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# Commentary from Russia/Ukraine

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Editors' Note: Following is an anonymous commentary written by a friend of our journal. Anonymity is required as a safeguard for this person. Because of the political situation, it is not safe to include any names or gender identification. The author is a professor of human services in Russia but is Ukrainian. The person's family lives in Kiev and it is an emotionally troubling time for all of them. This commentary represents the first of two parts. The second half will be published in our next issue.

By Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Editor and Kathleen Hoffman, Board Member

## Angelina <sup>1</sup>

I fell in love with her immediately and with all my heart. It's impossible not to love her. If you knew her, you would understand – Angelina is smart, beautiful, talented, mischievous, active, resourceful, kind, caring – this is all about her, and at the same time, this is not all that can be said about how wonderful she is. This is someone who is just perfection itself, and do not think that this is flattery or exaggeration, no! This is the absolute truth. And Angelina is very dear to me. Let me explain why.

We met way back in our now-distant Soviet childhood. My dad and I came to Kyiv when I was seven years old, and I was immediately introduced

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<sup>1</sup> Hero names have been changed for security reasons

to this big friendly family: there were many generations, along with brothers and sisters. For a while I didn't get them straight, and I couldn't call everyone by name for some time. But I remembered Angelina right away. I remember how on a sunny June day we walked along Khreshchatyk, the central street in Kyiv. We held hands, two very small girls with bows in their hair, wearing beautiful silk dresses.

When they bought us ice cream (many Ukrainians remember what delicious ice cream they sold on Khreshchatyk: popsicles, varied scoops in all their glory, creme brulees), I looked at the sellers and pointed with my finger at the kind of ice cream I wanted. Angelina was willing to help, but she had large horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses perched on her nose, and she could not immediately see what kind of ice cream they were selling. And so, having all stood in line, our adults bought us our chosen ice cream, and soon we were walking, completely happy, along the huge Khreshchatyk. People smiled at us, eating our popsicles on sticks. As I was walking next to her, I felt haunted by her glasses. It seemed to me that she needed help and protection, and I was ready to take care of her, help her. Still, as I walked beside her I couldn't understand: why would such a cheerful and beautiful little girl have these glasses, like my grandmother? It's seemed so unfair!

During the first month that we knew each other, we found lots of interesting things to do. We rode the elevators in neighboring buildings, and ran away from the yard to a phone booth – where we busily called various emergency services, excitedly describing imaginary accidents or fires nearby. Sometimes we called numbers at random, and even spending two kopecks on each call, just to talk to anyone who would pick up the phone. I remember once a big, rather frightening man chased after us when he realized what we were doing while we were occupying a telephone booth for so long. We raced out to a crowded avenue, and he was unable to nab us and perhaps punish us in front of people. All he could do was shake a finger at us before he turned around and left. Undeterred, we laughed heartily at his heaviness and clumsiness – having great fun after our narrow escape. Then we chased pigeons, climbed onto the roof through the door in the attic of a nine-story building, made gloves out of glue by smearing it on our hands

and letting it dry before removing the dried film, and catching cats on the street. We defied orders not to leave the yard and ran away to ride the subway. There was no end of the entertainment and fun Angelina came up with, day after day.

After my dad and I left for our home, in the Tambov region, I wrote letters to her. I wrote about my life, about school, about the weather we had, what interesting things happened, and how I missed her. When my mother, coming to visit my grandmother's house, where I mostly lived by then, would bring a letter from Angelina back at home, those were the happiest days. I opened her letters, first read each aloud to all the adults: grandma, grandpa, mom and dad, if he was also with us, and not at work, and they all listened attentively, smiled and sent greetings to Kyiv. And then, after lunch and dinner on those days, when I usually sat down to draw, I took her letter and began to reread it to myself, thinking about what I would write in response. In the summer, I was looking forward to my dad being freed from work for another vacation, so together with him we would go to Kyiv to visit my family. Several years passed, during which we became even closer to Angelina. And then her brother Bogdan was born, my cousin and my pride, who would become a talented musician who plays the clarinet and saxophone, writes music, and is a graduate of Kyiv Conservatory.

But not everything was smooth. Angelina had serious problems with her stepfather, who abused alcohol and sexually harassed her from an early age. This man was my own uncle, my father's brother and Bogdan's father. We only found out about this when Angelina became a teenager and informed her mother about what was happening. Then her stepfather began to beat her, apparently in retaliation for the fact that she had told her mother about everything. In the end, Angelina's mother drove him away in disgrace, breaking the marriage ties with this man.

But no one knows that after that I also kicked him out when he came to live with my father, citing the fact that he still had nowhere to stay. I write about it for the first time, in this article. My Kyiv family does not know what I told my parents: "Either he (this abusive uncle) or me. And if he doesn't get out of here immediately, then I'll leave the house." I told them what had

happened during those years, that he harassed not only Angelina, but also me. My father took him to their sister, my aunt, in the village. He lived there for a time, until he finally committed suicide by throwing himself under a train. Yes, I am willing to accept my part in this, but I could not do otherwise. I had worried about Angelina all these years, and yes, I wanted to take revenge on him, because it was very wrong to mistreat those who are weaker than you and are unable to answer you. I ask God to forgive me for my decision. In each letter, I tried to support Angelina and Bogdan, to write how much I missed them, but I thought that I could not help them at a distance. There seemed no way to protect her from her stepfather, a professional boxer who no doubt could have destroyed her health and even her life with one blow. Of course I was worried about Bogdan, too, who I felt about as a brother.

There was another disturbing moment. Both Angelina and I are “moon children”<sup>2</sup>, a circumstance that did even more to unite us, but also worried me. Once, when I once again came to visit Kyiv, Aunt Tanya, Angelina's mother, asked me to look after her because she had recently discovered her daughter on the balcony of her bedroom (their apartment in Obolon was located on the ninth floor). In a state of lunar sleep, she had climbed partly over the balcony to the ledge above the street. Aunt Tanya by some miracle at that very moment went into bedroom and saw that Angelina was standing on the ledge with one foot and was already moving her other foot there.

Her eyes were closed; she was truly asleep. Aunt Tanya was frightened, but she had the wisdom not to wake her up. Instead, she caught her by one leg and dragged her safely back onto the balcony.

Of course when I arrived I understood what Aunt Tanya was talking about, because from childhood I myself had suffered from moon sickness, and walked at night. Once my dad brought me back from the entrance, where I had opened the door and gone out in my nightgown, barefoot, in

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<sup>2</sup> Suffered from somnambulism in childhood and adolescence

20-degree frost. In another case, in a state of lunar sleep, with my eyes closed, I ironed my school uniform with a hot iron and went to bed in it, having oddly though to turn off the iron first. There were many other similar instances, although I think that many of them were never passed along fully to me. This was why my parents fell asleep only after I did, and locked the front door from the inside with a key which was then hidden.

And so, in my teens, when I once again came to Kyiv to visit, I heard from Aunt Tanya that Angelina also walked in her sleep. It really shocked me because the condition is rare. We slept together in her bedroom, where the balcony was located. We talked and listened to music, played cards, told jokes to each other, burned candles, ate Kyiv cake - it was pure happiness! I tried to never take my eyes off her, although I knew that in two weeks I would have to leave, and I wouldn't see her for another whole year. In that time, who knew what could happen? When it came time to go to bed, I said that I was too cold to sleep with the door to the balcony open, although it was July and actually very hot. But I looked at her – also seeing the full moon in the starry sky, and realized what it could mean for both of us. I was very worried that while I was sleeping, she would start walking in her sleep and fall off the balcony. I was responsible for her, not only because my aunt had trusted me but because I was older. The trick had an effect - Angelina closed the door to the balcony, covered me with a blanket and began to warm me, thinking that I was cold, clinging to me with her whole body.

In the morning I woke up realizing that I really was cold. My bedmate had wrapped herself in the blanket, completely pulling it off me, and her heels rested on the pillow next to me, not far from my nose. I tickled them, it was simply impossible to resist. She jumped up, and, realizing what was happening, immediately burst into laughter. The two of us woke everyone up that morning, and laughed at it all day!

## Chernobyl

So the years passed, and Angelina and I grew up. When I was in the 10th grade of a Soviet school, I remember how in May I stood at the window of

my classroom and looked at the snow. What? Snow in the month of May? When gardens grow and tulips and lilacs bloom? We were shocked. Teachers and students, transfixed at the windows, stared in complete silence and total fascination at the snow covering everything with large white flakes, enveloping the green grass that was already bordered with blossoming dandelions, daisies, flower beds and even asters. We had come to school in dresses and light summer shoes. In the Tambov region in May, at the end of the school year, it was about 20-25 degrees, and no one had expected to return from school ankle-deep in snow.

When I came home, my feet were cold and wet, since because of the light summer shoes we walked home almost barefoot in the snow. On television they reported about some kind of accident that had occurred in one of the districts close to Kyiv. I knew that my family lived in Kyiv, and since there was no accident reported there, I didn't worry too much. Well, we asked ourselves, do you think that some kind of factory or plant exploded, or is on fire? At the time, we did not yet know the significance of an accident at a nuclear power plant.

That day my mother came home from work very early. She was always anxious to make sure that I did not get sick with another disease, since I had had problems with rheumatism since childhood. As always, we had a good day, drank delicious Indian tea with sweets and halva at night and went to bed.

But during the night the doorbell rang, and there were several calls. I opened my eyes and looked into the darkness. My room was illuminated at night only by that notorious moon, which sometimes did not allow me to sleep peacefully at night. But not this time. The rain had not stopped yet, and the weather remained cold and overcast with clouds hiding the moon. Do you know the feeling when at night you are suddenly awakened by a loud knock on the door or a bell, and you understand that it is someone from outside is knocking or calling? You don't really understand what's going on, but you already know it's not good. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to jump out of my chest. Mom ran to the door and asked: "Who is there?" My breathing stopped. "Open up! An urgent telegram for

you!" I heard my mother fiddling with the lock to open the door, and then she turned on the light to read the text of the telegram. Noticing that I was no longer sleeping, she walked through the living room to my bedroom. "Sveta," she said quietly, "Angelina will arrive tomorrow." I asked for clarification. "Which one of them will come?" And my mother answered: "Angelina from Kyiv."

It was so unexpected that I immediately thought that something unusual and very bad had happened. I felt a strong premonition. Of course, I was always worried about her, a kind of worry that hovered in my subconscious. I still can't explain it; either the young woman who was as close as a sister to me always had a tendency to be mischievous and often took risks, or I already guessed about the inclinations of her stepfather and uncle. Or perhaps what I felt was the ability through a connection that I have to other living beings that opens an understand about where I am and where I need to go to be in the right place at the right time.

The morning, I went to my grandmother in the city. My mother and father lived in an urban-type settlement, and my grandparents, my mother's mother and father, lived in the city, 10 kilometers from us. I arrived at her place at noon Moscow time, and my mother went to meet the train from Moscow to the city station. Our city had no direct connection with Kyiv – we always traveled there via Moscow or via Voronezh. Angelina was traveling from Kyiv via Moscow.

Two hours later the doorbell rang. When I opened the door, Angelina was standing on the threshold, with my mom and dad. She and I hugged tightly and spent the next hour telling each other about everything that happened to us during the time we had been apart. We had a delicious dinner, and then had our tea. The adults in the hall turned on the TV. Angelina was sitting at a large table in my favorite place, where I drew and read books in the evenings. I was sitting on a large bed with a soft feather mattress, next to my grandmother, and my mother was sitting on the sofa with my father. I liked being with my grandfather, who went to a sanatorium because he was disabled. All his life he worked at a construction site as a foreman, building entire micro districts, and he was well known in



the city and respected. So I expected a pleasant evening with my family, solving crossword puzzles, board games and drinking tea together.

News was on TV, and then I heard that they were talking about Kyiv and the Kyiv region. We all froze and stared at the screen. We saw people running about in funny gas masks, with everything around clouded in smoke, and on the faces of men there was determination and concern. They were described as heroes who had saved people. I felt no surprise, because of course such people were brave. But then across the television screen came big trucks, and buses carrying crowds of people. They were stopped at some checkpoints, and for some reason people in white overalls were washing them with water from hoses. Now it felt strange – we had never seen such overalls before. Gradually, we all began to understand that something serious was happening.

Announcers in worried and serious voices reported that an explosion had occurred, and the resulting fire had not yet been extinguished. But after all, in the end, all fires are eventually extinguished, right? After the announcers finished speaking, the view of the screen turned to a large military helicopter. It flew over some large structure, from which the smoke was issuing, intending to dump water there and put out the fire. But suddenly I was seeing the helicopter blades become soft and deformed while in flight, above a large funnel that was producing the smoke. The helicopter tilted onto its side and collapsed right into the threatening funnel.

Someone screamed. It was my grandmother. She had survived the war fought when she was a teenager, when they were often bombed. A two-meter hole was dug near her house, and she jumped into it to hide from shells flying from the sky. She had described her experiences, including time spent in the shelter, when she raised her eyes to the sky, covered her ears with her hands and prayed. It helped keep her from going crazy. Sometimes she saw the stars and prayed to God while looking at them. And now, when something inexplicable happened, she cried out and said: “What a passion, Lord!”

I couldn't believe my eyes: the helicopter's blades had become soft like ribbons, they just drooped limply down, and then the helicopter fell! It just couldn't be, because it doesn't happen, you know? It suddenly dawned on me that something really terrible was going on. Not something that can scare you a bit when other people behave recklessly, not something that can change your plans for the future, and not even something that you or your family can somehow suffer from. No. It was a different situation – when the life of an entire country or people is in question. And it's just not clear: what's next? For the first time, we were faced with something that could forever change not only the lives of our family, but the lives of all the families we knew and even those who were not familiar to us. It was some kind of evil, from which emanated death and hell. I thought about all this at that moment and looked at my long-beloved Angelina. She sat silently at the table and carefully watched the news on TV. And I sat and thought: “God, what a blessing that she is here with me, safe! And even if something terrible happens in Kyiv, and she has nowhere else to go, she will stay here and live with me.”

Schools announced closings, and it was explained to us what an atom is, that it is dangerous, and shockingly, that the snow that fell in May was radioactive. We learned that the people who rushed in driving those emergency vehicles to put out the fire, and even those who were filming reports about the ongoing accident, were irradiated and now they were waiting for a painful death from radiation sickness. There was simply no cure for such a sickness. We considered them heroes because they had put out the fire, saving people at the cost of their own lives. We also learned that it would be impossible to live in the area where the nuclear power plant accident occurred for 200 years. It was a new reality that forever changed the face of the whole world and our lives.

(to be continued)