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**Class:** 11

**Poetry or Short Story (indicate one)**

## A Prayer for the Dying

Starvation walks hand in hand with desperation. Feeling so hollow that nothing can fill you, you begin to forget what it feels like to be filled. Nourished. Alive. The sharp ache of hunger whispers a low ring behind your ears, no more pain, just the harsh reality of your imminent death.

It's now been months since the Germans severed the last road to Leningrad. Months since my people have had contact with the outside world. The cruel snow drifts in through the crack in my wall. I don't have the energy to move to patch the hole, I forget the last time I had the energy to stand up. There's no point going anywhere, these whole cities' deaths are certain.

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For the first 100 days there was hope. We hoped, waited and begged for our red army to come liberate us from the Nazis, for Comrade Stalin and the Bolsheviks to crush the brigands and their brutish ways. But they didn't. They never came. Papa used to huddle my sweet sister Anya and I close, bringing us into his warmth and whispering reassurances into our ears. Reassurances can't feed empty bellies and purify water. After three months of the siege, the bitter cold set in. Winter was here and any good Russian knows that there is no plague quite like a Soviet winter. We were luckier than most. In our communal living flat, we had a whole room to ourselves. Since Mama and Deda had passed, three to one room has been a luxury that most do not get. Papa, Anya and I huddled as it became too cold for us to scavenge for firewood. At night, clutched in each other's arms, I could hear Anya's soft whimpering, her mutterings of Mama and home.

Once spring had arrived, we were finally able to leave our room. We were out of provisions, our canned ham, mushrooms and caviar all rationed out. We were getting occasional airdrops from the west, but not enough to sustain us. Papa contracted tuberculosis a week prior, he was one of the lucky ones, he coughed no blood, only laid and moaned. Papa rarely moved, sometimes to the point where I thought he was dead. I was not allowed to touch him, having to sleep in the corner of our room, keeping my sister warm with my arms wrapped around her small frame.

Papa sent Anya out first, to the old factory to collect any rations she could from the officers. Starvation walks hand in hand with desperation, so I learnt that day. A fight broke out in Anya's line between a man and the officer. The man was Mr. Novikov, he lived in the shared housing, three blocks down from us. His wife had just had a baby. Mr. Novikov tried to steal extra formula rations for his new baby who had contracted scarlet fever from the outbreak in block six. He was shot by the ration officer. The ensuing chaos caused a stampede, people rushed towards the officers to attack, and others ran away to hopeful salvation. Anya's fragile, little body, which only last night I was cradling in my warmth, was knocked over hard on the pavement. She was unrecognisable after she was trampled to death amongst the desperate rush. The Mikhaylovs brought her body back to us, stiff and unseeing. Her thin bones were snapped in all directions under the weight of the stampede's boots. They threw her body onto the pyre with the weeks dead, like taking out the garbage. Like she was nobody. The flames danced high in the sky that night, singing the rising death toll to everyone witnessed it. Singing Anya's demise to the city. To me.

It finally sunk in that night, the smoke from the funeral pyre drifting through the cracked window, filling my nose. Comrade Stalin is not coming for us. He never was. I can feel it. My organs are shutting down. I can no longer feel the biting hunger and the

icy breeze that would once cause me to shiver. All that is left is the aching grief for my sister, clawing its way into my heart. I don't think I could move if I tried. I bat my eyes shut, sure that once I fall asleep, I won't wake up again. I think I'm okay with that.

No one has prayed since the revolution and the establishment of atheism. People who prayed often found themselves taken in the night, being dragged away by the secret police in the darkness. But there are no more secret police, the Bolsheviks have forgotten us. I prayed to my Dedas God that night. Prayed that if heaven is real, that my Anya is there. Prayed that if heaven is real, I join my Anya there soon.