

Question 5- Touching the Void

The golden autumn, they had called it once. That was when St Petersburg belonged to the tsar in his glacial Winter Palace, to the icy jewel-encrusted banks of the Nevsky, to trees with leaves of burnished crimson and copper fire. More elegant than the dark, heavy richness of Moscow; lighter, prettier, a city built for joy. But winter struck hard in the fabled land of Russia. A winter for the people, a cold fury spiked into them by the layer of stricken grey lurking beneath all that imperial chill, a winter in which nascent rage froze over into a damning blizzard. They came with the first snows. Rushing, roaring, a crowd of pure fury channelled into something devastating, beating back at the impenetrable world of their glitterati overlords. So did St Petersburg fall; so was the power of lords and princes diminished forever.

Now that golden autumn had all burnt away, leaving behind it a layer of cold ash that tightened its choking grasp a little more each day. Looming concrete blocks of flats thrust their way up through the cobbled streets, dwarfing once-proud pal trees, grotesque in their enormity. They were meant to replace the sprawling palaces of cold, to be symbols of equality and freedom for the newly liberated inhabitants of the city. But the boxlike apartments, uniformly chilled and bleak, were no more welcoming than the infamous tsarist-torturing Kresty Prison of the Primorsky District. The names they bore offered no traces of warmth either. Iskovsky Prospekt, Rustaveli Street- hard names for hard roads, fitting for the people's Leningrad, marked with the starred crimson flag of the Red Army as much as they were with the ragged sheets of propaganda that few could read.

It had been an alien enemy that the Bolsheviks overthrew in the bright frigid spring of 1917. The unease in the air now hailed from closer to home, a poisoned wind that elevated preachers of egalitarianism to the tsar's bloodied throne and abandoned those who had followed them so faithfully. A new war; the same impassable rift of class left gaping wide. Low, buzzing drones hummed from overhead as the German bomber planes soared by searching for a chink of light to penetrate the still blackness that was Leningrad. The children of the Nevsky district soon learned to hear the difference between each plane as they crouched in their silent bunkers- rumbling and stuttering for Messerschmitts, a whining onslaught of sound if it was a Heinkel. Occasionally a half-hearted cheer would rise from outside, accompanied by the dull thud of a plane meeting its end on a dark Russian street. Their pilots were spared no humiliation afterwards. The bodies were stripped of clothing and supplies alike, in a futile attempt to throw ease the iron chains of poverty, then left to be ripped apart by biting frost and scavenging animals.

But once in a while the Luftwaffe found their targets. It began with a whistle, the metallic crunch of machinery, ending with a dull crack as a bomb evaded the lacklustre Russian defence. They never exploded instantly. There was always time for realisation, a thundering stampede as a building's occupants fled their doom for the unforgiving snows outside. And then the bang. Then the silence. In years to come, it would be said that Stalin's vision for Russia was no better than that of his royal predecessor; Leningrad's final few knew that in the end, it was far, far worse. The Winter Palace survived that war. Saint Basil's Cathedral, painted playhouse of politicians with greedy grabbing hands, stood through all those winters of waiting. There would be no mourners for those towering gravestones of buildings, no remembrance, no history books or place in time. Leningrad rekindled into St Petersburg once again. The faceted gleam of the old days had returned at a high price: the price of ashen memories, a faded red flag, and the knowledge that autumn would never again truly be golden.

