

Shauna Singh Baldwin
we are not in Pakistan



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Only a Button

October 1985

The front door flings open — Viktor. Breathless, as if he took the stairs two at a time. “Olena, I’m assigned to the Lenin Power Station!” Off come his coat and shoes. His arms are strong around his wife. Her feet leave the ground, the kitchen whirls. Kisses jab her cheeks.

She is laughing, kissing back fiercely, but her inside voice is saying *oh, no, oh no . . . we will have to move. Move from Moscow, close to Kyiv. Close to Matushka.*

Why must Olena call her Matushka? Because that’s what Viktor calls his mother.

A lock of dark hair falls across his forehead, words spill from him as never before. Viktor is delighted; Olena should be happy. The station is in Ukraine, near her home.

She brings out the vodka, raises a glass. “Shalom, Viktor!” The secret greeting comes to her lips as though warding off the future. “Omayn!” he says, downing his drink. So excited he doesn’t even tell her to hush.

But behind the locked door of the washroom, anger makes her heave and retch. Emptied and exhausted, she sits on the toilet seat, legs straight forward, an auburn veil of hair obscuring her face.

This man she loves is the one person she can't tell how she feels.

At seven, Viktor stood with other school children chosen to hail the man code-named Borodin, "The Beard": Igor Kurchatov, father of the Soviet atomic bomb. Viktor was chosen to study Borodin and more Borodin. While Olena was reading folk tales in school, Viktor read Dollezhal on reactor design. When they met, standing in line for Bulgarian cigarettes, she was a teacher of seven-year-olds, and he was almost through his six years at the Moscow Institute of Physical Engineering.

Olena rises, moves to the sink and splashes water over her face.

Viktor used to call her his Ukrainian samovar — and it's still true that she has a small face, slender arms and a long narrow torso perched on the flare of her hips. And he's still a methodical fireplug of a man with a rare but wide smile. A hard-working man, which makes him different from many husbands. And a member of the Party.

She cups one hand beneath the faucet, releases a trickle of water with the other. She rinses her mouth.

Matushka and Viktor — and Viktor's father when he was alive — always belonged to the Party. Olena's family never did. Dedushka, her grandfather, was "detained" by Stalin. Her grandmother too. Detained in a camp for years, despite his Stalingrad war medal, just for hiding a kulak from the secret police. Olena's mother was born in that camp. Still, Dedushka calls Party members "crownless clown tsars" and "the new feudals" — how lucky Olena is that he is seventy-one and alive.

Her father came from good proletarian roots. The son of a blacksmith. But he came to Moscow and was so seduced by the Lenin Library that he became a perpetual student of Chekov and Dostoyevsky. Olena's mother said he was living in someone else's story rather than his own. They divorced when Olena was only

two, and her mother took her back to Ukraine and Dedushka. By the time Olena met Viktor, her parents were gone. And marrying Viktor washed her clean of her family's sins.

For Viktor. But never for Matushka.

Olena squeezes paste onto her toothbrush and begins to brush slowly.

She was so young then, so naive. Newly married. Living in Matushka's Moscow apartment until Viktor graduated and his name came up among the thousands on Moscow's waiting list for housing. Hoping to win a single smile from her five-foot Tartar-faced mother-in-law. All those two years, Olena thought obedience would make Matushka love her. But even after the unthinkable, Matushka's lips stayed permanently pursed, as if she wouldn't deign to spit in Olena's direction.

Foam and water swirl down the drain.

Five years ago, during all the excitement of the Moscow Olympics, soon after Viktor and Olena first moved to this apartment, Olena came home from work to find Viktor and Anatoli sitting at the kitchen table. She thought Viktor had invited the swift-talking, lighthearted Anatoli to help her celebrate her twenty-fourth birthday, but no. The same Viktor who, two years earlier, when he couldn't afford a present, had given her a large box with a small card inside promising a thousand kisses, had forgotten it. And so had Anatoli, his college friend, who had known her now for three years. But as soon as Olena mentioned it, Viktor invited two more guests! Olena had spent her whole lunch break standing in line and all she could buy was a sliver of beef. Baby Galina's bare bottom riding her arm, Viktor and three guests to feed, and Matushka called. From Kyiv, thousands of kilometres away.

Viktor took the phone and relayed the message: Matushka lost a button in the apartment during her visit. She wanted Olena to find it. An embroidered button, it's true, but — a button. Worth

ten or twenty kopeks? Olena said to Viktor, “Tell her I will look, and if I find it, I will keep it for her.”

But no! Viktor stood with his palm over the phone cup, eyebrows a straight line. “Look for it. She needs it.”

“Now?” said Olena. A trickle of urine crept down her hip from Galina.

“That’s what she said.” He said this in Russian, not Ukrainian. Yes, Olena remembers that.

He expected Olena to search for his mother’s button, so she did. She propped Galina on her baby pot, then took her into the bedroom. She laid the baby on the bed and began searching, keeping her eye on Galina all the while. Searched through the bedroom, the kitchen, the washroom. Even pushed aside Viktor’s shirts in the tub room and looked in the bathtub. She searched for more than fifteen minutes, picked up Galina, and returned to Viktor and his guests. “Please believe me, Viktor, I cannot find it.”

Viktor placed a call to Kyiv. “Olena says she cannot find it.”

He should have said, Olena cannot find it. That might have kept Matushka quiet. He could have said, We have been trying to find your button ever since you called, and we have looked everywhere, but we cannot find it. He could have said, as one says to a child, Don’t worry, it’s only a button. We’ll find another just like it. Not Viktor.

So, of course, Matushka said, “Tell her to try harder.”

Meanwhile Viktor’s friends persuaded him to bring out his balalaika, and between songs, they grumbled at the wait for dinner and passed the vodka. Every hour, between chopping, peeling and stirring, Olena searched. She shushed Galina whenever the singing woke her, and she searched. And every hour, Olena told Viktor she still couldn’t find the button, and he called Matushka in Kyiv.

Then it became late and he was hungry and shamed before his friends, so Olena got one, then two slaps across her cheeks. Olena

didn't blame him. She might have hit someone too if she could — someone so dear he would have to forgive her. She thought this as she muttered under her breath that even her mother had never hit her — never. No matter how frustrated she was from never having enough money.

It was midnight by the time Viktor let Olena give up searching for the button and three in the morning by the time she finished cleaning up. And then to work the next day.

Olena holds a towel to her eyes, dries the rest of her face. Lipstick would make her look more festive, but she has none.

She would rather move to the other side of the world than to Kyiv. But she is like a cloud that must go where the wind blows. Viktor has worked so hard for this. Olena must have faith in love the way Dedushka has faith in his God.

Viktor said they'll be living in Pripjat. Pripjat is two and a half hours — about seventy kilometres — from Kyiv. They will be very close to her old home, Dedushka's farmhouse. Her little mushroom, her sunshine, her Galina is almost seven now, old enough that she'll come to know her great-grandfather.

They will not be living *with* Matushka.

And her Viktor will be happy.

Olena returns the towel to the rack and leaves the washroom.



November 1985

Viktor's ninth-floor apartment in Pripjat, immediately allotted in this city of only half a million, is larger and airier than the Moscow apartment. And the building is so new! It is as if someone had Viktor and Olena in mind: here is a maroon-upholstered sofa set, sheer curtains, their own TV, and a bookcase where she can display her father's collection of novels and Viktor can stack his