

TESSA LUNNEY

V

Vitali

The song *Katyusha* poured from the black box. His face was a foot from the speaker. He had nine medals on his chest but his war service medal was gone. He turned his head away, towards the opposite wall, and began to speak.

“We heard the warnings—the Germans were coming. We didn’t need the warnings. We all saw the planes the night before. I heard their deep throb over the city.

“So the factory manager moved the forest. There was a lake next to the factory, surrounded by pines. A perfect target—all the Germans had to do was find the lake and... I dug up—we dug up—each tree and set it in a bucket. We sent the trees out on the lake one by one. Every hour the lake filled with more trees, uprooted from the earth, tall and proud as they floated on the water. By nightfall the lake had vanished. All you could see from the air, I was told, was forest.

“We moved next. We set up the factory past the Urals, too far away from the West and too far away from the East to be found. Factories of strong young comrades, along with all the babies and children, all the breastfeeding mothers and toothless old grandmothers from Lenin-grad... That was a year after we’d heard the news over the loud-speaker—Russia is at war. In the square, fuzzy at first, but when my classmates and I rushed out we heard it clearly enough. Some of the old comrades cried. They remembered the last war, the price of the Reds’ victory. I got my orders—I was assigned to munitions manufacture. I made steel parts for bombs, the graceful brace that held the explosive. I did it, of course. But I didn’t want to be there. Of course! I was young, sixteen, eighteen, twenty. I wanted to be with Volodya and Lev, I wanted to be with the rest of the young comrades from

engineering school, as they set out with their guns. I wanted to have this song sung to me as I sat in uniform, cheek against the window of the carriage, on my way to Tallinn, Krakow, Berlin.

“But I spent the war with the ring and clang as I fitted two parts together. I spent the war in a small bed with a view across the overploughed fields. I think we must have been the best fed factory in Russia. All those farmlands in the Urals, we got the first pick. We each did what we had to do. It was for the good.

“Then I returned. After the war it was summer and I returned. We all did. Leningrad returned to Leningrad.

“I found his body. Lev’s. It was hidden in a coal cellar. Someone must have thrown him there. He was still in uniform. Ice burst from his broken canteen, but apart from that there wasn’t a scrap of metal on him. The comrade who showed me didn’t even flinch, I suppose it was nothing new to her. His face was eaten away but he had his identity cards on him. Identity cards are no real proof of identity, of course, but he had a scar, from his father, from a night with too much bathtub vodka. It was there, a black star on his forearm, dry and cold. He’d never thawed, in that cellar. Not for months. The bullet hole was still perfect, a star under his jaw. How the rats got to his face I don’t know. How the rats survived, even. I was told that he died at the front. I suppose he had—Leningrad was a front.

“I returned to a city with no dogs and no cats. No animals at all. No birdsong. It had been cold, the winter before. Not just in Leningrad, everywhere. The Germans felt it but we felt it too. Just a piece of bread a day. In winter. A cold soldier was nothing for a woman to cry over. We did what we had to do. When I returned it was summer, at least. I returned to a city with no old men or old women. With no children. There was no fuel for cremation, there was no space for burial. Nowhere marked the departed. All those bodies. They did what they had to.

“I returned to a city with no classmates. All gone. Some were heroes, good comrades, like Lev. They fought for the city. They fought for the Motherland, good comrades, true heroes. My class and the class above and the class below. All gone. We did what we had to do. We heard about the true comrades who sacrificed themselves for

victory. Others, we didn't hear about. Others, like Volodya, were just gone.

"Volodya's mother said that he went into Germany, on the march to Berlin. That was the last she heard. He was gone. He must be a true comrade too. He must be. I honour his memory. All the comrades, of course, but Volodya and Lev, I knew them best. I made their memorial out of stone, in the woods outside our dacha. It faces into Leningrad.

"I returned to Leningrad and became a student. I walked the streets at night because I was so hungry that I couldn't sleep. But I passed my engineering exams. There were only three of us left from my class. It was for the good."

Katyusha stopped. Four versions of four verses, the tape clicked at the end of its roll. The night outside ran on, past the streetlights, past the balustrades, and into the sea.

Vladimir

The armchair rose a foot above his head. There was a lace doily on each arm, on the chair back, on the mantelpiece. His feet were placed in the centre of the rug that lay on the carpet under his chair. A china dog guarded his coffee mug. He turned his head to the window to watch the snow.

"We saw the Mosquitoes above the city. Dozens of them, maybe even a hundred. No one counted, we had all stopped counting. Every night above Berlin the mosquitoes buzzed. They lit up the black, the night was striped white and red. We sat in the forest and watched. We waited. We couldn't do anything else. My stomach was empty. Those lights—the Americans all day and the British all night. The British in their Mosquitoes made the night sky a victory day festival.

"It'd been black for so long. Everywhere, every night, black as a dead eye's pupil. I was twenty, I could hardly remember a street light. Or a lit window, what it looked like. What it meant. Curtains were never open. Doors were never open. It didn't matter anyway. We got rid of them.

“They came at us with their bare hands. The SS. They bludgeoned, they bayoneted, one even ran at me with a brick. I shot him. His blonde hair light as down. His face, so surprised, I shot him as he held a brick. I turned away, I moved on.

“Doors were never open. There were no doors. No curtains to open. It was all gone. There were small hills on every block. Hills and valleys. Grass of ash, flowers of bone. It was spring. It was hot like a factory kitchen, hot and it smelt of blood. I was thirsty. I saw blonde faces, dirty baby faces. Little voices leapt up—Halt! Deutschland über alles!—and bullets from the nurseries, the playgrounds. I shot back and the little voices stopped. I moved on.

“I abandoned my uniform. Vreni helped, of course. Of course! All those who could, did. True comrade? What rubbish. We hadn’t eaten in weeks. The generals were fat. Zhukov was a monster. I took the clothes from her wardrobe. I was her husband now. What did it matter? I was thirsty, always thirsty. It was worse than the hunger.

“I moved on. They came at us with kitchen knives and knitting needles. Babes cried ‘Heil Hitler!’ Hitler was dead. Slingshots of rubble from the top of the hills, from the hills’ windows, those eyes that saw the whole of Berlin. Shadows in those eyes, the hills’ eyes, cataracts that moved across and then were gone. The curtains were never open, the curtains were never there. I shot and moved on. I always looked for water.

“I saw her there. In one of those eyes. She didn’t come at me with a hat pin. She knew Hitler was dead. She moved across the eyes and into the heart of the hill. Blonde in a dress the colour of memory. I moved in. Inside that hill were more hills, hills in hills, I couldn’t see through the dust, I could hardly breathe. Was she a shadow? A memory? Did I see her like I saw puddles on the road and I would run up only to find them a trick, gone, never there?

“I moved up and up. The staircase wound to the top of the hill. The building, not the hill, it was a building. She was in her room. There was a bed, a real bed. It had a pillow and a cover with tiny roses. Her dress a garden by the rose bed. The whole room smelled of roses, flowers. A real bed. Her skin was unlike any petal. I was twenty, I couldn’t remember a streetlight, I couldn’t remember skin. Her skin

had freckles—where did they come from? There had been no sun for years—her skin pushed back at me, it was firm and warm, unlike any petal. The room smelled of spring. True spring. It was April.

“I abandoned my uniform. Vreni’s wardrobe bloomed with trousers and shirts, with shoes and a coat. All too big for me. What did it matter? Who fit anything now? My own boots didn’t fit. I tied it up, my uniform. It was May. It kept us warm at night, we burnt it, that uniform, it kept us warm those first nights as we went west. We went into the hills. It was all hills, every city, hills and valleys that summer. All that bloomed were broken faces. She had family in the Black Forest, down near Switzerland. We kept going. I was her husband now. What did it matter?”

“Her family had a farm. They were clever, they planted all the summer before, it was harvest time. I was the only man at the harvest. I built. I built this house, the foundations are mine. They didn’t ask why my clothes didn’t fit. No one had clothes that fit. The clothes that did fit fell apart, the seams were all undone, there was no thread to bind them up again. They had to be abandoned, burnt, dresses and trousers and coats. They couldn’t even be made into cushions. There was nothing left. We found what we could and started again.

“Vreni helped, of course. After the Wall went up, I didn’t have to be Hermann anymore. It was safe, I could be Volodya once again. But I had abandoned my uniform. It never fit. I was Manni, with Vreni, in our room with the rose covered bed. Who was Volodya? He was lost somewhere in those hills and valleys in Berlin. He wandered, searching for water, unable to remember a time without war. I have four children, Vreni makes coffee in the kitchen. I am Hermann. I am Manni. What does it matter?”

The snow fell and fell. It covered everything. Every feature of the garden was erased.

Verena

She stood over the table in the kitchen. She rolled out biscuit dough, dark with nutmeg and ginger and cinnamon. There was flour over the table and the floor, over her apron and up her arms.

“I have never stopped working. I still make biscuits and coffee every afternoon. I still make dumplings, my own dumplings, by hand. Why would I stop? To get old and wrinkled? To just lay down and die? I have never done that. Oh, I’ve wanted to. But I won’t now. There is no end. There is never a time when we can say, ‘Stop, it’s over, you don’t have to do this anymore.’ My children say that, my grandchildren, and then they gobble down the dumplings and biscuits. No. There is never a time to stop.

“I knew what he was saying. My mother was Russian. She came to Heidelberg to study and then the first war began and she met my father, and then the civil war... I had a pen friend in St Petersburg, Leningrad, a cousin. I loved to practice my Russian, to read about her adventures with her neighbour, Vitali. I used to love it. I had to stop writing. Everybody was Germany’s enemy.

“I knew what he was saying but we didn’t need words. There was only one word—life. He wanted this, I wanted that, it didn’t matter. We wanted to live. We took what we could.

“We rarely spoke, those first days. We didn’t use words. We had to leave Berlin. We. It’s been so long. I didn’t say ‘we’ then. It was I, me, and him. I saw my first Hermann die. He’d been sent back to Berlin, I thought I was so lucky, no one came back. That’s what everyone said, you’re so lucky, no one comes back. They were right. My first Hermann wasn’t there. His eyes were dead. He had a warm body but there was nothing inside, no memory, no heart. He left bruises everywhere. He hit me in his sleep. He hit me when he woke because he had hit me in his sleep.

“I saw him die on the road. He shot him. My second Hermann shot the first. Volodya, Vladimir, I should say, shot Hermann. He saw me, he saw that I saw. I knew he would come. His face was so thirsty. That face—every wave of homecomers, the stragglers, even defeated and broken, had that look. I wasn’t surprised that he found my bedroom. I was surprised at his softness. All the others, they were like the first Hermann, I was meat, I was function. I was revenge. All the other girls said the same. Not this one. He said over and over that I smelled good. I stank. There was no clean water, I hadn’t had a proper wash in months. What can you say to that?

“So I said nothing. There was nothing to say. There was only one choice—life or death—so there was nothing else to do. He took the first Hermann’s wife, then his clothes, then we left. We. When did we become ‘we’? When he took me? He was always soft, at least. He put on Hermann’s clothes and I knew. By the time he had knotted the belt around his bony hips I had a plan. Why not this one? Was he any worse than the first Hermann? He wanted life, that was clear. That was enough.

“Enough—there was never enough but those days were clear. I did whatever I had to do. His tongue was almost cut out once. Soviet soldiers. They didn’t believe his identity cards, they didn’t believe he was really mute. Their commander walked in at the lucky moment. And another time, with German soldiers. They tied my second Hermann to a tree. They hated that a German was with a Russian, I was theirs by right, they yelled in my face, I still had a duty to the Fatherland. They were so thirsty, they were on fire. When one had finished, he would hold my shoulders down for the next. My husband yelled from the tree. He was already my husband by then. He was Manni. How did that happen? A tank growled in the distance. Americans. The soldiers ran. I couldn’t untie Manni, I was too weak. The Americans did it, fed us, gave us a bed for a night. We didn’t share a language. We didn’t need to.

“When did he become Manni? Somewhere on that road. I had nothing, he had nothing. He was always thirsty. It was cold at night and he was warm. We walked all day. I limped with blisters. When he noticed, he carried me. When he couldn’t carry me, he carried our bag. He held my hand in front of strangers. It was enough.

“It was more than enough. Who, in those days, had more? Love? There was only death. Everyone was thirsty. Every shelter was rebuilt from rubble. Softness, a warm bed. That’s all I wanted. If you had given me a feast I would have vomited.

“I haven’t been back to Berlin. Those days, before the war, everything was strong. I holidayed at Rügen, I lay on the beach in the sun. It was so warm. Everyone laughed. No one remembered the bombs from the first war. The bombs from the second were so far away. I haven’t been back. I prefer it here, making biscuits for my grand-

children. They take me to France for the day, they take us, we eat jellies in the town square, we eat éclairs and chocolates and four different kinds of cheese.”

She cut out the biscuits in perfect circles. The leftover dough she kneaded back into itself, rolled it out again, cut out more circles. Again and again until the dough was gone, until the biscuits were in the oven, until all that was left were her hands, trembling, in the flour.

Vyvyan

He sniffed and crossed his legs at the ankles. He had pulled up his beige trousers and his argyle socks showed. He sat at the table in a straight-backed chair and faced the garden window.

“Giles. Everyone calls me Giles. With a name like Vyvyan Aubrey, they could hardly do otherwise—I’ve been Giles since I began school. The only time I’ve ever liked my Christian name was when I met Vivian.

“She was the one bright spot of colour in all that.

“The smells of war. You can’t see that in the pictures. One can imagine the screams, or the explosions, boots over rocky ground—but the smells. It is impossible, in my opinion, to properly imagine the stench of a corpse. And a thousand corpses—no. No one can. If they could, I doubt we’d ever wage another war.

“They say you could smell the Roman army before you saw it—the aroma of garlic and unwashed soldier could carry a hundred miles. I believe it. You could smell the Nazi defeat before you saw their ragged child soldiers jump out from behind a schoolyard fence. Rubbish everywhere, it was... we sheltered in an abandoned abattoir on our way through, it was... it was nothing like that.

“Ghosts in a pig pen. The smell couldn’t be fenced in. The smell of rotting flesh is a phantom. It walked out over the flat marshlands and hailed us, it twined its fingers in our hair, around our buttons, and clung on. We were tired—I joined at the start, I was in the desert—all I wanted was a kiss. A proper kiss, from someone who mattered. Instead, this smell. It was a host of phantoms, a veritable Valhalla. Diesel fumes and rotting vegetables. Pit latrines and bomb residue. Melted plastics and corpses and fear. All those phantoms sat on our laps in the jeeps.

I opened the doors of the troop carriers when we got to Belsen and the first thing to hop down were those phantoms. The men looked at me. Between me and the back of the troop carrier was a chasm.

“Ghosts in a pen. They just floated around the enclosure. They searched for food like Miss Havisham searching for her lost love. Our hands were empty. Four years of forward thrust, gunfire and regimented footsteps—and we stopped. They walked but they were already dead. We watched them fade in front of us. They flitted out of reach, we couldn’t touch them any more than we could touch their wretched smell. I held one and she crumbled to dust in my hands. I had to throw her on the pile.

“I had orders, thankfully. Orders save a man. Raze this, erect that, put the Beast of Belsen in a cage. Kramer was a monster of the ordinary. I stared at him as he ate, so polite and particular. A rag in his lap as a napkin. His bread torn in equal pieces. I stared long after the others had gone to fulfill the orders I gave. He caught my eye once. His dull brown eye. I choked on the dust.

“I had orders, thankfully, and we brought in the doctors and nurses, all in khaki, to use their expertise to clean that mess up. The inmates were starving but couldn’t eat. Food killed them. The doctors tried to give them intravenous vitamins and they screamed, such howls, they stirred up the dust. But I had orders to save them so we kept going, we found some childish rice and milk mixture that they used on famine victims in Bengal. The smell of it, condensed milk, overcooked rice, and disinfectant. It clung around their lips and fingers.

“Four years of forward thrust and men left behind. Men with gashes for a heart, with guts on the floor and bones that reached for the sky. Men dismembered and disappeared. Charred. I’d become used to that. I said to myself, Giles, this is the pain of war, look it in the face and know it. Each place, each battle, I carved a small memorial in whatever stone face I could find—a church wall, a canal lock, a mountain road—I carved the names of the gashed in the rock with a prayer and I moved on. I said to myself, Giles, this is the pain of war, look it in the face and then move on.

“Four years of this and then we stopped. I was wrong. All those men

faded to nothing. All those stone names, they attached themselves to new bodies. I buried more people in four days than I had in the previous four years. Orders saved me, I moved through each day, but I kept moving at night, I couldn't sit, I couldn't stop. I moved like Miss Havisham. That pen my Sattis House.

"This was the pain of war. But by then all I had left were orders.

"I took to sitting in the hospital with the nurses. At first it was just at night when I couldn't sleep. There was always someone awake, I sat and watched as they attended to each cough and snuffle. The neat rows of beds. The paucity of options—life or death—it soothed me. The pretty bloom on the nurses. They said they were shocked, tired, sick of this war, but they always looked fresh to me.

"Then I began to sit there in the day. I gave my orders then would stand by a bed, any bed, for five minutes, ten, an hour. I ate my rations on the wards. No one looked at me. Everyone acted strangely in those days. Some men sang. Some men cried at the fence. No one looked at me, eating bully in a corner of the field hospital.

"Except Vivian. Little Viv, my little robin with her red heart. She cocked her nut-brown head and looked at me. She refused to see any tattered bridal veil behind me. She tended to her patients then tended to me—sit here, eat this, fetch me that. She found me at night and held my hand. She showed me her red breast in that grey place. I would've married her there and then, on the typhus ward.

"Little Viv. She passed away a year ago. I didn't realise—I should have, I should have understood—she kept them in. The ghosts. She kept them in their pens. Without her, they roam. They fill the house with their smell."

He stroked his moustache with shaky fingers as he stared at the garden. On the other side of the glass, hard frost, dew frozen and refrozen, dew that had never thawed. The garden a rough grey sheet all the way to the river.

Viktor

He was hunched, folded up, a ball in the poorly lit room. His finely tailored blue suit crumpled into the couch corner.

“I speak from the grave. I am not here. You understand? I have never been here. I was there. Then I was nowhere.

“They came. The British. They came with jeeps and Americans. They were ghosts. Kramer’s cruel trick. Even when they burned the camp we did not believe it. Even when they fed us. No. They did not exist.

“Some things happened. The British and the Americans hooted and quacked then they migrated with the summer. Some nurses herded us into beds, out of beds, into trucks, out of trucks, onto ships, off ships. Some British and some American.

“I did not go. I stayed. My body went to London but I stayed. That dust on the ground, it is me. That ash. They burned the camp and buried the villages. They buried whole towns, they buried histories and religions. I stayed, under the soil, under the ash.

“Yes, yes, my body went to London. Victor, a good name to have in England. Strong, historical. School, I was fourteen, I was with the twelve-year-olds. I was wizened and wrinkled and they made me play badminton. Kramer’s cruel trick. They played badminton with the dead.

“You ask me now. They ask me now. It’s an anniversary. What happened? It was a lifetime ago. I don’t know. I was Viktor, then I was dead, then I was Victor. What happened to Viktor? He died. I don’t know any more. I am Victor with the English spelling.

“He died. Viktor with the German spelling. But I am he. I am Viktor. I speak from the grave. They came and went, the British and the Americans, they came and went, the nurses and doctors, but I stayed. I stayed with my brother and mother. I stayed with my village, we were together, we worked together and died together. As one, all at once, when the British came. They opened the gates and we died at that same moment. Kramer’s cruel trick.

“Victor with a ‘c’? Victor with the English spelling? He—no, I... no, not, I am with my village, I am with my brother, Ari, and Mutti, we are together, I am not English Victor, I am not the English Victor, I did not walk through the gates through the town through the docks, no, no... I am Viktor. With the German spelling.

“Why did you come? Why did you come through those gates? Why did you play Kramer’s cruel trick on us, make us leave, make us leave

everything behind? Why did you come through those gates and take my name and take my tongue and then leave me behind? You left me there, you left me there dead, German Viktor, you killed me, you took...

"No... why did you come? To ask these things? Ah, it hurts, why did you—yes, that Viktor is this Victor, the German Viktor is the English Victor. They are one.

"It hurts. You don't know. I speak from the grave—his grave, her grave, not my own. My own is here, right here, look at my hand, yes here, this is my mass grave. My pit of ash. Here—look, I keep a handkerchief over my grave, look, in a little graveside pocket marked with the tailor's name. How very like the English Victor.

"I. Yes. I came here as a refugee, went to school, went to university. I was never the German Viktor. Stone, they called me. 'Stone, game of squash? Fancy a pint, Stone? Fancy a punt?' The German Viktor wandered over the flat northern land around Belsen, he held hands with Ari and sang to Mutti in the long winter nights. The German Viktor never lived on jam sandwiches between classes. The English Victor never knew his parents before they died.

"Ah, it hurts. The handkerchief is a putrid bandage. Why did you come?

"The English Victor. His bright blue eyes got him a clerk's position in that, ha, that most British of institutions, the Home Office. His bright blue eyes were passed on to all of his children. Bright, bright. They never asked. The German Viktor roamed in the flatlands. The English Victor stood still and listened in the fog.

"She never asked. Veronica. I was just the orphan Victor, brightest young man in the office. She never asked but when she died she put her hand on my arm and said, 'I always knew, my darling. That you were in one of those camps. I thought you might tell me about it... I didn't want to pry.' Pry! My wife, my wife of forty years, didn't want... oh, no, I am not the English Victor, I am the German Viktor. I speak from the grave and it hurts. Why did you come? Why did you unbury the German Viktor? Why do you force the German Viktor and the English Victor to be one?

"So, my children know now. Their father is a German. A Jew. My grandchildren. The neighbours. Everyone knows. What does it matter?

I am dead, I have always been dead. I have always spoken from the grave. What does it matter?

“Why did you come?”

He held his breast pocket and rocked. His bright blue eyes didn't waver. A clock struck in the next room and he unfolded himself, straighter and straighter, his finely tailored suit uncrumpling and hanging with a drop to the floor. He turned on his heel with a click. He walked slowly down the dim hall and never once looked back.