

# APPENDIX E: Grandmothers' Letters

GRANDMOTHER	GRANDCHILD
Olga	Dima
Ludmilla	Sasha
Yelena	Natasha

## UNIT 1

### UNIT 1 | LESSON 1

### The Mysterious Box: Your Adventure Begins

*Dear Dima, Natasha, and Sasha,*

*It all began easily enough; we would be the exceptions to the rule. Our dreams would come true and no one would ever come between us and the “happy ever after” we were sure was ours for the asking. My, how foolish we were back then!*

*We’ve been friends all of our lives. We went through school together, got in trouble together, were married within two years of each other, and saw each other’s children through the same seasons of life.*

*We faced the difficulties and disappointments of life and remained friends through it all. In fact, we were among the first to greet each of you when you entered this world. We are your grandmothers.*

*Dima, it was on the day of your birth that your grandmother, Olga, first thought of a way to reach beyond the unforgiving boundaries of time and space. We began to experiment that very night. Of course, our first attempts were clumsy and ill-planned.*

*Natasha, count yourself lucky that your grandmother, Yelena, gave up on the idea of involving the Mafia in our plan before it was too late! However, we needed a shrewd thinker like Yelena to get around our greatest obstacles — the three of you.*

*Sasha, it was your grandmother, Ludmilla, who finally convinced us that secrecy was the road to travel. That is why none of you has the slightest idea what’s in the box that now sits before you.*

*My, the fun we’ve had and the tears we’ve shed. We had no idea how costly our experiment would be. Living outside the present time and space extracts a painful price. It is not for the timid or those who bruise easily. There were times when each of us would have given up our quest, if not for the comfort and encouragement of the other two, and the vision of what it could mean for you, our dear grandchildren.*

*Of course you are not children anymore. In fact, that is why you have been summoned on this precise day to your teacher’s office. At first, we thought to wait until you were older. But each year we delayed, the final phase of our secret experiment puts each of you at greater risk, with more to overcome and less time to learn to overcome it.*

*Ever heard of “rite of passage”? It is a concept as old as time. An example would be that telling moment or season when a boy becomes a man or a girl becomes a woman. There are tribes in Africa that still mark masculine maturity by the day on which a young man kills his first lion with a spear. Sounds barbaric, doesn’t it? Not to mention dangerous and perhaps foolish. Of course, there are other rites of passage. Some are fairly harmless. Others can be fatal. We know. We three still carry the scars from foolishly participating in poorly chosen rites of passage.*

*Your teacher knows what lies inside the box. That she has summoned you here today is proof of the fact that she believes we have acted wisely on your behalf and is ready to commit herself to this endeavor.*

*Well, here we are. Time to choose. Say “yes” to the mystery. Open the box. Discover why we were willing to open our souls to such wonders and woundings in order to be your guides in this quest. Or, walk away.*

*With all our love,  
Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 1 | LESSON 2

## Imagine Your Life: Dreams and Barriers

*Dear Ones,*

*At this point we don't know if you answered our question. Perhaps you've never really thought about it before. Or perhaps you have followed the same path we did. Olga thought she'd die if a certain boy didn't start paying attention to her when she was your age – he didn't and she didn't (die that is). Ludmilla just wanted peace at home – her parents never seemed to get along. And Yelena would have traded just about anything to win a particular dance competition. The point is, we each went from one thing to the next, thinking each time that this was the answer to life's deepest desire. Yelena and her partner won the contest; but win or lose, there was still an unmet hunger in each of us that remained.*

*After a lifetime of pursuits, we all agreed that the answer to what the heart longs for is wrapped up in two things: 1) having a clear understanding of your personal goals, and, 2) the obstacles that can stand in the way of reaching them. Miss either one and life is significantly diminished. Of course “romance” and “adventure” are slippery terms. It is amazing how many distortions exist regarding both. As a friend of ours once quipped, “Romance and adventure is sex, drugs, and rock and roll!” But is it really?*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 1 | LESSON 3

## Freedom and Responsibility

*Dear Ones,*

*Ever meet anyone who didn't secretly wish they could fly? Not as a passenger in an airplane, but really fly — like a bird or by magic. Perhaps you've even had dreams where you were free to fly. Sasha, your grandfather, Alexei, worked in the airplane factory in a northern city where they made fighter jets — they were such beautiful planes. His job was attaching the wings to the bodies of the planes — kind of important, don't you think?*

*Funny thing, he always attached two wings to each plane. All those planes they made, and not once did they ever try to fly a jet with only one wing attached. Tell me, which wing is more important, the left or right wing? Silly question. They are both critical. Lose either one and the plane crashes or never gets off the ground.*

*I suppose there are a number of things we could write on our “wings”. Things absolutely critical to life. But for today let's write two of the most important on the wings of the paper airplanes you just made.*

*On the right wing, write “freedom”.*

*On the left wing, write “responsibility”.*

*Now tear one of the wings off your plane.*

*Now try to fly what is left of your planes.*



## UNIT 1 | LESSON 4

## Habits that Chain; Habits that Empower

*The grandmothers wanted me to tell you about a mysterious door knob – actually two door knobs. Turn one and enter into a life of unspeakable happiness. Ah, but turn the other – well, there's the rub. Turn the other and all pleasantries will end and a terrible darkness will devour your soul.*

*"In the land of the midnight sun, far from the shores of civilization, where life is hard and death is long, lies a pit set in twilight with high unassailable stone walls. Two doors are set deep into the stone side by side, one to the left and one to the right, silent sentinels of mystery and desire, hope and despair.*

*"From time to time, the owner of the pit lowers some poor wanderer by ropes into his pit. His words to the prisoner never vary, 'Choose your fate. Behind one door lies unspeakable bliss and comfort; satisfaction beyond imagining. Behind the other lies that which will freeze your soul and make death seem sweet in comparison. Choose! Choose your fate!'*

*"The wanderer is left to make his choice. Some quickly chose one or the other door, turned the knob and faced their fate. Others put off the decision for as long as possible until hunger or thirst nearly drove them mad. In the end, everyone who was ever lowered into the pit picked one door or the other. And true as true can be, the words of the pit owner came to pass.*

*"But how to choose? Pure luck or something more? Is the wanderer abandoned to random chance? Or, can anything be gleaned from the circumstance to aid a more informed decision?"*

*"Whether sooner or later, each wanderer was met with a similar surprise. For life or death did not come at the opening of either door. For behind each door lay another door, and one after that. The decision to choose one door over the other had to be made countless times. Some chose the left or the right and stuck with their decision until the final door revealed their fate. Others flitted back and forth choosing first the left and then the right set of doors. But flit or fixed, each eventually settled on the left or right choice as one doorknob after another was turned to reveal a bit more of the mystery.*

*"While there were some clues outside the first set of doors, those clues seemed vague and un compelling to the one with little experience choosing between the doors. But subtly, with each new door the evidence became clearer. The sweet smell of life or the stench of decay grew stronger the farther in one went. The sounds of wonder or wailing grew more distinct. But that was exactly the danger! For the scent of each was all but imperceptible to the senses. And the clarion sounds of warning or hope resided in the background noise of most of the wanderers. Each choice strengthened the next choice, until little choice was left. And so it was that each one's fate was settled through not one choice, but a long series of choices.*

*"And what lay behind each of the doors? Oh, that depends on who tells the story. One ancient tale has it that a beautiful maiden waits behind one door and a ravenous tiger is crouched behind the other. But those storytellers who craft their words closer to reality speak of different dangers and delights. One tells of the mind-numbing effects of drugs; another recounts the scars of past illicit relationships that leave one an empty shell.*

*"One reflects on the rewards of a clear conscience and another celebrates the satisfaction of a life well-lived. All tell of how no single choice binds one to his final fate, but each also tells of the cumulative effect each choice has for good or ill. And all affirm that each of us is a wanderer subject to the pit of choices."*

## UNIT 1 | LESSON 5

## Stronger Together: A True Learning Community

*No Grandmothers' Letter.*

## UNIT 2

### UNIT 2 | LESSON 6

### What Do You Know About Drugs?

Dear Ones,

One day when Dima's father was a boy, he found a small field mouse. It was September, and he was afraid that the mouse wouldn't survive the winter – and besides, he really wanted to keep him as a pet. For some time he kept his mouse concealed in a small tin box he hid behind the woodpile. He would sneak Mystyck (as he named the mouse) bits of bread and cheese, thinking that nobody would ever discover the new addition to the household.

The day came when Dima's grandmother, Olga, discovered the box. Wondering what such a nice tin box was doing in such an odd place, she opened it – and her screams could have been heard on the moon!

Let me tell you about two such traps. Many youths your age are beginning to experiment with these traps and at first nothing happens! What do you think they do? They keep on playing with them. In time, they become convinced – like Mystyck – that what they are doing is perfectly safe. Then . . . snap! That's when they're doomed."

If it killed every young person that tried it, it wouldn't be much of a temptation. But because it seems so safe, and also so delightful, it is all the more deadly when it finally snaps shut.

Another trap that is already luring your older friends is sexual experimentation. The terrible consequences of sex outside of marriage, including disease, pregnancy, and emotional crippling, aren't immediately apparent. They think that what they are doing is perfectly safe.

Your Grandmothers

### UNIT 2 | LESSON 7

### Effects of Drugs on the Body

Dear Ones,

We determined to tell you the truth about ourselves when we began this venture – not that anyone of our generation was ever encouraged to be so forthright. It would be far easier to take our personal shortcomings to our graves. Our upbringing taught us to view such silence as heroic. We think this approach is a mistake.

Personal issues are seldom restricted to that person when it comes to influence or effect. I think Dostoyevsky wrote somewhere, "Sin begets sin." In other words, family problems affect generation after generation. Yelena wanted to write about what happened to her.

"Dear Natasha,

I'm afraid that it is I, your grandmother Yelena, who must begin this business of laying bare a secret I've kept hidden from you and almost everyone else.

In most parts of the world, medical doctors are held in high esteem. There have been plenty of abuses to go along with some equally genuine caring and healing. I chose my profession from my twin desires to know how the human body worked and to aid in the healing of the body. They were noble desires, but they were compromised along the way.

My studies were very challenging, and my internship was grueling. Long nights, little sleep, and life and death demands pushed me farther and farther down the road to compromise. I'm speaking about drug use. At first, it was only a little something to keep me

*awake when the caffeine in coffee no longer did the trick. Such a difference it made! I was more alert! My mind seemed clearer. I got more done – and my performance evaluations improved. Unfortunately, I didn't stop there. The stimulants kept me up when I needed to sleep, so I occasionally took a sedative to allow myself to rest.*

*I reasoned that there was no real danger – I knew what I was doing. After all, I was trained to prescribe such drugs to those who really needed them and I really needed them to do my job. I knew, of course, that a long regimen of these drugs could harm my liver and permanently alter the chemistry in my brain. But I told myself this was only a temporary solution. Soon, I would get my schedule under control and stop using the drugs so readily available to me. I was sure no one could tell, so what was the harm?*

*Then there was the day I slipped on the icy stairs outside the bakery. My lower back hurt so much I couldn't bend over to tie my boots! But doctors don't take sick days. Besides, there were others in worse shape waiting in our hospital's beds. I knew the problem, I'd thrown my back out and the muscles had constricted, holding my back in the wrong position. I could have treated it with rest and heat, but that would require days or weeks. One little pill could relax those same muscles and take away the pain – and the pills I had in mind were locked in a cabinet to which I had the key.*

*After a while, my rationale for taking some particular drug was less specific. I now needed them just to get through the day. I walked through my days in a drug-induced fog. It is a wonder I didn't kill someone.*

*Don't get me wrong! Most of the drugs I took had a positive side when administered properly. The problem was that all of these drugs also had a negative side, and I could no longer be trusted with the key to the cabinet.*

*I wish I could tell you it was my strength of will or character that saved me, but it wasn't. It was Olga's prayers and Ludmilla's willingness to endure my abuse that finally broke me and got me the help I desperately needed.*

*So what do you think, Natasha? Your grandmother had become dependent on the drugs. And I knew all about the drugs that now wait for you. Of course, drugs are far more available today, and no one will insist that you become a doctor or nurse before you can get your hands on them. Remember, it is much easier not to start using drugs than it is to stop.*

*Remember, wisdom is often the art of learning from someone else's mistake."*

*Your Grandmother,  
Yelena*

## UNIT 2 | LESSON 8

## Understanding Addiction to Drugs

*Dear Ones,*

*When we first began the "unknotting ceremony", we were quite young. Our knots were "young knots". Yelena's tightest knot was the conviction that she would be punished for the least little thing; she lost the freedom to fail. Ludmilla's biggest knot was shame – the abiding sense that if anyone ever found out who she really was they would shun her or publicly ridicule her. And Olga's worst knot was the fear of being left out.*

*We were all married before we realized that many of our knots determined what we did or didn't fear, and that had a lot to say about how mature we were. As children, we were afraid of the dark but not afraid of playing in the street. As adults those fears reversed. The street represented a real danger, while the dark in itself held nothing worth fearing.*

*You are old enough now to see how your knots make you vulnerable to the very real dangers of drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. Of course, it is even more complicated than that, for you are also greatly influenced by your friends' knots.*

*Seeing your own knots is the first step in unraveling their influence over your life. And seeing how other people's knots cause them to push or participate in drugs, alcohol or premarital sex can spare you much of the misery associated with those twisted pursuits.*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 2 | LESSON 9

## Downward Progression of Drug Use

*Dear Ones,*

*One of the major turning points in the story of my own addiction occurred when I began to treat my patients who were addicted to various drugs. There is nothing like seeing first-hand where drug abuse leads to sober one up!*

*At first I thought I could handle it. After all, I didn't think I was addicted. Besides, my own experience might prove helpful to those in my charge. My, how naïve I was back then!*

*Addicts come in all sizes and shapes, young and old, rich and poor. Some quickly fell into the trap of addiction; for others, it was a slow slide to oblivion. The drug of choice might differ from one person to another, but one thing remained constant – all suffered.*

*As I listened to their stories, a familiar pattern for addiction began to emerge. I suspect you could come up with most of the stages on your own just using common sense.*

*Most experts come up with three or four stages of addiction, beginning with an introduction to a particular drug, followed by experimentation with other drugs, and finally preoccupation with a particular drug or family of drugs. A person's psychological make-up, physical constitution, the type of drug, their age, even their gender – all play important roles in determining one's passage through the stages.*

*Some people are addicted after a single use. Others are able to maintain some control and live a somewhat normal-looking life for a rather long time (we call them functional addicts). But how do you know which you would become? And more importantly, what "knots" in your rope are causing you to even consider taking the risk? I'm all for taking the right kind of risk but, believe me, drugs isn't one of them.*

*Love,  
Grandmother Yelena*

## UNIT 2 | LESSON 10

## Benefits of Drug Abstinence

*Dear Ones,*

*They say everyone has a story – a beginning, middle and an end. We've been telling you our story, and there's a lot more story to be told! But today we wanted to caution you about the utter waste of not sticking around until the end of the tale! It is often in the last chapter that the true purpose of the story is known. Stop too soon and you'll never know whether you were living out a tragedy or a triumph. Stop too soon and something is left undone.*

*A story can take all sorts of twists and turns. The hero can be repeatedly defeated and disgraced right up to the final chapter – and still win the day and get the girl. The thing is, from inside the story he doesn't know whether it will end one way or the other. If he could, you probably wouldn't care to read it. You don't want him to coast through the adventure certain of the outcome. There is something special about the struggle that makes it all worthwhile.*

*Sasha, you never knew your Uncle Igor. He died shortly before you were born. I think he loved books more than people. He could stay in our apartment all weekend just devouring one novel after another. Olga and Yelena loved to make him blush. They would tease him with their attention and then pretend to be offended when he showed any interest in them; it was a game they played with the boys. He was a year older than we were, but his social skills were years behind. He blushed so easily. None of us knew just how fragile he truly was.*

*It's hard to say what combination of things and events ultimately led to his suicide. In our family, you didn't disclose your feelings. We were taught not to confide in anyone. You never knew what might happen if the wrong people found out something; the fear of Stalin and his lieutenants always played in the background in those days. I guess he was scared or maybe he just got tired in his soul after he was drafted and deployed to Kaliningrad. The army was a brutal experience for some; I guess it proved too much for him. We never found out where he got the pills. Those kinds of drugs were not as easily acquired as they are these days. I don't even know whether he intended to kill himself or just take a break from the pain in his heart. I don't know what kind of man he might have become. That's the thing . . . I don't know. I guess I never will.*

Your Grandmother,  
Ludmilla

## UNIT 3

### UNIT 3 | LESSON 11

### What Do You Know About Alcohol?

*Dear Sasha,*

*There's an old story about an elephant that lived with a human family. It took over the largest room of their house. A full-grown elephant isn't easy to ignore. But that is exactly what everyone in the family did. They never mentioned it to each other, but they ordered their lives around the elephant.*

*The smell of elephant permeated the furniture and their clothes; even their food had a slightly musty odor to it. If you had ever been invited over to their home for dinner (which would never have happened), the stench would have turned your stomach. They ate each meal without uttering a single word about their unwelcome guest. The elephant crowded the dinner table when it was hungry – and it was always hungry. The family pushed and shoved each other, complained about not having enough room to eat and blamed each other for the lack of enough food to go around. But none of them ever spoke about the elephant that had taken over their lives.*

*I won't bother you with the details of cleaning up after the elephant, but you can imagine the mess it made of the house and you can imagine the mess it made of their lives. There was seldom a moment in any day when the elephant didn't weigh on their hearts and minds. The elephant was uninvited and unwanted. But still, they never addressed the problem of the elephant with each other or the elephant; they didn't know how.*

*Sounds like a ridiculous children's story, doesn't it? The absurdity of it sounds quite humorous. Oh, how I wish that were true! But it is not. You see, I lived with an "elephant" in my home for a very long*



time on pretty much the same terms as those in the story. It was the elephant of alcoholism.

*Your grandfather started drinking before we were married. I knew he drank, but everyone drank. Back in those days it was considered part of being a man to drink. That is such a destructive lie. It is a myth that goes hand in hand with the notion that it is nobody else's business, or problem, if someone wants to drink himself into oblivion. Like the elephant in the room, the rest of us are intimidated into thinking that we're supposed to just let it be. And trying to put up with it, pretending it doesn't exist, hoping it will go away on its own, or keeping quiet about it doesn't work. I know because I tried them all, some for decades at a time.*

*It is high time we talk about this elephant. It is time to address the problem and come up with a plan to get it out of the house or, better still, see that it is never allowed in in the first place.*

*Your Grandmother,  
Ludmilla*

### UNIT 3 | LESSON 12

### Effects of Alcohol on the Body

From the Grandmothers: A scroll containing these words:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost,  
for want of a shoe the horse was lost,  
for want of a horse the rider was lost,  
for want of the rider the victory was lost,  
for want of the victory the country was lost –  
all for want of a nail.*

### UNIT 3 | LESSON 13

### Consequences of Alcohol Abuse

*Dear Ones,*

*Alexei Stepanovich was a good husband. Of course he was. Do not let anyone say differently. He was my first choice, you know – the one I could only hope would choose me, too – when I saw him dance at the May Day festival so long ago. Right after the Great Patriotic War, it was. His medals were pinned to his shirt, and they reflected the sunlight, like fireworks, as he danced.*

*He was strong and handsome, and when I watched him, my heart began pounding in my chest. It wasn't just the women who admired him. Everyone cheered and clapped as he danced, and all the men tossed down big glasses of vodka along with him. He matched them, elbow for elbow, and showed not the slightest weakness for it, unlike the others, who wobbled and staggered as the alcohol took effect.*

*He saw me, my Alexei. His eyes were large and dark, like a storm sweeping in from the sea, and they flashed when he smiled or laughed. He saw me that day and smiled at me, and my heart was his. I smiled back at him.*

*I had very nice teeth, back then; people told me so. They were beautifully white and very straight, and I knew when I smiled, I looked pretty. Pretty enough to make men notice. Alexei noticed!*

*Once we were married, we were able to move into our own flat. It was a good flat, not like most of the workers' families, and we had it all to ourselves. The light shone in through the south window, which*

*I kept clean despite the constant soot in the air. Every day I washed off the black grime from the factory smokestacks.*

*In the mornings, Alexei Stepanovich left for work early, in the winter and spring before the sunrise. I knew when it was spring, because the eastern sky would glow orange in the smoke. Then he would come home after dark, and we would have dinner together.*

*Alexei worked hard. He was tired when he came home. His hands and face were covered with the same grime I washed off the window. At first, he would wash his hands and face before dinner. Later, he was too tired, and he sat at the table and drank his vodka, his flesh pale underneath the soot, as if he had been painted to blend in with the walls and the window and the sky.*

*In the beginning, a liter of vodka would last three, four days. Then, it was one each day, half before dinner, half after. The work was so hard. At first we did have pleasant talks together in the evening. I'd look forward to them all day. But soon he'd just drink his vodka; often we'd argue and then he'd stumble into bed. He hardly ever smiled, and his eyes were as dark as the smoke . . .*

*Then came that evening when Alexei hit me. His fist was like a rock, and his strong arm drove it as fast and hard as the steel rods on the machines in his factory. The blow blinded me, for a moment, and I didn't realize at first what had happened. I didn't even realize I was on the floor, until Alexei was over me, tears in his eyes, saying how sorry he was and that it would never happen again. He seemed as surprised as I was. The bruise on my cheek hurt, but not as bad as the ache in my heart.*

*"I'm so sorry," he said, and the alcohol on his breath smelled like sickly sweet perfume. "But you mustn't bother me with so many questions and problems. I need to rest when I come home. I can't stand all the problems."*

*I had asked him what he would like for dinner . . .*

*Time passed, and then the evening came that the beating didn't stop. He pounded me again and again, and I felt a sickening crunch as the teeth broke on the left side of my mouth. Gradually, the part of me that understood what was happening went away, and the light around me closed to a tunnel, a tunnel as dark as his blank, black eyes . . . Many years passed, and it seemed to me like one long nightmare.*

*Then one day, I watched as the doctor came out of the back room and looked from one of us to the other. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's cirrhosis of the liver. There's nothing we can do."*

*Alexei clutched my hand. I could feel that he was trembling . . .*

*He lay on his hospital bed, his yellowed skin swollen like overripe fruit. Even his eyes were yellow, except for the irises, which instead of the stormy flashing black I knew so well from our youth now were dull and empty, like two round pits dug into poisonous soil. His breath fought its way in and out, ragged and uneven.*

*"I was a good husband, wasn't I?" His voice was hoarse, and oddly squeaky, the way fingernails are on a chalkboard.*

*"Yes, Alexei, of course," I smiled. In the mirror I saw my reflection. My perfect smile and straight white teeth had long ago been replaced with caps of silver.*

*I think he must have seen the expression on my face, for he started to weep bitterly. It was the only time I ever saw him cry – at least for me.*

*Your Grandmother,  
Ludmilla*

## UNIT 3 | LESSON 14

## Your Vulnerability to Alcohol Abuse

Dear Ones,

A teacher of ours used to say, "There is no right answer to a wrong question." He was right, finding the right questions can take you a long way toward finding the truth. Hopefully, our two pillow questions have guided you in the right direction. It's always risky to ask questions; they have a way of making you uncomfortable. Perhaps that's why many people never bother to ask the hard questions of life – they just let it happen to them with varied results.

You were made to want and need comfort. Oh, how we wish we'd been better at it with your parents! If only we could have learned early to acknowledge their hurts, give them comfort, and offer them hope, they might have learned to do the same with you. But it is hard to pass on what you don't possess, and real comfort has been a long time coming in our lives.

Life can get very uncomfortable and where you go for comfort is one of the most important choices you will ever make. Choose well, and you will be one of those people who can live from their heart because they aren't afraid of getting hurt. They know that comfort is real and available. Choose poorly and a very different life awaits you.

Your Grandmothers

## UNIT 3 | LESSON 15

## Benefits of Alcohol Abstinence

No Grandmothers' Letter

## UNIT 4

## UNIT 4 | LESSON 16

## What Do You Want in A Mate?

Dear Ones,

We each learned things from our fathers – some good and some bad. Of the three of us, I was definitely blessed with the kindest father. He never tired of letting me perch close by while he worked on some lock or cut another key, filing away the rough edges. He had an eye for detail, honed over the years by his work with small interlocking bits of metal.

One night, he was sitting quietly in his big chair, half-listening to my big sister and her cousin talk about boys. Their conversation was undoubtedly sexual in nature, but they were talking around the issue. I was only five or six at the time and couldn't follow the subtleties of their conversation. I had no framework to understand. Still, the curiosity of my five-year-old mind filed their words away, along with my questions.

The very next day, my father invited me to travel with him by train to some job site. He put his case of tools and locks on the overhead rack of our train car. As the train rocked its way across town, I began to ask my nagging questions from the night before.

He listened to every word – words that carried only confusion and mystery to me. It could have become our facts-of-life talk, the birds and the bees – an uncomfortable lecture – at an elementary level, on the nature of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman. It didn't.

He never said a word. By his nod, I knew he'd heard me. But for the first time in my life, he didn't offer a ready answer. His silence seemed so strange. He closed his eyes, and I thought I saw his lips move – as if he were praying or something.

*The train pulled into our station, and as we gathered our coats to depart, he said, "Olga, would you please get my tool case for me?" I looked up at that high shelf and big box and said, "Papa, I can't. It's too heavy for me. I don't even think I can reach it!" He smiled and said, "You're right. It is too heavy for you. If you tried, it would only hurt you. And I would never really ask you to do such a thing. The answers to the questions you've been asking are like that tool case – they're too heavy for you to carry right now. The time will come soon enough for you to carry those answers. But I love you too much to burden you with them now. Can you trust me to give you those answers when the time is right?"\**

*It is the wisdom of his words that we offer you today. There is a season for everything. A time to speak and a time to be silent; a time to taste and a time to abstain; a time to question and a time to accept; a time to open and a time to leave closed.*

*The keys of life unlock many things – don't be in too big of a hurry to open them.*

*Some are too heavy to carry at your stage of life. They could break you if you opened them too soon – we know; we've needlessly picked up things before we were ready – to our regret.*

*Your Grandmother,  
Olga*

\*This text is an adaptation of a true story that happened between Corrie ten Boom and her father many years ago. You can find it in many of her books.

## UNIT 4 | LESSON 17

## Physical Consequences of Premarital Sex

*No Grandmothers' Letter.*

## UNIT 4 | LESSON 18

## Emotional Consequences of Premarital Sex

*Dear Ones,*

*You never met Yuri. He was one of the boys we went to school with. Life came easy for him. He was athletic and popular with the girls. He was usually at the center of whatever was going on. He was always trying to sneak a kiss from one of us and at first we enjoyed his attention. But he always wanted more than just a kiss. Yuri and Olga got pretty serious their last year in school – but that story is for another time.*

*A few years later, we compared notes on Yuri and wondered what happened to him. We lost track of him after he joined the navy. Said he wanted to see the world, and we guessed that's just what he did.*

*Funny thing. Yelena ran into him years later on a plane. She was flying from Moscow to Kiev, and who should sit down beside her but Yuri!*

*Yelena and Yuri caught up on old times, and then the conversation took an unexpected turn when Yelena asked Yuri whether he ever found that "perfect woman" he was looking for. In the privacy afforded by the sound of the jet engines, Yuri began to open up about his regrets in his past relationships.*

*Yelena thought, "I wonder whether this is how a priest feels when he is listening to his church members' confessions." Yuri's words carried just over the noise of the plane. He didn't make eye contact but spoke with his head down, staring into a place not on the airplane. . . .*

*"I've always known exactly what I wanted in a wife. Someone attractive, for sure – no doubt about that. Brunette, blonde, redhead . . . it didn't really matter, just so she was pretty, shapely and sexy. She also had to be sweet and kind, good with children, a really good friend, and intelligent – but not too intelligent." He smiled and caught Yelena's eye. "Perhaps even with nice parents. But all those other things were negotiable in the early stages. The physical was what attracted me – what really attracted me. You were lucky not to get involved with me."*

*"I'd think, 'This is the girl for me.' But once I had had sex with her, I knew she wasn't the one I was looking for. Oh, don't get me wrong. It was fun, at least until I broke off contact. After a while, those kinds of relationships got shorter and shorter. I'd pick up some woman just for the night. But that just proved they weren't worth marrying. They were – used – and sort of hard. You know what I mean? Where were all the soft, gentle, pure, unspoiled, lovely girls like I used to hang out with back in the old days?"*

*"I told myself that I was living every young man's fantasy. I just had to keep looking and I'd eventually find the one for me – but no sense depriving myself while I looked, right?"*

*Yuri began to recount various women he'd known: married women, divorced women, women with children, those who'd stolen from him and disappeared. He went on: the women he'd gotten drunk, and the woman who kept saying, "No" but he felt sure that it was not what she really meant.*

*Yelena listened in silence.*

*"It is getting really hard to find the right kind of girl, you know?" Yuri continued. "It seemed easy in my 20s. Did you know I was married for a couple of years? Yeah, I even have a kid – not that I see that much of her these days.*

*"I look pretty good for my age don't you think? Bet I could pass for a much younger man. Thing is, I'm not getting any younger. By now, I thought I'd have a family to come home to. It's not fair, you know. I'm a nice guy. I'd make a good catch, don't you think?"*

*"Say, Yelena! What are you doing after we land? Want to share a drink? I really need a drink – don't you?"*

*All Yelena wanted to do was get off the plane and end this conversation. She felt – what's the word – ugly, dirty. Yes, that was it. And, yes, she also felt very fortunate she had avoided the charms of a younger Yuri. Fortunately, the plane was landing.*

*As everyone stood up to exit the plane, Yuri turned to Yelena again and said, "I've told you about my life; tell me about yours."*

*"Not a whole lot to tell you," she said. "I'm married and have a family. We have struggled like everyone else, worked hard, and persevered. But the dreams of my youth are slowly coming true. My life is more fulfilled than I ever thought it would be."*

*Yuri and Yelena walked together through the terminal gate. A lively boy, about 7, and a beautiful little girl, who looked just like Yelena, ran up and hugged their mother. Their father joined them, and Yelena introduced him to Yuri. "I'd like you to meet the most wonderful man in the world – my husband, Grigor." They shook hands, and then Grigor turned, put his arm around Yelena and led his family away.*

*When we heard Yelena's story, we could see that Yuri had not really changed very much from when we had known him in school. He had not changed, but, we were grateful to realize, we had.*

*Your Grandmothers*



## UNIT 4 | LESSON 19

## Facts and Rumors About Sex

*No Grandmothers' Letter.*

## UNIT 4 | LESSON 20

## How to Prepare for Success in Marriage

Inside the envelope was a handmade card with the following written in large handwriting:

SOME THINGS ARE BEST LEFT UNOPENED – AT LEAST FOR NOW.  
IF YOU CAN RESIST OPENING THIS PACKAGE,  
YOU CAN EXCHANGE IT FOR SOMETHING FAR MORE ENJOYABLE,  
ENTERTAINING AND EXCITING. THE CHOICE IS YOURS.

*Dear Ones,*

*It is so easy to get your life out of order and end up missing the very thing you were trying hard to find! Do you remember the Greek myth of Pandora's Box? The story is told many ways. She is given a mysterious box by the gods that she isn't to open. Her curiosity gets the better of her and she decides to just have a peek. When she breaks the seal on the box, every woe ever known escapes to plague the world. Try as she might, she cannot put a single one of the vile things back into the box. Despair, Hate, Guilt, Regret, Revenge, Shame, and Deceit — those were just a few of the legion of troubles released on the world.*

*The weight of what she has done is too much for Pandora, but then she sees one last thing still in the box — Hope. In the midst of all the evil unleashed, there is still that one redeeming virtue.*

*Inside of you are many wonderful hopes and dreams — a lifetime of meaningful experiences yet to be tasted. But life can also hold much that is painful. Loss, regret, unfairness, and injustice are merely shadows of the emotional knots that can plague your life when you try to grow up too fast or open the wonderful mystery of your sexuality before it is time.*

*Oh yes, and curiosity is just one of the things that can trick you into opening the box too soon. Boredom, spite, hopelessness, foolishness, and gullibility are some of the inner voices that will try to get you to ignore the voice of your better self or the voices of those further down the road who love you and only want your best.*

*As Olga would tell you, the Enemy of your soul is always pointing out the one thing you don't have and making that one thing the measure of your happiness or fulfillment. "Forbidden fruit" is a term well applied beyond the Garden of Eden.*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 5

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 21

## The Pressure to Compromise

*Dear Ones,*

*Suppose you were walking along the beach of a deserted island and you chanced upon this watch. What might you conclude from your discovery?*

*Whatever possibilities you came up with, we'd bet you didn't say, "How amazing! The sand and wind, and water and waves have randomly mixed together to fashion this watch!" Utter nonsense! Clearly someone made the watch. In other words, a watch requires a watchmaker to create it.*

*Olga loved to use this illustration as an argument for the existence of God. "You don't get something from nothing," she'd say when we weren't quick to accept her argument. Of course, the cause behind a watch is easier to discover than, say, the cause behind an emotion or a response that seems out of place. Often it is a question of motive, and motives are complex things! To understand why people do what they do, you have to look around the edges – it is often the unseen that is the cause behind the seen.*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 22

## The Dangers of Infatuation

*Dear Ones,*

*Few letters are harder to write than the one that follows. Oh, how I wished I'd chosen another way to learn this lesson! Perhaps my story will spare you the pain and regret this particular "vocabulary lesson" cost me and those I care about.*

*Vlad was the handsomest boy in the school – and he was mine.*

*The snows came early that year, and I remember the sound of the geese as they flew south. If those geese were crying a warning, it was altogether lost on me.*

*When Vlad and I were together, my heart was as warm as summer. I had to be careful, though. My father would not approve of the closeness I was beginning to have with Vlad. My dad and mom liked Sergei, not Vlad. That, too, should have been a warning.*

*Sergei came over to my parents' apartment twice every week to help me with mathematics. Sergei and I had been in school together since kindergarten. He was always patient with me, even when I became frustrated with math and took it out on him.*

*Vlad was more reckless. He was ready for anything – except waiting. He didn't like waiting for me, either. As the fall went on, Vlad began to work hard to move me toward a sexual relationship.*

*"You love me, don't you?" he asked.*

*"Of course, I do."*

*"You must show your love."*

*"But I'm just not ready."*

*"When will you be ready?"*

*"I don't know."*

*Vlad sighed heavily and tapped his foot on the floor. "I can't and won't wait forever, you know."*

*I knew that. One thing Vlad would not do was wait forever.*

*The more I resisted, the more impatient Vlad became, and I really worried that I might lose him. Whom could I talk to? There was no one I could ask about something as personal as this. I was alone.*

*Vlad pressed me again, and this time I made him a promise. During the fall break, I would be ready.*

*The time drew near, and I began to pack the days with adolescent dreams. Vlad would finally ask me to marry him, and my father would simply have to accept the inevitable.*

*By the time the night arrived, I was nervous, but resolved. All my dreams would come true through this doorway.*

*It was nothing like I expected. After our time together, I didn't feel any of the peace I thought I'd feel. I felt guilty, as if I had participated in a robbery of something precious to me, a robbery in which somehow I was also the victim.*

Vlad seemed to change, too. As the week went on, he seemed to be avoiding me. Finally, I met him in the hallway.

"Oh, it's you," he said. It wasn't the greeting I expected, and he looked out over my shoulder, instead of staring steadily into my eyes as I had come to expect.

"I've missed you," I began.

"I've been really busy."

He just stood there. The moment grew more and more awkward. I tried to rescue it.

"Want to get some ice cream after school?"

"Uhhh," he said. "I really can't."

Silence, again. He didn't explain, and the time stretched out uncomfortably.

"I'll see you around," he said, and he walked off down the hall without a backward glance.

I stood in the hall for a long time. That night in my bed, I tried not to think about it. The next day, I resolved to talk to him again. I imagined him saying yesterday was all a big misunderstanding and we'd laugh about it later.

When I caught up with him, he got angry.

"What are you doing, following me around like this?"

"But Vlad . . ."

"But nothing. If I need to see you, I'll call you. Until then, I'm busy."

"Vlad . . ." I began again as he turned his back and walked off. A few paces away, he joined a couple of other boys and said something to them I couldn't hear, and they all laughed.

The next few weeks were ghastly. Somewhere deep inside I knew that I had already spent the only coin I ever had that could purchase his favor.

Winter settled in hard and cold. My grief had dulled to a monotonous depression. As if this were not enough, I seemed to have contracted some sort of stomach ailment, and I couldn't keep food down, particularly in the mornings. A horrible thought occurred to me. I tried to push the thought aside, but once in my head, it wouldn't leave me alone. The following day, I went to the clinic.

The physician's assistant brought back the results of my test. "You are pregnant. Would you like me to schedule a procedure for you?" Her words droned on, but I couldn't hear her. What was I going to do? What would my father do when he found out?

The next day, I found Vlad.

"What do you want?" he asked.

In a few brief sentences, I told him the news. There was a long pause. Then he spoke, his voice short and sharp.

"It isn't mine."

"What?"

"It isn't mine."

I was speechless. My throat grew tight, "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"You . . . you can't do this to me."

"I can get five other guys to say it might be theirs."

I went home and simply sat – I had no idea how long – staring into the pattern of the ice on the window.

Sometime later, I heard a knock on the door. It was Sergei, coming to help me with math. I didn't want to see anyone, but I didn't know what to say, so I just let him in.

He opened the math book and then looked at me.

"What's wrong, Olga?"

I looked at him and just started to cry. Sergei came over to where I was sitting and gently put his arm around my shoulders. It felt so good just to have someone hold me.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Maybe I could tell him. He'd always understood everything, ever since elementary school.

Finally, I just blurted out that I had ruined my life! I was pregnant. At first, he was shocked, and his face betrayed some other emotion. It might have been disappointment or pain, but I was too focused on myself.

He didn't say anything for the longest time. Then, he nodded, as if he'd just finished some conversation with himself. He said, "Don't get rid of your baby; I'll marry you. I'll talk to your Dad. You'll see. It will be all right."

I was so relieved that there was someone else willing to take over the mess I'd made of my life that I just went along.

Sergei was not the man of my dreams, but he was willing to have me as I was. The years passed and I found myself hating Sergei – as if it were all his fault. Neither one of us got what we'd hoped for.

But that is not the end of my story. There's one more chapter. It happened many years later. I saw Vlad on the street. He didn't even recognize me. The years hadn't taken away his good looks, but it was the woman with him that I'll never forget. He treated her with contempt.

"Keep up, woman! Don't make me slow down for you again!" She never looked up but increased her pace. And he never looked back; you could just tell she'd endured this for years.

I watched as, once more, Vlad walked out of my life. My face was wet with very old tears. They were tears from a well that was decades old. The enormity of what I had narrowly escaped – Vlad's abuse – and what I had gained instead – Sergei's love – broke upon me, and I sobbed, standing right there on the sidewalk.

Then, Sergei was beside me. "What's wrong, Dear?"

His concern lifted an old burden, and I couldn't even speak.

It didn't seem to matter to Sergei. He took my arm the way he always did, and we walked side by side. I squeezed his hand, and he looked at me for a long moment. He hadn't said he loved me in so many words all those years ago. He'd just said the baby and my father would be OK, and told me he would marry me – that it would be all right.

"Thank you," I said. "You were right, you know."

"About what?" he asked.

"Oh, I was just remembering something you said to me a very long time ago. I just realized how right you were."

From one who learned this lesson the hard way,

Your Grandmother,  
Olga

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 23

## The Lure of Immediate Gratification

Dear Ones,

*Ludmilla's piece of green candy was one of her prized possessions. It was the only thing she remembers her father ever giving her.*

*It was one of those incidents full of unintended consequences . . .*

*Ludmilla's father wasn't a kind man. He drank too much, and strange as it might sound, he was afraid of Ludmilla when she was a little girl. I suppose he didn't know how to treat her and was concerned he'd do something wrong. But fear wasn't an acceptable emotion, so anger took its place in her father.*

*When her mother had to stay in the hospital for six weeks because of a blood problem, he was left with a four-year-old to care for. He had a sister in another city, but because he hadn't bothered to speak to her in years, there was no foreseeable help from that quarter. There was a childcare center that would take Ludmilla for part of the day, and the rest of the time she was in her father's care.*

*Often he left her for long periods. On weekends, he got drunk and stayed drunk. Twice a week, he took her to see her mother in the hospital. It was halfway through that six-week period that the clear green candy entered her world.*

*Ludmilla looked forward to visiting her mother, even though the smells and sounds at the hospital made her queasy. Her father had her put on her best skirt and blouse for each visit. But when they got there, it was obvious that he was as uncomfortable being there as she was. Once they only stayed only 15 minutes, even though they had had to travel almost 45 minutes just to get there!*

*Ludmilla didn't know it at the time, but her father couldn't go without a drink for more than a few hours. Their visits to the hospital stretched him to his limit. Thinking he could stop her whining whenever he left her alone or forced her to leave her mother before a proper visiting time, he came up with the candy game.*

*As they walked into the hospital one evening, he told her that she could have one piece of candy, but she had to put it in her mouth. When the candy was gone, it would be time to leave. At first, she was pleased just to get a piece of hard candy and promptly sucked or chewed it away long before she was ready to go home. Her father would ask, "Do you still have the candy in your mouth? Open up and show me." All she had to show was a red or purple tongue. The candy was gone. Her father took that as a sign that it was time to go, and they quickly departed.*

*Of course, Ludmilla felt terrible that their early departure was due to her inability to not eat the candy. Somehow it was her fault that they couldn't stay and visit her mother longer. And then her father gave her the transparent green piece of hard candy.*

*When her father unwrapped it and she put it in her mouth, it tasted far more wondrous than any of the candies he had given her before. The purple ones were sour, and the red ones tasted like cinnamon, but this green one was sweet like nectar from the most exotic flower you could imagine. Her heart broke. How could she ever resist such a thing?*

*But as sweet as the green candy was, the thought of sitting beside her mother's bed was sweeter still. For the first time, she resisted the desire to eat this particular piece of green candy. Instead of sucking it or crunching it, she held it between her back teeth and kept it as dry as possible. When her father asked to see the candy she moved it to the front of her mouth and showed him the green candy completely intact.*

*He was surprised that she hadn't eaten it. A few minutes later, he asked to see it again. Her mother didn't know about their "game," but the third time he asked to see her candy, she began to suspect what was going on.*



*Finally, her father said it was time to go, candy or no candy – and, this time, her mother agreed. Every time before, when they had gotten ready to leave, her mother's eyes had turned sad and lonely. But this time, she seemed alive and almost vibrant. There was a battle going on for her company, and her daughter was winning her first skirmish.*

*The candy game ended that night, but something far more important began – Ludmilla knew for the first time in her life that she could control certain things in her world. She had not been left completely to the whims and wishes of others, at least not when it came to the things going on inside her.*

*She never ate the candy. She wrapped it up and kept it as a reminder that she didn't have to yield to her father's weakness – or her own. She had never heard of the phrase "delayed gratification," but she had tasted the power of resisting impulses for greater prizes – like spending more time with her mother.*

*In the total scheme of things, the candy battles may sound like little more than some random bit of fluff. But in the heart of one little girl, it was the beginning of independence, and something more – the resolve not to be a slave to her desires.*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 24

## The Media Unmasked

*I, Yelena, once saw a magician do an amazing bit of magic. When I asked him, "Do it again!" he smiled and said, "Once is magic; twice is an education. You have to pay for an education." Funny little comment I've never forgotten. Obviously, once you know the secret, it isn't magic any more. Much of the wonder and much of the power of the trick are gone. The masked and mysterious are always more interesting than the unmasked. Today, we want to unmask one of the costliest bits of magic you'll ever pay for. And we won't charge you so much as a kopek!*

*Your teacher, we trust, has graciously gathered the equipment for this bit of trickery. The magic involved can make you dissatisfied when you were satisfied, turn curiosity into a ravaging hunger, create a need where one didn't exist, and make an otherwise bright young person into a gullible rube. We know! It has happened to each of us, and we grew up in a time when this particular piece of deception was rare. It is called "advertising". Many people in the business world would tell you advertising is what makes the world go 'round.*

*Your teacher has the instructions for this exercise, so we'll let you get on with it – this is a slice of education that will pay for itself the first time you use it.*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 25

## The Power of "No"

*No Grandmothers' Letter.*

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 26

## The Path to Your Dreams

Dear Ones,

*Recipes are a bit like advice. The good ones get handed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, the same is true of a number of the bad ones. They are the product of trial and error, and subject to the judgments of personal taste. It can take a long time to get just the right ingredients in just the right combination, not to mention the details about how long to let it cook and at what temperature. Same thing is true when it comes to forming a recipe for life.*

*For the past few weeks, we've been trying to convince you that there are things going on beneath the surface of your lives that profoundly influence the choices you make. Choosing the right ingredients from your life, in the right combination, is the key to making decisions that will "leave a good taste in your mouth". (Yelena and I didn't want to include this last pun, but Olga insisted that it was far too clever to leave out. We did manage to edit out her next pun about "most of the bellyaching that goes on in the world being in bad taste.")*

*Think of decisions like a cake. The frosting is the first thing you see. That's where the surface part of choice occurs. You weigh out the likely consequences – good and bad – what it will likely cost and whether or not anyone else is likely to be involved. In other words, you use your head to sort out what you should and shouldn't do.*

*Next, there is the body of the cake. This is the part that gives shape to the cake – whether it will be round or square, short or tall, big or small. It is the product of the batter and the pan. We each had a couple of pans we used. That's why Olga's cakes were always round and Yelena's cakes were always square. Those were the only pans they had.*

*This is so basic to making the cake that you hardly think about it at all. And therein lays the problem. We have come to think of this part of decision making as the "Unspoken Family Rules." In my (Ludmilla's) family, one of the unspoken rules was, "No one is allowed to show their emotions." In Olga's family, the opinion of others was highly valued, so "How you look on the outside is more important than what's happening on the inside." And in Yelena's family, they weren't allowed to show weakness so the rule was "You can never ask for help."*

*I don't remember exactly when we stumbled on the notion of unspoken family rules, but we were all going through tough times in our marriages. Turns out our husbands also had a set of unspoken family rules and many of them were at odds with our own! Olga was brought up to believe that "Being on time is a big deal." But her husband was taught that "Time is a mystery better ignored for the most part."*

*It turned out that we all had two rules in common. First, "You don't talk about the 'rules' or question them – they just are." And second, "It is a terrible thing to ever break a family rule." Of course, we also judged each other whenever one of us happened to break another's unspoken rule – even though that person had no idea that such a rule existed!*

*This is why we had you play the crossed or uncrossed game with the scissors. The rightness or wrongness had nothing to do with how you passed the scissors but everything to do with the unspoken rule.*

*The third part of our decision making cake is the filling. You can't see the filling at all. It may be a complete surprise when you bite into it for the first time.*

*Remember when we went through the unknotting ceremony to discover some of the hidden motivations in our lives? Everyone has them. Sometimes they're unreasonable fears planted deep in us, like "If I ever mess up, the consequences will be horrible." Sometimes they're lies spoken about us that we've accepted as true: "I'm not really worth much." Sometimes they're vows we've made after being hurt: "I'll never share my feelings with anyone again."*

All three parts of our “cake” play an important role in the decisions we make. We’ve designed an exercise for your teacher to take you through that will help you see how all this works out in your life. It has taken us a long time to even recognize that there are hidden persuaders that have been undermining our lives. The good news is that there have also been hidden strengths in each of us that have surfaced during the journey. You, too, have a mix of good and bad ingredients to draw from. The question is which ones you will allow to influence the direction you choose.

Your Grandmother,  
Ludmilla

## UNIT 5 | LESSON 27

## The Importance of Boundaries

Dear Ones,

How envious we were when we found out Olga was going to visit her aunt in Moscow. Of course, we were all of seven years old at the time. The big event was to be a visit to the zoo. Olga had a brochure from her aunt that described all sorts of interesting things about the zoo. She saw to it that we learned about the zoo whether we wanted to or not.

It opened in 1864 and grew to hold more than 3,000 birds, reptiles, mammals, fish, and invertebrates – whatever those are. Of course, it’s much bigger today, but still – it sounded like the Hermitage of wild animals to us. We learned that jaguars are good swimmers and leopards are not, that most of the bears on Animals’ Island would rather spend their days mooching treats near the moat where the people walk by than climb the big tree planted in their enclosure. From Olga’s later description, the whole park sounds like a wonderful maze of cages, fences, moats, glass enclosures, and compounds designed to keep the inhabitants from snacking on each other.

Everything was going very well. Olga’s aunt took her picture in front of the Monkey House on Animals’ Island, and the outing was turning into a wonderful childhood memory. Then, shortly after they arrived at the open enclosure for the celebrated black swans, a string of real memory-makers occurred.

Swans are large graceful creatures, and Olga’s aunt thought it would be ever so nice if Olga were able to see the beautiful birds up close. Now you probably know that you aren’t supposed to feed zoo animals, but this didn’t occur to Olga’s aunt.

Bits of bread from her roll coaxed one of the largest black swans over to the bank of the pond. With a little more coaxing, she had the swan completely out of the water, gobbling down her dwindling supply of bread. Who knows? Perhaps it was the fact that the swan was out of the water and full of expectations, but the end of the food was also the end of the relationship as far as the swan was concerned. Olga’s aunt hadn’t realized the change in the relationship and picked that moment to reach out – purely in the spirit of friendship – to give the swan a parting stroke on the neck.

The swan lowered its head, spread its wings, hissed, and charged! It turns out that an enraged swan can really move! It also turns out that Olga’s aunt could move pretty fast when the circumstances called for it. With her skirt hitched up, she was high-stepping it with the best of them!

She might have escaped none the worse for the experience if she hadn’t mistaken the open gate for a safe haven. A sizable crowd had been drawn to the spectacle of Olga’s aunt trying to out-run the swan. And so, when she inadvertently charged into the kangaroo enclosure (one of the animal tenders had just opened the gate to feed the curious-looking creatures), the crowd of spectators immediately tried to warn her. Of course, 50 people yelling at you at the same time seldom brings clarity. However, it did bring the ever-curious Bennett’s wallabies, as kangaroos are known in Australia.

*Sensing that something must be afoot, the kangaroos bounced over to the opening to greet the one who, they probably thought, was their new feeder. Next to bouncing kangaroos, a charging swan looks like a small annoyance – especially when the kangaroos are bouncing directly toward you!*

*It was just bad luck that the mountain goats were being temporarily housed in the next enclosure. The zoo officials were all but certain that the goats wouldn't be able to jump the walls of their temporary home. Now, it is a well-established fact that, after elephants, zebras, and venomous snakes, male mountain goats are the most dangerous animals in captivity.*

*Of course, when the kangaroos jumped into the next compound, all bets were off. The jumping gene in the goats surfaced with a vengeance. The wall turned out to be woefully inadequate for keeping in the goats.*

*They say that was the only time they've had to close an entire section of the zoo during visiting hours. With kangaroos, swans, and mountain goats, and Olga's aunt running wild in the walkways, they thought it best to stabilize the situation before any more boundaries were breached. The zoo officials said it was a miracle that no one was seriously injured.*

*Olga often said in later years that subsequent visits to the zoo seemed rather tame after that. She only had two regrets. One was that her aunt had hung onto the camera during the whole episode and hadn't managed to take a single photo. Her other regret was that her aunt never showed the slightest interest in a second visit to the zoo – even though it was only a couple of years before she was allowed back in the park!*

Your Grandmothers

## UNIT 6

### UNIT 6 | LESSON 28

### The Unseen World

*Dear Ones,*

*One of the recurring themes that we've been trying to convince you of is that there is more to life than the eye can see. Our motives for what we do are often unclear, even to ourselves. The effects of drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex go far deeper than anything we can measure or test. And there is an unseen world surrounding each of us that we ignore at our peril.*

*You might be tempted to think us superstitious old women when we speak of a spiritual reality. We wouldn't be the first, nor are we likely to be the last, to meet resistance to the notion that the unseen profoundly affects that which is seen.*

*As you know, our Yelena is a medical doctor. My, the hours she spent poring over her medical books! Of course, she wasn't the only one to pick up a thing or two about medicine. We still remember that morning over tea when Yelena recounted the following bit of history to us. It points out the life-and-death consequences of failing to take an unseen world into account.*

*In the 1840s, medicine took a major turn. For the first time, surgeons could safely render their patients unconscious because of the breakthrough in anesthesiology (things like ether). They could then put their patients to sleep during an operation. This meant that surgeons could operate on a host of ailments that had once been beyond their reach, and the number of surgeries skyrocketed. However, of the people who lived through the surgery itself, only six out of ten survived the infections that set in after surgery. Gangrene, septic poisoning, and other bacterial infections claimed the other four often as doctors routinely operated in filthy conditions, moving from one patient to the next without so much as wiping the blood off their hands. Most doctors looked at surgery pretty much the way an auto mechanic looks at repairing cars – you take the part out, fix it or patch it, and put it back in.*



Nearly 20 years later in 1864, Joseph Lister, an English surgeon in Glasgow, Scotland, began to read the theories of France's greatest scientist, Louis Pasteur. The microscope had finally reached the point where scientists could put it to use, exploring the previously unseen world of microorganisms. Pasteur theorized that these microorganisms might be the cause or carriers of all the infections that plagued the medical world. And so Joseph Lister began to seek a practical application to Pasteur's theory.

Before long, Lister was urging his colleagues to take up a radical new practice in the world of medicine: "Wash your hands and instruments before you operate!" It was such a simple answer to the complex problem of infections – too simple for many of his colleagues. They mocked him and refused to take his advice of simply washing their hands. "Unseen world of tiny things crawling around, indeed!" During the next decade, thousands continued to die in the aftermath of what we now think of as minor operations – all for the lack of one simple procedure – "wash your hands." I'm sure it must have sounded as absurd to them as the notion that auto mechanics should carefully clean the grease from under their fingernails before they work on the next car.

For the next 30 years, Lister championed the use of antiseptics by all surgeons. His innovations and improvements in antiseptic techniques eventually won him international recognition. Many of the common practices of medicine today come from the dedication of Joseph Lister: sterile catgut for sutures, gauze dressings, and pinning together fractured bones, just to name a few. All because he took the unseen world seriously and took steps to live in light of it.

When I was your age, I was curious about everything! I was fascinated by plants and animals. But the thing that I found the most intriguing was the human body. I think that's why I wanted to study medicine. I wanted to know how everything worked. And of course, the further I went in school, the more I was taught that science could tell us everything we needed to know.

I trusted that scientific knowledge was the answer to every question and the solution to every problem. I continued thinking this way until, as I wrote about earlier, I found myself addicted to drugs. Don't get me wrong. Knowledge is a valuable possession, and we have all three tried to impart much of what we know about drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex through these letters. But, as I learned the hard way, even a precise scientific knowledge of drugs did not keep me from being addicted. There were some powerful things going on under the surface of all our lives.

Through often painful experiences, we've discovered that our parents and our husbands have had a powerful, and often hard to see, effect on each one of us. We realized that there are strong forces working within each of us that often make it much harder to avoid the dream breakers.

But even understanding these forces was not enough. Like Lister, I began to realize there were even more potent invisible forces at work in each of our lives. I've told you that Olga's prayers played a crucial role in helping me stop abusing drugs. Prayer is one example of a compelling, but invisible, force.

But I also discovered there were invisible dangers that, just like Lister's bacteria, could harm and even kill. My addiction to drugs convinced me that, even when I know the intelligent, wise, and right thing to do, there is something inside me, some destructive principle, that pulls me toward wrong and destructive choices.

There were many times when each of us felt a little like you probably did playing that game, dear ones. I was really enjoying my work as a doctor when I began to slowly realize that something invisible was sneaking up on me and hurting my chances of hitting the target of my dreams in life.

And the scariest part was that it was something inside of me that I couldn't see or even understand. Eventually I asked Ludmilla what she thought about my problem. She thought my problem must have something to do with my family. By then, she was realizing that many of her own problems had their roots in the conflicts between her parents when she was young.

Together, Ludmilla and I asked Olga what she thought.

"We're convinced there is some invisible principle living inside each one of us," we told her. "It pulls



us away from our dreams and lures us into thinking and feeling and even doing things we know are going to hurt us.”

*At first, Olga said nothing, but just smiled.*

*I was actually a little upset with her. It didn't seem like she was taking what we said very seriously.*

*“Look,” I said. “This may be funny to you, but it certainly isn't to us! How would you feel if you discovered there was a powerful force inside you that you couldn't control – that actually seemed to be controlling you?”*

*Olga's face grew serious. “I wasn't taking your insight lightly. In fact, I know exactly what you are feeling. In fact, that negative force is inside of me, too.”*

*“It is?” said Ludmilla, incredibly.*

*“Yes,” continued Olga. “In fact, I think everyone struggles with the exact thing you are talking about.”*

*“They do?” I asked. Olga nodded.*

*“But what do you think it is, exactly?” I said, shaking my head. “This is one malady that is beyond my ability to diagnose.”*

*Olga looked at us thoughtfully for a moment, as if trying to gauge how much we were ready to hear.*

*“I guess it's been called many things over the years,” she said. “Some call it obstinacy. Others would consider it rebellion or selfishness.” Olga paused and then continued.*

*“But I think the best name for it is also one of the oldest. What you are talking about – that destructive principle inside you – is what Christians call ‘sin.’ ”*

*I don't know whether Ludmilla was as surprised as I, but immediately she shook her head negatively.*

*“We know you are a very religious person, Olga, and we respect your beliefs. We really do. And I know that you tend to see everything in religious terms. But even if I were as religious as you are, I don't think I'd call this inner struggle, ‘sin.’ ”*

*“Yes,” I chimed in, “isn't sin doing bad things, like lying, stealing, and murdering? We're not talking about anything like that.”*

*Olga smiled at us again. “I agree that most people look at sin just as you do. They think sin is just a name for the very bad things some people do, like murder, rape, or terrorism. But I've learned that sin is a force, a pull that lives inside each one of us. It pulls us toward the dark side of life, even when we know better and want to do better. And ultimately, sin is our desire to live our lives separate from God.”*

*Of course, that was only the beginning of many conversations about the thing inside each of us that pulls us down and keeps us from our dreams. Together, the three of us began to explore more deeply this inner invisible world, the good parts of it as well as the bad.*

*It is because all of us have learned something about this hidden, spiritual world that we have written you a few more letters. I was rather late in coming to understand how this hidden world works. I hope you don't have to make foolish mistakes like mine before you investigate the most important dimension of your lives – the hidden, spiritual dimension.*

*The things we will share with you in the next few letters will be the most crucial elements in making your dreams come true.*

*Until then, remember that we love you, our dear ones,*

*Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 6 | LESSON 29

## The Worst Case

*Dear Sasha, Natasha, and Dima,*

*Everyone has his or her own stories. We've been telling you some of ours in the hope that you will be able to find your place in a story that ends with you fulfilling your very best dreams. Dima, you may not remember, but when you were younger, you used to beg me to tell you the story you called "The Runaway Boy." You never seemed to grow tired of hearing it. I guess it's not surprising — that story has been a favorite for nearly 2,000 years. It never seems to grow stale or wear out.*

*We want to tell you the story one more time, but a little differently from the way you heard it as a child, Dima. The story begins like this:*

"A man had two sons, and the younger one went to his dad one day and asked for his share of all his father owned. I guess he wanted to skip the traditional rites of passage and step directly into adulthood. 'I can do it on my own,' he thought. 'Everything takes too long when I have to go at my father's pace. I want out!'

"His father gave him what he asked. The next day, the younger son set off to places unknown, planning to put as much distance between himself and his father as he could. In a faraway country, he was free to do just as he liked, and he liked the very things that were forbidden back home. He did most of the things we've cautioned you about. Drugs, alcohol, and sex were not strangers to him. But I don't think you could call them his friends, either. In fact, when his money ran out, so did the crowd he ran with; they had problems of their own and couldn't be bothered with his troubles.

"Things went from bad to worse, and he ended up feeding pigs for a fellow who thought no more of him than he did of his pigs. He felt so hungry and hopeless that as he sat on the fence of the pigsty, the pigs' food started to look pretty good to him. That's when he came to his senses and thought, 'Back home even the least of my father's workers are better off than this!'

"Pretty soon, his mind was filled with thoughts of home. He couldn't think of anything else. He began to dream of going home, having a warm place to sleep, taking a bath, eating a home-cooked meal. Day gave way to night as he allowed himself to dream. But in the dark, he began to think about approaching his dad. What could he say? How could he ever make things right? He worried about his confession, as the pigs became nothing more than grunts and a nauseating stench in the night. In his head, he rehearsed what he would say to his father.

"I've made a mess of everything," he thought. "I have no right to even be called your son. Please, if you could just see your way clear to give me a job — any job. Please, Daddy!"

**VERSION 1 – Punishing Father**

"The son was just about to leave his perch on the fence of the pigsty when a voice interrupted his plan. 'Better think it through before you head home,' the voice said. 'Here's how it will play out.'

"Once he has decided on the appropriate words, the son's pace quickens. He hurries down the road to his father's house. At last the house is in sight, and the young man sees an older man burst from the door and run down the road toward him. It's his father! Perhaps — the young man's heart pounds loudly in his chest — perhaps his father will be glad to see him after all. Once his father is within earshot, the son calls out to him. While the father is still a few steps away, the son begins his rehearsed speech. But the speech is never finished. For the father's arm, strong from years of faithful work, darts from his side and with a mighty fist, strikes the son across the face, landing him in the dust. The father stands over him with an angry glare and kicks the son until the young man crawls away with a tear-stained and swollen face to the sound of his father's voice, 'How dare you

show your face here after what you've done!"

#### **VERSION 2 – Absent Father**

"The young man hears some murmurs of assent in the chilly night. And then another voice from across the pen offers a different tale:

"Ah, no, I think the story goes like this: The son hurries down the road toward his father's house. When he reaches the last rise before his father's property, the young man begins to run. He recognizes none of the servants in the fields as he passes, but no matter. Perhaps he is running too quickly to see the faces clearly. He reaches the house at last, and hesitates for just a moment to catch his breath and calm the nerves that hit him in that moment. Then, he knocks on the door. A moment later, the door opens, but it is a stranger who stands there. The young man is suddenly conscious of his ragged clothing and filthy appearance. 'Is this not my father's house?' he stammers. He gives his father's name and asks to see him. The stranger's face grows angry at the intrusion, and before the young man is thrown off the property, he learns that his father sold the grounds of his estate and moved elsewhere with his household. And no, he left no indication as to the whereabouts of his new residence."

#### **VERSION 3 – Demanding Father**

"Scarcely has this voice subsided when a third voice reworks the story yet again:

"The father is home when the young man knocks. He greets his son with a stony face and hears out the practiced speech. The father agrees with the young man's assessment of the situation and assigns him a place in the servant's quarters and a job in the fields. At first, the young man is happy, for though his clothes are simple, they are clean. And though his food is humble, it is plentiful and better than that which he had pilfered from the pigs. But as time goes by, the young man's happiness is replaced by a dull ache. Daily, he works in the fields that could have been his. Often, he sees his older brother dressed in fine robes, walking on the rooftop of the house, deep in conversation with his father.

"He could have had such conversations, such companionship and love. Sometimes, the father himself walks through the fields where his servants work. And each time the father comes near him, the young man doubles his efforts. His heart pounds until it nearly bursts, aching as the young man steals glances at the father. For he dares at times to hope that someday his current efforts will outweigh his past sin, that someday the father will look at him and the stony face will melt in compassion and that he will see his son in the sweaty fieldworker before him. The young man dares to hope. But the father always looks down on him with a face of stone."

#### **VERSION 4 – Cold-Hearted Father**

"Another voice rises now from among the pigpen chorus:

"The young man returns home and approaches his father out in the fields. He stands in front of his father and, through tears, chokes out the words he has prepared. And then, head bowed, he waits for the father's response. But there is none. The only sounds are the voices of the laborers and the rustlings of the fields of grain in the afternoon breeze. He dares to steal a glance at his father. And then, astonished, he takes a longer look. For his father is staring right through him at the fields. 'Father?' the young man says in a trembling voice. 'Father?' But the older man does not hear him. The son reaches out a timid finger and touches the father's arm, and then grabs at his sleeve and tugs. But the father makes no move, no indication that he has even felt the son's touch. It is as though the young man were suddenly invisible. He can see the father and watch him at work. But the father does not see him or hear his voice. The young man slumps to the ground at his father's feet. 'Father . . . Daddy, please hear me,' he whimpers. But the father turns and walks

toward his house. 'Father!' the young man screams. But he receives no answer."

#### VERSION 5 – The Helpless Father

"The night is at its darkest in the pigpen when yet another voice takes up the tale.

"The boy goes home, finds his father and begins his confession. He can't bear to look at his father as he speaks. When the young man finishes his practiced speech, he hears sobbing. He looks up to see his father crying. The boy seeks to hold the older man who collapses into his arms. 'It is going to be all right,' thinks the boy. 'My father still cares about me!' But his father starts to mumble something through his tears. At first, the boy doesn't understand the meaning behind the words. 'I'm so sorry,' he hears his father say, 'if there were anything I could do to help you now, I would.' The young man steps back in confusion as he tries to fathom his father's meaning. 'I gave you all that you asked; I held back nothing,' the father continues. 'There's nothing left that I can do for you. Oh, how I wish there were.' The boy feels the cold reality of the words wash over him as he realizes that his father is helpless to intervene. All the chances have been used up."

#### VERSION 6 – Forgiving Father

"The chorus of voices falls silent. Then, after a moment, a new voice speaks softly into the night. It's right next to the runaway. This voice, as though the speaker were leaning against the fence almost brushing up against the young man with his shoulder, says:

"The young man slows down as he comes near to his father's land, not knowing how his father will greet him. But he forces his feet to move steadily forward to the rhythm of the words of confession that run through his head. He is still quite a distance from his father's home when the young man sees a little puff of dust on the road ahead and, in the midst of the dust, a man. The man runs up the road toward him and, as the puff of dust comes closer, the young man sees that it is his father. He stops in his tracks and waits, his knees weak.

"He tries to steel himself against the anticipated blows or stony-faced silence, but he cannot hold his voice steady as he starts to speak. 'Father, I've sinned against heaven, and I've sinned against you. I'm not worthy to be called your son . . . .' But that is as much of the speech as the young man is able to deliver. For even before the son begins to talk, the father is wrapping strong arms around him. Even as the son's eyes tear up in remorse over his sin, the father's eyes are dripping tears of joy into his son's tangled hair. The father shouts for joy to his servants for them to prepare a celebration, and then he places his coat on his son — his son who has finally come home."

*There was something in this newest voice that reached into deepest Earth and into highest heaven to pull from them the solid story from its core — not the story of our own making, but as it's meant to be — as it truly is. There was something in this newest voice that makes one yearn to rest within it, to live within the story that it told.*

*And that, dear ones, is the true ending of this ancient story.*

*Your Grandmothers*

(Optional Story Summaries of Grandmothers)

*Olga was three years old when her grandfather died. He was an exacting man who seldom gave her father any encouragement. "Make him prideful if I were to praise him to his face," her grandfather would say. And so he never said the words her father longed to hear. That's in large measure why he did the same to her. Something like that can't help but affect the way one sees God. Her "head" knew that God is loving and kind, but her heart feared God as one very demanding and difficult to please. The thought of Him missing her and expressing it with His tears was hard to grasp with her heart for it was there that the lie resided.*

*Ludmilla's father died when she was 12. That loss translated into the incorrect view that God would eventually desert her or become helpless to respond to her need. For her, it became a matter of fighting through her heart-lie that God couldn't ultimately be trusted. She used to have panic attacks about ending up on the street in her old age. Telling her God isn't like that wasn't enough. It wasn't until she made peace with her Heavenly Father (until she "went home" and saw for herself) that the lie was broken.*

**UNIT 6 | LESSON 30****The Grand Proposal**

*Dear Ones,*

*Do you remember our first letter to you? In it, we said that we were to be the exceptions to the rule. Nothing would ever stand between us and our "happy-ever-after" lives. But you know by now that we let many of the dream breakers into our lives. Fortunately, we also discovered some of the dream makers as well. The most important one came from a source none of us would have guessed when we were your age.*

*When Olga first got her Bible, we thought it was just a jumbled bunch of fairy tales mixed with some ancient history and a bit of poetry. My, we were so wrong! It turned out not only to be true, but also to be a wonderful guide to the most important of our dreams.*

*In our last letter, we compared God with the father of the Runaway Boy. That is called a metaphor. It means that God is like a human father in certain ways. We discovered that, in other places in the Bible, God is compared to a shepherd – and with many other things.*

*My dears, I'm afraid that the Runaway Boy is an accurate picture of what all three of us were like when we were young. The young man almost destroyed his life with the dream breakers we have been studying, and so did we.*

*Like the three of us, when young people make a mistake and nothing bad results immediately, they think they've gotten away with it. A young man gets drunk a few times and feels fine the next day. He may even proudly boast to his friends that he can "hold his liquor". He cannot look 20 years ahead and see how alcohol will destroy his marriage, his job, his children, and his own life dreams.*

*A young couple decides to have premarital sex. "How can it hurt," they ask, "if we both want it?" But they don't know about or they ignore the likelihood of STDs, pregnancy, poverty, and the emotional and spiritual damage they are storing up for themselves.*

*Frankly, one of the hardest things for all three of us to understand was why so many people – not just young people – but people of all ages . . . would keep on doing things that hurt them, even when they understood the dangers.*

*As we discussed it, and as we studied more of what the Bible actually said, the more we realized we had some rather skewed ideas about "sin".*

*It turns out that this is what the Bible says is: Even the best of us have failed to be all that God hoped and planned for us.*

*We were particularly intrigued by the biblical statement that all people have sinned and fall short of what God intended them to be. By then, we had all seen enough trouble – much that we had brought on ourselves. We were certainly not living the way God wanted us to live. Finally, all three of us were ready to admit that we had sinned against God, much like the Runaway Boy had sinned against his kind and loving father. We realized we'd been running away from Him all our lives.*

*But that led us to a very serious problem. We read in many places in the Bible that the long-range consequences of sin are separation and death. Sin creates barriers between people (we were vividly aware of that!), but it also creates a barrier between people and God. We had spent all of our lives separated from God and hadn't even realized it!*



*We also read that God was perfect, perfectly fair, perfectly just, perfectly moral, and perfectly righteous. The problem was, how could a perfectly fair and moral God simply take us back? How could One so perfect and holy embrace us in our sinful condition?*

*The answer surprised and bewildered us. The Bible said that God Himself had come to Earth as a Man, Jesus Christ. And this Man who was also God had allowed Himself to be brutally murdered on a cross. After He had died and been laid in a tomb, He came back to life three days later.*

*I guess I (Olga) was the first to embrace the forgiveness Christ offered. Even as a little girl, somehow I'd always known there must be some sort of God or spiritual dimension to life. But it was only later in life that I began to learn about Christ and the Bible.*

*Ludmilla was next. I don't think she ever really felt loved before. It was not hard for her to believe with her head, but Sasha, your grandmother had a scarred and hardened heart from her many wounds. It took the love of a patient and tender Heavenly Father to melt the ice that had gathered around her soul.*

*And our dear Yelena took the longest of all. That wonderful mind of hers had always been such an asset to her in school and in her profession, but it almost kept her from finding the One who had made that brilliant mind. Yelena had so many questions! Ludmilla and I couldn't begin to answer them all. But Yelena kept reading the Bible and many other books. She knew it was important, and I think she couldn't dismiss the changes she was seeing in us. Finally, we found an eminent professor. He helped Yelena see that there were compelling evidences for the truth of Christianity and the Bible.*

*Then, after several years, one night in my little flat, Yelena opened her mind and heart to her loving Heavenly Father. She accepted Christ's death as payment for her sin and joined our little group at an entirely new level.*

*So Dima, Natasha, and Sasha – our dear grandchildren – we've come to the most important moment in all of our letters to you.*

*If there were one gift we could give you – if there were one legacy we could leave behind for you, it would be this.*

*We long for you to return home to your Heavenly Father at an early age. Please don't make the mistake of waiting as long as we did. We know that your lives have not been perfect, and you now know how far ours were from what they should have been. But we hope and pray that you will choose to learn from our mistakes, instead of having to repeat them.*

*How we yearn for you, if you haven't done it already, to say "I do" to Christ. He wants to come and live inside you by His Spirit. He wants to be your Forgiver, your Lord, your Companion, your Conscience, your Friend, your Guide, and your truest and deepest Love. He has become this and more to each of us, and we ache for each of you until you find this relationship for yourselves.*

*And as much as we want you to find God, He longs for you to come home to Him more than we ever could.*

*Ludmilla has just reminded me that for many years part of our problem (though certainly not all of it) was that no one told us how to step into an intimate relationship with God. It may surprise you how very simple a step it really is. All you have to do is believe.*

*Now you may be asking, "Exactly what am I supposed to believe?"*

*You begin a relationship with God by believing that Jesus' death and resurrection paid the penalty for your sin and opened the way for you to come back to God. You do not have to earn this relationship. It is a free gift, paid for by Christ's death.*

*But when I say you must believe this, I'm not talking about believing just with your head. This kind of believing you do with your head and your heart, in fact with everything you are.*

*We once heard someone say that coming to Christ means giving all of yourself that you know to all of God that you know. As the three of us have discovered, as soon as we began believing in Christ, we*

immediately began learning more about God and more about ourselves. But it began by giving ourselves to God. Accepting Christ's death and inviting Him to come in and change us from the inside were the steps we took.

You don't have to pray a prayer to believe. But often prayer is a good way of expressing and cementing your belief. So Ludmilla, Yelena, and I have written a little prayer for you. In fact, it's very similar to the one Ludmilla prayed when she first believed. The prayer is this:

"Dear Heavenly Father,

I need you. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for me. Thank you for taking me back and forgiving me. Please come in and change me into all you intend me to be. Amen."

This is what believing really means. And it is our greatest hope for you.

With all our love,  
Your Grandmothers

## UNIT 6 | LESSON 31

## The Cycle Broken

Dear Ones,

I've told you the sad story of what drinking did to my husband, Alexei, and I've also told you some of what it did to me. Even after he was gone, the hurt of what he'd done stayed with me, smoldering just under the surface.

But I promised myself that I would be the best possible mother to our only son, Vasily – your father, Sasha. Now that his father was dead, I vowed to be mother and father to him. And I thought I was doing a pretty good job – until the day Vasily turned 14. He came home from school very late. I was already worried. As he came through the door, I rushed to hug him, relieved he was all right. That's when I smelled the vodka on his breath.

I screamed at my son. I slapped him in the face. Through tears of rage, I shrieked that he would end up just like his father.

Vasily said nothing. Instead, he turned and strode back through the door, slamming it behind him, just like his father used to do. I collapsed to the floor and wept for what seemed like hours.

I felt trapped. It was happening all over again, and I was helpless to stop it. I waited for Vasily to return, not knowing what I would say to him. Finally, exhausted, I fell asleep around midnight.

During that fitful night, I was visited by a nightmare I will never forget. In my dream, Vasily and I were taking flowers to lay on Alexei's grave. As I stood there crying, a bony hand reached up out of the earth, clutched Vasily by the leg and dragged him down until the earth closed over him. I woke up screaming.

That very day, I sat down with Yelena and Olga and asked them what to do.

"You are the one who is going to have to break the cycle," said Yelena. "Vasily is almost certainly too young and in too much pain from his father's death."

"Cycle?" I asked.

"The cycle of addiction," Yelena responded. "It is a slavery that cycles through each generation as hurt children grow up to protect and comfort themselves with the same drugs or alcohol their parent or parents did."

"I agree," I said. "But what can I do? Vasily doesn't even listen to me anymore."

Yelena waited a moment before she answered. Then, very quietly she said, "You can forgive Alexei."

*"What?" I was astonished. "What good would that do? Besides, he doesn't deserve my forgiveness!"*

*"No, I don't suppose he does," said Yelena. "But that's not the point. You need to forgive him to break his grip on you."*

*"What grip?" I said. "I'm not the one who's getting drunk!"*

*Then Olga spoke up. "His grip on you is your anger, your bitterness, your pain, and your hurt."*

*"Your pain and anger burst into hot flame last night when you smelled Vasily's breath. And it will keep on burning you – and Vasily – again and again until you break the cycle. The only way you can do that is to forgive Alexei."*

*I thought a long time before I answered.*

*"I . . . I don't see how I can," I said. "The pain is just too great."*

*"I think part of the problem," said Yelena, "is that you haven't seen many good models of forgiveness. I didn't get the impression when we were growing up that your parents were very good at asking for or giving forgiveness."*

*"That's an understatement!" I agreed.*

*"Yelena's right," said Olga. "Most people have trouble forgiving, especially life-wrenching hurts, unless they have experienced what it is like to receive forgiveness themselves."*

*I looked at my two friends with tears starting to form. "Is it just hopeless, then?"*

*That was when Olga began to tell me how God could forgive all my sins through Christ's death.*

*Dear ones, it was not until I had drunk deeply of God's love and forgiveness that I could begin to truly forgive Alexei.*

*I don't want you to imagine that I became a perfect mother. I still got angry at Vasily from time to time. And it took several years of struggle with drinking before Vasily himself decided to quit. But the unquenchable fire pit of pain and anger was finally out.*

*I was truly able to forgive Alexei as Jesus Christ has forgiven me.*

*Your Grandmother,  
Ludmila*

## UNIT 6 | LESSON 32

## The Dream Makers

Dear Ones,

Many folks look back on their lives with regrets and “if onlys.” Things done and things left undone often haunt the corners of memories, both fresh and stale. No doubt the greatest regrets are those that fall under the heading of “unresolved issues between people”. For example, family members who choose to hang on to the offense and let go of the relationship; friendships that are crushed under the weight of unforgiveness or slowly starve to death in a sea of silence.

More than one reflective writer has put pen to paper to rewrite the past. Usually, it ends up as a list of reordered values. Here is a collection from our own lists:

*If I had my life to live over –*

1. *I'd laugh more in public.*
2. *I'd eat more ice cream and fewer beans.*
3. *I'd worry less about what my friends thought and more about what God thought.*
4. *I'd wait longer before rushing into things that I knew little about.*
5. *I'd listen more closely to what my elders were saying (instead of thinking I already knew).*
6. *I'd reveal my heart and not worry so much about getting hurt.*
7. *I'd say “I do!” to God much earlier in my life.*
8. *I'd live my life and not simply observe life in books or movies.*
9. *I'd learn to play some musical instrument well enough to perform.*
10. *I'd figure out some way to bless the beggars I see instead of pretending not to notice them.*
11. *I wouldn't hold grudges a moment longer than it takes to drop them after noticing them in the first place.*
12. *I'd remind myself every day that “no” is a very freeing word that can be said in an inoffensive way.*
13. *I wouldn't wait for others to take the first step in saying “I'm sorry,” “I love you,” or “Let's talk.”*
14. *I'd write letters telling those I love that who they are is more important than what they do.*

*Oh, wait, I guess we've done that one!*

*Our dear grandchildren, we are looking back on our lives and thinking about all we'd do differently if somehow we could return to youth. That gift has not been given to us, but it has been given to you! Do you remember way back at the beginning of the year when we asked you to list your answers to the question, “What do you most want out of life?”*

*It is our hope and prayer for each of you that this year has resulted in some changes in your own dreams for your life. And we also believe you now have a much better idea what it might cost to reach your dreams. Our dream for you is that you will succeed in all you desire. But even more, we long for you to discover all that your loving Heavenly Father desires for you. We pray that His dream will become your dream.*

*We love you,  
Your Grandmothers*

## UNIT 6 | LESSON 33

## The Final Celebration

*Dear Ones,*

*We three are rather sad that this day has come – we wonder how it is affecting you. For much of this year, we have reached across time and space through these letters to say what we've left unsaid when face to face with you. We're so glad that we undertook this experiment, and we have prayed that our effort would be of great help to you in seeing your dreams come true.*

*Do you remember our first letter to you? It started by saying, "It all began easily enough; we would be exceptions to the rule. Our dreams would come true . . ." As you now know, we weren't as wise as we thought. But we're convinced that it can be different for you. You can see your life goals and dreams come true, especially if you come home to the Father as we finally did.*

*This is our time of celebration. You did it! You stayed with us through all the games, memories, object lessons, questions, and riddles. All of it was to prepare you for the Rites of Passage that present themselves in this season of your lives.*

*As you now know, the problems surrounding drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex run much deeper than the obvious physical and social consequences, terrible as those can be. These things can kill your heart to all the wonders that life holds.*

*They can also attack you as a person – your true self, who you really are – that part of you we love most and which your Heavenly Father wants to prepare for an eternity with Him. It is so easy to lose oneself in the midst of all the false selves that we pour so much of our energies into, in the false hope of earning our acceptance – a total waste of time, if you ask us.*

*We have asked a lot of your teacher in this final time together. Rite of passage requires a number of things to successfully capture what has been gained. Our final task is a most pleasant one – our blessings of affirmation on you, our dear grandchildren.*



Dear Natasha,

*I can't think of you without seeing your determined chin thrust slightly forward like you were leaning into the wind. I see more in you than simply a collection of your mother and father. There has never been another exactly like you and there never will be. You have a unique place to fill in this life and the next. Though there are a thousand things I would like to say, all that's really necessary is this – God is very fond of you. You will never find Him with His arms crossed or His back turned. He will always keep you in the corner of His eye and the center of His heart.*

*May your life be blessed with the heart knowledge that you are the apple of His eye.*

*All my love,  
Your Grandmother,  
Yelena*

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Dear Dima,

*Life hasn't been easy for you. Your father's alcoholism robbed you of his strength and presence. But a deep wound like that doesn't mean that God is withholding His love from you. Quite the contrary. He allows wounds because they are the surest way to the heart. You already know life isn't safe, but the question is, do you know that it is good? I think you do. It is kind of like God Himself. God is completely good, but I wouldn't think anyone who truly knows Him thinks of Him as "safe" or merely "nice". The point is, I bless you and so does your Heavenly Father. You are blessed with hope and healing and help when you need it.*

*This is my prayer for you,  
Your Grandmother,  
Olga*

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Dear Sasha,

*Strange to write you this letter. There is a very good chance that I will not be there when you read it. Oh, how I wish I could have seen your smile as you worked your way through the obstacles and lessons we planned. So many times I all but told you of our experiment! I don't suppose I'll get to watch you fall in love for the first time. Or offer you some tangible comfort when you suffer your first broken heart (even though it will feel fatal, it won't be). So many tears and laughter we two won't share. I'd even hoped to one day see your children. But all of this will have to wait until another time and place, if God grants my prayers on your behalf. This we do share – our love. Love always wins, and you, my sweet Sasha, have truly been loved and are loved still by the One Who matters most. May you find your way home very soon – if you haven't already done so. I'll be waiting.*

*Love,  
Your Grandmother,  
Ludmilla*

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