"Fiction is a vehicle for growing in empathy for and understanding of this world. The magic of fiction is its ability to draw in the reader, to coax him or her to put on the shoes of the characters and go for a walk in those shoes. In *Like a River from Its Course*, Kelli Stuart worked this magic. The terror of the novel is its glimpse into the potential for human evil. The beauty is the way in which people can be instruments of grace and mercy in the darkest of circumstances. Raw, vulnerable, horrifying, beautiful, and true, this novel is a mirror for us to gaze into, to see our potential for good or ill. It nudges us to choose the path of love for those in need, regardless of what it may cost. This is a novel I will not soon forget."

—Susie Finkbeiner, author of *A Cup of Dust: A Novel of the Dust Bowl*

"A carefully researched, compassionately written journey into Ukraine at the height of World War II. Stuart brings her story vividly to life with warm, believable characters and vivid writing."

—Anne Bogel, modernmrsdarcy.com

"A chilling and lyrical treatise to faith in a time of tragedy, *Like a River from Its Course* is brimming with luscious imagery and characters who entrench themselves in your heart. Stuart weaves the travails of Kiev with the unfailing hope of Luda, Ivan, and Maria. Deft research, expert prose, and heart-clenching moments combine in a resplendent historical reading experience. This isn't just a historical fiction debut—this is a well-crafted piece of art."

—Rachel McMillan, author of *The Bachelor Girl's Guide to Murder*

LIKE A RIVER FROM ITS COURSE

KELLI STUART

Kregel Publications

Like a River from Its Course

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To the brave men and women of Ukraine
who fought for freedom in the
Great Patriotic War of 1941–45.
This book is for you.

This cruel age has deflected me,
like a river from its course.
Strayed from its familiar shores,
my changeling life has flowed
into a sister channel.

ANNA AKHMATOVA
LENINGRAD, 1941

On August 23, 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union surprised the world by signing the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, in which the two countries agreed to take no military action against one another for the next ten years.

On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler violated that pact, launching Operation Barbarossa, a well-coordinated invasion of the Soviet Union.

This is where our story begins.

PART ONE

THE BEGINNING

MARIA "MASHA" IVANOVNA

June 22, 1941
Kiev, Ukraine

"Papa! *Papa!*"

The screams lift from my chest, but I don't feel them escape. As the flat flashes and shakes, I turn circles. I know I'm home, but I don't know just where I am. I can't cry, can't walk, can't find my family. I can only scream, and again I cry out, the sound pulled involuntarily from my soul.

"Maria!"

I gasp as strong arms wrap around me, pulling me to the floor.

"We're here, *Dochka*," my father cries. "Follow me."

He flips to his hands and knees, and I grab on to one of his ankles behind him, shuffling along the floor to the hallway where my mother, sister Anna, and brother Sergei huddle close. They are three who look like one, intertwined in such a way that I can't tell where one begins and the other ends. I join the heap, my father lying over all of us.

For the first hour, I'm sure that we're moments from meeting the saints. I pray to Saint Maria to bring me quickly to her with little pain. I fear pain.

As I pray for an easy transition into the afterlife, my father speaks soothingly in my ear. "You're fine, my daughter," he whispers, a balm to my terror. "We're going to be fine."

I don't believe him. I want to, but I can't. So as the sky flashes, I continue to whisper my litany mostly because I can't stop. Truthfully, I know

very little about this act of prayer. I know some saints are useful to the protection of our souls. Outside of this basic fact, however, I know nothing of the spirit world.

But tonight as the earth spins and booms, I allow my soul to reach out to the unknown with hope that protection waits in my faithfulness.

As the rumbling fades into the distance, we remain piled on the floor, terror and fatigue anchoring us tight. Sergei is the first to extract himself, and he sits up slowly, rubbing his hands through his short, coarse hair. Anna and Mama remain hugged together, their cheeks streaked with tears, both sleeping soundly. I envy their slumber.

When Anna sleeps she looks like a younger, more delicate version of our mother. At sixteen, Anna is two years older than me, but in maturity I believe she's a lifetime ahead. She's kind and thoughtful, brave and helpful. I am none of those things. I can be, of course, and I do want to be. But I have to work very hard at being that kind of girl, whereas Anna was born with the ability to love. Grace runs through her veins, spite through mine.

Mama, like Anna, is small and gentle. Her light brown hair is long and soft, though she rarely wears it down. Every day Mama twists it into an elegant bun at the nape of her neck. It seems a shame to hide such glorious hair, but with it pulled back, her perfect features are much more visible. Mama's eyes are a warm brown and reveal the depths of her very being. Mama can never hide how she feels. Her eyes dance with laughter and swim with sorrow, and when she's angry, I'm certain I've seen lightning flash straight through them.

"Masha," Father whispers. I look up to see Sergei standing and stretching alongside him. "We're going to have chai, would you like some?"

I nod and stand up slowly, my legs and back stiff. Sergei grabs my elbow and pulls me into the crook of his arm. He smiles at me, then kisses my forehead. Looking up at my older brother, I get the frightening sense that I'm telling him good-bye. He'll be eighteen in two weeks, and we're at war. A fresh lump develops in my throat and tears prick the corners of my eyes.

"Shh, Masha," Sergei whispers. He knows my thoughts.

Together we walk into the small kitchen where Papa already has the kettle on the stove. He lights a match and puts it inside the firebox, then

leans back against the wall. The kitchen in our flat is very small. The three of us can barely fit in it together. In fact, we rarely ever enter this room since Mama long ago declared it her domain and ordered us out under threat of starvation.

Papa sits quietly, his arms crossed over his narrow chest. He's a thin man, my papa, but very tall. Sergei and I stand side by side as we wait for the kettle to sing. We don't speak. I don't know why Papa and Sergei remain mute, but I simply don't have words. Every time I open my mouth, the words disappear on my tongue like the puffs of smoke from Papa's pipes. So I sit, my shoulder pressed to Sergei, my eyes shifting nervously across Papa's worn face.

"We'll wait a few hours to make sure the bombing has stopped," he finally says. His voice bubbles with the heat of one who's been falsely accused. "Then you and I will go out and survey the damage," he says to Sergei. The kettle shakes slightly and lets out its mournful whistle. I don't remember ever hearing it wail like that. It brings a fresh batch of tears to my eyes, and I wonder if I'll even be able to swallow over the lump in my throat.

"Is it safe to go out, Papa?" I ask.

Papa pauses and looks at me softly. The tenderness in his bright green eyes dissolves the lump and warms me from the inside. My papa, whom I favor much more than Mama, has always been my confidant, his strength carrying me through the pain of youth. For years I endured the dreadful taunts of my schoolmates. They laughed at my broad, stocky appearance, and I laughed with them because I refused to cry.

I can be strong like Papa.

"I don't know if it's safe, Masha," Papa says softly. "But we'll go carefully."

I nod and take the steaming mug he hands me, wrapping my fingers around the searing metal. "Can I go with you?" I ask. I already know his answer, but I ask anyway. Papa's lips spread out thin, and his thick brows gather over his eyes. "No, *dorogaya*," he says firmly. "It may not be safe for Sergei and me. It's definitely not safe for you."

And that's it. I know not to ask again. My papa is a patient man, unless you ask twice. Nobody asks twice.

Two hours later, Mama, Anna, and I stand in the doorway as Papa and Sergei walk out into the dimly lit hallway of our flat. It's damp, and the air smells of gunpowder and fear. It's oddly quiet as they shuffle down the narrow staircase. I can hear their shoes scrape against the ground, but nothing else. No happy laughter. No morning greetings. The streets bear no sounds of normalcy. The quiet of the morning screams, and I want to clamp my hands over my ears just to block it out.

Mama closes the door and leans against it. Her eyes close, and her beautiful hair lies in cascades over her small frame. Anna and I watch, not daring to move.

After a moment, Mama opens her eyes and forces a smile. "It's time to clean up, girls," she says quietly. She sounds calm, but I still see terror swimming in the black center of her eyes. She pulls her fingers through her hair and reaches in her pocket for a band to secure it in a knot.

"Maria, I want you to make the beds and dust the furniture. Anna, you come with me to the kitchen to help prepare tonight's soup."

Anna quickly mumbles, "Yes, Mama," and heads to the kitchen. I, however, look at my mother in surprise. We're cleaning? Today? For a moment I forget the attack and the bombs. All I can think is that today is our first day of summer break and we're cleaning.

Mama returns my gaze evenly. I see her willing me to challenge. I won't win a challenge with Mama, and I know there's little benefit in trying. The grief that she wears on her face swiftly brings back our new reality.

We're at war. Nothing will be the same again.

IVAN KYRILOVICH

June 23, 1941

The memory of last night will forever haunt me. The whistle of Nazi bombs and the thunder as they found their targets move through my head, my heart, my soul. Intertwined with the noise is the screaming. Masha, turning and crying, confused and afraid. Tanya and Anna gripped in the corner, their cries mingling to form a low wail. In the midst of it all, I saw Sergei, my son. I watched him through the flashes and tremors. Between dark and light, he became a man.

As the terror of night slipped into a balmy, dusty morning, I observed them all closely. Tanya and Anna wrapped in one another's arms, their faces worn and strained. Masha tucked beneath Sergei's arm, her head nodding and falling, stubbornness alone keeping her from succumbing to the sleep that so clearly longed to take her away.

And the man Sergei, who sat with his back straight against the wall, his arm wrapped protectively around his sister. I saw him wrestling, an inward battle beating through his gray eyes. I knew the decision he made in those long, quiet hours.

As we leave to survey our battered city, I notice that Sergei's back is straighter and he stands a little taller. Cautiously striding into the still street, I turn and grab his broad shoulders. I feel the muscles round over the tops of his arms and for the first time notice the sinewy nature of his frame. My son has developed the taut muscles of a man without me even noticing. Surely this didn't happen overnight.

Looking straight into his eyes, I speak to him father to son, comrade to comrade. "You'll wait until your birthday. When you're eighteen, you may enlist."

My voice comes out gruff, almost harsh, and tears sting the corners of my eyes. Sergei's chin lifts slightly, and he nods calmly. "Yes, Papa."

Not caring who might see us, I pull him into my arms and grip him with the passion that only a father can feel for his son. Sergei's arms engulf me in return, and for a long while we hold one another. In that embrace I bid farewell to the boy I rocked, fed, played with, and taught for nearly eighteen years.

We finally pull away and wipe our eyes, turning without words to walk up the narrow alley that leads to Shamrila Street, the road on which we've lived since Sergei was born. I glance back at the tiny window into our kitchen, the green frame dusty and worn. I remember the echoing sounds of my infant son's cries so many years ago when I rounded the corner and stood beneath the window. I spent countless moments listening to Tanya sing softly into her firstborn's ear, lulling him to sleep.

Where has the time gone?

Taking a deep breath, I turn away from the memories. "We'll walk toward the Dnieper River," I say. "Then we'll make our way to Kreshadik Street." It's a long walk, and I'm not sure what kind of trouble we might run into, but I know that our best observations on the state of Kiev will come from these two vantage points.

"Will we see Nazis?" Sergei asks. He says *Nazi* as though spitting out bitter seeds.

"I don't know, *Sinok*," I say, burying my hands in my pockets. The morning is warm and wet, but I still feel chilled. As we round the corner, I look around cautiously.

"I thought there would be more damage," Sergei murmurs. "The bombs were so close." I don't respond, but I agree with him. The walls of our small flat rattled with such ferocity, I was certain they would crumble on top of us.

"None of the bombs hit here," I say after a pause. "But they hit close. We'll see damage today, Seryosha." I use his pet name to reassure him, and myself, that for now everything is okay.

We walk quickly after that, and it isn't long before we come upon the effects of last night's surprise bombing. "Papa, look," Sergei says, and the shock in his voice stops me in my tracks. I follow his pointing finger to the hill in the distance where the Pechersk Lavra stands proudly. But today, the golden domes of the ancient monastery don't sparkle in the morning sun. Instead, black smoke unfurls from the hillside in mournful tendrils, and my heart sinks. I look away from the carnage on the hill and observe the wounded section of my city, known as Podil. People wander the streets, shocked eyes moving slowly over blackened holes in buildings. Once the trading and crafting center of Kiev, Podil has in recent decades deteriorated with many now living in poor, wretched conditions.

"The Jewish live here," I murmur. I feel Sergei's eyes on me, but I don't look at him. Instead, I simply take it all in—the damage, the shock, the sinking feeling that this is the beginning of something terrible.

Streets lie in ruin, flats fallen to the ground. At the sound of an infant crying, Sergei and I run to help sift through the rubble. We hear the child but cannot see him, and after an hour of digging, the cries turn to whimpers. After two hours, the cries stop altogether.

We continue to dig, Sergei and myself with two older women and a young boy. It's useless, though, and at some point we all just quit. The child is gone, and with no hysterical parents around desperately searching for him, we know he was probably better off passing from this world with his parents than being left without them. Buried by hatred is better than orphaned by it. I know this too well.

Sergei and I slowly walk away, not even saying good-bye to the babushkas who had so desperately worked alongside us. There's nothing to say—no words to soothe the shock. We walk for a long time, hands stuffed deep into pockets, hearts weighted down with all we've seen and all that's changed.

"Papa," Sergei says as we approach Kreshadik Street, the center of our city.

"Da, Sinok."

"I'm ready to fight for my country." Sergei pauses, his breath halting with emotion. I stop walking and wait. "I'm ready to fight for my country,"

he repeats after a moment, his eyes facing forward in a distant gaze. "And I know that it won't be easy. But Papa . . ."

I observe him closely, my throat closed tight, and take in the sight of the late afternoon sun highlighting his wiry hair and square jaw.

"I don't know if I'm ready for death," he whispers.

I look down the street to try to mask the intense pain that engulfs me from the inside. Was it really only a day ago that we dreamed of going to the dacha for our summer break, escaping to a country home of peace?

"It's not that I'm scared of . . . my own death," Sergei continues. "But Papa, how do I handle watching others die? We just listened to a baby take his last breath. How do I keep moving forward when I have the sound of that child rolling through my head?"

I don't have an answer.

FREDERICK HERRMANN

June 24, 1941

I always knew I would be a great man. I look no further than my father to see greatness. The face of a hero is framed by the accomplishments he realizes in front of all who watch. As a child, I watched everything my father did, copying every movement, every inflection, every swell and fall of his voice.

I'm not tall like Father. I bear the unfortunate stature of my mother and have small, delicate features that fail to give me the formidableness of the great Tomas Herrmann. My father is tall and broad, his thick blond hair giving him a youthful appearance. Father never hides his feelings; every pleasure or disappointment reflects openly in his blue eyes.

My sister inherited the strong figure of our father—my rebellious sister who I once wished to be. Remembering her bold words against our fatherland brings a surge of disappointment, and my hands tighten around the barrel of my gun. When Talia left home, I vowed that I would make Father proud enough for both of us.

It never occurred to me that I might be anything but a soldier. I am the son of a proud German. My father stands in the presence of the Great Führer.

As a boy, I often listened to Father speak with his fellow countrymen about the growing need to create a pure Aryan race. My earliest memories reside in the dusty garden of our home, my mother moving about the house at the bidding of her powerful husband. I moved the dirt in circles

not because I enjoyed it, but because it gave the appearance of youthful ignorance. My play made me invisible to the men of stature and allowed me to listen and glean.

As I dragged my fingers through Munich's hallowed earth, I learned the ways of manhood. I listened closely as, eyes steely blue, the great men spoke, their thin lips organizing the mobilization of the masses. As a boy of only four, I knew of the shameful death at Feldherrenhalle that left true German nationalists martyred at the hands of a misguided Bavarian government. I learned of a man who was greater than all others. I heard of his courage as he ignited a putsch against his own government there in the beer hall.

One night long ago, after listening to my father retell the story, I stood before the mirror in my small bedroom. My hands and feet were covered in dirt, my cloak of invisibility. I imagined what this man they called Hitler must look like. Grabbing the stick I'd brought in from the garden, I marched back and forth, steps of power masked in the body of a child. I was the great, brave Hitler . . . until Mother came in and ordered me to bed.

"You must never pretend to be that man again," my mother hissed, tucking the covers around me so tight I struggled to breathe. "This game your father is playing is dangerous," she said, her breath hot on my cheek. "Don't become like him."

The last words were a vapor. They wafted from her lips to my ears and locked inside my memory.

That was the night I realized her weakness and I decided to hate my mother.

Two days later, I saw him for the first time. When Herr Hitler entered the room, I stopped short. We were inside the house, which left me without the protection of the dusty earth. The floorboards creaked, and the hollow walls reverberated with my heartbeat like a warrior's drum.

After greeting my father formally, Hitler turned and locked eyes with me. I couldn't hide, so I stood still, awed by his presence. He was not a tall man. My father, in his great stature, dwarfed the mighty Hitler. But the confidence that the future Führer possessed made him a giant.

"Hello, boy," he said. His voice was stiff. It wasn't warm or friendly. I made him uncomfortable. I knew it, and so did Father.

"Leave us, Frederick," Father barked, and I immediately obeyed. As I hurried from the room, I heard our future leader speak again. "Train him right, Tomas," Hitler said evenly. "Train him right and he'll do great things. Someday he will be a part of history."

He was right.

It's been fourteen years since that first meeting. Hitler visited our sitting room many times after that, but I was always ordered to bed before his arrival. I spent nights sitting at the top of the polished staircase, listening to the passionate conversation from the men gathered around the hearth. So many words, all of them moving and swirling together like the dust of the ground, and as I listened, I imagined what it would be like to be part of the future that they spoke of so highly.

I haven't spoken to Father since I left to wage this war, but I know he hears of me. He hears of my failures, and today he will hear of my success. My father is a man of great wealth and power within the SS. He commands respect when entering a room, and anyone who wants his approval must work hard for it. As I have done.

I've been promoted to Einsatzgruppen C. My colonel, Standartenführer Paul Blobel, is a personal friend of Father's, as is Major General Eberhard. They served together in the first war and quickly became partners and confidants.

I grew up with Blobel nearby, as he and father worked together in architecture after the first war. But, dissatisfied with the direction our country headed, Father and Blobel joined the SA and then the SS, where they quickly worked their way up the ranks into the highest levels of responsibility. Blobel was later moved into a high-ranking position with the Nazi army while Father, a brilliant architect and creator, has remained in the mother country working in close quarters with Hitler's top officials.

My father is a hero. My hero.

For my part, I worked my way through training, always at the top of my class, always ready and willing to go further and push harder. I've

earned this position—I am sure of it. Father would have no part in my undeserved promotion, and I want no handouts. I don't mention my connection to Father, or to Blobel or Eberhard. I don't tell anyone I've shaken hands with the Führer. If I'm promoted to a position of privilege, I want it to be of my own accord. And now, under the great Standartenführer Blobel, I have the distinct privilege of carrying out the Final Solution.

Today, as I march through the dust of another man's land, I hear the Führer's voice once again in the recesses of my memory. Looking down, I take note of the rich soil caking my boots, and I feel the same sense of power I got as a child when the dust of the land covered me. This dirt belongs to my people now. My heart swells as the dust fills in the crevices of my boots.

"He will be a part of history."

We move steadily forward, two days into the journey toward our destination. The dust rises and falls in puffs, our steps echoing the mission. We're not just a *part* of history. We *are* history. I taste it, gritty and rough. My father's passion, Hitler's vision, my destiny—it's all within reach.

Kiev, Ukraine, is to be our final destination. As we now pass the center of another village, a man steps timidly out into the road, his arms stretched out toward us, offering a large loaf of fresh bread. We stop and stare for a brief moment. Finally I step forward and take the loaf from his hands. He bows slightly, mumbling something in the language I've come to destroy.

They welcome us here. They think we've come to liberate them, to end their oppression and set them free. My eyes shift from the man to the villagers who surround him. Women cling to the hands of small, thin children whose eyes are big and round. The young ladies curtsy, and I nod my head politely in return. They're afraid of us. I see it.

I relish their fear.

LUDMILLA "LUDA" MICHAELEVNA

Vinnitsya, Ukraine
June 30, 1941

"Luda!"

I stand in the small bedroom and glance into my mother's hand mirror. It's the only piece of her I have left. My father got rid of everything else when she died. I don't remember her, how she looked or spoke or even how she smelled. I don't know if her laugh sounded like a thousand bells or a babbling brook. I have imagined her so many times, but I have no photographs to tell me what she looked like. There are no grandparents to tell me stories. So I'm left to my imagination.

I see her tall and pretty. Her eyes dance when she talks, and her delicate hands feel like silk when she holds me. In my mind, she is the very picture of love. In my mind, she sings softly to me each night as I drift to sleep. In my mind, her voice is a melody and her movements a beat.

But it's only in my mind.

I was two when she died. I don't even know what happened. Father won't tell me. The only time he mentions her is when the vodka bottle is half empty. My father at half empty is pleasant, relaxed, almost happy. When the bottle is empty he's sad, mournful, and wants only to be alone. Most of my nights are spent wrapping a blanket around the shaking shoulders of my empty-bottled father.

My father with a full bottle of vodka is frightening. This means he's sober. My full-bottled father is filled with dashed dreams and

self-loathing. He is the father I fear most. The full-bottled papa is why I keep pouring.

"Luda!"

I jump and look in the mirror again. Is this the same reflection she saw when she looked in it? Large brown eyes, thick brown hair, and a small red mouth? Today I don't have time to wonder. I quickly hide my precious mirror, protecting it from the potential rage of a full-bottled father. Rushing out the door, I smooth my tattered skirt. My father stands by the front door of our flat, his hand wrapped around a nearly empty bottle of cheap vodka.

I haven't eaten for two days so he could have his poison.

"Go out and get us some bread," he says, pushing open the door and gesturing into the dark hallway.

"I . . . But . . . Papa," I stammer. "It's late. The market isn't open."

"Stop being stupid," he snarls. "Go get me bread. I'm hungry."

With a sigh, I reach down and pull on my tattered shoes. I pull the pouch of money off the hook on the wall and hear the pitiful tinkling of two lonely coins knocking together. Even if the markets were open, I wouldn't have enough money.

Stepping out into the hallway, I turn to try to speak reason to Papa once more, but he shuts the door in my face. With a sigh, I slowly make my way down the stairs and out into the street.

Looking up at the dim sky, I wonder what the future holds. I know that the country has been invaded, and based on Papa's drunken rants, it seems that impending doom awaits. I wonder how long it will be before the Germans find their way to my town and if their arrival could possibly make things better for me.

I walk quickly to the only place I can think of for bread. Within ten minutes I've arrived, and I knock on the door timidly.

"Kto tam?"

"Katya, it's me," I answer. "Luda."

The door flings open, and my friend Katya pulls me inside. "What are you doing here?" she asks. I look up to see her father walk into the room.

"Excuse me, Alexei Yurevich," I say with a small nod of the head. "I'm sorry to come so late, but—"

"What is it, Luda?" Alexei Yurevich takes a step toward me, his brow furrowed.

"My father told me to get him some bread," I reply.

Katya and her family are the only ones who know of my troubles with Papa. They know that I quit school last year to work. They know of Papa's drinking and his cruelty, and whenever possible they allow me inside their home. Katya's brother, Oleg, joins his father and Katya inside the small foyer.

"Mama!" Alexei Yurevich calls out. Katya's grandmother appears in the doorway, and I shift in embarrassment to now have the entire family looking at me in pity.

"Mama, Luda needs a loaf of bread. Please give her what we have," Alexei says. She disappears quickly into the kitchen and returns minutes later with two small loaves of bread.

"Take this, child," she says softly. "You eat one of these before you return. Give the other to that pig you call Papa."

"Mama." Alexei Yurevich's voice is sharp behind her. She turns with a huff and leaves the room.

"Oleg will walk you home, Luda," Alexei Yurevich says. Oleg leans down and begins pulling on his boots.

"Oh, no. Please," I respond. "It's not necessary. I can make it."

"Luda." Alexei Yurevich takes another step toward me. "You shouldn't be out walking at night. Not anymore. It isn't safe."

I nod slowly, not really understanding but warmed by the concern in his voice. Oleg joins me, and with a wave to Katya, I turn and follow him out the door. We walk slowly down the sidewalk so that I can eat the second loaf of bread in my hand. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I took the first bite. I instantly feel my energy return, and as we turn the corner toward my flat, I brush my hands and mouth clean of all crumbs.

"Take care of yourself, Luda," Oleg says. Shy and soft spoken, Oleg doesn't speak often, but I always sense that he's standing at the ready to protect me.

"Thank you," I reply. With a small nod, I push open the door and make my way up the stairs. I put my key in the door and push it open.

"Papa?" I call. "I'm back."

I step into the room to find Papa slumped over on the couch, the empty bottle still clutched in his hand. With a sigh, I pull a small blanket over his shoulders, then lay the loaf of bread on the floor beside him and retreat to my room . . . alone.

IVAN KYRILOVICH

July 28, 1941

Pain is an interesting sensation. It's more than physical, though it certainly manifests itself in physical ways. I said good-bye to my son today. I watched him kiss his mother's tear-stained cheek and hold tight the sisters he adores as they soaked his shirt with bitter tears, and I felt the pain well up from somewhere deep inside.

Hugging my son for the last time, my arms physically ached as though the muscles tore from bone, and when I pulled back and looked into his brave, tear-filled eyes, I felt my heart rip.

I think I even heard it.

I won't get that piece of my heart back, and that's the interesting thing about pain. It never leaves you. Sometimes it's dull. Other times you feel healed, but pain always leaves a mark, a scar as a reminder that life and love aren't free.

Pain changes everything.

I have to walk slowly this morning, stopping frequently to make sure I'm going the right way. When a man surrenders his firstborn to wolves, it's not without repercussion. Mine is a feeling of loss and of being lost.

I've spent most of my life in hard labor. I worked the collective farms as a boy, my back bent over rows of vegetables and my hands caked with the dirt of another man's supper. My father didn't love me—he used me. I was his mule, and this made me strong. It also made me rebellious. I left

my home the day I turned eighteen, as well. I left for different reasons, less noble than my son's.

I wanted to be on my own. The first war was over, and my older brother, my father's pride, was dead. He was the boy, the *man*, my father wished I could be: loyal, dedicated, hardworking, with a love for the land.

I was the lover. I wanted to live life, and I wanted to give it. Tanya and I met when we were sixteen, and we both longed for the cosmopolitan life of the city. This was unheard of in our small country community. Boys didn't leave home unless they went to war.

But I did leave home, and I took the love of my life with me. With no money and enough food to last us one week, Tanya and I snuck aboard trains and walked the two hundred kilometers to Kiev, where I quickly began my work in construction. I loved the sweat and risk of building. I knew I was on a pioneer team to bring progress to my great country. Our work was slow, but I felt satisfied each day as I walked home, covered in dirt and grime.

Tanya threw herself into developing our lives with equal fervor and heaps of grace. We quickly found a judge who agreed to marry us, and by the time we were twenty years old, we were the proud parents of a son. I held my child tightly through those long night hours and stared into his delicate face. I vowed then to never be as my father had been. My children would understand love and would be free to develop in their strengths.

As I stop and study my surroundings once more, I wonder for the first time how my father felt when he woke up that morning and discovered my note. Did he experience a shred of the pain that I now feel? Was there any regret?

I tried to contact my mother twice after leaving. The first time was a month after we settled in Kiev. I sent a letter explaining why I chose to leave and asked if she could ever forgive me. I didn't receive a reply. I sent one more letter years later, after Maria was born. I thought my mother should know she had grandchildren. That time I received a reply, not from Mother but from Father.

"Ivan. Your mother is dead. You killed her. Does this finally make you happy?"

That was the final communication I ever received from home. I don't even know if he still lives . . . and I don't care.

I finally reach Shamrila and turn up the narrow alley toward our flat. My girls wait for me, wounded and scared. I wonder if I can be the man they need me to be right now. I pause and take a deep breath, my chest tight, hands shaking. My arms ache for my son, leaving me weak and fatigued.

Pushing open the heavy door, I breathe deeply. It's damp and wet, and the smell heightens my heartache. Taking one slow step at a time, I suddenly feel much older than my thirty-eight years. As I step onto the third landing, I pause to catch my breath, and the door in front of me opens a crack.

"Who's there?" comes a gruff voice.

"Ivan Kyrilovich," I answer with a jolt. "I live in the flat above you."

The door opens wider, and my neighbor steps out just beyond the door. I've seen him before once or twice, but only in passing. I take a moment to study him closely and realize he is doing the same.

He's a short man with small eyes framed by round glasses. His hair is a mop on top of his head, curly and wild, giving him a crazed appearance. His clothes are wrinkled, and the bags under his eyes tell me he hasn't slept well.

His eyes dart left to right as he ducks his head. "Would you join me inside, please?" he whispers, jittery and spooked.

I step inside his dim flat, and he locks the door behind us.

"I am Josef Michaelovich," he says in a nasal voice. "Can I ask for your help as a neighbor and countryman?" He wrings his hands. "My wife and I are Jewish."

I suck in my breath sharply. Suddenly his raw nerves make sense.

"We have a daughter, Polina. She's close in age to your daughter, I believe." I nod. I've seen her walking to and from school with my girls.

"What do you need?" I ask.

"Food," he says, finally stilling his hands. "I'm afraid to leave the building, and we have run out of food. In fact, we have not eaten in three days."

For the first time I look past him and notice his wife and daughter huddled on the couch. Polina is gaunt, her small frame thin, eyes circled in dark. Her hair hangs limply over her shoulders, and my heart cracks.

That's the other thing about pain. Just when you think you're incapable of enduring any more, you're split wide open again. There is no threshold.

"I will bring you down some bread and borscht. You're right to stay inside."

Josef's eyes fill with tears, and he grabs my hand, his palms cold and clammy. "Thank you," he whispers. I nod, then turn to leave, walking upstairs briskly.

Pain can also lead to action, and the feeling of purpose is like a balm to the wound. It doesn't close the hole, but for a moment the pain is silenced.

FREDERICK HERRMANN

September 24, 1941

Stepping out into the cool morning mist, I take in the sight of the city. After months of pushing our way farther into this wretched country, we finally reached our destination. Kiev was always to be the place that we stopped, but getting here hasn't been without a struggle. Closing my eyes, I fight nausea at the memory of coming upon my own countrymen hung from trees, charred and grotesque. Their socks had been dipped in gasoline and lit, burning them alive from the feet up. "Stalin's socks," my comrades whispered late at night, and I pretended that it didn't bother me. But it does.

And now this. Bombs went off three days ago just after we set up our command posts. How those stupid Soviets managed to coordinate the explosions is something I can't understand, and anger mounts as I think of their defiance.

"Frederick!" I turn and fight a snarl as Alfonse approaches. I offer him a curt nod. "Do you know what the meeting's about today?" he asks.

"Retaliation," I reply. I hear the impatience in my voice, and I make no effort to disguise it. I find Alfonse annoying. I want him to know it.

"They killed two hundred of our men in those explosions," I continue. "They'll regret it."

Alfonse nods. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it, then offers me one. I decline.

"Soviet tobacco is good," he says, smoke unfurling from his lips. I

choose not to respond. We walk in silence toward the building that's been set up as the new command quarters.

"What do you think command has in mind?" Alfonse asks.

"I don't know," I respond. "But they will pay."

MARIA "MASHA" IVANOVNA

September 28, 1941

The Germans are here. Papa came home ten days ago and asked Mama to put a little more water in the soup for he had invited Josef Michaelovich and his family to dinner. Papa told us the news that night as we slowly swallowed the broth in an effort to stave off hunger and mask fear. Polina grabbed my hand under the table and clung tight, her thin nails digging into my skin. I can still feel the terror in her grip.

My stomach is empty, and stress has made me anxious. Somehow my papa still manages to get food and even share a portion with Polina and her family, despite the fact that we rarely leave the flat at all. In fact, since we've been invaded, I haven't left at all except to walk downstairs to Polina's, where she and I tuck into a quiet corner and dream of all the meals we will someday eat. There is simply not enough food for all of us. I long for a steaming bowl of Mama's borscht: the beet-red broth, the meat and vegetables, the sour cream, and a slice of warm bread to dip into the bowl until it's mushy. My mouth waters, and I often wake up feeling crazed with emptiness.

Mama still makes borscht, but it's weak. There's no meat, and the vegetables are sparse. We receive bread sparingly and always share a portion of what we receive. So I live in hunger.

Today is no different. I wander around the house, looking for ways to occupy my time without thinking of food. Anna has begun unraveling old sweaters and blankets and using the thread to sew new clothing for all of

us. I find myself jealous of her. I'm envious of her ability to find something to do.

I spend a lot of time thinking of Sergei. Daily I retreat to the corner of our flat that has always been my escape. It's dark and musty and befits my mood. I used to sit in this corner to read and draw. When we were young, Sergei joined me, filling my head with fantastic stories of talking animals, magical forests, princesses, and kings. He described every detail of his creatures: the green frogs with purple spots; glittered owls with tufts of blue springing from their bodies; majestic eagles that walked regally and wore crowns. Sergei took me to far-off places.

He's been gone two months now. We received one letter two weeks ago. It arrived folded in a tiny triangle, Sergei's neat block letters formed perfectly on the front. The letter was so heavily censored that we were unable to make out much of what he wanted to communicate. Entire lines of my brother's voice were darkened with a thick black marker, edited out by someone for reasons I can't understand.

But that small piece of paper is evidence of him, evidence that he's alive, and for a brief moment I saw the old light return to Papa's face. His beloved son lives.

Bombs went off again this week. They weren't near our home, but we could still feel the rumble and knew that something happened. Papa quickly left to investigate. Every time he leaves, I worry. We all worry. But the war has only just begun, and I wonder how long we can all live in worry before we physically break.

Mama pushed open the windows this morning to let in the sun. We're experiencing *Baba Leta*, the time of year when warmth makes one last effort to stave off the waiting winter. The end of September tempts us to enjoy her beauty before October swoops in and darkens the sky. From my seat in the corner, I see the trees outside. As I gaze at the brilliant leaves, I wish for a moment that I were the blackbird sitting peacefully on the branch.

What must it be like to be a bird with all the freedom to fly? I imagine spreading my wings and letting the balmy breeze of autumn lift me high above the ground. What does the world look like from that vantage point?

Does the bird float lightly on the wings of freedom? Does he feel sorry for those of us who are chained to the ground?

I should like to be a bird.

My daydreams are cut short by four staccato taps on the front door. No one has knocked on our door since the war began, and immediately my heart drops. Is it the Germans? What do they want with us?

I step outside my bedroom only to see Papa wave me back in. I obediently shrink just past the threshold so that I can hear. Papa approaches the door.

"Kto tam?" he says firmly. "Who's there?"

"Ivan Kyrilovich, it is I, Josef Michaelovich." Papa quickly opens the door, and Josef enters. Knowing it's safe, Mama, Anna, and I step out of hiding and nod politely at the perpetually nervous man. His bespectacled face is always filled with a sense of dread. I don't believe I've ever seen him without a thin line of sweat on his upper lip.

He clutches a paper in his hand. "Have you seen this?" he asks, his voice trembling and weak.

Papa takes the paper and reads quickly. He sucks in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Where did you get this?" he asks.

"Someone slipped it under my door this morning. I know it couldn't have been you because you would have knocked and given it to me personally. You know what this means."

Papa nods gravely. "It means someone else knows you're Jewish." Papa looks somberly at Mama and hands her the paper. I look over her shoulder to read the notice:

ATTENTION

> All the Zhids of Kiev and the suburbs are to appear on Monday, September 29, 1941, at 8:00 a.m. on the corner of Melnikovskaya and Decktiarovska streets [near the cemeteries]. They are to bring their documents, money, other valuables and warm clothes, linen, etc. Any Zhid found disobeying these orders will be shot. Citizens breaking into flats left by the Jews and taking possession of their belongings will be shot.

"What are you going to do?" Papa asks Josef, who flits from side to side nervously.

"We're going to go," he answers without pause.

My heart drops at his words. Polina is the only friend I have. What will I do if she leaves?

"I don't think it's a good idea, Josef," Papa replies.

"I think it is necessary," Josef answers back. His tone is mournful. He stops moving, and looks Papa in the eye.

"Someone else knows we're here, Ivan. Someone knows we're Jewish. If we go, maybe we'll be spared. The notice says to bring our possessions. Perhaps they'll send us away, and we'll escape this horror."

"Or perhaps the horror you're sent to will be worse," Papa responds, his voice soft but firm. Josef says nothing. His face reads defeat, and the stillness of his often-fluttering hands unnerves me. He has given up.

"I will take my wife and daughter tomorrow morning as the notice commands," Josef says finally. "I don't have a choice. If I don't, I take the chance of being reported and killed."

"No," I cry. I wince as Papa turns and gives me a sharp look. "I'm sorry," I say, softer this time. "Please don't go, Josef Michaelovich."

Josef walks slowly to me. Grabbing my hands he squeezes them tight. "Thank you, *dorogaya*, for your concern. You've been a good friend to my daughter." He looks up at Mama and Anna standing silent in the middle of the room. "Thank you all," he says, "for taking care of my family these months."

Looking at me again, Josef smiles, thin lips stretched tight under his sharp nose. "We'll go tomorrow and escape the uncertainty of this isolation."

Josef steps past me, kisses Mama on the cheek, then reaches out and places his hand on Anna's shoulder with affection. Taking the notice, he turns to leave, stopping to shake Papa's hand.

"Good-bye, friend," Josef said. "*Spaseeba Bolshoya*. Thank you for everything."

Then he is gone.

Like a River from Its Course

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