

## Трилер

MY FATHER EXPLAINED it to me the first time when I was seven years old: The world is a system. School is a system. Neighborhoods are a system. Towns, governments, any large group of people. For that matter, the human body is a system, enabled by smaller, biological subsystems.

Criminal justice, definitely a system. The Catholic Church—don't get him started. Then there's organized sports, the United Nations, and of course, the Miss America Pageant.

"You don't have to like the system," he lectured me. "You don't have to believe in it or agree with it. But you must understand it. If you can understand the system, you will survive."

I'D COME HOME from school that afternoon to discover both of my parents standing in our front room. My father, a professor of mathematics at MIT, was rarely home before seven. Now, however, he stood next to my mother's prized floral sofa, with five suitcases stacked neatly by his feet. My mother was crying. When I opened the front door, she turned away as if to shield her face, but I could still see her shoulders shaking. Both of my parents were wearing heavy wool coats, which seemed odd, given the relatively warm October afternoon.

## Историска драма

Everything changed the day they came for the children.

I was supposed to have been in the attic crawl space of the three-story building we shared with a dozen other families in the ghetto. Mama helped me hide there each morning before she set out to join the factory work detail, leaving me with a fresh bucket as a toilet and a stern admonishment not to leave. But I grew cold and restless alone in the tiny, frigid space where I couldn't run or move or even stand straight. The minutes stretched silently, broken only by a scratching—unseen children, years younger than me, stowed on the other side of the wall. They were kept separate from one another without space to run and play. They sent each other messages by tapping and scratching, though, like a kind of improvised Morse code. Sometimes, in my boredom, I joined in, too.

"Freedom is where you find it," my father often said when I complained. Papa had a way of seeing the world exactly as he wanted. "The greatest prison is in our mind." It was easy for him to say. Though the manual ghetto labor was a far cry from his professional work as an accountant before the war, at least he was out and about each day, seeing other people. Not cooped up like me.

## Романса

I felt a little desperate, like if I let him win this fight, it would be the final straw: there'd be no getting back to myself, to believing in love and seeing the world and the people in it as pure, beautiful things—to loving writing.

Gus's brow furrowed, his dark eyes flashing from me to the road with that intent, absorbing look Shadi and I had spent so much time trying to put into words. "Sure, love happens," he said finally. "But it's better to be realistic so shit's not constantly blowing up in your face. And love is way more likely to blow up in your face than to bring eternal happiness. And if it doesn't hurt you, then you're the one hurting someone else.

"Entering a relationship is borderline sadomasochistic. Especially when you can get everything you would from a romantic relationship from a friendship, without destroying anyone's life when it inevitably ends."