

## The Ticket

*Imagine finding it at the bus stop.* Gerald picked up the slip of paper, soaked by slush pooling in the corner. He turned it over and scanned the faded letters. “Train Ticket: Helmfried,” he read. Was this a sign? He trembled.

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The night before, Gerald had been walking home as the snow fell, glistening in the air. Winter had come early in Sawcon. People scurried about like furtive mice, searching for scraps of food to eat or metal to barter.

As he made his way, Gerald gazed absent-mindedly at the crystalline snowflakes drifting down from the sky. Despite the harsh winter, Gerald took pleasure in his surroundings – the sound of his boots crunching on the surface of fresh snow, the bracing smell of cold air, the hauntingly beautiful landscape. These were things he looked forward to in this season of famine and death.

Arriving at his doorstep, Gerald jiggled the door lock and went inside. He found his grandmother sitting on her chair, rocking back and forth as she always did. He kissed her lightly.

“I’m off to bed, Grandmother. Good night.” Tomorrow would be another day – difficult, but familiar.

Gerald woke to loud banging on his door and the deafening yelling of the Sawcon Military service. He heard them crash through the door.

“Where is Gerald Ivanovich?” someone yelled.

Gerald cowered beneath his bed sheets. The footsteps slowly thumped up the stairs. He tried to stay as quiet as possible, but the footsteps were getting closer. He leapt out of bed only just before the sergeant burst through his bedroom.

“You. You’re Gerald Ivanovich,” the sergeant said. “Come here.” Gerald shuffled forward, unable to make eye contact.

“Draft time, boy. We are here to collect you for your service to the motherland. Gather your most essential belongings.”

Gerald nodded. The military stepped back outside to smoke. Gerald crumpled on his bed, panicking. He had survived by pretending this wouldn’t happen to him, that somehow he could avoid becoming part of the military institution that drove his country to ruin. His grandmother came and sat next to him.

“I think it’s time to go,” she whispered.

His grandmother gave him a parting gift. It was a map given to his grandfather by a friend in the military. With faint and squiggly lines, it outlined a path out of the country via Helmfried, a sleepy village at the country’s border. Gerald’s father attempted to use it, only to return fully clad in uniform. His father had slipped the map back to his grandmother before leaving for good.

Gerald could not fail. The thought of himself in uniform sent chills down his spine. Gerald quickly packed a tin of biscuits, a lighter, water, and an extra sweater. He hugged his grandmother and fled out his window.

The map took him to the inner city. He held his head low as he tried to walk as briskly as possible without arousing suspicion. But suddenly, a bright light blinded him.

“Stop right there!” someone hollered.

Gerald ran across the road, pushed through a broken barbed wire fence, and kept running. As he sprinted through the mud, he tripped and face-planted into the brown mush. He panicked for a moment but regained his composure quickly.

Sirens blared in the distance. Gerald spat out the dirt in his mouth, crawled up a hill and dodged incoming cars as he crossed another road. He lumbered to a worn-down bus stop to catch his breath. And there, he found the waterlogged train ticket to Helmfried. He could hardly believe his good fortune.

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Gerald made his way to the train station. He could feel his heart rate rising. Gerald handed his identification card and ticket to the conductor. The conductor looked at him and back at his card, frowning his eyebrows just slightly. Would the conductor realize he was a fugitive? Gerald stifled a sigh of relief as the conductor punched his ticket.

As the train sped across the tracks, Gerald relaxed. He unclenched his teeth and let himself lean back into his chair. He looked out his window, emblazoning the image of snow

covering his homeland into his memory. Finding solace in this, in he drifted off to sleep. He woke two hours later and pulled back the window curtain.

He froze. Across the terrain, dotted through a blizzard, were clusters of barracks. The speaker turned on in the cabin and a voice crackled.

“Welcome to your new life, soldiers.”