

"Few books are beautifully written, fewer still are important; this novel is both."
—THE WASHINGTON POST

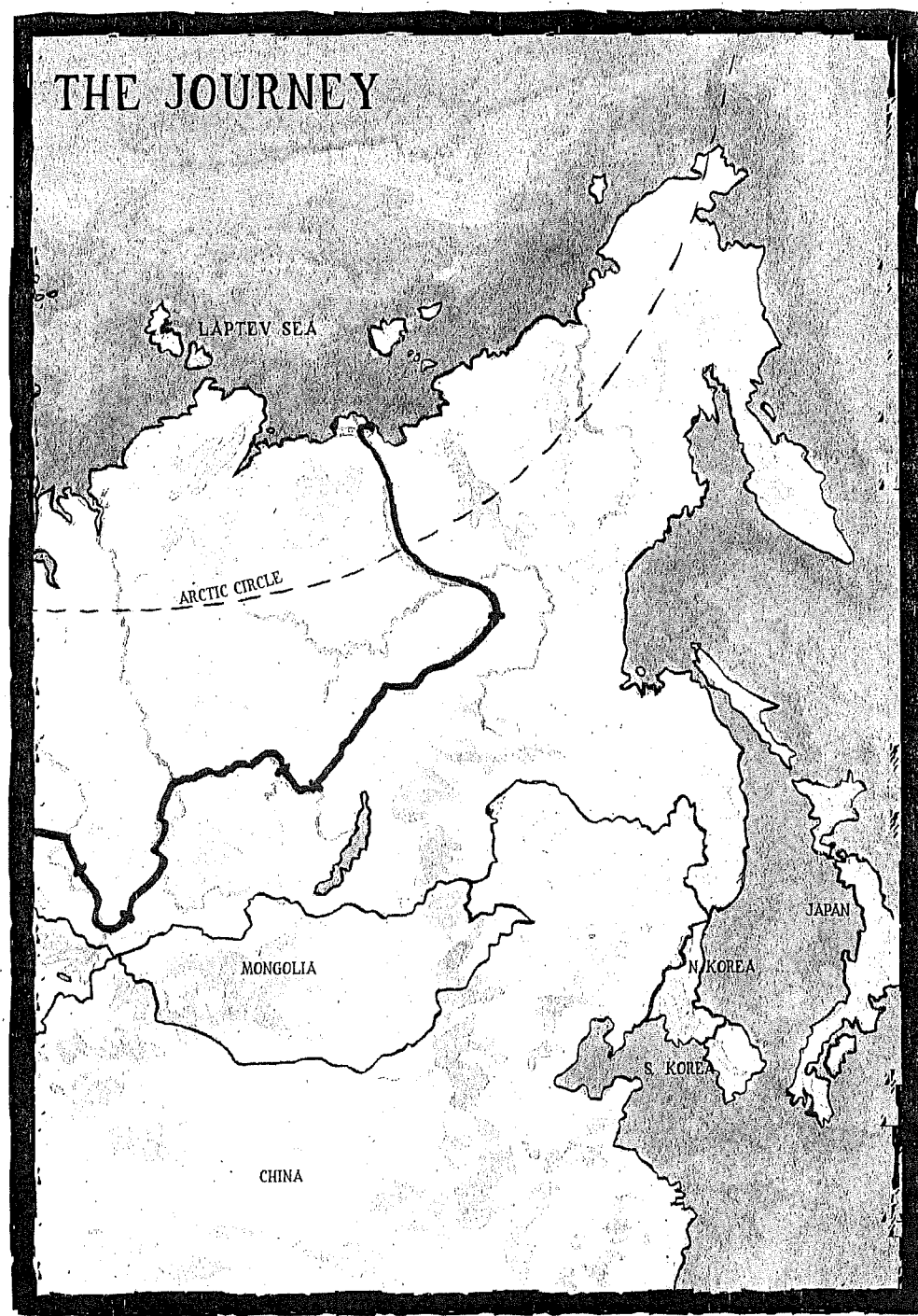
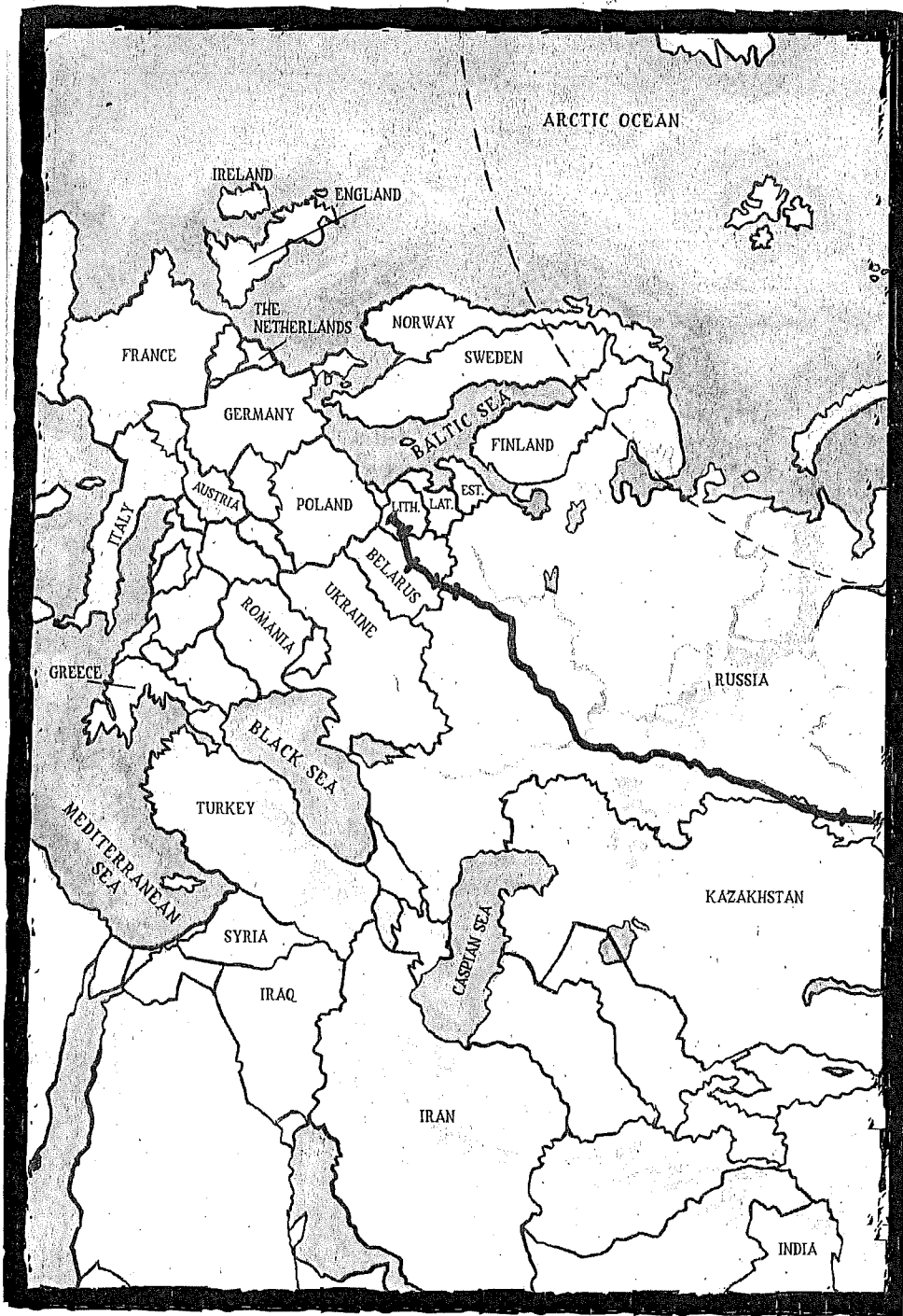
between
shades of gray

One girl's voice breaks the silence of history.

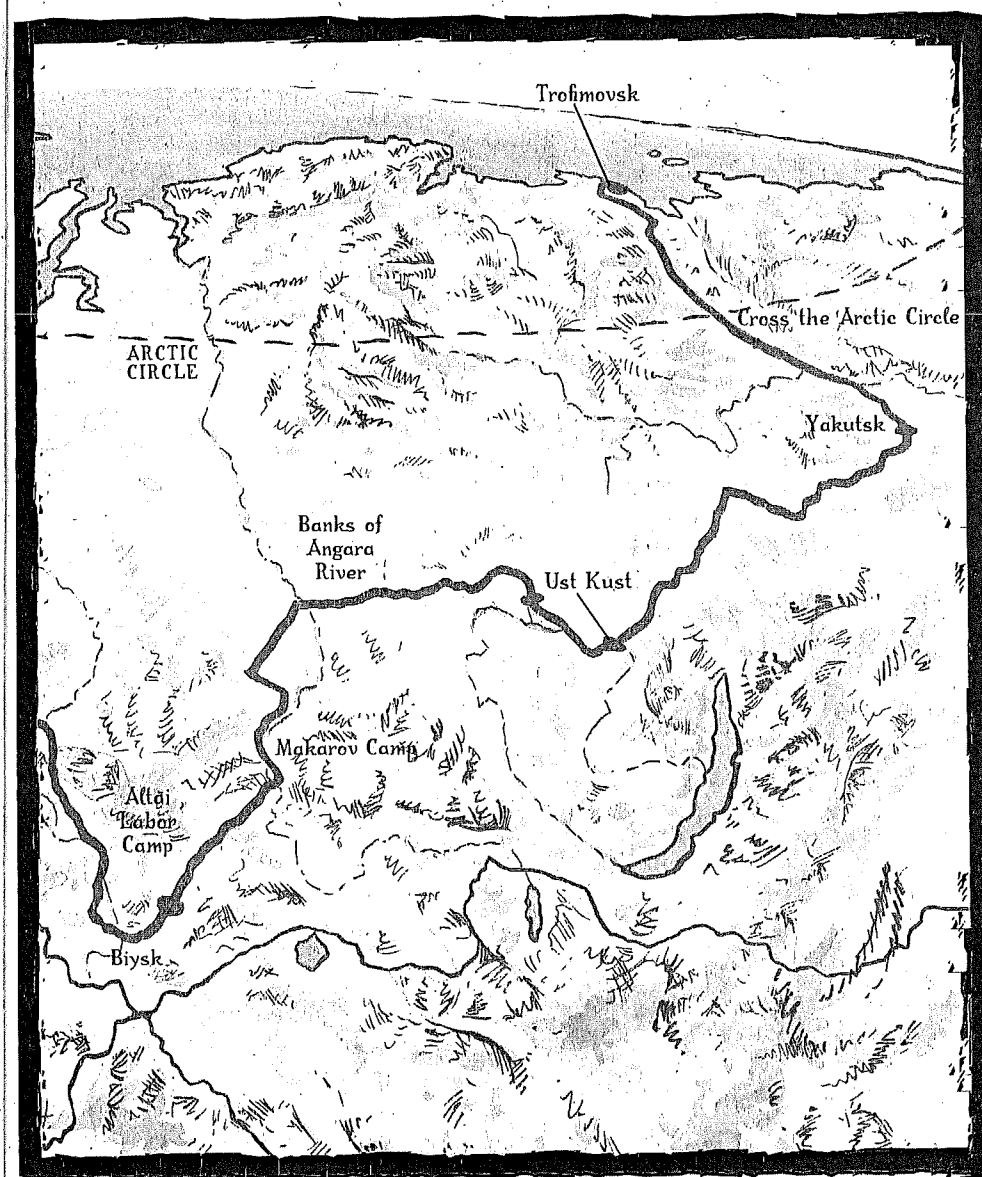


A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

RUTA SEPELTYS



This map is intended to convey the great distance Lina and her family traveled. It is not meant to accurately represent all country borders.



Day 1	Kaunas, Lithuania	Day 6	Smolensk, Russia
Day 3	Vilnius, Lithuania	Day 21	Cross the Ural Mountains
Day 4	Minsk, Belarus	Day 30	Omsk, Siberia
Day 5	Orsha, Belarus	Day 42	Altai Labor Camp

Day 306	Altai Labor Camp	Day 350	Ust Kust, Siberia
Day 313	Biysk, Siberia	Day 380	Yakutsk, Siberia
Day 319	Makarov Camp	Day 410	Cross the Arctic Circle
Day 320	Banks of Angara River	Day 440	Trofimovsk, North Pole

A TIMELINE

This map is intended to convey the great distance Lina and her family traveled. It is not meant to accurately represent all locations.

thieves and
prostitutes

1

THEY TOOK ME IN MY NIGHTGOWN.

Thinking back, the signs were there—family photos burned in the fireplace, Mother sewing her best silver and jewelry into the lining of her coat late at night, and Papa not returning from work. My younger brother, Jonas, was asking questions. I asked questions, too, but perhaps I refused to acknowledge the signs. Only later did I realize that Mother and Father intended we escape. We did not escape.

We were taken.

June 14, 1941. I had changed into my nightgown and settled in at my desk to write my cousin Joana a letter. I opened a new ivory writing tablet and a case of pens and pencils, a gift from my aunt for my fifteenth birthday.

The evening breeze floated through the open window over my desk, waltzing the curtain from side to side. I could

smell the lily of the valley that Mother and I had planted two years ago. *Dear Joana.*

It wasn't a knocking. It was an urgent booming that made me jump in my chair. Fists pounded on our front door. No one stirred inside the house. I left my desk and peered out into the hallway. My mother stood flat against the wall facing our framed map of Lithuania, her eyes closed and her face pulled with an anxiety I had never seen. She was praying.

"Mother," said Jonas, only one of his eyes visible through the crack in his door, "are you going to open it? It sounds as if they might break it down."

Mother's head turned to see both Jonas and me peering out of our rooms. She attempted a forced smile. "Yes, darling. I will open the door. I won't let anyone break down our door."

The heels of her shoes echoed down the wooden floor of the hallway and her long, thin skirt swayed about her ankles. Mother was elegant and beautiful, stunning in fact, with an unusually wide smile that lit up everything around her. I was fortunate to have Mother's honey-colored hair and her bright blue eyes. Jonas had her smile.

Loud voices thundered from the foyer.

"NKVD!" whispered Jonas, growing pale. "Tadas said they took his neighbors away in a truck. They're arresting people."

"No. Not here," I replied. The Soviet secret police had no business at our house. I walked down the hallway to listen and peeked around the corner. Jonas was right. Three NKVD officers had Mother encircled. They wore blue hats with a red border and a gold star above the brim. A tall officer had our passports in his hand.

"We need more time. We'll be ready in the morning," Mother said.

"Twenty minutes—or you won't live to see morning," said the officer.

"Please, lower your voice. I have children," whispered Mother.

"Twenty minutes," the officer barked. He threw his burning cigarette onto our clean living room floor and ground it into the wood with his boot.

We were about to become cigarettes.

2

WERE WE BEING ARRESTED? Where was Papa? I ran to my room. A loaf of fresh bread had appeared on my windowsill, a large wad of rubles tucked under the edge. Mother arrived at the door with Jonas clinging close behind her.

"But Mother, where are we going? What have we done?" he asked.

"It's a misunderstanding. Lina, are you listening? We must move quickly and pack all that is useful but not necessarily dear to us. Do you understand? Lina! Clothes and shoes must be our priority. Try to fit all that you can into one suitcase." Mother looked toward the window. She quickly slid the bread and money onto the desk and snapped the curtains shut. "Promise me that if anyone tries to help you, you will ignore them. We will resolve this ourselves. We must not pull family or friends into this confusion, do you understand? Even if someone calls out to you, you must not respond."

"Are we being arrested?" began Jonas.

"Promise me!"

"I promise," said Jonas softly. "But where is Papa?"

Mother paused, her eyes blinking quickly. "He will be meeting us. We have twenty minutes. Gather your things. Now!"

My bedroom began to spin. Mother's voice echoed inside my head. "Now. Now!" What was happening? The sound of my ten-year-old brother running about his room pulled a cord within my consciousness. I yanked my suitcase from the closet and opened it on my bed.

Exactly a year before, the Soviets had begun moving troops over the borders into the country. Then, in August, Lithuania was officially annexed into the Soviet Union. When I complained at the dinner table, Papa yelled at me and told me to never, ever say anything derogatory about the Soviets. He sent me to my room. I didn't say anything out loud after that. But I thought about it a lot.

"Shoes, Jonas, extra socks, a coat!" I heard Mother yell down the hallway. I took our family photo from the shelf and placed the gold frame faceup in the bottom of the empty suitcase. The faces stared back at me, happy, unaware. It was Easter two years before. Grandma was still alive. If we really were going to jail, I wanted to take her with me. But we couldn't be going to jail. We had done nothing wrong.

Slams and bangs popped throughout the house.

"Lina," Mother said, rushing into the room, her arms loaded. "Hurry!" She threw open my closet and drawers, frantically throwing things, shoving things into my suitcase.

"Mother, I can't find my sketchbook. Where is it?" I said, panicked.

"I don't know. We'll buy a new one. Pack your clothes. Hurry!"

Jonas ran into my room. He was dressed for school in his uniform and little tie, holding his book bag. His blond hair was combed neatly over to the side.

"I'm ready, Mother," he said, his voice trembling.

"N-no!" Mother stammered, choking on the word when she saw Jonas dressed for academy. She pulled in an uneven breath and lowered her voice. "No, sweetheart, your suitcase. Come with me." She grabbed him by the arm and ran down to his room. "Lina, put on shoes and socks. Hurry!" She threw my summer raincoat at me. I pulled it on.

I put on my sandals and grabbed two books, hair ribbons and my hairbrush. Where was my sketchbook? I took the writing tablet, the case of pens and pencils and the bundle of rubles off my desk and placed them amongst the heap of items we had thrown into my case. I snapped the latches closed and rushed out of the room, the curtains blowing, flapping over the loaf of fresh bread still sitting on my desk.

I saw my reflection in the glass door of the bakery and paused a moment. I had a dab of green paint on my chin. I scraped it off and pushed on the door. A bell tinkled overhead. The shop was warm and smelled of yeast.

"Lina, so good to see you." The woman rushed to the counter to assist me. "What may I help you with?"

Did I know her? "I'm sorry, I don't—"

"My husband is a professor at the university. He works for your father," she said. "I've seen you in town with your parents."

I nodded. "My mother asked me to pick up a loaf of bread," I said.

"Of course," said the woman, scurrying behind the counter. She wrapped a plump loaf in brown paper and handed it over to me. When I held out the money, she shook her head.

"Please," whispered the woman. "We could never repay you as it is."

"I don't understand." I reached toward her with the coins. She ignored me.

The bell jingled. Someone entered the shop. "Give your parents our very best regards," said the woman, moving to assist the other customer.

Later that night I asked Papa about the bread.

"That was very kind of her, but unnecessary," he said.

"But what did you do?" I asked him.

"Nothing, Lina. Have you finished your homework?"

"But you must have done something to deserve free bread," I pressed.

"I don't deserve anything. You stand for what is right, Lina, without the expectation of gratitude or reward. Now, off to your homework."

3

MOTHER PACKED AN EQUALLY large suitcase for Jonas. It dwarfed his small, thin frame and he had to carry it with both hands, bending backward to lift it off the floor. He didn't complain of the weight or ask for help.

The sound of breaking glass and china wailed through the house in quick intervals. We found our mother in the dining room, smashing all of her best crystal and china on the floor. Her face glistened with sweat, and her golden ringlets fell loose over her eyes.

"Mama, no!" cried Jonas, running toward the broken shards that littered the floor.

I pulled him back before he could touch the glass. "Mother, why are you breaking your beautiful things?" I asked.

She stopped and stared at the china cup in her hand. "Because I love them so much." She threw the cup to the floor,

not even pausing to see it break before reaching for another.

Jonas began to cry.

"Don't cry, darling. We'll get much nicer things."

The door burst open and three NKVD officers entered our house carrying rifles with bayonets. "What happened here?" demanded a tall officer, surveying the damage.

"It was an accident," Mother replied calmly.

"You have destroyed Soviet property," he bellowed.

Jonas pulled his suitcase close, fearful that any minute it, too, might become Soviet property.

Mother looked in the foyer mirror to affix her loose curls and put on her hat. The NKVD officer slammed her in the shoulder with the butt of his rifle, throwing her face-first into the mirror. "Bourgeois pigs, always wasting time. You won't need that hat," he scoffed.

Mother righted and steadied herself, smoothing her skirt and adjusting her hat. "Pardon me," she said flatly to the officer before fixing her curls again and sliding her pearl hatpin into place.

Pardon me? Is that really what she said? These men burst into our home at night, slam her into the mirror—and she asks them to pardon *her*? Then she reached for it, the long gray coat, and suddenly I understood. She was playing the Soviet officers like a careful hand of cards, not quite sure what might be dealt next. I saw her in my mind, sewing jewelry, papers, silver, and other valuables into the coat under the lining.

"I have to use the bathroom," I announced, trying to divert the attention from my mother and the coat.

"You have thirty seconds."

I shut the bathroom door and caught sight of my face in the mirror. I had no idea how quickly it was to change, to fade. If I had, I would have stared at my reflection, memorizing it. It was the last time I would look into a real mirror for more than a decade.

4

THE STREETLAMPS HAD been turned off. It was nearly black in the road. The officers marched behind us, forcing us to keep pace with them. I saw Mrs. Raskunas peer out of her curtains. The moment she saw me looking, she disappeared. Mother nudged at my arm, which meant that I should keep my head down. Jonas was having a hard time carrying his suitcase. It was banging against his shins.

"*Davai!*" commanded an officer. Hurry, always hurry.

We marched into the intersection of the street, toward a large dark object. It was a truck, surrounded by more NKVD. As we approached the rear of the vehicle, I saw people sitting inside on their luggage.

"Boost me up before they do," Mother whispered quickly, not wanting an officer to touch her coat. I did as she asked. The officers pushed Jonas up. He fell on his face, his luggage

thrown on top of him. I made it without falling, but when I stood up, a woman looked at me and clasped her hand to her mouth.

"Lina, dear. Button your coat," instructed Mother. I looked down and saw my flowered nightgown. In the rush and search for my sketchbook, I had forgotten to change. I also saw a tall, wiry woman with a pointy nose looking at Jonas. Miss Grybas. She was a spinster teacher from school, one of the strict ones. I recognized a few others: the librarian, the owner of a nearby hotel, and several men I had seen Papa speaking with on the street.

We were all on the list. I didn't know what the list was, only that we were on it. Apparently so were the other fifteen people sitting with us. The back gate of the truck slammed shut. A low moan came from a bald man in front of me.

"We're all going to die," he said slowly. "We will surely die."

"Nonsense!" said Mother quickly.

"But we will," he insisted. "This is the end."

The truck began to move, jerking forward quickly, throwing people off their seats. The bald man suddenly scrambled up, climbed the inside wall of the truck, and jumped out. He smashed onto the pavement, letting out a roar of pain like an animal caught in a trap. People in the truck screamed. The tires screeched to a halt and the officers leapt out. They opened the back gate, and I saw the man writhing in pain on the ground. They lifted him up and hurled his crumpled body back into the truck. One of his legs looked mangled. Jonas buried his face in

Mother's sleeve. I slipped my hand into his. He was shaking. My vision blurred. I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them. The truck jerked forward, moving once again.

"NO!" the man wailed, holding his leg.

The truck stopped in front of the hospital. Everyone seemed relieved that they would tend to the bald man's injuries. But they did not. They were waiting. A woman who was also on the list was giving birth to a baby. As soon as the umbilical cord was cut, they would both be thrown into the truck.

NEARLY FOUR HOURS PASSED. We sat in the dark in front of the hospital, unable to leave the vehicle. Other trucks passed, some with people covered in large restraining nets.

The streets began to buzz with activity. "We were early," one of the men commented to Mother. He looked at his watch. "It's nearing three A.M. now."

The bald man, lying on his back, turned his face toward Jonas. "Boy, put your hands over my mouth and pinch my nose. Don't let go."

"He will do nothing of the sort," said Mother, pulling Jonas close.

"Foolish woman. Don't you realize this is just the beginning? We have a chance now to die with dignity."

"Elena!" A voice hissed from the street. I saw Mother's cousin Regina hiding in the shadows.

"Have you any relief now that you're on your back?" Mother asked the bald man.

"Elena!" The voice appeared again, a little louder.

"Mother, I think she's calling you," I whispered, eyeing the NKVD smoking on the other side of the truck.

"She's not calling me—she's a crazy woman," Mother said loudly. "Be on your way and leave us alone," she yelled.

"But Elena, I—"

Mother turned her head and pretended she was deep in conversation with me, completely ignoring her cousin. A small bundle bounced into the bed of the truck near the bald man. His hand grabbed for it greedily.

"And you speak of dignity, sir?" said Mother. She snapped the bundle out of his hands and put it under her legs. I wondered what was in the package. How could Mother call her own cousin "a crazy woman"? Regina had taken a great risk to find her.

"You are the wife of Kostas Vilkas, provost at the university?" asked a man in a suit sitting down from us. Mother nodded, wringing her hands.

I watched as Mother twisted her palms.

Murmurs rose and fell in the dining room. The men had been sitting for hours. "Sweetheart, take them the fresh pot of coffee," said Mother.

I walked to the edge of the dining room. A cloud of cigarette smoke hovered over the table, held captive by the closed windows and drapes.

"Repatriate, if they can get away with it," said my father, stopping abruptly when he saw me in the doorway.

"Would anyone like more coffee?" I asked, holding up the sterling pot.

Some men looked down. Someone coughed.

"Lina, you're turning into quite a young lady," said a friend of my father's from the university. "And I hear that you're a very talented artist."

"Indeed, she is!" said Papa. "She has a very unique style. And she's exceptionally smart," he added with a wink.

"So she takes after her mother then," joked one of the men. Everyone laughed.

"Tell me, Lina," said the man who wrote for the newspaper, "what do you think of this new Lithuania?"

"Well," interrupted my father quickly. "That's not really conversation for a young girl, now, is it?"

"It will be conversation for everyone, Kostas, young and old," said the journalist. "Besides," he said, smiling, "it's not as if I'd print it in the paper."

Papa shifted in his chair.

"What do I think of the Soviets' annexation?" I paused, avoiding eye contact with my father. "I think Josef Stalin is a bully. I think we should push his troops out of Lithuania. They shouldn't be allowed to come and take what they please and—"

"That's enough, Lina. Leave the pot of coffee and join your mother in the kitchen."

"But it's true!" I pressed. "It's not right."

"Enough!" said my father.

I returned to the kitchen, stopping short to eavesdrop.

"Don't encourage her, Vladas. The girl is so headstrong, it scares me to death," said Papa.

"Well," replied the journalist, "now we see how she takes after her father, don't we? You've raised a real partisan, Kostas."

Papa was silent. The gathering ended and the men left the house at alternating intervals, some through the front door and some through the back.

"The university?" said the bald man, still wincing with pain. "Oh, well, he's long gone then."

My stomach contracted like someone had punched me. Jonas turned a desperate face to Mother.

"Actually, I work at the bank and I saw your father just this afternoon," said a man, smiling at Jonas. I knew he was lying. Mother gave the man a grateful nod.

"Saw him on his way to the grave then," said the surly bald man.

I glared at him, wondering how much glue it would take to keep his mouth shut.

"I am a stamp collector. A simple stamp collector and they're delivering me to my death because I correspond internationally with other collectors. A university man would certainly be near the top of the list for—"

"Shut up!" I blurted.

"Lina!" said Mother. "You must apologize immediately. This poor gentleman is in terrible pain; he doesn't know what he is saying."

"I know exactly what I am saying," the man replied, staring at me.

The hospital doors opened and a great cry erupted from within. An NKVD officer dragged a barefoot woman in a bloodied hospital gown down the steps. "My baby! Please don't hurt my baby!" she screamed. Another officer walked out, carrying a swaddled bundle. A doctor came running, grabbing at the officer.

"Please, you cannot take the newborn. It won't survive!" yelled the doctor. "Sir, I beg you. Please!"

The officer turned to the doctor and kicked the heel of his boot into the doctor's kneecap.

They lifted the woman into the truck. Mother and Miss Grybas scrambled to make room for her lying next to the bald man. The baby was handed up.

"Lina, please," Mother said, passing the pink child to me. I held the bundle and instantly felt the warmth of its little body penetrating through my coat.

"Oh God, please, my baby!" cried the woman, looking up at me.

The child let out a soft cry and its tiny fists pummeled the air. Its fight for life had begun.

6

THE MAN WHO WORKED at the bank gave Mother his jacket. She wrapped the suit coat around the woman's shoulders and smoothed her hair away from her face.

"It's all right, dear," said Mother to the young woman.

"Vitas. They took my husband, Vitas," breathed the woman.

I looked down at the little pink face in the bundle. A newborn. The child had been alive only minutes but was already considered a criminal by the Soviets. I clutched the baby close and put my lips on its forehead. Jonas leaned against me. If they would do this to a baby, what would they do to us?

"What is your name, dear?" said Mother.

"Ona." She craned her neck. "Where is my child?"

Mother took the child from me and laid the bundle on the woman's chest.

"Oh, my baby. My sweet baby," cried the woman, kissing the infant. The truck lurched forward. She looked at Mother with pleading eyes.

"My leg!" wailed the bald man.

"Do any of you have medical training?" asked Mother, scanning the faces in the truck. The people shook their heads. Some wouldn't even look up.

"I'll try to make a splint," said the man from the bank. "Does anyone have anything straight I can use? Please, let's help one another." People shifted uncomfortably in the truck, thinking about what they might have in their bags.

"Sir," said Jonas, leaning around me. He held out his little ruler from school. The old woman who had gasped at my nightgown began to cry.

"Well, yes, that's very good. Thank you," said the man, accepting the ruler.

"Thank you, darling," said Mother, smiling at Jonas.

"A ruler? You're going to set my leg with a little ruler? Have you all gone mad?" screeched the bald man.

"It's the best we can do at the moment," said the man from the bank. "Does anyone have something to tie it with?"

"Someone just shoot me, please!" yelled the bald man.

Mother pulled the silk scarf from her neck and handed it to the man from the bank. The librarian slid the knot from her scarf as well, and Miss Grybas dug in her bag. Blood began to soak through the front of Ona's hospital gown.

I felt nauseous. I closed my eyes and tried to think of something, anything, to calm myself. I pictured my sketch-

book. I felt my hand stir. Images, like celluloid frames, rolled through my mind. Our house, Mother adjusting Papa's tie in the kitchen, the lily of the valley, Grandma . . . Her face soothed me somehow. I thought of the photo tucked in my suitcase. Grandma, I thought. Help us.

We arrived at a small train depot in the countryside. Soviet trucks filled the rail yard, packed with people just like ours. We drove alongside a truck with a man and woman leaning out. The woman's face was streaked with tears.

"Paulina!" the man yelled. "Do you have our daughter Paulina?" I shook my head as we passed.

"Why are we at a countryside depot and not Kaunas station?" asked an old woman.

"It's probably easier to organize us with our families. The main station is so busy, you know," said Mother.

Mother's voice lacked certainty. She was trying to convince herself. I looked around. The station was tucked in a deserted area, surrounded by dark woods. I pictured a rug being lifted and a huge Soviet broom sweeping us under it.

7

"DAVAI!" YELLED AN NKVD officer as he opened the back gate of the truck. The train yard swarmed with vehicles, officers, and people with luggage. The noise level grew with each passing moment.

Mother leaned down and put her hands on our shoulders. "Stay close to me. Hold on to my coat if you need to. We must not be separated." Jonas grabbed on to Mother's coat.

"Davai!" yelled the officer, yanking one of the men off the truck and pushing him to the ground. Mother and the man from the bank began to help the rest. I held the infant while they brought Ona down.

The bald man twisted in pain as he was carried off the truck.

The man from the bank approached an NKVD officer. "We have people who need medical attention. Please, get a

doctor." The officer ignored the man. "Doctor! Nurse! We need medical assistance!" shouted the man into the crowd.

The officer grabbed the man from the bank, stuck a rifle in his back and began to march him away. "My luggage!" he yelled. The librarian grabbed the man's suitcase, but before she could run to him, he had disappeared into the crowd.

A Lithuanian woman stopped and said she was a nurse. She began tending to Ona and the bald man while we all stood in a circle around them. The train yard was dusty. Ona's bare feet were already caked in dirt. Hordes of people passed by, threading through one another with desperate faces. I saw a girl from school pass by with her mother. She raised her arm to wave, but her mother covered her eyes as she approached our group.

"Davai!" barked an officer.

"We can't leave these people," said Mother. "You must get a stretcher."

The officer laughed. "You can carry them."

We did. Two men from the truck carried the wailing bald man. I carried the baby and a suitcase while Mother helped Ona walk. Jonas struggled with the rest of the luggage, and Miss Grybas and the librarian helped.

We reached the train platform. The chaos was palpable. Families were being separated. Children screamed and mothers pleaded. Two officers pulled a man away. His wife would not let go and was dragged for several feet before being kicked away.

The librarian took the baby from me.

"Mother, is Papa here?" asked Jonas, still clutching her coat.

I wondered the same thing. When and where had the Soviets dragged my father away? Was it on his way to work? Or maybe at the newspaper stand during his lunch hour? I looked at the masses of people on the train platform. There were elderly people. Lithuania cherished its elders, and here they were, being herded like animals.

"Davai!" An NKVD officer grabbed Jonas by the shoulders and began to drag him away.

"NO!" screamed Mother.

They were taking Jonas. My beautiful, sweet brother who shooed bugs out of the house instead of stepping on them, who gave his little ruler to splint a crotchety old man's leg.

"Mama! Lina!" he cried, flailing his arms.

"Stop!" I screamed, tearing after them. Mother grabbed the officer and began speaking in Russian—pure, fluent Russian. He stopped and listened. She lowered her voice and spoke calmly. I couldn't understand a word. The officer jerked Jonas toward him. I grabbed on to his other arm. His body began to vibrate as sobs wracked his shoulders. A big wet spot appeared on the front of his trousers. He hung his head and cried.

Mother pulled a bundle of rubles from her pocket and exposed it slightly to the officer. He reached for it and then said something to Mother, motioning with his head. Her hand flew up and ripped the amber pendant right from her neck and pressed it into the NKVD's hand. He didn't seem to be satisfied. Mother continued to speak in Russian and pulled

a pocket watch from her coat. I knew that watch. It was her father's and had his name engraved in the soft gold on the back. The officer snatched the watch, let go of Jonas, and started yelling at the people next to us.

Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my brother's was worth a pocket watch.

"IT'S OKAY, DARLING. We're all okay," said Mother, hugging Jonas, kissing his face and tears. "Right, Lina? We're all okay."

"Right," I said quietly.

Jonas, still crying, put his hands in front of his trousers, humiliated by the wetness.

"Don't worry about that, my love. We'll get you a change of clothes," said Mother, moving in front of him to shield his embarrassment. "Lina, give your brother your coat."

I peeled off my coat and handed it to Mother.

"See, you'll just wear this for a short while."

"Mother, why did he want to take me away?" asked Jonas.

"I don't know, dear. But we're together now."

Together. There we stood on the train platform amidst the chaos, me in my flowered nightgown and my brother in a

baby blue summer coat that nearly touched the ground. As ridiculous as we must have looked, no one even glanced at us.

"Mrs. Vilkas, hurry!" It was the nasal voice of Miss Grybas, the spinster teacher from school. She urged us toward her. "We're over here. Hurry now, they're splitting people up."

Mother grabbed Jonas's hand. "Come, children." We made our way through the crowd, like a small boat cutting through a storm, unsure if we'd be sucked in or stay afloat. Red wooden train cars lined the platform, stretching in links as far as the eye could see. They were crudely built and dirty, the kind that would haul livestock. Masses of Lithuanians thronged toward them with their belongings.

Mother maneuvered us through the crowd, pushing and pulling our shoulders. I saw white knuckles clutching suitcases. People were on their knees crying, tying erupting bags with twine while officers stepped on the contents. Wealthy farmers and their families carried buckets of slopping milk and rounds of cheese. A small boy walked by holding a sausage nearly as big as his body. He dropped it and it immediately disappeared underfoot in the crowd. A woman bumped my arm with a sterling candlestick while a man ran by holding an accordion. I thought of our beautiful things, smashed on the floor at our house.

"Hurry!" shouted Miss Grybas, gesturing to us. "This is the Vilkas family," she said to an officer holding a clipboard. "They're in this car."

Mother stopped in front of the car and scanned the crowd intently. *Please*, said her eyes as she searched for our father.

"Mother," whispered Jonas, "these cars are for pigs and cows."

"Yes, I know. We'll have a little adventure, won't we?" She boosted Jonas up into the car and then I heard the sounds—a baby crying and a man moaning.

"Mother, no," I said. "I don't want to be with those people."

"Stop it, Lina. They need our help."

"Can't someone else help them? We need help, too."

"Mother," said Jonas, worried the train would begin to move. "You're coming in, aren't you?"

"Yes, darling, we're coming. Can you take this bag?" Mother turned to me. "Lina, we haven't a choice. Please do the best you can not to frighten your brother."

Miss Grybas reached down for Mother. What about me? I was frightened, too. Didn't that matter? *Papa, where are you?* I looked around the train platform, which was now in complete pandemonium. I thought about running, running until I couldn't run anymore. I'd run to the university to look for Papa. I'd run to our house. I'd just run.

"Lina." Mother stood in front of me now and lifted my chin. "I know. This is horrible," she whispered. "We must stay together. It's very important." She kissed my forehead and turned me toward the train car.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I don't know yet."

"Do we have to be in these cattle cars?"

"Yes, but I'm sure it won't be for long," said Mother.

9

THE INSIDE OF THE car was stuffy and full of personal smells, even with the door open. People were wedged in everywhere, sitting on their belongings. At the end of the car, large planks of wood approximately six feet deep had been installed as shelves. Ona lay on one of the planks, peaked, the baby crying on her chest.

"OW!" The bald man smacked my leg. "Watch it, girl! You almost stepped on me."

"Where are the men?" Mother asked Miss Grybas.

"They took them away," she replied.

"We'll need men in this car to help with the injured," said Mother.

"There aren't any. We're sorted into groups of some kind. They keep bringing people and shoving them in. There are some elderly men, but they haven't any strength," said Miss Grybas.

Mother looked around the car. "Let's put the little ones on the top plank. Lina, move Ona on that bottom plank so we can fit some more of the children."

"Don't be a fool, woman," barked the bald man. "If you make room, they'll just cram more people in here."

The librarian was shorter than me and stocky. She was strong and helped move Ona. "I'm Mrs. Rimas," she said to Ona.

Mrs. . . . She was married, too. Where was her husband? Perhaps with Papa. The baby gave a blistering yell.

"Is your little one a boy or a girl?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"A girl," said Ona weakly. She shifted her bare feet on the wooden plank. They were cut and full of dirt.

"She'll need to eat soon," said Mrs. Rimas.

I looked around the car. My head felt detached from my body. More people pushed into the small space, including a woman with a boy my age. I felt a tug.

"Are you going to sleep now?" asked a small girl with hair the color of pearls.

"What?"

"You're in your nightgown. Are you going to sleep?" She thrust a tattered doll toward me. "This is my dolly."

My nightgown. I was still in my nightgown. Jonas was still in my baby blue coat. I had completely forgotten. I pushed toward Jonas and Mother. "We need to change our clothes," I said.

"There's no room to open our suitcases," said Mother. "And there's nowhere to change."

"Please," said Jonas, pulling my coat tightly around him.

Mother tried to move toward the corner of the car but it was useless. She bent down and opened my suitcase a slight crack. Her hand dipped in and out, searching for something. I saw my pink sweater and a slip. Finally, she pulled out my dark blue cotton dress. She then searched for pants for Jonas.

"Excuse me, madam," she said to a woman sitting in the corner of the car. "Could we trade places with you so my children can change their clothes?"

"This is our spot," announced the woman. "We're not moving." Her two daughters looked up at us.

"I realize it's your spot. It would just be for a moment, so my children have a bit of privacy."

The woman said nothing and folded her arms across her chest.

Mother thrust us near the corner, almost on top of the woman.

"Hey!" said the woman, throwing up her hands.

"Oh yes, so sorry. Just for a bit of privacy." Mother took my coat from Jonas and held it up to shield us. I changed quickly and then used my nightgown to make an additional changing curtain for Jonas.

"He peed," said one of the girls, pointing at my brother. Jonas froze.

"You peed, little girl?" I said loudly. "Oh, poor thing."

The temperature in the car had risen steadily since we had climbed in. The wet scent of an armpit hung in front of my face. We forged our way near the door, hoping for some

air. We stacked our suitcases and Jonas sat on top, holding the bundle from our cousin Regina. Mother stood on her toes, trying to look out onto the train platform for Papa.

"Here," said a gray-haired man, putting a small case on the floor. "Stand on this."

"That's very kind," said Mother, accepting.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"Since yesterday," she said.

"What does he do?" said the man.

"He's provost at the university. Kostas Vilkas."

"Ah, yes, Vilkas." The man nodded. He looked at us. His eyes were kind. "Beautiful children."

"Yes. They look just like their father," she said.

We all sat together on the velvet settee, Jonas on Papa's lap. Mother wore her green silk dress with the full skirt. Her yellow hair fell in shiny waves against the side of her face, and her emerald earrings sparkled under the lights. Papa wore one of his new dark suits. I had chosen my cream-colored dress with the brown satin sash and a matching ribbon for my hair.

"What a handsome family," said the photographer, positioning his large camera. "Kostas, Lina looks just like you."

"Poor girl," teased Papa. "Let's hope she grows out of it and ends up like her mother."

"One can only hope," I teased back. Everyone erupted in laughter. The flash went off.

10

I COUNTED THE PEOPLE—forty-six packed in a cage on wheels, maybe a rolling coffin. I used my fingers to sketch the image in a layer of dirt on the floor near the front of the train car, wiping the drawings away and starting over, again and again.

People chattered about our possible destination. Some said NKVD headquarters, others thought Moscow. I scanned the group. Faces spoke to their future. I saw courage, anger, fear, and confusion. Others were hopeless. They had already given up. Which was I?

Jonas swatted flies away from his face and hair. Mother spoke quietly to the woman with the son my age.

"Where are you from?" the boy asked Jonas. He had wavy brown hair and blue eyes. He looked like one of the popular boys from school.

"Kaunas," said Jonas. "Where are you from?"

"Šančiai."

We looked at each other, silent and awkward.

"Where is your dad?" blurted Jonas.

"In the Lithuanian army." The boy paused. "He's been gone for a while."

His mother looked like an officer's wife, fancy and unaccustomed to dirt. Jonas continued to chatter, before I could tell him to stop.

"Our father works at the university. I'm Jonas. This is my sister, Lina."

The boy nodded at me. "I'm Andrius Arvydas." I nodded in return and looked away.

"Do you think they'd let us get out, even for a few minutes?" asked Jonas. "That way, if Papa is here at the station, he'll see us. He can't find us now."

"The NKVD won't let us do much of anything," said Andrius. "I saw them beat someone who tried to run."

"They called us pigs," said my brother.

"Don't listen to them, Jonas. They're the pigs. They're stupid pigs," I said.

"Shh. I wouldn't say that," said Andrius.

"What are you, the police?" I asked.

Andrius raised his eyebrows. "No, I just don't want you to get in trouble."

"Don't get us in trouble, Lina," said Jonas.

I looked over toward Mother.

"I gave them everything I had. I lied and told them he was

feeble-minded. I had no choice," whispered Andrius's mother. "They would have split us up. Now I have nothing, not even a crumb."

"I know," said Mother, reaching out to the woman. "They did the same with us, and my boy is only ten years old."

Ona's baby wailed. Mrs. Rimas made her way over to Mother.

"She's trying to feed the child, but something's wrong," said Mrs. Rimas. "The baby's mouth won't latch properly."

Hours passed like long days. People cried of heat and hunger. The bald man griped about his pain while others tried to organize the space and luggage. I had to surrender my dirt canvas on the floor and instead used my fingernail to carve drawings on the wall.

Andrius jumped down from the car to go to the bathroom but was punched and thrown back in by the NKVD. We all cringed with each gunshot or scream. No one dared leave the car again.

Someone discovered a hole, the size of a plate, in the corner where the stubborn woman sat with her daughters. They had been hiding the hole and the fresh air that came from it. People descended upon her, insisting she move. After she had been dragged off the spot, we all took turns using the hole to go to the bathroom. Some just couldn't bring themselves to do it. The sounds and smells made my head spin. A young boy hung his head from the car and vomited.

Mrs. Rimas organized the children and began to tell stories. The young kids scrambled toward the librarian. Even the

two daughters left their grouchy mother and sat mesmerized by the fantastic tales. The girl with the dolly leaned against Mrs. Rimas and sucked her thumb.

We sat in a circle on the library floor. One of the younger boys lay on his back, sucking his thumb. The librarian turned through the picture book, reading with an animated voice. I listened and drew the characters in my little notebook. I drew the dragon and my heart began to beat faster. He was alive. I felt a wave of heat from his fiery breath coming at me, blowing my hair back. Then I drew the princess running, her beautiful golden hair tumbling down the mountainside . . .

"Lina, are you ready to go?"

I looked up. The librarian hovered over me. All of the children were gone.

"Lina, are you okay? You're flushed. You're not feeling ill, are you?"

I shook my head and held up my notebook.

"Oh my word. Lina, did you draw that?" The librarian quickly reached for the pad.

I nodded, smiling.



THE SUN BEGAN TO SET. Mother braided my wavy, sweaty hair. I tried to count how many hours we had spent in the prison box, and wondered how many more we had to go. People ate the food they had brought. Most shared. Some didn't.

"Lina, that loaf of bread," Mother began.

I shook my head. Was that loaf of bread still there, sitting on my desk? "I don't have the bread," I replied.

"All right," said Mother, taking some food to Ona. Her lips pursed, she was disappointed.

Andrius sat with his knees drawn up, smoking a cigarette. He was staring at me.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Seventeen." He continued to stare.

"How long have you been smoking?"

"What are you, the police?" he said, and looked away.

Night came. It was dark in our wooden box. Mother said we should be thankful they left the door open. I wasn't about to thank the NKVD for anything. Every few minutes I heard their boots marching by. I couldn't sleep. I wondered if there was a moon out, and if so, what it looked like. Papa said scientists speculated that from the moon, the earth looked blue. That night I believed it. I would draw it blue and heavy with tears. Where was Papa? I closed my eyes.

Something bumped my shoulder. I opened my eyes. It was lighter in the train car. Andrius stood above, nudging me with his shoe. He put his finger to his lips and motioned with his head. I looked over at Mother. She slept, clutching her coat tightly around her. Jonas was gone. My head snapped around, looking for my brother. Andrius kicked me again and waved me forward.

I got up and stepped between the human bundles toward the door of the train car. Jonas stood at the opening, clutching the side. "Andrius said that an hour ago, a long train came in. Someone told him it was full of men," whispered Jonas. "Maybe Papa is on it."

"Who told you that?" I asked Andrius.

"Don't worry who told me," he said. "Let's look for our fathers."

I looked down off the train. The sun had just appeared on the horizon. If Papa *was* at the train station, I wanted to find him.

"I'll go and let you know what I find out," I said. "Where is the train that pulled in?"

"In back of us. But you're not going," said Andrius. "I'll go."

"How are you going to find my father? You don't know what he looks like," I snapped.

"Are you always so pleasant?" said Andrius.

"Maybe you can both go," suggested Jonas.

"I can go by myself," I said. "I'll find Papa and bring him to our car."

"This is ridiculous. We're wasting time. I shouldn't have woken you up," said Andrius.

I looked out of the train car. The guard was a hundred feet away, his back to me. I hung down off the edge and dropped quietly to the ground, scrambling under the train. Andrius beat me there. Suddenly, we heard a yelp and saw Jonas jumping down. Andrius grabbed him and we tried to hide behind one of the wheels, peeking under the train. The NKVD officer stopped and turned around.

I put my hand over Jonas's mouth. We crouched near the wheel, afraid to breathe. The officer resumed walking.

Andrius peeked out the other side and waved us on. I crawled out. The back of our train car had Russian writing on it.

"Thieves and prostitutes," Andrius whispered. "That's what it says."

Thieves and prostitutes. Our mothers were in that car, along with a teacher, a librarian, elderly people, and a newborn baby—thieves and prostitutes. Jonas looked at the writing. I grabbed his hand, thankful he couldn't read Russian. I wished he had stayed on the train.

Another line of red cattle wagons sat on tracks behind ours. The doors, however, were closed and locked with large bolts. We looked around, then ran under the other train, dodging the splatters of waste. Andrius knocked on the bottom near a bathroom hole. A shadow appeared.

"What's your father's name?" Andrius asked me.

"Kostas Vilkas," I said quickly.

"We're looking for Petras Arvydas and Kostas Vilkas," he whispered.

The head disappeared. We heard scuffling on the floor of the car. The head reappeared. "Not in this car. Be careful, children. Be very quiet."

We scurried from car to car, dodging droppings and knocking. Each time a head disappeared, I felt my stomach tighten. "Please, please, please," Jonas would say. And then we'd move on, with warnings of caution or messages for loved ones. We reached the seventh car. The man's head disappeared. It was quiet inside. "Please, please, please," said Jonas.

"Jonas?"

"Papa!" we said, trying not to raise our voices. A match scraped across a wood plank. Papa's face appeared in the hole. He looked gray, and his eye was badly bruised.

"Papa, we're in a car over there," began Jonas. "Come with us."

"Shh . . .," said Papa. "I can't. You shouldn't be here. Where is your mother?"

"In the car," I said, happy yet horrified to see my father's bludgeoned face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," he said. "Are you okay? Is your mother okay?"

"We're okay," I said.

"She doesn't know we're here," said Jonas. "We wanted to find you. Papa, they broke into our house and—"

"I know. They're attaching our train to yours."

"Where are they taking us?" I asked.

"To Siberia, I think."

Siberia? That couldn't be right. Siberia was half a world away. There was nothing in Siberia. I heard Papa talking inside the train car. His arm came out of the hole holding some scrunched-up material.

"Take this jacket and these socks. You'll need them." More noise came from inside. Papa handed out another jacket, two shirts, and more socks. He then handed down a large piece of ham.

"Children, split this. Eat it," Papa said.

I hesitated and stared at the ham my father handed through the same hole people used as a toilet.

"Put it in your mouths right now!" he said.

I tore the thick piece of ham in quarters and handed some to Jonas and Andrius. I put the last piece in my dress pocket for Mother.

"Lina, take this and give it to your mother. Tell her it's okay to sell it, if she has to." Papa's hand came down to me, holding his gold wedding band. I stared at it.

"Lina, do you understand? Tell her it's in case she needs money."

I wanted to tell him we had already traded a pocket watch

for Jonas. I nodded and put the ring on my thumb, not able to swallow the ham past the lump in my throat.

"Sir," said Andrius, "is Petras Arvydas in your car?"

"I'm sorry, son, he's not," said Papa. "This is very dangerous. You must all get back to your train."

I nodded.

"Jonas."

"Yes, Papa?" Jonas said, peering up at the hole.

"You're very brave to have come. You must all stay together. I know you'll take good care of your sister and mother while I am away."

"I will, Papa, I promise," said Jonas. "When will we see you?"

Papa paused. "I don't know. Hopefully soon."

I clutched the bundle of clothes. Tears began dropping down my cheeks.

"Don't cry, Lina. Courage," said Papa. "You can help me."

I looked up at him.

"Do you understand?" My father looked at Andrius, hesitant. "You can help me find you," he whispered. "I'll know it's you . . . just like you know Munch. But you must be very careful."

"But," I started, uncertain.

"I love you both. Tell your mother I love her. Tell her to think of the oak tree. Say your prayers, children, and I will hear them. Pray for Lithuania. Now run back. Hurry!"

My chest hurt and my eyes burned. I started to walk but stumbled.

Andrius caught me. "Are you okay?" he asked. His face looked soft, concerned.

"I'm fine," I said, quickly wiping my eyes and pulling free of his grasp. "Let's go find your father."

"No, you heard him. Hurry, run back. Tell your mother what he said."

"But what about your father?" I asked.

"I'm going to try a few more. I'll meet you back at our car," he said. "Just go, Lina. You're wasting time."

I hesitated.

"Are you scared to go alone?"

"No! I'm not scared," I said. "My father said we should stay together, but we'll go by ourselves." I snatched Jonas by the hand. "We don't need him, right, Jonas?"

Jonas stumbled, looking over his shoulder at Andrius.

12

"HALT!" a voice commanded.

We were so close, nearly under our train car. NKVD boots marched toward us. I tucked my thumb and Papa's wedding band into my palm.

"Davai!" the voice yelled.

Jonas and I crept out from under the car.

"Lina! Jonas!" yelled Mother, leaning out of the train.

The officer pointed his gun at Mother, signaling for her to be quiet. He then circled around us, his boots coming closer with each turn.

I felt Jonas edge up beside me. I tightened my fist, hoping the guard wouldn't see Papa's ring. "We dropped some things down the bathroom hole," I lied, lifting up the bundle. Mother translated my words into Russian for the guard.

The officer looked at the socks on top of the heap I was

holding. He grabbed Jonas and began searching his pockets. I thought of the ham in my dress. How could I explain a slice of ham in my pocket when we were all so hungry? The guard shoved us both to the ground. He waved his rifle around our faces, yelling in Russian. I huddled near Jonas, staring down the barrel of his gun. I closed my eyes. *Please, no.* He kicked gravel at our legs and then spat, "Davai!" pointing toward the train car.

Mother's face was ashen. She did a poor job of hiding her fear this time. Her hands trembled and she was nearly panting. "You could have been killed!"

"We're okay, Mother," announced Jonas. His voice shook. "We went to find Papa."

"Where is Andrius?" Mrs. Arvydas looked over our shoulders.

"He came with us," I said.

"But where *is* he?" she demanded.

"He wanted to look for his father," I said.

"His father?" She sighed deeply. "Why doesn't he believe me? I've told him again and again that his father . . ." She turned around and began to cry.

I realized I had made a great mistake. I should not have left Andrius behind.

"We found him, Mother. We found Papa," said Jonas.

People crowded toward us. They wanted to know how many men were on the train and if we saw their loved ones.

"He said he thinks we're going to Siberia," Jonas reported. "And he gave us some ham. The three of us ate it, but we saved a piece for you. Lina, give Mother the piece of ham."

I reached in my pocket and handed the piece of ham to Mother.

She saw it, the ring on my thumb.

"In case you need money," I said. "He said you could sell it."

"And he said to remember the oak tree," said Jonas.

Mother took the ring off of my thumb and put it to her lips. She began to cry.

"Don't cry, Mother," said Jonas.

"Girl!" shouted the bald man. "What else did you bring to eat?"

"Lina, give this piece of ham to Mr. Stalas," said Mother, sniffing. "He's hungry."

Mr. Stalas. The bald man had a name. I moved toward him. His withered arms were green and purple with bruises. I held out the piece of ham.

"That's your mother's," he said. "What else do you have?"

"That's all he gave me."

"How many cars were on that train?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe twenty."

"He said we're going to Siberia?"

"Yes."

"He's probably right, your father," he said.

Mother's crying subsided. I held out the piece of ham again.

"That's your mother's," said the bald man. "Make sure she eats it. I don't like ham anyway. Now leave me alone."

"He wouldn't come with us," my brother explained to Mrs.

Arvydas. "He and Lina started fighting and he said he was going to check more cars."

"We weren't fighting," I interrupted.

"If they find him wandering around and discover he is the son of an officer—" said Mrs. Arvydas. She hid her face in her hands.

The gray-haired man shook his head and wound his watch.

I felt guilty. Why didn't I stay with Andrius or insist he come back with us? I looked out of the train car, hoping to see him.

Two Soviets pulled a priest down the platform. His hands were bound and his cassock was dirty. Why a priest? But then . . . why any of us?

THE SUN ROSE and the temperature in the car climbed quickly. The wet smell of feces and urine hovered over us like a filthy blanket. Andrius had not returned, and Mrs. Arvydas wept so hard it scared me. I felt sick with guilt.

A guard approached the car and handed up a bucket of water and a bucket of slop.

Everyone surged toward the buckets. "Wait," said Miss Grybas, as if she were directing her class. "We must all take just a bit, to ensure everyone can eat."

The slop resembled gray animal feed. Some children refused to eat it.

Jonas found the package from Mother's cousin Regina. Inside was a small blanket, a sausage, and a coffee cake. Mother shared the food, giving small pieces to everyone. The baby continued to wail. Ona twisted and screamed right along

with the child, who still refused to eat and looked a darker shade of pink.

Hours passed. Andrius didn't return. Mother sat down next to me. "How did your father look?" she asked, smoothing my braids and putting her arm around my shoulder.

"Not too bad," I lied. I put my head on her shoulder. "Why are they taking us? Is it really because Papa works at the university? That doesn't make sense."

The bald man groaned.

"See, like him," I whispered. "He's not a teacher. He's a stamp collector and he's being deported," I said.

"He's not just a stamp collector," said Mother under her breath. "Of that I am certain. He knows too much."

"What does he know?"

Mother sighed, shaking her head. "Stalin has a plan, my love. The Kremlin will do anything to see it through. You know that. He wants Lithuania for the Soviet Union, so he's moving us out temporarily."

"But why us?" I asked. "They already moved into Lithuania last year. Isn't that enough?"

"It's not just us, dear. I imagine he's doing the same to Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. It's complicated," said Mother. "Try to rest."

I was exhausted but couldn't sleep. I wondered if my cousin Joana was also on a train somewhere. Maybe she was near Papa. Papa said I could help him, but how could I help him if we were really going to Siberia? I dozed off, thinking of Andrius, trying to see his face.

As I walked by the piece, my feet stopped. The face. It was enchanting, like nothing I had ever seen. It was a charcoal portrait of a young man. The corners of his lips turned up, yet despite his smile, the pain on his face made my eyes well with tears. The subtleties within his hair blended so softly, yet created strong variation. I stepped closer to inspect. Flawless. How did he achieve such sheer shade without so much as a pause or a fingerprint? Who was the artist, and who was the young man? I looked at the signature. Munch.

"Young lady, follow the group, please. That's part of a different exhibit," said our guide.

Some of the students had complained earlier. How could they complain about a field trip to the art museum? I had been looking forward to it for months.

The guide's shoes clacked down the tile floor. My body moved forward, but my head remained fixed on the drawing, fixed on the face. I rubbed my fingers together. A light touch, yes, but with confidence. I couldn't wait to try it.

I sat at the desk in my bedroom. I felt the charcoal vibrate slightly as I pushed it across the page. The sound it made against the paper gave me chills. I bit my bottom lip. I ran my middle finger along the edge, softening the harsh line. Not quite, but almost.

I pushed the tip of my finger through the dirt on the floor, drawing his name. Munch. I would recognize his art anywhere. And Papa would recognize mine. That's what he meant. He could find me if I left a trail of drawings.



WHEN I WOKE, the car was dark. I moved to the front and hung my head over the side for air. My hair swung away from my neck. A rush of air swirled around my face, and I breathed deeply. Gravel crunched. I snapped my head up, expecting to see a guard. No one was there. The gravel shifted again. I dropped my head back down, looking under the train. A dark figure huddled near the wheel. I squinted, trying to focus in the low light. A bloody hand lifted toward me, shaking. I pulled back before realizing.

Andrius.

I turned toward Mother. Her eyes were closed, her arms wrapped around Jonas. I looked out on the train platform. The NKVD marched two cars down, their backs to me. The little girl with the dolly sat on her knees near the door. I put my finger to my lips. She nodded. I lowered myself down off the car, trying not to make a sound. My chest

thumped, remembering the guard pointing the gun at me.

I stepped closer and stopped. A truck drove by somewhere outside, its lights momentarily sweeping under the car. Andrius stared off with a blue, battered face. He had swollen pillows for eyes. His shirt was covered in blood, his lips sliced. I knelt down beside him.

"Can you walk?"

"A little," he said.

I peeked out to see the guards. They stood in a group smoking, four cars down. I tapped lightly near the bathroom hole. The grouchy woman's face appeared. Her eyes widened.

"I have Andrius. We need to get him back on the train."

She stared at me.

"Did you hear me?" I whispered. "You have to pull him up. Move!"

Her face disappeared from the hole. I heard scuffling inside the car and glanced down to the guards. I slung Andrius's bloody arm over my shoulder and grabbed him by the waist. We rose and inched toward the door. The gray-haired man hung his head over, signaling for us to wait. Andrius sagged on my shoulder, making my knees bend. I didn't know how long I could hold him up.

"NOW!" said the gray-haired man. I thrust Andrius toward the man who, together with the others, pulled him up.

I peeked out at the guards. Just as I moved, they turned and began walking toward me. Desperate, I looked around. I grabbed on to the undercarriage of the train and lifted my legs up, suspended under the car. The sound of the boots came

closer and emerged near the wheel. I closed my eyes. They were speaking in Russian. A matchstick hissed, and a glow appeared on the guard's boot. They chatted in low voices. My arms began to shake, trying to hold on. *Hurry.*

I hung there. My hands began to sweat. I was losing my grip. *Leave.* A deep burning washed through the fibers of my muscles. Their conversation continued. *Please.* I bit my lip. *Move.* A dog barked. The guards walked toward the sound.

Mother and the gray-haired man pulled me up. I slumped against the open door, gasping for air. The little girl with the dolly put her finger to her lips and nodded.

I stared at Andrius. Dried blood caked his teeth and the corners of his lips. His jaw was swollen. I hated them, the NKVD and the Soviets. I planted a seed of hatred in my heart. I swore it would grow to be a massive tree whose roots would strangle them all.

"How could they do this?" I asked aloud. I looked around the train car. No one spoke. How could we stand up for ourselves if everyone cowered in fear and refused to speak?

I had to speak. I'd write everything down, draw it all. I would help Papa find us.

Andrius shifted his legs. I looked down at him.

"Thanks," he whispered.

I WOKE WITH A START next to Jonas and Andrius. The door to our car had been closed and locked. People began to panic.

The engines let out a hiss of steam.

"Please don't move unless you absolutely have to," ordered Miss Grybas. "Make sure the bathroom area stays clear."

"Mrs. Book Lady? Will you tell us a story?" asked the girl with the dolly.

"Mama," whimpered a little voice, "I'm scared. Turn on the light."

"Did anyone bring a lantern?" someone asked.

"Sure, and I have a four-course meal in my pocket, too," said the bald man.

"Mr. Stalas," said Mother, "please, we're all doing the best we can."

"Girl," he commanded. "Look out that little slot and tell us what you see."

I moved toward the front of the car and hoisted myself up.

"The sun is beginning to rise," I said.

"Spare us the poetry," snapped the bald man. "What's happening out there?"

The train hissed again, then clanked.

"NKVD officers are walking by the train with rifles," I said. "There are some men in dark suits looking at the train cars."

We felt a jolt and the train began to move.

"There's luggage everywhere," I said. "And lots of food on the platform." People groaned. The station looked eerie, desolate, frozen with only remnants of the chaos that had taken place. There were single shoes strewn about, a cane, a woman's purse lying open, and an orphaned teddy bear.

"We're moving out of the station," I reported. I craned my neck to look ahead. "There are people," I said. "There's a priest. He's praying. A man is holding a large crucifix."

The priest looked up, flung oil, and made the sign of the cross as our train rolled away.

He was issuing last rites.

AS WE ROLLED, I reported every detail from the window. The Nemunas River, the big churches, buildings, the streets, even the trees we passed. People sobbed. Lithuania had never looked more beautiful. Flowers burst with color against the June landscape. We moved along, our cars marked "thieves and prostitutes."

After two hours the train began to slow.

"We're coming into a station," I said.

"What does the sign say?" asked the bald man.

I waited for the train to move closer. "Vilnius. We're in . . . Vilnius," I said quietly.

Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. We had studied the history in school. Six hundred years ago, the Grand Duke Gediminas had a dream. He saw an iron wolf standing high upon a hill. He consulted a priest about the dream who told

him that the iron wolf symbolized a large and formidable city, a city of opportunity.

"Lina, may I speak to you, please?"

The remainder of my classmates filed out of the room. I approached the teacher's desk.

"Lina," she said, clasping her hands on the desk, "it seems you prefer socializing to studying." She opened a folder in front of her. My stomach leapt into my throat. Inside were notes I had written to girls in class, along with accompanying sketches. On top of the pile sat a drawing of a Greek nude and a portrait of my handsome history teacher. "I found these in the trash. I've spoken to your parents."

My hands became clammy. "I was trying to copy the figure from a library book—"

She raised her hand to stop me. "In addition to being quite social, however, you appear to be a gifted artist. Your portraits are"—she paused, rotating the drawing—"captivating. They show a depth of emotion well beyond your years."

"Thank you," I breathed.

"I believe your talent is above what we could develop here. There is a summer program, however, in Vilnius."

"In Vilnius?" I asked. Vilnius was a few hours away.

"Yes, in Vilnius. Next year, when you're sixteen, you'd be allowed to enter. If accepted, you'd study with some of the most talented artists in northern Europe. Would that interest you?"

I tried to swallow my excitement long enough to speak. "Yes, Mrs. Pranas, it would."

"Then I'd like to recommend you. You'll fill out an application and submit some samples of your drawings," she said, handing the folder with the notes and sketches to me. "We'll send them off to Vilnius as soon as possible."

"Mrs. Pranas, thank you!" I said.

She smiled and leaned back in her chair. "It's my pleasure, Lina. You have talent. You have a successful future ahead of you."

Someone discovered a loose board behind some luggage on the back wall. Jonas crawled back and wiggled it aside.

"What do you see?"

"There's a man in the trees," said Jonas.

"Partisans," said the bald man. "They're trying to help us. Get his attention."

Jonas stuck his hand out of the opening in the board, trying to wave.

"He's coming," said Jonas. "Shh!"

"They're unhooking the cars with the men," a man's voice said. "They're splitting the train in two." He ran back into the woods.

Intermittent shots rang out in the distance.

"Where are they taking the men?" I asked.

"Maybe the men are going to Siberia," said Mrs. Rimas. "And we're going somewhere else."

I preferred the thought of Siberia, if that's where Papa would be.

Metal clanged and screeched. They were dividing the train. There was another sound.

"Listen," I said. "The men." It grew louder. Louder. They were singing, singing at the top of their lungs. Andrius joined, and then my brother and the gray-haired man. And finally, the bald man joined in, singing our national anthem. *Lithuania, land of heroes . . .*

I wept.

THE VOICES OF THE MEN in the other cars had sounded full of pride, full of confidence. Fathers, brothers, sons, husbands. Where were they all going? And where were *we* going, a train car full of women, children, elderly, and infirmed?

I wiped my tears with my handkerchief and allowed others to do the same. When it was handed back to me, I paused, staring at it. Unlike paper, the handkerchief could travel hand to hand without deteriorating. I would use it to draw on for Papa.

While I devised a plan, the women in the car showed constant concern for the baby, who could not seem to nurse.

Mrs. Rimas urged Ona to keep trying. "Come, come, dear."

"What is it?" asked my mother through the darkness of the car.

"It's Ona," said Mrs. Rimas. "Her ducts are clogged and she's too dehydrated. The baby won't suckle."

Despite Mrs. Rimas's efforts, nothing seemed to help.

We rolled for days, stopping in the middle of nowhere. The NKVD wanted to ensure we could not be seen and had nowhere to run. We waited for our daily stops. It was the only time the door would be open to light or fresh air.

"One person! Two buckets. Any dead bodies in there?" the guards would ask.

We had agreed to rotate. That way, everyone would get a chance to get out of the car. Today was my turn. I had dreamed of seeing blue sky and feeling the sun on my face. But earlier, it had begun to rain. We had all scrambled to hold cups and containers out of the little slot to catch the rainwater.

I snapped my umbrella closed, shaking the excess rainwater onto the sidewalk. A gentleman in a suit emerged from a restaurant, stepping quickly away from the drops I was splashing about.

"Oh, sir, I'm sorry!"

"No trouble at all, miss," he said, nodding and touching the brim of his hat.

The smell of roasted potatoes and spiced meat drifted out of the restaurant. The sun appeared, spreading a golden filter across the concrete and warming the back of my head. Wonderful—the concert in the park wouldn't be canceled tonight. Mother had planned to pack a hamper with our dinner for a moonlight picnic on the grass.

As I rolled the umbrella and wrapped the closure, I jumped when I saw a face staring at me from the puddle at my feet. I laughed at my disorientation, smiling at myself in the pool of water. The edges of the puddle shimmered beneath the sun, creating a beautiful frame around my face. I wished I could photograph it to draw later. Suddenly, a faint shadow appeared behind my head in the puddle. I turned around. A pastel rainbow arched out of the clouds.

The train slowed. "Hurry, Lina. Do you have the buckets?" asked Mother.

"Yes." I moved closer to the door. Once the train stopped, I waited for the sound. Boots and clanking. The door jerked open.

"One person! Two buckets. Any dead bodies in there?" the NKVD commanded.

I shook my head, eager to get out. The guard stepped aside and I jumped down. My stiff legs gave way, and I fell to the muddy ground.

"Lina, are you all right?" called Mother.

"Davai!" yelled the guard, along with a series of Russian expletives before he spit on me.

I got up and looked down the length of the train. The sky was gray. Rain fell steadily. I heard a scream and saw the limp body of a child heaved out into the mud. A woman tried to jump out after the corpse. She was smashed in the face by the butt of a rifle. I saw another body thrown out. Death had begun to gather a crop.

"Don't delay, Lina," said the gray-haired man from our car. "Be swift with the buckets."

I felt as if I were dreaming with a high fever. My head seemed airy and my step unsteady. I nodded and looked up at our car. A group of heads stacked upon one another stared back at me.

Dirt and filth clung to their faces. Andrius smoked a cigarette and looked off the other way. His face was still bruised.

Urine streamed through the bottom of the train car. Ona's baby cried from inside. I saw the wet green field. *Come here*, it beckoned. *Run.*

Maybe I should, I thought. *Do it, Lina.*

"What's wrong with her?" Voices began chattering from the train car.

Run, Lina.

The buckets flew out of my hands. I saw Andrius limping away with them. I just stood there, looking at the field.

"Lina. Come back in, dear," pleaded Mother.

I closed my eyes. Rain splashed against my skin and hair. I saw Papa's face, peering down from the match-lit hole in his train car. *I'll know it's you . . . just like you know Munch.*

"Davai!"

An NKVD officer hovered over me. His breath reeked of liquor. He grabbed my arms and threw me toward the train.

Andrius returned with buckets of water and gray animal feed. "Hope you enjoyed your bath," he said.

"What did you see out there, girl?" demanded the bald man.

"I . . . I saw the NKVD throwing dead bodies off the train into the mud. Two children." People gasped.

The door to our car slammed shut.

"How old were the dead kids?" asked Jonas quietly.

"I don't know. I only saw them from afar."

Mother combed through my wet hair in the dark.

"I wanted to run," I whispered to her.

"I can understand that," said Mother.

"You can?"

"Lina, wanting to get away from this is perfectly understandable. But like your father said, we must all stay together. It's very important."

"But how can they just decide that we're animals? They don't even know us," I said.

"We know us," said Mother. "They're wrong. And don't ever allow them to convince you otherwise. Do you understand?"

I nodded. But I knew some people had already been convinced. I saw them cowering in front of the guards, their faces hopeless. I wanted to draw them all.

"When I looked up at our train car, everyone looked sick," I said.

"Well, we're not," said Mother. "We're not sick. We'll soon be back in our homes. When the rest of the world finds out what the Soviets are doing, they will put an end to all of this."

Would they?

18

WE WEREN'T SICK, but others were. Each day when the train stopped, we'd lean out of the car and try to count the number of bodies thrown. It grew every day. I noticed Jonas kept track of the children, making marks with a stone on the floorboard of the car. I looked at his marks and imagined drawing little heads atop each one—hair, eyes, a nose, and a mouth.

People estimated our path traveled south. Whoever was posted at the little window would call out when we passed markers or signs. My feet were numb from the vibration of the floorboards. My head was curdled from the stench, and I itched terribly. Lice were biting down the side of my hairline, behind my ears, and in my armpits.

We had passed through Vilnius, Minsk, Orsha, Smolensk. I wrote the path of cities on my handkerchief in ink. Each

day when the door was open to light, I would add more detail and identifying clues that Papa would recognize—our birthdays, a drawing of a *vilkas*—a wolf. I made markings only in the center, surrounded by a circle of hands touching fingers. I scrawled the words *pass along* under the drawing of the hands and I drew a Lithuanian coin. When the handkerchief was folded, the writing was undetectable.

"Drawing?" whispered the gray-haired man, winding his watch.

I jumped.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said. "I won't tell."

"I have to get word to my father," I said, my voice low. "So he can find us. I figured I could pass this handkerchief and that eventually, it will get to him."

"Very clever," he said.

He had been kind on the journey. Could I trust him? "I need to give it to someone who will understand the importance and pass it along."

"I can help you with that," he said.

We had been rolling for eight days when the train jerked hard and began to slow.

Jonas was at the little window slot. "There's another train. We're coming up on a train going in the opposite direction. It's stopped."

Our train car dragged, bleeding off speed.

"We're pulling up alongside it. There are men. The windows are open on their cars," said Jonas.

"Men?" said Mother. She quickly made her way to the window, swapped places with Jonas, and yelled out in Russian. They replied. The energy in her voice lifted and she began to speak quickly, pulling for breaths in between questions.

"For God's sake, woman," said the bald man. "Stop your socializing and tell us what's going on. Who are they?"

"They're soldiers," reported Mother, elated. "They're going to the front. There is war between Germany and the USSR. Germany has moved into Lithuania," she shouted. "Did you hear me? The Germans are in Lithuania!"

Morale soared. Andrius and Jonas shouted and whooped. Miss Grybas began to sing "Take Me Back to My Homeland." People hugged one another and cheered.

Only Ona was quiet. Her baby was dead.

THE TRAIN WITH the Russian soldiers rolled away. The doors were opened, and Jonas jumped out with the buckets.

I looked over to Ona. She was forcing the dead child toward her breast.

"No," she said through gritted teeth, rocking back and forth. "No. No."

Mother moved toward her. "Oh, my dear. I'm so sorry."

"NO!" Ona screamed, clutching her baby.

Hot tears stung my parched eyes.

"What are you crying for?" complained the bald man.

"You knew it was going to happen. What was the baby going to eat, lice? You're all imbeciles. The thing is better off. When I die, if you're smart you'll eat me if you all want to survive so badly."

He prattled on, grating, infuriating. The words distorted. I

heard only the timbre of his voice thumping in my ears. Blood pumped through my chest and rose up my neck.

"DAMN YOU!" Andrius screamed and lurched toward the bald man. "If you don't shut your mouth, old man, I'll tear out your tongue. I'll do it. I'll make the Soviets look kind." No one spoke or tried to stop Andrius. Not even Mother. I felt relief, as if the words had come from my own mouth.

"You're concerned only with yourself," Andrius continued. "When the Germans kick the Soviets out of Lithuania, we'll leave you here on the tracks so we don't have to put up with you anymore."

"Boy, you don't understand. The Germans aren't going to solve the problem. Hitler's going to create more," said the bald man. "Those damn lists," he muttered.

"No one wants to hear from you, understand?"

"Ona, dear," said Mother. "Give me the baby."

"Don't give her to them," begged Ona. "Please."

"We will not give her to the guards. I promise," said Mother. She examined the baby one last time, feeling for pulse or breath. "We'll wrap her in something beautiful."

Ona sobbed. I moved to the open door to get some air. Jonas returned with the buckets.

"Why are you crying?" he asked, climbing up.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong?" he pressed.

"The baby's dead," said Andrius.

"Our baby?" he asked softly.

Andrius nodded.

Jonas put down the buckets. He looked over toward Mother holding the bundle and then at me. He knelt down and took the small stone out of his pocket, making a mark on the floorboards next to the others. He paused for a few moments, motionless, and then began slamming the stone against the markings, harder and harder. He beat the floorboards with such force that I thought he might break his hand. I moved toward him. Andrius stopped me.

"Let him do it," he said.

I looked at him, uncertain.

"Better that he gets used to it," he said.

Used to what, the feeling of uncontrolled anger? Or a sadness so deep, like your very core has been hollowed out and fed back to you from a dirty bucket?

I looked at Andrius, his face still warped with bruising. He saw me staring. "Are you used to it?" I asked.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. He pulled a cigarette butt from his pocket and lit it. "Yeah," he said, blowing a stream of smoke into the air, "I'm used to it."

People discussed the war and how the Germans might save us. For once, the bald man said nothing. I wondered if what he said about Hitler was true. Could we be trading Stalin's sickle for something worse? No one seemed to think so. Papa would know. He always knew those sorts of things, but he never discussed them with me. He discussed them with Mother. Sometimes at night I'd hear whispers and murmurs from their room. I knew that meant they were talking about the Soviets.

I thought about Papa. Did he know about the war? Did he know we all had lice? Did he know we were huddled together with a dead baby? Did he know how much I missed him? I clutched the handkerchief in my pocket, thinking of Papa's smiling face.

"Hold still!" I complained.

"I had an itch," said my father, grinning.

"You did not, you're just trying to make this difficult," I teased, trying to capture his bright blue eyes.

"I'm testing you. Real artists must be able to capture the moment," he said.

"But if you don't hold still, your eyes will be crooked," I said, shading in the side of his face with my pencil.

"They're crooked anyway," he said, crossing his eyes. I laughed.

"What do you hear from your cousin Joana?" he asked.

"Nothing lately. I sent her a drawing of that cottage in Nida she liked last summer. I didn't even get a note back from her. Mother said she received it but is busy with her studies."

"She is," said Papa. "She hopes to be a doctor someday, you know."

I knew. Joana spoke often of medicine and her hopes of being a pediatrician. She was always interrupting my drawing to tell me about the tendons in my fingers or my joints. If I so much as sneezed, she would rattle off a list of infectious diseases that would have me in the grave by nightfall.

Last summer she had met a boy while we were on vacation in Nida. I'd wait up every night to hear the details of their dates. As a seventeen-year-old, she had wisdom and experience, as well as an anatomy book that fascinated me.

"There," I said, finishing the drawing. "What do you think?"

"What's that?" asked my father, pointing to the paper.

"My signature."

"Your signature? It's a scribble. No one will recognize it's your name."

I shrugged. "You will," I said.

20

WE TRAVELED FARTHER SOUTH and passed through the Ural Mountains. Miss Grybas explained that the Urals were the boundary between Europe and Asia. We had crossed into Asia, another continent. People said we were on course for southern Siberia, or possibly even China or Mongolia.

We tried for three days to sneak Ona's baby out, but the guard stood near whenever the doors were open. The smell of rotting flesh had become unbearable in the hot car. It made me retch.

Ona finally agreed to drop the baby down the bathroom hole. She knelt over the opening, sobbing, holding the bundle.

"For God's sake," moaned the bald man. "Get rid of that thing. I can't breathe."

"Be quiet!" Mother yelled to the bald man.

"I can't," whimpered Ona. "She'll be crushed on the tracks."

Mother moved toward Ona. Before she reached her, Miss Grybas snapped the bundle from Ona and threw it down the hole. I gasped. Mrs. Rimas cried.

"There," said Miss Grybas. "Done. It's always easier for someone unattached." She wiped her hands on her dress and adjusted her hair bun. Ona fell into Mother's arms.

Jonas clung to Andrius, spending nearly every minute by his side. He seemed angry all the time and so distant from his usual sweetness. Andrius had taught him a few Russian slang words I had heard the NKVD use. It made me furious. I knew I'd have to learn a bit of Russian eventually, but I hated the thought.

One night, I saw the glow of a cigarette illuminate Jonas's face. When I complained to Mother, she told me to leave him be.

"Lina, every night I thank God he has Andrius, and you should, too," she said.

My stomach ate itself. Pangs of hunger came at relentless intervals. Although Mother made an effort to keep us on a schedule, I lost track of time and sometimes dozed off during the day. My eyelids were drooping when I heard it.

"How could you? Have you gone mad?" A female voice shrieked through the train car.

I sat up, squinting to make out what was going on. Miss Grybas hovered over Jonas and Andrius. I tried to make my way over.

"And Dickens nonetheless. How dare you! You are becoming the animals they treat us as!"

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Your brother and Andrius are smoking!" she bellowed.

"My mother knows," I said.

"Books!" she said, thrusting a hard cover in my face.

"We ran out of cigarettes," Jonas said softly, "but Andrius had tobacco."

"Miss Grybas," said Mother, "I'll handle it."

"The Soviets have arrested us because we are knowledgeable, learned people. To smoke pages of a book is just . . . What were you thinking?" Miss Grybas asked. "Where did you get this book?"

Dickens. I had *The Pickwick Papers* in my suitcase. Grandma had given it to me the Christmas before she died. "Jonas! You took my book. How could you?"

"Lina," began Mother.

"I took your book," said Andrius. "Blame me."

"I certainly do blame you," said Miss Grybas. "Corrupting this young boy. You should be ashamed."

Mrs. Arvydas slept on the other side of the car, completely unaware of what had transpired.

"You're an idiot!" I screamed at Andrius.

"I'll get you a new book," he said.

"No, you won't. It was a gift," I said. "Jonas, Grandma gave me that book."

"I'm sorry," said Jonas, looking down at his chest.

"You should be!" I yelled.

"Lina, it was my idea," said Andrius. "It's not his fault."

I waved him away. Why did boys have to be such idiots?

WEEKS. I LOST TRACK of how long we had been traveling. I stopped watching for bodies to be hurled from the cars. Every time the train pulled away, we left a litter of corpses in our wake. What would people think if they saw them? Would someone bury them, or would they believe they were really thieves and prostitutes? I felt as if I were riding a pendulum. Just as I would swing into the abyss of hopelessness, the pendulum would swing back with some small goodness.

One day, for example, just past Omsk, we stopped in the countryside. There was a small kiosk. Mother bribed a guard to let her out of the car. She came running back, her entire skirt bowed full and heavy. She knelt down in the car and released her skirt. Candy, toffees, lollipops, black licorice, mountains of gumdrops, and other treats spilled out onto the floor, unfolding like a rainbow in front of us. Bright colors

everywhere—pink, yellow, green, red, and enough for everyone. The children squealed with delight and jumped up and down. I bit into a gumdrop. A burst of citrus exploded in my mouth. I laughed and Jonas laughed with me.

There were cigarettes, matches, and dark chocolate wafers for the adults.

“They didn’t have bread or anything substantial,” explained Mother as she divided the treasure amongst everyone. “There were no newspapers.”

Children grabbed Mother’s legs in glee, thanking her.

“Foolish woman. Why do you waste your money on us?” said the bald man.

“Because you are hungry and tired,” Mother said, handing the man a cigarette. “And I know you would do the same for my children if they ever needed it.”

“Bah,” he scoffed and looked away.

Two days later, while on the bucket run, Andrius found an oval stone full of quartz and other minerals. Everyone passed it around, oohing and ahing. Mrs. Arvydas joked and put it up to her finger as if it were a shimmering gemstone.

“Didn’t you know?” she said. “I’m a train car princess.”

We laughed. People smiled. I almost didn’t recognize them. I looked over at Andrius. His face beamed with a grin that changed his appearance entirely. He was handsome when he smiled.

AFTER SIX WEEKS, and the third day without food, the train stopped. They did not open the door. The bald man, who had been charting our progress from the city markers called from the window slot, guessed we were somewhere in the Altai region, just north of China. I tried to peek through cracks in the wagon boards, but it was dark outside. We banged on the doors. No one came. I thought of the loaf of bread I had left on my windowsill, still warm and swollen from the oven. If only I could have a piece. Just one small pinch.

My stomach burned with hunger and my head throbbed. I missed drawing on real paper and longed for light to sketch properly. I was sick of being so close to people. I felt their sour breath all over me, elbows and knees constantly in my back. Sometimes I had the urge to start pushing people away from me, but it was no use. We were like matchsticks in a small box.

Late morning came and we heard clanking. The guards opened the door and said we would be getting out. Finally. My entire body trembled at the shock of daylight. I marked "Altai" on my handkerchief.

"Lina, Jonas, come here and comb your hair," Mother instructed. She smoothed out our clothes, a wasted effort, and helped me twist my hair into a crown. Twisting it made it itch even more.

"Remember, we must all stay together. Do not walk away or stray. Do you understand?" We nodded. Mother still clutched her coat tightly under her arm.

"Where are we?" asked Jonas. "Will they give us a bucket of water?"

"I don't know yet," said Mother, fixing her own hair. She pulled out a tube of lipstick and, with a weak hand, applied the melted color to her lips. Jonas smiled. She winked back at him.

The NKVD had bayoneted rifles at the ready. The sun reflected off the dagger-shaped blades. They could puncture us within a fraction of a second. Miss Grybas and Mrs. Rimas helped the small children out first, and we followed. Andrius and the gray-haired gentleman carried the bald man from the car.

We weren't at a train station. We were in a wide, deep valley, surrounded by forested hills. I saw mountains in the distance. The sky had never looked so blue, so beautiful. I had to shade my eyes from the intense sun. I breathed deeply and felt the crisp, clean air draft my polluted lungs. The NKVD directed the deportees from each train car to sit in groups on

the grass, twenty feet from the tracks. We were given two buckets of slop and water. The children lunged for it.

It was the first time I had seen the other passengers. There were thousands of people. Did we look as pitiful as they did? Masses of Lithuanians with tattered suitcases and bulging bags poured out into the valley, dirty and gray with soiled clothing, as if they had lived in a gutter for years. Everyone moved in slow motion, some too weak to carry their belongings.

I didn't have control of my legs, nor did most others. Many buckled under their own weight onto the ground.

"We must stretch before sitting down, sweetheart," said Mother. "Our muscles have surely atrophied these past weeks."

Jonas stretched. He looked like a filthy street beggar. His golden hair stuck to his head in matted clumps, and his lips were dry and cracked. He looked at me, his eyes widened. I could only imagine the state I was in. We sat down and the grass felt heavenly, like a featherbed compared with the wagon floor. The chugging motion of the train, however, was still trapped in my body.

I looked at the people from our train car. They looked at me. Revealed by daylight, we saw the strangers we had shared a black closet with for six weeks. Ona was only a few years older than me. It had been dark when they put her on the truck in front of the hospital. Mrs. Arvydas was more attractive than her shadow. She had a very shapely figure, smooth brown hair, and full lips. Mrs. Rimas was a short woman with thick ankles, close to Mother's age.

People tried to communicate with the other groups, looking

for family members and loved ones. The man who wound his watch approached me.

"Do you have a handkerchief I could borrow?" he asked.

I nodded and quickly handed him the hankie, neatly folded to conceal my writing.

"Thank you," he said, dabbing his nose. He turned his back to me and walked amongst the crowd of people. I watched as he shook hands with a man he obviously recognized, passing the fabric within palms. The man patted his brow with the handkerchief before putting it in his pocket. Pass it along, I thought, imagining the hankie traveling hand to hand until it reached Papa.

"Elena, look," said Mrs. Rimas. "There are horse-drawn carts."

Mother stood up and looked down the row of groups. "There are men with the NKVD. They're walking amongst the people."

Andrius combed through his wavy hair with his fingers. He looked around constantly, watching the guards yet keeping his head down. He had to be nervous. His face had healed but was still sallow with remnants of yellow bruises. Would they recognize him? Would they haul him away or kill him right in front of us? I moved near him, trying to position my body to conceal his. But he was taller, his shoulders wide. I looked at the sharp blades of the bayonets and felt my stomach pitch with fear.

Ona began weeping loudly. "Pipe down," ordered the bald man. "You'll draw attention to us."

"Please, don't cry," said Andrius, shooting glances from Ona down to the guards.

A group near the front of the train was herded into two horse-drawn wagons. They drove away. I watched as the NKVD walked with men from cluster to cluster. The men looked strange, certainly not Lithuanian or Russian. They had darker skin and black hair, and their general appearance was disheveled, primitive. They stopped at the group of people next to us and began talking with the NKVD.

"Elena, what are they saying?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

Mother didn't answer.

"Elena?"

"They're . . ." She stopped.

"What?" said Mrs. Rimas.

"They're selling us," she whispered.

23

I WATCHED THE MEN walking amongst the groups, surveying the merchandise. They made people stand, turn around, and show them their hands.

"Mother, why are they selling us?" asked Jonas. "Where are we going?"

"Elena," said Mrs. Arvydas, "you must tell them that Andrius is a simpleton. Please. If not, they'll take him from me. Andrius, put your head down."

"They're selling us in groups," reported Mother.

I looked around our cluster. We were mostly women and children, with only two old men. But we had Andrius. Despite his injuries, he looked strong and able.

"Do we want to be bought?" asked Jonas. No one answered. A guard approached with a man. They stopped in front of our group. Everyone looked down, except me. I couldn't help

myself. I stared at the guard, who appeared well rested, clean, and fed. I saw Mother cough into her hand and discreetly try to wipe off her lipstick. The disheveled man pointed at her and said something to the guard. The guard shook his head and waved a circular motion around our group. The man pointed at Mother once again and then made an obscene gesture. The guard laughed and began muttering. The man surveyed our group, and then, he pointed at Andrius.

The guard walked over to Andrius and barked a command. Andrius did not move. My stomach braided up into my throat.

"He's slow—leave him alone," said Mrs. Arvydas. "Elena, tell them."

Mother spoke one word in Russian. The guard grabbed Andrius by the hair and raised his face. Andrius stared blankly. Ona cried and rocked back and forth. Mr. Stalas moaned and grumbled. The man waved his hands in disgust at our group and walked away.

Other groups were purchased, loaded into wagons, and driven off through the valley to disappear through the V at the base of the hills. We finished the last drops of slop and water, debating whether we wanted to be bought.

Someone mentioned escaping. Running away was briefly discussed until a gunshot rang out, followed by screams near the front of the train. The little girl with the dolly began to cry.

"Elena," said Mrs. Rimas. "Ask one of the guards where they're taking the people."

Mother tried to speak with a guard, but he ignored her. For the moment, I didn't care what happened. The grass smelled

like fresh chives, and the sunshine filled me with strength. I stood up and stretched.

The children spread out a bit, and the guards didn't seem to care. The NKVD inspected the train cars, stopping only to scream that we were filthy pigs who disrespected the train. The engine hissed, readying for departure.

"They're going back for more," said Andrius.

"You think so?" asked Jonas.

"They won't stop," said Andrius, "until they've gotten rid of all of us."

HOURS PASSED and the sun began to sink. Only two groups remained. The grouchy woman stomped around and yelled at us. She said Mother made our group appear weak and that now they would probably shoot everyone.

"Let them shoot us," said the bald man. "I'm telling you, we'll be better off."

"But they were going to make us slaves," argued Mrs. Arvydas.

"A little work wouldn't kill you," said the grouchy woman to Mrs. Arvydas. "They probably want some manual labor from us, that's all. That's why they took the other groups first, because most of you look so weak. I grew up on a farm. I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty."

"Then you're elected to go dig up some food," said Andrius. "Now leave our mothers alone."

Jonas and I were spread out on the grass, trying to stretch our stiff muscles. Andrius joined us, put his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky.

"Your forehead is getting red," I told him.

"A sunburn is the least of my worries," said Andrius. "I'm not turning my back to the guards. Maybe if we get a bit of color, we'll be bought and hauled off into Soviet slavery like the witch wants," he said.

Jonas rolled over onto his back like Andrius. "Just as long as we can stay together. Papa said that's important."

"I have no choice but to stay with my mother. I'm surprised she made it this far," said Andrius, looking over in her direction. Mrs. Arvydas was swatting flies away with her silk handkerchief and losing her balance in the process. "She's not exactly hardy."

"Do you have any sisters or brothers?" asked Jonas.

"No," said Andrius. "My mother didn't enjoy being pregnant. My father said that since he had a son, he didn't need any more children."

"My papa said that they're going to give us another brother or sister one day. I think I'd like a brother," said Jonas. "So, what do you think everyone at home is doing? Do you think they wonder what happened to us?"

"If they do, they're too scared to ask about it," said Andrius.

"But why? And why were we sent away?" asked Jonas.

"Because we were on the list," I said.

"But why were we on the list?" continued Jonas.

"Because Papa works at the university," I replied.

"But Mrs. Raskunas works at the university, and she wasn't taken," said Jonas.

Jonas was right. Mrs. Raskunas had peered out from behind her curtains as we were being hauled off in the night. I had seen her staring. Why wasn't her family taken? Why did they hide behind their curtains instead of trying to stop them from deporting us? Papa would never have done that.

"I can understand why the bald man is on the list," I said. "He's horrible."

"He's awfully eager to die, isn't he?" said Andrius, staring up at the sky.

"You know what?" said Jonas. "Looking at the sky, it's like I'm lying on the grass at home, in Lithuania."

That sounded like something Mother would say, throwing color onto a black-and-white picture.

"Look," continued Jonas, "that cloud looks like a cannon."

"Make it blow up the Soviets," I said, running my fingers over the blades of grass. "They deserve it."

Andrius turned his head to me. I felt awkward under his prolonged gaze.

"What?" I asked.

"You always seem to have a mouthful of opinions," he said.

"That's what Papa said. See, Lina, you better be careful," said Jonas.

My bedroom door swung open. "Lina, I want to see you in the living room," said Papa.

"Why?" I asked.

"In the living room, NOW!" Papa's nostrils flared. He walked out of the room.

"Mother, what's wrong?"

"You heard your father, Lina. Go to the living room."

We walked out into the hallway.

"Go to sleep, Jonas," said Mother without even looking in the direction of my brother's room. I looked over. Jonas was peeking out his bedroom door, his eyes wide.

Papa was steaming mad, and he was mad at me. What had I done? I walked into the living room.

"Is this what you waste your talent on?" He thrust a scrap of paper in my face.

"Papa, it was a joke," I explained.

"YOU think it's a joke. What if the Kremlin doesn't think it's a joke? They're perfect likenesses, for God's sake!" He dropped the paper into my lap.

I looked at my sketch. The likeness was perfect. Even in a clown suit, it was obviously Stalin. I drew him standing in our dining room, with Papa and his friends sitting around the table, launching paper airplanes at him. The men were laughing. Stalin had a sad clown face as airplanes hit his head. Papa and Dr. Seltzer were perfect likenesses. I hadn't quite mastered the journalist's chin yet.

"Are there others?" my father demanded, snapping the paper from me.

"It was for fun," said a small voice. Jonas stood in his pajamas in the hallway. "Please don't be mad, Papa."

"Were you in on this, too?" yelled my father.

"Oh, Jonas," said Mother.

"He wasn't in on it! I drew it myself. I showed it to him because I thought it was funny."

"Have you shown this to anyone else?" asked Papa.

"No. I just drew it this afternoon," I said.

"Lina," said Mother. "This is serious. The Soviets could arrest you if they saw your drawing."

"But how would they ever see it? I threw it away," I argued.

"What if someone found it in the trash like I did? A wind could have blown this to the foot of Stalin," said Papa.

"You've drawn your father and his friends mocking the leader of the Soviet Union! Are there others?" he asked.

"No, that's the only one."

Papa tore up my drawing and threw the pieces into the fire.

Andrius continued to stare at me. "Is that what you want?" he finally asked. "To blow up the Soviets?"

I turned to look at him. "I just want to go home. I want to see my father," I said.

He nodded.

EVENING CAME and two groups were left. Most of the NKVD had departed with the train. Only five armed officers remained, with two trucks. Nearly seventy-five Lithuanians and only five Soviets, yet no one dared move. I think most of us were too tired and weak. The grass was a welcomed bed, the space a luxury. I made note of landmarks to draw for Papa.

The NKVD made a fire and cooked their dinner while we sat and stared. They had American canned goods, bread, and coffee. After dinner they drank vodka and smoked, the volume of their voices rising steadily.

"What are they saying?" I asked Mother.

"They're talking about their homes, where they're from. They're sharing stories of their friends and family," she said.

I didn't believe her. I listened to the Russian words. The tone of their voices and the cackling laughter didn't sound like

talk of family. Ona began again. She had taken to chanting "No, no, no, no," over and over. One of the NKVD stood up and yelled, flipping his hand at our group.

"I better try to quiet her," said Mother, getting up, "before the guards become angry." Jonas was already asleep. I covered him with my blue raincoat and wiped his hair away from his eyes. The bald man snored. The gray-haired man wound his watch. Andrius sat at the edge of the group, one knee pulled to his chest, watching the guards.

He had a strong profile, an angular jaw. A piece of his disheveled hair fell perfectly against the side of his face. I'd need a soft pencil to draw it. He saw me staring. I turned away quickly.

"Hey," he whispered to me.

I looked up. Something rolled across the grass and hit my leg. It was the stone with the sparkles he had found that day when he jumped off the train.

"The crown jewel from the train car princess," I whispered, smiling.

He nodded with a laugh.

I picked it up to roll back to him.

"No, you keep it," said Andrius.

We woke at sunrise. A few hours later a wagon came, chose the other group, and took them away. The guards then loaded us into the back of two trucks and drove us across the valley beyond the notch in the hills where a road began. No one spoke. We were too frightened to discuss our possible destination.

Riding in the truck, I realized that trying to escape would have been ridiculous. There was nothing for miles. We didn't see a human being or pass another vehicle. I thought about the man who had my handkerchief, hoping it was passed along, moving closer to Papa. After two hours we saw huts dotting the sides of the road. We entered what appeared to be an inhabited area, and the truck pulled over in front of a wooden building. The guards jumped out, yelling, "Davai! Davai!" and other instructions.

"They say we should leave our luggage in the trucks," said Mother, clutching her coat tightly over her arm.

"I want to know where we're going before we get out," demanded Mrs. Arvydas.

Mother tried to talk to the guards. She turned and smiled. "It's a bathhouse."

We jumped off the truck. Mother folded her coat and put it in her suitcase. The guards split us into male and female groups.

"Boys, carry me," the bald man said to Andrius and Jonas. "You have to bathe me."

Jonas looked petrified, Andrius disgusted. I smiled, which seemed to annoy Andrius even more. The men went first. The guards called them up onto the porch and began yelling in their faces, pushing them. Jonas looked at Mother for translation.

"Take off your clothes, dear," Mother translated.

"Now? Right here?" Jonas asked, looking at all the women and girls.

"We'll all turn around, won't we, ladies?" said Mother. We all turned our backs to the porch.

"No use in being modest now," said Mr. Stalas. "We're nothing but skeletons. Now take off my pants, boy. Ow! Watch my leg."

I heard Mr. Stalas complaining and Jonas apologizing. A belt buckle knocked against the wood of the porch. I wondered if it was Andrius's. The guards yelled.

"He says you must leave your clothes there, that they will be deloused," Mother translated.

Something smelled funny. I couldn't tell if it came from our group of women or from the bathhouse. We heard the bald man yell from within the structure.

Mother turned around and clasped her hands together. "My sweet Jonas," she whispered.

26

WE WAITED. "What's going on in there?" I said. Mother shook her head. Three NKVD stood on the porch. One barked yet another command.

"Ten of us at a time," said Mother. "We must go to the porch and take off our clothes."

We were in the first group, along with Mrs. Arvydas, the grouchy woman, and her daughters. Mother helped Ona up onto the porch. I unbuttoned my dress and pulled it over my head, unbraided my hair, and took off my sandals. Mother stood in her brassiere and underwear, helping Ona. The guards stood on the porch, staring at us. I hesitated.

"It's okay, dear," said Mother. "Think of how nice it will be to feel clean again." Ona began to whimper.

A young blond guard lit a cigarette, turned his back, and looked off toward the truck. Another NKVD stared, grinning and biting his bottom lip.

I took off my bra and panties and stood on the porch, covering myself with my hands. Mrs. Arvydas stood next to me, her voluptuous breasts too large to conceal with her thin forearm. A guard with a gold tooth, who appeared to be a commander, walked down the porch stopping to look at each woman, scanning her up and down. He stopped at Mrs. Arvydas. She did not lift her head. He swirled a toothpick on his tongue and raised his brow, violating her with his stare.

I let out a breath in disgust. Mother's head snapped to me. The guard grabbed my arms and threw them down to my sides. He looked me up and down and grinned. He reached out and groped my breast. I felt his ragged fingernails scratch across my skin.

I had never been naked in front of a man before. His touch, the rough hand on me, made me feel sick, and dirtier on the inside than I was on the outside. I tried to cross my arms. Mother yelled something in Russian and pulled me behind Ona.

Ona's inner thighs and buttocks were caked with chunks of dried blood. The guard began to scream at Mother. She removed her remaining clothing and put her arm around me. They marched us into the bathhouse.

27

A GUARD STOOD AT a distance. He plunged a scoop in a bucket and threw some sort of white powder at us. The showers clicked on with an icy spray.

"We must hurry," said Mother. "We don't know how long they'll give us." She took a small chunk of soap and scrubbed at my scalp and face, ignoring her own body. I watched the brown rivers of dirt run down my legs, over my ankles, and into the drain. I wanted to be sucked down with it, away from the guards and the humiliation.

"Keep scrubbing, Lina, quickly," said Mother, turning to wash Ona.

I stood shivering under the stream of water, washing as well as I could, hoping the guards would not be waiting for us on the other side of the wall.

I washed Mother's back and tried to wash her hair. Mrs. Arvydas stood under the stream of water, her hands raised

above her head gracefully, unaware, as if she were in her own private bath at home. The showers snapped off.

We retrieved our clothes on the other side of the wall. I quickly pulled my dress over my head and felt a knock against my thigh. The stone from Andrius. I put my hand in my pocket, my fingers searching for the smooth edge.

Mother combed through my hair with her fingers. I looked at her wet face. Water dripped from her blond waves onto her shoulders.

"I want to go home," I whispered, shivering. "Please."

She dropped her clothing and hugged me, long and hard. "We'll go home. Keep thinking of your father and of our house. We must keep it alive in our hearts." She let go and looked at me. "If we do, we'll get there."

The men were already in the first truck. Another group of women and children stood naked on the porch as we exited.

"Feel better, darling?" said Mother, smiling at Jonas as she climbed into the truck. She checked her suitcase for her coat. Jonas looked much improved, in appearance and disposition. So did Andrius. His wet hair was shiny, the color of dark cinnamon.

"Now we're clean dead men. So what of that?" said the bald man.

"If we were dead men, they wouldn't allow us to shower," said the gray-haired man, looking at his watch.

"Hey, there was blond hair under all that dirt," said Andrius, reaching out and grabbing a strand of my hair. I shrank back and looked away. Mother put her arm around me.

"What's wrong, Lina?" asked Jonas.

I ignored him. I thought of the guard who touched me and all the things I should have done—slapped him, kicked him, screamed in his face. I put my hand in my pocket and grabbed the stone from Andrius. I squeezed it and tried as hard as I could to break it.

"Do you suppose they'll take us for a four-course meal now that we've been to the sauna?" joked Mrs. Rimas.

"Oh, yes, a piece of black forest torte and a cognac or two," laughed Mrs. Arvydas.

"I'd love a nice hot coffee," said Mother.

"Strong coffee," added the bald man.

"Wow, I never thought it could feel so good to be clean!" exclaimed Jonas, looking at his hands.

Everyone's humor was much improved, except Ona's. She continued chanting. Despite the efforts of Mrs. Rimas, she could not be calmed. As the last group of women and children boarded the truck, the commander saw Ona standing up, sitting down, and pulling her hair. He yelled at her. The young blond guard appeared at the back of the truck.

"Leave her be," said Mrs. Rimas. "The poor dear is grieving."

Mother translated to the commander. Ona stood up and stamped her right foot. The commander stepped up and pulled Ona from the truck. She lost all control, screaming, clawing at him. She was no match for his height or strength. He threw her to the ground. His eyes narrowed and his square jaw tightened. Mother scrambled to jump off the truck to Ona. It was too late. The commander pulled out a pistol and shot Ona in the head.

I gasped, along with everyone else. Andrius grabbed Jonas's face and covered his eyes. Blood, the color of thick red wine, pooled under Ona's head. Her leg splayed out in an unnatural, bent angle. One of her feet was missing a shoe.

"Lina," said Andrius.

I turned my head to him, dazed.

"Don't look," he said.

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I turned my head back. The young blond guard was staring at Ona's body.

"Lina, look at me," urged Andrius.

Mother slumped on her knees near the edge of the truck, looking down at Ona. I moved and sat down near my brother.

The engine rumbled and the truck began to roll. Mother sat down and put her face in her hands. Miss Grybas clucked her tongue, shaking her head.

Jonas pulled my head against his knees and patted my hair. "Please, don't say anything to the guards. Don't make them mad, Lina," he whispered.

Ona's body got smaller and smaller as we drove away. She lay dead in the dirt, murdered by the NKVD. Somewhere, hundreds of miles away, her daughter decomposed in the grass. How would her family ever know what happened to her? How would anyone know what was happening to *us*? I would continue to write and draw whenever I had the chance. I would draw the commander firing, Mother on her knees with her head in her hands, and our truck driving away, the tires spitting gravel onto Ona's dead body.

28

WE DROVE INTO A LARGE collective farming area. Clusters of decrepit one-room cabins formed a shanty village. The warm sun was clearly temporary. Buildings pitched at a slant, their warped roofs warning of extreme weather.

The guards ordered us off the truck. Andrius hung his head, standing close to his mother. They began directing us to what I thought were our own shacks, but when Miss Grybas and Mrs. Rimas entered one, a woman ran out and began arguing with the guards.

"There are people living in the cabins," whispered Jonas.

"Yes, we'll most likely have to share," said Mother, pulling us close.

Two women walked past us carrying large buckets of water. I didn't recognize them from our train.

We were assigned to a dingy hut near the back of the

settlement. The gray wood was bald, shaved by many seasons of wind and snow. The door had splits and cracks and sat crooked on the frame. A strong wind could whisk the shack up into the sky, scattering it in a burst of pieces. The blond guard pulled the door open, bellowed something in Russian and pushed us inside. A squat Altaian woman wrapped in layers ran to the door and began screaming after the guard. Mother moved us to the corner. The woman turned and began yelling at us. Her hair poked out of her kerchief like black straw. Wrinkles formed an atlas on her wide, weathered face.

"What's she saying?" asked Jonas.

"She says she has no room for filthy criminals," said Mother.

"We're *not* criminals," I said.

The woman continued her rant, throwing her arms in the air and spitting on the floor of the hut.

"Is she crazy?" asked Jonas.

"She says she barely has food enough for herself and she's not about to share it with criminals like us." Mother turned her back to the woman. "Well, now, we'll just set our things in this corner. Jonas, put your suitcase down."

The woman grabbed my hair and pulled it, yanking me toward the door to throw me out.

Mother yelled, blasting the woman in Russian. She ripped the woman's hand from my head, slapped her, and pushed her away. Jonas kicked her in the shin. The Altaian woman stared at us with angled black eyes. Mother returned the stare. The woman let out a hearty laugh. She asked a question.

"We're Lithuanian," said Mother, first speaking in Lithuanian and then in Russian. The woman jibbered.

"What's she saying?" I asked.

"She says feisty people make good workers and that we have to pay her rent." Mother continued asking questions.

"Pay her? For what? To live in this hole in the middle of nowhere?" I said.

"We're in Altai," said Mother. "They are farming potatoes and beets."

"So there are potatoes to eat?" asked Jonas.

"Food is rationed. She said the guards oversee the farm and the workers," said Mother.

I remembered Papa talking about Stalin confiscating peasants' land, tools, and animals. He told them what crops they would produce and how much they would be paid. I thought it was ridiculous. How could Stalin simply take something that didn't belong to him, something that a farmer and his family had worked their whole lives for? "That's communism, Lina," Papa had said.

The woman yelled at Mother, wagging her finger and shaking her head. She left the hut.

We were on a *kolkhoz*, a collective farm, and I was to become a beet farmer.

I hated beets.

