

Svetlana Alexievich

VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL: CHRONICLE OF THE FUTURE

Translated by Antonina W. Bouis

P R O L O G U E

We are air, we are not earth ...

M. Mamardashvili

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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 didn't even know how much. I had no idea. We lived in the hostel of the fire station where he worked. On the second floor. There were three other couples, and we all shared one kitchen. Below us, on the first floor, were the fire engines. Red fire engines. That was his work. I always knew where he was and what he was doing. 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." I did not see the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything seemed to glow. The whole sky. The flames were high. And smoke. Horrible heat.

And he was still out. The smoke came from the burning bitumen, the reactor's roof was covered with bitumen. He later told me it was like walking on tar. They were trying to beat down the flames. They kicked the burning graphite down to the ground.... They had gone off to the fire without their protective gear, just in their shirt sleeves. They had not been warned, they had been summoned as if to a normal fire.

Four o'clock. Five. Six. At six we had planned to go to his parent's house. To plant potatoes. It's 40 kilometres from the city of Pripyat to Sperizhye, the village where his parents live. Sowing, ploughing -- he loved that work. His mother often told me how they did not want to let him move to the city, they had even built a new house for him. But he was drafted into the army. He served in Moscow in the fire brigade and when he came out, he wanted to be a fireman. And nothing else! [Silence] Sometimes I hear his voice. Alive. Even photographs don't have the same effect on me as the voice. But he never calls me ... not even in my dreams. It's I who call him.

Seven o'clock. At seven they informed me that he was in the hospital. I ran over there, but a cordon of police surrounded the hospital and they 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 started looking for a friend who was a doctor at that hospital. I grabbed onto her white coat as she got out of an ambulance. "Get me inside!" "I can't. He's in a bad way. They all are." I held on to her. "Just to see him!" "All right," she said. "But hurry. Just for fifteen or twenty minutes."

I saw him. He was all swollen and puffed up. You could barely see his eyes. "He needs milk. Lots of milk," my friend said. "They should drink at least three litres each." "But he doesn't like milk." "He'll drink it now." Many of the doctor and nurses, especially the orderlies, in that hospital got sick themselves and died. But we didn't know that then.

At ten in the morning, the cameraman Shishenok died. He was the first to die. On the first day. We learned that another one was left under the debris -- Valera Khodemchuk. They never reached him. He was buried in concrete. And we didn't know then that they were just the first of many.

I asked him, "Vasenka, what should I do?" "Get out of here! Leave! You're going to have a baby." I was pregnant. But how could I leave him? He begged me, "Leave! Save the baby!" "First I'll get you some milk, and then we'll decide."

My girlfriend Tanya Kibenok was there. Her husband was in the same ward. Her father was with her, and he had a car. We drove to the nearest village for milk. About three kilometres outside town. We bought a lot of three-litre jars of milk. Six of them -- so there would be enough for everyone. But the milk made them vomit violently. They kept passing out, they were hooked up to IVs. The doctors insisted for some reason that they had been poisoned by gas and no one mentioned radiation. The city was filled with military machines and all the roads were closed. The commuter trains were stopped and so were the long-distance lines. They were washing the streets with a white powder. I worried about how I would get to the village to buy fresh milk for him. No one said anything about radiation. But the soldiers were wearing gas masks. And yet the city residents carried bread from the stores, open bags with rolls, and pastry lay out on the counters.

That evening they would not let me into the hospital. There was a sea of people all around it. I stood outside his window, and he went over and shouted something to me. So desperately! Someone in the crowd understood: they were being taken to Moscow that night. The wives collected in one group. We decided that we would go with them. Let us through to our husbands! You don't have the right! We fought and scratched. The soldiers - there were soldiers there by then - pushed us back. A doctor came out and confirmed that they were flying to Moscow, but we had to bring them clothing -- what they had worn to the reactor had been burned. The buses were not running any more and we had to run

across town. We ran back with bags, but the plane had gone. They had tricked us. So that we wouldn't be there shouting and weeping.

Night time. All along one side of the street buses were parked, hundreds of them (they were preparing to evacuate the city) and all along the other side were hundreds of fire trucks. They had brought them in from all over. The street was covered in white foam. We walked on it, weeping and cursing.

The radio said that the city might be evacuated for three to five days. Take your warm things and running suits, you'll be living in the woods. In tents. People were actually glad: a camping trip! A great way to celebrate May Day! Unusual. They prepared meat for *shashlyk* to cook over a fire. They packed guitars and tape-players. The only ones who cried were the wives of the men who had been hurt. I don't remember the trip. I woke up when I saw his mother. "Mother, Vasya is in Moscow. They took him in a special plane!" But we finished planting the garden (and a week later they evacuated the village). Who knew? Who knew then? That evening I started vomiting. I was in my sixth month. I was so sick. That night I dreamed that he was calling. All the time that he was alive, he called me in my sleep. "Lyusya! Lyusenka!" But after he died, he never called to me. Not once. [Weeps.] That morning I woke up with the thought that I was going to Moscow. Myself.

"How can you go in your condition?" his mother wept. We got his father packed to go with me. He took money from their savings account, all the money they had.

I don't remember the trip. It's as if it dropped out of my memory. I asked the first policeman I saw in Moscow which hospital had the Chernobyl firemen, and he told us. Hospital Number Six, on Shchukinskaya Street.

It was a specialist radiology hospital and you could not get in without a pass. I paid the woman at the door and she said "Go in." I asked and begged someone else And then I ended up in the office of the head of the radiology department -- Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova. I didn't know her name then, I couldn't remember anything. I only knew that I had to see my husband.

The first thing she asked me was "Do you have children?" How could I admit it? I knew that I had to hide my pregnancy. Otherwise they wouldn't let me see him. It's a good thing I'm thin, I wasn't showing yet. "Yes," I replied. "How many?" I thought: I have to say two. If it's only one, they won't let me see him. "A boy and a girl." "Well, if you have two, you probably won't be having anymore. Now listen: the central nervous system is completely damaged, the bone marrow is completely destroyed ..." "All right," I thought. "So he'll be a bit nervous." "And listen to this: if you cry -- I'll throw you out right away. You may not hug or kiss. Don't come close. I'll give you half an hour." But I knew that I would never leave. If I left, it would be with him. I swore that to myself.

I went in. They were sitting on a bed, playing cards and laughing. "Vasya!" they called to him. He turned and said, "Oh, boy, I'm doomed. She managed to find me even here." He looked so funny, he was wearing size 48 pyjamas, when he needed a size 52. The sleeves and legs were too short. But the swelling on his face had gone down. He was being pumped with some liquid.

"So where did you disappear to?" I asked. He wanted to hug me. "Stay put." The doctor would not let him get near me. "No call for hugging." We turned it all into a joke, and everyone else came running, from the other wards, too. They were all from Pripyat. They had flown 28 of them out in the plane. What was going on back home? I told them that they had started an evacuation, the whole city was going away for three to five days.

The boys kept quiet, but there were two women among them. One, who had been on reception duty the day of the accident, started to cry. "My God! My children are there. What's happening to them?" I wanted to be alone with him, even if just for a minute. The others sensed it and everyone made an excuse and went out into the hallway.

Then I put my arms around him and kissed him. He moved away. "Don't sit next to me. Take that chair." "It's all nonsense," I said, waving it off. "Did you see where the explosion was? What happened? 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.

The next day when I arrived, they were all in individual rooms. They were strictly forbidden to go out into the hallway or have contact with one another. They knocked on the walls to communicate. Dot dash, dot dash.

The doctors explained it by saying that every organism reacts differently to radiation and what one person might be able to tolerate could kill another. Even the walls in their area gave off radiation. To the left, to the right and to the floor below them. They moved everybody out of those wards. There was no one above or below them.

I stayed for three days with my Moscow friends. They kept telling me: take a pot, take a bowl, take whatever you need. I made turkey broth for six people. Six of our guys. Firemen from the same shift. They were all on duty that night: Bashchuk, Kibenok, Titenok, Pravik and Tishchura. At the store I bought them all toothpaste, toothbrushes and soap. The hospital didn't have any of that. I bought them small towels. Now when I think about it, I am amazed by my friends. Of course they were afraid, they had to be afraid, because there were all kinds of rumors by then, but nevertheless, they offered me whatever I needed. Take it! How is he? How are they all? Will they live? Live.... [Silence.] I met a lot of good people then, and I don't remember all of them. The whole world had narrowed to

a single point for me. It shortened. Him. Only him. I remember an elderly orderly, who told me, "There are diseases that cannot be cured. All you can do is to sit with them and pat them on the hand." Early in the morning I went off to the market, then to my friends' place, to cook broth. I had to mince everything and sieve it. Then someone asked, "Bring me an apple." With six half-litre jars. Always for six. Off to the hospital. I stayed there until night time. And then back across town.

How did I have the strength? But after three days they told me I could stay in the hospital hotel, right on the grounds. God, what happiness! "But there's no kitchen. How will I cook for them?" "There's no need anymore. They cannot digest food." He began changing -- every day I found a new man. The burns were surfacing. In his mouth, his tongue, his cheeks - first they were small ulcers and then they spread. The mucous membranes came off in layers. In white sheets. The color of his face. The color of his body. Blue. Red. Greyish brown. And it was mine, I loved every inch of it. I can't say it! You can't write it! I loved him! I didn't know yet just how much I loved him! We had only recently got married. We'd be walking down the street. He would pick me up and spin me round. And shower me with kisses. People would walk past and smile. The prognosis for acute radiation sickness is fourteen days. It takes a man fourteen days to die.

They used a Geiger counter on me the very first day in the hotel. My clothing, my purse, wallet and shoes -- they were all hot. And they took it all away from me, even my underwear. They only left the money. They gave me a huge hospital gown to replace my clothing, size 56, and large slippers, size 43. They said we might have to return the clothing, or we might not, since it probably wouldn't clean up. And so I came to him in that outfit. "Heavens! What happened to you?" But I managed to make broth anyway. I used an immersion coil in a glass jar. I threw in pieces of chicken. Tiny pieces. Later someone gave me a pot, I think one of the maids or the concierge of the hotel. Someone else gave me a cutting-board so I could chop parsley. I couldn't go to the market in my hospital gown, so someone brought me the greens. But it was useless, he couldn't even drink by then, or swallow a raw egg. And yet I wanted to get him something tasty! As if it could help. I did get as far as the post office. "Girls," I begged the operators, "I have to call my parents in Ivano-Frankovsk urgently. My husband is dying." They must have guessed right away where I was from and who my husband was, and they connected me instantly. My father, sister and brother flew out to join me in Moscow that same day. They brought me my things and more money.

May 9. Victory Day. He had always told me, "You can't imagine how beautiful Moscow is! Especially on Victory Day, with the fireworks. I want you to see that." I was sitting next to him in the ward. He opened his eyes. "Is it day or night?" "Nine p.m." "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.

"That's gorgeous!" "I promised you I would show you Moscow. I promised I would give 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. I ran over and kissed him. "My darling! My love!" He grumbled at me, "What did the doctors say? You can't hug me! You can't kiss me!" I wasn't allowed to hug him. But I ... I lifted him up and helped him sit. I made his bed. I took his temperature. I carried his bed-pan. No one said anything about that.

--Excerpted from an interview with Ludmila Ignatenko, wife of the deceased firefighter Vasily Ignatenko.

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