

GERMAN SADULAEV

I am a Chechen!

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
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One Swallow Doesn't Make a Summer

A Tale in Fragments

1

I could probably carry on living like this. In the morning run off the alarm ringing on my mobile phone, brush my teeth, shave, run a bath and lie in the warm water for half an hour, dissolving the night's dreams. In the daytime walk or drive, shuffle papers, exercise my face muscles and vocal cords, do all those things known as 'work' and for which I'll be paid money. In the evening read books. One could live that way for ever. As though there were nothing else. As though nothing else had been.

And if there are dreams, then they are only dreams, they will dissolve in the morning, in the warm water.

And if there is memory, that too is dreams, it will dissolve in the stream of the street.

And if there are thoughts, they are of the dreams and of

the past; but the dreams have gone, and the past is also a dream.

And if my heart . . .

If my heart does not stop.

One day it will stop.

And I will tell you of my love, my fear, my loneliness, my grief and delight, my guilt towards you, Mama.

Can you forgive me? Remember when I walked along your meadows, sat by your brooks, embraced your trees, you purred to me as a cat on my lap, you sang as the swallows, you shone for me as the sapphire stars. I was your youngest, and you loved me, I know you loved me more than the others. Perhaps because I was sickly, weak and timid. A mother always loves most the one she pities. The others were proud, strong and independent, but I would come to you and lay my head on the flowers and the grasses, and you'd caress me. And my words took the form of verse, I sang you songs and read you poems in the tall thickets, the burdock standing high. And you smiled at me, yes, but you didn't laugh. You enveloped me in willow branches and hid me from others: let nobody see, let nobody say that my boy is feeble and crazy, for all my soul is in him.

And I loved you as no one else loved you. When you moaned from pain during grueling nights and you cried, I sat with you on our old sofa, I stroked your legs all bumpy from your gout, and that terrible word 'blood-clot' – I burnt it with the fierce ray of my eyes, I dissolved it in my tears. And during the day I drowsed in

class, stood silent at the blackboard, didn't answer the teachers, just collected my book and sat down. I couldn't say: My mama is ill. For the third night, my mama's pain won't let up.

And then I left you. It became stifling, terrifying, unbearable. I ran away. An enormous spider, here he comes, crawling across his delicate web – I'm terrified, terrified, Mama! I close my eyes. And suddenly the spider's gone. This is my nightmare, but I'll run away; I'll close my eyes and it will disappear.

2

I had wanted to run away for a long time. Because I knew that you had to die, and that you would die slowly, in agony. I couldn't watch it. Fear dwelled in me, Mama, fear!

You turned green with the fresh grass of the glades, you adorned yourself with chamomiles and dandelions, and with autumnal gold of the highest purity. And I felt the gouty bumps beneath your skin, with the grape juice I drank your blood, and it was too sweet, the sugar levels were too high, so the doctor said. And the clot, I saw it moving slowly along your arteries, deep beneath the earth, closer and closer to your delicate heart.

When the excavator bucket furrowed your beloved body, on the edge of the field, beyond our house, I went down to the bottom, I pressed my cheek against your warm, aromatic flesh. It pulsed and breathed, and it was sick. Sick with premonition.

Premonitions filled my mind. On the long path between home and school I silently counted the combat units, saw the maps of operations, played through the scenes of battles fought over each

of your houses, at that time still calm and untroubled. They couldn't have been my thoughts: they were your thoughts, Mama, and you thought them through me. And I was terrified.

On my eighteenth birthday, I tried to run away for the first time. I came back from St Petersburg; my school friends assembled, boys and girls. The adults left and we drank sweet, scorching vodka. I was unused to drink, the alcohol robbed me of my outer senses; I got up and left the house as if bewitched. In the distance I saw the mountains, it was a clear day, and I saw the faraway blue mountains. And I headed for them. The others seized me, dragged me back. I tried to break away, shouting: 'I need to go, I must leave for the mountains, we all need to leave for the mountains otherwise it will be too late, soon it will be too late!' No one wanted to listen to me, but I knew: there was little time left.

Then I lost all strength, went limp and let them put me to bed. I awoke an hour later, almost choking on my vomit. I tried to say: Have no fear! I remember everything, I know what we must do. Hordes of nomads have come, an enormous cohort, hundreds of thousands of them, and the dust raised by the hooves of their horses is blotting out the sun. We'll take up arms on the plain and almost all of us will die. We will defend you, Mama! And you will mourn each of us with tears of bitter sap from the broken fern. And later, when too few of us remain, you'll say to us: 'Go to the mountains. Leave me here and don't grieve for me. I'll pretend to be dead, or no, I'll pretend to be alive, I'll leave my likeness here, bereft of blood, and, by night, past the guards' campfires, past the khans' tents, I'll creep after you, I'll find you in the mountains. One day you'll see my face in the mountain brook, you'll hear a maiden's laughter and realise that you never left your mother, and your mother never abandoned you. She is with you.'

And that's what we did. I left for the blue mountains; there, on the rocks, I built a tower from stone blocks and nearby, on a small plateau, I built a crypt where I lived on after death. And Mama came. At the edge of the gorge, on the narrow terraces, she pressed her warm cheek of fertile earth against me tenderly, she turned green with wheat and rye, her neat, supple, maidenly breast swelled each autumn, and I fell upon her nipples and she suckled me.

3

On the road to Vedeno, beyond Serzhen-Yurt, in the beech-forested Black Mountains, pioneer camps were held. I spent one summer there. In the mornings we had assembly, drill and breakfast. In the evenings there were dances in the asphalt square. And at night we broke out of the accommodation blocks, climbed over the tall fence and went to the Black Mountains. We knew the location of a slagheap where we could get white slate. We needed the slate to make towers.

Every Chechen must know how to build towers. We made our towers from the white slate, a truncated pyramid with battlements on the roof. We polished the slate with an aluminium spoon secretly smuggled out of the dining room, then dried it in the sun. Each child brought a tower home from the pioneer camp. A man must know how to make towers because the time will come when we'll leave for the mountains. And we'll build towers in order to survive. My tower was in the library. One day, while dusting the bookcase, my sister brushed against it and the tower fell and smashed. My sister became serious, picked up all the pieces, stuck them

together again, and, to hide the cracks, coated the tower in scarlet nail polish. Now my tower was blood red.

In fourteen years' time, my sister will fall in the village square, flattened by the blast wave of a surface-to-surface missile launched from a submarine or distant missile site. I'll fly to Narzan, walk into the hospital ward, gather her in my arms and carry her to an aeroplane. We'll set off for St Petersburg, and for one and a half years, doctors will pick up the pieces and stick her body together again.

5

But I did not leave for the mountains. I boarded a train and returned to the northern city. And I was not there with you. Can you forgive me, Mama?

I was not with you when the first heavy bombs fell, when you had nothing to cover your body with, when your dress ripped, the crater wounds turned your womanly flesh inside out, and even the cruel, shameless sky shut his eyes. I should have cleaved to your wounds, I should have shielded you from at least one shrapnel fragment, washed your body with my blood, pressed my face to you and absorbed your pain, but I was not there with you.

4

Three hundred years passed; the nomads slew one another and scattered across the steppe, and the dust clouds raised by the hooves of their cavalry settled. Then I returned. I remember touching your breast – sunken, pummelled by the hooves of the military camps – with the wooden plough. And it was dry, barren of milk. I fell upon the ground, I embraced you and cried, Mama. Then we held rites. In the summer we caught snakes and hung them on trees. We plundered crows' nests. We ploughed up the bed of the dried river in both directions. And we looked towards the mountains. And you returned to us, Mama. The next spring you shyly bared your shoulder, the black earth was tilled, and once more the milk flowed for us.

No need to fear the moment when death comes; we'll leave for the mountains and build towers there.

You hurried to the bomb shelter, already half blind, with pain in your legs, linking arms with your friend and neighbour, a Russian nurse whom the whole neighbourhood loved. She was known as Aunty Dasha – everyone remembers her, lame from birth – and a pilot fired at you with his machine gun just for fun and you started crying and sat down at the roadside. Because you couldn't go any faster on your tired legs, deformed by your gouty joints and varicose veins, and Aunty Dasha sat down with you and cried too. The pilot's ammunition ran out and he flew off. You lifted your white hand, stretched it upwards, looked to the sky with eyes that could now barely see, and said, 'Damn you!'

You had no Stinger rockets, no anti-aircraft guns, no surface-to-air missiles or air defence radars. Only your curse, addressed to the sky with its host of powerless angels and to the pilot at the controls of the fighter. Dark clouds cloaked the sky, and it rained for three days. The pilot was brought down by a single shot from

a Kalashnikov; they found him on the ground, tangled in the cords of his parachute, and cut his throat.

But I – I was not there with you.

And when the heavy tank tracks crushed you, when the attacks persisted for days on end, when you bled, your houses falling, demolished by vacuum bombs, when you quietly moaned in pain in the far room of our house, when you stopped covering the shrapnel marks on the walls and gave up reglazing the windows, I was not there.

I was afraid to see you when I came back. I was afraid to look into your eyes. I returned and realised that I needn't have feared finding reproach in your eyes. When I returned and saw your eyes, there was none in them. They were blind. And the house was blind, with empty eye sockets for windows.

But you took my hand in yours and said, 'Hello, son! It's good you're home.'

6

It's hard to be a Chechen. If you're a Chechen, you must feed and shelter your enemy when he comes knocking as a guest; you must give up your life for a girl's honour without a second thought; you must kill your blood foe by plunging a dagger into his chest, because you can never shoot anyone in the back; you must offer your last piece of bread to your friend; you must get out from your car to stand and greet an elderly man passing on foot; you must never run away, even if your enemy are a thousand strong and you stand no chance of victory, you must take up the fight all the same. And

you can never cry, no matter what happens. Your beloved women may leave you, poverty may lay waste to your home, your comrades may lie bleeding in your arms, but you may never cry if you are a Chechen. If you are a man. Only once, once in a lifetime, may you cry: when your mother dies.

At the very beginning of the war, my elder sister asked our parents to join her in Novorossiysk. Mama and Papa didn't want to, they still believed that the war would be short, that it was all a terrible mistake, a misunderstanding, and would be over soon; they didn't want to abandon their native soil. They went to visit my sister, watched television, believed it again when military operations were said to be at an end, and returned home despite their daughter's pleas. This happened many times over, until finally our parents decided to stay with her. So they moved, leaving our second sister, Zarema, behind in Shali. Zarema had married and Flatly refused to leave.

After a long, difficult life, after a terrible war, Mother and Father spent three years in Novorossiysk, their happiest years. Until then something or other had always got in the way, stopping them from simply being together. First there was work, Father's drinking with colleagues, guests, quarrels with relatives. Then prison. And the war. But all that had passed. Mama was already blind, severely ill, how could they have been happy? Yet they were. All day long Father was with Mama. They chatted, they no longer hurried anywhere. Every evening he took her arm and they would go out for long walks, especially during the summer when the south makes you drunk with its scents and dizzy with its warmth. All the neighbours looked at them in fond envy, the couple in love, together for more than thirty years.

When Zarema was wounded, Mama's condition began to deteriorate alarmingly. That surface-to-surface missile brought death

nearest, cost my father and mother several years, several years of true happiness.

Within a year Zarema was much better, she was almost cured, but Mama . . . Our elder sister called, and we flew from St Petersburg that very day. When we reached the apartment, Mama was still alive, or . . . I'm not sure. Could she hear us, did she realise that we were near her? Could she feel me holding her hand? Mama was in a coma all night. She passed away in the morning.

In the house the mirrors were covered, so I didn't see myself. My sister looked at me and said, 'Your temples are grey.' I'd turned grey overnight.

And I cried out my tears. Just once in a lifetime a man may cry, and at that time he cries out all his tears, a whole lifetime's worth, for all that has been and all that is yet to come.

In the morning I went outside and looked at the world. Feeling a light, ringing hollowness. There was no more fear. That morning I stopped being afraid. Nothing bad can happen now. It has all happened already. There will be no more tears. I shall never cry again.

7

Death no longer terrifies me. See, death is no longer a parting; death is a meeting with you, Mama.

And I plead for your forgiveness. I kiss your hands, your flowers, your grasses, I smooth your hair and embrace your earth. For my unvoiced love, for unspent tenderness, for not being with you for so many years, forgive me, Mama! Can you forgive me?

Can your mountains forgive me, the blue distant ones, seen only in clear weather, and the black close ones, visible always; can your gardens forgive me, your golden fields, your scarlet roses along the roadside, the lilac and the acacia, your spring breezes and autumn rains, your clouds and stars?

Can your swallows forgive me?

8

Let me tell you about the swallows.

Spring in the Caucasus starts early. In February the snows disappear, in March the lilac is already in bloom. The lilac lilac – for what else can we call this colour, if it's the colour of lilac – and the white. I remember on 8 March the lilac is already in bloom, and we go to school to congratulate our teachers, all carrying armfuls of lilac. It's planted along the roadside and in the central square, and in people's gardens lilac grows too.

Lilac tells you the grades you'll get that term. Most of the flower heads have three or four tiny flowers, but sometimes you get heads with five.² We pull them apart, a twig at a time, looking for our grades of excellence.

And in April the orchards are already in flower: the apple orchards are in blossom, the pear and cherry trees blossom, and the peach trees blossom in tender pink flowers. In May the first cherries ripen.

But only when the swallows arrive does it become quite clear that tomorrow will be summer.

Each year they fly here on a different date. I don't know who supplies them with such accurate weather forecasts, but they always

arrive a day ahead of summer. Nobody supplies the trees with such forecasts. The trees hurry into flower, and it may happen that a late cold spell will dash the flowers to the frosty ground. But the swallows always arrive on time.

We all wait, we search the sky, and everyone wants to be the first to spot them. At last the day arrives, and some lucky soul hurries home, overjoyed as if a miracle had occurred: I saw the swallows, they've come.

It's always as if we're unsure, we are never quite certain they'll come back. They flew here last year, and the year before, but maybe they won't come this year, and then – then what will we do? How will we live if the swallows fail to return?

I don't know where they fly to, perhaps it's worth asking the ornithologists, although it would be better to ask the children. Every child knows where the swallows fly away to at the onset of autumn: of course, they fly to the warm fairy-tale land where the summer spends the winter months. And they fly back, carrying summer on their elegant wings, slicing through the warming air. But no, summer comes the day after, perhaps the swallows are the vanguard or the reconnaissance squad, they fly ahead and inform the summer by Morse code, in whistles and chirps: 'All clear! You can come now.' And summer comes, summer occupies our villages, but this is an army of liberation, and the earth greets the summer with ripening fruits and brilliant flowers in the green meadows.

Perhaps, the ornithologists will say, they winter in Syria or in Africa. But do the ornithologists know why they fly back? For four brief months, from a faraway warm land, to rear their young hurriedly then fly off again: why don't they stay in the never-ending summer, what lures them from their climatic migration? They are simply flying home: in this there is no logic other than the logic

of love. So each year we wonder: when will the swallows arrive? Or perhaps they won't come?
If there's no love left in the world, if the motherland is where ever you feel warmest, then they won't return. That means we too need not live here; it means everyone should find the place that's warmest for him.

9

And here they are, but that's not all. On the first day, flocks of swallows swirl among the houses over streets stationary in anticipation. The swallows choose sites for their nests. And in secret jealousy neighbours eye those beneath whose roofs birds already cheep, and again, each thinks: Will no swallows build their nests and rear their chicks over my threshold this year? Could my house have been cursed?

At long last, early in the morning, as they're leaving the house, they notice with relief: Here they are, already fussing and fitting their bits of clay and straw, building their nests on to the wall. That means all is well, all will be well, my house will remain standing, my family will survive. And if two pairs of swallows begin building nests on opposite sides of the house, it's doubly good: This year my son will bring home a bride and I'll have grandchildren.

The swallow is a totem, a sacred bird, to kill a swallow is a grave sin. Nobody kills swallows. We are cruel children, we practise our marksmanship by hitting sparrows with catapults, we set traps for pigeons. Sometimes we kill pigeons just for fun, sometimes we light a campfire in the field and roast their tender meat on the

flames, but we never shoot at swallows. I suppose we were told from an early age never to do that, or perhaps not, I don't actually remember anyone telling us not to, it's just that we never shot at swallows.

And even the cats. Our cat, a glorious specimen of an ancient genus, a breed mixed in the extreme – with kittens as black as coal, blue as topaz, cinnamon-coloured – is the fourth generation to bear the name Pushka. Pushka the Fourth, that's what I call her. Her distant ancestor was given to my grandmother as a little fluffy ball; at first everyone thought it was a tomcat and they chose the name Pushok.³ But Pushok turned out to be a girl. Rather than giving her a new name, they simply adapted her old one. Thus, Pushka⁴ the First, then Pushka the Second, the Third and Fourth. Cat ancestry passes down the female line – just you go and try finding the father of a kitten among the neighbourhood's tailed Don Juans.

Pushka the Fourth is not just a huntress: she's a dedicated worker. She regularly flattens rats and mice but she never eats them. She understands that this is her duty, what she is expected to do. One evening, when the family was gathered in front of the television, Father complained about the hamsters gnawing at the roots of the pumpkins in the kitchen garden; the cat sat nearby and listened attentively. The next morning a row of nine crushed hamsters lay on the doorstep in the yard, the entire guilty clan. The cat sat nearby, waiting for praise and recognition of her service. And, of course, she ate not one of them.

Our cat preferred bird's meat.

One warm summer day, Mama was busy about the yard, Pushka was basking in the sunshine, the swallow chicks were attempting their first clumsy flights. Out of habit the cat coiled herself into a spring, following their moves attentively. Mama grabbed hold of

her broom and with surprising steel in her voice addressed the cat: 'Just you dare!' That's what Mama told her.

Our cat never did hunt swallows. And after that she didn't even give them, and when the chicks ran about the yard, she deliberately looked the other way, her entire appearance announcing: Oh no, they're not of the slightest interest to me, those swallows of yours.

10

I suppose the swallows die. The bulk of them must die during the migration. If, out of two generations that take to the wing over a summer, just one bird remains alive, it will instinctively return to the house where it hatched and repair its nest, or sometimes build it anew.

But we don't see the dead swallows. For us, swallows are immortal. And the swallow who flies back this spring is the same swallow who flew back last spring, the same swallow who has always flown back.

Swallows are the souls of our ancestors. My mama will never die, she will become a swallow, she'll fly to me from a faraway land, across the seas and mountains, she'll be an angel, watching me from the skies, but from low skies, very low, no higher than the eaves above my door. What can angels see from so far away, from beyond the clouds?

And when young children die, they turn straight into swallows.

11

I was already fairly big when I found out that I had actually had three sisters. Mama had named the very first Tanya. She died in infancy. At that time Mother and Father lived high up in the old house, with Father's brothers. Our village, Shali, is divided into the upper and lower parts, along the course of the river.

She was buried in the cemetery but without funeral rites. Children don't need rites. They are innocent, they need no purification, no priests or prayers; children become angels immediately, but if they love us dearly then they don't fly high above the feathery clouds, they become swallows and live with us.

The following year Mama and Papa moved to a new house in the lower part of the village. Their very own home, beautiful, spacious, and free from the uncomfortable proximity of large numbers of neighbouring relatives. Yet a house is nothing but empty walls until love dwells there.

So, Mama awaited her first spring in the new place with trepidation. And look, all the neighbours have swallows building nests in their houses of course, they are the fledglings from last year, they remember their homes, whereas our new house stands soulless and empty. How her mother-in-law had wished that Papa wouldn't marry a Russian. Their first child was dead. Almost every night Mama cries quietly, burying herself in the pillow, all alone in the far room of the house. She doesn't dare say a word against her husband's parents. Could they be right? Will nothing come of it, will the beautiful love between a quarrelsome Russian girl and a fine fellow – an amateur actor and first-rate tractor driver, later the chairman of the Party Committee, later

still the director of the State Farm – turn out to be a barren flower?

But the very first spring the swallows came. Mama went out with her cloth, wiped away the droppings from the freshly painted doorstep and watched the amorous pair busily weaving their nest. Once again tears filled her eyes, but these were bright, clear tears of happiness.

From that day on Mama straightened her shoulders, her voice became confident and firm. Mama put her husband's entire clan in their place. Now nobody could say a single hurtful word to her. She was a lawful wife. A mother. The mistress of the house. Swallows flew to her.

One after another, in the new house, two beautiful and clever daughters were born, and third came a son. Mama no longer went to the cemetery, to the unmarked little mound beside the fence. Only from time to time, glancing at her swallow chirping trustfully over her brood, she'd quietly murmur, 'Tanya . . .'

12

The war began in winter. The New Year blitzkrieg, the plan to take Grozny with tank forces, failed miserably. On the streets of the city Russian tanks burned; inside the tanks burned soldiers. The radio waves dripped with blood, spewing out dying men's curses and the call, reedy as a tuning fork, desperate as a newborn babe's cry: 'Request reinforcements, reinforcements, reinforcements!'

Reinforcements never came. War began – genuine, deathly slow war. Fresh combat units entered Ichkeria's from the north. The first

tanks and armoured personnel carriers in the first villages on the invasion route were met by women bearing flowers. The flowers fell to the mud, under the wheels and the heavy tracks. The bombardments and mop-up operations began. The women went out again to meet the troops, throwing down their headscarves in front of the military vehicles.

Chechen custom decreed that even if two blood foes stood face to face with their daggers drawn, a woman could stop the fight by letting her hair down and throwing her headscarf between the men. But who knew about Chechen customs? The scarves fell to the mud, under the wheels and the heavy tracks.

Then the women went home. Out of the houses emerged children. Boys of twelve disabled tanks and infantry combat vehicles with grenades, pelted them with petrol bombs. Getting the first vehicle in the column and the last. And then from behind cover you could shoot at the whole sub-unit.

The Federal⁶ units responded to this embittered resistance with carpet-bombing, with artillery, mortar and rocket shelling of the villages. House after house was reduced to rubble, interring people beneath.

13

And in the spring?

In the spring the swallows arrived. They appeared in their tail-coats, festive and happy. They whirled in flocks along the familiar streets, started searching for their nests.

Have you ever heard swallows scream? Do you think they cannot

scream? Swallows chirp, peal, twitter, their high-pitched warbles modulating; how could they scream?

That spring, panic-stricken flocks of birds flew over the ruins of the houses and screamed, continually, mournfully, inconsolably.

Ornithologists will say that this is impossible, that it simply does not happen. But when the swallows saw dust and ashes where only last summer they'd left their nests, they didn't stay in their homeland. Dashing about the streets, they flew back, to the fairytale warm land where the summer spends the winter months.

Because in our land no love remains. Only death.

14

Let me tell you about the mountains.

We have lived on a plain for three hundred years but the mountains are always nearby; in the morning they are an arm's length away, and in the evening they are an arm's length away; only on summer days when the air ripples in the sultry heat do they seem far away, yet on sultry days even the water tower seems far away, though I can run to it for a bet in ten minutes.

The mountains guard us to the south. The mountains await us, that's why we live on the plain; we don't bury ourselves under the ground like hamsters, and we don't fly away into the sky like swallows; we live along the sloping banks of the muddy river. If misfortune comes, we can always flee to the mountains. There each clan has its own rock; upon the rock stands a tower, tall and impregnable; inside it are arrow slits, wide from within and narrowing towards the outer wall, so that an archer may stand in comfort. Near the tower is a

vault, within it live our ancestors, we don't bury them under the ground, no, we place them on the stone slabs of the vault, and they are always near us. In the evenings we visit them to talk of our affairs and hear their mute advice. But when an enemy appears and every warrior in the clan counts, they too rise to the arrow slits. When a battle is waged, no warrior is surplus. If misfortune comes, we can flee to the mountains.

Misfortune always comes from the north.

15

In the north is the Great Steppe. On the steppe live nomadic people – a wild-spirited people. There are many of them, always so many, thousands. They sweep across the steppe on steeds as fast as hurricanes. When hurricanes blow from the north, they twist trees from the roots, rip roofs from the houses, flatten the barley and wheat to the earth.

The wind carries a cloud of dust – a storm of dust, and the arrows too fly in storms, yet we stand on the plain, shoulder to shoulder. We defend the mountains. The dust makes our eyes water, blood runs down our faces, then we fall, and whoever remains will leave for the mountains.

What is our land to these shrieking nomads? She is neither wife nor mother: she is a random girl caught in the rider's lasso. And here they hoot and guffaw, a furious glint glowing in their narrow eyes, their steeds whinnying, they seize the girl by the hair and drag her into the tent. Inside, ripping away her green clothes, they rape her. Their members bristling, their faces burning in anticipation

of their pleasure, they enter her in a frenzy. But her loins stay dry, causing the rapist pain, yielding no delight. Then they kindle the lamps and see: on the carpet lies not a girl but a doll of dry clay mixed with manure, with straw on her head and crotch instead of hair. Where is the girl? How did she trick them?

Enraged, the nomads burn the forests and mountain villages; their flamethrower reaches seven hundred metres, eight hundred at most, but there are also mortars, long-range guns, multiple-launch rocket systems called 'Hail' and 'Hurricane', and in the faraway sea floats a submarine for launching surface-to-surface missiles.

After three hundred years, they depart for the Great Steppe, only to return later with new horses and new faces.

16

One day they came quietly from the Great Steppe, on downcast steeds. They had neither spears nor arrows, only a big book which decreed what people should do from dawn till dusk, for six days. And that people should do nothing on Saturday.

They said: We are poor and we've been driven out, our land has been ravaged. Take us in, allow us to live with you. We won't be a nuisance, we'll build our villages in the most distant mountains, where even the narrow terraces hold no soil. We'll adopt your tongue, learn your dances and songs. Don't drive us out!

And the mountains took them in. But the nomads didn't begin ploughing and sowing, rather they learnt that you can steal all you need from your neighbour while he sleeps. They started to trade,

exchanging barley from one mountain village for wheat from another, and this trading too was akin to thievery, and the ploughmen of the two villages thought: How is it that they gather neither barley nor wheat yet enjoy the one and the other in abundance, while our granaries remain empty?

Then they set the clans one against another, and fighting broke out everywhere, and even within the clans blood flowed; whereupon they nodded their heads and spoke: 'Yes thus was it enjoined, each man for himself, thus spoke the god of the big book.' And many of the clans burnt the wooden body of Mother Tusholiz and went to join them and their big book, because the newcomers told them their god was the most powerful, and they believed it.

The earth alone responded to the wild-spirited people; her loins turned dry, and her eyes became moist. That was worse than the hurricane from the steppe.

17

Still further north, beyond the Great Steppe, is the Land of Snow. There live people in the skins of beasts, whose hands grip not the curved sabres of the nomads; rather, straight, long swords. In that land are cities and villages, plentiful honey and butter, the girls are lovely as the morning and bring happiness, because golden wheat grows straight from their heads.

But the wild-spirited people from the Great Steppe descend on the villages and burn them down, storm the cities, take the girls into captivity, as the sun is stolen by the night. They sell the girls, fair as the sun, overseas and receive round gold coins; they trample

down the sowings, and all that is reaped they take for themselves; they slaughter cattle and feast on the meat boiled up in huge kettles. The Land of Snow wails, it cries for its suns.

But here the brave people of the Land of Snow have assembled a retinue and set forth on a campaign to the Great Steppe. When their prince, his wife and child fell captive to the nomads, a youth from the south helped them escape and promised to shelter them in the mountains. Because we are brothers, we stand together and hold the Great Steppe: some from the north, others from the south.

18

Let me tell you more about the mountains.

The mountains come in many colours. There are the Black Mountains, and the blue mountains with white snowy caps, under a hazy veil of clouds. If you drive south from Shali the road will lead to Serzhen-Yurt and straight after Serzhen-Yurt begin the Black Mountains. They are not even mountains but foothills, a ridge of large, wooded hills. The Black Mountains are an ancient range. Once they were rocky, but time, the wind and the rivers running through them transformed these mountains into hills. Their summits and slopes became blanketed in beech forests. When summer arrives, and the trees come into leaf, the hills look dark green. In autumn they are ablaze with gold, bronze and copper. And when the leaves fall away, and the branches are left bare, the woods look black from afar, and the mountains seem black.

Further, beyond Serzhen-Yurt, lies Vedeno. There the blue

mountains begin. They are of rock; this is a young range, the backbone of the Caucasus.

Looking from Shali, the Black Mountains will always be visible, whereas the faraway mountains are often shrouded in the horizon's clouds. But on a clear, sunny day – it seems so like a miracle, dream or mirage – all of a sudden the blue mountains appear, enchanting and beckoning. We gaze at them for a long time and every detail becomes visible: the summits and slopes, the outlines of glaciers, the winding ribbons of rivers.

Then I hear my heart sing: *Go! Go to the mountains.* There in the mountains is your clan's rock; upon it stands the stone tower; near it lies the vault. There the sky becomes closer, there is silence and the music of pure mountain rivers, there you can wait for the end of this era, this Iron Age, in which people once more have gone mad. And long this music resounds in me.

19

I have noticed that I often confuse the four directions. The mountains have always seemed to be in the north. I remember where the sun rises: if you stand facing the mountains, the sun comes up on the left, and the fire of the sunset blazes to the right. So the mountains lie south. If you stand facing north, then the east will be to the right. That's what they taught us at school. In our geography lessons we were taught – I remember the maps – here's the Caucasian range, we live to its north, south of it is Transcaucasia. I was always a good student, I remember it all.

Why then does it seem that the mountains lie north?

Perhaps because even in summer snow rests on the summits of the faraway mountains. Snow means cold, winter, the north. Where the ice never melts, where the winter resides during summer.

Or perhaps because to the north of the Indus valley stand the Himalayas, whither, thousands of years ago, I also withdrew to die before the arrival of the Iron Age.

20

Creach-creach, squeak the wheels of the carts. The solid wooden wheels, without rims, hubs or spokes. Just a thick disc of wood. To the carts are yoked bulls; upon the carts sit women and children. Alongside the carts ride the men on horseback. Here the eldest man gives the signal to stop. It is already growing dark, we shall stop here for the night. The carts form a circle on the bank of a stream; inside the circle they kindle a fire.

The man is named Ger, because in his hands is a spear: a spear is called 'ger' in his people's tongue. They have come from afar, their journey has lasted for hundreds of years. At one time there was a host of tribes, a multitude of peoples, fair-headed, fiery-haired, tawny and black as the coal they use to caulk their barks. They left the shores of the warm sea and headed for the rising sun. They left the old wars, fought over ever-diminishing land, but found only new wars in new parts. Along the way and during the battles they died, they were burnt in communal funeral pyres, their high burial mounds strewn across the steppe. In a new land far away, where wide rivers flow, where the mountains lie to the north, they subdued the local tribes of swarthy peoples. Yet the warring

did not cease, the tribes started to fight, one against the other, exterminating generation after generation. Some left for the setting sun; thus will they complete their circle, and their journey will end.

When the sun rose, Ger awoke and went to the river to wash his body. On the high bank, a family priest sat rapt, looking into the distance. The morning was clear, the clouds had dispersed, and on the horizon mountains appeared, blue ones with white peaks, which had not been visible yesterday.

The priest saw Ger, pointed with his palm to the mountains and said, 'There lies Asgard, City of the Gods.' Ger nodded and walked down to the river. Cupping the water in his palms, he washed. Swallows flew above the river. They lived here, making their nests in the tiny caves of the sheer, high bank.

Ger entered the water. The current was swift and powerful. When he had washed, Ger came out and walked to the carts. The women and children had already awoken, the children were running around, the women began preparing food. Ger watched a pair of swallows fussing near his cart, plucking out straw and carrying it to their nest.

The priest saw this too. He walked up and said, 'This is a good sign. We can stay here. There is no need to travel further. We'll take our water from the river, not far off is the forest, we'll build our houses from the thick tree trunks, and there, a little further on, in the middle of the field stands a high, woodless hill. On its summit we can kindle a holy fire and offer a sacrifice.'

I remember all this. Remember the carts and the worn-out people. Remember their bulls, their cows and horses. Remember how at the break of dawn they lit a fire on the top of the hill, fed the flame with clarified butter and chanted invocations. I still dream

of it sometimes. When I close my eyes, I see it clearly. Only I see it from above – not from too high up, not from the distant heavens. I see it from the level of a bird's flight. From the level of a swallow aloft over the land in spring.

21

The war is over, the war ended long ago. They have written so in the newspapers and said so on television. In Chechnya civilian life is resuming. On the television they showed the schools opening again. On 1 September, Day of Knowledge, they hold a lesson about peace in all the schools. There is no more war. The dour generals have declared that the rebel gangs are smashed, that the separatists are no longer capable of organised resistance. Only the remnants of the gangs are sheltering in the forests and the mountains, but they will all be eliminated. Tomorrow. Or next week. After the weekend.

When spring arrives, and the forests burst into leaf, and after spring comes summer, the dour generals say: The bandits are making use of the 'growth' to evade detection, if it weren't for the 'growth' we'd have eliminated them by now. I never realised you could call it that – when spring arrives, and the forests are covered in leaves as tender as the skin of a newborn babe – 'growth'.

And when autumn arrives, and after autumn comes winter, the dour generals say: There is rain in the mountains, visibility is very poor, when the slopes freeze over and the roads turn into ice rinks it is difficult to manoeuvre our motorised units, the remaining armed gangs are making use of this to attack villages, capture them, then return to the mountains.

All year long, trucks filled with soldiers are blown up on the roads, officials serving the administration are fired at, terrorist acts are carried out in Grozny. Chechnya is at peace, Chechnya has long enjoyed stability – a stability which people in the Russian heartland could but dream of; here, jobs in law enforcement are even for life. For the full two weeks of life you'll have left.

The war has ended; perhaps soon they will even reduce the size of the limited contingent of troops based in Chechnya. Yet the artillery remains. And, in order to justify their combat pay, they fire shells.

Sometimes the soldiers tire of firing – the heavy artillery rounds make their heads ache and their ears pop. They collect the shells, carry them to the woods, bury them in the earth. A week later, they inform their mates in the infantry of the location of the buried ammunition. A special operation is mounted, then they announce on television: 'The rebels' latest cache has been discovered, along with a supply of explosives. Another terrorist act has been successfully averted.' The infantry too earn their combat pay.

But some of the shells are fired. Each night the artillery based outside Shali fires into the mountains. Officially the shelling is aimed according to bearings, according to intelligence received about clusters of combatants. But they cannot have such data every night. They are simply firing into the mountains. As if the mountains were at war with them.

Each night the heavy shells fly howling over the houses in the direction of the mountains and explode with a boom somewhere far away. The mountains shudder and moan, yet they are tremendously large. To kill the mountains you would need to fire for a tremendously long time.

That will indeed be a famous victory. When the mountains die.

When they are razed to the earth, and this proud range stands no longer. Gordost – pride – and gory – mountains: they share the same root. There'll be no more pride of the mountains, just the docility of the plains. Or the emptiness of the steppe.

No more mountains, only the Great Steppe, without end and without border.

22

They say that an ass who's experienced the shade won't work again in the blaze of the sun. We won't return to Chechnya. The Chechens of Moscow, St Petersburg, Omsk, Yaroslavl, Voronezh, Saratov, Astrakhan, Perm and God knows where else. The Russian Chechens. We have grown used to life here. Even when hounded with surveillance, rejected by employers, refused police registration, and then told by those same police to cough up for not being registered, we'll stay here all the same. And not just those on whom fate has smiled, who have become wealthy and successful in Russia. But also those who drift from rented flat to rented flat, earning each day only enough bread for the next.

We have become feminine and weak, we can no longer live under the harsh gaze of the faraway mountains. To follow our tribal laws, answer with our lives for every word, weigh each action knowing that our children will be held to account, that all will be revealed to everyone, and in a hundred years' time our descendants will be reproached for the ignominious behaviour of their ancestors. To preserve one's chastity, practise abstinence, know only one's wife. In the freedom of Russia, Chechen men

follow different rules: a man has only one mother, all other women are his wives.

They bring in tanks and armoured personnel carriers, they have artillery and missiles, they have aeroplanes: fighters, assault planes and bombers. The foolish Russians. Women – that's Russia's most terrible weapon. Russian women alone can disperse and destroy the Chechen nation.

Here they are, so long awaited, so long desired, the girls who bring happiness, the girls who have golden wheat growing straight from their heads. In Russia. Here we have nightclubs, discothèques, bars, alcohol and drugs. And there's always a new girl. We can hold her hand in a café or on the street and we won't be obliged to marry her; we'll take her home, but only for one night, and in the morning she'll catch a taxi and leave without a word. We always dreamed of them, of the wheaten-haired girls. Now we have them. But where is the happiness?

There is no happiness: the fair-haired Russian women brought us none. We have ourselves become women like them.

23

There are the Chechens married to their tribeswomen, who speak their native tongue, take their children twice a year to Chechnya and, setting off, refer to it as 'going home'. They don't call the place where they live now home, even if it's their own property, purchased or granted during privatisation. Yet they are dwindling in number. The new generation befriends Russian girls, visits night-clubs, and does not mean to return to the village.

And then there are those of us who lost our roots long ago, even before the wars began. We drift 'like a cloud rent by the wind, finding shelter in neither this world nor the other'.⁸

There we have become outsiders, yet we will never be insiders here.

We wouldn't even remember – we would have forgotten long ago – that we're Chechen, but they keep reminding us. Russia does its utmost to forge the Chechens into a genuine nation, united and monolithic, and each fledgling who falls out of the nest is shoved straight back in.

If we forget, then they'll show us our very own passports. In my old Soviet passport, under 'Ethnic Origin' it said: 'Chechen'. Lest I forget. In my new Russian passport there's no section headed 'Ethnic Origin'. Yet nothing has changed. The very first page shows my place of birth: the Chechen Republic. That's not correct. There was no such Chechen Republic when I was born. I was born in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in an area of the USSR, run, like all the other areas, by the regional committee of the Communist Party of the USSR. At the time we were taught that we belonged to one great nation called the Soviet People. And we believed it. We set off for the institutes of Moscow and Leningrad – the great cities of our great motherland – then stayed there. But now we're taught that we are Chechens. And this vast country has suddenly become foreign.

24

During the first Chechen war, nearer its end, an end which shamed Russia, I lived in St Petersburg. I had no residential registration

whatsoever, nor did I worry unduly about this. Thanks to my northern looks the police didn't stop me on the street. The poor policemen. Nobody had provided them with even the most rudimentary guidance on the anthropological type of the Chechen nation. In their search for terrorists they were detaining 'persons of Caucasian ethnic origin'. If you are really at war with an enemy, you ought at least to learn a little about him. The majority of Chechens are persons of non-Caucasian ethnic origin.

Please excuse me, compatriots and fellow tribesmen, learned and not so learned, who assert, out of perfectly understandable and worthy intentions, that the Chechen people are one of the most ancient ethnic groups on earth, an indigenous Caucasian ethnos. No, I won't argue about the origins of the Chechens. For such arguments are meaningless.

The very idea of the origin of the Chechen ethnos is wrong because no such Chechen ethnos exists – at least there was none until recently. There were the ancient Sumerians who lived in the days of the Babylonian kingdom, and the Hurrian tribes who later founded the state of Urtara. The remaining Hurrians settled in the foothills of the Caucasus, possibly mixing with the tribes who had resided here since earlier times. They gave the future Chechens the foundations of a culture and a common tongue, which is undoubtedly closest to ancient Hurrian. But a language does not make a nation.

Later, over successive millennia, the incoming tribes amassed. The Aryans were one of the first, it appears, during the period of the great migration of peoples travelling from the Black Sea's northern shores to the east, as far as India. Some stayed behind in the north Caucasus on the outward journey. Some also appear to have remained there on the way back.

I found the most unusual account of Chechen origins in the ancient Indian Puranas, the epic narratives. There the story goes that the caste of Kshatriya warriors became too numerous, with their incessant wars ravaging the earth. Then Bhumi, the goddess of the Earth, approached the Supreme God Vishnu in the form of a cow to plead for his protection. Vishnu manifested himself in the form of a Brahmin priest who deviated from dharma, the doctrine appropriate to a priest, by starting a battle and wiping out the generations of Kshatriyas nine times. The remnants of this warrior caste, driven out by the god's will, abandoned India and took refuge from the Lord's rage in Egypt – where they founded the Ancient Kingdom – and in the Caucasian mountains.

25

The Chechens paid dearly for the hypothesis of their Aryan origin, with expulsion to Kazakhstan, in 1944. I have found no official confirmation of this, but the Chechens themselves are convinced that Stalin decided to punish the entire Chechen nation not because of some yarn about a 'white horse' supposedly prepared by the Chechens for Hitler, nor because of mountain bandits who resisted Soviet power (Bandera's Ukrainian Insurgent Army was far more numerous, yet no one ever thought to exile the entire population of the Ukraine); rather, because scholars in Nazi Germany were working on the theory that the Chechens were an Aryan people, and in conquered Russia preparations were afoot for their role as equals with the Germans.

I don't know whether it was so, though it's quite possible that

such a theory was used as a Nazi propaganda trick to create allies within the Soviet Union, but the theory of Aryan origin – just like the theories of the Caucasian, Hurrian, Turkic and Semitic origin of the Chechens – is at once true and false.

For there was no origin. Though all the tribes listed were present. After the Aryans, plenty of others stayed behind in the mountains. What happened to the Pechenegs? Or the Polovtsy? Exiting history's stage, many peoples were preserved through melding into the conglomeration of tribes known to their neighbours as the Sosani, the Dzurdzuki, or some other such name. What the Chechens call themselves is of no help to us: the ethnonym 'Nokhchi' simply means 'people'.

After the fall of the Khazar khaganate, several Khazar clans also settled in the mountains, even spreading Judaism across the Chechen lands. And the process never ceased. Fleeing Russian serfdom, runaway Slavs inhaled the free mountain air and became Chechens.

In the Caucasian mountains, another Babylon arose. Only, if in the Sumerian Babylon many tongues tried to build one tower, reaching to the sky itself, then in the Caucasus tribes who'd adopted a common tongue each built towers of their own. And the sky – the sky was close already, standing on the summits of the mountains, you could touch the white clouds with your hands.

Many nations are born of a hybrid ethnic substratum, which does not stop them from being nations. But for this, fusion is required. And in Chechnya no complete fusion – whatever academic historians may say – has ever taken place. Each tribe has been preserved. This is the whole point of the existence of teips – the Chechen ancestral clans, about which so much is written yet so little understood in Russia.

Of course, within the teips, too, blood has been mixed. Since each teip traces its origin from a single ancestor, intra-teip marriage is frowned upon. This rule holds fast to this day. The blood in the teip is mixed, intentionally moreover, to prevent the clan from degenerating. Yet this is only along the female line. Any Chechen can name you at least seven forefathers on his father's side; some can name you twenty. But scarcely anyone can remember their ancestors along the female line beyond their great-grandmother. For thousands of years Chechens have taken wives from among the Avars, Ossetians, Ingush, Georgians, Russians and, needless to say, the female members of the other teips. But their descent is traced along the male line. Over thousands of years a unique process for the reinforcement of the male genotype has occurred.

Like the reinforcement of the Jewish nation's female genotype, only in reverse.

26

Each teip has kept alive the memory of its historical origins; the teips have not melded together. Everyone remembers that the Gunoy teip originates from the Russians; the Benoy, probably the largest teip, comes from the Hurrians; the teips who originate from the Khazars are still known as the mountain Jews, or Taty; my teip, the Ersenoy (Arsenoy in other transcriptions) descends from the Indo-European migrants.

That is why the Ersenoy are tawny, tall and light-eyed, more closely resembling Baltic peoples or Germans than 'persons of Caucasian ethnic origin'.

Oh, poor policemen. If you wish to arrest a Chechen, don't look for someone swarthy. You can spot a Chechen by other qualities, qualities which I'm not about to reveal in detail. I'll simply recount how one day, when my father was in St Petersburg, he met an old acquaintance, a Russian who had spent several years in Chechnya. This lady had never set eyes on me. My father sat with her waiting for me, and they chatted about the Chechens. The lady said that she could still spot a Chechen in the crowd by his gait and demeanour. Glancing at the mass of people walking along the street, she pointed and said, 'See that man there, I bet he's a Chechen.' Father smiled and replied, 'Oh yes. That is, in fact, my son.'

That lady said a Chechen always holds himself as though today the whole world belongs to him, and tomorrow he'll be killed regardless.

27

Such subtleties are unknown to the custodians of the law, and so I lived without any registration, walking freely past the police checkpoints. But when my company rented office space at a high-security plant, we required permits, and they wouldn't issue me a permit without registration. I approached the landlord of the flat I was renting; he was a good man and immediately wrote the necessary declaration.

My landlord and I were invited to attend the Department of the Passport and Visa Service, where they register foreigners. We arrived, and the moment I walked through the door I declared that

this was illegal: I was a citizen of Russia, why did my registration call for special treatment? I remember the major sitting behind his desk. He stood up, and, with spite in his voice, announced: 'We are at war, and you are the enemy.'

So that's how it is. We are Chechens, and we are Russia's enemies. Should we forget this, they'll remind us.

He explained in detail to the landlord of the flat what his provision of accommodation for me would entail. He guaranteed endless searches and passport registration check-ups, and should any explosion rock the district, my landlord would be tried as an accomplice. For I would automatically be identified as the perpetrator.

Nevertheless on that day my landlord wouldn't renege on his vow to get me registered. But a month later, apologising and hanging his head, he asked me to vacate his flat.

Ley Gumilev⁹ would have termed what's happening to the Chechen nation *passionary*¹⁰ overheating. Whence the heroism of the Chechens, their energy, their procreation, but also their fatalism and self-immolation. Their downtrodden instinct for self-preservation. At worst, such *passionary* overheating culminates in a nation's extinction.

I don't know whether this is provoked by solar activity.¹¹ More likely by historical realities, in the first instance by Russian politics. Right up until recent times, the Chechens were merely a ragbag of tribes, who'd never been able once and for all to unite, to establish their own statehood and form a unified nation. If the 'war till the last Chechen' is not carried to completion, if the Chechens survive and become a nation, they'll only have Russia to thank. Who ignited passion in them more than any solar anomaly, forced them to stand shoulder to shoulder, impressed on each Aryan, Hurrian, Khazar: You are a Chechen. The Russians are our last

hope. They won't let us remain women. They'll force us to be Chechens and men, because every Chechen is a combatant, every Chechen is the enemy.

And all that remains is to triumph or die.

28

Large houses like rocks over the narrow rivers of Petersburg streets. In the rocks are tiny caves, inside which live people who've brought in furniture and household appliances. Like the river swallows. The people are like swallows. Perhaps because everyone here died long since, but nobody remembered to inform them of this.

There are no real swallows here. Real swallows never fly here. Sometimes I think: How can we build a home here, light the hearth? Swallows will never fly to these places anyway.

I am mad, haven't you realised yet? Only a madman could spend so long thinking about swallows. Sometimes I think I'm a swallow myself. Perhaps because I died long ago.

Mountains. Nobody could think so much about mountains.

In sixteen years I've lived in twelve cities. Married twice. Yet to this day I'm merely a lone bird who has strayed from the flock; it's so easy to stray from the flock when the flock itself has lost its way in the sky. A daughter was born to me; I gave her the name my mother bore. That name was Vera – 'faith'. But I have no faith left. And I see her less and less, often only in photographs. Once again I cannot sleep at night; my heart is gripped with yearning and pain, because I barely see my daughter growing up. You will understand this, for even the mad are only human.

Time after time, why is nothing destined to come true? Perhaps somewhere in the faraway mountains a stray shell has smashed my clan's tower. And my entire clan is condemned to separation and drifting until I can find the place, pick up the age-old stones and put them together again. Even if I have to build my tower from white slate!

29

Let me tell you about the madmen.

Just before the war, many madmen materialised in Chechnya. Perhaps the foreboding of war begot them, perhaps the earth herself entered them, like an amber drop of resin swathes the fresh cuts on a tree, only the tree was yet to be cut. Perhaps it was Mother Tusholi speaking to us through them; she sent us her favourite children – but who listened?

In our neighbourhood lived Ibrashka. His full name was Ibragim. My Mama called him Ibrashka, Ibrashka the fool; that's what everyone else started calling him too. Ibrashka was the most ordinary village idiot. He was very strong and muscular, beautiful even. He would work for days on end: carrying water, laying up wood, building things; he herded and milked the cows himself. He was, no doubt, the best of sons to his mother; he loved her tenderly and wouldn't let her do hard work around the house or in the yard. They even tried marrying him off, but after three days the bride returned to her parents. Rumour had it that Ibrashka had proved too robust in bed, and the girl simply couldn't take it. Following his bride's departure Ibrashka fell sad for a week, then he forgot

and once more occupied himself with the house, the yard and the cows. In a word, he was a normal halfwit. He spoke poorly, mostly stayed silent, and wore clothes of the wrong size. There was one other peculiarity – well, all madmen have their peculiarities, that is why they are madmen. Ibrashka was frightened of aeroplanes.

A silver bird had only to appear in the sky, or the faraway drone of a jet engine to sound, for Ibrashka to fly into a panic, search for somewhere secluded and press himself to the ground, like a child presses himself to the soft breast of his mother. Even the nearby rumblings of agricultural biplanes frightened Ibrashka.

We, by contrast, weren't frightened of aeroplanes. We liked to look at them, holding our palms to our brows as visors, liked to follow these metal angels with delighted glances as they journeyed high above the clouds. We especially loved military aeroplanes, which left white vapour trails in the silky-blue sky. We weren't frightened of anything.

Ibrashka had remained at the developmental level of a child and we children often played with him. But sometimes, oh the mindless cruelty of children, we mocked the clod in every way imaginable. We called him unkind names, we pelted him with lumps of dung and stones. Ibrashka would put up with it for a long time but sometimes even his patience would snap. Then, his face flushed with blood, he would tear off after the herd of wrongdoers. Silly, witless children. If Ibrashka had managed to catch one of us, he could have easily – without even realising – twisted his captive's head and broken his neck. But we had one trusty method of escaping reprisal. When Ibrashka got too close, someone would shout loudly: 'Ibrashka, look! An aeroplane!' And the rest would start to hum: 'Vwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwm. Ibrashka would drop straight to the ground, sometimes on to the hard asphalt of the road, and there

he'd lie a long time, covering his head with his hands and laughing at him.

Poor, crazy Ibrashka. Aeroplanes weren't w. feared. When the air strikes began he patiently sat in the shelter. But when the sky was clear of aircraft, he would venture fearlessly on to the streets. Other than aeroplanes, he was frightened of nothing. On one occasion, he left the shelter to bring the children some water just as a mop-up operation was being conducted in the village. He was shot by the Russian soldiers' assault rifles.

Since the war, many of the survivors, when they hear the drone of civilian planes – the take-offs and landings of passenger aircraft near the aerodrome – involuntarily press their heads into their shoulders. And some can't control themselves and fall flat on the ground and cover their heads with their hands.

30

In the centre of Shali, for as long as I can remember, there lived another mad person, Dunka. Well, I don't know exactly where she lived, but you could see her in the town centre almost every day, near the department store or the market square.

Dunka was a Russian teacher who had been sent to Chechnya for work experience. When she was still just a young girl a Shali man had raped her. The rapist fled from the police into the mountains, while Dunka found herself pregnant. They say that it was then she became a little crazy, stroking her swelling stomach and saying, 'There's no need to send anyone to jail. See, I've got him

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he'd lie a long time, covering his head with his hands. And we'd laugh at him.

Poor, crazy Ibrashka. Aeroplanes weren't what he should have feared. When the air strikes began he patiently sat out all the raids in the shelter. But when the sky was clear of aircraft he would venture fearlessly on to the streets. Other than aeroplanes, Ibrashka was frightened of nothing. On one occasion, he left the bomb shelter to bring the children some water just as a mop-up operation was being conducted in the village. He was shot by the Russian soldiers' assault rifles.

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Dunka was a Russian teacher who had been sent to Chechnya for work experience. When she was still just a young girl a Shali man had raped her. The rapist fled from the police into the mountains, while Dunka found herself pregnant. They say that it was then she became a little crazy, stroking her swelling stomach and saying, 'There's no need to send anyone to jail. See, I've got him

right here, in the darkest of dungeons.' The man from Shali was eventually caught and convicted. The Soviet court tried him, and the rapist was sent to serve his time in a penitentiary. Had he been tried by a clan court, he wouldn't have been sent anywhere. But Dunka was Russian, an outsider, she had no clan – she hadn't a single relative, not even a distant one – so there was no one to cut the criminal's throat.

When the time came to be delivered of her burden, Dunka gave birth to a stillborn boy. For a long time she wouldn't hand the tiny corpse over to the doctors; only when she fell asleep did they manage to take the body and bury it by the cemetery railing. Then Dunka went fully mad.

Somewhere she got hold of an old pram, laid in it a doll with torn-off arms, and wandered all day long through the village centre, her hair matted, wearing the most extraordinary rags. The whole of Shali felt guilty that she was raped here and ashamed that the rapist remained alive, which meant, according to the law of the mountains, unpunished. Dunka was not sent to a lunatic asylum, they didn't even take away her staff flat. Each day passers-by gave her food and money, parents forbade their children to laugh at the holy fool, women chatted with her on the street. Women with children especially loved chatting with Dunka.

'How are you, Dunka?' they would ask. 'Where are you off to?' 'I'm going for a walk with my little one,' Dunka would reply. And she would immediately turn her attention to the other mothers' children: 'Ah, see how your boy's grown! Oh, you can tell straight away how bright he is! He'll be a big boss! And your little girl, what a beauty! She'll get the best groom in all of Shali, she'll live in clover, she'll have butter on her bread!' Mothers loved talking with Dunka. Of course, any mother likes to hear her child praised. But

the words of Dunka, one of God's fools, were held to be a blessing from the Almighty.

Then Dunka would complain: 'See, my little one just won't grow, I try feeding him, giving him milk.' Dunka would produce a baby bottle full of milk, lifting it from time to time to the mutilated doll's plastic head. 'But he won't grow! And you know why? Because he's dead.'

And the mothers would calm Dunka as best they could. They'd say, 'Don't worry, Dunka, your little one will grow too. See, he's just a wee baby! He was only born yesterday, what do you want, for him to walk and talk straightaway?'

That was how Dunka lived, for a good thirty years from the start of her madness until the war. Her hair had greyed, her face had wrinkled, and her child still refused to grow, but the mothers calmed Dunka, and she believed that she'd given birth yesterday, and smiled happily.

Only pregnant women feared meeting Dunka. If Dunka bumped into a woman bearing a baby in her belly, she'd come up, put her hand on the woman's tummy and ask: 'So, will your little one be born dead too?' Dread would grip the woman; she'd return home, more dead than alive, and pray incessantly, while relatives fetched a saint or mullah to the house for protection from the evil eye.

Dunka breathed her last after one of the first bombings, her old body, mutilated by shrapnel, was buried in the cemetery beside the graves of the Muslims.

In the aftermath of the two wars, medical workers in Chechnya have observed that, owing to stress, wounds and the effects of chemical weapons and vacuum bombs, women have started to deliver stillborn children with increasing frequency, even when there is no miscarriage and the child is carried to term.

Shali was not alone in having mad people. In another administrative centre, Urus-Martan, lived blissful Dangi. Dangi was tall, with hair as fiery as the sun. They called him Malkh Dangi, Sunny Dangi. Dangi lived on his own, didn't marry and had no children. He worked as a nightwatchman at the state farm, sleeping by day, unless there was a funeral. Funerals were Sunny Dangi's real work. When a Chechen dies, a funeral ceremony is held, a *tezet*. All the relatives of the deceased and the elderly folk from his village assemble. The body is buried immediately, that same day, then the ceremony is held after the funeral, in the yard of the deceased. The men and the women sit apart. Mutton is boiled up and offered to all the mourners. They perform a *zikr* – a Sufi prayer.

In Chechnya over recent years much has occurred that I find astonishing and inexplicable. A mufti called Akhmad Kadyrov appeared, who announced, 'The Russian-Chechen problem? I'll show you how to solve the Russian-Chechen problem: in Russia there are one million Chechens and 150 million Russians; each Chechen should kill 150 Russians, that's how the Russian-Chechen problem will be solved.' That very same Akhmad Kadyrov then became the pro-Russian leader of Chechnya. When he was blown up in a stadium – whether by the rebels or the FSB²² – Akhmad's son, Ramzan Kadyrov, set off for the Kremlin and, under the gaze of the world's television cameras, met Putin. The whole world saw Chechnya's new hereditary leader. Dressed in a tracksuit and *papakha*.²³

Mufitis? What mufitis? The Chechens have never been

fundamentalists, they have never favoured orthodox Islam. There were always mosques and mullahs, but not many went to the mosques, and the mullahs were the butt of jokes. Chechen religious life took place for the most part in the Sufi communities. The Sufis have no priests or mullahs, no mufitis or church hierarchies; the founders and leaders of the Sufi communities are the sheikhs, the saints. A sheikh need not even know Arabic, the language of the Koran – his authority stems from his personal holiness and his morals, for the Sufis what counts is religious ecstasy, not following rituals. The Sufi form of Islam could not be better suited to the freedom-loving Chechens, who have always opposed power of any kind save the authority of wisdom, experience and personal moral example. The majority of Chechens belong through family allegiance to the branches of a Sufi order. At the *zikrs*, to the accompaniment of musical instruments, the names of God are chanted, and during the prayer the participants in the *zikr* fall into a trance.

Dangi went to all the *tezets* in Urus-Martan and he joined in all the *zikrs*. He lived modestly, most days eating *siskal*, maize cakes, washing them down with sweet or sour milk. But at a *tezet* there was always plenty of meat. Dangi loved going to *tezets*. During the wakes Sunny Dangi behaved quietly and calmly; like all the men, he stood to greet people entering, conducted conversations befitting the occasion. But during the *zikrs* Dangi was always the first to fall into ecstasy and would sit for hours mumbling something unintelligible, rocking his head, crying out from time to time: 'Allah Akbar' – 'God is Great!'

When the war started, Dangi gave up going to work, and would wander all day long through the village wearing a drifting smile. He would tell everyone he passed that soon there would be lots of

funerals and he needed to get a good night's sleep so he could sit through the wakes. He no longer needed to work, because now he would eat his fill of meat every day.

Then one day Dangji put on his best clothes and left the village. He had never gone anywhere before, and people asked him: 'Where are you off to, Malkh Dangji?'

'To Samashki,' Dangji told them. 'I have lots of work to do in Samashki, they are digging hundreds of graves there, and they'll hold a *tezet* like I never saw in all my life!'

Poor Dangji, thought the people of Urus-Martan, what a goose this war has turned him into. The Russian checkpoint near Urus-Martan allowed Dangji through: 'Let him pass, the fruitcake. Mind you, he'll deactivate the mines along the road.' From Urus-Martan to Samashki is fifteen miles; Dangji went by foot and told everyone he passed on his way: 'I'm off to Samashki, there they will hold a great *tezet* because they're going to bury hundreds of people. How could Dangji pass up a *tezet* like that? Afterwards, they'll bury Dangji too, and all of you must come.' So Sunny Dangji invited people to his own funeral.

The Russians entered Samashki. They killed everyone: men, women, the elderly and children. They showered grenades upon the houses. In the schoolyard, from the poplars overlooking the blind windows of empty classrooms, they hung the younger schoolchildren, then they charred the little corpses with their flamethrowers. And they wrote on the brick wall: 'Museum Exhibit: Chechnya's Future'. In the course of a single day, over two hundred graves appeared in Samashki's cemetery.

But Dangji didn't make it to the *tezet*. On the outskirts of Samashki he was stopped at another Russian checkpoint. The soldiers accused him of being a combatant, said he was feigning insanity. They beat

Dangji, they shoved needles under his nails, but Dangji cried out: 'Allah Akbar' - 'God is Great! Dangji fell into a trance, like at the *zitr*, and the soldiers became more and more enraged. They tortured him to death and flung his corpse out on to the road. The people of Urus-Martan collected Sunny Dangji's body and they buried it. Many attended his funeral - hundreds, even thousands! After all, everyone already knew that Dangji's funeral would be soon: he had told them so himself.

32

The village lives by sunrises and sunsets. The city lives by watches, the time on the electronic boards in metro stations, the miscellaneous melodies of mobile phones ringing their alarms, news broadcasts on the car radio. But the village lives by sunrises and sunsets.

When the scarlet cow of the sun wanders into the boundless blue pasture of sky, chewing leisurely on the white shrubs of clouds in order to feed the green calf of the fields with her fresh milk of rain, the housekeepers rattle their enamel buckets and go out to the cowsheds for the morning milking. The milk strikes the bottom of the vessels resonantly in white jets. After the milking the housekeepers open the gates and march the cows outside, driving them on with smacks. The cows assemble in ragged columns and walk unaccompanied along the familiar route to pasture. Somewhere ahead strides the herdsman, who from each yard receives a little money and a lot of milk, sour cream and curd cheese.

There is no special pasture near the village. The land is built upon, filled with forest plantations or tilled for cereal crops. The cows pluck the grass at the roadside, along the lands of the state farm, and on the large field marked on the map of the village as a football pitch. There is another football pitch – a real one – in the centre. The district competitions are held on it, the pupils of the Child Youth Sports School practise there. Here, on this outlying field, at the edge of the mulberry grove and the bank of the river Bass, we kids are the only ones to play football, but the cows don't bother us.

In the evening, as the sun heads down towards its stall, the herdsman gathers the herd and steers it back to the village. A dappled parade of cows fills the road and pavements. The only traffic jam possible in the village forms, and car drivers wait obligingly for the cows to drift past. The parade spills out from the main street into the side streets, lanes and alleys. In the air hang the discordant moos and the dust raised by the herd, penetrated by the rays of the setting sun. Dust raised by the cows' hooves will cleanse a person of all sins, like waters from holy rivers and sacred rain, after which a horseshoe rainbow arches across the sky. Is that why people stand outside their houses when the cows return?

Each cow knows its path home. If its housekeeper doesn't meet it in the street, the cow will moo fretfully. Then the small gate will open, and a barefoot boy will swing open the heavy gates. Just at that moment the clouds reflect the last claret rays of the sunset.

Each village yard has a cow, sometimes two, perhaps several. Plenty of people can afford to buy their dairy products at market, but without a cow in the home – well, how would daughters occupy

their time, how could you tell whether a bride-to-be is lazy or flighty?

At market they sell the sour cream made from straining cream through a separator – thicker than shop-bought butter, delicious as the first December snow – and heads of homemade curd cheese, wrapped in muslin. But they don't sell milk at the market. Whatever next – selling milk! Every yard has a cow, and if your cow has yet to calve, then the neighbours will bring you milk, in a three-litre jar or an enamel bucket if need be. No one takes it into his head to sell air or water.

In our yard we have two cows, one red, called Zorka,¹⁴ the other dappled, Lastochka.¹⁵ We got them as little calves and reared them into beautiful brides. My sisters greet Zorka and Lastochka at the gate and escort them to the stalls in the brick cowshed built specially for them.

When my sisters went off to study in the big city, we sold the cows; Manna was ailing and she couldn't look after all the animals on her own. Besides cows we had dozens of hens, as imperious as aristocrats, geese, Chinese ducks, turkeys, rabbits and coypu in wire cages. Zorka had managed to calve – we sold her at the other end of the village along with her little calf – while someone on a neighbouring street bought maiden Lastochka. For a month, Lastochka would come to our yard and moo beguilingly. But once she had calved in her new home she accepted her new owners. For a long time Zorka continued to run away every so often, making her way across the entire village back to us. We would let her into the yard, feed and water her, and in the morning her owner would come and take her. A cow will remember for life the place where she first calved as home.

In our district's agro-industrial complex, there descended from on high plans for the harvest collection and the use of agrochemicals. The use of agrochemicals creates a vicious circle. Hiding among the seeds, many illegal immigrants infiltrated our lands: dapper beetles from the state of Colorado, runaway locusts and other insect riff-raff. Pesticides were sprayed over the crops to protect them. After eating the poisoned beetles, the birds – the natural enemies and population controllers to a host of pests – began to die. So our dependence on agrochemicals grew ever greater.

Then one year, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union and its agro-industrial complexes, there came a directive for super-intensive crop dusting. The local agronomists shook their heads, attempted to prove their point at the meetings, but they couldn't get the decision revoked. The chemicals were dropped using crop-spraying aircraft but even the low altitude at which the biplanes rattled in the sky could not guarantee, given the slightest breeze, 'pinpoint accuracy' in guiding the chemicals on to the fields. And so the poisons coated the grass bordering the crops, and the roads, and even the football-pitch pasture-field. The unsuspecting cows continued munching on the grass, and one by one began to fall to the ground and die in torment, gazing reproachfully at the low sky where swallows and biplanes flew, and from which, for the first time, rained death.

At first people stopped letting their cows out to pasture. But they couldn't keep them in the yard the whole day long, and besides there was nothing to feed them on. That's when it all began. Blood – thick, nearly black blood – suffused the earth. I

remember it well. We children played near the state farm abattoir, and I remember well the lake of blood, overhung by a dense, humming cloud of gnats.

At the market, sour cream and curd cheese became scarce – milk disappeared altogether – but then plenty of beef turned up instead. Prices fell to absurdly low levels, but by now nobody would buy the meat. For the first two weeks they had continued to buy it. They marvelled at its cheapness. In every yard they boiled up meat in large kettles, enormous pieces like the nomads eat. And they gorged themselves stupid, till their guts split. But then they stopped buying it, and it was just left to rot on the wooden counters, teeming with flies. Then they began throwing the beef out in the rubbish; the sanitary inspectorate was run off its feet, treating and burying the dismembered cattle corpses to prevent an epidemic. But an epidemic was to begin, and the sanitary inspectorate would be helpless to stop it. Within a few years, an epidemic of blood and corpses was to begin.

34

On the football pasture they later built a car market, the biggest in Chechnya. There they sold cars, spare parts, and all sorts of other bits and bobs. On market day thousands would flock to the bazaar, crowding it from one end to the other.

On 5 January 1995, the day of the first Russian air strike on Shali, the market was chock-full. When aeroplanes appeared in the sky, no one thought to flee. These were our planes – Russian planes – probably searching for combatants. Well, what was that to us? We

were innocent civilians. Why should we run and hide in bomb shelters, as crazy General Dudaev had urged us on television? It wasn't as if the Americans had arrived.

An aeroplane swooped low and dropped a cluster bomb right into the thick of the crowd. Hundreds were torn limb from limb, there were pieces of bodies, human meat, tangled with the mangled steel of the cars, so that it could only be buried as one mass. And blood – once more, blood poured across the ground. Rivers and lakes of it – so much blood that it seemed as though the very earth was sodden with blood, like an ailing mother from whose breast flows not milk but blood.

35

It was wrong to kill the cows. The cow is the mother of man, for she feeds him with her milk. A man has seven mothers: she who bears him in her belly, the earth, his country, his wet-nurse, the cow, the swallow, and any woman whose breasts are brushed by his lips. According to Chechen custom, if a man's lips touch a woman's breasts, she becomes his mother.

We are apostates. We have violated the law. We rape the earth, kill the cows, we sleep with fair-haired women, caressing their breasts with our lips. That is why the sky has fallen in on us. In Russia the sky is empty, distant – it couldn't care less what people do. The sky over Chechnya is more dense than steel. It is close, brushed by the peaks of the mountains. And it has caved in on us because we have violated the law.

No, I didn't take part. I alone didn't take part. One year before

the mass slaughter of the cows, I stopped eating meat altogether. I had a vision of death, sensed how close and heavy the sky was. Well, as you already know, I was mad. I ate no meat, I was afraid of the sky and left for the big city – not meaning to return to the place where it was going to fall down. But I was wrong to run away. I was wrong. A man dies but once: only a coward dies every minute. When the sky did fall down, its shards were scattered over the whole world, they pierced my heart, and now I no longer know if I'm alive or if I died there, on the field where cows once grazed and kids chased after a shabby football.

36

Sky, you never loved us! You love the meek, but we were proud, and you punish us for it, sky! In the high mountains we stole too close to you. And earth – our kindly mother – couldn't save us from father sky's rage. For we made off with your fire.

When Dela, the Almighty Lord, created this world and breathed life into its people, the earth was cold and dark. Even when wrapped up in the skins of beasts, we froze, and our clay walls could not keep our homes warm, while our bellies had only raw food to digest. But in the sky there was plenty of fire; Sela, the god of the heavens, splashed it about, hurling lightning bolts with bravado during the storms. And there was a youth by the name of Parmkhat who scaled the tallest mountain and reached the sky. While Sela slept Parmkhat stole the fire and carried it down to the people. The people kindled hearths in their homes, began cooking their food, and beheld light and warmth.

Yet Sela seethed with rage, for Parnkhat had made people almost the peers of the gods. So he chained the youth to the rocks of the Caucasus and commanded the eagle to peck all day long at Parnkhat's liver, while by night the liver would grow back. Thus Sela punished him with eternal torment for his insubordination and for his pride. People still praise Parnkhat in all their tongues. The Greeks know him as Prometheus.

37

Before the start of the first war, unidentified aircraft bombed an aerodrome near Grozny and the trainer aeroplanes it was home to. Dudaev sent a telegram to Moscow: 'My congratulations to the leadership of the Russian Air Force on gaining supremacy in Ichkeria's skies. Now let's meet on the ground.' As an air force general, he should have realised that in modern warfare air supremacy guarantees victory below. But he led his doomed people into war – into a war with the sky.

There was no air defence. Dudaev sent two emissaries to London to negotiate the purchase of Stingers and who knows how the war might have gone had the resistance forces got their hands on those Stingers. But the procurement of the Stingers fell through: the FSB had organised for the emissaries to be assassinated in London.

This time Sela did not sleep; he did not let us steal his lightning again.

38

Memory of mine, I cannot gather up your threads, cannot weave them into cloth. I remember all this, and I remember nothing. I remember what happened thousands of years ago, I remember what happened to other people, remember what merely may have been, I remember what never was, and sometimes I remember what is merely to come. Such memory is called madness.

I remember sitting – I think it was me – on the floor of a flat. It is the city of Petrozavodsk; I lived there too. I must have lived there too. Petrozavodsk, a flat on the thirteenth floor of a new building, I sat on the floor in the kitchen and thought about the Shali tank regiment. In the combat report from the front I heard that during the battle of Urus-Martan the Shali tank regiment had been eliminated. An enemy formation. When Russians die, they talk of 'losses', or even say they've 'fallen'. When Chechens die, they describe them as 'eliminated'. Because Chechens are the enemy. I too am Chechen: the enemy. And when I die, they'll describe me as 'eliminated'.

At the battle of Urus-Martan the Shali tank regiment had been eliminated. I give it some thought, but simply cannot grasp the sense of this strange, daft phrase. The Shali tank regiment. The Shali . . . Lord, wherever from? Where could Shali have got tanks from?

I remember just one tank. It stood on a concrete plinth in the centre of the village, where the road forks. The muzzle of its gun pointed at the village. They say that this tank was pulled down when Dudaev took power. Well, even if they put a tractor motor into it, that would still only make one tank, not a whole regiment!

I call to mind Shali. Shali stretched across the river – there's the upper village, where the cemetery starts. The village begins with the cemetery. Inside the cemetery are graves, some over a hundred years old, but there are no tanks. Next come houses. Houses surrounded by fences, barns in the yards, cows in the barns, yes, cows, but tanks – tanks don't hide in barns. In the centre of the village there's the square, the department store, the cultural centre, the park, then School No. 8. This I remember. But I remember no tanks. Then, lower down, houses again, the district hospital, the bus station and the kebab house. And the mulberry grove – but we kids explored every inch of that grove. If there had been any tanks, we'd have noticed them. We also knew all the buildings of the state farm like the back of our hands. And outside the village? Outside the village we knew everything too: the forest belt along the fields, the manmade pond, the hill with the oil pumps. We used to scramble up the hill; from there we could see the whole village spread out before us. There was no tank regiment in view. Of course, there were places in the village where I didn't go, for instance, near School No. 3. I hardly ever went there; perhaps that was where the tank regiment hid? No, how could you hide an entire tank regiment near School No. 3? I may not have gone there myself, but all the same, they'd have told me – the kids would have told me if we'd had tanks in the village, an entire regiment. We loved tanks dearly, how could we have failed to spot that?

I shut my eyes and see them crawling out from under the earth: heavy, clanking monstrosities. They crawl out from under the earth, they have always been in Shali, but lived below the earth, which is why we couldn't see them. They were waiting for the war to start. When there is no war, the tanks slumber. They awaken to the thunder of guns – and here they are crawling out, bursting

through the earth, blackened by time, shaking off clumps of clay and webs of roots, they form into a column and head for Urus-Martan. The battle will be there. They'll be eliminated there. And we'll be eliminated along with them. Because we are Chechens, and hence the enemy.

39

This era will become myth. War always becomes myth. They'll write thousands of books about it, make films of the books. That's all for kids. New generations of little boys will read about the war, watch films about it, stay awake at night imagining what they would have done if they'd been there; in the daytime they'll play at war, just as we played at fighting with the Nazis when we were kids. And once again, they'll be sorry that they weren't born earlier, that 'not a single bullet came their way'.¹⁶ And they will get their war, a war of their own. Each generation gets a war, because writers write books about it, because war is celebrated in poems and songs.

They're already writing books, plenty of them. Former soldiers and officers, generals even, are publishing sketches and memoirs about how they fought for Russia in Chechnya. And some even write about how they killed civilians. Well, *à la guerre comme à la guerre*, what else can we expect from war? Such is the stark reality of the front. The heroism of mopping-up operations, the self-sacrifice of reprisals and the absurdity of being blown up by your own mines. *A la guerre comme à la guerre*.

The warriors of Islam too write of how they fought against the

infidels, how sweet and joyous it is to become a shahid and join Allah, kicking open the gates of heaven.

And I alone write of swallows. Because I am a swallow. Neither a Federal knight, nor a holy mujahid: just a swallow who never returned to the eaves of his family home.

And we are not little boys any more, we were born at the right time, yes, we were born just in time to die. But we didn't die. Why?

Why did I wait for this war, why did I prepare for it since childhood, studying combat strategy and tactics, drawing up maps of the locality, arranging the troops, sketching arrows for the attacks and retreats, dotted lines for fortifications? Why, if I left, instead of standing on the plain and dying like everyone else?

If I had died, I would have died just once. What anguish to die time after time! But I left; that's why I was killed by a sniper's bullet on Grozny Street, I was blown up by a grenade in Samashki, I was fatally wounded by shrapnel in Shali and I burnt in a tank at the battle of Urus-Martan, where my entire tank regiment was eliminated.

40

And then, sitting on the floor in the flat on the thirteenth storey in the city of Petrozavodsk, I bit my pallid lips in impotence. The music was too loud. The mountains beckoned. I should have left – no, not to be a victor, I couldn't have been that. We have never won; how can you win against the sky? I should have died. Or rather – no, it's not that I should have, but that I had a right to. I had a right, a hereditary right to death in a desperate war.

Sometimes it seems to me like I alone used that right. I alone made my way back to the motherland, took up my weapon and was eliminated. I even know where: he fell in a trench at the bank of the river Bass, when the columns of Federal troops were moving down from the north, from the direction of Argun.

But that I – he'll never get to write about it. That's why I – another I, the one who remains – write this book. The one who died yet does not die, like the noon-time shade, who migrates from place to place and will now feel only one thing for eternity: that he is inhabiting foreign places. Alien places.

41

When did it happen and where? How did the threads of my memory entangle, knot, entwine? Perhaps it happened when I was twelve? Or six? No, most likely it happened before my birth. Just before my birth itself, some thirty-two years ago.

When my mother's belly began to expand – like a waxing moon, rounding out day by day – at the due moment, as entitled by employment law, she took maternity leave. Mama worked at the school, teaching maths. Sometimes she taught double shifts, worked overtime, even when Papa was director of the state farm and there was no want of money. Mama loved her work, loved her independence.

On maternity leave, Mama visited her favourite city, Leningrad. That's how I first found myself amongst these bogs – still in my mother's womb – first soaked in their sweet, noxious fog: prenatal memory. I recall particularly well Mendeleevskaya Lininya, the pavement along the railings at the building of the

Twelve Collegia. I still feel drawn to this place where I first enjoyed strolls, squeezed into an awkward pose, squashed by the walls of my mother's womb. I walk beside the railings, I shut my eyes and feel myself returning to this primordial condition, to pre-time, with this balmy, drunken phrase: *Mama, deliver me back.*

Not long before the day when the full moon was to give up its burden (was I a burden to you, Mama?), Mama returned to Shali. And even in the last days of her term, she often went on strolls, walking to the market and shops. Her pregnancy passed with ease, the fourth pregnancy of an adult woman.

On that day too, Mama strolled around the town centre, lost in thought, holding in her hand a light package of shopping. In one hand a light package of shopping, her other on her stomach, her eyes wistful, beholding the point on the horizon where sky meets earth. Have you observed the special wistfulness of a pregnant woman, ready any day now to empty her swollen belly? Have you observed the bulging of the spring earth, pushed from within by the pallid green shoots?

In her wistfulness, Mama didn't notice, didn't notice in time, there wasn't time to swerve, to cross to the other side of the street. Bang in front of her – as if the embodiment of some random negative thought – appeared Dunka, the village madwoman. Dunka stretched out her hand towards the belly and whispered, mutely moving her lips: 'A dead one...'

In dread, Mama recoiled and took off swiftly homeward. She had barely made it back when the contractions began. Father's driver took her to the maternity ward, the waters broke, and the expulsion of the foetus commenced. It was a difficult birth. On its way out of its mother's belly, the child dislocated her rib. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that he was born dead. Lifeless.

Silent. Not gasping in greedily his first helping of the caustic, weighty air of the earth's atmosphere.

The midwife beat me about the face for a long time, shouting: 'I'm not going to lose you, I will have you breathe.' Though I don't remember that. Like I don't remember the moment when I first convulsively swallowed in this life's air and cried, mournfully, inconsolably. I don't remember that. But I remember something else. The lives of ancestors, the flight of swallows, the mountains and steppe – and even the future, only someone else's. Because then – then everything became mixed up. Perhaps some of my brain neurons died, and those which remained meshed together in an unfathomable, unprecedented formation. And it became quite impossible to tell whose each memory was, who was doing the remembering.

42

It takes half an hour on the rattling bus from Shali to Grozny, always packed with people, the old men and the women sitting; the smaller children sitting with the women, while we stand. Riding along the tarmac road, we pass Germenchuk. That's what the little village just beyond Shali is called, almost like my name, an ancestral name, perhaps since the times when Ger Man, the fair man with the spear, stopped his cart here, at the bank of the river Bass. There's a stop in Argun, at the bus station littered with the spat-out shells of sunflower seeds, where you can get out and stretch your legs, sipping the fresh air. Then comes the road again, and fields with oil pumps, until, just before Grozny itself, an enormous

pit appears on the right. Here they quarried minerals from the bowels of the earth, perhaps gravel or sand, and left a huge, gaping wound.

The earth heals its wounds. After the war, people brought to the pit the heaps of rubble from wrecked houses, all mixed up with corpses. Now the pit is no more: the earth has regained itself and become level.

And so the bus enters the city. We never said 'Grozny'. Just 'the city'. We knew no other cities. There's the road under the railway bridge and Minutka Square. Then the bus station.

Minutka Square is the entrance to the city. Now this name is known throughout Russia, probably all over the world. During the wars, Minutka would change hands sometimes several times in a day. That patch of paved land just before the bus station became the key to the warring city, a strategic foothold, a junction.

Back then it was simply Minutka Square, the terminal where we got off the bus and went on into the city by foot. When we rode to the city for shopping or simply to visit the cinema, to amble its beautiful streets, to sit in the 'Juices and Sodas' café.

But that day we didn't arrive by bus. We drove by car. Mama at the wheel, me on the back seat amid a pile of notebooks and sketch-pads filled with drawings. Mama was the first woman in Shali to learn to drive. We were in the red Moskvich. Papa had gone to work in his staff car, Mama was on holiday – it was summer, school was closed. Mama was driving me to the city.

I like the road; my eyes glued to the window, I watch the scenery floating by.

Why are we travelling to the city? Because of Uncle Zhenya. Uncle Zhenya recently arrived from Moscow. Though he's no uncle to me, simply Father's friend. Older than Papa, he's an intellectual Moscow

Jew. Last summer he came and stayed with us for a couple of weeks, bringing his family. For the sun, forests and rivers, kebabs and booze in the glades. They sunbathed too, playing cards, and telling jokes. This time they brought their little girl, a plump Jewish girl, roughly my age. Our parents said that she was my fiancée and I had to marry her. They were just joking. Some jest: I nearly died of fright.

I didn't want to get married, much less to a plump Jewish girl. If I was going to marry, it would only be to Yulia, whom I saw in Grozny – though only once, it's true. But that would be later. When I grew up. For now, I didn't want to get married at all.

Left alone, I would sit for hours on the floor in my room, the furthest one in the house, surrounded by notebooks, sketchpads, maps and books. Among heaps of pens and pencils, I would carefully sketch. Once Uncle Zhenya came into my room and started questioning me about what I was drawing. So I told him.

After this, Uncle Zhenya advised my anxious parents: 'You need to take the boy to a psychiatrist. Don't be frightened – it doesn't necessarily mean he's ill. Take me, for example: I'm not, I hope, crazy, but I see a psychiatrist regularly. I know a good doctor in Moscow, I'll give him a call, he can recommend who to see in Grozny.'

There is soft furniture in the doctor's study, a big window draped with heavy curtains which match the furniture. We sit in a semi-circle, a crescent; Mama and this man of about forty with a small beard talk in front of me. Mama narrates. 'It was a difficult birth, he's had all the normal childhood illnesses, he doesn't really play with other children of his age, just sits for hours in his room, reading or drawing. He started reading at four – his older sisters taught him how to, they played school with him. I bought him children's

books but he doesn't like them. He reads about war the whole time. Especially books about military history, full of detailed descriptions and battle plans. Then he draws out what he's read. But the odd thing is he always switches everything round.' Mama shows a picture. At the battle of Cannae, the Roman soldiers are lined up differently, and Hannibal suffers defeat. At Austerlitz, the hussar regiment attacks the French from the rear. In the battle of Stalingrad, Paulus escapes the encirclement. And here's the strangest one . . . Mama shows the maps.

It's an atlas of the North Caucasus. The Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Republic, Northern Ossetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria. The maps are marked in blue and red pencil. Long, blue arrows point north to south, short, red arrows point south to north, Grozny is ringed in a double circle of both colours, and at Urus-Martan is a little cross.

'And then there are stories. All the children like talking about when they "were grown-ups". When the adults frighten our neighbour's boy and tell him that if he's naughty they'll give him away to the wolf, he says, "When I was a grown-up, I killed the wolf." But ours – ours just talks non-stop about war.'

The man with the little beard turns to me. He asks what the pictures are of. With a friendly smile, he suggests I tell him the most interesting thing I can remember. I want to tell him about how thrilling it feels to wait in ambush with a musket pressed to your shoulder, about how the Maxim machine gun clatters almost like the conveyer belts in the state farm's barnyard, about how . . . But I stay silent, I say nothing. Somehow I understand that it is better to remain silent. Though I'm desperate to tell someone how painful it is to die from a nomad's arrow piercing your throat.

Then the psychiatrist talks with Mama. He reassures her that

everything is within normal range, there is no pathological condition.

'My understanding is that there is no dementia. It's possible that asphyxiation at birth caused some degree of cerebral damage and there is a tendency to schizophrenia, but let's hope that once puberty has passed everything will normalise.' The psychiatrist explains the terms when Mama asks. 'Confabulation? Confabulation means false recollection – when the patient mistakes his fantasies for memories.

'And if the boy has leanings towards all things military, perhaps you should send him to the Suworov Academy?'

Towards the end, he confides: 'There have been many strange goings on lately. They brought me a man – an intelligent, calm, rational man. He refused to move from his village to Grozny, where they were offering him a flat. He told his relatives that Grozny was a dead city – that it was going to be razed to the ground.'

Mama agreed to bring me back in a month's time. But a month later the doctor was no longer to be found in Grozny. They told us he had swapped his flat in a hurry and travelled north.

43

'Chug-chugi' clatter the wheels of the goods wagon. The rimless, spokeless iron wheels, the grooved, cast discs. 'The red wheel, without rims or spokes, ran away to freedom, rolling down the blue field' (the sun). Here's another riddle: 'An iron wheel with twelve spokes whose rotation kills all life' (time).

There are people in the goods wagon: glum men, dejected

women, bawling children. In the corners stand mounds of frozen faeces and iced urine. It is cold. There is no water. No food. By now there are several dead bodies: they'll be taken out at the next stop. If they are taken out at all. If not, then the dead will travel on, with the living, to the new lands, the Great Steppe.

It is 1944. A special-op eviction. The NKVD unit has sealed the village. They have dug trenches, positioned their machine guns. Only after that do they enter. They round up all the men over fourteen, holding them in the school to thwart resistance. During this time they oust the women, old men and children. Then they load up the men. Drive them to the railway station and cram them into goods wagons. They fasten padlocks and seal them with wax. A package for you, Great Steppe!

That time they came to our yard. They saw a Russian woman with her suckling children. Decided to leave them. But took the Chechen father. That Russian woman was my grandmother, and one of the suckling children was my father.

Thus were we left on our land, with our mother. Thus were we torn from the breast of our motherland, which was exiled in goods wagons to the Great Steppe. Russian newcomers occupied the empty houses, dividing up the belongings and livestock. My father grew up in their midst, ignorant of his Chechen tongue, answering to the Russian name of 'Boris' rather than the one he was given at birth. Were we to blame for this?

In 1957 the Chechens returned. Boris saw his father return with another wife and with new half-brothers for him. He rushed to him, wanting to embrace him, to kiss him. His father pushed him away gruffly. It is not done for Chechens to show tenderness towards women and children in front of strangers. How was Boris to know this? He had grown up among Russians. Were we to blame for this?

Thus we started living, divided within, outsiders to the Chechens, outsiders to the Russians. Mixing inside us the blood of two tribes, when the sky had decreed these tribes should not mix blood but spill blood. And on this count we were to blame.

44

Salaudi is building a big brick house. Salaudi's sons mix up the mortar themselves with their spades. An elderly bricklayer hired for a high price smokes Prima and oversees the construction. The neighbours come over and watch. Secretly envious that they'll never build such a house, they laugh aloud: 'Eh, Salaudi, what's this basement you've dug? Decided to kit yourself out with your own personal bomb shelter, have you, in case of World War Three? If the Americans come and drop their atom bomb on us your basement won't help, Salaudi!'

Salaudi is silent. Let them scoff. Their own houses have no basements, their mud huts. They'll collapse with the first blast wave. Salaudi knew what a blast wave was. He'd managed to see action in the Second World War. And his sons knew. One of them had served in Afghanistan. Perhaps it will be no help against an atomic bomb, but if an ordinary bomb drops, it'll save us, they thought. From the blast wave and the shrapnel fragments. So long as it's not a direct hit, of course.

At that time Salaudi knew nothing of vacuum bombs.

... FAE (fuel-air explosive, or thermobaric weapon). Liquid fuel (ethylene oxide) functions as the main explosive. Upon impact a small explosive charge bursts open the casing of the bomb. The liquefied

gas starts to disperse, forming a cloud. As soon as the aerosol fuel cloud reaches a certain size, it detonates by means of the second charge. The overpressure within the detonation can reach 3 MPa with temperatures of 2,500–3,000°C, while the rapidly expanding wave front can damage structures invulnerable to the effects of a conventional blast wave. During the dispersion process the cloud flows into trenches, hideouts and bomb shelters, thus intensifying its kill capacity. The special feature of a vacuum bomb is the powerful shock wave created by the fuel-air explosion. Because of the instantaneous ignition of a large volume of space, the air heats and subsequently expands, forming a pressure wave of supersonic velocity; then terrible laws of physics come into effect.

However, a vacuum bomb is named not after the blast wave but after its consequences, when the reverse process of compressing air occurs. Buildings of all kinds will collapse like a house of cards. It is difficult to say what can happen to humans: it can reach the point of internal organs exiting through all bodily orifices. Vacuum bombs are very cheap to produce as they amount to a gas bottle and rudimentary detonator . . .

45

How could the bombs have failed to start falling, when in the soft soil so many bomb shelters had been dug, like irresistible magnets beckoning the malign iron birds?

So it was on our state farm. Near the farmstead was a field, sometimes sown with maize, sometimes ploughed fallow, and

sometimes just abandoned to the onslaught of the coarse thistle with its prickly, magenta clusters. Then, smack in the middle of the field, they dug out a long bomb shelter, covered it with cement tiles and shovelled a mound of earth over it. Though we already had a bomb shelter on the state farm, a short distance from the new one. I remember how the old bomb shelter had once saved us.

The favourite game of all little boys is of course war. But we couldn't always gather a large enough gang to divide into two camps and begin our noisy combat. Often there were three of us: Anzor, Sultan and I. Then the opponent in war would be the state farm, with all its manpower and machinery. It was also terribly exciting to play at being partisans. We carried out sabotage attacks on the railway; once with great success we derailed a wagon filled with mineral fertiliser. We struck nails into a cam belt and punctured the tyres of passing trucks. We carried out raids on civil defence warehouses: we made off with a whole sack of gas masks. And one day we burned down the German headquarters.

The German headquarters in our game was the state farm bathhouse. Right up against the bathhouse stood a barrel of diesel oil; we set it alight using a fuming tyre, and the fire quickly leapt on to the building's roof. Then we took flight and, bewildered, began bringing water from the nearest pump almost in our cupped hands, trying to put out the roaring flames.

When we saw the state farm watchman running for us and swearing in two languages simultaneously, we turned and fled. But where to go? We could have just split up, but who could guarantee that none of the captured partisans would crack under torture and give away his comrades? Oh, there was no need for torture. If they'd

brought one of us to his parents and said there were three of us, it would immediately have been clear who the others were. If I was caught, then it meant Anzor and Sultan. If Anzor was caught, Sultan and me. If Sultan was caught, me and Anzor.

So we sat shaking with fear on the damp concrete floor in the half-light, listening to the frogs jumping in the booming echo of the basement.

46

The residents of the farmstead did not hide in the state farm's bomb shelters. Better still was PP-2, the secure, underground communications centre, with a triple thickness of concrete and a whole mountain of earth above it. PP-2 was never bombed – the centre was designated a Federal asset. But that's quite another story.

Rather, the state farm's long bomb shelter in the middle of a disused field was used as a site for the disposal of unexploded bombs. In our district this task was voluntarily performed by Bislan Sabirov. I remember Sabirov well.

My family may have been mixed, but I was descended from a renowned and honourable clan: the Ersenoy teip. The elders of Shali knew twelve generations of my forefathers. The Sabirovs were newcomers – just some Kabardins⁷ who had settled in Shali relatively recently. They were all short and stocky with skulls shaped like Neanderthals. Their Chechen status was yet to be affirmed. Bislan would try to affirm his status by picking fights with me, an aristocratic outsider. He was three years older, no mean

difference at our tender age. But if you must fight, then you must fight. In the streets of Shali no one will laugh at you for losing. But they will spurn you for refusing to brawl.

Mostly I lost to the older and beefier Bislan. But at each meeting, of course, I would once again take up the challenge. By tradition, if you cannot overcome your opponent, then your elder brother steps in for you. I had no elder brother. Later Bislan was beaten by Dinka, my dear summertime friend, but that too is quite another story.

I also remember coming home after the first war. Wandering about the yard, mulling over my childhood, I kicked at random objects underfoot. Then I went inside and asked my mother, Why is the yard dotted about with upside down tubs for feeding the birds? And Mama replied. Under the tubs are unexploded cluster bombs.

Modern munitions (*fragmentation, pellet, high-explosive, incendiary*) which in terms of their capacity and effect may be classed as weapons of mass destruction. The special feature of such munitions is the enormous quantity (*hundreds or thousands*) of fragments (*pellets, flechettes, etc.*) ranging in weight from a fraction of a gramme to several grammes. Anti-personnel pellet bombs, for example, range from the size of a tennis ball to that of a football, and contain around 300 metal or plastic pellets, 5–6 mm in diameter. The strike radius of such a bomb depends on its capacity, ranging from 1.5 to 15 metres. Pellet bombs are dropped from aeroplanes in special casings (*dispenser pods*) holding from 66 to 640 bombs. The dispenser is detonated in the air and the showering bombllets shoot out, dispersing over an area of up to 250,000 m².

After the air strikes, some bombs fail to explode. To stop them from detonating by accident, my sister covers them with tubs. Then Sabirov walks through the yards collecting them and blows them up in the long bomb shelter out in the field. Mama talks calmly, matter-of-factly. I turn cold. Mama, couldn't you have told me any earlier? I've been wandering around kicking them.

Sabirov would gather bombs in the second war too. Here's how it worked: he would bring the lethal ball to the door of the bomb shelter, raise his arm, fling it deep inside and immediately slam the heavy metal door. Inside, the bomb would explode, causing no harm.

Sometimes the bombs wouldn't explode at the first go. On one occasion he'll have three goes at throwing an iron sphere into the dark womb. Then he'll go in, whirl it in his hands and drop it nonchalantly on to the floor.

And the bomb will explode.

47

Once more I write. Once more it is winter, it is cold, and I write. Now I write plenty. I know: it is disappointed, sketchy, fitful, jumbled, fragmented, broken. There is no central plot. It is hard to read prose like this, right? Easier to read linear prose. Prose that makes you want to turn the pages to find out what happened next.

And what happened next?

Nothing happened next. Once more it was winter and then spring in the city where no swallows lived. Once more I write. The wheel of my time has no spokes. Just a heavy, cast disc.

We shall write, to be sure. Perhaps I'll even write genuine narrative novels and stories. They will have heroes and heroines, plots and intrigues, unexpected twists, supporting characters, outcomes, the works. I'll write yet. There is nothing left for me to do but write.

That's for later. But now, now come spurts of blood. Not the crimson blood that fills our veins, smooth flowing and even; this is scarlet, arterial blood, shooting in a fountain from a throat pierced by a spear, spattering you with droplets – it won't wash out easily, okay?

Do not read further.

Oh, and another thing: it's like a cluster bomb. A big container; it opens in the sky and out fall smaller bombs, a mass of hedgehogs from the heavens, the size of a child's ball; inside each little ball is a deadly filling: pellets, shrapnel, flechettes.

Did something hit your heart?

48

Iron gates painted sky blue, across the street from ours – here is the house where Vakha and his family live. They had two girls and two boys. First the two girls, then two boys. In that order. The eldest was Satsita, almost the same age as me. Between our houses was a dead-end strewn with gravel. And scattered with little balls. On that day an aeroplane appeared out of the blue, in the early hours. They wouldn't have made it in time to PP-2. Everything happened fast. A random cluster bomb. Satsita fell. No wounds, no blood. She opened her eyes and murmured: 'It hurts, it hurts . . . here.'

Her hand fell on her heart. They took off her top, her T-shirt. Near her heart was a barely noticeable spot.

Yakha started up his car and raced for several hours to Makhachkaly, through mines, checkpoints, firing. The surgeon examined Satsita for a minute, then ordered his assistants, 'Get the operating theatre ready, prepare the anaesthetic.' A flechette had hit her right in the heart. But her heart hadn't stopped. It had continued, convulsively, painfully, to drive the blood in spurts. And Satsita hadn't died. She passed out from the pain on the journey, she was sinking into an abyss, but opened her eyes again.

The Dagestani surgeon pulled the flechette out of her working heart. Where, at which international medical conference will he present a paper on this unique operation? Which trainees took notes of every move he made? Who will write about this event in a specialist medical journal or dissertation? What prize will he receive, what honour?

Nowhere. No one. None. Because this operation could not have taken place. As there could not have been any flechette bombs. They were banned by the Geneva Convention and destroyed in all countries signatory to the agreement. Russia did not drop cluster bombs on Chechnya; Russia has no cluster bombs.

The surgeon said the steel pellet under the right shoulder blade of my father could be left there if it doesn't disturb him. Satsita keeps the long flechette, darkened with blood, in a cardboard box for New Year tinsel.

Do you know which occupation in Soviet times was the most prestigious in the North Caucasus, among the Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, the many-tribed Dagestanis? Mountain-dwellers are greedy, evil and wild. Probably, the job of director, or general or public prosecutor perhaps?

The doctor's profession.

And the most prestigious specialisation among medical workers?

The surgeon, of course.

And this too I remember well. The cleverest children, the straight-A students, the medal winners, didn't even pick a profession: it was already chosen. Parents would say with pride: My girl gets straight As. When she leaves school, she'll study medicine!

How did they know that so many doctors, the very best doctors, would be needed within just a few years, to save at least a few lives? Perhaps the earth whispered this to them.

The war started and in this carnage, in this nightmare, in this hell, there was only one way to stay human: by being a doctor. Someone who doesn't distinguish between military and civilian clothing – torn to rags anyway – doesn't distinguish between nationalities and tongues – all people moan in the same language – saving anyone who could be saved. Fighting against the sky which pours forth death.

While cruel father sky, preparing to kill his children, hoarded up shells and bombs, missiles and mines, dressed his mercenaries in khaki, mother earth prepared her resistance army. In medical institutes throughout the entire country, instead of the military

pledge an oath of humanism is sworn. The earth didn't want to hand over her children without a fight.

And here's the sky's army, in bog-coloured clothing, and the army of the earth, in white gowns like summer clouds. Where is the earth and where the sky? All had swapped places.

The Chechen doctors stood little chance. The sky knew whom it was fighting. The very first missile and bomb attacks by the Federal forces struck hospitals and clinics.

In the adjacent republics, in Dagestan, North Ossetia and Ingushetia, the earth's warriors stood rooted to the spot, going without sleep for days on end, hand to hand against the sky. Now you too know whose war it was.

50

I always find it hard to write narrative prose, especially now that I am exploding from within, ready to shower out in a fan of pain. I find it hard also because I don't like to fill in the gaps. For example, here are events in one city, events in another, but in proper narrative prose you need to tell how the main character packed his suitcase, took a taxi to the station, and then shook in the carriage on his journey from one city to the other.

But I don't remember how I bought a ticket, waited in the airport, boarded the plane and flew to Nazran. I remember only the call from Lena, our eldest sister, to say that Zarema was wounded – wounded several days ago in Shali, but nobody had known – and she was now in hospital, in Nazran.

And then, instantly, without pauses and scene jumps – as if

someone had cut out a section of the celluloid – I'm walking into an overcrowded hospital ward. Inside the ward . . . No, that's not right, not true. First I see only her. Thin, wasted, lying flat on the iron bed, all taped up in white strips of bandage, with pinched facial features, deathly pale. Did I say the word 'deathly'? I shouldn't have said it – after all, she was alive, that was the main thing, she was alive; that I must have grasped before anything else. But I remembered another Zarema: youthful, radiating health, athletic, ever confident and determined, and I felt so, so terrible! I covered my face with my hands, couldn't hold back the tears, my shoulders and chest shook with weeping, I whispered, 'Zarema, what's happened to you, little sister?'

An adult woman spoke loudly to me in Chechen: 'Don't cry, you're a man aren't you!' And quietly, in Russian: 'See, she's alive, now don't you cry, it'll only make her feel worse.' Only then did I realise there were other people in the ward. I looked around . . . No, I looked around properly only later. First I ran out of the ward to the corridor, calmed myself, pulled myself together, then went back in.

And, quieter now, I walked towards her, sat down on a nearby chair, and asked, 'How are you?' Tears were in her eyes, but she calmed down too and said, 'I'm well, I'm much better already.'

She really was much better. Here in Nazran, while we were none the wiser, an Ingush surgeon in an ordinary regional hospital with no neurosurgery department, tired, sleepless for days on end, had carried out a highly complex operation on Zarema. After the missile exploded into fragments, she was left with pieces gouged out of her forearm. But that wasn't the most terrible thing; the head had sustained shrapnel wounds, there was blunt traumatic injury to the brain. The intracranial pressure was rising, with pain, loss of

consciousness; the situation was critical. The surgeon performed trepanation of the skull. The pressure eased, the crisis passed, now Zarema was getting better.

Zarema spoke little, I was told all this by others. Yes, there were others, I noticed when I looked around properly. In the ward lay women, Bandaged, burned, some with amputated limbs.

Then I went back into the corridor. The regional hospital had become a crowded military field hospital. For the civilian population. There were old men, women, children. Wounded, maimed. A boy with his leg torn off sat on a little bench, crutches propped against the wall, and spoke with an Ingush kid of his age.

'How do you say "sun" in Ingush? And "water"? And "bread"?' The little Ingush replied; the little Chechen laughed. To him the Ingush words sounded like mangled Chechen.

You know, I remember how I was once taken by ambulance to the emergency ward of a St Petersburg hospital. My neighbours there whined and complained, one incessantly wailing, 'Why did it have to happen to me?'

In Nazran nobody complained, neither the women nor the small children. Sometimes they said, 'It was Allah's will.' How can you defeat such a nation, how can you subjugate them, conquer them? You can never defeat a Chechen. You can only kill him, eliminate him.

Then I felt ashamed – for my lack of restraint, for these tears. People had suffered deaths in their family, their bodies torn to shreds, but we were alive, we were still in one piece. And a Chechen should never cry. It is hard to be a Chechen.

What am I to say now, when they open my passport and ask, 'Are you Chechen?' I can only answer: No, probably not, though I would dearly love to be.

Zarema faced a long course of treatment, the healing of her forearm, neurosurgical intervention. All that could be done in Nazran's overcrowded hospital, with its shortage of medicines and inadequate conditions for complex operations, the doctors had already done. Father and I organised Zarema's discharge, and I came to take her to St Petersburg.

At last, they handed us her discharge report, a Ministry of Emergencies vehicle drove her to the airport. In the airport a prematurely aged Ingush woman official issues stamps for the never-ending shipment of 'Cargo 200'. And we see the covered trucks standing in line for loading. But we're alive, we're alive! They may have to carry my sister into the plane on a stretcher, then I'll hold her in my arms, but we're alive. The air stewardesses vacate three front seats for us. None of the passengers utters a word of protest: this is Nazran, everyone understands.

This is Nazran. Everyone understands. But in Moscow, in Moscow it is as if they don't even know that there's a war on, as if they haven't heard. Our flight is to St Petersburg, but we set down in Moscow. A car drives to the straits, men in civilian clothes come on board: 'Anyone here with firearms wounds, step this way!'

What? Step this way?

Only if you are wizards, if you can suddenly magic Zarema on to her legs. But you are not wizards, just pitiful Moscow office drudges, pitiful office drudges from the institute of pen-pushing. Once more I lift my sister into my arms, I go with them. This is the FSB, they have received information, and they must make

checks. I produce the medical documents, I can't restrain my feelings, once again I can't restrain my feelings.

'You scum, monsters, cretins, she's barely alive, maybe you want to lock her up in jail? Found a terrorist, have you? A lady sniper? She's a teacher. You bastards, you sons of bitches, you blew up my village, she was on her way from work, you launched a missile attack on the village when there were no combatants there, you murderers. You want to take her away, do you? Me too, perhaps? You'd better take me too, or better still, kill us right here, on the spot. If you didn't finish us off there, well kill us here. Because if you take my sister away and leave me alive, then I will become a terrorist, make no mistake, I will blow up the whole of fucking Moscow, together with your fucking pen-pushing office and your fucking president, you motherfuckers!'

At first they growl back: 'If she hasn't taken part in combat, then how come she's wounded? We're not at war with the civilian population.'

'Ah my little ones, my soft-headed Muscovites. You're not, right? You've no doubt been reading the government press and watching the television. And you know nothing, right? Your pen-pushing office knows nothing, right? Let's get back on the plane, everyone there is from Nazran, they'll tell you: the whole town is full of mutilated children, there are wounded lying in the hospital corridors, all of them elderly, small children, women. Perhaps they are all combatants, seeing as you're only at war with them? Perhaps babies take part in combat action too?'

Sullen, they shut up. They hand back the documents, apologise dryly. We return to the plane, I carry my sister in my arms through the tense atmosphere of the cabin – a sigh of relief, and we fly to St Petersburg.

Probably I should be ashamed of my lack of restraint. What do they know, how are they to blame? Boys from the FSB, in peaceful Moscow. At that time Moscow was still peaceful. Probably – but I'm not ashamed.

We are all responsible for this, all of us, and complicit, smug Moscow most of all. In the New Year they abolished pensioners' concessions, and Russia began to seethe with protests, till they shook the very throne of the president. Free travel cards and free electricity – that, it turns out, is the foundation of Russian existence that cannot be touched. Tens of thousands of people on the streets shouting political slogans: 'Putin – out! Putin – out!'

Why did we not take to the streets when this madness started, when this madness continued, when this madness recurred? When they bombed and shelled peaceful villages, killed people by the thousands – citizens of our own country. When unending train-loads of coffins were travelling, Cargo 200, the coffins of Russian kids – yes, Russian – senselessly killed in a senseless war. The tears of a mutilated child? What do we care for the tears of thousands of mutilated children and mothers, bereaved and grieving? We're more worried about our concessions, are we?

We forgave our generals, up to their elbows in innocent blood, but we cannot forgive them our travel cards, can we?

Why did we keep quiet, why did the nation's conscience keep quiet? Or has the nation no conscience any more?

Why didn't we listen to those who couldn't keep quiet?

Lazy, cowardly, mean, good-for-nothing nation, we deserve our worst tyrants.

Or did we think this was not about us, had nothing to do with us? Answer, for whom does the bell toll? Well? For whom does the bell toll? But the bell is not tolling. Even the sleigh bells are merely tinkling, the jingle bells on the reins of the troika. Where are you tearing to, troika? The three, the seven, the ace.⁸² You are tearing off nowhere, you are taking your new hotshot aces for a ride, with their diamond ladies in expensive furs, with their flunkies, along Nevsky Prospekt, along Palace Square. Give alms for the horses' feed! Give alms for the troika horses' feed, and for the coachman's drink, and that's all there is to Russia, that's all.

The madman General Dudaev told us, back then, 'Russians, the war will come to your home.' Well now it's come. And I say 'us' and 'we', because I'm one of you.

53

No matter how hard I tried to leave – to fly away, drive away, slope away – I just couldn't hide from the war. The war came after me, came not only through the official news broadcasts packed with lies and the tales of people from my village visiting St Petersburg, of how 'Idris – you know, who lived near the water tower – he went out to mow hay near where an army unit were, had a deal with them that he'd bring them a case of vodka, but they gunned him down all the same.' The war came to me through the searches at airports and stations, through the detentions 'while we verify your identity', through blunt refusals to register me, and the awkward and sheepish refusals to offer me jobs after reading my application form. Whether there's anything mystical to this or not, I had

occasion at around the same time to take a heavy Makarov pistol into my hands and risk a bullet in the head. To hell with it all, I decided, if everyone thinks I'm a Chechen, then I'll live up to the hype. You want a Chechen, well you'll get one.

At a brief meeting with a bitter Russian gangster, after he'd voiced his claims and described vividly how he planned to kill me if my firm refused to pay up, I shrugged my shoulders nonchalantly and said:

'My name is Sadulaev, German Umaralievich. I am a Chechen. I don't know how to feel fear. The part of our brains responsible for fear has atrophied completely. You can kill me – sooner or later, you or someone else. See, we're all dead already, and the dead don't fear death. But for each one of ours, there'll be ten of yours. That's how we do things.'

The gangsters stopped phoning. However, I did get a call from the FSB inviting me to a meeting. 'What's all this, German Umaralievich, why are you threatening honest businessmen?' Again I shrugged my shoulders: 'So you guys are protecting the protection rackets?' The captain smiled: 'Ah, the language you use. We aren't protecting them. Simply keeping things in order, upholding law and justice.' I smiled back: 'Then here's the low-down and you can see for yourselves who owes whom.' The captain pored attentively over the documents and let me go. He told me simply: 'You come to us if anything happens. Well, why did you have to be so uncivilised, eh? See, you're a cultured man . . .'

That is true: we are cultured.

I have carried my war with me; we installed it in the clinic; I sat with my sister for days on end, then travelled to visit her each day. And there is operation after operation. Papa writes to all the authorities, Papa attempts to get the treatment covered from a budget,

we are running out of money to pay for the hospital ward and the endless expensive operations. The responses are evasive. Perhaps yes, perhaps no . . .

I cheer up my sister: 'We Sadulaevs are like cats – no matter how you drop us, we'll land on all fours.' And we really are.

54

I was about to graduate in law at St Petersburg State University by distance learning. Over the summer I decided to do voluntary work experience at the Vasileostrov district prosecutor's office. I was assigned as a volunteer to the assistant public prosecutor for supervision over the police. A very pleasant, calm and intelligent girl. She gave me the job of going over the paperwork for closed criminal investigations, which had piled up on her desk by the dozen.

I remember those meagre office folders, containing just a few sheets, written in the dry, often clumsy and always dour language of the field workers and investigating officers.

Every second folder held a suicide case. Whenever we discovered a suicide the procedure was to conduct an assessment with a view to initiating criminal proceedings: was it actually homicide disguised as a suicide, or had the victim been driven to suicide, which would constitute a crime in its own right, in accordance with current criminal law?

They were as alike as stillborn twins, these investigations into the circumstances of suicide. From one folder to the next, the same story repeated itself: forename, patronymic, surname. Date of birth 19___. Cause of death: asphyxiation. Body discovered by family

members, hanged by rope noose attached to ____, no signs of struggle or violence. There would follow a brief biography of the victim. Attended School No. __; grades – average; no previous police record; not registered at psychiatric clinic; not registered at drug abuse clinic; was sociable, had friends, engaged in __ at sports centre; described by relatives and acquaintances of that period as honest, open, good-natured teenager. In 19__ called up for military service. Sent to Chechen Republic. Demobilised in 19__; no injuries. Following demobilisation attempted to enter higher education/find employment as a __; changed place of work frequently; became irritable and withdrawn; began using alcohol/drugs; no settled private life; relations with family became strained. On the day prior to suicide acted as normal; no incidents took place; received no letters or other communications. Decision: to deny prosecution in the absence of a criminal act.

Each week there were several such cases. And this was only in one district of one city. Who kept the statistics, how many of these superfluous victims were there, dead soldiers of a faraway war, across the whole of Russia? In America, someone did keep statistics, they calculated that the number of suicides among former military servicemen who had been through Vietnam was double the number of American combat losses during the Vietnamese adventure.

And these were the best of soldiers. Those whose hearts hadn't hardened, who saw bloodied children in their dreams. If this nation has a conscience, then they are it, and that conscience has already died, hanged in flats and rooms of communal apartments, unable to live with what it knows, what it remembers.

Then there are others. Those who went to fight for the combat pay, went voluntarily, to murder and rob with impunity, knowing

the sweet taste of other people's blood. And they too have returned. Make no mistake, they too have returned.

The women in Samashki said to the journalists: How could the Russians not realise that these monsters who have brutally murdered our children will go back home – they aren't human any more, they are subhuman, they know no other life, they will carry on killing there too, it's what now gives their lives meaning and excitement.

I don't want to write any more about this. We all have children. I don't trust these words, shaping themselves into sentences with suspicious ease, line after line. Or this blood spurting forth, these innards tumbling out of me, like after the explosion of a vacuum bomb; you can predict the future with them, if you know how. I write about the past – it becomes the future, I write about the future – it becomes the past. My little daughter is growing up, going to school, every day she goes out on to the street, the street where . . . Better not to write about that at all.

55

I'd like to write about something else. About what I remember. About my childhood in the green valley near the Black Mountains and the blue ones, about games, playmates, favourite pets. About dogs, for instance. Yes, dogs.

Here in the big city, people keep dogs in flats. Sometimes little toy dogs, no bigger than a cat. Sometimes strapping, aggressive canines. They keep them in the narrow confines of a city flat. How are these people not afraid? You can't always tell what's on the mind

of another human, so how can we tell what's on the mind of a large predatory animal, and sleep under the same roof as him? 'The Dogs of War' – it's the name of a Pink Floyd song. The dogs of war, they always live with us.

No, in the village we don't let dogs into the house. They have the spacious yard, they can take time off from their leashed duties and run around the street. In our yard there was always a dog or two. Of course, I loved them. It's hard for me to imagine now, but I almost kissed those smelly, doggy, toothy creatures. And they were patient with children, even when I harnessed a sleigh to the sheepdog – not a sledge-pulling animal by nature – and rode along the street.

We had Rem, an aristocrat, and a sheepdog, Mukhtar. Those I remember. Later Rem died under the wheels of a truck, and we gave Mukhtar away to someone. One day Papa brought home two reddish-brown puppies. So that the dogs would grow up fierce, they were given the names Pushkun and Koba.¹⁹ A few months later the puppies fell ill with canine distemper. They ate nothing, vomited murky green slop, wandered and staggered about the yard looking hopelessly gaunt or lay by the garage wall.

Before long one of them died. It was Koba. I felt personally to blame for his death. For not having had enough resolve, enough focus in my meditation to save his life. No matter what, I had to save the other one.

Early in the morning, as day broke, I stood waiting on the garage roof, facing the sun rising over the gardens. And I prayed: 'Sun! You bestow life upon all the living, you sustain our breath and the beating of our hearts. Do not forsake my puppy, show him your mercy.' Pushkun lived.

Koba I buried myself. In the far south-eastern corner of our

garden, under a crab-apple tree. I dug a grave, tipped soil over the corpse: a little hill took shape. I even made a bench, and placed it near the grave. Later I often sat on that bench reading, writing, sometimes just contemplating. My family did not approve of this, but said nothing. After all, I was still a child. Moreover, a crazy one.

56

During the war, when Russian aircraft began regular raids on the village, the villagers would try to hide in the bomb shelters. I have already mentioned this. But there's more. My father wouldn't go to the air raid shelter. He would simply stay at home, trusting to fate.

And one day it happened. Papa was standing in the yard, Pushkun was scampering nearby, an enormous dog with a pale-russet coat. A bomb fell directly into our yard.

From the moment the aeroplanes appeared in the sky, Pushkun had become restless, pressed himself to my father and whimpered. An explosion boomed, and in a flash the dog jumped on to his owner, knocking him off his feet. Pushkun covered him with his body. After, when Papa lifted him up in his arms, he was bleeding all over, wounded by the shrapnel blasted from the bomb. In him were dozens of metal pellets. Intended for my father. Only one hit Papa's body, in the shoulder.

That's how it will always be from now on. Must it always be? No matter what I recall, the threads of my memory lead me back to the war . . .

Many years earlier, on the garage roof, while praying to the rising sun, I solicited from him not just my puppy's life: without knowing it, I had petitioned the sun for the life of my father, whom the dog would save from death.

57

And I could write more. But somewhere must come an end. Everything comes to an end. This tale too must end, and the sooner, the better.

Somewhere inside, no doubt, though hiding this from everyone, even myself, I believe – still believe – that I should write a story about this and put an end to it. And then it will all stop. The dreams, the memory, the war. All my fears. See, they are my fears, but I'll close my eyes, I'll put an end to it, and the terrifying spider will disappear, it will all be over.

Yet so far the magic of my words has been powerless. I have already written, but as you see I write again. Perhaps this time it will work? I cannot forbid myself the hope.

58

And then I saw Father off at the station. He had visited me in St Petersburg, we spent two weeks together, we loved each other as though for the very first time. It was winter, but our feelings were as fresh as spring – people don't talk like that about filial love, but

why not? It is stronger and purer than love for a woman. And it wells up again, as if for the first time. We talked for hours, cooked meals together, went for walks. We couldn't get enough of each other. We were happy just the two of us, he and I – one whole. And the dozens, hundreds of our ancestors too, going back to far-haired Her and beyond, were all in us, conversing with one another. And this didn't seem like madness to us.

Then I saw Father off at the station. I embraced him, pressing my warm face to his unshaven cheek. At home I could not have done this. But we were in Russia. Nobody would see us. A few minutes remained before the train left, and Papa spoke.

'Yes, we cut down the cherry trees, but it's even better like that. The neighbours' kids were forever climbing them, in any case, breaking off branches – we kept having to shout at them. Now the garden's more spacious. The other trees have grown. There's a good harvest every year. And nobody touches it: there are no pests. There are birds, lots of them. When they started bombing and shelling the forests, the woodland birds flew to the village, they huddled up close to the people, settled in the gardens. Now there are loads of them, they sing, flutter about the branches. Thrushes, woodpeckers, bullfinches, blue tits – they're all here! And they've eaten the pests clean up so you don't need to use any chemicals now. And the swallows, you know, the swallows have started flying back! They've built a nest above our doorway . . . And . . . maybe it will all be the way it was?'

I could hear, unspoken: 'Maybe you'll come home, son?' I smiled sadly, and replied: 'One swallow doesn't make a summer, Papa.'

The train left. I went home. I switch off my telephone, close the doors; I'm going to sleep. I'll dream of mountains, the Black Mountains and the blue ones on the horizon. I'll dream of gardens

filled with flowers and fruit, suffused in birdsong. And Mama will come out on to the doorstep, squinting in the spring sun. And before everything comes to an end and is furled up in the helix of ancestral memory, I'll see myself as a swallow, an angel on a brilliant path. And I'll fall into the sky.