

THE DOOR

screenplay

by

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Based on The Testimony of Nikolai Fomich Kalugin
in the book VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL by Svetlana Alexievich

The sound of wind BLOWING over black.

FADE IN.

EXT. APARTMENT BLOCK, CHERNOBYL - NIGHT

The wind blows through a large, half derelict apartment building.

In the darkness, a disheveled figure drifts through the shadows, he could be a ragged ghost or a lithe burglar. He breathes fast, anxious. He reaches the heavy wooden front door of an apartment and lets himself in.

INT. NIKOLAI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The figure, NIKOLAI, a young man, his face older than his years, stands transfixed in the apartment, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He takes in the modest domestic scene, the table set for dinner, family photos on the wall, a small pair of boots on the mat by the door.

He takes a large chisel from his pocket and sets to work on the hinges of the heavy wooden door. His strokes are firm, strong, determination in his face. A few attempts, then success. With a heavy CREAK, the door swings down, pivoting on its lower hinges.

GUARD (O.S.)
(through a
loudspeaker)
Halt! Stop! We'll shoot!

Nikolai freezes. He holds the door shut, tries to duck down.

Through the cracked window, the beam of a torch cuts through the darkness, illuminating the photo of a young girl on the wall. Nikolai shrinks back further.

GUARD (O.S.)
Come out and show yourself
or I'll shoot!

Nikolai breathes heavily. Considers what to do.

Suddenly the window smashes and glass shards scatter everywhere. The Guard peers in through the broken windowpane, tries to shine his torch but can't see Nikolai cowering behind the door.

After a moment, the guard moves on leaving Nikolai in darkness once again. He sits back and sighs with relief.

EXT. PRIPYAT FOREST - NIGHT

The door is strapped to the back of a motorcycle which Nikolai drives through the forest at speed. The engine of the bike screams as it labours under the weight.

Shadows step out from the forest and watch him drive on toward the dawn.

NIKOLAI (V.O.)

That day, we didn't just lose a town, we lost our whole lives. We left on the third day.

The light bleaches out his image.

INT. NIKOLAI'S APARTMENT - DAY

Nikolai struggles to squeeze a large cat into a suitcase but the cat hisses, runs over to LENA, his six-year-old daughter who picks it up and pets it.

LENA

Misha doesn't want to be squashed in a suitcase.

NIKOKA

Then we'll have to leave her.

Lena looks up at him in shock and disbelief. ANYA, Nikolai's young wife, packs up their belongings, picking things up, putting them down again, unsure what to take. The radio plays in the background.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Do not take any belongings ...
leave everything where it
is ...it is an offence
to remove any property
whatsoever ...

Anya glances at Nikolai anxiously. Nikolai kicks the radio. It smashes on the floor, sending the cat scurrying. Lena runs out after it.

LENA

Misha! Misha come back!

NIKOLAI

Lena - leave it! Come on!

Nikolai grabs the reluctant Lena, tries to drag her out.

LENA

Misha! We're not leaving Misha!

NIKOLAI

I'll come back for
her later.

Lena looks at him with her wide blue eyes.

NIKOLAI

I will.

He takes her hand and leads her out, followed by the reluctant Anya. The door slams shut leaving the cat alone in the gloom.

EXT. TOWN OF CHERNOBYL - DAY

Nikolai, Anya and Lena join a stream of people, laden down with bags, all walking away from the apartment building. Fine flakes fall gently through the air.

EXT. SNOWY LANDSCAPE - DAY

In the far distance, a train cuts the white snowy landscape in half, like a pencil drawing a line on a sheet of paper.

NIKOLAI (V.O.)

Little did we know that
everything we smuggled
with us was a time bomb,
slowly ticking. That we
had become time bombs.

INT. NEW APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY

In a small, cramped apartment, Anya tries to cook dinner while another family are eating at the table. Lena sits on the floor, drawing. The door opens, Nikolai comes in. Lena looks up at him.

LENA

Dada, when can we
go home?

Nikolai frowns, glances at the old woman at the table.

NIKOLAI

This is our
home now.

LENA

But you said -

He goes into the bedroom. Lena glares at the other family, gets up and follows Nikolai into the bedroom.

INT. NEW APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Nikolai sits on the bed in the cramped bedroom, his head in his hands. Lena comes in and startles him. He reaches out and takes her hand.

NIKOLAI

We are the lucky ones,
Lena. Come.

He starts to undress her and pulls her long white nightdress over her.

LENA

When will you get Misha?

NIKOLAI

Soon my darling, soon.

Suddenly he notices a large black spot on her fair, freckled arm. He looks at it anxiously, tries to his fear but she has already noticed it.

LENA

I'm not going to die
dada, I'm still little.

He settles her in the double bed, then leans down and kisses her.

NIKOLAI

You'll always be my angel.

He kisses her tenderly and settles her down to sleep. She closes her eyes. As he looks at her, his eyes fill with anxiety again. He quickly switches off the bedside light.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Black boots scrape along a white floor. Skinny, pale legs stick up from boots. Nikolai and Anya hold Lena's hands as they walk up the long white corridor of a pristine hospital.

Seven little bald girls sit on a bench waiting. They turn their heads in unison to look at the others as they pass.

Nikolai and Anya share an anxious look. Lena walks on ahead, oblivious.

INT. EXAM ROOM - DAY

The doctor examines the large black spot on Lena's arm. Anya looks out the window. Nikolai sits staring at the floor.

INT. NEW APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Nikolai comes into the makeshift kitchen, takes off his boots. Anya is washing blood from sheets in the sink. She turns to him.

ANYA

It'd be better for her
to die than to suffer
like this.

Nikolai turns away, doesn't want to hear. Anya squeezes the cloth tight, water spatters into the sink.

ANYA

Or for me to die so that
I don't have to watch
any more.

Nikolai has no answer for her.

INT. WORKSHOP - NIGHT

By the gloomy light of naked light bulb, Nikolai rubs the intricately carved wooden door. He tidies up some of the decorative carving with a sharp knife. His face is full of pain. He works to keep himself busy.

The first traces of light appear through the window.

RELIGIOUS LEADER (O.S.)

I am the light of the World.
Anyone who follows me will
not be walking in the dark...

EXT. NEW APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

From above we see Lena lying on her back with her eyes closed. Her head is bald. She has her arms crossed on her chest and some beads between her fingers.

She is lying on the old wooden door.

The door is being carried by six men who walk away towards the cemetery.

NIKOLAI (V.O.)

We put her on the door,
the door that my father
was laid out on, the door
that I had to steal from
my own apartment.

Nikolai and Anya follow the funeral procession, Nikolai reaches out and takes Anya's hand, holds it tight.

NIKOLAI (V.O.)

We didn't just lose a
town, we lost our whole
world.

The small procession makes its way through the snow, away into the distance, as the wind starts to blow and, here and there, snowflakes drift gently down to the ground.

FADE TO BLACK.