A CONSTELLATION OF VITAL PHENOMENA

ANTHONY MARRA

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About the Book

In a snow-covered village in Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa watches from the woods as her father is abducted in the middle of the night by Russian soldiers. Their life-long friend and neighbour, Akhmed, has also been watching, and when he finds Havaa he knows of only one person who might be able to help.

For tough-minded doctor Sonja Rabina, it’s just another day of trying to keep her bombed-out, abandoned hospital going. When Akhmed arrives with Havaa, asking Sonja for shelter, she has no idea who the pair are and even less desire to take on yet more responsibilities and risk.

But over the course of five extraordinary days, Sonja’s world will shift on its axis, revealing the intricate pattern of connections that binds these three unlikely companions together and unexpectedly decides their fate.

About the Author

Anthony Marra was born in Washington, D.C. During his university years he spent a summer working as a night porter and doorman at a five-star hotel in Edinburgh, and from there moved eastward, studying first in Prague and then in St. Petersburg. He was one of the first foreign tourists to visit the post-war republic of Chechnya, and was interviewed on three Chechen television programmes as a result. He has an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. In October 2012, he received the Whiting Writers' Award, presented annually to emerging writers of exceptional talent, whose previous recipients include Jonathan Franzen, Tony Kushner, David Foster Wallace, Jeffrey Eugenides and Michael Cunningham.

To my parents and sister

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena

Anthony Marra

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It was of this death that I was reminded by the crushed thistle in the midst of the ploughed field.

– Leo Tolstoy, Hadji Murád

The First and Second Days

Chapter 1

ON THE MORNING after the Feds burned down her house and took her father, Havaa woke from dreams of sea anemones. While the girl dressed, Akhmed, who hadn't slept at all, paced outside the bedroom door, watching the sky brighten on the other side of the window glass; the rising sun had never before made him feel late. When she emerged from the bedroom, looking older than her eight years, he took her suitcase and she followed him out the front door. He had led the girl to the middle of the street before he raised his eyes to what had been her house. 'Havaa, we should go,' he said, but neither moved.

The snow softened around their boots as they stared across the street to the wide patch of flattened ash. A few orange embers hissed in pools of grey snow, but all else was char. Not seven years earlier, Akhmed had helped Dokka build an extension so the girl would have a room of her own. He had drawn the blueprints and chopped the hardwood and cut it into boards and turned them into a room; and when Dokka had promised to help him build an extension to his own house, should he ever have a child, Akhmed had thanked his friend and walked home, the knot in his throat unravelling into a sob when the door closed behind him. Carrying that lumber the forty metres from the forest had left his knuckles blistered, his underarms sopping, but now a few hours of flames had lifted what had taken him months to design, weeks to carry, days to build, all but the nails and rivets, all but the hinges and bolts, all into the sky. And too

were carried the small treasures that had made Dokka's house his own. There was the hand-carved chess set on a round side table; when moved, the squat white king wobbled from side to side, like a man just sober enough to stand, and Dokka had named his majesty Boris Yeltsin. There was the porcelain vase adorned with Persian arabesques, and beside that a cassette deck–radio with an antenna long enough to scrape the ceiling when propped up on a telephone book, yet too short to reach anything but static. There was the eighty-five-year-old Qur'an, the purple cover writhing with calligraphy, that Dokka's grandfather had purchased in Mecca. There were these things and the flames ate these things, and since fire doesn't distinguish between the word of God and the word of the Soviet Communications Registry Bureau, both Qur'an and telephone directory returned to His mouth in the same inhalation of smoke.

The girl's fingers braceleted his wrist. He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and sprint northward until the forest swallowed the village, but standing before the blackened timbers, he couldn't summon the strength to bring a consoling word to his lips, to hold the girl's hand in his own, to move his feet in the direction he wanted them to go.

'That's my house.' Her voice broke their silence and he heard it as he would the only sound in an empty corridor.

'Don't think of it like that,' he said.

'Like what?'

'Like it's still yours.'

He wound her bright orange scarf around her neck and frowned at the sooty fingerprint on her cheek. He had been awake in bed the previous night when the Feds came. First the murmur of a diesel engine, a low rumble he'd come to fear more than gunfire, then Russian voices. He had gone to the living room and pulled back the blackout curtain as far as he dared. Through the triangle of glass, headlights parted the night. Four soldiers, stocky, well fed, emerged from the

truck. One drank from a vodka bottle and cursed the snow each time he stumbled. This soldier's grandfather had told him, the morning the soldier reported to the Vladivostok conscription centre, that he would have perished in Stalingrad if not for the numbing grace of vodka; the soldier, whose cheeks were divoted from years of applying toothpaste to his adolescent acne, believed Chechnya to be a worse war than Stalingrad, and rationed his vodka accordingly. From his living room Akhmed wanted to shout, beat a drum, set off a flare. But across the street, they had already reached Dokka's door and he didn't even look to the phone that was without a pulse for ten years now. They knocked on the door once, twice, then kicked it down. Through the doorway, Akhmed watched torchlight move across the walls. So passed the longest two minutes of Akhmed's life until the soldiers reappeared in the doorway with Dokka. The gaffer-tape strip across his mouth wrinkled with his muted screams. They pulled a black hood over his head. Where was Havaa? Sweat formed on Akhmed's forehead. His hands felt impossibly heavy. When the soldiers grabbed Dokka by the shoulders and belt, tumbling him into the back of the truck and slamming the door, the relief falling over Akhmed was quickly peeled back by self-loathing, because he was alive, safe in his living room, while in the truck over the road, not twenty metres away, Dokka was a dead man. The designation '02' was stencilled above the truck bumper in white paint, meaning it belonged to the Interior Ministry, meaning there would be no record of the arrest, meaning Dokka had never officially been taken, meaning he would never come back. 'Where's the girl?' the soldiers asked one another. 'She's not here.' 'What if she's hiding beneath the floorboards?' 'She's not.' 'Take care of it just in case.' The drunken soldier uncapped a petrol jug and stumbled into Dokka's house; when he returned to the threshold, he tossed a match behind him and closed the door. Flames clawed their way up the front curtains. The

glass panes puddled on the sill. Where was Havaa? When the truck finally left, the fire had spread to the walls and roof. Akhmed waited until the tail lights had shrunk to the size of cherries before crossing the street. Running a wide circle around the flames, he entered the forest behind the house. His boots broke the frigid undergrowth and he could have counted the rings of tree stumps by the firelight. Behind the house, hiding among the trees, the girl's face flickered. Streaks of pale skin began under her eyes, striping the ash on her cheeks. 'Havaa,' he called out. She sat on a suitcase and didn't respond to her name. He held her like a bundle of loose sticks in his arms, carried her to his house and with a damp towel wiped the ash from her forehead. He tucked her in bed beside his invalid wife and didn't know what to do next. He could have gone back outside and thrown snowballs at the burning house, or lain in bed so the girl would feel the warmth of two grown bodies, or performed his ablutions and prostrated himself, but he had completed the *isha'a* hours earlier and if five daily prayers hadn't spared Dokka's house, a sixth wouldn't put out the flames. Instead he went to the living-room window, drew open the blackout curtains, and watched the house he had helped build disappear into light. And now, in the morning, as he tightened the orange scarf around her neck, he found a fingerprint on the girl's cheek, and, because it could have been Dokka's, he left it.

'Where are we going?' she asked. She stood in the frozen furrow of the previous night's tyre tracks. The snow stretched on either side. Akhmed hadn't prepared for this. He couldn't imagine why the Feds would want Dokka, much less the girl. She stood no taller than his stomach and weighed no more than a basket of firewood, but to Akhmed she seemed an immense and overwhelming creature whom he was destined to fail.

'We're going to the city hospital,' he said, with what he hoped was an assertive tone.

‘Why?’

‘Because the hospital is safe. It’s where people go when they need help. And I know someone there, another doctor,’ he said, though all he knew of her was her name. ‘She’ll help.’

‘How?’

‘I’m going to ask if you can stay with her.’ What was he saying? Like most of his plans, this one seemed so robust in his mind but fell like a flightless bird when released to the air. The girl frowned.

‘He’s not coming back, is he?’ she asked. She focused on the blue leather suitcase that sat on the street between them. Eight months earlier, her father had asked her to prepare the suitcase and leave it in the cupboard, where it had remained until the previous night, when he thrust it into her hands and pushed her out the back door as the Feds broke through the front.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But you don’t know?’ It wasn’t an accusation, but he took it as one. Was he so incompetent a physician that she hesitated to trust him with her father’s life even in speculation? ‘We should be safe,’ he said. ‘It’s safer to think he won’t come back.’

‘But what if he does?’

The longing knotted into such a simple question was more than he could contemplate. What if she cried? It suddenly seemed like a terrifying possibility. How would he stop her? He had to keep her calm, keep himself calm; panic, he knew, could spread between two people more quickly than any virus. He fiddled with her scarf. Somehow it had survived the fire as orange as the day it was pulled from the dye. ‘How about this: if he comes back, I’ll tell him where you are. Is that a good idea?’

‘My father is a good idea.’

‘Yes, he is,’ Akhmed said, relieved they had this to agree on.

They plodded along the Eldár Forest Service Road, the village's main thoroughfare, and their footprints began where the tyre tracks ended. On either side he saw houses by surname rather than address. A face appeared and vanished in an unboarded window.

'Pull your headscarf tighter,' he instructed. But for his years at medical school, he had spent his whole life in Eldár and no longer trusted the traditional clan system of *teips* that had survived a century of Tsarist rule, then a century of Soviet rule, only to dissolve in a war of national independence. Reincarnated in 1999, after a truce too lawless to be called peace, the war had frayed the village *teip* into lesser units of loyalty until all but the fidelity of a parent for a child wore thin enough to break. Logging, the village's sole stable industry, had ceased soon after the first bombs fell, and without viable prospects those who couldn't emigrate ran guns for the rebels or informed for the Feds to survive.

He wrapped his arm around Havaa's shoulder as they walked. The girl had always been strong and stoic, but this resignation, this passivity, was something else. She clomped along, kicking snow with each footstep, and in an attempt to cheer her Akhmed whispered a joke about a blind imam and a deaf prostitute, a joke that really wasn't appropriate for an eight-year-old, but was the only one Akhmed could remember. She didn't smile, but was listening. She zipped her puffy jacket over a sweatshirt that in Manchester, England, had warmed the shoulders of five brothers before the sixth, a staunchly philanthropic six-year-old, had given it to his school's Red Cross donation so his mother would have to buy him a new one.

At the end of the village, where the forest narrowed on the road, they passed a metre-tall portrait nailed to a tree trunk. Two years earlier, after forty-one of the villagers had disappeared in a single day, Akhmed had drawn their forty-one portraits on forty-one plywood boards, weatherproofed

them, and hung them throughout the village. This one was of a beautiful, self-admiring woman whose second daughter he had delivered. Despite his hounding her for years, she never had paid him for the delivery. After she was abducted, he had decided to draw on her portrait a single hair curling from her left nostril. He had grinned at the vain woman's ghost and then made peace with it. She looked like a beheaded giantess staring from the trunk. Soon she was no more than two eyes, a nose and a mouth fading between the trees.

The forest rose around them, tall skeletal birches, grey coils of bark unravelling from the trunks. They walked on the side of the road, where frozen undergrowth expanded across the gravel. Here, beyond the trails of tank treads, the chances of stepping on a landmine diminished. Still he watched for rises in the frost. He walked a few metres ahead of the girl, just in case. He remembered another joke, this one about a lovesick commissar, but decided not to tell it. When she began straggling, he led her five minutes into the woods to a felled log unseen from the road. As they sat down, she asked for her blue suitcase. He gave it to her and she opened it, taking a silent inventory of its contents.

'What's in there?' he asked.

'My souvenirs,' she said, but he didn't know what she meant. He unwrapped a hunk of dry black bread from a white handkerchief, split it in two uneven pieces, and gave her the larger one. She ate quickly. Hunger was a sensation so long situated in his abdomen he felt it as he would an inflamed organ. He took his time, tonguing the pulp into a little oval and resting it against his cheek like a lozenge. If the bread wouldn't fill his stomach, it might at least fill his mouth. The girl had finished half of hers before he took a second bite.

'You shouldn't rush,' he said. 'There are no taste buds in your stomach.'

She paused to consider his reasoning, then took another bite. ‘There’s no hunger in your tongue,’ she mumbled between chews. Her cupped hand caught the crumbs and tossed them back in her mouth.

‘I used to hate black bread,’ he said. When he was a child he would only eat black bread if it was slathered in a spoonful of honey. Over the course of a year, his mother weaned him from it by slicing larger pieces, until his breakfast consisted of a small, sad oasis of honey on a desert of black bread.

‘Can I have yours, then?’

‘I said used to,’ he said, and imagined a brimming jar of honey, standing on a worktop without a breadboard in sight.

She dropped to her knees and examined the underside of the log. ‘Will Ula be all right alone?’ she asked.

His wife wasn’t all right alone, with him, with anyone. He believed she had, in technical terms, lupus coupled with early-onset dementia, but in practice her nerves were so criss-crossed that her elbows ached when she spoke and her left foot had more sense than her brain. Before leaving that morning he had told Ula he would be gone for the day. As she gazed at him through her blank daze, he felt himself as one of her many visions, and he held her hand, and described from memory the placid pasture of a Zakharov oil painting, the herb garden and the cottage, until she fell back asleep. When she woke again that morning would she still see him sitting on the bed beside her? Perhaps part of him was still there, sitting on the bed; perhaps he was something she had dreamed up.

‘She’s an adult,’ he said at last and without much thought. ‘You don’t need to worry about adults.’

Behind the log, Havaa didn’t reply.

He had always tried to treat Havaa as a child and she always went along with it, as though childhood and innocence were fantastical creatures that had died long ago, resurrected only in games of make-believe. The only times

she had been in a schoolhouse were when they went to steal child-sized desks for firewood, but sometimes he imagined they shared what was essentially the same wisdom separated by years and experience. It wasn't true, of course, but he had to believe that she had lived beyond her years, that she could confront what no eight-year-old is capable of confronting. She climbed from the log without looking at him.

'What's that?' he asked. She carefully lifted a yellow shape from her palm.

'A frozen insect,' she said, and put it in her coat pocket.

'In case you get hungry later?' he asked.

She smiled for the first time that day.

They trod along the edge of the road and the girl's quickened pace compensated for their stop. With deep breaths he tried to unweave threads of diesel fumes or burning rubber from the air. The daylight provided a degree of safety. They wouldn't be mistaken for wild dogs.

They heard the soldiers before the checkpoint came in sight. Akhmed raised his hand. Wind filled the spaces between his fingers. Once used to transport timber, the Eldár Forest Service Road connected the village to the city of Volchansk. The gaps between the tree trunks provided the only exit points between village and city, and in recent months the Feds had reduced their presence to a single checkpoint. It lay another half-kilometre away, at the end of a sharp curve.

'We're going back into the woods.'

'To eat again?'

'Just to walk. We need to be quiet.'

The girl nodded and raised her index finger to her lips. The entire forest had frozen and fallen to the ground. Crooked branches reached through the snow and scratched their shins from every angle as they walked a wide arc around the checkpoint. Visible through the trees, the checkpoint was no more than a wilted army tarpaulin nailed

to a poplar trunk in a failed attempt to lend an air of legitimacy. A handful of soldiers stood by it. Crossing the floor of frigid leaves in silence was impossible, but the soldiers, eight men who between them could share more venereal diseases than Chechen words, seemed no more alert than brain-sick bucks, and they returned to the road a quarter-kilometre past the checkpoint. The sun shone yolk-yellow between white clouds. Nearly noon. The trees they passed repeated on and on into the woods. None was remarkable when compared to the next, but each was individual in some small regard: the number of limbs, the girth of trunk, the circumference of shed leaves encircling the base. No more than minor particularities, but minor particularities were what transformed two eyes, a nose and a mouth into a face.

The trees opened to a wide field, bisected by the road.

‘Let’s walk faster,’ he said, and the girl’s footsteps hastened behind him. They were nearly halfway across when they came upon the severed hindquarters of a wolf. Further into the field, blood dyed the snow a reddish brown. Nothing had decomposed in the cold. The head and front legs lay exposed on the ground, connected to the wolf’s back end by three metres of pulped innards. What was left of the face was frozen in the expression it had died with. The tongue ribboned from its maw.

‘It was a careless animal,’ Akhmed said. He tried to look away, but there was wolf everywhere. ‘It didn’t watch for landmines.’

‘We’re more careful.’

‘Yes, we’ll stay on the road. We won’t walk in the fields.’

She stood close to him. Her shoulder pressed against his side. This was the furthest she’d ever been from home.

‘It wasn’t always like this,’ he said. ‘Before you were born there were wolves and birds and insects and goats and bears and sheep and deer.’

The heavy snow stretched a hundred metres to the forest. A few dead stalks rose through the brown frost, where the wolf would lie until spring. With heavy breaths they shaped the air. No prophet had augured this end. Neither the sounding of trumpets nor the beating of seraphic wings had heralded this particular field, with this particular girl, holding his particular hand.

‘They were here,’ he said, staring into the field.

‘Where did the Feds take them?’

‘We should keep walking.’

White moths circled a dead light bulb.

A firm hand on her shoulder lifted her from the dream. Sonja lay on a trauma ward hospital bed, still dressed in her scrubs. Before she looked to the hand that had woken her, before she rose from the imprint her body had made in the weak mattress foam, she reached for her pocket, from instinct rather than want, and shook the amber pill bottle as though its contents had followed her into her dreams and also required waking. The amphetamines rattled in reply. She sat up, conscious, blinking away the moth wings.

‘There’s someone here to see you,’ Nurse Deshi announced from behind her, and began stripping the sheets before Sonja stood.

‘See me about what?’ she asked. She bent to touch her feet, relieved to find them still there.

‘Now she thinks I’m a secretary,’ the old nurse said, shaking her head. ‘Soon she’ll start pinching my rump like that oncologist who chased out four secretaries in a year. A shameful profession. I’ve never met an oncologist who wasn’t a hedonist.’

‘Deshi, who’s here to see me?’

The old nurse looked up, startled. ‘A man from Eldár.’

‘About Natasha?’

Deshi tensed her lips. She could have said *no* or *not this time* or *it’s time to give up*, but instead shook her head.

The man leaned against the corridor wall. A one-size-too-small navy *pes* with beaded tassels roosted on the back of his head. His jacket hung from his shoulders as if still on the hanger. A girl stood beside him, inspecting the contents of a blue suitcase.

‘Sofia Andreyevna Rabina?’ he asked.

She hesitated. She hadn’t heard or spoken her full name aloud in eight years and only answered to her diminutive. ‘Call me Sonja,’ she said.

‘My name is Akhmed.’ A short black beard shrouded his cheeks. Shaving cream was an unaffordable luxury for many; she couldn’t tell if the man was a Wahhabi insurgent or just poor.

‘Are you a bearded one?’ she asked.

He reached for his whiskers in embarrassment. ‘No, no. Absolutely not. I just haven’t shaved recently.’

‘What do you want?’

He nodded to the girl. She wore an orange scarf, an oversized pink coat, and a sweatshirt advertising Manchester United, likely, Sonja imagined, from the glut of Manchester apparel that had flooded charity donations after Beckham was traded to Madrid. She had the pale, waxen skin of an unripe pear. When Sonja approached, the girl had raised the lid of the suitcase, slipped her hand inside and held an object hidden from Sonja’s view.

‘She needs a place to stay,’ Akhmed said.

‘And I need a plane ticket to the Black Sea.’

‘She has nowhere to go.’

‘And I haven’t had a tan in years.’

‘Please,’ he said.

‘This is a hospital, not an orphanage.’

‘There are no orphanages.’

Out of habit she turned to the window, but she saw nothing through the gaffer-taped panes. The only light came from the fluorescent bulbs overhead, whose blue tint made

them all appear hypothermic. Was that a moth circling the fixture? No, she was just seeing things again.

‘Her father was taken by the security forces last night. To the Landfill, most likely.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘He was a good man. He was an arborist in Eldár Forest before the wars. He didn’t have fingers. He was very good at chess.’

‘He *is* very good at chess,’ the girl snapped, and glared at Akhmed. Grammar was the only place the girl could keep her father alive, and after amending Akhmed’s statement, she leaned back against the wall and with small, certain breaths, said ‘*is is is*.’ Her father was the face of her morning and night, he was everything, so saturating Havaa’s world that she could no more describe him than she could the air.

Akhmed summoned the arborist with small declarative memories, and Sonja let him go on longer than she otherwise would because she, too, had tried to resurrect by recitation, had tried to recreate the thing by drawing its shape in cinders, and hoped that by compiling lists of Natasha’s favourite foods and songs and annoying habits, her sister might spontaneously materialise under the pressure of the particularities.

‘I’m sorry,’ she repeated.

‘The Feds weren’t looking for Dokka alone,’ he said quietly, glancing to the girl.

‘What would they want with her?’ she asked.

‘What do they want with anyone?’ His urgent self-importance was familiar; she’d seen it on the faces of so many husbands, and brothers, and fathers, and sons, and was glad she could see it here, on the face of a stranger, and not feel moved. ‘Please let her stay,’ he said.

‘She can’t.’ It was the right decision, the responsible one. Caring for the dying overwhelmed her. She couldn’t be expected to care for the living as well.

The man looked to his feet with a disappointed frown that inexplicably resurrected the memory of *b) electrophilic aromatic substitution*, the answer to the only question on her university organic chemistry exam she'd got wrong. 'How many doctors are here?' he asked, apparently deciding to try a different tack.

'One.'

'To run an entire hospital?'

She shrugged. What did he expect? Those with advanced degrees, personal savings and the foresight to flee had done so. 'Deshi runs it. I just work here.'

'I was a GP. Not a surgeon or specialist, but I was licensed.' He raised his hand to his beard. A crumb fell out. 'The girl will stay with you and I will work here until a home is found for her.'

'No one will take her.'

'Then I will keep working here. I graduated from medical school in the top tenth of my class.'

Already this man's habit of converting entreaty to command annoyed her. She had returned from England with her full name eight years earlier and still received the respect that had so surprised her when she first arrived in London to study medicine. It didn't matter that she was both a woman and an ethnic Russian; as the only surgeon in Volchansk, she was revered, honoured and cherished in war as she never would be in peace. And this peasant doctor, this man so thin she could have pushed against his stomach and felt his spine, he expected her acquiescence? Even more than his tone of voice she resented the accuracy of his appraisal. As the last of a staff of five hundred, she was engulfed by the burden of care. She lived on amphetamines and sweetened condensed milk, had regular hallucinations, had difficulty empathising with her patients, and had seen enough cases of secondary traumatic stress disorder to recognise herself among them. At the end of the hall, through the partially opened waiting-room door, she saw the

hemline of a black dress, the grey of once-white tennis shoes, and a green hijab that, rather than covering the long black hair, held the broken arm of a young woman who was made of bird bones and calcium deficiency, who believed this to be her twenty-second broken bone, when in fact it was merely her twenty-first.

‘The top ten per cent?’ Sonja asked with no small amount of scepticism.

Akhmed nodded eagerly. ‘Ninety-sixth percentile to be precise.’

‘Then tell me, what would you do with an unresponsive patient?’

‘Well, hmm, let’s see,’ Akhmed stammered. ‘First I would have him fill out a questionnaire to get a sense of his medical history along with any conditions or diseases that might run in his family.’

‘You would give an unconscious, unresponsive patient a questionnaire?’

‘Oh, no. Don’t be silly,’ he said, hesitating. ‘I would give the questionnaire to the patient’s wife instead.’

Sonja closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them, this idiot doctor and his ward would have vanished. No luck. ‘Do you want to know what I would do?’ she asked. ‘I would check the airway, then check for breathing, then check for a pulse, then stabilise the cervical spine. Nine times out of ten, I’d be concentrating on haemostasis. I’d be cutting off the patient’s clothes to inspect the entire body for wounds.’

‘Well, yes,’ Akhmed said. ‘I would do all of that while the patient’s wife was filling out the questionnaire.’

‘Let’s try something closer to your level. What is this?’ she asked, raising her thumb.

‘I believe that is a thumb.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It is the first digit, composed of the metacarpal, the proximal phalange and the distal phalange.’

‘That’s another way of saying it.’

‘And this?’ she asked, pointing to her left eye. ‘What can you say about this besides the fact that it is my eye, and it is brown and used for seeing?’

He frowned, uncertain what he could add. ‘Dilated pupils,’ he said at last.

‘And did they bother teaching the top ten per cent what dilated pupils are symptomatic of?’

‘Head injuries, drug use or sexual arousal.’

‘Or more likely because the hallway is poorly lit.’ She tapped a small scar on her temple. No one knew where it had come from. ‘And this?’

He smiled. ‘I have no idea what’s going on in there.’

She bit her lip and nodded. ‘OK,’ she said. ‘We need someone to wash dirty sheets anyway. She can stay if you work.’ The girl stood behind Akhmed. In her palm a yellow insect lounged in a pool of melting ice. Sonja already regretted her consent. ‘What’s your name?’ she asked in Chechen.

‘Havaa,’ Akhmed said. He gently pushed the girl towards her. The girl leaned against his palm, afraid to venture beyond its reach.

A year earlier, when Natasha had disappeared for the second and final time, Sonja’s one-and two-night stays in the trauma ward had lengthened into weeks. After five weeks had passed since she’d last slid the key into the double lock, she had given up on the idea of ever going back. The twelve blocks to her flat might as well have been the Sahara. Waiting for her there was a silence more terrible than anything she heard on the operating table. Years before that, she had posed with her hand pressed against a distant Big Ben, so that in the photograph her fiancé had taken, she appeared to be holding up the clock tower. He had taken it on the eighth of their seventeen-day engagement. The photograph was taped above the desk in her bedroom, but not even its rescue was enough to lure her

home. Living in the trauma ward wasn’t much of a change. She’d already been spending seventeen of her eighteen waking hours in the ward. She knew the bodies she opened, fixed and closed more intimately than their spouses or parents did, and that intimacy came as near to creation as the breath of God’s first word.

So when she offered to let the girl stay with her, she meant here at the hospital; but the girl already knew that as she followed Sonja to her room.

‘This is where we’ll sleep, all right?’ she said, setting the girl’s suitcase by the stacked mattresses. The girl still held the insect. ‘Is there something in your hand?’ Sonja asked tentatively.

‘A dead insect,’ the girl said.

Sonja sighed, grateful, at least, to know she wasn’t imagining it. ‘Why?’

‘Because I found it in the forest and brought it with me.’

‘Again, why?’

‘Because it needs to be buried facing Mecca.’

She closed her eyes. She couldn’t begin with this now. Even as a child she had hated children; she still did. ‘I’ll be back later,’ she said, and returned to the corridor.

If nothing else, Akhmed was quick to undress. In the time it took her to show the girl to her room, he had changed into white scrubs. She found him preening before the hallway mirror.

‘This is a hospital, not a ballroom,’ she said.

‘I’ve never worn scrubs before.’ He turned from her, but the mirror held his blush.

‘How could you go through training without wearing scrubs?’

He closed his eyes and his blush deepened. ‘My professors didn’t have much faith in me. I was never, exactly, what you would call a house officer.’

‘This isn’t what I want to hear right after I take you on.’

‘I just feel privileged to work here.’ The sleeves showed off his pale biceps. ‘I always thought these would be looser.’

‘They’re women’s scrubs.’

‘You don’t have any for men?’

‘No men work here.’

‘So I’m wearing women’s clothes.’

‘You’ll need to wear a hijab, too.’ His face paled. ‘I’m kidding,’ she added. ‘A headscarf is sufficient.’

He nodded, unconvinced. Clearly, she had hired a buffoon, but a buffoon who could wash linen, make beds and deal with relatives was better than no buffoon at all. ‘Have you ever been here before?’ she asked, disinclined to give more than a brief tour of the hospital.

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘I was born here.’

She took him through the ghost wards: cardiology, internal medicine, endocrinology. A layer of dust and ash recorded their path. ‘Where is everything?’ he asked. The rooms were empty. Mattresses, sheets, hypodermics, disposable gowns, surgical tape, film dressing, thermometers and IV bags had been moved downstairs. All that remained was bolted to the floor and built into the walls, along with items of no practical use: family portraits, professional awards, and framed diplomas from medical schools in Siberia, Moscow and Kiev.

‘We moved everything to the trauma and maternity wards,’ she said. ‘They’re all we can keep open.’

‘Trauma and maternity.’

‘It’s funny, isn’t it? Everyone either fucking or dying.’

‘No, not funny.’ He stroked his beard, burying his fingers to the first knuckle. His fingers found their way to his beard in moments of trouble or indecision, trawling the thick dark hair but rarely touching upon wisdom. ‘They are coming and they are leaving and it is happening here.’

They climbed a stairwell washed in blue emergency light. On the fourth floor she led him down the corridor to the west side of the building. Without warning him she opened the door to the storage room. Something gleeful and malicious shot through her when he took a step back, afraid of falling. ‘What happened?’ he asked. The floor broke off a metre past the door frame. No walls or windows, just a cityscape muralled across the winter air.

‘A few years back we harboured rebels. The Feds blew off the wall in reply.’

‘Was anyone hurt?’

‘Maali. Deshi’s sister.’

‘Only one person?’

‘A benefit of understaffing.’

On days when both sides abided by the ceasefire, she came to this doorway and looked across the city and tried to identify the buildings by their ruins. The one that flickered with ten thousand pieces of sunlight had been a sheet-glass office building in which nine hundred and eighteen souls had laboured. Beneath that minaret a rotund imam had led the pious in prayer. That was a school, a library, a Young Pioneers’ clubhouse, a jail, a grocer’s. That was where her mother had warned her never to trust a man who claims to want an intelligent wife; where her father had taught her to ride a bike by imitating the engine growl of a careering municipal bus sure to run her over if she didn’t pedal fast enough; where she had solved her first algebra equation for a primary-school teacher, a man for whom Sonja’s successes were consolation whenever he pitied himself for not having followed his older brother into the more remunerative profession of prison guard; where she had called for help after witnessing one man spear another on the university green, only to learn they were students rehearsing an Aeschylus play. It looked like a city made of shoeboxes and stamped into the ground by a petulant child. She could spend the whole afternoon rebuilding it,

repopulating it, until the hallucination became the more believable reality.

‘Before, you couldn’t see the river from here,’ she said. ‘This hospital is the tallest building in the city now.’

There had been tall buildings and plans to erect taller ones. After the dissolution of the USSR, oil reserves had promised prosperity for Chechnya in the coming capitalist century. Yeltsin had told the republics to grab as much sovereignty as they could swallow, and after two thousand years of foreign occupation, it had seemed the republic would finally achieve independence. Her grandparents had moved to Volchansk in 1946 after Stalin added lorry drivers and seamstresses to the expanding list of professions requiring purging, but she felt as buoyantly patriotic as her Chechen classmates who could trace their family trees back to the acorns. That sense of electric optimism was evident in the designs that had been solicited from architects in Riyadh, Melbourne and Minsk. City officials had made a show of the blueprints, displaying them on billboards and distributing them as leaflets at the bazaar. She’d never seen anything like it. The sketches had suggested that the pinnacle of design no longer consisted of cramming the greatest amount of reinforced concrete into the ugliest rectangle possible. Once she had held a leaflet against the horizon and as the red sun bled through the paper the towers had become part of the skyline.

‘Did they really want the girl?’ she asked, turning her attention back to Akhmed. It didn’t surprise her, but she asked anyway. Disappearances touched down as randomly as lightning. Only those actually guilty of abetting the insurgency – an infinitesimal fraction of those abducted – had the benefit of understanding their fate.

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ Akhmed said. Whether he meant the floorless room, the crushed city beyond, or the girl, Sonja didn’t know. In the distance, a faint stream of tracers streaked skyward, disappearing into the clouds.

‘Payday must be coming,’ Akhmed said.

She nodded. The Feds were only paid if they used a certain percentage of their ammo. If the soldiers tired of firing blindly into the sky, they might bury their excess rounds, then dig them up a few hours later to claim the bonus given for discovering a rebel arms cache. ‘Let’s go,’ Sonja said.

They passed the original maternity ward, unused since Maali’s death, and descended the stairwell to the new maternity ward. Deshi set down her knitting needles and eyed Akhmed suspiciously as she crossed the room to meet them. After twelve love affairs over the course of her seventy-three years, each beginning with a grander gesture, each ending with a more spectacular heartache, Deshi had learned to distrust men of every size and age, from newborns to great-grandfathers, knowing they all had it in them to break a decent woman’s heart. ‘Will he be joining us?’ she asked.

‘Provisionally,’ Sonja said.

‘And the girl?’

‘Provisionally.’

‘You’re the nurse,’ Akhmed said curtly. ‘We met earlier.’

‘He speaks out of turn, without being addressed,’ Deshi observed.

‘I just wanted to say hello.’

‘He continues to speak without being spoken to. And he has an ugly nose.’

‘I’m standing right here,’ Akhmed said, frowning.

‘He tells us he is standing right here. As if we have been made blind and idiotic.’

‘What am I doing wrong?’ he asked Sonja. ‘I’m just standing here.’

‘He seems to believe that his presence might somehow transform the ugliness of his nose, but seeing that nose, right here in front of me, provides irrefutable evidence.’