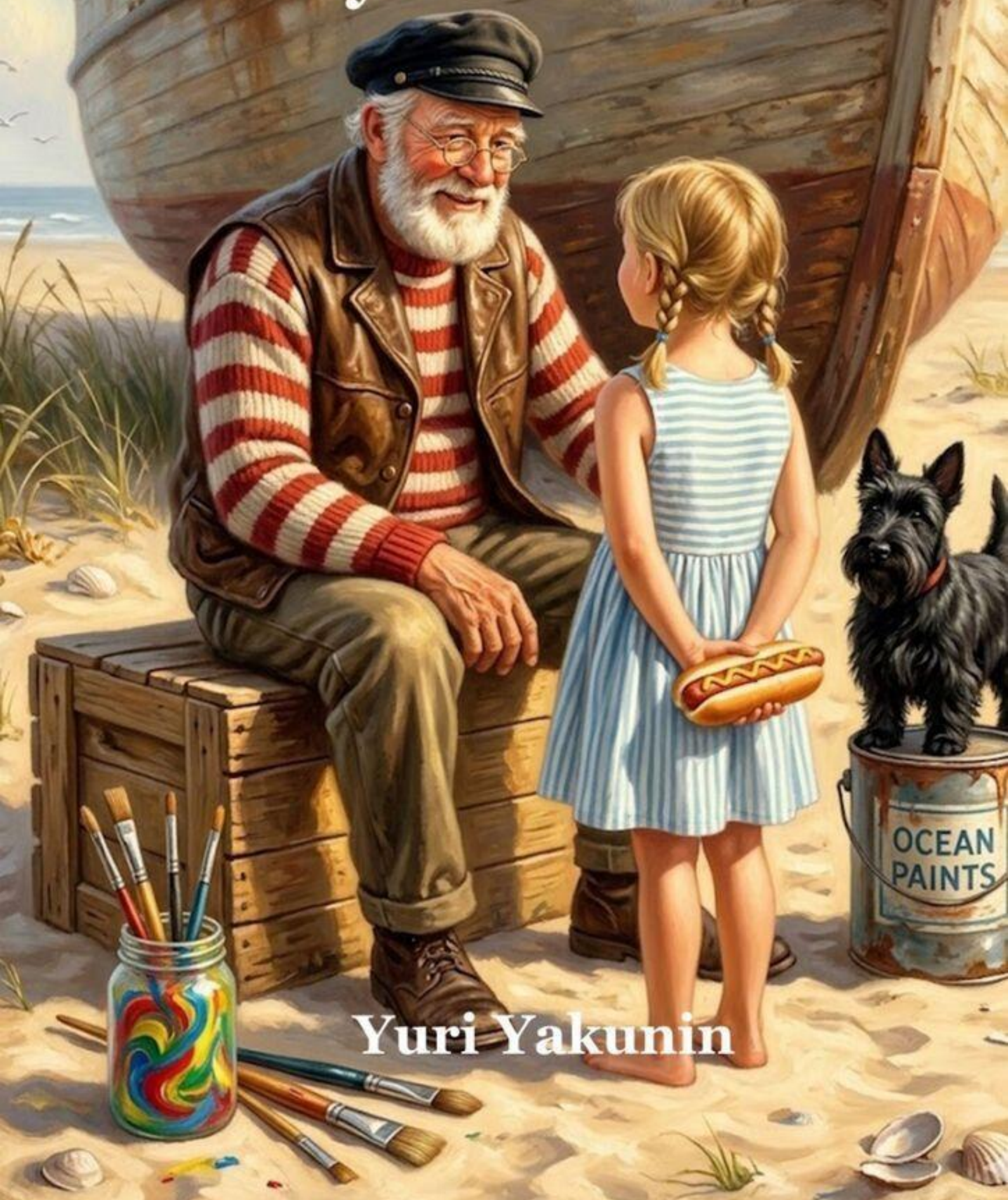


18+ Sailing Through My Memories



Yuri Yakunin

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Sailing Through My Memories

«Издательские решения»

Yakunin Y.

Sailing Through My Memories / Y. Yakunin — «Издательские решения»,

“Sailing Through My Memories” is a light autobiography where I write about the people who have surrounded me throughout my life, striving to keep the tone humorous and easy. Within these pages, you will find short stories, humoresques, and miniatures — a bit of everything, from the funny to the fearsome. For the most part, these are all events that actually happened to me. This book gathers everything that did not make it into the previous two volumes. What came of it — is for you to judge.

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Sailing Through My Memories

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By the Sea of My Memory

Foreword (Before I begin)

I have done many things in my life — some good, some not so much. If those situations repeated, there are things I wouldn't do again, but in many cases, I would act exactly as I did before.

Some names, of course, have been changed, and events have been trimmed down. My goal is not to write an autobiography; rather, I wish to describe the vivid moments of my childhood that warm my soul today. And for my children and grandchildren, who did not live through those times — I want to tell them about the important things we call roots! I believe many will find it interesting to read about Georgian everyday life in the sixties through the eighties, as perceived by a Russian person.

In a child's memories, there are no gray colors — unlike the monotony and predictability of an old man's life today. The passing childhood years have woven themselves into a bright tangle, and it would be a pity if this rainbow vanished with me, just as an ordinary rainbow disappears after the rain. However, while a rainbow after the rain can be captured in a photograph, the rainbow of life must be written down. For the future will determine what is true and what is mere chaff — and for that, the future needs that very abundance from which to make a choice, both artistic and historical!

Life, unfortunately, is not just a cloudless, rosy-eyed childhood. It is also years of mental, spiritual, and physical struggle, where everything is truly tough, sometimes even cruel. For mistakes — often not even your own — you have to pay not with a simple “time-out” or a father's belt, but sometimes with years of loneliness, or even lives. And if, God willing, this cup passes you by, it does not mean your life was lived correctly. Life is long, and we are not angels — anything can happen.

I will try to describe my ordinary life situations and the experiences associated with them, whether my actions were right or wrong. If this makes someone stop and think, and helps them avoid mistakes, I will be very glad.

Once again, I want to say that I do not intend to make excuses, though perhaps in some places I should. As they say, you can't throw a word out of a song; history has no reverse gear and no subjunctive mood.

Sometimes it seems to me that while proving a truth, we often trample that very truth into the mud. While saving one person, we may inadvertently drown a dozen others. We can beat our chests in passion, pouring out the “naked truth,” making many shed bitter tears while insisting on our own righteousness and rejecting someone else's truth — though who is to say whose truth is “truer.”

I am not a lawyer, and certainly not a clairvoyant; I do not intend to use examples to show how one should or shouldn't act. I will write it as it was, and let everyone decide for themselves where the truth lies. And do not try to cast a stone at me — let him who is without sin cast the first, and I am certainly not without it.

I will begin writing in the third person; later, I think, it will settle into place!

So...

Once upon a time, there lived a family — like many others, and yet not quite. A grandmother and grandfather, a mother, a father, and a little brown-eyed boy. And all would have been well, but tragedy struck — the father was gone. The mother remained, but after an accident and her injuries, it was as if she were no longer there. And so, the grandmother became the mother, and the grandfather became the father. From here on, I will still write “grandfather” and “grandmother,” but that is for the sake of the story — in life, until their very last days, I called them Mom and Dad.

The boy grew up kind, sensitive, intelligent, and very quick — so much so that the nickname “Tarzan” stuck to him in the courtyard.

He loved, with all his heart, the kindest person in the world — his Jewish grandmother, with wrinkles in the corners of her eternally smiling eyes, smelling of delicious dinners, forgiving his every mischief, and infinitely caring. And his grandfather — a retired Russian colonel, strict, courageous,

devoted to the Motherland and Communist ideals, with eyes as steely as his character. He felt warm and safe with them.

Once, when his grandfather's sisters came to visit from Russia, the men had to sleep on mattresses spread out on the floor. He lay with his grandfather on the uncomfortably hard mattress and couldn't fall asleep. The moon, hidden by clouds, tried to peek into the open window; it was a bit eerie, but his grandfather lay nearby — so big and brave, with his crew-cut hair (the boy would dream of having such a haircut all his life, but... those treacherous cowlicks!). It was enough to press against him, and all fears evaporated. That night, for the first time, he thought: what if Grandpa or Grandma were gone?

It was such a powerful emotional shock that he began to wake his grandfather, crying, and only calmed down when his grandfather gave his word that he wouldn't die! Perhaps a person's first gray hair appears on exactly such a day or night.

The grandfather's sisters openly disliked the grandmother — that was where the roots of everyday anti-Semitism showed. This didn't fit in his head; it seemed like the greatest injustice. When one of the sisters bought him a metal tin of lemon drops, he said loudly, looking at his grandmother:

— My MOM — it was from that moment on that he began calling her Mom — always buys me chocolate “Bears,” and I don't eat such junk!

The way his grandmother squeezed his hand under the table is impossible to forget. The pride he felt from that squeeze was beyond comparison. He had protected his grandmother, something his grandfather hadn't done. From then on, no one ever dared to speak ill in his presence of those he loved or those who were his friends.

But the world is not without “kind” people, and the question of “Mom” and “Dad's” age always hung over the child's head. He couldn't grasp the full depth of the question, but subconsciously felt an anxiety that made him bristle and harshly — as much as a child can — cut off any attempts to crawl into his soul. This painfully sharpened sensitivity, which made him instantly react to any phrase that seemed to belittle his or his loved ones' dignity, remained for life — like a complex. And this complex hindered communication, often leading to a total rupture of relationships.

Family

My family. I write this without claiming bibliographic or historical rigor, nor do I seek critical acclaim. I write because I want my loved ones — those so dear to me — to be more than just plaques in a cemetery. I want them to be recognizable and honored, as they should be, in the memories of my children and grandchildren who never had the chance to meet them!

Grandmother — a “Yuzovka girl” from the beginning of the last century, born into a large Jewish family. She started working at the age of nine and paid five kopecks to a high school girl to teach her how to read and write. She was beautiful, green-eyed, with purely national features — her nape and legs — and a straight, petite nose. She was gentle but proud, and she absolutely doted on her grandson: — He’s just like me!

Grandfather — a mysterious figure in many respects. A Russian village boy who had been a “drushka” (a child hired by wealthy families to be a companion to their own children). He finished only three years of a parish school, but the teaching there must have been of an extraordinary level. In his fifties, my grandfather possessed calligraphic handwriting, absolute literacy, could play Chopin or Bach on the piano, and was fluent in Polish. Despite being a Communist-athetist, he kept a silver body-cross from the Life Guards Preobrazhensky Regiment in a small box alongside his medals. Short, lean, gray-eyed, militarily organized, and physically resilient. He was fair, level-headed, and knew how to keep his word like no one else.

The childhood of the sixties — people had already stopped listening for nighttime footsteps on the stairs or the rumble of a lone car engine in the dark. My grandmother, with an altered passport where “Bella Semyonovna” stood in place of “Betty Samuilovna,” could calmly visit the synagogue once or twice a month without fearing for her husband’s career. Meanwhile, my grandfather would argue passionately with friends about the cult of personality, “excesses,” and blocking detachments.

I often heard my grandfather use insults like “seksot” (secret informant) toward some neighbor. I was surprised by Grandmother’s calm reaction to such “cursing” and couldn’t understand how these old neighbor women could interest anyone from a “romantic” perspective. I remember my grandfather’s stories about the war, after which I would lose myself in a thick, crimson-bound book titled *For the Motherland, For Stalin*. I grew up on the examples of Gastello, Talalikhin, Vanya Golikov, and the Kosmodemyansky siblings. The book contained sketches of all the Heroes of the Soviet Union and described their heroic deeds. I admired three-time heroes like Pokryshkin and Kozhedub with their 59 and 62 downed planes, unaware that in the German army, Gerhard Barkhorn had 301 and Wilhelm Batz had 237... — but well, one’s own are always the greater heroes! It is only much later that you begin to understand that the history of wars is usually written — or even rewritten to suit certain personalities — by the winners.

All of this did not pass me by; it played a significant role in my formation as a person.

Caught between “two opposites” — the adoration, permissiveness, and doting of my grandmother on one side, and the stern, sobering gaze, the personal example of patriotism and duty, and the reading of Perelman’s countless “Entertaining” books on the other — I grew up kind, open, and inquisitive, with a sharpened sense of justice. Yet, at the same time, I was stubborn, headstrong, and independent in my actions.

And everything would have been fine, but as luck would have happened, I was a desperate mischief-maker. Because of this, “battles of local significance” would sometimes flare up between my guardians, where even pieces of crockery were put into play. Grandmother usually emerged victorious. Her famous saying, whenever I didn’t want to go to school and feigned illness, was worth its weight in gold: — It’s no big deal, let him stay home; he’ll just become a professor one day later... — a fact she, of course, never doubted for a second.

From early childhood, I could indulge in my favorite pranks to my heart's content. There were a great many of them, and if a day was lived "correctly," it meant the day was wasted!

One such prank was building a "Headquarters" out of the dining table, chairs, and a folding cot... All this was covered with blankets. Inside the HQ, I'd place a pillow on the carpet, a few favorite toys, my grandfather's field binoculars (the Zeiss maritime ones hung around my neck), a hunting bandolier with spent shells, a mess tin, and... a desk lamp with a green lampshade, which was kept on because it was a bit dark and scary under the table! Two of my grandfather's hunting rifles were poked through narrow slits (embrasures), and the surrounding space was entangled in "barbed wire" made from Grandmother's wool yarn balls. Anyone passing by the HQ — guests included, and avoiding it was impossible — was obliged to present a pass to the Chief of Staff himself. The Chief wore a colonel's tunic that dragged along the floor, size 42 cowhide boots on stiff legs, carried a map case, and had a chest full of regalia — 28 pieces in total. The Order of Lenin and the two Orders of the Red Banner were not to be touched — they were sacred!

Among my grandmother's favorite games was "going to school." I would take an old briefcase and go to the back stairs, where I would sit for an hour or two "at my lessons." During this time, Grandmother could calmly go about her chores without worrying about me. Then there were "partisan raids for provisions," where she would sneak me everything she wanted me to eat. Like a magician, Grandmother skillfully used many of my games to suit her needs.

But there were things she endured only out of her boundless love for me: like diluting the kerosene in the stove with water, after which the wicks had to be replaced; getting Vaska the cat drunk on valerian drops; or "occupying" the Singer sewing machine... she stoically bore much.

Then there were the "unique masterpieces." We lived on the third floor and had a balcony with a railing. Usually, my head wouldn't fit through the bars, but one day I managed to maneuver it through anyway. The joy was indescribable. I could see not only what was happening under the balcony but also what was going on with the neighbor below — a cranky old woman who did nothing but bang her mop against her ceiling whenever she thought I was stomping too loudly. Grandmother said she did it because she didn't like children. But soon, joy turned to bewilderment — my head wouldn't come back out. My ears were in the way.

I didn't dare cry for help, knowing that Grandfather's rawhide belt might pay a visit to my backside before my head was freed. So, I stood there bent over for ten minutes until Grandmother, sensing a suspicious silence, peeked out onto the balcony. Throwing up her hands and wailing something unintelligible, she tried to help, but — "the spectacles didn't work at all." Then she brought me a small chair, upon which I sat with great relief. My head remained sticking out from the third floor.

Grandfather didn't even think of the belt; he laughed until he cried for about five minutes. I calmed down and even ate an apple through the bars. No tricks helped: not greasing the bars with oil, nor trying to pry the thick metal apart by hand. Gradually, the neighbors gathered. They brought a second chair for Grandmother and periodically gave her valerian. My head was still outside. Various solutions were proposed, from a hacksaw to welding. "Hacksaw" was mentioned most often, but we simply didn't have one. Salvation came unexpectedly: a neighbor, the only owner of a "Moskvitch" car in the yard, arrived and pried the bars apart with a car jack. If you look closely from the street, you can still see those bent bars today.

There was much else: my aunt's metal embroidery hoops, brought all the way from Moscow, were once forced around my waist, leading to a long and sharp debate. Grandmother proposed cutting the hoops; my aunt proposed cutting me, assuring everyone that her suggestion would rid the family of all its problems at once. But since neither side could agree, butter was brought in. My body was greased heavily, and through universal effort, both the hoops and I remained intact.

I nailed Grandfather's galoshes to the floor in the hallway; I launched "smoke rockets" made of old film reels into neighbors' open windows; and many other pranks for which I didn't get much

of a “scolding.” I was simply made to read something aloud for an hour. Having grown accustomed to it, I later started reading even without being punished.

Only two things in the house were untouchable and therefore incredibly desirable: the typewriter my grandfather used for side jobs (editing candidate and doctoral dissertations) and a captured German Darsonval device. Because of that device, I had to whine once or twice a week about “pains in my legs.” Then, with a solemnity and caution worthy of Fabergé eggs, the device would be brought down from the cupboard. With crackling and tingling, a massage would be performed using glass attachments that glowed with mesmerizing, multicolored neon lights inside. Of course, I eventually got my hands on them too. But when it was discovered (a jammed carriage or a broken glass tube), “scoldings” were not enough, and even Grandmother’s desperate maneuvers couldn’t save my rear from the belt.

But this cloudless period of my childhood wasn’t illuminated only by desperate mischief. There were, of course, less pleasant situations that were hard to avoid:

- Haircuts — with an old, manual, incredibly blunt clipper.

- Taking cod liver oil on Sundays.

- Bathing in “boiling water” with multiple rounds of stinging soap on my head.

The haircutting lasted several days because only a small part of my head could be shorn in one sitting before I, like the “Chief of the Redskins,” would break free from Grandfather’s embrace and escape to the safety of the street. The sight of my head, shorn in patches, was a common occurrence, so it didn’t evoke much emotion from anyone.

Cod liver oil... Well, who doesn’t remember it? Since the hungry post-war years, it was apparently the only way to replenish the body with necessary elements, and parents performed this “execution” with total devotion. After long arguments and Grandmother’s mostly unsuccessful attempts to soften the “fishy” suffering with a pickle, a lemon, or even jam, Grandfather proposed a wise solution. On Sunday morning, we drink a spoonful of the hated oil and then go to see popular science films in the small hall of the Rustaveli Cinema — with a mandatory stop at the grocery store in Building No. 1 on Rustaveli Avenue. At the corner by the entrance, there was a stand resembling an ice cream cart that sold small buns with custard inside (perhaps someone remembers them?). How delicious they were! No cod liver oil could eclipse their divine taste, savorily seasoned with a movie session! Even when the oil ran out, the Sunday cinema visits remained for a long time, for which I am deeply grateful to my grandfather. How much interesting and instructive information I learned over those years — and I might never have seen it, were it not for cod liver oil!

Bathing — this was the only procedure where I consistently and hopelessly lost! This usually pleasant activity was commanded by Grandfather, who managed to turn it into a regimental execution. Oh, I forgot the most important part. Our house was a communal one, corridor-style (more on its full glory below). The conditions were minimal — or rather, non-existent! A “bathroom” in our house was an irrational concept, something between a bourgeois relic (which was long gone) and a joy from the bright Communist future (which no one knew when would arrive). The procedure took place in the kitchen, in a multi-purpose tub. Water was heated in a bucket on... (think about these words! A couple of years later, man flew into space) a brick, wood-burning stove on the third floor of the capital city of Tbilisi, and then diluted to the required temperature.

Mothers usually test the water temperature with a gentle elbow; Grandfather, however, considered his index finger a thermometer just as good, which is why the water was usually about ten degrees higher than acceptable. Because of this, bathing turned into a semblance of drill practice on a parade ground, where the army motto reigned: — If you can’t, we’ll teach you; if you won’t, we’ll make you!

But while in the two previous cases there was room for maneuver — one could break away or strike a deal — in the latter, the situation was hopeless: you can’t run away in your birthday suit, and there was nothing much to negotiate. Therefore, only one option remained — to scream. To scream

as long and as loud as possible, so that in front of the neighbors, HE would find it “excruciatingly painful” for the torments being inflicted upon the child. So, whenever the wail of a Jericho trumpet echoed through the house, all the residents knew — THEY ARE BATHING HIM!

The Street and the House of My Childhood

It was a world of its own, as different from today’s courtyards as a street market is from a boutique. In general, the Tbilisi courtyards of that time are something that defies verbal definition — much like the Odessa courtyards of the same era.

A Georgian courtyard is an orchestra of God-knows-what sounds, constantly playing as a backdrop for someone’s solo parts, the librettos of which featured an unimaginable variety, both linguistic and conceptual. The courtyard was a living organism that absorbed the full individuality of its residents. It was a theatrical performance — a sort of “one-courtyard theater.” The talent, temperament, character, facial expressions, timbre of voice, soulful warmth or callousness, refined cunning or black envy — all were composed of the collective traits of its inhabitants. Even the random passers-by — milkmen, bakers, rag-and-bone men, garbage collectors, sellers of sweets and kerosene, all of whom were known by face — added their own unique brushstrokes to the courtyard’s vibrant canvas. And the ice cream men — those coveted wizards with magical, white oval boxes slung over their shoulders and booming voices — what legendary visitors they were for us boys. Lord, I can still hear that ear-caressing, trilling, long-drawn, imploring yet beckoning, seductively sweet and oh-so-desired combination of words: — Eeee-skimo-maaa-rozh-niiii-na-paaaa-loch-keeee! (Eskimo pie on a stick). Today, all of that is gone, and the world has become poorer and paler!

Of course, Odessa folklore is unique, but it is well-known because one-sixth of the globe spoke the same language. Georgian courtyard folklore, however, is a parallel world — one that never intersects with Odessa’s, but is no less colorful, possessing an equally refined humor seasoned with accentuated, temperamental gestures. As for Georgian profanity — only the deaf-mute wouldn’t envy it. This folklore is less known only because the people are few in number, which is a pity!

The courtyards of that time were not like today’s landscaped spaces between high-rises, where nobody really knows anyone. Spaces that are traversed by anyone and everyone. Spaces that serve merely as the shortest path from point A to point B and nothing more!

The courtyard of my childhood was the best version of a communal apartment. Unlike the “kommunalkas,” people in the courtyards united by choice, with whom they wanted and when they wanted. Therefore, the envy, malice, bitterness, and misunderstandings typical of communal living gave way to a completely different type of relationship. A spirit of togetherness reigned there — teasing, bravado, mutual aid, games of backgammon and dominoes, and a peculiar kind of kinship found nowhere else. And those Sunday morning trips to the market, followed by an evening in a shish-kebab-and-wine “relaxation zone” that united everyone — they have long since sunk into eternity.

My house was a sturdy, four-story building with a corridor system. Among the city’s residents, it bore the proud name “The House of Pilots.” Originally, it was a flight school built in 1923, and like a regular school, each floor had a corridor with classrooms to the left and right. At the end of the long corridor stood the crown jewel — a shared toilet with a single water tap.

After the war, it became a residential building where each family occupied one or two “classrooms.” There were sixty-two families: fifteen on each floor and two in an annex in the yard.

The house had no natural gas, no trash chute, no kitchens, and not even a single shower for the entire corridor.

In the corridor, every room-apartment had a semblance of a kitchen, built however one could manage. Some had a cupboard with kitchen gear and bundles of onions, garlic, and peppers. There were fanciful washstands and tables with kerosene stoves or Primus burners where meals were prepared. Tubs, buckets, and basins for laundry and bathing hung on nails upon the walls. An essential

attribute was a chair where, in between kitchen chores, the housewives would sit to share news and biting remarks about absent neighbors.

In this improvised “Babylonian kitchen” — which today is hard to even imagine — a showy matriarchy reigned. Yet, once past the room doors, it shifted into a strict patriarchy with unquestioning submission — a price paid for the corridor’s matriarchal concessions. The ladies clustered together for reasons known only to them, where they harshly and cruelly mocked those who were absent. But as soon as the targets appeared, the atmosphere of mockery instantly transformed into tender “sisterly” love and culinary mutual aid. They would even share their dinners if someone hadn’t managed to cook, always accompanied by the phrase: — Vasily Petrovich, try my cooking today, since your wife hasn’t had the time to cook for you!

Everyone knew who was cooking what, who ate how much, who hated whom, who was pining for whom, and even who was sleeping with whom. All this was known because of the thin, non-load-bearing partitions between the room-apartments, which were so acoustically porous that they blocked out nothing except, perhaps, gestures. Every neighbor knew (if one knew, everyone knew) not only everyone’s temperament — judged by the duration, frequency, and tempo of sex — but also their intimate nicknames. Some even managed to use a glass against the wall to determine the moment of orgasm, though almost all the women automatically covered their mouths with their hands, as they themselves were guilty of “using the glass.”

This female “Kitchen Babylon” lived by special laws of collective coexistence, quite different from those of small communal apartments where people usually hated each other openly and as a family unit, communicating only about kitchen or toilet issues or the schedule for changing shared lightbulbs.

Here, the atmosphere was “chameleonic,” changing instantly with the change of characters.

Ladies who were particularly “well-loved” by their husbands would emerge for the morning kitchen “runway” looking sleepy, with their heads and lower backs wrapped in scarves, always resting a hand against their waist. The poor soul would show with her entire being — to the envy of her neighbors — how exhausted she was from her husband’s excessive “attention.” She wouldn’t forget to sigh languidly, recalling the night’s excesses, and cast glances at the divorced or unmarried women! The latter, once the woman vanished behind her door (knowing her ear was likely at the keyhole), would silently use facial expressions, gestures, and poses to show how things really went down.

One could tell from the morning curlers that someone was planning an evening outing — or perhaps a “visitor.” Many knew not only the love affairs of their neighbors but even their lovers, including those from among the neighbors themselves; however, this topic was taboo, for who is without sin?

Once the husbands and children were packed off to work and school, the housewives’ bacchanalia began! The washing of others’ dirty laundry, discussions of other husbands’ virtues and their wives’ flaws... Verbal battles rarely turned physical, but you could expect any kind of mischief afterward — from small “kitchen” thefts to kerosene in the soup. Each such kitchen skirmish was vividly recounted at home in the evening. Everything was presented as a clear and unconditional victory, with the other side’s mandatory capitulation in the form of numerous apologies and the wiping away of repentant tears. Well, and some morning female disputes were settled in the evening by their husbands.

I remember once witnessing an argument between my grandmother and a neighbor. It was a long, endless monologue from the neighbor, after which Grandmother went inside and cried for a while. In the evening, however, she told Grandfather how she had “told that woman off” and how “that one” would now think twice before crossing her. The only thing that stopped her from ripping out a clump of the neighbor’s hair, she claimed, was my presence! Of course, I supported Grandmother, adding that I had been very scared for the neighbor because Grandmother looked so enraged — for which I was rewarded with a look of pure love and adoration.

During the day, the corridors seemed to fall into a slumber — some were at work, some shopping, some resting before the evening. In the evening, everything sprang into motion, and the corridors turned back into anthills. People scurried both horizontally and vertically. An indescribable scent hung everywhere — a mixture of food, “Red Moscow” perfume, laundry soap, kerosene, and everything that drained into the buckets under the washstands. This smell was “the standard” for the residents, but for guests, it sometimes hit like a physical blow, enough to make them faint!

The fifty-meter corridor was like a catwalk where the ladies demonstrated new outfits. Some would sashay in them toward the toilet; others would stand by the kerosene stove, conjuring dinner in crumpled, greasy robes and worn-out slippers with a big toe peeking out — but wearing a new hat, with painted lips and lined eyes. Someone would walk down the hall loudly asking to borrow a can opener to open a tin of red caviar, claiming their own had gone missing.

On our floor lived a prostitute named Ketino, about twenty-five years old. There was no “kitchen” at the entrance to her room — why would there be? She never quarreled with anyone; she was the loveliest woman, always smelling amazing, and she was unnervingly slender and beautiful. The neighbors left her alone, as she had not only a sharp tongue but could easily start seducing their husbands — and her “rear guard” was as numerous as it was high-ranking! she never brought men to her room, so she didn’t cook, and she always looked respectable — a sort of “Western thing.”

Once, when I was about 12 or 13, she asked me to fix an outlet. She settled into an armchair with her legs up and got lost in a newspaper. I spent over an hour fixing that outlet, and in that time, I appreciated not only her stunning legs but everything else visible under her half-open robe, right up to her neck, because Ketino pretended to have fallen asleep, covering her face with the newspaper. Oh, how I was tempted to touch her firm breast, but I was afraid to wake her. For about a week afterward, I constantly hung around the corridor, hoping Ketino would need something else fixed, but she would pass by as if not noticing me. Only once did she smile and ask quietly: — Did you like my body when I was “asleep”? If you want, stop by; I won’t tell your grandmother.

These words somehow insulted me, and I tried to avoid her after that. A couple of years later, she moved away to a private apartment.

The male half of the building took no part in this “clucking hen-house.” The older generation, split by interests, sat like moles in their rooms with beer and dried fish, chess, checkers, backgammon, or in front of the magnifying lenses of “Rekord” TV sets. The middle, “mature” generation gathered in the yard at a large wooden table polished by elbows, where the spicy details of “personal victories” were discussed before a game of Preference “charged up” until late at night. The younger, “immature” crowd sat nearby in silence, proud of their involvement. As for the little kids — they just fooled around, racing like mad across the large yard or quietly hanging out behind the sheds, of which there were also sixty-two — one for every family.

Friends

What could be better than sliding down the stairs like a whirlwind, casting aside all conventions, obligations, and the moralizing guardianship of adults, to find yourself on the street? There, among those just like you — so identical yet so different. The imagination of a childhood pack, huddled together, sometimes takes on such bizarre shapes as no single child could ever conceive!

There were five of us, all the same age. A Georgian, an Armenian, a Ukrainian, and two Russians — but who noticed? Who even cared? It made no difference who was who.

Boris lived with his mother; he was large, a head taller than the rest of us, level-headed, slow, and a bit haughty. His mother worked and wasn't afraid to leave him home alone. His father — a Candidate of Sciences — lived in Moscow, though with another family.

Yura was “crushed” by the weight of the piano and violin. He hated the ticking of the metronome more than anything and burst out onto the street with such desperation, as if it were his last time. His father was a military musician, a trombonist, who summoned Yura home for his violin-and-piano “Golgotha” with the loud blasts of a bugle. His mother — a petite, blue-eyed, plump nurse with a fine figure — was a charming “kitty” whom any representative of the building's male population was happy to ask for help on any pretext. And she certainly knew how to “help” like no one else.

Avto was a good-natured, crafty, and desperately mischievous son of the Georgian people, usually seen in a short-sleeved jersey and “Chinetsky” (Chinese) sneakers. His father was also a military musician — the marching trumpet. But how different these fathers were — just like the instruments they played and resembled. His mother — a tall, thin Mingrelian woman — was a literal devil in a skirt. She would chase her prankster son around the yard with a mop, screaming things in Georgian that... (I dare not translate into Russian; in any country, she'd be stripped of her parental rights on the spot). Yet, she would instantly turn from rage to mercy the moment she received her son's vow that it would never happen again.

Gagik, who left us too early (a heart attack at 40), was proud, intelligent, and even talented — a sort of Armenian Kulibin. He was the only one from my childhood to whose intellect I “tipped my hat,” despite not considering myself a fool. His temperament often ran ahead of the cart; reckless in his actions, he never fully realized his potential, wasting his life on trifles.

And then there was me — independent as a cat, quick as mercury, a ringleader and a dreamer. I was always rushing about with some idea or prank, loving the street to the point of self-oblivion and forgetting everything else while there.

I won't bore the patient reader with tales of standard courtyard pastimes — of lapta, Cossacks and Robbers, pulling girls' hair, or strutting around the yard with enormous cheese sandwiches like a messiah, letting each of my buddies take a bite. Many had that to some degree. Instead, I'll tell you about the things not everyone experienced — things that played a significant role in my later life and forged the character I have today.

Mischief is an innocent act as long as it doesn't strike the nervous systems of those around them or throw them out of balance. But the pranks Avto and I pulled could drive anyone mad. Those stunts, of course, were only possible in our communal house.

I'll describe a few. They often had “code names” and were repeated periodically, which didn't just rattle the residents but sometimes led to the police being called.

For instance, “The Knots.” The name of this outrage sounds harmless, but the consequences for some were serious. As I wrote before, the house had a corridor system with doors opening inward. By agreement, at a pre-set early hour, we would slip out of our rooms — the excuse was simple: going to the toilet. We'd head to the top floor and, using thick clotheslines we'd prepared in advance, tie the handles of opposing doors together. Having tied them all, we'd instantly dash back.

Imagine the indignant cries of the residents when they couldn't leave their rooms to wash up or cook breakfast — not to mention getting to work. And it wasn't just one apartment; it was all fifteen (the last one was tied to the toilet door). After much cursing — both in chorus and solo — and threats and pleas to be let out, they had to call for help from the neighbors living below. Through windows and balconies, they'd try to explain the idiocy of the situation. The neighbors below, of course, couldn't even fathom the cause of this "collective madness" on the top floor. Some advised them not to go to work; others laughed hysterically at the sheer comedy of it.

We caught hell for it — I, more than the others. Of course, the punishment wasn't distributed equally. While Avto would never, under any circumstances, admit to anything, I was accustomed to telling the truth and knew I had to answer for my actions. I stoically endured punishments that were far from humane.

There were many such pranks. "Fishing" — sitting on the sheds, we competed to see who could catch more of the chickens running around the yard. We used a large hook and a "snagging" technique when they pecked at the grain bait. "The Castling" — when we swapped pots of simmering dinner with a neighbor's pot from... a different floor. The results were completely unpredictable, ranging from laughter and tears to... physical altercations. And the small things: pouring water into matchboxes or adding... kerosene to the washbasins.

As they say, a drop of water hollows a stone. When we caught about ten cats, tied tin cans with smoke bombs inside to their tails, and released them into the corridor, the patience of the house finally snapped. Maddened by the clattering cans and the thick, acrid smoke, the cats tore through the hall like possessed demons, shrieking heart-wrenchingly, knocking over everything in their path, and scratching the petrified housewives who hadn't managed to dodge them.

At an emergency meeting of the residents with a representative from the local police, "the defense" was denied a voice for their permissiveness and unsatisfactory upbringing. It was decreed: send the hooligans to BOARDING SCHOOL! And so, they sent us! Avto went to a Georgian one located just behind our courtyard fence (now the Institute of Foreign Languages), and I was sent to a Russian one — Boarding School No. 4, which later became the Komarov Physics and Mathematics School.

The Boarding School

To know what Hell is, one must go there; but having arrived, it is impossible to speak of it, for no one returns from there. The difference between Hell and a boarding school or orphanage is that from the latter, there is a literal “path to the temple” back. And while from a boarding school that path physically exists, for an orphanage, much depends on the State and on people.

The traumatic and deforming effect of a boarding school on a child’s psyche can hardly be overstated. Even an orphanage — with rare exceptions — does not exert such an oppressive, depressive influence as a boarding school. Within its walls, a child’s mind is thrust into two completely opposite states. One moment, you feel the essential sense of security, the closeness of loved ones, the familiar surroundings, the feeling of belonging — if not total adoration, then at least being needed. When you lie in your “own” bed on weekends, your whole being feels the peace emanating from the parental aura. The next moment, you are thrown into an agonizing psychic pain, a state of prostration where a child’s unformed psyche is mangled by a sense of being unwanted, by detachment, by a cold, almost surreal herd mentality, by a lack of understanding, and sometimes by sheer cruelty from both peers and adults. You live with an all-consuming yearning for the weekend, your eyes constantly fixed on the road leading either to heaven or out of hell, where those long-awaited, familiar faces might appear at any moment.

When you lie in your “school” bed at the boarding school, infinitely lonely, covering your head with the blanket, you begin to choke on tearful self-pity. In those moments, for just one touch of a warm mother’s hand, you would forgive everything in the world. As you slowly drift off, your psyche allows you to relax a little and recharge with positive emotions, for only in dreams do these daytime longings turn into the “reality” of sleep. But in the morning... it’s back to the struggle.

In our second-grade class, there were over twenty of us. Some were pure “orphanage kids” — no one picked them up on weekends. The others were “boarding kids” who went home for the weekend. Consequently, two factions formed. One was the orphanage group — tightly knit because they had known each other since infancy, cruel, embittered against the “mamma’s boys,” with a rigid hierarchy and laws resembling those of convicts. The second group consisted of the boarding kids — plucked from warm family nests and tossed into a hostile “nowhere,” fragmented, bewildered, with eyes red from frequent crying, reflecting only one question: — What for?

If during lessons things were somewhat tolerable, the real horror began in the evenings. When we were in the dormitory and the supervisors (who deserve a story of their own) were not around, the “upbringing” began — a process that I believe left a mark on many for life. The orphanage group would choose one boy from the other camp — usually the largest and strongest, so the others wouldn’t dare “act up” — and begin to “break” him. The bullying was terrifying in its cruelty and sophistication. Most importantly, it was relentless, as children possess no internal brakes.

There was a boy in our class named Tolik, whose leg had been amputated below the knee. There was also a rather large eight-year-old boarding boy whom the orphanage group chose as their target. For five nights, as soon as he fell asleep, they would wake him by thrusting Tolik’s stump into his face. After two days, he started wetting himself; on the fifth night, he had a seizure. An ambulance took him away, and we never saw him again. Remember, these were children of eight or nine! This event so demoralized the boarding kids that for a month, they were completely broken. The orphanage kids simply robbed them, and the defiant ones were beaten mercilessly — sometimes openly by the pack, sometimes at night under a blanket (the “dark treatment”). Everything was taken: from food brought from home to clothes and shoes, which the orphanage kids would wear all week, only returning them on Saturday before the boarding kid went home, so the parents wouldn’t notice.

Any flaw in appearance, behavior, health, or speech was mocked cruelly. Almost everyone had nicknames — no one knew who gave them or why, but they were almost all humiliating: “Rusty

Doggy” (an orphanage boy from Ochamchira, my only close friend there, with whom I kept in touch for eight years after), “Booger-Man,” “Snot,” “Pisser,” and so on. Theft — especially of dried bread from a bedside table — was punished mercilessly, regardless of who you were!

My “Colonel’s upbringing” eventually made itself known. Over time, I rallied the boarding kids, and we put up a decent fight. The bullying stopped. A special recognition of my role in this “truce” was that neither side gave me a humiliating nickname. My “own” called me by my name, and the “others” — a title I was very proud of — called me Professor, because I often told stories at night by Edgar Allan Poe, Chesterton, and even occasionally Émile Zola, whom I read at home in secret on weekends.

I remember the mass vaccinations and the arrival of the dentists. While the former would leave you alone after the shot, the latter — arriving once a year and seemingly fulfilling a quota for teeth — wouldn’t stop at just one or two extractions. Many children walked around with numerous gaps in their mouths.

Once, my ear began to ache. The doctor looked at it and said it would pass. But the ear was throbbing mercilessly, and the pain was unbearable. I was allowed to stay in the dormitory and skip lessons. I lay there in agony for two days. The doctor never returned. Only Lyonya (“Rusty Doggy”) stayed by my side, constantly changing the cold compresses on my aching ear. On the second night, I ran away and showed up at home at five in the morning. It turned out to be middle ear inflammation; I was treated with penicillin shots every four hours and warm compresses. The inflammation was cured, but my right ear was left with permanent hearing loss.

The food and clothing were poor, especially evident on the orphanage kids. They were constantly hungry, and many wore whatever they could find. Because of this, the retired colonel director often caught “hell” from my grandfather. My grandfather did a lot of good for the school — for example, he forced the firing of two typical sadist-supervisors who delighted in tormenting children, reveling in their own impunity. One night supervisor named Beno was particularly vicious. He always carried a cornel-wood switch, which stung worse than any whip. For the slightest infraction after lights out in the dormitory (ours was on the third floor), Beno would march all the children down to the first floor, line them up in the corridor, and make them do squats — a hundred or more, depending on the prank. Those who couldn’t do it were left with bloody welts; the skin on their thighs would burst from the switch’s blow. Beno would then “caringly” and generously smear the wounds with iodine. If a child complained to the management, Beno wasn’t fired — his meager salary was likely compensated by his sadistic pleasure — but the punishment for the child was swift: a night in the “cellar” — a damp, empty basement with no light. Admittedly, only the orphanage kids were subjected to this particular torture, as the boarding kids might tell their parents.

There were also cases of girls being raped — again, usually the orphanage girls. I only knew of this through stories; the perpetrators were both older boys and supervisors. It was never brought into the open. Strangely, the girls would sometimes boast about it, showing off their “adulthood” by sharing scandalous details.

Our favorite activity was helping to unload the bread truck, after which two or three warm, delicious-smelling loaves would go “missing.” Our interest in unloading would vanish instantly, and the pack would head to the vegetable cellar in the basement of the separate canteen building. Under a heavy, metal-clad lid was a chute where vegetables were unloaded directly from trucks. Two boys would stand watch at the corners, several others would lift the lid, and one would slide down the chute. He would return with onions tucked into his shirt. Hiding in some secluded spot, the feast would begin. To this day, I cannot eat raw onions at all!

Once, I was running down the school corridor with other children and collided with the head of studies. She was apparently in a bad mood; she caught me by the arm and — as a lesson to everyone — she took off my Pioneer tie. It was a massive blow to me. I was terribly distressed, waiting for her

to call me and return it, but she simply forgot. Seeing my suffering, my grandmother offered to let me wear another one, but I told her: — You don't understand, they **TOOK** it from me!

I constantly tried to cross the head of studies' path, but she never returned it. Six months passed, the school year ended, and as we were heading home, I gathered the courage to approach her and ask for my tie. She thought about it for a long time, then went to a cupboard and pulled out my silk red tie, now covered in ink stains.

I never wore a tie again after that, and I never joined the Komsomol. Even then, in the third grade, I realized what a patriotic sham it all was.

Many things happened during those two years in the boarding school, and they had a profound influence on the formation of my character. Perhaps my ability to make independent decisions, to distinguish between good and evil, my maximalism, my ability to value friendship and hate betrayal, sycophancy, and theft — as well as my ability to live without idols and a certain recklessness — all have their roots in that boarding school.

I have had to endure much in life because of my inflexible and maximalist character, and I am still enduring it today.

School

Everything passes, and the boarding school was now behind me! Fourth grade, Secondary School No. 56. Pairs of students in the schoolyard. I was paired with Stepa Kabadzhan. Destined, perhaps! Stepa was the first person whose hand I took after the boarding school, and I was the last person who failed to realize he needed a friendly hand before his voluntary departure from this life during our fifth year of institute. That affected me so deeply that ever since, in the eyes of anyone needing help, I see Stepik.

In school, I gave him the nickname “Hurvínek.” Older people probably remember the cartoons about Hurvínek, who played the violin. Stepik played the violin too, and like Hurvínek, he had bulging eyes due to intracranial pressure that tormented him throughout his short life. We sat together at the same desk, often playing blindfolded chess during lessons. Stepik was a brilliant chess player and would whisper the positions of the pieces to me when I forgot. We even studied at the same institute, though in different groups. We met often; I wouldn’t say we were close friends — we were very different, and I don’t think Stepik had any true friends due to his somewhat strange and withdrawn nature. But our shared school years allowed us to have a wonderful time whenever student life brought us together.

Unrequited love led to the tragedy... The day before his “departure,” we met in the institute corridor, and Stepik suddenly suggested we go to Yerevan for a football match. If only I could have known that this was the straw Stepa was trying to grasp. But I already had a family, and how could I just, out of the blue, hop on a train from Tbilisi to Yerevan? The next day, Stepik was gone. The Kura River became his last refuge, the last thing he looked upon, and whatever he was thinking — the water carried it away. I don’t want to dwell on how he left — without posturing, not for show, quietly, without lengthy suicide notes or accusations. I knew the girl, and I knew the words that fell from her lips when Stepik confessed his feelings. I don’t want to repeat them, but I would like to say to all girls: when someone confesses their love to you — especially someone with a “defect” — they are so defenseless and vulnerable that any careless phrase or mockery can lead to tragedy. Be tolerant! A careless word can cost a life.

Secondary School No. 56 was located in the prestigious Vake district, inhabited mostly by the nomenklatura — now the elite. There were three parallel classes; two had forty students each, while the third — mine — had sixteen. As in all elite districts, there were also “not-quite-elite” residents. Therefore, unofficially, my class consisted mostly of the children of those “not-quentes.” As children, it didn’t seem to concern us, though it was strange to see two overcrowded classes and one half-empty. But the Bitkashis, Bidamirchis, Bitbunovs, Depperschmidts, Yakunins, Kabadzhans, Kazaryans, Manukyans, Sienkos, Asoyans, and Ayvazyans had to study somewhere.

If my class stood out for its lack of “eliteness,” it certainly made up for it in daring and mischief! Your humble servant, having completed the two-year “boarding school course,” was naturally in the front ranks of the instigators.

I studied easily and effortlessly, mostly getting “fives” (A’s) and... “ones” (F’s). If I hadn’t studied a lesson and was called upon, I simply wouldn’t stand up to answer at all. I could have gone to the board and bluffed my way to a “three,” but that would mean admitting I had studied and only mastered it at a mediocre level — my pride wouldn’t allow it. I felt no trembling awe toward the teachers; as someone “returning from the front,” I believed respect had to be earned through knowledge. I would simply say I hadn’t studied and receive my well-deserved “one.” Later, I’d stack a few “fives” on top of it, and everything would be fine.

The teachers didn’t worry about my knowledge, but my behavior caused them considerable problems! During math tests, I usually solved all four variants at once, and the whole class would get “fives,” even those who didn’t know the multiplication table. In all my years of school, I attended

a Georgian language lesson only once — how I regret that today! The Georgian teacher, Shota Anisimovich, mocked my pronunciation, and after that, nothing could lure me back to his lessons. I had “twos” in my report card for four quarters, and a dash for the year-end grade. Since (unofficially) you couldn’t be held back a year in a Russian school because of Georgian, I ended up with no grade for the subject in my diploma at all. “Shatalo” (playing truant) was a sacred thing; usually the whole class would head to the “Kazbegi” cinema, located at the crossroads of three schools. Collective raids were common; since there were almost no viewers except schoolkids, they would simply stop the film, turn on the lights, and sort the audience by school. The only salvation was to pretend you belonged to a different school.

Among my classmates, I had no nickname, but among the teachers, it was “The Bloodsucker.” Some teachers adored me, others hated me, but they could do nothing. What could they do? The “hooligan” was an honor student (except for Georgian) and regularly defended the school’s honor at all sorts of Olympiads — be it performing arts, mathematics, or technical drawing.

A Little Digression into the Performing Arts

Back in the boarding school, a classmate named Tityayeva and I were supposed to read the fable *The Wolf and the Lamb* at a holiday concert. On the day of the show, “The Lamb” fell ill! Bella Mikhailovna — a Russian woman of Jewish descent who believed the boarding school routine had stifled some great artist within her — was in charge of the concert. Wearing a “Duty” armband, she informed me in the deep, chesty voice of Ranevskaya: — My little one, I’m sorry, but without the lamb, it’s impossible!

No, that was unfair. The stage was the only bright stroke on the joyless canvas of the boarding school. I knew the whole fable by heart, and in rehearsals, I had internally played both parts. Imagine Bella Mikhailovna’s surprise when I asked her not to cancel the act, saying I would read for both characters. I demonstrated it on the spot. She literally fell off her chair laughing.

I read the fable alone at the concert. It was a triumph! One moment I was growling as the Wolf, the next I was jumping to the side and squeaking as the Lamb. Everyone realized it was an impromptu performance and cheered twice as loud. I was incredibly happy and, naturally, realized — I am an actor!

When I arrived at the new school, I tried to continue my acting career, but alas, there was no drama club. However, in singing class, upon hearing my voice — which was very low for a child — I was immediately invited to join the choir. I agreed, of course. As I wrote before, my admission to music school had failed due to a mundane lack of “ear,” but they didn’t know that, and I didn’t tell them. Usually, those who lack an ear for music compensate with a love for singing, especially in a group, closing their eyes in pleasure. I was no exception; if God hadn’t given me an ear, He certainly hadn’t shortchanged me in vocal power. I sang with abandon — not only louder than everyone else but faster, usually finishing half a verse before the rest of the choir. When the choirmaster realized I was a disaster for the group, he decided to “correct” his mistake by suggesting I just move my mouth silently. He didn’t know me well. I quit the choir, and my grandmother was stunned: — With a voice like that, you weren’t right for the choir?

She found “my” song — *The Buchenwald Alarm*. Minimum melody, maximum bass. For a week, she and I practiced to the record player (Grandma actually found the record in a store) under the guidance of our neighbor Maro, an opera lover who wore gloves even while cooking in the corridor. I not only got myself included in the “Political Song” concert program but managed to win a certificate. Grandmother told me then: — Yurochka, in our time, it’s not how you sing that matters, but what you sing!

So, I didn’t leave the choir because I lacked an ear, but because I wasn’t appreciated! Grandma was thrilled!

Then there were sketches like “The Blotter,” “The Mischief-Maker,” and others; everyone laughed, but I didn’t. And suddenly, Yuri Entin (not the famous songwriter) arrived and opened a drama club at the school. It was a feast for the soul! I played Karabanov from The Pedagogical Poem and other heroes with total devotion. The role of Karabanov became the school’s calling card. We performed the play at many military bases. Entin later came from Moscow and tried to convince me to drop out of the Polytechnic Institute in my second year, not to waste my talent, and to apply to the Shchukin School.

Later, I performed in one of the folk theaters in Tbilisi, but Grandma considered those theaters “dens of iniquity.” She thought it was too early for me to dive headlong into debauchery. If only she had known my later adventures — perhaps there would have been one more actor in the world.

My grandparents never attended a single parent-teacher meeting. Grandma was convinced that certificates for her grandson should be delivered directly to the house, and Grandfather only recognized one type of meeting — Party meetings. And so my school years rolled on: nailing drawing instructor Petrosyan’s galoshes to the podium; pouring acid on the chemistry teacher’s chair; writing wall newspapers with “disappearing ink” (I read somewhere it was made with ammonia). Actually, only some letters disappeared, and what remained is not worth writing here, as it was pure profanity. But I was somehow “uninvolved” because when the newspaper was first hung in its glass frame, everything looked perfect.

One evening, I propped the classroom door shut from the inside with a row of desks, wedging them against the opposite wall, and slid down the drainpipe from the second floor. In the morning, it was impossible to get into the class. There was no lock on the door, so everyone was convinced someone was inside holding it shut. A roll call began in the corridor to find out who was barricaded in. Imagine — someone was actually absent! The whole class spent a long time trying to persuade him to open up, then threatened him with expulsion, then promised forgiveness — all in vain! By the third lesson, we were sent home, and people stood guard at the door for a long time to see who would come out! In the evening, they got a long ladder and looked in through the window — then they understood. The culprit was identified instantly, but my awards from the school Olympiads outweighed the crime!

I could sabotage a math lesson by starting to prove that the teacher was solving the problem incorrectly on the board and that there was a shorter way — the whole hour would pass in debate! In literature class, they were afraid to call me to the board because I might read the “right” poets but the “wrong” poems. Rhymes with profanity were recited just as loudly and expressively as poems on the death of a poet!

Sometimes I was just too lazy to go to school — a sort of “Russian blues.” Grandfather, if it were up to him, would have insisted, but Grandma, my angel, would say her famous line: — Let the child sleep; it’s no big deal. He can become a professor one day later. On those days, it was practically a holiday in the teachers’ room, and my absences usually weren’t even recorded!

Overall, the boarding school played its part in making it very difficult to influence me with standard pedagogical methods. They couldn’t expel me — I was an honor student with no police record — just a “malicious prankster” who couldn’t be forced, only asked, not to do this or that! In short, I was a handful!

Beyond the School Walls

School, school, school — clearly, we all came from there. But what was there besides this standard institution? What did I breathe and what interested me outside its walls? Many things!

Now, from the height of my years, I can say for sure whether it was good or not that my interests were determined only by my own whims — that the pointing finger of adults did not loom over me. They respected me as an individual and considered me independent enough to make my own choices. I wasn’t led by the hand to extracurricular clubs, and no one zealously monitored my successes or failures. Probably, they should have. Children almost always take the path of least resistance.

Knowledge and skills that require persistence, monotony, and hard work — where the elements of play and entertainment are absent — are usually not loved. Children avoid them like the devil avoids incense. Yet, it is these very skills that later form the foundation upon which a talented dilettante grows into a real professional!

And although I believe children should be given maximum independence, parents are obligated to compensate for a child's lack of life experience — not from the height of personal ambition, but by subtly catching not only the child's abilities and inclinations but, if possible, the trends and demands of the time! Two subjects my eldest son studied under my vigilant, compulsory supervision: English and computers (skills I lacked due to laziness and circumstances). Now my eldest son is in the USA, working with computers. My youngest is a “special fruit” with a character even more unmanageable than mine and a mind that is sometimes frightening. To waste this child's potential merely on self-assertion would be unpardonable. But here, unexpected difficulties intervened, caused by the situation in the country — difficulties that didn't exist back in the Union. Overcoming them sometimes didn't depend on us at all.

“Tarzan” and the Sea Devil

Since I lived near the Physical Education Institute, I tried so many sports sections it's easier to say what I didn't do. Tennis, swimming, track and field, weightlifting, wrestling, football... and I was among the best in everything, except perhaps football; juggling the ball with my feet was difficult, and I remained only a fan for life. But I swam well; I was on the underwater swimming team, which even got me exempted from final school exams — I went to the USSR Youth Championship. I was physically well-developed; it's no wonder my nickname among friends since childhood was “Tarzan.”

In the summer after the 9th grade, I was in Sukhumi for training camp with the Georgian underwater swimming team. There, my older friends “opened my eyes” to that alluring and, at the time, unknown side of life: women. It all happened as romantically as it did comically. There's no need to describe the way I strutted across the beach with my scuba tank and fins past pretty girls. I saw myself as an “Amphibian Man,” whistling the song about the sea devil from the movie. I thought all the girls were staring at me in enchantment, and if I only wanted to... but there was no time, training and all that — no time for women!

So, one day, the older guys decided to enlighten me. They secretly talked one of the “workers of beach pleasures” into giving me a “basic training course” without me knowing it was a setup. They really wanted to see “Romeo and Juliet” performed by a virgin and a prostitute.

The next day, I “picked up” a pretty girl named Dasha on the beach, and of course, I strutted around like a peacock, seeing the “envious” looks of the older guys! In principle, I might not have ventured further than spreading my tail feathers, but one of our swimmers said he had talked to the guys and they were giving up the bungalow for the evening. The path to retreat was cut off!

I realized how “charming” and “attractive” I was to women the moment I mentioned going back to my place. A “passionate glint” appeared in Dasha's eyes, and a languid “Of course” escaped her lips. How I regretted that the guys couldn't see and hear this — and most importantly, if I told them later, they wouldn't believe me! On the way, I feverishly rehearsed scenes in which I seduced her, looking like a real Casanova. But looking at Dasha, something nagged at my soul, and I thought: — Maybe I should just call it off...

However, I seduced Dasha surprisingly quickly. It seemed to me she didn't even have time to recover before I lightning-fast and technically “laid” her in bed. I don't really remember charging the “pillbox,” and only at the end, having “finished my fire,” did I see a row of satisfied, smiling heads in the gap of the doorway. That's when I realized who was seducing whom, but the pleasure wasn't diminished by the realization. And from the look in Dasha's eyes, I knew — there had been no misfire!

The most pleasant surprise was when Dasha came to visit the next evening and asked the guys to go for a walk for an hour or two! This time, Dasha locked the door herself.

And away we went! The further polishing of my first experience took place at the tourist base and the dormitory of the Physical Education Institute, located right next to my house — and, it seems to me, not without success. Of course, I was no Alain Delon, but I was certainly no Quasimodo either. Well-built, looking older than my years, with a silver tongue, completely spontaneous, reasonably gallant, and with a low, raspy, confident voice that acted hypnotically.

I never deceived my “passions,” never pretended to be in love, never promised marriage, and was never too insistent. I always kept the situation under control. I was a cat — soft, fluffy, someone you wanted to pet. My purring not only lulled my companions but robbed them of all will, desire to resist, and, apparently, a realistic assessment of what was happening. My shamelessly devouring, eternally smiling eyes looked right through their clothes; in them, women saw an unobtrusive, warm admiration that made them believe in their own irresistibility. My rhythmically heaving chest and the nervous reverberation of my voice betrayed a desire to prolong that feeling as long as possible. Most importantly — I completely lacked sexual selfishness. My natural sexuality was focused mainly on providing pleasure, on bringing the partner to that state where all conventions are erased, where one forgets where, with whom, and why — when, amidst the unreality of the moment, the incredible significance of what has happened is suddenly understood, followed by a total emptying of consciousness, an all-consuming tenderness in the soul, a surge of warmth in the body, and... a complete absence of legs!

By my final year of school, I was already an experienced heartbreaker. Many young (and not so young) teachers could no longer withstand the direct, frank gaze I played with like a circus strongman plays with weights... and eventually, I played too far.

My Universities

One of my “crushes” was studying at the university in the faculty of cybernetics. Since I liked both the girl and electronics, it was obvious that I would apply to TSU (Tbilisi State University) for cybernetics. The faculty had only existed for two years; while a year prior no one knew about it and getting in was easy, by the time I applied, it was absolute madness. No, there weren’t crowds like at the history faculty, where there were twenty-five people per spot. Here, there were only two people per spot, but there were only ten spots in total. The problem was the caliber of the applicants! It was every dean’s dream — eleven gold medalists. Good lord, where did they find them? There were even two applicants named Korolev among them! Add to that three people on “quotas” (from enterprises), two returning from the army (also outside the general competition), and seven unrecognized geniuses! I wasn’t afraid of exams — not then, and not later, though lord knows how many of them I faced.

Out of the medalists, eight received straight “fives” (A’s), which meant only two spots remained. Before the final exam, those two spots were contested by three “quota” students (who only needed to avoid failing), two “army” guys, and four ordinary mortals without privileges who already had two “fives” each! You can imagine the “slaughter” that took place during the third exam — oral physics. It was only later I realized why physics was oral: you couldn’t appeal the results of an oral exam. I learned that on my own skin. Oral physics turned into a swim through “sulfuric acid,” where they cut people down left and right, indiscriminately. Everyone understood that even if only the quota students got “threes,” there would still be an over-enrollment.

I remembered this exam for the rest of my life. After all my answers, the examiner told me that my response was excellent, but “today that doesn’t matter.” He gave me a “four” and, with a smirk, remarked: — Today everyone lost. They could have at least added five more spots so that talent wouldn’t be left overboard.

After three exams, only one applicant had straight “fives,” and everyone knew exactly whose relative he was. I filed a protest against the “four” in physics. Naturally, it wasn’t accepted since it was an oral exam, but the Dean of Cybernetics was a real Dean — the kind who fought for a good student. He asked for my documents and, seeing that I was a member of the Georgian national underwater swimming team, wrote a request to the University Rector — Academician Vekua. He asked for the admission of a national team member who had received only one “four” and hadn’t passed the general competition. The Academician left a note on the request that read: “It is no wonder he got only one ‘four,’ as athletes work with their legs, but in an institute, headwork is what matters.” His verdict — REJECTED.

Truly — “Execution impossible, pardon”! The following year, I entered the Polytechnic Institute (GPI).

Military Training, or “Profanity with a Sequel”

In the days of the USSR, higher education institutions had military departments — factories for “inflated” lieutenants. There was such a department in my GPI as well. Starting from the second year, we spent one day a week there. Since we were electrical engineers, our military profession was signalmen, and the department was known in military parlance as the “Signals Cycle.” Eight hours a day, men from different groups of the same faculty and year gnawed on the armor of military science. A civilian army, masculine camaraderie, “boots-and-leather” humor — a student is a godsend for a major.

I won’t bore the reader too much, but I must dwell on the atmosphere and regulations that reigned there. Without describing certain moments of my coexistence with this department, the cause-and-effect of the summer training camps after graduation would be impossible to understand.

— Twenty-year-old guys with “Beatle manes,” healthy humor, appetites, libidos, and an unhealthy attitude toward military service — all “hee-hees” and “ha-has” — find themselves at the military department. There, it is explained to them that every Tuesday for eight hours, they are in the army. That there are no “faculties” here, only “cycles,” and everyone is a “comrade.” However, the realization that those with stars on their shoulders aren’t exactly “comrades” to those without them came through the standard army concept of “from lunch until the fence.” It turned out this wasn’t a pun but a concrete task, achievable only when you realize that a “comrade” is not a friend at all, but something between the concepts of “Father” and “Your Mother.” And “The Lord is not in heaven, but here, in the office of the Department Head” — in the person of General Zamtaradze!

I was ill-suited for the role of a temporary soldier, neither in manners nor in spirit. A “semi-box” haircut, a green tie, all that “Attention! At ease! Good health, sir! Requesting permission to speak!” — in short, a “fish day” in my personal life was not for me! Since hair doesn’t grow back in the other six days of the week, I naturally didn’t cut it. I didn’t write out the notes on radio receivers and transmitters because I already knew it all (from the Radio Club at the Pioneers’ Palace, UF6KAF at DOSAAF, and a year working as a radio technician at a research institute). In a word, I was somewhere between a dissident and a saboteur. Given my restless character and extensive school experience, one could guess whose lightning rod the bolt would strike!

They tried to make me cut my hair. Colonel Berezin once lent me three rubles for a haircut; instead of going to the department, I successfully spent the money on a movie, promising the Colonel I’d pay him back when my stipend arrived. Berezin — a world-class guy — just waved his hand, only asking that I didn’t cross paths with General Zamtaradze, or “it would be the end of us both!” Knowing I was slacking off in class, the Colonel would often call me into the faculty room for a slow dialogue that ritually began with his phrase: — Do you know that the length of hair is inversely proportional to the amount of brains? — to which I had the standard counter-argument in the person of Einstein. After that, the dialogue safely steered into the vastness of existence. We had a great time, but to prevent it from looking suspicious to other “comrades” free from lectures, Berezin would often loudly — with a smirk in his eyes — use phrases like: “Do you know where I’ve got you?” “This isn’t a circus!” “Next time I’m bringing scissors to cut those locks!” “Keep talking and I’ll kick you out of the department!” And all the “comrades with stars” understood — my days were numbered!

Everything rolled along “quietly and without dust” until my nemesis appeared on stage — Captain Tertsvadze.

I’ll go into a bit more detail here. One day, Major Kolbasenko fell ill. The Major was a most good-natured man who didn’t strain himself or us during lectures. That day, Captain Tertsvadze filled in. As luck would have it, I had a headache that day and decided to ask the Captain for permission to leave. This was a very big mistake.

When I approached Tertsvadze in the corridor — a short captain with a mustache like a cockroach — and asked to be excused, I got the reply: — Address me according to the regulations! — Comrade Captain, student Yakunin, requesting permission to speak. — You’ll speak in the classroom.

I trudged to the classroom. When the captain entered, I went to him: — Comrade Captain, permit me... — I’ll read the roster first, then.

I dejectedly slunk back to my seat in the last row. Every lesson, someone was the “on-duty student” for the room. This time it was a student from the Georgian sector named Gerkhelia — almost a carbon copy of the captain. The captain stood at the podium with Gerkhelia beside him; an inexplicable giggle rippled through the room. After a pause, Tertsvadze — without looking at the clean blackboard — habitually asked the duty student to “clear the board.” Gerkhelia, seeing the board was already clean and not being well-versed in the nuances of the Russian language, proceeded to follow the order literally. But removing a heavy blackboard from its hooks alone was difficult. Gerkhelia first lowered one side. The captain continued the roll call. The room was barely holding back; snickers broke out here and there. The captain took this personally and, turning red, stubbornly

continued the roster. Gerkhelia turned to him for help, and everyone simply roared. The captain thundered: — Silence! — and measuring Gerkhelia with a look: — You, you mustachioed “meter-with-a-cap,” how long are you going to play the fool?

At this point, the laughter was impossible to stop, because there were now two mustachioed “meters-with-caps” standing at the blackboard! When everyone finally calmed down, Tertsvadze reached my name in the roster. Remembering his instruction to speak after the roll call, I stood up: — Comrade Captain, student Yakunin, requesting permission to speak! — Questions after the lecture.

I realized he had no intention of letting me go and quieted down in the back row. Но на этом разбор полетов не закончился. “Fear small men” — the captain was incensed by the laughter, which he stubbornly took as an insult to himself. He launched an attack on me, remembering Berezin’s “long war” with my hair. And then it started! — Yakunin, lift your head and take notes. — I don’t have a notebook. — I said — write! — Comrade Captain, I’m not bothering you. If you won’t let me leave, then just leave me alone. — Stand up when an officer speaks to you! Do you think I’m Berezin? I’ll have you shaved and in the brig for fifteen days in no time! You’re a clown, and everyone in your family is a clown, but this isn’t a circus — you have no place in this institute!

And then I remembered Vysotsky’s lines: He got drunker and drunker. I was right on his heels. Only at the very end of the conversation, I insulted him, I said: — Captain! You will never be a Major!

I insulted him too: — Captain! You will never be a Major!

The room burst into laughter. Then he cursed at me, and I cursed back at him! A dead silence fell... The captain spun around and ran out of the room! Five minutes later, I was summoned by General Zamtaradze, who informed me that I was expelled from the military department and that the order would be on the Dean’s desk tomorrow! This meant automatic expulsion from the institute.

My relationship with the Dean of the Energy Faculty, Zivtsivadze, was not the best, mainly because he could never force me to attend classes. A notice hung in the institute stating that 36 hours of absences per semester meant losing your stipend, and 40 hours meant expulsion. I had 180 hours of absences. When Zivtsivadze called me into his office, he never expected that I was an honor student. He couldn’t expel me for absences if my grades were perfect. So, he decided to cut off my stipend, seizing on an error about an uncompleted German language credit. When it turned out I had passed it early, he found a term paper I allegedly hadn’t done. Time passed, and I remained without a stipend. When it was proven I had submitted the work, the stipend was simply withheld anyway. I had to write to the Pro-rector, who issued a directive: “If everything is submitted on time, grant the stipend.” But even this resolution had no effect, as it turned out I was now being denied my stipend because of... long hair!??

I had to go to Rector Buachidze. The Rector’s verdict on my application, written in blue pencil, was: “Give the stipend.” When I proudly presented the blue inscription, the Dean should have surrendered, but he couldn’t help himself and blurted out: — Who is Buachidze? I don’t want to give it, so I won’t!

Five minutes later, I was back in Buachidze’s office, relaying the Dean’s words with the exact same intonation. I won’t recount their telephone dialogue, which ended with a slam of the receiver so hard both phones nearly shattered. I’ll just say one thing: I received my stipend for all five months at once.

And then came my expulsion from the military department! Naturally, the order for my expulsion from the institute was written almost immediately after the report arrived from the military. The Dean didn’t deny himself the pleasure of handing me that order personally!

But Georgia is Georgia, and who is Captain Tertsvadze when Warrant Officer Shvangiradze comes to see General Zamtaradze? Especially considering this warrant officer was the adjutant to the District Commander and, by coincidence, my aunt’s husband. After warm greetings and a trip to a restaurant, the Captain and I were summoned to the office of the “Cycle Head” Zamtaradze.

The incident was settled with mutual apologies; I was reinstated in the department, and the expulsion order was annulled.

However, I had made two enemies: the Dean, who constantly created student inconveniences for me, and Captain Tertsvadze, whom I forgot about for two long years, as he didn't teach my classes. I shouldn't have forgotten him!

I defended my diploma with an “excellent” grade, though the Dean didn't miss a chance to interfere there either. But “there's no defense against a sledgehammer” — the diploma work was done perfectly. It was a special diploma, the first of its kind to be processed on a Minsk-222 computer.

Military Training Camps

And so, the two-month military training camps in Sal-ogly began. Sal-ogly is a semi-desert, almost a true desert with sporadic patches of green in Azerbaijan — a watermelon paradise. Three tents for three platoons of forty men each were pitched directly on the sand. There was no water; in the mornings, they filled our flasks with “tea,” which had to be rationed until lunch in heat exceeding 40°C.

For the first month, our commanding officer was Colonel Glazkov, whom we hadn’t known before. The Colonel turned out to be a great guy — he didn’t squeeze us, and we didn’t let him down. It was a month of lenient lessons, constant pranks, and even occasional drinking. The married men, like myself, would quietly slip away on Saturday mornings to the railway station and catch passing freight trains to Tbilisi. During roll calls, 120 people would “cover” for the absentees, and everything was fine as long as you were back for the Monday morning muster. The officers knew, but they made allowances for those with families.

Because of the relentless heat, we were salted like dried fish; all our clothes were covered in salt stains, and there was nowhere to wash. Near the base, I spotted a fire station and persuaded Levik Schneider (now a top energy executive in Israel) to join me. Levik was constantly reprimanded at morning formation for being “unshaven,” though he shaved daily — his stubble was just so black and thick it always looked like a shadow. I suggested we wash our grease-and-salt-caked fatigues in fire-fighting foam, since they had technical water in abundance. We didn’t have to ask the firemen twice; they even offered us a vat. We threw our green uniforms in, covered them with foam, and sunbathed on the sparse grass while they soaked. An hour and a half later, we pulled them out and gasped! The cotton had turned almost white, resembling either winter thermal underwear or a sailor’s dress uniform. At formation, Colonel Glazkov was initially stunned, then ordered us out of the line and walked around us, unable to comprehend where we had gotten this non-regulation gear. When he heard the story, he laughed until he cried. We spent the rest of the month as “albinos” in our white fatigues.

The Most Dangerous Post

We students and the actual unit lived in parallel worlds, rarely crossing paths. But once, when the regular conscripts left for maneuvers and dysentery hit those who remained, there was almost no one left to man the posts. The brilliant idea was formed to use the students. Imagine students, who knew nothing of military service, armed with submachine guns and sent on 24-hour guard duty.

On the base territory, it was manageable, but the Checkpoint (the motor pool), located a kilometer away, was a problem. Recently, a sentry had shot someone’s cow because it didn’t stop when challenged at night, let alone show its face. When he fired a warning shot, the frightened beast charged at him, and the soldier shot the “intruder” dead. Legally, it was all correct: the owners were paid the price of the meat at the rate of cow tails, and the vigilant soldier was rewarded with ten days of leave. Upon his return, while back on duty at the same motor pool, the cow’s owner shot him dead. Therefore, this post was the most dangerous — terrifying in its isolation and desolation.

We were divided into three-man teams. One shift on guard (two hours), one sleeping, and one “awake.” Just like a real guard rotation. Except we were students, and for us, it was all a game. Geographically, Sal-ogly received TV signals from all three republics. On football days, the TVs in the Lenin Room were turned toward the window, and the crowd would watch three matches simultaneously. I was on the “awake” shift during a match, meaning I wasn’t allowed to sleep. With my bag, my rifle, and spare magazines, I went to watch the football too.

During the second half, regular soldiers started racing around the base, shouting that someone had deserted with a weapon and ammunition. I was surprised — who would do such a thing, and

why? They started probing the outhouses with poles and running around with flashlights. After the match, I trudged back to the guardhouse. To my utter amazement, the “deserter” was me. Lieutenant Studennikov, nicknamed “The Student,” adjusted his round glasses and screamed that students would drive him to a heart attack or the gallows. He kept the incident quiet, as he would have gotten more trouble from the brass than I would.

Mustachios and Misfires

At the guardhouse, we were briefed: when the relief detail approaches the post, the sentry must demand they stop, show their face, and command: “Corporal of the guard to me, the rest stay put!” Then the changeover happens. I drew the “lucky lot” — the motor pool post. Before me was Todradze (Todradze was a walking joke, as suited for the army as I am for childbirth).

As we approached the motor pool, there was a wide alley of old oaks and a watchtower in the center. Todradze was nowhere to be seen. Studennikov grew nervous, called out the sentry by name — nothing. He shone a light on his own face — zero. He ordered us to stay back and walked down the lighted alley himself. We froze, remembering the cow story. Suddenly, Todradze jumped out from behind a massive oak, shoved his rifle into the Lieutenant’s chest, and screamed: — Surname?!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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