

Dining on Ashes

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On the first day, Larisa's shoes clacked on the pavement as she skipped through a throng of university students. She was with her parents, both stalwart professors that survived the political purge, and the cafe they dined at teemed with poetry and violins.

Their tea was interrupted by the news.

On the second day her parents eased her worries, telling her that the Germans were too far away from the city to pose a threat toward either her or Milashka, the bobtail cat sharing her pillow.

Larisa's dreams were filled with the usual purrs.

On the third day, she fled to her parents' bed as the bombers destroyed the food warehouses. Huddled by the window of their flat, the three of them watched the distant fires lick the horizon as tons of wheat, sugar, and butter burned.

On the sixty-third day, her father was drafted into the Leningrad People's Militia Army and sent to the South near Riga. His combat unit was comprised of steel workers and expendable intellectuals. Their mission: to recapture several train lines from an enemy tank division so the city could get desperately needed food.

On the one hundred and thirty-eighth day, Larisa's aunt moved in. The stout, scowling woman hauled her battered luggage while slinging archaic curses at Milashka. Apparently she didn't like it when cats nuzzled her leg.

"She just wants *pets*, Aunt Dina..." Larisa implored, snatching up Milashka from her figure-eight pattern of affection.

"I suppose you use your ration card to feed it, too." Aunt Dina grumbled as she unloaded potatoes from her suitcases. "Well, no more. The thing can catch mice outside. How long since your mother left the bedroom?"

"Last week..."

Aunt Dina's scowl reached a new stage of grim. Larisa's mother had gotten a letter last Monday, took it into the bedroom to open it alone, and had yet to emerge from behind the locked door.

On the two hundred and first day, her mother died. Aunt Dina carried the withered body out of the bedroom with more ease than she had with her luggage

when she first arrived. Wrapped in a sheet, Larisa couldn't fathom how the bundle of stiff bones could have been her mother, and she silently helped Aunt Dina pull the sled that carried the body to the cemetery.

It cost four potatoes to have her buried.

On the two hundred and sixty-third day, Larisa saw a girl sitting on the playground equipment in the park at the center of the residential buildings. The child shared the bars with a murder of calm crows.

It was before dawn and Larisa had taken Milashka out to hunt for mice.

She waved to the girl, and the girl waved back.

The crows didn't move.

On the three hundred and seventh day, a well-fed policeman came to the flat. He accused Aunt Dina of not reporting a death in the family in order to falsify an extra ration card. It was a crime punishable by death, but it was also a crime easily overlooked with a monthly bribe of salt and vodka.

"We have a deal, then. Consider yourself fortunate," he said with a magnanimous cock of his head. "Liberation from Moscow will be this month. Perhaps this week. So I suppose it matters little."

On the three hundred and twenty-sixth day, Larisa didn't celebrate her birthday.

On the four hundred and ninety-ninth day, they burned their last shred of available furniture in the fireplace; Milashka skinned and boiling above it in a cast iron pot.

Larisa was too numb from stifling hunger to cry.

On the five hundred and twelfth day, Larisa saw the girl on the playground through the window. Larisa's frame weighed too little to make the floorboards creak as she crept passed her sleeping aunt. Upon fetching her coat, Larisa slid into it so easily it seemed to belong to another person.

She shuffled her way down the stairs that wrapped around the derelict elevator. Within the lift, as if a caged animal, sat an old twig of a woman with her hands out. She had appeared there days ago and all she ever said was "bread..."

when someone wandered by. The word itself sounded heavy as it cracked through her sallow lips.

Outside, the snow was nearly untouched save the tracks that led to the playground equipment. Larisa placed her own feet in the tracks, following the footsteps precisely until she reached their owner at the crest of the jungle gym. This prompted the crows to casually flee.

Unsure of what to do, Larisa just waved again. The girl returned the gesture, her hands healthy and full of color.

“You must have food,” Larisa said, transfixed.

“I do,” she replied, her eyes as pale as the blue base of a flame.

“How?”

“I can show you. But not now. And never here. Look for me again.”

On the five hundred and twenty-first day, the old woman in the elevator cage died. Only Larisa noticed because the woman didn't even have enough meat on her bones to reek as she rotted.

On the five hundred and twenty-fourth day, the old woman's body was gone.

On the five hundred and twenty-fifth day, the girl was perched on the playground again with a single crow at her side. Larisa wandered out to her, tracing her steps perfectly once again.

“Hello,” the girl said. “I brought you something. Do not share it.” Reaching down she handed Larisa a warm bundle containing a jar of stew and an elegant spoon.

Larisa didn't even say thank you as she hurried back. Hiding under the apartment stairwell, she devoured it so ferociously she chipped her teeth on the spoon. Smashing the jar against the brick wall, Larisa licked the shards clean until she cut her tongue.

Later she was sick, black liquid bursting from her bowels, but she didn't care.

On the five hundred and ninety-second day, Aunt Dina was too sick to get out of bed. Larisa tended to her as best she could but even atrophied, her aunt was too heavy to roll for cleaning.

On the six hundred and second day, the thunder of mortars to the South pounded through the night like never before, and Larisa couldn't sleep due to their intensifying rhythm. All the signs in the city had been painted white by the City Defence Brigade in case the Germans made it through.

On the six hundred and fifth day, the little girl was on the playground again. Larisa ran out to her, ignoring the tracks, carrying her favorite book of nursery rhymes.

"I didn't thank you for the stew before," Larisa apologized timidly as her stomach growled with optimism. "but I brought you my best book of fairy tales. I wouldn't let Aunt Dina burn it."

The girl took it, her warm fingers gliding through the pages as her pale eyes gazed over the words and illustrations.

"Thank you," the girl said. "Is your Aunt nice?"

"As nice as she can afford to be."

"Then give her this..." from a satchel at her side, the girl produced several jars of stew.

Larisa spewed her gratitude over her shoulder frantically as she ran back inside.

Warming them on the oven, the house filled with the joyous and rare smell of hearty food. Using her mother's finest kitchenware, Larisa carried a bowl to Aunt Dina. The scent was pungent enough to draw the ill woman into the waking world by the nose.

Vacantly, Aunt Dina looked at the steaming bowl of stew as if to process an impossible vision. Her scowl suddenly returned with more energy and animation than Larisa had ever seen. The woman howled as she lashed out at the bowl and sent it shattering to the floor. Unable to find coherent words, Aunt Dina screeched and hissed in such a feral manner that Larisa fled the room and shut the door behind her.

Larisa had heard of the starvation madness that had overtaken some. Usually nothing was to be done except wait out the sickness until the person died. Such people were often imprisoned or simply shot in the street by the police.

Fearing her aunt, Larisa didn't dare enter again.

On the six hundred and eighth day, Larisa was certain her Aunt Dina was dead.

On the six hundred and twenty-seventh day, the policeman came to collect.

“Where’s your Aunt?”

“Sick. In bed. I can get your salt and vodka.”

He glared at the door in the hallway as Larisa bundled his bribe in a pillowcase like a bride in white.

On the six hundred and thirty-fourth day, Larisa took her three ration cards to the post office for renewal. Once in line, several boys charged her from both sides and wrestled her cards away as she bit at them.

None of the adults helped. They only clutched their own cards tighter and backed away. A policeman appeared and shot one of the boys in the chest prompting the others to run.

Her cards were gone. She cried.

“That’s what you get for hoarding cards!” the policeman said. “Now run! If I see you again I’ll shoot you, too!”

Larisa nearly tripped over the bleeding, wheezing boy; bloody bubbles blooming from his nose.

On the six hundred and thirty-sixth day, Larisa was ready to die. Where to do it was her main concern. The old lady had died in the elevator. Her mother had died in her bedroom. Her father had died at the front. Aunt Dina had died in her parent’s bed. Milashka had died on the cutting board in the kitchen. Surely there were better places to die than these.

Larisa trudged out to the playground under the stars, climbed the bars, and sat. It wasn’t snowing yet, so she knew her body wouldn’t have to wait until the snow melted to be moved. Her only remaining wish was that someone would notice she had died.

Last spring, when the snow and ice melted, mounds of dead bodies were revealed, their mass frozen too hard to chip at with a shovel until the rains came. She didn’t want to be like the men and women who paused at a city bench to gather their strength, only to stay there until first thaw. She didn’t want to be a tiny, sheet-wrapped bundle on a child’s sled abandoned at the cemetery gate.

“It’s dark and cold,” said the girl from the edge of the playground, her blue eyes vibrant as the stars above. “Are you hungry?”

“Not anymore,” Larisa said.

The girl nodded in understanding. She then climbed the jungle gym, sat next to Larisa, and put a warm arm around her. They observed the night together, breath huffing, until Larisa fell asleep.

On the six hundred and fifty-eighth day, Larisa awoke in her bed. Flutterings of memory dotted her mind, but they refused to arrange or congeal into anything tangible. She could only remember hands, warmth, swallowing, and nursery rhymes being read to her. The past weeks were a fragmented landscape of sensations.

Weak, but able, she shuffled her feet to the floor and wandered to the hallway of her flat. Her parent’s bedroom door was open, the bed gone and the floor polished clean.

Larisa realized her stomach wasn’t hurting and her toes weren’t freezing. Hands against the wall, she guided her body to the kitchen. The stove was on, the burner’s blue flame tickling a pot of meaty stew. Peering past the simmering meal, Larisa saw the girl sitting on the rug by the fire. She had the policeman’s cap in her hands.

Too numb to feel the sensation of horror, Larisa looked back to the pot on the stove.

“What are you?” she croaked to the girl.

“Alive.” Placing the cap into the fire, the girl stood and leveled her cool gaze to Larisa. “As are you.”

On the six hundred and sixty-fourth day, Larisa and Dola walked down the street holding hands, searching for the tired and sickly.

On the six hundred and seventy-ninth day, Larisa and Dola found the boys who attacked Larisa in the ration line. Before it was over, the boys begged to make amends by returning the ration cards.

Larisa no longer got sick from Dola’s stew.

On the seven hundred and eighth day, Larisa's coat fit comfortably once again. Dola warned that being healthy meant they had to stay hidden. Healthy looking people were suspicious and often attacked on sight by the police or those succumbing to starvation madness.

On the eight hundred and thirty-third day, Larisa made dinner for Dola for the first time. It was delicious and filling. They dined by candlelight in an abandoned mansion that served as a poet's retreat near the river's mouth.

On the eight hundred and fifty-sixth day, Policemen strolled through the streets announcing that the German line was cracking and relief was coming.

On the eight hundred and seventy-second day, Larisa and Dola set fire to their flat and burned the entire building. All the other residents were dead and the piles of bones, shoes, brooches, and coats in the surrounding flats were too plentiful to bury.

On the last day of the siege of Leningrad, Dola and Larisa held hands as they silently waded into the cheering crowds, obscured under layers of scarves and clothing.