

Leon who was on the listening end of confabulations with the old man, my questions fish-hooking his answers, which I scribbled on the pages of a lined notebook as soon as I got back home. The Leon who hung out with him in his apartment when nobody else could get to within shouting distance except for the comrades he called kittens, them and the household, who skimmed the marble floors of the palace in bedroom slippers so as not to wake him because it was supposed, at his age—not to mention what he might have had on his conscience being that he helped run the country—he didn't sleep all that much, which turned out to be more or less factual.

You're thinking to yourself: Like, how could the kid know a detail like that if he hadn't been there like he says he was?

I suppose I need to start at the start, the only problem being I'm not sure I can identify the start. Maybe, hey, maybe it was my dad

dying of radiation poisoning. You'll probably recognize his name—David Rozental?—he was famous, here in Russia at least. He was the nuclear physicist who came up with the quantum field model of the weak nuclear force (being my father's son, I actually understand it), he was the one who convinced the general secretary it was theoretically possible to make an atomic bomb (I think that's when they gave him the Pobeda with the golf-club gear shift), later he was in charge of the super-secret Laboratory No. 2 in the Academy of Sciences and organized Russia's first chain reaction. It wasn't cooled by heavy water because Russia didn't have heavy water—they used graphite to slow down the chain. Naturally it didn't slow down and overheated. Everyone bolted except for my dad, who tried to save the precious uranium in the rods because Russia didn't have all that much uranium neither. When my dad didn't come home from work that day my

mother, thinking he might have been arrested—hoping he had been arrested because the alternative was too awful—made frantic phone calls until she fell on someone at the Laboratory who told her what happened and made her swear not to say who told her. I heard my mom utter a swear word as she hung down the phone and break into hysterical sobs. Seeing her cry, naturally I cried too, though at the time I wasn't sure what I was crying about. That was four years ago, in 1949; I was six going on six and a half. David Rozental was awarded the Order of Lenin for his work on "First Lightning," which was the code name of our first Soviet atomic bomb. My mom took me with her to a secret ceremony in a stuffy hotel room filled with papier-mâché funeral flowers and stone-faced men who looked as if they were suffering from terminal heartburn. They gave me American chewing gum and a real NKVD badge. One of them, a little guy

with thick heels on his shoes to make him taller and a monocle glued to his left eye, stepped up to my mother and planted a noisy kiss on both of her ashy cheeks, then permitted the back of his right hand to graze her left breast as he pinned this medal on her dress. (Hey, at six and a half I already knew about the birds and the bees.) It was in this hotel room I learned the word posthumously. Okay, let's say, for argument's sake, that was the start.

Or maybe . . . on second thought, maybe it started with my mother's arrest. Now that I think of it, that seems like a smarter place to start if for no other reason than it's fresher in my brain.

So I'll start with this major event in my life: my mom's arrest.

Thanks to my father being this important nuclear physicist, thanks to my mother being this important heart doctor in the Kremlin hospital, we'd been assigned an apartment in

the House on the Embankment, on the third floor no less, where the politburo and CheKist bigwigs lived. The hero who led the storming of the Winter Palace in the glorious Bolshevik Revolution, Nikolai something or other, lived in apartment 280. I never actually saw him, my friend Isabeau did and said he had a long white beard. There was also this famous explorer, Ilya something or other, who walked the penguin he brought back from the Arctic on a leash. Him I've seen with my own eyes. The penguin was cute, the less said about Ilya something or other the better. The esteemed general secretary's cousins, the Svanidzes and the Redens, lived down the hall. I went to school with their kids—most of them were pills. The esteemed general secretary's own daughter, Svetlana, lived next to the elevator in apartment 179 with her newest husband. My chum Zinaida babysat their baby girl, which is how we heard about Svetlana having one or two husbands