

ALUMINIUM STAIRS

(Excerpt)

Eireene Nealand

Inside of the trailer it was cramped. I was one of five children, and nine years old, behind Obe and Ean and Promise and Hope. The year we met Al, we slept in shifts on the foldout benches of our rickety green trailer right where it broke down under a mossy-fork beech across the road from Selah and Dr. Ted's rental cottage. Al lived in a camper shell in their back yard.

He sprang out of the bushes with his beret and peacoat, board games and dice. We had broken down on top of some mushrooms that he wanted to collect, but he welcomed us. My mom like that Al kissed her hand. She hoped he would tell my dad not to be a dolt all the time but he didn't do that. He marched up the trailer's aluminum stairs every sundown to share my awake shift because I didn't mind playing Stalin when he wanted to play Hitler in his three-paneled board game, *Eastern Front*.

Al had to untilt the trailer's fold-out table by holding it up with his knees. He contained himself politely, elbows never touching the table, thin hands setting up markers and dice. He had to lean forward so as not to brush my mother and father's bodies, tangled behind him under a curtain of beads.

"Think of the war brides," Al said. His voice was hoarse, thin as a cracker. An octagon marked off every section of the board, continents and oceans alike. That was how it was in the Summer/Winter Campaigns '41-'43. From the viewpoint of the generals, none of the countries had more than dotted-line boundaries. Those were for history to decide, and our skill.

During the siege of Leningrad, Al said, children—especially little girl children—made circuses on freezing wood floors. They carved their performers out of icicles—everything from bears to ballerinas—which the whole winter didn't melt. In fact, many ballerinas and bears outlasted their children.

Modest girls refused to take baths when the Soviet Women's Councils came by with wood. Some girls saved food for their supposedly returning fathers, and starved.

Still, in those times there were war brides, Al said. His pencil mustache twitched when I made my first formation at Mlinsk. He told about Lena, who could have been my great-grandmother if only she'd survived just a few more short years. Lena escaped from the war by covering herself with mud in an unsuspecting farmer's hay cart. She fled with the dirty clothes on her back and a single letter that she couldn't throw out. It read: "Lenka, I've got a piece of bread for you. I'll get more. Love, Morris."

That story wasn't the only thing that made me like Al. When he reached for the dice to make his move on the Caucuses, it seemed somehow right that the trailer's one window was a thick, yellowed plastic with purple checked curtains, sewn too big for feminist reasons. Yellowed plastic didn't let the light in like glass but that was part of it, Al said. At first blackouts were ordered because of flyover bombers. Later no one had oil to spare.