

Writings from an Unbound Europe

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THE LOSS
A Novella
and
Two Stories

Translated from the Russian by Byron Lindsey



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THE PRISONER FROM THE CAUCASUS

I

THE SOLDIERS, MORE LIKELY THAN NOT, DIDN'T KNOW THAT *beauty will save the world*,* but on the whole both of them knew what beauty is. In the mountains they felt it (a beauty of place) all too well. It frightened them. A stream leaped out suddenly from a mountain gorge. An open meadow, shining with blinding yellow hues in the sun, put them even more on guard. Rubakhin, the more experienced, walked ahead.

Where had the mountains suddenly gone? This space, bathed in sunlight, reminded Rubakhin of a happy childhood (which he didn't have). A grove of "southern" trees (he didn't know their name) stood in stately formation above the grass. But what moved the plainsman in him most of all was the tall grass itself, stirring in a gentle breeze.

"Hold on, Vov. Don't rush," Rubakhin warned softly.

To be in an unfamiliar open place is the same as being between crosshairs. And before venturing out of the thick brush, the rifleman Vovka raises up his carbine and with particular deliberation aims it from left to right, using the optical sights like binoculars. He holds his breath and surveys the space so flooded with sunlight. Beside a knoll he notices a little transistor radio.

* Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*.

"Aha!" the rifleman Vovka exclaims in a whisper. (The knoll was dry. The little radio had flashed like glass in the sunlight.)

In quick, short bounds the two soldiers in camouflage fatigue shirts make it to a ditch, dug out halfway for a gas line (and forgotten long ago)—then to the knoll, red with fall colors. They turned the little radio over in their hands: they immediately recognized it by its shape. When Private Boyarkov would get drunk he liked to go off by himself and lie down somewhere, cuddling this little transistor in his hands. Spreading through the clumps of tall grass, they go looking for the body. Then, nearby, they come across it. Boyarkov's body is propped up by two rocks. He'd met his death. (Shot point blank. He hadn't even managed to wipe his drunken eyes, it seemed. Cheeks all hollow. In the unit they had decided that he had deserted.) No kind of ID. It has to be reported. But why didn't the guerrillas take the transistor? Because it's evidence. No. Because it's getting too old and makes a lot of static. Not a hot item. The irreversibility of what occurred (death is one of those clear-cut cases) pushes things ahead, urges you on, like it or not: it makes both soldiers extremely edgy. Using some flat rocks for shovels, they quickly and energetically bury the dead man. Then, when they have just as quickly built a mound of dirt over him (a conspicuously artificial knoll), the soldiers move on.

And again—at the very exit from the gorge—more tall grass. Not the least burned. Gently swaying. And in the sky birds are singing so joyfully (above the trees, above both soldiers). In this sense it's possible that beauty will in fact save the world. It turns up from time to time, like a sign. Not letting a person wander off the path. (Stepping along nearby. Keeping a lookout.) By making you alert, beauty makes you remember.

But this time the open, sunny spot turns out to be familiar and safe. The mountains give way. Ahead there's a

smooth path, a bit farther on, a dusty fork well worn by vehicles, and right over there—the army unit. The soldiers automatically speed up their pace.

Lieutenant Colonel Gurov is not at the unit though; he's at home. They have to go there. Without taking a moment's break, the soldiers trudge over to where the colonel lives. He's omnipotent not just in this place, but even in all the adjacent (beautiful and just as sunny) places of the earth. He lives with his wife in a nice country house with a veranda encircled by a grape arbor, a spot for relaxing; this house is well tended. It's a hot time of day—noon. Gurov and his guest Alibekov are on the open veranda; feeling languid after dinner, they doze in the wicker chairs while waiting for their tea. Stumbling and with considerable timidity, Rubakhin gives the report. Gurov gazes sleepily at the two of them, covered with dust (they had come to him without being called, and he didn't know their faces at all, which also was not in their favor); suddenly Gurov becomes more animated; raising his voice sharply, he barks out that no matter who it is there'll be no assistance given: the very idea of helping those devils! It's laughable for him to hear that he's being asked to send his men somewhere to rescue trucks that got stuck in a canyon out of the drivers' own stupidity.

What's more—he won't even permit them to return. Infuriated, he orders both soldiers to get busy with the sand: let them do some honest work—they can help him in the yard. *Ab-out face!* They are to spread the mountain of sand standing by the driveway. It's to be spread along all the walkways!—to the house and the garden—there's mud everywhere, not a frigging place to set your foot down! The colonel's wife, like all practical managers everywhere, was glad to get some free help from the soldiers. Anna Fyodorovna—with rolled-up sleeves and in dirty, torn men's shoes and shouting happily—appears immediately in the vegetable garden: come on, let them also help her with weeding the beds!

The soldiers move the sand in wheelbarrows. They shovel it out and spread it along the paths. The day's hot. But the sand, taken no doubt from the creek, is moist.

Vovka propped up the slain rifleman's transistor in the sand and found the kind of music with a beat that kept him going. (But not loud—just for his own pleasure. Not to bother Gurov and Alibekov, still talking on the veranda. Judging from the slow words drifting over, Alibekov was striking a bargain for weapons—an important matter.)

The transistor on the sandy knoll once again reminded Rubakhin what a beautiful place Boyarkov had picked to die in. The dumb little drunk had been afraid to sleep in the woods, so he went out in the meadow. Even up on a little hill. When the guerrillas rushed in, Boyarkov pushed his radio aside (his faithful pal) so that it slid off the knoll and into the grass. He was afraid they would take it from him—as if to say, "Me—okay, but the radio—no way!" No, that's unlikely! He was drunk when he fell asleep, and the radio simply slipped out of his hands and slid, little by little, down the slope.

They killed him point-blank. Young guys. The kind who want to kill their first man as soon as possible so they can develop a taste for it. Even one who's asleep. The radio stood now on a pile of sand, and Rubakhin saw the red knoll, with two tenacious bushes on the northern slope, shining in the sunlight. The beauty of the place was striking, and Rubakhin—in his memory—holds on to the slope (stores it, more and more, inside himself), the place where Boyarkov fell asleep, that knoll, the grass, the golden branches of the brush, and all combining to make one more experience in survival, which is totally irreplaceable. The beauty is constant in its attempt at saving. It calls out to the person in his memory. It reminds him.

At first they pushed the wheelbarrows through the sticky mud, then they figured out a better way—they stretched boards out along the paths. Vovka neatly rolls his wheelbar-

row ahead; behind him, loaded with a mountain of sand, Rubakhin pushes his huge barrow. He's stripped his shirt off, his powerful body, moist with sweat, glistening in the sun.

"I'll give ten Kalashnikovs. I'll give five crates of cartridges. Did you hear, Alibek? Not three, but five crates."

"I heard you."

"But with the agreement that we get the provisions by the first . . ."

"Petrovich, I take a nap after dinner. As far as I know, so do you. Did Anna Fyodorovna forget to bring our tea?"

"She didn't forget. Don't worry about the tea."

"Why shouldn't I worry!" the guest laughs. "Tea isn't the same thing as war; tea gets cold."

Gurov and Alibekov gradually renew their endless conversation. But the languor of their words (like the laziness of their argument) is deceptive: Alibekov had come for arms, and Gurov, his officers, and soldiers badly need provisions, food. The currency of exchange, of course, is arms; sometimes, gasoline.

"Grub by the first of the month. And it has to be without these idiotic ambushes in the mountains. Wine is not a necessity. But at least some quantity of vodka."

"There's no vodka"

"Look for it, Alibek, look for it. I'll look for some cartridges for you!"

The colonel calls his wife: how's the tea coming? Oh, what superb, strong tea is on its way! "Anya, what's the problem? You yelled from the garden that you'd already made it!"

In anticipation of the tea, both, in a state of after-dinner torpor, lazily light cigarettes. The smoke with similar laziness floats off the cool veranda onto the grape arbor and swirls out toward the garden.

Signaling to Rubakhin as if to say, "I'll try to get some booze (now we're stuck here)," the rifleman moves step by

step out to the wattle fence. (Vovka was full of sly signals and gestures.) A young woman with a baby is standing beyond the fence, and Vovka the rifleman immediately exchanges winks with her. In a flash he jumps over the fence and starts up a conversation. Way to go! And Rubakhin pushes the wheelbarrow full of sand back and forth. To each his own. Vovka is one of those fast-moving soldiers who can't tolerate long, drawn-out jobs. (Or any other kind of work either.)

And just look: they've hit it off! Amazing how this young married woman plays up to him, as if she were just waiting for a soldier who would say some affectionate word to her. But mind you, Vovka is likable, smiles easily, and when he hangs back anywhere for an extra second, he finds a pal.

Vovka gives her a hug; she slaps his hands. The usual thing. They're in plain sight, and Vovka understands that he needs to draw her into some hut, out of sight. He tries to talk her into it, tries to pull her forcibly by the hand. The young woman is resistant. "And so, there's just no place!" she laughs. But with each step they both head in the direction of a hut whose door has been left ajar because of the heat. And soon they are there. But a little boy goes on playing with a cat in front of the door.

Meanwhile, Rubakhin struggles with his loads of sand. In spots where he can't push through, he takes the boards from their previous places and lays them out again, then guides the wheel carefully along them as he balances the weight of the sand.

Colonel Gurov continues his unhurried haggling with Alibekov; his wife (she had washed her hands and put on a pretty blouse) serves them tea, each with his own two delicate little teapots, in accordance with eastern custom.

"She brews a fine tea, she has the knack!" Alibekov praises her.

Gurov: "And why are you being so stubborn, Alibek! If you really look at it, you yourself are a prisoner. So make

sure you don't forget where you are. You're sitting in my house."

"How come you say *yours*?"

"Well, for one thing—the valleys are ours."

Alibekov laughs. "You're kidding, Petrovich. I'm no prisoner—it's you who's the prisoner!" He laughs, pointing out at Rubakhin, rolling his wheelbarrow along the path with a grunt. "He's a prisoner. You're a prisoner. And in general every one of your soldiers is a prisoner!"

He laughs again. "I'm no prisoner at all."

He goes for his point another time. "Twelve Kalashes. And seven crates of cartridges."

This time Gurov laughs. "Twelve, ha! What kind of figure is that—twelve? Where do you get that kind of figure? Ten is what I can understand—numbers that are easy to remember. Okay, ten barrels!"

"Twelve.

"Ten . . ."

Alibekov sighs gleefully. "What an evening there'll be tonight! Whew!"

"Evening's a long time off."

They slowly drink their tea. It's the unhurried conversation of two people who have known and respected each other for a long time. (Rubakhin rolls his wheelbarrow on another run. He tilts it. Some sand sifts out. Spreading the sand out with a shovel, he evens the ground.)

"Petrovich, you know what the old men are saying? We've got wise old men in the little towns and *auls*."*

"What're they saying?"

"They say it's time to make a march on Europe. Time to go there again."

"Get serious, Alibek. Eur-ope!"

"And so? Europe's there. The old men say that it's not that far. The old men are unhappy. The old men say that we go

* *Aul*—mountain village, Turkic.

wherever the Russians go, but what are we shooting at each other for?"

"You go ask your *kunaks**—what's the point of it?" Gurov shouts angrily.

"Oh-oh-oh, you're offended. *We drink tea, we warm our spirits.*"†

They're silent for a while. Alibekov starts to discuss matters again as he unhurriedly pours his tea from the pot to the cup. "No, it's not that far away. From time to time it's necessary to go into Europe. The old men say that then peace will come at once. Life will become itself again."

"Things will straighten out. Hold on!"

"The tea is excellent. Ah, Anna Fyodorovna, make us some more. Please!

Gurov sighs. "True, it'll be a fantastic evening tonight. You're right."

"I'm always right, Petrovich. Okay, ten Kalashes, I agree. But seven crates of cartridges . . ."

"Your own way again. Where do you get these figures—there's no such thing as the number seven!"

The hostess carries the dinner leftovers (in two white pots) to feed the soldiers who had come. Rubakhin lets out a lively whoop: yes! yes! And what soldier would refuse?

"But where's the second soldier?" she asks.

At this point Rubakhin, stuttering for words, is forced into a brazen lie: "I think his stomach is messed up." Thinking a second, he adds with a little more conviction, "Poor guy's freaking out."

"Maybe he gorged himself on fresh vegetables and apples," the colonel's wife suggests gently.

The fresh vegetable soup was delicious; it had chopped egg and pieces of sausage. Rubakhin readily bent over the first pot. At the same time he loudly knocked his spoon against the top of the pot, making it ring. A signal.

* *Kunak*—trusted friend, Turkic.

† In the style of a Caucasian saying.

Vovka the rifleman hears (and, of course, understands) the sound of a spoon ringing against a pot. But he doesn't care about eating. The young woman also hears (and understands) the sounds drifting from the yard—a cat meowing in distress and the immediate cry of a little boy who's just been scratched. "Ma-ama!" Evidently he'd been pestering the cat. But at this moment the woman was occupied by feelings: longing for affection and not wanting to let the opportunity escape, she's carried away and embraces the rifleman. About him, what's there to say? A soldier's a soldier. And then, once again, comes the child's capricious cry, "Ma-ama!"

Dashing out of bed the woman sticks her head out the door, hushes the little boy, and shuts the door firmly. Stamping barefoot across the floor, she returns to the soldier and it's as if she's on fire again. "Wow, you're hot! Oh, you put out!" Vovka is enraptured, but she covers his mouth. "Shhh . . ."

In a whisper Vovka puts forth a simple, soldierly command: he asks the young woman to walk to the village store and buy him a bottle of cheap local sweet wine; they won't sell it to a soldier in uniform, but she can do it like a charm . . .

He even shares a major concern with her: they don't need just a bottle now—they need a crate of wine.

"What for?"

"Payment. They've closed the road on us."

"But if it's wine you need, why did you come to the colonel's?"

"Crazy, so we came."

The young woman starts crying suddenly and tells him that recently she lost her way somewhere and got raped. Vovka the rifleman lets out a whistle of surprise: man, it's that bad! With sympathy (and curiosity), he asks how many of them were there? Four of them, she sobs, wiping her eyes with a corner of the sheet. He would like to question her a little more. She doesn't feel like talking. She buries her head in his chest, her mouth covered by his body: she'd like some words of solace, just simple feelings.

They talk some: yes, of course, she'll buy him a bottle of wine, but only on the condition that the rifleman will go with her to the store. She will hand the bottle over to him as soon she buys it. She can't go home with a bottle, not after what happened to her—people know, what will they think . . .

There was also something to eat in the second pot: kasha and a piece of canned meat; Rubakhin stuffs it all down. He eats slowly, not greedily, then washes it down with a couple of mugs of cold water. The water gives him a little chill, and he puts on his fatigue shirt.

"Let's break for a bit," he says to himself and walks out to the fence.

He drops down and starts to doze off. The hushed words of an agreement drift from an open window of the little neighboring house.

Vovka: "I'll buy you a present. A pretty scarf. Or I'll look for a shawl for you."

She: "You'll leave." She started to cry.

Vovka: "So I'll send it if I do. You don't have to doubt!"

For a long while Vovka begged her to bend over while standing. Vovka wasn't very tall (he never tried to disguise this and gladly told the other soldiers), but he loved to grab a hefty woman from behind. Couldn't she understand? It's so nice when the woman is big . . . She pushed him away, refused him. To their long, heated whispering (the words became soon indistinguishable) Rubakhin drifted off to sleep.

Outside the store, as soon as she hands him the bottle of wine, Vovka sticks it in one of the deep, sturdy pockets of his army pants and—presto, in a run—makes off to Rubakhin, whom he had deserted. The young woman had helped him so much and she shouts after him. Keeping her voice down with a certain caution on the street, she yells after him in reproach, but Vovka waves her off. He's no longer concerned

with her—that's it, that's it, time to go! He runs down the narrow street. He takes a shortcut to Colonel Gurov's house and runs between the fences. He's got some news (and what news!). While keeping an eye out (awaiting his bottle), the rifleman had stood beside the grimy little store and overheard it from some soldiers walking by.

He leaps over the fence, but finds Rubakhin asleep and gives him a shove.

"Rubakh, listen! It's true—Lieutenant Savkin's going into the woods on a raid."

"Huh?" Rubakhin looks at him with sleepy eyes.

Vovka spews the words out. He propels them. "They're heading for a raid—to capture weapons. We should go with them. We'll grab some *churka** or other—that would be great! You yourself said . . ."

Rubakhin is awake by now. Yes, he understood. Yes. Matter of fact, it would be. Ye-ah, more than likely we'd have some luck there—gotta go. The soldiers very quietly make their way out of the colonel's place. They carefully gather their haversacks and weapons left by the well. They climb over the wattle fence and go out someone else's gate, so that the two men on the veranda won't see them and won't call out.

They didn't see them; they didn't call. They're still sitting there.

It's hot. Quiet. And Alibekov very softly croons in a clear voice:

All's gone qui-et here till the mo-orn . . . †

Silence.

"People don't change, Alibek."

"Don't change, you think?"

"Just get older."

"Ha! Like the two of us . . ." Alibekov pours a thin

* *Churka*—Russian pejorative slang for person from Caucasus or Central Asia, from *churek*, flat bread.

† Refrain from popular, semi-official Russian song "Evenings Near Moscow" by Vasily Solov'yov-Sedoy.

stream of tea into his cup. He doesn't feel like haggling anymore. It's sad. Besides, he's already said all the words, and the right words (by their own unhurried logic) will make their way to his own old friend Gurov. They don't have to be spoken aloud.

"You know good tea has completely disappeared."

"Let it."

"Tea's going up in price. Food's going up. But time doesn't cha-ange." Alibekov draws the words out.

The hostess at that very moment brings out two more fresh pots of tea. Tea—that's true. The price is rising. *But whether the times change or not, you, brother, will supply us with food . . .*, Gurov thinks, and he also doesn't pronounce his words aloud.

Gurov knows that Alibekov is a little smarter, a little more cunning than himself. For that reason he, Gurov, has a few solid ideas, thought through to such pure clarity over long years that they're not even thoughts anymore, but parts of his own body, like arms and legs.

Earlier (in those old days), during quartermaster failures or simply delays with the soldiers' food supplies, Gurov would immediately put on his dress coat and pin his little decoration and medals on his chest. Then in a GAZ-69 jeep (stirring up such dust, such a breeze!) he would speed along the winding mountain roads to the main town of the region, roll up to the familiar big building with columns, and stride in at full pace (not glancing at the visitors and petitioners worn out from waiting) straight into the headquarters. And if it wasn't at the Regional Party Headquarters, then it was at the Executive Office. Gurov knew how to get what he wanted. Occasionally he himself drove to the base and gave the bribe, sometimes even sweetening it by presenting to the necessary person a beautiful pistol with his name engraved on it. ("May come in handy: East is East!" He never at all thought that these words, said in jest, would come to be true.) But

what does a mere pistol amount to now? A pure frill! Now ten gun barrels is not enough—give me twelve. He, Gurov, has to feed his men. With age, changes come harder for a person, but in exchange, you become more understanding of human weaknesses. It even balances out. In the same way he also has to feed himself. Life continues, and Lieutenant Colonel Gurov helps it on its way: that's his whole answer. As a trader in arms he doesn't think about the consequences. What's his role here? Life itself shifted over to a place where any kind of tradeoff is possible (change whatever into whatever—you name it), and Gurov, too, changed. Life itself shifted over to war (and what a dumb war—neither war nor peace!), and Gurov naturally went to war. He went to war, but he didn't shoot. (Only from time to time, on orders, he took arms away. Or, finally, he did shoot on another order, from above.) He'll cope with this period, too; he'll hit it off now. But . . . but, of course, he's down about it. He misses those old times when he rolled up in his own little Gazik jeep, when he strode into the main office and could let himself yell and cuss to his heart's content, then later, agreeing condescendingly to talk terms, he would spread out in a leather armchair and smoke with the boss of the Regional Committee, all palsy-walsy. Let the petitioners wait outside the office door. Once, he didn't find the boss either at his office or at home. However, he found his wife in. (He had driven over to his house.) There, too, he wasn't refused. To the fine-looking Major Gurov, who was just beginning to gray, she gave everything that a woman who has been left alone for an entire week in summer and is bored can give. Everything she could. Everything and even more, as Gurov gave it a thought (having in mind the keys to the huge refrigerated Warehouse No. 2, their regional packing plant, where freshly smoked meat was stored).

"Alibek, I just remembered. Could you get some smoked meat?"

The weapons seizure (an encirclement called "horse shoeing" ever since General Yermolov's time)* had succeeded as an operation in surrounding the guerrillas except for the fact that the circle around them couldn't quite be closed. Only one way out of it was left. Racing along this route, the guerrillas spread apart into a broken chain, so that in an ambush, to take any one of them—either from the right or the left—and drag them into the brush (or in a jump knock them off the trail into a gorge and there disarm them) was not the easiest thing in the world, but it was possible. Of course, all this was while frequent overhead shelling went on, scaring and causing them to try to get away.

Both soldiers had sneaked into the group of men selected to undertake this "disarmament" raid. Vovka, however, got caught and sent away at once. First Lieutenant Savkin relied only on his own men. The lieutenant glanced over Rubakhin's powerful build, but he didn't make a fuss about him, didn't toss him out, and the wheezy command "Two steps forward!" was not consistent; more than likely, the lieutenant simply didn't notice. Rubakhin stood with the group of the strongest and toughest soldiers; he blended in with them.

But as soon as the shelling started, Rubakhin rushed and got into the ambush; he had a smoke behind some bushes with a certain rifleman named Gesha. They were soldiers who had seen long hitches of duty and now recalled others who had gotten discharged. No, they didn't envy them. Why the heck envy them? Who knows where you're better off . . .

"They're running like hell," Gesha said without glancing at the shadows flashing by in the bushes.

The guerrillas ran in twos and threes, hurriedly and loudly crashing through the ancient trail overgrown with under-

* A. P. Yermolov (1777-1861), Russian army commander in the Caucasus, 1816-1827.

brush. But one of the single evaders had already been hit. A shriek. The sound of a tussle . . . and silence. (*Get him? Gesha with a look questioned Rubakhin, and he answered with a nod, Got him.*) And once again there arose the sounds of men crashing through bushes. They were close. They just barely knew how to get some shots off (also, to kill, of course), but to run through the underbrush with weapons in their hands, with cartridge belts slung around their necks and while under fire, of course, was tough. Scared, stumbling upon the firing from ambushes, the guerrillas themselves headed up the trail, which seemed to grow narrower at every step and would lead them into the mountains.

"Hey, that one'll be mine, okay?" Rubakhin said, rising up and quickening his pace to close the gap.

"Good luck!" Gesha quickly finished his cigarette.

It turned out that it wasn't just one, but two men running past; once he'd jumped out from the bushes, Rubakhin couldn't possibly let them go. Rubakhin made a poor start. He couldn't immediately get all his muscles activated and up to speed, but once he was under way neither a thick bush in his path nor slippery ground underfoot mattered—he flew.

He sped on, several yards behind one of the men. But the first one (the guerrilla running up ahead) ran faster and was getting away. The second one (he was close now) gave Rubakhin no cause for alarm; he saw the automatic bouncing around his neck, but the shells were empty (or did the fighter have trouble shooting while on the run?). The first was more dangerous, he didn't have an automatic, and that meant that he had a pistol.

Rubakhin moved faster. He heard someone running behind him—uh-huh, so Geshka was covering. Two on two . . .

When he caught up with the second one, he neither grabbed nor tackled him (while you're dealing with him, when he's brought down, the first one will escape for sure). With a strong punch to the left, he knocked him into a

ravine, into some brittle bushes, and shouted to Gesha, "One's in the ditch! Get him!" and took off after the first one, who had long hair.

Rubakhin ran at top speed, but the other man was also a runner. Rubakhin would barely begin to catch him when he, too, would pick up speed. Now they were going at the same pace, eight to ten yards apart. From up ahead the runner turned around, raised his pistol, and fired: Rubakhin saw that he was quite young. He shot again. (And he lost speed. If he hadn't fired, he would have gotten away.)

He fired over his left shoulder and the bullets were way off mark, so Rubakhin didn't duck every time he lifted his arm to shoot. But he didn't fire off all his shells, the cunning bastard. He was about to get away. Rubakhin immediately understood what he had to do. Without hesitating a moment, he flung his rifle under the runner's feet. That, of course, was enough.

The man cried out in pain, jerked, and started to collapse; Rubakhin leaped on him, trampled him, and with his right hand grabbed the wrist holding the pistol. The pistol was gone. He had dropped it when he fell—some warrior! Rubakhin led him off, twisting his arms painfully behind his back. His prisoner groaned and went limp. Rubakhin, still all flushed, took a strap from his pocket, tied up the prisoner's hands, sat him down by a tree, and shoved the slim figure up against the trunk—sit there! And only then did he finally get up from the ground and walk along the trail, recovering his breath and hunting in the grass, with sharp eyes again, both for his own rifle and for the pistol the fugitive had tossed aside.

Again a tramping of feet—Rubakhin skipped off the trail to the scraggly oak where the man he had caught sat. "Quiet!" Rubakhin ordered him. In an instant several lucky and fleet-footed guerrillas dashed past. Rubakhin didn't interfere. He had done his job.

He glanced at his captive: the face startled him. First by its youth, however, such boys, sixteen or seventeen years old, turned up fairly often among the fighters. The even features, the tender skin. The face, native to the Caucasus, struck him in some other way, but what was it? He didn't quite get it.

"Let's go," Rubakhin said, helping him (his arms twisted behind his back) get up.

As they walked, he warned him. "And don't run away. Don't even think about it. I won't shoot. But I'll beat the daylights out of you, understand?"

The young captive was limping. The rifle Rubakhin had tossed had wounded his leg. Or was he faking it? Someone who's caught usually tries to create sympathy for himself. He limps. Or coughs heavily.

4

There were a lot of captives—twenty-two men, and maybe that's why Rubakhin managed to hold on to his own prisoner without a problem. "This one's mine!" he repeated, keeping his hand on the prisoner's shoulder amid the general noise and hubbub during the final stage of trying to get the captives in formation to take them back to the unit. The tension just wouldn't dissipate. The prisoners bunched up together, afraid that now they would be split up. They hung on to each other, yelling back and forth in their own language. Several didn't even have their hands tied.

"Why is he yours? Look how many there are—they're all ours!"

But Rubakhin shook his head: "They may all be ours—but this one is mine."

As always, Vovka the rifleman showed up at just the right moment. He was a lot better than Rubakhin at both telling the truth and twisting it. "For us it's essential! Lay off! Gurov sent a note . . . It a chance for us to exchange prisoners!" He lied with true inspiration.

"But then you report it to the first lieutenant," someone said.

"It's already reported. Already agreed to!" Vovka went on, spilling words on top of words . . . that the lieutenant colonel was sitting at home drinking tea (which was true) and that the two of them had just come from there (also true), and Gurov, he says, personally signed the note for them. Yes, the note's there, at the checkpoint . . .

Vovka's face was noticeably shrunken. Rubakhin glanced at him with bewilderment; even though it was he who had raced through the brush in pursuit of the long-haired fighter, he who had caught and tied him up, he who had sweated it through, but Vovka was the one with the pale and hollow cheeks.

The prisoners (in formation at last) were led to the trucks. The weapons were carried separately. (Gurov will give the confiscated arms back to the guerrillas in exchange for food. A listless, nonstop war.) One of the soldiers took count aloud: seventeen Kalashnikovs, seven pistols, ten hand grenades. Two were killed during the chase, two were injured; the Russians also had one injury, and Kortkov was killed . . . The tarpaulin-covered trucks were lined up and escorted by two armored personnel carriers (at the head of the column and at the end), and picking up speed as they went, they headed to the unit with a din. In the trucks an excited discussion of the events got under way as the men bellowed back and forth at each other. They all wanted to eat.

As soon as they arrived, Rubakhin and Vovka quickly got out of the truck and broke away to the side with their prisoner. The others didn't pester them. Actually, there was nothing to be done with the prisoners: the young ones would be let go, the seasoned fighters would be held two or three months in the guardhouse, as a prison, but if they should try to escape, they would be shot, not without pleasure—it was war! Possibly these same warriors had killed

Boyarkov as he lay sleeping (or barely opening his sleepy eyes). His face had not the slightest scratch. And ants were crawling over it. At first Rubakhin and Vovka began raking off the ants. When they turned Boyarkov over, they found a hole piercing his back. The shots had been point-blank, but the bullets weren't spread out and had hit his chest in a cluster, smashing his rib cage. The bullets took out all his insides—on the ground (in the earth) lay a hash of ribs with the liver, kidneys, and rings of intestines on top, all in a big, cold pool of blood. Several bullets had come to rest within his still-steaming intestines. Boyarkov lay turned over with a huge gaping hole in his back. But his insides, mixed with bullets, lay in the earth.

Vovka turned off toward the dining hall.

"We got him for an exchange. The colonel gave permission," Vovka hastened to say, forestalling any questions from soldiers he met from Orlikov's platoon.

The soldiers, full after their meal, yelled out to him. "Tell 'em 'hi!'" Others asked, "Who got captured? Who're you trading for?"

"An exchange," Vovka the rifleman repeated.

Vanya Bravchenko laughed. "For hard currency!"

Sergeant Khodzhaev shouted, "Way to go, guys. Good you caught him. Those are the ones they love! Their boss . . .," nodding toward the mountains, "really likes those kind."

Khodzhaev, himself from the Caucasus, laughed again, and to show what he meant he showed his strong, soldier's teeth.

"You'll be able to exchange two, three, maybe five for one!" he yelled. "Them kind—they love like a girl!" he added and winked as he drew abreast of Rubakhin.

Rubakhin stammered. He suddenly understood what it was that had bothered him about the captured fighter: the young man was beautiful.

He didn't speak Russian very well, but understood everything, of course.

Grudgingly, he spit out some high-pitched guttural sounds at Khodzhaev in reply to questions. When his face with its high cheekbones became flushed—framed by long dark hair falling to the shoulders almost in an oval—it became even more apparent that he was handsome. The shape of his lips. The fine line of the nose. The hazel eyes—large, slightly slanted and arched—especially caught and held a glance.

Vovka quickly came to an agreement with the cook. Before setting out, it was vital to have a good meal. It was noisy and stuffy at the long, rough-board table, and it was hot. They sat down at the end, and right on the spot Vovka extracted a half-finished bottle of sweet wine from his haversack; stealthily, he shoved it under the table to Rubakhin so that he could, as customary, grab it between his knees and drink it unnoticed by the others. "I left you an even half. Remember my generosity, Rubakha!"

He also set a plate in front of the prisoner.

"No want!" he replied sharply. Shaking his long thatch of hair, he turned away.

Vovka slid over closer to him. "At least take a little meat. It's a long haul."

The prisoner was silent. Vovka worried that he might push the plate away with his elbow and spill onto the floor the extra meat and kasha obtained from the cook with such difficulty.

He quickly divided this third portion between himself and Rubakhin. They ate. It was time to go.

5

They drank from the creek, the two soldiers taking turns at scooping water with a little plastic cup. The prisoner clearly was terribly thirsty; he rushed headlong to the stream and, scattering pebbles along the bank, seemed to collapse on his knees. He couldn't wait until they untied his hands or

let him drink from the cup; bending forward on his knees to the swiftly flowing water, he drank for long time. His hands, tied behind his back for so long that they had turned blue, at the same time pitched upward; it seemed that he was praying in some unusual way.

Then he sat on the sand. His face was wet. Rubbing his cheek against his shoulder, he tried without the use of his hands to brush off the drops of water splattered across his face.

Rubakhin came over. "We would let you drink as much as you like. And would untie your hands . . . What's your hurry?"

He didn't answer. Rubakhin looked at him and with his hand wiped the water off his chin. The skin was so tender that Rubakhin's hand trembled. He hadn't anticipated it. But, yes, exactly. Like a girl's, he thought.

Their eyes met, and Rubakhin immediately averted his glance, suddenly embarrassed by some none-too-good thoughts that darted past.

For an instant the wind, rustling in the bushes, put Rubakhin on guard. Could it be someone's steps? . . . His embarrassment abated. (But it only concealed itself. It didn't completely leave.) Rubakhin was a simple soldier—he had no defense against human beauty as such. And here again it was as if a new and unfamiliar feeling was rising up within him by degrees. He also remembered of course that hoot and wink Sergeant Khodzhaev had given. Now a close face-to-face encounter lay in the offing. The prisoner couldn't cross the creek by himself. There was a bed of large stones and a swift current, and he was barefoot because his foot had swollen so at the ankle that at the very outset he'd had to take off his pretty tennis shoes (for now they were in Rubakhin's haversack). If he should fall a time or two crossing the creek, he could become totally useless. The creek would drag him away. There's no choice. And it's clear that Rubakhin—who

else really?—had to carry him across the water: after all, wasn't it he who had injured his leg, since when trying to take him prisoner he had tossed his gun at him?

A feeling of compassion helped Rubakhin; compassion came to his aid at the right time and from somewhere above, as if out of the blue (but accompanied by another surge of embarrassment and, at the same time, a new understanding of the danger of this beauty). For just an instant, Rubakhin grew flustered. He seized the youth in his arms and started to carry him across the creek. The prisoner jerked, but Rubakhin's arms were powerful and strong.

"Now, now. Don't kick," he said, and they were approximately the same rather crude words that he would have said to a woman in a similar situation.

He carried him on and heard the youth's breathing. The latter turned his face away, but his hands (untied for the crossing) all the while clasped snugly around Rubakhin—certainly he didn't want to fall into the water, onto the rocks. Just like anyone else who's carrying a person in his arms, Rubakhin couldn't see anything underfoot and he stepped cautiously. Out of the corner of his eyes he could only see the far-off rushing waters of the creek, and against the background of cascading water, the youth's profile, tender, pure, with the unexpectedly puffed-out lower lip, stuck out willfully, like a young woman's.

Right here by the creek they made their first halt. For security they went downstream from the trail. They sat amid the bushes. Rubakhin held his automatic on his knees, with the safety off. They weren't hungry yet, but they drank water several times. Vovka, lying on his side, twisted the knobs of the little radio, which barely audibly squawked, burred, mewled, exploded with unfamiliar speech. Vovka, just as always, relied on Rubakhin's experience—he could hear a rock under an outsider's foot from a kilometer away.

"Rubakha, I'm gonna sleep. Hear. I'm gonna sleep," he gave fair warning as he sunk into a momentary soldier's doze.

When the hawk-eyed first lieutenant had kicked him out of the squad selected for the raid, Vovka, having nothing else to do, went back to the little hut where the young woman lived. (The little shack was next to the home of the lieutenant colonel. But Vovka was careful.) Naturally, she told the soldier off, scolding him for so abruptly abandoning her at the store. But a minute later she was standing face to face with him, and within another minute they were in bed. So that now Vovka was pleasantly worn out. He could manage the hike, but at each halt he was overcome by a need to sleep.

It was easier for Rubakhin to start talking when they were moving briskly.

"In . . . normal times, what kind of enemies are we? We're brothers. We were truly friends! Can it be denied?" Rubakhin argued heatedly, even seemed to be insisting, yet hiding his troubled feelings within the typical (Soviet) words. And the feet just keep on moving.

Vovka the rifleman snorted, "Long live the indestructible friendship between peoples!"

Rubakhin heard, of course, the mockery. But he said with restraint, "Vov, I'm not talking to you."

Vovka in any case said no more. But the youth was silent, too.

"I'm the same kind of human being as you. And you're the same kind as me. What's the point of us fighting a war?" Rubakhin continued speaking words familiar to everyone, but off their mark; it turned out that he was speaking the trite words to himself and to the bushes all around. And also to the path that after the creek took off straight as an arrow into the mountains. Rubakhin would have liked for the youth to make some objection. Would have liked to hear his voice. For him to say something. (Rubakhin felt more and more uneasy.)

Vovka the rifleman (on the move) twirled a knob, and the little radio in his soldier's sack came to life, started to chirp.

Vovka gave it another spin—and found a marching song. But Rubakhin went on talking. Finally he got tired and fell silent.

To walk with hands tied (and with a bad foot) is not simple, if the climb is steep. The captured fighter fell behind; he was walking with difficulty. On one of the rises he suddenly fell. He awkwardly got back on his feet, he didn't complain; but Rubakhin noticed his tears.

A bit rashly Rubakhin said, "If you won't run away, I'll untie your hands. Give your word."

Vovka the rifleman heard (through the music from his radio) and shrieked, "Rubakha! Hey, you've gone off your rocker!"

Vovka was walking ahead. He swore. "Stupid thing to do." And the radio meanwhile played loudly.

"Vov. Turn it down! I need to hear."

"Just a second."

The music went silent.

Rubakhin untied the prisoner's hands—with a foot like that, how would he get away from him? From Rubakhin?

They moved pretty fast. The prisoner up ahead. Vovka, half-asleep, right behind. And a little behind, the silent Rubakhin, operating on instincts.

To free someone, even if just the wrists and only for a little while on the way, is gratifying. In sweet anticipation a lump of saliva formed in Rubakhin's throat. A rare moment. Despite the anticipation, his scrutiny didn't weaken. The path grew steeper. They went around the hillock where big drinker Boyarkov was buried. Bathed in evening sunlight, a splendid place.

At the night halt Rubakhin gave him his own wool socks. He himself stayed barefoot in his boots. They all needed to sleep! (And the campfire was quite small.) Rubakhin took Vovka's transistor away from him (not a sound at night). The automatic, as always, in his lap. He sat with his shoulder to the prisoner and his back against a tree, in his now long-

avored hunter's position (vigilant, but allowing a little dozing off). Night. He seemed to sleep. And in parallel to his sleep he felt the prisoner sitting next to him—felt and sensed him to such an extent that he would react instantaneously should the other take it into his head to make even the smallest irregular move. But he wasn't thinking at all of escape. He was grieving. (Rubakhin delved into the other's heart.) Then they both fell into a drowse (trusting), but Rubakhin soon sensed that the youth became overwhelmed with grief again. During the day the prisoner tried to bear himself proudly, but now his inner pain was plainly wearing him down. What in particular grieved him so? Even during the day Rubakhin had distinctly hinted to him that they weren't taking him to a military prison or for any other dark purposes, but just to surrender him to his own men—in exchange for a right to passage. That was the entire thing—to hand him over to his people. Sitting next to Rubakhin, he can relax. No need for him to know about the trucks and the blocked road there, but for sure he knows (senses) that nothing is threatening him. Even more than that. He senses that he, Rubakhin, sympathizes with him . . . Rubakhin suddenly felt uneasy again. Rubakhin glanced over sidelong. He was grieving. In the now gathered darkness the face of the prisoner was beautiful as before and so sad. "Now, now!" Rubakhin said in a friendly tone, trying to cheer him up.

And slowly stretched out a hand. Afraid of disturbing this half-turn of the face and the startling beauty of the immobile look, Rubakhin just slightly touched the fine cheekbone as though straightening a lock of hair—a long strand which curled along his cheek. The youth didn't turn his face aside. He was silent. And as it seemed—but this could only seem to be—barely perceptibly, his cheek responded to Rubakhin's fingers.

Vovka the rifleman had only to shut his eyes and he was reliving the fleeting sweet moments that had flown by

so furiously in that little country house. Moment after moment—separate and so brief—the joy of a woman's proximity. He slept sitting; he slept standing; he slept on the move. It's not surprising that at night he fell fast asleep (although it was his hour) and he didn't notice that nearby an animal ran past, possibly a boar. It stirred everybody up. And the crashing in the bushes continued a long time before fading away. "You want us also to be shot sleeping?" Rubakhin lightly jerked the soldier by the ear. He got up. He listened attentively. It was quiet.

Adding some brushwood to the fire, Rubakhin circled around the area a bit, stood a while at the canyon, returned. He sat down beside the prisoner. Having recovered from the scare, he was sitting rather tensely. The shoulders drooped; hunched over—the handsome face completely buried in the night. "Okay now? How about it?" he asked with the simplest words. In such situations a question is, first of all, a way of checking on the prisoner: Is his dozing a ruse? Was he trying to find a knife? And was he intending to slip away into the night while they slept? (A stupid thing to do—Rubakhin would catch him immediately.)

"Fine," he answered abruptly.

Both were silent for a while.

It turned out that after asking the questions, Rubakhin stayed sitting next to him (so as not to change his place by the fire every single minute).

Rubakhin patted him on the shoulder. "Don't be afraid. As I've said: soon as we get you there, we'll immediately hand you over to your people—understand?"

He nodded: yes, he understood. With a chuckle, Rubakhin said, "But you're handsome, no doubt about it."

They were silent again for a bit.

"How's the foot?"

"Okay."

"Fine, get some sleep. We've got just enough time. Gotta get a little more shut-eye, morning got here too fast . . ."

And right then, as if in agreement that to nap was necessary, the young captive slowly bent his head to the right, onto Rubakhin's shoulder. Nothing special: that's the way soldiers extend their short naps, leaning onto each other. But then the warmth of the body, and along with it, the flow of sensuality, too (also in separate waves), began to shoot through, flowing across—wave after wave—from the youth's leaning shoulder into Rubakhin's shoulder. No, of course not. The guy's sleeping. The guy's simply sleeping, Rubakhin thought, fending off a delusion. And at once he tensed up and stiffened—just at that moment a powerful surge of warmth and unexpected tenderness pierced his shoulder and entered his silenced inner thoughts. Rubakhin froze. And the youth—having sensed or guessed his guardedness—also keenly froze. Another minute—and their touching was rid of sensuality. They simply sat next to one another.

"Yes. Let's nap," said Rubakhin into nowhere. He spoke without taking his eyes off the small red tongues of the campfire.

The prisoner swayed, slightly more comfortably resting his head on Rubakhin's shoulder. And almost at once the flow of pliable and inviting warmth could again be felt. Rubakhin now began to sense the youth's quiet drowsing. "How can this be . . . what the devil is this?" he wondered, fully roused. And again he felt completely chilled and checked himself (and already fearing that a responsive shiver would give him away). But a shiver—after all, a mere shiver—can be endured. Most of all, Rubakhin feared that at any moment the youth's head would gently turn toward him (all his movements were gentle and palpably ingratiating, at the same time as seeming to be quite insignificant—a person stirred in his sleep, well, so what?)—would turn toward him, his face almost touching him, after which he would inevitably hear the youthful breathing and the nearness of the lips. The moment swelled. Rubakhin also experienced an instant's weakness. His stomach was the first of the bundle of organs to reject such an uncom-

mon sensual overload—it contracted into a spasm, and instantly the abdominal muscles of the practiced soldier became as hard as a scrub board. And immediately he lost his breath. Rubakhin at once broke into a cough, and the youth, as if frightened, withdrew his head from Rubakhin's shoulder.

Vovka the rifleman woke up: "You're rumbling like a cannon. You lost your senses? You'd hear it half a kilometer away!"

Carefree Vovka immediately fell back to sleep. And himself—as a reply—started a slight snore. And with quite a resounding whistle at that.

Rubakhin burst into a laugh. "There," he says, "is my comrade-in-arms. Sleeps constantly. Sleeps in the daytime, sleeps at night!"

The prisoner said slowly and with a smile: "I think he had a woman. Yesterday."

Rubakhin was surprised. "Is that it?" And, recollecting, at once agreed. "Looks like it."

"I think yesterday during the day, it was."

"Right! Right!"

Both of them chuckled, as men often do in such situations.

But immediately (and very cautiously) the young prisoner asked, "And you—you had a woman long ago?"

Rubakhin shrugged. "Long ago. A year, say."

"Not pretty at all? Country woman? I think she was not pretty. Soldiers never have pretty women."

Such a long, uncomfortable silence arose. Rubakhin felt like a rock had lodged on the back of his head (and was weighing it down, down . . .).

In early morning the fire went out completely. Chilled to the bone, Vovka moved over with them and buried his head and shoulder in Rubakhin's back. The prisoner propped himself against Rubakhin to the side, all night luring the soldier with a sweet spot of warmth. So the three together, warming each other, made it to morning.

A pot with some water was set on the fire.

"We're indulging ourselves in tea," said Rubakhin with a certain sense of guilt from the unusual emotions of the night.

Right from the start of the morning, this sense of guilt, lacking self-confidence but now not able to conceal itself, came to life: Rubakhin suddenly began to look after the youth. (It worried him. He hadn't at all expected this from himself.) Like a malady, his hands impatiently sought little tasks. He twice brewed him some tea in a cup. He tossed in some lumps of sugar, stirred it up with a tinkling spoon, served it. He let him have his socks as if for keeps—"Wear them, don't take them off, you'll go farther in them!"—his concern showed itself in just this way.

And Rubakhin began bustling about and was constantly lighting the fire, lighting it so the prisoner would be warmer.

The prisoner drank the tea. He squatted and followed the movements of Rubakhin's hands.

"Warm socks. Good ones," he praised, shifting his glance to his own feet.

"My mother knitted them."

"O-oh."

"Don't take them off! As I said: you wear them. And I'll wrap something around my own feet."

The youth, getting a comb out of his pocket, busied himself with his hair: combed it for a long time. From time to time he proudly tossed his head. And again with meticulous strokes smoothed his hair out to his very shoulders. Feeling his own beauty was as natural to him as breathing the air.

In the warm and strong woolen socks the youth walked with a noticeably surer step. In fact, he acted more confident in every way. The sadness in his eyes was gone. He undoubtedly already knew that Rubakhin was embarrassed by the shape their relations had taken. Possibly this gratified him. He took side glances at Rubakhin, at his hands, at the automatic, and a smile would privately pass over his face, as if effortlessly he had gotten the upper hand over this enormous, strong, and shy young titan.

At the creek he took off the socks. He stood waiting for Rubakhin to lift him up. The youth's hand didn't just grab hold of his collar as before; his soft hand freely held Rubakhin by the neck as he waded across the creek; at times, depending on how fast and firmly Rubakhin was stepping, he would slip his palm under the other's fatigue shirt, as a more comfortable hold.

Rubakhin again took the transistor away from Vovka. And signaled for silence: he was leading; on an extended, well-trod trail Rubakhin didn't trust anyone (not even the white rock face itself). The cliff whose forking of trails he knew well was already in sight. A dangerous place. But defended exactly because two narrow trails separated there (or joined, depending on the point of view).

The cliff (in the soldiers' simple term) was called *the nose*. A large white triangular ledge of rock loomed over them, like the nose of a ship—and stood hanging.

They were already clambering up the base, under the cliff itself, in the curly-leafed brush. *This can't be!* flashed through the soldier's mind when he heard up above the sound of something dangerous moving (both on the right and the left). Men were coming down both sides of the cliff. Hostile, and such a heavy, disorderly, but regular tread! *The bastards*. That two hostile detachments should coincide right to the minute like that, occupying both trails—*this can't be!* The cliff's saving grace was that by carrying the sound it allowed time to avoid an encounter.

Now, of course, they wouldn't have time to move away in any direction. Not even to scramble out from under the cliff and back into the woods through a clearing. There were three of them, one a prisoner; they would be immediately noticed; they would be fired on at once; or simply driven into a thicket and surrounded. *This can't be!*—for the third time the thought screeched through his mind, in plaintive denial. (Then it left—disappeared, abandoned him.) Now everything was by instinct. A chill pinched his nostrils. Not

only their steps. In the almost completely still air Rubakhin heard a slow parting of the grass as they began passing.

"Ss-hhh."

He pressed a finger to his lips. Vovka understood. And nodded toward the prisoner: what about him?

Rubakhin glanced into his face: the youth also instantly understood (understood that his own men were coming), his forehead and cheeks slowly flushed—a sign of unpredictable behavior.

"Ah! Whatever—let it happen!" Rubakhin said to himself, quickly readying his automatic for battle. He felt his belt for extra clips. But the thought of battle (just like any thought in an instant of danger) also moved aside (abandoned him), not wishing to take an answer upon itself. Instinct demanded keen attention. And waiting. A chill pinched his nostrils again and again. And the grass quietly, meaningfully rustled. The steps were closer. No. There're many of them. Too many . . . Glancing again at the prisoner's face, Rubakhin tried to calculate and guess—what about him? What's he thinking? Would he freeze up from fear of being killed and keep silent (that would be good) or would he at the first moment rush out joyfully to meet them, with the look of a maniac reflected in his half-crazed, enormous eyes, and (mainly!) would he shout?

Without taking his eyes off the men moving along the trail on the left (this detachment was quite close and would pass by them first), Rubakhin reached his arm back and cautiously touched the body of the prisoner, who trembled slightly, as a woman trembles before a close embrace. Rubakhin touched his neck, then by feel shifted over to his face, and touching lightly, placed his fingers and palm on the beautiful lips, on the mouth (which must be silent); the lips trembled.

Rubakhin slowly drew the youth closer to him (his eyes on the left trail, on the detachment moving up in a file). Vovka kept watch on the detachment to the right: steps could be

heard from there, too, gravel slipped below, and one of the fighters with an automatic on his shoulder kept clanking it against the weapon of the man walking behind him.

The prisoner didn't resist Rubakhin, who, taking him by the shoulder, turned him around toward himself—the youth himself (he was standing slightly below) even drew toward him, pressed closer, sticking his lips below his unshaven chin into the carotid artery. The youth was shaking, not understanding. "N-n . . .," he weakly breathed out, quite like a woman who has pronounced her "no" not as a refusal, but as an expression of modesty, at the same time as Rubakhin watched him and waited (guarding against a shriek). And similarly wide-eyed, trying in fear to avoid meeting Rubakhin's eyes, and—through air and sky—catch sight of his own men! He opened his mouth, yet still didn't shout. Maybe all he wanted was to grab a deep breath of air. But with the other hand Rubakhin put his automatic down on the ground and covered both the slightly opened mouth with its beautiful lips and the nose, which was slightly quivering. "N-nuh . . ." The youthful prisoner wanted to say something, but didn't have time. His body jerked, legs stiffened, although now unsupported. Rubakhin swept him off the ground. He held him in an embrace to prevent his feet from touching either a sensitive bush or rocks that might stir and make a sound. Blocking any vision, Rubakhin circled the neck with the hand that embraced him. He squeezed; no, beauty didn't manage to save. Several convulsions . . . and that's all.

Quite soon, lower down the cliff where the trails joined, friendly, guttural-sounding shouts echoed. The detachments had discovered each other. Greetings could be heard, and questions: How? What! Where are you headed? (The most likely of questions.) Slaps on each other's shoulders. Laughing. One of the fighters, making use of the halt, decided to relieve himself. He ran up to the cliff, which provided a convenient spot. He didn't know that he was already sighted in

crosshairs. He stood just several steps away from the bushes that concealed two live men (they lay down and hid low) and a dead one. He finished, hiccuped, and, hitching up his pants, rushed off.

When the detachments passed by and were moving into the distance below, and their steps and voices had faded totally away, the two soldiers with automatics dragged the body out of the bushes. They carried him into the sparse woods not far away, by the trail on the left, where, as Rubakhin remembered, there was a clearing—a dry, bald patch with sandy, moist earth. They dug a hole, scooping the sand out with flat rocks. Vovka the rifleman asked whether Rubakhin was going to take his socks back; Rubakhin shook his head. And not a word about the person that, all in all, they had gotten accustomed to. They sat down in silence for half a minute beside the grave. Sit a while? No way—there's a war on!

6

No change: two cargo trucks (Rubakhin sees them from far away) are standing in the same spot.

The road squeezes itself without a break into a passage between cliffs, but guerrillas guard the narrow corridor. The trucks are already shot up with bullet holes, but with random aim. (If you move closer, you see twice as many—simply rid-dled.) The trucks are sitting there for the fourth day, waiting. The guerrillas want arms—then they'll let them through.

"We're not carrying automatics! We got no weapons!" comes a shout from the truck side. A shot from the cliff rings in reply. Or a whole volley of shots, in a long series. And as added fillip, laughter—*ha-ha-ha-ha!*—such joyful, bubbling laughter, so gloatingly childlike, rolls down from the heights.

The soldier escorts and drivers (six people altogether) have taken up a position by the bushes on the roadside, sheltered by the truck bodies. Their nomadic life is simple: they're either cooking food on the campfire or sleeping.

When Rubakhin and Vovka the rifleman get closer on the cliff to the area of the siege, Rubakhin spots a fire, a pale, daytime campfire—the guerrillas are also cooking dinner. It's a slack war. Why not chow down till you're stuffed, why not drink hot tea?

As they draw ever closer, Rubakhin and Vovka are also noticed from the cliff. The guerrillas are sharp-sighted. And although it's apparent that the pair had returned just as they had left (carrying nothing visible), shots ring out from the cliff, just in case. One round. Another round.

Rubakhin and Vovka had already reached their own men.

The sergeant major juts his stomach out. "Well? Any support coming?" he asks Rubakhin.

"Not a fuckin' thing!" Rubakhin didn't try to explain.

"And you didn't manage to trap a prisoner?"

"Nope."

Rubakhin asked for some water and drank from the bucket for a long time, pouring it straight onto his fatigue shirt, onto his chest, then blindly strode to the side, and without caring where he was, collapsed in the bushes to sleep. The grass was still bent flat—it was the same spot where he had been lying two days before when he got poked in the ribs and sent to get help (and was given Vovka in the bargain). He stuck his head into the soft grass up to his ears, not hearing the sergeant major's reproaches. He didn't give a shit. He was tired.

Vovka sat down beside a tree, stretched his legs out, and pulled a straw hat over his eyes. He asked the drivers sarcastically, "What's wrong? You guys couldn't do it? Didn't find a detour? You don't mean it!"

"There is no detour," they answered him. The drivers were lying in the tall grass. One of these slow-witted types was rolling his own cigarette from a scrap of newspaper.

Sergeant Major Beregevoy, irked by the mission's failure, again tried to engage in some negotiations.

"Hey," he yelled. "Hear me! Hey!" he yelled in a trusting

(as he considered it) voice. "I swear, there's nothing of the kind in the trucks—no weapons, no food. We're empty! Let one of your men come and check—we'll show you, we won't shoot him. Hey! Listen!"

Shots resounded in response. And boisterous laughter.

"Up your mother's!" the sergeant major swore.

Shots came from the cliff erratically. The shooting went on so long and so senselessly that the sergeant major let out another oath and called out, "Vov! Vov! Come here. Show the *abreks** how to shoot!"

Vovka the rifleman yawned; he lazily removed his back from the tree trunk. (He was sitting so nicely as to be anchored to it.)

But the laziness disappeared once he grabbed his weapon and aimed. He took up a comfortable position on the grass, and thrusting his carbine out, he fixed the sight on one, then another of the silhouettes that flitted about on the cliff, to the left above the road. They were all clearly visible. Maybe he could hit the target even without the optical sight.

Just at that moment a mountaineer standing on the edge of the cliff let out a whoop, like a taunt.

"Vov. Wouldn't you like to hit him?" asked a driver.

"I say to hell with him," snorted Vovka.

He paused, then added, "I like to aim and squeeze the trigger. I know when I hit even without the bullet."

The impossibility was clear without words: kill even one fighter and the trucks for sure won't pass down this road.

"Just consider that I zapped that one! And I can rip half this one's ass off. Not kill him—he's behind a tree—but half his ass—easy!"

At times, if he saw one of the mountaineers with something that flashed in the sun—a bottle of vodka or (as there was in the morning!) an excellent Chinese thermos, Vovka

* *Abrek*—Ossetian word for mountain warrior, used frequently in Russian literature of the Caucasus.

would carefully aim and shatter the visible object to smithereens. But now there was nothing that attracted the eye.

In the meantime, Rubakhin's sleep was restless. The same stupid, disturbing dream broke in (or, burying himself in the grass, Rubakhin himself called it up): the beautiful face of the youthful prisoner.

"Vovk'. Gimme a smoke!" (And what kind of pleasure is it to catch one of them through the crosshairs?)

"Just a second!" Vovka aimed again and again, all absorbed in his game—he aimed the sight on one or another of the cliff's silhouettes: the outline of a rock . . . a mountain bush . . . a tree trunk. O-ho! He noticed a gaunt fighter; standing by a tree, he was bobbing off his long hair. A haircut is something intimate. The little mirror flashed, giving a signal—Vovka in a instant loaded and aimed. He pressed the trigger and the silvery little pool that had been fastened to the trunk of an elm exploded into tiny pieces. Oaths resounded in reply and, as always, random firing. (As if cranes had broken out honking beyond the cliff that hung over the road: *gulyal-kilyal-lyal—kilyal-sniper* . . .) The silhouettes on the cliff began running—shouted, shrieked, whooped. But after that (obviously on a command), fell silent. For a certain time they didn't show themselves (and generally their behavior was more subdued). And they thought, of course, that they were hidden from sight. Vovka the rifleman not only saw their concealed heads, their Adam's apples, their stomachs—he also saw the buttons of their shirts, and continuing to play, he drew the crosshairs across from one button to another . . .

"Vovka! Cut it out!" the sergeant major admonished.

"Right!" responded the rifleman, taking the carbine and heading toward the tall grass (with a soldier's usual simple thought: catch some sleep).

But Rubakhin kept losing focus: the youth's face held only briefly before his eyes—the face fell apart almost as soon as it emerged. It washed away, losing itself and leaving

only an indistinct and dull prettiness. Someone's face. Forgotten. The image melted. As if in farewell (parting and, maybe, forgiving him) the youth again acquired more or less clear features (and how it shone!). The face. But not only the face—the youth himself stood. It seemed that he was about to say something. He stepped even closer and abruptly grabbed Rubakhin by the neck with his arms (as Rubakhin had done on that cliff), but his slender arms turned out to be soft, like a young woman's—jerky, but tender, and Rubakhin (he was on guard) managed to grasp that right then in his dream a certain male weakness could occur. He ground his teeth, with effort driving the vision away, and then woke up, feeling an aching heaviness in his groin.

"If I could have a smoke!" he muttered hoarsely. And heard the firing . . .

Possibly the shots even woke him up. The thin stream of an automatic round—*tuk-tuk-tuk-tuk-tuk*—kicked up light gravel and little curls of dust on the road by the idle trucks. The trucks sat there. (This didn't bother Rubakhin much. At some point, sure, the road will be opened for them.)

Vovka the rifleman slept in the grass nearby, with his rifle in his arms. Vovka had some strong cigarettes now (bought, together with the sweet wine, in the little village store)—the cigarettes were visible, sticking out of his breast pocket. Rubakhin fished one out. Vovka snuffled lightly in his sleep.

Rubakhin smoked, taking slow draws. He was lying on his back—looking up at the sky, but crowding in from the left and the right (pressing on his peripheral vision) were those same mountains that surrounded him here and wouldn't let him go. Rubakhin had served his time. Every time that he got ready to say to hell with everything and everyone (and go home for good, to the steppe across the Don), he hastily got out his battered suitcase and . . . and stayed. "So what's so special here? The mountains?" he muttered aloud, with wrath not at someone else, but at himself. "What's so interesting in the coldness of the army bar-

racks—in fact, what's so interesting in the mountains themselves?" he thought with annoyance. He wanted to add, "How many years now!" But instead he said, "How many centuries now!" As if by a slip of the tongue, the words jumped out of a shadow, and the soldier, surprised, pondered this quiet thought that had settled into the depth of his consciousness. Gray, mossy gorges. Poor and shabby little houses of the mountain people, stuck together like birds' nests. But still—the mountains! Their peaks, yellow in the sun, crowd together all around. Mountains. Mountains. Mountains. How long now have their majesty, their mute solemnity chafed his heart—but what actually did their beauty want to say to him? Why did it call?

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