

GAGARIN'S SHOELACES

Eireene Nealand

for Kayum

*How alone without the revolution!
This age like a wilting cabbage leaf . . .*

You were conceived on the roof, and I was widowed by roofies. On April 12 1961, you began. It was twenty-six degrees where your father and I stood fifteen stories tall on a Chermushki high-rise in fur coats and hats. Refrigerators hummed in the apartments below. From several windows, phonograph music flowed. These were our victory songs! We tipped our heads to the stars, watching layers of atmosphere twinkle around the white moon. Gagarin was up there, orbiting the whole world, thanks to our great push. To celebrate, Volodya squeezed one of my muscles and one of my breasts. He had big fists and when his half of you shot into my womb my cry was with ten thousand peasants. It was a love moment, the age of machines, and your father's cheek bulged with the sausage he always chewed. Not a problem that he kept a few in his pocket when he walked out the door of the factory. History was confronting us with its big teeth and—are you listening, Yuri?—your father had a real contact with life. Meat! He made it, and ate it. When they paid him and when they didn't. No running off to other jobs. All those winter months he shuffled along behind his scratched up steel bin, pushing it tenderly like a carriage for babies. Meat in. Meat out. It becomes like spaghetti, then paste. Try to understand: we were producing a new kind of man, and no one tried to stamp your passport before you looked up at the sky!

For a decade, we lived on nothing but dreams. Women persisted at the sausage spinning machines, sliding intestines on sticks, packing meat in, making a swell. We were assembling a pipeline to friendship, and fifteen republics clamored with open mouths. So, so what if you were afraid of the drunk in the hall, or if the neighbors used my good pots. There'd always be room, yes, in the imagination! We were engineers of the world-historical soul. The Soviet motherland's pride was its roofs. Even in the winter, hot water heaters shone from on high. They twinkled and puffed, melting every snowflake before it could land. Man, after all, had merged with machine. And we women knew how to sweep, not just our own dirt, but what used to be brought in by the chickens and pigs. Thus, when we went up to the roof to cast our gaze

on the city we'd built, there was never snow. There never was ice. Not once did a puddle form on the roof!

Now that we no longer pumped dirty water from deep countryside wells, we women ate every meal with a view. And oh how we enjoyed every sausage, every spoonful of jam! We held you up and let you kick your legs over the side, delighting in the squeals that showed you wanted to fly. Back then it seemed your future was as bright as two railroad tracks; no one doubted we were headed for the great Sputnik in the sky.

That was before the freezers and driers sucked the lifeblood from our meat! It was before anyone spoke about cholesterol. At the time you were born, our prized buildings had not yet begun to leak, nor had the newspapers aired their dirty complaints. But one thing led to another, just like Lenin said. First, corruption scandals loomed without anyone being shot. Then the republics showed their ungrateful teeth. Somehow, our factories were privatized. I don't have to tell you what became of our shares! An ice was forming not just in the streets, but over every good partisan's heart.

I, for one, felt the pain deep in my knees. Few, now, had the strength to ascend to the roofs. Instead, teens gathered with friends to scoff at our feats. One by one they went off to college in America, where they enrolled in ridiculous jobs, producing brave new tastes for dental floss, or reinventing the age-old recipe for watered-down bleach. Sometimes they even began to talk like they'd fought the Great War themselves. Of none of this did we really approve.

"Is this worse than the winter of '41?" I asked Volodya when foreigners moved in on the ground floor. "We rebuilt after the Nazis forced us to burn all our crops."

I think you remember the nineties. When things got bad, we ate pumpkin soup, pumpkin fries, what we could take from the garden. Ah yes, you complained. But during the war, Yuri, even in the countryside, there wasn't always bread. Nevertheless, we fed you and stuffed you. Your ears stuck out like radars. When I convinced you to let go of my skirt, you ran and slid—into your father's big gut.

The only thing we didn't care enough for was your soul!

For far sooner than we'd ever planned, you too obtained one of those long visas to stay abroad, using the knowledge you gained sitting up night after night, burning the electricity we'd fought so hard to win. No, you weren't entirely happy there. To pay your rent, you scrubbed potatoes and washed kettle after kettle until your nails broke.

"But at least America is honest," you said.

Elections were on—there and here. From every square, the parties in power blasted rock and roll, promising freedom—for what?

"Think of Gagarin, who ascended in nothing more than a simple round ball!" we said, reminding you of the posters we pinned on your wall. "Remember, Yuri, Gagarin returned to the earth! When he came down, he fell where he should—in a good peasant's field!"

Not you!

"The picture of Gagarin was airbrushed," you said. "The one you hung oppressively close to my bed."

Sure, it's a story everyone knows.

Our Great Cosmonaut was so excited to meet Our Great Leader, he ran in his slippers right to the door. His two-year-old daughter grabbed his shoes and waddled roly-poly with them after her dad. She even used her little thumb as a shoehorn and so what if she wasn't good at tying double knots! Gagarin wouldn't have changed things for the world, but what kind of a model would he have been for you children if we let you see his shoelaces trailing as he walked to the stage?

This much I tried to explain.

Only, "listen," you said. "Gagarin isn't my only concern."

You wanted to talk about the people your father had killed.

Something about prisoners of war who'd had their fingers ground up like meat. Something about everyday citizens who'd got their tongues stuck in the factory's spinning machines.

"I can't sleep for all the blood I see on my father's hands," you said. "How many did he torture? Which organs did he twist until the men stank? Whenever I felt cold, he told me to put my hands in his pockets, but I always felt intestines down there. What did he think he was—some kind of a god?"

No wonder your dad ceased to look at the sky while he tested his beer!

"Now he's ungrateful for meat?!" Volodya said as he bared his teeth.

"Meat?" he said as he deliberately stood to cut the phone line.

Then, off you flew into the future we'd planned!

To celebrate, he took his pension down to the basement of the old House of Culture, which he'd once helped to build—off to see the future we'd sacrificed everything for. You see, someone had sold off the building and divided it into a seven-shop mall. From down in the basement spewed a din harsher than the rattliest meat grinder could ever produce, plus down there, where the ceilings were low, a disco ball spun. Orbiting it were GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS and a mass of pale children who partied and squirmed. In that basement they didn't need ears; they didn't need eyes. The pale larvae's only work was to lean into the bar and tap on their phones.

"Look, here's a coupon," one of them cried.

When your dad began to talk about the meat he'd ground in May '45, the young girl giggled and stuck her hands down her pants. Then she offered to treat your dad to a big Happy Meal. And what could he say when she laid down a giant cheeseburger with a basket of fries? Like any good peasant, he scarfed down the food, gobbled it up until nothing was left but pickles and crumbs.

Yes, it was filling. He let out a belch!

"At least," your dad thought, "my son's generation knows how to share."

So so what if their Coke was half filled with ice?

"To freedom," the coupon girl cried.

And how could your father refuse to drink to that?

He began, again, to tell about the old days, when we stood below the hot water heaters, watching steam rise, like our futures, like our whole lives. Usually such speeches produced grand huzzahs, only the air was thin when the DJ cranked up his set. Dissolving beneath the echoing beats, your father's breath slowed. His heart seemed to catch. Blearily, he watched as the pale larvae counted the blinks of their neon signs. Meat! Endless meat! The future we'd built had coupons and screens!

What use now for our dreams? After all, they'd slipped something much stronger into his drink: rodophyl, roofies, a mind-altering weapon worse than any encountered in any previous wars! Listen, Yuri, so you'll understand: the drug dulls the will and burrows into the meat of the mind.

Amidst the abundance, your father's knees jerked, his head spun and his heart seemed to burst. Along with the whole country, he landed clunkety plunk on the keys of an old Soviet piano that hadn't been played since the Great Thaw.

"Yuri," he cried. "We've arrived."

Only this time your father could not lift himself up. When he reached out, his head was a cloud. His arms seemed to float. As he tottered home, holding his groin, the only familiar mark was a shred of meat he pulled from his teeth.

"Nasya," he moaned, remembering how he'd huddled with the young girl during the winter when the factory ran out of heat. As he crushed the sinew between his finger and thumb, he understood exactly how the past had returned to us now.

He'd eaten meat, Yuri, human meat!

Not that, I could grasp it, myself.

"You're back," I told my husband as he stumbled through the door.

I pitied him as he knelt at my feet, moaning about the taste of her, the smell of our comrade's ungodly perfumes.

"We've never needed those fancy scents," I said as I got out the mop. I wouldn't be a peasant if I didn't believe in forgiveness for drunks. Only this time, your father prayed as he staggered past the bedroom door and retched in the corner where he usually peed. A beady glaze formed in one eye.

"History," he said, "has come to a stop."

Sure, these were words we all knew from Marx.

Yet, why should he mumble them into the broken phone line? And who, now, could I call on for aid?

No militia watched over the house. No *dezhurnaya* stood guard at the door. After you left for America even the village soviet lost its clout. With everyone selling their floors and their roofs, our nearest neighbor was a twenty-four-year-old American doctor who'd taken over the apartment of fourteen families and eighteen cats. Yet, not once did I see him ascend to the roof! Never did he ever sweep dirt from the stairs! Every time he barged down the hall, it was to show us some sort of papers he wanted signed.

"Beware of depreciation," he said, flapping his hands like ugly moths.

And how many times had I shaken my broom?

How many times had I shut the door in his face?

Only, now I opened it, Yuri. I showed the young doc the chunks of flesh your father had spewed.

"Behold the blood of a hero of the Great War," I told him with pride. "Remember America was on our side!"

Not that the young doc really heard.

He whistled as he used his tweezers to transport chunks of flesh into his neat zip lock bag. Then, he stopped to ask about your progress in college, Yuri. Did you send money home? Anyhow, America had joined us in building the space station Mir. Didn't they learn from Demikhov's two-headed dog? Where we watched our liftoffs from roofs, they watched from lawns. (First, obtain an apartment. Next, install a green plant. Stuff your cupboards with lard.) So why not make a joint venture now?

Purge and renew was the look the young doc had in his eyes: what with the broken light bulbs in the stairwells, the plumbing repairs we were needing, what with the way our good green wallpaper succumbed to the leaks. . .

Now, complaining and gossip are two faults Lenin warned us to avoid, but when the doctor mentioned the Uzbeks who'd been hired by

the municipal government to crack the ice on the roof, I couldn't help but add my little peck.

"It was sabotage, doctor, a White Russian revenge."

With so few youngsters left to sweep the snow from on high, puddles oozed like an alien gel. We could have trained figure skaters up there—had not our education system gone to rot. With each thaw icicles dripped and froze and grew. One even fell and killed a dog! Then, Uzbek's were hired, and paid a small wage. Once comrades of the Druzhiba pipeline they now suffered harsh passport checks. So why should they complain when an unknown boss handed out tough metal pikes. After all, what did an Uzbek know about ice? As an immigrant, he was paid by the hour and was even told to feel a certain triumph when our roofs began to fracture and crack!

"Listen," the young doc said, picking his perfect teeth with one of those new plastic toothpicks you'd sent as a gift. "Your husband's ready if you are not."

Clammily, he supported Volodya in gaining the roof.

Surely, I thought, up there he'll revive, only when I finally poked out my head, little did I find of the glory we'd known: the rivets had popped, our great heaters sagged, and all about were craterous holes. Already Volodya knelt at the edge with tears in his eyes.

"Capitalism's monument to Soviet oil," the young doc said, pointing down at an ugly green building inching its way up from the Neva Reka.

Gasprom Tower was the name of the beast. It was to stretch higher than any our continent had ever borne. Yet, no citizen would live therein! The colossus was meant for stock market trades and oxygen bars. Because who, up there, could think of freedom from hunger, or freedom from want? Once our houses were shadowed and dwarfed, even the human would be a thing of the past! This, your father must have known as he bowed his head. An ancient glitter remained in his eye, but when doctor approached with the needle that was to make his death humane, the proboscis entering seemed almost his own.

"Meat," I thought, afraid to look more. "They've ground us up to a heavenly paste."

Indeed, as the young doc explained, there'd been a remarkable shift: Gasprom had merged with O'Kei-Mart, a Western line of groceries that lined the city in orbital rings. Turns out GMO cows weren't worth a damn, so they'd been kidnapping humans, and churning them up to feed the new man.

"We learned from the best," as one former Socialist boss said. "What did the Soviet Union have but human resources upon which to build?"

Wasn't that what Lenin or someone had said?

Cannibalism, sure, hardly seems a triumph. Yet, standing there at the edge of the roof, your father and I seemed to understand progress, too, had become a thing of the past, for while our goal was to scabble up from the dirt, you, born a human, also needed a thing to surpass—so why not let it be community, love, Soviet hope.

It was regressive when your father grabbed me with a calloused hand. There, amidst the holes and the rust, I clung to the muscles that had churned a thousand cows. Yet, even as I let him trample my breasts, I understood. Exhausted by our years of pulling the plow, your father and I had only this: the redness of sunrise, the beauty of our hot water heaters as the light made them blush.

"Once," I reminded my husband, "we taught men to fly."
"Why should Yuri care for that now?"

As quickly as you came into this world, your father crossed his arms and leapt. Then, your dad, like the great march of history, sped across a horizon no astronaut could ever explore.

That, Yuri, is what I want you to know.

The Americans may mine the asteroids. They may build an elevator that reaches as far as the moon, but they'll never surpass your father's world historical soul. For, to build the roof from which he jumped took the work of a whole generation and, as he sped home, he knew he'd begun the journey meat has always been meant to take, long before it lifted itself from the ground to crawl. ■

ON DOING GOOD

Sofi Stambo

One day someone parked a very dirty Volga in our yard. This was a shock, since we were confined there precisely because it was car free. We were not allowed outside, for fear that since we were short and erratic, the drivers, high up on their seats, wouldn't be able to see us and would crush us all. Russian cars, like missiles, were parked on both sides of the street. Under each, there was a potbellied uncle, spending his weekends there or talking to another uncle squatting next to him, his ass crack out, theoretically helping with car repairs or other tricks.

Volgas were sleek long black cars the Communist party used to transport its members in style. When the cars got old, they sold them to whoever had connections. Clearly the driver of this filthy thing was someone important. He may be visiting the prostitute aunt Philomena on the third floor. She was extremely fat now, with hair cut short and uneven, like a punishment.

My father said that she used to be skinny and long-haired and worked three blocks from our house, where the big general store was. We liked her, because she was nice to us and always brought baklava. She had a kid, but he was in jail now. One time she started telling us what happened but couldn't stop crying. I ran and brought her one of our handkerchiefs. My sister and I were in charge of ironing and folding the family's handkerchiefs. That job came with a lot of "jishes," a baby word for burns on your hands. But it also made us feel grown up and important.

I guess aunt Philomena wanted more children in her life, but since she wasn't married now, that wasn't happening, I thought. In the afternoons she would walk slowly, sit shyly on one of our kid's chairs, most of her spilling over it, and open a box of sweets and give each of us as many as we wanted, sadly smiling and asking us questions about school and complimenting us on whatever it is we were building or digging.

On the other hand, the visitor may have gone to see aunt Petrana, the angry grandma of Jore, the boy who couldn't spit. All of us in a circle around him spat emphatically, hoping to teach him the basics of survival. He desperately tried but could not produce a single drop. His grandma Petrana had a thick black mustache and a man's voice and constantly yelled at him not to do that, because he would spoil his clothes, and to come home this instant because his father said so. Jore was a stressed kid but so