

CHAPTER 19

as a joke. In Putin, I recognized the same sort of men who once dominated Chicago's political machine—smart and hardworking guys who felt they'd made their way up through not just toughness but also a keen understanding of their environment and the people with whom they were dealing. Men who'd been shaped by their battles, whose worldview was grounded in a calculating realism, seeing life as a zero-sum game and politics as a series of transactions in which the end justified the means. Their knowledge of human nature in the raw—human nature as it expressed itself when money or status or power was on the line—was impressive. Yet they possessed scant belief in any larger purpose, other than accumulating more power or enjoying the perks that power brought. As a result, there was always something a little empty about them—a sentiment that, in their more reflective moments, they recognized in themselves.

That was what I felt sitting across from Putin as he complained about not getting his respect. I felt myself growing impatient. It wasn't just that I believed his grievances were overblown or his zero-sum view of the international order was outdated. It was that I imagined how different Russia might be if he applied his obvious talent, discipline, and energy to the task of actually leading, guiding his country toward a better future, harnessing its proud history and culture, its vast territory and natural resources, the talents of its people, toward improving their lives. I couldn't help but feel a sense of waste. I found myself wondering how much the confines of our experiences and the rigidity of our ideologies prevented all of us—leaders and citizens alike—from imagining what's possible.

The good news, in the course of my travels, was that I always ended up meeting people who imagined more. The young men and women before me in that room, the activists and organizers who'd come to hear me speak—they were an example of this. Despite facing challenges that were no different in scale and sometimes even more daunting than those faced by their government counterparts, they worked day after day, often against the odds, because they envisioned a better world. In their efforts, in their ambition, in their refusal to give up hope, they reminded me why I'd gone into politics in the first place. And as I looked out into their eager, youthful faces, the fatigue from the long day's meetings seemed to fall away. Here, finally, was my crowd.