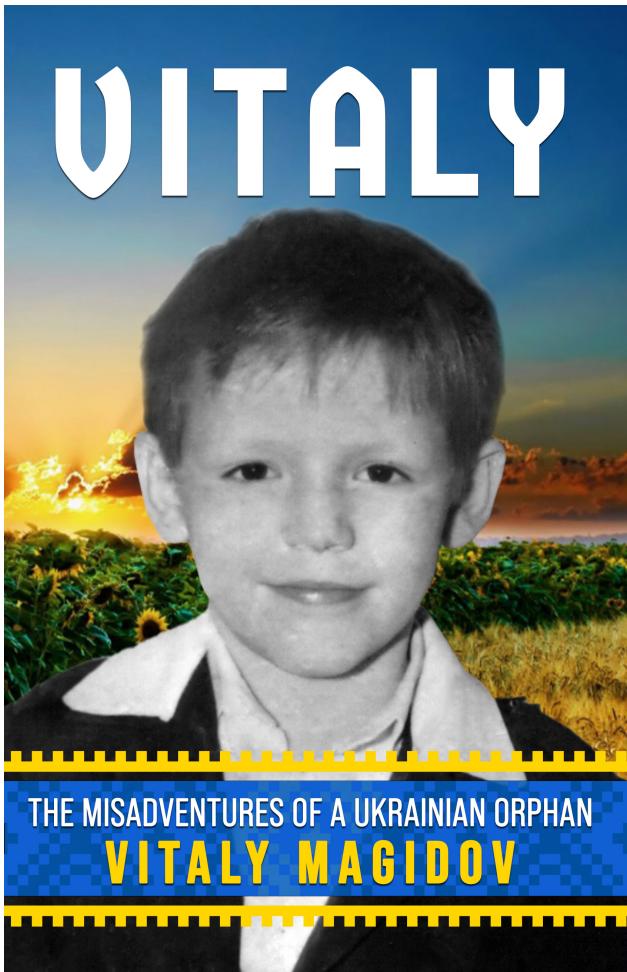


VITALY



THE MISADVENTURES OF A UKRAINIAN ORPHAN
VITALY MAGIDOV



Vitaly Magidov

VITALY

The MisAdventures of a Ukrainian Orphan

*For orphans around the world and the people who show them love
and care*



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VITALY

The Misadventures of a Ukrainian Orphan Vitaly Magidov

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This book is a combination of facts about the author's life and recounts events and conversations to the best of the author's memory. The conversations in the book all come from the author's recollections, though they are not written to represent word-for-word transcripts. Rather, the author has retold them in a way that evokes the feeling and meaning of what was said. While all the stories in this book are true, some dates, places, events, names, and identifying details of individuals have been changed, invented, and altered for literary effect. The reader should not consider this book anything other than a work of literature.

info@vitalybook.com

www.vitalybook.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prologue

I AM A LITTLE BOY, running through the fields as fast as I can. I feel myself pursued by some invisible force, as though life itself is chasing me. The race to see my dreams come true consumes me. Still, I find myself distracted by the beautiful sunflowers along the path, tempting me with their promises.

I look back at the field now, trying to see my past, but everything is just a cloudy haze.

The beginning of my life was miserable by any standards. I grew up in an orphanage with life's deck stacked against me. Still, I did my best to enjoy that life and create success where I could. Whenever I walked the streets naively enjoying the day, I always liked to imagine what was behind the faces of strangers passing by, trying to read them as I might read a book. I enjoyed watching a mother walking the street hand-in-hand with her child because I knew it was a priceless commodity to have. I savored the sight of two brothers hugging each other or two lovers holding hands frozen in a moment of endless love. Most of all, I held faith in my parents, silently hoping they would come back for me.

I sought ways to bear the loneliness around me, but it wasn't easy. Being alone in a crowded place is not the kind of solitude that inspires youth. Many of the lonely souls around me—those left by parents who should have naturally given the purest unconditional affection—believed it was their fault for being rejected or left alone.

When I was young, I also thought some parts of me must change for others to love me. There were ways I stayed true to myself, but I also tried to be someone else. There were also people in my life that said they saw signs of greatness in me, that I was a young budding star. I wish these signs were as visible to me as they were to them.

Unfortunately, I didn't see what they saw. I felt cursed by gender confusion and sexual attraction that was deemed unacceptable. I tried not to pay attention to what other people thought, but somehow it mattered. I didn't know who to be. So, I tried to be like those around me. I tried to conform to the standard, but I was always different, and I often felt guilty for it. No matter what I did, I felt less than average—whatever being average was. I wasn't normal, but I thought I should be. So, I spent years trying to understand what 'normal' was. Of course, some perspectives of normalcy remained eternal, bred deep in society's roots: enjoy your childhood, be good, don't lie, respect your parents, go to school, finish school, get a job, start your own family, retire, and savor the rest of your life. Unfortunately for me, only a minority of the people I knew could live up to that pattern.

So, I was left trying to reconcile the contradiction.

I struggled for a long time until I finally questioned the standard itself. Who decided what was 'normal' anyway? The definitions of 'normal' are different from person to person. We all have unique beliefs, religions, views, and attitudes because normal depends on individual experiences. Having differences is what makes us normal. We are all human. So many of our experiences are the same, but we are different from one another too. If only we could find a way to come together and get along with each other, we could see that it is easy to take what we have for granted, to forget we had a childhood spent with doting parents, or that we had opportunities in our lives that others didn't. We may even fail to care about the people who cared for us, regardless of their circumstances, or that even though we might have once felt wrapped up in misery, our lives eventually found love.

When we accept the complete picture of who we are, we can learn to appreciate times of sorrow because we will remember to recognize joy when it strikes us, and it will. I discovered that life is more than just white and black. It is a spectrum full of color, vibrant and versatile for those not bound by the chains of solely striving toward materialistic

gains, forgetting about the most valuable and unavailable purchases. I was lonely as a little boy, but I also understood my life had a purpose.

I didn't know the steps I would take to achieve my goals, but I knew I was still alive because I kept moving forward. As long as I was working toward my dreams, I was truly living.

I didn't want to forget about the things that mattered. So, I spent my life searching through books, songs, movies, experiences, and childish experiments, exploring different belief systems and religions in an attempt to unravel the meaning behind my pain and loneliness. In the end, I learned and wish to remind everyone who may be doubting; regardless of the number of days we have in front of us; family, love, and acceptance are the things we all need. I always felt that little in life is more valuable than a simple hug or word of consolation. Even with a million other materialistic values around us, happiness cannot be everlasting without others' love and attention.

I have often wondered how it would be if everyone put their stories on paper, making their lives eternal for others to feel their successes and learn from their mistakes. If we learn from the world's history, why can't we also learn from people's individual stories? Perhaps we would discover that being normal is just one of the ideas we don't need and that judging has no place in any conversation, regardless of how pleasant our surroundings may be.

Now, I seldom reflect upon my history, not because I fear it might haunt me, but because it does not tell me where I am going. Our histories do not tell us who we are. We make ourselves by our choices. I chose not to let the unfortunate circumstances of my past define me.

I did not make peace with what life gave me. Instead, I was inspired to go further, beyond that unbearable state. Overcoming that history, tearing it down, and denying it, I learned to go beyond it. Making goals and striving to achieve them made my life worth living. Studying anything new was the only thing that brought me joy. Finding a way to

be better, go further, learn, and later teach others who were willing to learn—that was my way out.

Besides sharing my life experiences, I decided that writing my ‘Misadventures’ would be an excellent way to draw parallels within cultures and religions. I think we all benefit when we find common ground between us. The best we can do in life is to make every experience count and maybe even help someone else while we do it.

I am not writing to be accepted, nor am I writing to be understood. I am writing to share and show that every life counts, no matter how lonely it may feel. Going back, dreaming, remembering, and recalling, I put my experiences on paper, reviving every moment, breaking loose, telling another story, and ultimately sharing the unique experiences of someone who counts... me.

I

The Beginning

*Life is Beautiful! Enjoy every moment of it! Share it with your friends!
Focus on the things you have in life and not what you lack!*

—Vitaly Magidov



Once Upon a Time



Sign at the entrance to Chernivtsi written in Cyrillic - Ukrainian

THE BEGINNING OF NOVEMBER 1979 reflected the air of Communist Russia. It was almost always raining, and the weather influenced my little town of Chernivtsi. On most days, you could only see the bleak gray sky pouring its tears upon the face of the small Ukrainian city. Still, the sun's brightness would sometimes penetrate the clouds and make its way down to earth. The people could feel more than see the light because the sun didn't just pierce the clouds. It also penetrated the windows and the hearts of the people behind them.

Communism dictated its rules to the faithful people of Ukraine then. Still, so gracious were those times when you could buy ice cream for twenty Russian kopeks, or what would be two cents in America today. It was a time when people had respect for each other, and nobody swore or had the thoughts of hurting their neighbor when everybody felt as though they were free, but they weren't, not really. The shadow of socialism still covered their hearts.

Not far from the center of the town lay a petite woman of thirty-eight. She had blond hair, dark brown eyes, and tiny wrinkles that unfairly aged her face. The clouds hung heavy outside her hospital window, spreading as much gloom over her as they did the rest of the town. The first days of November were the worst for her. She was sure she couldn't go on, and she still had to carry the child for who knew how many more days.

Some might argue that the alcohol she consumed every day caused her trouble. It was killing her, but it also saved her. It killed her pain and gave her the strength to endure her suffering. She still had a lot of power. She knew how to fight and win battles, which helped her survive. She knew alcohol might damage the life growing inside her but didn't care. Without her daily dose, there was too much pain. So, she drank. As much as she could, she drank.

She was selfish. There is no doubting that. She would not concern herself with how to get money for food or clothes to wear. She would not think of serving others or how to care for the child she carried. Her only concern was surviving the pain of that day. She would drink, and she would count the minutes until the blessed moment finally arrived—a moment most would still count as the miracle of life. For her, it would be the glorious gift of her freedom.

Peace Hospital silently whispered into the ears of its patients, "sleep, sleep," until the only sound you could hear was the drip of a faucet in the far hall bathroom. Six hours of peaceful bliss were still drifting aimlessly through the corridors when screams suddenly pierced the stillness, bursting with fluorescent light from a single room to flood the otherwise darkened hall. The screams drowned out the doctor and nurses, who were doing everything they could to give this child its very best chance at survival.

The mother lay crying and screaming, begging the doctor for just one drink, "just a little something for the pain... please?!?!"

The doctor ignored her cries, dismissing her sickness to think only of the child.

The nurses responded, begging her, “Please, remain calm. For the sake of your baby.”

Her cries continued over their words. She didn’t care. She couldn’t think of anyone or anything. Her pain was too great. So it was left to the valiant effort of the doctor, nurses, and their overwhelming patience to bring this sweet new life into the world.

“What will you call him?” the nurse asked the exhausted mother as they reached to her with a swaddled baby boy in their arms.

After a moment of deafening silence, she accepted the child, answering, “Vitaly.”

I was four kilograms when I was born, and as my name suggests, I was full of life. Though I began on an artificial respirator and didn’t grow as fast as the other babies, I gave life everything I had from the very start.

They didn’t expect much from me, saying I had some kind of dysfunction in my “Psycho System,” but even then, before I was conscious enough to know, I was determined to succeed. I started to walk when I was almost two and had already made tremendous developmental improvements by the time, I was three. Life seemed to stack the deck against me, but I was determined to overcome the odds. I wouldn’t quit. Maybe I was like my mother that way.

Maybe I learned my courage from the woman that gave me life, but that is all she gave. She walked out of the hospital without me that day. She left, and I stayed with the doctors and nurses until I was a toddler, old enough to attend the young children’s home with the other orphans. When I moved to the Detski Dom, or what you might think of as preschool, it was amazing to see so many children there. The hospital nurseries were small. As an adult, I learned that there were over twenty

thousand young children in the USSR at that time who did not have parents willing or able to care for them. Those children, like me, lived in children's homes until they were old enough to go to an orphanage.

I was one of about eighty children, thrust into a world where we all needed love. Each of us was different, but with many stories that were the same, getting all, we could from just a handful of educators. It seemed we were left to begin our lives with a disadvantage. Still, we all had our chance. In the end, it is what you do when you don't have the advantage that counts.

My First Misadventure



Chernivtsi Orphanage on Fastivska Street where I grew up.

SURROUNDED BY THE MAGNIFICENT crown of the Carpathian Mountains, Chernivtsi sat atop fertile soil on the upper course of the river Prut. As the cultural, educational, and architectural hub of Ukraine, the city suffered continued attacks by warriors and influxes of refugees as the currents of many nations altered its destiny. Every new conquest changed its history, and its people as various rulers selflessly adapted it to fit their benefit or belief.

A heavy stream of conquerors ravaged the town, but I didn't see scars carved into the cobblestone streets. I saw something more. I loved wandering and wondering who else had passed along the roads I walked. I imagined that those feet were still there, traveling with me, only caught up in another realm, repeating history by trying to fix what is wrong and preserve what is right.

The city is a better place now. It is slowly blooming, finding its way to survive and be free. Some of those currents of the past have stopped, disappeared, or maybe we just forgot them behind the unusual peace empty battlefields left in their place. Chernivtsi was one of those war-torn places that seemed to hold a composure only occasionally disturbed by its chilly wind.

Wherever I have traveled in my life, I have always longed to return and see the sign outside the city entrance, saying “Chernivtsi,” but it wasn’t always like that, not when I was a boy.

I once heard that Chernivtsi owes its name to the black color of the city walls, built from dark oak layered with its black-colored soil. Like something birthed from the soul of the land itself, a building with the same kind of stoic composure stood on the outermost edge of the town. Surrounded by shy crowns of flowers planted carefully by the little hands of its residents, the Orphanage on Fastivska Street reached toward the fading light of another day. As they worked with discipline cut deep into their thoughts, anyone passing by could hear their voices chanting:

Ravlik Pavlik, vysun rozhki, Dam tebe kusok kartoshkii Esli budet malo, dam kusochek sala Ravlik Pavlik, show your antenna, If you do, I will give you a piece of potato If it is not enough, I will give you a piece of fat My voice stood out from the rest, singing to the snails, hoping to see their antennas. With every rainstorm, they came out, and I joined them. I removed my shoes and thought my shirt was too much to wear. I longed for the awakening touch of moisture falling from the sky, wondering how many other faces it bathed with its crisp refreshment. Rain was one of the things I enjoyed the most. I loved playing or watching television in the playroom I shared with dozens of other curious orphans, but sometimes there were too many children trying too hard to be happy. The rain was something I could enjoy alone.

I was like everyone else on sunny days, trying to squeeze every bit of happiness I could from my environment. No matter how innocent the games, I enjoyed pushing limits and finding ways to test my wit and strength. Our playground was old and well used, but I thought it was magnificent. A steel rocket built for climbing stood glorious next to swings, merry-go-rounds, and teeter-totters. The missile called to me, daring me to abandon my contemplation of the flowing clouds and accept its challenge.

In a few seconds, I was at the top, with my head held high. Taking a deep breath, I puffed out my chest and stood bathed in pride. I reached to touch the sky with one of my hands, but I was cut short. The sound of my friends' voices cut through the rays of sunshine that were selflessly spotlighting my accomplishment.

"Quick, the headmaster is coming!"

Their words released the restless bird waiting in my chest. I felt it flutter and come to life as I saw the headmaster coming toward me.

Then, as if struck with a brick on my head, I reacted. I swallowed the bitter lump growing in my throat and rushed to find a way down from the rocket.

Looking up again, I saw my friends running away from sure detention, but I would not be so lucky. I suddenly slipped and fell to the ground. Uncomfortable warmth rushed through my head, melting the frozen soil beneath me. The earthy smell of dirt and grass joined with the severe vibration of pain, reminding me of bones I seldom considered, bones that were still intact just minutes ago. The warmth I first felt in my head now burst from my wrist, stretching the skintight as it swelled. Finally, as all these sensations gathered into a single devastating moment, my face twitched in pain, and an uncontrolled scream escaped my lips.

"For God's sake, Vitaly, what were you thinking, climbing up that high?!" The headmaster's voice was a perplexing blend of anger and

compassion as he helped me stand. Though he took me by the arm that wasn't injured, I could feel the bones in my wrist trembling in pain and distress. I wanted to cry, but I kept the tears in the corners of my eyes. As we entered the building, we passed my friends all huddled together. I could see them wanting to renounce the guilt of running and bury it deep by their silence. They tried to appear as excluded from the story as my arm was from my body.

The headmaster Vasyl Ivanovych took me to the recovery room we liked to call 'the isolator.' That day, it wasn't a lonely place. Instead, it was full of people who wanted to discover what had happened. The pulsing, hot pain that echoed in my ears like a drumbeat joined their worried voices—making my head spin.

The trauma of the moment, or maybe the pain and hospital-like environment, took me back to growing up in the Peace Hospital nursery, a baby boy, forgotten by his mother. Her name was Evheniya Mykytivna, and she began her life in Russia on a bitingly cold day in 1941.

Born with her, Chernivtsi witnessed the birth of a second world war. Tanks rumbled down narrow city streets, drowning out the sounds of her first cries, wiping out her hopes and dreams with them.

I was born thirty-eight years later, in a small hospital painted with the same gray carelessness as the war. I liked to imagine my birthday as a magical day with pleasant expectations hanging above Chernivtsi. Still, I suppose I was just another drop in the sea of humanity, one more soul to explore, love, and suffer, just another crier echoing through the hospital halls hoping to make history.

My mother later told me that I left her womb minutes after a shot of vodka ran through her bloodstream. Neutralizing her pain with alcohol was a deeply established habit. Its roots wrapped around her damaged liver and into the cord that held us together for nine months. I suppose we were never closer than we were at that time. My birth

severed that connection, and after a hearty scream, I was breathing the world's air. I did not have the rumbling tanks to overwhelm the sound of my sorrow, but I began my journey crying, nonetheless.

The last thing my mother did for me before she left was to name me 'Vitaly,'—with the accent on "a," rather than the "i." Though people often mispronounce it, the meaning is unmistakable. Vitaly means "life" or "the one with a desire to live," and I suppose that my name was, in fact, my destiny. It allowed me to find beauty in even the ugliest of experiences.

I don't think I consciously remembered my beginnings, but I dreamt of what I wanted them to be. But it wasn't night, and I wasn't dreaming. This time trauma enveloped me as I slipped in and out of memories, traveling back and forth between the pain of my origins and the searing agony in my wrist.

"Vitaly.... Vitaly.... Vitaly!" a faint voice called my name from what seemed to be miles away.

My dreamless sleep was interrupted, and I tried to open eyelids that felt heavier than rocks. A silhouette was gently leaning over my body, trying to rouse me from a memory that felt too real to leave.

As the morning sun worked its way through the windows, a golden glow wrapped itself around the silhouette, bathing the angel in a nearly divine halo. A hoarse whisper escaped me, "Mom?"

"Vitaly. Wake up, Vitaly," the clarifying nature of the chilly morning air overtook the warmth of the vision as I recognized the chestnut curls of Tamara Petrivna, a strict but thoughtful teacher at the orphanage. I was glad to see my instructor but also worried about her judgmental reaction. The fear of punishment overtook the dreams of a childhood I never had, chasing the final remnants of who my mother might have been from my mind. Finally, I came back into the moment and the overwhelming pain of my broken wrist.

She saw I was awake, and her fear exploded, becoming the only life in the room. “What did you do to yourself?” she asked, not posing the question to me as much as she was to some elusive power that might one day control my adventurous spirit.

Although I heard her question, I was overwhelmed with the feeling that every answer I could give would be inappropriate or wrong. So I froze like a captured animal, decided not to blink or move, keeping my voice lodged somewhere between my brain and vocal cords.

“What were you thinking? Why would you climb that high, and then of all things, jump from that God-forsaken piece of steel?” She walked in circles in front of my bed, with her eyes nailed to the well-scrubbed floor: She was angry, but I also noticed the worry in her eyes and that her voice occasionally cracked beneath the bitterness and fright.

“You could have gotten out with more than just your arm broken... do you know that? What if you....?” She stopped suddenly, unable to continue. Sighing, she took a moment, looking at the freshly plastered cast binding my wrist. She then continued decisively, “What would we do if you ended up with a broken back or legs? Did you think about that?” I could hear her vocal cords tightening as she fought to control her tears.

After a moment, she continued in an even controlled tone, one painfully void of emotion. For a moment, when she was so upset, she seemed to see me as a mother might see her child. Concern overcame her, but she stifled her affection. She was back again, a teacher speaking to a wayward student. “There is someone outside who would like to see you. I will leave you two alone for a while.”

Before she finished saying the words, I knew who it would be. She was talking about Igor, the only other person I could understand without a single word spoken. He entered the room, looking around to gather all of the information he could. Today was his first time seeing the isolator. It wasn’t mine.

Tamara Petrivna looked at him, “Please, try not to stay longer than half an hour. Breakfast is about to start.” Then, she turned to cast a final glance at me and left the room.

“Hey, Vitaly!” I could hear the guilt nearly burst from him as he nestled himself at the bottom of my wrinkled bedding. “They told me I was supposed to ask you how you feel, but I bet you feel horrible. I’m sorry for not being there.”

I suddenly remembered that he wasn’t at the playground when I fell from the rocket. I was unable to hide the smile this stirred. I was glad he wasn’t one of the deserters who ran to protect themselves and not me. Igor was always there for me. We had a special connection, something more than I had with anyone else in the world. We were linked together like we had known each other all our lives.

I tried to stop his guilt, “You don’t need to be sorry. You weren’t even there, which is good. Everyone else ran away when they saw the headmaster coming.” I was mad. They didn’t even care if I was okay, but my curiosity about Igor overtook my worry, “Where were you anyway?”

“I was in the garden, making dens,” he said, dropping his head to hide the shame drawn on his face.

I started laughing uncontrollably. “Dens?!?! That sounds cool,” His laughter soon joined mine, and I knew things would be okay again. “We’ll make more dens together when I get out of here. Deal?”

He nodded, “Deal.”

We sat silently for a moment as kids sometimes do, waiting for the next thing to say. Before we could come to it, a teacher entered, carrying a breakfast tray. The food at the orphanage wasn’t always good, but judging by the growling sound in my stomach, I guessed that anything would taste delicious to me today.

Igor jumped from the bed, looking over the incoming tray, trying to discover what we were having for breakfast. From the look in his eyes, I could see he was hungry too.

He headed toward the door to find some food of his own, but he stopped and turned at the last moment, almost to confirm I would be okay. Then he smiled and said, "See you, Vitaly."

I smiled back. That was all I needed, a smile from Igor and whether I ended up in detention or not; I also knew I would be alright.

Lullabies in the Rain



Kids at the Summer Camp with our Instructor in the front. I am way on the back corner at the top on the left, hiding.

AFTER THREE DAYS IN THE ISOLATOR, I returned to my routine, which meant spending more time with Igor and my other friends. However, it also indicated I must return to my chores. I had an endless list of duties, one of which was hand washing my clothes. It was painful with an injury. I can still feel the sting of when the clothes got heavy, all soaked in water and soap. Igor tried to help me, but he also had his clothes to wash, and I didn't want him to get a double round of laundry. So, I pretended not to recognize his attention and worked quickly.

After finishing the laundry, it was time to take a shower. Holding soap was a challenge, but I forgot about the pain as I knew there were rays of sunshine outside my window, inviting me into the open air for a playful afternoon with my friends. I smiled with anticipation as the laughter and screaming of children playing catch, swinging, and enjoying the teeter-totter broke the silence on Fastivska Street.

I would soon be dressed and with them again, deeply involved in games, too busy to notice what anyone else was doing. I loved that time when play was the only chore left on my long list of things to do, but I still found myself distracted, repeatedly glancing at the gate, expecting someone, anyone, to appear and take me home with them. I liked to imagine that someone passing by our building would find the playful screaming enjoyable and decide to enter the world of orphans looking for a child to love. They rarely did. They continued with their lives, not willing to admit the presence of the children they were leaving behind. Still, I dreamed that all of us would have a home of our own one day and that every one of my friends would forget what it meant to be parentless.

As I made my way to the playground, Igor was already waiting for me. I went straight to him, speaking in a mischievous whisper, “How about we start digging?”

He smiled and followed me to the garden. I scrutinized the trees behind us, hoping no one would see us leave, but the only thing following us were more screams and laughter of children lost in their adventures. Finally, we were safe to begin our next experiment.

Leaves covered the ground in the small orchard nestled next to an empty side of the orphanage. Not many children played here as there was nothing but the earth and the garden to entertain them. Enjoying the quiet of nature was something both Igor and I loved. So we could often find places like this where it was just the two of us and everything nature had to offer.

Over the last year, the teachers at the orphanage had guided us through each step of the flower’s journey, beginning with the seed. We learned to collect their pistils in the fall and replant them. In spring, we pruned and nurtured the garden’s growth by cleaning out the weeds and watering them with buckets of water from the orphanage building. We stood now, surrounded by the earthy fragrance of the garden we had planted. Inhaling the scene around us was sweet and gratifying.

The fallen leaves danced with the mild aroma of the flowers, making every one of my senses come to life.

I walked up to lean on a tree, taking a spot I thought was perfect for our work. Igor was crouched in the shadows of the building, bent in search of something. As he came into the light again, I saw he was clumsily carrying scrapped objects he had found. They looked like chunks of brick that had fallen from the orphanage walls and turned out to be perfectly acceptable substitutes for shovels when we started digging the hole for our den.

We were only halfway through making our perfect hiding place when I began to feel random drops of rain land on my forehead. I ignored them, wanting to finish the project we started. As the drops began to multiply, I felt them tangle in my eyebrows before gathering to rest in the corners of my eyes, but I kept digging.

“Do we stop now?” Igor asked.

“No,” I laughed, “We just dig faster until the rain starts pouring.” We continued digging, and when Igor thought the den was ready, he jumped in to see if both of us could fit. Igor wasn’t as small as I was, but it was perfect. So, we started gathering the already damp leaves, and after we collected a proper pile, we found branches to lay across the top of the hole. After blanketing the sticks with the leaves, we hid inside. Rain drummed atop the stockpile, creating a melody that reminded me of someone I knew. That sound was the closest thing to a lullaby I had heard in a very long time. It took me back to the times when I was too small to sing to myself, a time when nurses probably cradled me, giving me as much motherly love as they had to offer. I didn’t know how young I was when my mother abandoned me. So, I closed my eyes and pretended she was there, singing to me through the rain.

The warmth of Igor’s body made my imaginings as tangible as they could be, and his silence made me think that maybe he was also trying

to recall his mother's voice. We lay together quietly, allowing the rain to be our substitute for the comforting sound of a mother's loving song. I let the memory of a beautiful woman blind me as if this moment was a piece of heaven. I felt it like the sun and the sky, the warm air I was breathing, the earth beneath us, and the bed where I usually slept, cuddling my pillow. I could almost hear her humming a divine melody I had never heard before, making me dizzily intoxicated with the feeling of unconditional love. I lay there knowing that even if the sky fell today, I would be safe, sound, and sleeping peacefully.

After what felt like an eternity spent wrapped in my pleasant trance, I was awakened by Igor's voice telling me that we needed to go. The rain had stopped. Still, the lullaby was playing in my head, mystifying my thoughts with imagined memories of my mother. I tried to hold onto every impression of her, modifying, recreating, and beautifying everything I knew about her. I rewrote the stories I heard, putting her on a throne made of unconditional devotion.

Only later, as I grew, would I see the real woman who was likely lying in the rain-drenched streets, buried in the oblivion of alcohol.

Nevertheless, until that time came, I had a world where I made her mine and where I was hers and where we loved each other. When I wasn't eating, working, or going to school, I spent most days with my head wrapped in a dreamy mist of wishes, hopes, and expectations. Every day I dreamed of falling asleep in her arms, our limbs crossed in one warm unbreakable hug. I held hope until the very last second when they would lock the doors against another day where she didn't come, and I would go to bed, clinging to a pillow wet with tears, pretending it was the giant stuffed bear I always hoped she'd give me.

It was late as we rushed into the building. Tamara Petrivna was already trying to chase the other children into their beds, threatening to call the headmaster if they didn't listen. So, she didn't notice when we came in later than everyone else, still covered in the dirt of our hiding place. I snuck past her, watching her threats successfully work on

some of my friends. I never responded well to force, but I knew she was trying her best, so I decided to oblige and head to bed.

Tiny needles coursed through my body, injecting exhaustion into my head and making my eyelids heavy. As I undressed, I was unusually silent, trying to ignore the voices of boys colliding around me and hold tight to the memory of the rain lullaby instead. Mesmerized by thoughts of my pillow and my only other chance to hug and be hugged, I wished I was already out of my wet clothes and drowning my face in the warm comfort of sleep.

As I climbed into bed, clamoring for the same comfort I felt only moments ago in the den, I pulled the blanket over my head and lay on my belly. I was almost entirely covering my pillow—the only thing that separated me from the hard mattress beneath me. Memories of Igor's company clouded the cravings of my dreams as thoughts of my mother faded from my mind, temporarily replaced by the feeling of genuine warmth and safety that only exists when one person touches another.

The Buried Secret



My brother Slavik on the very left and sister Nadya at the front right playing in the sand.

I DIDN'T REALIZE THAT MY EYES had closed when I first saw the beautiful woman. I could see she was the kind of woman who knew how to make you feel cherished and loved. In the dream, she was looking at two little boys. One of them wrapped his arms around her, clinging to her love. The boy's skin was blonde and freckled, illuminated by sunlight trying to break through the glass doors that rested behind the woman's eyes.

The woman's skin was as dark as night, holding stars in her chest and showing a thousand moons in her stiff smile. I could see the muscles around her lips trembling as she worked to control the facade of artificial kindness. From behind the woman's eyes, the clinging boy tried to wave, but he was trapped by her as if she was trying to keep him only to herself.