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Letters to Natasha  
8th Grade  
1,947 words

Sixty years is a long time; for most, it is long enough to erase the memory of pear trees, of pain, of the taste of things too impossible to keep, but altogether too wonderful to give up. Yet the image of our younger selves—innocent and untouched by the world's troubles—refuses to fade from my thoughts.

The memories still come to me, brought back by cold nights and the sounds of a sleeping city, and even after sixty years, I can never decide whether they are sweet or bitter.

Our eyes were unusual, and for a while, they were all people noticed. Mine were grey, the color of ashen snow and tarnished silver. Yours, a deep brown. And because we were two Russians living amidst Leningrad's dizzying clamor, that was as far as the distinctions went.

We shared an apartment, and because I was always too proud, and you too timid, nothing more. Day after day, you played outside alone, your mother only ever calling you in by the name Natasha—Natalya was always too formal, too proper to fit comfortably on a loved one's lips.

Once, my mother Lidiya invited you in for borscht, and your eyes said that you would rather suffer the relentless summer heat than drink a steaming bowl of beetroot soup. So I reluctantly swallowed my pride and asked you to play, watching as relief lit up your face.

We didn't just play—we raced. Our footsteps clattered down the silent alleyway like we were being hunted by Baba Yaga herself, and we welcomed the thrill, letting the smell of spices and dark magic fill our lungs.

When our racing heartbeats finally slowed, we were staring at the ruins of an abandoned building, bricks crumbling over cracked, grey cement. Amidst the rubble, one tree sprout

extended its arms into the ash-colored sky, and neither of us could describe the feeling that suddenly awoke in our chests as we walked away.

One by one, the years flitted past like butterflies and vanished beyond a glowing horizon. The evenings grew longer, the little sprout grew taller, and as we sat under its branches and surveyed the land like royalty, the air quieted until all we could hear were our own voices pointing out shapes in the clouds.

Slowly, as stars formed into shimmering constellations, babies cried, and men chuckled over bottles of kvass, the pear tree became our own. Its stunted limbs offered just enough shade for two. Only we could see the quiet pride in its crooked trunk, comforting us in the way only the wisdom in tree rings could.

I tried calling you Natasha, once, when Natalya Ivonova became too foreign a name to fit comfortably on my lips. Even now, I cannot call you by anything different.

We found the nest on a chilly Sunday morning in the middle of fall. By then, you'd turned thirteen, each forgotten year hidden inside another like nesting dolls when you spoke.

We heard the weak chirping before we saw the bird who had made her home in our tree. She was a lively little thing with dark eyes and ruffled down, and she seemed not at all afraid of us when we peered at her through the branches. We named her Vasilisa, after the adventurous girl in the stories who had survived Baba Yaga's clutches. For her, it seemed a fitting name.

Every day on our way to the pear tree, we began to scavenge for abandoned things—a drifting feather, a ribbon, a newspaper clipping—to put in Vasilisa's nest. We watched over the two

speckled eggs nestled inside, marveled at the baby birds when they finally hatched, and walked the five blocks necessary in heavy rain to lay a sheet over the branches.

For a few months, all was well.

The storm came silently, without warning. Later, our mothers would describe it as heaven itself being lit on fire. But to us, the lightning only meant one thing. By the time we woke and heard the news, we were too late. Our tree had split in two, and Vasilisa—poor Vasilisa and her tiny fledglings—were nothing but ashes and blackened feathers.

While you cried, the warmth leaving your eyes, I stood numbly, suggesting that Vasilisa had finally angered Baba Yaga and encountered her wrath. But as I watched the clouds drain the world of color, I knew we were far too old now to be enchanted by lurking witches and flying mortars.

Three years, mixed into one blur of feeling. A hesitant kiss, full of uncertainty and a glimmer of hope. A happiness, blooming into my beating heart.

Eventually, it would cease to matter. Change was coming, and for a Russian at the volatile age of seventeen, it would not wait long. Two short months later, I received a draft letter and the Red Army came and took me away.

It was easy enough at first. Aiming a gun, throwing a knife—none of it much different than the self-defense drilled into me by lonely walks and spiteful classmates. Though the cold embrace of the trenches froze my legs stiff, true regret didn't come until much later.

It was only after I felt the weight of the first tanks rolling above my head and the single grenade hidden beneath my clothing that my confidence began to wane. For an instant, I could sense something cold and unpleasant settling in my chest.

It was then that I began writing the letters. They came in twos and threes and even fours, and whether they were salvaged pieces of paper or a scrap of tattered uniform, they were all addressed to you.

Those letters, those words, those wavering lines. They kept me sane, took the edge off the madness that consumed us all when the rations ran too low. They started off lighthearted and hopeful—wishful promises written down in a shaky hand. Though my fingers were blistered and blue at the tips, the pain was a reminder, a small price to pay for being alive.

Then, two years later, it all began to change.

By then, word of the battle raging in Stalingrad had spread like wildfire. All day, we chewed our fingernails to stubs waiting for more news, and it came as a relief when we were finally given a more secretive assignment, separated from the chaos. Operation Mars, General Zhukov whispered between breaths. He pointed us towards the troops west of Moscow, armed us with weapons and promised us victory.

It was his fault we didn't expect to be such failures.

Looking back, I can't recall when I stopped counting, when tears or sweat obscured the bodies from my vision.

Anatoly, blood from a dozen wounds staining the mud.

Vlad, no older than twenty, his unseeing eyes infused with quiet ferocity and a deep sadness.

The single bullet graze on my hand only fueled my hatred for the Germans, for myself. Because even though we'd lost, they were the ones who had sacrificed. They were the casualties of war, the martyrs, the heroes, as Zhukov later put it.

But I remembered the wild look of the Germans—of all of us—and knew that it wasn't just people the war was killing.

Natasha, I wrote, my injured hand shaking. I want to come home.

Natasha, after a while, you learn to fall asleep as the horses do, with at least one eye always open.

Natasha, in Stalingrad, the gasoline-filled water burned all around the evacuating children. It is enough for the whole world catch flame.

Natasha, Natasha, Natasha.

Letters to you—I had thought that was all they were. If only I'd known they each still sat, unopened and unread. Then, perhaps, I would have realized they were really notes to myself.

Natasha, they say the war is ending. I think I am coming home. There was one last bombing today, and the pigeons sat so eerily still that I wondered if they were still breathing. How is my mother's borscht? Please write back.

Because when I finally returned after five long years, you were gone.

In the end, it wasn't any bomb that stole you away.

It was hunger.

Leningrad had been laid siege to; my beloved city, my home...or perhaps my destruction. Seeing the smoke and skeletal people that day, I could no longer recognize the place I'd once called home.

Blankly, I tried to imagine tripping over corpses in the street, being so hungry that even the animals that prowled the alleyways did not go to waste. I tried to imagine you—desperate, starving along with the people I once knew—but couldn't. I refused to believe even the words of my mother Lidiya, by now only an empty shell of a woman with hollow bones and eyes that held a faint memory of a forgotten time.

The burnt remnants of our pear tree could still be seen from the alleyway. When I stood at the edge of the ruin, the air carried to me the fading scent of hunger and stolen ration cards.

Later, the sadness came, though the tears never did. Because no matter how much time passed, these streets would never be the same. Because by spring, the blood of eight million Soviets would have dissolved with the snow, and the flowers that bloomed over it would smell just as sweet as they had before. Because thousands had been spared, hiding broken limbs and shattered hearts that would never quite heal.

It didn't matter that the Allies had claimed a tired, weary victory. Even if I had eight million tears to shed, it would never be enough.

Everything fades with time. Hair, clothes, memories. After a few years, and you'll start to see the change. Vision turns hazy. Ink blurs until you can't be sure if it was rain or tears that washed them away.

Even you, Natasha, have started to fade for me. There are certainly good days, when I recall the chirping of birds and the silvery laughter that reminds me too much of home. As your ghost flickers beside me, I think I would give anything to return to the place we once stood, just two Russians with nothing but adventure to occupy their days. But there are also bad days, days when no voices come and the memories slip through my outstretched hands like water.

Those are the ones that scare me the most. But I'm never quite sure if I should be thankful for them, too.

They're the only way I know time is passing.

Dear Natasha,

Hate. Loss. I've seen it all. Still, nothing can compare to the moment I meet another like me walking down the same city street, when I see the past—the beautiful, and the ugly—reflected back to me in another pair of eyes.

I wish you could see where I live now, Natasha. You would have liked the beauty of the windowsill flowers, of the children playing in the street, their lives still innocent and untouched by the world's troubles—as ours once were. Like me, you would have sensed their naïveté—perhaps they will never know true sacrifice, true pain.

But I'm beginning to think that isn't such a bad thing.

There's comfort to be found in every corner, Natasha. Though my hopeful words have long since turned to ash, the words still linger somewhere in the streets around me.

I've seen a great many things since the naive young man I once was penned those words. Time has smoothed away at my memories, made them less sharp, less painful. Do not worry, Natasha, there are other ways to remember.

Hate, and loss. Joy, and first love.

Once you've had a taste, it's impossible to forget.

Alexei