

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL:

A chronicle of the future

Written by Cindy Marie Jenkins

Inspired by the book *Voices From Chernobyl*

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CHARACTERS

Katya Shimanky, young girl at the time of the accident

Vasily Shimanky, Physicist

Irina Shimanky, Doctor at a Radiation Hospital

Anna Sushko, Resident of Chornobyl

Grigory Brovkin, Former Soldier, Leader of a Clean-up Crew

Stepanov Morozkov, Vasily and Grigory's Supervisor

Sergei Gurin, Cameraman from Minsk

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE (A Solitary Human Voice), Wife of a Fireman

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE (A Lonely Human Voice), Wife of a Clean-up Crew Member

NOTE

At times the characters speak to their Interviewer and at times they are back in the moment. If there is a slash (/) on one line, then the following line should overlap at the point of the slash (/).

KATYA

My Grandmother read in the Bible that the time will come when everything will be in abundance, everything will flower, and bear fruit, the rivers will be full of fish and forests full of trees, but man will not be able to enjoy it. He will not be able to have children and perpetuate the race.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I don't know what to tell you about. Death or love? Or is it one and the same?

KATYA

You're writing a book, but so far no book has helped, explained it to me. No more than the theater or the movies. I figure it out without them. By myself.

ANNA

There was no sign.

KATYA

We're all going through this alone, and we don't know what to do.

ANNA

Sometimes, your palm itches and you know to get ready. But today, no signs.

KATYA

We're all going through this alone, and we don't know what to do. I want to love, I try to love! I pray for my love! And----

VASILY

My family didn't know.

ANNA

The first fear came out of the blue, over water---

VASILY

My daughter - at this moment she would be walking to school. With friends. Outside.

KATYA

My father is particularly bewildered. He always taught me to live by books. And suddenly books cannot help. My parents are confused. My father does not

KATYA (cont'd)

know how to live without the counsel of books. Without Chekhov and Tolstoy, and the old Greek masters.

VASILY

My first reaction was to call my wife and warn her. But all our telephones at the Institute were bugged. That eternal fear, beaten into us through the decades.

KATYA

Remember? I want to remember and at the same time I don't.

VASILY

Shut the windows.

KATYA

I remember my mother's phone call in the early morning.

IRINA

There's a fire at the atomic station. Orders are to keep the radio on.

KATYA

We lived in Pripjat, just three miles from the reactor. I was born and bred there.

VASILY

Listen to me very closely.

IRINA

What are you talking about?

VASILY

Quiet. Shut the windows. Put all the food in plastic bags.

Put on rubber gloves and wipe every surface with a wet rag. Then put the rag in a plastic bag and get rid of it. The laundry drying on the balcony has to be washed again.

IRINA

What's happened ther—

VASILY

I hung up. She was in medicine. She was bound to understand.

KATYA

Remember? Perhaps it's better not to. Just in case. We saw the fire---

ANNA

--and we figured it was temporary, and no one was worried about it. We didn't know about atoms, I swear!

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

In the middle of the night, I heard a noise.

ANNA

One nightingale sang all night—that means a sunny day.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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. Below us, on the first floor, were the fire engines.

Red fire engines. That was his work. That was all he ever wanted to do.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE (Cont.)

(Takes a deep breath) 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."

KATYA

Flames cover the whole sky.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

And he was still out.....

ANNA

People took their small children outside, lifted them up and said, "Look, how beautiful! Don't forget this." We stood in that horrible black smoke.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Flames cover the whole sky.

KATYA

/The smoke over the station was not black or yellow, it was light /blue.

ANNA

/We did not know that Death could be so beautiful.

KATYA

I did not see the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything seemed to flow.

IRINA

The police and the military set up roadblocks, they were letting no one out. We spent all day watching TV, waiting for Gorbachev to speak. The authorities were silent.

KATYA

I stared all day out of the closed window. It was just an ordinary fire, being put out by ordinary firemen.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

And he was still out. They went off to the fire without their protective gear, just in their shirt sleeves. They were summoned as if to a normal fire. I sat and waited. Four o'clock.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I'd go to church, where it was so quiet.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Five.....

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

The way it is in the mountains sometimes.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Six.....

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

So quiet. You can forget your life in there. But in the mornings, I'd wake up. I'd wake up and feel around for him. Where is he? I'd shut my eyes and think about him until I fell asleep. In my sleep, he would come to me, but very quickly. Vanish immediately.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Seven o'clock.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Where is he? I can't tell you what it is like. I don't know how I manage to stay alive.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

At seven they informed me that he was in the hospital. I ran over there, but police 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 grabbed onto a Doctor as she walked by—"Get me inside!"

IRINA & A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I can't. He's in a bad way.

IRINA

They all are.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Please! Just to see him.

IRINA

(Hands her a form)

Sign this.

Do you have children?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I have to say yes. If I say no, they won't let me see him.

Yes.

IRINA

How many?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

A boy and a girl.

IRINA

Now listen. The central nervous system is completely damaged, the bone marrow is completely destroyed.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

AL right, so he'll be a bit nervous.....

IRINA

And listen---

IRINA & A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

If you cry, I'll throw you out right away. You may not hug or kiss. Don't come close.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I'll give you half an hour.

VASILY

That day, April 26th, I was in Moscow. On a business trip.

ANNA

The first fear was....in the morning we found dead moles in the garden. Who killed them?

KATYA

We're all going through this alone, and we don't know what to do. I cannot comprehend it with my mind. My grandmother said she had no childhood. She had the war. Their childhood is the war and mine is Chornobyl.

GRIGORY

I had just returned from Afghanistan. I wanted to return to my classroom. I teach history. And instead I got a notice with a red stripe meaning "Special Draft." Show up with your things at the following address within an hour. My mother started weeping. She thought they were sending me to war again. They came suddenly.

STEPANOV

Get in the van.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I loved him madly. Maybe you shouldn't use my name.

VASILY

I called once, two, three times, but they wouldn't put me through.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

There are secrets. People say prayers in private. Whispering.

VASILY

I reached an assistant. "I'm calling from Moscow. I have urgent information. About an accident!" They disconnected me.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

No, use my name. Say it to God.

STEPANOV

I heard that there was a fire there, and it's been put out.

VASILY

That's a lie! Deceit. It's a serious accident. According to my calculations, the radioactive cloud is moving towards us. Towards Belarussia. We must immediately give prophylactic iodine treatment to the population and move out everyone living close to the station. People and animals within 100 kilometers have to be moved away.

STEPANOV

Had a phone call. From the Kremlin. From Gorbachev. Something about not starting a panic in Belarussia. The West is making too much of it already.

KATYA

(Sing-songy)

At the foot of the hill puffs a tractor

At the top of the hill a reactor

*If we hadn't heard it from the Swedes
We'd still be eating all those seeds.*

VASILY

You will---

STEPANOV

My reports say the situation is now stabilized. Certain functionaries have a tendency to embellish their reports.

KATYA

What do I remember? In the first few days after the accident, all the books on radiation, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even on x-rays vanished from the libraries.

STEPANOV

But for the most part, I believe that I am kept informed in good faith.

VASILY

We need potassium iodine. Ordinary iodine. Two or three drops in a glass of water for children and three or four drops for adults.

KATYA

There was a rumor that this was an order from the authorities to keep people from being terrified. So that we could not/imagine for ourselves what it meant.

STEPANOV

/you can imagine for yourselves the consequences.

GRIGORY

I warned you, nothing heroic, nothing for a writer's pen from me.

ANNA

Birds kept smashing into the windshields of cars and buses as if they were blind. They were crazed. Flying into the glass...or under the wheels. It was a kind of suicide.

STEPANOV

The word "panic" - do you know where it comes from?

VASILY

The Greek mischief-maker, Pan.

VASILY & KATYA

The god of woods and fields who created mysterious sounds.

STEPANOV

He tried to teach the people how to communicate, but these sounds were too advanced for the people surrounding the woods and the fields. They didn't understand them, and so the sounds caused hysterical fear in villages. They say entire herds followed their owners over cliffs. Panic is born of fear and fear is irrational, infectious. Prevents people from reacting in a disciplined way.

Our job is to maintain discipline.

GRIGORY/VASILY

I understand, Comrade.

STEPANOV

You can imagine for yourself the consequences of a terrible panic in a town of several million inhabitants.

GRIGORY/VASILY

Yes, Comrade.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I can't tell myself, like some others, that I don't remember a thing.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

But I keep having this strange idea.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

It torments me. It may not be mine: I have seen what others have not yet seen.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Something terrible was revealed to us before it was to others.

I put my arms around him and kissed him. He moved away. "Don't sit next to me."
"It's all nonsense," I said, waving it off. "Did you see where the explosion was? 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.
They next day when I arrived—

IRINA & A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

They are strictly forbidden to go out into the hallway, or have contact with one
another.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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.

He's changing. The burns are surfacing. In his mouth, his tongue, his cheeks. They
started as small ulcers. Now they're spreading.

IRINA

The prognosis for acute radiation sickness is fourteen days.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Him. Only him, only him.

IRINA & A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Fourteen days.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

It takes fourteen days for a man to die.

GRIGORY

We've received our orders. The nearby towns will be evacuated. We'll clean the zone out around the reactor, and in a few days time the people will be home again.

ANNA

(Kneeling)

Mother, we are leaving.

ANNA & KATYA

They're evacuating us.

KATYA

My mother brought that word home from work - "We are going to be evacuated."

ANNA

They say they'll just go over, wash everything, and then we'll be back in a few days. I borrowed some of your earth to guide me back home.

Forgive me for leaving you.

GRIGORY

The hospitals will remain open so that necessary medical aid can be given to those affected.

ANNA

I'll remember it all for you. Planes flying overhead. Every day.

KATYA

Really low over our heads.

ANNA

Flying to the reactor. To the station. One after the other. And they're evacuating us.

KATYA

Just like in the books on war!

VASILY

Here's what it was: at home, the level was 30,000 microroentgens an hour. People were sowing and plowing. Out on the boulevard people were selling meat pies, ice cream, hamburgers, bread. Under a radioactive cloud. I tried to explain. A woman said: What's radiations? What's that?

Roentgens, microroentgens. Extraterrestrial language.

ANNA

Fairy tales. Just fairy tales.

What radiations? Do you see the world outside? The fire has been put out, and everything is growing in the garden. The apple trees are in bloom.

ANNA & VASILY

How can you talk about Radiation when the butterflies are flying and the bees are buzzing?

KATYA

There? Have I hit the mark or not?

VASILY

(To STEPANOV)

On April 29th, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria and Romania.

STEPANOV

Where did you get these?

VASILY

I made them.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

He's dying.

IRINA

And what do you want? He got 1600 roentgens and the fatal dose is 400.

VASILY

On April 30th, high levels of radiation were recorded in Switzerland and northern Italy.

IRINA

You are sitting next to a reactor.

VASILY

On May 1st and 2nd, radiation was detected in France, Belgium, the Netherlands/ Great Britain and Northern Greece.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

/Fourteen days. It takes fourteen days -it's all mine. Every bit. I can't say it. You can't write about it! There was an apple on his nightstand. A big one. He smiled and said, "They gave me a treat. You take it." The Nurse signals me through the plastic curtain that I cannot eat the apple. If it's been near him for a while, just being near it, much less eating it, is dangerous. "Come on, eat it," he asks. "You love apples." I pick it up. The nurse looks at me in horror. Me? I was ready to do whatever was necessary to keep him from thinking about death. Or that his illness was horrible, that I was afraid of him.

VASILY

On May 3rd in Israel, Kuwait and Turkey.....

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Every day I heard: died. Died. Andrei died.

VASILY

On May 4th, gaseous airborne particles registered in Japan.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Ivan died. Died.

VASILY

On May 5th in India, May 6th in the U.S. /and Canada.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

/Died, died. Like hammer blows to my temple.

VASILY

It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE & VASILY

May 9th.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Victory Day. He opened his eyes. "Open the window! The fireworks!" I opened it. We were on the eighth floor, we could see the whole city below us! A bouquet of fire burst into the sky.

"I promised I would show you Moscow. I promised I would get 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.

STEPANOV

I consulted with Moscow. Everything is fine here. And the government commission is at work. And the procurator's office. They've sent in the Army and the military technology.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Night. Quiet.

STEPANOV

Don't worry,

STEPANOV & GRIGORY

Comrades,

GRIGORY

The situation is under control. Nothing to worry about. People are living and working here.

SERGEI

(To GRIGORY)

Civilian life is too boring, too sweet for me.

(He puts out his hand. No answer.)

I'd been taught you become a real writer in the war and so on. Now I'm just a cameraman, but that will change soon.

(no answer)

In September the first cool nights came, then the leaves on the trees began to turn color and we knew the summer was gone.

GRIGORY

Hemingway? *A Farewell to Arms?*

SERGEI

Yes, it's my---

GRIGORY

I hate that book.

GRIGORY (cont'd)

We are cleaning Chernobyl for the residents. We'll be paid for a work day, plus a bonus. 30 roubles.

(hands out forms)

Sign this.

SERGEI

We can't tell anyone what we see there?

GRIGORY

Or what we do.

SERGEI

When do we get there?

GRIGORY

Where?

SERGEI

The accident?

GRIGORY

We are there.

SERGEI

Here? What's going on here? What am I supposed to film? Where are the explosions?

GRIGORY

We'll round up some heroes for you to film. But your cameras will speak for you.
Sign.

KATYA

We rode in the buses to Minsk, and the sky was so blue.

SERGEI

I caught myself filming the scene the way it always was played in wartime movies. They loaded them into large tourist buses. This remains etched on my memory. A girl waving to her mother, as if to say, everything's fine, she is brave. And she gives a little victory sign.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

He was no longer in an ordinary room, but in a special barochamber, behind a clear plastic curtain, and no one was admitted inside. They had special mechanisms to be able to give shots and insert catheters without getting inside the curtain. But it was held together by tabs and locks and I learned how to use them, open them and get through to him. There was a little chair next to his bed. He was in such a bad way that I could not leave him, not for a minute. He called to me constantly, "Where are you? Lyusenka!" He called and called.

KATYA

The soldiers looked like extraterrestrials, walking down the street in white camouflage and masks.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

The other barochambers with our guys were serviced by soldiers, because the staff orderlies refused to work without special protective clothing. The soldiers carried

bedpans, washed floors, made the beds. They did everything. Where did the soldiers come from? I never asked.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE (cont'd)

I was in my sixth month. In the hallway, I was faint, I put out my hand to steady myself----

IRINA

Why did you lie to me?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I had no other way out. If I had told the truth, you would have sent me out.

IRINA

What have you done?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I am with him. It was a holy lie.

IRINA

Listen to me. Pregnant women tell me their dreams: giving birth to a calf with eight legs, or a puppy with the head of a hedgehog. Such strange dreams. Women didn't have dreams like that before.

VASILY

Our land is already covered by thousands of tons of cesium, iodine, lead, zirconium, cadmium.....the amount was equal to 350 bombs of the kind dropped on Hiroshima.

STEPANOV

Do not hand our enemies any more fake information to use against us.

VASILY

We are supposed to be talking about physics. The laws of physics. But you talk about enemies.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

The skin on his arms and legs began to crack. Covered in blisters. When he turns his head, clumps of hair remain on his pillow. I try to joke about it. "It's handy, you won't have to carry a comb."

GRIGORY

We have fellows from all over the Soviet Union. Russians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Armenians. It is an exciting time to be a partisan.

For us, victory is not an event but a process. Life is a struggle. Overcoming. You must win and conquer.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I remember a piece of conversation in my memory. Someone telling me:

IRINA

You must not forget. What is in there is no longer your husband, the man you love, but a radioactive object with a high density of contamination. You are not a suicide case. Get a grip on yourself.

GRIGORY

You must win and conquer. Conquer what? Conquer the atom? Conquer physics?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I wanted to do everything myself. If I could have stood it physically, I would have been by his side twenty-four hours a day. I hated losing a single minute. Even one minute.

GRIGORY

See, just a few days after this catastrophe, the red flag waves over Reactor Number four.

VASILY

A month later, it had been eaten by the high radiation.

SERGEI

I didn't film that.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I love him. I love him. He sleeps and I whisper I love you. I walk through the hospital courtyard and whisper I love you. I remember how we lived before, on the second floor, above the fire engines. I told you "I love you," but I didn't even know how much. I could not speak it. I could only hold his hand.

That was his habit. To hold my hand while he slept. All night.

IRINA

My daughter went to Minsk, to her aunt's house. My own sister would not let her in, because she had a baby, she was breast feeding. Can you imagine? I had wild ideas? Where could we go?

KATYA

Grandmother got her knees and prayed. She told us, "Pray! It's the end of the world."

IRINA

We had nowhere to go.

KATYA

Mama often wears black. A black kerchief. There's always a funeral on our street. When I hear the music, I run home and pray. I pray for Mother and Father.

GRIGORY

Your husband will be buried in a special way, in a sealed zinc coffin, under concrete slabs. These men are heroes and no longer belong to their families. They are state personages. They belong to the state.

(hand A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE a form on a clipboard.)

Sign this.

STEPANOV

Listen, there are many domestic animals left in the zone - cats, dogs, and to avoid an epidemic, they have to be shot. Go do it.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

(to a baby)

Natashenka. Your father called you Natasha. She looked healthy. Hands and feet. But it turned out she had cirrhosis of the liver. The liver showed 28 roentgens. And congenital heart defects. Four hours later they told me that the girl had died. And once again, they would not give her to me.

GRIGORY

Sign this. I called all the men together. Announced it.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Can I see her?

IRINA

We---cannot give her to you. She belongs to the state.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I won't give her to you! You just want her for your science, and I hate your science! I hate it! It took him away from me and now it wants her. I won't hand her over! I will bury her myself! Next to him.

STEPANOV

What's the delay?

GRIGORY

They don't want to go, Comrade. They would like some protective clothing.

STEPANOV

Apply to the civic defense office.

GRIGORY

They had nothing.

STEPANOV

Apply to the cement plant. They use masks.

GRIGORY

Thin masks. For cement dust.

SERGEI

DUST ROAD (from book)

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I keep saying the wrong things to you. Not the words I want. I'm not supposed to shout after my stroke. Or weep. That's why the words are wrong. But I'll tell you something. No one knows this. When I would not give them my daughter - our daughter - they brought me a wooden box.

IRINA

She's in there.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I looked, they put diapers on her. She was in diapers.

STEPANOV

See, everything's fine. And the reactor is just 10 km away. Our flag still blazes over Reactor number four. People still swim in the Pripyat River.

GRIGORY

The West is trying to spread panic. They tell lies about the accident. Everything is fine here. See this brave man and his grandson. They were evacuated, and still they brought the cattle back to their village!

SERGEI

A scientist then found me, and led me to the gigantic trench, where bulldozers were burying the herd. I didn't film that.

I turned my back to the trench and filmed an episode in the best tradition of Soviet documentaries. The bulldozer drivers reading the newspaper Pravda with a headline in inch-high letter: "The Country Will Not Abandon Those in Need." I tried very hard to make the headline readable. And I had another stroke of luck. I caught a stork landing in a field. A symbol! No matter what catastrophe befalls us, we will win. Life goes on.....

STEPANOV

Why are you creating hysteria, Professor? Are you the only one concerned about the Belarussian people?

IRINA

You can find ways or acting. Without announcements.

VASILY

Without panic. Just add iodine to the water supply.

IRINA

Add it to the milk.

You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses in the city.

VASILY

We'll take care of everything. Just sign this ---

SERGEI

I lived in a hostel. With men. We are given tons of vodka. To flush out the radiation. They had one order.

GRIGORY

I can't sleep at night.

SERGEI

Shoot everything.

GRIGORY

Whenever I shut my eyes—

SERGEI

Then bury it.

GRIGORY

I see something black moving, turning over, Like a living thing.

KATYA

I remember a lot of things to be afraid of.

GRIGORY

Living layers of the earth. With beetles, spiders and ants. In the dream, I can't recognize any of them. I don't know what they are called. But awake, I remember: beetles and spiders. Ants.

KATYA

Ants, butterflies, bees, all contaminated.

VASILY

Ants crawling along a tree trunk.....Military trucks roaring around you. Soldiers. Shouts and curses. Swearing. Helicopters whirring. And they keep crawling.

(to Stepanov)

You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses.

STEPANOV

That's where it will stay. Everyone has to die of something.

SERGEI

The villages were evacuated, but the dogs lived on, waiting for their masters to return. They were shot. A man with a rifle was shooting at dogs, with children nearby. I recognized and went over to him. "What are you doing?" He calmly took a paper out of his pocket: orders from the city council to shoot stray dogs.

GRIGORY

Don't bother me. I have this paper.

SERGEI

The smell of blood works on a primitive level. It's something animal.

VASILY

You will say that you are only a tractor builder and that you knew nothing about radiation. But I'm a physicist and I have an idea of the consequences. In case of a threat of nuclear accident, instructions recommend preventive iodine treatment.

A threat. And here it is 30,000 microroentgens an hour.

STEPANOV

You were warned, Professor. I tried—but Moscow is sending your family back.

VASILY

Moscow stopped seeing me. Listening to me. I showered them with letters and reports. I sent them maps and figures. They got their own kids out quietly. Threats. They got what they wanted.

GRIGORY

The first time is scary, but then you get used to it. You have a shot or two and off you go.

Same system as war. We arrive, circle the village, and as soon as the dogs hear the first shot, they run into the woods. Cats are clever and it's easier for them to hide. You go into a house, a cat shoots out between your legs, and you chase it with a rifle. Not pleasant.

(They hear ANNA singing)

Come on. Let's go woman.

ANNA

But boys, I just got back.

KATYA

I remembered what a woman begged me on the bus ride back home.

Find Anna Sushko for us. She used to live in our village. Her name is Anna Sushko. I will describe her to you and you find her. She lived alone. No one knows how old she is. During the resettlement she was taken away in an ambulance in an unknown direction. She never learned to read and write, so we have no letters from her. The solitary and sick were placed in asylums. Hidden away. But no one knows the address.

KATYA (cont'd)

Just give us her address, where she's living and suffering, and we'll go and get her. We'll bring her back. Wait, there's something else to add to her description, I forgot. When something hurts, she sings a song. Without words. Just the voice. When it hurts, she goes "aaaaaaa." For comfort.

I wonder if they ever found her.

ANNA

I washed the house, whitewashed the stove. You have to leave bread and salt on the table, a bowl, and a spoon for every person in the house. That's what you do so that you will return.

VASILY

And you returned?

ANNA

The sun doesn't shine right in other places.

GRIGORY

In addition to automatic rifles we were handed shovels. We re-dug garbage dumps and gardens. Village women watched us and prayed. We would appear in their gardens like devils. They could not understand why we were digging up their beds, pulling out garlic and cabbages, when the garlic and cabbage looked perfectly normal. Yet we loaded up the vegetables in trucks and took them to be buried in deep trenches, burial pits, scientifically speaking. The women would cross themselves and say---

ANNA

Soldier boys, what is this? The end of the world?

GRIGORY

Inside the stove would be on, bacon frying.

ANNA

I found some lost animals on the way back. Sit down at the table, boys.

GRIGORY

I'm sorry, Lady, we can't stay. You know you're not supposed to—they brought in Chinese meat, and potatoes from Minsk---

ANNA

And what am I supposed to buy it with? That radiation was in my garden, and I washed it away. It was white, it clung to my tomatoes like dew, but a good washing and now

they're like new. I'll find a glass of vodka for you. Sit down. Talk to me. I haven't heard another human voice in so long.

VASILY

And what could we tell her? That's no stove, it's a small reactor.

ANNA

Have some vodka, Professor.

VASILY

No thank you.

ANNA

Our women who went to live in the city cry all the time. My husband is here, in the graveyard. If he weren't there, he would be living somewhere else. And I would be with him.

ANNA (cont'd)

But why leave? It's good here! Everything grows and blossoms here. From gnat to beast, everything is alive. After the accident, all the sparrows vanished from our town. And now, just a few months later the sparrows returned.

Tell me, is this another war? I cannot bear another war.

GRIGORY

You can't compare this to a war, it's not accurate, but everyone does it.

ANNA

We've lived through the worst. We lived through the blockade. Nothing worse can ever happen to us.

VASILY

We prepared for nuclear war, we built bomb shelters. We wanted to hide from the atom as if it were shrapnel. But it's everywhere. In the bread, in the salt. In the vodka. We breathe radiation, we eat it.

GRIGORY

I can understand being without bread or salt, having to eat almost anything, that you could boil a leather belt in water just for the smell, to eat the smell of cooking. That I could understand.

ANNA

How can you talk about Radiation when the butterflies are flying and the bees are buzzing?

GRIGORY

But this? This, I can't understand. Then I look around. I take the woman's advice and I look around. Everything is poisoned?

IRINA

I remember those days. My throat burned, I felt a heaviness in my body.

STEPANOV

You're a hypochondriac.

IRINA

It's not hypochondria. It hurts and I have no strength. My husband and I were too embarrassed to tell each other, but we were losing the use of our legs.

GRIGORY

The children will attend school from eight in the morning until nine at night. They are strictly forbidden to play outside or to run. Everyone was given clothing: skirts and blouses for the girls, suits for the boys. The mothers will wash their clothing every day, so the children can show up at school in everything clean.

IRINA

But they only gave them one set of clothes, without a change, and for them dirt was ink, soil, grease spots, not the action of short-lived isotopes.

VASILY

It's not very easy to explain the difference between rems and roentgens.

ANNA

I thought radiations was some kind of disease, and whoever got it would die right away.

VASILY

No, it's something that lies on the ground and gets inside it, but you can't see it.

ANNA

You can't hear it or see it? You scientists have just made it up!

IRINA

Things went along as usual: plough, sow, harvest. The unbelievable happened, but people went on as before.

VASILY

Rejecting cucumbers from your own garden was more significant than Chornobyl.

IRINA

Chornobyl is not as terrible as leaving unharvested potatoes in the field.

SERGEI

Thousands died at the Battle of Kursk in World War II. That's comprehensible. But here, only seven firemen died in the first two days. And a little while later a few more people. And then. It was too abstract - "nothing," "eternity," "in a few generations." Eternity is not a concept for daily life. Rumours spread: three-headed birds, chickens attacking foxes, bald hedgehogs....yes, our imagination was not ready to deal with the catastrophe.

KATYA

A ball rolls down the street.

"Where are you going, ball?"

"I'm not a ball, I'm a hedgehog from Chornobyl."

I'd just come back. The other children at the summer camp called me a lightning bug. I came back to my warm blankets, my autumn coat and the complete edition of Euripides, father's favorite reading.

Believe me if you will

VASILY & KATYA

What will it matter if you won't?

It comes when it comes and soon you'll see it face to face

VASILY

And say the seer was all too true.

KATYA

We found a spot on the blanket.

ANNA

It's over now, isn't it?

KATYA

Mother washed it, vacuumed it, nothing helped. We gave it to the dry cleaners. It "glowed." That "Spot." We cut it out with scissors in the end.

VASILY

I was on my way back from the zone and this one picture stuck in my mind, out of everything that I had seen that day. We had stopped in the forest, and I was smoking near a birch tree. I leaned on it. Right in front of my face ants were crawling along the trunk, not paying the least bit of attention. We will vanish and they won't even notice. And I? I had never looked at them so closely before.

IRINA

Stop people! We have to live here. You talk and then leave, but we have to live here. Why have you come here? To save us? To trade on our philosophy? No? Then why have you come? Leave us alone, please. We need to live here.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

My husband left for Chernobyl on my birthday. The van came in the late evening. Guests were still seated at the table.

SERGEI

I was once filming people who had been in a concentration camp. They don't like getting together. I met this guy who wanders around here, drinking and would start lecturing. I think he had spent time in jail. Chernobyl, He said:

VASILY

Exists to create philosophy.

SERGEI

He called animals "walking dust" and people:

SERGEI & VASILY

"Speaking earth."

VASILY

Speaking earth because we eat the earth.

SERGEI

That is, we're made of the earth.

IRINA

Daughter, here we are all from Chernobyl. We don't scare one another. We all have the same memories. Anywhere else we would be strangers.

KATYA

*Oh, the grief. The grief of the city
Ripped to oblivion.*

SERGEI

Speaking earth.

ANNA

First I waited for the people to come back. I thought they would come back. No one ever left forever. There's no church. The priest doesn't come. I have nowhere to take my sins.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Just recently I was so happy. Why? I have forgotten. It was all back in some other life. I don't understand. I don't know how to start living again.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

A lot of the doctors, and nurses, got sick and died, too. But we didn't know that, then.

VASILY

This is for thousands of years. The breakdown of uranium will take a billion years. And thorium takes 14 billion years.

KATYA

We took my mother to bury her. It was behind the barbed wire. Soldiers with automatic weapons were guarding it. They only let adults past the barbed wire. My father. Other relatives. But not me. I understood that I would never be able to visit my mother. I understood it.

GRIGORY

We were digging ditches and dumping all of the animals' bodies into it. One day....it was just an ordinary ditch, a deep one. Not regulation. We dumped all of the animals out of the trunk into the hole, and this little poodle climbed out. No one had a bullet

left. Not one bullet. We pushed him back into the hole and covered it with dirt. I still feel bad about it.

VASILY

We humans understand, they simply exist. Walking dust.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

We had no fear for a long time. I was so happy when he came back. Sometimes I would dream that I was a part of his body—we were inseparable. When he was away, I missed him terribly, it hurt me physically to be without him.

KATYA

I was little. Six, no, eight years-old, I think. Right, eight. I just counted it up. I was nine when I went back.

GRIGORY

We buried soil in the earth. With beetles, spiders and ants.

KATYA

Pick up a beetle. It crawled on the ground, and the ground was contaminated. Ants, butterflies, bees - all contaminated.

VASILY

Ants crawling along a tree branch...
Should you remember? I think it's pointless.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

His lymph nodes were swollen when he came back.

KATYA

I was little. Nine years old.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Will you see a Doctor? He reassured me, "They'll go away." "How was it in Chernobyl?" "The usual work."

KATYA

Spring came. And the leaves came, as usual. Year after year. Green ones. The apple trees bloom. White.

And then we ran to the river to ask the fishermen if the fish still had heads and tails.

SERGEI

After all those years, I sometimes go into the zone. A wild boar will leap out of an abandoned, ruined house.

KATYA

No book has explained it to me.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I read a lot of books and I meet a lot of different people. He didn't want to go to the Doctor. "I don't want to hear of it. It doesn't hurt." But his lymph nodes were the size of eggs. I pushed him into the car. One doctor took a look and called another: "Got another guy from Chernobyl." And they wouldn't let him out. A week later they operated: they removed his thyroid and his larynx and replaced them with tubes. Yes.....yes. Now I know that that was a happy time, too.

VASILY

After Chernobyl, all that's left is the mythology about Chernobyl. Newspapers and magazines compete to see who can write the scariest pieces.

KATYA

Have you heard anything about the Hibasuki? The survivors of Hiroshima? They can marry only among themselves. We don't write about it here, we don't talk about it. But we exist. The Chernobyl Hibasuki.

VASILY

Everyone has read about mushrooms the size of a person's head, but no one's ever found one.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I was given a special syringe and shown how to use it. I was supposed to feed him through it.

SERGEI

My men are getting sick. And their bosses say it's the Chernobyl hypochondria.

GRIGORY

There is nothing—

SERGEI

This is not hypochondria. I felt something similar when a close friend died. The sun was shining. Birds flying around. Swallows. It rained. But he was dead. Do you understand?

I saw an apple tree in bloom and started filming it. The bees were buzzing, the flowers were wedding white. People were working, flowers blooming, a symbol! I had the camera in my hands, I should have been filming, but there was something wrong. The exposure was right, the picture was ready and something was off. And suddenly I understood. I didn't smell anything. The orchard was in bloom, but there was no smell. I learned later that this happens, to some. When the organism is exposed to high levels of radiation, some of the organs get blocked.

GRIGORY

Bring me certified accounts. They have to have official seals.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Four times a day I cooked something fresh, it had to be fresh, ground it up, strained it and then put it in the syringe.

VASILY

Show me a science fiction novel about Chornobyl. There isn't one! Reality is stranger.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I would push it into one of the tubes, the largest, which went into the stomach. He couldn't smell things anymore. I would ask, "Taste good?" And he wouldn't know.

VASILY

That's why instead of writing, one must just take notes. Document it. I keep a special notebook. I write down conversations, rumours, jokes. They're the most interesting thing, and they're timeless. What is left of Ancient Greece? Their mythology of Ancient Greece.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

We managed to get to the movies a few times. To kiss there.

VASILY

Here is my notebook: The most popular fairy tale from the Zone is that Stolichnaya vodka is the best defense against strontium and cesium.

GRIGORY

We didn't start thinking about it until—let me get this right - probably twelve years later. One got sick, and then another. Someone died, another went crazy, another committed suicide. That's when we started wondering.

VASILY

"Suddenly the village stores were full of things that were in short supply before. I heard a Party secretary give a speech: 'We will create paradise for you here. Just stay on and work. We will pile on the sausages and buckwheat. You will have everything that is found in the best special stores.'

ANNA

I don't think there ever was any Chernobyl. I think they made it up.

VASILY

Geiger counters were on sale for a month and then vanished. You can't write about that.

ANNA

Tricked people.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

We were hanging by the thinnest thread. They guys were dying one after the other. And then one morning, I woke him up, gave him his robe, but he couldn't get up. Or say anything. He couldn't talk any longer. His eyes were so big. That's when he got scared. Yes.

We had a year left.

GRIGORY

At night I'm awakened by my mother's voice. "Son, why don't you speak? You're not sleeping, you're lying there with your eyes open. And the light is on." I keep silent. No one can speak to me in a way that I can answer. In my own language. No one understands where I've been. And I can't talk about it.

VASILY

You also can't write about fall-out -- what kind and how many radionucleides.

KATYA

I didn't know that we couldn't make love here. I listened to the ancient prophecies like fairy tales. I did not believe them.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

He died all that year. Every day he got worse and worse, and he knew that he was dying. We were living like that, too. With that thought. Ask me how people die after

Chornobyl. The man I loved, whom I could not have loved more if I had given birth to him myself, turned before my very eyes into a monster.

VASILY

'Don't forget we have enemies. We have many enemies across the ocean,' the editor threatened. And that's why everything is good here and nothing is bad. Only special trains are being scheduled and people have seen the authorities with their suitcases''

GRIGORY

Items from the newspapers flashed through my mind: the academician Alexandrov, the godfather of our nuclear stations, had sworn that they were absolutely safe, that they could be built on Red Square. Safer than a samovar. But that poodle, it's stuck in my mind. Too bad we didn't have a bullet among us to finish off that poodle. Twenty people and not a single bullet at the end of the day. Not one.

VASILY

And you can't write that only men were left in the villages. The women and children were evacuated. For the whole summer the men did their own laundry, milked the cows and dug the gardens. And drank of course. And got into fights. A world without women.

GRIGORY

I landed in a wild world there, a combination of the end of the world and the Stone Age. And all my nerves were raw, exposed.

SERGEI

We lived in the woods. In tents. Twenty kilometers from the reactor.

GRIGORY

They called us "partisans," that is, people like me who were called up for military reserve training. Many had higher or a technical education and I am a history teacher.

VASILY

The military knew about it ahead of time, but it was all top secret.

STEPANOV

They put away the director of the atomic station for awhile and then let him out. In that system it was hard to say who was guilty.

GRIGORY

On the one hand, we had no freedom, like prison-camp inmates, and on the other, there was fear. But I didn't feel fear. I felt as if I was observing everything that was happening to me.

VASILY

"An old woman stopped me near a police post. 'Take a look at my house when you're there. It's time to lift the potatoes, but the soldiers won't let me through.' They had been resettled. Displaced persons, dispossessed people.

ANNA

A woman sells her apples on the street. "Apples from Chernobyl! Apples from Chernobyl!" A businessman stops her. "Don't say they're from Chernobyl. No one will buy them." "Sure they do. Some buy them for their mothers-in-law, some for their bosses."

VASILY

Rumors: they are building camps behind Chernobyl to intern those who have been exposed to radiation there. They'll keep them, observe them and then bury them.

GRIGORY

I saw a man whose house was being buried before his very eyes.....They told us never to tell anyone what we had seen. When I came back from Afghanistan, I knew that I would live. But with Chernobyl it's all backwards: I'd be killed when I got back.

VASILY

Corpses from the villages closest to the station are brought out in bus loads straight to the cemetery, thousands buried in common graves.

GRIGORY

Burials, burials. We buried houses, wells, trees. We buried earth. We cut it and rolled it up in big sheets which lay there like coffins. I told you, nothing heroic.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I always go to them with two bouquets: one for him and the other I put on the corner for her. She has no name, no nothing.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

When my husband was dying, he just looked at me. He wrote in our notebook: "When I die, burn my body. I don't want you to be afraid." Why? Well, you know the rumors. That Chernobyl victims glow even after death.

VASILY

Children from Chernobyl have an unknown liquid instead of blood.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

If the dead fear the dead, what about the living?

VASILY

There are scientists who say that the apes grew so intelligent because they lived in areas of high radiation.

GRIGORY

I destroyed their houses. Their secrets. I buried them.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Something black grew over him. His chin vanished, so did his neck, his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Blood vessels would burst and he would bleed. In all directions.

VASILY

Someday they'll find the remains of some very strange burials. Graveyards for animals are called bio-cemeteries by the scientists. These are modern-day temples.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

It was horrible. The whole pillow would be covered in blood. I'd put a basin under the bleeding. The streams would strike it like milk hitting a bucket. That sound - so peaceful and country like. I can hear it at night even now. When he was still conscious, he would clap our hands - that was our signal. Call an ambulance! He did not want to die. He was forty-five.

GRIGORY

I haven't told you anything. Just fragments.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

He would scream in pain. Scream all day long. I found something that helped: I would use the syringe to pour a bottle of vodka into him. He would forget the pain, then. It wasn't my idea, other women told me.

GRIGORY

There is a story, about a resident of Jerusalem, whose house was on the route that Christ took to the cross. He saw everything and heard everything, but he had a toothache then. He saw Christ fall as He was carrying the cross, fall and scream. The man saw all that, but his tooth hurt and he could not follow and be a witness.

KATYA

My daughter. She's not like everyone else. And when she grows up, she's going to ask me, "Why am I like this?" When she was born....it wasn't a baby but a living sack, closed on all sides, without a single crack. Only the eyes were open. The medical chart read female; born with multiple complex pathology: aplasia of the anus, aplasia of the vagina, aplasia of the left kidney. In ordinary language it means no peepee, no poopoo and only one kidney.

STEPANOV

I feel humiliated on behalf of the homeland. What a superpower it was. The whole world watched us. Some trembled with fear, some envied us. Damn it! And now? If Chernobyl had not blown up, the country would not have collapsed. A superpower! Damn it! A loaf of bread under the communists cost 20 kopeks and now it's 2000 roubles. I used to buy a bottle of vodka for three roubles, and had enough left over for a snack. And now, with the democrats? They've sold everything! Signed it all away! Our grandchildren will still be paying off our debts.

KATYA

My daughter sings and dances and recites poetry by heart. Her mental development is normal, she is no different from other children. But she has other games. She does not play shops or schools, she plays hospital with her dolls. She takes their temperature, prescribes an IV. And when the doll dies, she covers it with a white sheet.

GRIGORY

Two days later when his toothache was over, he was told that Christ has arisen, and he thought, "I could have been a witness, but I had a toothache."

KATYA

They made an anus for her. They're forming a vagina. After the last operation her urination stopped completely. They couldn't get the catheter in, and she needs a few more operations. But now they suggest we continue abroad. And where are we supposed to find tens of thousands of dollars, when my husband makes 120 dollars a month?

VASILY

With this pathology your child is of great interest to science. Write to foreign clinics. They will be interested.

KATYA

I am writing. I write that every half hour I have to squeeze the urine out by hand, the urine comes out through a pinpoint opening in the area of the vagina. If you don't do it, her only kidney will malfunction. Where else in the world is there a child who has to have her urine pumped out by hand every half-hour? And how long can she take that? No one knows the effect of low doses of radiation on humans, on children. Take

my little girl, even if it's for experimentation. I don't want her to die. I'm willing to let my daughter become a guinea pig, to experiment on like a rabbit or a frog, if that will keep her alive. I have written dozens of letters.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

There are private things. He had desires. Even then. In the mornings I would look at him and not believe what had happened during the night.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Whenever I passed a school, I would stop and stare. I could watch children all day. I want to have a baby. I am afraid to be alone.

SERGEI

I was covering a summer festival, on the Black Sea, and asked about the vacation homes on the horizon. "Be careful of those," a local told me. "They bought the wood from Chernobyl."

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

The final weeks were the worst. It took him half an hour to urinate into a half-litre jar. He couldn't look up. On the last day, this happened: he opened his eyes, sat up, smiled, and said my name. He died alone.

SERGEI

I remember in fragments. It was a very dry May. Where there had been a dusty road, they were suddenly laying asphalt—and two or three layers thick. They were expecting big shots. And I saw those big shots, who walked very carefully only on the fresh asphalt and not a centimeter off the road. I didn't film that.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I did not tell you that when he died, no one dared go hear him, they were all afraid. And yet relatives aren't supposed to prepare the body for burial.

SERGEI

Pictures jumble in my mind....the chairman of the collective farm wants to bring his family and all his things out in two cars, but the Party organizer wants one car for himself. But that same week they couldn't evacuate the Pre-school group, because they don't have the transport.

I saw them packing for their morning trip. I didn't film that, either.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

Two orderlies came from the morgue. They asked for vodka. "We've seen it all, car accidents, knife fights, children who died in fires. But nothing like this. The Chernobyl victims die the worst.

SERGEI

I have a long film in my memory that I did not film. Lots of reels.

KATYA

My knowledge of the world is this:

I must sit here

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

What has saved me? What has pushed me towards life? Brought me back? My son. I still have a son, our son together. He's been sick/ a long time.

KATYA

/I must sit here prepared at any moment to have death come knocking at the door.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I dream of getting an apartment near the psychiatric hospital. He's there. The doctors said that if he is to survive, he must live there. I go there on weekends. When he sees me he asks, "Where is Papa? When will he come visit?" He's waiting for him.

SERGEI

I learned and felt something in Chernobyl that I do not want to talk about. For instance, that all our humane ideas are relative and that in extreme situations man

doesn't behave as they write in books. I've never found a manlike that. Never. On the contrary. Man is no hero. We are all sellers of the apocalypse. Big and small.

KATYA

That is my knowledge of the world.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

We'll wait together.

KATYA

And that, I think that breaks the heart.

SERGEI

I want to make a movie from the point of view of an animal. St Francis preached to the birds. He talked with the birds as if they were equals. Those birds talked to him in their language, he wasn't talking down to them. He understood their secret language.

A LONELY HUMAN VOICE

I stopped the clocks in the house. Seven in the morning. And all these years later, we can't start one of them.

GRIGORY

I could have been a witness.