



Katya Cengel

## A Chernobyl Love Story (Excerpt)

### Chapter One: Latvia

#### Journalists Invade Former Soviet Union

Three things you shouldn't do in Chernobyl are visit, drink home brew vodka and fall in love. I did them all. Not exactly in that order, and not in a single trip, which leads me to a fourth thing you shouldn't do — go back. But then that was before I spent several weeks in a Ukrainian hospital where even toilet paper is a luxury. Before I met the Bulgarian doctor who insisted I needed a shot in the BUTT, that's how he said it, not me. And before the Orange Revolution which really began after Hryhorii Gongadze lost his head.

First I need to explain how I ended up in Chernobyl. The best place to start is Berkeley, where I was born in the mid-1970s. Then fast-forward through over-analyzed California childhood, skip through extremely awkward adolescence, a sober and far too productive college career and stop at a water fountain in the San Diego Union-Tribune building. The year is 1998 and newspapers are still being read. I was a college senior without a car majoring in literature writing with a minor in history. My mother figured I would be moving back home after graduation. Instead I noticed a job posting. I had stretched an internship at the paper into freelance work and wasn't really looking for anything more than a ride home when I spotted the flyer.

REPORTERS NEEDED IN FORMER USSR

Even without the all-capital heading it would have caught my eye. You don't grow up during the tail end of the Cold War in a place like Berkeley with a name like Katya and not wonder about the Soviet Union. I think one of my aunts gave my sister a Vladimir Lenin ABC book. It was red. The jobs were not in Moscow, but in the capitals of Latvia and Estonia, two countries I could safely say I knew nothing about. But the rhetoric was enticing.

"If you like the idea of covering infant democracy and whirlwind business but cringe at the idea of living in a Brezhnev-era apartment building, don't apply."

I took that as a challenge. I was tough enough, as the posting put it, to be among the "first significant wave of ambitious English-language journalists to invade Europe's wild northeastern corner." Brezhnev-era apartment buildings be damned. Little did I know that those words, written with such authority, had been crafted by a guy not much older than me. Later I would meet the author, Eric, a Wisconsinite who had a talent for rhetoric matched by no one I know. He would later become a lawyer. He could go on and on in several languages on topics as undecipherable to me in English as they were in German and Russian. So of course I slept with him. When the only other option was a bed in a room lacking several walls during a Russian winter you would share a bed with a verbose intellectual and several plastic coke bottles filled with warm water as well. I am still waiting for him to run for office. Nothing happened aside from sleep.

Back up a bit to a time when you still accessed the Internet with a dial-up connection. A time before there were programs that brought laptops to children in third-world countries. A time when I was trying to figure out where and what Latvia was on a library computer. The first website I checked was the one listed on the job posting, the one for the newspaper doing the hiring, the English language Baltic Times, which covers the tiny Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Like so many websites back then, theirs was "under construction". Luckily for me my British stepfather — who left his island homeland long before I entered the picture, but had yet to become an American citizen — also remained loyal to the most British of publications, the *Economist*. It was within the pages of that hallowed magazine that he found articles on the Baltics and faxed them to me via a perpetual student friend who was crashing at the home of an old man down the street who owned a fax. Looking back, the man was probably in his early 50s, but I was 21 and he limped, had white hair and no longer worked.

The descriptions I read of the Baltics were slightly intimidating. A restless and in some cases rootless Russian population, leaders who tended toward nationalism and a business model that seemed to include mafia involvement were just a few of the red flags being raised. But the job posting had hooked me and the idea of working in a former Soviet outpost was only slightly more daunting than my other plan, which involved trying to get a writing job in the movie business. Today it may be hard to understand quite how rare a move this was. With email and the Internet still in their infancy, knowledge of and communication with far-off countries was less common than it is now. It hadn't even been a decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall. And despite the name, I was not Russian. I was a California native who had spent the last four years in sunny self-absorbed Southern California. I was tall and athletic with a perpetual smile. I rode my bike or rollerblades everywhere, worked as a waitress at a bakery restaurant and went for runs on the beach. I lived on a street with a Spanish name that translated to "quiet road" and

survived on frozen yogurt and bagels. The former USSR was about as far from Camino Tranquillo as it gets.

Latvia was not a place anyone I knew had ever heard of let alone lived in or visited. Lithuania was vaguely familiar due to the bronze placement of their tie-dye outfitted men's basketball team at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. But the jobs were in Latvia and Estonia, another complete unknown. Applicants were supposed to state where they would prefer to work. I chose Latvia based on its geographical position between the other two countries, the paper's main office being there and a rumor that Estonians were standoffish.

My mother tried to prepare me for the eventual let down by explaining that this was the first, and so far only, professional job I had applied for and it usually takes several applications before an offer is extended. I knew this. But for some reason I felt I had a good chance of landing this job. I have no idea now what made me so sure of myself other than a few good clips from a decent-sized daily newspaper and extreme youth. But when the email arrived asking for a phone interview the only one taken by surprise was my mother. I prepared with a little more *Economist* reading and as much surfing of the internet for Baltic stories as my patience would allow — the age of dial-up and “website under construction” notices meant you could spend ten minutes waiting for a single page to open.

The phone interview went as well as can be expected when two strangers separated by various time zones and bodies of water attempt to converse. The editor of the paper was not a Boris or a Vladimir but a Steve from New Jersey. He didn't sound much older than me and in fact wasn't.

A few days later he emailed with a job offer. I didn't pay much attention to the details. All that mattered was that I was going to the Baltics. At the time plenty of my fellow college students thought they had heard of the Baltics.

Didn't we bomb them?

Why do you want to go there?

Um, be careful.

But they were thinking of the Balkans, an area plagued by various wars since Yugoslavia began to break apart in the early 1990s and an area of the world Americans recognized. Now we recognize not just Afghanistan but Iraq as well. Of course the Baltics are still a mystery to most and probably would have remained so for me if I had not ended up living there. It was Latvia that drew me to Ukraine. Or more precisely my experience in Latvia led me to Ukraine. As a young reporter my job options in the U.S. were likely to include covering school board meetings and neighborhood zoning issues, neither of which held much appeal after I had interviewed diplomats, dignitaries and members of the SS. Ukraine, with its crumbling coal mines, organized corruption — and of course Chernobyl — had a strange appeal. My peers were chasing the riches of the original dot-com bubble. I was hungering for Soviet era apartment buildings and borscht, neither of which I had ever experienced prior to Latvia.

I had been abroad before. My family lived in England for a while when I was a teenager. I enjoyed the experience of being called an American slut and getting shingles and every other sickness I had never had before back in America so much that once back in California I vowed never to leave my country or home state again. Then I moved to Latvia. The decision may have had something to do with not knowing what else to do.

My sister was in medical school and my parents had made it clear when I graduated from high school that home was no longer with them. If the suitcase they gave me for graduation wasn't enough of a hint, their relocation to a hippy ranch reachable only by dirt road did the trick. Communication was strained, my mom was never home and their answering machine worked on solar power and tended to get fried. Later they moved to England. Eventually they settled in a small Northern California town reachable by both paved roads and societal norms. But by then I no longer connected them with home. My sister found security with her boyfriend's families. I didn't have a boyfriend. My best friend had recently married. I had felt comfortable in San Diego, but I had never fit in. I moved off campus the second week of my freshmen year because I missed seeing old people. I didn't drink. I looked like your typical California golden child but I had a tendency toward severe depression. Latvia offered a job and possibly an escape from the weighty emptiness that had returned in college after an almost decade long absence. At the paper I would be with writers, a breed that I knew had its share of loners and lost souls.

My unfamiliarity with cold climates, the former USSR and professional jobs made packing rather challenging. I relied on the L.L. Bean catalogue for my coat, hat, gloves and scarf. I figured a company based in Maine probably knew something about winter. The boots I special ordered weighed about 20 pounds and cost almost \$100. I was figuring out fast that the whole season thing made life more expensive when it came to apparel. Wags was a more reasonable but just as necessary purchase. A stuffed toy dog, Wags, I decided, would be perfect to crush in my arms when I was scared and lonely and far from everyone and everything I knew. He cost \$20, name included.

Fitting my new purchases in the two bags the airline allowed was not easy. Warm clothes take up far more space than summer shifts and my list of necessities included rollerblades. I also packed a small pile of books, including a Baltic guidebook, and an even smaller pile of magazines. Laptops and cell phones were not common then so the only electronics I took were a Walkman and a travel alarm. I planned to rent a furnished apartment so I didn't pack sheets or towels or other household items. But I did add some decorations, including a small dragon figurine and a cloth moon and star that hung from a door knob. There were also photos of family and friends and a package of single-use medical needles and syringes. The needles were difficult to obtain, but not nearly as difficult as the next item on my packing list, police clearance.

The difficulty did not arise from my having grown up in Berkeley, where just about everyone I knew had been weaned on marijuana. The problem was that there isn't really such a thing as police clearance in the U.S. -- at least there wasn't pre-9/11. My new employer required that I prove I had a clean criminal record in the United States and wanted me to have a police station state as much.

"You want what?" the cop on the other end of the phone line asked.

I repeated my request for the third time: "I'm moving to the Baltics and I need a paper that says I have no criminal record in the U.S."

"You're going to the Balkans and you're worried about criminal records?"

"No, the Baltics, in the former Soviet Union."

"Oh Russia, I get it."

I decided not to correct him. "So can you write me a paper that says I don't have a criminal record?"

“That’s not something we can do. But good luck in Russia.”

I opted for an in-person request my second time round and after talking to several people finally was told to send them something in writing. A week or so later I received a letter back saying something like I had no record in their town but I might be a mass murderer in Alabama. I got it notarized to make it look more official.

A slightly larger problem was the request that I bring my college transcript. I had not officially graduated when I accepted the job. In fact I was scheduled to graduate from the University of California at San Diego in fall 1998, three months after I moved to Riga, Latvia. I convinced two of my favorite professors to let me do independent study and brought an unofficial transcript with me. No one has ever questioned how I managed to graduate from college in San Diego while working in Riga. I walked that summer with a class I didn’t belong to and students I barely knew. UCSD is separated into different colleges and I couldn’t wait the extra day to walk with my college. A friend bought me fleece pants and my mom held a surprise going-away party. The guests were as surprised as I was.

It was a warm day when I left, made even warmer by the fact that I was outfitted in full winter gear too bulky to pack. Wags went under my arm and a copy of “Dead Souls” in my jacket pocket. My new editor spotted the book when we met and was instantly impressed. I didn’t have the heart to tell Steve I had barely gotten through the first 20 pages. Satire had never been my thing. But I didn’t know him yet and didn’t know how important he would consider a liking of Gogol to be. I also figured I couldn’t afford to dismiss any serious impression I had made since I was carrying a small child sized stuffed toy under my arm and a pair of rollerblades over my shoulder.

Actually the fact that I didn’t know Steve, or anyone else in Latvia for that matter, didn’t really cross my mind until I was somewhere in Europe waiting for a connecting flight. I got to talking to a group of American teenagers traveling to Poland on some sort of mission and realized maybe I should have thought about more than winter boots and police clearance before moving to an unknown land. I would have been even more worried had I known what a departure from protocol it was for missionaries to be quizzing me on my language skills instead of my belief system. But this is before I spent almost a decade in Kentucky and became familiar with the ways of hard-core Christians.

Did I know Latvian?

Did I know anyone in the country?

Had I ever seen a hard copy of the newspaper?

Did I know if the company had money to pay me?

Did I have a phone number for Steve, an address for the paper?

Did I know if anyone would meet me at the airport?

My answer to pretty much all of their questions was the same — no. Except the last one. Steve knew my flight details so I figured someone from the paper would be at the airport. But I wasn’t sure. The missionaries seemed concerned. I figured it was too late for that.

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