

Diary

by Gary Moshimer

Ivan was used to explosions, but this was high in the sky. He was on his back between tall sunflowers that grew infinitely in all directions. The blast made the flowers bow their heads. Bits of debris fell from the blue sky, some shiny, trailing fire or smoke. The boy stayed where he was, afraid if he moved, something would land on him. He could feel the ground shake as something large crashed in the distance.

Three rows away, a smoking object. He dared not move; soldiers were yelling and starting their tank. They rumbled, crushing stalks, their vibration painful in Ivan's chest. When they were gone, Ivan crawled to the object. He had smelled burning flesh before and he thought this was a piece of a human being, but it was a book. The smell was the leather. There was a metal clasp, and when he touched it, his fingers burned.

He waited a long time before he could pick it up. His mother was ringing the bell for him. He put the book, still warm like bread, under his shirt.

Ivan used the compass his father had given him before he left to fight. He used it to find the small cottage where he lived with his mother, four chickens, and two goats. The dirt road had been widened and tortured by the trucks and tanks, and often soldiers would stop and talk to Ivan's mother, Elena, because she was beautiful. They hung on the fence, smoking and looking her over, but that was as far as they went, because they never knew if Dom was around. Ivan was confused about which soldiers were which; there were always soldiers with guns held on soldiers holding guns to other soldiers. His mother had tried to explain it, and some of the men with guns had tried as well, but in the end Ivan concluded they just liked chaos. There was no one to answer to.

Now there was talk of a passenger jet downed by a missile. Only the Russians have such sophisticated missiles, one of the soldiers said. Not the Ukrainians. Not the Resistance, although the Russians

would try to pin the blame there. The men showed their crooked teeth to Elena, nodded and twisted out their cigarettes. They forced a practiced, pleading look, and Elena returned with a carton of the English cigarettes that Dom brought. They wheezed when they laughed, but then withdrew into themselves, heading for the rising smoke in the distance.

After they left, Elena told Ivan to bring some wood for the stove. She pulled down the biscuit mix, which meant that Dom was coming with the sausage. Dom arrived from whatever city, driving a beat up taxi. He was a young, talented man, a reporter or a spy, who could disguise himself and speak many languages. Some condition had left him completely hairless, so sometimes he was made up with a wig and robe and walked with a cane, claiming to be Elena's Aunt Rena. The Dom that other soldiers knew was a tough bald man who looked like some American actor Ivan had seen on their tape player. No one bothered either one of these characters.

While his mother made the biscuits, Ivan hid in his room and held the book in his trembling hands. The clasp had a tiny lock, but it was unlocked and opened easily, spewing some warm ash.

He was disappointed that it was in a different language. The edges of the pages were charred, and some chunks fell, but the writing remained intact in neat columns down the centers. The first page contained a single sentence:

Dit is het dagboek van Anna Bruxvoork

There was a pencil sketch of a girl Ivan's age, a ballerina with a long and graceful neck, hair hanging to the side, the toe of one slipper on the floor to show the fine muscular curve of her calf. It was a very fine drawing. He flipped through. It was a diary, an entry a day, each signed "Anna." And drawings for each day. At the bottom of the last page was a colored sketch—yellow fields, and next to that a single sunflower. It was beautiful, more so because of its mystery.

Ivan closed the book and placed it under his bed. He heard Dom's voice in the kitchen. Dom had taken off the wig and dress, and he had a large handgun holstered to his side. He carefully hugged Elena, then Ivan.

He handed a cloth bag of sausage to her as she was asking if he thought Ben—Ivan's father—was in any danger because of this crash. "You know he'll be heading there to help out," she said. "Is it dangerous? A trap?"

Dom started whacking the sausage with the cleaver. He was exciting to watch, even performing ordinary acts. Then again, he had used this cleaver to remove the hand of a rebel who had tried raping Elena. He had the fingers in a box, as a reminder to the young ones who thought they were tough.

He tossed sausage into a sizzling pan and told Elena that everything was more uncertain and dangerous now. Already the rebels were blocking the progress of the crash investigation and the search for survivors. Although there was slim hope any would be found. Dom attacked with anger the remaining hunks of sausage. There were tears in his eyes. "Elena, this was a Malaysian airline flight, a couple hundred civilians. It is a tragedy. No one knows who had the missile. Everyone points fingers."

They ate quietly, the sausage and biscuits, some fresh milk from Tevia, the goat. But Ivan gagged on his food, thinking of Anna, how she may have been coloring the fields of sunflowers she saw below at the moment of impact, how she turned to vapor—the breath of angels. Ivan ran to his room. He clung to his bed like a baby, sobbing. He was not just crying about Anna. It was for everything: his missing father, and how Dom spent the night there often, holding Ivan's mother. Sometimes Ivan wanted to take the cleaver to Dom. Then he would fear his thoughts and feelings and break out in a total body rash. If he also thought of the time the tank destroyed half of their house, crushing his little sister, Yulena, he would let out a high pitched scream that could not be stopped for ten minutes, and then only by plunging his head into cold water.

It all happened now. He vomited next to his bed, and the rash spread quickly from his belly, as did the scream.

But it was Dom who came, saying, "The boy's turning 12, nearly a man." Instead of the tub treatment, the rash rub down by his mother, Dom tossed Ivan into the cold shower, gave him some rough

rag and strong ointment to clear his baby rash as well as his sinuses. Enough smacks on the back and testicles to know he was a man and pain killed other pain. Soon he would have a firearm.

"But... Dom," Ivan whispered. "I need to show you this."

Ivan limped, holding his balls, back to his bed and told Dom to pick up the diary. "It came from the sky. I think it's the diary of a Dutch girl."

Dom leafed through. "Exactly," he said. "About your age. Anna. Talented ballerina, artist. And here, the last page, last day... There are our fields, our yellow the last in her pretty eyes."

Ivan cried again. Dom smacked him. "Study her like a man." Ivan nodded and bit his lip. "You are the man here to protect your mother, as well. You have responsibilities."

"Will you translate this for me... and get some tracing paper for the drawings? I want to draw as she did."

"You don't need much, huh? I am a supply train?"

That night Ivan slept in his mother's bed, his last time. Last chance at being a boy. They brought in Serge, the male goat. He slept with his hooves in the air, but woke them up by eating the pillow. Ivan had the idea of writing Anna letters. *Dear Anna, I have a goat that sleeps with me, and also eats my pillow. Isn't that funny?*

Dom was back the next day with the tracing paper and a notebook. He sat at Ivan's desk and translated the diary, writing the Russian version in the new book. He left room for the drawings. Every so often he would shake his head and laugh and say, "Girls," but he did not get up until he was done.

"Now," Dom said, closing the books. "You can read that later. I have something else for you." He handed Ivan a pistol. "Beretta Pico," he said, winking. "Hide in your pants or sock. Six shots, plus one in the barrel. Good for up close, self-defense. Come, let's try her out."

Dom swiped a pie tin and nailed it to a fence post. Elena protested. "He's just a boy."

"You'll need him," said Dom.

The tin was too close to Yulena's grave, so Ivan snatched the hammer from Dom's hand, trying to give him a look like a man would, some tough look he'd seen in a movie. "Good," said Dom. Ivan yanked the tin and nail, then pounded it into a different post.

"You'll draw attention, said Elena. She was sitting in the kitchen window, hanging her legs out in her red summer dress, her black hair blowing gently, and Ivan caught himself admiring her the way Dom did. He did not like the feeling.

As soon as Dom loaded the gun, Ivan whirled like some gunfighter and hit the tin without even trying. It flew away. He breathed heavily, fighting back tears. "That's for Anna," he said, and Dom clapped him on the back. The tin floated down like another piece from the sky.

Dear Anna,

Today I got a gun. I can hide it on me. I live in a dangerous place. If I find out who did this to you, I will kill them. But I think you wouldn't like that. Killing leads to more killing. People need to sleep with their goats more, ha-ha. Anyway, I will read your diary and see how and where you lived.

Always,

Ivan

They made cabbage stuffed with sausage and were settling at the table when someone tapped weakly at the door. They went silent. Dom held out his hand and went cautiously. It was a young soldier, 16 at the most, drooping from his prominent collarbones, which looked like coat hangers. He was very white, and he swayed, his lost blood coating his pants. Ivan saw himself in the kid and trembled inside. Dom spread the kid on the floor and pulled up his shirt to examine the wound. Ivan looked out the window, scanning with his Beretta.

"I have to get him to the hospital," Dom said. He took anyone in his taxi. It didn't matter which side anyone was fighting for. Sometimes he saved them, and often he didn't. Ivan helped carry the boy to the taxi and waved as Dom bounced away. A painful journey.

Ivan and his mother finished eating. He helped her with the dishes, and she sang softly. She had a good voice. "Tell me the story of how you wanted to sing and dance," Ivan said.

She spun around the table with the dishcloth. She could nearly dance on her toes, and they laughed when they heard them crack. She danced with the broom and sang into the handle, a folk song about Chekhov down the well, and his only way out was to compose a love letter beautiful enough to make a woman throw down a rope, and finally a girl threw down her long braids. The girl was big and homely with hands like a man, but Chekhov married her and had beautiful babies.

"My father did not want me on the stage," Elena said. "He was jealous of the way men looked at me, even at twelve. He was not right. Finally I ran away with Ben to the country, where I was safe. Safe in a way. I was just fourteen." She suddenly grabbed Ivan and tickled him and danced him around the kitchen. When they were out of breath, Ivan said, "Mom, I have to show you something."

He locked the doors, shut the curtains. They sat on his bed, and Ivan presented the diary. "It fell from the sky," he said. "It's Anna's. She is 12, or was. No, she is forever twelve." Elena paged through. On the last page she put her hand over her mouth. Ivan showed her the notebook with the translation. "Dom did this," he said.

"He's amazing," she said, and for the first time Ivan felt like his father was not coming home.

Hello world,

This diary begins the day I turn 12, and I have to dump my red-haired boyfriend. He is 13 and already a pig like most men. He wants to draw me nude. He says he respects my body. That is a laugh. Also his skin smells weird lately, like his pores are leaking a male pheromone that I am repulsed by. I should be attracted to it. Therefore... bye, bye...

Anna

There was a drawing of her letting go of a balloon, which was the chubby red-haired boy. In the next frame he was struck by lightning.

Dear Anna,

Happy birthday! I hope you don't mind, but I showed my mother your diary. She was a dancer, too, although not as trained as you. She is impressed by your posture. She also thinks you are a great artist, as I do. I have black hair, and I am respectful. Maybe I could be your boyfriend.

Forever,

Ivan

The next day brought all the searchers, roaming the fields like they owned them. Some were legitimate—soldiers and other military personnel—but many were souvenir hunters of the worst kind, sniffing out tragedy to make money. There was gunfire in the distance and thick clouds to keep undesirables from the wreck. Again it was a question of who was in charge. Stragglers sat outside Ivan's front door, and he fired some warning shots as if he were in charge until Dom returned. Some young ones darted from the sunflowers, holding scraps of metal. Ivan was sure he had the one item that did not burn up, as though it was meant for him.

Hello World,

My father, the well-known but ugly Oscar Bruxvoort is a dick. He pushes me, wants me to be a famous ballerina, an area where my mother fell short. He buys me the best and hardest teachers, graceful creatures with toes like toads. They say to embrace the pain is to forget it. I am making progress, but I hate them. I would rather draw and paint. The city is dreary. I would like to visit the country and sit with an easel and soothe my feet in a cool stream... My parents have different ideas. I might have run off with the red-head if I had loved his smell.

Anna

Elena read on. Ivan traced and tried to fill in shadings. There was one group of drawings that really got to him: Anna looking out a window, through the raindrops on the pane. On the window sill, a rose in a vase, and a thorn has pierced her finger. She touches the bright blood to her cheek. It forms a tear.

Ivan wanted to be talented like this, but he was clumsy. He wanted the fighting to be over so he could just go to normal school and then to a university to learn how to make beautiful art. He slammed his pencil down.

"What is it?" Elena asked. Her eyes held tears.

"I need colored pencils," Ivan said. Then he put his face under his shirt to smell himself.

"Dom will bring them," Elena said, throwing back her hair in the special way she did when she said his name.

"Do you love him?"

"I love your father."

"Where is he? Will he come back?"

"I don't know." She ruffled Ivan's hair, but he pulled away.

Dear World,

Oscar wanted me to dance in the dining room for all his stuffy friends. When I refused he locked me in the cellar. I broke bottles of his expensive wine. In a slice of moonlight a rat watched me with shiny black eyes. I'll leave this place, I told it. Just wait and see.

Anna

Dear Anna,

Men are pigs. Many soldiers have come to take my mother, but she is protected by god and our secret agent friend Dom and now by me. I pray for your safety.

Always,

Ivan

Ivan kept his letters in a big envelope under a floorboard, so his mother wouldn't think he was crazy.

Dom was back the next day. "Rebels are hampering efforts," he said. They had to be persuaded to let an international team through. Most of the dead were Dutch, heading to Australia. He looked at Ivan. There was a caravan of trucks shaking the house, raising clouds of dust. Ivan feared the house would be crushed again.

Dom went out to wave the trucks down. "Slowly," he called. "It is our home." Some men threw cigarette butts at him.

When Ivan saw all the dust settling on his mother's pretty dresses on the clothes line, he felt rage. He took his gun from his pants and fired into the air. The men laughed and threw wads of chewed gum at him, and some spat tobacco juice. Ivan lowered the gun to fire. His hands shook. Dom took the gun from him, saying, "It is a waste of bullets. They'll die of their own ignorance, soon enough."

At that moment a young man ran from the sunflowers shouting and laughing. He had found a human hand and was waving it around. Dom ran and tackled him, and Ivan kicked the man in the leg, and then the stomach. The hand fell to the road. It was delicate, expressive with long fingers and pink nails. Ivan swore it was hers: there were smudges of color on the fingertips.

"It doesn't matter," said Dom. "It must be bagged and put in a cooler. It will go by train to Kiev, in a refrigerated boxcar." Ivan knew that, but he cried as a man with gloves put the hand in a plastic bag. Dom gave him a hard stare and said, "Go cry on your Momma's lap."

Instead Ivan ran around back and sat on Yulena's grave.

"Sis," he said, "the world is a horrible place." He lay on his back and looked at the sky. The convoy moved on, a chopper roared overhead, the flowers nodded, and the dresses danced on the line.

The next day Dom pulled up in his taxi with a man in the back. The man jumped out before the car had stopped. He was short, moving quickly in his black suit, his face bloated and red. Ivan and his mother came onto the porch, and the man looked them up and down as though he had a general distaste for peasants.

Dom cleared his throat and said, "Here is Oscar himself. He lost his wife and daughter. He has come to claim them."

Oscar spoke in Dutch, and Dom translated: "I would like Anna's diary. I understand it is here?"

Ivan shot Dom a look, and Dom shrugged. "It is his only daughter, Ivan." Oscar stepped close to Ivan, showing the piercing power of the black eyes. Ivan recalled Anna's confronting the rat in her cellar.

"Over my dead body, Ivan said," which Dom, smiling, translated as, "He will be glad to present it to you. You have our deepest sympathy." And he bowed.

Ivan fingered the pistol in his pocket. The man had no tears, no expression of despair. He just kept looking around, flinching when the goat ran between his legs. Elena sat him at the small table. Ivan clenched his fists and went for the diary, but then ran back saying, "Oh my god! It's been stolen!"

"Nice try," said Dom. "Now get it."

Ivan brought it to the table. Oscar's face remained cold. He fingered the clasp but didn't open it. Ivan thought he would probably burn the book when he read the things Anna wrote about him. Ivan wanted to hurt him, so he said, "The key is around her neck." But Dom did not translate.

Oscar then turned his face up and began to rant. Ivan thought it might be an angry prayer, but Dom whispered: He says, "Why in a place like this, among the terrorists and ignorant? It's likely they have abused her body."

Dom said something sharply in Dutch, and Oscar fell silent. He tapped his fat fingers on the book and it made Ivan sick to see him touching it. He turned to size Elena up, and then Ivan. He spoke rapidly to Dom, making hand gestures at the surroundings. When he was done, he lit a cigar without asking permission. He blew jets of smoke out the window, frowning at the fields. His gaze seemed to draw clouds and put everything in shadow.

"He has a proposition," Dom said. "Since he has lost his wife and daughter, he needs help in his home. The wages will be fair, there are good schools. He can dress this beautiful woman in the best modern designs."

Elena blushed and pretended to be busy at the stove.

"To stay here," Dom continued, "is to condone the killers, to look the other way. It is chaos, suicide, and corruption. The boy will be a soldier without identity. He'll fire missiles at other innocent people."

Ivan rested the Beretta's barrel on Oscar's temple. "You killed her," he said.

Dom lowered Ivan's arm with one hand. The other pushed the diary into Oscar's chest and then led him to the taxi by his tie.

Hello World,

7/17/14 (this is flight 17, and it is a 777!)

This is the big day. As you know I've been chosen to represent my country. I am flying to Australia for a ballet with people from all over the world. I'm excited and nervous. My mother is going with me. Oscar says to not let our name down. Anyway, far below are the most beautiful fields. I will draw them.

Anna

Ivan asked his mother if he should be a man and join the searchers.

She said, "No, lay down here with me. Let's not grow up. Let's be stuck in time with Anna."

They closed their eyes. Serge the goat came up and stuck his legs in the air. The tiny house vibrated with the continuing chaos, like the earth hitting turbulence in its orbit.

Ivan dreamed of Anna's hand. It was painting—he saw it from her perspective, as though he were one with her. There were easels set up around the yard, and she painted scenes from his future. Hers was a stunning realism, every feature clear.

He was at the university, in classes with a beautiful reproduction of Anna, named Marta. They lived in an apartment over a café, looking after Elena and Ben. Elena suffered from a nerve disorder, and Ben had returned fragile after years of imprisonment and torture. But they looked happy in a scene where they sat on their tiny balcony, looking down at Ivan and Marta, who were seated at the café painting street scenes. Ivan painted himself writing a note.

Dear Anna,

The wars are over! My family is together and well. Dom sends greetings and camel hair brushes. It is a good day. Only one thing could make it perfect.

Yours always,

Ivan

Ivan woke to his mother crying in her sleep. Her brow was cold and wet, but when he put his hand there, she smiled. For several minutes the noise outside stopped, and through the window came a warm breath that was fresh and sweet as a young girl's. It sucked in Ivan's scent. It swirled and captured them in graceful arms, and peace filled the room.

