

Warflower

“SERGEI,” OLGA SAID, NUDGING HER BROTHER’S BODY. “Get up, we have to hurry.” Sergei didn’t move. How could anything be colder than my hands, she thought. But nothing was as cold as a dead body. Hunger spasms echoed in her stomach, but she tried not to cry. Extra fluid in her eyes and nose would freeze and make it difficult to breathe, and she had to get to work before the shelling began again. Thousands of people had slipped quietly away in the night since Dimitri Pavlov had inventoried the food supplies of Leningrad and cut rations a third time. Grief must wait. She thought only of staying alive.

If she took Sergei’s body to the cellar where the other frozen Petrovich relatives were hidden, she’d have the family’s ten ration cards. As a munitions worker, it meant she’d get ninety ounces of bread a day instead of nine.

Olga searched frantically for the ration card. Death was stalking her. Soon, she’d invite him to take her by doing something stupid. Maybe Sergei had saved some of his ration and died before he ate it. She felt a lump and withdrew what looked like a dirt clod. He hadn’t even nibbled at the crust. She stuffed the clod between her legs, squeezed her thighs, and wrapped herself in the fur blanket, praying the frozen lump would thaw quickly. She felt it yield to pressure and brought it to her lips. Her gums hurt as she chewed, but she barely noticed. *Thank you my brother. You’ve given me another day of life.*

She didn’t drag Sergei to the cellar. She gave his body a great shove and watched it careen down the steps. If she survived until spring, the bodies would be discovered. But by then, she prayed, the rumored Road of Life would have supplied the city, and the laws would be lifted. She could always say she was saving her family from cannibals. Stalin was massing the Red Army to retake Tikhvn, opening the railway line from Moscow – at least that was the latest news brought in by sled from across Lake Ladoga. Soon, the ice would be thick enough to support trucks. Perhaps by Christmas, Pavlov would increase rations as he had increased arms production quotas.

She dragged Sergei behind her grandmother’s yellow brocade settee and covered him with an old quilt and a bicycle with a bent wheel, then crawled up the stairs and closed the cellar door. Carrying Sergei’s boots in a threadbare valise, she joined the line of workers, three abreast, who marched through the wind to the Kirov munitions plant. They scattered when the first explosion signaled the onslaught of another day of deafening noise and death. Some turned back, seeking refuge in unsafe buildings with loved ones too weak to work any longer.

Olga turned towards Haymarket Street, where she could trade Sergei’s boots for a portion of meat jelly – made from belts, or suitcases, anything leather. *Today, just today, I will survive and cast a silver shell, and engrave Sergei’s name on it, another one for Mama, and one for Papa, and seven more. Somewhere a soldier will fire them into the head of a Totenkopf helmet that will be a headstone for my family.*

“I didn’t see Sergei on the street,” Tanya Savichev whispered as she and Olga waited in line for their bread. “Come stay with me. There’s no one left for either of us.”

Olga remembered the roster Tanya had made of all who had starved or frozen to death: ZHENYA, BABUSHKA, LEKA, DAYDA, LESHA DEDYA, MAMA. The list ended with the notation: SAVICHES DIED. ALL DIED. ONLY TANYA REMAINS.

“No,” Olga said. “I want nothing that might keep me here. No friends, no teachers, no love.”

They parted in Decembrists’ Square, near the mound of sand that covered the statue of Peter the Great. It was Tanya’s turn to play mother;

she gave the younger girl a kiss on the cheek. “Try to resist, Olga. Don’t surrender to despair what you won’t surrender to the Nazis.”

At eleven and twelve, the two of them had joined the thirty thousand, mostly women and students, who built the 200-mile defenses at the Luga River and dug air-raid shelters and trenches to protect the city’s two million inhabitants. As part of the People’s Volunteers, Olga had worked alongside the very young and the very old, hour after back-breaking hour, her hands bloodied and raw, her body so exhausted she believed she wouldn’t make it back to the city even if a machine gun didn’t kill her. Someone had told her that Shostakovich had tried to volunteer, announcing that only fighting could save humanity. Her father had said much the same thing as he and Nicolaus took leave from their wives and children. “Live, my little one,” he’d told her. She promised to obey. Now twelve, Olga readied herself for menses that never came. Hunger had kept her from becoming a woman. Now she could be a soldier.

Eventually, the Luga line – defended by poets, writers, artists, and children – had fallen to twenty-nine divisions of German soldiers. Three months after the invasion, Leningrad had been contained – no way in or out – but no German jackboot had yet entered Peter’s city. But how long did Stalin believe the weakest could be strong? Olga dreamed of her father and Nicolaus, dead in Moscow from a German barrage, dying before they knew the Petroviches were all dead and only Olga remained.



Coming from the factory was even more dangerous than the going. As if hunger and cold obeyed the *Fuehrer’s* orders too, they hounded the workers. The fallen were loaded onto sleds by loved ones. Others, without family, simply let Death take them without resistance. Olga avoided the temptation to lie beside them by taking the longer way to her family’s house on the Neva River, past the Academy of Arts. It was foolish to believe that the Nazis shelled in a pattern that exempted the route after four o’clock, but she believed it anyway. If nothing else, the route provided more places to hide. Her ears still aching and ringing from the rumblings of the machines, she scurried to find one of those hiding places when an explosion demolished the myth.

The shell hit a block away, but she was knocked to the ground. Amid the rain of debris and snowflakes, she was choking, trying to crawl somewhere, anywhere to escape. She felt herself vomit. How long could she keep breathing out? She covered her head with her coat, trying to filter the air, but felt herself fading into unconsciousness. *Eli, eli, lama sabchthani?* A hand gripped her arm, and she felt herself being dragged by her coat sleeve.

When she woke up inside a small candle-lit room, the bombardment was still raging, but it was muffled. *I must be underground.* Impossibly, she was warm.

She crawled out of the covers and took in a great, full breath – it was the smell of fire. Not the fire of exploding shells, but of a hearth. She ran to it and stoked the embers. *Don’t die. Don’t die.* She put a dry log on the coals and the bark caught.

“Thank you,” she said to the man in the Komsomol uniform. He was braced against the wall like a gargoyle, next to a fur-covered bed. A bear’s head, its teeth bared in a perpetual snarl, stared up at him. She’d never seen a dead person standing. Death usually knocked them over. Perhaps if she questioned him. The dead don’t answer.

“What is this place?” she said, looking around the red-velvet draped room.

The stony face waxed a half-smile. “A room under the Archbishop’s wine cellar. Legend has it Catherine the Great fucked her footman here when she was supposed to be in church confessing her sins.” He struck a match and lit a pipe with a carved ivory bowl.

He stayed against the wall, watching her.

“How do you know about – here?”

“My father was the Archbishop’s groundsman. Procurer’s more apt. They both brought whores here. And they were both killed in the Bolshevik purge. You’re hungry.” He laid his pipe on the mantle, put a kettle over the fire, and unwrapped fish fillets that he chopped into chunks. The smell of fresh fish made Olga sway. “I’m Vladimir Zuhkov. Director of the Komsomol. You’re Nicolaus’ sister. Olga, is it?”

“Yes, sir.” He cut a bright orange carrot and half a cabbage and added them to the boiling water. “You have food,” she said.

“We’re having fish soup.” *Was that a potato he took from his sack?* “There are some very stupid people in Russia, Olga. Pavlov, for instance. Did he

really believe people whose relatives were slaughtered by Stalin's thugs would donate their food caches? All those lavish May dinners – you'd think everyone would have known the pact with Hitler was meaningless." He handed Olga a chunk of sweet cabbage and she held it to her mouth, almost afraid to taste it lest it disappear. "Sergei isn't with you."

"He took the short way home." Olga took a bite of cabbage, determined not to gobble it down, but one taste and she swallowed it like a dog.

"Bullshit. You think I'm going to turn you in when I'm hoarding too? When did he die?"

"Last night." She sat down on the stone hearth and watched Vladimir add a squash and seasoning to the pot. No perfume had ever smelled so delicious.

"Twenty thousand a day. That's the truth. But according to Papa Joe – two thousand a day." Vladimir stirred the soup slowly, occasionally taking a taste. "He doesn't want anyone to know how unprepared his communist utopia was for Hitler." Vladimir spat over his right shoulder.

"Did you know my father?" Vladimir looked as old as her father, and she wondered how he had escaped conscription south. He ladled out a serving of soup into a wooden bowl and handed it to her. She cradled it in her hands, letting the steam cleanse her nostrils of the remnants of the Nazi shell. Vladimir rummaged around in a rucksack again.

"Your father wasn't a party man. I'm like you. I find my own way in our common cause." He gave her an army spoon, inspected his pipe, and rapped it gently on the inside of the fireplace to empty its ashes.

"You're not eating?" she said. "It's wonderful." Tears rolled down her cheeks. She and Sergei had passed St. Basil's Church many times with empty stomachs and shivering limbs, never knowing that a Tsar's banquet was steps away in the wine cellar beneath. *Why did he save me? He could have saved Sergei too.*

"I don't eat when I'm not hungry." He put his pipe back on the mantle, pulled the bear rug off the bed, and spread it on the floor in front of the fire. "Come sit by me," he said, offering her his hand. She didn't take it, but shifted to the rug. "I have something for you." He opened the rucksack and drew out a glistening tin. "Chocolate."

Olga reached for the tin with trembling fingers, praying he wouldn't take it away, salivating at the mere mention of the word.

"Oh, God," she said. "Real chocolate?"

Inside the tin were six hand-dipped truffles, their tops swirled into sugary peaks. "Real *German* chocolate. Orange and marzipan. Buttercream and hazelnut."

"How did you get them? When?" Olga said. It seemed like treason to enjoy German anything, though her father had told her German beer was the best in the world – and he'd been to China.

"Does it matter? All we have is what's here," Vladimir said.

Olga took a bite and let the chocolate melt on her tongue, savoring the taste of sugar that brought back memories of Christmas and Eastertide, of birthdays and family dinners where the men drank too much and the women danced too fast. Vladimir had given her heaven and hell in a small metal box embossed with a double-headed eagle. Kaiser Chocolate. The best Bavaria had to offer. *How could people who made such blessed candy make such a terrible war?*

"I've never tasted anything so good in my life," she said.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

"No, sir."

"Nothing is as sweet as the taste of love." Vladimir let her take another truffle and watched her lips pucker in ecstasy. "Do you want another?" he said.

"Yes, Sir." Olga reached for another candy, and Vladimir brushed her hand away.

"Not that one." She chose another and popped it into her mouth.

"Did you want that one?" she said, ashamed of her greed.

Vladimir slowly shook his head from side to side. "It's got a cyanide capsule in it. One bite and you'd have been dead in three minutes." Olga clutched her throat. "You're in no danger." He moved the truffle to the back of the tin. "One of these," he said, pointing to the other two, "is laced with arsenic, but that takes days to kill. Cyanide makes the body smell like almond – like marzipan."

"You could kill someone..."

"Only certain someones." Vladimir pulled a photograph from his rucksack and placed it on the rug in front of her. "Sasha Zhdanov – the Mayor's nephew."

Olga recognized his name from the newspapers. "Why would you want to kill him?"

“Hitler’s in a bind. He’s got to protect his oil sources on the Black Sea and he can’t do that with troops in Moscow and Leningrad. If the city doesn’t fall soon, Papa Joe will resupply it as soon as the ice can support transport trucks on Lake Ladoga and Hitler’ll be following Napoleon home. Zhdonov’s a Russian Nazi bringing in poisoned meat from Kobona for the Komsomol rations. Without the firefighters, thousands more will die. Who’ll miss them when we can’t keep count now?” Vladimir gave her another tin of candy. “This one is all for you. Go ahead. It’s safe.”

Olga held the photograph as Vladimir spoke, gazing at the glossy five by seven of a handsome man in his twenties. How easily she could have been killed. None of the young men would turn down fresh meat any more than she could turn down chocolate. She opened her tin and saw six more truffles. “Does Sasha like chocolate?” she said.

“Yes, Olga. And he likes little girls too.”



Sasha’s death couldn’t appear to be murder. His body would be found under a heap of rubble by a firefighter and recorded as a bombing casualty. That way the people would not have betrayal added to their woes. Mayor Zuhdrov would be consoled rather than hanged. “And I can continue to catch traitors,” Vladimir explained.

For three days Olga had remained underground, sleeping mostly and asking Vladimir questions about Sasha’s assassination. “Tanya will tell everyone I’m dead when I don’t show up for work. Will the firefighters find me too – after?”

Vladimir had brought his radio downstairs from the church – dangerous because of its spires, but the best place for reception. “They’ll find you in the church. You won’t be a suspect. Sasha keeps his sexual desires secret.” Vladimir was cooking again, this time sharing his ration of pork and offering dried fruit for dessert. “There’s news – Captain Norov ordered sixty trucks onto the ice. Sasha is driving in a full load of flour and meat. He’ll be here tonight.”

After she ate, Vladimir cut her hair – Sasha liked his little girls to look like little boys – and took her to the bathroom where she had her first hot wash in three months. He gave her rose-perfumed soap and scrubbed her nails with a soft brush. First her hands, then her feet. And after her

bath, he gave her lilac-scented powder and lavender lotion for her skin. The noise of the guns and the smell of death had faded. In their place was the music of small talk as she made herself smell like a soft garden. Vladimir didn’t even look at her, avoiding her eyes as if he was ashamed.

He gave her a white silk dressing gown that wrapped around her almost twice. He dried her hair and combed gently through the tangles. When he was through, he finally gazed at her, bowed his head into his folded hands, and sobbed. “You’re a beautiful girl, Olga. Someday a man will give you his heart. Be merciful.”

“What do I do after Sasha’s dead?” She looked above him to the gold-framed mirror where Catherine might have admired herself while readying for her footman. Her candle-lit reflection surprised her. She’d never thought about being pretty. Only when the boys had begun to stare, dreamily and anxiously, shuffling from foot to foot in her presence, had she realized the power of freckled pink skin and large eyes. Her skin was no longer freckled or pink, her eyes no longer large. They were sinking back into her body, shrinking from the hunger for love as well as food. She was a sack of bones that would never hold life even if she lived through the war. And she would never have enough lovers to take the place of her family. All she had was Vladimir, kneeling before her, slipping her feet into white satin slippers.

“Afterwards, dress in your warmest clothes and go upstairs to the church. Hide in one of the confessionals. I’ll haul the body to the wall behind the church and bury it under stones and mortar, and then come for you.”

“Where will you be when he’s here?”

“Drinking with the other drivers after we unload the truck. I’ll ask what’s happened to Sasha, and someone will say he’s probably visiting his family.”

“And the poisoned food?”

“That’s my job. I’ll get rid of it along with his truck. German shells will be lucky again.” As he drained the tub, Olga sat down in a chintz overstuffed chair and leaned back, almost disappearing into its plllowy comfort.

“What if he doesn’t want me or the chocolate?”

“I forget you know nothing about a man’s desires,” he said. His hands were scarred, though clean from washing her; his hair was thick and wild as blackberry brambles. But his eyes were calm. They looked at her with cold determination. He was no hesitant schoolboy who giggled and blushed at the sight of a woman’s breast, and pressed his palm against his thigh to hide his pleasure. “Here’s what you do,” he said. “Put the chocolate here.” His hands parted her legs and he put his finger between the pink layers of flesh. Olga shivered. His mouth pressed against her chest, his face half-hidden by the dressing-gown lapels. She couldn’t see his other hand, but heard him unbutton his pants and saw his arm move back and forth. She heard herself groan, and he lowered his head between her legs, rubbing his face on her hairless mound. “God almighty, what war does to people.”



Death wasn’t terrible. Watching a man die was terrible. Sasha knew seconds after he swallowed the candy that he had only minutes to live and fewer to be lucid. Gasping, Sasha grabbed her round the waist and held her tight, struggling to get hold of her throat. He seemed to be trying to speak, but only a soft gurgle came out before chocolate foam spilled over her flailing arms.

He tried to bite her. Even a little of the poison in her, and she would die too. Olga kicked him away and rolled off the bed.

He lay there, convulsing like a man with St. Vitus’s Dance until the death rattle erupted from his lungs. She pulled herself up and staggered to the fireplace, panting. Three days of food, warmth, and rest had given her enough strength to fight him off, but the effort had claimed all her energy. It was fear, not cold, that made her teeth chatter. One life for thousands. She was a heroine no one would ever celebrate. She’d done a patriotic duty no one would ever read about. She’d saved lives no one would ever thank her for saving. She clutched the mantle to steady herself and breathed slowly. He hadn’t held her long enough to contaminate her, but she stripped off the dressing gown, shook off her shoes, and stood there naked.

She wanted Vladimir to come quickly, to rid the room of the corpse. She saw his pipe on the mantle and held on to it – a talisman to protect

her from Sasha’s angry spirit, if there were such things. She slumped to the hearth and held the pipe over her heart, rubbing its ivory bowl with her fingers and whispering a thankful prayer. She had killed a Nazi dog. She would kill hundreds more. She’d shaken hands with Death and found him reasonable. When it was her time to go with him, she’d know it. Just as Sasha had.

Her heart was quiet now. Blood was no longer slamming through her veins, terror no longer urging her to run. She sighed. She would wait for Vladimir here, not in the confessional. She knew enough about the dead to know they can’t hurt you. She held the pipe in her lap, and caressed its carved design, its circles and edges. She held it up and examined it. There were letters near the base of the bowl. She could make out a partial outline of one because of the ash that filled in the spaces – a T.

Olga took a pinch of ash and rubbed them over the surface of the bowl, then wiped it with part of the dressing gown’s sleeve to reveal a skull and crossbones.

She turned the bowl and saw the familiar twisted cross of a swastika, and around the bottom – T-O-T-E-N-K-O-P-F – Death’shead. The insignia of the ss.

If Vladimir was pretending to be a Nazi, he would have German chocolate and an ss insignia carved on his pipe. He would have a radio and monitor transmissions from Soviet forces. She felt her heart begin to race again, then laughed at her suspicions.

The apathy of starvation had transformed into childish imagination. She was no longer a child. She was a Russian Mata Hari. She felt a chill and realized she was still naked. Vladimir must keep extra clothes somewhere – a woolen sweater or another pair of socks. She went to the bathroom closet and found a white cotton shirt, a pair of socks, a new pair of boots, and a red woolen scarf that was so long she could use it as a sash. She stood in front of the full-length mirror and struck a gallant pose. She looked like a Cossack. Thoughts of afternoons with Tanya playing dress-up made her smile. If Tanya could see her now, she wouldn’t recognize her. No one had seen her with short hair. She did look like a boy.

She sat down in the overstuffed chair and pulled on one of the boots. When she pulled on the other, she heard paper crumpling. She reached

inside and drew out an envelope with old photographs inside – of her. And by her side, Sergei. They were younger – Olga nine and Sergei ten, walking past St. Basil’s in their school uniforms on a sunny day, carrying their books and lunch boxes. She felt inside the boot again and drew out another envelope – and another. In each one was a picture of her and Sergei – one of them on the school steps, only they were a little older. And the third one – the buildings around their house were still intact and they were sitting on the porch drinking lemonade. Before the war. Before the hunger. He’d been watching them, following them. Maybe waiting for her to be alone.

Olga replaced the envelopes in the toe, and returned the boots to the closet. Was it possible for Vladimir to have loved her her whole life? She lifted the candle to the shelf and saw a box – Schrade’s Boots Danzig. She tried to move it but it didn’t slide easily. There was something in it. She set the candle on the floor, wrapped her hands around the sides of the box and pulled it towards her. Socks, maybe. It wasn’t heavy.

She lifted the lid. There, in layers separated by vellum sheets were photographs of young girls, each picture covered by shorn tresses tied with ribbons. Gingerly, as one would touch a worm, she traced the scrawls at the bottom of the pictures. CARLA BERLIN 1935. GISELLE BERLIN 1938. MARTA POLAND 1939. She pulled a picture from the bottom of the box. MARGRITA VIENNA 1925.

Her body jerked, knocking over the candle. It went out and she scrambled out of the closet to the false safety of the living room fireplace. These girls were not Russian assassins, yet they each wore a white silk robe and white satin slippers. And each stared into the camera with the fixed glassy eyes of the dead.

She brought her hand to her heart, remembering Vladimir’s mouth on her nipples. Nausea was siphoning her strength. *How could she have let him touch her? He’d saved her, fed her. She wanted to feel safe. To feel loved. To feel something other than pain. She didn’t want to die without making more memories. Excuses. She wanted him to touch her, to feel like a woman. Why did Hitler want her dead? She didn’t even know him. Why did Vladimir want her dead?*

The aroma of almonds hung in the air. She went to the bed and stared down at Sasha’s wide-open eyes. She forced them closed and put the

pillow over his face. She ran to the bathroom and vomited. Truth was hammering inside her brain. She was only alive because Vladimir needed an alibi. She was just one of many who would join the girls in the box. She had gotten away from Sasha because the poison had weakened him quickly. But if Vladimir wanted to kill her, she couldn’t fight him. Yet she knew. She had to fight. Fight fear. The only enemy here now.

She went back to the closet for the suitcase next to the Schrade’s box. Inside she found civilian clothes. The woolen pants were too long, so she cut them and folded the cuffs. The shirt sleeves she rolled up. She slipped on two pairs of socks and stuffed her feet into her boots. Once dressed, she scoured the cupboards for food she could take with her. Into the rucksack she stuffed a half loaf of bread, two tins of peaches, and two tins of sardines. She didn’t trust any of the other supplies, especially the chocolate tins. She rifled through Sasha’s coat pockets, taking ten rubles and his ration card from his wallet – then found treasure. Sasha’s Nagant was still in his shoulder holster. She pulled out the pistol and checked the chamber. Full. Seven shots.

“If it comes down to it,” Mama had told Papa, “I’ll do it. No Nazi will lay a hand on Olga.” Every woman in Leningrad had seen films of Nazi atrocities in Poland. Most men left their side arms with their women, and the women kept them loaded next to their beds – until the food ran out. When the enemy became hunger, the rounds were spent on dogs, cats, horses, birds, and finally rats; the pistols became useless. But Olga had learned to shoot. Papa said the Nagant was accurate only at close range. To take down Vladimir, she’d have to be close to him.

Olga placed the boot box back on the shelf and burned her old clothes, watching the flames consume the dirty rags the way the Red Army had scorched the grain fields in the Ukraine, and the way the Nazis had set ablaze the cities of cities of Kiev, Minsk, Kursk, Smolensk, Novgorod, Kazaki, as it retreated further and further East, and the people moved entire factories on railcars, wagons, and horseback just ahead of the invaders. The Bulgarians had formed what they called partisans, civilian forces that lived off the land and fought in tiny bands. It was rumored young people in Leningrad were forming their own partisan units. She would join them. Women were learning to fly fighter planes – she’d learn to handle a rifle and a bayonet.

“You were right, Vladimir. Sasha was a thief at heart, and he paid dearly for stealing your chocolates.” The muffled sound of another voice surprised Olga. She hid behind the closet curtain, the Nagant cocked and ready to fire as soon as Vladimir came into the bathroom.

Candlelight, she discovered, let her see through the light cotton. When he discovered she was not in the confessional, Vladimir would look to see if her clothes were still where he’d put them, to see if she was dead in the bathroom, or had fled in fear.

“Help me put on his coat,” she heard Vladimir say. “Where is his pistol?”

“He doesn’t like to wear it when he loads; it fires easily if it’s dropped and he’s afraid he’ll shoot himself. Stupid bastard. His dick is out.”

“Put it back in his pants, Boris.”

“Me? I’m not touching Sasha’s dick. What’s it doing out anyway?”

“It’s not like he’s going to slap your hand. He’s stiff.” Vladimir paused. “He probably took a piss while he was eating the chocolate and was able to make it back to the bed. There. Happy?” She heard a thud, and the sound of Sasha being dragged off, and their fading laughter. If Boris heard the shots and returned, she would have to kill him too.

But Vladimir returned alone. She heard the door close and then Vladimir’s voice: “*Das ist Lennigrad – können Sie mich lessen? Der Bar ist tot...nein...Tikhvin ist verloren? Mein Gott...*” She slipped out of the closet and watched him from the darkness. He put the radio aside. Olga could see his lips quiver. She could read defeat in his face. The rail line was open.

Vladimir wiped tears from his eyes and slowly rose from the bed. Olga heard a heavy sigh escape his lips, and when he took his hand away from his eyes, she fired into his face three times.

He spun backwards. A bloody hand slapped the wall and then slid down to the reddening sheet. Globes of spattered gray and white flesh hung on the wall and then tumbled onto Vladimir’s black hair. She waited for Boris. When he pushed open the door, she stepped from behind the door and fired three shots into the back of his head. His body was propelled forward and landed on the bear rug in front of the hearth.

She removed the men’s boots, belts, and holsters and wrapped them in white silk. The meat jelly and the sardines would keep her alive until

the first supply train could arrive. She took the pistols too, stuffing them in the rucksack along with the men’s ration cards and the thirty rubles they had between them. Papa Joe will want people to stay and work in the factories, and he will never apologize for abandoning Leningrad and its women and children to fight the Nazis alone. But she wouldn’t stay. If the trains and the trucks could get into the city, she could get out – to fight. *Thousands more will die. Who will miss them when we can’t keep count now?*

As if to acknowledge the Tikhvin defeat, the German guns were silent. But by the time Olga reached Decembrists’ Square, the shelling had begun again. 