

С. ОГОЛЬЦОВ

As Is



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Аннотация

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Annotation

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~ ~ ~ the royal troops

'And the drill grounds will start shining,

Will get polished with our boots,

Will get crushed to fractions tiny

By the marching brave recruits...'

(to the air of 'C'mon, fellas, uncinch the horses...')

The buses rolled past the summer-green countryside beyond the window. The covered seats were soft enough, but it brought little consolation. Summer would begin without me, and how

could I manage all the summer without Olga?

Two years of compulsory military service were less terrifying. The length itself turned them into an abstraction. The unimaginable can't frighten, but here, a concrete summer flies past the window. Sad view...

In five hours, the buses delivered and unloaded the recruits at the Assembly and Distribution Center (ADC) in the regional capital, the city of Sumy, named after the Sumka River, where Peter the Great lost his. It was probably leather, and it contained coins from the Tsar's treasury. Of course, he swore, the lanky gaper. He must have been carrying a bribe to fortune before the Battle of Poltava...

At the ADC, I made a desperate, last-ditch attempt to avoid the draft. At the final checkup, I told the ophthalmologist that I could barely make out the second line from the top of his chart on the wall, although I'd actually seen the third, in part.

Lying is wrong, unseemly, and shameful. However, the fear of the impending nightmare—two years without Olga!—shaken my moral compass, and I lied. Partially.

The doctor nodded with clear empathy. And I was deemed unfit for active duty, but perfectly suitable for a construction battalion...

Then I spent three days on bare planks of bunks in further ADCs and on the equally hard shelves of conscript train cars... But finally, here I am: standing in the pre-dawn gloom on the platform of the Stavropol railway station—after the heavy rain

of the receding night—in only one shoe.

On my other, bare foot, there still stays a sock, soaked to the core of its cottony soul. This fact prevents me from being identified with Jason, or whatever the ancient Greek name was for that gaping idiot who couldn't lace his sandals properly.

Because there were no other options left. Nothing to choose from. When, in the dim light of the overhead bulbs, we, chechaco recruits were shouted out. I searched not only the compartment where I slept but also a couple of adjacent ones. My search was hampered by the sergeant's obscene yells from the vestibule at the end of the empty car, where only he and I remained.

My right shoe was still missing. And so, while the chill dampness of the rain-drenched asphalt seeped through the fabric of my black sock—so defenseless against the rest of the shod ranks—with the same slowed undercurrent, slowly but surely, the awareness of the cause of my discomfort surfaced within me. A nascent (even in the absence of direct evidence) indirect suspicion grew stronger that the disappearance of half my footwear was the vengeful handiwork of Valik Nazarenko from Krolevets.

... .

Of all the guys in our compartment, he was the only one carrying a thick wad of five-kopeck postcards congratulating with Soviet Army, Aviation, and Navy Day. At every station, through the narrow transom above the window, he would pester passersby with a whiny plea to drop half a dozen filled-out

postcards into a mailbox.

Would anyone dare refuse a kid being transported, no, not in a prison car, but still locked?

And when the train left the station and settled into the steady clatter of throwing the miles behind, Valik would put on a smart face and ask himself the same question: 'Who else should I write to?' And to this, he invariably found the same answer: 'Ah! I know!' After which, he began filling out the next couple of postcards, declaring that he'd been drafted into the army and had already passed through the city of Rostov.

Having accomplished his literary feat, he read the creations (every single postcard) to his two-day-old companions, sharing the same compartment. Among those present, only one had been drafted from the same regional center as he. But even his fellow countryman couldn't immediately figure out which of the postcards' recipients were who in the glorious city of Krolevets. Although Valik had been communicating with him for three days, starting from the first.

The epistles were distinguished by an enviable consistency of theme and an unwavering set of words. Each composition concluded with the inevitable, timeless line: 'My best wishes, Valik.'

Towards the end of the second day of travel, I suggested that he change the word order, for sheer variety, and at least occasionally, say, every other postcard, write 'My Valik wishes best.' The compartment's audience, already driven to brain stupor

by the author's monotony, burst into laughter...

But who laughs last laughs best, and now, in one sock amidst all these puddles, I was in no mood for laughter. An innocent play on words had caused the disappearance of a shoe, which had surely left the train before Stavropol, forcibly... hopelessly left behind... pairless, alien to the grass along an unfamiliar embankment... lashed by a nighttime downpour... This red-haired bastard responded to the elegant pun with a crude, practical joke. But if he wasn't caught, then he wasn't joking...

...

We were ordered to climb into the waiting trucks' backs. The convoy rolled through the streets of a strange, still-sleeping city, then exited along an empty two-lane highway, but soon turned left onto a potholed asphalt road.

A low forest stretched along the sides, and after another three kilometers, a long wall of white sand-lime brick, one and a half meters high, ran along the right shoulder.

The trucks turned into a wide-open gate made of a tall grating of vertical pipes (2-inch cross-section). A red and yellow sign under a glass frame, next to the outer door of the checkpoint, announced that this was Military Construction Detachment No. 11, Military Detachment No. 41769. Meanwhile, the deserted road beyond the gates flowed on—through a gap between a green forest and the white brick fence that ended about a hundred meters from the checkpoint, and the road, with no companions now, crossed the near horizon.

The sergeants led us to the bathhouse, where a lieutenant with a youthful, clean-shaven face came up to the porch and asked: would anyone like to send their rags back to where they were drafted from?

Predictably, no one made such plans, remaining true to the folk tradition of joining the army in clothes having one foot in the grave. Those were now dumped in the stunted grass under the brick wall of the bathhouse...

Only once, in the mess hall of the Rostov Assembly and Distribution Center, did I happen to see a conscript in a suit and tie. Besides that, his age was also striking—almost ten years older than the cropped-haired punks around him. But he was younger than twenty-seven, otherwise they wouldn't nab him.

He hadn't his hair cut and wasn't eating anything, but simply sat motionless, staring into space, or rather, into himself.

(... because on the outside, we're smoothly homogeneous, but inside—wow!—there's something to laugh about, such epics unfolding there—no Odyssey neither the Iliad cant hold a candle to...)

So he sat there, his tie loose around his thick neck, oblivious to the sympathetic or malevolent glances, not knowing where they were taking him or what would happen there...

~ ~ ~

Military Construction Detachment No. 11, or MCU-11 for short, had the bare minimum necessary to house a large number of people compactly, in one place.

Behind a brick fence separating the detachment from the asphalt road, a group of five barracks huddled together, lined inside with painted plywood and faced outside with white brick laid in shiner position. The barracks were connected by a common system of steam heating pipes, laid overhead on tall (2.2 m) supports, each consisting of a pair of two-inch pipes.

For thermal insulation, the pipes were wrapped in a layer of brown glass wool, swaddled in white fiberglass, which occasionally stuck out from under the final layer of black roofing felt (aka tar paper). The said layer was kept in place with pieces of fine-gauge binding wire at three-meter intervals.

Three barracks to the right of the gate ran parallel to the wall between them and the road, each bordered by the badly packed asphalt of the internal paths.

In the second echelon, behind the first barrack from the checkpoint, stood a building of equal length but wider and also one story. It housed the canteen, with its own kitchen, and the unit club. The next building—in the third rank from the fence—comprised the bathhouse, the boiler house, the sewing and shoemaking shop, and the metalworking shop under one common roof.

The parade ground, clumsily paved with concrete, began at the checkpoint gates and continued to the mess hall. On opposite side of the ten-meter-wide parade ground, stood the last pair of barracks (of five). Separated by poorly compacted asphalt paths, they maintained a parallel alignment with each other and the

silicate fence that protected MCU-11 from the potholes in the filthy asphalt of the outside world.

Behind the last pair of barracks, near the far left corner of the parade ground, stood a red brick latrine, with its entrance facing the mess hall exit (near the far right corner of the parade ground).

The latrine consisted of ten equally spaced holes of standard size, along the left wall. Each hole demonstrated the fairly solid thickness of the concrete floor screed. Along the entire opposite wall ran a cemented urinal channel, sloping toward the corner where it met the far end wall and bent along it to reach the left corner with a drain hole into the underground cesspool.

To the left of the latrine was a deep tin wash basin, about ten meters long, raised above the ground by meter-tall legs made of rebar. Another half meter higher, a half-inch pipe, emerged from under the ground, hanged loosely burdened with a dozen water taps mounted at one-meter intervals to discharge into the basin.

Directly beyond the parade ground, about twenty meters away, stood three box-sheds without front walls—to keep a pair of reclining trucks. To the left of the sheds stretched two rows of sturdy warehouses for food products and inedible ammunition. Behind them, in the very corner of the rectangular territory of military detachment 41769, the squat structure of a pigsty could be seen.

Oh, I almost forgot! Near the gate, opposite the checkpoint, stood the brick box of a small 'Militar-trade' store, with a gate wing hung from its corner toward the second wing hung from the

corner of the checkpoint...

A white fence, with brick posts, ran only along the asphalt road, while the rest of the perimeter was bordered with the same barbed wire surrounding my childhood.

Behind the boxes and the sagging wire fence, a wide field tilted gently upward, concealing the following hollow with an abandoned sand quarry and a deep ravine with the village of Tatarka, the immediate destination for soldiers going AWOL—unauthorized absences from their unit.

And the road we were brought along, six kilometers later, entered the village of Demino, where soldiers also went AWOL, just like they did to Stavropol itself, of course. But I knew none of this as I emerged from the bathhouse, freshly dressed in a monochrome khaki cotton uniform, pungent with the smell of acetone, each foot clad in a separate black tarpaulin boot over clumsily swathed foot wraps.

I also didn't know that 'KhE/bE) means 'cotton', and that foot wraps—two strips (30 cm x 60 cm) of light calico or flannel (depending on the season) used to swathe your feet—are much more practical than socks.

In the summer, when you take off your socks, you notice uneven streaks of dust near your toes and on the instep where the dust has worked its way through the socks' fabric. Foot wraps are a different matter—they get dirty themselves, but they keep your feet clean. You just have to swathe them properly—tight, evenly, without creases, otherwise you'll rub your feet to bleeding. And

in winter, foot wraps without socks keep you warmer than foot wraps over socks, although neither method protects you from frostbite in your boots, frozen to the point of being as stiff as iron...

A couple of soldiers from previous conscriptions rummaged through civilian rags discarded on the grass in front of the bathhouse, picking out some civilian clothes for their AWOL...

... .

We were taken to the unit's club, with a bare stage, devoid of any curtains, and rows of plywood seats across the hall with the sloping floor of unpainted planks.

Our first mission in the army became clearing the hall of seats, washing the wide gray floorboards, hauling double-decker iron beds from a nearby barracks, and then installing for the personnel of the fourth company, since their barracks had been repurposed as a 'training' facility for us new recruits.

~ ~ ~

After completing our initial non-combat duty assignment, we formed up in front of the entrance to the fourth company to be divided into three platoons, each under the command of a separate sergeant. The sergeants compiled lists of their commandos, checked them against the master list with the senior lieutenant, and began drilling the recruits.

All three platoons practiced the same command.

‘Platoon! Form up!’

‘Platoon! Disperse!’

'Platoon! Form up!'

'Platoon! Disperse!'

'Platoon! Form up!'

'Platoon! Disperse!'

We followed the commands, warding our hunger off with anticipation, because a small group of recruits had already been dispatched to the mess hall to prepare the tables for the meal. And finally: 'Form up for lunch!'

'Forward... ARCH!'

. . . .

Unlike the Club, where you have to climb three steps to reach the entrance, in the mess hall, after the door without a porch, the same number of steps descended to enter a spacious hall filled with tables in two tightly packed squares, separated by a central aisle from the back wall to the entrance/exit.

Beside each table stood benches of equal length, painted a smooth brown, strong enough to support the weight of ten diners stepping over them and sitting down, side by side.

The dark gray, smoothly polished concrete 'mosaic' floor filled the room with a reverberating, indistinct echo, like the gigantic waiting rooms at major railway stations.

Along the entire left wall (from the entrance), two wooden steps led up to three windows that provided access to rooms outside the mess hall. A sturdy window sill, lined with galvanized tin sheets, extended half a meter above the steps, running, like them, uninterrupted along the entire left side of the room.

First, in the row of windows above the sill was a small one for the bread-slicing shop, mostly closed by a tin-lined shutter.

The next—a meter high and four meters long, precluding the use of shutters—presented a panoramic view of the kitchen with its wide, cylinder-shaped nickel-plated cauldrons, from whose half-unscrewed lids steam gushes billowed. A pair of soldier-cooks strolled through the clouds. They wore army pants, flip-flops on bare feet, and tank tops under half-unbuttoned white jackets stained yellow with frying pan grease. One of the cooks wore a flat white beret, nesting there (even a novice ornithologist could tell) for months.

The final window—also free of shutters, but half as wide, merely two meters—looked into the dishwasher, where clouds floated, thicker and foggier than those in the fjords of Norway. The phenomenon was fed with the relentless gush-and-splash of hot water from several taps into a long tin trough, piled high with enamel bowls, mugs, and heaps of aluminum spoons, washed almost separately.

The far wall, opposite the entrance—blank, painted, like everything within the MCD, a practical mourning marsh color—separated the mess hall from the Club.

In the right wall, high above the floor, there was a continuous strip of glass in the woodwork of the fixed transoms.

Bowls (once white, but long since chipped enamel) placed on the tables serve as markers for seating on the benches. Twenty aluminum spoons are piled in a compact heap in the center of

the table, nestled in a pool of water dripped of them, so each eater can grab one.

A heavy ladle lay close to the spoons heap, and a tight cluster of enamel mugs (also 20) crowd by the heap's opposite edge, not exactly in their first youth, they bear battle scars from scraps and battering in the dishwasher trough.

Nearby are two and a half crosswise-cut 'bricks' of gray bread, on a dented aluminum tray, also falling apart into exactly twenty pieces...

The cooks began to toss five-liter enamel pots onto the windowsill beneath the serving window and shout something vague.

The first army meal had started. Borscht was brought from the serving window to be poured into bowls with the heavy ladle. This dish turned out to be very red and scalding hot.

Since the soldier used the same bowl throughout the meal, he had to finish the borscht to get a second course, or refuse it outright and wait for the soldier on duty to bring a 'bucket' of second course, a thin pearl barley porridge known in military parlance as 'kirzukha.'

(... look closely at the shaft of a soldier's boot, made of kirza [from the shyz-garied English 'kersey'], this artificial leather was invented during the Russo-Japanese War, and although it did not prevent the defeat of the Russian Empire in the aforementioned conflict, it nevertheless faithfully served its purpose, both combat and non-combat, for over a hundred years.

Now, putting aside these side comments, focus on the fine pattern of the upper layer of the boots of the Russian-Red-Soviet-(and, yes, again) Russian armies. Well, how about it? Objectivity will not allow one to deny the impeccable accuracy of the unofficial nickname 'kirzukha' for the traditional barley feed in the aforementioned armies.

It is not surprising that this similarity prompted soldiers on the brink of starvation to boil the shafts of their boots. As it happened on a small barge carried by storms into the Pacific Ocean, where it became a plaything of currents and winds for 49 days before being spotted by a US Navy aircraft carrier off the coast of California.

Four emaciated Soviet sailors were offered political asylum in the United States. They did need some rest from the Cold War, declared by the British hereditary star on the political firmament, Winston Churchill, in his Fulton Oratorio, had not yet given way to the Greenhouse Effect and other global shifts.

However, Sergeant Ziganshin remembered the beauty of both sunsets and sunrises in the steppes of his native Tatarstan and refused. The other three sailors followed his example (even though they were not Tatars).

Later, they were all nominated for the highest orders and decorations of the Soviet Union, after appropriate verification to ensure they had not become CIA agents while in the process of regaining normal body weight in the notorious 'horn of plenty', aka state of California.

[It wasn't until the mid-1990s that Askhat Ziganshin finally managed to recover from the alcohol addiction he'd developed through endless drinking during interrogations disguised as all sorts of celebratory patriotic events.]

All this happened in 1960 and inspired the then-popular folk-rock song:

Beware the boogie man!

Ziganshin's on the loot!

The night before

He chomped his buddy's boot!

And this is the strangest fact in this whole story, since there wasn't a single vocal-instrumental ensemble in the USSR at the time...)

...

The porridge also turned out thin and as hot as borscht. The compote, poured into mugs from a dented aluminum teapot, wasn't hot, but still thin. The deep hum of bustle at the train station served as a backdrop to the chomping and slurping.

Occasionally (though not daily), the peaceful symphony of animal feeding was pierced by the loud curse of someone hurling something and the whining clink of a mug as it bounced and splashed across the floor of the central aisle.

Nothing to startle at! The soldier simply noticed that he'd received a defective mug—it was worn beyond its capacity to hold a full cup—and he expressed his indignation at the current situation, since, according to time-honored prison tradition,

using leaky utensils is both a prerogative and, at the same time, a mark of a buttboy, whose holes are used by other prisoners, even if he's not homosexual, but rather a degraded one, regardless of his straight sexual orientation outside the walls...

After eating, the implements of personal nourishment are to be carried to the dishwasher window and left in piles or heaps of similar items on the shelf. As they accumulated, the dishwashers themselves would dump these piles into the appropriate sections of the trough, under the scalding water from the taps.

Now we could leave the mess hall and stagger back to the training barracks, wary of missing the next command, 'Form up!'

~ ~ ~

Subsequent army experience showed that borscht is never served for breakfast or supper; those begin immediately with 'kirzukha'. Furthermore, in the mornings, a tray with twenty cubes (2.5 cm x 2.5 cm x 1.2 cm) of yellow butter appears on the table next to the bread, delivered from the bread-slicing shop. You spread it on the bread with the handle of an aluminum spoon snatched from the common heap.

If the butter is brought in a single piece, it is divided by the most respected soldier (of those at your table) using the handle of his spoon.

A piece of butter (or a number of its cubes) could noticeably dwindle thanks to the attentive care of a soldier passing by your table. The fellow began serving his duty to the Soviet Motherland a year or a year and a half earlier than you. A weighty reason

to reward himself for his combat service early in the morning. The lump sugar brought for morning tea also didn't escape the attention of one or another distinguished veteran...

Overall, the rations were unpretentious, but sufficient for survival. In the fall, they reached a deeply unassuming simplicity—cabbage with water for the first course, cabbage without water for the second, water without cabbage for the third.

On a particularly good day, your bowl of 'kirzukha' might contain a piece of lard (the unit has a pigsty, by the by), but nothing but lard. And on Soviet holidays, morning tea was accompanied by a bun for everyone, one of those that cost 12 kopecks in the school canteen...

~ ~ ~

At first, I couldn't eat soldier's food. It wasn't that I was squeamish, but on the contrary, I tried my best, but despite all my efforts, I couldn't stomach the rations. They stubbornly stuck in my throat. During one of the feedings, a soldier from the previous draft, watching my diligent toil, laughed and explained, 'Don't worry! You'll get the hang of it and start gobbling everything in sight.'

He turned out to be right. The thing is, in a construction battalion, they don't eat, they gobble.

'The company's off to gobble. Catch up!'

'What's the gobble today?'

As soon as I stopped eating and started gobbling, everything went smoothly. Sometimes I could even gobble a second helping.

But that came later, because if a soldier in the first six months of his service (called 'youngster' or 'greenhorn' or 'salabon' during that period) dares to approach the food service window with a bowl in hand, the cook will likely be too lazy to pour a ladle of chow into it and will simply bark, 'Get the fuck out, greenhorn!' And not because he's a genetic misanthrope, but simply because he was also scared off when he was still a greenhorn himself. However, he might not send you away, because exceptions are found anywhere.

. . . .

(... during two years of compulsory service, a Soviet soldier climbed the hierarchical ladder.

In his first six months, he was a 'greenhorn,' also known as a 'youngster,' also known as a 'salabon.'

For the next six months—following the draft of new 'youngsters'—he became a 'ladler.'

A year of service is over, two more conscription waves arrived after you, and you're a 'pheasant.'

For the last six months, there are no senior soldiers above you; you're an unchallenged 'grandpa'.

And finally, the USSR Minister of Defense has signed the order discharging into the reserves those drafted, like you, two years ago. Demobilization begins; you're a 'dembil'!

Hierarchical terminology isn't very hieroglyphic.

'Youngster' therefore means junior at the service.

A 'ladle' is entrusted with dispensation of the food at the table

—it's too early for the 'greenhorns,' and degrading the senior ones.

'Pheasant' sews up his cotton pants to make them tight and form-fitting, and he swaggers like a London punk.

'Grandpa' is the opposite of 'young,' and 'dembil' is a pleasantly pronounceable abbreviation for 'demobilizable'.

To climb this ladder, you need to live for two years... At 18 or 20, that amount of time seems like an eternity.

Moreover, the quality of time in the army is unpredictable: some days fly by almost immediately, while others feel like a week has passed—but you're fucking wrong!—that's still today.

In the army, the total amount of time of the quality from the second example overrides that from the first exponentially.

The 'dembils' have it the hardest: they dragged this enormous thing of two years to the finish line. And now every hour feels like an eternity, filled with soul-excruciating, nagging anxiety, and disbelief that such a thing is even possible...

The soldiers on the lower rungs of the ladder attempt at spurring time with card calendars. Those that hold all 12 months printed on one side and the call to fly by Aeroflot airliners or save money in the Savings Bank, on the other.

They mercilessly prick each passing day with a needle, one after another. The card calendar loses its gleam and gloss, but if you raise it up against the sky, neat groups of tiny holes are visible.

Calendar acupuncture requires a disciplined mind and

remarkable willpower.

I've never seen such calendars on any 'pheasant.' Eternity will tame anyone, humble any pride...)

~ ~ ~

The first day of service ended after midnight – we were drilled to go to bed within 45 seconds and rise within the same amount. In 45 secs, you must remove your outfit, carefully stack its items on a stool in the central aisle of the barracks. The lengthy fluorescent lamps fixed along the ceiling, would pour folorn illumination on diver to their double-decker beds in the quarters, to cover themselves with a sheet and blanket. The sport event went on for an hour.

The quarters are 2 double-decker beds, placed bedhead to bedfoot and an identical group of double-decker beds on the other side of the narrow aisle where you bump into another of the 8 divers being drilled.

How can you avoid pushing? The width of the aisle is determined by the width of the nightstand standing against the barracks wall at the end of the cul-de-sac, along which 8 recruits are scrambling, each one to their own... Oops!... Fuck!

. . . .

It's a squat, 40 x 40 cm nightstand, with a pull-out drawer under the top, and a door beneath it to close 2 two shelves. Isn't that enough for the population of eight in the quarters, whose double-decker beds loom on both sides of a half-meter-wide passage?

If any bed in the cul-de-sac is occupied by a 'grandpa', then all the nightstand is his sovereign domain, unquestionably. While the 'pheasant' nesting in the quarters might have allocated the bottom shelf to the remaining seven fellow, but then again, not everyone would.

The construction battalion teaches seabees to live lightly, without burdening ourselves with unnecessary materialism. As regards the Neva blades and safety razor those things can shelter on the shelf of the guys from your draft. Those lucky enough to spend nights in a quarter free of either old men or birds.

Seeking sympathy and assistance by officers in solving the problems of soldierly life is detrimental to one's health.

Since the 'pheasant-grandpa' system is the key to military discipline, an officer who violates it is sawing a branch under his own ass. And if you complain to him, he'll complain about you to the 'grandpas.' In the evening, the officer will go home after a day on duty, and at night, your health will be damaged...

Attempts at unsettling the fundamentals are more hazardous than nicotine.

. . . .

But all this becomes clear later, and for now, the sergeants pace the central aisle of the training barracks. They're looking for a foot wrap carelessly wrapped around a boot, a belt not coiled over the uniform, or some missing piece of the uniform—the SOB's dived under the blanket half-dressed!

Having found a fault, they command 'Reveille!' And the drill

starts all over again...

It's highly unlikely we improved our results; rather, the sergeants themselves were getting sleepy. After another 'Lights-out!', the long fluorescent tubes in the ceiling above the central aisle went out, except for one over the orderly's nightstand at the entrance to the barracks. Its distant light isn't a problem; you can close your eyes and...

'Reveille!'

What? For what? Fuck! It's already morning! But where's the night?

(... have I already told, eh? That time in the army is a fucking bitch...)

~ ~ ~

A couple of reveille!'s were trained, but they weren't over picky, just so you'd understand—'you're in the army now, bitch'.

The indulgence of attitude rooted in the upcoming breakfast, because if we were late for it, the cook-'grandpa' would give the sergeant his 'J'ai presque dû attendre' from the serving window.

(... the French kings had a specially trained courtier at their court, the floor jerk.

The job wasn't difficult—the jerk simply thumped the floor with a stick, signaling the king's entry into a particular hall of a particular royal palace.

He'd thump and yell, 'His Majesty the King!'

And so one day at the Louvre, another Louis—with the appropriate ordinal number—approached the door to enter,

noticing that this floor jerk—(or was it jerkeau? I really need to work at my French! Merde!...)—wasn't there. Perhaps he'd had a reason to go around the corner, discovering something wrong about his court uniform and—he rushed there to button it up...

But the rascal managed to do it, at the very last moment, literally out of nowhere, and—done his business, according to regulations—Bang! He slammed his stick down at the floor: 'His Majesty the King!'

In fact, Louis didn't even have to march in place. As he passed the special courtier, he gave him a little reprimand, a so-called grandfatherly royal reproach:

'J'ai presque dû attendre,' he said, and then went on his way to mess with the other courtiers.

And his rebuke, translated from French, means, 'Just imagine! A little more, and I would have had to wait!'...)

But the 'grandfpa' in the window will deliver this royal phrase with a completely different subtitle:

— You, fucking asshole! Have you lost your scent, bitch? They dropped a sergeant's snot on your shoulder board, and now you've lost your sense of smell? I fucking fuck your fucking rank and you too as well! You're late again, I'll have you dispensing the fucking pots yourself from this window! You a fucking bird-doer!

And the sergeant has no answer to parry so courtly a subtitle, because, although he's not currently a bird-doer he's still just a

'pheasant'.

(...what could kings possibly have in common with our construction battalion?)

Well, you're amazing! An inextricably direct connection!

Commonly, albeit unofficially, the Soviet Army's military construction units were referred to as 'royal troops'. Everyone who's ever been stuck in the muck knows how to duck.

Got it? Let's move on then...)

~ ~ ~

The outfit of the military construction battalion (constbatt) soldier, aka constbatter, consisted of a khaki piss-cutter with a small red-cherry star screwed in its bow with the still smaller yellow sickle-and-hammer inside. The star was a very important detail called to make easy seeing the front from the rear in that headgear.

On the strength of its shape, the piss-cutter was of no use for protecting the soldier's ears. When caught in the strong wind or rain, you could turn off the cap's flaps and pull it on your skull, yet the trick bestowed on the serviceman the looks of a mugger in a 'condom'-hat.

Under certain circumstances, the constbatter could even put his piss-cutter crosswise, that is, with the star transferred into position above one or another of his ears. The cap applied in that manner was supposed to present a motif 'a-la Tricorn of Bonaparte', however, on the whole, that looked like a dull moron with the star on the side of his fucking gibbosity.

Alternately, a constbatter's head might be covered with a forage cap, but, according to the Statute of Inner Service, the forage cap should co-occur with the jacket and trousers over the blunt-nosed high shoes of black leather. Such a set was briefly referred to as 'parade-crap' (ceremonial dress) with black shoulder-boards on the jacket. (...black is always in vogue, ja, immer so, Meinen Herren)...

The black insignia fields up the lapels of the ceremonial outfit were decorated with miniature emblems of military construction troops, made of a light yellow alloy. The same emblem was repeated in a larger size on the forearm part of the jacket's left sleeve, but already without any metal impurities.



The Brief Heraldic Explication of the Constbatt Emblem

'Battalion Commander pours forth Thunder-and-Lightning;
Ensign trots like a squirrel in the Wheel;
I dropped the Anchor and don't care a fuck,
They won't urge me onward
Not even with the fucking Bulldozer.'

~ ~ ~

But let's return to the other parts of the fatigue or 'everyday wear' because it was donned every day, being replaced once a year. It's upper part (the piss-cutter) may be put aside, being already outlined in general terms.

The innermost layer of those sheathing a constbatter were underpants and a tank top (in winter long-sleeved undershirt and long johns).

These next to the skin items at the following layer (moving outward) had a composite cover of the khaki cotton jacket without any shoulder boards (in case you got promoted to any rank distinguished by a number of yellow stripes across the shoulder board, it was your responsibility to get the needed insignia and fix it in place).

Let's start with the top composite part of the second layer—the jacket.

Five round buttons of light green plastic had no holes but a single protruding eyelet in the underbelly so as to save the button's entire convex face for the relief image of pentacle star with the same Siamese twins—a hammer and sickle in a crisscross position—in the center.

They were sewn onto the right side of the jacket, opposite the vertical row of horizontal buttonholes regularly spaced on the left side.

The jacket's hems reached mid-thigh, and on the sides, just below the waist, were straight, fairly deep, but not patch pockets, protected by wide flaps from clogging with soil when a constabatter is in a deep hole, digging.

The buttons in the wide cuffs of the sleeves completely replicated the chemical composition and design of the forward-facing buttons, despite being three times smaller.

Under the left side of the jacket, at heart level, was an inside pocket made of khaki canvas.

The trousers (the second component of the fatigue) were a proud manifestation of all-conquering Pragmatism—two cotton tubes tapering downward, reinforced at the knees with patches for durability and longevity of the item.

some proud manifestation of the ideals of pragmatism—two cotton pipes of legs, narrowing downwards, overlaid with large patches on knees for hardening and prolonging the service life of the whole item. Two upright pockets on the hips had no flaps and the small smooth buttons of emblematic to operate the fly.

(Just for the record. The lower leg openings, used for passing the legs through, were provided with wide, strong straps sewn across the foot. However, this elegant addition was cut off at once so that they wouldn't fuck your brains nor chafe your soles.)

The vertical hip pockets (one on each) had no flaps, nor did

the small buttons used to control the fly ('closed-open') have any emblematic decorations.

In winter, your piss-cutter swapped for a gray faux fur hat with earflaps. Flapplaces at the tips of the long enough faux earflaps allowed the hat to be styled in four distinct ways:

1. 'ears up' style, aka the Crown of Solomon;
2. 'ears below the nape' aka the Humble Rabbit;
3. 'ears wide open' style, aka the Proud Petrel Weathering a Storm;
4. 'ears about the jawline' style, aka the Sparring Partner.

A jacket quilted with parallel seams, aka fooflo jacket, was the outermost and only winter/third layer of the uniform. Vertical seams an inch apart, used to secure the wool padding in between the course fabric softer lining, gave the quilted jacket the appearance of both an ancient suit of armor and a concentration camp prisoner's uniform. But, naturally, in a consistent monochromatic khaki color scheme.

Instead of a quilted jacket, a soldier might wear a trench coat with an unstitched, smooth surface. It was superior to the quilted jacket in many ways.

First, it was lined with twice as much wool and therefore warmer. Second, it reached mid-thigh, protecting the groin and buttocks from the harsh winter weather.

As for the 'paradt crap,' a double-breasted greatcoat of woolen felt was worn over it in winter to complete the ceremonial dress ensemble appropriate to the season.

The greatcoat ended just below the knees and had a pair of vertically parallel rows (one of which was decorative) of yellow metal buttons (yes, with the same relief of the pregnant star, etc.) on the chest.

Behind, at the rump, the greatcoat had a short transverse strap with a pair of decorative buttons on the edges. Below it, at the average rectum level, began a vertical slit—to have extra legroom for a revved gait, when needed, and for other related needs.

And finally, a crucial detail—a wide waist belt with a heavy metal buckle, aka blakha, which could be used for any number of purposes: be it an entrenching tool or a highly lethal weapon in a fight, a kinda flail on the wrist. The belt was not intended to hold up the soldier's trousers, but solely to gird the jacket or greatcoat. When in the dress uniform, it was discreetly worn under the straight jacket, just in case. That, in a nutshell, is how a military construction worker, aka a constbatter, dressed.

True, we, the spring conscription of 1973, initially had the honor of wearing the classic Russian and Red Army-style tunics (donned exclusively over the head, with a stand-up collar, which had been inherited and lying around in Soviet Army warehouses. Later, when we wore them out completely, and those turned into extreme rarity, the 'pheasants' pissed with steam desperate to find one like it, which you wouldn't see on anyone else.

A comparative analysis of the presented outfit components demonstrates that the most idiotic item is the peaked cap with a hard visor—which you can't sleep in or on, and it's impossible

to pull it down over your ears.

~ ~ ~

The barracks entryway was through a vestibule attached from outside (in the middle of the long sidewall). This narrow hallway (3 m x 3 m) is paved with large tiles the color of wet ash. The ceiling of proportionate dimensions, allows you to brotherly touch its plywood. Two vestibule walls, reaching one meter height, give way to beam-framed glass panes; the other two have doors, one opposite the other.

Below the step in front of the outside door, a rectangle of parallel welded rebar rods (cross-section 12 mm) covers a shallow cemented pit—a place for dirt to fall into, when scraped off boots against the rods.

In 3 meters further out the vestibule and exactly its size, is a gazebo without walls, but with meter-tall sides. Four posts at the corners support a hipped roof. Within, along the gazebo's three plank sides is a bench made of a triad of beams. In the center of the concrete floor is another pit, this time round and with no grating, for the personnel to throw their cigarette butts into, and the on-duty soldier would scoop them out later.

To the right of the gazebo, a portable three-meter-long pipe, positioned horizontally on legs appropriate for its intended height, allows several soldiers to simultaneously rest their feet on the support provided by the pipe while polishing their boots.

Forgotten anything? Oh, right! The grass flanking the asphalt path around the barracks.

When the sergeants get too hot to drill us in the torrid sun on the parade ground, surrounded by the mess hall, the lontrine, the endwalls of three barracks and the gate, or too tired by driving home the spirit and letter of the brochure 'Regulations of the Internal Service of the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union,' they give the order 'At ambrosia!'

Of course, I remember ambrosia from my childhood. Then and there (by the Titan the Boiler) it made me envious of the eternally youthful gods of Olympus, who guzzled it down by the mug at their feasts!

However, in our complicated world, it's increasingly difficult to find a steadfast foothold—the godly drink turns into a trowaway piece of paper bearing a hazy black-and-white picture of some plant and the call in bold to find and liquidate the spiller of dangerous hay fever.

'At ambrosia!' is one of too few commands we're glad to hear, because the sergeants disappear for an hour, and we lie in the grass, and can leisurely get to know each other...

... .

I'm the only one from Konotop here; the others were drafted from other cities—Bryn, Shostka, Krolevets—in the Sumy Region we all share.

Accidentally, the entire spring draft of MCU-11 is from Ukraine. The Dnepropetrovsk guys had arrived before us. They'd already completed their training and been assigned to the battalion's companies. Taking advantage of the sergeants'

absence, a couple of the Dnepropetrovsk guys snuck into the gazebo, picking larger cigarette butts from the round pit where we'd tossed them at the command 'Form up!'

No one really knew how or why the grass in the blurry picture became an outlaw. Combing through the military unit's grounds hadn't led to the discovery of the two-faced Ambrosia, but the idle chatter somehow distracted from the thoughts of the two-year eternity pressed upon us...

~ ~ ~

The newly donned outfits were fraught with pitfalls when executing the commands 'Lights-out!' and 'Reveille!'—the buttons either wouldn't fit or got stuck in the buttonholes. On the advice of a competent buddy, Vitya Streliaanny from Shostka, at breakfast in the mess hall I slipped through the loops of my fly and cuffs the handle of an aluminum spoon. Creaking, it finally slipped through, the squeaky key cracked the problem without a drop of lubrication: the stubborn buttons started to get in and out in a twist tempo.

And where on earth do people get so much knowledge?

. . . .

The immediate goal of our endless drill training on the parade ground was to sell ourselves on the upcoming day of our Oath-taking. Three platoons were trained to march, but the marching song was just one for all. That very one aired daily by the All-Union Radio Station 'Mayak' in their concerts upon request. No less than twice a day. The Soviet Union was doomed to learn it.

No matter where they scooped you up—from Konotop, Anadyr, or Vladivostok—you inevitably knew that:

'In two winters,
Merely in two winters,
In two summers,
Merely in two summers
I'll do my honest service in the army
And come back to you...'

The first platoon, at the command 'Halt! One-two!' stopped pounding the parade ground with the soles of their boots and shut up this hoarse, off-key chorus.

Without a moment's delay, the second platoon would stomp onto the same ground with the roar of the same quality. The jaunty marching song would turn unbearably long. Eventually, they'd cut there wail-and-stomp.

Now, dear radio listeners, for those who's managed to survive yet...

We, the third platoon, would whack the ground with our boots, yelling about the third pair of winters and springs, which felt like total overkill. The recruits chuckled, the sergeants of the first and second platoons laughed openly, and ours was visibly nervous...

When I told him I could prepare another song for us, but I needed a pen and paper, he didn't immediately understand what I was talking about. However, he dismissed me from the parade ground to benefit our platoon by means of volunteer mental toil.

For stationery, as instructed by the sergeant, I turned to the

on-duty soldier guarding the nightstand at the entrance, whose drawer indeed contained a pen and some paper...

... .

Entering whichever barracks, the first thing caught with your glimpse is a soldier standing next to a nightstand. This soldier is the on-duty private, and the nightstand is his post. From that position post, he is to yell 'Company! Attention!' whenever an officer enters the barracks. Two privates stand guard for the entire day, taking turns at the nightstand every four hours. Before the company's mealtime, one of them (who isn't by the nightstand) goes to the mess hall to set the tables for his fellow soldiers, under the supervision of the company on-duty sergeant.

These three (the company on-duty sergeant and the pair of on-duty privates) are called a 'detail' and in the mornings, before breakfast, they relieve the previous detail, to be relieved by the next one after 24 hours.

... .

Walking to the end of the barracks, I turned into a room of two names. The lieutenant, the company political deputy commander, called it 'Lenin Room' because the walls were lined not with ordinary plywood but with chipboard. Besides, in its corner theree hung a yellow-brown icon with a minimalist profile of the Leader of the Revolution.

His bald head and pointed wedge-beard would instantly make you recognize the bugger in any stylized brushstrokes conveying signs of any racial background. The further to the East, the

slanter became the optics slits, while Lenins from the Baltic republics looked reserved and thoughtful. And Kuba n murals are quite different kettle of fish...

However, for a soldier, this was a utility room, aka utilra, thanks to wall outlets for an iron or electric razor, the table, and the wall mirror wide enough to reflect two pairs of constbatters' soap lathered pans.

However, this happened in the mornings and evenings, and now, due to the daytime, the utilra was empty. There weren't any problems with the melody; everyone knew the eternally popular hit even without Mayak the Radio Station:

'Maroosya, a black-haired girl,

Picked gelder rose berries:

One-two-three!

In her garden in the morn...'

However, not everyone knows that this song originally appealed to the fellow to finally unharness those darn horses... and, therefore, it's used to adaptations:

'Our parade march is the best,

And our song's the loudest,

That's the tune

Of our platoon!...'

Sitting over a piece of paper, I twirled the pen in my fingers, twirling the words in mind, adjusting them this way and that. And gradually, the cross of Lenin chapel and utilra around me, the smell of acetone from my unworn uniform, and the stinging pain

in my right foot, rubbed raw by a merciless boot, faded. I went AWOL from the army...

And, yes, we learned it and sang it quite bravely...

~ ~ ~

At the end of the day, the recruits had a moment to smoke in the gazebo (those who managed to find room to sit on the 3-beam bench) and around it. The sergeant major of the fourth company, a man of about forty, with a round, good-natured face and a taut potbelly, was passing by.

He stopped to ask where we'd been drafted from. He probably just wanted to while away the half hour before departure—at five o'clock, all the sergeants major, officers, and other commanders, along with two pairs of women from the accounting department at unit headquarters, were being transported to Stavropol. Only the on-duty officer remained in the detachment for the night.

One of us, named Vanya, seeing the humane attitude of the senior in rank, asked with a fawning smile, 'Comrade sergeant major, can they discharge me for this?' He bowed his head pressing his index finger against the wide scar on his crown, visible through the stubble of his shaved hair.

'You fucking smartass, you found a way to avoid the draft?' the sergeant major replied. 'Some fucking professor!' — A broad, thick palm slapped approvingly Vanya between the shoulder blades.

The resounding spank bent Vanya's spine in a backward arch twisting his mouth in pain, 'Ouch!'

The personnel readily laughed at the superior's witticism...
And as for the tactical exercises, I even enjoyed them.

All three platoons of the 'training' formed into a single column and marched from the unit's location to a field near the MCU-11 pigsty.

The sergeants explained that the 'flash' meant the detonation of an atomic bomb, and the personnel who chooses to survive were to drop down, head toward the announced flash.

After the command 'Run, march!' the entire column broke into an awkward trot, till one of the sergeants yelled, 'Flash on the right!'

With animated exclamations and addressless curses, we all fell to the grass in disarray. The drilled column repeated this prone position several times.

(... an eternity later, when we ourselves had already become 'grandpas', and the guys drafted with me recalled those 'flash on the left!', 'flash on the right!' as an ordeal and mockery of innocent 'greenhorns', I didn't understand them... And I still don't. Running across a summer field, tumbling in the green grass, when you have the desire and strength for it—it's pure joy!

'How young we were!

How young we were!')

~ ~ ~

After tireless, intensive training, which demanded the selfless dedication of all physical, moral, and mental strength over the course of four unforgettable days, we took the Military Oath.

Although I still don't know from whom, but the Ministry of Defense knows best. Anyway, we became an indisputable part of the Armed Forces of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

No, our hands weren't trembling in the grip on any automatic or melee weapon, such a traditional attribute of the most solemn ritual in the Soviet Army. We simply took turns stepping out of line in the trampled grass to approach the table on the path of black, crumbly asphalt. There, we pick up a sheet of paper with the Military Oath from the tabletop, read it aloud, and put it back.

Then we signed another sheet (the lieutenant would indicate the exact spot), returned to line, turned about (no, not waiting for the command, so as not to disrupt anyone's pace), and stood facing the long wall of the barracks, made of white sand-lime brick laid in shiner style.

Behind the table, facing us, with their backs to the wall, stood a pair of officers. If someone wasn't quite comfortable with the printed text while taking the Military Oath (from whom?!), they didn't bother with it, just mumble something and put your shaky tick where indicated.

At the end of the ceremony, the lieutenant asked if anyone present had a medical degree. After a few seconds of subdued misunderstanding and confusion in the ranks, a young soldier stepped forward and reported that he had been assisting a paramedic at his village's medical center. He had been assigned to serve in the fourth company, along with three professional drivers from our draft.

(... oh, how many times over the next two years I cursed myself in the most unambiguous terms for not stepping forward in response to the senior lieutenant's question and reporting three years of rigorous preparation for admission to a medical institute's neurosurgery department!...)

Then they told us who would serve where. I was assigned to the first company, a company of bricklayers. The plasterers were assigned to the second and third companies. The fourth was where drivers and other personnel with tricky assignments served.

We were led to the barracks according to our assignments and handed over to the commanders of our 'young' platoons. Those showed us vacant beds in the quarters of an empty, quiet barracks, as at that time of day, the company's personnel were busy at construction sites in the city...

~ ~ ~

In all of nature, there are hardly any sounds more disgusting than the thousand-fold cursed command 'Company! Reveille!'

(... looking ahead, I must confess—as an on-duty private, I waited until the hands of the large glass square clock above the nightstand formed a perfectly vertical line, so as to take a deep breath and scream in the most vile voice I could muster:

‘Company-ee! Reveille!’

An eye for an eye. An ear for a raped ear...)

After my first night in the first company barracks, of all my personal belongings, the only thing left in the nightstand of the

quarters where I slept was a half-opened pack of Neva razor blades, worth 25 kopecks when untouched.

The loss of my toothbrush, and toothpaste, and my safety razor didn't plunge me into the same depression as the disappearance of 30 kopecks from my pants pocket, which had been sleeping on a stool in the central aisle—those kopecks would have been enough for two packs of Prima cigarettes... I recollected the Dnepropetrovsk guys picking cigarette butts in the gazebo pit of the 'training barracks'...

Having carefully and tightly wrapped the mattress of my bed with the blanket (otherwise the on-duty sergeant would yank it off and demand to make the bed better), I hanged an army waffle towel around my neck, like everybody else, and left the barracks in the general stream of khaki-colored soldiers heading to the latrine.

Over each of the ten holes in the floor, someone was straining in a deep squat before a queue of two or three fellows in wait, and even reaching the wall-length urethral trough foresaw a bit of a push-and-shove. The assembly filled the crowded space with mingled sounds of gurgling, farts, and the exchange of news from the previous day.

‘So, what he was? Plastered?’

‘You know yoursel.’

‘Got caught then?’

‘Who the fuck knows. They're looking for him.’

‘He'll be caught.’

‘You know yoursel.’

At the wash basin outside, they broadcast the same news, but with more details.

By eight o'clock, the on-duty sergeants herded the 'youngsters' and 'ladles' from their companies onto the parade ground, conducted general exercises, led them for breakfast, and again formed the personnel into loose ranks, five deep, on the parade ground. Except for the 'grandpas,' who didn't give a fuck about all this hooey and only left the barracks for the mess hall.

~ ~ ~

About eight o'clock, the battalion commander's 'goat' and a small bus carrying officers and accountancy ladies pulled up at the gate. The 'grandpas' formed up in the rear ranks of their companies.

The battalion commander, aka ComBat, his deputy for political affairs, aka DepuPolit, and the chief of staff, aka ChiStaff, walked to the edge of the parade ground, in the middle, the right corner of the mess hall behind their backs.

The arriving officers headed the ranks of their respective companies, while the accountancy ladies rounded the corner of the third company toward the fourth company barracks—half of that barracks was occupied by the MCU-11 headquarters, with the entrance just on the other side.

The morning parade has begun. The on-duty officer—his right elbow raised to shoulder height, the tightly clenched fingers of his straightened hand three centimeters short of the peak of

his cap—reports to the senior officer in the commanding triad that no incidents or violations of military discipline have been recorded during his tour of duty at Military Construction Unit No. 11.

The chief of staff orders 'two steps forward!' and 'turn around!' to two soldiers from the third company. Those obeyed the command, to face the formation. Yesterday, these two violated military discipline at their construction sites in the city. The major announces their punishment—ten days of detention in the guardhouse. Each of them.

The gray-haired battalion commander, twitching his horn-rimmed glasses from side to side, delivers a torrid condemnation.

This pearl of oratory, like his other masterpieces, is beyond comprehension due to a chronic brain leak that allows him to stumble no further than the middle of a sentence, from where he leaps to the next, also halfway through.

A scattering of such unique pearls... afucomuzza... will twist the brains of any decoder; they'll have to cart him off to the nearest military hospital, straitjacketed, repeating, 'What the hell was that?' And there, out of compassion, they'll administer sedatives, and the double dose will have an effect, slowing and suppressing the poor man's mutterings, his tongue losing its flexibility: complex subordinate clauses without any main clauses at all?... a lost and found apocrypha of the opening of 'The Tale of Igor's Campaign'?...

Along the asphalt path behind the Battalion Commander,

the Separate Company advances to eat its grub in the mess hall. They don't care a fuck about this morning parade; they're a separate company, reporting directly to higher command. They're plumbers.

Finally, the Political Officer informs the Battalion Commander that enough is enough. The Battalion Commander lets out a couple of muddled final afucamuzzas and goes quiet. The on-duty officer hands over duty to another officer for the next 24 hours. The new assistant to the officer taking over collects the belts from the troublemakers, and they trudge toward the checkpoint to be locked in the 'guardroom'—a 3 m x 3 m x 2 m space with a tin-clad door, no windows or bulbs, yet with a deck for stretching out.

The chief of staff orders the remaining personnel to 'straight ahead!' and march to their stations. We gush through the gates, where trucks are already waiting. The batcom perked up—a fragment of a sentence, slipped out when he wasn't quite there yet, plopped back into the lieutenant colonel's brain neurons: 'afucamuzza!'

Well, fuck you, motherfucker! The scam is over! We're already loading into the trucks—a kick into the tire, hands grabbing the side, swinging over, and—pushing forward in the truck back, lest the next jumper ram in your behind. Let's go!

The gate's moved off, and to the left, the white wall runs connecting white masonry pillars. Who cares there's nothing to sit on—we're holding on to the sides and each other, we're going

to the city!

~ ~ ~

Actually, it turned out to be the outskirts, and near the construction site where we were taken, the remains of a former forest belt were still present. The construction site turned out to be a nine-story apartment building of two sections with separate entrances. The walls (laid of white sand-lime brick) already reaching half the planned height.

Our squad leader orders pallets to be placed around a white hillock of sand-lime bricks, piled high by dump trucks. We are to stack them on pallets.

Each pallet is simply four pieces of thick lumber, each 1.2 meters long, nailed to two crossbars (90 cm x 6 cm x 6 cm). These serve as the pallet's piers, spaced ten centimeters from the edges to allow the steel slings of a tower crane to be tacked underneath.

However, the pallet must first be stacked. A load of twelve rows of bricks (about 300 bricks, all together) will amount to approximately one cubic meter of masonry. On the pallet, the bricks must be laid in a staggered pattern, bridging the gaps in one row with the bricks of the next. The trick will prevent from the load spilling down when the crane lifts the pallet to the masons on the walls. It's a simple job, but the fine silicate dust eats into the skin of our palms, and the fingertips we use to pull bricks from the pile. They are worn down before we've even finished stacking the first pallet. The hands starting to itch, and

for some reason they didn't give us protective gloves...

Grisha Dorfman, with the air of a dejected palm reader, studies the fate lines on his palms... For some reason, on both at once, not one after the other... Or is he looking for discrepancies?

Besides, the white silicate dust clings to our outfit, and it's a pain to shake it off, but they didn't even offer us overalls...

... .

Return transportation to the unit's location for lunch. Leaving the highway at a fork outside the city, the truck rushes past a group of industrial-type buildings off to the right. Our brigade-squad erupts in a wild shriek-and-whistle. The guys wave their piss-cutters at the industrial hub—a mob of infatuated fans greeting the jog of their football team out into the field.

Vitya Strelianny reluctantly explains that this isn't an industrial hub, but the Zone. Now it sinks in—the corporate spirit of those who served their time and ate their balanda rations.

(... 30% of the construction battalion personnel were citizens who had served prison terms for moderate crimes before being drafted into the Soviet Army.

The remaining 70% were unfit for combat duty due to an unacceptably low educational level, health issues, or, like me, unsuccessful attempts to dodge the draft.

At the temporary lucid moments amid his chronic dementia, Battalion Commander of MCU-11 would occasionally utter undeniable truths: 'A rabble of cripples and criminals,

afucamuzza!"...)

They brought us home from work at dusk. The evening roll call after supper was conducted by the commander of the first company, Captain Pissak. The company formed two lines from one end of the barracks to the other, with the 'youngsters'—so the rule—in the front row.

... .

Facing the line, Pissak read the names, not raising his head from the list, but listening attentively to the responses:

'Here!'

'Here!'

'Here!'

He didn't need to look; he recognized each 'here!' by ear, and by the tone of their voices, he could determine the soldier's general state at that moment.

When the roll call reached the greenhorns, Pissak would approach and stand opposite each new 'here!' for a few seconds, silently scanning your face with an unblinking gaze from under the black peak of his cap, then call out the following one.

And—that's it, his photographic memory has you fixed for two years to come, and a month later, instead of 'What's your name, private?' he'll say, 'Private Ogoltsoff!'

'Yes, Comrade Captain!'

'Do you act a master thief, Ogoltsoff?'

'No, Comrade Captain!'

'Why does the belt blakha dangle to your balls then? Sergeant

Batochkin!’

‘Yes, Comrade Captain!’

‘Private Ogoltsoff has five extra duty assignments.’

‘Yes, Comrade Captain!’

Well, yes, when we were approaching the nine-story building under construction, I loosened the belt on my tunic, just a little. How was I to know he'd watched from behind the ruined forest belt trees? But he popped up and started twirling my belt, one duty assignment for every 360-degree turn of the buckle.

. . . .

That day, I worked my ass off to curry favor with the sergeant, who sent me to plane the ground for the curb.

I carried on like a fucking shock-worker! Shoveled for at least two hundred meters, hoping the sergeant would wink at those work assignments to reward my diligence.

‘Two constbatters full of vigor
substitute a backhoe digger...’

A couple of passersby on the nearby sidewalk were deeply impressed by my zeal; they approached me and offered to share a bottle of wine they were carrying somewhere.

‘No, thanks! I can't.’

During the evening call roll, the sergeant silently beckoned me with his finger, ‘To the floor fatigue!’

. . . .

‘To the floor fatigue!’ means—when everyone's settled into their beds, sweep the central aisle and the passages in the

quarters, fetch water from the wash basin by the latrine, and wash the barracks' entire sixty-seven-fucking-meters, including its quarters, utility room, and vestibule.

Do this in two stages.

Step one: with a rag drenched heartily, wash every goddamn centimeter of the linoleum floor.

Step two: thoroughly rinse the rag, wring it dry, and repeat Step one. And the more often you change the water when washing the floors, the better your chances of avoiding the on-duty sergeant's order to wash again because of the cloudy streaks on the linoleum.

Then go and report to him that the order is complete and awaiting inspection. And if he accepts it on the first try, you can take a late lights-out and be glad you weren't sent to the mess hall tonight, where other 'fatigued' like you haven't yet returned from.

Undress, lie down, and the moment your head hits the pillow, you'll hear:

‘Company-ee! Reveille!’

~ ~ ~ no steadier groupies than muses

‘Vanya was carteed away to the nutshouse.’

‘Which Vanya?’

‘C’mon, you know—the scar on the crown of his head.’

‘What for?’

‘He refused to get up at the raiveille another morning, said, there’s a mouse nested in his boots.’

‘Faking or went bonkers?’

‘Who the fuck knows? They’ll check his head.’

. . . .

Our first day off happened in August. Until that day, we’d been working on site from half past eight until dark. And then, out of the blue, we spent the whole Sunday at the unit’s quarters.

The ‘youngsters’ washed their dusty, stinking cotton uniforms. They hung the laundry on the white brick wall along the deserted road and flaunted from barracks to barracks in black underwear, white tank tops, and black tarpaulin boots, like those sporty Fritzes with automatic Schmeissers in the movie ‘One Chance in a Thousand.’

Before our first day off, our brigade-squad dropped the habit of whistle-and-yell salutes to the roadside Zone at the fork from the highway. And on cloudless mornings, on our way to the latrine, we no more stood still, gazing at an unseen wonder—the snow on the distant peak of Mount Elbrus, hanging in the sky above the pigsty.

Private Alimonov, aka Alimosha, taught me to finish off a burning Prima cigarette’s butt I’d borrowed for a final pull from my comrades, until there remained three millimeters of smoldering paper.

And one time, we even got paid. The sergeant major of the first company, a gray-haired man in his fifties, quite drunk, would call us one by one into his supply room and give each a ruble and about 50 kopecks. The rest in kind—a piece of white rag for undercollars, a couple of cans of shoe polish, and a spool

of white thread for sewing on the undercollar after washing it.

But in his payroll we signed, of course, for 3 rubles 80 kopecks flat. Because everyone knows, ask whoever you choose, that a private's salary in the Soviet Army is 3 rubles 80 kopecks per month. The axiom is more indisputable than the statement of the Volga River flowing into the Caspian Sea.

... .

In the middle of summer, at the evening roll call, the company's political officer announced that they had sent a ref my wife, at her request, to confirming that I was serving my army hitch.

'You didn't bragged you were married, buddy.'

'You didn't ask.'

(... they had no time for that in the juvenile detention centers...)

~ ~ ~

Olga, Konotop, the Plant, dancing—it all began to seem unreal, like dreams from another, distant life.

Letters came from her:

'... and when in the evening I see girls going for walks with their boyfriends but only I'm always alone it's so unfair that I cry... '

My mother wrote letters too, and my sister and brother sent a couple each. I don't know what to write in response. 'Hello, I received your letter, thank you very much... '

And then? What next? '... I'll serve my hitch, and in 2

summers-winters—I'll be back...'?

Nothing comes to mind. And I've even forgotten how think the simplest thought without swearing. The words somehow don't stick together. Degenerated like a fucked up fucker, it's just fucking incredible.

But that's a shame, they are my close folks, the closest I've ever had, and still I feel a kinda estrangement.

Estrangement?

Well, like the one I felt when, deep in the twilight, we were sitting in a truck back, under the wall of the unfinished nine-story section looming white. We waited for a grandpa bricklayer who hadn't yet changed into his outfit. Another grandpa soldier, already in the back, started picking on Misha Khmelnitsky—for no fucking reason, just to pass the time—because Misha's.

Misha averted his eyes and muttered that he wasn't a Ukrainian, but only his last name. The other 'greenhorns' remained sullenly silent, and the 'grandpa' started sneering—what a shitty draft from Ukraine, they couldn't even bring a single Ukrainian!

'Okay, so I'm a Ukrainian, so what?'

Only when these words echoed strangely from the brick wall, white even through the darkness, did it dawn on me that I'd said it. It's strange to hear yourself speak from the outside, especially when you least expect it. There's a strange sense of estrangement there.

'Grandpa' shut up. And really—what of? Or even of anything?

... .

Later, Misha Khmelnitsky opened up to me, as to a kinda protector, warding off the threat looming over the nest, that he, too, was married. And he didn't skimp on intimacy, like, he'd always wanted to piss in his wife's cunt afterward, just for fun, but it just wouldn't work.

I remained silent, but secretly rejoiced that the evolution of Homo sapiens had provided an anatomical mechanism to prevent the crappy jokes of such completely fucked up nuts, some nasty fuckers-jokesters...

Of course, my comrades in arms didn't know terms like 'evolution' or 'sapiens,' but they could easily rattle off the unrhymed lines of any article from the USSR Criminal Code.

'Which one were you convicted under?'

'Article 607, Part 2, Section B, under aggravating circumstances.'

'What fucking bosh! There's no such article!'

'No bosh. It's introduced recently. For cannibalism.'

... .

As it turns out, a tattoo isn't just a cute, romantic decoration, but also an esoteric code—for those in the know, a record, and a chronicle of what the wearer of this tattooed skin was convicted. The rung he's climbed up to in the Zone Table of Ranks. And those who got the full brunt of it and received a life sentence get 'Slave of the USSR' tattooed on their foreheads.

But then again, not everyone is the same. One of my

non-combatant buddies returned from the Zone with a neat explanation across his upper arm: a discreet, in unassuming font, 3-word admonition: 'in vino veritas.' With a tattoo like that, you could easily pass for a PhD. Some fucking Latinist...

But there are also certain taboos. A tattoo not answering one's rank, attempted to falsify one's authority by means of a tattoo exceeding one's thievish status in the common criminal underworld, is punishable by cruel, brutal reprisals; sometimes even capital punishment.

And you have to be careful with the word 'waffles' too. After that half-pay cut from the sergeant major of the first company, Alimosha entered into the militar-trade store holding the gate and, pointing his finger at a pack of waffles, said to the saleswoman, 'Give me some of those checkered cookies'. But the ploy didn't save him from teasing by his fellow soldiers. 'What's up, Alimosha, you craving waffles, huh?'

'Get the fuck off my back', Alimosha snapped in a delicate whisper behind the saleswoman's back as she reached for the waffles.

In the parlance of the Zone, the name of this innocent food product has long meant semen swallowed during a blowjob. Oldtimers' play on words.

(... and how can you not get filled with admiration and delight, not be touched by the unpretentious—yet, for all their artless modesty, full of sparkling poetic ardor—duelings of the mocking ditty couplets of Zone folklore?!

'I have fucked you at the gate,
And can present the certificate!...'

'I have fucked you in the grass dew,
Here's the reference for you!...'

'I have fucked you in the raspberries
With all of your dumb references!...'

And the final, victorious period:
'No trumps? No ace?
Grab my dick and wipe your face!...')
... .

Besides the wordplay, there were also practical jokes...

Standing at the gate after lunch, we waited for the truck. Sasha Khvorostyuk and Vitya Strelianny shaved each other's heads last night with safety razors, and now their milky-white, hair-free scalps stand out in stark contrast to their brick-tanned mugs.

'But if I get a notch on the top of my head, will I look like a dick?' Vitya asks me.

'Don't worry, buddy, you're a perfect replica without any notch.'

'Look, do me a favor, grab my ears and jerk me off, please?'

You can't say 'no' to your buddy. I squeeze his ears and jerk them up and down.

'Tu-tu-tu... '

I didn't get it right away—a white foam of saliva, in tiny spittle drops, bespattered the chest of my tunic.

'I came', he explains.

A truck with a team of plasterers in the back pulls up in front of the checkpoint. The Dnipropetrovsk guys, of our draft, enter the open gates. Five 'ladles' leap out of the gatehouse door to pounce on the burly 'youngster' like a pack of wolves on a bull.

But proving too much for them, he manages to fight them off, and the pack retreats, hurling obscene threats. The bull picks up his piss-cutter, knocked off in the scuffle.

Both the 'greenhorns' from the big fellow's team, and we abide by to a non-interference policy, remaining bystanders to the internal squabbles of the third company. The truck driver honks for us to jump in the back...

~ ~ ~

The laying of the walls of the nine-story building went on around the clock: from the morning in natural daylight, and at night under a string of electric lights suspended above the work section of the wall. Two of fellows of our draft were transferred to the night shift—a lanky guy who'd worked as a bricklayer back in civilian life, and me.

He was given a trowel, and he also laid bricks, while I expertly carried mortar from the box with a shovel and slapped it on the wall wherever I was told.

Stavropol nights are chilly even in summer, so we donned threadbare pea coats and quilted fooflo jackets, worn by who

knows who and for how many five-year plans.

In the darkness beyond the wall, beyond the garland, the cabin of a motionless tower crane looms, and within it, the vague blur of the crane operator's face. The bricklayers take turns coaxing him to lift a kettle of drinking water. But he's too lazy to climb down the long ladder inside the tower to fill the kettle from the tap on the water pipe next to the mortar hillock dumped in the day, and then climb back up.

Finally, one of the bricklayers climbs onto a pallet of bricks, his hands grasping the steel cables of the 'spider' (the bundle of four iron ropes with hooks used to lift a load), his feet landing on a pair of spider hooks dangling there. The crane operator fires up his machine...

With a whine and a crackle of electric motors, the crane lifts and carries off its boom, taking away the figure of the fellow in between 2 spider's dangling cables. The remaining pair is taut by his feet standing on its hooks. The rattle-and-clang crane immerses him to the depth of 25 meters below, where a lone bulb casts a mournful light on the tall pile of mortar in the middle of the dump spot.

(Safety regulations, huh? The royal troops know best...)

From down there, the crane lifted an additional pallet of bricks, with a victory trophy teapot put on the top row. The bricklayers settled the pallet onto the scaffolding and shouted to the crane operator to pull the boom away.

A stray hook from the floating 'spider' caught the 'youngster'

bricklayer by the strap on his trench coat waist as he hunched over the masonry, and hauled him up, trowel in hand. The soldier's ascent to the heaven was not exactly high—a meter above the scaffolding, no more—because whistles and cries of 'Down!' arose from all sides.

The crane operator obeyed the command, and that was the end of it. But what did the poor fellow's soul have to go through while he was hanging in midair, kicking his legs in all directions, screaming, 'Halt! Halt!'?

(... it must have been an accident, because the 'grandpas' on the line were also shouting 'Halt! Down!' to the crane operator...)

Then the foreman of the bricklayers went to the far corner of the section under construction. Standing at the edge of the masonry, he busily urinates down onto the remains of the forest belt, invisible in the darkness. The arced spout from the apex of the parabola flashed the dash-lined reflections of the garland of lightbulbs.

'There's not a nicer sight

Than you pissing from the height... '

When the trickle dried up, the sergeant jumped off the corner and, joining the line of bricklayers, continued with the masonry...

. . . .

But not everyone always gets away with it so bravely...

In daylight, at this same construction site, a pair of soldiers engaged in a playful wrestling match on the edge of the wall of

an unfinished elevator shaft.

Or rather, the bigger one seized the smaller one—big idiots have a natural disposition to stupid frolics. When they both fell into the shaft, and for real, the safety layer of boards on the floor below broke under their combined weight. Thanks to the law of acceleration in free fall, the big guy reached the bottom of the shaft first and splash-crushed to a pulp over heaps of broken brick and other construction debris.

The smaller soldier reached the bottom second and landed on a mat made from the body of the deceased prankster, escaping with multiple fractures. After the hospital, he wasn't discharged, and he served until his demobilization as a guard at various construction sites built by the MCU-11's slave workforce...

... .

Every two to six months, during morning parades, we were read a circular order. Another fatality resulting from yet another malicious violation of safety regulations in the military construction units of the Baku Air Defense District, to which our battalion belonged...

~ ~ ~

All 'youngsters' get fairly pressed and overloaded at the beginning of their service, but our squad turned out to be the 'youngest' of the 'youngsters'. A chain of meanly twined circumstances had brought to so loathsome situation.

First, the ensign, our platoon commander, caught the sergeant, our squad commander, with two bottles of wine from a nearby

grocery store.

What is an ensign, aka a piece (no one added of what exactly, but it was too obvious to entire Soviet Army)?

He's a 'grandpa' who enjoys being a scarecrow (wow! The 'youngsters' fear him) and who's smart enough to figure out that after demobilization, back in civilian life, this cushy life will be over and he'll be a complete nobody.

(... in civilian life, the hierarchy is different...)

These are the motives that prompt the 'grandpa' to stay on for extended military service. Four months at ensign school they'll bust his ass, and then he pops up back at the same unit where he served his conscription. Now there's a starlet in each of his shoulder boards, and not a chance at promotion. He wears his parade crap every day, busts personal's asses, and earns one hundred and twenty rubles a month for this hobby. We can be only happy for a man who has found his place in life.

... .

And now, on the occasion of a successful hunt, the soldiers of our squad have been summoned and gathered from various locations, where each was performing his own combat mission. Someone was laying partitions, someone else was digging a trench, and still another was stacking bricks on a pallet. But then the order came, 'Form up!', next to a pile of rubble at the entrance to the second, still unfinished section.

Our sergeant stands facing our line without his belt—a clear indication of being under arrest. Next to his boots are lined two

0.5-liter bottles with identical ruby stickers. A fair-haired ensign in a short-sleeved dress shirt (it's summer, after all) takes up a position on the left flank of our dusty, dirty, and splattered formation.

So, this young brat, who's not even a 'grandpa' anymore, decided to stage a rant. Like, this traitor to our great socialist Fatherland treacherously abandoned his comrades in arms and deserted to a grocery store, but the vigilant fellow caught him red-handed...

And after he blurted out all this hooey, he stands there, sniffing, and doesn't know what to do next. But apparently, at ensign school, he watched some TV series about the lives of military cadets, where someone got a package from home, and he ate it on the sly, not sharing it with his buddies. However, in the next episode, he's caught, and the school's political officer forces him to eat a chocolate bar in front of his comrades in formation. And that glutton, head bowed, burns with shame and begs for everyone's forgiveness. Watch episode 17 tomorrow, after the news program 'Vremya'...

And now this blond Pestalozzi, with one shabby star in shoulder board, started playing the political officer star of the TV series: 'So you traded your comrades for wine?! Well, well... Then drink it!'

But he didn't take into account that real life is a completely different movie, not like this Central Television crap...

Instead of bowing his head, the sergeant tilted it back and

gurgled from the bottleneck, obeying the order. The ensign froze in place. The line of spectators hungrily pumped their Adam's apples—dry, but in sync with the sergeant's gulps—and he slammed it in without stopping.

He didn't have time for a second shot, though—the ensign came to his senses, took off like a sprinter, and smashed it into a pile of gravel.

The sergeant was taken to his unit and locked in the checkpoint 'guardhouse' room. The next day, he was demoted to private during morning parade, and he returned to the squad as a simple bricklayer, where he worked until our conscription arrived at the MCU-11.

How else could it be? Should he spend ten days in the 'guardhouse' room and eat his bread for nothing? No way! We have a five-year plan, the Party, and the Government have been working on it from top to bottom. With or without the explanatory tattoo across our foreheads, we are all slaves of the USSR...

Our squad was assigned a new commander, and he's just a 'ladle', named Prostomolotov. 'Call me just... Molotov.'

Some intellectual guy, glasses on his nose, knows about Molotov, too. But he's just a 'ladle'! And although he was soon promoted to corporal, the 'grandpas' bossed him around as they pleased, and he didn't dare utter a word about at least occasionally loading another squad of 'youngsters', for a change.

. . . .

Under these circumstances, after a workday, instead of lights out, our squad would be assigned to the kitchen. And we peeled potatoes so that the entire personnel plus the Separate Company would have something to eat the next day, despite the potato peeler's failure...

All night long, until five in the morning. The last sack, of course, was carried out, in portions, to the trash, six buckets of it, and sprinkled with peelings on top, so the kitchen on-duty ensign wouldn't get it. And then at six—'Company-ee! Reveille!'—morning parade and—march, bitch, to work!

Or, they'd bring us home from work in the evening, straight to the mess hall—eat up quickly, the truck's waiting! And they take it back to the nine-story building, because dump trucks carry alabaster there from the train station, and if it rains, a whole carload of valuable building material will turn useless crap.

And, knee-deep in loose alabaster, we shovel it into the basement of the first section, through an opening in the foundation blocks under the end wall.

And as soon as we've cleared one mound, the next KAMAZ truck arrives with its 13 tons of cargo, and then the next, and the next, and... a very effective way to practically grasp that a railway car has a capacity of 68 tons...

However, inside the basement, this same alabaster must be moved to the adjacent compartment, otherwise it won't all fit.

(... no horror movie can recreate that purple-blue hue on Vasya from Buryn. When he fell asleep on a dune of white

alabaster under the of a basement bulb shedding scrimpy dim light onto his lurid face...)

In short, Just-Molotov, the army saying is right: 'It's better to have a prostitute daughter than a corporal son.'

~ ~ ~

Grisha Dorfman's dad arrived, talked to someone in the headquarters barracks, and when he left, Grisha was transferred to the fourth company. His current rank is tailor.

Very soon, our Grisha is showing off in the 'peshA' outfit, and doesn't even spend the night in the barracks, since he has a room in the sewing workshop in the same building as the boiler house. The 'peshA' is a uniform made of a semi-wool fabric, a sturdier material than cotton, the color of dark swamp mud—another shade of khaki. The 'peshA' is a corporative badge, the prerogative of the aristocrats of conscript service, like the driver of the Combat's 'goat' or the Club projectionist, who also doubles as a postman.

It's good to have a dad who knows how to negotiate...

. . . .

And Vanya, in whose boots the mouse was planning to make a cozy nest, was discharged after all.

The sergeant who escorted him home from the mental hospital later recounted that at the Stavropol train station, Vanya threw his string bag loaded with a newspaper package of victuals onto the floor in the waiting room. He started yelling, 'Run, folks, run! There's a bomb! It's ticking!' People rushed out, and who knows

—a soldier in uniform sounded the alarm!

Well, when the sergeant brought Vanya to his parents' place and was setting off on the return journey, the discharged explained—in a perfectly even tone of voice—as a parting shot: 'Learn, 'pheasant', the way how smart people serve in the army!'

. . . .

So, basically, it was because of all this, on that very first Sunday off in mid-August, that seeking solitude from the beach crowd in tarpaulin boots, I rounded the corner of the Club. Right there I stood still, arrested by the sound of an acoustic guitar through the bars of the window, next to the porch of the locked cinema booth door. Guitar...

I stood listening, although there wasn't much to listen to—someone clumsily trying to play the chords of 'Shyz-gary'. But the rhythm was simply off—someone was thumping away with a balalaika beat. Unable to bear it, I turned back around the corner and entered the Club.

At the end of the hall, on either side of the projection booth's loopholes, are two doors; one of them is wide open, and the sound of a guitar is coming from within.

In the room under the only barred window stands a hard hospital cot. On it sits a soldier with stubble, blending with the wisps of hair that stick out softly from the gaping opening of his overalls. A flattened piss-cutter lies like a flimsy pancake on the crown of his head. His feet are in slippers covered with shaggy hair that has escaped from the legs of his black overalls. A guitar

is in his paws.

Another soldier, also in slippers, sits on a chair with its back pressed against the blank wall opposite.

‘What the fuck you need here?’

‘You wanna play Shokin Blue here. I can show how.’

They exchanged glances: ‘Well, show.’

(... ‘Beauty will save the world...’ Hmm, that’s a bit of a stretch. Beauty is a very vague thing. Music, on the other hand, is a different matter. It’s tangible, capable of performing concrete miracles, building bridges, cutting away the unnecessary.

Instead of the ‘pheasant’ Zameshkevich, the ‘ladle’ Rassolov, and the ‘greenhorn’ Ogoltsoff, there remain simply three guys passing a guitar from hand to hand...)

~ ~ ~

A couple of days later, a ‘youngster’ from Dnepropetrovsk, Sasha Rudko, knocked on the tin-clad door with fingers sore from lime mortar—plaster ‘mud’. Musician Alexander Rudko, who in his civilian life worked as a bass guitarist at the regional philharmonic.

This was the beginning of the creation of the VIA ‘Orion’ in the eleventh military construction unit. Using the equipment and instruments left behind by the musicians, aka labookhs, of yore. The guys went to the headquarters barracks and spoke with the MCU-11 political officer. Alexander was appointed head of the unit’s club. But he never got a uniform of ‘peshA’; he slept in the second company barracks and stood there for evening roll calls...

He could read music and played anything that ever popped up there. He taught us to do the 'mi-me-ma-mo-mu' chant and blinked, painfully and silently, at my poor singing... His big nose was constantly swollen from a rhinorrhea, and he burred.

But he was the Musician...

. . . .

And I began living a double life. After work and a quick supper in the mess hall, I'd turn left—to the Club. Before evening roll call...

'Permission to form up, Comrade Sergeant Major!'

'Why are you late, Ogoltsoff?'

'I was at the Club.'

'And what are you, club-goers, doing there?'

Fawning giggles from the ranks, echoing the hint.

'We're practicing solfeggio there, Comrade Sergeant Major.'

The commander's face froze in stupefied amazement; he'd never encountered such a fucking word in his career. The laughter intensified, but in the opposite direction.

'The unit's political officer is aware, Comrade Sergeant Major.'

'Get in line, suffl... soffle... Son of a bitch!'

. . . .

Well, during working hours, I'm like everyone else...

We were transferred to a five-story building—it was being prepared for delivery. Vitya Novikov and Valik Nazarenko invited me into an empty apartment. They had a bottle of wine.

We shared it from the neck. A forgotten thrill. It all wore off before the evening roll call, and what was there, anyway, between the three of us?

During evening roll call, Captain Pissak sent the on-duty private to the dishwasher for a clean mug to perform an alcohol test.

Moving down the line, Pissak randomly hands soldiers a mug to breathe into. The resulting mixture he consumes alone, meaning sniffs it personally.

He's already ordered two to break ranks and turn around.

When he handed me the mug, I realized I'd been fucked utterly.

Not even waiting for the test I'd given myself away before exhaling by those hot and cold waves running all over me. Pissak had given me five fatibues for loosening my belt, and now I'm fucked beyond salvation.

Captain took a sniff from the mug, sadistically dropped his gaze, and said, 'Well, if a man hasn't been drinking, it's immediately obvious.'

After the roll call, Vitya Strelianny, with a grin, shared, 'You were whiter than a wall.'

As if I don't know myself... Pissak, bitch, what kind of Tom And Jerry was that?

~ ~ ~

And another day off, unbelievable! They even showed a movie this evening. A Polish film, 'Anatomy of Love,' with erotic hints.

Maybe there were more erotic hints in Poland, but by the time the film reached here, a bunch of rippers had hacked it up. Starting with the censors to the pimply projectionists who cut out the film in chunks wherever there flashed a glimpse of naked tits. For close friends and personal use. Morons.

The next morning, in the line facing the urinal channel toward the cesspool, I sadly shook mine from the last drops and silently informed him, amid the general hubbub in the latrine: 'That's how it is, buddy, you'll be just a drain faucet for two years'. And I buttoned up the fly...

At the site, we were hauling construction debris and excess soil from the basement on a stretcher—it's called planing. Everyone was kind of silent, in a pensive mood. The unfortunate consequences of the ripped Polish film, although overall, it didn't seem like a tragedy.

At a smoke break, having nothing better to do, I started pestering Alimosha. He didn't respond, or just gave me curt 4-letter replies, and then suddenly he jumped up at me, punching. I had to fight him off as best I could, and frankly, I'm not any good at the sport.

Then Prostomolotov came into the basement, shouted, 'Halt!' and we took up the stretcher again. I made a couple of trips, and I noticed the pain in my right hand wasn't going away. I must have hit Alimosha's Tatar-Mongolian face with my thumb all wrong...

...

The next morning, my whole hand was swollen, and after

the inspection at the paramedic's office (by the same country bumpkin from our draft, but now in a peshA outfit) the guy took me to the Stavropol military hospital. We reached the city in a truck with some squad, and then took a bus, because public transportation is free for soldiers.

When we arrived at the hospital, he told me to wait and went into some building. It was so nice around here, a lush garden with yellow cherry plum trees. It's a shame I don't have an appetite—my damn hand aches. So, I sat down on a bench in a shady alley between the buildings and fell asleep.

Opening my eyes, I rammed into the sight, right in front of my nose, of a round face in cat-like whiskers. I even flinched, but luckily the bench had a back; it kept me from falling. I glanced again and saw captain's boards on the cat's shoulders. Well, clear as day, he'd spotted a private in his peaceful sleep early in the morning, and came sniffing him to detect the presence of alcohol on his breath.

Then my escort came and took me to another building to have my injured limb checked. They twisted my thumb, and I responded by making a goose hissing, while my free hand patted my left side, like a broken wing.

For these symptoms, they diagnosed me with a fracture, bandaged my hand, put a cast on it, and left me in the hospital.

Thank you, Alimosha! But washing with just my left hand is still not convenient...

~ ~ ~

What could be better than a broken bone? No injections, just lie there and wait for the fracture to heal. The dining room has square tables with four chairs instead of benches. And the food is much better than what we have in the mess hall. It's understandable, because officers get treatment here too.

Of course, the patients are all in pajamas, without insignia. Officers' rooms are on the second floor, while the enlisted personnel are kept in the basement. What difference does it make where you sleep? And it's closer to the mess hall from here; which is right next to us, at the end of the corridor.

The hospital is a quiet and uncrowded place. In my room, besides me and a Georgian named Rezo, there are four free beds.

Rezo's black hair is so long that he can comb it back. A clear sign of a 'grandpa'. He usually holds his left arm close to his side; this pose stems from his patronage of a steppe collective farm, where he was sent as a truck driver. At the camp, he started having an affair with a cook, and her husband stabbed him in the back with a large kitchen knife. Now the cook comes to the hospital to check on the injured man.

They go into the neglected garden, and back in the ward, Rezo offers me some cherry plums from his pajama pocket, but I don't want any, even though my hand in the cast doesn't hurt anymore...

~ ~ ~

And the next door ward is packed. There's even one of our construction battalion's guys there, also a 'grandpa', like Rezo,

but a Russian, and his name is Sanyok. Besides, his hair is light brown, and one eyebrow is missing—a flat scar had licked it away. He was also a driver when he went AWOL in his tractor, and then crashed into something or flipped over. His legs were amputated above the knees.

He doesn't go to the mess hall. The guys from his ward bring him grub onto his nightstand, even though he has crutches, and a pair of tall prosthetic legs are propped up against the wall next to his bed.

He liked a shock worker from Stavropol on the cover of 'Village Life' magazine, with her combine harvester in a field of wheat in the background, and he started writing her letters: 'Hello, unknown Valentina... '

Sometimes his buddies, drivers from our construction battalion, come to visit. After these closed-door meetings, he yells songs and gets into arguments with the medical staff. But he gets away with it, because he's to be discharged from the army...

On the second floor, there was a library, sort of, because both shelves were filled exclusively with translations of Chinese novels about the socialism being built up in the Chinese village. The books were published in the fifties, before the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU denounced the cult of personality/ Then Mao Zedong took offense on behalf of his buddy, Generalissimo Stalin, and both great powers stopped singing:

'Moscow – Beijing,
Friendship forever... '

And what can you do under such dire circumstances? So you read masterpieces of socialist realism in the best traditions of the central newspaper 'Zhemin Ribao'...

... .

The neighboring room, the entire corridor is in a tumult—Valentina, the combine operator, has responded to Sanyok's letter with a visit, in person. She's sitting in the courtyard on a bench under a tree. A dark-skinned Moldavian style woman of over thirty, pretty looks of an actress from the first Soviet color films about collective farms in Cossack villages.

The most handsome patient in the neighboring room joined her, chattering and explaining that Sanyok would soon appear—his treatment was about to end.

Meanwhile, Sanyok was shaking hysterically, sitting on his bed, strapping on his prosthetics. They helped him pull his pajama legs over them, and, tucking two crutches under his arms, he clumsily dragged his shortened body toward the exit.

But Valentina was a good girl; she sat on the bench for a full three minutes before he finally made it there. Then the same handsome patient led her along the short path to the unofficial exit through a hole in the wall.

And Sanyok had gotten drunk again that day...

~ ~ ~

Two days later, along the same path... I look and—I can't get it... it can't be! And who else, if not Olga? Yes, definitely her!

She ran up, we hugged, only her hair was already dark red,

and she was wearing unfamiliar flared trousers with big yellow flowers.

That same evening, I went out to the park with her wearing those same trousers, and a tight turtleneck to go with them. And she, of course, was wearing her miniskirt.

On the dance floor, some locals started closing in; those yellow roses on my trousers must have gotten to them. But two 'ladles' from our unit recognized me and approached... One was dressed in civilian clothes, the other wore a 'peshA,' I don't even know which company they were from. The locals realized a construction battalion was going AWOL and dissolved...

... .

Olga's life is awash with news. She's gone back to Feodosia, and there's no room in the nursery there for babies. So she waited until the city executive committee chairman had his office hours, picked up Lenchka, and went. But he said the same thing: there's no room, that's all.

Then she simply placed Lenchka on his desk and left. The chairman rushed out into the hallway and ran after her all the way to the stairs: 'Citizen! Collect the child!' Anyway, there was room found.

Now Olga's mother is looking after her grandchild so she can come to me. But on the way to Stavropol, her money was stolen on the train. And my wedding ring is also missing. But that was back in Konotop. She wore it on her finger, even though it was wide. And while she was washing diapers, she didn't notice when

the ring slipped into the basin. So and spilled it along with the water into the cesspool hole in the vegetable garden.

... .

The next day, she borrowed money for the return trip from the cook who was visiting Rezo at the time, and left along the same path, through the hole in the fence wall...

~ ~ ~

They removed the cast and discharged me. I took the free trolleybuses to the southeastern outskirts of Stavropol, and from the ring road, I walked under the tall trees along the highway to Elista, toward the Deminskaya fork. The dirt shoulder was covered with sparse, bright yellow leaves. The sun was shining, but it felt like autumn already. But where was summer?

A construction battalion truck pulled up on the highway, and the civilian driver shouted from the cab, 'Home?'

I said yes, home, and jumped into the truck back. Because, whether from work or from AWOL, we never returned 'to the barracks' or 'to the unit'. We were returning home...

~ ~ ~

There was some news at home, too. During my absence, our squad had lived through a wild hazing spree. They'd be driven out onto the parade ground after lights out and forced to walk in a circle, while squatted, before being beaten.

The worst offender was Karlookha from the second company; he liked to stab the 'youngsters' with a knife. Not too deeply, but until they bled. And he himself was a real pipsqueak, half a head

shorter than a normal human.

Then, in the basement of a 50-apartment building, he lunged at Sergei Chernenko, nicknamed Gray, from Dnepropetrovsk, with his knife. But Gray had developed Zone skills for such showdowns, and he knocked him out. Karlookha's criminal swagger was based solely on his 'grandpahood', but the 'grandpas' from his conscription, who had served time and ate balanda rations, didn't enrolled against Gray on his behalf. So things seemed to have calmed down, but tensions remained.

. . . .

In the wake of this lingering tension, some 'pheasant' from our company pestered me: 'What's up? Acting a muster-thief?'

If you answer affirmatively, then explain how much and under what article the prosecutor demanded for you, and how the case ended. For me, criminal code articles are as sealed off area as organic chemistry formulas. If you say 'yes' not based on doing bird, you become an impostor, according to the Zone code, and face dire consequences. So I said 'no,' and he took me to the Lenin Room and started cutting my hair short with a manual clipper, because it was too long for a 'youngster'.

I didn't mind; it would grow back in two years. However, the clipper jammed and yanked a couple of times, quite painfully.

A plasterer from the third company was in the room, visiting his fellow Armenians. So, he offered to finish the haircut for the self-proclaimed barber.

'Pheasant' himself was already unhappy about having started

the whole thing and passed him the clipper.

Anyway, Robert Zakarian finished my hair, and whenever the clipper jammed, he kept saying, 'Sorry!'

I'd already forgotten such words even existed...

~ ~ ~

Later, Robert started coming to the Club and became Orion's vocalist. He spoke with a rich Russian accent, having grown up in the Far North, where his father served time in a labor camp, for dissidence or something similar.

When his ancestor was released on parole in the same region, Robert's mother moved there, taking Robert and his younger brother from sunny Armenia.

When his sentence ended, Robert's father applied for his family to emigrate from the Soviet Union. Two years later, permission was granted, despite the fact that the applicant had already died.

With some time remaining before the emigration, Robert went to visit his Armenian relatives in the city of Sochi. There, he met a Russian girl named Valya and fell in love. They exchanged addresses, and upon returning to the North, Robert announced that he refused to leave the Soviet Union.

But all the paperwork had already been completed in the entire family's name, and without him, neither his mother nor his brother would be released. His brother tried to explain the situation to the enchanted through nightly no-holds-barred fights at his place of residence. However, Robert didn't give in, nor did

he change his resolve to keep true to his promise to his beloved.

Then his mother introduced nightly crying into his daily routine, and eventually they landed in Paris, where they were met by relatives whose invitation had finally allowed them to be released.

. . . .

In Paris, he found work on a construction site. He didn't speak the language, had no friends, and his only dream was Valya from Tula...

A year later, as part of a tour group from France, Robert Zakarian arrived in Moscow, and on his very first evening, separating from his group at the hotel, he headed to Tula. He lived there for ten days, in Valya's parents' house, before her mother persuaded him to surrender to the authorities.

When he reported to the KGB in Tula, they were overjoyed, because their superiors in Moscow were already in an uproar over the disappearance of the Parisian tourist. Robert was taken to the airport and deported to France.

In Paris, he approached the Soviet Embassy, asking to be allowed back into the USSR to reunite with his beloved.

('Back to the USSR!' was his motto then. But, unfortunately, he didn't speak English either.)

He came there every week, and the embassy employee, with a tattoo of 'Tolik' on the back of his hand, shook his head and said there was no answer to his application...

It took Tolik a whole year to finally nod instead of shaking his

head and say the answer was yes.

Robert arrived in Tula, married Valya, they had a daughter, and he was drafted into our construction battalion. He loved to show a black-and-white photograph of his family—himself on the left, broad-faced and dark-haired, looking out with the serious, wide-set eyes from under the thick, black eyebrows of a reliable family man; his wife, Valya, on the right: a white blouse and a round face in the frame of light-brown curls; their baby daughter between them, in a lace cap...

... .

So, you've got it messed up, demented ComBat! Our ranks aren't all cripples and convicts! We even have double emigrants here!

~ ~ ~

On November 7th, Orion gave its first concert on the stage of the MCU-11 Club.

Vladimir Karpeshin, aka Karpesha, played drums and hi-hat. Vladimir Rassolov and Robert Zakarian performed as lead vocals. Alexander Rudko sang along with them on bass guitar, and I played rhythm guitar. Silently.

Our vocal and instrumental ensemble even included a trumpeter, Kolya Komissarenko, aka Commissar, a short, dark-haired soldier of a cheerful Jewish looks from Dnepropetrovsk. He played diligently, but he was just as bad as I was in my singing. Every false note on the trumpet clearly tormented Rudko, but he endured it stoically.

Perhaps the presence of the trumpet on stage tickled the piercing nostalgia for his philharmonic past. To somehow survive the ultra-jazz outbursts, he repeatedly pared the trumpet part down to its bare minimum...

... .

For the concert, we changed into full parade crap (three of the Orionists in borrowed, as a construction battalion soldier only receives his dress uniform after serving one year in the Soviet Army).

The first number of the concert was 'The field, wide field' (a kinda patriotic one).

Rudko dreamed of doing it with a four-part arrangement, like Pesnyary band. However, due to the limited vocal range of the singers and the absolutely botched performance of Commissar's trumpet (which he himself stared at in amazement, his already bulging eyes wide open, but continued to stubbornly blow in the wrong direction until he reached the end), this philharmonic piece of crap was almost booed.

However, Robert Zakaryan received warm applause for his reworking of a French song (a kinda lyrical one). Its melody was on everyone's lips, accompanying—year after year, decade after decade—the weather forecast on the news program 'Vremya' on Central Television:

'Yes, I can forgive you all

And let to the sky like a bird free of thrall...'

Servicemen of Caucasian nationalities (primarily the

Separate Company) enthusiastically greeted the song 'Eminnah' performed by Vladimir Rassolov (a kinda oriental comic song):

'Under the burka of your girlfriend

There's no girlfriend but your Grandpa.

Uh, Eminnah!...

And the song 'Rains' from the repertoire of Fofik (the 'Orpheuses' vocal-instrumental ensemble at the KEMP Cultural Center, Konotop), received a unanimous ovation (a kinda hit of the season).

However, in his verbal review, the battalion's Political Officer, aka DepuPolit of the MCU-11, in a close group of musicians after the concert, the shoo-in song was the lowest-rated: 'Rudko! These fucking rains of yours have already fucked sick and tired any living soul!'

He gave his voice a saccharine, faggot-like tone, in the manner of aspiring pop stars: 'Rains... rains again... but you wait... no, I won't wait... and fuck you stupid fucker... '

We couldn't help but laugh. The Political Officer had never heard this song before, but he clearly grasped the essence of the lyrics of this type of mass-produced crap.

'I'll get through any rain,

'Cause I love you! Ou! Ou! Ou!...'

~ ~ ~

Once again, our squad experienced a change in command. Prostomolotov was transferred back to his squad, but he wasn't demoted from corporal because he wasn't caught with anything.

It was just the ensign, the platoon commander, who had gotten mad at him, which prompted the rotation.

Most likely, at some point, he couldn't hide his intellectual superiority over the ensign. 'Acted a muster-thief' as they call it in the construction battalion.

Alik Aliyev, an Azerbaijani in tight, pheasantly-narrowed pants, replaced him. He was a tall, slender man with a handsome round face, where thin, clear skin stretched over high cheekbones and a well-developed jaw.

. . . .

A week later, he was promoted to corporal. On this solemn occasion, Alik Aliyev ordered the squad to form up, clapped his right fist into his left palm, and declared, bubbling with delight: 'Me be you fukka!'

However, he was a bit hasty in his predictions and cheerful anticipation. In our squad, there were some equally tall but more emotionally reserved privates who calmly and rationally shared with the corporal their standpoint (which he understood and accepted): while people who ended up in the construction battalion after the Zone don't leap too actively, he, who had been awarded this high honor merely on the basis of his poor command of Russian, would be better off displaying restraint and modesty, the ticket for many a wreck to survive in our harsh world, full of the never-ceasing struggle for existence.

As for me personally, he had never had hard felings from the start. While still a private, Alik happened to witness a situation

in our company's Lenin Room, where two senior soldiers were explaining to Prostomolotov, then our squad commander, the principle that musicians were beyond certain provisions of the Internal Service Regulations...

. . . .

So we simply did our job—digging, laying, dragging, lifting—and after work, we got the rest that was possible under the construction battalion's conditions. Of course, we weren't allowed to lie down on top of the blankets on our beds in the quarters (that was the privilege of the 'grandpas'). But there were stools in the central aisle of the barracks—you could sit and repose, or in the Leninist utilra, because it had become too cold to sit out in the gazebo at the entrance to the barracks...

Then winter came. We were issued warm hats and quilted fooflo jackets. The GAZ's and UAZ's trucks that took us to work had canvas covers stretched over their backs, and even wooden benches were installed underneath, from side to side, so we no longer had to sit on haunches, gripping at each other's shoulders...

~ ~ ~

In the blue darkness of the approaching night, our squad assembled after work at the foot of the nine-story building, but the truck was late picking us up. We even went out to meet it, across the remains of the forest belt, then another hundred meters, onto the sidewalk stretching toward the distant block of five-story buildings, empty of pedestrians at such a time of

darkness. There we stood, undisturbed, in a wide circle, tapping our boots at each other to keep them from utter freezing...

Taunts, laughter, elbow-pokes, slaps on the shoulders—the usual excitement at the end of an ordinary workday, before heading off to the usual chow in the construction battalion mess hall.

I grew bored with the jokes and quips I'd heard many times before, and I headed back to the distant star glowing in the night—a light bulb hanging on the end wall of the nine-story building, which had imagined itself to be a lighthouse in the Drake Passage.

(... one way to overcome the drag of time is to trudge along the available space...)

So I trudged there, from where we came, knowing they wouldn't leave without me, just as they wouldn't leave without a couple of 'grandpas' still changing clothes in the nine-story building... The screams, laughter, and hoots of my comrades died down, plunging into the distance... I walked at a measured pace, thinking about nothing...

(... such states are also called 'beautiful soul's languor', when you can't clearly formulate a fleeting thought, but still feel it was melancholy...)

Slowly, I entered the remains of the forest belt, when a muffled call came from the sad faraway. Something called me.

Coming back to the now and here, I reluctantly glanced back at the tailgate of the truck, which was backing up at full speed

toward me.

There was no time to jump off, though my legs instinctively bent to kick the road. It was precisely my half-turned lean toward the intended jump that saved me—the impact of the tailgate boards, completing the movement I'd begun, sent me flying under a tree, not under the spinning wheels of the truck...

'We yelled so much at you,' said Vitya Strelianny, already in the back of the truck on the way home.

Well, I don't know. I only heard one scream, and from very far away...

My right shoulder hurt for two days...

~ ~ ~ two-way service

By the end of December, our squad was deployed to the construction site of an apartment building. Or rather, to the initial phase of its construction. There, we were greeted by a deep, rectangular crater, empty, not yet filled with concrete foundation blocks.

Near the crater's edge, the tracks of a crane runway lay beneath the tower of a frozen, idle crane. The lunar landscape was completed by a wooden trailer with a single door and a pair of windows flanking it.

A convenient structure: you pulled the door and stepped inside, straight from the snow. But why a 'trailer' if there were no wheels?

. . . .

We got a clear operational task—one for all—to dig a trench

for the installation of foundation blocks under the side wall of the building. It was to run not within the pit, but parallel to it, three meters closer to the trailer. Thus, expanding the already gigantic pit.

It turns out that during the excavation work, they discovered that the building was sitting on the water supply for an entire city district. The unwelcome news meant that if the pipes failed due to corrosion or other damage, the apartment building would become a new Noah's Ark. But the sheer weight of the brick and concrete would prevent it from floating.

So, the city development department had to wake up, scratch themselves, and decide to move the entire building before it was too late, before starting construction.

However, while the calculations, cost estimates, and other approvals were being finalized, winter arrived, the frost hit, and no excavator could tear through the frozen ground to widen the pit. Now, they threw us into the breach—rescuers from extreme situations, crushers of any insoluble problem...

... .

Half the trailer was filled with brand-new—not a fly had sat on it yet!—both bayonet and scoop shovels. We were even given the unheard-of luxury of cloth mittens. Of course, the ground was too hard for any shovels, wielded in mittens or not. Digging bars were needed.

And they brought them, a whole dump truckload, and dumped

them with a clanking sound between the trailer and the pit. Heavy, iron, five-foot-long digging bars, their only flaw being that they were homemade.

They found thick rebar rods at a local factory, cut them to the required length, took them to a forge, flattened the ends to give them a pointed shape, and dumped the bunch beside the pit.

However, the digging bar needs to be smooth, since it's a hand tool. The purpose of the rebar, conversely, is to strengthen the concrete, and so it's covered with closely spaced diagonal scars to better bond with the concrete slurry. These scars, though rounded, will wear through any mitten with a dozen blows of a digging bar into the ground, and then this 'supposedly handheld' tool will begin to wear away the skin from your palms, however long-callused and rough they be.

But if not us, then who will protect our beloved Motherland from these idiots busy with planning? The construction battalion will cover everything and rectify any situation...

~ ~ ~

The wind, like a dog that has broken its chain, gallops, runs in circles, pounces from all sides, tugging at the loose laces at earflaps' tips of our hats, lashing our faces with their flutter. Yet, not this is its, the winds, ultimate purpose, but dragging the black-gray clouds, scraping them against the boom of a tower crane.

Because of these clouds, everything around, from morning until night, is drowned in uncanny twilights. We warm up in the

trailer, heated by our breath.

The mittens have long since worn to scraps, so instead we grab the frozen rebar with rags found in the trailer. The impact of the rebar on the ground breaks off a gnarled piece the size of a walnut. And so on—piece after piece.

Your partner stands with his yanked up shoulders to the wind, waiting for you to chip away enough shells for a shovelful. He scoops them up and throws them aside. After three or four shovels of scraped-up material, you swap tools and places. As Vitya Strelyany put it:

'We were brought to Stavropol
To dig and shovel the ground,
But it is so fucking hard,
Harder can't be found.'

(... but I have an unspoken suspicion that this is a remake of a Zone ditty from the era of the first Soviet five-year plans, composed in the Donbas mines...)

... .

But anywhere you can find a moment of bliss—oh! How sweet is the slumber, sitting on the floorboards, your back resting against the backs of your comrades in the trailer!

After half a day of chipping and shoveling, we discover that at a depth of about half a meter, the permafrost gives way to soil of almost the same hardness, but still yielding to the chopping and stabbing blows of a bayonet shovel.

On the third day, we developed a tunneling technique:

First, you dig a pit, a meter by a meter, and then two meters deep. Step two, retreating a meter along the route of the future trench, you dig a second identical one. You connect two pits with a burrow (2 shafts with 1 audit), cutting it through the softer ground (below the frost-hardened layer). Now, you noose the audit ceiling with the tower crane hook bearing cable, threaded from shaft to shaft. Step three, boring narrow channels across both ends of the bridge from the frozen ground. You go on boring with the digging bar until the crane has enough strength to rip out a solid block of permafrost.

Aha! Fuck you, fucker!

. . . .

Yes, the construction battalion did it! And although many days of chiselling, scraping, and plowing still lie ahead—to the very end of the trench—victory will be ours. We have crushed the spine of the Arctic night darkness, which descended all the way to Stavropol...

~ ~ ~

Besides the trailer, you can find shelter from the cold in the entryways of an apartment building on the opposite bank of the empty pit. If not standing in the piercing wind, even a cigarette warms you, just find someone to chisel it from...

. . . .

While I was sybaritizing on the other side of the pit, Alimosha and Novikov explored the surrounding land. A dairy factory and a bakery emerged through the blizzard's shroud. The pioneers

returned in quilted jackets bulging with cardboard pyramids of 0.5-liter milk and loaves of warm bread. Since that day, we've been sending foragers there. It's just a matter of climbing over a couple of walls. And the workers at both factories will watch you loading finished goods from the conveyor line without noticing...

...

Sometimes we go out into the street to beg passersby for money: 'Brother, I'm 27 kopecks short for a bottle, can you help me out?' 'Sister, 11 kopecks for a Belomor, can you spare me? I haven't had a smoke in two days. My ears got swollen with the want.'

Alimosha explained the finer points to me. Never ask pensioners—no use, and they might even start yelling about discipline and sacred duty. Never ask for a large sum. Instead of 27 kopecks, he'll definitely give you 30, and instead of 11, you'll get 15 kopecks.

What do we need money for? Well, instead of shag in packs for 9 kopecks, or rancid Pamir for 11 kopecks. You can buy a 'thermonuclear' Kuba n Portugas or that same Prima, but not the Indian Red and White—sour stuff in golden wrappers. And sometimes we share a bottle of wine, when we're tired, with hunks of bread for snack.

Oh, how low I've fallen! Blagging on the streets like a beggar! Where are my decency and pride? How could I not burn down with such shame?!

(...) well, firstly, we have a more precise term for it: we don't

'beg' at all, we're 'jackalling'.

And as for the whereabouts of my decency and self-respect, they're always with me, it's just that their form changes, unlike some immutable quantities like that infinite pi they drilled into us in school, I don't fucking know why.

As regards shame, I'm probably a pervert. I'm far more ashamed of that Whatman paper cylinder I stole from Valya Pisanko than of the kopecks I accepted from passersby in the scoop of my outstretched palm.

Yes, on occasion, my innate nobility simply oozes forth, but overall, I'm no Spanish grandee, that's for sure...)

~ ~ ~

At the beginning of February, our bread factory festival ended. We were transferred to the construction of the Medical Center, where the foundation had already been covered with concrete slabs, but only partially. We sheltered from the winter wind under those slabs and warmed ourselves by a fire made from whatever wooden scraps we could find, because there was no trailer at the deployment site. And although the site of the future Medical Center was quite sprawling, it was located on the outskirts, where prey for jackals never wandered...

. . . .

Transportation for carrying military construction workers to and from work was provided by the city motor pool with its civilian drivers...

Our squad encountered a dashing ace. As he flew onto the

site of the future Medical Center in a UAZ-66, he slammed on the brakes, and the trained vehicle slid across the frozen puddles in a technical pirouette—backwards toward us. The moment of complete stop coincided with the neighing of the horn: 'Go-go-go! Home-go-go-go-go!'

During the stunt, the poorly secured but well-ripped tarpaulin over the truck back, billowed with its wide holes like a parachute in the arms of a landed saboteur. The driver dangled a snaggle-toothed grin from under his scrawny mustache—for the sake of airing. He enjoyed giving out such campy, nomadic romance.

Besides, he trained the exhaust pipe to blast, but reserved the gunfire for driving along city sidewalks—to scare passersby. Bam!

— 'Oh, Mommy!'—and she slung her hands over the chest. But she still didn't drop the string bag.

The guys tried to explain something to me about the engine and carburetor, but all that stuff was always above my head...

~ ~ ~

One of my first days in the new place, I went to the outhouse shed, the M-&-F kind, right on the edge of the territory. When we need to take a leak, we unhesitatingly direct our drainage system around anything that can serve as a screen to protect it (the system) from drafts, so I wouldn't trudge into the frontier regions for that.

Simply because of the freezing temperatures, using the unit's latrine became too risky. The entire floor there turned into a

smooth yellow skating rink, too slippery to walk on, and even when squatting over the hole, the soles of my tarpaulin boots tended to glide off across the ice. Yellow as well...

. . . .

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. . . .

While defecating in the ruins of the frontier outhouse, I began to experience strange auditory sensations. I, like, heard... well, not exactly, not right away—voices... more like echoes of voices... a distant, unbroken hum, like the indistinct murmur of a crowd, without splashes, clarity, or meaning...

Then I pulled out one of the letters. My inside pocket had been bulging with them for a long time. I never reread them, but I kept them there anyway. Without specifying who the letter was from, I wiped my ass with it, stood up, buttoned my pants, and suddenly stumbled upon the source of the noise:

... the crumbling boards of the walls and partitions between the stalls were covered with inscriptions, completely, leaving not a single living space... names, dates, and towns written and scratched with pencils and ballpoint pens... some had crept over others because there was nowhere else...

It became clear to me that the territory of the future Medical Center had once housed the Stavropol conscript Assembly and Distribution Center. The conscripts, swallowed by the jaws of an eternity of two years, had been hastily scribbling their farewell marks across the moldy boards:

'Sakha, settlement...'

'Afos, village...'

'Dran, city...'

They were already there—swept away, seized, absorbed into the gorge—that's why the voices, transformed into some kind of shared, wordless murmur, were no longer audible. There's a hum, but the hands are still writing their farewell to the irrevocable themselves:

'Andron...'

(... in a construction battalion, the universal human urge to leave a mark doesn't disappear, but becomes anonymous. You won't see the classic 'Vasya was here' here; a construction battalion serviceman signs for everyone:

'OREL, DMB-73.'

Read: 'Recruited from the city of Orel (or the region), demobilized in 1973.'

With graphite, chalk, paint on walls, pipes, tin, whatever. Every construction site erected by the Stavropol Construction Battalion, a year or two before 1973, bore such a sign.

It was replaced by:

'TULA, DMB-74.'

The turn will come for:

'SUMY, DMB-75,'

'DNEPR, DMB-75,'

but that's still a long way off...)

~ ~ ~

VIA 'Orion' took part in the city music competition.

Although we presented two numbers, we didn't snag any spots. It seemed the entire event was held for the benefit of a single local singer. The young man sang without a microphone, but his voice filled the entire hall. What a singer!

(... I never heard him again. Neither on the radio, nor on television. 'No spots'—muslim magomayevs and joseph kobzons entrenched themselves there for decades...)

Our second number at the competition was 'Song of the Indian', from Tom Jones's repertoire. No one knew what he sang about in it, and the Soviet remake lamented the bitter lot of the American Redskins (it later turned out that Tom Jones had plenty of his own hits, and this is a John Dee's song performed by the band 'Raiders,' but the reversal of the terms didn't ease the plight of the natives):

'From the reservations, brother, mark it well,

There's only one way—straight to hell...'

At the competition, the 'brass' section of 'Orion' already had two trumpeters. Ensign Jafar Jafarov was transferred to our battalion, I don't know where from or what for, because I didn't care. He just came into the Club one day and announced he played the trumpet...

... .

Jafarov's oriental appearance left a pleasant impression of softness. A round face with soft, swarthy skin, the soft gleam of his black, olive-like eyes, his gentle smile when he uttered his 'I swear on my mother!' And he really did play the trumpet, which he brought to rehearsals at the Club and carried away in its surprisingly hard case. Kolya Commissar began to blow the Club's equipment much better under Jafar...)

... .

Gray, Karlookha's tamer, began to frequent the Club, not for the music, but for the relative privacy—a rare luxury in construction battalion life.

He'd given up on work right from the start of his service, simply serving another stint, tanning two years in the construction battalion. What fucking difference was it from a penal colony? The regime was a little more lenient, and the protective rags was khaki instead of blue. Brought to the construction site in the morning, he would go into town, returning only for the evening truck. From time to time, he was locked up in the room at the checkpoint, and a couple of times he

was carted away to the city garrison guardhouse. However, even the Battalion Commander, with his chronic brain leak, clearly understood the futility of such educational approaches to this sturdily built, thin-lipped product of the correctional system.

The bald spot of a scar on his left eyebrow somehow humanized his sharply defined face, drooping forward like a wolf's from his broad shoulders... Gray's walk in life was the simple straight path of a hereditary thief.

In the band room, he shared stories of his recent adventures in the city, or he'd bully Commissar. This isn't right, since they were both from the same draft, but for Gray, the Zone Code took precedence over the commandments of the construction battalions.

Preparing for his transformation into a 'pheasant,' Commissar got a striking tattoo on the back of his right hand—two triangles of mountain peaks, and between their sharp summits, an arc of the rising sun with spiky rays. And this entire shining new world of thick lines rested on an explanatory and educational inscription for the most obtuse dummies: 'NORTH CAUCASUS.' On stage, Commissar kept his tattoo facing the audience, and, raising his trumpet to play notes, he proudly glanced at the sprawling masterpiece of an unknown tattoo artist.

Gray probably didn't appreciate the fact that Commissar was flaunting a more massive blot than his bluish cross spider (a Zone's crest for the initiated), barely larger than a ping-pong ball. Such blatant inequality, even in the absence of any Zone

restrictions on geographical tattoos, encouraged Gray to pick on the cheerful Trumpeter.

(... however, where the word 'probably' is used, you shouldn't just take my word for it—it will probably be followed by nothing but speculation, assumptions, and idle conjecture. There could be a ton, a carload, a freight train, of possible interpretations, but the word 'probably' dismisses them all and leaves just one, perhaps not the most accurate.

Words require careful handling. Sometimes you blurt out something so brazen, like: 'Labookhs—we're one family. We're all for each other!' and then you're embarrassed to have said just another hooey, again!

Because generalizing statements are only good for slogans, like: 'Workers of the world—unite!' Or: 'Bipeds! Love one another!'

Such verbal pretzels only work as long as common interests coincide with the interests of a given, individual mammal, and the moment they diverge, it's like, 'You do your business, and we look after ours.'...)

Take, for example, that same Yura Zameshkevich. Having locked the boiler house, he takes refuge in the Club, so as not to be an eyesore to the Fathers Commanders. He'll strum a guitar here and serenely sip a mug of chifir (for Chuck Palahniuk's space monkeys: mix a 250g packet of tea with 250ml of water, bring to a boil), where he's one of us—a person of refined character, a sophisticated connoisseur of true music, which is

exactly the bomb, a loyal friend, a reliable comrade, and simply a brother—a labookh, in a word.

But then his wife from Tula arrives and waits at the checkpoint while he runs to get his dress uniform, and greatcoat to leave for the city with her. He scrapes the fur off his muzzle as he runs, gets a leave slip from the headquarters barracks, and for some reason darts into the Club, where I am sitting peacefully in the empty hall, in the back row. He leaps into the band room, hops back, and on his way out, he grabs my unsuspecting dick with his bear paw clutch and lifts me into the air. Of course—I screamed!

Then the pain gradually faded, leaving an inescapable sense of bewilderment. Why?

(... I haven't come across an answer to the question raised, neither in the writings of the naive primitivist Freud and his sycophants, nor in the Upanishads and Bhagavatas, nor in both Testaments, nor in the Koran. And only in 'The History of the Russian State from Ancient Times' does V. Solovyov briefly mention the incident with Dmitry the Pretender, when he hid in the distant chambers of the palace, but a bestial Cossack discovered him there, grabbed him by the 'secret knot', and dragged the usurper out to the raging rubble for cruel reprisal. But at least there is some practical purpose... But why did Yura need mine?

There are questions unfathomable by the means of human mind; all we can do is point them out for the enlightenment of the inquisitive for their speculative skills' edification, and then

shrug our shoulders sadly, and spread our arms wide—Alas! This is beyond of mere mortals' comprehension...

By the way, science has invented a beautiful, sonorous term for exactly such cases. Let's say you're so cool that you can pee through three meters thick glacial ice, in a jiffy, but suddenly something so fucking stupid pops up that even a mammoth would sooner pee his dick off than through the fucker, then you know—you stumbled at that damn transcendentalism...)

~ ~ ~

So what were we, the club-goers, doing there? Alongside solfeggio, rehearsals, and the sullen grinding of our brains against transcendental questions? Enjoying the briefly mentioned, fleeting sip of chifir? Alas, its bitterness was a rare treat. And vodka wasn't often enough...

. . . .

We had a coded knock on the door of the band room, which ensured unhindered access. Knock out the right rhythm—the door will open, but if not, then go back where you came from or yell through it, locked, what the fuck you need.

Once, after the correct knock and the clang of the lock opening, the DepuPolit's bulky figure grew in the door, accompanied by an ensign from the fourth company, like a bodyguard; and it must have been him knocking out the code, the fucking guide.

However, The Orion's lead singer, chef Volodya Rassolov, aka Rassol, reacted instantly, and while the tourists were swiping

their faces left and right to check who was there and what preoccupied with, he casually transferred the bottle to the tarpaulin boot of the pair standing next to the bookcase.

Of course, DepuPolit still ended up branding us a den of alcoholics and parasites, but still unable to present any direct evidence...

. . . .

So, the basis of our time was conversation: who was who in civilian life, what life would be like after demobilization, when we returned home (we still were so naive as to believe it was possible to return anywhere at all from the incessant flow of the stream of ever-changing space), and about how the Third Company went to kick shit out the Separate Company, but the choorkas fought them off with blakhas, and the private pigman was probably screwing his harem of sows, and why else would they squeal so much at night after lights out?

Karpesha was undoubtedly the laureate of conversation. In a quiet, brotherly, confidential tone of voice, he would rustle to you for hours about how he went on leave and broke up and made up six times in ten days with the girl he met there, his former classmate, as it turned out...

Not interested in listening for the seventh time? Go out into the empty Club hall, sit next to Robert in the back row, and he'll tell you about life in Paris, where everyone knows everyone else. That, for example, Jean Marais is gay.

And that's a shame, of course, because while I didn't like him

as Fantômas, his D'Artagnan in The Iron Mask is a total macho, masculinity incarnate. That's what fucking Paris makes of men.

...

Well, Gray will share his memoirs about how he scared off lovers who inadvertently wandered onto his street. How, emerging from the gate with his dad's double-barreled shotgun, he'd cock the trigger and ask conversationally, 'Well, Romeo, have you had enough fun? Or shall we talk about love?'

And the one being questioned, losing the chance for an interesting discussion, takes off, but, damn it, stubbornly zigzagging and, for a goodbye, shouting instructions over his shoulder: 'Run, Sveta! Run!'...

Or, to change the subject, how he beat his wife for the first time, and the next morning her eyes were swollen shut, like a chink's...

...

And Jafarov, thoughtfully caressing the beautiful soft shine of his pipe, will tell how he was still just a kid, and playing hack work at some party, he spied with a childish eye through the keyhole as some whore gave some officer a blow job, and then she came back into the hall and danced there, and passionately kissed another officer, higher in rank than the one she was giving blow jobs to: 'But such a fucking beauty. I swear on my word of honor! What a woman!'

And when he served in the combined military band, their leader would parade around town in a tuba. It's the largest

trumpet in the band, you have to slip it over your shoulder. He'd put it on and parade around in his tuba: catching hack work, such a rascal—I swear on my mother.

He'd see funeral wreaths being carried somewhere, and he'd go right there: 'Want a military band for the funeral? We can work it out.' I swear on my mother, such a hustler. But playing it not with a full band, of course; in a skeleton composition. That kind of hack work is called 'playing the sleeper'. Yeah.

Well, one time, we showed up just like that, for playing. Second floor, the apartment door open to the landing, everything's as it should be. We went in. In the first room, relatives were sitting along the walls, crying, all as it should be. But looks like a bit too much, and no one pays attention that people with trumpets had arrived. So, the manager asks the woman he'd arranged it with, 'What's up?'

'Oh! We're in such a terrible situation! We'll probably have to cancel the funeral.' And she leads us into the second room, which is also full of relatives, and everyone is bawling even louder than in the first.

And in the middle of the room is a table, and on it is a coffin, all right, as it should be, and in that coffin is a dead man sitting. I swear on my word! He's actually sitting!

You see, he was hunchbacked in life, a huge hump, and he can't get it to lie down. Basically, the whole hack work job is over... But the manager, the son of a bitch, doesn't give up. He goes over and presses on the dead man's forehead, and he rolls

over and lies down as he should. Only now—splash!—his legs are sticking out of the coffin, and the lid won't close. 'We've already tried that,' says the one with whom we'd arranged it, and roars louder than anyone in the room.

But I told you the manager was a total swindler, huh? He figured it out: 'That's it,' he says, 'let everyone except the musicians leave the premises.'

So, anyway, the sleeper goes out, lowered face down to the floor, and the coffin gets dropped on his back—wham! Who wants to lose a hack work job, huh?

('Did it... oh... work?' I ask, half-drowned in my tears.)

Well, something crunched, but—I swear on my mother!—he straightened up. So, the coffin lifted back on the table, the dead man shoved inside. Everything's as it should be... except...

('??'—I don't have the strength to ask anymore.)

His legs are sticking out ten centimeters from the coffin because, and I swear on my mother, he's gotten longer...

. . . .

In the labookh's tall tale about the hunchbacked sleeper, reality intertwines with fiction... In a daze, passed out, I slide backwards onto the plywood seat in the club hall, lie there, in stitches, breathe my last, choked with laughter.

And I don't even guess that in Stavropol there is a Regional Committee of the CPSU. And the Regional Committee has Chairman whose last name's Gorbachev, and that he is the future mortician of the USSR, nicknamed Hunchback. However,

among the Stavropol tsekhoviks of that period, the nickname 'Envelope' stuck to him.

(... 'Tsekhoviks' were people who wanted to do business under the developed socialism conditions. But they had to pay a price to make their dreams come true.

M. Gorbachev trained the Stavropol 'tsekhoviks' to bring him their pay in an envelope, as is the custom throughout the civilized world...)

~ ~ ~

I don't want to leave an impression as if a construction battalion is nothing but backbreaking labor with no silver lining. Sometimes, spring would come to us, too, forcing us to switch to summer uniforms. We hand over our undershirts, long johns, fooflo jackets, and padded trench coats to the company sergeant major because the winter uniforms had become too heavy. We traded in our faux-fur ushanka hats for dandy piss-cutters.

It's so wonderful to stand in the lightly dressed ranks at the morning parade, under the crisply blue sky, with translucent feathers of clouds up there in the bottomless heights; to drive, in the glow and sparkle of the warming sun, in an open truck back, into the city, where so many colorful dresses, so many skirts, line the sidewalks!

. . . .

In the spring, the population of girls experiences a sharp rise, and even begins to spill over, off the sidewalks.

In any case, at the end of the workday, two girls even appeared

on the grounds of the future Medical Center... I was nearing the assembly point where the UAZ was arriving for us, and these two girls were walking ahead, about thirty meters away. They must have taken a shortcut somewhere, and so they were leisurely strolling, talking to each other. Taking turns.

Suddenly, their conversation stopped. Passing the area where the team had to gather to get into the truck, they revved into a quick pacing and disappeared from sight.

And there was Sasha Khvorostyuk, already waiting, the first to show up. He perched on a half-meter post, his knees spread wide to rest his hands on them, in his signature pose of a BLB—Boss of Latrine Buttboys. Pleased as Punch, some cock of the walk, smugly turning his beak from side to side. His dick dangled from the unbuttoned fly of his cotton pants...

That's why the girls were trotting, and they'd never shortcut here. Because of that fucking platypus!

~ ~ ~

And sometimes, in a construction battalion, you suddenly find yourself in a completely different world, far removed from all these trenches, shovels, pallets, bullying...

. . . .

That Sunday morning, everything was going as usual, but from the ring road the truck took an unusual turn. Corporal Alik Aliyev probably knew where we were going, but his limited vocabulary hampered his ability to communicate beyond common commands and responses. So he remained silent, his

expression mysteriously important...

The truck pulled up in front of the city circus building. We jumped out after Alik, and a man in civilian clothes waiting on the sidewalk explained the task we faced during the transitional period when the circus was changing shifts. One circus troupe was leaving the circus, and a midget circus was arriving to replace them.

(... what role does a construction battalion play between two circuses?

Exactly! Upload one and unload the other...)

But it was still a celebration, and we were festively hauling large boxes into long, canvas-topped trailers, and festively hauling identical boxes out of identical, but different, trailers.

And then we ate ice cream and drank kvass from a yellow barrel on wheels, right at the edge of the circus plaza's sidewalk. From there, we went inside the building and sat wherever we liked on the crimson velvet chairs in the empty amphitheater surrounding the arena.

. . . .

The performers of the newly arrived troupe of midgets going in admired circles around the shortest soldier in our special forces up-and-down-loading team. If he'd been smarter, he'd have been two centimeters shorter so they couldn't draft him for the hitch, but as it was—one meter fifty-six and a half? Wow! Just right for someone fit for non-combat duty!

One of the midgets was whispering something to him—the

soldier would never admit what. They were probably recruiting him for a group of strength acrobats, where a whole pyramid of lightweight midgets is built on the shoulders of a mighty dwarf...

The midget woman called me to go out with her. We left the building through a side door, and she led the way to the residential trailers.

(... it's somehow strange to follow a woman who's up to your waist; you feel like an elephant in an Indian village...)

She climbed onto the high porch, raised her hand high above her head, and tugged at the unyielding doorknob. Sadly, she asked for help.

I put my hand onto the willingly yielding handle, and swung the door open.

'Thank you!' came a voice thinner than a piccolo.

'You're welcome.'

It's so awkward to live in a world not designed for you...

...

I returned to the circus, where Alik Aliyev, forgetful of the world around, was galloping in circles across the arena chasing a white pony. But the haughty quadruped couldn't care less about flirting horsemen in tarpaulin boots, even with corporal stripes in the shoulder boards.

In the orchestra pit, above the curtain, a brass band was hurriedly rehearsing bravura marches, with that brazen, off-key quality characteristic of all circus orchestras. The Labookhs shut up for a quick smoke break, and a group of midgets gathered

near the heavy folds of the curtain, listening as one of them, the size of a middle-schooler, was throwing a jealous tantrum at her husband, whom she'd caught in a trailer with another midget...

The obscenities, delivered in a chicken-like squeak, lose their weight in their gross and net values, yet the ardor of the brawler's emotions was no less intense than the passions raging in Shakespeare's works...

~ ~ ~

Olga arrived in the middle of the day. We were brought in for lunch, and then they told me, 'Your wife is waiting in the checkpoint corridor.'

I ran there, then to the headquarters barracks. They gave me leave until the morning. The battalion commander isn't here, they said, but they'll extend it tomorrow after the morning parade, they said. Then I barely managed to get the parade crap. The sergeant major was gone, along with the key to the supply closet. But the military patrol in the city would snatch you up in no time, even if you had a stack of those leave slips when strolling in a fatigue.

So, we arrived in town only in the evening, but she already had a room at the hotel. A single room with a faucet and a sink on the wall.

Then some red-haired guy knocked on the door. Olga introduced the clown: 'Meet, please, we arrived on the same train.'

The fellow traveler invited us into his room, where he was

having a get-together with friends.

And as we were walking down the hall, Olga asked me to pretend I was her brother; on the train she'd taken the traveler on a ride that she was going to visit her brother.

(... c'mon, so what...

Abraham and Sarah pulled that very stunts...)

The redhead had a long table in his room, completely covered in wine—a real hussar's feast. He had previously been a cadet at the Stavropol Military Aviation School for Pilots and Navigators, but they'd kicked him out for something, and now he came to visit his friends, who were already in their third year...

I'm familiar with the aviation school; our squad about a week was putting up partitions in the basement of some building there. When the bell rang and the cadets ran from the courtyard to their classrooms, we'd rummage through the trash cans in their gazebos, shooting cigarette butts...

Now they're here around the table, sharing memories, raising toasts to this and that from their shared past. We drink too. But I see this half-baked cadet quietly drop his hand onto Olga's knee—she was sitting between him and me. What to do? Should I stun him with a bottle on the headtop? Not exactly right behavior for a brother. I might scare off a potential brother-in-law, huh?

Of course, she took his hand off, and I acted like I didn't notice. We went back to our room, and she says, 'Well, what's the big deal?'

It's true, when we all sat down to smoke on a bench near the

dried-up fountain at Peace Square in Konotop, people would also stroke her knees, and Olga, taking a drag on her cigarette, would brush away those playful little hands, like a pestering fly. But we weren't married then!

~ ~ ~

In the morning, as I ran to the UAZ van that carries ensigns to the checkpoint for morning parade, Jafarov was laughing all over the back.

'You ran like you were in slow motion. It's obvious you do your best, but the run stays in the same place, no progress, I swear on my mother. Good news, there was no headwind.'

They only gave me leave until evening roll call, bitches. When I returned, Olga was asleep. Already in her smock, but for some reason inside out...

Then it was time to vacate the room—they rented for one day, until midnight... I said I had to be back for evening roll call, and she said she also had a train that evening.

We went to a movie, some fairy tale about a Persian Hercules named Rustam... Then we sat on a bench at the bottom of Komsomol Hill.

She said she had to go to the station, but I didn't need to see her off, and started crying. Passersby chuckled under their breath—a classic scene from Repin's painting: the girl gets pregnant, and the soldier doesn't give a fuck.

After she left, I sat for a bit longer and then went home...

. . . .

The next day, in the mess hall, I knocked over a bowl of soup from the tabletop. It spilled all over my legs, the hot bastard, and even burned me through my cotton pants. I don't know how it happened. Everyone at the table looked at me, strangely silent. No one laughed...

I knocked the bowl over myself... What kind of sign is that? The smock was inside out...

(... some thoughts are better left unthought, just leave them alone, but if heedlessly started, they'd better be dropped and not thought through down the road to their inevitable conclusions...)

~ ~ ~

DepuPolit ordered the club director, Alexander Rudko, to have a brass band ready by Victory Day, May 9th, otherwise he would be fired and sent to work as a plasterer's mate at a construction site, and the company sergeant major would be ordered to rot him 'on the floors' until his demobilization.

Naturally, we stood up for the bandleader, the bass guitarist of 'The Orion' and we didn't disappoint. In three weeks, we, too, had a state-of-the-art brass band ready.

Jafarov and Commissar, of course, are blowing trumpets, Rassol is wheezing on the baritone, and Zameshkevich is going boom-boo-boo-boo on the tuba. It turns out they used to go to the brass club in their school days.

Karpesha is drumming. Rudko is playing the clarinet, and the club's artist is thumping-thumping on the bass drum. And I have

the most important instrument in the brass band—two cymbals. Bzdenz!

Sasha Lopatko started his service in the same squad as me, but then his dad arrived, held talks in the headquarters barracks, and Sasha was appointed artist at the Club... His dad, by the way, was a priest, and probably for that reason Sasha was drafted into the construction battalion as a priest's son, because you can't trust military equipment to just anyone...

We prepared two numbers: 'On the Hills of Manchuria' and 'Farewell of Slav Woman' not because we were afraid of DepuPolit's threats, but simply because a labookh will do everything humanly possible for another musician's sake.

On May 9th, we changed into our parade crap and drove around various construction sites in a UAZ van, accompanied by the 'goat' where DepuPolit sat in the passenger seat. Holidays are for slackers, but a construction battalion is always on alert.

The construction site squads, along the route of a two-vehicle column, received orders to temporarily leave the work front and form up. DepuPolit gave out a very brief speech (ComBat, with his cerebral marasm, would have gone on for half an hour, not knowing what he was talking about), we played 'Slav Woman' and 'The Hills' and the sun glinted off the copper of polished pipes... A brass band is the first necessity for a festive occasion.

~ ~ ~

The next step in the Orion's career was a dance evening at the club in the village of Demino, with which we shared the same

chipped asphalt road.

Responding to the invitations, the soldiers not only played, but also, taking turns on their instruments, descended one by one from the small stage into the small hall to dance among the local youth. Of all the Orion members, only Alexander Rudko, the indispensable bass guitarist, was left behind...

To the endless song about a bird-loving ornithologist, performed by Robert Zakarian, I embraced the ample forms of the village girl Irina. Life was smiling upon me...

...

On the eve of his demobilization, Yura Zameshkevich informed the Deputy Battalion Commander for Logistics and Supply, ZamPoTyl Avetisyan, that only I and no one else could replace Yura as Battalion Boilerman. Zameshkevich's statement was convincingly supported by Battalion Cook Vladimir Rassolov, aka Rassol, who still had six months left to serve. During the petition, the cook didn't fail to congratulate the Deputy Logistics Officer on his recent promotion to the long-awaited rank of major. As a result, Major Avetisyan sanctioned my acceptance into the glorious ranks of the chmo.

The collective name 'chmo' encompassed all the soldiers involved in the battalion's internal services: the pigman, dishwashers, stokers, cooks, mechanic, tailor, shoemaker, artist, projectionist, staff clerk, drivers of commanders' vehicles, and even the assistant paramedic at the medical center. In short, everyone who wasn't lucky enough to toil on the construction

sites constituted the 'chmo,' under the command of Major Avetisyan.

(... originally, 'ЧМО' was an acronym for 'person who hinders society', but the overly expressive sound (chmo) made people forget the original meaning of the three letters, and now everyone thinks 'ЧМО' is the same as 'sod' only worse...)

Before returning to civilian life, Yura Zameshkevich showed me the location of the well with the main water valve, used to maintain the proper water level in the water tower above the boiler room. He taught me how to light the burner in the steam boiler furnace, read the pressure gauge and the water level tube on the boiler. I was transferred to the fourth company, where all the 'ЧМО' belonged, and Yura was demobilized.

... .

Major Avetisyan assigned me a partner named Vanya from the Crimean 'youngsters' draft. He had peach-fuzz where his mustache should have been, but bushy eyebrows.

It's doubtful Major Avetisyan chose Vanya because of his eyebrows' thickness. Most likely, Vanya's father, who came to visit his son on his third day of service, found some compelling arguments during negotiations with the major in the headquarters barracks.

I shared Yura Zameshkevich's lectures with Vanya, and we began taking turns on a daily basis.

... .

The boiler house of Military Detachment No. 41769, aka

MCU-11, consisted of two tall halls in a red brick building. Each hall contained a pair of massive steam boilers, enclosed within a shared, cube-shaped firebrick furnace. And a multitude of pipes populated the space about the boilers with various valves and shutoff valves—for hot water, cold water, steam, fuel supply...

High-pressure air pumps are mounted in the concrete floor in front of the boilers to atomize the fuel into the furnace nozzle of the corresponding boiler. However, only one of the four was used, the furthest from the entrance; 3 others stood still as backups for the winter heating season.

The job of a stoker, aka boilerman, aka fireman, in the summer was to supply steam to the kitchen cauldrons for cooking and hot water to the dishwasher. We also heated water for the bathhouse for the entire MCU-11 and Separate Company personnel once a month.

So, three times a shift, we had to sit for three to four hours at an old table with torn plywood on the round tabletop, next to a tall window, a few meters from the deafening rumble of the air pump, backed by the roar of flames shooting from the nozzle into the furnace's innards, until the on-duty cook knocked on the latched door of the steamshop to say the food was ready.

Then we could turn everything off. Silence is a priceless blessing... Until the next time to again turn on the combination... enjoy...

To the right of the front door is a narrow section of the pump room, used to pump hot water through the heating system in the

winter. But if you go straight from the entrance to the corner behind the twin boilers of the first hall, you'll see a door on the right—to a small workshop. It contains a window, and a workbench without a vise, opposite the entrance, and a small iron safe box, rapped up irreparably. In the corner between the door and the window, it stands with the door ajar, with a hammer and a blunt chisel on a shelf inside.

Between the corner and the entrance, next to the light switch, is a narrow piece of mirror embedded in the plaster, which accommodates no more than a half of the shaving man's face.

~ ~ ~ the crest of a wave

The arrival of summer was celebrated by the MCU-11 chmomen with a collective drinking bout.

The battalion's UAZ-66, which delivers chow to the construction sites—to the guards and those kept on the site even at night by the shock assault—returned from the city with a case of vodka in the same thermos flask used for taking the grub out 3 hours before. The on-duty officer at the gate glanced briefly into the back of the truck, looking for any AWOLs (as if anyone of those came back through the gate! Or as if the on-duty officer didn't know it as well as I did!), and the truck drove on to the box-shed.

They didn't forget to invite me, too; a stoker is an important connection in a soldier's life.

The drinking bout began after lights out, near the far box-sheds. In the bright illumination of a full summer moon, 15

chmomen sat on the ground in a wide circle, like natives of the field crossed by barbed wire; Everyone was facing the center, where the vodka bottles glittered. Their glitter was backed by the white of a couple enameled pots brimmed with meat, which the cooks had fried in enormous pans on the kitchen's electric stoves. Across two empty sacks, spread out like the tablecloth in fairy tales, rose 3 mounds of five loaves of bread, sliced in the bread cutter's...

Never before had I drunk vodka straight from the bottle. The initial swigs tasted vile, but the following gulps swept over like a brave falcon.

The snack, unfortunately, disappeared too quickly... I never finished my bottle. Rising up to my unsteady feet, with complete respect for the honorable company, I informed those present of my immediate departure for the village of Demino.

'C'mon, all's oukay, buddies! What fuckin o-dute... I'm off... fyrcerr... meselves... I'm the one-do-duty... Fuck!'

And yet, to avoid getting caught, I crossed the fence near the pigsty, away from the barracks. And then I headed for the round face of the full moon shining from the sky above the village of Demino.

But not only did it provide the guiding beams, it also swung back and forth, like on a swing. I muttered rebukes to her for such treacherous inconstancy, and to the field as well, which also was not behaving but imagined itself an amusement park, circling, you know, I mean, you know... not a fair play... not at all...

Then I fell and tried to prop myself up on my elbow, but gravity proved too irresistible, and the field so invitingly soft...

I woke up in the twilight of dawn, a hundred meters from the pigsty, and trudged to the steamshop to drink some tap water and crashed onto the wooden workbench in the workshop...

~ ~ ~

Seems like I'd gotten too carried away, dreaming of shuttling between the Club and the boiler rooms for the rest of my service. One morning, after the night shift, Major Avetisyan found me sleeping in the workshop and ordered to go straight to the company barracks. And this at the time when most of the chmomen even skipped evening roll call! The staff clerk, for example, slept in the medical station, on one of two hospital beds, and if anyone had any health complaints, the assistant paramedic would, without delay, escort them to the city military hospital. The mechanic Ter-Teryan never left Grisha Dorfman's sewing workshop. The club artist, Sasha Lopatka, even had his own room in the Club.

And the stoker, poor wretch, after sitting through the whole day amidst the howling and din, had to trudge off to evening roll call, where, in place of an absent chmoman, someone from the ranks would yell 'On duty!' and—no questions asked...

To somehow kill time while the food was cooking in the kitchen, I borrowed a book from the library in the headquarters barracks, through the clerk private. I chose it for its thickness, so it would last longer. Dostoevsky's 'The Idiot.' Holy shit!

What a thing! Climaxes follow each other... After that axe-wielding murderer in the school curriculum, I wouldn't imagine the guy could write so well... And there's nothing else to take at headquarters, there's only one shelf, and after Fyodor Mikhalych's book, the crap by B. Polevoy and N. Ostrovsky aren't worth it.

At the Club, Rudko gave me a booklet called 'The Beatles in America,' about their tour of the States. One of the 'youngsters' brought it as a souvenir of his youth spent at large. I started translating because the booklet has more photos than text. However, without a dictionary at hand, my school knowledge only covered 10 to 15 percent of the content; in some places I had to guess from pictures, but Rudko was happy with that...

~ ~ ~

And so it goes, in a circle—a routine of the hissing of steam, the rumble of the pump, then the Club, the evening roll call, and back to the Club. And in the morning, it all starts again...

There comes Jafar galloping, his eyes bulging wide and wild, his soft mug white, and so the shirt on his back too; he'd gotten a good rub on the whitewash somewhere.

'Hide me! The Chief of Staff's on my tail!'

I squint through the door. And who else is closing in, straight from the kitchen in his boxer's stagger? Jafar barely managed to jump out the workshop window into the weeds.

'No, Comrade Major, no one came in here.' But the major has a nose like a hunting dog, and from around the corner comes:

— Ensign Jafarov! To me!

You'll get it in full, Ensign, I swear on my mother... And why is ChiStaff so mad about Jafarov? Although, what the fuck difference does it make?

And in the evening, there's a different hunt in the field.

The swarthy cowboys from the Separate Company chased a rat into a length of iron pipe. They splashed gasoline inside and set on fire it. The rat jumped out, engulfed in flames, darting across the field like a fireball, and they followed close behind—a cultural and sporting pastime, 2 in 1...

During the night shift, in the passageway around the twin boilers, I saw a litter of rats—I screamed and rushed to trample them with my boots, but they scattered. But why did such hatred for rats flared up in me? So all of a sudden.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

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