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PEOPLE I WANTED TO BE

GINA OCHSNER. *Houghton Mifflin/Mariner*,
\$12 paper (192p) ISBN 0-618-56372-5

★ In this offbeat, affecting follow-up to her debut collection, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, Ochsner assembles a host of oddballs whose touchingly resilient hopes and small leaps of faith fly in the face of almost certain disappointment. Set mostly in Russia and Oregon, the collection is steeped in a perversely funny Slavic fatalism woven through with strands of Pacific Northwestern unflapability. Ochsner's misfits range from a Czech illustrator whose rebellious sketches come to life and won't stay put, to a young woman who does a brisk business in catapulting strangers' "wounded, rusty" hearts over her back fence and into an abandoned dump next door. When the tone shifts abruptly from carefully observed realism to clever fantasticality, the transitions between stories can be jarring, but incongruity—the tension between small, improbable miracles and the damp, chilly world in which they suddenly occur—form the luminous heart of this collection. In "When the Dark Is Light Enough," an old woman, beaten to death by her nephew, lies stiff on a slab in the morgue, "caught smiling in spite of a mouth full of broken teeth.... Her arms had been flung open. They'd looked like wings." Ochsner knows that vindication and inspiration often come from unlikely places, and she can capture this contradiction gorgeously in a gesture. *Agent, Julie Barer. (May)*