HAD SOUNDED THE ALARM IN TIME. BUT . . . NOTHING IS SO CAREFULLY PREPARED FOR AS AN ACCIDENT. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF KSUSHA'S LIFE HAPPENED TO WEAVE INTO THE MOST SAVAGE OF PATTERNS.

THE CITY

THREE DAYS AFTER KSENIA KIRGIIZOVA DISAPPEARED, THE AGTU RECTOR'S OFFICE OFFICIALLY CANCELED THE PRACTICAL WORK. IT WASN'T UNTIL NEARLY A WEEK LATER, WHEN THE PARENTS TOGETHER RAISED A POETRY CURVE A SENSE THAT COMBED THE UNIVERSITY. SECRETARIES FROM DEANS' OFFICES CALLED ALL THE COEDS AND BEGGED THEM: "PLEASE DON'T SHOW UP HERE BEFORE 1 SEPTEMBER!"

PANIC BROKE OUT IN THE CITY. PEOPLE HAD DISAPPEARED BEFORE, BUT SOONER OR LATER THEY'D BEEN FOUND, DEAD OR ALIVE. BUT FOR SEVERAL PEOPLE TO DISAPPEAR AT ONCE, EN MASSE, AND WITHOUT A TRACE FROM THE HALLS OF A SINGLE INSTITUTION—NOTHING LIKE THAT HAD EVER HAPPENED BEFORE! THE CITY WAS RIFE WITH RUMORS BASED, ACTUALLY, ON SAD REALITY. IT WAS AT ABOUT THIS TIME IN BARNaul THAT SEVERAL MORE PEOPLE DISAPPEARED, ALL OF THEM CONNECTED ONE WAY OR ANOTHER WITH THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER OR SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION. TWO COEDS' MAMA'S--VALENTINA MEKHAYLYUKOVA (54) AND NINA SHAKIROVA (44) VANISHED INSIDE THE AGRICULTURAL INSTITUTE AND THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURE FOUR DAYS APART FROM EACH OTHER, ON 14 AND 18 JULY, RESPECTIVELY.

ON 12 JULY, 18-YEAR-OLD YELENA ANISIMOVA WENT TO SUBMIT HER DOCUMENTS TO SPTU AND NEVER RETURNED. SHE HAD JUST ARRIVED IN
Barnaul from the country the night before, on 17 August, under other but also exceedingly strange circumstances, one more newly fledged high school graduate, Irina Serova, vanished. In late July, in one of the tributaries of the Ob River, they found the dismembered bodies of two more 15-year-old homeless girls.

Evil begets evil. Therefore, in the evening the streets empty out and steps behind your back seem sinister. Rumors spread faster than radio waves: any family quarrel or confusion over an unexpected sleepover at friends’ ends up in screams about new victims, reigning over all of this is his majesty fear. Therefore everyone keeps quiet, and the parents of the lost girls keep from despair: how come no one saw anything! Why are you silent, people? After all, tomorrow this could happen to you! Gentlemen bandits, gentlemen officials, gentlemen bureaucrats... This is Barnaul’s submarine, only the crew is very small.

The parents—each on his own—started pasting up posters they’d had printed with their own money all over town. The next day the posters would have vanished. Barnaul was preparing for City Day, and janitors were pulling the girls’ faces off the signs so as not to spoil the holiday for the rest of the city’s inhabitants. By all accounts, the holiday issue of the local evening paper, which was devoted to the 27th anniversary of the city, did not have a word in it about this not even municipal but national drama. They had torn down the posters not at their own initiative but on orders from above.

The parents

"The father of the third found me through the police when he learned there was a fifth." This sentence, incomprehensible to an outsider’s ear, was told to me by Vladimir Kirgizov when we met. Aching from working actively only after at the initiative of another Papa, Vyacheslav Shmakov, the parents of all the lost girls joined forces. The Shmakovs took leave without pay, although on their modest incomes this is tantamount to suicide. They covered all the area beaches in the hope of finding any clue—all to no avail. Her Mama doesn’t trust anyone any more and doesn’t wait for anyone. They sit together in complete silence in their very clean apartment and silently look at the cheerful parakeets in their daughter’s embroideries. "They say that people go crazy when they’re alone. That they don’t collectively, but you could confidently send our five families straight to the psych ward," Shmakov jokes darkly. "They say that we lived badly before. It’s those who lived badly, who lived fine. Now the population is helpless."

Nadezhda, Yulya Tekhtiyekova’s Mama, can barely carry on a conversation. She’s developed a tremor and even refused to speak on live television. She just brought her daughter’s photograph. Dina Voznyuk, Lilia’s Mama, went back to work at her school on 1 September. How she conducts lessons I don’t know, but over the telephone all she can do is cry. Anzela Burdakova’s parents hired a professional lawyer. The Kirgizovs have a whole headquarters operating with lots of cars and people ready to paste a poster on another box immediately and check out any new story.

The parents have located a number of witnesses themselves. The police, by the way, now react differently to all their suggestions. Should you check all foreign passports issued in Altay this summer? Done. Check the accuracy of the information proffered to them for sale? Certainly. Criminal investigation now even listens with interest to the stories of the psychics, which Ksusha’s cried-out Mama wrote down in a school notebook. Because the police themselves have almost no clues.

"You get the feeling the girls were taken by UFOs," experienced investigators admit to each other. I could only envy Vladimir Kirgizov’s courage.

(More)