The Siege

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Extract

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Naval Staff
Sk1 Ia 1601/41 g.Kdos. Chefs.

Berlin
29 Sep. 1941

Top Secret

Re: The future of Leningrad

. . . The Fuehrer has decided to have Leningrad wiped from the face of the earth. The further existence of this large town is of no interest once Soviet Russia is overthrown. Finland has also similarly declared no interest in the continued existence of the city directly on her new frontier.

The original demands of the Navy that the shipyard, harbor, and other installations vital to the Navy be preserved are known to the Armed Forces High Command, but in view of the basic principles underlying the operation against Leningrad it is not possible to comply with them.

The intention is to close in on the city and blast it to the ground by bombardments of artillery of all calibres and by continuous air attacks.

Requests that the city may be handed over, arising from the situation within, will be turned down, for the problem of the survival of the population and of supplying it with food is one which cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for existence, we have no interest in keeping even part of this great city's population . . .

Naval staff

[From the Fuehrer Directives and other top-level directives of the German armed forces, 1939–1941. The original US army translation from the German is held in the Naval War College, Newport, R.I., USA.
With thanks to the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany.]

I

June, 1941

It's half past ten in the evening, but the light of day still glows through the lime leaves. They are so green that they look like an hallucination of the summer everyone had almost given up expecting. When you touch them, they are fresh and tender. It's like touching a baby's skin.

Such a late spring, murky and doubtful, clinging to winter's skirts. But this is how it happens here in Leningrad. Under the trees around the Admiralty, lakes of spongy ice turned grey. There was slush everywhere, and a raw, dirty wind off the Neva. There was a frost, a thaw, another frost.

Month after month ice-fishermen crouched by the holes they'd drilled in the ice, sitting out the winter, heads hunched into shoulders. And then, just when it seemed as if summer would forget about Leningrad this year, everything changed. Ice broke loose from the compacted mass around the Strelka. Seagulls preened on the floes as the current swept them under bridges, and down the widening Neva to the sea. The river ran full and fast, with a fresh wind tossing up waves so bright they stung your eyes. Everything that was rigid was crumbling, breaking away, floating.

People leaned on the parapets of the Dvortsovy bridge, watching the ice-floes rock as they passed under the arch. Their winter world was being destroyed. They wanted spring, of course they wanted it, more than anything. They longed for sun with every pore of their skin.

But spring hurts. If spring can come, if things can be different, how can you bear what your existence has been?

These are hard times. You can't trust anyone, not even yourself. Frightened men and women scuttling in the dusty wind. Peter's great

buildings hang over them, crushingly magnificent. In times like these the roads are too wide. How long it takes to fight your way across Peter's squares, and how visible you become. Yes, you're a target, and you don't know who's watching. So many disappearances, so much fear. Black vans cruise the streets. You listen for the note of their engines, and your heart pumps until it chokes you as the van slows. But it passes this time, and halts at the doorway to another courtyard, where you don't live. You hear the van doors clang and the sweat of relief soaks you, shamefully. Some other poor bastard is in that van this time.

Spring stripped everything bare. It showed the grey and weary skin of everyone over thirty. It lit up lips set in suffering, with wrinkles pulling sharply at the corners of the mouth.

But the lime trees' bare branches were spiked by the glitter of sunlight and birdsong. The birds had no doubts at all. They sang out loudly and certainly into the still-frozen world. They knew that winter was on the move.

Now it's June, and night is brief as the brush of a wing, only an hour of yellow stars in a sky that never darkens beyond deep, tender blue.

No one sleeps. Crowds surge out of cafés and wander the streets, not caring where they go as long as they can lift their faces and drink the light. It's been dark for so many months.

A line of young men, arm in arm, drunk, stern with the effort of keeping on their feet, sways on the corner of Universitetskaya Embankment and Lieutenant Schmidt's bridge. They won't go home. They can't bear to part from one another. They'll walk, that's what they'll do, from one end of the city to another, from island to island, across stone bridges and shining water.

These are the nights that seal each generation of Leningraders to their city. These nights are their baptism. The summer light will flood every grain of Leningrad stone, as it floods every cell of their own bodies. At three o'clock in the morning, in full sun, they'll find themselves in some backstreet of little wooden houses, miles from anywhere. There'll be a cat licking its paws in a doorway, a lime tree with electric-green leaves hanging over a high wooden fence, and an

old woman slowly making her way down the street with a little bunch of jasmine pinned to her jacket. Each flower will be as white and distinct as a star against the shabby grey. And she'll smile at the young men as if she's their grandmother. She won't disapprove of their drunkenness, their shouting and singing. She'll understand exactly how they feel.

However old you are, you can't stay indoors on a night like this. It stirs again, the promise and recklessness of white nights. Peter's icy, blood-sodden marshes bear up the city like a swan. The swan's wings are still folded, but they are trembling in the summer light, stirring, and getting ready to fly. Darkness scarcely touches them.

The wind breathes softly. Water laps under the midnight bridges. And suddenly you know that there's no greater possible happiness than to be here, even when you're so old you're beyond walking. You lean out of your apartment window, with stiff joints and fading strength, over the city that will outlive you.

But Anna is not in Leningrad tonight. She's out in the country, at the dacha, alone with her father and Kolya. She doesn't belong in the crowds of students celebrating the end of their examinations. She doesn't share the jokes any more, or know which books everyone's reading. Hers is a daylight city of trams packed with overworked mothers, racing from work to food queue to kitchen and back again.

The white nights rouse up too many longings. Anna has a duty to crush them. She has five-year-old Kolya, her job at the nursery, and her responsibilities. It's no good letting herself dream of student life. She'll never have long days in a studio, mind and body trained on the movement of hand across paper. It's no good remembering what it was like to be seventeen, only six years ago, with graduation from school a year ahead of her, and a crowd of friends round the table at the Europe, packed together, laughing and talking so loudly that you could hardly hear what anyone said. The words didn't matter. The noise of happiness was what mattered, and the warmth of someone else's arm pressed against yours. There was a smell of sunburnt skin, coffee, cigarettes and marigolds.

Don't think about all that. She's at the dacha, leaning out of the

window and resting her elbows on warm, silver-grey wood. It's very quiet. Behind her, Kolya sleeps in his cot-bed. They have a bedroom divided in two by a plywood partition. One half for her father, the other for Anna and Kolya. Downstairs, the living-room opens on to the verandah. Every sound echoes in the dacha's wooden shell.

But to have a dacha at all is luxury. There's no chance of her father ever qualifying for a dacha at the writers' colony, but they have held on to this little place, which once belonged to Anna's grandmother. They come here whenever they can in summer, when the city's airless and full of dust. Anna bikes it, on the precious, battered bike that was her mother's, with Kolya tied on to his seat behind her.

Anna does most of the cooking outside on the verandah. She chops onions, kneads pastry for meat pies, peels potatoes, prepares sausage. She even makes jam outside, on the little oil-stove.

All through each summer Anna builds up stores for the winter. She gives grammar and handwriting lessons to the Sokolov children at the farm, in exchange for honey, jars of goose-fat, and goat's cheese. She dries mushrooms, and makes jams and jellies from the fruit she and Kolya pick. Lingonberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, wild strawberries. She buys a drink made from fermented birch sap, which is packed with vitamins and said to be particularly good for asthmatic children like Kolya. Then there are red cabbages to be pickled, onions to be tied into strings, garlic to be plaited, beans to be preserved in brine, potatoes to be brushed free of earth, sorted, then brought back to the apartment sack by sack, strapped to the back of her bike. You have to be careful with potatoes, because they bruise more easily than you think, and then they won't keep.

Anna doesn't know how she'd have got them through the last two winters without produce from the dacha. Not only are there food shortages all the time, but her father can't get his work published. He survives by translating, but even that might dry up. Editors have got their own families to consider. Her father's near-perfect French and German are dangerous assets now. He can't help speaking like someone who has spent time abroad. A year in Heidelberg in 1912,

a summer in Lausanne. He could be pulled in for questioning as 'an individual with foreign contacts'.

Her father wanted to take it lightly, the first time one of his stories was rejected. He was asked to appear in front of a magazine committee, where the shortcomings of his story were explained to him. They told him that his tone was pessimistic. He had failed to take on board and reflect in his work the principles drawn from Stalin's speech of the first of December 1935: *'Life has become better, comrades, life has become more cheerful.'*

'And yet in your story, Mikhail Ilyich, there is no sense that any of the characters are making headway! Publication of this work would do nothing to advance your reputation. In fact, it would damage it.'

'Frankly, we were surprised that you submitted it, Mikhail Ilyich,' said the chairman of the committee. 'We try to be understanding, but really in this case it's impossible, as I'm sure you'll agree.' And he chucked the manuscript face-down on the table, lightly, pityingly, humorously, just as he would have done if a schoolboy had submitted his outpourings to a top literary magazine, and expected to get them published. 'No, we can't have this kind of stuff!'

He twinkled at Mikhail, begging him to see the joke. Other members of the committee looked down at their blotters, or played with their pens. Their faces were dark with the resentment we feel towards those we are about to injure.

Mikhail looked at the familiar faces. A flush of hot blood ran under his skin. Was the shame in himself, standing there with his unwanted manuscript, unable to accept the criticism of his contemporaries? The room itself seemed washed with shame. Even his story was stained with it.

'No,' he muttered, 'I should never have brought it here.'

'Ex–actly so,' said the chairman, rising. 'But allow me to say, dear Mikhail Ilyich, that I've always been an admirer of your work. All you need is a little –' his fingers sketched adjustments – 'a little less gloom and doom. That's not what people want these days. That's not what we're here to do.'

He smiled, showing white, strong teeth in healthy gums. The

room prickled with agreement. The room knew what was wanted these days.

Mikhail continued to submit stories, which were always rejected. One evening a colleague from the Writers' Union appeared at the apartment.

'Don't send anything else in just now. It's for your own good, Mikhail Ilyich.'

'I'm writing as I've always written.'

'Yes, that's it, that's exactly it. Do you really not see? We all have to make adjustments.'

'They are good stories.'

'For God's sake, what has that got to do with anything?'

On his way out, he paused. He was waiting for something, but Mikhail couldn't think what. After the man had gone, it dawned. He'd expected to be thanked. He'd taken a risk. He'd tried to help. Not many did that these days, because it was too dangerous. Each person taken in for questioning could drag a hundred more down. '*Who was in the room with you when this occurred? Their names. Write them here.*'

'*Better put it in the drawer,*' Anna's father would say, as he typed out the final draft of a new story. His fingers pecked at the keys. He had never learned to type properly. When Vera was alive, she typed for him. '*Let the drawer read it. Well, here we are, Anna, I'm back to my youth again, pouring out rubbish that nobody wants to print. People pay thousands for rejuvenation treatments, don't they? I could sell my secret.*'

His attempts at humour make her wince. All this is changing him, month by month. It's scouring him out from the inside. He even walks differently. Anna can't think what it all reminds her of, then one day she's at work and she sees little Seryozha hide behind the bins as a gang of big boys charges round the playground, windmilling their arms, bellowing, knocking into everyone. They're the gang. They're the ones who count. Seryozha shrinks against the wall.

In the nursery, you can sort it out. You can break up the gang. You can put your arm around Seryozha. There, in her little world within a world, things still make sense. But then out comes her boss, Elizaveta Antonovna, with the latest directives in her hand. Her eyes

are fixed to the text. She has got to take the correct line. She must not make an error.

Elizaveta Antonovna doesn't even see the children. She's frightened, too. The bosses are all frightened now. How should she interpret the directive? If she gets it wrong, who will inform on her?

Anna's father still goes to the Writers' House on Ulitsa Voinova, but not very often, although as a member of the Union of Soviet Writers he's entitled to eat there every day. 'I don't feel like it today, Anna,' he says. 'And besides, I've got to rewrite these last two pages.'

He had a dream one night. He dreamed he was lying in bed and someone clamped a hand over his mouth and nose. A firm, fleshy, well-fed hand. The fingers were thick and greasy. They squeezed his nostrils until he couldn't breathe.

'What did you do?'

'I twisted my head from side to side to try and shake him off, but he pressed harder. And then I –'

'What?'

'I bit his hand. I could taste his blood.'

'Whose hand was it?'

And then his whisper, in the frightened room that held only the two of them: 'Koba's.'[1]

Anna didn't answer. She knew there was more.

'And then I woke up. I looked in the mirror and there were marks on my face. Dirty fingerprints. I tried to wipe them off but they wouldn't come off. I filled a basin with water and dipped my head into it and when I looked in the mirror my face was streaming with water, but the marks were still there.'

He looks at her. She half-expects to see the fingerprints rise to the surface of his skin and show themselves. But there's nothing. 'It was a dream, that's all.'

'I know that.' He raps it out. There she goes again, stating the obvious, not thinking before she speaks.

'A nightmare,' says Anna.

'Don't shut the door.'

1. A nickname for Stalin.

'No, I'll leave it open.'

Her father has always been afraid of a shut door. He was afraid of getting trapped in a lift, that was why he always took the stairs. When they went to the cinema he had to sit near the exit.

Her father's income is down to a fifth of what it was three years ago. Each summer Anna has increased her vegetable plot at the dacha. She's dug up all the flowerbeds now, except for her mother's three rose-bushes.

Three rose-trees, bearing dark-red, velvety roses which open helplessly wide and spread out their perfume. Before winter her mother packed straw around them, then sacking, and bound it with twine. Anna can see her now: the quick, expert fingers, the way she brushed soil off her knees as she stood up. There, it was done for the winter. Strange, how easy it is to remember her doing that, and yet there are long, blank patches when it seems as if Anna's mother never lived at all.

But she lived. Remember it.

Anna and the sledge. Little Anna on her sledge, long ago. Mammy loved sledging as much as Anna did. They would go out, the two of them, while Anna's father worked. He would have liked to come with them but he had a deadline to meet.

Walking through snow, with the red sledge bumping along behind them, Anna wished that everyone she knew was there to see what a beautiful sledge she had. There were curls of green and gold on the smart, bright red. The rope was new and Anna was allowed to pull the sledge herself. Her mother swooped down to pick up Anna when snow went over the top of her boots. When she set her down again, Anna took up the thick, new rope. A bit farther on, near the park, someone stopped them. She stood so close that Anna smelt her smoky perfume. Her boots had shiny silver buckles on the side, and Anna wanted to touch them.

'Hasn't she grown! How are you all, Vera?'

'We're well,' said Vera. Her hand squeezed Anna's tightly. There was a silence, but Vera didn't put any more words into it.

'I haven't seen Misha for weeks – he's not ill, I hope?'

Her mother's voice was steady. 'He's perfectly well, Marina Petrovna. We are all perfectly well. And now, if you'll excuse me, Anna mustn't stand in the cold . . .'

'Of course –'

When Anna looked back she was still standing there. She didn't move, and no one said goodbye.

When they had turned the corner, her mother stopped and placed Anna carefully on the sledge. She wrapped the shawl around Anna in the usual way, making sure that her chest was covered.

But suddenly she changed and did something new. She dropped on her knees in the snow in front of the sledge. She grasped Anna and pulled her close. She pressed her tight, tight, so that Anna felt the cold of her mother's cheeks burning her.

'Mammy, you're hurting me.'

Her mother moved back. Anna saw her face close-up.

'Mammy, are you all right?'

Her mother stood up, brushing snow off her coat. 'I'm fine. Don't worry, Anna.'

Anna said nothing. Carefully, she tucked in the ends of the shawl which her mother had forgotten. She looked up and she saw that her mother's face was stiff with anger. She was drumming her fingers on the rope, staring up the street as if she'd forgotten about Anna.

'Mammy?'

'What?'

'Can we go?'

'You want to go back home?'

'I'm cold, Mammy.'

'I'm sorry. I was thinking about some things at work. Let's go. Hold on tight now, Anna.'

How old was she then? Five, six? All through that spring and summer there was trouble hanging in the air like thunder. At night Anna woke up and there were voices slashing the dark. When holiday time came her mother took Anna away to the dacha, but her father didn't come with them. He had things to do in Leningrad.

'Too much work to do, Anna. I want to come, but –'

Her mother had two weeks' holiday, and every single minute Anna was with her. Nobody came to visit. Her mother belonged entirely to Anna. In the morning, they ate their breakfast on the verandah, and Anna put a lump of sugar in her mouth and sucked it before she drank tea, exactly as her mother did. Her mother read, while Anna cut out paper dolls and painted their clothes. Sometimes it was hot, high noon before they dressed. Toys and paper scraps lay on the verandah where Anna dropped them, and two days later they were still there. There wasn't a breath of wind.

Her mother sat on the verandah, stretched her bare feet into the sun, and read to Anna. Her mother's feet were tired and lumpy, but she stretched them like a dancer.

'Did you ever dance, Mammy?'

'Oh yes.'

'With Daddy?'

'Your father never liked dancing.'

'Show me how.'

'Not now, Anna, I'm reading to you.'

They slept in the same bed. Anna would roll over and grasp her mother's waist, pretending to be asleep so her mother wouldn't be cross with her. She would say in a sleepy, just-woken voice, 'Mammy?'

'Sh. Go back to sleep now. It's late.'

But her mother didn't push Anna away. In Leningrad, in the apartment, there was no room for Anna in her parents' bed. Here, the old iron bedstead creaked as her mother turned over and settled to sleep, with Anna curled at her back, and Anna's arm around her waist.

'Are you all right, little pigeon? Go to sleep.'

'I love it when you call me little pigeon.'

In the middle of the night, Anna woke. There was her mother's shoulder, warm and broad. She was turned away from Anna. Anna moved her mouth across her mother's back. She licked her mother's skin and smelled it. It smelled quite different where she'd licked it. Her mother tasted good. Anna swam up her mother's body until her mouth was against the soft, creamy pad of flesh behind her

shoulder. She opened her mouth and, without knowing what she was going to do, she bit. Her mother startled all over, throwing Anna off. But she still didn't wake. Anna wanted her to wake. Squaring her mouth, she began to make a crying noise, and then to cry. Her mother sat up and lit the bedside candle.

'Anna, what's the matter?' Her mother's plait swung forward and touched Anna's face. 'Are you ill?'

Anna doesn't remember any more. Her mother was herself again, calmly in charge. It was like a change in the weather. Anna settled neatly back to sleep, on her own side of the bed. The next morning, before Anna had even woken, her mother had picked up all the toys, thrown away the dead flowers, and put her research papers into a pile on the table.

'We go back tomorrow,' her mother said.

Back in Leningrad, her parents shared their bedroom again. Every night Anna settled in her cot-bed in her parents' room, and then they moved her into the living-room when they went to bed. But some mornings she woke to find her father huddled in a blanket, asleep on the leather sofa beside her. The thunder growled and rumbled, but far away so she could scarcely hear it any more.

That summer at the dacha grips Anna. It keeps unpacking in her mind. Eighteen years ago. The only time, maybe, when her mother gave way and bound Anna to her, because she needed her. But in all the years afterwards nothing was said. Never again was she as close to her mother as on those summer nights, listening to her mother's breath.

'You won't ever die, will you, Mammy?'

'One day I will,' her mother said, in her usual clear and serious way. 'But not before you are able to live without me.'

'I'll never be able to live without you.'

'Of course you will. You think you won't now, but you will.' Did Vera think of that, when she was really dying?

It was a postpartum haemorrhage. Neither Anna nor her father was there. Vera was unconscious and had already had a heart attack by the time they arrived.

She'd been so practical about her pregnancy, right from the start. Practical, realistic, and humorous with colleagues who teased her about being caught out. Vera, who wrote everything down in her small black memo-book, and never forgot an appointment. She stood there in her cotton maternity smock, and smiled at the teasing. She said, rather oddly, 'Well, none of us is immortal.'

'Immortal?'

'No, I don't mean that, do I? What's the right word?'

'Infallible?'

'Yes, that's it.'

Her colleagues laughed with her. It was nice, the way Vera never tried to know everything. They suspected that maybe she'd wanted this last-chance baby, now that Anna was seventeen. After all, think how good Vera was with the younger members of the team. Always encouraging, taking time, able to teach people without them noticing it. Never losing her temper when they made mistakes.

But Anna knew that it was not her mother who had wanted this baby. She was forty when she became pregnant, almost forty-one. She was an expert in her field, and was beginning to travel, lecturing in Moscow, Odessa, Kiev.

'Are you going away again?' her father asked.

'It's only five days, Misha. You knew about it, it's been planned since last August. It's in the diary.'

'You're never here these days.'

'Anna is old enough now.'

'Is that all you think about?'

Dark stains grew under Vera's eyes. Her ankles swelled so much that the straps of her sandals cut into her pale, puffy flesh. The baby was due in late summer.

'Go and lie down, Mammy. I'll cook.'

'It's all right, Anna, I'm fine. I've just got to finish this.'

Work went on as it had always done. Vera was writing a paper which she would give at a conference in Kiev, three months after the baby was born. Nothing was going to change, she said to her colleagues on the telephone. She would fulfil her responsibilities. When her eyes met Misha's across the room she stared him down.

Kolya's birth was easy, and immediately afterwards everything seemed fine. He was a big baby, a strong, fine child they said to her, slapping the soles of his feet to make him cry. Vera sat up and took the baby. A nurse told Anna about it afterwards.

'I want to know everything that happened,' said Anna. *'Don't leave anything out because you think it will upset me.'*

The nurse looked at her, frightened.

'What is it?'

'It's only – it's just that you sound exactly like your mother.'

Anna brushed that away. Don't think of it now, think of it later.

'Go on, please. Tell me what happened.'

The delivery of the placenta was difficult. Immediately afterwards, before Vera's uterus had contracted fully, there was an emergency in the next ward. A prolapsed cord, it was. They had to leave Vera alone for a few minutes. *'It was only a few minutes, Anna Mikhailovna, no more than seven. I swear it.'*

Vera would not have been frightened when she lifted her sheet and saw blood, even though she'd have known what the bleeding meant. This was her world, the hospital world. She'd have guessed what had happened. Part of the placenta had not been expelled. Now she would continue to haemorrhage until it could be removed. The situation was urgent, but not yet dangerous.

She rang a bell beside the bed. A nurse came. Vera said calmly, 'I think I'm bleeding.'

'Is that exactly what she said?'

'Yes, it was me who came, you see. Those were her words.'

So Vera was frightened. She said 'I think' when she knew. Or perhaps she didn't want to frighten the nurse. The nurse lifted the sheet. She looked and then she said, 'It's all right. You're fine,' and then she ran, her feet striking the hard floor all the way down the ward. Next, there was a metal trolley and porters lifting Vera on to it. The nurse ran alongside the trolley as it clattered down the corridor to the lift. Vera said she felt faint, then closed her eyes.

And then what? Then the clean, shabby hospital wall, and the shut door. Anna can't go any farther with her mother. And then there was her father, kneeling by Vera's bed with his hands over his

face. Anna touched her mother's soft, warm cheek, but the gaping face belonged to someone else. All the sense had gone out of it.

Vera was forty-one.

'There's always a greater risk, you understand,' someone said.

But how could it be Vera who had died in this way? It wasn't like her at all. She knew about bodies, and hospitals. She understood the limits of what should happen to people. Health was her job and her life. She knew what Anna should eat, and how many hours she should study. She'd talked to Anna about her periods before they started, telling her just enough and not too much. 'When you have children,' she'd said. Not 'When I have children.' Vera's days of children were over, it went without saying. She had Anna.

But she died at forty-one. She left her child to Anna. In the end, instead of freeing her daughter, she put a child into her arms. That red, squirming thing they were swaddling in the next room. Kolya.

Little Anna stayed at the dacha with her mother, eighteen summers ago, the two of them alone together for the first time. Every night, when she woke, her mother was there, dreaming, her fist up to her face as she slept.

'Mammy?' said Anna.

'It's all right,' said her mother in her sleep-thickened voice. 'I'm here.' She said it every night, until Anna slept without asking.