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Henry Holt and Co.

Snow in May

Tanya lingered, then took a few steps toward the metro, which made her feel like a criminal. She took her place at the end of the line. Maybe there would still be enough time, maybe Luciano would wait. She stood, pelting the backs of fellow line standers with all the anger and frustration accumulated in her line-standing life.

Thirty minutes passed. Her whole being itched with indecision. Flecks of her new beautiful skin, the ones blessed with Auntie Roza's pungent Red Moscow, fluttered across the vast, indifferent city toward Hotel Rossiya, to Luciano, with his shiny hair and olive oil-rubbed lips. She understood that bananas would have a relatively small impact on the bright future she hoped for her sons. Yet, their future would begin when she returned home, and she had the power to make it a little sweeter. Gradually, the romantic kite of her soul descended back to her body. She felt tired and overdressed. Like herself.

When at last it was her turn, Tanya saw that the sales clerk was drawing bananas from two different boxes. One contained taut yellow bunches, while bananas from the other box were covered with brown spots.

"Excuse me, are you selling rotten bananas?" Tanya cried out.

"And what else am I supposed to do with them, grazhdanka? Throw them out? I have to move the product. If you don't want them, I have plenty of other customers who will take them with joy and be grateful."

Tanya bought three bunches—the allotment per person. Only one was in the early stages of rot. She looked at her watch: seven fifty. It would take her at least forty minutes to get to the hotel by metro. She could try catching a taxi, though she doubted there'd be any in this area. Surely someone would pick up a hitchhiker.

Twenty minutes later not a single car had stopped. Was her dress scaring people off? Clutching bananas to her chest, she turned the corner to a poplar-lined street and sat down on a bench. The pollen swirled around her like snow. There had been a time when the distinctions between right and wrong seemed indisputable, and doing right felt good. When all the decisions had been premade and in her best interest. Back when she didn't need so much to be happy.

She remembered sitting once as a girl on the bank of the Volga River. She had just finished a shift of volunteering at the kolkhoz with her Young Pioneers brigade. Soon it would be dark, and the Pioneers would build bonfires and sing songs about loyalty, valor, and honor. Tanya remembered how her hands hurt from pulling carrots all day. She knelt and dipped them into the river. The water was so cold, a shudder ran up her arms and jolted her heart. She tried in vain to scrub the black soil from under her nails. She lifted up her eyes in time to see the last sunray strike a little fire on the golden cupola of a country church on the opposite bank. She felt at the center of her life then, separate from the world only in a way that could allow her to improve it. Although her future seemed vague, its every mysterious facet glimmered with light and possibility.

Early the next morning Tanya loaded up on several kinds of sausages and cheese, ham, smoked meat, good Hungarian wine and canned fruit, good vodka for Anton, and fresh produce at the grocery store near Auntie Roza's. She found two sturdy boxes sitting by the garbage dump in the courtyard. One of them, Tanya was shocked to discover, was from a color TV, a defisit unavailable in stores even in Moscow. Luckily, the foam forms were still intact—perfect for fruits and vegetables. She hurriedly repacked everything again for optimal transportability.

At the airport, the loudspeaker announced that the eight-hour nonstop flight to Magadan was delayed because of adverse weather. The terminal swarmed with passengers, stir-crazy from the

foul-smelling bathrooms and insufficiency of places to sit. Various personages of questionable intent, particularly gypsies and persons of Caucasian nationality, trolled the waiting halls, panhandling, selling trinkets, and soliciting fortune readings.

Tanya had too many things to carry all at once. She dragged her suitcases up to the end of the check-in line and asked the woman in front of her to keep an eye on them. When she returned for the boxes mere seconds later, the one for the color TV was gone.

She lost her breath, as if punched in the stomach. The bananas. She spun around and around: thousands of people, thousands of boxes of every stripe in continuous movement like atoms. How could she have not foreseen this?

Tanya shuffled back to her place in line. Now she knew with absolute certainty that she'd been happy just a moment ago, steadily on her way home, with presents for everyone. She began to cry. And she couldn't stop, not when the woman in front of her asked her what was wrong, and not when, pushing her remaining luggage centimeter by centimeter, she reached the counter and handed her passport and ticket to the check-in clerk.

Everything felt wrong, like she was living in a parallel universe, separated by one crucial degree from the one containing the life she was meant to have. This other, true life was visible to her, even palpable at certain instances—like during the births of her sons—but impossible to occupy. She cried from pity for herself, and because of the stupidity of such pity. She cried for Luciano and for Anton. She cried because she'd only loved one boy with the follow-you-over-the-edge-of-the-earth kind of love—at fifteen. She cried for her mother, who had died two years ago, and whom she still missed every day.

For the rest of her wait Tanya haunted the airport, looking in every corner for the missing box, in the weak hope that, upon opening it, the thieves had discovered no color TV and abandoned it. It was eight in the evening when the plane finally took off.

She landed the following afternoon. Wet snow fell in clumps from the chalky sky. After an hour on the washboard Kolyma Route—the infamous road built on the bones of Gulag prisoners—Tanya began to recognize familiar streets, decorated with red flags along the May Day parade route. Banners with noble yet unrealistic proclamations hung from the most important buildings. The snow kept falling and falling, covering muddy slush from the recent thaw, last year's yellow grass, and the garbage on the sidewalks—masking, for a short while, the old sins.

The taxi driver parked by Tanya's building and helped her carry the luggage up to the fourth floor. Their apartment was small, but all their own. Anton was supposed to be at work and the boys in kindergarten, but as she opened the door and right away stumbled over a vacuum cleaner in the hallway, she knew that everyone was home, waiting for her. It smelled deliciously of fried potatoes. A soccer match played on TV in the living room. Various articles of clothing hung over the backs of chairs, and socks were piled in little nests on the floor. Anton and Pavlik were napping on the couch, Anton's face raw from a recent shave. She bent down to Pavlik's bottom: his pants appeared to be clean. She looked at them again. They were a perfect subject for Mary Cassatt, had she painted in Russia. Tanya felt a twinge of pleasure and shame.

She went into the boys' room. Borya sat on the floor, tinkering with his metal construction set. He wore his favorite orange flannel shirt and briefs. His feet were bare. He looked up at her, first startled, then astonished. His imagination winged back from the distant magical city he was building, and he smiled, baring a gap in his milk teeth. He jumped up and hung on Tanya's waist. She could feel the angularity of his knees through her coarse traveling pants. As she kissed his head, she noticed a cluster of new freckles on his nose.

"Borechka, put on some socks. The floor is cold."

"I'm hungry."

"Papa hasn't fed you?"

“Papa said to wait for you. We cooked together. I cut a potato myself.”

Tanya pressed Borya to herself so tight that he cried out, but he didn't try to wiggle free.

“Wait here, kitten.”

Before waking up Anton and Pavlik, she tiptoed into the hallway. The bananas were gone, as she'd suspected, along with the tomatoes, oranges, cheese, Anton's favorite smoked meat and sausages, and the wine. She rummaged in the suitcase and pulled out the green Yugoslavian dress. Made of high-quality silk, it had hardly gathered any wrinkles on its long journey east.

Copyright © 2014 by Kseniya Melnik **Kseniya Melnik** was born in Magadan, in the northeast of Russia, and immigrated to Alaska at age fifteen. She earned an MFA from New York University and her work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Epoch*, *Prospect* (UK), *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and was selected for *Granta Magazine's* New Voices series. She lives in El Paso, Texas.