

Years 11 & 12
1st Place: Tallulah Davison
Year 12, Swan Online

Tick of a Box

Stalingrad, Russia / 8th of November 1937

The combination of fog, smoke and steam swirls ominously in the narrow backstreets. The clouded gloom is so dense my vision is completely obscured. I tread on confidently. Others lost in the haze will move for me. My face contorts as the stench of rotting flesh reaches my nostrils. The whole street reeks of decay. I've heard the peasants are resorting to retrieving corpses from beneath the frosted earth. I try not to gag. I need to get out of this wretched place. These twisted alleyways are not made for someone like me.

As the fog clears, I have a better view of my path forward. I grimace; it's not exactly a pleasant sight. A thick, heavy smog hangs low over the crumbling buildings, as putrid fumes from the nearby factory swirl above. A thin layer of ice coats every surface in the street. Crowds of peasants huddle together for warmth in the frosty air. They are trying in vain to light a fire, every attempt just as unsuccessful as the last. I laugh scornfully. They should just accept their fate. These people were not designed for success in this life.

The same goes for the exhausted workers dragging their crippled bodies down the street after lengthy hours inside the factories. They are not here to live happy, fulfilled lives. These workers are here to be useful, to do the hard lifting so others, like me, may rise.

I watch a few skeletal children attempting to catch rats from the open sewers. They'll be lucky if they manage to catch one. Those rats are getting smart these days.

I pass by an old man, lying in thin clothing on the freezing ground and shaking uncontrollably. I cast him one contemptuous glance, taking note of every protruding bone in his useless body. He visibly withers at my harsh gaze, dark eyes filling with practiced fear as he spots the familiar, menacing badge pinned proudly upon my chest. At least the workers are actually contributing to this crucial industrial period. I see no point in these worthless tramps crowding the streets. All they do is block my way. I assume my usual disdainful expression and quicken my pace.

As I open the front door of my house, I breathe a sigh of relief. Finally, I am away from the scum of those streets. It had been a long day in the office. Everyone kept shooting me furtive glances. The usual jealousy, I presume.

I settle myself at my desk and open my black leather briefcase. I take out a thick wad of papers and toss them onto the desk. It's getting late now. Darkness presses itself against my frosted window, desperately trying to creep its way in. I shut my curtains to the outside world and get started on the papers.

One flourish of my pen and there goes another life . . . and another . . . and another. One careless signature and another traitor is gone. One casual tick of a box and another criminal, another useless peasant, another lazy worker or just a specific person I want dead, will meet their end within days. All 'enemies of the people'.

There is significant power that comes with my position in the Secret Police. Only last week, I signed off the death warrant of an irritating fellow officer who seemed a little too keen on my job. We are given monthly targets of executions to carry out. It doesn't matter who dies, just so long as we give the illusion of complete, unwavering control. Earlier this year, even the head of the entire Secret Police, Yagoda, was arrested. They are all at risk. These days everyone lives in constant fear. I relish the thought of the impact I have on people. Seeing them cower as I walk by. Seeing them plead as I watch lower uniformed officers take them kicking and screaming away. Seeing their families collapse with the pain and suffering.

And they deserve it. It is their own fault they feel that way. It is always emotion that weakens a person. If you love, you have significantly more to lose. Besides, love and emotion never got anyone anywhere. Only gruelling persistence and brutality get the hard work done.

Our empire cannot be a place that embodies the weakness of emotion. Emotion does not create a strong, unsinkable, powerful nation. Russia is destined for greatness, not the petty squabbles of democracy that the West are so fond of. They won't know what has hit them. This is a time of growth for Russia. A revolutionary period that we will pull out of triumphant. Yet for this to happen, sacrifices need to be made. Human sacrifices. A nation cannot be strong and unwavering in that strength, unless it is united. And for a nation to be united, any threats, weak links or opposition must be eliminated.

You might think me a stupid man, but you would be gravely wrong in that assumption. I am not so ignorant as to be blinded by the propaganda. I see the reality. But, what, I must ask, is wrong with that reality? Humans are disposable. Simply put, some lives just matter more than others.

There is no place for emotion with this progressive system. Sacrifices must be made. The ends justify the means. As we sculpt our empire, there is no room for disagreement and variety. For weak sympathy. The people should not determine the way a country runs. That is the work of the man who runs said country. For if one man with clear goals in mind is in control, we cannot be swayed by the limiting confinement of emotion. We will become a great, intimidating force.

It's not like the people are fighting us much either. It astounds me how stupid they can be. They are so easily swayed, sucked in by empty promises. I am not complaining though, people will always be ignorant in this way. Not everyone can think like I do. And that is why they roam the streets, famished, confused, brain-washed and vulnerable, and I, someone who is valuable and important, am in control. They are just pawns in this great scheme that I play a crucial role in.

I know I speak the truth. I have connections everywhere. An intricate spider's web that I have spun all over the city. I am informed. I am powerful. I am above the terror. I am controlling it.

I am pulled from my musings as a sudden loud knock on my front door slices the eerie silence like a knife. Silence, I only realised was so unsettling when it was so unexpectedly broken. The sound reverberates around the room as loud as thunder to my unaccustomed ears. I make my way to answer the door in a daze. Who could possibly be visiting me at my house? I only ever conduct meetings in the formal way – at my office. I cannot remember the last time someone visited this house – my house. Actually, I don't think anyone ever has . . .

I open the front door.

I vaguely register uniformed men crowding my doorway, but my eyes only seem to focus on one thing – the piece of paper they hold out before me.

I know that piece of paper; I've signed countless ones myself. The only difference is this time it's not some meaningless tortured soul, a fallen politician or just someone myself, or one of my fellow officers has a private grudge against.

No.

This time it is my own face that stares back at me.