STORY OF THE WEEK

Destined

AN ESSAY

BY SASHA VASILYUK

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QUICK TAGS

COMING OF AGE LOVE
CROSSING BORDERS DEATH YOUTH

THE NEW BOY, Ilya, sat at the very back of the eighth-grade classroom, and as I stood near the blackboard telling my old Russian classmates about my strange new life in America, I could feel his presence—a black hole sucking me in from the back of the fluorescently white room.

It was the fall of 1996 and my first time returning to Moscow after immigrating to San Francisco a year earlier. My mother and stepfather had won a green card in a lottery, and when they had packed everything from books to bath towels into sarcophagal crates, the whole thing seemed so final that I was certain I would never see my beloved Russia again. Now that I was miraculously back here, staying with my father for two weeks, I spent almost every afternoon at school with my classmates. The twenty of us had been together since we were six-year-old tadpoles, and they—Natasha, Liza, Dima, and the rest of the gang—were my closest friends in all the world. Not a day had gone by as I sat bored and numb in my middle-school ESL class in foggy San Francisco that I hadn't dreamt about returning to resume my real life back in Moscow once I was eighteen and free to choose.

And so it was a relief finally to describe my year in America to my friends. I could have told them about the furniture my mom had picked off the streets or how I was teaching myself Russian history to keep up with their coursework. Instead, I focused on my new school, opting for details with the most shock value: the seventh-grade math we had mastered in second grade, the openly gay history teacher, and the gyrations of the black girls to hip-hop at the middle-school dance. As I talked, I grew increasingly aware of the new boy. He had joined our class after I emigrated and was the one person in the room who didn't know the old me. A part of me delivered those shocking details for his benefit.

Though Ilya had also been in our school since first grade, we had never met. Our school was too huge for that. By huge, I mean it was the biggest school on the European continent. The blue-and-white building, which sat on the grassy bank of the Moscow River and faced a herd of new seventeen-story apartment buildings, was a sprawling thing with three four-story campuses connected by long hallways whose light-green walls were speckled like a Jackson Pollock painting. It housed elementary, middle, and high schools under one roof and could have been a small country —there were nine hundred first graders in my year alone. It was so crowded that in the fifth and seventh grades we had to attend class in the afternoons as there weren't enough classrooms to fit all the students. Our school had two cafeterias, two changing areas with a dozen rooms that held hundreds of coats and salt-stained winter boots, two gyms where I practiced badminton, a music school where I'd been a piano student, a stage where I had played Tinker Bell and won poetry awards, a chess club, a dance studio, an art studio, a darkroom, a woodworking shop, an indoor winter garden, and a kiosk that appeared after the Soviet Union collapsed to peddle a colorful menagerie of American things like stickers, markers, and Barbie dolls.

Though it was impossible to know all the students and teachers, after a while certain faces acquired that vague familiarity of people from your neighborhood. That's how it was with Ilya—he wasn't entirely unfamiliar, and now that we were in the same room, he came into sharper focus. It didn't take long before my best friend, Natasha, told me—in a conspiratorial whisper—that I might remember his older sister, Ira S., who had died in a drunk-driving accident two years earlier, sending a shock wave through the school. Something inside me twinged when I heard that. I had spent the previous year cocooning in the tragedy of being severed from my father, my friends, my school, my country. Yet here was someone whose tragedy was far worse than mine. All those previous months in America, I kept hearing that we were masters of our destiny, that if we worked hard and conquered obstacles, we could manifest whatever we wanted and essentially win at life. Hearing about Ilya's sister reminded me that I was back in a world where our destiny was not ours to change.

Ilya was my height, not tall for a thirteen-year-old boy, with wide, confident shoulders, thick brown hair, and the slightest hint of a mustache above his full lips that tended toward a smirk, as if he was unconvinced by the soundness of the world. His large brown eyes seemed to reflect no light, shining instead with a magnetic foreboding.

One evening, as a group of us walked through the neighborhood after school, there was a commotion and I saw Ilya hurling a rock at a man—a grown-up!—while yelling, "And keep walking!" The man, who looked shady in his scuffed jacket, must have done something, though I didn't know what. We all tensed up, expecting trouble. Moscow in the 1990s was full of gangsters—one of the main reasons my mom wanted to leave—and the last thing you wanted was to provoke a stranger. Yet to my relief, the man disappeared down the street. As Ilya sauntered back toward us, I saw a fearless boy with nothing to lose. I was hooked.

Our flirtation progressed quickly, though looking back on it now, what was there, really? Some furtive hand-holding in the back of a taxi and several phone calls. The rest of the time we were surrounded by the gaggle of our classmates, where any show of emotion embarrassed us both. It was on the phone that I learned how much he missed his older sister and how worried he was that something bad would happen too to his younger sister. Listening over the phone, I imagined his face, his smirk gone, his eyes sincere. And so I confessed to him what I couldn't tell Natasha and the others—how despite trying to act like I still belonged to their crew, after my yearlong absence I now felt like a ghost.

On my last night in Moscow, Ilya accompanied me home from school. We rode the metro and then walked along the eight-lane Garden Ring road toward Patriarch's Ponds, where my father lived and where Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* opens. It was a dark, cold November evening. Cars zoomed past. People rushed home from work. Ilya took my hand and said, "Girls' hands are always cold." It made him sound like he had lived on this Earth far longer than I had. For a moment I wondered if he'd held many girls' hands before or if it was something he had learned from his sisters, though it didn't really matter. I had never walked hand in hand with a boy before, and as we moved through that unique Moscow air of petroleum and hurriedness, everything inside me hummed. Finally something in my life was happening that I truly wanted, and it was happening here, in Russia, the only place that mattered.

When we turned into the quiet linden-lined alley where Bulgakov's Devil first appears in Moscow to argue with two Soviet writers about whether man is in control of his destiny, that hum turned into a rattle. I wondered what would happen once we circled the pond, which was covered by a thin sheet of ice that reflected the glowing white orbs of the streetlamps, and ducked into the darkness of the archway in my dad's apartment building. My chapped lips hankered for my first kiss. I would be turning fourteen soon, and I wanted to return to America—where I was just another poorly dressed, clueless, lonely immigrant—a wiser, bolder, remade young woman.

Our footsteps echoed in the shadow of the archway, but Ilya didn't stop. Soon we arrived at the front door of my dad's building. Here Ilya faced me. I barely breathed, trying not to let any vapor out into the cold air. For the first time, his dark eyes were only centimeters from mine. As I looked up, they enveloped me, and I experienced what I had never felt before and haven't felt since: a distinct sensation of falling into a well.

The summer before I left for America, I had spent some time at a friend's dacha in a tiny village in the middle of Russia. It had no electricity or running water, so every morning we took a metal pail and went down the dirt road that smelled of dew and cows to get water from the wooden well. We'd tie the pail and launch it downward into the invisible abyss until—always later than anticipated—we heard a splash and knew to pull it back up. Here, now, I was that pail, falling eagerly into a vast, hushed darkness of Ilya's gaze, hoping I would never need to be pulled back up into the dreary light of day.

At the time, I didn't understand that strange sensation. All I knew was that Ilya didn't kiss me. He held my hand and said goodbye and walked away while I ran inside, confused, devastated, and happy.

An hour later, when I figured Ilya had gotten home, I rang him.

I have to tell you something, I said.

What?

I love you.

I was certain of it and needed him to know, needed someone to know that I had found this thing I'd heard so much about—love. Love! I heard him breathing on the other end of Moscow. Then he began to object.

How can you say that? You barely know me.

And yet I love you. I am sure of it.

Do you just go around saying "I love you" to every guy you like?

He sounded offended and I found it amusing. I liked that he was taking my confession seriously, that he was making sure I knew what I was saying.

No, I told him. I've never said this to anyone before.

He tried some more to convince me that I was mistaken, that this couldn't be, that we'd met only two weeks ago, but eventually he stopped arguing. I didn't know if he accepted it or simply relented. Soon it was time for me to pack for my flight, so we said goodbye and hung up.

Ten minutes later, my phone rang.

I love you too, he said. I wanted you to know that before you left.

You don't have to say that to make me feel better or anything.

I'm not. I love you.

I didn't believe him. It sounded like pity for the girl who had to leave all her friends and fly across the world to be alone in a place she didn't like. But it also didn't matter. My love for him required no reciprocity. It had no conditions and no expectations. I had no dreams of walking down the aisle with Ilya. I wasn't even sure we'd ever see each other again. In that way, it was perhaps the purest form of love I have ever experienced. I loved him the way I loved Russia—not because of what I knew about it but because of what I never would.

Once I landed back in California, my conviction that what I experienced was my first love didn't fade. I spent the next year shutting myself in my room, where I'd turn off the lights, put on 96.5, the "love songs after dark" radio station, and pretend that Ilya and I were in Moscow and that he was reaching in for a kiss. It was all I could do. This was the 1990s, when email barely existed and international phone calls were expensive. We had no way of keeping in touch.

I was eighteen the next time I heard about Ilya. By then I was no longer planning to move back to Moscow. I had gotten into a good American college and fallen in love with a Russian immigrant with mischievous brown eyes and an inclination toward risk, and I knew I would marry him. I was going to go places. I was going to win at life. Then one bright San Francisco morning, I got a rare call from Natasha. Her voice was faint, shaky. Ilya had gotten into a drunk-driving accident, she said. She had just returned from the funeral.

I shut my eyes and fell down, down, down.

I felt then that I understood the strange, beckoning darkness in Ilya's gaze that night at Patriarch's Ponds. It was death I saw in them. He was destined for it. Eager for it. And his proximity to death had made me feel alive.

Later I learned that he was survived by his girlfriend, who was five months pregnant. I never learned her name, but I often thought about her—not because I wondered if her fate could have been mine, no. It was because I wondered if she had also seen what I'd seen in his eyes and fell for it anyway.