

# How Did We Come to Know You?

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I was sitting in the kitchen one evening checking my email when my grandmother told me she was going for a walk. It was snowing a little, and slippery—I could see that—but it wasn't too slippery. Despite the cold, my grandmother had been out earlier to get some groceries and had done just fine. I felt like I should go with her, but I also wanted to continue checking my e-mail. Was I just going to spend my whole life going out with my grandmother whenever the notion struck her? That was no way to live. I went over and kissed her on the forehead and told her to have a good walk.

Not thirty minutes later, I heard a sharp cry in the stairwell. At first, I thought it was a dog or a child, but then I realized exactly who it was. I ran out onto the landing; my grandmother was lying on her back at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes were open, and she was holding her head and looking at me. She was scared. I went down and helped her up; her thick pink coat had cushioned the fall, but when I looked at the back of her head, I saw that there was blood. "Oh, Andryushenka," she said. "I'm so stupid. I'm so stupid. My head is spinning."

I got her upstairs, helped her out of her coat, then laid her down on her bed and looked up the number for an ambulance. It was 03. I dialled it and explained that my grandmother had hit her head. The woman on the other end asked if I thought my grandmother was in danger. I had no idea. "Is she conscious?" the woman asked. I said yes. This apparently helped her make a determination as to where to send us. She said that an ambulance would be there in twenty minutes, and it was.

I'll never forget the view of Moscow I got from the back of that ambulance as we stopped and started through the traffic on

the Garden Ring. After a while, my grandmother fell asleep on the gurney; one of the paramedics was sitting in the back with us, playing with his phone, and when I asked if it was all right for her to fall asleep, he said yes. I watched the city out the back window. It was covered with a thin layer of snow. People walked, in black coats and black hats and black shoes, trying to keep close to the buildings, for warmth.

When we finally got off the Garden Ring and onto Kiev Highway, I asked the paramedic sitting with me how much longer it would take.

"About an hour," he said.

"An hour? There's nothing closer?"

"They told us to route her to the neurological clinic," he said, "because it's a head injury. Don't worry, it's a good clinic."

We kept going, through the industrial neighborhoods and forests at the city's southern edge.

The hospital was in the woods. In the dim light, as we pulled into the driveway, I could see a long, four-story yellow brick building. It looked old; it might have been a village hospital from before the Revolution. The paramedics carefully rolled my grandmother out of the ambulance and into the hospital. She was now awake. She did not seem disturbed by the proceedings; in fact, she seemed to like the attention. Her health had been troubling her, and here were some people who were taking it seriously. "Thank you," she kept saying to the paramedics. "Thank you."

I had moved to Moscow a few months earlier, in the summer of 2008, to take care of my grandmother. She was almost ninety. My brother Dima and I were her only family; her lone child, our

mother, had died when I was a teen-ager. Baba Seva now lived by herself in her old apartment in the center of the city, a mile from the Kremlin. When I called to tell her I was coming, she sounded happy, and a little confused.

My parents and my brother and I left the Soviet Union in 1981. I was six and Dima was sixteen, and that made all the difference. I became an American, whereas Dima remained essentially Russian. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, he returned to Moscow to make his fortune. Since then, he had made and lost several fortunes; where things stood now, I wasn't sure. But one day he Gchatted me to ask if I could come to Moscow and stay with Baba Seva while he went to London for an unspecified period of time.

"Why do you need to go to London?"

"I'll explain when I see you."

"You want me to drop everything and travel halfway across the world and you can't even tell me why?"

Something petulant came out in me when I was dealing with my older brother. I hated it but couldn't help myself.

Dima said, "If you don't want to come, say so. But I'm not discussing this on Gchat."

"You know," I said, "there's a way to take it off the record. No one will be able to see it."

"Don't be an idiot."

He meant to imply that he was involved with some very serious people who would not be so easily deterred from reading his Gchats. Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn't. With Dima, the line between the concepts of truth and untruth was always shifting.

As for me, I wasn't really an idiot. But neither was I not an idiot. I had spent four long years of college and then eight much longer years of grad school studying Russian literature and history, drinking beer, and winning the Grad Student Cup hockey tournament (five times!); then I had spent three years on

the job market, with zero results. By the time Dima wrote me, I had exhausted all the available postgraduate fellowships and didn't have enough money to continue living, even very frugally, in New York. In short, on the question of whether or not I was an idiot, there was evidence on both sides.

"Can I use your car?"

"I sold it."

"Dude. How long are you leaving for?"

"I don't know," Dima said. "And I already left."

"Oh," I said.

In truth, I was desperate to leave New York. And Moscow was a special place for me. It was the city where my parents had grown up, where they had met; it was the city where I was born. I hadn't been there in years. In the course of a few grad-school summer visits, I'd grown tired of its poverty and hopelessness: the aggressive drunks on the subway; the thugs in tracksuits and leather jackets eying everyone; the guy who ate from the dumpster next to my grandmother's place, periodically yelling, "Bloodsuckers!" and then returning to his food. It was a big, ugly, dangerous city, but it meant more to me than just about any other place.

"O.K." I wrote.

"O.K.?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why not?"

A few days later, I went to the Russian Consulate, on the Upper East Side, stood in line for an hour, and got a one-year visa. Then I wrapped things up in New York: I sublet my room, returned my books to the library, and fetched my hockey stuff from a locker at the rink. It was all a big hassle, and expensive, but I spent the whole time imagining the different life I would soon be living, the different person I'd become. Perhaps there was even some way I might be able to use my grandmother's life story as the basis for a job-winning journal article.

Baba Seva—Seva Efraimovna Gekhtman—was born in a

small town in Ukraine in 1919. Her father was an accountant at a textile factory and her mother was a nurse. Her parents moved to Moscow with her and her brothers when she was a child. I knew that she had excelled in school and had been admitted to Moscow State University, the best and oldest university in Russia, where she studied history. I knew that at Moscow State, not long after the German invasion, she had met a young law student, my grandfather, and that they had fallen in love and married. Then he was killed near Vyazma in the second year of the war, just a month after my mother was born. I knew that after the war my grandmother had started lecturing at Moscow State, and had consulted on a film about Ivan the Great (“gatherer of the lands of Rus”) which so reminded Joseph Stalin of himself that he gave her an apartment in central Moscow; that despite this she was forced out of Moscow State a few years later, at the height of the “anti-cosmopolitan”—i.e., anti-Jewish—campaign; and that she got by after that as a tutor and as a translator from other Slavic languages. I knew that she had got remarried, in late middle age, to a sweet, forgetful geophysicist, whom we called Uncle Lev, and moved with him to the nuclear-research town of Dubna—vacating the Stalin apartment for my parents, and then eventually for my brother—before moving back, a couple of years before I showed up, after Uncle Lev died in his sleep.

But there was a lot I didn’t know. I didn’t know what her life had been like after the war, or whether, before the war, during the purges, she had had any knowledge, or any sense, of what was happening in the country. If not, why not? If so, how had she lived with that knowledge? I pictured myself sitting monastically in my room and setting down my grandmother’s stories in a publishable way.

The next thing I knew, I was standing in the passport-control line in the grim basement of Sheremetyevo-2 International Airport. It seemed to never change. As long as I’d been flying

here, they made you come down to this basement and wait in line before you got your bags. It was like a purgatory after which you entered something other than heaven. A young, blond, unsmiling border guard took my battered blue American passport with mild disgust. He checked my name against the terrorist database and buzzed me through the gate.

I was in Russia again.

Baba Seva’s apartment was on the second floor of a white five-story building off a leafy courtyard. I entered the courtyard and tapped in the code for the front door—I still remembered it—and lugged my suitcase up the stairs. My grandmother came to the door. She was tiny. She had always been small, but now she was even smaller, and the gray hair on her head was even thinner. For a moment, I was worried she wouldn’t know who I was. But then she said, “Andryushik. You’re here.” She seemed to have mixed feelings about it.

I came in.

She wanted to feed me. Slowly and deliberately, she heated up potato soup, kotlety (Russian meatballs), and sliced fried potatoes. She moved around the kitchen at a glacial pace and was unsteady on her feet, but there were many things to hold on to in that old kitchen, and she knew exactly where they were. Her hearing had declined considerably since my last visit, so I waited while she worked and then helped her plate the food. Finally, we sat. She asked me about my life in America.

“Where do you live?”

“New York.”

“What?”

“New York.”

“Oh. Do you live in a house, or an apartment?”

“An apartment.”

“What?”

“An apartment.”

“Do you own it?”

"I rent it. With roommates."

"What?"

"I share it. It's like a communal apartment."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Do you have kids?"

"No."

"No kids?"

"No. In America," I half-lied, "people don't have kids until later."

Satisfied, or partly satisfied, she then asked me how long I intended to stay. "Until Dima comes back," I said.

"What?" she said.

"Until Dima comes back," I said.

She took that in. "Andryusha," she said. "Do you know my friend Musya?"

"Of course," I said.

"She's a very close friend of mine," my grandmother explained. "And right now she's at her dacha."

Musya, or Emma Abramovna, was my grandmother's oldest living friend. An émigré from Poland, she had been a literature professor who had managed to hang on at Moscow State despite the anti-Jewish campaign; long since retired, she still had a dacha at Peredelkino, the old writers' colony. My grandmother had lost her own dacha in the nineties, after Uncle Lev got swindled out of his share in a geological-exploration company he'd founded with some fellow-scientists.

"I think," she said now, "that next summer she's going to invite me to stay with her."

"Yes? She said that?"

"No," my grandmother said. "But I hope she does."

"That sounds good," I said. In August, most Muscovites left

for their dachas; clearly, my grandmother's inability to do the same was weighing on her mind.

We had finished eating, and my grandmother casually reached into her mouth and took out her teeth. She put them in a little teacup on the table. "I need to rest my gums," she said, toothlessly.

"Of course," I said.

"Tell me," she said, in the same exploratory tone as earlier. "Do you know my grandson, Dima?"

"Of course," I said. "He's my brother."

"Oh." My grandmother sighed, as if she couldn't entirely trust someone who knew Dima. "Do you know where he is?"

"He's in London," I said.

"He never comes to see me," my grandmother said.

"That's not true."

"No, it is. Ever since he got me to sign over the apartment, he hasn't been interested in me at all."

"Grandma!" I said. "That's definitely not true." It was true that, a few years earlier, Dima had put the apartment in his name—under post-Soviet-style gentrification, little old ladies who owned prime Moscow real estate tended to have all sorts of misfortunes befall them. From a safety perspective, it had been the right move. But I could see now that, from my grandmother's perspective, it looked suspicious.

"Andryusha," she said. "You are such a dear person to me. To our whole family. But I can't remember right now. How did we come to know you?"

I was momentarily speechless.

"I'm your grandson," I said. There was an element of pleading in my voice.

"What?"

"I'm your grandson."

"My grandson," she repeated.

"You had a daughter, do you remember?"

"Yes," she said, uncertainly, then remembered. "Yes. My little daughter." She thought a moment longer. "She went to America," my grandmother said. "She went to America and died."

"That's right," I said.

"And you—" she said now.

"I'm her son."

My grandmother took this in. "Then why did you come here?" she said.

I didn't understand.

"This is a terrible country. My Yolka took you to America. Why did you come back?" She seemed angry.

I was again at a loss for words. Why had I come? Because Dima had asked me to. And because I wanted to help my grandmother. And because I thought it would help me find a topic for an article, which would then help me to get a tenure-track job. I decided to go with the one that seemed most practical. "For work," I said. "I need to do some research."

"Oh," she said. "All right." She, too, had had to work in this terrible country, and she could understand. Momentarily satisfied, my grandmother excused herself and went to her room to lie down.

From inside, the hospital looked even older. A rickety elevator took us to the top floor, and then we walked down a dim corridor. We arrived at an open door, where a young man in green hospital scrubs with dark circles under his eyes sat smoking a cigarette. This turned out to be the head neurologist.

"Hello, Arkady Ivanovich," one of the paramedics said. "Woman fell down, hit her head, there's some minor bleeding. Dispatcher said we should take her to you."

"Take her to examination room 410, please," the neurologist said, and then followed us there.

For the first few weeks after I'd arrived, I'd followed my grandmother everywhere: room to room in the apartment, store

to store on her interminable grocery runs, and once a week to Emma Abramovna's, to drink tea and talk about the old days, Emma Abramovna in a cheerful key, my grandmother in a minor one. "Everyone I know has died," my grandmother liked to say. "I am all alone." Following her around had made me depressed and lonely, too. And I'd had some bad luck. I got hit in the head with a gun while out one night with some expats; I got rejected from a series of pickup hockey games; my grandmother remembered nothing of the purges. But eventually my luck had turned. I found a hockey game; I found some friends; I even met a girl, a literature grad student named Yulia. I thought maybe I was getting the hang of this country, this life. And then my grandmother fell down the stairs.

As I walked to the examination room, I felt a little as my grandmother did—it was a relief to have her and her health finally in the hands of professionals—but I was also apprehensive. This place was dirty and far from home. I wasn't sure if I could trust these people. For reasons I didn't understand, the paramedics hung around outside the doorway of the examination room, even after they'd moved my grandmother to the examination table and repossessed their gurney. Noting this, the doctor looked from them to me.

"You know," he said quietly, "they don't get paid much."

"Oh!" I said. I pulled out my wallet and found five hundred rubles—sixteen dollars—and handed them to the paramedic who'd sat in back with me.

"Thank you," he said, and left.

In the examination room, the doctor checked the back of my grandmother's head, shined a light in her eyes, and asked her some questions. When he was done, he told her and me that she was safe for the moment but that it would be wise to keep an eye on her and run some tests.

"What do you think, Seva Efraimovna?" he asked her gently. My grandmother turned to me. "Whatever Andryusha thinks is

best," she said. I straightened up. "Would we be able to go home tomorrow?" I asked.

"No," the doctor said. "This will take a week."

"A week?" In America, I would have been concerned about the cost; in Russia, it was something else. The medical care was free. I looked around the room, with its high ceiling and chipped blue paint.

The doctor followed my gaze. "It doesn't look like much, but this is a decent hospital," he said. "I can't force you to keep her here, but sometimes the cranial bleeding from a fall like this doesn't show up right away. Of course, there may not be any bleeding. It's up to you."

I felt the pressure of medical expertise. If she dies, or suffers brain damage, he was saying, because you thought that our peeling paint meant that we didn't know anything about medicine—well, it'll be on you, not me.

"Grandma," I said. "Do you want to stay here a little so they can run some tests?" "O.K.," my grandmother said. "If you think I should, I will."

I didn't know what to think. But I felt like I had no other choice. "I do," I said. "Then O.K."

"O.K.," the doctor said. "Visiting hours are noon to eight. I'll have a nurse bring her to her room."

And he left. A few minutes later, a nurse came with a wheelchair, put my grandmother in it, and then wheeled her to a bed in a large room down the hall. At the nurse's signal, we lifted my grandmother from the wheelchair to the bed; she was incredibly light.

I wrote down my cell-phone number. "I will be back tomorrow," I told my grandmother.

"O.K.," she said. "Do you have the key to my apartment?"

"I do."

"Good. There is still some soup—make sure you eat it."

"O.K.," I said. I kissed her on the forehead and left.

The metro was closed by the time I got out of the hospital; I took an expensive cab home. At the apartment, I heated up the potato soup and opened my computer. In the Gchat bar, Dima's little green light was on.

"Grandma's in the hospital," I wrote him.

He wrote back right away. "What??"

"She fell down the stairs and hit her head. The doctor says it's not dangerous."

"Where were you when this happened?"

"I was in the apartment."

"I told you about those stairs!"

I didn't say anything to that. A minute later, the landline rang. It was Dima.

"Which hospital is she in?"

"Neurological Clinic No. 8." I had taken a card with me. "It's way out at the end of Kiev Highway."

"What?!" Dima said. "That's a state hospital. They have private hospitals now where you can get decent care."

I didn't say anything. Of course, I'd had no idea. Probably I should have called Dima right away. Everything had happened so quickly.

"Can you move her?" Dima said.

"This place is O.K.," I said. "It's not bad. And it's devoted to neurology."

"Move her to the American Clinic," Dima said. "It's right near Prospekt Mira. You'll be able to walk there."

"How much does it cost?"

"I'll pay for it," Dima said.

"I'll think about it," I said. I didn't want to put my grandmother back in an ambulance for two hours while she still had a head wound. And I didn't want Dima paying for her.

"If you keep her at this place, at least give the doctor some money," he said. "Give him three thousand rubles." A hundred dollars. "And give the nurse five hundred. It'll help."

"O.K.," I said.

"You had one thing to do," Dima said, before hanging up. "You had one thing you were supposed to do."

My soup had partly boiled out of the saucepan. I ate what remained, then spent an hour online reading about head trauma. Then I went to bed. It was the first time in my life I'd had the family apartment all to myself. I slept badly.

I decided not to move my grandmother. She was comfortable in her room, and the staff was attentive. I was nervous about paying money to the doctor, but it worked out. I had been unable to find any envelopes in my grandmother's apartment, and so I folded my three thousand-ruble bills into a ripped-out page from one of my notebooks; this looked pretty ridiculous, and when I caught the doctor in his little office and thrust it at him, he demurred. But I insisted. "Please," I said. Finally, he agreed and, opening the top drawer of his desk, stuffed the makeshift envelope inside. "It's unnecessary," he said, looking at me with dignity. "But thank you."

And that was that. No receipt, no exchange of goods, and afterward I went back to my grandmother's room. But the payment worked. I felt as if I had bought a small part of the hospital. I was no longer a stranger there. And after I paid off the nurses, too, I noticed that my grandmother had an extra blanket and that they rolled a television into her room.

My grandmother had a roommate, a garrulous woman named Vladlenna. She was just a few years younger than my grandmother, but large where my grandmother was small, and loud where my grandmother was quiet. On the morning of my first visit, I found her regaling my grandmother with tales of her health from the next bed. "Oh, Vladlenna Viktorovna, this is my grandson Andrei," my grandmother said.

"Nice to meet you, Andryusha!" Vladlenna hollered from her bed. "Seva," she asked, "is this guy married?"

"I'm afraid not," my grandmother said.

"Well, we'll take care of that!" Vladlenna said. "I know lots of girls!" I smiled politely. But the truth was, if it weren't for the recent advent of Yulia, I'd have asked Vladlenna for some phone numbers.

I stayed until evening, alternately working on my laptop while my grandmother napped and exchanging pleasantries with Vladlenna. Then I started on the long, cold ride home.

And so, it was every day. I was able to get some work done in the morning, then take the subway to the bus, and spend the remainder of the day with my grandmother. The CT scan showed no internal bleeding, but the doctors proceeded to do a whole raft of other neurological tests, as they said, "while they had her." All these came back negative. My grandmother was in good health.

"Are you sure?" I asked the doctor when, on the final day, he delivered this report to me. "She's always forgetting things. Basic things."

"How old is she?" "Eighty-nine."

"Exactly right. She has medium-stage dementia, which for her age, after the life she's led—it's good. It's above average."

"There's nothing she could take? She's pretty depressed." "You live in America, is that right?" the doctor said. I nodded.

"I know that in America they prescribe medication for this sort of thing. Maybe they're right to do so. But these are powerful drugs. They have side effects. Here we're more careful. My advice is to keep your grandmother as mentally engaged as you can. Her memory is going to disappear, but you can slow that down. And she can still enjoy her family. She can still enjoy the outdoors. These drugs can delay some of the processes, but they might break something else in her brain or body—I would avoid them." The doctor sighed. He had never said so many words to me at once, and I was surprised and grateful. "Vot tak," he said. So that's that. "Good luck." And he

reached out his hand for me to shake.

All this for a hundred dollars.

It was time to go home. I called us a cab and went to my grandmother's room to fetch her. As I helped her up out of bed, she nearly collapsed in my arms. "She's been lying in bed for a week," the nurse who was watching us said. "It'll be a little while before she gets her strength back."

But a terrible thing had happened. Forcing an elderly woman who was used to walking several miles a day, even if only back and forth through her apartment, to lie in bed for such a long stretch of time was hugely destructive. They had meant her no harm! But my grandmother had come in with a mild head injury and she was leaving with a limp. On our way out, we bought her a cane in the hospital shop. Gradually, things returned to normal. We hired a woman to cook for us, and my grandmother started walking through the apartment again. We settled back into our routine. We watched the nightly news together, played anagrams, and sipped tea after lunch. I felt like she had finally accepted my presence as a real and solid thing, less because of anything in particular that I did than because I was just there, day after day. When I would get dressed to go to a café or out for some groceries, she never failed to express admiration.

"Andryusha, I'm so impressed with you," she'd say. "You are so tall."

I am barely five feet seven. But my grandmother was now so tiny that I might have looked tall to her.

Occasionally, there were flashes of something else between us. Not long after my grandmother's fall, we received a rare visit from Emma Abramovna. Her son Arkady was staying with her for a few days, so she had access to a car, and she wanted to see how my grandmother was doing. My grandmother was thrilled and made elaborate preparations, including sitting me down and asking very seriously whether I thought the old

bottle of red wine in the fridge, which had sat there half empty since I'd arrived, was still good enough to drink. If not, with what should we replace it? The day of the visit, my grandmother put out the plates and her best napkins and a new bottle of wine early in the morning, and we ate breakfast in the back room, so as not to disturb them.

Finally, lunchtime arrived, and with it Emma Abramovna and Arkady. Arkady was a quiet computer programmer in his early fifties; he spent much of the visit looking at his phone. No matter: the visit was about my grandmother and Emma Abramovna. It began, as their conversations usually did, with a discussion of Emma Abramovna's children (wonderful!) and my grandmother's grandchildren (neglectful, except for me), their mutual acquaintances (mostly in Israel), and the lousy weather. Arkady and I occasionally tried to introduce fresh topics, with limited success. And then my grandmother fell into her usual post-lunch funk. "Yes," she said, "yes," and then, before I could stop her, "You see, the thing is, everyone has died. Everyone I know has died. All my relatives, all my friends. They died and left me all alone."

"Come on, Seva," Emma Abramovna said.

"But it's true!" my grandmother insisted.

"I'm still alive," Emma Abramovna said, taking the bait.

"Yes, you, O.K. But who else?"

"How should I know?" Emma Abramovna lost her temper.

"I'm sure there are other people alive besides me!"

"Yes," my grandmother said, sadly. "Maybe." And, with that, her melancholy filled the room.

After Arkady took Emma home, I couldn't help myself.

"Grandma," I said. "You so value Emma Abramovna's friendship. You were so worried about whether she'd have a good time. And then she's here and all you talk about is how lonely and depressed you are."

"So?" my grandmother said, looking up at me. "It's true,



isn't it?"

"That's not the point! People don't want to hear how depressed you are! It makes them depressed!"

"You don't need to yell," she said, placed her mug of tea in the sink, and then left the kitchen. I hadn't been yelling, I didn't think. But I hadn't not been yelling, either. I watched her walk to her bedroom and close the door behind her. Why I thought I could change my grandmother's behavior by criticizing it, I don't know. But this is what it's like to live with someone. Or, at least, this is what it's always been like for me to live with someone.

In early May, my grandmother turned ninety. She was convinced that she was turning a hundred. We had long arguments about the math. But we threw her a party. "Whose party is this?" my grandmother kept asking. "It's your party!" we would answer. "Yes?" my grandmother would say. She seemed pleased.

Now summer was around the corner, and she still had not discussed her dacha dream with Emma Abramovna. Or, rather, she had hinted at it numerous times, and Emma Abramovna had not taken her up on the hinting. Finally, I decided that I should just go over there and ask.

Emma Abramovna was an intimidating person. She had escaped from Hitler in '39, been exiled to Siberia as a Polish national, and still, more than a half century later, maintained her glamorous good looks. As she received me, half lying on her couch with a blanket draped over her lap, I knew I was coming before someone who was quite formidable, no matter her age and condition.

"So, what have you been up to in Moscow?" she said.

The honest answer was that I was playing a lot of hockey. But I had also become increasingly involved with a small political group, which called itself October, after the October Revolution, which Yulia had introduced me to. I had become

interested in its members initially as a potential subject for my long-wished-for academic article, but then I came to share their ideas, their critique of the post-Soviet predatory gangster capitalism that had dispossessed millions of people, including my grandmother, and I had even joined up. I told Emma Abramovna some of this.

"They're, what, Communists?" she asked.

"Socialists," I said.

"Idiots!" she said. "Socialism has been tried in this country. I lived through it. And I can tell you that the only thing worse is Fascism."

"They all propose something different, and in the end it's the same. Look at China, Cuba, Cambodia—wherever you go in the socialist world they set up camps, and sometimes worse. No, thank you."

This seemed like as good a time as any. "Emma Abramovna," I said, "as you know, Baba Seva lost her dacha in the nineties. Every summer she gets really sad when she has nowhere to go."

"I know," Emma said. "She tells me all about it."

"Well, I was thinking. Maybe she could come stay with you at Peredelkino for a little while? It would make her summer so much better."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Emma Abramovna said right away. She did not seem in the least bit surprised by the suggestion. She had apparently not been oblivious to my grandmother's hints. She had just chosen to ignore them.

But I was surprised. "Really?" I said. I knew Emma Abramovna's social life was more varied than my grandmother's, but it didn't seem like a round-the-clock party. "Why not?" I said.

"Borya and Arkady and their families will be visiting a lot," Emma Abramovna said. "Really, there's not much space."

"There won't even be a week when you'll have room?" I

asked, begging now. "You're her best friend!"

"Well," Emma Abramovna said, setting her mouth in a way that wasn't like her, but then being honest in a way that was, "she's not mine."

And then it was over. I was silent, Emma Abramovna suggested that we change the subject, and her aide, a Moldovan woman named Valya, brought out some tea and cookies. I gulped them down as quickly as I could and took my leave as politely as I could. I was heartbroken. It was as if a door had been shut on my grandmother's life, and she didn't even know about it. As I walked home, I called Yulia to tell her the news.

"That's very sad," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Know anyone else with a dacha?"

"Well, maybe Kolya will be done with his in time."

A friend from October, Nikolai, was in the process of building a dacha outside the city and was always trying to get people to help him. Yulia had said it half-jokingly, but it wasn't the worst idea.

"That hadn't occurred to me," I said.

"Of course, even if he does finish, there won't be much to look at," Yulia said. "And nowhere to swim."

"My grandmother's not a big swimmer these days. Do you think we can ask him?"

"I don't see why not. He can say no if he wants."

I called Nikolai. "Listen," I said, "I'm hoping to get my grandmother out of town for a week this summer, and I was wondering—could we use your dacha?"

"Of course!" he said. "I would be honored to provide shelter for a woman whose dacha was taken from her by unscrupulous capitalists." There was a pause. "But, if the place is going to be ready for the summer, I'm going to need some help."

So, for several weekends in a row, I made the long trip out and painted and sanded and hacked through some of the overgrowth in the back yard and helped the Uzbek construction

guys unload their small trucks and set up the bathroom and the kitchen. We agreed that I could have the dacha for a week in mid-July.

In the meantime, my grandmother was growing increasingly despondent. She was shrinking physically, but her personality was shrinking as well. There was less and less of her inside her.

We could no longer watch the evening news—at some point, without any warning, she'd started having a viscerally negative reaction to the country's political leadership—and so instead in the evenings we would watch old Soviet films. Sometimes Yulia, who was our main source for tips on what to watch, joined us. Other times, I saw her afterward. She slept over a fair amount, and my grandmother seemed to find this arrangement congenial. It was as if she were sprouting a new family.

Still, in the late-afternoon hours, after lunch, she spoke of death. "You know," she said one day, over tea, "I asked one of the pharmacists to give me poison. I even gave her the money. But now she won't do it."

"What? Who?" "The pharmacist." "Where?"

"Over there." She motioned outdoors. It was probably the pharmacy where she had a discount card, but who knew.

"What kind of poison?" I said.

"I asked her for something that would kill me. She said she had something like that."

I couldn't tell if this had actually happened. I imagined myself showing up at the discount pharmacy and, through the glass, demanding to know if they had promised to poison my grandmother.

"In one of the European countries, there is a place you can go," my grandmother went on. "A house—you can go to the house, and, if you want to die, they will help you." She was talking about physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia. Perhaps she had seen a segment about it on the news. "Isn't that nice?" she went on. "If you want to go, you can go."

I no longer argued with her about these things. I agreed with her that it was nice. Sadly, I suggested, the same was not possible here.

“No,” my grandmother agreed. “It’s not.”

Sometimes in the evenings, as she was going to bed, my grandmother asked me to sit with her. She could no longer read for long stretches of time, as she once had done, because her back hurt. She had taken to tearing out chapters of books, so that she could hold them aloft as she lay in bed, and her memory was so bad that she had trouble enjoying anything of any length. She would lie in her little twin bed, her glasses perched on her nose, and read and reread a thin sheaf of pages, while I sat in the armchair beside her. Eventually, she would fall asleep, I would gently remove her glasses, pull her blanket over her, and turn off the light. One night that spring, after she fell asleep, I sat in my chair for a while, wondering if I should do it. My grandmother was in pain. She was bored, she felt useless, she was sad. She lay with her mouth hanging open, her teeth out, the mother of my mother, lightly snoring. She had a pillow under her knees, which I could remove without waking her and then press over her face, and perhaps if I did it gently enough, she wouldn’t even wake up. This was what she wanted above all—to not wake up! But, of course, she’d wake up if I tried to suffocate her with a pillow. I pictured her fighting, instinctively, even as, intellectually, she wanted the end to come. And then what, exactly, would I tell the police? That she had asked me to do it? I pictured a baby-faced policeman—would he be understanding? Should I try to bribe him? Or would that be an implicit admission of guilt?

It didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to do it. I didn’t have it in me. A better person would have done it, I think.

The highlight of the summer was our trip to Nikolai’s dacha. There had been some delays and cost overruns, but by mid-July it was done. Nikolai spent a week there in triumph, and then

turned it over to us.

There was no way that my grandmother could take the hellish journey to the dacha on public transportation, so Yulia and I borrowed a friend’s rickety old Lada. I had never driven in Moscow before, and it was terrifying. It was not just that it was a big city—it was a tremendously confusing one. The side streets were narrow, the radial avenues were enormous, and on certain long stretches the traffic lights had been eliminated, making it impossible to turn left.

Somehow, we arrived at the dacha without incident. I hadn’t been there in a few weeks, and Nikolai had continued to improve it. The main thing was that he’d finished clearing out the yard. The weeds and the overgrowth were gone, and the bushes had a bit of shape to them. My grandmother, on seeing one, immediately said, “Raspberries!” She approached it and started pulling down raspberries and eating them.

And thus, we spent the week. There was a cot on the first floor where my grandmother could sleep, so she didn’t have to tackle the stairs, and though the closest little grocery store was too far to walk to, we were able to drive there every morning and pick up potatoes, beets, cabbage, and bread. At Nikolai’s suggestion, one day Yulia and I drove out to a village, where we went door to door buying eggs. The most eggs we could buy from any one person was two—that seemed to be all they had. But we kept going until we had twenty eggs. Neither Yulia nor I could really cook, but between the two of us, and with conceptual input from my grandmother, we were able to make enough food to keep us fed, and everyone was satisfied.

The house was in the middle of nowhere. We did not wake up to the sound of a babbling brook or the fresh smell of dewy trees and grass taking in the morning sun. But we were also not in Moscow, and that meant we were on vacation.

Yulia and I would work in the mornings, then in the afternoons we would go for a walk to an abandoned quarry

nearby. My grandmother was content to sit in the back yard wearing her old wide-brimmed summer hat and occasionally getting up to feed herself raspberries from the seemingly inexhaustible bushes. One morning, Yulia and I stumbled into the kitchen to find that my grandmother was already out in the yard, picking raspberries. She had in recent weeks become almost entirely reliant on her cane when she walked, but now she was stretched out to her full height, reaching for berries. Yulia said, "She looks like a little bear."

I had brought along a whole box of old Soviet movies on DVD, and in the evenings we watched them together. We watched "Office Romance," about a mean lady boss who falls in love with her nerdy but charming underling, and "Five Evenings," a Nikita Mikhalkov film about a man who returns unexpectedly from parts unknown to spend a week (five evenings) with his former love and her teen-age nephew, whose mother died in the war. The film is set in the mid- nineteen-fifties, and it's unclear why the man, Sasha, has been away—whether he was imprisoned, or simply left, or what. His old girlfriend, Tamara, is wary of him but not actively hostile, whereas the boy rejects him. By the end of the film, Sasha has broken down the boy's resistance somewhat, and the three of them spend some time together. Still, it is not a happy film. In the last scene, Tamara drops her skepticism toward Sasha and allows him to fall asleep with his head resting on her lap. We finally learn—and it's possible that to the Soviet audience of the time this would have been obvious from the start—the reason that the couple was separated: the war flung them to different parts of the Empire, and Sasha has only now managed to make it back. As he falls asleep on her lap, Tamara, beginning to plan her future with him again, pronounces a kind of prayer. "Just don't let there be another war," she says. "Just don't let there be another war."

"Yes," my grandmother said when the film ended. "Just

don't let there be another war."

The phrase, which during Soviet times had become a kind of slogan, contained so much. Her husband, my grandfather, dying at the front; her parents, forced to evacuate Moscow despite her father's poor health; in the midst of all this, her pregnancy and the birth of my mother. Just don't let there be another war: a mixture of terror and hope.

We were sitting next to each other on the couch that became her cot at night. If my grandfather had survived the war, my grandmother could have had other children. Or if she'd remarried sooner than she did. If she'd had other children, they could have been here for her now, and she would have had more grandchildren, probably, than just me and Dima.

"But you don't get to say how your life is going to be," my grandmother said suddenly. And that was also true. On a whim, I took her hand in mine. For such a tiny little grandmother, she had surprisingly big hands.