

Also by M.G. Crisci

Indiscretion

Papa Cado

Rise and Fall of Mary Jackson-Peale

Save the Last Dance

Seven Days in Russia

This Little Piggy



Call Sign, White Lily



The amazing story of a beautiful young woman who became one of the most famous Russian fighter pilots during the Second World War. Based on true events.

M.G. CRISCI

In collaboration with

Yelena Sivolap and Valentina Vaschenko



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*To the brave Russian and Ukrainian families
who suffered so much. May the world never forget.*

Praise for *Call Sign, White Lily*

Call Sign, White Lily does a superb job of poignantly depicting the life and times of an extraordinary young lady, Lilia Litvyak. But, the book does much more. It provides insights into many important Russian customs and traditions, and accurately depicts the extraordinary resolve of the Russian people to seek peace among all the world's communities.

—Russian Cultural Centre,
Washington, D.C.

It continues to amaze the editorial staff of our newspaper that an American with no Russian ancestry could deliver such an insightful literary work. We applaud his vision, tenacity, writing prowess, and desire to break down long-standing barriers of misunderstanding and mistrust.

—Russia Now Newspaper,
Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Moscow

The story is poignant and powerful. The reader will be rewarded with a magnificent tale of patriotic integrity and characters that must be admired, and acts of valor and loyalty that embody the dedication of undying love and devotion to country and countrymen.

—San Francisco Book Review

M.G. Crisci never disappoints. He writes non-fiction so well that it feels like its fiction. I loved all the characters in *Call Sign Lily*; there's not a person I didn't like. I also loved how the book sound likes it was Russian translated into English. It gave the book more authenticity. Crisci makes you feel like you are actually living the story beside Lilia Litvyak. I recommend this book to anyone who just wants to read a great book.

—Goodreads.com

Lilia Litvyak's unflappable patriotism and amazing flying skills are the perfect vehicle to remind today's generations of young people to never forget the unimaginable atrocities our people (i.e., Russia and the Ukraine) experienced at the hands of the Nazi's. Mr. Crisci's sensitive and approachable style brings the substance to life in engaging human terms.

—Ukrainian Embassy to the U.S.
Washington, D.C.

It is amazing that Lilia Litvyak's coming-of-age story took 66 years to assemble. Her courage, her skills and her love of country are terribly relevant today to freedom-loving people around the world. The story's engaging, the writing more so."

—Lakeside International Group
New York, NY

My name is Lilia Litvyak.
I died on August 1, 1943,
just 17 days before my 22nd
birthday when I was shot
down near the small
Ukrainian village of Dmitrovka.



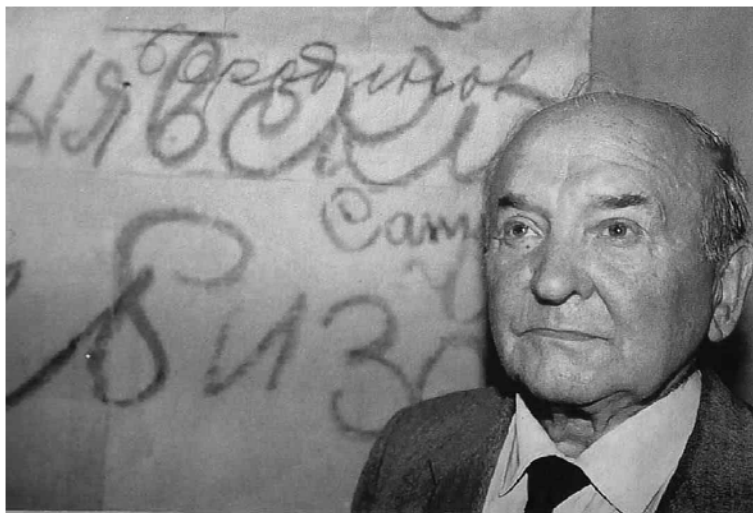
I never wanted to be a
warrior. I did not want to fight and die so
very young. Who would? I grew up in Moscow
just like any other teenager—lost in thoughts
of young love, games and dreams of a
bright future. But my world changed when
the horrors of war came to my country.

I'm proud of what I accomplished as a
fighter. It helped save the country I love
and showed that women are just as capable
as men.

Yes, my times and my country shaped me.
But as you read my story, you'll see that we all
have the same hopes and dreams. Understanding
what we have in common is a gateway to mutual
trust and a better tomorrow for Russians,
Americans and everyone—a tomorrow where
teenagers don't have to go to war. Please read.
Please understand.

Yours always,
Lilia Vladimirovna Litvyak

Preface



*Boris V. Sapunov, PhD. (Doctorate in History)
Honorary Doctorate, Oxford University
Head of Scientific Research, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
Above: Dr. Sapunov in the year 2000, next to the signature
he placed on the famous Reichstag Wall on 2 May 1945.*

Dear Reader,

As a lifetime historian, I found the book “Call Sign, White Lily” by M. G. Crisci and his collaborators, Yelena Sivolap and Valentina Vaschenko, to be incredibly interesting. This book has a special place in among all the books written and stories told about the World War II. The author and his colleagues brilliantly re-created the image of the main character—Lilia Litvyak—a courageous and brave pilot who, along with other female pilots, brought down multiple enemy planes.

The author did a fantastic job combining Lilia’s biography with the everyday life of pre-war and during the World War II

Russia. What is most surprising is that not only is M. G. Crisci not Russian himself, but also the fact that he does not even have any Russian relatives or predecessors. Moreover, Mr. Crisci does not speak Russian. As a war veteran and a former soldier who fought in many battles, including in Berlin, I was amazed at the author's skill and mastery to re-create the events, of what is now considered to be in the distant past, in such an objective manner.

When I read through the pages of this book, the images and the stories truly come alive. Many episodes of the life of Lilia Litvyak are still remembered by the veterans of World War II. Incredibly, the author was able to include many details of the everyday soldier life that could have only been known to those soldiers.

Today, many people have a misconception about what really happened during the War and either purposefully underestimate or are simply unaware of the role of the Soviet people in the victory of the War. This is why it is so important to preserve the truth about what really took place for the future generations.

In conclusion, I can add that a careful read of the text reveals some inaccuracies. This is probably inevitable, since many years have passed since War World II has ended. Many facts have either been distorted or completely forgotten by the people with the passage of time. The inaccuracies, however, do not take away from the value and the significance of this great book. The book of M.G. Crisci plays an extremely important role in what is our duty to history—to preserve the truth about the tragic and heroic chapters of the 20th century for the future generations. Therefore, I highly recommend this book to both Russian and American readers.

Foreword



(l) M.G. Crisci, Author; (c) Valentina Vaschenko, Curator, The Lilia Litvyak Museum; (r) Yelena Sivolap, English Teacher, School No 1

This book began ten years ago in a most unlikely place.

Boris, my gregarious Russian cab driver, was stalled in South Beach's incessant stop-and-go traffic while attempting to reach my Miami Beach office on trendy Lincoln Road. I decided to ask a simple question. The answer would change my life forever.

Boris, a Muscovite with two Ph.D.'s in computer sciences, his two teenage daughters and his wife also a Ph.D. had migrated to America five years prior, like so many others before, wanting a "better life." Trying not to sound like a culturally insensitive idiot, I asked why one so educated was driving a cab. He paused for a moment. "No good English, no good job. But all right, my time come."

For whatever reason, I persisted. "Since arriving, what has been your biggest surprise about America? Bad or good, it doesn't matter."

Boris looked in the rear view mirror then stopped his cab and turned around. "You want to know. Really know?" He stared in the rear view mirror. "Very sad. Thirty million dead and nobody remember!"

Boris explained. We talked. 40 minutes later the ride was over. I promised myself, someday, somehow, I would deliver Boris's message to generations of Americans, and hopefully to the rest of the developed world, about the millions of peace-loving Russian civilians who suffered unfathomable atrocities at the hands of the Nazis during World War II, ordinary men, women and children, like you and me, murdered and mutilated in their homes, in their factories, on their street corners and in their fields, as they defended Rodina (The Motherland).

I was momentarily motivated, then returned to my self-absorbed life. Two years passed. I was now living in San Diego. There was a story in the newspaper about an exhibition at the Air and Space Museum called *World War II through Russian Eyes*. I heard Boris's voice, "Please Go." Four hours later I was moved to tears and embarrassed I had done nothing. Fate had now given my project a kick start.

My first attempt at telling Boris's story was to create a Russian version of Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*. I would call it *28 Million Dead and Nobody Remembers*. It would be family stories about how ordinary Russians put their lives on hold during The Great Patriotic War. As I was to learn, during 1,418 days and nights of unconscionable aggression, the Nazis burned part or all of 1,710 cities and

towns, 6 million buildings, 32,000 factories, 65,000 kilometers of railroad track, 98,000 collective farms and left another 25 million people homeless.

Somewhere along the way, I met the spectacularly beautiful Lieutenant Lilia Litvyak through the Internet. There were numerous bits and pieces here and there. The more I researched her story, the more fascinated I became. Eventually my research led me 8,731 miles from my home to the industrial town of Krasny Luch, Ukraine, near what is now the Russian-Ukrainian border. There I met Valentina Vaschenko, the curator of a modest museum dedicated to Lilia, and her friend, our loving translator and editor, an English teacher by the name of Yelena Sivolap. As I was to learn, Valentina had made it her life's work to keep the memory of Lilia alive, as best she could with limited resources and limited government support.

These ladies helped me accomplish something that I don't believe has ever been done. Together, this altruistic, jaded, aging middle-aged American man and two passionate, trusting Russian women, 8,000 miles apart, took a journey back in time to create what began as a work of literary fiction based on a real life and real events but ended as something else.

They taught me about their lives and their culture in ways I never imagined. I hope I did likewise. The face-to-face meetings, the Skype calls, the electronic correspondence, the misunderstandings of words, the humor in colloquialisms, the delicate listening, the respectful sharing, is a story in itself.

During my travels to Russia and the Ukraine I visited Lilia's old neighborhood in Moscow, stopped by her apartment,

talked to her last remaining childhood friend, Lyudmila Agafejeva, and then took an incredible journey to visit my new friends and Lilia's gravesite in Dmitrovka, the small town not far from where she was shot down. Those trips and the memories are etched in my mind forever. Maybe one day this book will have a companion volume. But first things first! People around the world need to meet Lilia up close and personal.

To that end, Valentina and Lena gave without reservation: their pictures, their recollections, their memorabilia, their time, their love. To this day in Krasny Luch, as in most Russian towns, reminders of the Great Patriotic War remain everywhere. Stories are passed orally from generation to generation in homes and schools in the hopes that history will not repeat itself. The overwhelming majority of Russian citizens (and its newly created federation of states) have the very same hopes and dreams as the majority of American citizens—a world of peace where hope springs eternal. Perhaps our little collaboration will add to that understanding.

Clearly, Lt. Lilia V. Litvyak was just one brave soul who perished in Hitler's brutal Russian Massacre, the greatest human tragedy this world has ever known. But because Lilia was a woman before her time and lived such a meaningful life in her twenty-two years, I have chosen to use her as the vehicle to tell Boris's story. In the process I feel I've gotten to know and love Lilia as I've gotten to know and love Valentina and Lena. I hope I have done their story justice.

One last comment. I am an ordinary American citizen. My parents emigrated from Italy in the early 1900's. Dad was a butcher; Mom a telephone operator. I have no Russian ancestry, directly or indirectly. I do not speak Russian. I'm just

a man who would like to see a better world for his children and grandchildren.

mother & Giusi



The author and village children at Lilia's gravesite in Marinova

Author's Note

To enhance the authenticity of the reader's experience,
Call Sign, White Lily has been written to sound as though it has
been translated from Russian.

Chapter 1



Three-year-old Lilia at a park not far from the Litvyak apartment on Novoslobodskaya Street near Moscow City Centre.

August 1921
Moscow..

GRAY. THE SKY WAS A DARK, gloomy gray.

The clouds hung low, thick, laden with chilly moisture. The temperature, hovering around fifteen degrees centigrade, was unseasonably low for a late summer day in Moscow. Women wrapped in wool cardigans shuffled briskly as they ventured shop to shop on busy Arbat Street. It was as if October had arrived early.

The architecturally mundane obstetric clinic at the nearby Moscow Centre Maternity Home showed decades of neglect and long, harsh winters. Hairline cracks traveled from the top floor to the worn, rounded street-level entrance steps.

Here on August 18th, in a non-descript ward, a squirming, screaming Lilia Vladimirovna Litvyak announced to her proud parents, Vladimir and Anna, two former peasants from tiny Istra Village—a six hour horse and carriage ride from Moscow—that she had entered the world.

The midwife handed the baby with penetrating blue-gray eyes and curly flaxen blonde hair to her mother and smiled broadly, “Congratulations, Comrade Litvyak, your daughter is an extraordinary beauty.”

Anna exuded pride as she held her child for the first time. The baby appeared surprisingly at peace, seemingly content to stare into her mother’s eyes. All was right with the world.

Soon it was time for mother and child to leave the clinic. Vladimir had dreamed of this day for months. He greeted his new daughter with a broad smile. “She gets her beauty from her mother.”

After wrapping both in a warm blanket to protect them from the cool morning breeze, Vladimir gently placed mother and child on a mattress of soft hay and straw in the rear of his horse-drawn carriage and snapped his whip to begin the ride home. Anna began to sing *Spi, mladenets moi prekrasnyi* (Sleep, My Charming Baby), written by the famous Russian poet M. Lermontov, while Vladimir pensively reminisced about how his family had come to be in this joyful place at this time.

Just four years prior, on the farm of the wealthy, arrogant nobleman Evgeniy Vasiliev, two young peasants, Anna

Tarasova, 16, and Vladimir Litvyak, 19, had been randomly assigned to long days locating, cleaning, and packing a portion of the season's potato harvest.

The handsome, wire-haired Vladimir was a diligent and muscular worker who moved from main tuber to main tuber seeking mature potatoes. He assumed feeder tubers were devoid of mature crops. Anna knew otherwise, and she was not afraid to say something.

"Vladimir, you work too hard for each potato. Why not search the attached tubers?"

Vladimir's response was predictably curt. "How would you know such things?"

"Believe it or not, Vladimir, women sometimes see other things than men do," smiled Anna, twirling her long blonde hair with her fingers.

"Really," said Vladimir, oblivious to the natural beauty standing in front of him. He handed her a spade to dig and a knife to cut. "Show me."

Minutes later she had traversed the same line of tubers that Vladimir had previously harvested and found another twelve perfectly mature potatoes. She stood and smiled proudly. "I believe you will now have a much larger harvest!" And so Vladimir came to realize the subtle determination of the beauty that stood before him.

Other Russian men of that time might have kicked and screamed. Made excuses. Vladimir, in a society dominated by men, was ahead of his time. His broad imposing physique masked a deeply sensitive nature. But cupid's arrow had pierced him deeply, and for all time.

"Maybe you can teach me how you did that?" he flirted.

"Maybe," smiled Anna devilishly. She, too, was smitten.

Some eleven months later, in that same potato field, Vladimir would ask Anna for her hand in marriage. Not long after, they exchanged vows in a peasant ceremony typical of the times. During their first year of marriage, the socially aware Vladimir felt the couple should move to Moscow. Anna was at first reluctant; the farms were all she knew.

“Dear wife, wasn’t that what the Revolution was all about?” argued a confident Vladimir. “To create a better life for us. And that of our children.”

“Let me think,” responded Anna, delaying the inevitable.

After weeks of discussion, Vladimir ran out of rational arguments and attempted a different, more subtle tactic: “My wife,” he said lovingly over dinner one evening, “you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I hope our life on the farm never wears that beauty.”

Two weeks later, the couple packed their meager belongs, and Anna’s vanity, and headed to Moscow.

~

Not long after arriving in Moscow, Vladimir knocked on the door of the manager at a bustling furniture factory on the outskirts of the city, adjacent to the waterway where ships collected the factory’s completed product for other ports of call.

The manager wanted experienced help. Vladimir did not fit the bill.

“I can make anything with my hands. Just need to show me how,” passionately pleaded Vladimir. “I work hard and long. You will be satisfied. I give my word.”

The gray haired manager rubbed his hands across his beard and then smiled. “I take a chance.”

“No chance,” said Vladimir. “Sure thing.”

In time, Vladimir became an accomplished carpenter. For Anna's 20th birthday, Vladimir created a surprise. "My wife, we must go to your birthday present."

"Why can you not give it to me here?" said Anna, reaching for the bag at Vladimir's side.

"There is a good reason," he responded.

"Then, what is that?"

"If I were to tell you, there would be no surprise. Just follow. For one time please, stop all your chatter."

Twenty minutes later they were standing by a pond not far from the factory. Vladimir took a handsome red-and-yellow wooden sailboat from the bag and proudly announced, "I made with my own hands. My tribute to you."

Anna smiled at the handsome boat with her name inscribed on both sides of the bow in bright blue letters. Her heart pounded with pride. It was probably the closest she would ever come to owning a real sailboat.

"This is the most beautiful gift I have ever received."

"We can now imagine sailing to far off places together," said Vladimir.

"And, will we always return home?" teased Anna.

"Most certainly," smiled Vladimir as he pulled a string from his pocket and attached it to a small hook on the front of the boat.

Weekend after weekend, weather permitting, the handsome couple placed their boat on the pond and watched it being carried by the wind.

"Today I say we sail the Volga to the Caspian Sea and taste the breezes of the salt air."

The couple laughed as Vladimir pulled their vessel to shore. He then looked inside the boat.

“I am disappointed to say, it was a poor day at sea.”

“It is never a poor day when I sail with my husband,” smiled Anna.

~

It was a bitter cold January. The couple had long since placed their boat in storage.

Vladimir, who accepted but did not enjoy winter, look-ed out the window. His mind filled with thoughts of a splendid picnic after one of their imaginary sailing trips. He smiled.

“Why such a smile?” asked Anna.” Do you suddenly love winter?”

He rubbed his hand across his stubby beard. “We were having a picnic by the shore. Under the tree, not far from where we went ashore. The picnic basket was so full. The apples and pears were delicious, the lemonade so refreshing. We ate until the basket was empty.”

Anna rubbed her stomach. “Not so, the basket is still full.”

“Now you are going to tell me about my dreams,” laughed Vladimir.

“It is not a dream.”

Vladimir looked totally confused. Anna realized she needed to be more explicit.

“Dear husband, I am talking about this basket,” said a smiling Anna pointing to her stomach.

And so it was that Vladimir learned he would be a father in the near future. As Vladimir recalled those early days of their relationship, he wondered if his wife’s staunch determination and sense of vanity would find its way into baby Lilia.

~

Lilia's first "home" was a small but tidy two-room apartment on Smolenskaya Street. Vladimir, Anna, and Lilia slept in one room, while the other was a combination kitchen, dining room, and place to read and invite friends to discuss matters of the day.

"We will save our rubles and one day give our daughter a better life," declared the optimistic Vladimir, who now worked two jobs—Monday to Saturday during the day at the furniture factory, and Tuesday to Friday evenings as a railway clerk. While neither job was the stuff that dreams were made of, Vladimir received regular wages and still worked less total hours and had better working conditions than the virtual servitude of Vasiliev's farm. Anna and Vladimir were proudly and solidly lower-lower middle class!

~

"I need to shop for dinner," said Anna one day when Vladimir arrived home from work. "Can I trust you with little Lilia?"

"Trust me?" responded a clueless Vladimir.

"You know, make sure nothing happens to our daughter."

"What can happen, my wife? She is but three months old. She simply lies and sleeps."

"She struggles to turn more each day," said Anna.

"With all respect, wife, your imagination runs wild."

~

After Anna left, the politically passionate Vladimir invited his equally passionate neighbor, Boris, to share a drink. Matters quickly turned to a discussion of current affairs, who was doing what to whom.

Within minutes the men were waving their arms and shouting at each other, trying to convince the other of his

point of view. "I still do not trust Kamenev [a Bolshevik revolutionary and well-known Soviet politician in the 1920s]. Remember he and Zinovyev were the only two Central Committee members to vote against the October Revolution [the Soviet seizure of power in October 1917]," offered Vladimir. "Did not Lenin write a pro-clamation calling them deserters?"

"That is old news. Times change. People change. Must you always live in the past? Even Lenin had a change of heart!" responded Boris emphatically.

While the men drank and swore, little Lilia, in an adjacent room, was awakened by the commotion and attracted to a dark brown kerchief on a nearby chair. Rather than cry, she determinedly squirmed to the edge of the bed and slid onto the carpet. The startled baby began to cry from the tumble. The increasingly boisterous Vladimir and Boris heard nothing...until Anna came home.

"How has our daughter been?" she asked.

"Quiet as a church-mouse," replied Vladimir. Boris nodded. Anna saw the half empty vodka bottle. She went into their bedroom. Lilia's cheeks were pink from the tears she had shed. She looked at her mother and cooed lovingly, as if to say, thank goodness you have returned.

Anna was furious. "My husband, how could you be so unaware! Thank goodness our daughter fell to the soft carpet."

~

At six months, a surprisingly well-coordinated Lilia began to grasp the legs of the kitchen table in a determined effort to stand erect. By nine months, she had taken her first steps. A month later, she first uttered mama and papa. By the twelfth

month, Anna was teaching Lilia the names of animals and letting her smell the flowers she had picked.

Also during this first year, the couple accidentally learned about another of their child's unique gifts. Anna always placed a wide neck jar of fresh wildflowers on the table between Lilia's crib and their bed, preferably red and white to commemorate the day she told Vladimir of Lilia's impending arrival. One evening after Anna sang her daughter to sleep, she and Vladimir returned to the kitchen table to read a few more hours before retiring. Unbeknownst to both, Lilia had awoken, seen the flowers dangled over the side of the crib, grabbed two white wildflowers (her favorite color) from the jar, and then went back to sleep.

Anna turned the light on in the bedroom.

"Husband, look at your daughter."

Lilia lay sound asleep with two wildflowers by her face.

"How could that happen?" wondered Vladimir.

Concerned that the wildflowers might poke their daughter in the eye, Anna quietly removed the flowers and returned them to the jar.

"Perhaps we should move the jar, so our daughter cannot get into any additional trouble," she said.

"That is a good solution," said Vladimir.

Later that evening, Lilia awoke to find the wildflowers had been removed from her direct view. The determined child cried and pointed for a solid hour.

"That little girl has an iron will. Let her have the flowers," whined Vladimir.

"She must learn," responded a determined Anna.

"Learn what?"

"Learn things cannot always be her way."

At 4 AM an exhausted Anna acquiesced. She tore the rough stems off the wildflowers and returned them to the crib. Within moments, Lilia stopped crying and went right back to sleep.

“We lose. I guess the solution was not so good,” said Vladimir, covering his head with the blanket.

~

“Congratulations, Comrades,” smiled the doctor at the child’s first annual medical examination. “Lilia is a perfectly healthy and very well-coordinated little girl.”

“But what about her continued temper?” said Vladimir, referring to their sleepless nights.

“I don’t understand,” responded the doctor.

Vladimir then described his tale of woe. “She will not go to sleep without wildflowers by her side.”

“And so?”

“Once asleep, we turn out the lights. We remove the wildflowers from her crib so there is no accident during the night.”

“That is good, no?”

“Every night is the same. She awakes, realizes the flowers have been removed, and ‘the temper’ cries until they are returned to her side.”

“I do not believe that means the child has a particularly difficult temper,” responded the doctor.

“Then what does it mean?”

“Comrades, it means Lilia appears to possess good night vision in addition to her advanced coordination and determined personality.”

“Will that remain as she grows?” wondered Anna.

“Comrade,” smiled the doctor. “Are we referring to

her vision, her coordination, or her determination?”

Vladimir laughed at the interplay. “Perhaps she will use her gifts to become a night watchman.”

“Perhaps she will decide to become a pilot and fly night missions!” imagined the doctor.

Vladimir, Anna, and the doctor laughed. Baby Lilia did not.

~

The couple needed a larger apartment, so all could have their own space. Anna, over Vladimir’s protestations, got a part-time job as a store clerk. “We will work as partners to raise our child,” declared Anna. “The situation will only be temporary.”

Anna was right.

Ten months later, the couple had saved enough to move to a larger, more functionally proportioned apartment on Novoslobodskaya Street, a 400-year-old street that had burned to the ground during the Patriotic War of 1812 and had been since rebuilt. In fact, Lilia even had her own room, a rare amenity in Moscow for one so young.

“How did you find such a grand place?” said Vladimir, thinking he had died and gone to heaven.

“While I was stocking the shelves, I heard my manager tell his assistant about the apartment. I told my manager I was feeling sick, and needed to go home. Then I went right over, and here we are

Chapter 2



*Lilia's father, Vladimir, believed ardently
in Stalin's vision of a better life.*

September 1927
Moscow...

AN AMBITIOUS JOSEPH STALIN warned delegates at the 15th Congress of the Communist Party of the impending "capitalist encirclement" caused by the failure of Lenin's New Economic Policy. His vision: the survival and development of the Soviet Union could only occur by

pursuing “state-controlled” development of heavy industry, managed exclusively by him.

Change came swiftly. Stalin had cleverly captured the mood of the day. People, particularly the ordinary proletariat like Vladimir and Anna, embraced these Communist ideals as the way to the better life they were seeking. The State formally laid claim to all the shops, farms, and factories in urban and agri-cultural centers alike.

“I believe we should take advantage,” explained Vladimir one evening. ”Working for the State will mean regular employment and regular pay.” Anna agreed.

After passing a series of detailed security checks (Stalin had become preoccupied with eliminating anyone with dissenting views), Anna became a clerk in a government-run general store in downtown Moscow, not far from their apartment, while Vladimir was appointed to a position of railway switchman for the rapidly expanding Soviet Railway system.

Before long, the highly organized and detail-conscious Anna was promoted to head stock clerk, which allowed her to view all the merchandise shipped to and sold at the store. Occasionally a few out-of-date and heavily edited Western European and American fashion magazines would find their way to her store. Anna would select those of visual interest and place them in a side cabinet; then she would study them on her lunch break and at the end of the day, imagining what the words to the pictures might say. She quickly concluded that “bourgeois culture” underscored the essential, universal, and immutable qualities of all women: the desire to improve one’s appearance.

“So you like?” said Olga, her distinctly unfashionable manager, noting Anna’s magazine interests.

Anna’s instinct was to say nothing, lest she be accused of anti-state behavior.

“No worry,” said the cherubic woman with her black hair in a tight bun. “You are a very good worker. Take one from stack; nobody will say anything.”

A few days later Anna arrived home with her first selection, a German edition of *Harper’s Weekly* magazine. The chauvinistic Vladimir thumbed through the pages in utter amazement. “Those women are so frail; no wonder the Germans tell their women to stay home and make babies.”

“So, my husband, you are saying I’m fat?” teased Anna.

An unsuspecting Vladimir was flustered. “No, I did not mean that.”

“Then are you saying I am no longer the beautiful woman you married?”

Vladimir realized he was damned if he did and damned if he didn’t.

~

Six months later, a few tubes of foreign made lipstick arrived in damaged, unsalable condition. Anna was curious. “Olga, may I try one of the broken color sticks?”

Olga’s response was as surprising as it was insightful. “Anna, with your dark complexion and brown hair, I would apply one of the darker shades. Here, let me show you.”

Olga selected a bright, glossy, deep red lipstick, applied it, and then dabbed the excess so Anna’s lips had a pronounced, almost earthy definition.

“See. Take a look,” said Olga pointing proudly.

Anna was pleased with the woman she saw in the mirror. That evening Vladimir was equally pleased to be met at the door by his “fashionable working lady.” From that moment, Anna rarely was without her lipstick, a trait her daughter would soon emulate. In fact, by the tender age of seven, Lilia refused to leave the house before Anna applied “her lips,” as the girls came to call the process.

The magazines also touted the self-indulgent bath oils and scents used by the ladies of New York, London, and Paris. One day, while picking a wildflower bouquet for the dinner table, Anna came upon a patch of fragrant wild rosemary bushes. She picked some blossoms, brought them home, boiled a few liters of water, and soaked them for 30 minutes. When she deemed the scent of her infusion ready, she strained the sweet-smelling liquid into a bottle she kept in a cabinet. That evening while bathing, she added a liter or so of her homemade infusion. Anna’s fragrantly scented body attracted Vladimir like bees to honey. He was driven to a bout of passionate lovemaking. Quite accidentally, she also discovered that infusing her homemade concoctions with certain wildflowers (particularly poppies and daffodils when in season) further enhanced her attractiveness to Vladimir.

Anna made it a practice to bathe in her rosemary water whenever she wanted to communicate to Vladimir that she wanted his love and tenderness.

Lilia also came to enjoy her mother’s homemade bathing fragrance, although still too young to understand Anna’s ultimate motivation.

“Mummy,” asked little Lilia, “you smell wonderful. Might you make some additional liquid for me?”

~

Vladimir was an excellent and obedient employee, who was interested in and quickly absorbed every facet of railroading: conducting, maintenance, scheduling, dispatching. His work ethic was a role model for a disgruntled and increasingly passive workforce. His ability to train new switchman and schedulers permitted him to earn small production bonuses under Stalin's rule that provided material rewards in proportion to contributions, less a withholding for state expenses.

Unfortunately, Vladimir's multiple skills and positive attitude created an unexpected strain on his family because he was summoned away from Moscow far more frequently than he would have liked. One month he was training dispatchers in the Urals, and the next building a maintenance staff along the foothills of the Volga. But Anna never complained and Vladimir never refused a "suggested" assignment.

The question was always the same when Vladimir returned home from a trip.

"Daddy, can we go to the swings?"

Lilia loved the sensation of being airborne, the breeze passing through her hair, from the time she was old enough to discover a park swing. Fortunately, Novoslobodskaya Street was not far from the Central Park of Culture and Rest where there was an abundance of bright red swings and see-saws.

Vladimir looked at Anna. "Go, enjoy your daughter. Dinner will be ready in an hour, give or take," she said.

"How long is 'give or take?'" teased Vladimir.

"Give or take when you two return," smiled Anna, who understood how precious father and daughter time was to both of them.

Their park ritual was always the same. “Have you selected your swing yet, my daughter?”

“I am still deciding,” said Lilia, who had narrowed her decision to two swings to her right. “I think this one has two less links, which should make it go higher.”

Vladimir was not about to dispute her observation. He had learned Lilia, while never disrespectful, had a mind of her own.

On board, Lilia would say, “faster and faster.” Once she attained her desired speed, she would urge her father, “now—higher, higher.”

“Daughter, we can only go so fast, so high; otherwise, you can slip and fall.”

“Daddy, no worries. I want to touch the sky.

Chapter 3



*The annual May Day celebration in Red Square
was a Litvyak Family Tradition.*

THE FIRST OF MAY WAS considered one of the great-est working-class holidays of the year for millions of Muscovites.

The streets surrounding Red Square were a feast for eyes and ears: hundreds of flags, banners, and slogans were mounted on carts as they rolled past cheering crowds, reaffirming freedom from Tsarist oppression and a better life for all. Laughter, singing, dancing, and sounds of the garmoshka were everywhere.

Vladimir and Anna always enjoyed the festivities, but this year was very special—they were bringing eight year-old Lilia for the first time.

“What do you think?” asked Anna, holding a beautiful white wool coat she had made for Lilia to wear.

“It is almost as beautiful as the wife who made it and the daughter who will wear it,” smiled Vladimir.

“The railroad does you well. You have become my silver-tongued husband.”

“Truth is truth.”

“Time is fast approaching,” reminded Anna. “We do not want to miss the people’s parade past the reviewing stand or listening to Comrade Stalin’s words.”

Quickly, the family dressed and headed for the square. Before long, they were surrounded by the masses. Little Lilia in her white coat, brand new black leather shoes, and long blonde hair began to tug on her father’s pants.

“What is it, my child?” said Vladimir, looking down.

“Daddy, I cannot see,” complained Lilia.

Vladimir knelt down. “Come, get on my shoulders and hold my hands. You will see all.”

Lilia noticed the hordes of soldiers passing the Tribune, paying tribute to Comrade Stalin.

“Why do all the soldiers look to the Tribune?” she asked innocently.

“To pay their respect.”

Lilia’s expression turned blank. Vladimir realized he had assumed too much.

“The man on the Tribune is our leader, Comrade Stalin. He helped Mummy and Daddy get out of the fields, far from our home. If it were not for him, Mummy and Daddy would not have the fine jobs we do. He wants everybody to have the same things we do. And he wants all the people in the world to speak kindly of our motherland. That’s why we have such a powerful army with all the soldiers.”

Lilia got the general sense of what her father said. Vladimir assumed this explanation would suffice. But, as always, Lilia

had questions. “Why do we need soldiers for people to speak kindly? Doesn’t everybody have jobs?”

As Lilia got older, she would spend hours discussing such matters with her father *privately*. In fact, Vladimir would become the primary cause of her unshakeable sense of patriotism. But Vladimir also made it abundantly clear to Lilia that political discussions in public, however well-intentioned, had to be avoided for fear of retribution by the authorities.

~

This particular day, the heavens opened, the rains came, and spectators and participants alike got soaked. Still it was a happy time, so the demonstrations continued. Finally, when the festivities concluded, a weary Vladimir removed Lilia from his shoulders as the crowd began to disburse.

Lilia again tugged at her father’s pants.

“What is it now, my child?”

“Carry me! My feet hurt so. The shoes are very tight.” Vladimir, his back already aching, tried to reason with his daughter. “My child, it is a long trip, please be...”

A determined Lilia interrupted, “Carry me!”

About that moment, a cart with familiar faces stopped next to the Litvyak family. It was Novoslobodskaya Street neighbors Maya and Semyon Demidov, carrying decorations from the demonstration.

“Can we offer a ride home?” said Semyon. “There is no room on the bench in front, but you can sit near the flags and banners! It will be comfortable.”

Vladimir nodded yes.

As the cart shook and rattled its way home, Lilia soon found herself sitting on the flags and banners in the rear.

Thirty minutes later the group arrived at their apartment. Vladimir, favoring his back, gingerly began walking toward their apartment with Lilia. Anna began to laugh rather hysterically.

“And what is so funny? Your husband, the hunch-back?”
“No, no. Not you,” said Anna, pointing at Lilia

The rain-soaked red flags and banners had dyed Lilia’s brand new white coat a bright Communist red.

~

Maya Demidov was the perfect neighbor—initially!

She and her husband, Semyon, an office clerk in the local MGB office (the forerunner of Khrushchev’s feared KGB), and their three children lived down the hall from Vladimir and Anna on Novoslobodskaya Street. While his income was substantially less than the dual income Litvyak household, his position did provide his family certain perks not available to the general public—for example, first-selection foodstuffs and preferential treatment at various medical clinics.

To earn some additional rubles, Maya agreed to act as a part-time nanny for Lilia while Anna worked at the store. After all, she rationalized, “When one already had three small ones, what is an additional small one?”

In time, Maya’s eight-year-old daughter, Elena, had become steadfast friends with Lilia. After school and homework, they would spend hours playing games together. The girls had become particularly fond of a game called *Words*, in which one child would write down the longest word they knew. The other child then tried to make as many words as she could with letters from the long word. Each word counted ten points. Each child also got chances to write a long word.

Typically, Lilia, who was a more advanced reader than Elena, would write longer words and identify more words with a word, thus winning at least 70% of the time.

"I don't want to play anymore," said a frustrated Elena one day. "You cheat."

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

Anna tried to interrupt. "Girls, girls."

Maya looked at the words and sided with her daughter.

"Let us forgive and forget," said Anna, willing to compromise in order to keep the peace.

"See, your daughter makes a word spelled t-r-a-i-l. There is no such word. Only t-r-i-a-l."

Anna tried to explain the difference between the two words. Maya became incensed and left in a huff. "You cheat like your daughter."

~

Once home, Elena told her father how the neighbors always cheat.

From the Demidovs' standpoint, the Litvyaks now had two strikes against them. First, Anna defended a daughter who cheated in children's games.

Secondly, the Litvyaks had a larger apartment—one more bedroom—despite having fewer children. Sharing one bathroom and toilet in turn, one kitchen with several kerosene cookers, several kettles and pans, or one stove to cook in turn constantly reminded Maya of the inequity.

In time, she also discovered Lilia's room contained a polished ash wood dresser, while her children's furniture was mostly rough timbers that had a tendency to splinter.

Maya asked the building superintendent for a larger apartment. "I believe the size of my family and my husband's position should warrant a larger flat."

"Comrade, I'm sorry," said the building manager. "You will have to wait like the others. The waiting list is several years."

Maya seethed with jealousy