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The Ficuses in the Open



The Stepanakert Saga series: Book One

Сергей Огольцов

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What is "Stepanakert Saga"? It's a series of books by an eyewitness, an indie writer. What is an indie writer? Someone who doesn't write what is good, right, moral, and profitable! No! He dwells on what he saw, felt, what he was scammed with, grown weary of The bastard is nobodys patriot! Ruled by no regulations! Yep, an independent indie SOB. What is, is, buddy. No use arguing the obvious. That's life, see? There's laughter, sin, tragedy—you'll die laughing! Comedy—to the grave. In other words, it's a thoroughly engaging read for a wide range of readers, of any caliber and level. Even for serious researchers of the question of why and what way Armenians around the world—including those in Karabakh, who still happened to be the concluding crowd—lost the most crucial part of their historical homeland.

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1 Explanatory

What is "Stepanakert Saga"? It's a series of books by an eyewitness, an indie writer.

What is an indie writer? Someone who doesn't write what is good, right, moral, and profitable...

No! He dwells on what he saw, felt, what he was scammed with, grown weary of... The bastard is nobody's patriot! Ruled by no regulations! Yep, an independent indie SOB...

"Stepanakert Saga": a literary chronicle of thirty seven years, from the inspired start to the tragic finish of the struggle of the Armenians of Karabakh for the independence of their native land.

Sounds like the campaign blah-blah of a populist faggot, huh? Or the rant of a vet military instructor at a high school.

What is, is, buddy. No use arguing the obvious. That's life, see? There's laughter, sin, tragedy—you'll die laughing! Comedy—to the grave. In other words, it's a thoroughly engaging read for a wide range of readers, of any caliber and level. Even for serious researchers of the question of why and what way Armenians around the world—including those in Karabakh, who still happened to be the concluding crowd—lost the most crucial part of their historical homeland.

2 Introduction

The Ficuses in the Open: Book One in the series "Stepanakert Saga"

Although the number of personae dramatis is pretty limited—they are just a family and their closest relatives and neighbors as well as a pinch of colleagues from the demised establishment, and though the action mostly consists of monotonous household chores, this here artifact is an attempt at honestly depicting the besieged Stepanakert town in winter 1991-92 when physical survival was the foremost objective common to all.

All that was so abysmally long ago:

a zero reason remains to suss output

if all that was exactly that way

or some other,

or at all...

makes no difference now

Important Note: English was not the Native Language sucked in with the mother's milk by this indie writer, who feels deeply obliged to his Assistant Editor, Gemini Ai

3 ___month one

December 4, ___day 1 of 106___

The night was serene. Weirdly so. Even the machine-guns up in Krkjan kept a pregnant silence...

Still, it took a lengthy wait before I fell asleep. The tossing in bed churned up the recollection of my last visit to the Department Store. Roozahna's birthday it was. The girl turned ten—a good reason to pick a present for the occasion.

Two customers for all two stories of the Department Store: a dad treating his boy to treasures in the toy department. The father dug his heels in to make the kid discern silver lining in any crap, including the snafu we have here.

Sending tiny echoes into the murky void around, the sullen sales assistant lined up on the counter a row of random picks. Plastic clones of identical dolls-trucks-bunnies cramming shelves at any department store of any Soviet city in any year from the past decade.

"Anything else, jahna?" Daddy asked.

No answer, just a dismal gaze of the boy at the generous sweep stake. What's the use of deathbed gifts?

(...rubbing shoulders with the Grim Reaper mitigates a certain percentage of tightwads, supposedly...)

Next, Maxim the Chief Editor popped up in my sleepless vigil. The boss paced in a stately to-and-fro across the renderers'. The subordinate gents, Wagram and Lenik, sat at attention at their respective desks in the attitude of eager beavers.

The floorboards creaked yet held the ponderous maxim proclaimed by the head of *The Soviet Karabakh*, the one and only paper in all this Autonomous Region:

"To stick it out down here, to see it through thick and thin, is the unique opportunity for a journalist."

Maxim underlined the point with a jingle of his regal key-bunch. He never left his office without that upturned iron bouquet dangling from the perennial clasp of fatty hands over his mighty butt. The wise gents repeatedly nodded in support of the philosophical extravagance in his axioma.

My backache, like a loyal vassal, sticks by me. The shortness of Lydia's couch makes me feel it even in sleep... Back on that same day, I rifled through her bookshelves and—wow! congrats!—there's *The Bhagavad Gita* in Russian.

Only on principle, I went on tossing under the blanket, too lazy to get up for the volume and switch the light on.

Same date, evening

Hard to say if it's a snowy rain or a rainy snow outdoors. Our kitchen tap yields just a needle-thick trickle, yet it yields.

In the morning, I had another job interview with Arkadik, the Russian Section Head—pretty bald already, and on the payroll of this unique rag in town.

Skillfully steering his gaze elsewhere, he trotted out that the periodical did need my professional services, so the coming week would certainly see me in the position of a renderer. The period until then is required for managerial chicanery—an unavoidable stage in staff-reshuffling castlings to create the vacancy. The process is not subject to acceleration, you know.

From my current standpoint—habitually here-and-now—employment in a week is a helluva distant call. I'm not really a fan of rubies in the sky. However, when jobless, practice patience, buddy.

In the afternoon, Sahtik sent me for a jar of milk from the Milk Factory. Down there, I found neither Valyo nor anyone at all whom I knew. Schlepping the empty jar back, just to bring it over again after a better-timed arrangement, didn't sit well with my idea of basic reason.

I found a cozy little nook to stash it: that never-shut door to the eternally dark corridor on the second floor in the Administration Block. It has a turn-handle on its backside drawn to the wall. I bet there's not a chance of someone ever nosing it out. Eternity handlers have turned into too rare a specimen in our cut-and-run world. Unseen, untouched, unvexed, the bagged jar will hang on that door handle in wait for my next arrival—a dead-on wager.

Later in the day, Lydia's husband Nerses, arriving from his native village of Hnushinak, tap-tapped from the street onto the matte-glazed windowpane in our single-but-spacious-room flat. With that window open, you can talk through the grates or pass things to a person standing on the sidewalk. The frames of other two windows in the room are simply nailed up.

He wanted the key to their house.

"Oh, sure, here you are!"

Now, his return to the town ended my career as a security guard at their place. Fare thee well, *The Bhagavad Gita*, and thee as well, O Procrustean couch!

My backache faithfully lingers by; however, tonight I'm in luck. The kitchen tap had trickled almost two pails of water before it was completely cut off.

December 5, __day 2 of 106__

At walking, the backache aggravates, especially in the morning, more so when moving downhill.

When at the Milk Factory I entered the Director's office, Valyo was yelling on the phone at the top of his lungs to share that the town had run out of flour, so the Bread Factory down here was stopped four days before. Then he rang off and, in a lower tone of voice broke the news: there was no milk either.

Fortunately, when I stepped out of the Milk Factory gate, Sashic was passing by in his car and pulled up for me to hop in—he was heading uphill to the downtown. On the main square I walked to the paper's two-storied Editorial Building. There, Ms. Stella, the Responsible Secretary, handed me two articles for rendering into Russian.

Despite the differently named authors, the things were remarkable clones of each other—Patriotic Jar-Rattle of an Empty Oil-Drum rolled downward along all bumps and potholes in the road. To save my ears, I went at both hammer and tongs to render their double din into Russian as soon as I could for riddance's sake.

In my position of an oddball not as yet officially installed, I nonetheless occupied the vacant desk whose sitter was on her pregnancy leave.

Wagrum, a reporter at the Russian Section, fluttered in, perched onto his desktop, and shared his utmost surprise at the shameful procrastination with my inauguration to the Renderer position. Some dickhead bureaucratic tricks, if you ask him. A solid monkey business! And he took wing again...

The too close burst of a protracted salvo made me jump, triggering off my personal response to occurrences of the kind.

A sudden heat whiplash through the belly up to the chest combined with a piercing grip at the back of my neck. Splashclutch! On the sensation's peak, the grip goes slacker and starts to dissolve in the inaudible fizzle of the receding heatwave.

(...too wordy, buddy. Put it straight: "Scared stiff, I felt all funny; a crush of butterflies in the stomach."...)

As it turned out, the salvo styled up the interment of the four youths killed by a single shell in their dugout in Krkjan: the Azeri part of the town on the commanding height to the northwest...

When I came home from the paper, Valyo's kids, Sego and Gaia, were on a visit to our place. Sahtik and I played cards with them, the kids' game of "buy-it-or-flip." Roozahna—still under punitive restrictions after the latest of her pranks—was not allowed to partake and bravely took her medicine, sticking around as a scornful onlooker.

The game was put off, the little party cheered up by the arrival of Sashic's wife, Carina, with their boy and girl. She brought a present for our Ahshaut: some hand-me-down footwear from her son Tiggo. All went on as merrily as marriage bells until an hour later Sashic pulled up and honked by our communication window to pick up all of our guests.

At ten pm, Sahtik and the kids started for the Shelter, a former tailor's shop on the ground floor of a dingy two-storied apartment block a little bit up the street. The room enjoys swell popularity in the neighborhood—its only window does not face the slopes from where they shoot *Alazan* missiles at the town. About a dozen women with two or three kids each spend nights in that six-by-six meter room.

Through the dark I saw my family over to the Shelter, carrying Ahshaut in my arms. A wordless walk it was under the snappy din of shooting out in Krkjan, beneath the stars indifferently gleaming from above. Our slow convoy proceeded in time to the kid's breath. Wrapped in his blanket, he slept, pressed to my chest full of mute bitter butterflies in my heart.

December 6, __day 3 of 106__

I started at midnight and for two solid hours kept treading—to-and-fro—the sidewalk. Though the bastard usurped the noble title, being a low-grade SOB—ruts, potholes, and tree roots bulging through wrinkled asphalt: all the mess was at the ready to trip you and fell you on the route. Yet,

there was no choice; with a couple of enamel pails I fetched water home, 'cause my missus was in the mind for a capital washing. Up and down I trod.

Down—to the Three Taps below the red slab set on its rib by the theater's rear, carved in a huge bas-relief of three masks: comic, tragic, and silly with a tap under each.

Up—back to our hall-alias-outer-kitchen where all the containers in our household waited agape to get their fill. In and out.

Dog-eat-dog gunfire kept swelling in Krkjan—up and down the whole slope; bazooka booms too, to-and-fro.

Stepping out for another of the numberless downs, I marked silent forms across the road, right opposite our three windows. Their white garbs sent a ghostly gleam through the darkness. The ghosts lugged two drums from the upper Twin Bakery to its Twin—ten meters down the street. The polished metal of the drum sides shortly glittered under the lamppost.

Seems like the hearsay reported by my mother-in-law of some flour airlifted here by choppers had come from a trustworthy source. Up and down.

On the theater's back porch a group of men stood chatting and smoking. A greedy loner split off, descending to the foot of the stairs to have a joint all to himself, unshared. In and out.

Nearing the Three Taps for the damnteenth time, I encountered a couple of guys trudging in the counter-direction. "Hey, bro," a husky voice thickly slurred in Russian, "don't go there. They shoot."

A split second later, a stray bullet from Krkjan confirmed the alert, whipping along the crossroad by the Three Taps. "Oh!" commented the folks in the lee of the theater.

About four in the morning, the town immersed in such an incredible calm that Sahtik and my mother-in-law left the Shelter to bring the kids home...

My mother-in-law shared news about a lad of twenty killed this night fighting on the Krkjan slope.

Same date, evening

About eleven am, I took Chief for a walk to the central park... A sunny day under the pale blue sky. The waves of hills snoozing motionless in the late autumn's haze. Empty park alleys under thick rags of fallen leaves—withered, brittle, rustling at each our step... The ever-present gunfire—distant, yet sturdy.

Leaving the park, we met Yuri, a co-owner and part-time attendee at the video games pavilion next to the entrance-exit steps. His business is closed now, the zeal of digital shooting fans at its lowest.

Yuri is the model of a small-shop keeper, oriental and plump, all sweet smiles, blissful squints, and immense happiness from seeing you at long last. Just a handshake caught betwixt both of his palms—gently tender and, oh, so soft—runs your train of thought straight to Orgasm Terminal. Why the hell did he marry at all? One may wonder.

After the regular greetings and exchange of regards were enacted, he amazed me with one more puzzle: bowing all the way down to Chief and kissing his hand for a good-bye...

Chief and I crossed the Upper-ring-road circling the mighty pines of Piatachok and strolled up Lenin Street when I marked Galyo in a group of four coming. He acknowledged me with a wink. Going home after a shooting night shift in Krkjan, I suppose. Though the buddies looked more like peasants than gunmen.

Galyo and I worked at the same construction gig, SMU-8. Gas pipelines to the Karabakh villages, but then smart asses from the State Emergency Committee came to power in Moscow. Next morning I resigned from work because it's a state organization and I didn't feel like slaving for a state ruled by clowns. The SMU boss had a hearty laugh yet he signed my application. In a couple of days the GKChP putsch in Moscow was cracked but I stayed jobless. That's when I started full-time raising the walls of our future house...

When the walls were finished and the general situation in Stepanakert grew grossly grim, my mother-in-law advised me to look for a job at the local newspaper, as I was such a bookworm. She

and the Chief Editor had the same family name. No relatives though, notwithstanding the fact that the origin village of both is the same. Accidentally so...

We walked as far as the Corner Grocery. At the nearby news stall I bought a Russian digest of the local daily with my maiden-flight rendering on page four. A whoopee feature trumpeted in the most unbridled one-horse-burg style a skinny booklet of patriotic rhymes churned up by a local poet. Both the literary critic and the producer of the greatest achievement of poetry alive were from the paper's building, the doors of their respective offices facing each other in the corridor on the second floor.

All day long the crowd, queuing at the Twin Bakeries, buzzed and shrieked right opposite the three windows of our single-but-spacious-room flat.

Already at dusk, Valyo tapped from the sidewalk onto the pane in our communication window to hand in the jar which I had left at the Milk Factory. Full of milk now.

It's five past eight pm and quiet so far.

December 7, __day 4 of 106__

At three am, a crushing detonations in the lower parts of the town frightened Roozahna out of her bed into a fit of uncontrollable tremors. Sahtik could hardly talk her into keeping calm. Before six in the morning, two more *Alazan* volleys ripped up the night. Ahshaut slept manfully through everything.

At dawn, the roaring monsters withdrew to their lairs, swapped for the screams and shrieks of humans in the raging crowds in a desperate scramble by the Twin Bakeries, just opposite the three unbearably large windows in our single-but-spacious-room flat. All day long, the fluctuations in their squash-and-shout made a kind of mighty surf background to our domestic affairs.

Carina and Orleana, Valyo's wife, called in to leave their children at our place. Sahtik joined her two sisters, and the three of them went out to pay their last tribute to the demised first headmistress of them all—at respective intervals, of course. The old lady lived next door to their mother's and died of natural causes.

I visited the building site of our future house to collect a bagful of apples and an armful of tree roots chopped off when digging the foundation trenches before I had started laying the walls. Since summertime, they had dried up enough for tomorrow's barbecue.

On my way there, I saw two Soviet Army armored vehicles bowling busily along, each one decked with a squad of five to seven soldiers. The braves had black warpaint on their mugs. The combat smear was applied at personal discretion, obviously—from finger-thick mud masks over the whole visage up to a soft touch or two at the cheekbones. Tastes differ.

However, no warrior eschewed the battlefield Schwarzeneggerization, not even their captain in a civilian beanie. On they rolled past the gazing sidewalks, feeling noticeably complimented by the public attention.

If some complete outsider to this here-and-now saw us just poke along or tread busily toward our daily chores under the constant din of the assault rifles in Krkjan, they'd certainly take us for a town of the deaf.

Don't let our out-of-place appearance fool you, o, Stranger! We do hear the enraged rounds and each of us has inside funny feeling of their own...

By nine pm it turned completely quiet. Some creepy silence.

Could it be, I'm too strict with Roozahna?

December 8, __day 5 of 106__

Yesterday at eleven pm, Sahtik had to bring Ahshaut back home: he couldn't sleep in the Shelter because of a baby crying in the same room. She left him with me and went back to Roozahna, who gets funky when alone in a crowd of strangers.

From midnight till one am, I again was bringing water from the Three Taps: Sahtik's capital washing isn't over yet.

My legs mastered navigating on their own the serrated terrain of the sidewalk. Their prowess let me fully enjoy the quietude of the night. No shooting at all. How sweet the peace is!

(...as sweet as a piss after six cans of beer—what a bliss!...)

At dawn, two mighty explosions in Armenavan—another uphill outskirts side by side with Krkjan. The big bangs did not disturb Ahshaut; he slept on bravely... Later in the morning, the two of us had a walk to the Bazaar after some herbs for today's feast—a synchronized celebration of Roozahna's birthday, almost a week after the proper date, and Ahshaut's, upcoming in a fortnight.

The usual feasting team of sisters-with-husbands-with-children turned up for the event as well, as our landlord and landlady, Armo and Nasic, respectively, and their three kids.

my mother-in-law was not present, attending the funeral of the late neighbor—the headmistress of all three of her daughters.

Now, it's half past eleven. Sahtik and Roozahna have gone to the Shelter. Ahshaut is left to sleep at home tonight.

Silence outdoors.

December 9, __day 6 of 106__

The night was shattered by bombardments: seven volleys of six to ten *Alazan* missiles each were shot at different hours... A missile from the second volley exploded fairly near our place. There followed a stretch of deafening silence in the street, followed by hasty footsteps and agitated male voices: “Where? How?”

A not too distant voice called out, “Hit here!”

Ahshaut slept okay through all the night.

Stretched on my bed, I followed through the matte glass in the panes of our three—so absurdly wide!—windows the languid flame traces of *Alazans* flying toward their earsplitting crash.

At a lull between the attacks, I had an oddly protracted dream:

... the bombardment's over I'm coming back home through the raw rays of the rising sun midst a silent crowd walking and an old woman—dark and strange—asks me to help and immediately puts a girl of nine on my back to carry on I catch the legs of the kid bestriding me and feel through her brittle stockings that her left leg is missing—cut at the knee—and the old hag plods after me fast-talking the small Ira-girl that now all's gonna be all right and when we split off I enter our room just in time to hear Sahtik's call from the outside kitchen I have a visitor and going over there I'm confronted with a close-up of a hen spread out on the asphalt floor with its head chopped off a second before and the bird wriggles its neck ending with a pulpy ringlet of raw meat while the girl that I carried along stands by and she turns up to me the smile on her face shadowed by lank bangs of her dark straight hair falling over the brow to her eye-sockets filled instead of eyes with just seamless patches of pinch-tight skin...

It's a quarter to ten am. The night is over, and Ahshaut is playing with his wooden blocks. Sahtik has dropped in and stepped out to ring up her sisters. Roozahna, reportedly, is sleeping in the Shelter.

My mother-in-law went to her workplace to wash floors in the two-storied building of The Soviet Karabakh. Which is, actually, her job.

Same date, evening

At eleven am, I turned up at my soon-to-be workplace just to find the renderers' locked up. I went upstairs to Ms. Stella's office, and she informed me there was no stuff for translating.

Back at home, Sahtik announced her intention to take the kids to the downhill part of town to shelter for the night in the basement of Orleana's apartment block.

Not a reasonable idea if I were asked. Yet my humble opinion remained wisely corked up. Now, five stories above your head are as insecure as two. However, a long walk, a change of place, and doing something—however senseless it might seem to a certain smartass—would do her more good than just sitting and waiting for nothing good.

Then Sahtik spoke of her funny feeling caused by a sudden fright. She feels an icy curd started up within her, tightening to become real hard.

(...quite contrary to the decompressing heatwave over my innards in the goddamn splashclutch...)

We set off in the fall drizzle, never letting up all this day.

Roozahna mouthed off nonstop about missiles, shelters and stuff until Sahtik, emerging from her dismayed thoughts, ordered the girl shut up. My seized up back grumbled under the weight of the bag with victuals and kids' clothes, so I kept silent too. And only Ahshaut, perked by having an all-out walk, time and again issued yells of delight...

Walking back home alone, I was as slow-go as that ceaseless drizzle. Yet, a couple of times the sun peeped through the clouds to set tiny raindrops a-glitter.

By the Department Store I met my former workmates from the pipeline constructing SMU-8, a couple of horny-palmed lads from Baluja village. Vartan asked if I had enrolled in a *Phedayee* group. His hand stretched out up-palm went sawing air across his chest to hint at my beard.

"Nope," sez I, "I have not. Besides, guerrillas can't claim beards as their property, a kinda league badge. Look at artists and tramps, they have a more time-honored right to sport it."

Further uphill I encountered Murad, a KRUZ truck driver, barging down along the sidewalk as any mortal biped, though he did it as bulkily as his bull-truck. We just halloed each other.

One block higher, at the next crossing, I exchanged a courtly nod with Guiro, a gaffer from SMU-8, hanging uselessly around on the opposite side of Kirov Street—a white-collar remains a white collar.

Near the theater I was saluted by a group of my former pupils from the Seidishen Village School. They already had adolescent looks, with that dawn on their upper lips. Kids can't but grow up. These village boys are growing up into a war.

At eight pm I went out to make a call to Orleana's on the payphone round the corner. For half a minute I listened to long beeps in the receiver. Everybody's gone down to the basement shelter, I guess.

Half an hour later I had supper with my mother-in-law. Then she left for the Shelter. A mattress and blanket stay there on a permanent basis to stake off their sleeping place.

December 10, __day 7 of 106__

It was a hard day's night, and through my sleep I heard only one missile attack—they say there were more—followed by the too loud bangs of the legitimate, Soviet army artillery guns. They were fired from the nearby garrison right next to the Upper Park. A furious answer to an *Alazan* missile gone astray?

I fell back to sleep and had a loathsome wet dream of sticking it in but feeling nothing, neither felt she—who?!—and didn't care a pin to conceal her resentment. Which of my wrongdoings called for punishment with so devastating a nightmare?

At noon, I ventured to Orleana's to take Sahtik with the kids back home. Heading downhill, I dropped in at the theater to partake in the referendum on independence for this country under bombardments. Sahtik voted on our way back.

(...so, we did it on the road... Anybody saw us?...)

At three pm, the so-long-and-eagerly-craven-for event took place in the Chief Editor's office: Maxim signed my job application. Starting tomorrow, I am (nominally) a sidekick reporter at the local newspaper but actually in charge of Armenian-Russian translations. Because throughout its glorious history, The Soviet Karabakh was always bilingual, the vernacular issues duplicated in Russian for the Big Brother to check the consistency thereof with the current imperial course.

The wise provision allowed for my kissing goodbye to unemployment. I've embraced the position of translator for the following three weeks, till January 1. And then—quoting Maxim, the Chief Editor—"as God will dispose."

His concluding invocation set me on alert to heed the noise in the streets on my way home.

“You should've seen,” a Soviet army officer said to his mate marching along, “what a f—ing mess that *Alazan's* made of my hotel room!”

In the following couple of gossips, a half block nearer to our flat, a Russian military officer's wife under a finger-thick makeup mask responded to her companion, “Yeah, I agree!” Loud and shrill, to drive it home to random passersby how readily she can agree.

From four pm till half past eight, I was fixing up a basement compartment in the five-story apartment block over the crossroad by the Twin Bakeries.

The musty air in the cemented catacombs moved in a busy stir: the buzz of voices, the rasping of a handsaw, hammers knocking, men ferrying through the trunk corridor in the basement pails of rubble and litter out of their would-be shelters.

One of the compartments, though, was overlooked by shelter-seekers. My mother-in-law conveyed the intelligence to Sahtik and, consequently, I was instructed to go over and inspect it.

I went there and found the mentioned compartment, dark and silent. A flickering match disclosed the mains running loosely along the bare concrete walls. A shuttle trip home after a bulb. I attached it to the mains and, in the steadfast light, took a turn about to have a look.

The view squeezed a tiny whistle of understanding out of me. The naked bulb's light showed clearly why no one had staked a claim to the room. Some dreadful lump of work had to be done to carve a relatively habitable place out of the six-by-six-meter room..

Room? Sooner a dump filled up to the ceiling with heaps of discarded ventilation fragments, boxes, tins, bottles, bits and pieces of all descriptions, earth, masonry blocks, worn-out tires, and suchlike whatnots.

Fluffy layers of black dust coated the landscape, and cobweb festoons sagged copiously, crisscross, bringing the picture to utmost perfection... So it was the only compartment to choose from.

(...poor Robinson Crusoe! How could you possibly come to this!...)

After two hours of concentrated efforts, all of the sizable objects and things were copulated into each other and stacked up into one half of the room. At that point arrived the reinforcement—our landlord Armo together with his son Arthur, a boy in his late teens, and Romah, the adopted son of a single mother living next door to Armo's house. Normally, they all took refuge in the cellar under the floorboards in our single-but-spacious room, descending there by a steep flight of stairs directly from the yard.

Sahtik rallied them by advertising the advantages of the underground basement under the apartment block: a shelter where the explosions' din is almost inaudible, the ceiling made of reinforced concrete slabs—not just inch-thick wooden planks.

Armo took to shoveling the earth and litter into pails; the rest of us—the two boys and I—were taking it out from the basement. By our incessant shock-work, we freed space enough for half a dozen cots and a table. Then the women came and swept the concrete floor. Later, they hung some blankets and old rags to screen off the trash-store in the other half of the room. Thus, it acquired the looks of a standard wartime shelter.

It's half past ten pm, all of my family are over there now.

Armo, the landlord, ducked out of moving to the block's basement room. His wife, on second thoughts, balked at the idea and lined him up into sticking to the accustomed stall. Yeah, a cellar under the floorboards is not as safe as a shelter under the apartment block.

However, down here she queens over those of her neighbors who, having no cellars of their own, seek refuge in hers. Locking them out altogether is not a wise move in the present situation. Yet the option of leaving the cellar with her jams and pickles entirely to the neighbors' mercy is equally unthinkable.

It is a still and starry night outdoors. A muffled chitchat of the shelterers preparing for their night's repose is heard from under the scraped floorboards in our single-but-spacious room.

Good night, everybody.

December 11, __day 8 of 106__

The night was not too good for me. Instead of a sound sleep canceling all the troubles, I bogged in sticky insomnia.

At six in the morning, a major missile attack broke loose from all quarters. Severe bombardments were repeated every two to three hours today.

At nine sharp I was in the Editorial House to fill in the forms for my employment. There chanced to be only Ms. Rita, the Secretary of the Chief Editor. Her other position is that of Acting HR Manager, when not making coffee for the Boss and his visitors.

We had hardly started the action when a close round of *Alazan* blasts prompted her to apologize and take a hasty leave. I stayed alone in the whole building and, because the renderers' was locked, I kept sitting next to the Boss' office door in Rita's office-kitchen-anteroom.

At twenty-past-ten, Wagram triumphantly pranced in. Know what? A dictaphone tape cassette sprang out of his pocket. See, huh? The recording of his interview from the day before yesterday with a Deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet on a visit down here. Was Max in his office?

(... Boss should know once again what champ of a reporter sweats for this rag!...)

A sad pity. No fanfares. No one to be alerted of the hero's arrival. *Alazan* bursts made the Boss sit at home tight and steady.

The treasured cassette went back. The trifle of a key to the renderers' door lock was missing from Wagram's pocket. Very likely, left at home. A rising star of journalism has more important things to care for, right?

He zipped out, and I—fed up with idling in the frigid anteroom—set off for the Town Military Commissar's to report a missing stamp in my military papers. The gap was spotted by Ms. Rita's experienced eye when looking through my military ID.

At the TMC I was met by Oleg Pronchenko in full uniform with major's insignia. The stink of the perfumes he wore reminded me of that broad wife from yesterday, boldly painted and ready to agree. He chose not to recollect our fleeting acquaintance and just abruptly indicated there was no one there. Okay, I ain't in no hurry—tomorrow's as good a day for me as this one.

Back home, I asked our neighbor lads, Romah and Arthur, for help and ferried a door from our Site to fix it up in the underground shelter for my family. The raw, doorless entrance made the compartment look like a primeval cave.

Then Sahtik took me for a little walk to find out the current whereabouts of Arega, the Senior Librarian at School 8. The lady was in charge of the key to the school library where Sahtik, a librarian, had our electric heater installed under her work-seat.

On the way, Robik, a lover of Arega and her husband's bosom friend, cut short our quest by fetching the appliance in question from his house's basement. In the ensuing shoptalk about their school affairs and schooling in general, Robik and Sahtik looked noticeably sad. I stood by wondering if it was caused by the subconscious libidinal current between the two. Desire's sad by definition.

Then the three of us—Sahtik, I, and the recovered heating device—returned home and (using a flowery cliché from the days of yore) "veiled off the Olympus summit with a golden cloud." Scholarly speaking, it may be with sufficient accuracy stated that in the case of perfect sexual adjustment, even wartime conditions don't have their say on the performance.

Another of the missile attacks took a shot at precipitating us, but in vain. We cum in a dignified manner and with the maximum pleasure attainable. Our concluding grunts added to the hilarious yells of the folks pouring in to shelter in the underfloor cellar beneath our bed.

Half an hour later, fixing up the door to the Underground compartment, and then the wires for the heater, I felt as slowed down as never before...

Now it's five to eleven pm, with an antiphony of *Alazans* and bangs of an answering cannon that measures the time outdoors.

When coming back from the Underground, I met Sahtik's brother in the street. Aram was making for his mother's house he currently lives in—a solitary pedestrian through the darkness and cannonade.

We shook hands as Brethren of the Order of Lonely Hearts. He also sleeps at home alone. His wife and kids shelter someplace in the town together with her parents.

Good night, Aram, my brother-in-law.

December 12, __day 9 of 106__

An exemplary calm night was followed by a no less peaceful day. Machine-gun shooting has become one of those nagging yet petty trifles of no account by now.

At nine am, I visited the TMC where they glibly clapped the missing stamp-smear of theirs into my military identification card.

The first day at a new job. The renderers' is a chilly corner room with three windows in two walls and three office desks. At times a pack of idling men assemble in it, one after another, to wag jaws and to offset the air chillness with rough smoke from their cigarettes. Still and all it's a good thing to have a workplace! And I tried to make a good beginning:

a) borrowed from Wagrum the key to duplicate it;

b) in the corridor I made friends with Ahlya (really, it's her first day too? well I never! a typist? wow!);

c) from the Typing Pool on the second floor I collected carbon copies of my four renderings to proofread them before submitting to the Head of Russian Section.

About three pm, I was told I might leave: there was no more work for today.

A nice and cozy family evening at home. Sahtik was playing with Ahshaut, Roozahna reading in an undertone, my mother-in-law sleeping, and I shaping and filing the duplicate key clutched with pliers.

At eight pm, my mother-in-law commenced to bake bread in the gas oven. I saw Sahtik and the kids to the Underground. There, Sahtik complained of unbearably cold draughts breaking into the compartment from behind the hanging rags.

After a long and winding way meandering between and over the heaps, stacks, and hills of boxes, pipes, bottles, and sundry jetsam jumble, I reached the deepest, dustiest, and darkest corner in the room. A pitch-black hole—two by two feet—gaped there, letting in the steady icy breeze. I stopped the hole with a piece of cardboard.

No sooner had I climbed out of that dust abyss through the sideway and a minor corridor than a tall gaffer rigged out in a stylish overcoat and an expensive fur affair on his head confronted me in the main tunnel. He demanded my explanations as to by what right I had cut off the air coming in for all the Underground. I let sleeping dogs lie and told him I hadn't sealed it up in toto, so some air was still getting in.

(...all things considered, my statement was true... well, to some extent. You bet he'd never dive into that dust maze to check the size of that extent...)

At home, my mother-in-law surprised me with her pensive question if I trusted in God after all. Supposedly, so queer an inquiry was instigated by some priest's visit to the Underground. He distributed there leaflets of a printed prayer and finger-thick Bible adaptation for for kids—short stories with candy pictures.

I responded that there were too many of Them; the overwhelming number clutters the way of my picking One as yet.

It's half an hour to midnight. My mother-in-law has just finished baking bread and left for the Underground. I saw her to the crossroads.

The biting cold wind outdoors sweeps snow dust along the street. At times a random cannon shell spices the setting with its burst..

Fiat nox.

December 13, __day 10 of 106__

Both the night and the day were quite quiet. Had a dream of

...dwarf Santas in red coats lined up in close rows to form an alive maze in a tremendous hall with mirror walls where a plushy pop-singer with his sugary hit was sticking out from among the narrow lanes in their dwarfish labyrinth until the gaudy number got swept away by a black-leathered angel of hell riding like hell-for-leather and finally coasting at two to three meters above the ground as if arisen by the teeth of wind...

At the workplace, I rendered one article and gave the final cut to my duplicate key before returning the original to Wagram.

After the midday break, they summoned me to a general meeting in the Boss' office. A sizable space with single-rank rows of chairs each one run in tight formation under three walls. It was a solemn thank-you-and-good-bye affair to fling the gates wide open before a resigning veteran journalist.

The Boss, Arcadik, and one more member of the editorial upper crust took the floor, respectively, with their tribute speeches varying only in the orators' lens thickness index. They squeezed themselves out dry to put across one and exactly the same set of ideas: how it's impossible to list the grand qualities of the departing vet. Unfortunately, all his life the man advanced in the wrong direction, deceived by those commies—not his fault, see? Nonetheless, our paper's door shall be kept open for him forever and a day... In the end, Ms. Stella presented the geezer with a sheaf of creamy rich carnations.

At home, I wallowed in our happy family life till ten pm, and then saw everybody to the Underground. When I was back and scribbling these notes, two powerful but mute flashes ripped up the darkness outside our communication window. I had the usual heat whiplash up my chest. The heart went pit-a-pat. I went out to the sounds of beastly female shrieks in the street.

Some forty meters up the road, there was a house on fire. Clinks of glass going a-splinter, squeals of squaws in the bystanders' crowd mixed up with angry demands from non-interfering males to give them fire extinguishers. The uproar was out-noised by the businesslike crunch of the fire devouring the house in high—about two-to-three-meter-tall—tongues of flame.

I recollected the red-clad Santa Clauses from my night dream.

Then there arrived a fire truck equipped with firefighters—never dreamed of—and in a couple of minutes they put the fire out. My mother-in-law stood in the throng, partaking in the subsiding lamentations. Her house is just ten meters off the one burned down.

Among the onlookers I also made out Sahtik, took her aside, and expressly asked her to go back to the kids.

In the absence of further entertainment, the crowd started to disperse. I spotted Nerses walking away and overtook him to arrange a visit to his place tomorrow at three thirty pm.

(The fortnight about St. Yuri's Day when serfs are free to seek another master is not over yet.)

It's a quarter past eleven. Desultory shooting of no account in the thick fog outside.

December 14, __day 11 of 106__

At night, the cannon bangs woke me up. Then I slept again. No dreams remembered.

It's a day-off. Roozahna was taken by her biological father's sister to the girl's grandparents. Sahtik, Ahshaut, and I had a downhill walk to the Department Store. On the way, we met Garrik, a grunt at Sashic's business. Excitedly, he shared the latest gossip about a missile fragment they found marked "Made in Turkey". Now they're looking for means of shipping to the Soviet Empire's capital this corroborative evidence of an exterior force's involvement in our sovereign scramble.

(...they're beating the dead horse, I'd say. Moscow will give no more ear to the case than Ankara...)

In the Department Store, they extravagantly put up for sale the goods kept normally for shadow transactions. I bought a kit of household hand tools. A lucky strike.

Stepping outside into the sunlit Kirov Street, we met Carina with her children. She frisked the innards of her bag and presented Ahshaut with a pair of mittens grown too tight for her son Tiggo. And then she added two buns also.

We returned to our place. After lunch, my mother-in-law left for her home and, with Ahshaut having his day nap, Sahtik and I were given free rein to make love.

Yes, ours was a commonplace marriage of convenience for both. The man nearing his forties, who's drifted here from a strange land within our mutual USSR, and the local woman ten years younger, divorced, having a pre-school daughter to raise.

As for me, a long since established fave of fate, I was in luck to find such a partner in life, as well as in sex. At this point in my lifespan, the grounds for romantic feelings are scarce and dwindling; yet, by heaven, I believe it's not made-up trash to say that I love her. Sure, I do. And even if not madly, I love her properly and deeply and with real vigor—yep!—when needed.

Historically, there is no record of a female making both a good wife and a superb sex partner. It's either one or the other. You just can't have this 2-in-1. I am a lucky dog indeed to meet a fill for the gap...

At half past three pm, I visited Nerses. He gave me the latest address of Larissa and Vanya, his daughter and his son-in-law, respectively. They were our dear weekend-friends before their flight to Vanya's Cossack fatherland at the outbreak of armed confrontation down here.

However, my objective was to borrow *The Bhagavad Gita*, to which request Nerses immediately consented. In the follow-up chat, he outlined his current venture selling grapes from his garden at the Bazaar. The basement in the TMC Building, just opposite his house, serves as his nighttime hideout.

About four pm, Roozahna came back followed at once by my mother-in-law. We had a peaceful family evening. Sahtik, Roozahna, and I played a pencil game, then all five of us had supper, after which I made a fresh start with two pails for the round of water bringing.

It's ten past ten pm. They're in the Underground now. All's calm outdoors.

December 15, __day 12 of 106__

This night's dream was a slow zoom-in to

...a vast emptiness in a colossal military tent of smeared walls quaking slowly, no action at all just a close-up scroll of the greenish sagged-in tarp walls until...

The shell bursts of a bombardment brought me back to the reality inside our room, which was as dark as thunder or even blacker...

The second day-off. In the morning, I took Ahshaut for a walk to the Main Post to send a birthday postcard to Nerses and Lydia's granddaughter, who was Ahshaut's playmate at weekend bouts of our and Larissa-Vanya's families. Today she becomes a two-year-old.

In the evening, a tin tub was placed in the middle of our single-but-spacious room for the kids to bathe in turn. Sponging their sides, Sahtik remarked pensively that the simplest and most routine things seem weirdly odd amid the war raging around.

I concurred, admitting that some TV programs do seem absurd to me when it shells outdoors.

As my back starts to behave, I decided to resume my yoga exercises. Some asanas—even after such a pause—remained as feasible as they used to be.

It's half past nine pm. The family went to the Underground, but my mother-in-law is to come back for bread-baking.

An uproar of dogged shooting surges up in Krkjan.

December 16, __day 13 of 106__

A pretty gross bombardment they kicked up yesterday while I was bringing water to spend the time before my mother-in-law finished baking bread. A couple of times while shuttling with the pails along the sidewalk, I heard quite close whistles overhead. Bullets or missile fragments?

I soothed myself with the speculation that, of whatever nature they were, neither had my name on. What's the use of getting uptight after the threat is over? And I beseech you, Mars, O God of War, if one of those be more accurately addressed, then let it kill me flat and clear. No monkey tricks with curability, rendering, reanimation, and suchlike blithering drivel. One right through the temple would perfectly suffice, methinks.

The bombardment intensity grew to the point of forcing my mother-in-law to leave for the Underground. She trusted me to handle the last batch of bread put in the oven before I saw her out.

Today at nine am, I was at my workplace to find nobody in the whole Editorial House. For a couple of hours, I fiddled about the locked-up drawer in my desk. All my attempts at making a skeleton key fell flat. Full of shame and sadness, I gave up on the undertaking and just raped the lock open with a screwdriver.

From eleven till twelve am, Wagrum, Lenik, and Arcadik peeped in, respectively. Lenik asked if I would like to visit a room down the corridor to watch a game of chess. Most politely, I declined.

(...why on earth does Sahtik say I am an outright disaster in terms of sociability? I'm politeness itself...)

At noon I left a note on the desk for all who might be concerned about my pending return at one pm. Sashic and Carina with their children were at our single-but-spacious-room flat, having lunch. I presented Sahtik with the paper issue containing three voluminous renderings by me. Sashic promptly toasted the event; yet, reluctant to be back to work with vodka on my breath, I abstained.

I wolfed down my lunch and went to the Underground to fetch our heater. Yesterday, down there they forked out a brand-new, mighty-looking heater per compartment. I planned to take our old one to my workplace but changed my mind when Sahtik reminded me of the blackout we had been having since midnight.

At a stone's throw off the Editorial House, I met Arcadik strolling away with an unknown youth. Arcadik told me to go home as there was no work that day. I nodded most humbly and slowed down as if pondering alternative things to do. The maneuver was followed by a stealthy penetration into the Editorial House, smuggling *The Bhagavad Gita* under my coat breast.

In the renderers' I found my note on the desk flipped over and used for an unsigned communication dashed off across the backside—"We are not working today."

What a smart thing this Bhagavad Gita is! And so mighty to stir and make you hit the road! It cut the anchorage and put in motion the very cornerstones in my concept of the origins of modern civilization. Those drifted to much more oriental quarters.

Now, I know where the Greeks ferreted out the ideas of countless universes and the tininess of atoms.

And the digits that I was taught to think of as Arabic came to the worldborn millennia before a single Arabian mathematician was conceived.

And the Fathers of the Church would become fans of the Trinity interpretation found in the Gita! They would admire such refined subtleties or anathematize them on sight!

Yet as usual, after the initial delight, there pops up one or another bitchy bitter word of "but"... At being told for the first time that the human soul is an immeasurably wee spark residing in the heart of each and every individual, I just give a shrug and say "Okay, why not?"

(...I can trust anything when I am not hungry...)

I wince at the brow-beating reiteration of the same suggestion. However, when the idea is blared out for the third time, I feel like asking an exasperated question: may I? Concerning organ transplantation, eh?

Suppose a saint's heart is inserted into a sinner's body—or vice versa—where would the migrant soul go after the receiver's death? To hell or higher planets?

Still and yet, the supplementary discourse on how it's totally impossible to kill one's soul is awesome! Completely rewarding stuff in this here situation...

At this point, I looked out the window to the right of my desk to check the damn situation and saw:

- a provincial hotel in ages-long need of repair;
- a squat hag idling on the steep stairs of the porch;
- a girl of ten piggybacking her brotherlet, a brat three times younger than her;
- a fuzzy cur limping across the lane separating the hotel from the Editorial House.

All in all, a classical backwater town landscape in the frame of rambling, clip-long rounds with AKs...

At half past three pm, the vet, warmly sent home two days ago to enjoy his wrongly deserved rest, came back for a visit. Of all the doors in the Editorial House, only mine happened to be open. Surprised, he asked if I had nothing to lock it up with. I proudly had... At half past four, I went home.

Sahtik had taken the kids to the Underground, scared by the increasing frenzy of shooting out in Krkjan. I came to visit them. A feeble candle was oozing gruesome light onto our meeting. We could hardly find a thing to say to each other.

Suddenly, an all-out gasp of cheer echoed throughout the Underground. The electricity appeared! Glory be to Edison and his bulbs!

I was doing yoga at home when Sahtik and Ahshaut came back. He inquenchably disagrees to keep to the Underground longer than it's a must absolutely...

Earlier in the day, the Twin Bakeries offered their dough for sale—their electrical ovens are useless during blackouts. My mother-in-law didn't miss out on the opportunity.

In the evening, she started bread-baking but felt all in and repaired to the Underground to keep Roozahna company. Sahtik continued the baking.

It's half past ten pm; I'm alone. The relative calmness outside couldn't sway Sahtik to stay home.

December 17, __day 14 of 106__

Just a model day. At the workplace, I knocked off two renderings and had a talk with my roommates.

Lenik was keen on my background and professional preferences. Then even Wagrums had for a while to keep his volatility in check and perch up surprised by a proposed short discussion of a Hellenistic subject.

I wouldn't call Wagrums a dream gossip—rejecting any novel thought, too ready to substitute chords for brains, chanting the corny parrot-cries from the inbred set of ideas they had formatted his mind with—as well as anybody else's among us for that matter. True, the guy is fairly young, yet his hustle and bustle won't let him grow wiser when older.

At home, I basked in as happy family life as any wise man could reasonably expect. The life of down-to-earth problems when finishing the repair of the favorite tumble-toy of your kids you are sent to the Underground where the shelter door needs a finer adjustment.

Today I plan to do my yoga about six pm. And then I'll have a supper and a shot of vodka and go to bed at once because I have to get up at 2 am and bring water for the washing scheduled by Sahtik for tomorrow... Right now, the waterqueue at the Three Taps is way too long, and the needed lots of water can't be fetched at one go.

On the whole, the war wasn't too butting in today. Thank you, December 17!

December 18, __day 15 of 106__

The alarm clock awoke me at 2 am. I dressed and went out for water. Dash it! I am not the only wise guy in this here neck of the woods. However, two or three water-carriers cannot be called "a queue".

On route in my pendular to-and-fros I watched a night missile attack—the languid flaming streaks of yellow gliding silently overhead to crash someplace in the town. In the heights beyond Armenavan, half of the night sky shimmered with ghostly crimson radiance of the giant gas torch there, the blown up trunk pipeline set ablaze.

At twenty to four in the morning my water-carrying was done.

From nine to 12 am I rendered one article at work. Lenik came after the midday break. He narrated of his vigil in the Bread Factory, queuing for three-and-half night hours just to buy the regular quota of three loaves.

Arcadik, the Head of Russian Section, asked me—just as a personal favor, you know—to render the manifesto of a newly stewed political party. Sure, I was only happy to oblige my immediate boss but...

Oh, brother! What a mess! The toil of making some sense from burbling gibberish of ultra-patriotic students tripping up at pompous words without rhyme or reason in their mental diarrhea!

And only the concluding paragraph in the manifesto was a plain and clear threat of ruthless punishment to any would-be dissents as well as doing away with all the members lacking in strength. (...a promise to purge the infiltrated impotents?...)

The local radio announced the gas supplying would be stopped to repair the blown up pipeline. After the work, I collected our heater from under my desk in the renderers'. It was transferred to the Underground because, according to Sahtik, the heater from the recent distribution despite its mighty looks sucked miserably.

In the Underground, I picked and brought home a masonry block—twenty-by-twenty-by-forty cm—to make a substitute heater for my workplace. Fortunately, I happened to have a second-hand heating element.

Until my supper at seven pm, I was carving ruts in the stone to insert the glow spiral. The job gave me an excuse for hooking yoga today but, frankly, I skipped it too readily. My eternal sloth.

It's ten past ten pm, Ahshaut sleeps at home.

The complete quietude outdoors lit by the giant gas torch flaring mutely on the distant slopes beyond Armenavan.

December 19, __day 16 of 106__

Inexplicably peaceful night it was and the hush extended till noon.

Before the midday break, I finished rendering the Declaration of the Anti-Impotent Party (AIP). Wagrum remarked: whenever three Armenians settle down some place the location lives through a boom of political activities with the creation of no less than seven contending parties. Well, that was a good one from his kit.

Boss and his Secretary Rita dropped in, in turn, and were obviously impressed by my block-stone heating device. I dared a slight dispute with Boss when he proclaimed laziness a distinctive trait of oriental man. I stood up for all mankind arguing the quality in question belonged to all of the human race.

In the morning Sahtik with our children and Carina with hers went to Orleana's. So, I had a lunch all by my own.

After the break two missile attacks hit the town. Lenik, sheltering in the doorway of the renderers', tried to talk me into leaving the room: what if a missile bursts in right through the window opposite my desk, eh?

"I'll never be aware of the fact," was my reply.

His advice to at least move over into the corner was also turned down—should a missile dash in, I am rather for instant death than any wounds.

About four pm, I finished a rendering and phoned to the Orleana's. Sahtik was just setting off back home. I waited for her and the kids in the desolate emptiness of the Editorial House.

When on our last leg towards the Underground we were passing the Three Taps—Sahtik rather wound-up by the earlier attacks in the day—I detected the pale flame of *Alazans* flying on our left.

"Now it'll ..." I had time to think before off went the crash of blasts.

Roozahna—all mad shrieks—bolted towards the flock of water-queuers that froze like a line of wax figures next to the Three Taps. Sahtik followed the suit.

(...it's just so human: to seek safety in a thicker mass of fellow beings. Let someone else from the herd get snatched off, not me!...)

Ahshaut and I were walking on, hand-in-hand. Lagging, in fact. He was fairly tired after doing it all the way uphill from Orleana's.

The crowd shouted at me to grab the child and hare off, lest it got frightened. Defiantly, I kept walking on. In my opinion, Ahshaut would sure get scared if I followed the advice.

Still, I'm not a daredevil—far from it!—that funny feeling of mine never fades away and most of my waking hours I'm busy fighting the willies down. That tiny tearful whimper squeezed in my throat behind the Adam's apple.

At today's yoga my left knee protested painfully when in the Lotus.

Sahtik, on a flying visit from the Underground announced proudly that by Orleana's scales, she's three kilos lighter than before... O, those women! Not frailty, but vanity is their true name. Even the war can't straighten them out.

It's half-past-nine pm, I am alone.

A tranquil night smirks outdoors.

December 20, __day 17 of 106__

A nasty night it was, but I stubbornly slept it through. In dreams

...I tilled a kitchen garden on a too boggy mountain slope and then rode a bicycle along a wide path of sand getting finer and deeper until the trail turned into a hopelessly impassable dust hole...

At the workplace I toiled at rendering four articles distracted shortly by a small talk with Rita on her visit to the renderers' to get warm at the block-stone heater jutting partly from under my desk for the public benefit.

After the final period, I sat back and suggested Wagram to write an article with practical instructions what to do when a missile attack catches you on the street. Nope. He found the subject too shallow when compared to the life in shelters which he was going to describe in an awesome feature one of these days.

Arcadik also dropped in. Running for an MP in the upcoming parliamentary elections, he could speak only about his chances— slim, so slim in his opinion because his rival's too mighty popular with all the criminals and gamblers in their constituency.

Sahtik had visitors today. Yana, a friend of hers, came to share most sad accounts of her maimed married life with a KGB officer.

(...men are pigs, all of us, as W. S. Maugham vividly exposed in his masterpiece story, yet a pig invested with power is the most horrid critter in the human herd...)

In the afternoon, Robik, a PE teacher at School 8, brought Sahtik's salary for last September paid only now. So, even among the pigs you can occasionally stumble on a suave knight.

After the working day I went to the Printing House, three blocks southward. Once a month as any other employee at the editorial staff I have to oversee the paper through the press. Arcadik, whose turn it was today, explained me the supervisor's duties and moves before you give the go-ahead for printing it. After two hours of step-by-step instructing, we parted with a handshake, the first one since we had met.

When I came home, it was too late for yoga. I suppered and then took a bath in the washing tub.

It's half-past-ten pm. Routine shooting outdoors.

Ahshaut's fast asleep.

December 21, __day 18 of 106__

This goodly day-off Ahshaut became two years old. What a tall guy: ninety-two cm!

In the morning he and I jaunted to the Site for the last bagful of apples in the cellar. On our way back I bought three bottles of wine at the shop by the Shooshva Corner.

Carina and Sashic, with their children, came to congratulate.

After lunch, the scheduled sexual intercourse (the only suitable time during the whole week while Roozahna is on a visit to her relatives, Ahshaut napping, my mother-in-law tactfully gone to her place: all fixed, fitted, and aligned).

(...frankly, I am anything but fond of having it with your eye on the ticking clock and no matter if it's before, at, or after the action...)

Past four pm, Lydia came to our place bringing some grapes and roses. The feast got a fresh start.

It's ten past ten pm.

Five minutes ago I saw Sahtik and Roozahna off. Ahshaut sleeps home.

The full moon outdoors and the first shell-burst of the day, I wish it were also the last.

December 22, __day 19 of 106__

The second day-off. Till four pm I was doing my hard labors time on our Site.

The layout improvement is a choice pastime; breaking up frost-tightened clay and shoveling it down into the bottomless gorge that serves the natural border to the Site.

On my way home I stopped for a chat with Goorgen, the only neighbor we have on our side of the gorge. He shared that all the truck-drivers at their state-owned firm work for *Phedayees* now. He also has to transport the arms flown in from Armenia to Kolatac village.

Going under the pine trees that line the sidewalk opposite the Children Hospital, I picked up a big bough chopped off by a shell fragment. There's enough material to make a decent X-mass tree.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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