

Chapter Three

Geological Party #10

After we went to work in the Kyzylkum Desert, for the first three years our young family lived in the little settlement of the geological expedition with headquarters in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Our settlement was simply called Geological Party #10. There were two dozen barracks houses under the blistering sun, in a barren area of the landscape that was lacking vegetation, offering hostile living conditions for human, plant, and animal life.



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Geological party #10, Kyzylkum Desert, Uzbekistan, 1969.

We worked and lived literally in the middle of

nowhere. The closest civilized city, Navoi, was 200 kilometers (124.3 miles) away. The winter of 1968-1969 was unusually severe, even for a wild desert climate. Our little habitation got cut off from the entire world because of the severe weather. At night, under a wide canvas of the open sky, the wind flitted along the vast expanses of desert, picking up speed and ferocity, growing into a growling, tumbling sand and snowstorm. I could not fall asleep for a long time, as I was listening to the howling sounds outside. It was one of those winds that made the nerves jump, curl hair, and make skin itch. Our little aircraft stopped delivering products and food to us. Water and goodies did not come for days, sometimes weeks, as the passage in the sands was covered by snow and ice. We ate canned meat with macaroni and old, dried pepperoni sausages from our store's reserve. I stopped eating canned food and pepperoni after that winter.

We melted snow and filtered it from the sand to make water for our drinking needs. I dreamed about milk and apples. The fact that I was pregnant during that time made everything even harder. I think we survived only because we were so young and ignorant. Eventually, everything ends, and so did that unforgettable winter.

I could not see a doctor during my pregnancy because there were no doctors in our geological party. In fact, it was almost my due date before I saw a doctor for the first time. As my due date approached, we were ready to head to Navoi, where I was supposed to stay with our friend until my delivery date. It was the end of May. Sparse vegetation

scorched by the desert sun had already turned brown and dry, the temperature was unbearably high during the day (around +50C/122F), and air conditioning was not available, at least not in the desert of the Soviet Union.

Navoi was founded in 1958. The city got its name in honor of the great Uzbek poet and statesman, Alisher Navoi. The city of Navoi is nearly a midpoint between Samarkand and Bukhara. In my years in Uzbekistan, it was never under the jurisdiction of Tashkent. It was administered and supplied directly from Moscow. The city was completely artificial; the grand boulevards, square parks, and rectangular apartment blocks represented the height of Soviet perfectionist ideology. The city of Navoi currently has an ethnically diverse population of 133,526. But in 1969, it was a 10-year-old city rising on the southern corner of the Kyzylkum Desert.



City of Navoi, Uzbekistan.

Nikolai brought me to Navoi, but he had to return

immediately to our geological party to continue to work while I waited for my delivery date. Right before he left, Nikolai went to a little radio station that kept in contact with our geological party by transmitting messages. He asked the radioman to send him a message as soon as the radioman received a phone call about my delivery. To make it easier for the radioman, he wrote a template of a message for him to transmit. It read something like this: "To Nikolai Gelya. Larisa has delivered a daughter/son and is waiting for you to come." The radioman promised everything would be okay on his end. Nikolai and I said goodbye to each other, and he went back to work.

Two endless weeks still lay ahead before our baby came. I didn't know anyone except our friend, so I started out anxious and lonely during those two weeks waiting for the baby. I was astonished to see Nikolai return just two days later. He, too, was wondering why I was still walking around with my big tummy. What happened was that the radioman got very drunk the day Nikolai left, and he saw the template of the message in front of him and transmitted it to our geological party for Nikolai: "Larisa has delivered a daughter (the radioman skipped 'son')." That's why Nikolai had to do an extra trip back to Navoi and then return again to his work before my delivery date. Excessive drinking was a common problem in the Soviet Union, and in the geological industry, it seemed especially pronounced.

Finally, on June 14, 1969, our daughter, Natalya Gelya (Natasha for short), was born—the radioman had been right about the baby's gender. The delivery

went relatively easy (I spent only two hours in labor) and had no complications. Four days later, three of us were heading back to our little place in the middle of the desert that we called home. First, we took a train and then rode 60 more kilometers in the back of a big, heavy-duty truck, through the dusty passage in the sands, under the sweltering desert sun.

I was nineteen at the time and knew very little about how to take care of a newborn baby in such extremely harsh living conditions. We made milk from a dry powder mix—I still hate its taste even now. We cooked food on a make-believe stove: electrical spirals in the grooves of a brick. In the hot summertime, we slept with buckets of water near the bed—to make our sheets wet from time to time in an effort to cool ourselves. All of these adversities did not prevent us from being happy and enjoying our life together. We were young and had a lot of friends. Meanwhile, Natasha was growing. She started to walk and liked to play with camels that hung out near the cistern that held the water—we all used this water for drinking and cooking. Sometimes camels managed to open the faucet, then they drank as much water as they needed before walking away. We would get up in the morning to find out that we had no water until the next delivery was to be made.

One evening, while I was watching the sun go down where the dry brown land and always blue sky met, I thought, “I do not want to live here for the rest of my life. It is time to move out of here.” Soon, in 1972, we had moved to a bit more civilized place—to the geological expedition in the Muruntau region.



With Natasha, November 1969.