

ДИВА DIVA ROCK КАМЕНЬ

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I wake up shivering, pulling into myself. My bed doesn't smell like my bed. The room is dark, and in the darkness the size of it telescopes in and out. It's nauseating, even lying down—I am stiffened with vertigo. I'm a lion in a foot locker; I'm a mouse in a cathedral. A domed space of uncertain distance from my face hums with the pressure of its shifting magnitude. I pull at the covers with my massive paws; my rodent eyes dart around in the black.

In a long moment it comes back to me: spare bedroom, the Snezhkins' house, Simferopol, Crimea, Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Earth, Milky Way. Panting in the dark cold, I can see in vivid neon the glowing web of my life spread out: a slightly vibrating fiber-optic net with strands stretching from every loved one to me, at its center. The nucleus has shifted now. Lines are crossing and straining, some going slack. I can see some of them snap—the ones that are too brittle to bend.

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We finally reach it and start to climb. We saw it in the daylight, a massive rock about a hundred meters out from the shore, connected by a knuckly thumb of rough stones. Diva Rock is shaped, depending on who you ask, like a bear or a woman. Halfway up the steep, rotting stairs, the handrail has fallen away completely, and there's only rock on one side and a long fall to the sea on the other. We keep going; we seem to have silently agreed somewhere along the way that this is more than a casual venture. It's the kind of intoxicated recklessness that easily and often leads to tragedy, but we are lucky tonight. From way up here, we can hear again the persistent techno coming from a late-hours club up the beach. Pink and blue spotlights stripe the cloudy night sky, and the entire Crimean Peninsula is thrumming with bass.

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We're in the Zhmaks' kitchen in Kiev, eating fatty sausage and black bread with Olga and Slava over a Jacob's ladder of conversation in English, Russian, Russian, English. I am the switchboard operator at the center—the dizzy weaver.

Knowing I should help out while Olga cleaned up, I instead skulk off to join the men for a smoke on the cramped, dilapidated veranda. From there, the 14th floor, we look over the suburb of Soviet-era apartment blocks. The June sunshine almost cheers the clusters of colorless towers. I stand between the two men—one lover, one sorta uncle; one American, one Ukrainian; with similar mirth in their similar blue shocking eyes. I interpret for a while. Then we shut up and let the warm stink of tobacco and the improbable height of our bodies speak for themselves.

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At first he signed his e-mails Yudjin, back when my dad first met him over the web. His best shot at the English version of Yevgeniy. Then his English improved; he became Eugene. Now he is Zhenya to me, the diminutive form, because we are family. He met me in January at the gate, with his eldest of two daughters, Nadia, who kissed me and gave me flowers. She beamed. She was wearing construction orange ten-hole Docs and a loose, burlled-looking sweater that reminded me of hippies back in Boulder. We hugged. She seemed older, not just since the first time I came, when she was twelve and I was sixteen, but older than me even, as if she'd passed me by. She may as well have. She would be my guide and initiator here, a clever older sister to take the place of the one I left back in Denver.

At the Snezhkin house on Veterinarniy Street, there was Mama Vera waiting for me, and younger daughter Inna, and Babushka Lina, Eugene's ancient mother. I greeted Smoky the cat, and Diesel; I knew them from Nadia's e-mails. My classroom Russian was sluggish on my tongue and thick in my ears. I sat obediently at the table while Vera fussed over my soup.

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My brain is spitting out Russian at me like a skipping CD, replaying my desperate conversation from this morning. *Suitcases...not here. Yes, from U.S.A. Yes, I have visa. A teacher. Here, here it is. Yes, yes ma'am.* Turns out I can say 'da' quite convincingly, practically like a native. 'Nyet' too. *No, didn't get. Yes, two. Sorry? I don't know. Yes, no, no money. Many things. Clothing, gifts. No alcohol. Can you repeat? Yes, here in Simferopol. Yes, family here. Sorry, no, not my family. Sorry, I don't understand. Can you repeat? Sorry, I still didn't get it. Oh, yes of course, address. Yes, no, sorry. In my suitcase.*

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You can get along amazingly well by faking it. It just takes decent pronunciation, a few casual idiomatic expressions, and the ability to read and mimic. Like this:

Woman on bus [scowling]: "Ti govorish, kak inostranyetz. Otkuda ti?"
You sound like a foreigner. Where are you from?

Me [smiling reservedly]: *I come from the U.S.A. The state called Co-lo-ra-do.*

Woman [smiling reservedly]: *Go on! American? I thought you were _____.*

Me [smiling and nodding]: *Really? Thank you.*

Woman [scowling again, shaking head]: *You know, _____ is _____
_____ country.*

Me [pausing, scowling, shaking head]: *Yes, tell me about it. You're absolutely right about that. It's really a problem. [shrugging] But what can be done?*

Woman [shrugging gravely]: *Exactly, young lady, you understand. What can be done?*

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Inna disappears into the back room, then comes in holding a small brown puppy. He has a tiny white bandage on his front leg, and I try not to cry because the puppy is so very small and fuzzy to be already broken. Plus the airline's lost my luggage, plus the world has become a huge wall of sounds and faces, not to mention I already miss Brady and I just don't know how I will survive this. She hands him to me.

"What's his name?" I ask in Russian.

"No name. We just call him 'Mali' for now," Inna answers in English.
Little One.

"No name," Eugene repeats sternly, in Russian. "*We cannot keep him.*"

"Shto vi buditye dyelat...um..." My brain is grinding; the most basic words have abandoned me.

"Okay, you can speak English. Today only!" Eugene laughs. His trademark, this infectious, merry, generous guffaw. He looks like Topol as Tevia, even more so now that he's grayed. I've missed him.

"So what happened to him?" I ask in English. The puppy, he says, was run over by a car; he and Inna found him. The vet came over to fix him up, gave him antibiotics and everything. I nuzzle him and he bites my chin with his teeny, sharp teeth. He has a round, naked belly and smells like puppy breath and pee.

“Just a few weeks,” Zhenya scolds Inna, with exaggerated sternness and an emphatic pointing finger, *“and then to the market.”* His eye sparkles, though I see no reason for it to.

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Why am I being so dramatic? I stretch a goosebumped arm out of the covers and fumble for the little lamp by the bed. A tiny clock on the tiny table says it's two something. The thin cotton nightgown Vera lent me is balled up around my waste. I wish I had my cozy sweat pants and sweater, or my wool socks. But those are in my luggage, which is somewhere between New Jersey and here. I can picture my new navy blue suitcase and almost all the contents I packed into it two days ago. I see it floating lonely on a life raft in the middle of the Atlantic; I see it perched nervously on someone's roof in Lisbon; I see it flattened and weeping beneath the wheel of a 747.

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Central Market, first visit. I'm with Inna and Zhenya, shopping for a coat and boots. My luggage has been declared by LOT Polish Airlines no longer to exist in the accessible physical realm. We spend two long hours weighing the relative value and appeal of a hundred identical-looking choices. I give up on finding things I truly like. I see a few items that are decent-looking, but Eugene's face sours and he says those are too expensive. He darkens entirely into a thunderhead of despair when it comes to spending money, whether it's his or not. I am Eugene's 25-year-old child, confused by unfamiliar atmospheric conditions. I settle on sensible, affordable choices, let him do the haggling for me.

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The lame puppy Mali and senile old Bab Lina are my companions of choice. We are three dumb creatures taken in by these kind people. We are often confused; we often don't understand what's being asked of us; but we like to eat and are obligingly good-natured. We enjoy belonging to this sunny kitchen and its owners. I spend hours holding Mal, watching him run around the little square garden, playing with him in the kitchen, sneaking him bits of food, while Lina sits at the table sneaking spoonfuls out of the sugar pot. I speak infantile Russian to him, baby talk I can handle. Lina asks every day where the puppy came from, and which of her sisters I am. Every day I tell

her I came from America and I brought the puppy for her little son Zhenya to play with.

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Inventory: one sweater, one pair of pantyhose (oppressively thick, for warmth), a down coat, and warm pointy boots like the 40-year-old moms wear. Oh, and what I was wearing when I landed: underwear, bra, socks, thin sweater, corduroy pants, shoes. I wear my pair of pants every day, and alternate between my two sweaters. I wash my underwear every night in the sink.

But it's okay. Wearing the same clothes all the time seems to be normal here. Many of the other teachers have two well-chosen outfits—fashion uniforms. The ascetic in me revels in this forced depravation. I pretend it's allowing me to shirk vanity and materialism, reducing the daily act of dressing to rote.

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Central Market, second visit. Inna and I are on an errand I've been dreading: to sell the now robust puppy-with-no-name, Mali. Inna puts him in a cloth shoulder bag and we snicker on the marshrutka when he squirms and mewls in her lap. Then, deep inside the canopied pet market, among cages full of kittens, birds, and rabbits, she haggles calmly and firmly for ten minutes, then hands him over to a woman. I have no chance for a last nuzzle. The woman thrusts a small sum of hrivnia into Inna's hand and shoves Mali into a crowded wire cage full of puppies. He will become someone's security dog, Inna says, maybe a pet. I'm not convinced. The streets are full of mud-caked dogs skirting the markets and gutters in wary packs, prowling for trash.

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I take the all-day train north to Kiev and meet Brady at the airport. I leap on him like an insect and hold on with all my limbs. We take a taxi to our rented room and set about the task of relearning each other. We spend an hour for every one of the six months we've been apart marveling at the physical existence of one another, at our re-embodiment—the facts of skin and stubble, of sweat and saliva and fingernails. Eventually we sleep, but fitfully, afraid of waking to find us gone again. The next day we walk over to the botanical gardens. I joke with the spider monkey man, convincing him to let me hold it for free. I scold the man teasing girls with his boa constrictor. I

chat with a group of middle-aged women from Petersburg who ask me for directions. They expected me to be from here. I obligingly flashed my new feathers, wielded my foreign speech like an mating call, watching Brady watch me keenly.

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We're in Crimea, in Simeiz, on the shore of the Black Sea. Our tones and expressions are coming back to us. We're recalling the geography of each other's brains. I order breakfast from the proprietress of this cobbled-together guesthouse, where everything is decorated in clashing florals. Only I speak to her, to avoid paying inflated Western rates. I pass as Czech, barely. She eyes Brady's plaid cowboy shirt suspiciously as she brings us our eggs, bread, and fruit. I snap a photo of Brady eating a strawberry and we laugh at the photo. He is somehow distorted into an apelike beast with a gaping mouth that could swallow entire houses behind him in the distance.

That evening Zhenya drives over from Yalta to meet us. We walk along the rocky coastline together on the fringe of Simeiz and drink wine from plastic cups. He rumbles like a dark storm, disappointed that we want to be here alone, not with him and the family. Disappointed that I am just another daughter who wants to leave him.

When he's sober he admits it was never stable, never free. The world was never simple, but whenever he drinks wine he remembers it that way. He talks of the days before The Fall, the days when everyone had enough: when his mother was a beloved state-sponsored artist, when he and his best friend Slava could support their families as teachers, when their four daughters were small and close and ignorant of the world, when Vera and Olga and they were still young and vigorous, when life was a fixed ground with a grand but finite border. In other words, nostalgia; in other words, the same old story.

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I'm out with Inna and her friends. Their favorite spot in Simferopol, which Nadia won't come near, is Doktor Nagval, a stylish club all lit up in green, in a basement across from the school where I teach. Inna and her girlfriends are shiny-lipped and impossibly slender and long; by comparison, I'm bovine in my size eight. But whatever. I'm not here for this neurosis; I'm here to dance, drink vodka, be nowhere.

The music vibrates warmly in my ribcage. The February air outside stops at the door, and it is soporifically warm down here. I talk to a few of Inna's friends, and I'm not sure if they're speaking English to me or Russian. We can't hear each other through the bass. But we're here to dance, drink vodka. We order a bottle from the bar and take shots chased by orange slices. The girls dance and I shake my head no. I'll dance after another shot, another cigarette. I need to chill out, forget myself. Be nowhere.

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I'm out with Nadia and her friends. She talks about Cotton Club all the time, and because of the way Zhenya mopes about it, I know I want to go there. Finally we do, on a cold Friday night in March. It's down a graffitied alley, surrounded by people wearing old metal band t-shirts, heavy eye makeup and big boots. I'm instantly more comfortable than I've been yet since I arrived. Inside we meet Skin, Nadia's friend, who has long hair and is closer to a hippie than a skinhead. He winks at me, kisses me and buys me a drink. We settle into a table to watch the band, a rockabilly trio from Moscow. Nadia, Skin, and another of their friends say the name of the band four times for me and I give up asking. They sound almost exactly like the Stray Cats. The slender lead singer climbs up on the stand-up bass a few times, singing and posing, showing off his rolled jeans and slicked-back hair. They sing in English, have the American folk accent down, almost. I jump up to talk to them afterwards, excited to speak English to strangers. They don't understand a word I say, so I revert to Russian to tell them how great they are. They are mystified by my presence, act almost as if they've been caught. Nadia and Skin and a bunch of us sit around and drink a few more beers, smoke more cigarettes, and I'm laughing along with everyone. I don't understand much still, but I'm a really good pretender, and I like that they like it when I laugh at their jokes. I like that they tell me jokes and expect me to get them. I like that I'm here with them and that they are rockers. I like that I almost feel real, almost like my self.

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Central Market, third visit. I'm free and alone. I have my first pay from the language school and still need many things: pants, a skirt would be nice, tops for the coming warmer weather. I learn again that there's one style available here: stylish. I go through several stalls and leave empty-handed. Nothing looks right, and there's so *much* of it. I hate the part where I ask *How much?*

and know from the hesitation that the answer is carefully—or wildly—augmented. But I don't know by how much, and they know that I don't know, so they've always got the upper hand. The women at the market laugh at my Russian, they cajole me to buy everything in the stall because I'm a rich American. They tell me what to like; I run away and leave them gesturing after me. They are a surly army and I fear them.

I end up with: two pairs of socks and an ornate, lavender-colored matching bra and underwear set. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever spent money on, overpriced even by American standards. But there was this long row of menacing lingerie guarded by gold-toothed middle-aged women with red hair and white roots, and cigarette-thin modelishly apathetic young women, all of them watching me with amusement and disdain. And mounds of lace, netting, embroidered flowers, push-up pads, more lace, and the occasional rhinestone butterfly or bow. I panicked. I bought whatever was in the loud woman's hand before she could press any more bras up to the front of my sweater, or stretch out another pair of panties down by my crotch, showing me how they'd fit, grinning suggestively.

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The global techno-pop campaign is winning on the Ukrainian front. Beats ranging from decent to awful bust out of almost every shopfront, bus, cafe, bar, and car window. All techno-pop, all the time. There's a song that's been huge lately, that one with a sample from the old Mamas and Papas song: *If you're going to San Francisco...be sure to wear some flowers in your hair...* laid over a catchy hook and thumping bass drum. Hearing it here makes me nostalgic for a golden America I wasn't even a part of. From this distance, it all looks the same: the sixties and the aughts; the West Coast and the Rockies. It's all mine. I'm an *Amerikanka* and it's mine.

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Zhenya fills our cups with more wine, points to Diva Rock to the east, just in sight up the beach. From this angle we can't really make out whatever it's supposed to look like. We pretend, for his sake, nodding *Yes, yes, I see it now*. Finally he leaves, back to one of his tourist clients, drives away gray and graying, leaving us alone again to wander farther up the main beach. We try to hold onto Eugene's sadness for him, to care for it, but we are suffused with red wine and renaissance, delighted with the dizzying spread of the world

and our being possible in it. We stand for a while looking out at the Black Sea, which is deep blue, post-dusk. On a whim, we scramble on all fours across the wet stones that lead to the Diva.

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Inna's friends finally get me out on the floor. I can't dance, despite the vodka, despite the music. I'm heavy and distracted. The walls are lined with full-length mirrors, which are lined with girls dressed like expensive whores, dancing by—no, *with* themselves. Awesome, I guess. But no. No, definitely not awesome. They palm the image of their palms, make 'fuck me' eyes at themselves or anyone's eye they can catch in the reflected room, flip their hair over and grind their hips against their own hips. I realize they're practicing, studying the effect of their seduction. Like male birds of paradise, they perform and hope a mate will show up and respond. Dozens more enact the same moves with smug-looking dudes who smirk at each other and barely shuffle around. Maximum payoff for minimum output.

It embarrasses me; I'm embarrassed for them, for their embracing their own objectification, fueling every unhelpful female stereotype I stand against. Back to the table, more vodka and cigarettes, whatever. My Nancy's coming out now, and all I want is to stomp, to be loud and masculine and course and anything anything *anything* but pretty. To stop trying to attract and be gloriously repellent. Anything but rhinestones. Fuck your sexy, your glossy.

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Comfortably loose-fitting pants? No way! They're gonna be tight as hell, and you're going to squeeze your ass into them in twenty-degree weather behind a thin sheet that some distracted clerk on her cell phone is halfway holding up to hide you from the steady stream of people passing by in the narrow aisle outside the cramped booth. There's no mirror, but don't worry; after a moment, she'll drop the curtain, whether you're ready or not, and study the effect for you, immediately determining Yes or No. The answer is usually Yes, even if you're bulging over the top and the zipper's not quite closed.

Beautiful, she mumbles. Stylish. She says it like a threat. If you shake your head, she'll bring you other sizes, other styles, but she will *not* let you off the hook. Now you've taken up so much of her time, you'd better buy *something*, dammit. Shopping is not a job for obliging souls.

I wish I had a Target. I wish I was in Germany, where I could wear mannish clothes and sensible, ugly shoes. Here it seems 90% of the women under thirty look like either elegant hookers, trashy hookers, or fashion models. Stiletto heels, mini-skirts, see-through-tummy-bearing blouses, and full makeup everywhere. Not Nadia, though; she and her friends are proof that the city harbors punks and rebels.

But a bizarre, alien desire now: not to attract attention to myself, not to stand out, at any cost. That will only lead to strangers speaking to me, and once I start speaking, everyone in a twenty-foot radius becomes interested. An American? Here? Why? Then I stutter and stall, nod and smile eagerly, stupidly, to make up for lack of understanding. Without my smart-ass comments, my ability to banter, I'm not quite myself. So then what?

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I've started cheating on Vera's cooking, which is top notch, but I've discovered the secret joy of solitary eating dates. On Pushkin Street there's a food stand that serves shawurma. The divine hot meat tube, I call it. I walk there after teaching a few times a week and dance back and forth on the cold sidewalk as they cut the meat and spread it on the flatbread with slaw; I nod *yes, yes* when they ask *spicy sauce?* and *creamy sauce?* which they then crisscross in red and white lines. The surly Tatar man hands it over, wrapped in paper, for about a buck. I sit on a frigid bench and snarf it before the air steals all its heat.

There's a stand, too, on Prospekt Pobediy –Victory Avenue – that sells chebureka, fried bread stuffed with spiced minced meat. It drips grease when I bite into it, and is a cheaper indulgence than cigarettes. I get one every time I pass by, but only when I'm alone. The Snezhkin girls rarely ever pay for prepared food; there's always Vera at home in the kitchen. I'm an awful, wasteful, gluttonous American. Every time I buy a chebureka, I walk down a side street to eat it, just in case Vera or one of the girls should happen by the market. I'm ashamed of my frivolity, but I savor every damn fatty bite.

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We go out with Lesya, Slava's older daughter. Her English is close to impeccable, so Brady is talking to her, asking her a million questions. He gawks and exclaims. Why is he doing that American loud-talking tourist

thing? Why is he asking so many stupid questions? Does he have to be so animated and eager about everything? Can't he just cool it a bit? He's drawing amused attention to us as we make our way through the crowded sidewalks of Kiev's mid-summer outdoor festival. I rumble behind the two of them like a storm.

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The San Francisco song comes on at Doktor Nagval, and everyone gets up. Finally I can't help but dance. I feel it again—this is MY music. I'm dancing with my eyes closed, cutting loose. More vodka and oranges with Inna, more dancing. The DJ plays the same song again an hour later. My cell phone rings—it's Brady calling from Hanoi.

I run out to the cold air on the street, speak too loudly in English, so proud to be from the country that produced The Mamas and the Papas that I'll gladly shove my English words into the ears of any curious smoker standing by on this Saturday night. I'm talking to MY LOVER, people! I'm IN LOVE! In love AND AMERICAN and I don't care who KNOWS IT! This place is a circus and suddenly I love the mirror-girls because they put on a great act and I get to laugh about them to Brady. Our call gets cut off. I go back in, jump around some more among the well-trained writhing sex kittens and their dancing bears in trousers, thinking *I love this circus and all you people, I fucking LOVE you tonight.*

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One of us makes a dare; we scramble on all fours across the wet stones. Diva Rock is larger in the darkness. She is a massy body with her own hot, dangerous gravity.

The rocks are slick and unpredictable in blackness. The surf crashes violently against them; halfway out we stop to catch our breath, alarmed by the sudden and sobering realness of it all. Then there's suddenly this luminescent planktonic life ghosting the shallows. We stare at the drifting colonies of light for a long time, watching them change shape on the waves, growing brighter or dimmer with depth.

Finally we get to the base of Diva Rock and start to climb. Halfway up the steep, rotting stairs, the handrail has fallen away completely, and there's only

air on one side and a long fall to the sea on the other. We keep going; we seem to have silently agreed somewhere along the way that this is more than a casual venture.

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It's late night in Kiev. We beg off from going to a concert with Lesya and her friends. Instead we buy some bottles of beer and drink them in the courtyard of the opera house, hiding among the lavender-flowered shrubbery and iron benches. It's a warm, perfectly comfortable night. We are in a movie. This is our close-up scene. His eyes are just his eyes but I'm having trouble looking at them look at me. *Do you have any idea what I've been through to get here?*

"I'm sorry I was mad at you, baby—I know it wasn't fair. It's just, the thing is...I've been sort of winning at this game."

" — "

"I mean learning the walk, the expressions, the tone of voice, even the hair, the makeup. Everything. Learning to pass without notice."

"Since when did you care about fitting in?"

Shrug. *I'm still that me. Pink haired and rowdy, don't give a shit don't give a shit what anyone thinks, fuck all that noise anyway.* "I guess since I got here and lost all my shit. I know it sounds shallow, but I lost, like, everything that defined me: my clothes, my jewelry, my music, books, journals. My collected identity was in those suitcases. Well, I mean, not metaphysically speaking, but... it's... It's like there's been no padding. So then I just took it as a challenge. To become invisible. It's like the most elaborate prank ever."

"Well, you're doing great. Sorry I'm ruining it for you."

" — "

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I began to blend. Carefully, carefully, into the crowd. I am a newly-hatched chameleon, a fastidious squid. I mimic their Beautiful and match their Stylish. I will not go so far as rhinestones, but I'll wear the tight-ass, stretch flare trousers and pointy-toed shoes. I hereby swear to wear lipstick and eye shadow every day. Since adolescence, there's been a pretty girl inside me duking it out with a tomboy punk. For now I'll throw the fight and let the princess have her day. She lets Inna give her highlights and manicures, she wears lavender lace underwear. She can camouflage herself, work under cover.

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I've started sneaking away to eat whole meals in restaurants alone. I make good money teaching, by local standards. I don't pay rent and Vera and Zhenya usually refuse when I try to leave money on the table for groceries. I should try harder, I think, as I order myself a beer and a salad in a chic café by the children's park. I love coming here, or to any random restaurant I don't know, with my headphones and my journal and a couple of smokes I buy in singles from the old ladies on the street. I write, I eat, I smoke. Listen, write, eat, smoke. I indulge and I know Eugene would disapprove. Hell, *I* disapprove. But I can't help it; I'm lonely for myself and adolescent all over again. I'm greedy for the comfort of a controlled environment where I know what will be said to me and what to say, where I can spare the brain power for something beyond the next sound to come out of my mouth.

But the guilt gets to me. I even offered to take out the whole family for such a meal, but Zhenya shook his head, disgusted with the idea of me wasting my money. If he knew. I still can't give up the gratuitous shawurma and the chebureka. One time in six months, I even commit a gross act of cultural corruption by going to the one McDonald's in Simferopol. It costs the same as a three-course meal at a local restaurant. I am ashamed and it sucks as I knew it would. I never tell anyone, not even Nadia. I am a horrible person.

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The rocks are slick and unpredictable in the black, and the waves crash violently. We stop to catch our breath, alarmed and suddenly sober. But there, just below us in the water, a luminescent life form is bobbing on the waves. It seems to breathe. We go to all fours, strain closer, swear the cloud of light brightens towards us. We pant and grin, our faces outlined in ghostglow. We grasp arms and nod...

Finally we reach the Diva herself and start climbing. Halfway up, there's only rock and air and a long fall to the sea. We keep going. We keep going. We keep going. We have agreed this is more than a cheap adventure.

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Spring comes to Simferopol like a long, slow orgasm. I gasp every day in delight as I enter it, feel its spreading warmth, watch its lush progress through the city. I never knew a winter like this one—so long, gray, damp, and solitary. As the weather is breaking, I go to a concert in Gagarin Park.

Nadia and Skin and the gang are there, and Inna too – a rare confluence of sisters. Nad concocts a hiking trip and the next week we take the electric train and a bus out of the city to walk in the forest, drink beer from two-liter plastic bottles, eat dried fish, and sing along with whoever’s got the guitar. Skin’s a great singer, and so is Nadia. The forest glimmers with green leaf parts; the air is thick with floating seed puffs and pollen. I wonder how I’ve survived all this time without pine needles and birch bark.

Back in the city, I start walking home from school instead of riding the marshrutka, stopping by the riverside on my way, buying my two smokes each day, smoking them on the bank. The bare ground is greening; the bushes are livening into shocks and sprays of radical lime. Everyone melts; shoulders lower from ears, hair emerges from fur hats, and the people of Simfer become a friendlier breed.

The city has become a map in my head. I’ve memorized its erratic web of streets and the vectors of marshrutkas that cross it. I can navigate and converse. With the warmth of May comes a long, yogic exhalation. Now I’m thinking about spending the whole summer, going to a music festival with Nad. But Brady’s coming soon to visit, to collect me, and then we’ll move on together. There’s nothing to sustain us here together. I’m starting to wonder if I could be happy here prolonged, with Nadia and her friends, with their music, with my students and the friends I’ve made at the school. But staying is never an option, even if you don’t leave.

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Tonight, we are lucky. From the top we can hear the music coming from a club up the beach. Below us in the water, a luminescent life form is ghosting... they breathe with us, brighten towards us. Pink and blue spotlights stripe the sky, and the whole town thrums with bass. “Techno nation,” Brady laughs.

It will stick, will become a private joke, a way of naming a private country and an expansive moment we spent in it. We laugh nervously but wholly. Like we’re sitting on his rooftop in Denver, the very first time we watched the early-morning sparrows. Chilly wind blows on us from the Black Sea. We listen and watch what we can see intently, not talking, talking, not talking. Trying to pay attention, already failing again. The neon lines that cross and pull, the ambitious stupid fingers, the lines that snap and slacken.