

VOICES FROM CHORNOBYL:

The crown of creation

6 characters

Written by Cindy Marie Jenkins

Assisted by Aaron Lyons

Inspired by the book *Voices From Chernobyl*

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CHARACTERS

Katya Shimanky, 8-30 years-old

Vasily Shimanky, Physicist, 30-50 years-old

Anna Sushko, Resident of Chornobyl, 50-100 years-old

Grigory Filin, Former Soldier, Leader of a Clean-up Crew, 30-50 years-old

Sergei Gurin, Cameraman from Minsk, any age

A Solitary Human Voice, Wife of a Fireman, timeless

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

(Reading from the Bible)

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? 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.

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

KATYA

We don't know what to do. I want to love, I try to love! I pray for my love! And----

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.

ANNA

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

VASILY

My family didn't know./ My daughter--

KATYA

/My father is particularly bewildered.

VASILY

At this moment my daughter would be walking to school. With friends. Outside.

KATYA

My father is confused. He does not know how to live without the counsel of books. Without Chekhov and Tolstoy, and the old Greek masters.

We lived in Pripyat, just three miles from the reactor. I was born and bred there. We were very happy about it.

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

VASILY

Shut the windows.

KATYA

(on the phone)

Hi Papa!

VASILY

Is your mother home?

KATYA

No, Papa. The hospital called and she had to work.

VASILY

(pause)

Listen to me very closely.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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.

VASILY

Shut the windows.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I heard a noise. He saw me and said, "Get back to sleep. There's a fire at the reactor. I'll be back soon. "I did not see the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything seemed to flow.

VASILY

What do you see out there?

KATYA

Flames cover the whole sky.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

And he was still out.....

VASILY

OK. Quiet. Careful now. Shut the windows. Put all the food in plastic bags. Sssshhhh.....it's all right. 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. We got cut off.

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

The whole sky. The flames were high. And /smoke. Horrible heat.

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

The police set up these blocks, no one could get out.

(Silence.)

The whole next day, I stared out of the closed window.

It looks like an ordinary fire, being put out by ordinary firemen.

The streets are filled with military machines. All the roads are closed. They are washing the streets with a white powder.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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.

KATYA

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

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Five.....

KATYA

The way it is in the mountains sometimes.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Six.....

KATYA & A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

So quiet.

KATYA

You can forget your life in there.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Seven o'clock.

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?

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

I ran to the hospital, 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!"

Please! Just to see him.

I had to sign a form. I didn't stop to read it. I just wanted to see him.

Do you have children? She asked.

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

Yes.

GRIGORY

I had just returned from Afghanistan. I was going to return to teaching. I teach History. Instead, I got a notice with a red stripe Meaning "Special Draft." Show up with your things at the following address within an hour. When my mother heard, she started weeping. She thought they were sending me to war again.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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

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

And listen---If you cry, I'll throw you out right away. You may not hug or kiss. Don't come close. You have half an hour.

GRIGORY

(to Sergei)

Get in the van.

SERGEI

They came suddenly and a special van was waiting downstairs.

VASILY

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

A SOLITARY 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!" As soon as I started talking about the accident, they disconnected me.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

No, use my name. Say it to God.

SERGEI

Where are we going? I only got this paper---

GRIGORY

We are going to Chernobyl.

SERGEI

To the fire?

GRIGORY

It was put out.

VASILY

(on the phone)

I got hold of someone else. According to my calculations, the radioactive cloud is moving towards us. We must immediately give prophylactic iodine treatment to the population and move out every-

(Dial tone)

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.

GRIGORY

My reports say the situation is now stabilized.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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. The next day when I arrived— I couldn't go near him—they were forbidden to have human contact.

I met a lot of good people there, 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.

The prognosis for acute radiation sickness is fourteen days.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE & VASILY

It takes fourteen days for a man to die.

GRIGORY

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

We are going to be evacuated.

ANNA

They say they'll just 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 the necessary medical aid can be given to those affected.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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. But 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.

Night. Quiet.

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.

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.

GRIGORY

My Superiors received a phone call. From Moscow. Something about not starting a panic in Belarussia. The West is making too much of it already.

KATYA

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

GRIGORY

/you can imagine for yourselves the consequences.

ANNA

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

VASILY

There are warehouses full of iodine in the city.

GRIGORY

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

VASILY

From the Greek -Pan—he was a mischief-maker.

VASILY & KATYA

The god of woods and fields who created mysterious sounds.

GRIGORY

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 and prevents people from reacting in a disciplined way.

Our orders are to maintain discipline.

VASILY

I understand, Comrade.

GRIGORY

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

VASILY

Yes, Comrade.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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

But I keep having this strange idea.

It torments me. It may not be mine: I have seen what others have not yet seen. Something terrible was revealed to us before it was to others.

GRIGORY

As we got closer, some of the men started asking questions. The driver looked back and said, "Don't worry, Comrades, the situation is under control.

Nothing to worry about. People are living and working here."

SERGEI

(To GRIGORY)

I'm just killing time really, until I become a real writer. It's hard to get known without a real war. 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.

Here are the orders: We are cleaning Chornobyl 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 camera will speak for you. Sign.

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! 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.

VASILY

Here's what it was: at home, the level was 30,000 microontgens 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:

ANNA & VASILY

What's radiations? What's that?

VASILY

Roentgens, microontgens. Extraterrestrial language.

ANNA

Fairy tales. Just fairy tales.

What radiations? Do you see the world outside? The fire had been put out, and everything is growing in the garden. The apple trees are in bloom. How can you talk about Radiation when-

ANNA & VASILY

--the butterflies are flying and the bees are buzzing?

KATYA

There? Have I hit the mark or not?

VASILY

(To GRIGORY with maps)

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

GRIGORY

Where did you get these?

VASILY

I made them.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

He's dying.

And what do you want? The doctors told me. 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.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

The Nurse said I was 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.
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.

I was in my sixth month. In the hallway, I was faint, I put out my hand to steady myself----The Nurse caught me. She was angry for hiding my pregnancy.

I had no other way out.

I had to be with him. It was a holy lie.

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.

GRIGORY

From Moscow. Everything is fine. 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.

GRIGORY

Don't worry, Comrades, the situation is under control.

Nothing to worry about. People are living and working here. Look, just ten days after the accident and the red flag is already waving 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

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?" 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.

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.

GRIGORY

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:

VASILY

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.

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.

ANNA

Fairy tales. Just fairy tales.

GRIGORY

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

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.

KATYA

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

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

We had nowhere to go. Except home.

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.

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

Sign this.

(reads a letter)

Comrades, there are many domestic animals left in the zone - cats, dogs, and to avoid an epidemic, they have to be shot. Let's go.

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.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

Can I see her?

GRIGORY

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.

ANNA

The sun doesn't shine right in other places.

GRIGORY

(to Vasily)

We are delayed. The men, they don't want to go. They would like some protective clothing. At least masks to cover their faces. The civic defense office had nothing, the regional office had nothing. We were told to go to a cement plant. They would provide us with equipment.

VASILY

Thin masks. For cement dust.

SERGEI

Village roads. Dust. I realised by then that it was not simply dust, but radioactive dust. I tried protecting my camera from the dust, it was optical equipment. It was a very dry May. I don't know how much dust our crew swallowed. After a week, my lymph nodes were swollen.

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.

She's in there, they said.

I looked in.

They put diapers on her. She was in diapers.

GRIGORY

(to SERGEI)

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 Pripjat River. The West is trying to spread panic. They

tell lies about the accident. Everything is fine here. See this brave man and his grandson. After the evacuation, they brought the collective herd back to their village!

SERGEI

A scientist saw me, and led me to the gigantic trench, where bulldozers were burying that same 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.....

GRIGORY

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

VASILY

You can find ways of acting. Without announcements. Without panic. Just add iodine to the water supply. Add it to the milk.

You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses in the city. We'll take care of everything. Just sign this --- You have 700 kg of iodine in warehouses.

GRIGORY

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

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. 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.

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. A normal man. I recognized him and went over. "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 following orders 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.

GRIGORY

You were warned, Professor. I tried—but Moscow has something in mind.

KATYA

There. Have I hit the mark or not?

Am I a fraud?

KATYA & VASILY

A fortune-teller babbling lies from door to door?

KATYA

Tell me, soldier, are you staying in Chornobyl?

GRIGORY

Where are your parents?

KATYA

Please, soldier--- 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. She's an innocent soul suffering in an alien world.

GRIGORY

I can try ----

KATYA

Katya. My name is Katya.

GRIGORY

I can try. I can't promise.

(He starts to leave.)

KATYA

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.

GRIGORY

Here's how I see it. The Japs had their Hiroshima and now they're ahead of everyone else. First place in the world. Therefore-----

VASILY

They 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.

SERGEI

(watching KATYA)

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 nightingales, chickens attacking foxes, bald hedgehogs....yes, our imagination was not ready to deal with the catastrophe.

ANNA

We were made to feel right away that we, from Chernobyl, were a separate people. The bus that was carrying us stopped in a village for the night. We slept on the floor in the school and in the community centre.

There was nowhere else to go. One woman asked us to her house: "I'll give you beds. I feel sorry for your son." Another woman pulled her away.

"Are you crazy? They're contagious!"

KATYA

A ball rolls down the street.

"Where are you going, ball?"

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

ANNA

When they first told us we had radiation, we thought it was some kind of disease, and whoever got it would die right away.

VASILY & ANNA

No,

ANNA

they said,

VASILY

it's something that lies on the ground and gets inside it, but you can't see it. An animal, maybe, can see and hear it, but not a human.

ANNA

But that's not true! I saw it. That cesium lay around in my garden, until the rain wet it. It was inky-coloured. It lay there and glistened in pieces. I came back from the collective farm and went to my own garden. And there was this blue lump. I called my neighbour and the other women, we ran all over the place. All the gardens and the field around us. Maybe two hectares. We found four big lumps. And one was red. The next day it rained. From early morning. By lunchtime they were gone. The police came, but there was nothing to show them. We could only tell them. Pieces like this, like my hankie. Blue and red.

KATYA

I had to come back. All the children called me a lightning bug.

VASILY

Don't cry, Katya, no need to cry now. Here we are all from Chornobyl. We don't scare one another. We all have the same memories. Anywhere else we would be strangers. You want to be like everyone else, but you no longer can. You may not.

KATYA

I had a boyfriend. An artist. We wanted to get married, too. Everything was fine until---he pumped me about the colour of the fire at the reactor, whether I had seen the cats and dogs shot and left in the street? How did the people cry? Did I see them die? After that, I couldn't be with him anymore. Answer his questions.

My children will not live. They will be born and they will die.

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.

ANNA

We weren't very scared of that radiation. Before we saw it, when we didn't know it, we were afraid, but once we had a look at it, it wasn't so bad. We'd always lived on our potatoes, and now they told us, forbidden! It was like a horrible joke.

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.

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.

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.

VASILY

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

GRIGORY

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

Children from Chernobyl have an unknown liquid instead of blood. There are scientists who say that the apes grew so intelligent because they lived in areas of high radiation.

ANNA

The soldiers told us to work in our gardens with gauze masks and rubber gloves. And then this wandering scientist told us to wash our logs and kindling. Crazy! May my ears fall off! They wanted us to wash our blanket covers, sheets and curtains. But they were inside the house! In cupboards and chests.

What kind of radiation could there be inside the house? Behind glass? Behind doors? Crazy! Why didn't they look for it in the forests, in the fields. They shut up the wells, covered them in plastic. Said the water was "dirty". It wasn't dirty, it was always very clean!

GRIGORY

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

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.

GRIGORY

I haven't told you anything. Just fragments.

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.

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 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."

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.

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.

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

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

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.

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 SOLITARY 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.

GRIGORY

I don't know whose custom it is, not everyone does this, but we lay out the deceased on the door of his house. He lies there until the coffin is brought. I sat up next to my father all night while he lay on that door. The house was open. All night. And that door is also covered with hatch marks. Measuring my growth. First year at school, second year. Aged thirteen. Before the army. And next to it, how our daughter grew. Our whole life is written on that door. People thought I was crazy, but I brought that door with me when I married.

My daughter was six years old. I was putting her to bed and she whispered in my ear, "Papa, I want to live. I'm still little."

We laid my daughter out on the door -- the door on which my father had been laid out -- until they brought the tiny coffin. It was the size of a box for a large doll.

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

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