

OSWALD'S TALE

Norman Mailer



**RANDOM HOUSE
TRADE PAPERBACKS**

 SWALD'S TALE

AN AMERICAN MYSTERY



NORMAN MAILER



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS
NEW YORK

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TO NORRIS, MY WIFE,
for this book and for the other fourteen that have been written through these warm years, these thirty
years and more we have been together.

REPRESENTATIVE BOGGS. Why did your son defect to Russia?

MARGUERITE OSWALD. I cannot answer that yes or no sir. I am going to go through the whole story or it is no good. And that is what I have been doing for this Commission all day long—giving a story.

REPRESENTATIVE BOGGS. Suppose you just make it very brief.

MARGUERITE OSWALD. I cannot make it brief. I will say I am unable to make it brief. This is my life and my son's life going down in history.

—from Marguerite Oswald's Warren Commission
testimony,
February 10, 1964

AN APPRECIATION

to Larry Schiller, my skilled and wily colleague in interview and investigation, for the six months we labored side by side in Minsk and Moscow, and then again in Dallas, feeling as close as family (and occasionally as contentious); and to Judith McNally, my incomparable assistant, whose virtues are so numerous it would weigh upon one's own self-regard to list them—yes, to Schiller and McNally, full and unconditional appreciation. Without them, there might have been no tale to tell.

A NOTE ON STYLE

The definite and indefinite articles are not employed in Russian. Nor is the verb “to be.” One would not say, “The man is in the room,” but rather: “Man in room.” (Which is why those Russians who do not command much English invariably sound brusque.) On the other hand, a construction like “Man in room” does tend to make you aware of the man and the room both.

One was tempted, therefore, to dispense with articles and the verb “to be” during the first half of this book, for it would have given an overpowering Russian flavor to the prose. A full effort in that direction would, however, have tortured the English language beyond repair, and so only a suggestion of this difference is present. Let me, then, wish you good reading and happy accommodation to small liberties taken with King’s English.

VOLUME ONE

OSWALD IN MINSK WITH MARINA



PART I

THE ADVENTURES OF VALYA



Volchuk

When Valya was three years old, she fell on a hot stove and burned her face and was ill for a whole year, all that year from three to four. Her mother died soon after, and her father was left with seven children.

When they buried her mother, Valya's father said, "Now, look at her and remember her." He put them all around the coffin and told them again, "Try to remember your mother." There they were, a seven children, dressed in black. Valya's dress had an ornament like a small cross. She remembered that, and how all her brothers and sisters cried. Their mother had died giving birth to her eighth baby.

She passed away at a hospital fifty kilometers from where they lived, and when her mother felt she was at her last, she asked somebody to call Guri, her husband, and tell him that she wished to say a few words. So, she lay in bed waiting, her eyes on the door, and when she saw that door open, she was so weak she could only say, "Guri, please take care of our children," and then she died. She couldn't live a moment longer. Of course, she still comes back to Valya in her dreams.

While Valya was only the fifth child in this family, she was the second sister, so when her oldest sister left home a couple of years later, Valya had to take care of the house. It was a good family and the same, and they were kindhearted, and approximately everybody was equal. When Valya was seven she could already bake bread in a stove where you had to use a flat wooden spade to insert your loaf of dough, and everybody was happy when she made her bread because it was tasty.

Her father was a switchman and worked on the Smolenskaya section of the Soviet rail system at a town called Pridneprovsk. Since his children had no older woman to help them now, Guri married again. And his children were not upset by this new wife but loved her, for she was a nice person, and they even called her Mama. She was very kind to them, even if she was not healthy and had been married twice already; but her only child, from her second marriage, had died and now this was a third marriage, and Guri and this new wife did not have children together.

It is possible the stepmother married Valya's father so she wouldn't have to stay on a collective farm but could live with a man who did not need a wife to work outside. Sometimes Valya wondered why he did marry her, because she was sick a lot, even hospitalized; but though she did not help so much as hoped, these children needed her to feel like a family, and so they waited each time for her return from her sickness. She did care for Guri's children. Sometimes when Valya's father went to Smolensk or to Vitebsk and returned with something special to eat, he would say to his new wife, "You see, there are so many children and they are so young, so I can only bring back this small thing for you," and the wife said yes, but when he left, she usually divided it all, and never kept it for

herself. She lived with them for years before she died and they all grew up with her, and Valya's father lived on beyond that, and did not pass away until he was eighty-seven years old. Even when life was not easy, they always had their father.

Valya was very shy. Always upset about her cheek. One side of her face remained scarred from the burn when she was three. The medical cures in those days had been wrong. They used to put on some type of bandage that would dry out, so when they took it away from her skin, it left a mark. Besides this treatment was painful, very painful. Valya remembers crying through the whole year. She even heard some people say, "Maybe it would be better if she died, because if a girl has a face like this, she does not have happiness." It made her a quiet person, she feels, who kept everything unhappy inside. She never was emotional. She went through things and never screamed at anybody, just felt unhappy inside.

Children, however, were never cruel to her in school. Valya had four brothers, so it was not easy for children to insult her. Her brothers and sisters were all healthy, and so they had a special feeling for Valya. They pitied her because she'd been sick for that entire year and they saw her suffering. Her father even said, "You know, when you were a child I spent more time with you than with all my other children. I was always keeping you in my hands for that whole year, you cried so much." Valya grew up believing that this scar on her cheek had taken away her beauty as a woman. She had a nice body, she had nice teeth, but because of her cheek she did not consider herself attractive. And yet there were always men around her. It was strange. She didn't know why she attracted men, but she did. Even when she was already married and was traveling from Arkhangelsk to Minsk to join her husband, at a time when it was difficult to buy train tickets and she was standing in line for hours to get one, there was a captain standing behind her and they talked for three or four hours while in line. This captain said, "I don't know if you're married or not, but if you can marry me, then we'll register, and you'll be my wife." And she thought, "He says this even though I have such a problem with my cheek!" And she was maybe twenty-three or twenty-four years old. He was very serious. But she said, "I'm going to marry my husband; I'm married."

Perhaps, she would say, it was because people knew she could make a good home. All this time she was growing up, her interest was housekeeping. She made everything clean; she kept Guri's house spotless. It was a cottage with two rooms, one for his seven children and one for Guri and his wife. There was no kitchen, but in her father's room there was a stove and she cooked meals there. On holidays, like New Year's, they put their decorated tree in the other room, where seven kids slept on three beds.

By every railway station was a small house, usually in a field near the railroad tracks, and its first floor was an office, but the top floor was given to whichever station man lived there with his family. So now, whenever she passes a small railroad station, she feels sad. Her childhood had not been easy, but somehow she likes to remember it and enjoy it, and so this sadness is equal to a recollection of nice moments in life. She enjoys such sadness.

In high school she studied German as a second language, but students were always told that fascism was a totalitarian regime and they were in a democracy of socialism, and, of course, she never saw German until they arrived in a large group soon after the war began, in June of 1941. She remembers that the fields were ripening and Germans were already in Smolensk. They came so quickly.

Everywhere, Russian troops were retreating, leaving behind many tanks, retreating. Germans kept coming. They were masters of this place. First there were planes, and then Germans showed up themselves, but first there were airplanes high and low, bombarding them. Bridges, their railway station, burned villages. These planes came for a week, then tanks. They occupied everything. The Germans brought their laws, and didn't allow anyone to leave home and walk even a few kilometers without some special pass.

They would kill you. Germans were hanging people on trees. Valya saw that: young partisans on trees. She can see it to this day: There was an alley, and down this alley were young people hanging. Sometimes, on one tree, two people. Everyone in their village went down to look. They were all in horror, but they went to look, back then when she was sixteen and the Germans had overrun all the country she knew.

Her father had been working at the railway station, and the Germans passed through and kept him working. And he did. He had to earn a living. But they were very cruel in other places, and burned many villages. So, all the Russians who were working for the Germans in these villages were worried. They might be punished later. Certainly her father worried. He didn't say anything; but everyone worried about her father being punished, and they talked about it among themselves, and later they would wonder whether Stalin would do something in time to come. Her family always felt marked. Yet, she was never a collaborator, never. She'd always lived honestly in her life. Besides, those Germans beat her father.

Valya still remembers. Their family had a cow but no fodder. And when trains would pass, hay was sometimes left on the station platform, swept out from boxcars. Her father would gather such remains. And one time, some Germans coming by on a train decided he looked Jewish because he had black hair and a black beard and black eyes and was wearing a hat. There were three Germans and they pounded his face and he lost some teeth. Something was always wrong with his teeth after that.

When he managed to get back home that night, he cursed in a way Valya could not repeat. He said the strongest swear words, *Iob ikh mat*. Very strong. She could not say it aloud. It meant doing something sexual to your mother. All of Guri's life, he remembered that beating. He had to stay home for two weeks. Later, he was afraid, but he went out again to pick up hay on the station platform because their cows needed it, and he always worried about being beaten again, but then, they were afraid.

Later, the Germans took her father and her brothers and two of her uncles away. While they didn't burn the railroad station, they smashed every window. And these Germans raped a lot of women, but not her stepmother, because she was not seductive enough, and none of her sisters or herself, because they were children. Then they tried to burn her house, but they lit it quickly and moved on, and Valya had some water she had been using for washing, so she poured enough on to stop their fire. Neighbors screamed at her and said if any Germans saw it, they'd burn other houses. It was very difficult. They were all standing in their yard, and these Germans had killed their dog, and all the villages around their station were burned.

Her father and her brothers had to stay a year and a half in the German prison camp, right until the end of war. It was fortunate that she could even see them. She and her younger sister and her

stepmother would walk. It was thirty-five kilometers away, and they were allowed sometimes to bring food. ~~Because there was a lot of snow, the family had killed their pigs and hid them.~~ That way, her stepmother could boil meat and take it to her brothers and her father. In fact, they sacrificed their own food, though their men, in turn, insisted on giving back a portion. All the same, on their return, they would have to beg on the country roads. They were always hungry all this while that she was fifteen and sixteen, no shoes, no dresses. Once she heard her father talking to her stepmother, and he said, “My daughters are growing up without anything to put on. Take my suit; maybe you can alter it into a dress.”

And once, in fact, when Valya was fifteen and her sister fourteen, they were dressed in such old clothes that some Germans called them *matki*, which is a rude word, like “old bags.”

One day in June of 1944, with no warning, many Germans came and took every person her age and put them on a train, loaded them into a boxcar, closed it, and transported them away. All the girls were crying. It happened around noon, and they were rounded up and brought to the railway station. They were told them not even to bother changing clothes, just took them along in whatever they were wearing, and she learned later that her father couldn't find her when he came back from camp, and fell to his knees and wept, but there she was, in a boxcar, jammed in with so many other girls, and no toilet. They had to pull up a plank and make a hole in the floor.

It was a long train, and they had been picked up from a place where they had been working with shovels; they had to climb up into the boxcar without even the kind of plank that cows go up.

“They just pushed us in there and closed the door. These Germans didn't scream at anybody, didn't beat us, but they were very strict. People were in there already from other places; they kept collecting people at each station. Later, after more stops, it was jammed.” She would never forget what she saw on this train to Germany. “No painter could make that picture. On all faces, only fear, as if life had ended, horror had followed. It was dark inside. And then we had to make that hole in the floor of the train.” She doesn't remember what tool they used; maybe there was already a little hole and they widened it with their fingers.

Valya never saw even one town and doesn't remember anything about Poland except that she was told, yes, you are crossing Poland. And then they came to a transit camp, where they were told to line up and take off their clothes, and their teeth were checked as if they were horses, and every other part of their bodies, and they were given injections, all in a line naked, both men and women. It was very uncomfortable; they didn't know what was going to happen next; they were all standing there naked without really knowing what was to come. She didn't feel ashamed, because everyone else was also without clothes, but it was uncomfortable. To this day Valya thinks the injections given them on that day kept her from getting pregnant later.

Then they were given back their clothes, and this time they were on that train for a week, with just a little food, a spoonful of soup, and room to sit down on the floor, which was better than when this train first went from Byelorussia to Poland. But everyone still had a bad expression, as if they were going to be executed. Even now Valya can't stop crying when she remembers.

Eventually they arrived at Frankfurt am Main and stayed in a camp with wooden houses and head

that Germans burned a lot of people in giant stoves, but all these girls she was with were young and were going to be put to work, not killed, although anyone was in trouble who looked a little like a Jew.

In camp, their beds were made of wood, no blankets, no pillows, and by preference they slept outside in warm weather. A little later, they were given wooden shoes with hides inside and jackets that bore a special signature, OST, so everyone would know they had come from the east.

Every morning at seven they would walk downhill from camp to take a train to Frankfurt am Main where they would work all day, and not return until late at night. She was in this camp for nine months. Valya never saw anyone get shot, although a few young girls died of disease, malnutrition. But there came a day, in April 1945, when a train didn't come to pick them up for their job and they were forced to go to work on foot. Now they could see that American planes had come over the night before in a bombing raid, and Valya saw a railroad track standing straight up in the air. She was afraid to return to camp for fear of another air raid, so she stayed alone in Frankfurt while a friend started back, but not too many minutes had gone by when she thought, "What am I going to do here alone?" and so she ran to catch her friend. At camp, people said they were going to be evacuated, and everyone was afraid. Would they be put into stoves and burned?

People started to escape and, with others, Valya went down a hill so steep they had to slide down parts of it. They also had to cross a valley beyond this hill, and a small forest, and a couple of houses, and a German, who came along with their group, showed them how to hide in a storage bin below ground, and there they stayed for ten days with no light, until the war was over.

Valya heard that it had all been craziness up above while she was below earth. When she came out ten days later she didn't even know that the war had ended, but this German had saved her group, since their camp had been destroyed in a battle between Germans and Americans. It was then that she saw Americans for the first time in her life. There were a lot of Negroes. She remembers that they looked nice; they looked happy and alive, and so well built. They were proud they had liberated people. It was the first time she had seen smiles in a year. Valya thinks that even when she dies, she'll remember that day and how it was when she came out into the light and it was as if her life had started again.

Valya remembers one American soldier who came up to her, offered her his canteen, and gave her a big piece of chocolate. It was the first time in Valya's life that she tasted chocolate, and there was wine in his canteen. So there she was, never drank alcohol before either, and suddenly she didn't feel weird. There, full of happiness, she still had to throw up.

The American officers said, "If you don't want to return to Russia, you can stay here; we'll try to help you with jobs." But Valya felt she couldn't stay on the American side. She loved her father and missed him a lot. So those of her friends who also wanted to go home were sent to a transit camp—Russian Reevaluation Camp—and there they were mixed in with thousands of people in Frankfurt under the Oder in this Russian camp where they waited. By now it was June again, and she worked in nearby fields, separating good grass from bad for cows, then milked cows, then was put to work in a small butter factory and was promoted and even put in charge because she worked so well. Here in the butter factory she met a man she loved very much, but he was only there for two months. He was tall and very shy, a modest person, a very good person, and you could hardly say they were dating, but they would meet each night after work and kiss. He never even touched her breasts. He proposed to her and

said, "When we are back in Russia, we'll marry." And she had a dream that she was kissing him and kissing him and couldn't stop, but when she told this dream to her girlfriends, they said, "Listen, means you will never see him again." It turned out to be true, because the Russian Army needed him and she didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. She cried then. She loved him so much, because she had never seen such tenderness in her life. He had been close to her for two months and never asked her once what happened to her face. He treated her as if something very special were true of her, whereas when she met the man not long after who would actually become her husband, he asked her on their second meeting why her cheek was the way it was.

She married this second man, but she always felt more comfortable with the first one. She never saw him again, even though they wrote letters back and forth. Even when she was married to her husband she wrote letters, but then she stopped. For in spite of her face, this second man had married her, so she felt grateful. She was afraid to lose him. Therefore, she stopped writing.

Later, the first man wrote to her that he was married to a schoolteacher and that they went to theater a lot and to cinema, and added, "I knew you only for two months, but my heart belongs to you." And even though she didn't have anything sexual with him, she loved that man very much and believes that if he's alive now, he still loves her.

After he was gone, she kept working at this small place they called a butter factory, and a soldier who was assigned to a hospital nearby would come to her dairy to take food to the man who would become her future husband. Valya finally asked: "For whom do you take all this?" He said, "There's one lieutenant who is sick and I give it to him." She said, "Okay, give him my best regards and tell him we want him to be healthy." She said it just to be nice to someone who was ill. But when the soldier came back, he said, "This lieutenant, he sends you best regards too," and it turned out later that her husband-to-be had been told: "You know, there's one girl who works there, she's so kind and nice, she even gave food to me." Soon enough that lieutenant was put in charge of the whole butter factory and he turned out to be tall and as strict as a German. Then one evening every other dairy girl decided to go to the movies, but Valya—she doesn't remember why—stayed home. Perhaps she was depressed. She saw somebody walk by in a leather jacket—even now she has this leather jacket—and he looked at her and said, "Why didn't you go out?" Then he recognized her and said, "Okay, let me introduce ourselves to each other," and as people of his rank usually did, he invited her to his office and she went there and they talked. He said, "Let me hear your story." She told him everything. Then his friend of his came by who could play the piano, so this officer said to her, "Do you dance?" and since there was nobody around, he invited her, and then he said, "Thank you for your regards." It was then Valya understood that this was the sick man to whom she had sent all that food.

He was married. That is, he had been married in 1939, but his wife sent him only one letter in four years and then she divorced him in order to marry a pilot. This tall man told his story, and then said he had never had any children with that wife. He showed her a picture. His former wife was very attractive.

This officer was fifteen years older than Valya, and very severe, but he was nice when he danced. It was just that by the second evening, he asked her about her face, and she was offended and cried all night once she was alone. Only later did she tell him she was upset about it, upset because he certainly didn't know her, but already he was kissing her and asking her questions.

He was very intelligent, very cultured. After they were married, she discovered he actually had a great tact and it was not possible not to love him, but it was a different type of love than she had had before. First love is first love. This man that she would marry was tall, slender and handsome, and not only elegant and intelligent on their first evening but remained so all their life. He always behaved in a calm, neat manner, very elegant. At the end of their life together, just a few years ago, when he was very sick and had a high temperature, he was so neat that when an ambulance came for him, he said, “Valya, do you think I can go without a tie?” She did not know whether to laugh or to weep.

They stayed together through most of that following year in Germany, nine months. They met in August of 1945 and were married in May of 1946, and Ilya—that was his name, Ilya Prusakov—had courted her in a proper way. He protected her and treated her with great tenderness. She never thought they would marry. He treated her very nicely as a person, and she liked him, but he was often sick. He had gotten some kind of disease during his campaigns. Once in this period he was taken to a hospital and she couldn't even find the place—it was that difficult for her to visit; but when he came back, he said, “You know, you did so much for me when I was in trouble that I'll always take care of you. I'll marry you if you'd agree, but I know you're so young—I can't propose marriage to you because there's such a big difference in our ages. Maybe later on you'll find someone else and I'll be jealous. So I'd like to propose to you and to marry you, but it's up to you to decide.”

Of course, he had a very serious inflammation in one of his bones, and after that he had another illness where he ran a high fever and had to go to another hospital, but he sent out word. He asked Valya to bring him chicken broth. It was not possible to buy a chicken, so Valya found a Polish woman who spoke German and took her to another town to find one, and Valya brought it back and made some soup. Then Ilya asked her to bring tea, and he wanted it to be of a certain temperature because he felt more comfortable with warm liquid, so she ran with it to him because she was afraid his tea would turn cold. Then there were other things she did: She repaired his clothes, and was happy to do it. She wanted to do it. He said that even if she didn't want to marry him, he would always take care of her. He said, “I'll always help you; I'll train you and teach you to be a typist. I'd always like you to be near me.” But, in fact, she agreed to marry him. She had expected he would propose.

It also turned out that this fine officer, Ilya, had suffered several serious war wounds. Not only had his leg been badly injured by machine gun bullets, but he had been near some explosion that had left him with a condition called *khontuzheniy*. It meant he'd been close to some explosion, and his brain had suffered a shock. Concussion.

Meanwhile, the butter factory was closed, and because Ilya wished to keep Valya near him, he arranged to give her a job, and she cooked for Russian soldiers and officers.

She was so full of energy and so sweet and happy and so much on the move that Ilya began to call her *volchuk*, which is a toy like a top, brightly painted and always moving, very funny, very gay, very energetic, always moving. She, in turn, called him Ilichka. When they decided to register their relationship and be married, he went to Potsdam. She didn't even have a nice dress, but he bought her a beautiful one, with embroidery, and she remembers that they went by train from Berlin, and Valya was very happy because now she knew she was going to be married, since he had told his relatives.

Back in Russia, they moved in with his people in Arkhangelsk. That was more difficult.

Arkhangelsk was all the way north of Finland. Now they were no longer just two, but part of a large family, way up in the far north. Ilya did not change when they got there; never in his life did he offer her or insult her personally, and she soon loved him so much that when he would come home from work, she would look at him with such admiration that his mother would say, “Don’t show that much happiness. Don’t look at him so much that evil comes.” Yes, it was dangerous to let the devil know how happy you were.

All the same, thirteen years of living with the Prusakov family were to follow. Of course, that was not a surprise. Before they registered their marriage, Ilya had said, “Valya, I want to tell you that I will never leave my mother.” So Valya was prepared to share her life with his family instead of her own, and she knew that his mother had a very large influence on him. Ilya’s first wife had been a woman he had brought back from a holiday in a health resort, and his mother, Tatiana, had not been happy about it. His mother’s opinion, when a man goes to the Crimea on vacation, meets a woman and marries her, is that it’s a bad idea, and very uncultured. You don’t know this person; you have fun for a few weeks, then you marry; such a woman is tricky—she trapped him into marriage. Ilya’s mother said it was not a serious decision. Just passion, not marriage, and his mother had been right. It didn’t last through a bad war.

When Ilya came back with Valya, however, Tatiana accepted her. So did all of Ilya’s sisters, more or less. Everybody, however, was surprised. Ilya was such an attractive and educated man and he had married a woman who had a problem with a burn mark on her face. Everyone said, “Couldn’t he find someone who’s his match?” And, of course, they talked about it. But Ilya did like young women, and she was young.

In the beginning, Valya couldn’t get used to such an educated family as these Prusakovs. She was, after all, from a village. Later on she would learn, but at first it was not easy to do what was expected. There were so many new persons that she felt a little bit closed. Still, she was always trying to learn, and Ilya’s mother, Tatiana, taught her a lot.

Tatiana was a very good cook. Since Valya was always around her, she learned to be better in the kitchen than Ilya’s sisters. It helped that Ilya never made excuses about Valya; he said, “This is the woman I love”—that was it. He had brought her from Germany. If you don’t love a woman, you don’t take her home with you.

In their first years together, Valya wanted to have children, and every month she would cry, and Ilya would always say, “Don’t worry.” Now, she wonders if he was ever truly upset about it. When he was old, he even said to her: “Maybe it’s good we didn’t have children: Look around. Nowadays, children are not really good.”

Of course, there were always lots of people around. In Arkhangelsk, they lived in Tatiana’s apartment, which had three rooms. First thing Tatiana said was, “I have five daughters. Now, you’ll be my sixth.” That pleased Valya so much that she fell in love with Ilya for a second time, because she realized he had a happy family life already, and so if he had chosen her, that meant he really loved her. It wasn’t as if he just needed her. Besides, his family lived together with love like Valya’s family, but in a different way, more grace. More cultural. So she could love him more, because he changed her life for the better.

But she didn't have much freedom. Everyone's eyes were always on her, and she remembers the
once when they were in bed, she even cried because she did not feel alone with him.

One night, they brought out an album of photographs, and Valya had to think how different it was
from her family, where they'd never had anything like that, so poor. So she was embarrassed when
they sat around their big table and his mother asked, "Now, tell me your stories, tell me about
yourself." Fortunately, Ilya's mother then said, "You know, Ilyusha's first wife was brought up by
stepmother." Valya got upset, so she touched her husband's foot under the table, and he touched back
which she understood to mean, "Don't tell her," and she didn't. But later on her mother-in-law asked
"Why do you always talk about your father? Why do you never tell me anything about your mother?"
So she confessed. She, too, was brought up by a stepmother.

In this Prusakov family in Arkhangelsk were Ilya's sister Klavdia and her two children, Marina and
Petya, conceived from separate fathers. There was also another sister, Musya, and still another, Lyuba,
who lived with them, but the center of this household was Marina, Klavdia's daughter, who was five
years old and very pretty and very bright. She had large beautiful blue eyes, and her grandmother more
than admired her. You could say that Tatiana was completely in love with her. Marina was not exactly
spoiled, but she was *izbalovanaya*, which is a little nicer than spoiled, for it means somebody who
may have been loved too much. There was certainly a tendency to deal with Marina more leniently
than a strict parent might accept. But she was a child you could like, and in school Marina got very
high marks, and all her family was for Marina.

There was no father around, however, only a stepfather, named Alexander Medvedev, and at first he
treated Marina very well, even after his first child with Klavdia, Petya, was born.

As for Marina's natural father, Valya was never sure what happened to him. He had disappeared in
1941, before Marina was born. Ilya never explained. He just said that Marina's missing father was
a nice man, and Klavdia's sister Musya said she met him one time, and he was attractive, very attractive
eyes, an engineer, whose name was Nikolaev. Nikolaev and Ilya had worked together building a small
new city where before there had only been water and marsh, but now it exists, Severodvinsk, about
fifty kilometers north of Arkhangelsk.

As for Nikolaev, Valya thinks maybe they didn't tell her any more about him because the Prusakov
family did not want to disgrace themselves. Perhaps Nikolaev had been married to another woman and
just made a baby with Klavdia and left. On the other hand, this all happened in Stalin's time. So
Nikolaev could have been deported. Valya remembers how when she was a child Stalin once said
"We have started to live better and we have more fun." There had been a man in the crowd who heard
this slogan and he added, "Yes, so much fun that you could cry." He was taken to prison for that.
It was a terrible time. So, people had the habit of not talking. In any event, Ilya always said that
Nikolaev was a good man.

Of course, Valya did not know much about such things. She lived at home and took care of things
for her mother-in-law. Neither then nor later did she go to Ilya's office. He had a job in MVD—
Ministry of Internal Affairs—and he would always be in MVD; he never left. Nor did she know
exactly what kind of work he did, whether he was an office manager or a production manager. She
knew there were people who worked in factories and camps who'd been sentenced for things they did

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