



PROJECT MUSE®

Palace of the People

Maria Lioutaia

Ploughshares, Volume 46, Number 2, Summer 2020, pp. 118-132 (Article)

Published by Ploughshares

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/plo.2020.0108>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/760456>

MARIA LIOUTAIA

Palace of the People

On the day she will receive the terrible news, no one offers Ludmila and Antosha seats on the rush-hour train.

“Hold on to the pole with both hands,” she instructs her grandson, but he’s distracted, opening his sweaty palm again to check that the tooth hasn’t disappeared. The previous night, Ludmila tied the loose tooth in his mouth to a cotton thread, wound the other end of the thread around the kitchen door handle. Antosha stood in the hallway with his mouth open, excitement stitched with terror on his face. She slammed the door shut—the noise, the exhalation, the tiny weight left dangling at the end of the string. Only a speck of blood. She gave Antosha a towel to hold against his mouth as he inspected the tooth, so recently him but now separate, its own smooth, strange thing. Watching him now, Ludmila is wrung with love for the boy. She loves him so much she could eat him. It scares her sometimes, how violent love can feel.

As the train screeches around the bend running into Park Sokolniki, Antosha stumbles into the lap of a commuter, crumpling his newspaper.

“Watch your kid,” the man grumbles at Ludmila in the guttural accent of one of the ‘Stans, and straightens the newsprint with a snap. Ludmila glowers at him, gathers Antosha to her. Unlike so many people who come to Moscow from all over Russia or from the former Republics, thinking they’re of this city when they’re merely transplants, she and Antosha are Muskovites through generations. Ludmila’s parents met while building the Metro—her mother installing lights, her father laying tiles at the Lenin Library station. The earliest glimmer of her, passed in the first glance between her soon-to-be parents, happened in this subterranean palace. She feels bound to the city from its depths. The Metro lines are arteries, the blood of the city branching below the grand boulevards, leading to echoing marble chambers corralling millions of people each day. Sometimes it feels to Ludmila as if all the pivotal aspects of her life happened here underground. She even went into early labor with Dima at Slavyanskiy Boulvar, her water breaking over the red marble.

As Ludmila and Antosha ascend the escalator to ground level at Park Sokolniki, she inspects the faces gliding down past her on the opposite side. All these strangers. She likes watching people. Some of them look like people she might have known. Certain people just have those types of faces, universally familiar. But then a young man floats past her and something about the pitch of his eyebrows, or maybe the way he's biting the edge of his thumbnail as he's staring off into the middle distance, reminds Ludmila of Shurik.

He was quiet. Funny. Six years older than her. Shorter than her, with the thin, wiry build of a track-and-field athlete. He was from Khabarovsk, all the way on the other side of the country, just over the border from Mongolia. She first noticed him while taking a packed train home after classes at Moscow State University. He gave up his seat, and they started talking as he swayed over her, holding on to the overhead bar. He'd just moved to Moscow, was renting a room in a communal apartment and working as a junior electrician. Soon, he was meeting her at the entrance to the Metro after her classes and they were taking the train together. Soon, he was missing his stop to ride all the way to the end of the Red Line with her. He courted her slowly, painfully politely. She'd thought there was an understanding building between them, and she could see the filaments of their lives extending into the future, together, starting to form outlines of children, work, old age. And then two things happened, nearly simultaneously: she told him she was pregnant, and he disappeared.

She meant to tell him when they were alone together somewhere quiet, but blurted it out when they were saying goodbye on the platform. He didn't quite hear the first time, so she had to scream it again over the roar of a train entering the station, her voice echoing up the marble archways. He hugged her. Said he was happy. And then, the next day, he wasn't at the entrance to the Metro at the usual time. Not the following day either. At his communal apartment, the neighbors, a large noisy family, said they had no idea where he was, couldn't confirm whether he'd been around the past few days. Still waters run deep, the woman said, shaking her head, as she let Ludmila into his room. The bed was made, his few shirts and slacks neatly hanging in the closet. Ludmila went to the police.

There was a cursory investigation. By all accounts, she'd been the last to see him, stepping onto that Metro train. He never showed up for

work again. There were no leads, no news, as if the deep tunnels had swallowed him. The police had bigger problems to deal with, said he likely ran off. She tried to find out his address in Khabarovsk, or even the names of his parents. For months she kept expecting a phone call or a letter, but none came. At that point, it was too late to do anything about the pregnancy. Ludmila's mother cursed Shurik, said it was men like him, from the hinterlands, who came to the city to take advantage of Moscow girls and then abandon them. Said he probably already had a family back in Khabarovsk, was just in the capital to earn better money, fooled them all.

But whenever Ludmila was in the Metro, some part of her subconscious was aware of Shurik, snagging her glance on strangers with similarities. She knew he would be older now. Wiry, still—his constitution wasn't one to gain fat. Balding, probably. But even though she understood this logically, she kept seeing him in young men. A straw-haired student hurrying past her looked like he could be Shurik, rushing to work. Mellow cologne and boyish laughter and short-sleeve collared shirts. She couldn't remember his face, save glimpses of him she'd see in Dima, in Antosha.

At Park Sokolniki, she and Antosha exit. There's the school, other stragglers like them hurrying through the wrought-iron gates. Antosha's face is already tightening into tears. He's finding the rigidity of first grade hard to adjust to. He's never gone to daycare—why would he, when he has Ludmila. She's focused onto this one small boy all the energies previously prised across dozens of schoolchildren. Under her care he was reading by three, reciting poetry by four, and already knew the multiplication table up to the fives.

“Baba, I don't want to go to school,” he whispers into her skirt.

“Come on now, Antoshen'ka, you need to go and study hard, otherwise who will take care of your grandma when she's old?” He considers the responsibility, sighs, and lets go of her hand. He hugs her, a brief press of his body to her legs, and trudges up the school steps. A good boy, compliant, kind, Ludmila thinks with pride. Just like Dima, when he was little. Antosha's rectangular satchel is nearly as big as he is, bumping against his back. He's tiny still, one of the smallest in his grade. Ludmila thinks it's because Natasha tried to keep skinny

during her pregnancy, refused second helpings, cried a lot. Her milk never came in well. It had been blue, watery.

Ludmila watches until Antosha disappears behind the heavy oak door; then she looks up at the building where she'd taught history for thirty years, looks at its familiar stonework lines. She used to take her grade-tens every year on a Metro field trip. A tour through all the historical stations of the Circle Line, their depiction of the history of Russia, the building materials reflecting the productive range of the USSR. It was her favorite day of the school year. A janitor is trying to mop a fresh swatch of graffiti, a large, rude drawing. Ludmila isn't sure how the collapse of the USSR three years before has correlated to this hooliganism, save that it has. A perverse permissiveness reigns. Stories of the elderly held up at knifepoint for their pension. The kaleidoscope of broken bottles by the building entrance. The elevator in their building finally had a new button panel installed the previous week, but already someone melted it with a lighter, the plastic blackened and congealed.

But that's just growing pains, she thinks. The country going through adolescence, acting up, before coming into its own. Moscow hadn't cowered before worse times, and this is nothing. Already there are signs of the coming renaissance, like the wider selection in stores: strawberries in winter, foreign chocolates, high-quality cosmetics in all shades of sunset. The greatest city in the world, Ludmila thinks, looking up, and the linden trees overhead shiver in agreement.

In the evening, as Antosha plays with a die-cast truck on the kitchen floor, Ludmila makes dinner, as usual. With one hand she prods the kotlety spitting in the pan, with the other she holds back the lace curtain to watch down to the street for Dima. An old habit, formed when he was first old enough to start going out by himself. Her parents died when Dima was three. Then it was only the two of them, always. Until six years ago when Dima announced he had met someone, she was pregnant, and he was marrying her. He brought Natasha home a week later. A mousy thing, shy in a way that seemed less polite and more distrustful. She was from some stagnant town in the middle of the country, and had moved to Moscow to work in the market stands. Dima had met her while buying a leather jacket, a pretension

Ludmila hadn't approved of in the first place, but a young man had to feel presentable. Clever of her to snag a Moscow man, her neighbor Fedotyevna said over tea when Ludmila told her, now she'll be able to get an internal passport allowing her to stay in the city.

The window is lashed with drizzle, and the highrises of their neighborhood materialize gray and ghostly through the mist. Not even the gossipy old women are on their usual bench out front. And there he comes, and even though he's obscured by a black umbrella that is identical to every other black umbrella on the street, Ludmila would know him anywhere. Dima ducks under the awning of the building entrance. Ludmila wipes her hands on her apron and goes to unlock the door.

Natasha is home soon after, and they all eat dinner elbow-to-elbow at the small kitchen table. They exchange news about their day, but the conversation is porous, and through it Ludmila suddenly sees the outlines of some tense discussion to take place after Antosha has gone to bed. She catches Dima and Natasha exchanging silent glances that are imbued with meaning. What could be so laden with subtext, so secretive? Maybe they're divorcing, she thinks with a flicker of hope. But the pleasure of no longer having Natasha around is fast replaced with the fear that she will lose Antosha. Then it dawns on her—it's likely the opposite, and they're about to announce a pregnancy. Natasha had been looking rather peaky lately. Ludmila can understand their apprehension about telling her. Technically, it's her apartment. Twenty-six square meters, barely enough for the four of them. It would be difficult to have another child in that small space, in this uncertain economy. Maybe they worry about disturbing her with a baby, with the presumed obligation that she take on the care of another grandchild. A little girl would be nice. Or another boy, a good playmate for Antosha.

Natasha goes to put Antosha to bed after he watches *Goodnight, Little Ones!* on the television. But soon she's back, quietly agitated, telling Ludmila that he keeps asking for grandma. As Ludmila enters the darkness of the bedroom, she hears Natasha say, "His own mother, can you believe it!" Dima makes soothing noises in response. What does she expect, Ludmila thinks. Natasha regularly works late nights as a shelver at a warehouse. And when she's home she's exhausted, impatient. If she can barely manage the one child, Ludmila isn't sure how having a second one is an answer to anything. And Dima has

taken on some sort of idea that he ought to side with his wife in every argument, that marriage means contradicting his own mother. A market girl from nowhere appears, and suddenly Ludmila is the odd one out.

Antosha is curled up in bed. Visible through the lace curtain are the multitude of glowing windows from the highrises all around them, cramped serviceable apartments like theirs. She lies down next to her grandson. The bed creaks in protest. "Do you want me to read you a story?" she says, already reaching for the bedside lamp, but he says no in a small voice, and asks, "Can you scratch my back?"

She slides a hand under his pajama top and lightly drags her nails down his skin. Those sharp shoulder blades, like embryonic wings threatening to burst through the skin. The knots of his spine. He coughs, but it is a good dry sound. He is sick with bronchitis nearly every winter, hacking up green phlegm, Ludmila ministering to him with eucalyptus oils, mustard plasters, chicken broth. "It's the Moscow air," Natasha says, "It's noxious," but Ludmila knows it's because he's so skinny, he needs more fat to protect him, he needs to grow better. When he is finally asleep, she stops the scratching, smooths down his cotton top, but keeps her hand on his back to feel the tide of his breath.

As soon as she opens the door, the fervent whispers in the kitchen cease.

Natasha and Dima are side-by-side at the table, Natasha chewing her lip and sliding an empty cup back and forth across the tabletop. "Here, I'll make more tea," Dima says, jumping up and seizing on the task.

Once the kettle is on the stove, he looks around as if searching for something, anything else to distract him. Finally, he sits. Natasha and Dima glance at each other, as though trying to decide who would speak first.

Natasha looks away.

Dima begins hesitantly, "Ma, there's something we have to talk to you about. But it's hard to say. Hard to explain."

Ludmila is getting the feeling this isn't about a baby after all.

The kitchen clock ticks quietly. Someone down on the street is yelling, maybe singing. A distant truck backfires. Dima clears his throat.

"Mam, you remember Andrei Shipak? From my uni? He's living in America now. California. And there's Viktor Kazanov too, remember, he came with his guitar to my birthday, played *Moskva Doesn't Believe*

in Tears so nicely. Viktor's in Canada now. There are others, too, who've left. Nearly a quarter of my graduating year now. Andrei and Viktor, they tell me it's a very good time for programmers overseas. Andrei's bought a big house with a garage, Viktor's family went on vacation to Cuba last winter." He looks at her, hopefully, and she knows he's expecting her to understand now, to spare him the difficulty of explaining, but she doesn't yet, not yet, this catalog of the successes of his peers, what of it, so she waits, tugs her housecoat tighter around herself.

Her son looks away from her, to his reflection in the dark kitchen window. "We've started applying for immigration. And it's only immediate families that can go. We wouldn't be able to take you with us, at least not right away."

The kettle starts whistling, choking on its own steam. Ludmila can't quite process what they are telling her, what he is threatening. It feels like a threat. "Why, Dimochka? Are you trying to get away from me? Is she," she nods at Natasha, "trying to persuade you to leave me?"

Natasha jumps up to turn off the stove.

Dima reaches for Ludmila's hand, "Mama, what are you talking about? You know how low my salary is here. And there will be so many more opportunities for Antosha. Viktor's daughter has a tennis scholarship to Harvard. Harvard, Mama!"

The conversation is long. Eventually Natasha goes to sleep, having contributed little to it, perhaps understanding that Ludmila wants to hear Dima explain, needs to understand Dima's reasons. They talk until there are no more words. He reassures her that this is still preemptive, there are no guarantees. It might not even happen. It's a hard process. Many people apply for immigration and get denied. Eventually, he goes to bed too, kisses her on top of her head as he leaves, as if she is the child. Ludmila sits in the kitchen, alone. She supposes the foreign temperament would suit her son best. Dima is a soft man. He's immersed in his numbers and programs, in the screen of the computer. Uncomfortable about social interactions, terrible at the subtle art of bribery. And without connections or bribery or a better way to make money, how is Antosha to get ahead? America seems more straightforward, direct, more suited to Dima's abilities. She understands, she tells herself. Whatever is best for Antosha. She feels a sour sickness rising in her throat. Anything for him. The buildings from the window watch her, their ever-vigilant eyes closing one by one.

The old women sitting by the building entrance, they know everyone. They know everything. Ludmila says good morning to them, but she doesn't spend her days on that broken-slatted bench, shucking sunflower seeds and discussing the neighbors. But the women, somehow they find out.

Ludmila told no one but Fedotyevna, her downstairs neighbor, over tea and Little Squirrel candies. Even to her, Ludmila showed a good face, said it would be best for the family, for Antosha. Fedotyevna nodded her support, "Well, everyone's a millionaire in America, good for Dima. He knows what's what. And soon enough they'll bring you over too."

Maybe Fedotyevna couldn't resist the gossip. Or else the news got out some other way, percolated through the walls. Soon the women know that Ludmila's family is looking to immigrate. And if they know, the whole building knows.

This is the most exciting news the building's had all year, after the parking spot brawl between Potapovich and Irmak. So the women take it upon themselves to gather rumors and present them to Ludmila when she leaves the building, when they're in the elevator together, when she's on the playground with Antosha. That whole fall and winter, as Dima and Natasha quietly wait on their paperwork, the women sidle up to Ludmila, tell her stories.

"You know Ivanych, in building five? Well, his son and daughter-in-law left eight years ago. First, they said they didn't have enough money to bring him, now they say that the Canadian government froze the process for bringing over elderly parents. So he's waiting, still waiting. They visit him once a year, but what of it? He walks with a cane now, was in hospital for a week with respiratory distress. He'll keep on waiting until they bury him."

"You heard of Lavrontievs, left three years ago for Chicago? Their daughter found some boyfriend a decade older than her, got into drugs. So easy to get drugs there, in America. They're drowned in debt paying for her rehab stays. Good girl she was too. Good Russian kids go over and get ruined."

"Klavdiya's grandkids barely speak Russian anymore. On the phone just silence, just their breathing, as they say *Hi baba* with their accents,

and can't say anything else. Little strangers they're growing up to be. Little foreign men."

"Everyone knows the real reason Zinaida's daughter immigrated was to put half a continent between them. But at least she phoned, every Saturday. And Zinaida kept saying, they'll bring me over, soon I'll live in England, like a queen. She and her daughter talked one weekend. And it must've happened the next day. Heart attack, probably. Remember, last year, it was a warm May, unexpected heat wave? They only found her because she started leaking through the neighbors' ceiling a week later. Big brown stain spreading over their kitchen. They say that when the police opened up the apartment the stench was awful. Paid the Uzbeks five thousand rubles to come in and mop the floor. The daughter arrived a few days later, cremated her, interred the ashes. Had some contractors rip up the kitchen floor, and sold the apartment on the cheap."

December and Ludmila starts her mental List of Lasts, when she realizes this may be the final year they celebrate together. What would be the use of setting up a New Year's tree when she's alone? The silver strands of tinsel glimmer with the multicolored lights and she tries to imprint the scene in her mind, the smell of fir and citrus, the way Antosha battles sleep to try and stay up late enough to catch Grandfather Frost in the act of delivering gifts.

When the rejection from the UK comes in early January, she commiserates with Dima and Natasha, calls the UK immigration personnel imbeciles to Fedotyevna, but secretly feels like it's a belated holiday gift just for her.

Only two weeks later, Canada moves forward with approvals.

The following month, Dima dresses in a suit, Natasha in the navy wool dress Ludmila bought her shortly after their wedding, and they take the day off for the first consular interview.

That day, between dropping off Antosha at school and picking him up, Ludmila finds that she cannot go home. The empty apartment, usually such a comfort, has grown to feel haunted. There are everyone's slippers lined up by the door, the milk carton filled with suet for the chickadees suspended outside the kitchen window, the wallpaper scribbled with red pencil from when Antosha was two and briefly

left unsupervised. It feels like the walls are creeping in centimeter by centimeter. She's tried to distract herself with reading, television, visiting Fedotyevna, but it's no use. This is how it will be when I am alone, she thinks. She has never been alone, even when she was a young mother, lonely and scared. She had Dima.

So instead, she stays in the Metro. It is dry there, warm. Sounds are caught in the curving archways far overhead, the echoing hush of a museum. The Metro is always busy, always alive. Spacious. It's never day or night there, but always the same soothing lighting, always the same sounds echoing over the frescoes, the wind of the trains coming from deep in the earth. In the Metro, she can think without feeling the eyes of the highrises on her. In the Great Patriotic War the deepest stations were used as air raid bunkers, whole communities forming within them, storefronts and sleeping areas and schools, and Ludmila thinks she can hear the echoes of those times tendrilling around the chandeliers, flitting through the balustrades, the voices of people also seeking refuge, long gone now, whispering on the tunnel winds.

Ludmila rides the deepest escalator in Russia at Park Pobedy station, three minutes of descent past oblong milk-glass lamps growing up out of the stone like stalagmites. She rides it up and down, because it is beautiful and soothing and she feels like she's doing something, going somewhere purposeful. She watches a young man in front of her on the escalator. He recently got a haircut—there are fine dark hairs littering the collar of his white shirt—and something in his stance, the self-conscious slouch, reminds her of Shurik. But then when the man, boy, steps off the escalator, turns to the right, the profile is all wrong, heavy and hook-nosed. No, the Metro is not like arteries at all, she thinks, or like nerves. It's like thoughts, neurons. The Metro is the mind of the city, its subconscious, always the trains roaring, shuddering, clacking, the electricity and the winds and the echoes perpetual, even when the rest of the city is sleeping.

It is March. In two days is the health inspection. Natasha will be picking Antosha up from school, taking him directly to the specialist's office. The final immigration approval step, this physiological appraisal of imported goods. Natasha has been fretting all week, kept Antosha

back from school for three days because some kids in his grade are down with chicken pox.

Ludmila is making Antosha's morning porridge. Millet today, yellow and grainy, a knob of butter melting into gold. Her nose is tender, her sinuses are in a vice. She turns away from the porridge to cough into the sleeve of her housecoat. She picked up a chest cold. Maybe the drafts in the metro. Or all the commuters, breathing each other's exhalations. Natasha wouldn't let Antosha sleep in Ludmila's room this week. "So he won't disturb your rest," she said at first, but then admitted they couldn't risk his getting sick before the inspection. And then this morning, as Dima left, he knocked on her door, reminded her not to kiss Antosha, not to hug him, not until she's better.

She takes a mug off the hook on the wall. The water is hot, the concentrated tea brew strong and bitter. The milk is ready. She can hear the water running in the bathroom as Antosha is brushing his teeth.

The sneeze overcomes her without warning. Right into the mug she's holding, ready for Antosha's tea. At first, she means to put the mug away, get a different one. But then a different impulse moves through her. Ludmila brings the mug to her face. Just a light touch of her lips to the rim, at first. Then she licks the ceramic, all around. Coughs into the mug once, twice. Pours in the tea, the milk, and places it on the table as Antosha walks into the kitchen.

Two days until the health inspection. Two days is likely enough time for the germs to take hold. Is a bad cold enough to reject him? They will listen to his lungs, hear the damp weakness in them, cancel the immigration process.

Antosha clammers onto the chair, the cowlick at the back of his head at attention, his eyes still puffy with sleep. He holds the mug with both hands, looking like a world-weary traveler. He pulls it toward him across the table, dips his head down to take a sip.

But before his lips make contact, Ludmila is already snatching it away from him, the mug splashing some tea out onto the table. He looks up at her with surprise.

"I made a mistake, Antoshen'ka," she says without looking at him, her face burning, "That mug isn't clean, let me get you a new one."

She pours him new tea. Places his porridge on the table. And as he's eating she hunches over the sink and scrubs and scrubs and scrubs

the contaminated mug under hot water until her hands are raw and pulsing.

Diplomats somewhere are debating her family's fate, and in the meantime, Ludmila takes Antosha to school, then rides the Metro every day. She rides farther and farther, down lines she has never used—green, orange, gray—through the archwork of unfamiliar stations, marble and metal and mosaics, past statues and frescoes she doesn't recognize, the farther from the center, the more slick and futuristic the design, cool blue and ice white of marble, burnished chrome lighting fixtures writhing overhead. She sits so still on the trains for so long that she starts to feel inanimate, a part of the machinery. Even at night she thinks she hears it, through the layers of apartments below her—the cement foundation, the sand and the stonethose echoing tunnels expanding, growing. Excavators gnawing at the earth as if they are searching for something. The rumble of the trains in her bones.

Dima brings home the brown envelope without warning, its flap bound with a twine closure. Inside are the passports, visas stamped with approval. He and the others sit at the kitchen table and pass the documents around reverently. Ludmila inspects the photographs: her son trying to seem stern but looking apprehensive instead, Natasha's face young, worried, Antosha's mouth open just a little in his photo as if he's about to say something.

"Careful Ma, don't smudge them," Dima says, gently prying the documents out of Ludmila's hands. He puts them in the cupboard of their room, turns the little brass key but leaves it in the lock.

The next morning as Antosha is eating his porridge, Ludmila walks into her son's room, over to the cupboard, turns the key. And there they are, as they were last night, leaning serenely. A piece of paper, so important, so fragile. She takes the documents out, and they feel heavier somehow, more solid, than the previous night. So many things could happen to a piece of paper. It's so vulnerable to scissors. And to fire. And to water. And to simply being ripped into pieces and dropped down the garbage chute on the building landing.

“Baba, I’m done! Baba where are you?” rings Antosha’s voice from the kitchen, the scraping of his chair backing away from the table.

Ludmila shoves the documents into the cupboard, turns the key, leaves it in the lock.

When she checks it again three days later, the documents are no longer there. She does not ask Dima if he moved them, because that would admit she looked at them, and why would she need to look at them. She says nothing, and neither does he.

Everything starts happening so suddenly, in fast-forward. Airplane tickets are purchased, a two-leg KLM flight with a stopover in Amsterdam. Dima and Natasha spend evenings and weekends sorting through cupboards, laying dusty books into piles of yes and no, folding and putting aside clothes, debating over the merits of transporting kitchenware. Their life packs down to two filled and belted suitcases in the foyer, Ludmila’s old olive-green canvas and a used maroon one bought at the market. Five cardboard boxes taped and labelled with the address of Viktor Kazanov in Toronto, with whom they’d stay for a few weeks until they find their own apartment. In the evenings, Dima plays a cassette called *Easy English Phrasebook I*, and the whole family makes a game of repeating the words after the stern British woman pronounces them—*Excuse Me, Good Morning, Refrigerator*. Antosha’s parents finally sit him down and tell him he will be moving, will go to a new school. Ludmila is hoping for a tantrum, but Antosha’s favorite game becomes having imaginary conversations with his new Canadian friends. “Will you miss your babushka?” Ludmila whispers to him at night across the chasm between their two beds. But Antosha doesn’t seem to comprehend a world without her in it, so this is not a concern for him. There was always babushka, and so there always will be.

Time is shrinking at a terrible rate. Soon, it is Friday morning. Their flight is the next day. It is Antosha’s last half-day at school, a celebration planned by his teacher. In art class earlier that week they painted the red—and—white sectioned flag, the maple leaf. Ludmila is making him porridge, all along her List of Lasts cataloging with inevitability:

last time I woke him up for school, last time I helped him pack his school bag, last time we have our morning alone together, last time I am making him porridge.

Last time taking him to school. The old women at the building entrance nod to her, look significantly at each other, watch them pass. It is May, finally, the trees covered in the green haze of spring, the swell of first buds, the birches hung with soft earrings. Snowmelt gurgles down the drainage grates.

Mama, we'll bring you soon, Dima keeps telling her. Soon, just give us a few years to settle in. You'll love it there. But the words ring hollow against the barrage of Lasts. And it's not fair, she wants to tell him but doesn't, it's not fair that I have to choose leaving behind all I know or never seeing my family again, save for rare visits.

She's holding Antosha by the hand as they descend into the Metro; there's the train, and it's one stop, then another, and Antosha is already standing to get off, but Ludmila finds that she can't get up. Leaving the safety of the train makes it so much closer to the Last of dropping him off at school. And she can't, not yet.

"Baba, we need to go?" He says, unsure.

"No, Antoshen'ka, we're going on an adventure instead. I'm going to give you grandma's Metro tour."

"But what about the party?"

"The party's been cancelled," she says, "Too many kids got a cold. Your teacher told me. We'll do an adventure instead."

So they keep riding. Station after station. They rub the nose of the brass dog for luck at Ploshchad Revolyutsii. They ride the longest escalator up, down, up, down. She shows him the gray Georgian marble at Park Kultury, checkered tiles imitating a carpet, the bas-reliefs demonstrating Soviet prowess in sports. The tour she used to give her history class, it all comes back to her. Oktyabrskaya's dedication to victory over Napoleon, the dark red Ural marble at Prospekt Mira and the mural to Mothers of the World. The three dozen stained-glass panels at Novoslobodskaya, the echo and hush and glow of it like a subterranean cathedral.

Soon, Antosha is getting tired. Distracted. She finds a clementine in her purse but has no other food. At Taganskaya she tries to amuse him

with the murals of pilots and tank crews, but he starts crying, asking when they will go home. People are glancing at them, and Ludmila scoops him up, holds him against her, says hush.

“Soon, Antoshen’ka. Just a few more stops.”

It is too busy on the Circle Line, she needs to go somewhere quieter where she can think, where there are fewer people. If she rides the trains for long enough, she will come up with a solution. She will find a way to keep them here. She gets on the first train that pulls into the station. It is well after two o’clock. They were due home a while ago. Dima and Natasha are likely finishing their packing, checking the clock. Antosha quiets down and is soon asleep in her arms.

She looks all around at these people, so calm and sure of their place here. And then under someone’s armpit, behind two women talking, she recognizes the narrow but strong shoulders, the nape of the neck, the way he hangs onto the overhead bar. Ludmila still can’t see his face. She would call out for him, call his name, but she doesn’t want to wake up Antosha. A station appears, another, another, the distances between stations growing longer and longer. Perhaps it goes on forever, the Metro. Who knows its dark secrets. Perhaps it never ends, despite what the maps say. Antosha is breathing against her neck. Ludmila is watching the man, boy, waiting for him to look up, to recognize her, to tell her why he went away. To show her where he’s been hiding all this time.

Copyright of Ploughshares is the property of Ploughshares, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.