



Boris Makarenko lay asleep. In the distance the German guns roared. High explosives, incendiaries and shells bombarded dying Leningrad, the city that was too proud and too courageous to surrender. It was December 1942. Boris Makarenko slept and dreamed. Nearly always it was the same dream . . .

*Cautiously the long line of lorries zig-zagged its way over frozen Lake Ladoga. Like a great white hell the frozen waste of snow stretched to the horizon. Where were the safe places . . . ? Where were the cracks . . . ? It seemed that death rode with the convoy, hovering over the trucks as they laboured with food and supplies towards besieged, starving Leningrad.*

*Skidding wheels . . . cracking ice . . . spattering water. In the dark depths on the left Zolymski and his co-driver were slowly drowning. Their heavy lorry had got out of control as the ice cracked under the wheels. The bonnet had slipped between the ice-floes. Slowly, very slowly, a precious crate of food disappeared into the icy water, then the lorry . . . The convoy travelled on. No one could stop to help. They had their orders.*

*In the distance the German guns roared . . . the first light of early morning began to show on the horizon . . . the freezing night was nearly over.*

In his dream Boris was sitting beside his father. "To the left," he murmured in his sleep. "Father, drive to the left, to the left . . . ?" He wanted to shout the words aloud but his voice would not come. In his dream he could see the set, calm face of his father through a kind of mist. His father peered through the frozen windscreen at the ice, at the track of the lorries twisting



through the snow. He turned the steering, not to the left but to the right . . .

*Suddenly a black speck appeared in the cloudy sky. There was a horrible roar and a single fighter plane dived down. Machine-guns began to rattle. The ice shattered into stars and the water foamed as the first bombs exploded. Father tried to stop a skid and turned the wheel further to the right. Behind their lorry lurched Ivanov's. The ice broke . . . Next came Pavlitchko with a cracked windscreen. His lorry disappeared through the hole in the ice. Lorry, men, and food were lost in the depths of the lake . . .*

Sobbing in his sleep, Boris turned his head here and there on the pillow, trying to escape from the dream. He muttered to himself and gripped the blankets with both hands . . .

*Like maddened elephants now the lorries swerved crazily over the ice trying to avoid the bullets and shells.*

*With skidding wheels his father's lorry reeled over the white flatness. Did he see that huge dark patch where the ice had begun to melt? "To the left! Drive to the left!"*

*But again his father made for the right. The distance to the dark patch got less and less. Now it was only forty yards away, now thirty, now twenty. There was a ridge on the ice, a last frail wall of snow. It was only a few yards away. The crashing of ice was even louder than the roar of the engine. The front wheels skidded through the layer of snow. The lorry stopped for a moment, then the back wheels went. With a crash the load of boxes and sacks of supplies fell among the breaking ice. Dark water covered the snow. The engine spluttered . . .*

*Slowly, very slowly, the lorry sank between the ice-floes into the icy cold water. Deeper and still deeper . . .*

Boris woke with a start. Again he had been dreaming about the convoy in which his father had lost his life. It was so vivid that he could not believe it was only a dream.



What happened daily in besieged Leningrad was like a thousand nightmares at once. The German soldiers surrounded the city. They were determined either to starve out the people or flatten the city — every day more than three hundred bombs and shells were hurled at it. Boris might well have dreamed of the hundreds of people who each week died in the streets of hunger and exhaustion; of the soldiers who time and again crawled back wounded from the fighting lines around the city; of the streets and houses that collapsed in flames; of the women who went crying among the ruins as they looked in vain for their children.

Leningrad indeed seemed a dying city. There was no longer any running water, gas or electricity, or any public transport. The whole city was disrupted. For the most part people showed astounding patience and courage, though some behaved like animals, forgetting all decency in the terrible struggle for life.

Boris could have dreamed about the overwhelming hunger, about the women and children who stood in queues in more than twenty degrees of frost to get a jug of watery soup or a piece of bread. In hundreds of houses lay the dying and the dead, but all fear and sorrow were forgotten in the daily business of living. Suffering was inevitable in war — it had to be lived through, because life just had to go on.

The lorries of Boris's dream seemed much more real to him than what was happening around him, simply because his father had been a driver in the convoy. When the wide lake of Ladoga froze, lorries with essential medical supplies, food, and ammunitions could travel across it. People could then manage to slip through the German lines and so relieve at least a part of the abominable want in Leningrad. In his imagination, Boris had driven with his father dozens of times. He knew only too well how the men sat in the driving-cabins and how the heavy trucks inched their way over the white, treacherous ice. He knew how the drivers were tormented by fear, and how unlimited was their courage. At the beginning of winter when the ice was still not very thick, and in the spring when it was beginning to thaw, the worry for his father's safety had been almost unbearable. At



these times the water would seep over the wheels of the loaded trucks. On every expedition almost half of one convoy never came back at all. But still the survivors set out again the following day. Each lorry that managed to make the journey would save the lives of many people; each lorry that was lured by death into the lake took with it the lives of an unknown number of men, women, and children in the city.

Boris often had nightmares about the lorries. Each time his father's lorry veered in the wrong direction, then disappeared into the depths — and Boris would wake up, clammy with sweat, for minutes afterwards still held in the grip of the terrible dream. Its horror would sometimes haunt him through the day . . .

His mother's bed creaked. She raised herself up on her pillow.

“Boris, are you awake?”

Boris opened his eyes. In the faint early light he saw the familiar room: the planks that his father had nailed over the window after the panes had been shattered during an air-raid, the stove in the corner where there was now no fire burning, his mother's bed, the lamp hanging crookedly from the ceiling, the cracks in the walls . . .

Boris flung off the blankets. It was icy cold in the room. As quickly as he could he pulled on his clothes and thrust his feet into his shoes. Then he went over to his mother's bed.

“You had better go to the canteen right away.”

Boris nodded. In the distance the guns still roared. He looked at his mother. He decided not to ask her how she felt. She would only answer that she felt much better and that she had had a good night's sleep, as if he were still a child that didn't know better. In her feverish eyes Boris could see anxiety and fear as well as illness. His mother was smiling at him, trying to pretend that she was quite well. Boris smiled in return. He too pretended all was well, just because he was no longer a child. Anyone who was twelve years old and had survived almost two years of the siege was certainly quite grown up.



“Wrap up well.”

Boris nodded again. He looked at his mother’s suffering face. There were little sores caused by lack of food on her right cheek and along her upper lip. Her gentle brown eyes were hazy and in them he seemed to see a shadow. Was his mother going to die . . . ?

“Shall I go and ask Dr. Kirov to come?” Boris asked this question from time to time, but his mother always shook her head. The doctor would not have any time. He must give all his attention to the soldiers who came wounded from the front lines and to the people hurt in the air-raids. Against hunger and exhaustion Dr. Kirov could not begin to fight, however much he wanted to. Hundreds of people died in the city every day. That was part of the price that Leningrad had to pay to keep her freedom.

“There’s something else that I want you to do for me,” said his mother. With a hint of a smile she put out her hand and pulled Boris towards her. “You must go and see Uncle Vanya. Ask him if he will put your name on the list of children who are to be evacuated.”

Now there was no doubt at all in Boris’s mind that he could see death lurking in her eyes.

“Boris, Dear, it would be much better for you to get away from the city.”

“No?” said Boris. “Never?” He knew that the lorries that travelled over Lake Ladoga with supplies sometimes took women and children back with them. But not for the most wonderful food parcel in the world would Boris travel in a lorry over that terrible water . . . over the dreadful weak patches of ice where his father had drowned. Not for the world would he drive over the frozen waters of the lake. And apart from his own terror, it was unthinkable that he should forsake his mother and leave her to die alone.

“The war might last for years yet,” said his mother. She tried to get up, and looked imploringly at Boris. “I want you to go. You must go?”



“And what will you do without me?”

“I shall be all right.”

“Who will bring you food and water then?”

“By the time you go away I shall be quite well again.”

There was no point in arguing. Whatever happened, he would not go. To bring an end to the conversation Boris leaned over and kissed his mother on the forehead.

They looked at each other earnestly, both thinking their own thoughts. Boris: “Is she going to die? Does she want to get me out of the way so that she can die alone? Does she want to spare me the pain of seeing her die?” His mother: “Let him leave here. Oh God, don’t let him stay in this city. Let him live?” Boris was all that she had now. She didn’t have the strength to keep on living for his sake but she was determined that he would not die for hers.

Boris straightened his shoulders. “I’ll go and see if there is any food.”

“Wrap up well,” said his mother again.

Boris put on his scarf and his fur cap. It was still quite dark. He took the lamp from the table and shone it into the dresser to find a pan.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” His mother shook her head.

Boris fastened his coat tightly. Hoping that his mother was not watching him, he slipped his father’s old army revolver into his pocket. It was good to feel something belonging to his father close to him. It gave him a bit of extra courage.

From the door he waved to his mother as if he were setting out for school on any ordinary day. She mustn’t see how troubled he was because that would make her more unhappy. With the pan under his arm Boris went down the crumbling steps . . .