

PETROPOLIS

ANYA ULINICH



Penguin Books

Operation Exodus

"VITALY TOLD ME SO MUCH ABOUT YOU," SAID MRS. TARAKAN, leading Sasha inside the house. "You're a brave girl."

"Thank you," murmured Sasha.

Brave? Sasha wondered what Vitaly Sergeevich could have said. What did he even know?

Inside, the air smelled like moist concrete and candle wax. The sky-lit foyer opened into a two-story hall with a buttressed ceiling. Despite her high heels, Mrs. Tarakan managed to walk soundlessly on the stone floor. Sasha tried to follow suit, but each step she made echoed under the roof, making her feel like a *Masterpiece Theatre* character.

Sasha stared at the boar skins that hung upside down above each of the hall's four fireplaces. The boars still had their heads. A cluster of medieval weapons crossed in a petrified brawl on one of the whitewashed walls. The Waterfall House looked like a museum. Did people actually live here?

They walked into a bedroom. Here, the luxury was spare: a platform bed with translucent silk canopy stood in the middle of the room, some embroidered pillows lay scattered on the floor. Through the open door, Sasha noticed a huge bathroom with two sinks and a claw-foot bathtub in a glass enclosure. A couple of stylishly exposed chrome pipes ran along the ceiling, terminating at a vintage showerhead. Mrs. Tarakan slipped a gold chain with a Star of David charm into Sasha's hand.

"I want you to wear this," she instructed. "And now, just relax. We're having a party tonight, and I must get ready."

"Thank you," said Sasha. The chain was real gold, but the star itself was brass, just like the one Marina wore in Phoenix.

Mrs. Tarakan showed Sasha to a sprawling leather couch in an adjacent room and left. The couch and a glass-topped coffee table were the only furniture here. African statues lined the walls. Most were at least as tall as Sasha, but the vast white space above made them appear insignificant, like figurines on a souvenir store's shelf. One had a drum, and another was offering its elongated conical breast to a tiny version of itself. For a second, Sasha Goldberg pretended that she shared their shelf. It would be nice to just stand by the wall, mute and dumb. Sasha wondered what Mrs. Tarakan expected her to do during the party.

She picked up a Norman Rockwell folio from the coffee table and tried to interest herself in the dilemmas of knotty-faced imps, but had trouble concentrating. The Tarakans' house reminded her of something she'd read in childhood. Some endless story by Victor Hugo, replete with sweaty stones and secrets. Sasha shivered and put down the book.

Mrs. Tarakan flew in and out of the room, yelling in Spanish at her two maids. Every time Sasha saw her, she was wearing a different expensive-looking but slightly off-kilter outfit. Finally, she returned for good, dressed in a pearly beige jumpsuit and a ten-inch-wide golden belt with scales. The belt looked dangerously sharp, as if it were about to slip underneath Mrs. Tarakan's rib cage and open her up like a can of tomato paste.

"There will be lot of important people at our house tonight. We are having a benefit for an organization that helps people like you. Do you know what a benefit is?"

Sasha knew. She didn't know what "people like you" meant.

A man in his sixties and two young people came into the room. The man wore a Castro suit with short shorts and innumerable pockets. His hair was dyed jet-black. The young guy and girl had handsome faces with heavy jaws and Mrs. Tarakan's mermaid hair. The girl was telling the man in shorts about her new apartment.

"I'm trying to get Jason to move in with me," she said. "I can keep an eye on him."

"No way!" The young man shook his head, laughing.

"Gordon, I told you about Sasha Goldberg," interrupted Mrs. Tarakan. "Sasha, meet Mr. Tarakan, Alyssa, and Jason."

"It's my pleasure . . .," said Mr. Tarakan, obviously flipping through a giant book in his brain, trying to remember who on earth Sasha could be. Mrs. Tarakan whispered something in his ear, and the flipping stopped. Mr. Tarakan nodded meaningfully. Gazing into Sasha's eyes with a wide benevolent smile, he seemed to be about to speak, but didn't. Instead, he took Sasha's right hand in both of his and held it long enough for Sasha to thoroughly contemplate the nature of the blue space between his teeth and his gums.

Alyssa looked Sasha over with large disinterested eyes. The last rays of sunset illuminated the room, and Sasha felt her vision sharpen in a dizzying, unpleasant way. She couldn't stop staring at Alyssa's orange cleavage. It seemed to have a life of its own, threatening to swallow the gold razor-blade charm on the girl's necklace. Alyssa scratched her chin with her curving pink fingernails, and Sasha noticed tiny metallic spiders glued to each nail's base. She felt an irresistible urge to run and hide.

"Excuse me, where's the bathroom?" she asked, hating herself for the break in her voice, for sounding like a foreigner, for being a foreigner, for being there at all.

"Down the hall, the first door to the left," said Alyssa, and Sasha hurried away, ignoring the echo as best she could. She spent a long time in the bathroom, playing with iridescent soap shells, touching her own face in the mirror for comfort.

By the time she came back out, most of the guests had arrived. Sasha noticed that many women were dressed like Mrs. Tarakan, in fabrics that changed the texture of their bodies in some mad attempt to transcend their species. There was a Moth lady, a Fish lady and a Firefly lady. Old men, homogeneous like black bugs, accompanied these shimmering creatures around the room. Sasha noticed OPERATION EXODUS buttons on their lapels. A tall, stiff-haired woman walked into the room, awkwardly holding hands with two

brown children in polo shirts. The room fell quiet. Mrs. Tarakan flew up to the woman and pecked her on the cheek.

"That's Congressman Leake's wife," Mr. Tarakan explained to someone behind Sasha's back. "They just came back from Bangladesh with their adopted children. They also have a baby girl at home."

"Those kids are sure lucky," replied a nasal voice.

"*Tozhe mne*, lucky!" someone declared aloud in the high-pitched, disgruntled Russian of a market haggler. "What's so lucky? Their parents are dead, and he calls 'em lucky!"

Or alive somewhere, thought Sasha, looking around for the source of the voice.

"*Zatknis'*, Mama!" another woman hissed.

They stood by the wall near one of the fireplaces. The mom was a squarish, bowlegged shape that Russian women get from years of carrying and eating potatoes. Heavy gold earrings with sapphire, probably a retirement present from a now-defunct Soviet organization, stretched her wrinkly earlobes. The daughter had beautiful fat lips and almond-shaped eyes, like the People in Ivanov's *The Appearance of Christ to the People*.

Making her way toward them in the crowd, Sasha noticed that the mother absentmindedly reached over and stroked the stuffed boar's rubbery snout. Encouraged by the homey gesture, she approached the women and began a standard immigrant "Where are you from?" conversation, but soon stumbled, realizing that she couldn't tell them anything coherent about herself. A dark-skinned mail-order bride from Siberia. Where did she live now? She wasn't sure yet. As soon as the introductions were finished, Sasha could read the verdict in the old woman's posture, in her distracted eyes. Alla Aronovna was thinking, *trash*.

Alla Aronovna and Yulia were from Kiev. Sasha found out that they had refugee status, a Section 8 apartment, and a monthly Social Security check. Alla Aronovna was proud of the fact that Yulia would be starting at Northwestern in the fall. Sasha could tell that, from the wisdom of her years, Alla Aronovna calculated more or less exactly where Sasha came from, and regarded her the same way she regarded the Bangladeshi children, as a pitiful victim of a world that was not her own. It was apparent from the look of well-

hidden squeamishness on Alla Aronovna's peaceful face that if Sasha and Yulia had been kids, they wouldn't have been allowed to play together.

The party moved outside. The maids set up three rows of white plastic chairs on the lawn, and people began to take their seats for the official part of the evening.

"Come, sit by me!" Mrs. Tarakan beckoned Sasha to a chair next to her own.

Mr. Tarakan tested a microphone on a card table draped with a large Israeli flag and waited for silence. Mrs. Tarakan crossed her legs and leaned forward, the elegant golden S of her body culminating in a Kermit head, her eyes barely visible under the bluish, stretched-to-the-limit lids. In profile, Mrs. Tarakan resembled Igor the Skeleton. Her nose didn't seem to have any cartilage. Sasha wondered if she destroyed her face herself. She couldn't imagine a plastic surgeon who'd carve up a person like that. She pictured Mrs. Tarakan in her claw-foot tub, armed with one of Lika's X-Acto knives and a compact mirror.

After the last of the guests were seated, Mr. Tarakan began to speak. Sasha studied blades of grass at her feet. In the light of a flood lamp, they looked uniformly healthy, supersaturated green, like Astroturf.

Sasha heard Mr. Tarakan say "thousands upon thousands of Soviet Jews," "freedom," and "hope." Trained by years of Asbestos 2 schooling, her mind automatically tuned out the speech. At one point, Mrs. Tarakan yanked Sasha by the arm and made her stand up. Sasha noticed that Alla Aronovna and Yulia were also standing and realized that all three of them were serving as examples of Soviet Jews. She got to gloat, briefly, watching Alla Aronovna hide humiliation under her little smile. Yulia remained solemn and beautiful, her expression unchanged.

Following some imperceptible cue, the guests began to applaud, and it was Yulia's turn to speak.

"My mother and I have been fortunate to slip through a crack in the Iron Curtain, to escape anti-Semitism and oppression, but thousands of Jews are still trapped in the former Soviet Union, unable to worship openly. Because of your efforts, many of them will receive the gift of freedom. In the name of all the Jews from the former Soviet republics, I would like to thank everyone present here. You will be in my prayers tonight."

Cheeks flushed, Yulia smoothed her skirt and sat down, prompting another wave of applause. A woman to the right of Sasha dabbed her eyes with a tissue. Sasha couldn't help but be impressed with Yulia's oratory. She wondered if Yulia really prayed, and to what. Suddenly nostalgic for Phoenix, she could almost feel the heat rising from the Taco Bell parking lot where Marina had pompously delivered the news.

"Jews have their own religion, Sasha."

"What, they go to church?" Sasha had asked. She'd never seen a religious Jew.

"No, a synagogue, and the priest is called a rabbi," explained Marina. "My grandma remembers her grandma going to one. Now we go, too, with our benefactors. We sit there, and then they give us food and stuff."

"You pray to Jesus?"

"No, to God."

"To a different god? What's his name?"

"How would I know?" Marina shrugged. "It's all in Hebrew. In their English prayer books, they sometimes replace the o with the dash. So I call him Gd. Sounds sort of Vietnamese."

Sasha didn't blame herself for being confused. If you didn't count Alufiev's icons and the plaster heads in the basement of AFTER EATIN, gods kept a low profile in Asbestos 2. Perhaps they were intimidated by the giant RELIGION IS THE OPIATE OF THE MASSES! banner that spanned the entire length of the coatroom in Sasha's school. It had been there from the time when Sasha didn't know what an opiate was; it hung there the day she found out. It was probably still there, too large to remove, fading to anemic peach.

On TV, Sasha Goldberg had watched the rest of Russia rediscover Christianity: mattress factories and museums were converted back into churches; a silhouette of the Virgin Mary appeared on a slab of beef in a Moscow supermarket; a group of American missionaries cured a blind child at the Prosruda soccer stadium. But Asbestos 2 was too new to have had a church and too small to draw missionaries. Only the fake diamond crosses in the town's teenagers' ears reflected the national obsession with faith.

When the old projector in AFTER EATIN wasn't swallowing slides, it was possible to glimpse gods' dim and scratched visages on the wall. Sometimes

the slides were of Jesus, sometimes of an old man with a gray beard. White doves flew through stiff golden rays; the art history teacher talked about intuitive perspective. Religious paintings were discussed in the same terms as still lifes and landscapes. Color, light, composition.

Sasha looked around, wondering when she'd be allowed to sit down. She tried to achieve Yulia's expression, to look pleasant on display, but suddenly felt terribly alone. Looking at the fat couple in the second row, Sasha pictured them going home at the end of the evening. The wife would throw her shoes across the room and plop down on the sofa. The husband would lock himself in the bathroom and sit there with a magazine until his legs went numb and the toilet seat made a crimson ring on his thighs, and then they would both go to bed and put their heads on pillows that smelled like their hair. Even the congressman's Bangladeshi children were probably already used to their maritime teddy-bear wallpaper.

Sasha realized that she'd become complacent at the Vasilievs', because they had seemed similar to her, only a notch above on the food chain. On Devon, Sasha could fantasize about walking into a store and seeing a tall black man arguing with a cashier in Russian. *Do I know you?* she'd ask. And although the phone book Goldbergs offered little hope, at least it was something to hang on to. Vitaly Sergeevich had mentioned that Mr. Tarakan was a lawyer and that he might be able to help Sasha sort out her immigration status. Standing on exhibit in front of the glittering audience, Sasha Goldberg suspected that Mr. Tarakan had better things to do. After all, he was trying to help *all* the Soviet Jews at once.

Mrs. Tarakan motioned for Sasha to sit down. One by one, the guests approached the table and handed checks to Mr. Tarakan. He pushed his glasses down to the tip of his nose and, holding the checks in an outstretched arm, slowly read the amounts.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Shmel, one hundred dollars!" Applause. Mrs. Shmel, dressed in transparent layers that rustled with every move, gave a little wave from her seat.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sarancha, five hundred dollars!" The applause got louder.

"Mr. and Mrs. Svetlyak, seven hundred dollars!"

"Mr. Pauk, one thousand dollars!"

"Mr. and Mrs. James Blocha, three thousand dollars!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Komar, twenty thousand dollars!"

Even though it wasn't really cold, Sasha felt so tired she shuddered every few seconds. She hugged her knees and tried to warm up. The air smelled of freshly mowed grass, food, and perfume. Sasha squinted and watched Mrs. Komar's diamond earrings turn into perfectly symmetrical four-pointed starbursts.

She imagined the Komars' donation benefiting the Soviet Jews. Thanks to the organization's efforts, the Soviet Jews would get to travel, dazed and sweaty, in airplanes, with their fur coats underneath them in suitcases. On arrival, the young ones would exchange their gold teeth for more becoming white teeth and lose weight, while the old ones would keep their gold teeth and attend English classes to never learn English, and the children would go to school to forget Russian.

Sasha wondered what she'd do if she personally had twenty thousand dollars, if such an amount would constitute a *future* to Mrs. Goldberg's liking. *You're an adult now, Sasha. Nadia deserves to be with her real mother.*

Suddenly an alternate future popped into Sasha's head and refused to leave. *She is a college student, like Yulia and Lika. She owns a futon and a CD tower, her own personal Jim Morrison on the ceiling. In Asbestos 2, Nadia grows into a schoolgirl.*

Jim Morrison's black-and-white head loomed in Sasha's field of vision, obscuring everything else. From somewhere behind the head, Sasha heard Mrs. Tarakan's concerned voice.

"She's falling asleep. Honey, could you show her to her room?"

Jim Morrison disappeared. Sasha got up groggily and followed Alyssa into the house.

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