

NIKOLAI CHUKOVSKY

# *Baltic* SKIES



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# Балтийское НЕБО



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ  
Москва

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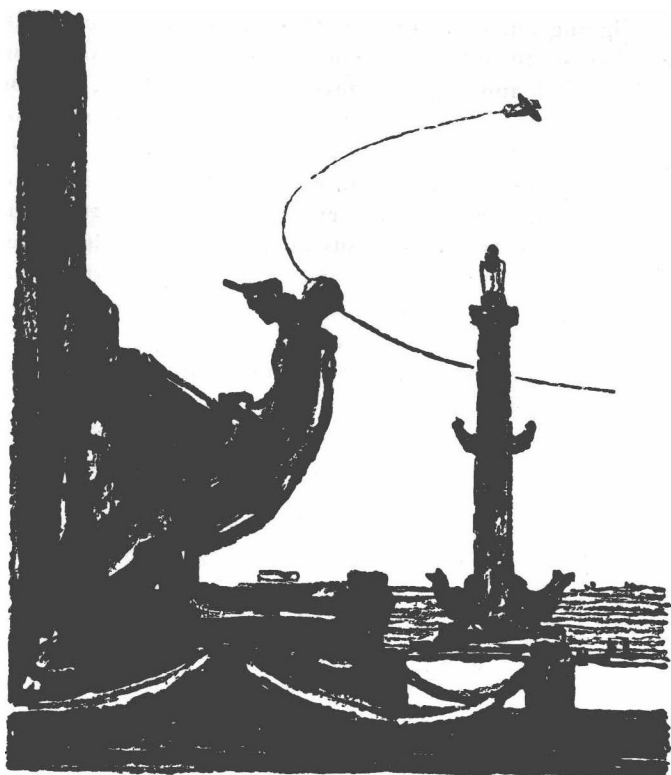
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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Maria Sergeyevna*

#### I

**M**aria Sergeyevna Andreyeva, a little woman in a woollen dress, jumped down from a lorry outside Baltic Station, brushed the mud off her skirt and walked to the tram stop.

She had not been in town for over a month and there was anxious curiosity in her eyes as she looked about her at the familiar station square. For over a month she had



been digging anti-tank ditches, first in the Kingisepp District, then south of Oranienbaum, then, when the Germans took Peterhof and Strelna, outside the city itself, beyond the North Wharf and near the Leningrad typewriter factory. All this time she and tens of thousands of other women had slept in their clothes on the bare earth, living under constant air and artillery bombardment, with burning villages and trampled fields all round. There had been little news from the city, but she knew the Germans had been bombing it since the beginning of September and the front was very close. She had not been able to imagine quite how the city would look when she got back, but was sure it would have changed.

To her surprise, however, the city seemed much the same as usual. The station kiosks were selling fizzy drinks of various colours, little girls were drawing squares on the pavement and playing hopscotch, passers-by were eating choc-ices on little wooden sticks, a woman traffic regulator was wielding her baton cheerfully at the corner, the stagnant water in the Obvodny Canal was rainbowed with pools of oil, the trams clattered past in their usual docile fashion. Only in the sky, at a tremendous height, among light wisps of cloud, a curious white monogram had been woven on the blue by an aeroplane that she could scarcely see. Maria Sergeyevna did not know whether the plane was German or Soviet but the sight of it made her think of Kolya Serov.

She decided to go first to Vasilyevsky Island to see the Bystrovs, because she knew no one was expecting her at home. At the beginning of July she had sent her children Irina and Sergei with the local camping club to a place near Valdai.

All through July she had lived alone, waiting for the school where she taught Russian to be evacuated. The whole school, including the staff, was to be evacuated together.

That waiting had been agonizing for Maria Sergeyevna.

It was terrible to have nothing to do at such a time. At last, at the beginning of August, the day of departure was fixed and Maria Sergeyevna received instructions to report at school with her belongings. But when she did so, she was told the departure had been postponed for another two weeks. And then it turned out that someone had to be sent to dig trenches for ten days. Maria Sergeyevna volunteered at once, because it was unbearable to sit alone in her two empty rooms, waiting and doing nothing. Without even returning home, she set out for the trenches with the biology mistress Katerina Ilyinichna Bystrova.

The ten days passed but no one arrived to relieve them, and they had to stay on. After another ten days they happened to meet a teacher they knew from the Dzerzhinsky District, who told them their school had already left. And after yet another two weeks, a few days ago, a Messerschmitt had strafed the anti-tank ditch in which they and many other women were working, and had killed Katerina Ilyinichna before her eyes.

As a matter of fact Maria Sergeyevna had not known Katerina Ilyinichna very well. They taught different subjects to different forms. Katerina Ilyinichna was ten years older than Maria Sergeyevna, had kept rather aloof and seemed disinclined to form a friendship. But in the month they had spent together the two women had unexpectedly felt drawn to one another and become friends. And it had not been because they worked, slept and ate together, but because Katerina Ilyinichna had displayed such understanding gentleness towards Maria Sergeyevna on hearing the whole difficult story of her married life, her widowhood, and her new love.

Something had happened to Maria Sergeyevna that worried and upset her terribly, something that left her at a loss. In the spring, just before war broke out, she, the mother of two children, had surprised herself. She had fallen in love with Serov, an airman she had chanced to

meet not long before, and who, on top of everything else, was several years younger than herself.

She and her husband had at one time studied together at a teachers' training college; he had been in her year, and also a student of Russian. Before they married, their love had been involved and platonic, they knew each other thoroughly, they had mutual tastes, mutual attachments, friends, hopes. When they had graduated, they worked together, and they would probably have lived happily if he had not contracted tuberculosis. His health grew worse and worse, and for several years Maria Sergeyevna, first with one little child, then with two, looked after him, took him from one sanatorium or clinic to another, and worked herself to the limit of her strength to feed him as well as possible, to save him. In the end he became irritable and unreasonable and treated his wife with a kind of childish ruthlessness. And yet she was in despair when he died, and it took her a long time to get over her grief. Then she started work again, brought up her children, settled down, read much, and it seemed to her that her life had become fixed for ever. It never occurred to her that she might marry again. Her life was taken up entirely with work and the children.

She was a serious, unassuming, well-read woman and second love, unexpected as it was, frightened her. He was a man whose surroundings were different from hers—a military man, a flier. He lived all the time somewhere out in the country, on an aerodrome, doing work that was completely unfamiliar to her. She met him and fell in love with him passionately; she had never suspected that love could be like that. It was a devastating emotion and, above all, quite independent of Maria Sergeyevna's will.

And yet, when exactly a week before war broke out he proposed to her, she had the strength to refuse him. She refused him because she had two children, and because she was convinced that in spite of his affectionate words he could not really be in love with her, and in any case

could not love her for long. While telling Katerina Ilyichna about this one night, Maria Sergeyevna had said it was clear "as twice two is four." But she could not say what a sad tenderness came over her at the thought of his big hands, his kind eyes, his rather round shoulders, and what a secret, timid hope was mingled with that tenderness.

They had seen each other seven or eight times, not more. The aerodrome where he lived was a long way out of town and he was free only on Sundays. In May and June he called for her every Sunday and they went out for walks. Those Sundays had been very difficult for her; she did not know what to say to their neighbour, or to her daughter Irina, who was already in her ninth year. He, too, did not know how to behave with Irina; he addressed her formally and rocked Sergei on his knee with an embarrassed smile.

After her refusal Maria Sergeyevna had thought she would never see him any more. But deep down she still hoped timidly that he would call again the following Sunday. And he did call, and when he came in, she was radiant. She could not hide her joy. That had been June 22. They listened to Molotov's speech together. An hour later he left.

Maria Sergeyevna went with him on the tram as far as Baltic Station. They rode along the Obvodny Canal. He was paler than usual, and very quiet, and while they stood on the platform at the end of the tram, he did not let go her hand for a minute. She looked up at him and tried to guess what he was thinking, but it was impossible, and she felt horrified that she knew him so little.

They were overwhelmed and scarcely spoke. All she could do was to try and remember his face.

Just before leaving he said: "Take care of yourself."

He bent down and kissed her on the lips.

Then he stepped into the carriage and the train started.

She walked home on foot, right across the city, petrified with grief.

And she had never talked about him to anyone, except for that night when she somehow told it all to Katerina Ilyinichna.

They were lying in a barn; through the gaps in the roof there were stars. Exhausted by the day's work, women were sleeping all round them, huddling together to keep warm. And Maria Sergeyevna talked in a whisper all night, cried and talked. Maria Sergeyevna told Katerina Ilyinichna everything, without concealment, trusting her completely and full of gratitude because Katerina Ilyinichna was staying awake all night for her sake, and because for some reason she seemed to regard all Maria Sergeyevna's doubts as trifles. When she had heard everything, Katerina Ilyinichna with the confidence of an older and more experienced woman said that it was only a matter of being able to wait and they would be sure to see each other again.

"If you both stay alive," she added.

The next day Katerina Ilyinichna was killed.

Maria Sergeyevna had rarely been to Vasilyevsky Island and it took her some time to find the block of flats where the Bystrovs lived. The huge six-storey block stood in a quiet, narrow side-street, behind the buildings of the Academy of Sciences and the University. At the end of the street she glimpsed the embankment of the Little Neva, light-coloured water, barges. Maria Sergeyevna ran her eyes up the whole six storeys and halted.

She had no idea how she would tell Katerina Ilyinichna's family of her death. She had never visited them and did not know them at all. She had heard that Katerina Ilyinichna's husband was at the front. There were children. The boy was still quite young, probably no older than Irina. And a daughter. Katerina Ilyinichna had often said: "My daughter's quite grown up now." She must be about eighteen. Katerina Ilyinichna was forty, she could

have had an eighteen-year-old daughter. What was the girl's name? Sonya, it seemed. And they had Katerina Ilyinichna's father living with them. He worked at some institute or other, must be very old. . . .

Maria Sergeyevna glanced at the scrap of paper with the Bystrovs' address on it. Flat 28, back entrance on the right, fifth floor. Maria Sergeyevna walked under a deep arch into the yard.

The yard was square and like a well, with sunlight falling diagonally across it. A thick white arrow on the wall indicated the entrance to an air-raid shelter. A crowd of children—cheerful, lively children—were dashing about the yard and the air rang with their cries. They were mostly boys and all rather small; but Maria Sergeyevna at once noticed a girl there, too, a long-legged girl, taller and noisier than all the others. They were playing hide-and-seek or perhaps it was tag. This long-legged girl, carried away by the fun of the game, nearly ran full tilt into Maria Sergeyevna, and Maria Sergeyevna noticed the black hair, the big mouth, the straight nose, the sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks, and the black eyes, filled with joy.

Maria Sergeyevna turned right, stopped at the entrance to the staircase and tried to pick out the windows of the flat she was to enter. High above, the windows were bathed in sunlight, just as in summer, and there were pigeons on the window-sills.

While she was looking up, she heard firm masculine footsteps behind her. She turned round. A naval officer was walking across the yard. At the sight of his tunic and the peaked cap pushed back on his head, Maria Sergeyevna started and caught her breath.

Kolya Serov also wore a naval officer's uniform. When she had first known him she had even considered him a sailor, not an airman. He had tried to explain that he was a naval airman, and had showed her some badges on his sleeve, but she had understood little of his explanations, because that side of him did not interest her. Since he had

gone away, every naval officer's uniform she saw made her start. The officer walked towards an entrance at the back of the yard. At the door he turned round and glanced at Maria Sergeyevna. He had a heavy, elderly face. In no way did he resemble Kolya Serov.

Maria Sergeyevna mounted the dimly-lighted staircase to the fifth floor. On the door of flat 28 there was a shining brass plate: "Professor Ilya Yakovlevich Mednikov." The name was printed in old-fashioned script. Maria Sergeyevna stood looking at the plate, trying to guess who this Mednikov was. Perhaps he shared the flat with the Bystrovs? His name was Ilya. . . . He must be Katerina Ilyinichna's father and Bystrova was her married name.

While Maria Sergeyevna hesitated at the door, footsteps sounded from below. Someone was running quickly up the stairs. Maria Sergeyevna glanced over the banisters and saw the girl who had nearly knocked her over in the yard. The girl was flying up the stairs, two at a time. When their eyes met, she cried: "Are you looking for us? I was sure you must be. . . ."

Maria Sergeyevna waited for her at the top of the stairs. The girl reached the fifth floor, scarcely out of breath. She was Katerina Ilyinichna's daughter, of course, and Maria Sergeyevna wondered why she had not realized it before. Katerina Ilyinichna had been tall like this, and had the same dark hair, but there had been a lot of grey in it. And she had the same straight nose, the same broad mouth, the same eyebrows. . . . She can't be more than sixteen, Maria Sergeyevna thought. Perhaps not even that. . . .

But the girl's eyes were no longer bright with the childish happiness that had filled them a few minutes ago. She surveyed Maria Sergeyevna with alarm, expectation, even a touch of severity.

"You're from Mummy, aren't you?" she asked quickly, mounting the last few steps.

Maria Sergeyevna nodded.

"I thought you had come from there," the girl went on.

"Your skirt's all muddy." She watched Maria Sergeyevna's face with mounting alarm. "What's happened to Mummy? What's wrong?"

"You must be Sonya..." Maria Sergeyevna began.

"She's dead?" the girl asked.

Maria Sergeyevna nodded again, astonished at such insight, and turned away.

She heard the girl breathing behind her. Not a sob, not a sigh. They stood like this for some time. Then Maria Sergeyevna felt in her pocket for a small packet tied with string. She took it out and turned round.

The girl's eyes were wide open and tears were trickling down her cheeks, gathering at her chin. But she seemed not to notice them.

"Was it a shell?" she asked.

"No," Maria Sergeyevna said. "We were machine-gunned by an aeroplane."

"When did it happen?"

Maria Sergeyevna thought for a moment.

"On Thursday..."

"Have they buried her?"

"No. We were taken out of the ditch at once, and we never went back again. The Germans are there now.... So, you see..."

She held out the packet. It contained a bundle of letters, a passport, three hundred-ruble notes, a photograph of a rather bald man in a grey suit—all that Katerina Ilyinichna had carried on her.

The girl took the packet and held it at arm's length, not even glancing at it. Big tears fell on the stone flags of the staircase landing.

Maria Sergeyevna touched the girl's shoulder gently.

Suddenly there were quiet footsteps on the other side of the door. The girl started, and her face at once became calm. She wiped her tears with her sleeve and pushed the packet under her blouse.



"Go away, please," she whispered hurriedly to Maria Sergeyevna. "Thank you. . . ."

Maria Sergeyevna had only descended a few steps when the door chain rattled, the door of flat 28 was flung open and a little man in a blue dressing-gown and soft red slippers appeared. He had a wizened, hook-nosed face with a moustache so grey it looked almost blue. He held himself straight, and his head in its black skull-cap was thrust back with dignity and even a trace of hauteur.

"From Katerina?" he asked sharply.

"Yes," the girl said calmly, getting between him and Maria Sergeyevna and trying not to let him out on the landing. "She's sent a message to say she'll be away for some time yet."

"I said it was too soon for us to leave," he said. "We shall wait for her."

The girl edged him carefully back into the flat and followed him in. The door shut with a bang.

## 2

Maria Sergeyevna lived in Mayakovsky Street. At one time it had been called Nadezhdinskaya Street, and before that, about a hundred years ago, the Street of the Six Shops. She got off the tram in the Nevsky Prospekt and turned into her home street. How well she knew it, even the cracks in the pavement. Looking about her attentively, she at once noticed that there had been more changes here during her absence than in the other parts of the city she had visited.

In the second house from the corner all the windows were out. As she passed the Snegiryov Nursing Home, she noticed a big gap in the wall and twisted iron bedsteads lying in the garden. On the other side, one of the white blocks in the Martyrs of the Revolution Hospital was half demolished. The house on the corner of Zhukovsky Street