flooding in through the crack of the window.

One cluster of men disappears into a two-story building on the corner. There must be no more than two flats in there for them to loot and who knows how many people left to harass. When another group—four noisy men—breaks off this sinister parade, moving close to our street front, my heart quickens. Their talk is elevated and bounces between the buildings in a chilling

echo. I notice their saunter is not wobbly; they are not drunk yet. They must have just gotten off duty, eager for whatever they might deem as fun.

"Mamochka, what is it?" Zoya asks, trying to peek from behind me.

"Soviet soldiers. Looking for trouble."

"Trouble only for us."

I move the lace curtain so that only a narrow strip of the window is clear, from behind which I can keep peering down. One of the soldiers yells, "Which one should we try?" The sound of my native language from his mouth strikes me almost as something unfamiliar. A bottle glints in his hand when he raises it to his mouth, tilting his head up to take a swig. He is turned in my direction, and when the bottle lowers, his face remains open toward me. I could swear I lock eyes with him before he looks away, pivots, and heads straight for the entrance of our building, his laughing comrades following.

"*Blyat*!" My curse and stare scares Zoya, but I ignore her questions as my mind races through our limited options in the little time we may have. I grab her arm and begin pulling her to the living room. "Quick, you need to hide!"

This is what I feared ever since the siege ended and the Red Army took over the city. I knew this all too well. I have seen it. I left my country because of it. One power leaves, another takes over, with no sense of liberation. It was always the common population bowing its head in shame under the scourge of a new power, blamed for the old one's mistakes—an entire nation put firmly back in its place. There was never freedom to be found in any of it. I used to fear for myself when I left Russia decades ago. This is new fear. Stronger, fiercer: the fear of a mother.

Zoya obeys in silence, hastening as I drag her into the living room.

A single floor lamp's light dresses the room in amorphous shadows, casting elongated

black shapes behind the family photos on the mantel. The pine-green drapes had been drawn, their fabric blends into the thickness of the air, as they block the glow of the streetlights below.

I rip the oversized cushions from the sofa, shoving my daughter into the depth of its frame. The four seat cushions, with the swell of the pillows on top should be sufficient to conceal her, even if she bulges up slightly from underneath. My survival instinct—sharpened by two world wars—have long recognized the enormous furniture as a hiding place for someone petite.

Zoya lowers inside the belly of our sofa, shrinking herself into a horizontal position. She balances on her elbows and stares up at me, and I can't bear the look in her eyes. No mother ever wants to see pure, gripping fear on their child's face, no matter how old they are. "And the kids?" she whispers.

"These men aren't looking for children, Zoya." I hold onto her face with both hands, as if my grasp could somehow steady her mind. "You have to stay absolutely silent, no matter what you hear, do you understand me?"

She nods and submerges.

I bury Zoya with the seat cushions and throw a blanket with a couple of decorative pillows on top to add more fluff.

Back in the kitchen, I clear away Zoya's teacup, and hide the samovar in the lower cabinet, remembering that a typical Hungarian would not own a samovar. I sink into the same chair I sat before, sipping my now cold tea. I light a cigarette, unsure if it is to keep myself calm, or to appear calm. My hand trembles, I wipe the sweat off my palms on my skirt one after the other.

Then I hear their laughter and shouting as they ascend the main staircase from the foyer, followed by banging on our door.

"Inspection! Open door!" a man yells in broken Hungarian. Another one chortles.

I have no plan, only a straight spine, when I open the door and set my eyes on the first soldier at the doorstep.

He is barely in his twenties. He leans one elbow against the door frame high above his head—a pathetic attempt to conceal the deficiency of his height. My hand slides off the door handle when he shoves past me into the flat. He considers himself at liberty to say or do anything in a country that was his enemy only a few weeks ago. The rest of them file in behind and I take in each of their appearances. I feel a pang at the thought that they could all be my sons. Their uniforms suggest only one may be a higher-ranking officer, and not higher by much.

They stroll through the front hall and begin peeking into rooms, speaking in Russian, unaware that I understand every word. Their speech is common class, although I haven't been home in a while to know if everyone sounds different since the Bolshevik revolution.

Two of them enter the living room. I hold my breath. The tall one hesitates, throws tentative glances at his comrade, then around himself, before making a move to sit down on the sofa. Just then the other points to the silver ashtray on the coffee table, instructing his friend to check it out.

I'm afraid to blink.

The tentative soldier-boy looks for the silver stamp on the bottom of the ashtray, before his buddy rips it out of his hand and slides it into his own pants pocket.

My heart drums against my chest, sending echoes into my ears.

A call rings out from the kitchen, and the two soldiers rush past me out of the living room, leaving an acidic stench in my nostrils.

I follow them into the kitchen, pulling the living room door closed behind me.

Forcing fear out of my throat, I focus on their banter. They call the young, short one, with the wine bottle in his hand, Dimitri, while the higher ranking one's name is Ilya. They begin

opening cabinet doors, slamming each one closed when they don't see anything to their liking. Dimitri whirls around to look at me.

"Where do you keep your liquor, you Hungarian whore?" he asks in Russian. He shakes the wine bottle in his hand and points at it with exaggerated gestures.

I think of that bottle of *palinka* we've been saving to use only in case of injury, in lieu of rubbing alcohol and pills. If I give it to them, maybe they'll leave. I move to the sink and pull out the bottle from the cabinet underneath.

They all shout in a rude sort of joy, and Dimitri rushes toward me from the other side of the kitchen table. I hold out the *palinka* to him, but his superior, Ilya, steps in front of me and removes the bottle with an unhurried smile that sends chills up my spine. His face, up close, strikes me with a rush of unease and familiarity. His resemblance to my late husband, Nikolay, disturbs buried images from Russia, feelings of happiness, loss, and guilt. Nikolay was a little older than this Ilya when he left to fight with the Russian army in The Great War. Or is it now called the *first* world war? Nikolay never returned and I had to leave, fleeing from the Bolsheviks. It has all felt so long ago, neglected by my mind, that I have begun to forget Nikolay's face. Until now.

Ilya laughs at my facial expression which to him, looks pitiable, but to me, his eyes are Nikolay's eyes, his laugh is Nikolay's laugh splitting the previous silence of this home. I can see Nikolay question me—not with love, but with judgment: *'What have you done? Have you no loyalty?'* I'm fixed on the features of this young man in my kitchen, a young Nikolay materializing like a ghost of my guilt, a raven tapping at the window of my conscience. I looked for him after I left Russia, hoping to find him alive somewhere, traversing half of Europe, only to betray him in the end. He had left me alone with two daughters, and by the time I gave up my search and landed in Hungary, I had three daughters. During my travels I naively accepted a man's help and affection,

only to be cheated and alone again. Of course I had wanted to be faithful but there was no one to be faithful to. I eased my conscience by telling myself Nikolay was gone. I even hoped he was. Because I did not want to face him, and I did not want to imagine the things he may have done during that war. While I struggled to survive, young and naïve, so easily enchanted by the first helping hand to break my fading vows, did Nikolay invade people's homes in foreign nations, looking for silver to pocket and women to rape like the men sitting in my kitchen right now? I refused to think that. But isn't that what always happens? Soldiers who come apart by their seams by the numbing emptiness of their wars, becoming something they'd never imagined they would. Why should I feel bad for having been lonely, abandoned and trusting? All I have known is that the war either killed Nikolay, or it made him rotten. Just like the man I betrayed him with. Just like these men in my kitchen.

I start when Ilya passes the bottle of *palinka* back to me. I shake my head, but he insists and pushes the bottle into my face. I take it and drink, as they cheer. The liquor's burn feels oddly pleasant on my throat, but the soldiers' sudden silence sends a chill into my chest, sucking the air out of my lungs. I jerk my head towards the door. In the hallway, standing behind the kitchen's doorstep, barely half a meter tall in his blue pajamas, little Istvan squints into the light.

For a moment, nobody moves. I put the palinka on the table and stride over to my grandson, whispering to him that he needs to go back to bed. But before I can lead him away, Ilya calls out, "Little boy, come here." He motions the universal sign to make sure Istvan understands.

I pray that my grandson doesn't say anything in Russian, in a silly effort to try to show off. Zoya speaks to him in Hungarian, and he rarely uses anything else—but he can still understand Russian.

Istvan walks over to Ilya, who bends at the hips to be at the boy's eye level.

"Where did you come from, you little devil?" Ilya asks, then glances at the other three men. I can't tell if he's upset, or simply wondering about how they could have possibly overlooked a child while waltzing through the apartment.

None of them found the children sleeping in the far back room. The men never made it to the end of the hall in their search, too busy looking for alcohol and valuables.

"Show me your room," Dimitri says, coming to his feet and pointing down the hall.

Istvan complies and dutifully marches back toward his room, where his baby sister is sound asleep.

I push ahead of them, grabbing Istvan's tiny hand, as my pulse throbs in my ears.

"Do *not* say anything in Russian," I whisper to him as we turn into the kids' room.

The soldiers allow me to put my grandson back to bed, while they argue about missing not one, but two children during their vague search.

After tucking the boy in, I turn to them, reprimanding them with a shushing sound. The four men pause for a moment, and then break into a laugh, like scolded kids. My fear turns to impatience and frustration, a fury forming in my stomach. If they would just take the booze and leave already! I force myself to calm down and I point toward the kitchen, hoping to entice them with their previous interest, and pray that they can't hear the shakiness of my voice. "Palinka?"

They stroll back out, but Ilya keeps a suspicious gaze on my face.

In the kitchen, I start washing my teacup just to avoid looking at them, but I'm fully aware of Ilya leaning against the door frame, ignoring his comrades' chatter and careless drinking. His glare burn holes in my back.

I remind myself that children are supposed to be protected by Soviet order. That means hurting children is punishable by their own laws. These soldiers will surely decide to go

somewhere else now that they found the children.

My anxiety decreases by a notch, but my respite doesn't last long.

"Where's the mother?" Ilya asks, and the teacup slips out of my hand, clanking at the bottom of the sink. I stiffen for a moment, but I am supposed to be clueless to what any of them are saying. He used the word *matushka* for mother, but when I ignore him, he asks again, louder this time, pronouncing the word *mama*, knowing that even a Hungarian will understand that.

I turn around, the water behind me still running.

Ilya's question booms over the others' voices and they stop their jabber. The room falls still, and I feel the space around me shrink. Ilya looks at his comrades and speaks to them while pointing at me. "She's way too old to be the mother of those kids," he says, prompting them to put together the pieces.

I shake my head a little too forcefully and answer in Hungarian. "No mama, no papa."

Now Dimitri jumps to his feet, his suspicion aroused. "Tricky little *suka*," he says, determined to call me a whore every time he addresses me. He bolts out of the kitchen, two of the other men following him. Ilya makes no move. He watches me and his resemblance to Nikolay nearly makes me burst into pleading with him.

A profound form of worry rises into my throat. It takes immense effort to inhale and keep my face as flat as possible for Ilya, whose glare is fixed on me. We both listen to the rumbling as the others search all the rooms again. I imagine them looking under every bed, the sofa, and inside every wardrobe, and wish to God they don't think to look *inside* the sofa.

The thought barely crosses my mind when I hear their voices shouting in a wicked glee. Every nerve falls apart, collapsing the tension in me into a sense of utter hopelessness.

Ilya smirks at me, pivots, and leaves the kitchen.

In a daze, I rush after him to find the three lower rank soldiers next to the sofa, cushions scattered on the floor. Dimitri and the other man who pocketed my silver ashtray earlier drag Zoya out of her hiding spot, with a rough jerk of her arm. The tall, shy boy steps back into the shadow of the drapes.

"Look what we found," Dimitri says. "Another lying bitch, but this one's much more to my taste."

I shove past Ilya, but he just laughs at me as I push myself in front of Zoya.

Dimitri brings his face so close to mine, that I can smell the apricot *palinka* on his breath. "Nice try, bitch. You thought you could keep this hot little *devochka* hidden?" He grabs Zoya's chin, holding her face up for the rest of them to ogle at. "I don't even care that she's older than me. I haven't seen anything this pretty in a long fucking time."

A burning sensation kindles in my belly, slowly growing into a ball of fire.

Zoya starts crying and I just want to ask them why they act like this? It cannot be possible that these men were *taught* to act this way—not by women they weren't. Is this what happens to men who spend years away from home, away from their mothers and wives? Does fighting slowly envelope their souls in shadow, forcing them into dark caves that birth demons of vice and malice? I see their chests puffed, their eyes hazy, filled with a false sense of power bestowed upon them by pretend gods of war. Is this what my Nikolay did, when he'd been sent to fight in foreign lands, while I cared for our children and waited for his return? Is this how Zoya's husband acted as his hussar regimen entered France?

Ilya walks up and pushes Dimitri aside, so he can take a better look at my daughter. His eyes travel up and down her body, watching her chest shake as she quietly sobs. "I think we hit the jackpot, comrades."

The fire in me turns liquid, rage finally spills out like lava through the cracks. The Russian words roll from my mouth, inches from Ilya's face. "How dare you?" I ask him. His eyes widen, expression frozen in a shocked grimace. I shift my stare to the rest of them. "How dare *all* of you?"

The surprise of hearing their mother-tongue momentarily paralyzes them.

"Don't you have mothers?" I am spitting with anger. I don't shout but my tone is deep and clear. "When was the last time you saw their worrying faces, heard their voices sing, ate the foods their hands made for you? When was the last time you *thought* of them? Of the lessons they taught you?" I shake my head, words coming in a pant. "They didn't teach you *this*! And what would they think if they saw you right now, right here—akin to animals, to *beasts*—ready to violate someone else's daughter, someone else's mother…?" I run out of air but keep my stance as they all stand still around me.

Zoya's sobs cease. Ilya steps back. He blinks several times, and his arms drop awkwardly by his sides. Dimitri and the other two men shift their gazes toward the floor.

"You…you speak Russian?" Ilya asks, his ice-blue eyes captured by my scowl.

"I *am* Russian, you imbecile. And so is she," I say, tipping my head toward Zoya. "But that's not what matters. We're wives and mothers, who've suffered through wars we didn't choose to start." I wait for him to say something, a glimmer of hope crawling back out from deep within me. When he says nothing, I soften my voice: "What did you call your mother, Ilya? Did you call her Mama? Matushka? Mamochka?" I look to the other three. "And you? What about you, Dimitri? Or do you prefer Dima? Is that what your mother called you, as she gave you tea with honey whenever you felt ill?"

Calling them by name puts the four soldiers in an even more profound state. Suddenly, they remind me of two Hungarian soldiers who showed me kindness during the siege, despite their

orders. The difference is that these Russian boys have less to fear. They survived the fighting, they won, and now they are fed lies about victory and dominance away from their home. But they are still lost, carrying with them an empty purpose and a lifetime of terrifying memories. I now watch, as the soldiers' collective arrogance deflates within the silence.

"Mamochka," says the tentative boy by the drapes, whose name I never caught. "I call mine…Mamochka." He seems painfully juvenile now, standing behind Dimitri, the dull light of the lamp illuminating the glaze over his eyes.

"What's your name, son?" I ask him, as his wordless comrades all stare at him.

"Nikolay," the boy says, his hand nervously rubbing the back of his neck. The collar of his uniform curls up and hides the red tag that displays the Soviet emblem: a star encircled by two ears of grain.

I nod, the pressure in my chest returning from the sound of that name. "That's the name of my late husband. I lost him in the war. Not this one; the first one." Nikolay's countenance opens with something like awe. "When I was alone and scared for him at home, it never occurred to me how he might be acting towards civilians, towards young women in some faraway land. Now I wonder, was that naïve of me?"

Their shame is palpable. Even Ilya won't meet my eye anymore.

"Your mama would be ashamed of you, although she may never know how you behaved today. But I don't think you want your commanding officer to find out, do you?"

Ilya shakes his head and shoots uneasy glances at his comrades.

I feel as if my veins have suddenly opened up, sending a cool flow through my entire body, the tenseness in my limbs release. I do not yet process the situation, I simply try to maintain it. "Take the rest of that *palinka* if you want. I have some cigarettes, too."

They file out of the room, following me into the kitchen. I give them a pack of smokes and hand Ilya the bottle of liquor.

Before they leave, Ilya pauses in the doorway. “What is your name, ma’am? And where are you from?”

“I grew up in Kiev. My name is Yefrosinia” I point toward the back room, in the doorway of which Zoya watches us warily. “And that’s my daughter, Zoya.”

He smiles at her and I notice the creases around his eyes crinkle in playful curves, just like my Nikolay’s used to. Something flashes across his face—maybe a memory or an image of a pretty girl he knows back home.

Dimitri—whose favorite name for me until recently was whore—is last to leave, and before he does, he steps in front of me. “I—I’m sorry, Mamochka,” he mumbles.

For a moment I wonder if he meant to call me ‘mom’ or his unconscious did.

I find peace in the fact that I will never need to know.