

**Red Stars**

**Davide Morosinotto**

Translated from the Italian by Denise Muir

Approximate word count of full manuscript in English: 78,000

*I became a hero on the day of my thirteenth birthday.*

*I knew right away. Not as soon as I arrived in the city but almost, when I was trudging up the icy river, dragging my sled – and her – behind me.*

*It was afternoon, somewhere between half past four and five o'clock; darkness had fallen, like a coat of thick, black paint. It was twenty degrees below zero.*

*I remember the bodies on the banks of the Neva. They'd appear suddenly, here and there, like waxen mushrooms. I also remember an old woman, in a threadbare coat, clasping a bucket and dragging herself along the ice in the middle of the river. She stopped, suddenly, pulled out a long nail and hammered it into the ice with the swing and force of a woodcutter. She lowered her bucket through the hole she'd made and swung it through the water below. Then she saw me. She stopped. I took one step, just one, but she dropped everything and ran, ignoring my shouts to stop, that I wouldn't hurt her.*

*I felt bad. I knew how precious water was, the bucket and nail even more so, but I was too weak to go after her. I put my wrist to my forehead to adjust my beret and moved off again. A bridge. Another bridge. Then I saw it. The Hermitage Museum. It was different from how I remembered it. Darkened windows sealed with cardboard. No more gold or statues; rubble everywhere. But it was still the museum.*

*The Hermitage was where it had always been. It had resisted.*

~~So that was me. A hero.~~

~~I had made it, after travelling so far, to save the city.~~

Viktor, are you mad?

*Why?*

You know you can't write stuff like that. You'll get us into trouble and I think we've been through enough already.

*Listen, Nadya. This is my story. I want to tell it my way!*

We've already told it. Our way. Back then. We just have to wait for someone to read it. Trust me, please. Let the notebooks speak for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: For clarity, Victor's writing is in italics and Nadya's in roman throughout.

Smirinov's interjections will also be in italics, but should be easily identified by the square brackets and 'S.'

December 1946

No. 973 / B

**NKVD**

**People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs**

ATTENTION

The pages enclosed herewith did not pass the censorship inspection and have therefore been classed as NON-COMPLIANT and DANGEROUS.

Adequate clearance is required to read on.

All breaches will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

December 1946

No. 973 / B

**NKVD**

**People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs**

REPORT FOR INTERNAL USE

The attached document was recovered during a search of the residential unit at 8, Stolyarny Alley and obtained by the Ministry of Justice as evidence in the inquiry into Soviet citizens:

Viktor Nikolayevich Danilov; born Leningrad, 17 November 1928;

Nadya Nikolayevna Danilova; born Leningrad, 17 November 1928.

The accusations levelled at the aforementioned citizens regard events which took place in the period from June to November of the year 1941.

This document, more specifically referred to as "the notebooks" by the accused, comprises a variety of materials, including loose sheets, notes taken on scrap paper, leaflets, old postcards, drawings and photographs. It is presumed that some of the pages were originally joined by wire spirals but were later tampered with to allow the order to be changed.

This order also appears to have been changed by the accused at a separate time, in all probability to reconstruct the proper chronological order of events.

The folder was entrusted to the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), to the undersigned Officer in Charge, for the purpose of determining the fate of the two young people named above.

Accompanying the document were two regulatory rubber stamps which I have been authorised to use, at my sole discretion, on completion of the inquiry.

They are identical, both bear the star and two ears of wheat, but have different wordings – one says INNOCENT, the other says GUILTY.

There will be only one sentence.

Only one justice.

For the glory of the Nation.

Signed,

Colonel Valery Gavriilovich Smirnov

Notes

~~Hermitage Museum~~

Belongs to: Nadya

*and Viktor*

### NOTEBOOK 1

The notebook has been split into chapters and, where necessary, marginal annotations have been added to the original, written in my own hand.

- Smirinov

## S – Chapter 1

*Leningrad, 22 June 1941*

It's Sunday today and Viktor and I have been to the museum.

Of all the places in this city, I like the Hermitage Museum the best. It takes up a whole row of palaces along the embankment of the Neva, although the biggest one is the Winter Palace, a beautiful royal residence that is white and green on the outside, with a thousand golden statues that light up the sky like stars.

The Winter Palace was once home to the Tsar; I can't imagine what he found to do in a house with more than a thousand rooms. Luckily, the revolution came and the Winter Palace stopped belonging to the Tsar and became the people's, so it's a little bit mine now too, and Viktor's.

I've been to the museum lots of times and I know all the paintings and statues in its endless collections off by heart. I even gave a lesson on them at school once, for the whole class and I was so good, they all clapped. When we got home, Viktor told me not to boast because I shouldn't take credit for the fact that our parents work at the museum and let us visit them on school holidays.

Today is a visit the museum day.

Yesterday was 21<sup>st</sup> June and we celebrated the summer solstice, when the sun sets really late and the light never leaves the sky. Viktor and I spent the day in the park with our friends from the Young Pioneers – we ate on the grass, played football and tug-of-war, then at night Dad took us to the ballet and after that to a late-night street concert...

*Come to the point. It doesn't make any sense otherwise!*

... so we woke up late this morning. Dad had gone out already and Mum said, "Get ready, I'm taking you to the museum today."

I flew out of bed so quick, I didn't see Viktor was still sleeping below, lying on his tummy with his face squashed into his pillow, and I sent him flying with a kick.

"What's up?"

“What’s up is we’re going to the museum. Get a move on!”

We had rye bread and butter for breakfast then waited for Mr Berezin to finish in the bathroom.

He took forever, he always does, and came out an hour later with his big wool underpants pulled up to his armpits and the *Leningradskaya Pravda* under his arm.

“If you’re thinking of going in there, I’d wait a bit, ha, ha!”

Viktor and I looked at each other, wondering what we might find. Dad says the Red Army could use Mr Berezin as a chemical weapon, but we had no time to waste so went in anyway, noses pinched, and to save time, we brushed our teeth at the same time, squeezed over the sink.

Viktor started making faces and it was really funny because, although we’re not completely identical (I am a girl, after all!), we did look alike in the cracked bathroom mirror, and it was like being teased by a short-haired version of myself.

I burst out laughing, and to laugh you need to breathe in, so I breathed in and, like I said, Mr Berezin is like a human atomic bomb – I very nearly died from the stink!

*Stop it, Nadya! You’re not supposed to put silly things like that in a diary.*

Natalya Zhirov was waiting when we came out the bathroom (the Zhirovs are the other family, along with the Berezins, that we share the apartment with) and she had no idea why my brother and I were braying like a pair of donkeys (something else my Dad always says).

Never mind.

It was a lovely day outside, so warm it made you want to go diving in the river. Mum always says the sun in Leningrad is the most beautiful in the whole world. It hides during the winter but when it comes out in summer, there’s no beating it, she says, and I agree with her.

Good weather always puts Mum in a good mood, me too, that’s why we decided to walk to the museum instead of going on the tram like we usually do.

*[S. The Danilov’s apartment is in Leningrad, 8 Stolyarny Alley, top floor.]*

We'd hardly started walking when Viktor started moaning that it would be quicker with the tram, but Mum reminded him that a good communist is never lazy. That shut him up right away, no one cares more about being a good communist than Viktor.

It's a nice walk from our house to the museum and the streets were empty. Nearly everyone stays up late on Midsummer's Day to "make merry", Mum says

When we got to the square outside the Winter Palace, a guard greeted us and asked Mum, "Are these the famous twins, then?"

I tutted – what other twins might Mum have? – and although my brother and I look very alike, we couldn't be more different. For example, at that moment, I was looking up at the sky, admiring how the dome of the Admiralty seemed to pierce the sun, while Viktor couldn't take his eyes off the guard's rifle and shiny uniform!

We went inside the Winter Palace and Mum said, "Remember our rule. Eyes down and off you run!"

Viktor and I yelled "yes" and dashed off up the stairs, falling over each other, and into the rooms full of statues. Mum always tells us to run around the museum, partly because it's so big and takes ages to get around, and partly because, if you stop to look at everything, the time flies past.

Mum took us to see the statue of a crouching boy today. He looks so perfect you almost expect him to stand up any minute. Mum said an Italian artist called Michelangelo made the statue. Then she said Dad was waiting for us in his office and we were all going to eat together there.

Mum and Dad are both assistants to Doctor Iosif Orbeli, the director of the Hermitage. I love the office they share with all their colleagues – it used to be a ballroom, so you can imagine how big it is!

Even though it's Sunday, lots of people were busy working but when they saw us, they all rushed over to welcome us and announce that it was "time for a break!"

A lady turned on the radio for some music, Dad pulled some sandwiches out of a drawer, Viktor sat down on a gold chair and I perched on a wooden crate.

“That crate,” Dad said. “Look inside it, Nadya.”

I did what he said and I found some notebooks, just like the one I’m writing in now! There were loads of them in the crate, each with a hard red cover and a rectangle at the top, like a label, to write your name inside.

The best thing about the notebooks, though, is that the pages and the front cover all have holes down one side and a wire spiral through them to hold them together.

“They’re new,” my father explained when he saw how delighted I was. “They were sent here by mistake but Dr Orbeli thought we might be able to use them and asked if we could keep them.”

“Oh, do you think I can have one?” I asked straight away.

*[S. – Theft of state property, Art. 89.]*

Mum said no, Dad said who do you think will notice, Mum said absolutely not, so Dad said he’d already taken one to write notes in but didn’t like it because the spiral got in the way (Dad is left-handed like me, whereas Viktor and Mum are right-handed).

And with that, he ripped his notes out the notebook (he’d only used three pages!) and handed it to me and Viktor.

“You can both use it,” he said. “Keep a diary together.”

“Two people can’t write a diary,” one of Dad’s colleagues said, but I think it’s a fantastic idea.

I took the notebook and wrote my name on the front cover, Nadya that is, and Viktor wrote his. I used a blue fountain pen and Viktor a red Lapis one.

*The true communist colour!*

After that, I started writing about all the amazing things that have been happening today.

I don’t agree that spiral notebooks are no good if you’re left-handed; I actually like them because the spiral tickles my hand. Dad obviously made the whole story up as an excuse to give me the notebook. I only hope Mum isn’t too angry with him, she gave him such a nasty look!

I'm going to attach a photo that I found in one of the hallways at the Hermitage, to show what they're like.

Photo with caption: the frames are all empty because the room is being renovated.

Done.

That's enough for now, Dad has pulled out the sandwiches and I'm hungry. The grown-ups have a bottle of vodka and things are livening up. Two young clerks are dancing on the other side of the office; the woman's pleated skirt is whirling around like a spinning top.

A man with a red nose (I think he's called Garanin or something like that) is singing away to himself but his voice is awful. It's so bad a woman tells him to stop. "Quiet, Vladimir, quiet."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"The radio! Let me hear what they're saying on the ra..."

## S. – Chapter 2

*“Citizens of the Soviet Union!*

*“At 4 a.m. this morning, German troops attacked our country and their planes bombed our cities!*

*“This attack upon our nation, launched without warning, is perfidy unparalleled in the history of civilized nations and violates the treaty of non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union.*

...

*“The Soviet Government has ordered our troops to repulse the predatory assault and to drive German troops from the territory of our country. This war started today has been forced upon us, not by the German people, not by German workers, peasants and intellectuals, whose sufferings we well understand, but by the bloodthirsty Fascist rulers of Germany who have enslaved Frenchmen, Czechs, Poles, Serbians, Norwegians, Belgians, Danish, Dutch, Greek and other nations.*

...

*“It is not the first time that our people have had to deal with an attack of an arrogant foe. At the time of Napoleon's invasion of Russia our people's reply was war for the fatherland, and Napoleon suffered defeat and met his doom.*

*“It will be the same with Hitler.*

*“The government calls upon you, citizens of the Soviet Union, to rally still more closely around our glorious Bolshevist party, around our Soviet Government, around our great leader and comrade, Stalin. Ours is a righteous cause. The enemy shall be defeated. Victory will be ours.”*

*We heard this speech on the radio today, at 12 o'clock, in our parents' office at the Hermitage. I rushed to grab the notebook out of Nadya's hands so I could write it all down to remember forever.*

*It's too bad the speech was so fast. There are some bits (where I've put dots) where I couldn't keep up.*

*It's difficult to describe what happened after but, as Dad said, this is a Terrible Moment in History, and our memories need to be conserved for Posterity.*

*The person who spoke on the radio was the People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of the USSR: comrade Vyacheslva Mikhailovich Molotov.*

*He sounded very concerned on the radio. One woman in the office started to cry as we were listening, Nadya too.*

*"It's strange that Molotov gave the speech," Mr Garanin commented. "Comrade Stalin should have made such an important announcement."*

*[S. –Vladimir Garanin. Employee at Hermitage. Further investigation needed.]*

*"So?" another woman asked.*

*"Well, it must mean something. Maybe the radio's not telling us the full story."*

*"Be quiet!" the woman snapped.*

*I think she's right: Mr Garanin can't go around saying whatever he likes just because we're at war.*

*At war.*

*Hitler, the dictator in charge of Germany, has launched a surprise attack on us and we must now defend ourselves. Everything is going to change. Maybe I'll be allowed to fight, I'm nearly thirteen after all, and I'm a Young Pioneer.*

*I have to ask Dad.*

*The thing I liked most about Molotov's speech was when he said the Russian people had defeated Napoleon and it would be the same with Hitler. I bet we will.*

*Poets will write about this war for centuries. It will be the most glorious war in the whole wide world!*

My brother Viktor writes some really silly things.

There is nothing wonderful about being at war (I did cry when I heard the speech on the radio, it's just that I'm really scared).

We don't know what's going to happen but there's no doubt it's very serious. They said on the radio that the enemy has already bombed numerous cities, including Kiev and Sebastopoli, where our cousin Anna lives, and we don't know if she and the others are still alive.

Everyone is scared, even more so because Leningrad is really close to the border, as one of Dad's work colleagues quickly pointed out.

I looked for a map when I got home and I've stuck it in here.

The Soviet Union is enormous and Leningrad is on the far left, very close to Europe. The Fascist Enemy is bound to attack us first.

After Molotov's speech was over, the radio said more news would be broadcast shortly and music started playing again, only it was patriotic songs and not the music that had been on earlier.

Dr Orbeli came out of his office at that point. He looks like Grandfather Frost, the old man who brings presents to children in winter, because of his long white beard (although he has a black moustache!) and wrinkled forehead.

Mum and Dad say Dr Orbeli is the best director the museum could ever have had; he was so good at predicting problems before they happened.

He did it this time, too. "Unfortunately, it has happened," he said, as if he'd known war was going to break out sooner or later.

*[S. – Interesting. Check what information Orbeli might have had?]*

He began handing out typewritten sheets and when my father asked what they were, the director replied, "It's the evacuation plan. It is our duty, now, to save the Hermitage's treasures and make sure the enemy does not destroy them."

My brother Viktor, who sometimes forgets his place, jumped to his feet and said that, at such a tragic time, there are more important things than paintings.

Dr Orbeli took the wind right out his sails with a single look.

“There is nothing more important than culture. Men may die but art lives forever. Young people in the future will thank us for what we do now.”

Everyone went back to work and Mum came over to Viktor and me. “Do you feel up to going home alone? Mrs Berezin can make you something for dinner. Dad and I will be along later.”

I’ve never really liked Mrs Berezin, much less her husband, but it didn’t seem like a good time to be difficult.

When Viktor and I went out of the museum, there were people everywhere; the whole city seemed to have poured onto the streets. It was even worse on the tram and we saw long queues outside the shops on our journey home.

People were talking all around us and I’ve never heard the word “war” pronounced so often.

At home, we asked Mrs Berezin if she could make us dinner and she said okay, then Viktor told her the shops were open, so she rushed out with the whole family’s ration books to stock up.

Maybe we should do the same; there might be shortages because of the war which means you need to have as much of everything as possible. But Mum has all the ration books.

There’s nothing I can do so I stay here and write.

We ate with the Berezins this evening and there was only one topic of conversation at dinner. The Zhirovs ate in their room, but we heard their voices from behind the door. They must be very worried. Their son, I can hardly remember him, is a soldier somewhere.

I couldn’t stand it any more – at one point, I went off in search of some peace and quiet. I fell asleep reading my book and I’ve only just woken up. It’s almost midnight. Viktor is snoring his head off, Mum and Dad aren’t here.

Their bed is right next to ours and it’s empty.

They didn’t come home last night.

## S – Chapter 3

*24 June*

The radio says we're winning the war.

The Nazis (another name for the fascists) have decided to invade the Motherland but they weren't expecting the proud resistance of the Red Army and are now in retreat across the Russian front.

What I don't really understand is, if we are winning, why is everyone behaving as if we aren't? The queues outside the shops are so long they fill the streets; people start lining up outside the closed shutters from four o'clock in the morning.

We've been told we need to be ready for when the enemy arrives. I keep asking how he's going to get here, if we've already beaten him back at the border, but no one answers.

Young Pioneers like us are also expected to contribute to the war effort. That's why Viktor and I had to take part in a very boring drill yesterday – Mr Yashkin (the leader of our section) made us carry bucket upon bucket of water up to the top floors of the apartment buildings in our district.

"What are they for?" I asked.

"It will be easier to put out fires if there are any air raids," Mr Yashkin replied.

The drill was so boring and really hard work! Luckily, it wasn't just Viktor and I, there were other children with us, like my friend Darya who lives in the building across from ours, she's in my class at school and my squad at the Young Pioneers. We carried the buckets up and down stairs together and even managed to spill one on Boris' head. He's a bit weird. He goes to our school, is built a bit like a bear and never speaks to anyone.

When the water landed on his head he stared at me and I felt a bit sorry for him, but then Darya started laughing... so I laughed, too.

Too bad Mr Yashkin shouted at us for wasting water. He made us do more trips than the others as punishment.

Never mind.

My parents haven't been home since the war started, not until Mum arrived this morning. She had those black shadows under her eyes she gets when she doesn't sleep.

"The director gave the order to evacuate the Hermitage. That means there are trains just waiting to be filled, and your father and I have to get all the exhibits, label them, pack them up, put them into crates..."

"Does that mean there will be no more paintings in the museum?"

"We're putting them all away somewhere safe."

"Who will put us somewhere safe?" I asked before realising it was a stupid thing to say, so stupid Mum turned away without replying.

"Mrs Berezin can't look after the two of you all the time," she said instead. "Today you have to go to Uncle Dmitry's."

Uncle Dmitry is a labourer and he lives in a *barak* near the Bullet Factory.

*[S. – Dmitry, surname unknown. Bullet Factory. No record of him in our archives.]*

He's not a real relative, but Mum told us to call him Uncle (she wouldn't say why when I asked).

I wasn't in the mood to go to Uncle Dmitry's and I said so; Viktor did, too, but it didn't get us anywhere.

We put our stuff in a bag (all I took was this notebook) and went out to wait for the bus. Mum fell asleep on her feet, head leaning against the window.

I was already gazing out at Leningrad.

Viktor and I were born here – we're so lucky, it's such a beautiful city. It was founded centuries ago by a Tsar and stands at the point where the river Neva flows into the Gulf of Finland.

That means the city is surrounded by water – it's actually made up of lots of islands connected to each other. The surrounding area is full of lakes (some small, others bigger, like Lake Ladoga, which is so big it could be a sea).

Leningrad is also the city in which communism – the idea that people should all work together and have the same things – originated.

The Father of our Nation, Lenin, was exiled to Europe but sent back to Russia in a train with lead-sealed windows for fear he might speak to someone and infect the whole world with communism. Where did Lenin's train journey end? Right here in Leningrad, which is now named after him!

I'd better stop now or this diary will end up like a history book, but honestly, Leningrad is a very important city and it's now in danger: there were trucks full of people with sad faces when we got to the suburbs.

"Who are they?"

"Soldiers," Mum answered. "They're going to the front."

"Where you fight the enemy," Viktor added.

"Shouldn't they be wearing uniforms?"

Mum said they don't need uniforms and I thought, *well, a rifle at least would have been useful*. Maybe they'll be given one when they arrive.

Never mind.

The *baraks* the labourers live in are wooden huts with small vegetable plots beside them. Each *barak* has one main door, on the short end, and this opens onto a long corridor which runs all the way down the building to the other end, where the kitchens and shared bathrooms are situated. There are loads more doors on each side of the long corridor, one for each family living in the *barak*.

The strange thing is that when you knock on a door and go in, it's just one big communal space; there are no separate rooms. If a family wants to mark off its own area, it has to hang up a tablecloth or use a piece of furniture, if they have one.

The great thing about the *baraks*, though, is that all the inhabitants live together like one big family, the same as when Viktor and I sleep at the house of the Young Pioneers.

The bad thing about the *baraks* is that you can never find anywhere to be alone.

To give you an idea what they're like, I've drawn a map of a *barak* and stuck it here.

See?

Something that made me really angry happened while I was sticking on the drawing.

Before I write about it, I have to explain that Uncle Dmitry wasn't here when Viktor and I arrived, there were no grown-ups around either because all the men and women labourers have to work continuous shifts because of the war.

We had to stay with Grandma Olga, who looks after all the children in the *barak*. There's Viktor and I, we're the oldest (nearly thirteen), then four or five children who go to the same school as us but one year below, and loads of small children, even a few babies.

The thing is, I was sitting minding my own business in a corner, writing in my notebook, when Grandma Olga came over and asked me what I was doing.

"Well, it's like a diary that Viktor and I are writing together," I replied. "I do most of it, though. I write down everything that happens. All my thoughts. Secrets, too."

I've no idea why, but Grandma Olga got really angry when I said that. She started yelling that secrets are supposed to be kept secret and that one day I'll lose the notebook, someone will read it and Viktor and I, and our entire family, will be in big trouble.

[ S. – Suspicious. Verify.]

"Have you put my name in that notebook? And Dmitry's?"

"Of course not," I said.

"I don't believe you. Show me."

I didn't want to show her so I ran away.

I'm hiding now in the vegetable garden, no one knows I'm here, not even Viktor.

I have to admit my brother is strange: since war broke out, he hardly speaks to anyone any more, not even me.

I've decided I'm not going back into the *barak* until Mum comes to get us.

I don't want anyone to get their hands on my notebook.

## S – Chapter 4

26 June

Yesterday, 25<sup>th</sup> June that is, we went back to the *barak*, only Dad took us this time.

I didn't want to run the risk of Grandma Olga taking my notebook again so I left it at home. I worried about it the whole time, terrified someone (the Berezins, for instance) might find it.

Grandma Olga was right about one thing, though, secrets are meant to be kept secret.

There was this student, once, with dark eyes, who used to live on the floor below us. The police came and arrested him one night. I asked Dad what the student had done wrong, but he wouldn't tell me. Later, I overheard the women on the first floor say he hadn't known how to keep his mouth shut.

This must be a very serious crime because the student never came home.

I don't know if my notebook will contain many secrets or not, but I've decided to protect it at all costs.

*Dear sis, you're making this diary sound downright boring. We're living through the most exciting times and you're wasting time talking about Grandma Olga?*

*Just as well I'm here to write something interesting every now and then.*

*Starting with the events of last night: our first shift on fire watch!*

*Dad came to get us at the barak. He said we'd been summoned by Mr Yashkin.*

*"Summoned for what?"*

*"For your turn on fire watch!"*

*This is how it works: the enemy might try to attack the city by dropping bombs from planes, so squads of Young Pioneers are deployed on roofs every night to scan the sky and raise the alarm if they spot a plane or a fire.*

*Each group is supplied with:*

- *binoculars*
- *a hand siren*
- *a map of the city*
- *buckets of water and sacks of sand to put out any fires.*

*Unfortunately, due to a hitch of some kind, our district didn't receive any binoculars or maps.*

*[S. – Sabotage?]*

*Mr Yashkin made do with sheets of paper to write notes on and three pairs of binoculars (one pair was his own, which he uses to go birdwatching in the forest because Mr Yashkin is an ecologist; two pairs were theatre glasses that ladies use when they go to the ballet).*

*He then split us into three groups.*

*Each group was to have:*

- *a lookout, to scan the sky with the binoculars*
- *a scribe, to take notes on the location of enemy planes*
- *relays, to run and raise the alarm, or put out fires.*

*I was appointed lookout because of my razor-sharp vision. We tossed up with the other two lookouts to see who could have the good binoculars but I lost and ended up with one of the tiny opera ones, unfortunately.*

*I appointed Nadya as my scribe (obviously, she never stops writing!) and Mr Yashkin saddled us with Darya, her brother Stepan and a boy called Boris as relays. Boris is strong as an ox but a bit slow and doesn't try very hard, that's why I don't like him.*

*"Where should we station ourselves, sir?" I asked Mr Yashkin.*

*"Come with me," he said.*

*He took us to the building across the street, up ten flights of stairs and out onto the roof terrace, where the women hang out their washing; we couldn't move for sheets.*

*The people who live in the building complimented us for being so brave and brought us pillows and old blankets. One woman left us a small spirit stove and a kettle to make tea. They all urged us to keep our eyes open.*

*"It's not a game," Mr Yashkin said before he left.*

*We are well aware it's not a game. The fate of Leningrad is in our hands!*

*The first thing to do was explore the roof. The second was to build a shelter; it gets damp at night and our watch was until eight the next morning. We were going to be there for a long time.*

*We inspected every inch of the roof terrace and eventually decided that the best place was the northern corner. There was a chimney pot I could climb up to get a good view of the sky. The others could easily wait down below it.*

*Nadya and Darya laid out the blankets and Boris lit the stove. Stepan tied a sheet between two washing lines to make a sort of roof, and when it was all ready, I climbed up to my spot on the chimney.*

*"Ready, Viktor?" Nadya asked.*

*"Ready, Nadya?"*

*"You tell me where the planes are and I'll write!"*

*"Great." I got into position with the binoculars.*

*"What can you see?"*

*"The sky," I replied. "Sky, sky and more sky."*

*"Anything else?"*

*"There's something over there!"*

*It turned out to be just a cloud.*

*"There's something tiny right there!"*

*This time it was a swallow.*

*"Anything else?"*

*"Sky, sky and more sky."*

*"Oh well," Nadya said. "The important thing is to keep your eyes open."*

*The binoculars were mother-of-pearl with a handle on the side to make them easier to hold. They were very pretty but you couldn't see much through them.*

*Not that there was anything to see!*

*Just sky, all pearly grey even though it was the middle of the night. The flat and empty sky. Away in the distance, on my right, I could see smoke from the factories. A few birds in flight. The cloud I'd spotted earlier. Nothing else.*

*"Can I have the binoculars for a bit?" Nadya asked.*

*"I'm the lookout."*

*It was my duty, I couldn't give them away to a mere scribe.*

*Hey, I'm not a "mere" scribe! I'm your sister!*

*It was pretty boring, though.*

*Nadya and Darya started talking about girls' stuff at one point. Stepan had curled up in a corner and fallen asleep.*

*I was tired, too, but I couldn't fall asleep with the fate of the city on my shoulders!*

*"Do you want some tea?" Boris asked.*

*It was the first time he'd ever spoken to me.*

*Boris is odd. He's always by himself at school, gets terrible marks and whenever we make teams for football, he always gets left out. Even though he could be the best player of the lot – he's so big.*

*"No thanks," I said.*

*"It'll keep you awake."*

*I decided to come down from the chimney. The two of us moved to the edge of the roof, near the eaves, so I could still keep watch as I drank my tea.*

*"It's good."*

*"I make it all the time at home," he replied. I thought that was unusual because Mum and Dad never let me or Nadya make the tea.*

*"Why do you make it?"*

*"My mum can't cook, so I do it."*

*We stood in silence. My sister and Darya joined us after a bit.*

*“Where’s Stepan?”*

*“He’s sleeping.”*

*“Can we have tea, too?”*

*“Here.”*

*“Any sugar?”*

*“I don’t have any.”*

*“It’s okay, it tastes fine without sugar.”*

*“Great, thanks.”*

*“What’s going to happen now?”*

*“They say we’re winning the war.”*

*“Bull,” Boris muttered.*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“We’re not winning. We’re losing. Do you remember what Molotov said on the radio? Hitler and Stalin had made an agreement, but Hitler betrayed us and attacked anyway. We weren’t ready, the Germans had surprise on their side. And they have the best army in the world. Everyone knows that.”*

*“The Red Army is the best army!” I answered.*

*“We don’t even have rifles!” Boris said. “We’re not a real army, just peasants and labourers sent to fight. The Nazis are experts.”*

*I jumped to my feet. “What you’re saying, that’s... that’s... treason!”*

*[S. – Boris. Surname? Patronymic? Add to inquiry.]*

*“It’s the truth,” Boris said. “The Nazis use the blitzkrieg method, lightning war it’s called. They’ll be here in a few days and they’ll attack the city. That’s why your parents at the Hermitage are evacuating the museum. That’s why we’re here on this roof. To raise the alarm when the enemies arrive.”*

*Boris was far too full of himself for my liking – I wanted to punch him.*

*Instead, I turned to walk away.*

*“Where are you going?” Nadya asked.*

*“To the toilet,” I replied. “I must’ve drunk too much tea.”*

*The truth is, I didn’t want to get into a fight. But I did need to go to the lavatory, though. I opened the roof door and went onto the stairs.*

*It was dark, so I started to feel my way down. The toilets weren’t on the top floor, or the next floor down, so I went down yet another floor. I started to think I should’ve done it on the roof terrace.*

*I finally came across an open door and realized I’d found the toilets. I went in and did what I had to do.*

*VIKTOR!*

*It wasn’t actually Nadya’s voice I heard. In truth, it wasn’t anyone’s voice, more like goose bumps, a tingling feeling warning me that my sister needed me.*

*Do me a favour! I was only wondering where you’d gone!*

*Mum says it happens sometimes to twins. They have a very special bond because they’re born at the same time and grow up together. I’ve always wondered how she knows that, considering she’s an only child.*

*In any case, I raced up the stairs, taking them as fast as I could, and when I burst out onto the terrace, Nadya was shouting, “Planes! Over there, look! Are those planes?”*

*I grabbed the binoculars. I saw them, too.*

*They were dots, no bigger than insects. Flying in formation. I adjusted the binoculars slightly. I couldn’t see if there were any markings on the wings, but there was a chance they were enemy planes.*

*“Nadya,” I said, calm as can be. “Take a note of their position. Over in that direction there’s the hay market, if I’m not mistaken, and the planes are heading northeast. Towards the Nevsky Prospekt.”*

*“Hay market. Nevsky. Got it.”*

*“Come on, then,” I cried. “Let’s raise the alarm. Planes flying over the city!”*

*While Darya ran to wake up her brother, Nadya, Boris and I dashed down the stairs.*

*We started yelling and knocking on doors, then went out into the street and ran all the way to Mr Yashkin's house.*

*He opened the door in his nightshirt and by the time he got into the street and looked up at the sky, the planes had already gone.*

*"Are you sure?" he asked.*

*"Definitely," I replied.*

*"Uhm," he said. "Well, we had better submit a report. I'll take care of it, you go back to your positions." He said nothing for a few seconds then added, "I bet those devils were on a reconnaissance mission. When they come back to Leningrad, they'll meet their match, you can be sure of that!"*

*We thanked him; I even did the military salute.*

*I hope Mr Yashkin tells everyone how heroic we were.*

*They may even give me a medal.*

## S – Chapter 5

*27 June*

The city committee declared martial law today, Mr Berezin told us at breakfast.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means Leningrad is officially at war. The old laws no longer apply and there are lots of new ones which we all have to abide by from now on.”

In effect, there are an awful lot of new laws. For example, it's now forbidden to go out at night, and if the police stop you and you don't have special permit, you could be arrested. It's called a curfew.

“Does that mean we won't be able to do fire watch any more?” Viktor asked.

“No, that's different. You'll be given a special permit for that. But be careful you don't lose it.”

Another of the new laws is that all men and women aged over sixteen have been called up to entrench the city. Mum and Dad are already spending nearly all their time at the Hermitage, and from now on they're also going to have to do special daily shifts to dig trenches, build barricades, put up barbed wire fences and other things like that.

Viktor is really annoyed that the new law is only for people who're already sixteen because he wanted to take part.

On the plus side, we have another lookout on the roofs tonight.

I'd much rather be asleep in my own bed.

Here's one of the leaflets they were handing out in Leningrad today!

*28 June*

Our house: when you come in, there's a long corridor piled high with the Zhirovs' old furniture because this flat used to be theirs (they were very rich) before the Communist Revolution (I wasn't born yet).

The corridor has a door on the right into the Zhirovs' room, and a door on the left that takes you into the room we share with the Berezins. It used to be one big living room but now it's split into two by a wooden partition that almost goes up to the ceiling.

Our room is nice because it has my parents' bed and the bed where Viktor and I sleep, a stove, a small wardrobe and piles of books everywhere – on the floor, on top of the wardrobe, around the edges of the room; they're even built up into a kind of wall between my bed and Mum and Dad's, giving us somewhere to put things, like a night light or alarm clock.

When you go back out of our room and into the corridor, there's another door at the bottom into the kitchen, which is really small but has a long table and a window. The bathroom is off the kitchen.

Mum always says we're lucky to have an inside toilet.

In our family there are four of us; there are three Berezins (Mr and Mrs Berezin plus Anastasia, who's twenty-two); and five Zhirovs (the grandparents, Natalya and her husband, and Yulian, who's one and a half and cries all the time. I haven't counted Natalya's brother, as he's a soldier and hasn't lived here for ages).

I'm writing all this to explain that, since there are lots of us in the house, there's always someone around and always noises to be heard – voices, people cooking, the Zhirovs' stove whistling, someone in the bathroom, and someone waiting their turn to go into the bathroom, and so on.

It's a nice house because you never feel alone.

Until this morning, when Viktor and I got back, at eight o'clock, from our lookout shift.

"We're here!" Viktor shouted.

"We're back!" I said.

But it was all quiet in the house.

The Zhirovs' door is shut and we can't hear any voices behind it, not even Yulian crying. The Berezins have gone out. The kitchen light is off and the bathroom door is wide open.

It's so quiet I can almost hear the blood pulsing through my body and I'm happy that at least I've got Viktor with me.

I wonder how people who don't have a twin manage.

## S – Chapter 6

*30 June*

They're sending us away.

I can't believe it.

They're sending us away.

*1 July*

I couldn't bring myself to write anything yesterday, I cried nearly all day.

Everything seemed to be going alright.

It was Sunday the other day, so Viktor and I put on our uniforms, red neck ties and stars and went to the House of Young Pioneers.

All our friends were there, along with Mr Yashkin, who's old so hasn't been called up.

"We need to be ready for the hard times ahead," he said. "So, today we're going to do gas mask drills!"

A gas mask is a rubber cap that covers your face. It has two big eyes to see out of and a funny-looking trunk with a filter at the end to clean the air.

"If the enemy drops a gas bomb, you could choke to death. A gas mask could save your life because it lets air in but keeps the poisonous gas out."

"Ooh," we said.

"But it must be worn and used properly, and the instructions followed carefully."

Mr Yashkin spent about half an hour showing us how to put the mask on but when I tried it later, everything he'd said had gone right out my head.

"It smells horrible!" I cried. It was difficult to breathe and I could hardly see a thing out of the big eye pieces.

"You'll get used to it," Mr Yashkin replied. He took a photo of us.

(Viktor is first from the left, wearing a checked shirt; I'm in the middle. We look funny, don't we?)

It turned out to be a fun day. At night, we did another lookout on the roof and this time we were better organised. Darya brought an elastic band to play at *rezinochki*. My brother and Boris accepted to have the elastic band around their knees, so Darya and I could jump over the stretched bit and do lots of acrobatics.

We never saw any planes.

*[ S. – Absenting oneself from wartime duties, Art. 82. Breach of watch rules (perhaps) under Art. 257]*

Anyway, we were tired when we got home on Monday morning (yesterday) and thought that there would be nobody home, but Mum and Dad were waiting for us.

You could tell right away that something was wrong because they both looked so serious.

“What’s wrong?”

“Come here,” Dad said. “Let’s have breakfast.”

They’d laid out a proper feast in the kitchen. There were cheese pastries, fried eggs and ravioli, which are my favourite.

But instead of being happy about all the delicious things to eat, I was scared, because Mum’s eyes were red, and it was like there was a black cloud hovering in the air.

“What’s wrong?” Viktor asked. “You’re scaring me.”

That’s when I realized he could feel it, too, so I went over to him and squeezed his hand. Dad said, “Sit down, eat.”

“Tell us what’s wrong first.”

Mum said, “Later.”

“Now.”

So they told us that...

*It’s probably better if I take it from here.*

*It was obvious that Dad didn't know where to start, so he pointed to the band he was wearing around his arm.*

*He explained that it was the symbol of the People's Militia, a voluntary citizen's army, set up so that Russia would be protected by its inhabitants!*

*"Does that mean you've signed up?"*

*"More or less."*

*"So you'll be going to fight? Like the soldiers in the Red Army?"*

*"I have been ordered to and it's my duty," he replied. "For our country."*

*At that point, my sister Nadya erupted, "But Boris said there aren't even any rifles for real soldiers! What will you fight with?"*

*"With whatever they give me. You don't always need a rifle to fight." He said it really quietly, under his breath. As if it were something he'd thought long and hard about.*

*"If you fight, you could die, couldn't you?" Nadya asked.*

*I pinched her. Of course he could die. That's what happens in war.*

*"I promise I'll try not to," he replied.*

*He smiled. He seemed proud, but also a bit tired. Or maybe something else...*

*It was resignation.*

*"Dad will be leaving in five days," Mum explained.*

*"We don't know exactly where he'll be sent."*

*"But the radio said we're winning!"*

*"You need to fight to win."*

*"But the radio said..."*

*"Nadya, what you hear on the radio is not always the truth," Dad said.*

*He stopped and looked at Mum*

*It was like he was asking for help.*

*and she added, "Dad will be gone in five days. I'll be staying at the Hermitage. They need me. We have to protect all the artworks, and like Orbeli said, the museum must be evacuated. It's my duty. Just like it's your father's duty to fight."*

*Mum and Dad looked at each other.*

*That's when they told us.*

*Nadya and I have to go away.*

The city committee has laid on special trains, they call them the "children's trains". They're going to take us far away from Leningrad.

"It's for your own safety."

"We want to stay here with you!"

"You can't stay with me," Mum said. "It will be dangerous, and I have to work in the museum."

"And I won't be here any more," Dad said.

That's when I realized there will be no more us.

"You can't send us away."

"They'll attack the city. It will be bombarded."

"But the radio says we're winning and that can't be a lie, too."

"Nadya..."

"You can't send us away. Please..."

"You have to go. You'll be safe. The trains will take you as far away as they can from the front, near the Ural Mountains, where the enemy will never get you. It'll be like a holiday. Then when you get back, we'll all be together again."

"The war won't last long," Mum said. "If you ask me, you'll only just have got there and it'll be time to come back again."

"You and Viktor probably won't even get off the train."

"Mr Yashkin will be with you, as well as all your friends from school and from the Young Pioneers."

Dad smiled. "The Urals are wonderful at this time of year. Maybe they'll let you camp out and Mr Yashkin will take you climbing. I'm sure it'll be great."

"You'll have fun."

"And we'll have a big party when you get back."

Oh!

I don't know why I'm even writing all the silly things Mum and Dad said in this notebook. I know it's all lies. Lies, lies, lies. You could tell from their faces and their red eyes, it was just a fib, fabrications and fairy tales.

*What a pack of lies!*

The truth is, they've decided to send us miles away, and it's not true the war will be over quickly, and it's not true we'll be home really soon and that we'll all be together.

There is no more Us.

Dad is going to fight, Mum is staying in her beloved museum, Leningrad is going to be attacked, and my brother and I will be alone.

Alone.

ALONE!

"Nadya, Viktor," Dad said. "You need to be strong and brave and get on that train. It's the right thing to do, it's your duty, just like I have mine and Mum has hers. Make us proud."

That was a lie, too.

*Night-time, 1 July*

Mum and Dad had to work today, so Mum went away to the Hermitage and Dad to the suburbs to build barricades.

They promised to be home for seven, but they didn't come so Viktor and I had breakfast leftovers for dinner and waited for them to come home. The house was like a cold and empty shell.

We fell asleep together on the big bed. I couldn't stop trembling, I was so uptight, but with Viktor beside me, I managed to sleep.

I woke up all of a sudden, a little before midnight, and saw Dad sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands.

When he realized I was awake, he smiled and pretended nothing was wrong.

“Dad” I mumbled, “tell me what’s happening.”

Viktor had also woken up by then, so all three of us sat up together on the bed.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll try.”

He heaved a deep and worrisome sigh. “The next few days, perhaps even months, will be extremely difficult. We have to separate, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep at night thinking of you two so far away, and for worrying about your mum. I will pray that you are safe every single second. Terrible things happen at war. I know you think you already know that, but you don’t. But...” He let out another heavy sigh. “Compared to everyone else, you two are lucky. You are twins, you look out for each other and you can always stay together. That will make things so much easier.”

Dad stood up and pulled a canvas bag out from under the bed. He opened it and there were five exercise books inside, just like the one I’m writing in now, all with the same red cover and spiral.

“Doctor Orbeli let me take them for you. You can write about everything that happens to you while we’re apart. Then when we meet again, your mum and I can read them and find out what you got up to. It will be like we never separated.” He picked up the books and gave them to me, solemnly. “Promise?”

*[ S. – Further theft of State property (perhaps), under Art. 89]*

“Of course, we promise,” I said.

Then Viktor added, “We promise to stay together, always.”

He took my hand.

And I squeezed his as tight as I could.

## S – Chapter 7

*2 July*

We're leaving tomorrow at dawn. We don't know where they'll send us, but Mum says the city committee has thought of everything and will tell us where we're going when the time's right but most importantly, they'll tell our parents, so they can write to us.

Mum thinks one hundred thousand children have already left from Leningrad, a lot of them very young, so we're not to worry.

I know she's right and I wish I wasn't so scared, but the truth is I am, and a lot. I've never been away from Leningrad, I've never been away from home, and I've never been to the Ural Mountains.

I'm scared I won't be happy there, and I'm scared I'll want to come home but won't be able to. I'm also scared something bad will happen to Mum and Dad.

Viktor is pretending everything's alright, but I know he's just as worried as me. I saw him looking at the atlas earlier, trying to work out where these Ural Mountains are. He was following the course of rivers and the crests of mountains, his forehead all wrinkled, the way it is when he's about to do something difficult.

Never mind.

Mum woke us at five o'clock this morning and asked us to come with her. Since it's been raining solid for two days, she had us put our rain capes on.

"Are we going to the museum?" I asked, still half asleep, but Mum very chirpily replied, "No, I asked for the day off to be with you. We're going shopping."

We went to our district shop and even though it was still closed, loads of people were already queuing up outside, more than thirty, the umbrellas they were all holding like a row of black flowers.

Most were women, and they all had straw baskets or fabric bags for their groceries; one even had a wheelbarrow and a thick stack of ration books.

As soon as they saw us, it was one long chorus of “Oh, what lovely twins” here, “what lovely twins” there. Then they started grumbling.

“The shop didn’t open until midday yesterday,” one lady said. “And there was nothing left on the shelves.”

“People are buying up everything.”

“The storerooms are empty.”

“There’s nothing left.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Their conversations were a little depressing, so we stopped listening to them and started talking to Mum. She wanted to know everything we’d been up to the past few days, including the fact that I’d argued with Grandma Olga about my notebook, down at the *barak*, and that Viktor had been in the lavatory when I saw a plane.

In the meantime, it was getting late, the rain was getting heavier and the shop still hadn’t opened. Viktor started huffing and puffing. “Why do all three of us have to queue? You could have left us sleeping at home then woken us up when you’d done the shopping.”

“We don’t have much time left together,” Mum replied. “I don’t want to leave you alone even for a second today!”

Then she asked if we could give her the biggest present ever – would we write her a letter before we left, so she would have something to keep while we are away and not miss us so much.

(I’ve written mine already and put it beside her bed).

The shop finally opened, and we went in, although only a few people at a time.

Unfortunately, there was nothing left inside. The shop assistant, a kind girl who lives at the end of our road, told Mum she had nothing to give her and that she should come back another day, but Mum leaned over the counter and said, “Please.”

Again, the girl said, “I would if I could, but there’s really nothing left.”

Mum insisted, “I’m begging you, they’re leaving tomorrow, I can’t send them away with nothing to eat.”

The girl stopped to think for a second, then gestured to us to follow her into the back shop.

It was all dark and musty but there were several big boxes, a few baskets of rye bread and some shelves of tinned food.

Mum gave the girl our ration books and bought all the bread she could, also some tins, a bag of flour and one of sugar. We left the shop loaded up like packhorses.

We took all the food home, but Mum kept half a loaf of bread and some tins in her bag and we went out again.

“Where are we going now?” Viktor asked.

“To buy some more things,” Mum replied.

We always do our shopping in the same district shop where we’re registered; I didn’t know you could buy things elsewhere.

“Trust me.”

We took the tram to the suburbs then Mum asked some people for directions, whispering, but they all shook their heads until one woman eventually pointed us to a park with lots of trees. We went into it and saw some tarpaulin sheets hanging over trees to provide shelter from the rain, blankets laid out on the muddy grass and people waiting with their backs against the tree trunks.

*[S. – Black market. Location: Udelnaya?]*

“You two wait here,” Mum said.

She went over to a fat man in a leather jacket (in the summer! I suppose it was raining!) and said something to him. She moved away from him and went over to someone else, then to someone else and someone else. When she’d spoken to them all, she went back to the start and spoke to them all again, this time showing them a black velvet pouch.

I know that pouch well – it’s where Mum keeps all her “gold”, namely a necklace Dad gave her when they got engaged and a pair of silver earrings with a sparkly stone.

In the end, the fat man took the necklace and gave her a fabric bag filled to the brim and Mum came back over to me and Viktor, smiling.

“What did you buy?” my brother asked.

“Some things for you,” she said, opening the bag and pulling out a bar of chocolate wrapped in shiny paper. “It comes from abroad,” she explained, “and it’s really, really good. I also got some other things you’ll need for your trip.”

*[S. – Purchase of contraband goods, Art. 78]*

We got the tram home but, on the way, we stopped at the museum and went into a giant hall covered in frescoes and had a picnic sitting on the floor, with the bread and tins Mum had put in her bag; she’d obviously planned everything.

“I wanted to eat in the park,” she said, “but it’s too wet.”

“It’s much nicer here,” I said.

We went home after lunch and she’s in the kitchen now, making biscuits, because she says it’ll be a long trip tomorrow and we’ll be hungry. Viktor and I are in our room packing our bags.

I don’t feel like doing it. I tried to put it off until the last minute by writing the letter for her then describing everything we did today, but I can’t put it off any longer, I have to do it now.

*Later*

I packed my bags, or rather, I put all my things into a blue checked haversack, and Viktor did the same.

Stuff in my bag:

- my favourite dress, the smart polka-dot one;
- two hair ribbons;
- my Young Pioneers uniform, with the red neck tie and red star badge;
- the notebooks Dad gave me;
- Dad’s fountain pen and seven or eight ink cartridges (he said I could take them!);

- four red Lapis pens – Viktor likes to write with them;
- the biggest book I could find in the house, which is *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy;
- a photo of Mum when she was young.

I thought about it then decided to stick the photo in here, so I don't lose it! Mum is really pretty, isn't she?

In his bag, Viktor put:

*Let me write for a bit.*

*My bag contains:*

- *a clean shirt;*
- *my favourite book, Russian Endgame by Ilya Rabinovich, the chess master (he's from Leningrad like me, I'm going to be a chess master someday, too!)*
- *a bear's tooth.*

My turn now.

Mum asked to see both our bags and she said we'd done a good job, although she took out my favourite dress and put in some footwraps, a heavy wool jumper, some gloves and a hat. She did the same for Viktor and said that we should wear our heaviest clothes and coats to travel.

I asked why, given that it's summer now and they say the war will be over really soon, but she said it's better to be prepared.

I said she must think we'll be away for a long time and can't bring herself to tell us.

I got really angry and scrunched up the letter I'd written for her.

*Later, at night*

We had our last dinner here at home and I'd like to say it was a nice, happy dinner but it wasn't. Viktor and I shouted and cried all the way through it.

To begin with, they told me my friend Darya WON'T be leaving with us tomorrow, or her brother Stepan, or Mr Yashkin.

Apparently, Mr Yashkin thinks leaving Leningrad is for cowards and has decided to stay, while Darya's parents want her and Stepan to stay with their family for a few more days.

"That means we could stay a bit longer, too!" I cried.

"Yes, but it's safer to leave now," Dad replied.

"Dad has to join the Militia – it's better if you are already away when that happens."

That's when Viktor got angry. "You want rid of us!"

"I'm not leaving!" I screamed.

We started arguing and didn't stop, not even when the Zhirovs came into the kitchen. Mum jumped to her feet at one point and ran to the bathroom, and when she came back in again you could see she'd been crying.

I feel really sad for her, but I'm really sad for me, too.

Why can't we leave in a few days with Darya?

Or why can't we stay at home with Mum, to keep her company when Dad leaves?

Why, why, why?

*Later, middle of the night*

It's three in the morning – Mum and Dad's bed is empty but I can hear them speaking in hushed tones in the kitchen, quietly so the other people in the house won't hear.

I get up, tiptoe down the hall and stop just before the door, which is slightly ajar, clutching my notebook to my chest.

"You'll see, it will all be okay," Dad says.

"I'm scared," Mum says. "For them and for you."

"We'll manage," Dad replies, "and they'll be fine. You'll see. They'll be together. Nadya has Viktor to rely on, and Viktor has Nadya."

I hear Mum start to cry and I go away, although I realize Dad is right. I have my brother, that's why I'm not so scared at the thought of leaving tomorrow.

Dear Mum,

You asked us to write you a letter for when we'll be far away. Here it is. I don't know where to start, though... I asked Viktor to help me but he's studying his atlas and told me not to bother him. If you ask me, he's worried about leaving tomorrow. You know what he's like – when he's scared he acts all hard, like a rock.

Never mind, I've thought of what I can write.

Since you'll probably be sad when you read this, I'm going to make a list of happy things you can do until we're all back together again.

Don't you think it's a fantastic idea?

So, here's Nadya's list of fun things to make you happy:

- Go to the public baths for a sauna, but stay away from the fat lady who does the massages. (Do you remember the time she nearly broke my arm? It was so sore!!!)
- Sit on the banks of the Neva, throw a stone and try to make it bounce three times across the water.
- Have a glass of vodka! I've never tried it but Mr Yashkin says it works wonders, and he should know, he usually has three or four glasses.
- Make cheese pastries and eat them all yourself.
- Jump down the hallway in our house, but only stepping on the black tiles.
- Read Pushkin's fairy tales and do all the different voices.
- Lie on the big bed with your arms and legs out to take up all the space and imagine you're the blanket fairy.
- Imagine you're giving us one of your really big hugs.
- Write Viktor and me a letter every day until we arrive in the Urals. Then maybe I'll have something nice to think about if I feel sad because you're not there.

I love you Mum, Viktor, too.

We don't want to go.

Don't forget us.

Yours, Nadya