A lone human voice

I don't know what to tell you about. Death or love? Or is it the same thing. What should I tell you about? . . .

We were just married. We'd still hold hands walking down the street, even if we were going to the shops. We were together the whole time. I used to say, 'I love you.' But I couldn't imagine just how much I loved him. I had no idea. We lived in the hostel for the fire station where he worked. On the first floor. Lived there with three other young families. We all shared a kitchen. The fire engines were below us, at ground level. Red fire engines. It was his work. I always knew where he was, what he was up to. In the middle of the night, I heard some noise. There was shouting. I looked out the window. He saw me and said, 'Shut all the windows and go back to bed. The power station's on fire. I won't be long.'

I never saw the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything was kind of glowing. The whole sky . . . There were these tall flames. Lots of soot, terrible heat. I was waiting and waiting for him. The soot was from burning bitumen, the roof of the power plant was covered in it. He told me later it was like walking on hot tar. They beat back the fire, but it was creeping further, climbing back up. They kicked down the burning graphite. They didn't have their canvas suits on, they left just in the shirts they were wearing. Nobody warned them. They were just called out to an ordinary fire.

It was four o'clock. Five o'clock. Six o'clock. At six, we were planning to visit his parents. We were going to plant potatoes. From our town of Pripyat to Sperizhye, the village where his parents lived, was forty kilometres. He loved planting and tilling. His mum often spoke of how they never wanted him to leave for the

town. They even built him a new house. He was called up, served in the Moscow firefighting troops, and when he came back, it was only the fire brigade for him! There was nothing else he wanted to do. (*She falls silent.*)

Sometimes it's like I'm hearing his voice. Like he's alive . . . Even the photos don't get at me the way his voice does. But he's never calling me. Even in the dreams. It's always me calling him.

Seven in the morning. At seven, they told me he was in the hospital. I rushed over, but there was a police cordon round the hospital, they weren't letting anyone in. Only the ambulances were let through. The police were warning us not to go near the ambulances. The Geiger counters were going berserk! I wasn't the only one. All the wives rushed over, everyone whose husband had been at the power plant that night. I ran to look for my friend. She was a doctor at the hospital. I grabbed her by her white coat as she was coming out of an ambulance. 'Let me in there!' 'I can't! He's in a terrible state. They all are.' I wouldn't let go of her: 'I just want to look at him.' 'All right, then,' she says, 'but we'll have to be quick. Just fifteen or twenty minutes.' So I saw him. He was all puffed up and swollen. His eyes were almost hidden. 'He needs milk, lots of it!' my friend told me. 'They need to have at least three litres of milk.' 'But he doesn't drink milk.' 'Well, he will now.' Later, lots of the doctors and nurses in the hospital, and especially the orderlies, came down sick. They died. But back then, nobody knew that would happen.

At ten in the morning, Shishenok, one of the plant's operators, died. He was the first. On that first day. We heard another was trapped under the rubble: Valery Khodemchuk. They never got him out. He was buried in concrete. We didn't know at that time they were only the first.

I said, 'Vasya, what should I do?' 'Get out of here! Just go away! You're having a baby.' I was pregnant. But how could I leave him? He begged me: 'Get out! Save the baby!' 'First I need to bring you some milk, and then we'll see.'

My friend Tanya Kibenok came rushing over. Her husband was in the same ward. She was with her father. He'd brought her by car.

We jumped in and drove to the nearest village to get fresh milk. It was three kilometres out of town. We bought lots of three-litre jars of milk. We got six, so there'd be enough for everyone. But the milk just made them violently sick. They kept losing consciousness all the time. They were put on drips. For some reason, the doctors kept insisting they'd been poisoned by gas, no one said anything about radiation. And the town filled up with these army vehicles, they blocked off all the roads. There were soldiers everywhere. The local trains and the long-distance ones all stopped running. They were washing down the streets with some sort of white powder. I was worried about how I'd get to the village the next day to buy fresh milk. Nobody said anything about radiation. It was just the soldiers who were wearing respirators. People in town were taking bread from the shops, buying loose sweets. There were pastries on open trays. Life was going on as normal. Only they were washing down the streets with that powder.

In the evening, they wouldn't let us into the hospital. There was a whole sea of people. I stood outside his window, he came over and was shouting something to me. Shouting desperately! Somebody in the crowd heard him: they were being moved to Moscow that night. The wives all huddled together. We decided we were going with them. 'Let us see our husbands!' 'You can't keep us out!' We fought and scratched. The soldiers were pushing us back, there were already two rows of them. Then a doctor came out and confirmed they were being flown to Moscow, but he said we needed to bring them clothes – what they were wearing at the power station had all got burned. There were no buses by then, so we ran, all the way across town. We came running back with their bags, but the plane had already gone. They had done it to trick us. So we wouldn't shout and weep.

It was night. On one side of the street were buses, hundreds of them (they were already preparing to evacuate the town), on the other side were hundreds of fire engines. They'd brought them in from everywhere. The whole street was covered in white foam. We were walking over it, cursing and crying.

On the radio, they announced: 'The town is being evacuated for

three to five days. Bring warm clothes and tracksuits. You'll be staying in the forests, living in tents.' People even got excited: a trip to the countryside! We'll celebrate May Day there. That'll be something new! They got kebabs ready for the trip, bought bottles of wine. They took their guitars, portable stereos. Everybody loves May Day! The only ones crying were the women whose husbands were ill.

I don't remember how we got there. It was like I woke up only when I saw his mother: 'Mum, Vasya's in Moscow! They took him away in a special plane!' We finished planting the vegetable plot with potatoes and cabbage, and a week later they evacuated the village! Who could have guessed? Who knew back then? That evening, I began throwing up. I was six months pregnant. I was feeling so awful. At night, I dreamed he was calling my name. While he was still alive, I'd hear him in my dreams: 'Lyusya! My Lyusya!' But after he died, he never called my name. Not once. (*She cries.*) I got up in the morning with the idea of going to Moscow on my own. 'Where are you off to in your state?' his mother asked, so upset. They decided his father should get packed too: 'He'll go with you.' They took out all their savings. All their money.

I don't remember the trip. It's gone from my memory. In Moscow, we asked the first policeman we found for the hospital the Chernobyl firemen were in, and he told us. I was quite surprised, because they had been scaring us, saying, 'It's a state secret, top secret.'

It was Hospital No. 6, at Shchukinskaya metro station.

It was this special radiation hospital and you couldn't get in without a permit. I slipped the receptionist some money, and she told me to go on in. She told me which floor. I asked someone else, I was begging them. Then there I was, sitting in the office of Dr Guskova, the head of the radiation department. At the time, I didn't know her name, couldn't hold anything in my mind. All I knew was I had to see him. Had to find him.

First thing she asked me was: 'You poor, poor thing. Have you got children?'

How could I tell her the truth? I realized I needed to hide my pregnancy. Or they wouldn't let me see him! A good thing I was skinny, you couldn't tell by looking at me.

'Yes,' I said.

'How many?'

I thought: 'I've got to say two. If I say one, they still won't let me in.'

'A boy and a girl.'

'As you've got two, you probably won't be having any more babies. Now listen: the central nervous system is severely affected, the bone marrow too.'

'So, all right,' I thought, 'he'll become a bit excitable.'

'And another thing: if you start crying, I'll send you straight out. No hugging or kissing. You mustn't get close. I'll give you half an hour.'

But I knew I wouldn't be leaving this place. I wasn't going anywhere without him. I swore it to myself!

I went in. They were sitting on the bed, playing cards and laughing.

'Vasya!' they called to him.

And he turns round and says, 'Oh no, guys, I'm done for! She's even found me here!'

He looked so funny, had these size forty-eight pyjamas on, though he was a fifty-two. The sleeves and legs were too short. But the swelling had gone down on his face. They were giving them these fluids by a drip.

'What's all this, eh? Why are you done for?' I asked.

He wanted to hug me.

'Sit right back down.' The doctor wouldn't allow him near me. 'No cuddling here.'

Somehow we turned it into a joke. At that point everyone came running over, even from the other wards. All our guys from Pripyat. Twenty-eight of them had been flown here. They wanted to know what was happening back home. I told them they'd begun an evacuation, the whole town was being moved out for three to five days. The guys went quiet. There were two women as well. One had been on reception duty the day of the accident, and she started crying. 'Oh my God! My children are there. What will happen to them?'

I wanted to be alone with him, just for a minute or two. The guys picked up on it, each made some excuse and they went out into the corridor. Then I hugged him and kissed him. He backed away.

'Don't sit near me. Use the chair.'

'Oh, all this is silly,' I told him, waving it off. 'Did you see where the blast was? What happened? You were the first ones there.'

'Most likely sabotage. Somebody must have done it deliberately. That's what all the guys reckon.'

It was what everyone was saying. What they thought at the time.

When I came the next day, they were all in separate rooms. They were strictly forbidden to go out in the corridor or mill about with each other. So they tapped on the walls: dot-dash, dot-dash, dot. The doctors explained that each person's body reacts differently to radiation exposure, and what one person can take would be too much for another. Inside their rooms, even the walls were off the scale. To the left, the right and the floor below they moved everyone out, not one patient stayed. The floors above and below them were empty.

I stayed three days with some friends in Moscow. They told me to take a pot, a bowl, to help myself, not be shy. Amazing people! I made turkey broth for six men. Six of our guys. Firemen on the same shift, the ones on duty that night: Vashchuk, Kibenok, Titenok, Pravik and Tishchura. I picked up toothpaste, toothbrushes and soap for them all at the shops. They had none of that in the hospital. I bought them some little towels. Looking back, I'm amazed at my friends – of course they were frightened, they had to be, what with all the rumours flying, but they still said to take what I needed. They asked how he was doing, how all of them were doing. Would they live? Would they . . . (*She is silent.*) At the time, I met so many good people, can't even remember them all. The whole world shrank to a dot. There was just him. Nothing but him . . . I remember one orderly, she taught me: 'Some illnesses are incurable. You just have to sit and stroke their hands.'

Early in the morning, I'd set out to the market, then back to my

friends to boil up some broth. Grated everything, chopped it fine, ladled it out into portions. One man asked me to bring him an apple. I had six half-litre jars to carry to the hospital. Always for six men! Stayed there till the evening. And then back again to the other end of town. How long could I keep it up? But on the fourth day, they told me I could stay in the hotel for medical staff in the hospital grounds. My God, what a blessing!

'But there's no kitchen. How will I cook for them?'

'You won't need to do any more cooking. Their stomachs have started rejecting food.'

He began changing: every day, I found a different person. His burns were coming to the surface. First these little sores showed up inside his mouth and on his tongue and cheeks, then they started growing. The lining of his mouth was peeling off in these white filmy layers. The colour of his face . . . The colour of his body . . . It went blue. Red. Greyish-brown. But it was all his precious, darling body! You can't describe it! There are no words for it! It was too much to take. What saved me was how fast it was all happening, I didn't have time to think or cry.

I loved him so much! I had no idea how badly I loved him! We were just married, couldn't get enough of each other. We'd walk down the street and he'd grab me in his arms and spin me round. And cover me in kisses. The people passing would smile.

He spent fourteen days in the Clinic for Acute Radiation Sickness. It takes fourteen days to die.

On that first day in the hotel, they took readings from me. My clothing, bag, purse, shoes – they were all 'scorching'. So they took the lot away from me on the spot. Even my underwear. They only left me my money. They gave me a hospital gown to put on instead, but it was a size fifty-six – I'm a forty-four – and the slippers were size forty-three, not my thirty-seven. They said I might get my clothing back, or maybe not, they doubted it could be 'cleaned'. So I showed up looking like that. It gave him a fright: 'My God, what's happened to you?'

I came up with a way to cook broth. I put an electric water heater in a glass jar and threw in tiny pieces of chicken. Very finely

chopped. Then someone gave me a pot. I think it was the cleaning lady or the hotel attendant. Someone gave a chopping board, which I used for cutting parsley. In that hospital gown I couldn't go to the market, so someone bought me the parsley. But it was all a waste of time, he couldn't even drink. Couldn't swallow a raw egg. And I wanted to give him something tasty! As though it might help him.

I ran to the post office: 'Please, ladies, I have to call my parents in Ivano-Frankovsk urgently. My husband is dying.' Somehow they guessed right away where I was from and who my husband was and they put me straight through. My father, sister and brother flew to Moscow the same day. They brought me my things and some cash.

It was 9 May. He'd always said to me: 'You have no idea how beautiful Moscow is! Specially on Victory Day, when they have the fireworks. I want to show it to you.' I was sitting next to him in the room, he opened his eyes: 'Is it day or night?'

'Nine in the evening.'

'Open the window! The fireworks will be starting!'

I opened the window. We were on the eighth floor, the whole city spread out before us! A bouquet of fire shot into the sky. 'Wow, that's something!'

'I promised that I'd show you Moscow. I promised that I'd always give you flowers for every holiday.'

I turned round and he pulled three carnations from behind his pillow. He'd given some money to a nurse to buy them.

I ran over and kissed him. 'My darling! My true love!'

He grumbled, 'What did the doctors say? No hugging me! No kissing!'

They'd forbidden me to cuddle him or stroke him. But I lifted him and positioned him on the bed. Smoothed the bed sheets for him, took his temperature, brought the bedpan, then took it away. Wiped him down. All night long, I was close by. Watching over every move he made, every sigh.

It's a good job it happened in the corridor and not in his room. I started feeling dizzy and grabbed on to the windowsill. A doctor

was walking past, he took hold of my arm. And suddenly he asked: 'You're pregnant?'

'No, no!' I was terrified that someone would hear us.

'Don't pretend,' he said, with a sigh.

I was so shaken that I didn't manage to ask him to keep quiet.

The next day, I was called to the head of the department.

'Why did you trick us?' she asked harshly.

'I had no way out. If I'd told you the truth, you'd have sent me home. It was a little white lie!'

'What on earth have you done!'

'But I'm by his side . . .'

'You poor, poor thing!'

Till my dying day, I'll be grateful to Dr Guskova.

The other wives also came, but they weren't allowed in. The mothers were with me: they let the mothers in. Vladimir Pravik's mother kept begging God, 'Take me instead.'

Dr Gale, this American professor. He did the bone marrow transplant. He comforted me, saying there was hope, maybe not much, but with his strong body, such a hefty guy, we still had a chance. They sent for all his family. Two sisters came from Belarus, and his brother from Leningrad, where he was serving in the army. Natasha, the younger one, was just fourteen, she was crying a lot and frightened. But her bone marrow was the best match. (*She falls silent.*) I'm able to talk about it now. Before, I couldn't. I kept quiet for ten years. Ten years . . . (*She is silent.*)

When he found out the bone marrow would be from his little sister, he flat out refused: 'No, I'd rather die. Leave her alone, she's just a kid.' His older sister, Lyuda, was twenty-eight, she was a nurse and knew what she was going into. 'I just want him to live,' she was saying. I watched the operation. They were lying side by side on the table. The operating theatre had a big window. It lasted two hours. When they'd finished, Lyuda was worse off than him, she had eighteen puncture holes in her chest and had a rough time coming round. And she's in poor shape now, she's registered disabled . . . Used to be this beautiful, strong woman. She never got married. So I was rushing from one ward to the other, from his

bedside to hers. By then, he wasn't in an ordinary ward, they'd put him in this special pressure chamber, behind a see-through plastic curtain, which you weren't allowed past. It was specially equipped so you could give injections and insert catheters without having to go behind the plastic. It was all sealed off with locks and velcro, but I worked out how to open them up. I'd quietly move aside the plastic and sneak in to see him. In the end, they just put a little chair for me by his bed. He got so bad that I couldn't leave his side. He kept calling my name: 'Lyusya, where are you? My Lyusya!' He called over and over. The pressure chambers for the rest of our guys were being looked after by soldiers, because the orderlies were refusing and demanding protective clothing. The soldiers took out the bedpans, they mopped the floors, changed the sheets. Took full care of them. Where had these soldiers come from? I didn't ask. I only saw him. Nothing but him . . . And each day I'd hear: 'This one's died, that one's died.' Tishchura died. Titenok died. 'Died . . .' It was like a hammer hitting your head.

He was passing stools maybe twenty-five, thirty times a day. All bloody and gooey. The skin on his arms and legs was cracking. His whole body was coming up in blisters. When he turned his head, clumps of hair were left on the pillow. But he was still my love, my precious one. I tried joking: 'It'll make life easier. You won't need to carry a comb.' Soon they all had their hair cut off. I cut his hair myself. I wanted to do everything myself. If I could have coped physically, I'd have been with him twenty-four hours a day. I felt sorry for every minute away from him. Every minute . . . (*She buries her face in her hands and falls silent.*) My brother arrived and he was scared for me: 'I won't let you go in there!' But Dad says to him: 'You reckon you'll stop her? She'll climb through the window! Up the fire escape!'

I left him, and when I came back, there was an orange on the table. A really big one, pink rather than orange. He smiled. 'Somebody gave it to me. You have it.' The nurse motioned through the curtain that the orange couldn't be eaten. Once it had been lying near him, you couldn't even touch it let alone eat it. 'Go on, eat it,' he said. 'You love oranges.' I took the orange. And just then he

closed his eyes and dozed off. They were always giving him injections to sleep, giving him drugs. The nurse looked at me in horror. And me? I was ready to do anything just to stop him thinking about death. Stop him thinking his illness was horrid and that I was scared of him. There's one conversation I remember. Someone was pressuring me: 'You mustn't forget this isn't your husband, it isn't the man you love, it's a highly contaminated radioactive object. You're not a suicide case. Pull yourself together.' But I was like a crazy woman: 'I love him! I love him!' While he was asleep, I whispered, 'I love you!' Walking about the hospital courtyard, 'I love you!' Carrying the bedpan, 'I love you!' I thought back to our life together in the hostel. He could only fall asleep at night holding my hand. It was his habit: he used to hold my hand while he slept. The whole night long.

And in the hospital, I used to hold his hand and wouldn't let go.

It was night. The room was quiet. We were alone. He looked at me really closely, and suddenly he said, 'I want to see our baby so badly. I want to know what he looks like.'

'What should we call him?'

'You'll have to think of something on your own.'

'Why just me, if there are the two of us?'

'Okay then, if it's a boy, let's call him Vasya, and if it's a girl, Natasha.'

'What do you mean, "Vasya"? I already have a Vasya: you! I don't need another.'

I still didn't realize how badly I loved him! It was just him, nothing but him. Like I was blind! Didn't even feel the kicks under my ribs. Though I was already in my sixth month. I thought she was safe and protected inside me. My little one . . .

None of the doctors knew I was staying with him all night in the pressure chamber. They didn't catch on. But the nurses let me. At first, they tried to talk me out of it. 'You're so young. What on earth has got into you? He isn't a person now, he's a nuclear reactor. You'll both frazzle together.' But I followed them around like a puppy. I stood for hours by the door, begged and begged them. And finally they said, 'Oh, to hell with it! You're nuts.' In the morning, just

before eight, when the doctors began their rounds, they'd motion through the plastic: 'Quick!' I'd run back to the hotel for an hour. And from nine in the morning till nine at night, I had a permit. My legs went blue right up to the knees. I was so worn out they were swelling up. My soul was tougher than my body. Oh, my love . . .

They didn't do it while I was with him. But when I was gone, they photographed him. He had nothing on, he was naked. Just one thin sheet over him. Each day, I changed the sheet, and by the evening it was all covered in blood. I'd raise him up and bits of his skin would be left sticking to my hands. I asked him, 'Help me, sweetheart! Lean on your hand or elbow, as much as you're able, so I can smooth the sheet, get rid of all the seams and creases.' Just one little seam could injure him. I clipped my nails to the quick so they wouldn't catch on him anywhere. None of the nurses dared go near him or touch him; if they needed anything, they called me. And they took photos of him. Said it was for science. I wanted to kick them all out of there! I wanted to scream and punch them! How could they! If only I could have kept them out. If only.

Coming out of his room into the corridor, I'd almost bump into the wall or the couch, because I couldn't see anything. I'd stop the nurse on duty: 'He's dying.' She'd say, 'What do you expect? He's had 1,600 roentgens, and the lethal dose is 400.' She felt sorry too, but it wasn't the same. For me, this was my love. My sweetheart.

When they'd all died, they refurbished the hospital. Scraped down the walls, ripped up the parquet and got rid of all the woodwork.

I remember only odd snatches from the end. It's all a bit hazy.

I sat through the night at his side on the chair. At eight in the morning, I said, 'Vasya, love, I'm off now. I'll get some rest.' He opened and closed his eyes – that meant he was letting me leave. The moment I used to reach the hotel, make it to my room and flop down on the floor – I couldn't lie on the bed because I was aching all over – an orderly would come banging on the door: 'Quick! Come back! He won't stop calling for you!' But on that morning, Tanya Kibenok was just begging me to go with her: 'Come to the cemetery. I really need you there.' They were burying Viktor

Kibenok and Volodya Pravik that morning. Viktor and he were friends, we were all family friends. Just the day before the explosion, we'd had a picture taken together in the hostel. They looked so handsome in that photo, our husbands! So bright and smiling. It was the last day of our old life. Life before Chernobyl. We were so happy.

I got back from the cemetery and quickly rang up the nurse on duty: 'How is he doing?' 'He died fifteen minutes ago.' No! I'd stayed with him the whole night long. I'd only been gone for three hours! I stood by the window and screamed: 'Why? Why this?' I looked up at the sky and screamed. Screamed the building down . . . People were frightened of coming near. I got a hold of myself and realized: I could see him! One last time! I tore down the stairs . . . He was still lying in the chamber, they hadn't taken him. His last words were 'Lyusya! My Lyusya!' 'She's just slipped out, she'll be back any minute,' the nurse comforted him. He gave a sigh and was gone.

This time there was no dragging me away. I stayed with him right to the grave. Though I can't remember the coffin, just a big plastic sack. That sack . . . In the mortuary, they asked, 'Do you want to see what he'll be wearing?' Yes! They put him in his dress uniform, with the service cap on his chest. They didn't pick any shoes out because his feet were too swollen. He had balloons for legs. They had to slit the dress uniform too, they couldn't pull it on his mess of a body. All just one gory wound. The last two days at the hospital, I'd lift his arm and the bone would be all wobbly, hanging loose, the tissue falling away from it. Pieces of lung, lumps of his liver were coming up through his mouth. He was choking on his own innards. I'd put a bandage on my hand and slip it into his mouth, scoop it all out . . . You can't describe it! There are no words! It was too much to take. This was my sweetheart, my love . . . Not one pair of shoes would fit him. They put him in the coffin barefoot.

Right before my eyes they shoved him in his dress uniform into the plastic sack and tied it up. Then they put the sack in a wooden coffin. And they wound that coffin in another plastic sack. It was

transparent plastic, but as thick as oilcloth. Then the whole bundle went into a zinc coffin, they could barely squeeze it in. Just the service cap was left on top.

Everyone came to Moscow, his parents and mine. We bought black headscarves in the city. We were seen by the emergency commission. They told everyone the same thing: that they couldn't give us the bodies of our husbands and sons, they were highly radioactive and would be buried by some special method in a Moscow cemetery. In sealed zinc coffins, under slabs of concrete. And we had to sign some paperwork, they needed our consent. They drummed it into anyone who was unhappy and wanted to take the coffin back home that the dead were now heroes and no longer belonged to their families. They were public property, belonged to the state.

We got into the hearse, us relatives and some army men. There was a colonel, with a walkie-talkie. We could hear someone's voice: 'Await our orders!' For two or three hours, we were driving around Moscow, round the ring road. Then we came back into town. Over the walkie-talkie, we could hear: 'Access to the cemetery is denied. The cemetery is besieged by foreign journalists. Continue to wait.' Our parents kept quiet. My mum was in a black headscarf. I felt like I was about to faint. I had hysterics. 'Why do you have to hide my husband? What is he – a murderer? A criminal? A convict? Who is it we're burying?' My mum said, 'Shush, love.' She stroked my head, held my hand. The colonel radioed: 'Request permission to proceed to the cemetery. The wife is hysterical.' At the cemetery, we were surrounded by soldiers, had to walk under escort. The coffin was carried under escort. No one was allowed to say their farewells, only the relatives. They immediately started filling in the graves. 'At the double!' an officer ordered them. They didn't even let me embrace the coffin. And then we were bundled into buses.

They quickly bought and gave us our tickets home for the next day. The whole time, we had a man in plain clothes with us, carried himself like a soldier, wouldn't even let us leave the hotel room to buy food for the trip. God forbid we should start talking to anyone, especially me. As if I was in a fit state to talk: I couldn't even cry.

When we left, the hotel attendant counted all the towels and sheets, put them in a plastic bag. They must have burned them. We paid for the hotel ourselves – for all fourteen days.

Fourteen days in the radiation sickness clinic. It takes fourteen days to die.

Back home, I fell asleep. I went into the house and collapsed on the bed. I slept for three days straight. They couldn't rouse me. They called an ambulance. 'No, she isn't dead,' the doctor said. 'She'll wake up. It's just a horridly long sleep.'

I was twenty-three.

There's a dream I remember. My dead grandma is there, she's wearing the clothes we buried her in. And she's decorating a New Year tree. 'Granny, why have we got a New Year tree? It's summer.' 'That's just how it is. Your Vasya is joining me soon.' He grew up by the forest. I remember a second dream. Vasya is all in white, and he's calling Natasha's name. Our little girl, who still hadn't been born. She is big already, and I am puzzled at how she's grown so much. He is tossing her up to the ceiling; they are laughing. I am watching them and thinking how simple happiness is. How simple! And later there was another dream. Vasya and I were wading through water. We kept walking on and on. He must have been asking me not to cry. He was sending me a sign from there. Up above. (*She is silent for a long time.*)

Two months later, I travelled to Moscow. Went straight from the station to the cemetery. To see him! And right there in the cemetery, my contractions started. The moment I began speaking to him. They called an ambulance, I told them the address. I gave birth in the same place. In Angelina Guskova's department. She'd said back then: 'When you go into labour, come to us.' And where else could I have gone? I gave birth two weeks early.

They showed me: it was a little girl. 'Natasha,' I said. 'Your dad named you Natasha.' She was healthy enough to look at. Tiny hands and feet. But she had cirrhosis, her liver had had twenty-eight roentgens. And congenital heart disease. Four hours later, they told me my little girl had died. And for a second time, they wouldn't let me have her! What do you mean, you won't give me her! It's me

who won't give her to you! You want to take her for science, but I loathe your science! Loathe it! First, your science took him away from me, now it's back for more . . . I won't give her to you! I'll bury her myself. Next to him. (*Her voice drops to a whisper.*)

What I'm telling you, it's not coming out right . . . The words are all wrong. Since the stroke, I'm not meant to shout. And I'm not meant to cry. But I want . . . I want people to know. I've never opened up about all this. When I refused to give them my little girl, our little girl . . . Then they brought me a wooden box: 'She's in there.' I looked inside, and they'd swaddled her. She was lying there all swaddled up. And then I started crying. 'Lay her at his feet. Tell him it's our little Natasha.'

The grave doesn't say 'Natasha Ignatenko'. It only has his name. She still hadn't been named, she had nothing. Only a soul. I buried her soul there.

I always take two bouquets: one for him, and the second one I put on the corner for her. I crawl on my knees at their grave. Always on my knees. (*Incoherently.*) I killed her. I . . . she . . . saved . . . My little girl saved me, she took the whole brunt of the radiation herself, like she was a buffer. So small. Such a teeny little thing. (*Gasping.*) She protected me. But I loved the two of them. Can you . . . Can you kill with love? With such love! Why are they so close? Love and death. They're always together. Who can explain that to me? Who can help me understand? I crawl on my knees at their grave. (*She falls quiet for a long time.*)

In Kiev, they gave me an apartment. In a big block where everyone who left the nuclear plant lives now. We all know each other. It's a big one-bedroom flat, the kind me and Vasya dreamed of. But I went out of my mind there! In every corner, wherever I look: he's there. His eyes. I started redecorating, just so I wouldn't be sitting about, to keep myself occupied. And it's been like that for two years. I've been having this dream. He and I are walking, but he's barefoot. 'Why do you never have shoes on?' 'Because I've got nothing at all.' I went to the church. The priest told me, 'You need to buy some large slippers and put them in somebody's coffin. Write a note that they're for him.' That's what I did. I arrived in

Moscow and went straight to a church. In Moscow, I'm closer to him. That's where he is, in Mitino Cemetery. I told the church man that blah-blah-blah, I need to pass on these slippers. He asked, 'Do you know the way to do it?' He explained it again to me. Just then they brought in an old man for a funeral service. I went up to the coffin, lifted the cloth and put the slippers in. 'And did you write the note?' 'Yes, but I didn't mention which cemetery he was in.' 'They're all in the one world there. They'll find him.'

I had no desire at all to live. At night, I used to stand at the window, staring at the sky. 'Vasya, what should I do? I don't want to live without you.' In the daytime, I'd be passing the kindergarten and would stop and stand. I would have happily looked at the children for hours. I was going crazy! And at night I began asking, 'Vasya, I'd like a baby. I'm frightened of being alone. I can't take it any more, Vasya!' Or another time I asked, 'Vasya, I don't need a man. No one could ever be better than you. But I want a baby.'

I was twenty-five.

I found a man. I told him everything. The whole truth: that I had just one love in my life. I was completely honest with him. We used to meet, but I never invited him home, I couldn't bring him home. Vasya was there.

I worked in pastry. I used to be trimming the sides of a cake, and the tears were rolling down my cheeks. I wasn't crying, but the tears were flowing. All I asked of the girls was: 'Don't feel sorry for me. If you start pitying me, I'll have to leave.' There was no need to feel sorry for me. I had known happiness once.

They brought me Vasya's medal. It was red. I couldn't look at it for long – the tears would flow.

I had a boy. Andrey. Little Andrey. My girlfriends tried to stop me: 'You mustn't have a baby.' And the doctors tried to frighten me: 'Your body won't be able to cope.' And then . . . Then they said he'd be born with one arm missing. His right arm. That's what the screen had shown. 'So?' I thought. 'I'll teach him to write with his left hand.' But he was born normal. A beautiful boy. He's already at school, gets top marks. Now I've got someone who I live and breathe for. The light of my life. He understands me perfectly.

'Mummy, if I go to Granny's for two days, will you be able to breathe all right?' No, I won't! I'm frightened of being apart from him for just a day. We were walking down the street, and I felt myself falling. That was my first stroke. It happened in the street. 'Mummy, should I get you some water?' 'No, you stand right by me. Don't go anywhere.' And I grabbed his arm. I don't remember the rest. Opened my eyes in the hospital. I grabbed Andrey's arm so hard that the doctors could barely unclench my fingers. His arm was blue for ages after. Now, whenever we leave the house, he says, 'Mummy, don't grab me by the arm. I won't leave your side.' He is poorly too: does two weeks at school, then two at home seeing the doctor. That's our life. We worry about each other. And in every corner, there's Vasya. His photos. At night, I talk and talk to him. Sometimes I dream that he's saying, 'Show me our baby.' I bring Andrey, and he leads our little daughter by the hand. He's always with our daughter. He plays only with her.

So that's my life. I'm living in a real and unreal world at the same time. I'm not sure which I like more. (*She gets up and walks to the window.*) There are lots of us here. The whole street. They call it Chernobyl Street. These guys worked their whole lives at the power plant. Many still go there to work shifts, they run the plant with a rotation system now. Nobody lives there any more, and they never will. They've all got serious illnesses, disabilities, but they won't give up their work, they wouldn't even think of it. They'd have no life without the reactor. The reactor is their life. Where else are they needed now? Who needs them? They keep dying. It's a quick death, they die on the go. They'll be walking along and just collapse, black out and never wake up. Bringing flowers to the nurse and their heart fails. Or standing at a bus stop. They're dying, but no one ever really questioned them properly. About what we went through, what we saw. People don't want to hear about death, all these terrible things.

But I've told you about love. About how much I loved.

Lyudmila Ignatenko, wife of Vasily Ignatenko, deceased fireman