

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL:

chronicle of the future

Written by Cindy Marie Jenkins

Inspired by the book *Voices From Chernobyl*

By Svetlana Alexievich

Cindy Marie Jenkins

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## CHARACTERS

Katya Shimanky, young girl at the time of the accident

Vasily Shimanky, Physicist

Irina Shimanky, Doctor at a Radiation Hospital

Anna Sushko, Resident of Chornobyl

Arkady Filin, Clean-up Crew Member

Grigory Brovkin, Former Soldier, Leader of a Clean-up Crew

Stepanov Morozkov, Vasily and Grigory's Supervisor

Sergei Gurin, Cameraman from Minsk

Ludmila (A Solitary Human Voice), Wife of a Fireman

Valentina (A Lonely Human Voice), Wife of a Clean-up Crew Member

## NOTE

The play is a collective memory and spans all the years since the accident at Chornobyl. At times the characters speak to their Interviewer and at times they are back in the moment. Katya sometimes recites from a book. If there is a slash (/) on one line, then the following line should overlap at the point of the slash (/).

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL was originally presented by the Open Fist Theatre Company (Martha Demson, Artistic Director; Weston Blakesley, Managing Director; Amanda Weier, Literary Manager; Aaron Lyons, Production Manager) as part of their Directors' Festival (March-April 2006). Dan Jenkins designed Sets & Lights, Lee Osteen II composed the original music, Sudro Brown II Stage Managed and Cindy Marie Jenkins Adapted & Directed.

The Cast included: Aaron Lyons, Amanda Weier, Bradford Beacom, Bradley Spann, Daryl Dickerson, Dylan Maddalena, Jeff Graham, Jim Kieffer, Kai Mammoser, Lola StVil, Mary Herrera, Niki Hersh, Sarah Jones, Shawn MacAulay, Katie Sweeney, Ruth Grayson, Michael Franco.

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL: Land of the Dead was presented as part of Los Angeles's Edge of the World (Edgefest) 2007 Festival. It was presented at The Regent Theater, 448 S. Main, L.A. 90013 and included the following cast and production team:

**Adaption & Direction:** Cindy Marie Jenkins

**Composer:** Lee Osteen II

**Anatoly Shimanky:** Bradford Beacom

**Sergei Gurin:** Jason Decker

**Anna Badeava Petrovna:** Enci

**A Solitary Human Voice:** Clementine Ford

**Irina Konstantinovna:** Olivia Lim

**Arkady Bogdankevich:** Katie Sweeney

**Nadezhda Petrovna Vygovskaya:** Gina Torrecilla

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL: Chronicle of the Future was presented as part of Empty Stage Theater's New Voices Festival in 2007.

Cast and Production Team:

**Vasily Borosovich Nesterenko :** Bradford Beacom

**A Lonely Human Voice:** Daryl Dickerson

**Anna Badeava Petrovna:** Enci

**Arkady Filin:** Aaron Lyons

**Stepanov Moroz:** Brian Sparrow

**Arkady Bogdankevich:** Katie Sweeney

**Katya P.:** Kappa Wood

**Adaption & Direction:** Cindy Marie Jenkins

**Composer:** Lee Osteen II

**Costumes:** Valerie Rothenberg

**Lights:** Dan Weingarten

**Graphics:** Dan Jenkins Design

The production performed Draft 15 and was paired with **GROWING UP...AND LIKING IT!**  
Written & Performed by Sally Randa.

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL:  
chronicle of the future

KATYA

You're writing a book, but so far no book has helped me, explained it to me. No more than the theater or the movies. I figure it out without them. By myself.

ANNA

There was no sign.

KATYA

What do I pray for? You ask me, what do I pray for?

ANNA

Sometimes, your palm itches and you know to get ready. But today, no signs.

KATYA

I don't pray in church, I pray privately.

VASILY

My first reaction was to call my wife and warn her. But all our telephones at the Institute were bugged. That eternal fear, beaten into us through the decades.

ANNA

The first fear came out of the blue, over water---

VASILY

My family didn't know.

KATYA

My father is particularly bewildered.

VASILY

My daughter - at this moment she would be walking to school. With friends.  
Outside.

KATYA

He always taught me to live by books. And suddenly books cannot help. My  
parents are confused. My father does not know how to live without the counsel  
of books. Without Chekhov and Tolstoy, and the old Greek masters.

Remember? I want to remember and at the same time I don't.

VASILY

Shut the windows.

KATYA

I remember my mother's phone call in the early morning.

IRINA

There's a fire at the atomic station. Orders are to keep the radio on.

KATYA

We lived in Pripyat, just three miles from the reactor. I was born and bred  
there.

VASILY

Listen to me very closely.

IRINA

What are you talking about?

VASILY

Quiet. Shut the windows. Put all the food in plastic bags.

Put on rubber gloves and wipe every surface with a wet rag. Then put the rag in a plastic bag and get rid of it. The laundry drying on the balcony has to be washed again.

IRINA

What's happen—

VASILY

I hung up. She was in medicine. She was bound to understand.

KATYA

Remember? Perhaps it's better not to. Just in case. We saw the fire---

ANNA

--and we figured it was temporary, and no one was worried about it. We didn't know about atoms, I swear! One nightingale sang all night—that means a sunny day.

LUDMILA

In the middle of the night, I heard a noise.

*(pause.)*

I -I don't know what to tell you about! Death or love? Or is it one and the same? What shall I tell you? We were newlyweds. We still held hands in the street, even if we were just going to the store. I told him: "I love you." But I

## LUDMILA (Cont.)

didn't even know how much. I had no idea. We lived in the hostel of the fire station where he worked. Below us, on the first floor, were the fire engines.

Red fire engines. That was his work. That was all he ever wanted to do.

*(Takes a deep breath)*

In the middle of the night, I heard a noise. I looked out the window. He saw me and said, "Shut the windows and get back to sleep. There's a fire at the reactor. I'll be back soon."

*(pause)*

I did not see the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything seemed to flow.

## ANNA

People took their small children outside, lifted them up and said, "Look, how beautiful! Don't forget this." We stood in that horrible black smoke.

## LUDMILA

The whole sky. The flames were high. And smoke. Horrible heat.

## KATYA

The smoke over the station was not black or yellow, it was light blue.

## ANNA

We did not know that Death could be so beautiful.

IRINA

The police and the military set up roadblocks, they were letting no one out. We spent all day watching TV, waiting for Gorbachev to speak. The authorities were silent.

KATYA

I stared all day out of the closed window. It was just an ordinary fire, being put out by ordinary firemen.

LUDMILA

And he was still out. They went off to the fire without their protective gear, just in their shirt sleeves. They were summoned as if to a normal fire. I sat and waited. Four o'clock.

VALENTINA

I'd go to church, where it was so quiet.

LUDMILA

Five.....

VALENTINA

The way it is in the mountains sometimes.

LUDMILA

Six.....

VALENTINA

So quiet. You can forget your life in there. But in the mornings, I'd wake up. I'd wake up and feel around for him. Where is he? I'd shut my eyes and think about him until I fell asleep. In my sleep, he would come to me, but very quickly. Vanish immediately.

LUDMILA

Seven o'clock.

VALENTINA

Where is he? I can't tell you what it is like. I don't know how I manage to stay alive.

LUDMILA

At seven they informed me that he was in the hospital. I ran over there, but police would not let anyone in. Only ambulances could drive in. The policemen shouted: the ambulances are radioactive, don't get close. I was not alone, all the wives whose husbands were at the reactor that night, were there. I grabbed onto a Doctor as she walked by—"Get me inside!"

IRINA & LUDMILA

I can't. He's in a bad way. They all are.

LUDMILA

Please! Just to see him.

IRINA

*(Hands her a form)*

Sign this.

Do you have children?

LUDMILA

I thought, I have to say yes. If I say no, they won't let me see him.

Yes.

IRINA

How many?

LUDMILA

A boy and a girl.

IRINA

Now listen. The central nervous system is completely damaged, the bone marrow is completely destroyed.

LUDMILA

AL right, so he'll be a bit nervous.....

IRINA

And listen---

IRINA & LUDMILA

If you cry, I'll throw you out right away. You may not hug or kiss. Don't come close.

LUDMILA

I'll give you half an hour.

VASILY

That day, April 26<sup>th</sup>, I was in Moscow. On a business trip.

ANNA

The first fear was....in the morning we found dead moles in the garden. Who killed them?

KATYA

I cannot comprehend it with my mind. My grandmother said she had no childhood. She had the war. Their childhood is the war and mine is Chornobyl.

GRIGORY

I had just returned from Afghanistan. I wanted to live, to get married. I wanted to get married right away. And instead I got a notice with a red stripe Meaning "Special Draft." Show up with your things at the following address within an hour. My mother started weeping. She thought they were sending me to war again.

ARKADY

At the time I was thinking about something else. This will seem strange to you.

GRIGORY

*(To ARKADY)*

Get in the van.

ARKADY

But just then I was getting a divorce from my wife. Everything else seemed minor. They would come suddenly and a special van was waiting downstairs. Just like 1937.

VALENTINA

I loved him madly. Maybe you shouldn't use my name.

VASILY

I called once, two, three times, but they wouldn't put me through.

VALENTINA

There are secrets. People say prayers in private. Whispering.

VASILY

I found an assistant. "I'm calling from Moscow. I have urgent information. About an accident!" As soon as I started talking about the accident, they disconnected me.

VALENTINA

No, use my name. Say it to God.

STEPANOV

I heard that there was a fire there, and it's been put out.

VASILY

That's a lie! Deceit!

It's a serious accident. According to my calculations, the radioactive cloud is moving towards us. Towards Belarussia. We must immediately give prophylactic iodine treatment to the population and move out everyone living close to the station. People and animals within 100 kilometers have to be moved away.

STEPANOV

Had a phone call. From the Kremlin. From Gorbachev. Something about not starting a panic in Belarussia. The West are making too much of it already.

KATYA

*(Sing-songy)*

*At the foot of the hill puffs a tractor*

*At the top of the hill a reactor*

*If we hadn't heard it from the Swedes*

*We'd still be eating all those seeds.*

VASILY

You will just sit there?

STEPANOV

My reports say the situation is now stabilized.

Certainly, I will not exclude the possibility that certain functionaries, who were afraid of being accused of not haven taken the correct measures, had a tendency to embellish their reports.

KATYA

What do I remember? In the first few days after the accident, all the books on radiation, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even on x-rays vanished from the libraries.

STEPANOV

But for the most part, I believe that I was kept informed in good faith by my representatives.

VASILY

We needed potassium iodine. Ordinary iodine. Two or three drops in a glass of water for children and three or four drops for adults.

KATYA

There was a rumor that this was an order from the authorities to keep people from being terrified. So that we could not/imagine for ourselves what it meant.

STEPANOV

/you can imagine for yourselves the consequences.

## ARKADY

I warned you, nothing heroic, nothing for a writer's pen from me.

## ANNA

Birds kept smashing into the windshields of cars and buses as if they were blind. They were crazed. Flying into the glass...or under the wheels. It was a kind of suicide.

## STEPANOV

The word "panic" - do you know where it comes from?

## VASILY

The Greek mischief-maker, Pan.

## KATYA

The god of woods and fields who created mysterious sounds.

## STEPANOV

He tried to teach the people how to communicate, but these sounds were too advanced for the people surrounding the woods and the fields. They didn't understand them, and so the sounds caused hysterical fear in villages. They say entire herds followed their owners over cliffs. Panic is born of fear and fear is irrational, infectious and prevents people from reacting in a disciplined way.

Our job is to maintain discipline.

## GRIGORY/VASILY

I understand, Comrade.

STEPANOV

You can imagine for yourself the consequences of a terrible panic in a town of several million inhabitants.

GRIGORY/VASILY

Yes, Comrade.

VALENTINA

I can't tell myself, like some others, that I don't remember a thing.

LUDMILA

But I keep having this strange idea.

VALENTINA

It torments me. It may not be mine: I have seen what others have not yet seen.

LUDMILA

Something terrible was revealed to us before it was to others.

I put my arms around him and kissed him. He moved away. "Don't sit next to me." "It's all nonsense," I said, waving it off. "Did you see where the explosion was? You were the first ones there." "I think it was sabotage. Someone did it on purpose. All the guys think that." That's what people said then. And that's what they believed. They next day when I arrived—

IRINA & LUDMILA

They are strictly forbidden to go out into the hallway, or have contact with one another.

LUDMILA

I met a lot of good people there, and I don't remember all of them. The whole world had narrowed to a single point for me. It shortened. Him. Only him.

He's changing. The burns are surfacing. In his mouth, his tongue, his cheeks. They started as small ulcers. Now they're spreading.

IRINA

The prognosis for acute radiation sickness is fourteen days.

LUDMILA

Him. Only him, only/ him.

IRINA

/Four—

IRINA & LUDMILA

--teen days.

LUDMILA

It takes fourteen days for a man to die.

GRIGORY

The nearby towns will be evacuated. We'll clean the zone out around the reactor, and in a few days time the people will be home again.

ANNA

Mother, we are leaving.

ANNA & KATYA

They're evacuating us.

LUDMILA

Fourteen days.

KATYA

My mother brought that word home from work - "We are going to be evacuated."

ANNA

They say they'll just go over, wash everything, and then we'll be back in a few days. I borrowed some of your earth to guide me back home.

Forgive me for leaving you.

GRIGORY

The hospitals will remain open so that necessary medical aid can be given to those affected.

ANNA

I'll remember it all for you. Planes flying overhead. Every day.

KATYA

Really low over our heads.

ANNA

Flying to the reactor. To the station. One after the other. And they're evacuating us.

KATYA

Just like in the books on war!

## VASILY

Here's what it was: at home, the level was 30,000 microroentgens an hour. People were sowing and plowing. Out on the boulevard people were selling meat pies, ice cream, hamburgers, bread. Under a radioactive cloud. I tried to explain. A woman said: What's radiations? What's that?

Roentgens, microroentgens. Extraterrestrial language.

## ANNA

Fairy tales. Just fairy tales.

Do you see the world outside? The fire had been put out, and everything is growing in the garden. The apple trees are in bloom.

## ANNA &amp; VASILY

How can you talk about Radiation when the butterflies are flying and the bees are buzzing?

## KATYA

*There? Have I hit the mark or not?*

## VASILY

*(To STEPANOV)*

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria and Romania.

## STEPANOV

Where did you get these?

## VASILY

I made them.

LUDMILA

He's dying.

IRINA

And what do you want? He got 1600 roentgens and the fatal dose is 400.

VASILY

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, high levels of radiation were recorded in Switzerland and northern Italy.

IRINA

You are sitting next to a reactor.

VASILY

On May 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, radiation was detected in France, Belgium, the Netherlands/ Great Britain and Northern Greece.

LUDMILA

/Fourteen days. It takes fourteen days -it's all mine. Every bit. I can't say it. You can't write about it! There was an apple on his night-table. A big one. He smiled and said, "They gave me a treat. You take it." The Nurse signals me through the plastic curtain that I cannot eat the apple. If it's been near him for a while, just being near it, much less eating it, is dangerous. "Come on, eat it," he asks. "You love apples." I pick it up. The nurse looks at me in horror. Me? I was ready to do whatever was necessary to keep him from thinking about death. Or that his illness was horrible, that I was afraid of him.

VASILY

On May 3<sup>rd</sup> in Israel, Kuwait and Turkey.....

LUDMILA

Every day I heard: died. Died. Andrei died.

VASILY

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, gaseous airborne particles registered in Japan.

LUDMILA

Alexander died. Died.

VASILY

On May 5<sup>th</sup> in India, May 6<sup>th</sup> in the/U.S. and Canada.

LUDMILA

Died, died. Like hammer blows to my temple.

LUDMILA & VASILY

May 9<sup>th</sup>.

LUDMILA

Victory Day. He opened his eyes. "Open the window! The fireworks!" I opened the window. We were on the eighth floor, we could see the whole city below us! A bouquet of fire burst into the sky.

"I promised I would show you Moscow. I promised I would get you flowers on holidays as long as I lived." I turned around, and he was getting three carnations from under his pillow. He had paid a nurse to get them.

STEPANOV

I consulted with Moscow. Everything is fine here. And the government commission is at work. And the procurator's office. They've sent in the Army and the military technology.

LUDMILA

Night. Quiet.

STEPANOV

Don't worry,

STEPANOV & GRIGORY

Comrades, the situation is under control.

GRIGORY

*(To SERGEI & ARKADY)*

Nothing to worry about. People are living and working here.

SERGEI

*(To ARKADY)*

After the Army, civilian life seemed boring and too sweet for me. At night I would walk through the streets in search of some powerful experience.

*(he puts out his hand. No answer.)*

I'd been taught you become a real writer in the war and so on. Now I'm just a cameraman, but that will change soon. This is my chance, to become a writer.

*(no answer)*

*In September the first cool nights came, then the leaves on the trees began to turn color and we knew the summer was gone.*

ARKADY

Hemingway? *A Farewell to Arms?*

SERGEI

Yes, it's my---

ARKADY

I hate that book.

GRIGORY

We are cleaning Chornobyl for the residents. We'll be paid for a work day, plus a bonus. 30 roubles.

*(hands out forms)*

Sign this.

SERGEI

This says we can't tell anyone what we see there?

GRIGORY

Or what we do.

SERGEI

When do we get there?

GRIGORY

Where?

SERGEI

The accident?

GRIGORY

We are there.

SERGEI

Here? What's going on here? What am I supposed to film? Where are the explosions?

GRIGORY

We'll round up some heroes for you to film. But your cameras will speak for you. Sign.

KATYA

I rode in the buses to Minsk, and the sky was so blue.

SERGEI

I caught myself filming the scene the way it always was played in wartime movies. They loaded them into large tourist buses. This remains etched on my memory. A girl waving to her mother, as if to say, everything's fine, she is brave. And she gives a little victory sign.

LUDMILA

He was no longer in an ordinary room, but in a special barochamber, behind a clear plastic curtain, and no one was admitted inside. They had special mechanisms to be able to give shots and insert catheters without getting inside the curtain. But it was held together by tabs and locks and I learned how to use them, open them and get through to him. There was a little chair next to his bed. He was in such a bad way that I could not leave him, not for a minute. He called to me constantly, "Where are you? Lyusenka!" He called and called.

KATYA

The soldiers looked like extraterrestrials, walking down the street in white camouflage and masks.

LUDMILA

The other barochambers with our guys were services by soldiers, because the staff orderlies refused to work without special protective clothing. The soldiers carried bedpans, washed floors, made the beds. They did everything. Where did the soldiers come from? I never asked.

I was in my sixth month. In the hallway, I was faint, I put out my hand to steady myself----

IRINA

Are you pregnant? Why did you lie to me?

LUDMILA

I had no other way out. If I had told the truth, you would have sent me out.

IRINA

What have you done?

LUDMILA

I am with him. It was a holy lie.

IRINA

Listen to me. Pregnant women tell me their dreams: giving birth to a calf with eight legs, or a puppy with the head of a hedgehog. Such strange dreams. Women didn't have dreams like that before.

VASILY

Our land is already covered by thousands of tons of cesium, iodine, lead, zirconium, cadmium.....the amount was equal to 350 bombs of the kind dropped on Hiroshima.

STEPANOV

Do not hand our enemies any information to use against us.

VASILY

We are supposed to be talking about physics. The laws of physics. Our families. But you talk about enemies. We are looking for enemies!

LUDMILA

The skin on his arms and legs began to crack. Covered in blisters. When he turns his head, clumps of hair remain on his pillow. I try to joke about it. "It's handy, you won't have to carry a comb."

GRIGORY

We have fellows from all over the Soviet Union. Russians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Armenians. It is an exciting time to be a partisan.

For us, victory is not an event but a process. Life is a struggle. Overcoming. You must win and conquer.

ARKADY

Conquer what?

LUDMILA

I remember a piece of conversation in my memory. Someone telling me:

IRINA

You must not forget. What is in there is no longer your husband, the man you love, but a radioactive object with a high density of contamination. You are not a suicide case. Get a grip on yourself.

ARKADY

Conquer the atom? Physics?

LUDMILA

I wanted to do everything myself. If I could have stood it physically, I would have been by his side twenty-four hours a day. I hated losing a single minute. Even one minute.

GRIGORY

See, just a few days after this catastrophe, the red flag waves over Reactor Number four.

ARKADY

A month later, it had been eaten by the high radiation.

LUDMILA

I love him. I love him. He sleeps and I whisper I love you. I walk through the hospital courtyard and whisper I love you. I remember how we lived before, on the second floor, above the fire engines. I told him "I love you," but I didn't even know how much. I could not speak it. I could only hold his hand.

At home. He could only fall asleep when he held my hand.

That was his habit. To hold my hand while he slept. All night.

IRINA

My daughter went to Minsk, to my sister's house. My own sister would not let her in, because she had a baby, she was breast feeding. Can you imagine? I had wild ideas. Where could we go?

KATYA

Mother got her knees and prayed. She told us, "Pray! It's the end of the world."

IRINA

We had nowhere to go.

KATYA

Mother often wears black. A black kerchief. There's always a funeral on our street. When I hear the music, I run home and pray. I pray for Mother and Father.

*(She prays the "Our Father" over the following.)*

GRIGORY

Your husband will be buried in a special way, in a sealed zinc coffin, under concrete slabs. These men are heroes and no longer belong to their families. They are state personages. They belong to the state.

*(hand LUDMILA a form on a clipboard.)*

Sign this.

GRIGORY (Cont.)

*(To ARKADY)*

Listen, there are many domestic animals left in the zone - cats, dogs, and to avoid an epidemic, they have to be shot. Go do it.

LUDMILA

*(to a baby)*

Natashenka. Your father called you Natasha. She looked healthy. Hands and feet. But it turned out she had cirrhosis of the liver. The liver showed 28 roentgens. And congenital heart defects. Four hours later they told me that the girl had died. And once again, they would not give her to me.

GRIGORY

Sign this.

ARKADY

I called all the men together. Announced it.

LUDMILA

Can I see her?

IRINA

We---cannot give her to you. She belongs to the state.

LUDMILA

I won't give her to you! You just want her for your science, and I hate your science! I hate it! It took him away from me and now it wants her. I won't hand her over! I will bury her myself! Next to him.

SERGEI

A group of scientists flew in by helicopter.

ARKADY

In special rubber suits, high boots, protective glasses. As if they were going to the moon. AN old woman came up to one of them. "Who are you?"

ARKADY & VASILY

"I'm a scientist."

ARKADY

"Ah, a scientist, are you? Look how he's all dressed up. Masked himself. And what about us!" And she attacked him with her stick. I kept thinking that one day scientists would be hated and persecuted, the way witches were caught and drowned in the middle ages.

STEPANOV

What's the delay?

GRIGORY

The don't want to go, Comrade. They would like some protective clothing.

STEPANOV

Apply to the civic defense office.

GRIGORY

They had nothing.

STEPANOV

Apply to the cement plant. They use masks.

GRIGORY

Thin masks. For cement dust.

LUDMILA

I keep saying the wrong things to you. Not the words I want. I'm not supposed to shout after my stroke. Or weep. That's why the words are wrong. But I'll tell you something. No one knows this. When I would not give them my daughter - our daughter - they brought me a wooden box.

IRINA

She's in there.

LUDMILA

They put diapers on her. She was in diapers.

GRIGORY

See, everything's fine. And the reactor is just 10 km away. Our flag still blazes over Reactor number four. People still swim in the Pripyat River. The West is trying to spread panic. They tell lies about the accident. Everything is fine here. See this brave man and his grandson. They were evacuated, and now bring the collective herd back to their village!

SERGEI

A scientist then found me, and led me to the gigantic trench, where bulldozers were burying the herd. I turned my back to the trench and filmed an episode in the best tradition of Soviet documentaries. The bulldozer drivers reading the newspaper Pravda with a headline in inch-high letter: "The Country Will Not Abandon Those in Need." I tried very hard to make the headline readable. And I had another stroke of luck. I caught a stork landing in a field. A symbol! No mater what catastrophe befalls us, we will win. Life goes on.....

STEPANOV

Why are you creating hysteria, Professor? Are you the only one concerned about the Belarussian people?

IRINA

You can find ways or acting. Without announcements.

VASILY

Without panic. Just add iodine to the water supply.

IRINA

Add it to the milk.

You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses in the city.

VASILY

We'll take care of everything. Just sign this ---

SERGEI

I lived in a hostel. With men. We are given tons of vodka. To flush out the radiation. They had one order.

ARKADY

I can't sleep at night.

SERGEI

Shoot everything.

ARKADY

Whenever I shut my eyes—

SERGEI

Then bury it.

ARKADY

I see something black moving, turning over, Like a living thing.

KATYA

I remember a lot of things to be afraid of.

ARKADY

Living layers of the earth. With beetles, spiders and worms. I can't recognize any of them. I don't know what they are called. But now I remember: beetles and spiders. Ants.

KATYA

Ants, butterflies, bees, all contaminated.

VASILY

You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses.

STEPANOV

That's where it will stay. Everyone has to die of something.

LUDMILA

Fourteen days.

SERGEI

The villages were evacuated, but the dogs lived on, waiting for their masters to return. They were shot. A man with a rifle was shooting at dogs, with children nearby. A normal man. I recognized and went over to him. "What are you doing?" He calmly took a paper out of his pocket: orders from the city council to shoot strays.

ARKADY

Don't bother me. I have this paper.

SERGEI

The smell of blood works on a primitive level. It's something animal.

VASILY

You will say that you are only a tractor builder and that you knew nothing about radiation. But I'm a physicist and I have an idea of the consequences. In case of a threat of nuclear accident, instructions recommend preventive iodine treatment.

A threat. And here it is 30,000 microrentgens an hour.

STEPANOV

You were warned, Professor. I tried to warn—but Moscow has something in mind.

KATYA

Father returned. He shouldn't have been home, he should have been working. I was confused. All he would say was:

VASILY

They stopped seeing me. Listening to me. I showered them with letters and reports. I sent them maps and figures.

Threats.

They got what they wanted.

KATYA

I tried to cheer him up. I recited his favorite verse:

*There. Have I hit the mark or not?*

*Am I a fraud?*

KATYA & VASILY

*A fortune-teller babbling lies from door to door?*

GRIGORY

Here's how I see it. The Japs had their Hiroshima and now they're ahead of everyone else. First place in the world. Therefore-----

ARKADY

The first time is scary, but then you get used to it. You have a shot or two and off you go.

GRIGORY

Same system as war. We arrive, circle the village, and as soon as the dogs hear the first shot, they run into the woods. Cats are clever and it's easier for them to hide. You go into a house, a cat shoots out between your legs, and you chase it with a rifle. Not pleasant.

*(They hear ANNA singing)*

Come on. Let's go woman.

ANNA

But boys, I just got back.

## KATYA

I remembered what a woman begged me on the bus ride back home.

*Find Anna Sushko for us. She used to live in our village. Her name is Anna Sushko. I will describe her to you and you find her. She lived alone. No one knows how old she is. During the resettlement she was taken away in an ambulance in an unknown direction. She never learned to read and write, so we have no letters from her. The solitary and sick were placed in asylums. Hidden away. But no one knows the address.*

*We were forced to live elsewhere for two years before we could come back to our own houses. Tell her that her house is still standing. The roof is intact and so are the windows. We'll work together to restore what's broken or stolen.*

*Just give us her address, where she's living and suffering, and we'll go and get her. We'll bring her back. So that she doesn't die of loneliness. I'll be eternally grateful to you. She's an innocent soul suffering in an alien world.*

*There's something else to add to her description, I forgot. When something hurts, she sings a song. Without words. Just the voice. She can't talk. When it hurts, she goes "aaaaaaa." For comfort.*

I remembered her and wondered if they ever found her.

## ANNA

I washed the house, whitewashed the stove. You have to leave bread and salt on the table, a bowl, and a spoon for every person in the house. That's what you do so that you will return.

VASILY

And you returned?

ANNA

The sun doesn't shine right in other places.

ARKADY

Instead of automatic rifles we were handed shovels. We re-dug garbage dumps and gardens. Village women watched us and prayed. We would appear in their gardens like devils. They could not understand why we were digging up their beds, pulling out garlic and cabbages, when the garlic and cabbage looked perfectly normal. Yet we loaded up the vegetables in trucks and took them to be buried in deep trenches, burial pits, scientifically speaking. The women would cross themselves and say---

ANNA

Soldier boys, what is this? The end of the world?

ARKADY

Inside the stove would be on, bacon frying.

ANNA

I found some lost animals on the way back. Sit down at the table, boys.

ARKADY

I'm sorry, Lady, we can't stay. You know you're not supposed to—they brought in Chinese meat, and potatoes from Minsk---

ANNA

And what am I supposed to buy it with? That radiation was in my garden, and I washed it away. It was white, it clung to my tomatoes like dew, but a good washing and now they're like new. I'll find a glass of vodka for you. Sit down. Talk to me. I haven't heard another human voice in so long.

VASILY

And what could we tell her? That's no stove, it's a small reactor.

ANNA

Have some vodka, Professor.

VASILY

No thank you.

ANNA

Our women who went to live in the city cry all the time. My husband is here, in the graveyard. If he weren't there, he would be living somewhere else. And I would be with him.

But why leave? It's good here! Everything grows and blossoms here. From gnat to beast, everything is alive. After the accident, all the sparrows vanished from our town. And now, just a few months later the sparrows returned.

Tell me, is this another war? I cannot bear another war.

*(They drink.)*

GRIGORY

You can't compare this to a war, it's not accurate, but everyone does it. My grandfather lived through the blockade of Leningrad when he was a child. You can't compare it.

ANNA

We've lived through the worst. We lived through the blockade. Nothing worse can ever happen to us.

ARKADY

My father defended Moscow in 1941. He understood only decades later what a great event that had been. From books and films. All he remembered was, "I was sitting in a foxhole. Shooting. I was buried by an explosion. The orderlies took me out of there half-dead." Is that the way it always is? Events are always greater than the man?

VASILY

We prepared for nuclear war, we built bomb shelters. We wanted to hide from the atom as if it were shrapnel. But it's everywhere. In the bread, in the salt. In the vodka. We breathe radiation, we eat it.

ARKADY

I can understand being without bread or salt, having to eat almost anything, that you could boil a leather belt in water just for the smell, to eat the smell of cooking. That I could understand.

ANNA

How can you talk about Radiation when the butterflies are flying and the bees are buzzing?

ARKADY

But this? This, I can't understand. Then I look around. I take the woman's advice and I look around. Everything is poisoned?

IRINA

I remember those days. My throat burned, I felt a heaviness in my body.

STEPANOV

You're a hypochondriac. Everyone is a hypochondriac because of Chernobyl.

IRINA

It's not hypochondria. It hurts and I have no strength. My husband and I were too embarrassed to tell each other, but we were losing the use of our legs.

GRIGORY

The children will attend school from eight in the morning until nine at night. They are strictly forbidden to play outside or to run. Everyone was given clothing: skirts and blouses for the girls, suits for the boys. The mothers will wash their clothing every day, so the children can show up at school in everything clean.

IRINA

But they only gave them one set of clothes, without a change, and for the mothers, dirt was ink, soil, grease spots, not the action of short-lived isotopes. It's not very easy to explain the difference between rems and roentgens.

ANNA

I thought radiations was some kind of disease, and whoever got it would die right away.

VASILY

No, it's something that lies on the ground and gets inside it, but you can't see it.

ANNA

You can't hear it or see it? You scientists have just made it up!

IRINA

Things went along as usual: plough, sow, harvest. The unbelievable happened, but people went on as before.

VASILY

Rejecting cucumbers from your own garden was more significant than Chornobyl.

IRINA

Chornobyl is not as terrible as leaving unharvested potatoes in the field.

SERGEI

Thousands died at the Battle of Kursk in World War II. That's comprehensible. But here, only seven firemen died in the first two days. And a little while later a few more people. And then. It was too abstract - "nothing," "eternity," "in a few generations." Eternity is not a concept for daily life. Rumours spread: three-headed birds, chickens attacking foxes, bald hedgehogs....yes, our imagination was not ready to deal with the catastrophe.

KATYA

*A ball rolls down the street.*

*"Where are you going, ball?"*

*"I'm not a ball, I'm a hedgehog from Chornobyl."*

I'd just come back. The other children at the summer camp called me a lightning bug. I came back to my warm blankets, my autumn coat and the complete edition of Euripides, father's favorite reading.

*Believe me if you will*

## VASILY &amp; KATYA

*What will it matter if you won't?*

*It comes when it comes and soon you'll see it face to face*

## VASILY

*And say the seer was all too true.*

## KATYA

We found a spot on the blanket.

## ANNA

It's over now, isn't it?

## KATYA

Mother washed it, vacuumed it, nothing helped. We gave it to the dry cleaners. It "glowed." That "Spot." We cut it out with scissors in the end.

## IRINA

Stop people! We have to live here. You talk and then leave, but we have to live here. Look at these medical charts. I see them every day. Every day! Anya Budai, born 1986 - 380 rems. Vitya Grinkevich, born 1986 - 785 rems. Nataya Shabloskaya, born 1986 - 570 rems. Andrew Kotchenko, born 1987 - 450 rems. They say that this is impossible. That no one can live with that in their thyroids.

I see this. Every day. Why have you come here? I do not wish to trade on their misery, to indulge in cheap philosophy. Leave us alone. We need to live here.

## VALENTINA

He left for Chornobyl on my birthday. Guests were still seated at the table.

SERGEI

I was once filming people who had been in a concentration camp. They don't like getting together. I met this guy who wanders around here, drinking and would start lecturing. I think he had spent time in jail. Chornobyl, He said:

VASILY

Exists to create philosophy.

SERGEI

He called animals "walking dust" and people:

SERGEI & VASILY

"Speaking earth."

VASILY

Speaking earth because we eat the earth.

SERGEI

That is, we're made of the earth.

IRINA

Daughter, here we are all from Chornobyl. We don't scare one another. We all have the same memories. Anywhere else we would be strangers.

KATYA

*Oh, the grief. The grief of the city  
Ripped to oblivion.*

SERGEI

Speaking earth.

ANNA

First I waited for the people to come back. I thought they would come back. No one ever left forever. There's no church. The priest doesn't come. I have nowhere to take my sins.

IRINA

Why are all of your doll's eyes closed?

KATYA

Because my children will not live. They will be born and they will die.

VALENTINA

Just recently I was so happy. Why? I have forgotten. It was all back in some other life. I don't understand. I don't know how to start living again. I don't know how I manage to stay alive.

LUDMILA

A lot of the doctors, and nurses, got sick and died, too. But we didn't know that, then.

KATYA

I remember what my father said when my mother died.

VASILY

This is for thousands of years. The breakdown of uranium will take a billion years. And thorium takes 14 billion years.

## KATYA

We took my mother to bury her. It was behind the barbed wire. Soldiers with automatic weapons were guarding it. They only let adults past the barbed wire. My father. Other relatives. But not me. I understood that I would never be able to visit my mother. I understood it.

## GRIGORY

We were digging ditches and dumping all of the animals' bodies into it. One day....it was just an ordinary ditch, a deep one. Not regulation. We dumped all of the animals out of the trunk into the hole, and this little poodle climbed out. No one had a bullet left. Not one bullet. We pushed him back into the hole and covered it with dirt. I still feel bad about it.

## VASILY

We humans understand, they simply exist. Walking dust.

## VALENTINA

We had no fear for a long time. I was so happy when he came back. Sometimes I would dream that I was a part of his body—we were inseparable. When he was away, I missed him terribly, it hurt me physically to be without him.

## GRIGORY

It's better to kill from a distance, so you don't make eye contact. A wounded roe, lying there. She wants to be pitied, and you have to finish her off. At that last second, her eyes are full of awareness, almost human.

## ARKADY

We didn't have time to bury everything.

GRIGORY

I do wish there'd been just one bullet left for that poodle.

KATYA

I was little. Six, no, eight years-old, I think. Right, eight. I just counted it up. I was nine when I went back.

ARKADY

We buried soil in the earth. With beetles, spiders and ants.

KATYA

Pick up a beetle. It crawled on the ground, and the ground was contaminated. Ants, butterflies, bees - all contaminated. I still wear Mama's black kerchief for every funeral.

VALENTINA

His lymph nodes were swollen when he came back.

KATYA

My father would only recite:

*There. Have I hit the mark or not? Am I a—*

VASILY

*--fraud? A fortune-teller babbling lies from door to door?*

KATYA

I was little. Nine years old.

## VALENTINA

Will you see a Doctor? He reassured me, "They'll go away." "How was it in Chernobyl?" "The usual work."

## KATYA

Spring came. And the leaves came, as usual. Year after year. Green ones. The apple trees bloom. White.

And then we ran to the river to ask the fishermen if the fish still had heads and tails.

## SERGEI

After all those years, I sometimes go into the zone. A wild boar will leap out of an abandoned, ruined house.

## KATYA

You're writing a book, but so far no book has explained it to me.

## VALENTINA

I read a lot of books and I meet a lot of different people. But no one knew. He didn't want to go to the Doctor. "I don't want to hear of it. It doesn't hurt." But his lymph nodes were the size of eggs. I pushed him into the car. One doctor took a look and called another: "Got another guy from Chernobyl." And they wouldn't let him out. A week later they operated: they removed his thyroid and his larynx and replaced them with tubes. Yes.....yes. Now I know that that was a happy time, too.

## VASILY

Ants crawling along a tree trunk....Military trucks roaring around you. Soldiers. Shouts and curses. Swearing. Helicopters whirring. And they keep crawling.

## VASILY (Cont.)

We will vanish and they won't even notice. And I? I had never looked at them so closely before.

## KATYA

Have you heard anything about the Hibasuki? The survivors of Hiroshima? They can marry only among themselves. We don't write about it here, we don't talk about it. But we exist. The Chornobyl Hibasuki.

## VASILY

Should you remember? I think it's pointless. We'll only be trying to invent something that resembles our life. I tried. But failed. After Chornobyl, all that's left is the mythology about Chornobyl.

## VALENTINA

I was given a special syringe and shown how to use it. I was supposed to feed him through it.

## SERGEI

My men are getting sick. And their bosses say it's the Chornobyl hypochondria.

## GRIGORY

There is nothing—

## SERGEI

This is not hypochondria. I felt something similar when a close friend died. The sun was shining. Birds flying around. Swallows. It rained. But he was dead. Do you understand?

I saw an apple tree in bloom and started filming it. The bees were buzzing, the flowers were wedding white. People were working, flowers blooming, a

## SERGEI (Cont.)

symbol! I had the camera in my hands, I should have been filming, but there was something wrong. The exposure was right, the picture was ready and something was off. And suddenly I understood. I didn't smell anything. The orchard was in bloom, but there was no smell. I learned later that this happens, to some. When the organism is exposed to high levels of radiation, some of the organs get blocked.

## GRIGORY

Bring me certified accounts. They have to have official seals. Signed.

## VALENTINA

Four times a day I cooked something fresh, it had to be fresh, I ground it up, strained it and then put it in the syringe.

## VASILY

Show me a science fiction novel about Chernobyl. There isn't one! Reality is stranger.

## VALENTINA

I would push it into one of the tubes, the largest, which went into the stomach. He couldn't smell things anymore. I would ask, "Taste good?" And he wouldn't know.

## VASILY

I keep a special notebook. I write down conversations, rumours, jokes. They're the most interesting thing, and they're timeless. What is left of Ancient Greece? Their mythology of Ancient Greece.

## VALENTINA

We managed to get to the movies a few times. To kiss there.

VASILY

Here is my notebook: From conversations: "All the radio has reported for the last ten years is that the situation is stabilizing. The situation is stabilizing.....The situation is stab—The most popular fairy tale from the Zone is that Stolichnaya vodka is the best defense against strontium and cesium.

GRIGORY

We didn't start thinking about it until—let me get this right - probably twelve years later. One got sick, and then another. Someone died, another went crazy, another committed suicide. That's when we started wondering.

VASILY

When will it all end? Not even when this generation passes away.

ANNA

I don't think there every was any Chornobyl. I think they made it up.

VASILY

The first wolf dogs have appeared, born of she-wolves and dogs that are not afraid of the light or of man. And wild cats are entering villagers in packs and attacking people.

ANNA

Tricked people.

VALENTINA

We were hanging by the thinnest thread. They guys were dying one after the other. And then one morning, I woke him up, gave him his robe, but he couldn't get up. Or say anything. He couldn't talk any longer. His eyes were so big. That's when he got scared. Yes.

We had a year left.

ANNA

You know, they tell stories. There was this other man, his wife also died, and he was left with a baby. A man alone. He drowned his sorrows. He would take all the baby's wet things and stick them under a pillow. And his wife, or her spirit, would come at night, wash and dry them and fold them. He saw her once, called to her and she vanished. Turned to air. She never showed up again. Your daughter is grown, be happy. You don't believe it? Then tell me, where do fairy tales come from? Maybe they were true stories once upon a time. You should know, you're educated.

VASILY

We had a New Year's Eve party. The table was beautifully laid. Everything was home made: smoked meats, bacon, pickles—only the bread came from the store. Even the vodka was our own, moonshine.

We ate. And we started singing. Without having discussed it, we started singing revolutionary songs. Songs about the war. "*The morning adds a delicate color to the walls of the ancient Kremlin,*" - my favorite. And we had a good evening. Like the old days.

KATYA

Papa, I can picture the scene. It's madness. Chernobyl land. The tree lit up. And people at the table singing revolutionary and wartime songs.

VASILY

I was horrified. Not for myself, but for my daughter. She has nowhere to come back to.

GRIGORY

At night I'm awakened by my mother's voice. "Son, why don't you speak? You're not sleeping, you're lying there with your eyes open. And the light is on." I keep silent. No one can speak to me in a way that I can answer. In my own language. No one understands where I've been. And I can't talk about it.

KATYA

I had a boyfriend. An artist. I remembered how he questioned me about the color of the fire at the reactor, whether I had seen the cats and dogs shot and left in the street? How did the people cry? Did I see them die?

GRIGORY

We have our instructions. For the time being we must consider such cases as normal maladies. In twenty or thirty years, when we have a full data bank on Chernobyl, we will begin to link these conditions to radiation. But for the time being, science knows very little about it.

KATYA

*Oh, the grief. The grief of the city  
Ripped to oblivion. Oh the victims,  
No cure for the doom*

VASILY

*That took the city after all, and I,  
Her last ember, I go down with her.*

KATYA

I didn't know that we couldn't make love here. Many years ago my grandmother read in the Bible that the time would come when everything would be in abundance, everything would flower and bear fruit, the rivers

## KATYA

would be full of fish and forests full of trees, but man would not be able to enjoy it. He would not be able to have children and perpetuate the race. I listened to the ancient prophecies like fairy tales. I did not believe them.

## VALENTINA

He died all that year.

## ARKADY

At the time I was thinking about something else.

## VALENTINA

Every day he got worse and worse, and he knew that his crew was dying. We were living like that, too. With that thought.

Ask me how people die after Chornobyl. The man I loved, whom I could not have loved more if I had given birth to him myself, turned before my very eyes into a monster.

## VASILY

The Chornobyl mythology: A few people allegedly saw a strange light in the sky above the station before the explosion. Someone even photographed it. The negative revealed an extraterrestrial object floating in the sky.

## ARKADY

Items from the newspapers flashed through my mind: the academician Alexandrov, the godfather of our nuclear stations, had sworn that they were absolutely safe, that they could be built on Red Square. Safer than a samovar. But my wife had left me. That was all I could think about. Her. I had attempted suicide a few times.

## GRIGORY

It's stuck in my mind. For years. Too bad we didn't have a bullet among us to finish off that poodle. Twenty people and not a single bullet at the end of the day. Not one.

## VASILY

It wasn't an accident, but an earthquake. Something happened in the earth's core. A geological explosion. Geophysical and cosmophysical forces at work.

## ARKADY

I landed in a wild world there, a combination of the end of the world and the Stone Age. And all my nerves were raw, exposed. We lived in the woods. In tents. Twenty kilometers from the reactor. They called us "partisans," that is, people like me who were called up for military reserve training. Many had higher or a technical education and I, by the way, am a history teacher.

## VASILY

The military knew about it ahead of time, but it was all top secret.

## STEPANOV

They put away the director of the atomic station for awhile and then let him out. In that system it was hard to say who was guilty.

## ARKADY

There was one Geiger counter for the lot of us. On the one hand, we had no freedom, like prison-camp inmates, and on the other, there was fear. But I didn't feel fear. I felt as if I was observing everything that was happening to me.

## VASILY

People are finding pike in the rivers and lakes with no heads or fins. Just a belly swimming. And something similar is going to happen with people soon. The Belarussians will mutate into humanoids.

## ANNA

A woman sells her apples on the street. "Apples from Chornobyl! Apples from Chornobyl!" A businessman stops her. "Don't say they're from Chornobyl. No one will buy them." "Sure they do." She says. "Some buy them for their mothers-in-law, some for their bosses."

## VASILY

Rumors: they are building camps behind Chornobyl to intern those who have been exposed to radiation there. They'll keep them, observe them and then bury them.

## ARKADY

I saw a man whose house was being buried before his very eyes. They ironed it flat with a tractor. Along with the couch, stools, pails, jars and spoons. Along with the bicycles and baby carriages. When they were done, the ground was flat. There wasn't even a mound. A field where there had been a village.

## GRIGORY

They told us never to tell anyone what we had seen. When I came back from Afghanistan, I knew that I would live. But with Chornobyl it's all backwards: I'd be killed when I got back.

## VASILY

Corpses from the villages closest to the station are brought out in bus loads straight to the cemetery, thousands buried in common graves. Like during the time of the Leningrad blockade---

## ARKADY

Burials, burials. We buried houses, wells, trees. We buried earth. We cut it and rolled it up in big sheets which lay there like coffins. I told you, nothing heroic.

## LUDMILA

I always go to them with two bouquets: one for him and the other I put on the corner for her. On the grave stone it does not say: Natashenka Ignatenko. It has only his name. She has no name, no nothing.

## VALENTINA

When my husband was dying, he just looked at me. He wrote in our notebook: "When I die, burn my body. I don't want you to be afraid." Why? Well, you know the rumors. That Chernobyl victims glow even after death.

## VASILY

Children from Chernobyl have an unknown liquid instead of blood.

## LUDMILA

I crawl around the grave on my knees. Always on my knees.

## VALENTINA

I read that people avoid the graves of the Chernobyl firemen who are reburied outside of Moscow. They don't want their relatives buried near them. If the dead fear the dead, what about the living?

## VASILY

There are scientists who say that the apes grew so intelligent because they lived in areas of high radiation.

## KATYA

I have two boys and one girl. They don't go to nursery school or kindergarten. They're always in the hospital. The older one—he's neither a boy nor a girl. He's bald. I take him to the doctor, and also to the healers. He has a blood disease. I can't even pronounce the word for it.

## ARKADY

I killed them by the dozens, hundreds, thousands, without even knowing what they were called. Destroyed their houses. Their secrets. I buried them. Buried.

## VALENTINA

Something black grew over him. His chin vanished, so did his neck, his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Blood vessels would burst and he would bleed. In all directions.

## VASILY

Someday they'll find the remains of some very strange burials. Graveyards for animals are called bio-cemeteries by the scientists. These are modern-day temples. There lie thousands of dogs, cats, horses that were shot. And not a single name.

## VALENTINA

It was horrible. The whole pillow would be covered in blood. I'd put a basin under the bleeding. The streams would strike it like milk hitting a bucket. That sound - so peaceful and country like. I can hear it at night even now. When he was still conscious, he would clap our hands - that was our signal. Call an ambulance! He did not want to die. He was forty-five.

## ARKADY

I haven't told you anything. Just fragments.

## VALENTINA

He would scream in pain. Scream all day long. I found something that helped: I would use the syringe to pour a bottle of vodka into him. He would forget the pain, then. It wasn't my idea, other women told me.

## ARKADY

There is another story, about a resident of Jerusalem, whose house was on the route that Christ took to the cross. He saw everything and heard everything, but he had a toothache then. He saw Christ fall as He was carrying the cross, fall and scream. The man saw all that, but his tooth hurt and he could not follow and be a witness. Two days later when his toothache was over, he was told that Christ has arisen, and he thought, "I could have been a witness, but I had a toothache."

## KATYA

My daughter. She's not like everyone else. And when she grows up, she's going to ask me, "Why am I like this?" When she was born....it wasn't a baby but a living sack, closed on all sides, without a single crack. Only the eyes were open. The medical chart read female; born with multiple complex pathology: aplasia of the anus, aplasia of the vagina, aplasia of the left kidney. In ordinary language it means no peepee, no poopoo and only one kidney.

## STEPANOV

I feel humiliated on behalf of the homeland. What a superpower it was. The whole world watched us. Some trembled with fear, some envied us. Damn it! And now? If Chernobyl had not blown up, the country would not have collapsed. A superpower! Damn it! A loaf of bread under the communists cost 20 kopeks and now it's 2000 roubles. I used to buy a bottle of vodka for three roubles, and had enough left over for a snack. And now, with the democrats? They've sold everything! Signed it all away! Our grandchildren will still be paying off our debts.

## KATYA

Write this in your book. My daughter sings and dances and recites poetry by heart. Her mental development is normal, she is no different from other children. But she has other games. She does not play shops or schools, she plays hospital with her dolls. She takes their temperature, prescribes an IV. And when the doll dies, she covers it with a white sheet. They made an anus for her. They're forming a vagina. After the last operation her urination stopped completely. They couldn't get the catheter in, and she needs a few more operations. But now they suggest we continue abroad. And where are we supposed to find tens of thousands of dollars, when my husband makes 120 dollars a month?

## VASILY

With this pathology your child is of great interest to science. Write to foreign clinics. They will be interested.

## KATYA

I am writing. I write that every half hour I have to squeeze the urine out by hand, the urine comes out through a pinpoint opening in the area of the vagina. If you don't do it, her only kidney will malfunction. Where else in the world is there a child who has to have her urine pumped out by hand every half-hour? And how long can she take that? No one knows the effect of low doses of radiation on humans, on children. Take my little girl, even if it's for experimentation. I don't want her to die. I'm willing to let my daughter become a guinea pig, to experiment on like a rabbit or a frog, if that will keep her alive. I have written dozens of letters.

## VALENTINA

There are private things. He had desires. Even then. I would go to him, at night, the way a man goes to a woman.

LUDMILA

I found a man. I explained it all to him.

VALENTINA

In the mornings I would look at him and not believe what had happened during the night.

LUDMILA

I had no desire for life. Whenever I passed a school, I would stop and stare I could watch children all day. I want to have a baby. I am afraid to be alone. I can't take it anymore.

We met, but I never brought him home. I couldn't at home. Vasya was there.

SERGEI

I was covering a summer festival, on the Black Sea, and asked about the vacation homes on the horizon. "Be careful of those," a local told me. "They imported the wood from Chornobyl."

VALENTINA

I couldn't imagine for a moment that he would not be in the house, that we would not be together. My mother and his brother, they tried to prepare me, told me the doctors recommended a special hospital outside Minsk for the dying. For doomed men who had fought in Afghanistan and were dying without arms, without legs. Now they brought Chornobyl victims there.

LUDMILA

I gave birth to a boy. Now I have someone to live and breathe for. He understands very well. "Mama, if I go to grandma's for two days, will you be able to breathe?" I won't. I'm afraid to be separated from him even for one day.

Then I had the stroke. Out on the street. And I grabbed him by the hand. I don't remember the rest. I opened my eyes in the hospital. I had grabbed him so hard that his hand was black and blue.

He is sickly, too. He spends two weeks in school, two weeks at home with the doctor. That's how we live.

#### VALENTINA

The final weeks were the worst. It took him half an hour to urinate into a half-litre jar. He couldn't look up. On the last day, this happened: he opened his eyes, sat up, smiled, and said my name. "Valyushka!" He died alone. People die alone.

#### SERGEI

I remember in fragments. It was a very dry May. Twenty years ago. Waiting for the First Party Secretary Slyunkov to arrive. No one could tell us exactly where or when he would show up, but we figured it out ourselves. Where there had been a dusty road, they were suddenly laying asphalt—and two or three layers thick. I remember complaining about the reek - the smell of the asphalt---

They were expecting big shots. And I saw those big shots, who walked very carefully only on the fresh asphalt and not a centimeter off the road. I didn't film that.

#### VALENTINA

I did not tell you that when he died, no one dared go hear him, they were all afraid. And yet relatives aren't supposed to prepare the body for burial, according to Slavic traditions.

#### SERGEI

Pictures jumble in my mind....the chairman of the collective farm wants to bring his family and all his things out in two cars, but the Party organizer wants

## SERGEI (Cont.)

one car for himself. But that same week they couldn't evacuate the Pre-school group, because they don't have the transport. And here he insists he needs more than two cars to load up everything, including three litre jars of pickles and sacks of potatoes. I saw them packing for their morning trip. I didn't film that, either.

## VALENTINA

Two orderlies came from the morgue. They asked for vodka. "We've seen it all, car accidents, knife fights, children who died in fires. But nothing like this. The Chernobyl victims die the worst. I stopped the clocks in the house. Seven in the morning. And more than twenty years later, we can't start one of them.

## SERGEI

I have a long film in my memory that I did not film. Lots of reels.

## KATYA

*My knowledge of the world is this:*

*I must sit here*

## VALENTINA

What has saved me? What has pushed me towards life? Brought me back? My son. I still have a son, our son together. He's been sick/ a long time.

## KATYA

*/I must sit here prepared at any moment to have death come knocking at the door.*

## VALENTINA

I dream of getting an apartment near the psychiatric hospital. He's there. The doctors said that if he is to survive, he must live there. I go there on

VALENTINA

weekends. When he sees me he asks, "Where is Papa? When will he come visit?" He's waiting for him.

KATYA

*That is my knowledge of the world.*

VALENTINA

We'll wait together.

KATYA

*And that, I think that breaks the heart.*

ARKADY

My wife was afraid of me when I came back from Chernobyl. Stopped loving me.

I could have been a witness.