Full Metal Jhacket

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Thirty Years of Prosperity for Every Fifteen Years of Hard Work

Pebbled strokes of black ash crowded the sills of the tenement where the cosmonauts lived. Bitter upcroppings of air from the south sailed mournfully through the cracked eaves of a building that was new just ten years before, but which was already indistinguishable from the bombed ruins at the border of Elevengrad on the Eastern Front. A clutch of boys in blue coveralls cleared away the dust from the courtyard with tiny whisks, moving slowly backward on their haunches, dark blue bandanas tied tight against their mouths. A bulb went on in a room on the second floor, throwing a messy block of light across the boys’ path. There was a head silhouetted in the window, which the boys dutifully ignored.

Rozhko watched them work from his window, their hunched backs swaying slowly in the ruined dusk. He’d just woken from another spacewalk dream. He’d stripped out of his pressure suit as he floated away from the capsule, his limbs petrifying as he leapt into the unfathomable darkness. But like the drowning man who flails toward the dwindling marbled light of the sun as he’s dragged down into the abyss, the urge to look back at the Earth overtook him. He turned awkwardly in the void to face the luminous globe. On its surface he could see his tenement with alarming clarity, its frame listing, crumbling like a soiled fruit. Somehow he could even make out his son, who determinedly kicked a rust-colored ball around on the worried plot of dirt along the side of the building. He watched his son until the tenement took up his whole field of vision and he realized he was tumbling through the atmosphere. He smacked the empty basin of the Fountain of the Four Virtues of His Almighty Excellence and the shock woke him. He rolled over on his other side, having heard that a person could empty his head of a bad dream that way. When that failed to calm him he slipped out of bed in an effort not to wake Vera and went to the window where he cranked his hand lamp until it went on. He watched the boys clean the walkway, going over in his mind all the details of the dream,
sorting out what was real from what was impossible. He knew that he would not be able to see his tenement from outer space, but he also knew that his weekly trips to and from the *Tiomkin IV* were staged for the Glory of the People, that he only sat inside a simulated nosecone in front of a battery of primitive television cameras, eating yogurt from a tube until he was told it was time to leave.

He heard the grating shuffle of his son moving down the hallway in a poly nightsuit. He stared at the curved orifice of the door where Yegor’s shape crystallized in vague, gray stages. The boy stood at the threshold, his shape rustling in and out of focus like a curtain agitated by a hot wind.

“What is the problem?” Rozhko offered in a windy, breathless burst, training the hand lamp on the boy. The words softened in the darkness—the end of the sentence went cottony and dim.

Yegor stopped shifting his weight in the sudden light and began to cry silently.

“You can’t come in here,” Rozhko said.

“I know.”

“We talked about this.”

“I know,” the boy said, raising a shaky hand, palm out, to show that he knew and that he didn’t want to talk about it again.

“If you come in here now you will never learn to be alone. And if you never learn to be alone, your life will be very difficult.”

“I know,” Yegor said with the hollow wheeze of a boy who’s had the wind knocked out of him. He continued to stand at the threshold, gripping the molding for balance.

“You can find your way back to your room, I suspect.” Rozhko felt the springs on the bed shift slightly.

Yegor rested his head against the doorjamb. “What if I pick the wrong room?”

“You’re seriously worried about that?” Rozhko said, but before he could finish the sentence Vera rose from the bed and took Yegor’s hand. The two of them disappeared in the garbled dark, nothing left in the spotlight of Rozhko’s lamp but a griddled square of carpet. The cosmonaut felt a familiar dread metastasize coolly throughout his chest. Vera stayed in the boy’s room for the remainder of the night. Outside, two warships circled the central tower. Rozhko watched their lights blink in spastic unison until they merged with the purple sky, and then it was morning.
Rozhko took the tube out to the training facility where he was scheduled to meet his replacement, a putty-faced boy from the Fourteenth Honorable League of Defense. Morse had whistled when he handed over the charts on the boy in a way that meant Rozhko was in trouble. “This young man can barely cut wood, let alone buckle a seatbelt,” Morse had said, backing away from the counter.

It was an outrage that Rozhko was being replaced. The dailies had him at third place in the popular vote. He lagged behind Kravchik, sure, but no one could beat Kravchik. The way he handled the controls, the seamlessness with which he simulated the experience of real spaceflight, approached the unreal. He did delicate little things with his hands that no one had ever thought of. He literally advanced the form. His dexterity and grace were unmatched. Paraskova was in second place. She was the daughter of a pinch-faced barrel merchant, which got everyone worked up for all the obvious reasons, but she managed to exude a cool and even temperament that showed she’d risen above her station. She didn’t make anyone feel guilty, even with her overly stocky torso and trademark sallow complexion. But her work in space was nothing extraordinary. She had method but no passion. Her range of motion was weak. There were six cosmonauts below him in the charts, including Karpov, but still he was the one being mothballed.

The tube hit something, probably a body, which sent everybody tumbling violently into the aisle. Once or twice a week the train would hit a floater. All of the papers in Rozhko’s pockets spilled out on the corrugated floor in a ragged fan pattern.

He scooped the documents up to his chest, cradling them like a newborn animal as he returned to his seat, readjusting the stiff brim of his top hat with his free hand. Once the train started moving again, he carefully unfolded the latest letter.

“Dear Father, I’m almost done with training. Can you believe it? Yesterday they took me up into the ionosphere for an anti-gravity simulation. It wasn’t what I expected. I thought it would be easier to tell which way was up, but I lost that sense right away, as soon as we hit the crest of the arc. Is that how you feel when you go up? I am dying to know if it is something I inherited from you. My father here has never been in space. He makes those murder kits for girls. I don’t know if you have them over there. I think I heard that murder is still outlawed where you live. Anyway, next month we graduate, and then we have a vacation week, and then I am going to Calisco station. Will you still be in orbit then? I know we wouldn’t be able to meet in person, with all the laws
against it, but it would be the closest we’d ever been to each other. My parents here don’t like it that we’re both astronauts, but I do. Yours, Galina.”

Galina was Yegor’s twin. When the two were born, Rozhko and Vera were forced to choose only one to keep, and he thought the boy would be more useful, so they sold the girl and used the money to put Rozhko through cosmonaut training. It became more and more clear he’d made a poor decision. Galina sent letters regularly, detailing her space training in a country that could actually afford space travel, while Yegor stunted and gnashed in Rozhko’s living room, growing solidly into his form and aspiring to little else. Galina’s letters came every month in an exotic, long envelope made of fine red paper, marked with erratic, faded stamp work. Opened, of course, by the Ministry of Correspondence, and censored wherever necessary. Rozhko would take them into the washroom, slide the footstool in front of the door, and read them by candlelight. Vera was not interested in the letters, and she hated that Rozhko read and answered them. The memory of Galina was like a meal she wished she could swallow and expel. It wasn’t her choice to keep Yegor.

Rozhko folded the letter hastily and slipped it in his breast pocket with the others.

The auditorium went dark. On the screen a single white dot appeared. A confident voice issued from a threadbare speaker cone somewhere in the back of the auditorium. “Space,” it said, “they can do it—why can’t we?” The dot became larger on the screen until it became clear that it was the exhaust from a rocket. The ship came closer and closer, revealing three figures in the cockpit—three serious men with close-cropped hair. “Seems like an unattainable goal, doesn’t it? Yet here at the Yuri Yushkakov Center for Agriculture, Public Welfare, and Interplanetary Exploration, we’re setting the pace for space travel across the globe. Within the past five years, we’ve conducted successful missions to the nearest three heavenly objects, without sacrificing our dedication to the thriving community of agronomists working day and night for the glory of the people and His Almighty Excellence.”

Rozhko stood at the back of the auditorium, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the impenetrable darkness.

The film ended and the lights went up. He found Ekar by the water trough. “Rozhko, I don’t need to tell you how sorry I am,” he said, smiling bitterly, grasping Rozhko’s shoulder with an intimate aggression. It was an excessive but heartfelt gesture, which was why Rozhko couldn’t help but admire Ekar, even as he was likely the one in charge of phasing Rozhko out of the program.
“It’s not—it’s nothing. We all have our day.”

“According to His Almighty Excellence, yes, I suppose so,” Ekar said, his face frozen taxidermically in the smile.

“Where is he?”

“Oh,” Ekar said, stroking his chin. “Your replacement. Follow me.”

Ekar led Rozhko down a narrow, unlit hallway that led to the first-year center.

“He’s not a first-year, is he?”

“First-year? Well—”

They approached the nosecone simulator. Inside, they could hear a young man’s voice. “This is the cockpit,” the voice called. “Wow. I can’t believe this is really the real cockpit.”

“Aksak,” Ekar called abruptly, “you’ve a visitor.”

Rozhko’s replacement emerged from the nosecone. His face was flimsy and boyish, only barely featureful. The head was a hastily rolled fleshball in which two glaring eyeholes had been poked. The mouth, too, seemed gored by a small child’s hand.

“I’ve seen this stuff, right?” he said, as though introductions had already been made. “On television—a hundred times. A thousand hundred. Everything’s so different in color, though. I never knew these buttons were colored.”

Rozhko flinched. “Don’t touch those, please—”

“I mean, and these switches—they’re red. I always imagined them like I saw them—just like, a medium grayish tone, sort of. But they’re red!”

Aksak continued to circle the nosecone, handling every surface that would accept touch. Rozhko trailed close behind, righting all the controls, returning the valves to zero, shocked at his own attentiveness. The cockpit had been the subject of derision for so many years—on off hours, during His Almighty Excellence’s fireside primers, Rozhko and the other cosmonauts would moon the camera crew from the thick blast windows, their asses white and hairless against the tiny portholes. As soon as the station went off the air for Unity Hour, they’d unzip their coveralls and play speed rounds of euchre, just because they could. Just because they knew that, inside the safety of the capsule, they were the only people in the entire nation who were naked. He found himself suddenly possessed of a crippling reverence for the space.

They crawled inside the cockpit. “There are the breathing tubes,” Aksak said, pointing at the breathing tubes. “Those are the breathing tubes that you had to use on mission sixteen. That’s incredible. What was mission sixteen like? Did you really almost choke?”
“No.”

“Didn’t you—I thought you threw up at one point, and everyone was worried that the gravity simulator would go off so that your barf would go flying around the room in little particles.”

“I performed an expectorant simulation, if that’s what you’re asking about. Please, don’t put your hands on those—people have to mouth them.”

“Were you scared you would die?”

Rozhko looked closely at Aksak, searching for a cue that would let him know the boy was tugging his chain. But he saw only earnestness and wonder.

“What do you mean when you say ‘scared’?”

“I mean, I was totally scared for you guys. Especially you, on account of your vomit. Being out there in the blackness, sick, losing air, not sure whether you were going to be able to reenter the atmosphere. I was up all night watching that with my dad.”

“But you know it was a simulation. You know that all of this is predetermined.”

“Like, you knew that you guys should instantly open up the red book and go to plan 11A?”

“No, I mean—”

The boy actually believed. The spectacle was complete—the illusion had been transmitted seamlessly from the actors to the audience, and now the reality he’d created was stronger than the reality in which they were living.

He stood at the threshold of their flat, the open door flooding the narrow corridor with dusty afternoon light. The only sound was the riffling of fabric against fabric punctuated by the occasional grunt. The air had a thickness that said to him that something was not right. He entered the living area. Vera was on her hands and knees in yellow coveralls.

“Yegor is stuck behind the reception screen again,” she said between labored tugs. She had hold of Yegor’s sock foot, and he was vigorously kicking against her grasp.

Rozhko knelt at her side.

“I can do this,” Vera said.

“I’ll get the other leg.”

“If you would just let me take care of this,” she said, but Rozhko ignored her, taking Yegor’s other foot. Yegor increased the ferocity of his thrashing. He kicked out like a mule, which dislodged him from the reception screen. The three of them crashed backwards onto the floor. Yegor stood up first, a ragged
swatch of blood marking his forehead. He gave his parents an accusatory stare before retreating to his personal living area, where he crawled inside a packing box he’d decorated with the insignia of the People’s First Tank Brigade.

“What is his interest back there?” Rozhko said, forcing the reception screen back into position with the furnishing winch.

“He thinks the people on the screen are actually standing behind the set. He thinks he’ll find a tiny version of you back there,” Vera said, struggling up from the floor. Rozhko knew he should feel ashamed that his own son would entertain such ludicrous theories just to make a connection with him, but instead he felt only pity for a boy who clearly was not cut out for the world, not like his sister, who was preparing to make the flight Rozhko himself had been making in pantomime for the past thirteen years.

“My Dearest Galina,” he wrote, and then struck a line through the salutation. He started again—“Greetings, Galina,” he wrote. He tapped the tip of his pen across each of the letters of her name. Then he crumpled the sheet, tearing it from the notebook in the process, and started on a second, clean sheet.

“Dear Galina,” he wrote. “What I have to tell you is not easy. Hard as it is to believe, what I have to tell you is more difficult than the decision to give you up to the Traffic Ministry so that you would have a better chance in another country. When I think of it, I didn’t feel so bad, bringing you there. I really thought it would be better for you. I just didn’t anticipate the sucking circumference of the hole it would leave in my life. Now I know, and this letter, this confession, is—”

Rozhko stopped and put down his pen. He found that he was breathing rapidly, and his throat had swelled so that he could barely take in air. His face made a whistling sound in the empty room.

“So, you’re telling me I should not pull the lever all the way back?”

Rozhko and Aksak were in the cockpit again, going over the launch sequence.

“You did hear me when I said ‘ease the lever back to the midpoint,’ right?”

“Oh, Aksak said, looking sternly at his own hand, gripping an imaginary lever. “Can you tell me, will I get to do anything dramatic on this mission?”

“It’s your first mission.”

“So?”

“So, nothing happens on the first mission.”
“Okay, but how do you explain Geicho?”

“Geicho was inevitable. Geicho’s situation—he had to be jettisoned.”

Aksak hunched in his seat. His eyes, half-hidden by black tufts of eyebrow hair, seemed too small for his head. “It’s just—what am I doing, you know? If I’m not even doing anything—if I’m just a guy going up and down in a fancy tube?”

An unexpected rage spiked in Rozhko’s brain. He felt a strange urge to protect the discipline he’d held in disgust for so long. “Who are you, saying these things, baldly, right inside the cockpit? You’ve never been on a mission before, Private. You’re not Geicho. You’re not even Kirnov.”

“Whoa—hold on. Stand down. What are you suggesting?”

“You’re a nobody calling into question the methods of the greats.”

“Choice words, coming from an expired—” but Aksak stopped, focusing on a point just beyond Rozhko’s head. He slowly rolled his tiny eyes back toward the display screens and coughed. “Sorry,” he said to his fingers, which nervously caressed the launch sequence indicator buttons. “Sorry about that.”

“I hope so,” Rozhko answered.

The story he gave Vera was that he was taking Yegor for a walk by the old park. Vera did not like this idea, being that it was so close to curfew, and that so many boys in the neighborhood had been raped or abducted and sold overseas. Rozhko worried about these things, too, he reminded himself as he walked hand in hand with the boy, steeling himself against the frigid wind, but he needed to see Zadora.

There was little to see in the park since play had been abolished during the last Great Push. The elaborate concrete climbing structures, each modeled after animals at the nearby zoo, had been razed when viewing creatures for pleasure had been outlawed. The structures were sawn into boulder-sized chunks and buried, leaving only a series of crumbling oblong bases and, occasionally, the tragic carved concrete head of a shattered Bengal tiger rising through the leathergrass.

“What are they teaching you?” Rozhko asked as they stepped over a giraffe’s snapped neck.

“Sums,” Yegor responded distractedly, dragging one foot theatrically behind.

“Really? You’re on sums now? Give me a sum.”

“Sums aren’t something you give. They’re something you take.”

“Okay, add five and five.”
“Why?”
“Just because. Otherwise we’re just walking.”
“Five plus five. Eight.”
Rozhko looked away, grimacing.
“I can do sums, Father,” Yegor said sharply, withdrawing his moistened palm from Rozhko’s grip. “I do them my way, but I can do them.”
They arrived at Zadora’s flat. Zadora had told Rozhko to knock four times when he arrived, and then to go immediately over to the hole where the fountain had been and wait. When he saw a light flicker in Zadora’s right window, he should approach the door again.
“You’ll need to wait here,” he said, pulling the drawstrings tight on Yegor’s snow suit. “When the light goes on. You’ll stay here and wait until I come out.”
“What if I get stolen?”
“You won’t get stolen, but if anyone approaches, just start yelling and I’ll come running out of that house.”
They stood by the hole for a good twenty minutes. Rozhko hopped from foot to foot. Yegor balanced on a toppled pillar. The sky was heavy with stars. The light went on and then off again.
“Is that yours?” Zadora said, peering out at the boy’s silhouette when Rozhko arrived at the door.
“He’ll be fine. He’s big.”
Zadora had told Rozhko not to say anything as they made their way into the clay pit. At the other end, in a tiny receptacle chamber that accommodated two kneeling men, there was a single television monitor draped in cheesecloth.
Zadora removed the cheesecloth like a bridal veil and pressed a button on the face of the television. An image slowly emerged from the lazy cathode array—a stretch of luminescent tundra, clutches of snow whisked up in conical eddies at unpredictable intervals. It looked like late afternoon. A group of vehicles appeared over the horizon—three or four compact vehicles with riders. Behind the first group, a second, larger group emerged. It became clear that the vehicles were a sort of four-wheeled motorbike, and that the drivers were all women, completely naked except for athletic sneakers, red knee-length socks, and red batting helmets. The camera receded as the motorcade drew closer, revealing a cove packed with seals, all struggling to move out of the way. The riders reared up on the vehicles as they approached the cove. With expressionless precision they jumped the lip, landing in the seal pile in a vicious, well-orchestrated convoy. Wild jets of blood doused the drivers. Rozhko had
trouble processing what he saw. He took in the images, could understand what he was looking at on a basic level, but couldn’t link any of the elements together in any meaningful way.

“This is a program?” Rozhko asked.

“Yes, this is prime-time. A very successful program over there.”

“Any idea what it’s about?”

“None. I can’t always get the soundtrack. I feel I’m missing some crucial information. These women were apparently imprisoned earlier in the show. I don’t want to speculate.”

Rozhko looked at his hands to reorient himself. “How are you able to do this?”

“Everything is happening at once in the sky,” Zadora whispered.

“And the launch, my daughter’s launch—I will be able to see it?”

“If all goes as planned. The governmental programming there is often preempted. The other day, a presidential speech was canceled to make way for the premiere of a program about sport exhumation.”

“You could be so easily killed for this. Not just killed—I can’t even imagine.”

“Eh. Talk to me about something interesting.” Zadora had spent twelve years at a camp in the north where he was regularly put in a small concrete box for days on end.

“What will I owe you?”

Zadora shut off the television as one of the women held a seal carcass up above her head with dramatic fury. “You would never pay back what you owe, so I’m giving it to you for free. Be here on Workday Four evening. That’s when your daughter’s launch is scheduled.”

“Yegor, please get down from there—chairs aren’t meant to do that.”

They were sitting in the commissary at the Table for the Glorification of His Almighty Excellence’s Twelve Resplendent Theses. The cosmonauts were allowed to sit at the table with their families on the night before each mission as long as they left an empty seat for His Almighty Excellence. Rozhko forked down his meal with deliberate precision. They’d rescheduled the mission for Workday Four, so that, while he sat in the Styrofoam cockpit of the Tiomkin IV, shaking in his chair on the makeshift set, his daughter would actually be launched into space, the details of her face remaining a mystery to him. Vera sat across the table tinkering with her utensils. Yegor slumped at Rozhko’s side, stroking the outline of a lion into the shallow pool of gravy on his plate.
Down at the other end of the table Aksak sat alone, contentedly forcing down spoonfuls of hardened rice.

“This is the last time we’re eating on wood,” Vera said, looking down at her food, largely untouched.

“Don’t say that. You don’t know that. We’re nearly halfway to the years of prosperity.”

“Rozhko, you know nothing will come of it. What did we get out of the last age of prosperity? Ergonomic broom handles. An extra soy cake a month.”

“I suppose it all depends how you measure prosperity,” he said. He found her distress repugnant and childish.

“You’re being put away. How soon do you think you’ll be forgotten?”

“Forgotten? I believe I appear in my son’s own history textbook.”

“You’ll fade,” she said resignedly. “You’ll fade. You’re fading already.”

There was a dull, rubbery crash. Yegor had overturned his tumbler onto himself. Rozhko and Vera turned in unison to see the boy frozen in place, his back arched against the seat, left hand gripping the tumbler’s handle. He looked dazed, as though he’d been tasered.

Rozhko stared at the boy evenly. He had no intention of acting on his son’s behalf, even though he was sitting close enough to blot the spill with a canvas napkin.

“Clean it up—do something,” Vera said urgently, rising up from her chair.

“Do something? It’s just water. When I was a child, my mother spilled maple syrup on my lap, and it was winter, and the syrup froze, so that my pants were stuck to my thighs. I wore the pants until spring thaw, so tell me why I should worry about this?”

Vera stood quickly and crossed to Yegor’s side of the table. “I can’t even begin to imagine what’s made you into such a monster.” She picked the boy up by his shoulders and set him on his feet and then moved with efficiency toward the latrine, training her eyes on Rozhko. It was a look that expressed the general closing down of possibilities.

A group of shirtless men worked the riser that lifted Rozhko and Aksak to the elevated grid that circled the nosecone of the Tiomkin IV. The cosmonauts turned toward the camera crew below in the manner they’d been taught in the training sessions and walkthrough exercises, waving to the imaginary crowd, their backs to the sweeping blue skyscape that would be keyed in behind them by the men at the machines.

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“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” one of the squarish, severe anchormen said to the other in another part of the soundstage.

“Amazing. I wouldn’t be surprised if somewhere, somehow, our leader hasn’t built us some sort of weather machine–type device, something that fires up a column of sunlight whenever we need it most.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt—they’re just getting into the capsule,” the first anchorman said, tapping the other’s forearm.

“The capsule that will take them to the stars.”

“And beyond.”

“Let’s watch.”

Rozhko stepped aside to let Aksak into the capsule first. He watched his replacement fit himself through the crimped aperture of the portal. Every moment he allowed to advance before him was a moment in which the possibility of watching Galina pierce the atmosphere diminished. The worst of it—the part that made him choke with rage and embarrassment—was that she’d see him in this footage, waving solemnly just before he entered the cockpit, and she’d believe that he was headed to the same place. Maybe she imagined they’d pass by each other when in orbit—two people who couldn’t possibly be further apart grazing momentarily by each other, waving through thick, misted portal glass, nothing—literally nothing—between them, for a full forty seconds, a minute maybe.

He entered the cockpit and took his seat. A team of men in orange cloaks followed, buckling him in and hooking up the pressure valves to his suit. He looked over at Aksak, who was gazing up through the blast glass at the tungsten light array that made daylight. Aksak was trying with great difficulty to stifle a wide, boyish grin.

“This is it,” Aksak said, fiddling with the arm of his chair. “This is what we’ve been training for. Were you this excited when you first went up?” He turned to Rozhko, who returned his glance with a hollow, vacant face.

“I don’t remember,” he said after a long pause.

The technician radioed in to let them know that the launch was beginning. Rozhko started to cry silently.

Rozhko put his head back in the seat. The voice on the radio was aggressive and tinny, shouting down the seconds. The tungsten bulbs bore a cloverleaf pattern into the center of his vision. Galina, somewhere, was zipping herself into a pressure suit. The thought flushed Rozhko with a darkness. He took a single, world-inhaling breath, and began methodically removing the seat buckles.
Aksak looked over, snapping instantly from his reverie. “Whoa, whoa—what are you—we’re about to launch, you can’t . . . we’ll crash—you . . .”

Rozhko was out of the chair, tearing off the pressure valves, which flailed like angry, weightless cobras in the tiny cockpit. The portal door only opened from the outside, so he knelt by a flimsy control bank and began tearing at the cheap fiberboard and vinyl.

“Holy—you don’t—” Aksak was halfway through unbuckling his buckles when Rozhko had made a hole big enough to fit through.

“Enjoy space,” he said, lowering himself hastily into the crevice. “You’ve never experienced anything like it.” He slid himself down into the hole until all Aksak could see was the top of his head. Then he lost his grip and fell straight into the hollow cavity of the rocket. On his way down he glimpsed Aksak’s head peering through the broken hole.

He landed in a cloud of musty batting. His legs were immobilized by an unseen beam. He thrashed in the blackness, dinging his forearm on a corrugated aluminum pipe. He was stuck. They’d have to tear open a wall to get him out. He would not see his daughter. The program was likely already over. In the darkness, he could no longer tell which way was up. He let out a desultory hiss—in all his years of space travel, this was the closest he’d come to experiencing weightlessness. He knew it with a tactile precision, the way the blind knew Braille. He’d first felt it long before the space program. Back in the hazy, solitary years before the children, back when he worked on the lava barge in Tronsk. He was gone three weeks out of four and when he returned he would sit quietly with Vera in the dim kitchen at night, drinking cadmium tapwater while the tube light flickered angrily, Or maybe they’d go following stray cats in the park during free hour, her arm docked in his. Everything was ahead of them then. The future was an untamed thing, theirs if they wanted it. He remembered coming back after a particularly grueling extraction in Barkabos. The apartment they shared was soft and still and filled with dying light. He removed his groin parka in the hallway, bracing himself with one hand against the white wall. He ached to see Vera. His hands, in those days, were like divining rods, always trained on her, no matter how far away he traveled. But there would be time, he thought. There was all this time to hold his Vera. He unthreaded the nylon cord from his coccyx ring and removed his elephant boots, and when he looked up again, he saw her, framed in the doorway to the common room, her gown illuminated faintly by the light through the windows. She offered a nervous smile. He found a streak of fear in her face and he knew immediately that she was carrying.
“How long have you been wait”—” he said, holding a single boot with both hands, like an offering.

“Waiting to tell you? For three days now.”

“But that’s—that’s—”

“Oh Rozhko,” she said, as if she were coming toward him for an embrace. But she stood in the door frame. “Please be as excited as I am. Please be even half as excited. I’m already imagining all the little uniforms the ministry will be sending us—those little red books,” she said.

Rozhko dropped the boot and came toward her. He threw himself into her, burying his face in the crook of her neck. His eyes stung and he started losing air.

“Why are you doing that?” she whispered, running her hands down his back.

“Can we really be expected to take care of a child?”

“What?” She pulled back to try to get a look at him.

“Think of all the things that could happen to a child, even before it’s born. There is almost no way it could work. The odds are against us.”

“Why do you say that? How can you say that? We’ve talked about this—we’ve gone over it so many times.”

“I know,” he said. He shuddered, weeping heavily. He clawed at her shoulder as if holding on for dear life.

“Aren’t you even a little happy?”

“I don’t want to be happy.”

Her face went small.

“Look. I don’t mean—it’s just that, this happiness, such as it is—what if it is the arrow that pierces the future, ruining everything? I need to hold it off until we are safe.”

She struggled to pull away from him, put a hand to the side of his face in what might have been the last real point of contact between them. “It’s true—terrible things could happen. But even if they do, you won’t have wasted your happiness now. Happiness is not a resource—you don’t understand this?” The logic of this statement worked its way into him virally. He wanted to believe what Vera said, and for that moment in the hallway, he could see his happiness as something timeless and immortal, not the scraps of something cached in a dark hole. And in spite of the arrow he feared would soon puncture the fabric of his life with Vera, he allowed himself to brim with happiness. He felt breathless and light, like a large man was standing behind him, lifting him up by the lungs.

It was, he realized as he lay in the cavity of the model rocket, staring up at Aksak, the sense of weightlessness he’d been miming ever since.