

**I LEFT THEM IN EMBERS**

By

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I am not Soviet, I am not Rusnak. I am part of the *other* Ukraine: the forgotten one. Mikhailo tells me that in a few years, he'll fly me to America, or sail me to the port of Spain - anywhere away from Moscow's iron thumb.

While we wait, we begin to learn the languages of these different universes.

As we string ribbons around trees for the May Day Parade and fry blinis pancakes to mirror the summer sun, we murmur to one another under our breaths.

"*Mångata*," I smile, pointing out to the Pripyat River. "Swedish. The winding road of the moon's reflection in the water."

My brother rests his hand on my shoulder. The sun warms our backs. He pauses for a moment, then turns to me.

"*Ya'aburnee*, Khrystyna." He taps his chest with his right hand. "Arabic. I hope that I die before you because it would be impossible for me to live without you. You bury me."

I laugh gently and rest in his lap under the late summer sun.

We slowly walk home and settle into rough linen sheets with Mama. I am dreaming of parades and maypoles when light wakes me from my fitful sleep. A fireball brightens the sky, the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin Nuclear Power Station spews a glowing blue beam, and sirens pervade the air.

Mama pulls us up and shepherds us outside. We see flames licking the plant's roof. Then devouring it. I squeeze her arm tightly - until the skin of my knuckles is stretched tight over the bone. Papa works nights at the station.

Mama looks out to the railway bridge. Nearly the entire town is huddled there, staring at the lights and fire.

"Stay here, my darlings. I'll be back before you know I'm gone." She plants a firm kiss on my forehead and hurries to the bridge, praying that she'll find Papa there, waiting for her.

A moment after she leaves, so do we. I have to see it all for myself. I run until my lungs are raw and my palate is caked with syrupy saliva. My twin gasps behind, his face pale and wet, but I do not stop. I can *feel* the scale of the disaster now. It burns me, my lips tingle and chafe, my head spins. The word *Chingada* comes to mind, used in Mexico to describe a far off Hell. Only, this particular underworld is uncomfortably close. Near enough to smell.

Papa's dead. I don't have to see his body to know. The ground is littered with skinless, faceless firemen. And he works on the inside. If the fire or the smoke didn't take him, he asked the first passer-by to mercy-kill. He's gone. And they all will be, soon enough.

I turn, and through tear blurred tunnel vision, see a civilian army gathering. The operators are stealing everyone near, conscripting them. Men, women, and not-even-children. Hoses and Geiger-Mueller detectors have been clipped to their belts and flimsy gas masks strapped to their necks.

A man with bleeding eyes takes my baby brother by the collar and fits him with heavy nylon gloves. Mikhailo pauses a moment, then straightens, takes the man's hand, and marches into the ranks. I bite my lip until I taste warm iron and shout for him to come back to me, to our little hut by the river. He cries, telling me that he has no choice. He talks of our father, our cousins, the radioactive cloud blooming from reactor four. But everything he says is as if through the lens of a fever dream.

He's blubbering now. "Ya'abur-" he tries to choke.

I turn away. "Don't."

He looks at me with huge, bloodshot, earnest eyes.

"I'm sorry, Khrystyna."

He doubles over and vomits blood at my feet until he is dry-heaving.

"*Run.*"

I do as Mikhailo tells me. My next weeks are spent alone in the hospital. Mama's the first to meet me there. She arrives on a stretcher. Her skin is blistered all over. It turns blush, and then brown. She decomposes as I watch. Her arteries and veins bruise and burst, like an overripe fruit. She lays like this for two weeks before she dies. She received a fatal dose of radiation on the railway overpass - all who gathered there did. The nurses call it the 'Bridge of Death'.

Papa's body could never be identified.

And Mikhailo is the last to be found.

It aches, seeing him hurt like this. The hospital beds are full, the floor too. I take him to the river, to die with me.

Red flags still line the streets in preparation for the May Day Parade. Only now, they are tattered and singed. We are meant to be weaving ribbons around maypoles and washing our faces with the summer-time dew, and eating the sun. But instead, we are here: the all-alone girl and her irreparably-irradiated boy. Better-off-dead boy.

Mikhailo's burns look like a thousand stick-figure skeletons, lying prone in a cracked and puckered wasteland.

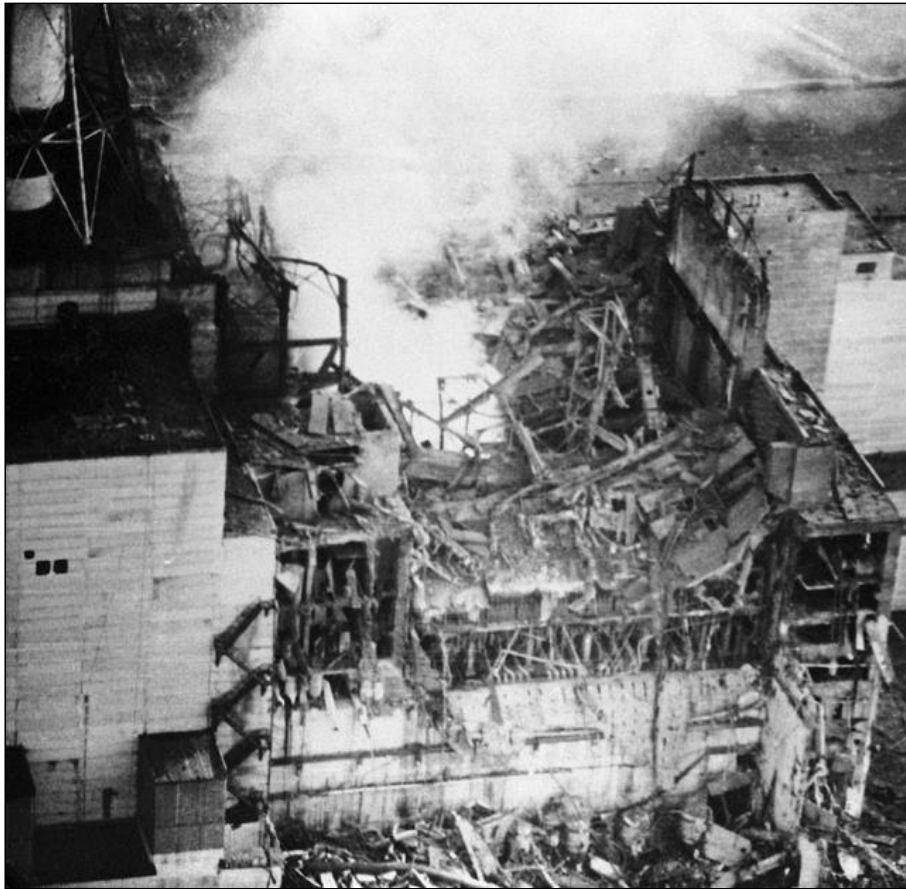
I swallow, choking back metallic bile. My face contorts. Tears stream down my cheeks, falling onto his own. I gently roll Mikhailo's body into the waters of the Pripyat. He drifts down the moon road, out to a place of peace.

Even as he disappears into the Pripyat's depths, I whisper, praying he can somehow hear me. I beg him. Hoping a part of him is here, listening, living still.

*"Ya'aburnee. You bury me."*



*Disused cradles in the maternity ward of the Pripyat hospital.*



*A photograph of the Chernobyl power plant burning in the aftermath of the explosion.*



*Firemen attempt to extinguish the flames devouring Chernobyl.*

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