

ZAKHAR PRILEPIN

SIN

Glagoslav Publications

The Sergeant

He had this conversation with every soldier in the unit, and more than once.

He looked like a normal guy, but you never can tell.

“Every person must determine certain things for themselves,” he said for the umpteenth time, and the Sergeant already guessed what he was talking about. He listened languidly, not without secret irony. “I know what I will never allow myself to do,” he said – his name was Vitka. “And I consider this to be correct. And I know what I’ll never allow my woman, my wife to do. I’ll never use her mouth. And I won’t allow her to do this to herself, even if she wants to. And I’ll never use her...”

“You already said that, Vitya,” the Sergeant interrupted him. “I remember where you won’t do her... I’m even prepared to share your point of view. But why do you keep telling everyone about this?”

“No, you do agree that if you commit such acts, that means that you degrade yourself, and your woman?” Vitka said, getting excited.

The Sergeant realized that he had put his foot in it, and that now he would either have to lie, or argue about a stupid topic.

Should he tell Vitka what he would do right now with his beloved woman...

“Why don’t you tell me, Vitya, why you didn’t charge the walkie-talkies?” the Sergeant changed the subject.

Vitka knitted his brows and tried to go out of the semi-darkness of the post onto the street, where it was just becoming light.

“No, you wait, Vitya,” the Sergeant said, stirring up the already fading mood. “Why did you take half-dead radios? Why didn’t you charge the batteries?”

Vitya was silent.

“I told you three times: ‘Charge them! Check them! Charge them!’ the Sergeant continued, sneering and enjoying himself. You answered three times: ‘I charged them! I checked them! Everything’s fine!’”

“But there was enough to last almost till morning,” Vitya justified himself.

“Almost until morning! They croaked at three a.m.! What if something had happened?”

“What could happen...” Vitya replied quietly, but in a tone that was meant not to irritate: a conciliatory tone.

The Sergeant was not in fact irritated enough to answer. He himself... didn’t really believe...

Their unit had been stationed in this strange, hot place by a mountainous border for a month now. The guys were going mad in their male loneliness and sweaty boredom. There was nowhere to swim. They had driven to the nearest village a few times in a jeep and only seen goats, fat women and a few old people.

But the village shop and the pharmacy looked almost the same way that they did in distant, quiet and secluded Russia. The guys bought all sorts of crunchy and salty rubbish, and spat the shells of nuts and salty saliva out of the window as they drove back.

The base was ten minutes' drive from the village. It was a strange building... They probably planned to make a club here, but got sick of building it and abandoned it.

They slept there, ate, slept again, then furiously pumped iron, swelling up their crimson backs and blue veins. They resembled invigorated animals, smelt of animals, and laughed like wolves.

They wandered around the area to begin with, with the officers, of course. They looked around.

A guy nicknamed Sluggish stepped on a snake and called everyone over to look it.

"It's poisonous," Sluggish said in a satisfied tone. There were pigment marks visible on his cheekbones. The snake angrily hissed and writhed with its nasty little head against the tip of the boot, and Sluggish laughed. He squashed its head with his other boot and cut the snake in half with a fearfully sharp knife. He raised his foot, and the tail danced a finale.

After the guys had fired shots out of the gun slits and the posts, they were forbidden to make noise and fire shots. But they really wanted to shoot a bit more. To imagine an attack of bearded devils from the other side of the mountains, from the border, and repel this attack, disperse it and break it up.

They had three posts, two useless ones and another on a stony and dusty path from that black, strange side, where angry separatists lived.

Today the guys were stationed at the post located by the road. Here there was stationary radar, but the guys on the shift before last had done something stupid: the idiots had probably got drunk, and dropped it, or fallen on it from above. So it didn't work. The radar operator was supposed to come here first thing in the morning to fix it.

Sluggish looked into the dispersing darkness. The Sergeant was prepared to swear that Sluggish's nostrils were trembling, and that his pigmented cheek was shaking. Sluggish wants to tear someone to pieces. He came here to kill a person, at least one, and he did not even hide this desire. "It would be great to see a human head flying apart," he said, smiling.

"Sluggish, do you plan to stay at this post long?" the Sergeant asked him sometimes.

"Why not stay here," Sluggish replied without a question mark, without emotions, and touched the walls, the rough concrete. It seemed to him that the concrete was eternal, that he himself was eternal, and that the game could only be in his favor, because how could it be otherwise.

At seven in the morning, half past seven at the latest, they were supposed to be relieved by the next shift, and the Sergeant, lying on top of the sleeping bag, with a cigarette in his hand, looked at the clock. He felt like a hot meal, there was probably borshch at the base... Today was Wednesday, so there would be borshch.

Smoking made him feel ill, because he was hungry. The smoke dispersed in the semi-darkness.

There were six of them; the others were Ginger, Ridge and Samara.

Samara, the youngest of them, had served in Samara; Ginger was bald, and why he was called Ginger no one remembered, and he didn't talk about it himself; Ridge was short and had a strange, amazing strength, which he used in unusual ways; he was constantly bending or crushing something, just for fun.

The Sergeant – everyone called him Sergeant – sometimes wished that Ridge would fight Sluggish, it would be interesting to see how it ended up, but they avoided each other. Even when they ate stewed meat out of cans, they sat at a distance from each other, so their elbows wouldn't hit accidentally.

Sluggish fished through the backpack, looking for something to eat; he was hungry too, and in general was constantly eating, persistently moving his pigmented cheekbones.

Ridge, on the other hand, ate little, as if reluctantly; it seemed as if could go without food altogether.

When Sluggish was hungry, he became aggressive and picky. He would constantly bug someone, and really wanted to make jokes besides, but was not always able to do so.

"Vitya," he said. "Why did you come here?"

"I love my Homeland," Vitya replied.

Sluggish choked.

"Fuck me," he said. "What Homeland?"

Vitya shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, that's a stupid question.

"You can love your Homeland at home, you understand, Vitya?" Sluggish found a piece of bread and started tearing off pieces of it with his fingers, nibbling on it. "But to come here to love your Homeland – that's perverse. Worse than taking it in the mouth, you understand?"

"So you're a pervert?" Vitya asked.

"Of course," Sluggish agreed. "And Samara's a pervert. Look at how he sleeps: like a pervert..."

"I'm not asleep," Samara replied, without opening his eyes.

"You hear what he said: '*I'm not asleep*,'" Sluggish remarked. "But he agrees with the first part of my statement. And the Sergeant's also a pervert."

Sluggish looked at the Sergeant, hoping that he would keep up the joke.

The Sergeant stubbed out a cigarette against the wall, and because he had nothing better to do, he immediately lit a second. He didn't respond to Sluggish's glance.

He couldn't remember when he had last pronounced this word – *Homeland*. There hadn't been one for a long time. At some point, maybe in his youth, his Homeland had disappeared, and in its place nothing had formed. And nothing was needed.

Sometimes there was a forgotten, crushed, childish, painful feeling beating in his heart. The sergeant didn't admit it and didn't respond. Who hadn't felt this...

And now he thought a little, and then stopped.

The Homeland – people don't think about it. There are no thoughts about the Homeland. You don't think about your mother – not chance images from your childhood, but thoughts. In the army, it seemed shameful when other people talked about their mothers, that she... I don't know what she did... cooked soup, made pies, kissed them on the forehead. Is this something you can say aloud? And in front of these unshaven men. It's even embarrassing to think it to yourself.

It was only possible to think seriously about what scared Vitya. Although here it was also better to get a grip.

...He'd become nervous again...

Sometimes, the Sergeant recalled, once every few years, he would start to feel a strange nakedness, as though he had shed his skin. Then it was easy to offend him.

The first time, as a teenager, when this feeling seized him, he felt discouraged and humiliated and hid at home, he didn't go to school, he knew that any idiot could upset him and go unpunished.

Later, when he was grown up, he was so afraid of this intermittent weakness that he started drinking vodka – and barely got out of that.

The last time this morbid feeling came was when his children were born, two boys.

And then the Sergeant fled from this feeling, which suddenly gained new shades and became almost intolerable. He fled here, to the post.

Essentially, the Sergeant now realized, this feeling came down to the fact that he no longer had the right to die when he felt like it.

It turned out that he needed to look after himself. How humiliating this was for a man...

The Sergeant, who had never seriously valued his life, was suddenly surprised by his evident weakness. Humans are such laughable creatures, he thought, looking at the guys pumping iron. This hunk of meat, with so many bones, and it just needed a few grams of lead... why even lead – a thin needle would be enough if it went in deeply...

To live to the full extent of his power, restricting himself in everything, to sleep little and eat almost nothing – the Sergeant could do all of this without difficulty. Furthermore, he never saw any special value in human freedom, rather believing it to be shameful. Various unpleasant people had talked about freedom so often recently, but when he listened to them, the Sergeant was almost certain that when they said *freedom*, they meant something else. The color of their faces, perhaps...

No one said that the most terrifying lack of freedom was the inability to make the main choice easily, and not a lack of a few indulgences in vulgar trifles, which actually came down to the right to wear stupid rags, go out dancing at night, and then not work during the day, and if you did work, then the devil knew at what, for what and why.

Recently the Sergeant had made a choice: it seemed to him that he had. He had, he believed, managed to claw out the right not to look after himself, and left.

But now he lay there, feeling the cold of the concrete dust with his shoulder, and felt longing – not for anyone, but an empty, sluggish sense of longing without any attachment. Nothing was happening.

No one was even coming to collect them.

"What's the time, Sergeant?" Samara asked, without opening his eyes.

"It's after eight," the Sergeant replied, without looking at the clock.

They lay there, almost calmly until ten, then became worried.

"Come on Vitya, you freak, pray now," the Sergeant began to pep himself up. "It's early to bury you yet."

Vitya didn't say anything.

"Or go climb a tree and wave your handkerchief, so they notice you from the base," Sluggish immediately joined in.

Ridge and Ginger were watching the road: they hadn't changed since they began at four in the morning.

"Sluggish, replace Ginger, it's time," the Sergeant said.

"Time for what? I've done my own duty," Sluggish replied. "Vitya can go."

Sluggish had got some idea in his head, he wanted to make some nasty joke about how Vitya should be "used", but he didn't manage to come up with anything.

"Vitya will go with you too," the Sergeant replied, and got up himself.

This was a simple psychological gesture: he didn't have to get up at all, but if you're on your feet, your team works better than from a lying position.

In any case, with animals like Sluggish, it was generally better to keep yourself in line, and stay alert. In empty deserts, subordination is sometimes forgotten.

What's going on? the Sergeant thought, walking back and forth aimlessly. *Where has everyone disappeared to... We'll soon be out of cigarettes.*

Ridge squatted down and started squashing an empty can, turning it into a pancake.

Ridge, the Sergeant recalled, was the only one in the unit who frightened the regiment's German shepherd, which was not even afraid of Sluggish, who constantly harassed it. Although Ridge did not do anything bad to it. He just started stroking its back, and then, without even noticing himself, he tried to pin it to the ground, and could not stop from playing some more: he didn't let the dog get up, he butted it, and lifted it up with his heavy hands, until the dog, with an unusual, almost hysterical squeal, shook itself loose. It then made large circles, looking sideways at Ridge with an eye that was frightened and furious at the same time. Ridge then stood without a smile, not quite sure of what had happened, and looking like a heavy, perhaps underwater, rock that would break in two any boat that happened to hit it.

"Ridge, I forgot, do you have any children?" the Sergeant asked. He suddenly thought with horror how Ridge would play with his kids.

Ridge shrugged his shoulders:

"Where from," he replied strangely.

"You ask Vitya where they come from," Sluggish joined in. "You probably don't use your girlfriend properly, you've got it all wrong."

Ridge frowningly looked to where Sluggish's voice came from – he couldn't see him behind the wall.

"So you're not married?" the Sergeant asked.

Ridge shrugged his shoulders, as if he didn't know himself whether he was married or not.

...Samara turned on his side and seemed to fall asleep. Ginger sat by the wall, pressing his bare head against it; it was strange that it didn't hurt him.

...There is no greater emptiness than waiting.

As a child, the Sergeant would try to cheer himself up at any depressing moment by telling himself: *Just imagine that you have to die today: with what melancholy you will be to remember this time that seemed completely intolerable to you... Enjoy yourself, idiot, breathe every second. How good it is to breathe...*

"I'm sick of lying around here!" Samara suddenly got up. He didn't look sleepy at all.

"What's with you? Sleep!" the Sergeant said. "You'll go back to the base and sleep anyway."

"It's different there. There I'll... sleep peacefully. But here... Did their car break down or something?"

The Sergeant did not reply.

"All three at once?" Ginger asked for him.

There were three cars in the unit.

"Maybe they went somewhere in two of them," Samara suggested.

"Where?" Ginger asked. "To Russia?"

"How do I know?" Samara said; he realized himself that there wasn't really anywhere to go.

He fell on his back once more and lay there with his eyes open.

"I feel sick," he said.

The Sergeant thought for a moment, and said the thing with which he had calmed himself at such moments, and which he had recalled recently. He generally avoided abstract conversations with the soldiers – they were pointless, but here he unexpectedly felt himself to be in a lyrical mood.

Samara looked at the Sergeant in surprise and didn't reply: he simply didn't know what to say.

"Sergeant, what did you used to do for a job?" Ginger asked.

"I was a bouncer in a bar," the Sergeant replied, turning back to Ginger.

"And after that?"

"A loader."

"And after that?"

"After that I was a bouncer again."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever work as a psychologist?"

"No."

"You could. Talk some sense into people."

I shouldn't have done that, no, the Sergeant decided. *I shouldn't have said all that, after all, I know...*

"All right, Ginger, I'll think about it," he replied calmly.

"I've got a name," Ginger said, half closing his eyes.

The Sergeant directed his clear gaze at him, but Ginger didn't react.

"If I understand correctly, two people will call you by this name: your mama and I," the Sergeant said.

"I have no mama."

"Well, just me then."

"Just you."

The Sergeant swallowed an angry mouthful of spit.

"Get up, private," he said to Ginger.

Ginger opened his lazy eyes.

"And be so kind, private, tell me what's the matter. Is something bothering you?"

"Yes, I..."

"Get up first."

Ginger slowly got up and stood with his back to the wall.

"I'm bothered by the fact that our radios aren't charged."

The Sergeant nodded his head.

"And you should have checked it," Ginger concluded.

"I heard you," the Sergeant replied. "You can write a report to the commanding officer about this fact. Are there any other questions?"

"Not right now."

"Then go and check the signals and tripwires."

Damn him, the Sergeant thought, following Ginger with his gaze. *What's up with him?*

Who called him Ginger, anyway? he tried to recall – and suddenly he did.

It wasn't anything special: back in distant Russia, they were sitting around and drinking, and

that guy was sitting to the side – he had recently joined the unit.

"What are you sitting there for the whole time, on the side?" the main unit's joker asked, the deputy engineering specialist, who was thin and talked in a slightly nasal voice, and was nicknamed Sinew. "Why are you acting like a redhead?"

This wasn't funny in itself, but applied to the shining, hairless head it seemed amusing. Everyone laughed drunkenly.

"Aren't you sharp," Ginger had replied quietly. "That's a sharp tongue you've got there. You want to sharpen my pencil for me?"

"I won't sharpen your pencil, I'll jerk you off," Sinew replied, and everyone once more merrily bared their drunken fangs and pink tongues.

"All right, Ginger, don't honk," Sinew honked himself, quite amiably. "Come on, let's drink to brotherhood, to your new name."

For all his cheerfulness, he was brutal, Sinew was, and he was good at shooting people down, and liked to do so.

So that's how it came about: Ginger...

"What's with him?" Samara asked the Sergeant cheerfully.

"Go with him," the Sergeant replied, quickly calming down. "Or he'll fall over the tripwire. Make sure that..."

Samara, grinning cheerfully, went outside.

"Take an automatic weapon, where are you going with that oar of yours!" the Sergeant shouted after him.

Samara came back and put the sniper rifle in the corner, and took an AK-47.

"What's going on here?" Sluggish appeared.

The Sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

"Everything's fine, Sluggish," he replied, smiling. "Or shouldn't I call you Sluggish anymore?"

"No, call me Swift," he chuckled in reply.

Another dreary, limping hour dragged by.

Ginger came back and sat down in silence, staring ahead.

The others walked around him, as if he were not alive.

"Sergeant!" Sluggish called. "Could I have a word with you?"

"You hear what he's saying?" Sluggish nodded towards Vitka, when the Sergeant came over.

The Sergeant shook his head.

"He heard shooting at night. In the area of the village."

The Sergeant shifted his eyes towards Vitka.

"Not for long, just two minutes or so," Vitka answered quickly. "Even just a minute, probably."

"Who were you on duty with?" the Sergeant asked. "With Samara? Why didn't he hear anything? Was he asleep?"

Samara had already appeared behind him with a guilty look.

"Sergeant, I swear to you: I wasn't asleep. I just dozed off for a minute. Vitka shook me when the shooting started."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"It stopped immediately."

The Sergeant stood for a while, looking into the gun slit, with the wind blowing into his face... and he went outside, beyond the post.

He thought for a while, trampling a rock under his foot.

What should we do? Leave the post, go to the base?... No.

Send one person to the base on their own, or two people, to find out what's going on? Who? Sluggish and... Vitka. Yes.

Or should we all go at once? And leave the post? Who needs it... No, that's not right...

He turned around to enter the post, and suddenly in the distance there was a distinct rumble, as if an enormous sheet of canvas had been torn, and a land slide had begun. There was a dull thud and a resounding echo from the ground.

Samara and Vitya darted out of the post together, as though running from a fire.

They stopped still, because there was nowhere to run.

Everyone looked in the direction of the base: the racket was coming from there.

"We're being stormed, guys," the Sergeant said, not really recognizing his own voice, which sounded unusual.

"They're being stormed," Ridge said. He had also come outside, with the grenade launcher over his shoulder. "We're not, not yet."

"And we're not going to be," the Sergeant replied, and immediately raised his voice. "Right then, fuck it all, back into the post, quick."

For several minutes they clearly heard the sound of battle.

"Get ready," the Sergeant ordered. "Take the cartridge containers. Grenades, as many as you can. We're going to the base."

Everyone but Ginger started fastening combat vests, tightening bootlaces and collecting grenades – they were kept in two green crates at the post.

"What about the post?" Ginger asked.

"Get ready, private," the Sergeant said. "We're leaving the post. That's my decision."

The Sergeant took a pair of binoculars, and for a minute he surveyed the area around the post, first from one gun slit, then from another.

"Right, let's go."

At a quick trot, they made the run to a sparse grove which stood one hundred meters away from the post.

"Stop," the Sergeant commanded.

They all squatted on the withered grass.

"A car... Cars are coming," Sluggish said, looking at the road. "From the direction of the base..."

The Sergeant heard the noise of motors himself even earlier. He also looked at the road, seeing out of the corner of his eye that Ginger was smiling.

He's probably happy that I'm going to get a dressing down for leaving the post, the Sergeant thought lazily.

"It's ours! It's our jeep," Sluggish stretched his pigmented cheek into a smile. "Let's go, what are we..."

"Stay there," the Sergeant said quietly.

The jeep drove almost right up to the post, with the front facing the entrance, and beeped: two, three signals in a row.

Sluggish stood up straight, looking in surprise at the Sergeant, and immediately squatted down again: out of the jeep jumped two bearded men, in a strange, bright uniform, and hid by the entrance to the post. Then another one jumped out, and crouching down, he jumped over to the gun slit, and seemed to take out a grenade of a sling, which looked expensive, and not Russian.

"Fuck me," Sluggish sighed. "Who are they?... They're Chechens. In our jeep. Shall we waste them?"

Samara snapped his jaw.

Ginger clutched his automatic weapon, alternately grasping the grip and opening his palm: on the black metal a wet trace remained.

The grenade exploded inside the post: the bearded man had thrown it in. He threw another. And a third: it seemed to roll into the gun slit from the other side.

Following the car, another two jumped out, and they all crawled into the post.

They were absent for one and a half minutes.

"Let's go," the Sergeant said.

"Let's shoot them," Sluggish suggested, almost quivering with desire.

"We won't do it, you got that, Sluggish? We won't!" the Sergeant replied, almost growling.

"Why not?" Sluggish asked, and his nostrils quivered.

"Because shooting at a post is a waste of time. You can shoot for days on end. Or do you want to take it by storm? All six of us?"

"What about the car?" Sluggish asked scornfully.

"And what if our guys are there? Even one? Tied up? Do you want to shoot him?"

Sluggish moved his jaws, as if he wanted to bite something that prevented him from breathing, thrown on like a bridle.

Everyone looked, transfixed, at the post.

The bearded men came out, sullen and swift: they climbed into the car and sped off, back towards the base.

After a short distance, by the sharp turn-off behind the hill, which took them out of the line of fire, they fired a long volley at the grove.

Samara cursed so much that he almost fell on his stomach, Sluggish sank to one knee, and the Sergeant didn't move a muscle. The bullets went high: at the treetops.

They've guessed that we're here somewhere... the Sergeant thought. *And they're afraid themselves.*

"We should have met them at the post," Sluggish said. "I would have met them."

"You'd be lying there now with a hole in your head," the Sergeant replied, and went on ahead, into the thick of the trees.

Thirty seconds later he turned around: everyone was following him. He increased his pace, running. He heard breathing and the stomping of heavy men's legs.

If they took the short cut, they could reach the base at the same time as the jeep. The road for the jeep was much longer.

Shooting continued from the base, breaking off occasionally, and at these moments they stopped and caught their breath.

Ginger was breathing heaviest of all: he was carrying the case with the shells.

Never mind, let him... the Sergeant thought, but at the next stop Samara took the case.

Samara can take it then, the Sergeant agreed.

Two kilometers from the base, they walked more slowly, unhurriedly.

Soon our own tripwires will start, the Sergeant thought. *After all, I haven't seen them from this side... And they were put here by another platoon. Now we'll disturb our own grenade, that will be great...*

"Let's bear right, toward the road," he said after ten minutes.

Sluggish almost ran into his head: he was walking as stubbornly as if he had picked up a trail and didn't intend to leave his prey.

"What for?" Sluggish asked.

"Because," the Sergeant replied.

Shots were ringing out extremely close nearby, and this was quite terrifying.

Now, right now, they were about to run into people who wanted to kill them, and they would have to kill these people.

The soldiers looked around constantly.

They were mainly shooting from the base, in fact, the Sergeant thought, sitting down when the

shooting got particularly persistent. And they were shooting high into the air.

"Sergeant, why aren't you saying anything?" the embittered Sluggish persisted.

"It seems to me that they're only shooting from our side," the Sergeant said.

Sluggish listened.

"So what?" he asked.

"It means they're shooting to frighten us rather than exchanging gunfire. Perhaps over there, in the forest, there aren't any Chechens. And the closer we get to the base..." the Sergeant breathed in some air, which was constantly in short supply – "the more chances we have... to get shot by our own people. You understand? And we're also about to run into our own tripwires. We could be blown up by them," he explained it all as if to a child.

Sluggish looked at him with mistrust.

"So what?" Sluggish asked again.

"Observe, observe, guys," the Sergeant said to the soldiers looking at them. "Or they might crawl out of somewhere..." and only then did he look at Sluggish. "We'll go towards the road. There are no tripwires by the road. And we can get a good look at the base from there. As long as they don't see us first."

They moved diagonally, away from the base: to the place where the road came through.

...The woodland came to an end, and open terrain began.

They squatted down, getting their breath back. They listened as the shooting started again. From

here it was again unclear how they were shooting, who was shooting, and in what direction.

If only we had the radios... We're running around here... the Sergeant thought sadly, glancing sideways at Vitka, who seemed to understand the look, and turned away.

The Sergeant took out the binoculars and looked at the now visible road.

Our jeep probably drove past not long ago...

Now, if we can get to that left turn, the Sergeant realized – then we will be able to see the base. We can see everything lying on the bank. But if someone drives past on the road... That will be stupid. There's nowhere to run.

Two of us will go, the Sergeant decided. With Sluggish? I'd take Ridge, but he has the grenade launcher. He'll be able to blow up any car from here... And Sluggish will instantly throw himself into an attack... I can't take Gingcr. And I won't take Vitka either. And Samara is too young.

"Let's go, Sluggish," he said. "Guys, cover us if necessary... Ridge, you're in charge. If you see a car with bearded guys stopping near us – shoot immediately. Aim well. Your shot will save us. If you hit them... And the rest can support you."

They could have crawled to the road, but this seemed completely humiliating.

So they ran, bending and grabbing the air with their clutching hands.

What idiocy, the Sergeant thought. We're running like... Like idiots... We'll get to the road, and those bastards... will come to meet us... in their car... 'What's the hurry, soldiers?' they'll ask. And we'll turn around and run back...

They made their way over the stones and ruts, almost breaking their legs... They ran across the road that they had driven along just yesterday, so free and calm, with their elbows out the window, and their sweaty faces grinning... There was the track from the wheels, dusty...

They slid down the bank on their backsides. They crawled to the turn.

Well then, base... How are you, base?... the Sergeant thought, listening. We'll take a look, and see a black flag hanging there...

What's going on in my country, he thought fleetingly. Why am I crawling across it... not walking...

There was the base. It stood at an angle to them. Two gloomy floors, and sacks over the windows. Nothing could be seen. No one was storming it, at least. There weren't any ladders against the building, no one was climbing in.

The Sergeant looked for a long time, squinting, and stupidly hoping that he would see someone's arm waving from the gun slit, or even a face, and everything would immediately become clear.

Then he took the binoculars, and pressed his face into them.

The base was impenetrable.

"What's going on there?" Sluggish said, unable to wait.

"Nothing," the Sergeant replied, and gave the binoculars to Sluggish: he wouldn't have believed anyway that there was nothing there.

Sluggish looked for a long time, and the Sergeant began to get tired of this: they should be returning to the wood, and thinking what to do next.

He felt thirsty.

He took out his flask and had a gulp.

Sluggish crawled off somewhere. The Sergeant looked after him sullenly, not calling out.

Pouring dust over his black beret, Sluggish raised himself up high, but did not look at the base, but somewhere to the side.

Again, the angry firing began – they were shooting from another side of the base that they could not see. From this side, there was nothing to shoot at anyway, apart from the road and the trees. From the base to the woodland there were three hundred meters of empty land and sand, and this was all in the line of fire.

But from the other side of the base, there were hills and some abandoned buildings, stables or cattle sheds. There were places where the bearded men could hide.

"I can see the jeep," Sluggish said, returning: his face was dirty, but dry, not sweaty – the Sergeant was surprised by this.

"Where?"

"Sticking out behind those buildings. They must have taken a detour to get here. Around the base. They didn't take this road. So our guys wouldn't shoot at them."

On the one hand, we need the jeep: it has a radio, the Sergeant thought. On the other hand, the bearded men already have our walkie-talkies... And they know the wavelength. After all, they disarmed the guys who were coming to relieve us... Or killed them already... Let's not think about that, no need. No one was killed. Everyone's alive... What was I thinking about?

"Sluggish, why do we need that jeep?" the Sergeant asked aloud, to avoid thinking.

"You don't need any fucking thing at all," Sluggish replied, licking white dust off his lips.

"I don't. You do. That's why I'm asking you: why?"

"It has the radio."

"I've already thought of that. The Chechens are probably using it already, on our wavelength. What are we going to say to that radio: *hello, brothers, we're in the woods? Someone come and get us!*"

"Is it better to sit here in the dust?" Sluggish asked. "Without any food?"

The Sergeant was silent briefly.

"Let's go into the wood," he said. "And in the evening, we'll go to the buildings. When it gets dark."

The Sergeant lay on the grass.

His whole body languished and ached from the inescapable feeling that there were other human animals in this forest, and that they could come here.

But there was nowhere to hide.

And nothing to think about.

Because any thought led to the fact that they could be killed today...

This was all so... stupid. As it turned out, that was the only way everything looked – stupid: at a time when something was reaching out for his very throat.

The Sergeant remembered how he had called his mother when he came here. His mother didn't

even know that he was here: he didn't tell her when he left, he deceived her. And here he heard her voice in the receiver:

"I'll kill you, son, what are you doing!" she said.

The Sergeant even smiled: her words sounded so foolish, so good-natured, and therefore even more pitiful.

His mother herself was scared by her own *I'll kill you*: it was quite a common word at home, that was often uttered in a fit of temper, when as a child he broke something, or got up to mischief. But now this word took on a new meaning, terrifying to his mother.

I won't kill, don't kill, don't kill! she probably wanted to shout into the phone.

But there was no reason for this shout: on the second day after the unit arrived, they had their first and last normal shoot-out with the other side. Some bastards fired a few clips at the post and crawled back to their holes.

And that was all... Until today nothing serious has happened, mother.

You're still thinking about your mother, the Sergeant caught himself out.

I'm not thinking, I'm not thinking, I don't remember anyone, I don't remember my nearest and dearest, he waved aside these thoughts, realizing that if he remembered his other blood, poured into the world in the two pink, small, boyish, chick-like bodies, then he would go mad immediately.

I don't want to remember, I don't want to suffer, I want to eat rocks, I want to spin my stupid nerves into bundles, and I don't want to have to dream anything. I want to dream of stones, animals, primitive things...

Before Christ – what was before Christ: that’s what I need. When there was no pity and fear. And no love. And no humiliation...

The Sergeant looked for something to lean on, but couldn’t find anything; everything was weak and dragged you with itself to die, everything was full of soul, warmth and such tenderness that is intolerable for existence.

From somewhere, a sullen face summoned by his entire being came drifting along, it was stern, distinct and alien to everything that flowed inside. The Sergeant felt with his skull this inhuman, soul-strengthening glance...

He shuddered, and realized that he had fallen asleep for a second. Perhaps for even less than a second. And he had had a dream.

He squatted, looking into the semi-darkness.

“What did you see?” Samara asked.

“Stalin,” the Sergeant replied hoarsely, thinking his own thoughts.

“Sergeant!” Samara exclaimed.

“Mmm.”

“What’s with you?”

“Everything’s fine. Gather the posts. Let’s go hunting.”

They walked in the darkness, hardly concealing themselves.

The Sergeant said nothing to anyone. So as not to persuade them. And in any case he didn’t want to talk anymore.

This is a foreign land, the Sergeant repeated, as if in a delirium. A foreign land. Why does it want me so much?

I used to be light... I felt light... I knew how to live lighter than snow... Why has it oppressed me so?

The land is breaking up. The crazy and trampled East. Apparitions, and the flickering remains of the West. And magma that will swallow everything.

...And there’s nothing to hold on to..

“Where are you leading us?” Ginger asked.

The Sergeant kept silent, not at all comprehending what these words meant.

“I am leading you,” he replied with difficulty.

“I don’t get it, Sergeant,” Ginger answered rudely. “I don’t believe you, Sergeant. Where are you going?”

I also love my Homeland, the Sergeant thought, looking into the darkness and stumbling. I love my land terribly. I love it horribly and immorally, not regretting anything... Humiliating myself and others... But what is spreading out under my feet – is that my land? My Homeland? What have you done with it, you...

The Sergeant took out his flask, and drank the last gulp of water.

“Sergeant, why aren’t you saying anything?” Samara asked, and his voice trembled.

And Vitka snorted nearby, looking the Sergeant in the face.

Only Ridge stood at a distance, confident and firm.

“What are you driveling about, everything’s OK,” Sluggish replied.

"Everything's OK," the Sergeant repeated loudly.

"You do remember where to go?" Sluggish asked him.

"Yes."

He remembered, and took his men through the darkness right to the buildings: one hundred meters from them, the soldiers squatted down.

Shots came from the base from time to time. Occasional flares cut through the darkness and hit the roofs and walls of the buildings.

A volley of automatic gunfire responded from somewhere nearby, and the soldiers thought that they were being shot at, they all immediately fell down into the sand, with their hands, bellies and faces... but the shots were being fired in a different direction.

"The jeep is parked there," the Sergeant said. "We're going to take it now."

"What for?" Ginger asked.

"We're going home," the Sergeant replied. "I'll take you home, Ginger," the Sergeant repeated angrily.

They crawled, stopping and listening from time to time.

The Sergeant licked salt off a stone and ran the crunchy grains of sand over his tongue and lips.

He did not have a single thought in his head.

"...there's no key there...if...there's no key?" the words reached him: Sluggish was whispering.

"I'll start it," the Sergeant replied. "I'll take off the hood... cables... I can do it... Shit."

Twenty meters away they lay down and stayed there for a few minutes, without moving.

Someone laughed inside the buildings.

And it was quiet again.

"Ridge," the Sergeant called. "Everyone will get into the car, and you get in the back, in the box."

The "box" was what they called the section behind the seats in the jeep.

"When I start moving, shoot from the grenade launcher... at them."

Ridge nodded.

"Wait," the Sergeant said to everyone and crawled ahead.

Slowly, slower than a blossoming flower, he crawled the last meters to the car. He lay by the wheel, stroking the tyre, as if the iron jeep was an animal that could be scared.

The Sergeant got up, and bending over, trying to tread quietly, walked around the car.

He searched for the handle... there it was, ice-cold... He raised his head and looked in the window, expecting to see crazy eyes stuck to the glass from the other side. There was no one there, no eyes.

He pushed the handle down and pulled the door towards him.

He stuck his head inside, and smelled rather than looked. It didn't smell of a living, sleeping person.

It smelt of the strangers who had left, dirt, sweat and gunpowder.

The Sergeant put his leg in, and then moved his entire body into the car. He stretched out on the seat and even shut his eyes for a second.

Don't think, he begged himself.

He felt in the dark car with his blind hand and shuddered: it seemed to be the key.

He bent over: yes, the key. In the ignition. They hadn't taken it.

Why the hell should they take the key, who would steal the car here...

And the radio... Where's the radio? There it is.

There was laughter in the buildings again: ridiculous, foolish laughter.

The Sergeant listened, and suddenly thought quickly: *They're out of it... That's how people laugh when they're out of it... They probably looted the pharmacy in the village...*

He felt light, light and clear, and everything fell into its place.

He touched the steering wheel, the gear stick, the pedals, adjusting to the car, so that he wouldn't get anything wrong.

And no one's storming the base, he thought, not hurrying himself. They blocked it. They're waiting for their own guys, I suppose. Reinforcements. Our guys are probably all fine. There wasn't any assault on the base. Good. Look alive, men. The planes will be here soon. And those bastards will get it... they will...

The Sergeant bent over across the seat and opened the door on the right.

"Sluggish!" he called quietly.

Sluggish climbed into the car calmly, as if he was stealing it from his father's garage, and not...

"Don't slam the doors," he said to the others, when Vitka, Ginger and Samara climbed into the back.

"Fuck it, we've got to turn around," Sluggish said. "Can you?"

"Is Ridge there?" the Sergeant asked instead of replying.

"Yes," Sluggish sighed, turning around.

"Let's go," the Sergeant said, turned the key, and switched on the headlights.

In the blinding beams of the headlights, 30 meters away, a bearded man was standing, swaying, with an automatic weapon over his shoulder, and urinating on the wall of the building. It seemed as if the light had caused him to sway. He turned his head, not at all surprised.

For a fraction of a second everyone looked at him from the car. The Sergeant was already starting the engine.

"Hey, who turned on the light? Are you nuts?" someone shouted inside the building, in a nasty voice, with an accent, but in Russian.

The engine started on the second try.

"For the Homeland," the Sergeant said, and moved into first gear. "For Stalin."

In second gear, he stepped on the gas and the man with the weapon went flying on to the bonnet of the car, before he had time to realize what was going on.

The Sergeant immediately put the car in reverse, knocking the limp body off the bonnet, and drove out onto the square in front of the cattle barn.

Furiously turning the steering wheel, he turned around and drove off, not seeing the road to start with – jolting, risking stalling every second – and then suddenly, by intuition, he drove on to it.

Fourth gear... They flew along, yelling and weeping.

Something flared in the car, and instantly rose and blazed in the rear-vision mirror.

“Great, Ridge!” the Sergeant yelled, guessing that Ridge had fired the grenade launcher. “Waste them, Ridge!”

Sluggish, turning around and pushing his legs into the seat, shot from the automatic weapon, putting it out the window and not taking his hand off the trigger.

“Sluggish, asshole!” the Sergeant howled. “Call our guys!”

“Base! Base!” Sluggish yelled, turning around and grabbing the radio. “Base, it’s us! It’s the Sergeant!”

They sped on and didn’t hear shots behind them.

“Base, for God’s sake!” Sluggish yelled.

“Receiving?” came a distant, questioning voice.

“It’s us! In the jeep! Don’t shoot! You understand? Base, for heaven’s sake! Don’t shoot!”

“Over,” came the distrusting reply.

They sped up to the building and all fell out together, in a single moment.

The Sergeant painfully tore his hands away from the steering wheel: it cost him incredible effort.

The heavy door was opened for them: the Sergeant saw in the glare of the headlights that heavy bags were being moved inside the building, freeing up the entrance.

Ginger ran in first, then Samara, then Vitka.

Ridge moved his body inside.

Sluggish changed clips and shot into the darkness from his belt.

“Come on, Sluggish, let’s go home!” the Sergeant said to him.

Scowling, he jumped into the darkness of the building, and the Sergeant took a step after him.

He was thrown back heavily and slowly, exploding somewhere in the air. But then he unexpectedly stood lightly on his feet and made a few very gentle, almost weightless steps, coming out of the line of fire. Somewhere here, his own men should be waiting for him, but for some reason the Sergeant did not see any of them, but for all that he did feel with all his being the good, almost sweet semi-darkness.

Damn, how am I... how did this happen to me? the Sergeant said, surprised at his luck, and turned around.

The black, evil smoke dispersed, moved away and disappeared, and he saw a person with his arms and legs splayed clumsily, and his head thrown back: one eye was black, and the other was shut.