“Stoneland” and “The Third Sin” by Rita Kogan, 2021

Translated from Hebrew by Yardenne Greenspan

Translator's Introduction

The first thing that struck me when I began to translate Rita Kogan's short stories was her attention to detail. I know, I know—this is a writers' workshop cliché, sounded alongside such gems as "What's at stake for the protagonist?" and "Show, don't tell." But in this case, the details do more than simply enrich the story—though they do this, too, in their delicious sensory abundance. In Kogan's writing the details are, in fact, the most foundational and essential building blocks.

Take, for instance, the fabrics in "The Third Sin"—the woolen scarves onto which crystalized frost clings, the thick curtains behind which fantasy awaits, the plush rug that allows a child to drag a chair silently and climb to new heights of adventure. The jackets, the aprons, the stockings—they all speak of a harsh Russian winter, spent in the cozy indoor solitude of a little girl trying her hardest not to wake her mother from a depressive nap.

Or, in the same story, the sleekness of a lacquered cardboard puzzle and the brightness of plastic toys in the home of a girl "whose parents were party members and could afford the wonders of capitalism" and whose relatives lived "in the good part of Germany" imply not only socioeconomic disparities but also the corruption of the Communist Party, preaching anticapitalist sentiment while enjoying the riches of the free market.

In "Stoneland," the smell of saltwater, the red-black stains of cherries on sunburned skin, the rustling of lavender and limonium in nighttime, the quiet of a rural getaway punctuated by blaring communist marches from a nearby youth camp—details that encompass the freedom of a summer vacation spent so far away from home, as well as the helplessness of children constrained by the rule of adults.

But the power of these details is not only in how they drop readers into a particular time and place, shaping a clear image of a cultured place taken over by politically prescribed dereliction and neglect, but also in the way they speak wordlessly of a longing both sweet and bitter for somewhere that once was and never would be again. The Russia of Kogan's childhood is gone—not only from her personal experience, having immigrated to Israel as a young child,

but from the world at large, the country having transformed, its old ways vanished, then vanished again. The food lines, the shady deals to procure canned meat, the graphics on these tins, the stories and poems recited to a young child—which inspire her pretend play and her daydreams—are no more.

In the face of such grand sorrow, Rita Kogan's stories zero in on small dramas—a row between siblings, a petty theft, envy toward a scholarly child enjoying adult attention, a mother whose long naps leave time and space for transgressions. A sense of budding, unripe, and not yet understood sexuality pervades her scenes. The iron fist of communism casts a shadow over all. And every scene is water-colored with the warm, hypothermic emotion that is the lot of the immigrant—an unresolvable pining for a complicated past, both happy and miserable, one which they are glad to be rid of and yet for which they cannot stop yearning.

They lay, each in his or her own shack, each in his or her own bed. They lay separated. The shacks weren't locked, but they were forbidden from leaving. The forbidding separated them more than any door, more than any key turned once or twice in any lock. The forbidding and the shame.

The sheets beneath Vita's body were taut and cold. Their cool alleviated her heat. Evening descended. Dark shadows sent trembling fingers from the corner of the shack, gripping the legs of the wooden table, the carved backs of the chairs, the feet of the iron cots, hers and her mother's. There was little furniture in the shack, all well made and comforting in spite of its agedness. Honey Mountain was still visible beyond the open window, or rather, its contours were—a soft, unbroken line with three rounded peaks. Its yellow-orange face, which inspired her nickname for it, was now painted black. At night it went back to being an extension of Kara Dag, the enormous black mountain that towered jaggedly over the coastal line.

Voicelessly, she listed the petrified mountain dwellers: the King and Queen, the Devil's Finger, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, and the Portrait of the Bearded Poet (even though we can't see the profile from our side of the mountain, she clarifies wordlessly). The act of counting helped her unwind, removing her from the blowup that had just occurred.

Then she tried to rhyme Kara Dag: *ovrag* and *rag*. The high-quality rhymes (valley and foe) stopped the crying. But then they deteriorated: *durak*, *niyeh tak* (fool and not so). Here come the tears. Tyomka must be crying too. She pictured his face, his light blue eyes turning pink like a rabbit's, his upturned button nose flaring and filling with dripping dampness, his cherry lips growing wet and bitten.

She was convinced that Ilka wasn't crying. That traitor. How he'd screamed. He never dared curse, knowing he'd find himself grounded, just like them. The boys' mother was the strictest of the grownups when it came to clean language. Unlike Vita's mother, who herself indulged in the occasional dirty word, rolling it down her tongue before crushing it with her white teeth, as if it were a sour, juicy cherry. How he'd screamed. His face had twisted into a

Greek mask, a tragedy of rage and insult. She didn't believe him. He was acting again. His eyes had remained dry and calculated in spite of the sobbing and weeping. He'd yelled that it was always two against one, that they were keeping him out, disappearing on him, that he was always alone. He'd collapsed onto the dirt of the upper yard, limbs twitching. She still didn't believe him. A liar and an actor. A traitor. The three of them had never discussed it out loud, but it was clear to all—there was an unequivocal, all-encompassing agreement that, no matter what happened, they would not involve the grownups.

The grownups had believed him. His father had held him, enveloping him in the embrace of strong, tan arms adorned with white-burnt fuzz. He undid the boy's tightened fists, wiped his eyes without noticing they were dry. Ilka was then led downstairs to the kitchen shack, his entire body portraying a lonesome, defeated crusader for justice.

Now the pleasant dry air of dusk was filled with the aroma of valerian root, bitter and boozy. She imagined her mother releasing twenty drops from the dark glass bottle with a skilled hand, counting them solely with the movement of her lips, in a state of utter concentration, as if the world had fallen away, leaving nothing beyond the countdown of drops: twenty, nineteen, eighteen. She herself had never had the pleasure of partaking in valerian root drops. It was a remedy reserved for grownups with their shaky nerves and their fragile world. Ilka the traitor, having undergone the bitter initiation ceremony, had become a grownup that night.

She remembered how it all began. First there was a train. Actually, no. First there was the big accumulation. Mama had accumulated bags of sugar and tins of cured meat. The sugar was easier. Grandma exchanged her vodka food stamps for sugar food stamps. She performed the exchange in a dark cabin where glass bottles were returned for a deposit, a decrepit room hidden behind the large grocery store, laden with the heavy, sour smells of alcohol and alcoholism.

The cured meat was more complicated. The tins were never sold at the grocery store or at any other store Vita was familiar with. To enjoy them, one had to procure a gift basket intended "for party

members only." She herself was a Pioneer, one of the first in her age group to be accepted into the movement, but that didn't count when it came to gift baskets. Mama and Grandma were not party members, but Grandma was a doctor at an urgent care facility at the city's largest railway station. Her satisfied patients often thanked her in the form of a party-issued gift. Shamelessly, Grandma requested that they leave her the cured meat as well as the condensed milk. "Go ahead and keep the vodka to yourselves," she would add, winking generously.

After a year of accumulating, the tin cans crowded the shelves of the large pantry—soldiers on guard, twinkling dully in their red uniform, each bearing the grim image of a horned bull.

Then there was the train. They'd been lucky, she and Mama: their car-mate was an older woman, almost elderly. She parked herself on one of the bottom bunks. Mama took the other one, and Vita had climbed happily to the top bunk, the one above her mother's. Since the other top bunk was empty, she hopped back and forth between the two until she was finally scolded, and the spare bunk was reappointed as a hand towel drying rack. The towels were thin, gray, and smelled vaguely of mildew. But even with just one bunk, she was still the Olympian goddess of the train, observing all that went on below from her mighty, elevated position. She watched the sliding door inside which a distorted rectangular mirror had been welded, the small, round-cornered metal table with a set of four thick, stained tea glasses, each stored inside an ornamental brass holder, carved in the shape of twigs and red currant berries. The train groaned and moved on, the glasses shook in their holders, and hard-boiled eggs and bits of boiled chicken were pulled out of tinfoil. Their heavy, moldy, yet appetizing aroma spread through the train cars, seeping into the aisles, mixing with the burnt tobacco smell blowing out of the mouths of smokers through the corridor windows they'd cracked, diluting with the stench of urine and feces that invaded through the sliding door of the filthy bathroom. Once again, somebody had failed to press down on the metal pedal, their excrement swaying and bobbing inside the black toilet bowl, up and down, left and right, along with the glasses, the eggs, the chicken legs, the bunks, the train cars, the passengers, and her. They were all

traveling seaward. They traveled a day, two days, and on the morning of the third day, they arrived at the seaside.

The sea was a miracle. It was blue, twinkling, enormous, warm, and nothing like her Baltic Sea, which was a pale, gray strip of freezing water. A small, white, peeling motorboat picked the two of them up from the dock, sputtering, faltering, starting up, and heading back out to the water. It was the first time she saw Kara Dag, the Black Mountain, the magical mountain, the primordial volcano that had gone extinct but might, someday, spew fire and spit scalding lava once more.

She remembered the salty spray, the white trail that lingered through the water, as if to mark their path from one beach to the next. At first, Mama forbade her from standing up, commanding her to remain seated against her. But within a matter of minutes, her mother had given in to the swaying of the waves and the headache they gave her and fell asleep. Then Vita was free to breathe, smell, lick the awfully salty drops, to move from the bow to the stern, from the stern to the bow, and commit to memory the rising contours of the mountain. It was hot, but it was a different heat, not the humid, deadening heat of her city in summer. The heat here was dry like sandpaper and translucent. Through it, she could see the petrified dwellers of the mountain: the King and Queen, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, the Devil's Finger. Obviously, she hadn't known the names when she'd first seen them, and yet she did know. That first night, when Ilka, pointing at the mountain, had told her about the jagged shapes the lava had formed when it froze, listing them for her, she knew right away which one was which. Then she told him, "And that's Honey Mountain."

"Nonsense," Ilka protested. "There's no Honey Mountain here."

"Yes there is. That mountain over there, see how it's yellow and orange, even though you can hardly make it out in the dark? That's Honey Mountain."

"I see it!" Tyomka cried with excitement. "Honey Mountain!"

She was nine, Ilka was eleven, and Tyomka was eight. They were three, but they were not united. They were two against one from the very first night.

The rivalry was subtle at first, polite, contained—the rivalry of children of the intelligentsia. Though he was the older one, Ilka was shorter than his brother but also more muscular and sculpted. His boyish body implied the man he would become. His features were chiseled, his eyes narrow and gray, his nose straight and just the right length, his lips appeared painted, his manicured, thick hair, smooth and honey-toned, rested diagonally over his forehead.

The brothers had arrived in the small village about two weeks before her, and Ilka's skin now carried a gorgeous, uniform, golden tan. The milky-white, golden-haired Tyomka had been cursed with skin that tended to burn and turn red in the sun, much like hers—a redhead's skin, delicate and freckled.

Ilka was smart, sarcastic, and protective. He read books, could recite poetry by heart, even the forbidden kind. As he recited, he would narrow his eyes and emphasize the words he deemed important with a low howl. Her mother seemed to be flirting with him. Sometimes she would walk with him in the back of the group, discussing literature and poetry. Once, she recommended a Salinger book Vita had been forbidden from reading with that familiar enthusiasm that made her daughter envious of its object.

"There are sex scenes in that book," her mother had said in a low, knowing tone when Vita said she also wanted to read it.

"But I want sex scenes!" she'd let slip, louder than she'd meant to.

Everybody laughed. Vita blushed. Everybody kept laughing. Everybody but Tyomka. He squeezed Vita's arm gently, then whispered to her, "Big deal, sex scenes. So stupid. So grownup. Who cares?"

Ilka and Tyomka wore nice clothes, much nicer than was customary, especially for boys. Her mother said that Ilka and Tyomka's mama had an older sister who was married to an Italian man and living in Italy. Vita couldn't understand how a Soviet citizen could be married to an Italian but reassured herself—he might be a communist Italian, like Gianni Rodari. This international sister also had two sons and would periodically send packages of her kids' hand-me-downs for Ilka and Tyomka. The two wore thin, woven summer pants in cheerful yellows and whites. They had swimsuits that were

not see-through and reasonably stiff—unlike her swimsuit, which was made of the same fabric as her underpants. At least Mama had made sure to get her a new one before this trip, so the fabric still concealed her body, even when wet, rather than slip down when she swam toward the waves.

She was the one who'd discovered Stoneland: three boulders, not far apart, surrounded by a deserted pebble beach. Until they'd found this land, they'd been immersed in harmless competitions. She was also the one who'd come up with these. The first was a boat race. To the grownups, they seemed to be competing against one another, but in reality, she and Tyomka had built their boats together, while Ilka had built his alone. They were small boats made of smoothed bark and whittled twigs for masts. The first boats were bad. A few of them flipped over as soon as they met the water's surface. Others floated backward, not so much ships as insubordinate hermit crabs. All of them eventually sprung a leak and sank to the bottom. Ilka was the first to figure out what they were doing wrong. First he built a concave boat, forming a kind of keel that prevented it from overturning. Then he used clear fishing line as a hypotenuse, stabilizing the masts and blocking the boat from moving backward. Finally, he even sewed sails from a shirt he'd sacrificed for the cause. His father punished him for this choice, but his boats won every race. Each loss taught her and Tyomka another trick, but they were always behind. Ilka would lock himself in his shack or hide in the upper yard, slaving over his boats. When she and Tyomka just "happened" to stop by, he'd shoo them away. Over time, their boats also began to feature a keel, a hypotenuse, and a sail.

A week later, they enjoyed their first victory. Ilka threw his flagship to the ground furiously and stepped on it with a bare foot. A cracking sounded, and a momentary expression of pain folded his face in half, perhaps for the loss of the ship, perhaps from the force of the blow.

He limped for an entire day, and they embarked on the next contest—archery. "The trees are afraid of you," her mother pointed out lyrically during an afternoon walk in the park. "You've destroyed them all, you little barbarians," Natashka, the Iron Lady, admonished the children. She was a tall, long-legged, stone-faced spinster,

the unbaptized godmother of the boys and the best friend of their scatterbrained mother.

They truly had ruined the trees, first the bark in order to make the boats, then branches in favor of their bows and arrows. The bows required thick, bendy branches, ones that had just recently matured, still holding on to the memory of the young offshoots they'd once been. The arrows called for twigs of medium thickness, long and straight, older but not yet dried and aged. Ones that broke easily without hitting the target. Once again, fishing line was an essential component. Bow strings made of sewing thread, though more flexible and easier to tie, tore after one or two shots. To procure fishing line, they had their parents run to the department store in the neighboring village, larger than their tiny village which was devoid of shops, save for a small, empty corner store and a makeshift farmers' market that had come together alongside the dock and resembled a beehive. Since the two-hour ride in a wobbling truck bus down a bumpy dirt road was entirely unappealing, the boys' father suggested a day-long voyage by foot, through the mountains. The athletic Natashka was excited about the idea. The mothers considered sabotaging the endeavor but reconsidered after they were promised a potential restocking of the sugar and cured meat stock, which were running low, in spite of the great accumulation. "The boys have a healthy appetite, bless their souls," Natashka would mutter, adding a few hunks of the cured meat to a tin pot overflowing with young potatoes.

Tyomka, whose motto for the past two and a half weeks had become "What Vita said," never questioned her, even when he received a resounding "no" to his suggestion of inviting Ilka to share Stoneland with them.

They named each boulder, inspired by the stone characters of Kara Dag. Their favorite was the one closest to the waterline, which was shaped like an isosceles triangle, easy to climb, and offered protection from wind and spray. It was therefore named the Defenders' Boulder.

The second one was farther away in the deeper water. It was the widest of the three and shaped like a trapezoid. To reach it, they had to swim three or four minutes, then climb up. Though its sides

were gradated, climbing it was harder: its water-submerged foundations were covered with spongy seaweed, intensely slippery, and the children found themselves plopping into the water over and over again with a big splash and burning scratches. Sitting on it was comfortable, and there was room to hide against its back wall and keep lookout for approaching enemies. "This boulder has exceeding strategic importance," she lectured Tyomka with a grave face, quoting, almost to the letter, a beloved James Fenimore Cooper character or a newscaster prattling on about American imperialism. This boulder was therefore named the Generals' Boulder.

The third rock was also in the deep, parallel to the Generals' Boulder, and nearly inaccessible: tall, jagged, without any visible protrusions to hold onto when one climbed it. It was black, while the Defenders' Boulder and the Generals' Boulder were yellowish-brown. This boulder was like a small-scale shred of Kara Dag, proud and dangerous. It was named Black Tooth, and she claimed it protected them from pirate ships. Everybody knew that jagged beach boulders were the cause of most shipwrecks. He and Vita only climbed Black Tooth a handful of times, and once it almost ended with injury. True, when they'd located an alternative swimming route to the tooth, one that overtook the Generals' Boulder, they discovered an easier climbing angle, but it was still inaccessible and therefore immensely necessary. "This is where we'll flee in times of trouble," she said, and Tyomka nodded admiringly.

They came up with code names for different enemies. Strangers, though rare on this wild, remote beach, were known as Browns. Grownups—mostly negligible, unthreatening foes—were Greens. Code White, the worst of all, was reserved for their one true enemy: Ilka. Whenever they caught sight of him approaching Stoneland, they busied themselves with innocent beach activities: jumping into the deep end, sunning on a sun-warmed rock, or wading in the small bay.

It worked for three days. On the fourth day, as they made their way to their private realm, they spotted Ilka climbing toward the peak of Black Tooth. He was more muscular than they were and therefore an adept climber. He was already halfway to the top.

When he noticed them, planted motionlessly on the beach, staring, he stood up and cried, "Hey, you losers, is this where you've been hiding from me? It's cute. What do you call this boulder? Black Tooth? Kind of a moronic name, if you ask me, but what can you expect." As he said this, his foot slipped, his grip loosened, and he fell into the water, pushing himself away from the boulder at the very last second.

The contest had gone up a notch. It was no longer just healthy competition. This was war, bloody and persistent.

"À la guerre comme à la guerre," Tyomka said gravely.

"What's 'algerre?'" she asked.

"It's from *The Three Musketeers* and it's in French: in war as in war," Tyomka said, chuffed to the roots of his golden locks that he, too, had something of value to contribute.

"Oh, yes, that's good, especially if it's from the musketeers."

Thus, the battle had commenced. First, they drew a precise, confidential map of their land, including boulder names, outpost locations, and markings for arms and food storage. It was all imaginary, of course, save for the food. They'd decided to gather nuts and unoiled fried bread, which they'd sneaked under the table at mealtime. These were the only foods they could get their hands on that would not grow moldy. They'd drawn the map with magic markers and watercolors on a square piece of cardboard. She had drawn the majority of the details, but Tyomka, who turned out to possess a fantastic sense of distance, had afforded the map its desirable geographic panache. They covered it with an old kitchen towel and rolled it inside of a rare plastic bag to keep it safe even in case of drowning. Then they hid it in Vita's shack, tucked underneath the thin mattress, just below where she rested her head. Now the target was well defined: he or she who holds the map is the ruler of Stoneland.

The day of the blowup, it was business as usual. An early wakeup to the sounds of cheerful communist marches emitted from the loudspeakers of the neighboring summer camp. Face washing and toothbrushing in freezing water from a manual, stainless steel watering apparatus the shape of a full, bell-like breast. The water for

this apparatus was pumped from the owner's well by the boys' father every few days. A long clapper, also made of stainless steel, dangled from the nipple. When pressed, a thin stream of water sprayed from the nipple, accompanied by a tender jingle that caused the entire breast to tremble. Morning exercise led by Natashka and attended by all those who were interested or not. A breakfast of kefir and black bread, and that day a special indulgence of salted hard-boiled egg. Walking down the rocky path to their regular beach, remote and undeclared. Ilka made a show of ignoring them, though he was overly polite. This should have raised their suspicions, but they were blasé. They'd had the map for a week by that point, carefully hidden. Illustrations now adorned its margins: of foxes leaping from the tops of boulders to their deaths in sea foam, of mermaids with twisted tails and budding breasts, of gold coins inside a coffin crowded with bottles of rum. They were close to calling a ceasefire in favor of a new, promising, joint endeavor: creating a homemade Monopoly set. The boys' mother forbade playing cards as well as Monopoly. "A lowly, moronic game of commerce," she determined, rolling her Rs. But when they assured her that the traded streets would bear the names of painters, composers, writers, and poets, she acquiesced, even suggesting some potential names, including Pushkin and Lermontov.

When they returned from the beach, salty and sunburned, Vita and Tyomka were sent to pick cherries in the upper yard. The landlady had allocated the vacationers three fruit trees for self-picking in exchange for a small fee. This wasn't an act of goodwill. The fruit was so abundant that she couldn't possibly pick it all herself before it went bad or was stolen by the birds. Ilka, who had been complaining of a stomachache since noon, was excused from duty.

By the time they came back downstairs, covered with red and black stains and carrying two overflowing baskets, lunch was waiting on the common dining table in the lower yard. They washed their hands and sat right down to eat.

Ilka showed up at lunch, ravenous as usual. Now Vita began to grow suspicious. As soon as she finished clearing the dishes, she asked for permission to retire to the shack. She walked over to her bed and lifted the mattress. The map was gone. Defeat, downfall,

destruction! They had already won and had been conducting discussions about the Monopoly set for the past two days. Traitor. Liar. Actor. She returned her mattress to its place and went out to look for Tyomka.

"What's wrong? You're as red as a tomato," her mother said when she saw her, wandering, lost, in the lower yard.

"I must have spent too long in the sun," Vita lied.

"Wear a hat tomorrow and make sure not to take it off. But, actually, this is good. The sun will make that horrid sinus infection of yours go away."

Vita had no time to discuss that horrid sinus infection of hers. She had to find Tyomka, report the calamity, and plan their next move. But before she could find Tyomka, a long, high-pitched scream found her.

She rushed to the upper yard. The sound of the grownups' footsteps echoed behind, but she was faster and therefore the first to see: the two brothers were standing in the upper yard. One of them was holding a large piece of badly damaged cardboard. Since he hadn't managed to tear it apart, he'd burned it first, then drenched it with water, and finally tore bits and pieces off it. The black, wet scraps were flying around in the air. Ilka laughed, Tyomka screamed, and the laughter and screaming gave birth to the first slap.

She never confessed that Tyomka was the one who'd dealt the first blow. Then again, she never claimed the opposite, either. She didn't say a word, and neither did Tyomka. Now the minutes ticked by very quickly and very slowly. Bodies were slammed, limbs wrapping around each other, dust billowing, damp flakes of dirt swirling through the air, as if the blowup had awakened Kara Dag itself, to complete its Pompeii-esque work of destruction.

They lay, each in his or her own shack, each in his or her own bed. They lay separated. Tyomka was surely crying. She wondered what they'd do now. They had to run away. She rose silently, gathered the bundle of nuts and fried bread, and ducked behind the kitchen shack. She only lingered a moment, listening in on the grownups' conversation.

"You're the one who messed up here, Lilka. Was it so hard to give birth to two of them? If you only had two girls, this whole

debacle would have been resolved!" the boys' father cried, a hint of drunkenness in his voice.

If you only had two girls. But how could that be? Vita was the only one.

She heard them toasting and clinking glasses. Ilka the traitor joined his voice with theirs, reciting a poem. They applauded. Vita twisted her face as if she'd bitten into something rotten.

When she reached the brothers' shack, she didn't dare cross the threshold. The prohibition was too palpable, and its breach could entail a severe and prolonged punishment. She crawled under the open window, through which she heard stifled sobs, and tapped on the glass.

"Hey, it's me," she whispered, her voice suddenly growing hoarse.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Tyomka poked his bloated face out the window.

"I think we should run away. We'll climb Honey Mountain, spend the night there, and then decide what's next. Let them kiss and hug their darling Ilichka all they want. That'll leave us plenty of time to decide our next steps, and at least we'll be together."

Tyomka said nothing for a while. Then, his voice dull from crying, he spoke. "I can't run away. Besides, there's no point. You're going home the day after tomorrow anyway. I'm the one who'll be stuck here with them."

"Then I won't leave. I'll stay here. And so will you. We'll live in the mountains, like savages. We'll hunt wild boars, gather blackberries, drink from streams."

"Then we'll get married," he added.

She was surprised. They'd never discussed a wedding. "Warriors don't get married," she whispered.

"But if we don't get married, how can we be king and queen of the mountain?"

She hadn't thought of that. Tyomka was right; they couldn't be king and queen without getting married. "Fine, we'll get married. But not right away. First, we'll build a shack in the mountains, and a boat, and we'll learn how to fish. Then we'll see."

Tyomka rested his head on the windowsill. She pulled herself up and sat down beside him. This was nearly breaking the prohibition, but just nearly. She was still outside of his shack. He was still inside.

His crying subsided. The voices of the grownups, which had been ringing out until that point, high and cheerful, from the kitchen shack and the lower yard, faded away. They must have all retired to read in bed. Her mother must have stayed back to read in the kitchen so as not to wake her up. Vita couldn't sleep in anything but pitch dark. Even a dim nightlight made her toss and turn restlessly and whine, "Mama, Mama."

The darkness around her thickened. Now she wasn't sure they'd ever make it to Honey Mountain. Tyomka trickled into the room, back to bed. She heard his breathing, soft and measured—furry ping-pong balls tapping against the thin wall. He fell asleep. The village fell asleep too. Once in a while, a plopping sounded: another ripe cherry, the size of a baby's fist, fell to the dirt of the upper yard. One of the landlady's sheep responded with a long, lamenting bleat.

From her seat, she could only picture the sea, black as tar, mockingly performing for the King and Queen, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, the Devil's Finger, and the Portrait of the Bearded Poet (though he could not be seen from their side of the mountain). Sea lavenders and limoniums whispered on the mountain slopes, both purple and dry. Tomorrow, she would climb up Honey Mountain with her mother to gather a small bouquet—a prickly souvenir to place in a vase before they travel back north, home.

"The Third Sin"

There were five carnations, red as blood, real nice and pretty, flowers of the revolution. Five erect heads whose petals have yet to open completely, presented atop dark green stems, long and straight like Robin Hood's arrows. Masha loved Robin Hood better than Peter Pan, because Peter was just another mean boy, while Robin stole from the evil, greedy rich and gave to the poor, just like any Communist worth his salt. Occasionally, she loved Peter, too, but she was convinced that if he ever visited her, he would break her heart, just like he'd done to Wendy Darling and the others. Though she was only five years old, Masha was an expert on heartache and communism.

Masha gazed at the bouquet as if hypnotized, curled up against the tall cushions at the far corner of the large, carpeted sofa. Her heart went out to the crimson wonder that had erupted in the middle of this freezing, snowy December. Mama had come home from school in the early afternoon, pale and tired. The low, gray skies of the northern city weighed heavy upon her head. The flowers, bundled in gray wrapping paper, were shielded from the cold inside her thick, purple woolen scarf. The drops of water on the ends of the stems clustered into delicate frost ornaments against the rolled paper and wool fibers, melting as soon as she entered the heated apartment.

A potbellied crystal vase was pulled out of the glass cabinet, filled halfway with lukewarm water, and carefully filled with five real nice and pretty carnations in perfect order, each flower tucked into its own crystal wedge. Once, Masha asked Mama why she always bought five-flower bouquets. Mama wouldn't answer, but Grandma reproached Masha, explaining that only an odd number of flowers would do. "Even numbers are for the grave. Living people buy odd numbers, and three flowers are not enough for your Mama, because she's got money to waste."

"Money isn't everything," Mama barked. "And a three-flower bouquet is just sad."

A low afternoon sun suddenly emerged from behind the icy-blue windowpane, glimmering over the crystal openwork, blackening the large dining table, silently charging the crimson heads, which now resembled the eternal flames at the center of the Tomb

of the Unknown Soldier. Masha had seen photographs of the tomb and the flame at the end of the thick book about the Great Patriotic War. This book was forbidden, because in addition to the photos of the tomb, there were also black-and-white images of dead people. Some of them were hanging from nooses; others were tossed naked and shot in pits; and others yet, shockingly pale and skinny, were crawling among the snow piles along the city's streets and bridges. She recognized the city easily. The bridges over the river and the embellished copper railings had remained untouched.

A woolen silence was sporadically interrupted by the rustling of the water trapped in the heating system. Grandma had yet to return from her evening shift. Mama fell asleep after dozens of valerian drops. A touch of the medicine's pungent odor hung in the warm air, like a reminder of some formidable mystery of the grownup world, foreign to Masha's universe.

Masha shook herself out of her reveries and got up to drag a tall wooden chair over from the phonograph corner. The seat of the chair was domed and upholstered dark brown, and the ends of its legs were pointy and uncovered. Masha therefore made sure to only drag it along the rug, never across the bare hardwood floor.

Once the chair was in the right spot, she climbed up and lifted both knees onto the table. She ran her fingertips over the hard petals and jagged edges. Carnations smelled like nothing, like snow. A clean, festive scent. She brought one curious eye closer to the flower and peeked into the tender sepal. Her eye drowned in the dozens of shades of red and pink, a living kaleidoscope, a thin, breathing tapestry.

Masha discovered the disappointing sight of a real kaleidoscope when she accidentally dropped the one she'd received a few months earlier, for her fifth birthday. It fell out of her hands as she stood on the command bridge (her mother's desk), using her makeshift telescope to examine the black, puffy sail striding toward her with its smoking cannons. All of a sudden, the two brass caps detached from the cardboard cylinder, and out spilled the glassy innards.

At the shattering racket, Grandma came running in from the kitchen, her paunch wrapped with the sails of an apron, a damp kitchen towel dangling from her shoulder like a military badge of

honor, and the sleeves of her blouse rolled up her thick arms. When she saw the glass flakes, she wrung her hands. "What did you break? The new toy Mama bought you?"

She kneeled to carefully rake the large shards. When she noticed her granddaughter preparing to jump down from the desk to help, she ordered the girl to stay put. "I don't want you walking here with bare feet and getting cut by the glass. That's exactly how sepsis happens. In the meantime, take that rag off of your head and fold it real nice and pretty back in the closet." Grandma jutted her chin toward the red silk strand her mother liked to wrap around her neck on warmer days, which was now tied around Masha's head in perfect pirate fashion. "Thank goodness it's just the toy and not the thermometer," Grandma grumbled as she returned to the kitchen to get the broom. Masha knew that breaking a thermometer was a serious misdemeanor. It was impossible to track down every tiny silver ball. Some would remain buried forever under the furniture, and mercury inhalation was even worse than sepsis.

But now the memory of the shattered kaleidoscope had fled her mind, and all that was left was the charm of the flowers. Stunned with their beauty, Masha bated her breath, which wheezed slightly due to constant mucus. If only the bouquet belonged to her alone, her own private, magical, enchanted treasure. The silence around her thickened, reddened, ripened.

Finally, she descended from the table, sliding slowly from the chair to the rug, so as not to wake up Mama. If Mama woke up and still had a headache, Masha would have hell to pay. If not through a slap then through a word of snarky malice, or worse—the silent treatment.

Masha tiptoed into her bedroom. When she passed the closed door of her grandmother and mother's shared bedroom, she held her breath a second time.

Masha's room was fabulous. A matching furniture set of bright green particle board and unfinished wood; a thick ceiling shade printed with enormous orange sunflowers; long, heavy drapes made of the same sunflowered fabric and alternately standing in for a dungeon or Tom Sawyer's cave; Swedish wallpaper with a design of willowy stamens and pale rose petals. Secretly, Masha used to smear

drippings of green snot over the wallpaper, making sure to stay on the stamens so that her mother wouldn't find out. The wall across from the bed was installed with shelves crowded with books: thin ones, which Masha could read by herself, and grownup-looking books with hardcovers and pages bare of illustrations. And there were drawers overflowing with dolls and toys; a desk covered with a glass plate, underneath which Mama and Masha had arranged their favorite reproductions: Degas's *Blue Dancers*, *The Rooks Have Come Back* by Savrasov, and Kiprensky's *Portrait of A.S. Pushkin*, bathed in its chilled brownness. In the portrait, the poet's right shoulder is covered with a homey checkered woolen shawl, and his gaze is angled toward the right, thoughtful and closed-off. Though Masha knew the artists' names by heart, she was always anxious about failing Mama's pop quizzes. When she did answer all the "And who painted this one?" questions promptly and correctly, she enjoyed a "That's my girl!" look.

But to Masha, the bedroom's pièce de résistance was not the fine furniture or even the large toy chest underneath the bed, containing countless treasures (a lifelike crossbow, a black pirate sword, and letter-faded wooden blocks for building forts and castles). The finest item in her room was a tiny dollhouse concealed on a little shelf.

This was no ordinary dollhouse, like the one owned by her neighbor Yulia—who was also the only daughter of a Jewish family and lived in the same section of the railroad building on 6 Shostakovich Street, with its many stories and entrances. Yulia was older than Masha by one year and one month, and her parents were busy engineers. She spent most of her afternoons and evenings in the company of her grandmother, a refined elderly widow and a retired German teacher. Once, in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek, Masha hid in Yulia's grandmother's room, underneath an enormous armchair covered in a silk sheet with brown tassels. Through the tassels, Masha watched Yulia's grandmother slip into the room and pull a white fabric bundle from underneath her mattress. She unfolded the bundle carefully on the desk, gathered invisible crumbs with bird-like fingers, and swallowed them down. Only when she fished a fresh slice of bread, which still carried the aroma of the oven, from the pocket of her house robe, did Masha realize that a stale slice

had been concealed in the handkerchief. Yulia's grandmother swaddled the fresh slice with utter devotion, then finally buried the precious bundle deep underneath her mattress, and left the room with the same soft, stealthy step. Yulia, who never imagined that Masha would be able to hide in her grandmother's room unnoticed, continued wandering through the apartment, calling over and over again, "Masha! Mashka! Where are you? Come out!" Only after thirty minutes had elapsed and the grandmother had intervened, did Masha crawl out of her hiding place and declare victory.

There was one advantage in spending time in Yulia's apartment—her friend's grandmother had relatives in the good part of Germany, who sent over clothes and toys the likes of which Masha had never seen before, neither in the shops nor in her other friends' closets. Among other valuables, she had puzzles made of thick cardboard coated in shiny lacquer, adorned with stylized, detailed designs, as well as a two-story dollhouse with an attic and a yard, and six spacious rooms furnished with light, bright plastic pieces.

But despite the grandeur of Yulia's dollhouse, Masha was convinced that her own tiny structure, a gift her mother had brought back from Tallinn, was immeasurably prettier. Her single-story dollhouse, handmade with delicate precision, a masterpiece of carving and engraving, included kitchen cabinets whose doors were painted the dark green of pine needles, a wide dining table, a porcelain sink with a tiny brass tap, minuscule kitchenware, and a little reading nook, which contained a bookcase, an armchair upholstered with orange fabric, and a standing lamp with an orange shade.

Masha's dollhouse was uninhabited. From time to time, she allowed one of the poopsies—tiny suckling babies made of hollow plastic—to take a tour. But this home was intended for grownups, not infants, and Masha owned no suitable dolls. One day, Yulia told her that in capitalist America there were tall, long-legged dolls with a painted girl's face and real hair, flowing and brushable. Yulia also confided that these women-dolls had breasts, a butt crack, and another crack—the secret one, the one at the bottom of the belly. Masha's attentive ear grew hot. She pretended to busy herself searching for a missing piece of the puzzle she was solving and then retired to her own apartment shortly thereafter, excusing herself to complete

chores she didn't actually have. Masha thought at length about this fantastical woman-doll but refused to believe it truly existed. Though Yulia had sworn she'd seen one with her own eyes when visiting a girl whose parents were party members and could afford the wonders of capitalism, Yulia herself did not own such a doll, and Masha was convinced that she herself would never own one either. Her gorgeous doll apartment therefore stood empty.

But a single piece of oddly shaped cardboard laden with knobs and holes had managed to sneak into the apartment and claim squatting rights. It was painted with half of Robin Hood's head, wearing a green beret, and his face, a handsome young man's face, filled with brash boldness. It was one of a 100-piece puzzle of Robin Hood and his Merry Men driving away the Sheriff of Nottingham's brutes. Yulia spent days searching for the missing piece, burrowing under the furniture and the rugs, checking dozens of other puzzle boxes, even digging through her mother's German vacuum cleaner's dust tank. But that entire time, the missing piece was set in a far corner of Masha's dollhouse, keeping watch over the reading nook with one sparkling, stouthearted eye.

Masha walked into her bedroom, closed the door carefully behind her, not letting it slam, and turned toward the dollhouse. First, she shifted the kitchen cabinets and pulled out a rectangular paper cutter from behind them. She slipped the paper in between two tightly squeezed books, so that their hardcovers could complete the task of smoothing it out. Then she returned to the dollhouse, nudged the armchair, placed the dining table in the middle of the room, and arranged the four chairs a small distance away, one on each side. Then she pulled out plates, bowls, cups, and glasses from the cabinets, and tiny forks and knives from a little drawer, and set the table. The glasses to the left of the plates, same for the forks. The knives to the right. When she finished setting the table, she pulled the paper rectangle from between the books and went to her desk. She kicked off her slippers and folded her legs underneath her on the soft, upholstered chair. Her feet, wrapped in a pair of old, fleecy cotton tights, rubbed together mindlessly once and again, trapped underneath her buttocks. An excited heat took hold of her—not the caressing warmth of the heater, but a ticking chill that hinted at

sickness, cooling and scorching in turns. She placed the cool back of her hand on her forehead. She reached no conclusions, because her hand was warmer than her forehead, but the dizziness persisted. Masha recalled that in order to accurately check her temperature, her mother used to kiss her forehead with her lips, which were pursed with concern, a fluttering touch that lingered only for a moment, though Masha wished it would go on for longer. She considered taking the thermometer from the vanity in Mama and Grandma's room but waved off the thought immediately. Instead, she lifted herself from the chair, pressed her forehead against the cold glass plate of the desk, and closed her eyes. A pleasant sensation spread through her. She pushed her forehead against the glass as hard as she could, careful not to fall off her seat. Then she opened her eyes. The colorful reproductions were so close, a terrifying, microscopic proximity; she could spot minuscule wrinkles in the chrome paper and imperceptible scratches on the glass surface. The blue dancers rustled their tutus; the rooks flapped their wings above the naked trees; and Pushkin fixed his eyes on hers, urging her to hurry up.

She raised her head. She had to finish the card. A week ago, she'd started preparing a secret card made of fine, firm paper that she'd cut out of a book of aquarelles. She painted it using the new watercolors that resembled double-wrapped pralines: wrapped once with tinfoil, then with a regular paper printed with the name of the color alongside a square of the very same color. She'd created a wonderful card, floral and sunny, the back of it devoid of all stains. But the water she used to paint the background had distorted the paper, so she had to locate a hiding place that would double as a flattener and a fastener.

This would be the first time that, alongside the traditional drawing, she would write a greeting in cursive letters. She's known how to write and read print for six months now, but she'd only recently learned to write in cursive, like a big girl. First, she'd write down the numbers—two and eight—then on the next line, she would write, "To my beloved Mamochka." Then, on the last line, aligned to the right and in smaller letters, "From Masha." Masha had practiced writing the words over and over again on the back of a lined notebook. She'd acquired her mother's age and a sample of the

words from Grandma, who wrote them for her on a separate piece of paper.

Masha pulled a small wooden ruler and a pencil from her stationery drawer, sharpened the pencil, careful not to break the tip, and drew three lines on the back of the card—three near-invisible lines, two centimeters apart. Then she sharpened the pencil again and began to write, slowly and with effort, her tongue sticking out and her nose wheezing meekly. When she finished, she leaned back and examined the result with satisfaction. Finally, she smoothed out the card and tucked it back in its place behind the dollhouse kitchen cabinets. Then she pulled out a pair of heavy scissors with rounded handles wrapped with orange plastic. She liked to play with the handles, pulling them open and pretending they were strange glasses. Her mother liked to joke that she'd end up cutting her nose off, and her grandmother cried that she could poke her eyes out.

Masha soundlessly opened her bedroom door and listened intently to the sounds of the apartment. The quiet rested over the space like a thick comforter, but the sun had disappeared. A thin dimness, emanating the scent of lavender, spilled in from the open windows and spread through the home, starting in the corners, then flooding the rooms. Mama was still asleep.

When Grandma came home, the silence was broken at once. Her keys jangled in the double locks, her heavy, locally made boots ("Not the Austrian garbage your mother spends a fortune on, then walks around all winter long with wet feet and a dripping nose") treaded confidently over the hardwood of the foyer, sounding the ruckus of a warring battalion.

"Is anyone alive in here?" Grandma's voice echoed through the space of the apartment, filling Masha with burning joy. *Babushka! Babushka is home!*

She rushed out of her room and skipped over to Grandma, hurrying to wrap her arms tightly around the woman's thick hips, to bury her head in the big, soft, comforting gut.

"All right, all right. Let me take off my jacket. It's so hot in here!"

"You know, Babushka, I have something so pretty to show you!" Masha prattled, her thin voice soaring to fill the apartment.

"Where's Mama?" Grandma asked, paying no mind to her granddaughter's statement. She turned to the kitchen and began to unpack the groceries she'd carried in a collapsible, knitted shopping bag, a bag that reminded Masha of a stately lady's elegant hairnet.

"She's asleep. She has a headache."

"Asleep again? What about food? Did she make anything?"

"No, but I'm not hungry, Babushka. Come on, I've got to show you something so pretty!"

"Fine, fine. You're a pain in my ass. You've got to, huh? Well, come on. What have you got to show me?"

Masha led her grandmother proudly into her bedroom, holding onto the woman's blue apron as if onto the reins of a carriage horse.

"Well?" Grandma paused in the doorway, her eyes searching the room for something new.

Masha pulled her inside and closed the door. "First of all, this." Masha pulled out the signed card and presented it proudly, holding the edges with her fingertips.

"What's that? The birthday card? Very nice! Did you write it all properly? Good job, smart girl. Is that it? Can I go? Someone's got to cook dinner for everyone."

"No, Babushka, come here." Masha nudged her grandmother gently toward the dollhouse. "Bend down and look."

Grandma sighed and leaned in. She was used to her granddaughter's inventions. Sometimes they were made of paper, other times of pine cones, acorns, or dry twigs she collected outside. That much, the mother had been right about—the girl was talented. Not in vain did she drag her frantically from art class to choir practice.

It took Grandma several seconds to notice anything different on the small, dim shelf, but when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she bit her lower lip hard, stifling a scream.

"What's wrong, Babushka? Isn't it pretty?"

"It's . . . it's very pretty. Very. Does Mama know you cut them?"

"No, it's a surprise!" Masha cheered.

Grandma rose back slowly, one hand supporting the small of her back, the other gripping the bookcase, then walked to the other room. Masha heard the squeaking of the opening door and the metallic click of the doorknob as it closed, followed by whispered

murmurs. Fear made its way into her heart. She padded softly out into the hallway and tried to eavesdrop on the conversation taking place behind the closed door. All of a sudden, the door banged open, and Mama, wearing a thin white nightgown and a brown Orenburg shawl around her bare shoulders, burst out. Her gorgeous, curly hair swelled wildly around her head, her large glasses rested crookedly atop her nose, and an odd expression sealed her brown eyes. Without so much as glancing at Masha, she strode into the living room. Grandma lumbered after her. Masha tiptoed behind, her footsteps inaudible.

A cry broke the quiet of the apartment. "But why?! Why?! Why did she do it? Why did she cut them? All of them! Why?! Is she an idiot? Is she evil? Why?! Does she hate me? Is she trying to spite me? She's always trying to spite me!" The yelling was replaced by broken, unintelligible sobs.

"Shh, there, there . . . she didn't mean it. She just wanted to do some decorating. It really does look very pretty. She wasn't thinking."

Masha ducked down and peeked between the legs of the adults. Five glimmering, waxy, dark green decapitated arrows, long and straight, were perfectly arranged inside the crystal vase, which was powerfully illuminated by the eight electrical pears of the grand chandelier.

"Of course she wasn't thinking! Does she ever think about anyone but herself? Evil girl! Evil!" Mama stumbled out of the living room, her face red and puffy, her eyes burning and her nose dripping. Masha flinched and retreated. Grandma appeared behind Mama, overtook her, dragged Masha into her bedroom, and slammed the door behind her, blocking the exit with her body. "That's it! Enough with the hysterics! Big deal, flowers! We'll buy new ones tomorrow. She didn't mean it. She wanted it to look pretty."

"Sure, pretty. Pretty for her. Only for her! Always only for her!" Mama raised a skinny, bare hand and punched a single, lonely fist against the closed door. "I waited in line for hours. In the freezing cold. Hours, just to have flowers for . . . tomorrow." She started crying again, a small, soft cry.

"Shh . . . it's all right. She's a good girl. She loves you. You love her too. Enough. The gals will come tomorrow—your friends. You'll

sit, you'll gossip. He'll call too. Maybe even tonight. Or tomorrow." Grandma's voice poured more and more comforting words. Her bony hands caressed her daughter's curls, smoothing the shawl around her shoulders. "Go get dressed, you'll catch cold. Go."

Behind the closed door, Masha stood, petrified, her legs squeezed together. Her stomach growled. The voices outside her door dwindled and retreated, and she herself dwindled and retreated from the words. A thick dimness poured from outside through the two large windows which have yet to be draped shut. Masha didn't dare press the light switch. Mechanically, she kicked off her slippers and placed them side by side by the bed, pulled off her tights and hung them neatly on the back of the chair. The green feet of the tights draped down, unreal, barely visible in the dimness. She closed her eyes and began walking forward, barefoot, first on the cool hardwood floor, then on the old rug that was only spread over the floor of her room in winter. She held her arms out to her sides and put one foot in front of the other, silently, like a tightrope walker crossing a gaping abyss. The rug ended and the cold floor stung her bare feet once more. Finally, when she reached the windows, she could not go any further, and she opened her eyes again. Now she noticed that some snowflakes, few and far apart, had started falling, gathering slowly into small piles on the exterior windowsills, painting the rusty playground, the burst asphalt roads, and the hunchbacked street lamps with a thin, white brush, disguising the surrounding buildings, the ugly doppelgängers of her own, with their illuminated and dark windows—rows upon rows of twinkling squares that seemed to be made of tinfoil, as well as blackened, dead ones.

She felt a sudden urge to open one of the windows, but the latch was too high to reach without dragging the chair over. Instead, she turned to one of the drapes that were bundled into a thick, flowing fabric scroll and wrapped it around her body. Inside of the drape, the darkness became complete. Masha widened her eyes but could see nothing, as if she were in the belly of a sunken ship. As if her eyes had been poked out by a crow's beak. Her breathing turned heavy, wheezing, and monsters emerged from within the dimness, sorcerers and witches who stole lifetimes away from children, satanic robbers whose sole wish was to make innocent humans walk the

plank and slit their throats, pretty stepmothers whose true, evil faces were revealed only when reflected in the pure water of a pond. She pushed away the ends of the drape, fighting for breath, dropped to the floor, and crawled away on all fours. She crawled quickly, like a baby, until she reached the tiny dollhouse shelf.

The room was cloaked in darkness. The child sat, limbs gathered, on the rug. A meek, milky light beamed from the rectangular card she held in her hand, and her face stared motionlessly at the dollhouse, where Robin Hood's half-face was boiling a tiny pot of water for four marvelous crimson heads, which sat, each in its own seat, around the set dining table, while the fifth dozed off in the orange armchair, a tiny book at its side.