

The image is a book cover for 'Khatyn' by Ales Adamovich. It features a dramatic, low-angle photograph of a large fire. The fire is bright orange and yellow, with intense, swirling flames that fill the upper and middle portions of the frame. In the foreground, the dark, silhouetted branches of a tree or large shrub are visible, their intricate, gnarled forms reaching upwards into the fire. The background is a deep, solid black, which makes the fire and the dark branches stand out sharply. The overall mood is somber and powerful, reflecting the historical tragedy of the Khatyn massacre.

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**Glagoslav Publications**

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By Ales Adamovich

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Translated by Glenys Kozlov,

Frans Longman and Sharon McKee

Edited by Camilla Stein

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"According to documents of the Second World War, more than 9,200 villages were destroyed in Belarus, and in more than 600 of them almost all the inhabitants were killed or burned alive; only a few survived." *WWII Archive*.

"I jumped out of the car and began elbowing my way through microphones. 'Lieutenant Calley, did you really kill all those women and children?' 'Lieutenant Calley, what does a man who killed all these women and children feel?' 'Lieutenant Calley, do you regret not having killed more of women and children?' 'Lieutenant Calley, if today you could go back to killing women and children...'" Lieutenant William L. Calley (responsible for My Lai massacre in Vietnam) in his book *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story*.

"It is incomprehensible, unfitting to think that on this planet there could be war that brings grief to millions of

people.” Soviet cosmonauts Georgiy Dobrovolsky, Vladislav Volkov, Victor Patsaev in their *Public Address to the People of Earth from Space*, June 22, 1971.

“There’s already a whole platoon here!” the man in dark glasses, holding a white metal cane in his hand, said loudly. The boy in a light-blue raincoat sprang into the noisy bus in front of him, looking around for an empty seat.

The man in glasses lingered by the door, listening to the silence evoked by his voice; there were deep lines round his mouth, his face, which narrowed towards his chin, was unattractively pointed, while his forehead was wide and bulging like that of a child. His mouth quivered with the guilty smile of a blind man.

“Daddy, there’s a seat over there,” said the boy in the transparent raincoat and he immediately touched the trembling hand that was held out to him.

Once again the bus buzzed with noise and shouts, but that recent, sudden silence also remained like something beneath it all. The voices, the cheerful shout were too hasty.

“Gaishun, come over here, old man!”

“Flyora, come and sit with us!”

“Come on, over here!”

The man with the fixed quiet smile of a blind man was waiting for someone. The metal cane tinkled dryly and hollowly as the blind man brushed against the seat support.

A man in a sweat, wearing a crumpled cloth suit, had put a sack down on the bus steps.

“Where’s this bus going to?”

“To Khatyn.”

“Where?”

“Khatyn.”

“Ah!” the wearer of the cloth suit drawled in an uncertain voice, picking up the sack.

A woman appeared in the doorway, wearing a flowery summer dress and carrying a bag and a raincoat on her sunburnt arm. She climbed onto the step, her dark-complexioned face smiling at the side of the absolutely white cropped hair of the blind man.

“Glasha, come over and sit with us!”

“Come and sit here with the third platoon!”

“She’s got fed up with your lot in the forest, haven’t you, Glasha?”

Softly saying “hello”, the woman touched the blind man’s elbow, and he walked down the bus. There immediately became noticeable the leisurely manner forming a bond between them and the strained smoothness that one finds when two people are carrying a full bucket.

“Come over here, Daddy, there’s a seat here,” the little boy shouted to the man; he had already settled down with his back to the driver’s cab, pressing his palms down on the seat on both sides of him as children often do.

A very young-looking and noisy passenger got up from his seat and grabbed the blind man by the shoulder.

“Flyora, you sit with my missus, and I’ll sit with Glasha.”

“Kostya,” said the wife of the noisy passenger, reproachfully. She gave the blind man a friendly smile. “Don’t get in the man’s way. Look what you’re doing!”

The man in dark glasses held his hand out in front of him as he usually did; people greeted him, touching those thin fingers, which slightly trembled in response.

“Things all right, Flyora?”

“Who’s that? Is that you, Stomma?”

“You recognised me? Yes, old man, it’s me.”

“Whose head is that?”

“It’s Rusty’s. Do you remember who he is? Say something, Rusty.”

“Make yourself known,” the blind man pulled his hand back. “Make yourself known. Is it really you, Rusty?”

“Hello, Gaishun.” The passenger got up a little and shook the hand of the blind man awkwardly as if it were a child’s hand.

While the process of recognition was going on, the woman stood behind her husband. She was smiling, too, but she was not looking at anybody, while the dark glasses of the blind man focused on each voice attentively.

A thick-set passenger with a squint in both eyes caught hold of the blind man’s hand.

A camera strap was cutting his soft shoulder in two, and he seemed somehow to be all oval in shape, bulging out of his new dark-blue costume.

“Do you recognise me? It’s Staletaw.”

“And you’re here as well,” the blind man was surprised.

“Where else should I be?” Staletaw sounded offended.

But the woman had already led Gaishun further down the bus. He brushed against the knee of a stout man, who was tall even when seated. Like a pupil who was too big for his desk, he was sitting sideways, blocking the gangway.

“Hello,” said the stout passenger softly and very calmly. “Hello, Flyora,” he said again.

For a moment his voice caused everything to fall silent again, as if the silence had shown through the noise like the bottom of a shallow lake.

The expression on the woman’s face changed immediately and she quickly caught hold of Gaishun and whisked him forwards. She sat him down and she herself took a seat facing the driver’s cab and with her back to everyone.

The little boy called out, “It’s better over here, Daddy.”

“Well, you sit there then!” his mother snapped at him.

The stout passenger, too, would have been more comfortable sitting by the driver’s cab, facing everyone. But he did not sit there either.

...Kasach! That was his voice. The confidently quiet voice, of a man who knows and is accustomed to people always listening to him. That was a voice that I would discern among thousands.

Look what Glasha’s hand was like now—it was as if she had stopped me being run over by a car!

What is Kasach like now? Well, whatever he is like, he, at least, is not blind like her husband.

The noise of the motor and the tinkling sound of the bucket under the seat drowned any general conversation. Only the most piercing or the most cheerful voices reached them, clinging to one another and overlapping:

“Last year...”, “You’ve already got grandchildren...”, “A bomb will explode, a cloud will rise...”, “Well, Kostya, who do you think you are! Don’t keep interrupting...”, “There are Kasach’s men everywhere, I tell you...”, “No, I’ll tell him, our Chronicler, that...”, “Heh, Staletaw...”, “He’s doing exams for the Institute of Foreign Languages...”

Unreally, impossibly familiar voices from way, way back in the distant past flooded the bus. The accidental words of the present day floated on the surface like pieces of rubbish, and the familiar voices are pouring into me apart from the words, brackish and scorching...

There were about twenty of our partisans. I had already heard some of them, had picked them out: Kasach, Kostya, our chief of staff, Stomma, Rusty, Staletaw....

Kostya still had that same little boyish voice that would break into any conversation: he would guffaw, shout out surnames, nick-names, intentionally meaningless words (“You haven’t forgotten Grandpa?... Staletaw, take a photo of us for history. You do that really well... Grandpa, where did you get that hat from?... Mensch!... Don’t interfere, old girl...”).

Yes, that is what he was like, our chief of staff, Kostya; with him around, it’s crowded even in the middle of an

open field; he will bump into everyone, embrace them and immediately make fun of them. He was not very respectable for his post. Twenty-two or twenty-three, he must have been. They liked him then as now for he knew his job and he knew how to fight. Just as well as Kasach.

Kasach was here, close by, behind me. "Hello!" That "hello" was meant for Glasha as well, but he detected something in Glasha's look, and excluded her from his greeting saying, "Hello, Flyora." Now what had happened to Glasha's hand. It shook with fear and became hard as it tensed up. She was sitting next to me, bolt upright and tense. I may not be able to see but I knew.

Was he still as huge and strong? His voice sounded the same anyway.

I have always wanted to know whether he himself noticed his constant irony which sometimes appeared to be involuntary.

"I can tell him straight!" a voice came from somewhere behind him. "We pulled him out from behind the stove where he was hiding, made him a partisan by force, and now..."

Who were they talking about? Whose voice was that? It was nervous, and irascible. The lads were already egging him on, our lot always knew how to do that.

"His secretary won't let you in."

"But you'll ring him up, won't you, Zuyonak? Or you'll send a telegram." Of course, it was Zuyonak. He had been the guardian of our partisan heraldry. Zuyonak always remembered exactly when, in what year and even what month people came to the partisans. And who deserved to be respected and how. The whole of Zuyonok's family had been wiped out by the Germans when in 1941 he went away into the forest. Many of our monuments have been erected thanks to his long and persistent letters. And the one we were going to unveil, too. It is the first time that I was going; when I could still see, such things were not yet common practice. Zuyonak even used to get into trouble for trying to get us together. "What kind of meetings are these? Who needs them?" they would ask.

"We'll be crawling along till nightfall at this speed!"

"Oh, Grandpa here is used to aeroplanes!"

It was Zuyonak's idea as well that we should call at Khatyn at the same time although it was not exactly on the way to our partisan country. For me it was especially important to visit Khatyn. Although what would I see there? I would not see what there is there now, but what was there before. I know our Khatyns... I know that..."

Grandpa who had been in charge of supplies in our partisan detachment kept on worrying whether we would manage to get there and back in time, and whether that would make us late. How old was he? He had seemed an old man to us even at that time. When he spoke it was like someone eating a hot potato, making hoarse sounds, blowing and wheezing after every word. And there was the uncertain chuckling of a bustling, good-natured peasant. Somehow Zuyonak had managed to get us all together in this coach, those from the town and those from the surrounding area.

"Never mind," someone responded (it appeared to be Rusty), "they have waited longer for us."

You could even detect certain irony in Rusty's voice. This is probably something he had acquired after the war. Formerly they had all played tricks on him and he had just snuffled through his peeling nose and promised:

"Next time you try it I'll punch your nose!"

"What kind of monument is that, Zuyonak?" someone asked from the back seat.

"A burial mound built up by schoolchildren."

"And what kind would you have liked?" shouted Kostya Chief of Staff.

"For some reason I did not think about it when we were walking—do you remember—through the burning marshes. We walked round in a circle as if on a string.

The faces flash in my memory as if they are being shuffled like cards but none of them fits the voice with the

quiet cough.

“It’s all the same for the lads now.” (Grandpa.)

“All the same, no, not quite!” (Stomma.)

“I would not like to lie under one like the one we saw last year.”

“Zuyonak, take people’s wishes into account!” (Kostya Chief of Staff).

“No, but do you remember Chertovo Koleno, how we walked around through the smoky marshes? When you tell people, they don’t believe you!”

Who is recalling that burnt-out swamp at Chertovo Kolyeno? That voice has such a familiar, gently subtle cough. Can it be Vedmed?

Well, of course, it is! What is he like now, I wonder, without his cartridge belt across his chest and round his waist? It was very uncomfortable and impractical to carry cartridges like that for they used to go rusty and in battle you had to pull them out one at a time and push them into the magazine, into the cartridge-chamber. By the First World War a convenient cartridge clip had already been invented; you put it in the slot, pressed it with your thumb, and immediately the rifle was loaded with five cartridges. But Vedmed stubbornly dragged his belt around with him as if he were dressed for some film, and he himself was thin and stooping and wore glasses. His thoughts were not about impressing the girls like those of the scouts and aids-de-camp who sported weapons and belts for the purpose, but on being fed. Any peasant woman immediately saw that he was a fighting man and gave him something to eat or was it perhaps a passion for the cinema already burning in Vedmed’s sickly chest? We went to the cinema once and when the film started Glasha exclaimed softly, “Oh, Flyora, our Lev Vedmed must be the producer of this film!”

I usually go to the cinema with Syarozha. We would go in right at the beginning of the performance, so that the audience was not bewildered by the fact that someone who cannot see has come to the cinema.

To begin with Syarozha whispers to me what is happening on the screen until I catch what the authors are trying to say and then I help him to watch it, listening to the film as if it were on the radio. Some films seem to be made for me for everything is explained out loud and is obvious. But when the audience suddenly fell silent in front of a screen that had become dumb—and all that could be heard was hundreds of people breathing, just as happens before you cry out in a dream— then my own screen would switch itself on and light up, I would perceive my own picture against the background of the sudden shouts and shots coming from their screen. I could see what no one else could see.

“Are you a partisan as well. Uncle?” Syarozha pestered Staletaw who had moved over to the driver’s cab, and now I could hear that he was sitting opposite me.

“We’re all partisans here, laddie.” Staletaw had not appreciated the question. “And are you a Pioneer?”

“Of course, I am.” Syarozha was indignant as well.

“Don’t get your shoes on the gentleman,” Glasha warned Syarozha. From the moment she had seen Kasach, everything in her seemed to have hardened; I could hear it in her voice.

“Were you one of Kasach’s men, too?” Syarozha tried to find out. If he starts bothering you, then you’ve had it.

“Oh, no,” Staletaw was gladdened by the question. “I belonged to the Stalin Detachment.”

Staletaw was now sitting facing Kasach; and they could see one another. He had a peculiar sort of squint, towards the sky and towards the ceiling.

“Nor is your Dad any kind of Kasach man, he’s from the Stalin Detachment.”

It is one and the same: according to our papers we belonged to the Stalin Detachment, but in the villages they probably remember Kasach’s men now.”

That Staletaw was a fairly exotic specimen, even among such a variety of people as the partisans were.

At first, when the mischievous instructor from Germanised schools who had travelled around the area giving

lectures on “Hitler the Liberator”, was brought into our camp at Zamoshievo, he was a podgy fellow with eyes that appeared at that time to be squinting with fear. But they did not shoot him; they left him in the brigade (he proved that he had supplied those in the landing force with a typewriter and some kind of stationery to boot), and then we found out that his eyes were naturally like that. Naturally like that and, as it turned out, very much in keeping with Staletaw’s nature.

In the wake of that fear-filled squint Staletaw was overtaken by a rush of enthusiasm that swamped us all to such an extent that the lads did not know how to get away from him. He would steal up to Rusty, Zuyonak or Vedmed and would stand in front of them, looking adoringly at them and squinting at the sky. Their heads definitely, it seemed, were up there somewhere in the tree-tops of the forest. He made you feel like an idol basking in worship.

“What do you want?” the partisan would ask, surprised by this attitude towards him.

“Me?... Nothing. Perhaps you'd like some lunch as well? I'm going over to the cook-house.”

“Why not, get me some. Yes, get me some, old chap.”

Once we returned from an operation and Staletaw was nowhere to be seen, either in our dug-out or anywhere close by. He was at the camp but he no longer seemed to be taking any notice of us. It turned out that Staletaw was already working as a clerk at headquarters, or to be more exact, as a chronicler. He had managed to persuade someone who had come to us from the brigade HQ that it was absolutely vital to write down the histories of our detachments. The front was already rolling forward, other brigades will suddenly start thinking about it and there we are, ours will be all ready.

Staletaw no longer toadied to Vedmed, his squinting eyes moved to others; somehow they did not seem to pick us out any more.

That man did indeed have strange eyes. He seemed to be measuring you, setting you up against something invisible, pulling you upwards slightly like a tailor straightening out your collar or the back of your coat; but his eyes seemed to sentence you, even exhibiting disappointment, as if saying, oh dear, you’re just not up to it! Not good enough for history, is that it? He would pull you up straight yet again with his glittering black eyes, which seemed at times like those of a madman, but there was a smile in those eyes, so subtle and derisive. You cannot deceive me, you know. He would cast his eyes upwards to the sky one last time, leaving you standing there as if in front of a swiftly departing lift. Any phrase would make him prance with excitement as he enthusiastically incriminated people: “Oh, no-o!” If you were to tell him that it was 12 o'clock, he would immediately incriminate you by saying, “Oh, no-o! It’s two minutes to twelve!”

No one knows how the chronicle of the brigade turned out. He was suddenly thrown out of Kasach’s headquarters just as rapidly as he arrived there. Kasach made no bones about doing things like that, and his protector in the brigade HQ did not help Staletaw either.

It came to Kasach’s ears (they had been grumbling in the villages) that “one of your lot with a squint” had beaten up some old fellow, had threatened the womenfolk with a rifle, and had tried to put someone up against the wall.

“We are fighting here,” Staletaw tried to justify himself, “and some chap is sitting over there, hiding behind his beard, and you’re supposed to go and liberate him. I wouldn’t let them all go back.”

“Fighting, are we?” Kasach inquired again. “Well then, go and fight. You can compile your history later on. To begin with, put him in the guardhouse!” So Staletaw did “make history”, only not the kind of history he was so anxious about.

We joined up with the army. Some went to the front, others started to get the economy going, and suddenly there was a hitch with those who had stayed in the area to work. Staletaw’s file came to the surface and it turned out



to contain such things (especially about Kasach and about the others, too) that when they summoned the lads, they did not even begin to read it out loud, but just ran their fingers along the lines. They could not bring themselves to utter the phrases that Staletaw claimed to have heard in our detachment. It is hard to say what he actually heard there and what he made up. The partisans really did discuss all sorts of things, sometimes very heatedly and openly. He possibly heard something at headquarters as well. But, it appears, he put too much arsenic in it: one deadly dose of arsenic is fatal, but ten doses may just cause vomiting and clean out your stomach straightaway. You couldn't bring half a detachment back from the front anyway. The matter was dealt with by someone who was no fool. Staletaw had to try to vindicate himself, for the "Hitler the Liberator" lectures as well. For a long time, nothing was heard of our Chronicler but suddenly he turned up reading essays on the radio and writing articles. He had come to life! He even published a brochure on the heroic deeds of the members of the landing force (those to whom he had handed over the typewriter). Soon Staletaw began to appear at meetings. I did not go to the early meetings but I heard that Staletaw had appeared, that the eyes of the Chronicler, squinting towards the sky, were again filled with rapture and adoration. At first, I don't think they stood on ceremony when it came to reminding him of the brigade's "history", but it looks as if they have got used to him again. Our hot-heads do not bear grudges.

"Oh, no-o," Staletaw drawled, as if testing the reaction of those in the bus, "No-o, your Dad and I are partisans, and not some kind of" (Kasach's men, but he did not say it).

They were already singing songs, two or three at the same time.

It was a while before it dawned upon Syarozha that his father was different from the others. And when his child's heart finally perceived it—he once looked up and suddenly understood—he screamed and cried; it was as if from that moment on that everything happened to me: "Who did it to you, Daddy? Don't be afraid to tell me. It was the Germans, wasn't it, the Nazis? Tell me, please tell me!" He ran over to his corner, grabbed his German-made red clockwork windmill and began to break it, crying loudly, and threw it on the floor. Glasha and I tried to assure him that his toy was made by other Germans quite different ones....

From that time on, not a day passed that Syarozha did not begin to talk about my "little old eyes". He and I discussed a plan as to how I would be cured and see him with his freckles and his black eyes. Syarozha laughed uncertainly when I told him how he would appear before me and I would fail to recognise him.

The first operation three years before was a failure. I decided to have another one for Syarozha's sake. He and Glasha came to see me at the clinic and talked a lot. Syarozha laughed excitedly, lie was quite sure that, when they took off my bandages, I would be able to see him and to see everything again. Then they took me home still in that same darkness. Glasha wept softly and stroked my hand. Syarozha sat in front, next to the taxi-driver, and I could not hear a sound from him.

Syarozha never spoke about "my little old eyes" any more. Sometimes I could discern from the way he breathed, from his sudden sigh, that he was looking at my face, studying it sorrowfully. My eyeballs began to hurt me and they definitely became rounder. It was even suggested to me that I should have them removed to stop the pain, but I did not consent, for Syarozha's sake, as well.

Today Syarozha was cheerful and full of beans; he was going to the former haunts of the partisans and he was, moreover, among people who needed no explanation as to who his Daddy was. On the contrary, he could listen to what they had to say and ask them questions.

The noise of the engine drowned the voices in the bus. We were going into the forest, and, when the trees parted, a field opened out. I could clearly discern the voices, even on the back seats. All the time, I was trying to imagine what each of the people looked like. I compelled myself to make allowances for time, for it was twenty-five years since I had seen them.

I imagined myself just a decade ago as well, what I was like when such a thing as a mirror still existed in the

world, and reflected in the mirror was a pale, narrow-faced man with swollen eyelids, with the hair on his temples turned white and with deep, arched lines round his mouth which sustained a guilty smile.

Glasha married a man like that but she probably saw me in some other mirror, not such a pitiless one. In her memory I was connected with her girlhood. And with many other things as well, with Kasach, too. But how she hates him! Or she is afraid of him? She is afraid of herself. No, it is I who is scared. A cowardly and envious blind man! And an ungrateful one.

While I was still like everyone else (my eyes only began to become red and hurt suddenly from time to time). Glasha and I did not get on very well together: what brought us together, divided us and tormented us, was our time in the partisans together, it was Kasach. We did not talk about it, we did not recall it aloud, but it was ever present. When the most awful thing happened to me (over a period of six months), it was as if Glasha had become someone else, her voice, her hands, the way she touched me had all changed. And she herself wanted to give birth to Syarozha.

Once again Kasach was next to us. He was behind us, he had sat behind us all the way. I could feel that Glasha had not forgotten that even for a moment. How silent she kept, all tensed up. I myself had insisted that we should go to this meeting when Zuyonak wrote to us. Glasha did not want to, but Syarozha and I insisted. I was doing it in revenge for all that had happened before, to spite myself. That is a blind man's gratitude for you...

The bus buzzed with loud, cheerful conversation. It is always easier for me when people are distracted like that, then I could observe them instead of them observing me.

“Under him even that one sat in the waiting-room as good as gold.” (Zuyonak.)

“That's how it was, one in front of the other! In our village there was one...” (Grandpa.)

“Suvorov talked about China... Do you know what Suvorov used to say?... ”

He was here, too, Ilya Ilich, our company commander. Gypsy-like with that small beard of his, he always had a little book in his pocket or in his bag... God alone knows where he used to get those books. In the villages they had smoked the last bibles already in their hand-made cigarettes.

“Let's have a singsong!” Kostya, our chief of staff, shouted now and immediately began singing “Oh, what a welcome there will be at the station when we come back with flying colours!...”

Kasach remained silent. He alone was not drawn into the loud conversation. It was interesting what he would have said and how, what he had been thinking all those vociferous years. Immediately after the war he worked at the local Soviet's executive committee, then he was made manager of the peat factory and later chairman of a state farm. What he was doing now I did not know, nor did Glasha. For all that, they had incriminated him for being taken prisoner by the Germans and possibly for something else contained in Staletaw's notorious file. He himself was a sufficiently complicated person with surprising traits of character. It was the first time that I was attending a partisan meeting, but I could already see (from the conversations, the rejoinders, and from his deep silence) that they were not making much of an effort to converse with him, nor he with them, for that matter. He had never been sociable and companionable, he was not like Kostya, our chief of staff. It was probably because in our minds Kasach was linked with much that did not dispose one to cheerful gossip, things that were buried deep down in our memories. War is war, but in the company of Kostya, it was a completely partisan war, with noise, anecdotes and recollections of all kinds of adventures; with Kasach you recalled something quite different, more drastic and poignant. Kasach was not inclined to pride himself upon and boast about his exploits as a partisan like the rest of his men did, nor did he tend to see those partisan days in an increasingly romantic light as others did, as the years went by. He was going to this meeting like a stranger. Anyone regarding him from outside would decide that he was the only one who was not one of Kasach's men.

I have heard or read somewhere that people who have known each other in especially agonizing and degrading

circumstances are not very keen to meet afterwards. It happens now and then, but not more often. It is difficult, even impossible to live with your secrets constantly, bared as if they are concealed in an open basket. The families of such people are seldom friends. I myself was acquainted with two men who had survived Auschwitz in the same barrack. They would bump into each other in the corridor or the smoking room at the teacher-training institute and would sometimes check the camp numbers stamped on their arms with a definite lack of concern (“I’m 120 thousand people younger than you...”), but you could tell from their conversations that they knew nothing about each other, not even on which street each one lived.

What’s the use talking about it, I would not tell Syarozha everything either (even when he becomes a student), although we do not apparently have anything to hide or be ashamed of. I know for certain from my own students that there are some things that you cannot communicate to those who have not experienced anything like it.

My third-year students heard about an incident when the commander of a partisan detachment, ambushed by the Germans and trying to avoid an encirclement which meant sure destruction, allegedly ordered a child to be killed that kept on crying in its mother’s arms and betraying the detachment’s movements. They told me the story indignantly. But it was an interrogation as well to find out how I would be able to answer with my “universal science of psychology”. They were convinced that after this incident the detachment would most certainly break up, for people who have betrayed and lost sight of the purpose of their struggle would come to hate each other and themselves and their very lives bought at such a price. Just as indignant as they were that such a thing could happen, I could not agree for all that that it would have ended like that. I reminded them of the defensive mechanism of the psyche without which war would be unthinkable in general, unendurable for man.

I did not see the faces of my students, but for the first time I sensed—from the tone of some of their voices, and from the reticence of others—not simply disagreement, but antagonism. It seemed as if my blindness itself, my dark glasses were unpleasant, repulsive. No, they would not have given way to any “defensive reaction” if they had been in the place of that detachment.

And thank God for that. Although too many things recur in life, they were right in not wanting to believe that such a thing had happened for all that. Spring that does not wish to know that autumn and winter recur is right. Youth is right which does not want to believe that life began in just the same way for others. Blessed is the river that takes its source from a pure, clear spring; even if the spring were to know that the lower reaches of the river are befouled, this would not make its waters turbid. The river can be cleansed. That would be quite pointless, however, if it were not for the initial purity of the spring and the underground sources that fed it.

The first person I was in love with in the partisans was not Glasha at all. My love for Glasha which came later seemed to take source in my adoration of Kasach. Yes, Kasach! Boyish and funny as it was, with its reveries, fantasies, grievances and joys, you could not call it by any other name but love.

Even before I joined the detachment, I had heard a lot of things like: “Kasach’s men, oho, they don’t take just anyone!”, “Armed like commandos”, “All Kasach’s men are experienced soldiers, they know how to fight!”, “Kasach’s men are waging battle”, “Kasach’s men, Kasach’s lads...”

I did not simply dream of becoming a partisan, for quite a few of them passed through our village, but one of Kasach’s men for sure.

I managed to get hold of a weapon without which you could not even ask to join him. Fedka Sparrows’ Death told me how to do it. He, the son of the collective farm’s book-keeper, had freckles all over his face like the speckles on a sparrow’s egg. He was only fourteen years old, two years younger than me and, in order to make my constant advantage in that appear less, Fedka kept on trying to find things to boast about. This time he pulled two small hand grenades, out of a hollow in a tree trunk and showed them to me as I stood under the tree.

“Well, what do you say?” he asked with a proud ring in his voice.

My amazement must have been so delightfully gratifying to him that he decided to finish me off. He took me into the marshes. From beneath an uprooted tree stump he pulled out, wrapped in a piece of tarpaulin, what I had long dreamed of, a rusty rifle, its butt rotting slightly, but the genuine article nevertheless. Now even a fool could have seen that the advantage I gained from being two years older was sheer presumption and effrontery on my part.

“All right,” said Fedka, becoming kinder, “they’ve got plenty where this came from.”

I was perplexed.

“The little old dead men,” Fedka explained. “So what?”

Involuntarily I glanced at my fingers which immediately opened out and which had suddenly become sticky. This was why the wooden parts of the rifle were so black, as if they had been scorched.

The next day we set out for the graves. There were many of them in the pine forest on the sand dunes. This is where they buried them in 1941. They were interred where they were killed, each in his own trench. The battle thundered on for a long time here in Polesye, among the forests. The Germans had already taken Smolensk, but here in the forests and swamps they were checked by armoured trains and the cavalry of Oka Gorodovikov with his big moustache.

The yellow sandy mounds of the trench graves had settled, grown over with heather like a camouflage net disguising them. Fedka sat down under a bush and had a smoke.

I stood in front of him with the spades, ready to beg “Better not do it!”

“Well?” he inquired sullenly,

I did not know what he meant.

“Have you hired me? Arbeiten!”

I, most likely, blushed.

“Give it to me!” he tore the spade out of my hand. “Dead men don’t get tooth-ache!”

The damp yellow sand, bright like fresh blood, gradually built up around us and we kept going deeper and deeper down into the ground. I sprang out of the trench suddenly for the earth seemed to be moving away, sliding slipperily under my bare heels.

“You running off for some water?” Fedka shouted scornfully.

“It’s cramped with both of us in there,” I explained, choking on my sticky saliva.

Fedka threw something black like a piece of burnt paper out onto the yellow sand.

“This is a German the buttons are German there’s not a thing here!”

“Why?” I forced myself to take an interest, although if I had been alone now I would have liked to have left, to have run away. I had the feeling that I had lost something for ever.

Fedka banged about in the pit with his spade, trying to detect the sound of metal.

“I’ve already told you! They don’t have them in their graves. It’s a proven fact. They buried their dead without weapons.”

A sound like the thud from wood thundered in my cranium. Fedka looked me in the eyes.

“Little helper, eh! Well, get on and fill it up. Am I your slave?”

He walked away to one side and lay down with his eyes shut, and I began to fill the pit up with the already dry sand.

It was not until we dug the third pit that the spade (his, not mine) rang out as it struck something. At this, point, I forgot about everything else.

The rifle was lying in fresh sand and we were standing over it. The metal, was so rusty that it was yellow like a buttercup in spring, and the wooden parts of it which were as black as coal were impregnated with the odour and dampness of death.

“We’ve got it,” I cried out.

It was with this very rifle that I asked to join Kasach’s men. (I had to put a new canvas strap on it).

I did not begin by telling Mum, knowing how difficult it was for her to make such decisions, but got straight down to business. Twice we went (and we took Fedka with us) to saw down telegraph posts. The lads we knew who were with Kasach were rewarded with cartridges for taking us with them. Fedka hid them away somewhere. But Fedka was again racked with envy,

“It’s all right for you. You haven’t got a father.”

But I did have a mother. I summed up my courage, summoned all my ingrained fearlessness of a rather unsatisfactory pupil and told Mum that her son was a partisan.

My little sisters, twins of seven, examined the partisan who had suddenly announced himself in their family with enthusiastic and pitying expectation, for they thought that he was going to cry now. Our Mum was quick to go for the belt and even for the stick. Then she herself wept, but you would be likely to howl before she did.

This time she was the first to cry. She wept softly and helplessly, looking at her twins’ little mugs, flat like saucers, casting a glance round at the walls, and the corners of the house, as if the family needed to run away immediately, to leave everything.

She went into the kitchen without uttering a word. She busied herself there around the stove and wept, and we talked in whispers.

“Will they give you a horse?”

“I’ll get one myself. Kasach’s men get everything themselves.”

“Will you let us have a ride on it? Will you sow the seeds in our kitchen garden? Otherwise it will be hard for Mummy.”

“I shall come and do it. You’re a partisan’s family now.”

“Mummy’s crying.”

“She always does... When Daddy went away to fight the Finns she did as well... You were too little to remember that.”

Our twins were not regarded as beauties, even Mum would speak of them with a pitying smile (when they were next to one another it was hard not to smile): “Good heavens, little old ladies are growing; its bad enough having one, let alone two.”

I loved their flat faces with their thick lips although I often used to shout at them, like a bad-tempered lout when they would not leave our band of kids alone. But in our own home we were friends. Anyone would have been touched by that pair of submissive smiles on those kindly little mugs, a double portion of respect for an older brother.

Now, when Mum cried and looked at them in that way and at the walls, I felt guilty. For the first time it struck me well and truly how everything might end. These were times when no family could feel safe, let alone partisan families, who needed a great deal of luck and good fortune if they were to survive, for the Germans hunted them down all the year round. “Come on, let me sew your father’s collar on for you. Get up in the loft and bring it here,” said Mum, turning towards us from the stove; we had immediately stopped talking. “Some devil will find it and take it anyway. Or they’ll burn it.”

I rushed out into the inner porch and flew up the ladder. Among some rags near a deck-chair I unearthed the sleeve of an old jersey reeking of tobacco. The sleeve contained the only valuable our family possessed, an



astrakhan collar rolled up in tobacco leaves to protect it from the moths.

Mum sewed the collar with its gleaming black curls onto my faded red-brown school coat, while we sat by there in a communion of silence and expectation. Mum's straight, thin shoulders shuddered with the cold, and I ran and brought a warm old shawl from the cupboard. When the shawl was round her shoulders, Mum's figure did not seem so angular and she seemed to become kinder through and through, more sorrowful and pensive. It was when she was like this, with the shawl round her in the chilly dusk, that she would tell us about life in the town, about her youth, and about father. (I came from the town, but my little sisters were born in the country. My father himself had requested the job at the tractor pool and he was manager there right up until the war with Finland started. Then something incomprehensible and stunning happened—he was taken prisoner. Two letters had arrived from somewhere in the north before the new war started.)

Mum's shawl and the astrakhan collar that Father had bought for his coat were all that was left of our "manager's" life style. We had begun to sell our things from the town even before the war started.

Mum finished sewing, and she looked at my coat with the luxurious collar and even smiled, "It came in useful at last."

Gladdened by her smile, we hastened to try on the coat: the twins held it like a fur coat for a rich gentleman to don, and I was ordering them about like valets. The astrakhan smelt of tobacco as if it has already been worn. It probably seemed like it to Mum as well.

"You'll smell of Dad's tobacco."

I breathed in deliberately cheerfully and loudly and smelt it, afraid that she would start crying again. My little sisters poked their noses, in as well, but I ordered them to wipe their noses first, and they wiped them obediently.

The first days and weeks at the partisans' camp were for me a veritable feast of things to learn. Discipline in the detachment was almost like that in the army, Kasach's men prided themselves on this for all their neighbours to see. But they were partisans all the same; everything they did was with inventiveness, cheerful swearing and with a small portable gramophone with one record for all moods "Stop being angry, Masha". This "Masha" sounded different when things were going well and when the dead were brought back and the partisans wandered round the camp gloomily and without saying a word.

We, Kasach's men, loved to see ourselves as others saw us. Once a captured polizei man, told us how he had hidden in the cellar and how he had heard us attacking from there, what we had shouted, our very words. We used to make a special effort to go and listen to the man and, being aware that he had hit the nail on the head, he did his utmost to make up the most complicated swearwords that we were supposed to have said.

It was considered obligatory to fight in a cheerful manner. It was only the beginners who described the fighting seriously and in detail; Kasach's experienced men talked of it as amusing, almost ridiculous adventures. Someone would come tearing along, having barely hooked it from the Germans, his eyes each as big as an apple, but he was already thinking up a story, trying to find something funny in what had happened just as if he had been playing some kind of cruel, but cheerful game with the Germans. If it had not turned out all right and the Germans had made our tails hot, that was made out to be funny too. And only when the dead were brought back, it was best not to go near if for some reason you had not been involved in the fight, for they would bite your head off as if you had been a stranger. In the evening they would sing songs softly and listen pensively as a prewar baritone assured Masha that "our life is splendid on sunny days".

Kasach was respected in the detachment, perhaps even feared, but feared very much in a partisan way, too: they would say that that was just the kind of handling they deserved, that you should look sharp and be able to slip away even from Kasach, otherwise you were not Kasach's man!

All the same, there was something about him they did not understand, even I noticed that. Yes, he was tough,

perhaps even too tough, but then he was brave, and Kasach's men knew that he would never leave them lying there wounded as others sometimes did; even when we were ambushed no one would have dreamed of breaking loose and running unless commanded. The courageous man would not run because he was courageous, nor would the coward run because he was a coward and he knew that Kasach would decide his fate for him.

But that mystifying smile of his, the ironical attitude it revealed towards everything, whether good or bad! That smile annoyingly made everyone and everything level. It was as if Kasach only saw and remembered you when you were in front of him. Each time he appeared to be noticing you for the first time.

But perhaps this did not disconcert others. But I, I was in love, you see!

There I was, standing at my post near the headquarters' dug-out. The camp was slowly falling asleep, and the unsaddled horses under the awning were sonorously sorting through the dried clover. Someone was walking towards the headquarters, making the last year's leaves, which were slightly stiff with frost by evening, rustle loudly. In the chilly twilight I recognised the big figure of Kasach in his short sheepskin jacket and cap with ear-flaps.

"Who goes there?" I called menacingly, glad that he would hear me, my partisan's cry, but I was a little shy. For I had recognised him, and he knew that I had recognised him; it was as if I was suggesting we played a game. "Password!" I demand, more softly this time.

He kept walking towards me out of the darkness, without saying a word or slowing his pace. I pulled back the trigger, but said immediately, "Is that you, comrade commander?"

I might as well shout out, "Ah, I recognised you, aha!"

Kasach walked quickly up to me and pushed my rifle to one side as if it had been a stick.

"Why didn't you shoot?"

A game is a game, but what a game he was proposing to me!

"I recognised you straightaway."

"If a person does not give the password, then shoot him!"

"But I..."

"It makes no odds." Kasach looked into my perplexed and aggrieved face closely and attentively and grinned: "Two days in the guardroom." This was probably to make it clear to me that war was a game in earnest and a fierce one.

But this was where Kasach's men took notice of their commander's character. It was really nasty, chilly and uncomfortable in the guardroom in the daytime: the bunks made of alder poles were cleared away and, standing or squatting in the freezing cold dug-out, you would breathe into your collar permeated with the smell of father's tobacco... But then a nights! At nights you enjoyed all the privileges, the extra special care of the guards.

I wonder if they told Kasach, even after the war, how they fed those under arrest out of headquarters' rations.

I had a hand in that too, when I had to stand on guard near the cook-house. You used to stand there, knowing that they would soon come out. (The rattling of saucepans instead of a password).

"Watch out when you're on watch!" someone like Rusty or Zuyonak would sob with a chuckle, their sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He would pick pieces of meat out of the smaller "headquarters" kettle, blow on his fingers, and you, the sentry, would have to hold the mess-tin as well. One mess-tin for all those under arrest.

Kasach was sitting behind me, just as he was, but quite different as well. I do not know what he is like now, though.

At that time, we gave the man something of our own, something good and something bad, so that he took something from us with him.

And now we had taken back what was ours, retrieved it, and although he seemed the man he used to be, he was different for that matter.

People live this change in different ways. Some would be terribly surprised and take umbrage: “Only yesterday their life and death were in my hands, and here they are, each having the right to live, as he pleases, as if he and his fate had not been completely in my power just a short time ago”. Some would live and keep pondering what they could have done yesterday, how they could have dealt with you!

I do not think Kasach is like that. He knew how to command. But I do not believe that was all there was to it. His ironical, at times even incongruous smile seemed as if he was somehow looking on from the side at what he was doing so skilfully and firmly. Most likely he was not getting his own back on the Germans, on the Nazis alone, but on something else as well. May be it was on the war itself? Perhaps this was the reason why he was less of a Kasach man than all of us and this was why the things he did so exactly and firmly did not bring him closer to people. Yes, we had given up to him something of our own and he bore within him something of ours. But it was not a cheerful sense of desperation like Kostya, our chief of staff, but something quite different. Perhaps it was a human need to wreak vengeance on the war by waging another war, to avenge himself on the war for it falling to his lot to come face to face with it.

Perhaps I am making Kasach a more complicated person than he really is. But he is not to be oversimplified either.

And I ought to say that I hardly know Kasach as he is today.

All the way there he did not say a word. Both he and Glasha were silent. When she saw him, possibly her face did not betray anything of what she felt. People learn to keep their face straight, but their hands will give everything away, and her hand had been resting on my shoulder.

I had always thought myself an ugly person, even when I could see. As if a person who can see can be an ugly person. But before I met Glasha, I did not pay much attention to that. When I became a member of the detachment, I even thought very highly of myself. I had a rifle and grenade, I was a partisan, what other beauty could a person wish for!

And then a girl looked at this partisan. She burst out laughing for the whole street to hear, and all at once became different.

As if on purpose, that day came along damp, cold and muddy. The hay under me which I had taken from a meadow flooded with water from melted snow was also damp and heavy. Lying on top of a high cartload of loose hay, I was going down the village street, looking for a house to have lunch in... Suddenly I saw Kasach riding a strong, fiery stallion, followed by the adjutant wearing straps and with hussar's whiskers. While my thoughts were wandering in admiration of us, Kasach's men, Zhenka the adjutant and I changed places (all in the mind, of course); he was now sitting on my cart and I was bounding along on his steed; I was so lost in my fantasy that I completely forgot about my own horse, old fat-haunched Goering, and it, the fascist critter, played a right trick on me, too. I was suddenly aware that the cart was tilting, that I was slipping and sliding together with the hay, slowly and inevitably into one of those puddles you get in spring.

“Go on, fall in, it will be drier there!” shouted Zhenka, absolutely letting me down in the eyes of Kasach, who looked round at us angrily. But we all looked round when we heard the girl laughing loudly. I was ready to do away with myself and Goering as well and that laughing creature, too, who just had to choose this moment to appear. With the long legs of a baby stork stuck in huge worn out boots like pink candles in candlesticks, she held a dirty bucket on her graceful outstretched arm and in the other hand a big, thick sheepskin mitten. She was gathering up for the pigs the manure that the horses had been kind enough to leave behind, and she was getting a real laugh out of it too!

Glasha likes to recall that incident; she finds especially funny my indignation at the time at the way she held her bucket in a ballet-like pose. But it turned out that it was Zhenka with his sideboards, pulling faces that made her laugh, and not me and my cart at all.

Kasach and Zhenka turned into her yard. They had also decided to take a short rest. I was in no fit state for that.

Glasha lived with her mother who was still a young, shapely woman. She had only ever seen photographs of her father, smiling from ear to ear. Maintenance from him used to arrive from somewhere in the Urals. One day another photograph arrived showing a whole bunch of smiles like her father's. These were Vera, Nadezhda, and Lyubov, Glasha's little sisters on her father's side who lived far, far away.

In the village Glasha and her beauty of a mother were referred to as Glasha-Win-Ten-Grand and Ulyana-Win-Ten-Grand. It so happened that they had been lucky enough to win this sum on bonds; it had even been reported in a local newspaper. It was at that time that the owner of the house got his head turned, and embarked on a series of heady adventures that carried him as far as the Urals where he finally settled down.

At first it was not Kasach that Glasha was attracted to, but Zhenka "if only he hadn't been so free with his hands". She and Zhenka used to argue, throwing water over each other; they would almost come to blows and try to justify themselves loudly and angrily, she to her mother and he to the commander with the words "Let him (her) not start it!"

In the summer of 1943 the Germans started to bomb the villages where the partisans lived. Glasha suddenly came to be in our detachment. It was her mother, Ulyana, who begged Kasach to accept her, although even in the cook-house and the medical unit we had men working almost exclusively. Glasha's mother justly thought that it was safer at the partisans' camp anyway than in the camp for families where she herself moved with the rest of the villagers.

In the beginning a short-haired girl as skinny as a bean pole, lanky, shy and swift began to be seen around the cook-house and the medical unit. She was fairly tall for her seventeen years, but she had such narrow shoulders, drawn up tightly together as if in embarrassment. She had such joyful blue eyes that at times she seemed just like a little girl.

What happened did not do so immediately, but after another blockade, that is, the Germans' attempt to encircle and destroy the detachment. The blockade ended, and we began to notice many things around us again. People usually came out of a blockade as if they had just been through a wasting illness, exhausted but longing incredibly for quiet, sleep, laughter, voices, and the light of day. Day would become day again and the night night; the moon was no longer like a Hare, and human shadows like graves.

It was at that time that we discovered a "commander's woman" living around us.

The Germans had destroyed our previous camp, burned it down. Now we were living in a different tract of forest. We were no longer sleeping in dug-outs but in cabins built of branches and fir tree bark, or just under the trees.

Towards morning you would keep watch in this temporary camp surrounded by the fir trees, bashfully naked and shivering from cold now they had been stripped of their bark. Suddenly, in the cabin farthest from the road you notice a pair of bare feet slip out from under a sheepskin coat and be drawn back again under the coat startled. Kasach's voice could be heard in the cabin, implausibly good-natured, as well as Glasha's laughter, all of a sudden the resonant laughter of a woman.

If Kasach were to leave at that time, he would be followed by looks full of love and jealousy as Glasha and I watched him go. Once our glances met. Kasach rode past me thoughtfully, his horse going at a trot. I watched him go and then looked round at the cabin. Glasha sat there, pulling the sheepskin coat round her knees as she felt the cold. When she lost sight of Kasach in the trees, her eyes accidentally came upon the sentry. I do not know what she read in my glance, but it would seem that it grudgingly allowed her to love the commander. Fear flickered across her face, and she withdrew into the cabin.

Now the "commander's woman" used to get up later than everyone else. But I understood that this was because she was afraid of us, of our little smiles, and our looks. Everything that Kasach possibly did not notice depressed her

doubly as soon as morning came and day broke.

So, our camp would wake up, its occupants coughing, laughing, having a smoke and washing in the yellow water of the swamp looking like cold tea. Some would be gnawing on rusks, some were rubbing flints together or were bringing lighted wood from the kitchen to make a little camp fire to protect themselves from the mosquitoes and some were examining their weapons. Night had come to an end, but day had not yet started. It was the very time to shout to one another loudly across the camp, to have a discussion or a laugh about something or someone.

It seemed as if there was no one at all in the commander's cabin. The "commander's woman" used to appear before us already dressed and with her hair done. She would walk round the side to the barrel of water, and would wash without making a sound as if she were afraid of waking someone up. More often than not, she would be wearing neat boots and a grey German sweater, which did not cover up her skinny neck, but on occasions she would appear in a ridiculous black silk loose-fitting dress on her narrow shoulders. She wanted to look as much an adult as she possibly could in front of us, but she appeared even more unprotected in that long dress. Especially with that flat and unpleasant, somehow alien female whiteness showing through the black silk.

That was our "commander's woman" for you, her eyes cast down, her lips pressed together, her face sleepy and unfriendly. But if someone, someone older and kinder, were to call to her or say hello to her, she would shudder, blush from head to foot startled and joyous, and the hunched up narrow shoulders would move around, struggling with a feeling of awkwardness and embarrassment.

But when Kasach was in camp, she would forget about us and herself as well. She only had eyes for him. Just as a shadow quivers as a ray of the sun catches and overtakes it (gradually becoming lighter and growing in it), so would she blush and brighten up when Kasach was around.

We were getting ready to go on a mission. The general formation of the detachment was in a clearing overgrown with stunted bushes. Everyone else was standing, only we, the drivers, were sitting on the carts. We could see everything as we were so high up. Shardyko, as the detachment commissar, addressed a few words to the men. As long as I can remember, he always walked around with his hand or arm bandaged or a dressing round his head. The bullets seemed to make a special effort to hit that agile little body. Kostya, our chief of staff, once explained why this happened. "You're a smart one, you are, commissar. You want to keep pace with everyone everywhere at once. If you're running through the rain, you will catch all the drops, yours and other people's as well. You're used to making home-to-home rounds on a collective farm, telling people what to do. No, let each person find out what he has to do for himself!"

Kasach listened to the commissar's words, his head hung, buried in thought or simply waiting to give the general order.

Glasha was waiting among the supplies platoon boys and the wounded. I could see how she was waiting for him to look at her. (I even became angry with him at times that she should have had to wait like that, and he, cross about something, did not notice). At last, he raised his head and looked her way. He looked for an indiscreetly long time, his mind on some problem of his own. His eyes shifted to the commissar. But it was already too late. As if summoned, Glasha moved towards the middle of the clearing. And, as if on purpose, she was wearing that same dress, that awkwardly long silk dress.

The whole detachment observed her strange, sleep-walking movement. The commissar stopped speaking and looked at Kasach disapprovingly, Kostya, our chief of staff, gave a laugh after saying something.

My heart stood still as I watched Glasha going towards the centre of the glade without remarking either the sudden silence or Kasach's sullen face behind the grin. But suddenly she noticed it as if she had pricked herself. She stopped, looked round horror-stricken, like someone who has found himself on an ice-floe that has drifted away from the shore. Kasach turned away, and she ran off into the woods.



If there was something about her that I loved at that time, it was precisely the fact that she was so in love with Kasach. It was a reflection of my own feeling for Kasach cast on her.

In my childhood I was in love with the brother of a girl in my class, in a reflection in just the same way. For me he was a living model, a copy of his sister. The eyes were the same, the mouth was the same, you need not be afraid to look, you could look to your heart's content. The little boys tormented the weak-willed, whining son of the teacher who had come from other parts, but I watched over him and protected him. Sensing my incomprehensible dependence on him he, in his turn, tyrannized me and acted capriciously. But this made him even more like his sister and made me even more attached to him. When I was with him, I could mention the name of that girl, unintentionally as it were; I could say it aloud in front of everyone, out loud—this is what it really meant to me, this was the special sweetness of it.

This is apparently how I perceived Glasha at first. It was almost like that. But she did not heed my secret, conspiratorial kindness, my guardianship, she did not notice our triple union. This was the case right up to that very meeting in the glade where the red grasshoppers flew away and sprayed out from under your feet.

Sometimes it seems to me that these sparks, these swiftly moving points on the black screen of my blindness are not little shivers of pain, that they issue from there, from our drilling. I had been to the glade before that, often seeking my Goering there, but I did not notice the red grasshoppers although they were, of course, there the whole summer through.

But summer was already drawing to a close. The damp, warm forest smelt of mushrooms, blueberries, and oily rotten stuff like an old cellar. The woodpecker could be heard tapping on the trees. At first it seems like the firing of a machine-gun far away. You listen hard—no, it is close at hand, the woodpecker is making a real effort. There will not be any fighting today, it will be tomorrow, towards morning. My immediate boss, Sashka, was sitting in camp, greasing his machine-gun. I was in charge of the horses and the cart. Something serious must be going to happen if they were taking the machine-gun carts. I could see the grey back of our trace-horse in the bushes on the other side of the glade. This meant that Goering was somewhere around. I was busy, lathering nuts. There were so many nuts that you could pick them with your eyes closed. You would catch hold of the brunch, crumple up the dryish leaves that pricked your palm until you found the solid, heavy cluster of nuts. The green flesh of the nut left a sour taste and a coolness in your mouth....

At first the hazel-nut grove dragged me into the dark thicket of the forest and then led me out and pushed me out unto the other side of the clearing.

There I heard the weeping of a woman and then a child.

I espied Glasha lying under an oak tree, her narrow back quivering under the black silk, I myself was at a loss, unable to understand where the crying child was. Then the muffled sobbing of a woman turned into the sobs of a child. The woman was lying there on the hard rib-like roots sticking out of the ground under the oak-tree in her long silk dress and choking on infantile tears. Her little boots stood by her head with the puttees hung neatly on them to dry. Her bare legs and feet shuddered angrily in response to mosquito or ant bites.

Greedily and frightened, my eyes scrutinised the whiteness of her woman's skin sharply set off by the black silk. Glasha suddenly sat up, tucked her legs under her, and grabbed her boots.

"Oh, it's you....," she said in such a tone as if it was only Goering breaking out of the bushes.

"I'm looking for my horse," I explained why I was there at all.

How neatly the little boots stood at the side of her, the weeper.

When the war was over, Glasha recalled: "I used to walk right through the camp, talking to people if anyone spoke to me, laughing and guffawing, but I would be going to have a cry. The camp would be behind me, no one could see me, but I would still not have burst into tears; I would be hastening towards my glade, to the oak-tree. I

would run to it, pull off my boots, make myself comfortable, hang my puttees up to dry—now everything was comfortable and nice—and at last, I would give way to my tears, such sweet tears because they had been held back for so long.”

I found the fact that frightened, tearful Glasha looked almost ugly with her swollen lips, lacklustre, furious eyes, very touching. She must surely have become plainer and lacking in vitality specially for me so that it was simpler and easier for me to be with her. Grateful that she was so generous and kind, although she was unattractive (she even sniffed like a boy), I stood there and did not go away, amusing her with my notions regarding the lighting the near day. It must be a big garrison if we were taking the machine gun carts. It was good that we were going to have a shot of strength. There had long been talk of another blockade (they would come in the autumn, to grab the harvest) and our detachment was right in the very salient of the zone controlled by the partisans. We needed to widen that salient and in general we had not seen much action for a while.

“I don’t go on the operations,” said Glasha, without hearing my discourse out, “I’m the lady commander, you see!”

She looked at me as if I had called her that, as much as to say, “All the more fool you are!”

I readily agreed. That went without saying, it was obvious.

“Well, now you can do what you like with your commander. I’m going to have a baby. Even if you all fall apart with malice!”

I looked askance in fright, just as if this were going to happen right now. There was something about me, something about my lanky, flabby figure that meant that Glasha was not shy of me at all.

“That’s the very thing to do,” I said gladly, “You’ve got the right idea. When the war ends, you’ll have...”

I could have said “we’ll have”: I eagerly thought of her as one of us in that imaginary world of mine where Kasach and I were close friends, and Glasha did not interfere with that.

“You’ve got the right idea!” Glasha said, mocking at my enthusiasm. “You’re a right little fool, aren’t you!”

She looked at me in such a way, however, as if begging me to repeat that stupid remark. And I was quick to do so.

“So, you’re going to be a Mum, then!”

It was as if I had dealt a blow at her with that word: she suddenly blushed agonisingly, turned away and got to grips with putting on her boots.

“Yes, of course our commander’s...” I dragged on and tried to help Glasha to continue our conversation. “When the war’s over...”

“Do you think I don’t know that you have a ‘mother-in-law’ in every village?”

And again it was as if someone was rubbing salt into the wound, she even groaned. She stood up and walked across the glade. Somehow I could not put an end to the conversation, I kept dragging it out idiotically in her wake, I just went on talking. Glasha remained silent, almost hostile, and at last I stopped talking.

She was ahead of me, I was about ten paces behind her. We were walking among piles of logs that had collapsed. The warm, sour odour of the rotten stuff tickled the nostrils. Before the war firewood used to be cut and sawn here. Blocks of birch, aspen and hornbeam wood were rotting away, caked and stuck together, covered with a frothy, foam-like fungus.

A thick carpet of dense, young, spreading bushes stretched between the piles of logs. If you were to throw a stone into them, it would bounce back as if it had fallen on rubber. Glasha was taking steps slowly, pensively. The bushes were so dense that you had to balance on one foot while searching for somewhere to put the other foot down, and this pose probably cheered her up. It was just like the ballet posture she had taken up that time with the bucket.

“Look, it’s pink!” she said, referring to the jagged-leaved, spreading bushes. And it was true, they were

completely bespattered with red. It was the woodland grasshoppers hiding in the warmed, dry shade of this green carpet tinged with red. They would shoot out from under our feet like flames from a camp fire, fly through the air and fall on the jagged leaves where they would immediately stay as if lifeless. A grasshopper sat on my palm like a little piece of charcoal smouldering away and coated with grey ashes. Glasha took it from me and put it down on her funny narrow hand. She let it shoot up into the air, and, like a flying spark, it went out amongst the green and pink leaves.

I began to say what I was thinking out loud, that perhaps they were adapting. The war, the conflagrations, look how long that had been going on for, and there was not even any hope that it was going to come to an end.

“Perhaps they only live for a day,” Glasha objected. “What will they remember!”

Then I began to feel sorry for them. What if they were born on a rainy day, then they would only see clouds! They would never know that the sky is sometimes clear and blue as blue can be....

Glasha caught my furtive glance and looked at me mockingly and encouragingly as if I had not thought it but had said something aloud about her eyes. She turned away and began to laugh.

“What a funny boy you are! Especially when you’re on your cart. You’ll make the Germans laugh themselves to death.”

(This is what struck me most about Glasha at that time. She would sometimes be surrounded by lads laughing at one another softly and at her, and she would be like a thin stalk in the wind. Her long arms and the whole of her upright figure would be tearing themselves away from our glances just as girls do, and her huddled shoulders would move as if performing some kind of embarrassment dance. But her blue eyes were surprisingly daring, laughing eyes. They betrayed a joyful awareness of the strength that gathered and held us around her, the power that a woman has over us.

In Glasha there was, nor did she lose it later, the awkwardness of a girl, a feeling of embarrassment when she moved and the audacity in those blue eyes that knew what effect they had).

Almost thirty years have passed since we were in that green and pink glade. But how many times I have returned there in my dreams. The ground suddenly begins to smoulder with the red raindrops of the grasshoppers. Glasha and I look round at a loss as to where to put our feet. Then we run back. Above us, thundering like a train rumbling across a bridge, the wave of fire rolls across the tree tops of the forest, showering us with hot sparks. When you wake up and for a long time you cannot understand where you are and where you have come from as you make efforts to open your eyes....

When you lose your sight, the first terrible thing that happens to you is that you cannot open your eyes. You keen on trying but you cannot. This happens over and over again in your dreams. But at the same time you are tormented by the fact that you cannot close them either. They are forever open to the world! And to your inner self, to your memory.

I followed Glasha step by step, watching the flying, dying sparks shooting out from under her little boot and my stiff boot. I could hear the hard cracking of the leaves underfoot while my own footfall sounded like the light cheerful beat of a sonorous drum. And I knew that the fighting (and perhaps injuries or death) would not catch up with me until the following morning—a whole eternity away.

“Flyora, where did that name come from?” Glasha asked, turning round in such a way that she herself was standing still while her adult’s dress continued to swirl round her legs. She had long, straight legs and she did fine that trick of swirling her dress round them.

I told her what “Flyora” meant (I had read it in a calendar).

“A flower?” Glasha laughed. I laughed as well. Some flower I was with my monkey-like smile stretching from ear to ear, in that baggy German full-dress uniform and baggy trousers which I had exchanged with the scouts for

my coat from home. "Let me have a shot." Glasha was already eyeing my rifle.

"We're not allowed to here," I warned cheerfully, taking the rifle off my shoulder, "Kasach's orders."

That name suddenly sounded unfamiliar, even somewhat taunting, and, just as if I were arguing, I said in a dull voice, "It's only right, too. They'll soon be shooting up the limp."

Glasha was not listening, she left me on my own to face any possible trouble. She was aiming at the bottom of a tree. I swiftly lifted the barrel of the rifle.

"Press it against your shoulder." I took hold of her by the shoulder and elbow to show her how to do it. The silk was so slippery that I seemed to burn myself.

"I'll do it myself."

She moved the rifle like an anti-aircraft gun and at last she fired. She handed me back my rifle and burst out laughing.

"You poor thing, you'll be in the guardroom again."

"They've got to prove it first."

I sat down on a tree stump, pulled out my cleaning rod and fished around for a little bottle of oil in my gas mask bag.

"How did you come to find this glade?" Glasha was walking about in front of me, kicking over the fly-agarics which flared in such bright splashes of colour amidst the grey-green aspen.

"What do you mean? Surely that's not difficult?"

She had probably fled here so many times to have a good cry that she regarded it as her own secret glade.

That evening we left the camp so as to have the garrison surrounded by morning. What garrison we would find out when we got there. Because it was like this, the feeling with which you usually prepared for and went on a mission was doubly intense. A link has already been forged between you and someone there (you do not know where or whom) for you have to kill each other. Because you are aware of this, but he does not yet know it, you imagine what it will be like for him, how he will hear the first shots striking home, how will jump up in fright. For you yourself those first deafening shots are so familiar that they sound like a knock at the door, and you are filled with relief that you are at last coming face to face with the danger. "There it is!" you say to yourself.

When the detachment which had formed up was listening to the commissar, I was perched high on my cart once again at the back of my platoon, watching and waiting for Glasha to go over to Kasach. But he himself rode up on horseback to those who were crowding round the edge of the clearing...

It had gone quiet in our bus. Drowsiness was even overcoming Kostya, our chief of staff. Only my Syarozha kept chattering away, painstakingly telling me what he could see through the window at this moment and what had just gone by. Suddenly he burst out laughing and exclaimed, "Oh, Daddy everything's moving across your dark glasses... Oh, there's hare, a hare! Look, it's in the clover!"

"No-o, it isn't, it's in the buckwheat," the words resound in the sleepy calm.

I was shell-shocked during the fighting at that time. The detachment was launching an offensive on a railway static from the direction of a stream and a meadow overgrown with birch and alder bushes. We had a long time to wait for the sun to rise, hiding in the bed of the stream, to which we had brought our cart down as well. At exactly five o'clock, without firing, we rushed towards the allotments above which the brick water-tower showed up darkly like the tower of a fortress.

Our company commander, Ilya Ilyich, warned us just before the attack, "Keep your sights on the water-tower. I wouldn't mind betting there's someone up there with a machine-gun! You can look after this for me."

He threw up to us on the cart a little book by Nekrasov "Who Can Be Happy In Russia".

We placed the horses so that they were shielded by the low bank, at least leaving them concealed and we

remained face to face with the tower.

Shots had already rung out—the fighting had begun. Floating in the mist that precedes the dawn, the tower suddenly began to spatter flashes, teasing us unmercifully with a little red tongue of fire. Yes, that was a machine-gun, all right! Sashka immediately entered the duel with it. At first the German ignored us, firing on the attackers. Somehow Sashka just could not get the machine-gun in the right position and kept ordering me to move the horses from one side to the other. Our “Lewis”, tall as a bicycle, was fixed on the mounting from a “Maxim”, which was not a very comfortable hybrid as you could neither lie down behind it nor sit behind it unless you crossed your legs. And we did not have anything to shield us.

Finally Sashka found the right position and the “Lewis” spoke through its nose in a bas clef, something like a bulldog. It chewed up its ribbon, turning it into a flat wafer. I handed him another one and helped to fit it into the slot. And then our turn came, but it hit the water behind us just as if stones were raining down. Sashka set “the bulldog” on them again (that is what we called our machine-gun). I was holding another half metre long ribbon of bullets across my palms, rather like a waiter. There was nothing else for me to do except count the little stones dancing on the water around us. Suddenly a red snake appeared in the water, lithe and unhurried, becoming longer and longer. I did not realise straightaway that it was blood. Swiftly (in my mind’s eye) I felt myself all over. There did not appear to be anything wrong with Sashka either. The horses were standing there calmly and indifferently, but Goering kept lowering his muzzle to the water as if trying to catch the red snake with his lips. But it continued to grow long, winding with the current, floating away from us yet unable to tear itself away.

“Hurry up!” shouted Sasha. “Get your skates on or he’ll nail us.”

Now the firing intensified, now it died down, but it was already clear that the nastiest thing had happened: we had not crushed them in a single swoop, and now everything depended on who had more ammunition and time. We had loss of both.

German mortar shells were pounding the allotments. We could see the black peaks of the explosions. You simply wanted to groan at the thought that they were ripping and rending our men apart who were lying low up there. Sashka let loose another stream of bullets into the little black aperture of the tower which was becoming more and more visible with every minute, its dark colour gradually becoming brick red.

Immediately we felt we had got him, we had hit the German.

“Come on, let’s get another one!” cried Sashka, rubbing I his sweaty freckled nose and his short-cropped hair with his sleeve from sheer joy. “I’ll make him pay.”

I put up four fingers. That was how many cartridge belts were left in the boxes.

Clumping through the water, someone was running behind the bushes. It was Kasach’s aide.

“What are you doing here?! The commander ordered you to go over there, on the fringe over there... closer to the forest... on the flank! Come on, get a move on!”

But “our” German came to life again. Showered with little stones, Zhenka fell towards the cart at my feet.

“Did you see that?” Sasha bawled at him. He was ever such a kind man and would get worked up at the slightest thing. He had been with the partisans a long time, joining the detachment along with Kasach. There had been time enough for his nerves to become frayed. He pressed the trigger again. With a rumble, “bull-dog” accurately counted off ten cartridges. It chewed up almost half the cartridge belt.

I showed Zhenka how few cartridges we had left.

“Come on! Kasach’s orders,” he shouted without even looking and ran off. The German released another shower of bullets. We heard them hit the wheel directly below us.

“All right, let’s go, it’s an order,” cried Sashka. We were reloading the machine-gun when Kasach swooped down on us. Yes, it was certainly Kasach.



“What do you think you’re doing? Firing at the skies? You bloody... ”

Never before had I seen that large and at the same time sharp-featured face so close. It looked sharp because of two scar-like furrows running down his cheeks from his eyes to his chin. And what eyes he had. His eyes were particularly striking. They looked furious and yet seemed to be grinning all the same, not a hint of mercy as he looked at me. But at last it was precisely me that his eyes perceived and recognised.

“Come on, up there!”

Neither hearing nor understanding what Kasach and Sashka were shouting to one another and what they were doing, why they were trying to pull the butt of the machine-gun out of each other’s hands, I rushed towards the horses consumed by a burning sensation that what had happened was irretrievable and fully prepared to do some last, terrible thing, which alone could put right what had gone wrong. I dragged the horses on by their muzzles. Goering’s ear had been torn by a bullet (that was where the red snake had come from). Blood was trickling down into his distraught eyes and his foaming nostrils and stained my hands and the green sleeves of my German uniform. When I jerked the cart out of the water onto the bank, I tore it and the machine-gun away from Sashka and Kasach, and they immediately came to their senses. (When I went over it afterwards in my mind, I realised that Kasach had furiously and contemptuously pushed Sashka off and seized the machine-gun himself, but Sashka, swearing like a trooper and almost in tears had refused to give way). In the end, Sashka pushed Kasach away, ran up to the bank and tumbled onto the cart. “Get moving!”

And move I did. For the first hundred metres probably because of the fit of temper and the dreadful bone-shaking we got as we raced across the hummocks in the meadow it seemed as if we were speeding along like lightning. I thrashed the horses with the whip-handle, bouncing up and down in agony on my knees, and Sashka, still holding on to the machine-gun for all he was worth, kept shouting, “Get going, move it!”

When we flew out onto the meadow, the tower rose directly above us, drawing closer to us, all aflame with the red rays of the rising sun. But the forest seemed to be miles away now. Mine and Sashka’s eyes met for we both got the same feeling at the same time; we already knew that we could go on rushing along like that for only a few more seconds. That feeling was quite distinct, as intense as if someone were counting out those seconds aloud. It was as if we could see ourselves from up there on that tall red tower: there we were, in a cart pitifully and defencelessly creeping across the meadow. We could see the German training his machine-gun on us, he would hit us any moment. Something snapped beneath us, the cart became warped, but we still kept rushing on, trampling down those last seconds. Then, just as if they had stumbled the horses dropped with a crash right in front of us, caught by the explosion, and the cart flew on in a semicircle before overturning and hurling us out. (All the time I was flying through the air I was remembering where the heavy machine-gun was and where my head was...)

There were explosions all around us. I was tossed up into the air, torn away from myself and let down into a state of ringing silence. From there I looked out as if through a thick window glass at Sashka, crawling along so slowly, so terribly slowly. I could see what had happened to his leg, but he did not understand as he hastily pushed himself off the ground with that shuddering red stump, shedding blood on the grass. His boot and what was in it were trailing on a long trouser leg far behind. His huge eyes were full of expectation that he would see something any moment. I awkwardly stripped off my German jacket and crawled along that bloodstained path. I caught hold of what remained of the leg, but could not wrap it up in my jacket. It pulled itself out of my hands as I tried to catch it and kept crawling away like a frightened little wild animal. It seemed to me that I could hear the piercing shriek of that little wild animal, creeping along that red path, shivering hurriedly.

Anyone who has been wounded or shell-shocked even once is not the same person as he was before. He already knows what it will be like. Before that he only knew that he was mortal but now he has actually felt it.

I went round the camp, smiling at everyone. I had discovered that it was cheering to be mortal, that there were

masses of advantages to it.

First of all, everyone starts to notice you and becomes fond of you. A wounded person is a highly respected individual among the partisans, noticed by everyone to such an extent that you feel uneasy because you are not used to that and you try to get rid of your bandages and crutches as soon as possible, so as to become like everyone else. (True, sometimes the opposite occurred; someone would enjoy wearing bandages as if they were epaulettes, but here the most awful thing would await him—people would suddenly lose interest in him; he would still like it, but instead he would get distrustful grins and scornful indifference...)

Well, secondly the mortal one was an adult, on a par with everyone else. (Only children were immortal.) Immediately to become closer to them, to the adults—that was worth losing immortality for. You could go there where they all were, where Glasha was....

When they brought me in, deaf, limp owing to the noise in my head and suffering from nausea, Glasha ran over to the cart where I lay. Suddenly I saw her blue eyes against the floating grey sky— she had bent over me. Many carts had already passed, bearing the dead and the wounded, and she appeared, leaning over me and weeping. She had run up to those who had been killed, to the dead and then she spotted the faint, awkward smile of someone who was alive. She was so happy about it that she kissed him, the person who was alive (somewhere near his eyes) and it was not apparently until later that she realised she had kissed me. Such a shocked expression registered on my face which had been inert owing to nausea up till that moment that Glasha started back in her girlish indignation, but she smiled straight away and stroked the spot that she had kissed with her fingers, leaving it to me.

Three days later I was already able to walk about the camp; it was silly to just lie there when you could get so many kind affectionate smiles. I strolled around, gathering them like mushrooms. What I was looking for was Glasha's smile, but she was not there. Glasha was away from the camp for a whole week. I espied Kasach in the distance several times. He did not notice me again. But the shame, ardour and horror at the irretrievable that I had experienced by the stream made me even more attached to this man.

Sashka, who had died from his wounds was buried in the forest by the path. Kasach had stood there, he looked grave and downcast, stooping in an unfamiliar manner. It was not allowed to sound a salute near the camp. Kasach threw down a handful of earth like the others, but he kept his fingers clenched round a lump of soil and I saw him take it right back to the camp with him....

I used to go out into the clearing and sit there for a long time, deaf, lonely, and mortal. I no longer heard the dry patter of the grasshoppers as they rained down and I only watched the noiseless red sparks of them. The scales of things had become imperceptibly intermingled, and here I already seemed to be in the fiery redness of the explosions with a pulsating rumbling recurring in my head. A sense of alarm would come stealing up on me and begin to grow as to what would happen if there was fighting in the camp and I was sitting there deaf and knowing nothing about it. Something may have changed in the world drastically and menacingly and only I knew nothing about it. If anyone had seen how I used to return to the camp, so cautiously with my weapon at the ready, they would have decided that the real war was not enough for the lad, that he wanted to play at it as well.

Once I fell asleep, warmed by the gentle caress of the autumn sunshine, resting comfortably between the high roots, like the arms of an armchair, of a very fat oak-tree. When I opened my eyes, there was Glasha. She was standing there, staring at me. I had already opened my eyes, but those blue eyes did not even waver, her face rigid, almost stern. At last she noticed that I had woken up, said something and sat down by the oak in the next "armchair" formed by the roots. She threw back her head so that the sun fell on her face, and sat stiff, her eyes closed, only the lids and the lashes quivered a tiny bit under the melting tears. Glasha was wearing a German sweater, open at the neck, revealing her neck that had grown even skinnier. She was wearing, as most women partisans did, a skirt on top of blue trousers which were tucked into her boots.

But it was obvious that she was not seeing herself that day, that she was not thinking what she looked like, she could not care less.

She muttered something without opening her eyes. Had she forgotten that I had become deaf and could not hear? Or was it all the same to her whether anyone heard what she was saying? I could not hear, but then I was glad of a chance to talk. About Kasach, of course. How else could I thank her for coming to sit by my side instead of going looking for him and spending time with him?

Naturally, I know more about Kasach than she does. All these stories do not perhaps make such a difference to a woman's love as they do to a boy's. There was the story of how Kasach appeared in the forest along with seven other escaped prisoners of war who were taken to be German spies and sentenced to death. Both Sashka and Kostya were also among those seven. Sashka cursed and wept from anger and resentment. Kostya Chief of Staff kept asking for a smoke (both while they were led to the place of execution and while he was digging his grave), and the rest acted as if they did not believe that what was being done was being done in all seriousness. Suddenly, down in the half dug grave Kasach said loudly, "When I finish you off, don't whimper! All right?"

He had spoken out loudly (everyone had heard him), but no one knew whom he was talking to. (I do not know whether he himself could explain what he had in mind. It was some kind of bitter, suppressed thought altogether and not a reproach or a threat. He could not have known that the fighting was going to start presently, that the Germans would appear two hundred metres away and that he, Kostya and Sashka, would display their mettle to such an extent that a few months later Kasach became commander of the platoon and then the detachment. The only thing that was strange was that they had already been lined up to be shot, but when the Germans fell upon them, they were immediately handed out weapons.)

I kept on talking and talking, and all the time about Kasach and about the fighting with Sashka down by the stream, and in everything I saw Kasach as being right because he showed himself no mercy, he did not spare himself. It seemed to me that Glasha listened to me attentively and approvingly, although she kept her eyes shut. Suddenly she articulated the words, "Be quiet, you little fool!"

I read it on her lips and in the irate look in her eyes.

She stood up and walked across the clearing just as she had the time before. Something must have happened between her and Kasach! I was absolutely stunned by this conjecture. For things had turned out so fortunately, so well balanced. Where was I to go, whom was I to follow if they were no longer together? Without her for me there was something missing from him. And without him this glade and our meetings meant something quite different, something that I was not ready to think about right away. I was so accustomed to being conveniently sure that we used to go there so that Glasha could voice her thoughts about him and I would help her to do it...

The fighting started immediately and was surprisingly close, not even beyond the brook where the embankment of the demolished, unused railway line lay, but on our side, almost in the camp.

We went through the pine woods with their smell of pine needles and summer sand. As Glasha pushed the branches aside, her wrists became pricked all over by the needles, and she licked them eagerly with her funny tongue. Suddenly she stopped and looked at me inquiringly and beseechingly.

"Shots are being fired!" I read on her lips. She waved in the direction of the firing.

"Are there a lot of shots?"

She nodded.

"Submachine-guns?"

"Yes!"

That meant they were very close.

I heard the explosions myself. My whole body somehow seemed to register them. It was probably mortar shells exploding. If they were already throwing grenades, then things must be really bad.

Glasha was listening to the fighting and watching me just as if it depended on me whether what was already going on would be stopped. And precisely at such a time I was deaf as a stone! Being deaf was like being blind, it meant being open to what comes, being clumsy and helpless. It is like being in a cage; you are caught and anyone can come up and look at you. The Germans would not look for long....

Glasha grabbed hold of my elbow with both hands. From her trembling fingers I sensed that they were shooting very close, right next to us in fact. I loaded my rifle and held it at the ready, looking round, but all the while I still remembered and thought about the fact that I was walking *arm in arm* with a girl like in an amusement park and that now they would see it, those same Germans would see it. It would be even worse (and it did seem to me much worse) if our own scoffers were to see us. And what if Kasach were to see us?

Those fingers were tightening on my elbow and trembling at the nearness of the shots and the explosions. In a whisper I ascertained, "Are there machine-guns? There are submachine-guns, aren't there?"

Glasha looked upwards to show me that there were even aircraft as well. This could only mean a blockade and nothing less. Now the main thing was to get back to our own people, not to get cut off and be left alone. Glasha was either leading me or hanging onto me amidst the shooting I did not hear. In my head I had my own noise, an empty, senseless rumbling. We tried to skirt the shooting and the shouts (later Glasha said she heard German voices shouting) in order to get back to camp. We kept moving to the right to avoid the fighting and enter the camp from the other side. But no matter how far we walked, how much we ran, we were not able to leave the fighting behind us. Glasha showed me that it was going on in front of us, to the sides of us and all around us. I was already becoming angry, thinking that she was probably confusing the shots with the echoes. I pulled her fingers off me and indicated that she should walk behind, that she should drop further back. I set out straight for the camp, I looked round. Glasha was shuffling along obediently behind, smiling guiltily and shyly. Involuntarily I smiled back at her, and she immediately approached me like one forgiven. Once again she put her arm round mine. Something had altered between us and had already changed in me. Now I saw myself as someone quite different, and that someone did not stand on ceremony; it was up to him to save Glasha. This was now the main thing and let others be embarrassed and feel shy!

Suddenly the pine tree that we were approaching spluttered with white splinters, mute and terrifying as if exploding from within. Glasha had already fallen to the ground and was pulling me down by the flap of my jacket. The pine-trees were blowing up. Shreds of white like foam were bursting from under the bark. They were explosive bullets, but we could not see where they were firing them from.

(Sashka had talked about them once, but then the froth was red; it was as if I was recalling it as I had seen it myself—those red squashy bursts. It was in 1941. He and Kasach were plodding along as prisoners in the dusty columns when suddenly a hare jumped out onto the road. The German guards excitedly and merrily shot at it and into the column at the same time. Right before Sashka's and Kasach's very eyes, the back of the head of the man walking in front of them burst open, spluttering red froth.)

They were firing from the birch woods a hundred metres from us which showed up white beyond the trunks of the pine trees. I pushed Glasha, indicating that she should crawl away and she looked at me as if I could really change something in the whole world.

Dark patches of people appeared against the white wall of birch tree trunks as if filtering through them. They were coming away from the white wall of trunks and falling, coming unstuck and tumbling to the ground as if hit by a mute machine-gun. Then they were getting up again and stretching out in a line.

Glasha, her head raised slightly, was watching me from the ground with her big, defenceless blue eyes. Her face might be about to explode in a mass of red, too.

The trees kept on spraying out white splinters in the silent terror. I moved my legs right up to Glasha's face, indicating to her with a fierce grimace that she should creep away as fast as possible behind a dead fir tree lying nearby. And all the time I was afraid that that face turned towards me would blow up in a red froth. Suddenly I imagined that only the face, those huge blue eyes were Glasha, and her body, hastily crawling away, was someone who had seized her and was dragging her along and this was the reason for the horror and the beseeching look in those eyes.

The Germans walked by right next to the withered fir tree bare of its needles, behind which we lay. I even saw how the German closest to us in a helmet and spotted water-proof cloak hesitated for a moment when he saw the fallen fir tree, probably thinking that he ought to take a look behind it or fire a burst from his submachine-gun. That was such a tense moment that it seemed to me that even the cartridge in my rifle moved. The narrow young face remained turned in our direction for a little while longer. He did not fire his gun, however, nor did he walk up to the tree....

When they disappeared from sight, we jumped up and ran. It was pointless and even very dangerous to run for we did not know who or what was fifty or a hundred metres ahead of us. But we were overwhelmed by the feeling that had been building up within us throughout those minutes, by a desire to get as far away as possible from the spot where we were now. The danger had ceased to be so imminent, it was no longer breathing into our necks, but was perhaps lurking ahead....

"If you stand still—disaster will catch you up, if you run, you'll run into it yourself," This is what Rubezh liked to say over and over again. Timokh Rubezh was a strange, funny man we met two days later. No one in the bus would remember him for they did not know him, that Rubezh. His path and mine came together for a short space of time, but only mine stretched further on and his came to an end. Probably someone somewhere other than Glasha and myself remember him, for he had a family, but all the same you got the feeling that of the living only Glasha and I knew that he had existed and while we detained him in our memory it was true that he had existed.

It was strange how I perceived the people in the bus at this moment as intermediaries through whom I could communicate, *as if with the living*, with them, with Kostya, with Zuyonak, with Vedmed whom I had known and seen many years ago. It seemed as if Kostya, that noisy, laughing fellow, and Kasach who remained silent all the way, and Staletaw, had all come straight out of that distant past of twenty-five years ago. It is odd when your memories suddenly acquire flesh and blood and real voices. The sighted would have to exert themselves to picture in the present what Kasach, Zuyonak, Staletaw, and Kostya had been like a quarter of a century ago. But I did not have to make any effort, for I could only see them as they had been before. Those who were here today just confirmed that everything had indeed taken place....

Glasha was squatting, resting against a tree. After that lunatic dash pallid and flushed patches began to spread over her cheeks, and her staring eyes mirrored an expression of dark fright. I stood over her, wiping the stinging sweat from my face and looking in all directions at once. Glasha indicated that shots could be heard everywhere, all around us.

There was certainly no chance of us slipping into camp. And there would not be anyone there anyway, if that was what was going on.

"Kasach will wonder where you are," I said.

Glasha pulled down the grey sweater, removed a birch leaf from the toe of her boot and scrutinised it.

"It's autumn already," her lips and those eyes watching me said. I took the yellowed leaf from her which was still soft and fresh, as if she had said something vital, something that was important to us at the moment.

If a blockade had indeed started, all this—the firing and the aircraft—was already occurring there now where my Mum and my little sisters were. It would be a good thing if they had had the sense to leave immediately for the “islands” in the depths of the swamps. The people from our village had hidden there in 1941 and in 1942....

Glasha looked at me and agreed with what I was thinking. My goodness, I was already thinking out loud! I was speaking at the top of my voice without noticing it. I went on as if nothing had happened, “There in my forest I shall ride over the Germans whenever I feel like it. They won’t be able to reach us there. When things quiet down, I’ll deliver you to...” I did not utter the word “Kasach”. Her look prevented me from pronouncing that name. Previously she had assisted me in uttering it, had demanded of me that I say it and here she was for some reason hindering me.

We were walking through the forest once more, and again Glasha pointed out where the firing was heaviest. We turned towards the little swamp, green with the long grass spreading over it. I filled my forage cap with water and, raising it above my head, I caught with my lips the stream of water, salty with sweat. Glasha drank from the palm of her hand.

“You’re hungry,” I guessed. She nodded swiftly and looked at me in a childish manner as if I could pick something from the tree at that very moment and hand it to her. Hell, I had even left my bag back in the camp. It was lucky that I did at least have my rifle and a grenade with me. Glasha had absolutely nothing. Kasach could have given her some kind of carbine, if only for appearances sake. Now we were making for my fellow villagers, and there they would decide that I had simply brought my girl along, my fiancée, and they would wish us all the best. Should the Germans kill us, they would come up and look at us lying there on the ground.

I pulled my elbow out of Glasha’s grasp. To do that I made out I had to return to the clearing in the forest and take a look.

Everyone in the bus was half asleep. Glasha, who had bent over, was fumbling about in her bag and passed Syarozha a bottle with a drink in it. She said to him sternly, “Don’t spill it.”

Now she was looking out of the window. I sensed that she was breathing tensely, and it seemed to me that I caught a glimpse of her blue eyes, just as Kasach behind us probably did, too. Kasach was sitting at the back of us. We were going there to meet up. We were going to an encounter with ourselves.

But you are the one, Flariyan Pyatrovich, who is indebted to the partisan Flyora, that self-assured, angry, deaf man in the baggy, old German clothes, you are obliged to him for making it here, for managing to get through with Glasha. At times I see that Flyora from aside, myself at the age of eighteen. There was certainly nothing of that youth left in me, for he had remained there. Sometimes it seemed to me that Glasha and I were following him, heeding his furious signs, and he, raking through the leaves and the pine needles with his heavy boots, would either disappear among the trees or emerge from behind them with his narrow, skinny back. He still had to think about his mother and his little sisters. With his elbow pressing tightly against it, he would carry his pitiful little rifle permanently blackened by the dampness of the grave, as if that rifle could have defended us all.

...And then we caught sight of people. It was immediately noticeable that they were the inhabitants of a village who had fled into the forest, and that their flight had occurred that very day, perhaps just two hours before. There were no huts built of branches or trenches, no trees obviously used for hanging up clothes and other oddments. People had scattered and then gathered together again, huddling together in a throng, standing stock still and looking in one direction, for over there they were burning their village. The peasants’ cottages themselves were not visible, just the spirals of smoke, differing in heaviness and colour, swirling upwards into the sky from behind a hill, but not yet joining together to form a single wall of fire. At first, as if one, the people turned in our direction, started, ready to rush off again, to run off, but they were immediately relieved by our appearance. Only a woman in a clean white jacket which stood out among the worn old clothes, raced towards us, bewailed something, shouted something angrily, pointing at my rifle with a cast iron pot which she was holding for some reason.

Glasha and I stood still for a moment as if waiting for people to lose interest in us, and then we quietly slipped away, along the edge of the forest. We did not want to lose the edge of the forest now that we had gained it by conquering our fear, we did not want to go into the forest again and wander about blindly. We still had to cross some three kilometres of open fields if we were to get to “my” forest.

We kept to the edge of the forest until dusk and saw ever new columns of smoke billowing upwards in one direction or another, some closer, some further away. Aircraft were swinging backwards and forwards between them as if on giant trapezes. They appeared first from one side, then from the other. There had never been such a blockade in our parts before, with so many aircraft involved!

By evening the sky was completely overclouded. The clouds of smoke curled upwards and twirled around as if held down by a low, black ceiling. Suddenly it rained heavily and then, as if that had been a mistake, it stopped raining, and dry sand came whipping through the air, caught up somewhere by the wind and now being hurled right down out of the clouds.

At first the glow spread along the horizon, hugging the ground, and the reflections leapt up to the heavy belly of the sky. Then the glowing patches began to grow and grow until they finally seized hold of the clouds and hung on them. The lower layers of the sky seemed to become smoother and more solid as it were, while the very depths of the sky became increasingly black and gloomy. Huge shadows collided with one another, knocking each other downwards. Night did not fall, nor was it day. The world became long and narrow, the whole of the horizon like an embrasure lit up from within.

Stumbling and tearing the leafy tops of the potatoes with our feet, we hastened across the field, hurrying towards the distant coal black trees of the forest outlined against the glow.

Then we espied people running against the background of the glow, along the horizon. The distant black figures that looked as if they were burning, flickering in the luminous embrasure, would disappear, while others would appear, only to be swallowed up by the blackness as well.

Other people would run out of the blackness closer to us, driving their long shadows before them as they fled. The ever lengthening shadows had already raced past us while the people themselves were only just approaching. Others further to the left were shooting away out of the rye which, like a fish-pond from which the water is being drained away, seethes from the thrashing fish. People did not notice us until they got right up to us. Their eyes would regard us hesitantly for a moment as if inquiring “Who’s that?” or “Why aren’t they running?” and then they would race past. As you watch them drawing away, you see the eyes again, this time children’s eyes. Pressing themselves against the shoulders of adults, as they flew past us the children kept their little heads turned and their eyes fixed on the glow behind them.

Suddenly something happened on that side of the field to which everyone was fleeing. The darkness was pierced by tracer-bullets, and it became obvious that people were running away from there, probably from another village. When they caught sight of each other, the people came to a halt for a moment, perplexed, and perhaps they shouted out (maybe they had been shouting all the time, but I could not hear it). They began to rush about and then, all together, they raced towards the forest out of which Glasha and I had just come. In the forest, the habitual partisan abode, that we finally reached, we immediately felt freer. The forest admitted us, drew us into itself and led us into its depths, its quivering mottled light flickering over our faces and hands like a dog licking us. We walked for another kilometre and sat down for a rest. Glasha found a tree to lean against and immediately fell asleep, leaving this war and the whole of this world to me alone, for she was tired of it. I sat there, looking at her sleeping face with its capricious expression, as if it were slumbering as a challenge to the world about it, and softly, like a madman, I laughed probably because I was so weary and because of my idiotic deafness.

Since that was the very thing not to do, I also fell into a deep sleep, sleeping unconcernedly (as if giving way to

Glasha's childish inclination), and nothing terrible happened. It was very cheering to wake up and see a world in which everything had remained just as it was.

At the same time as I awoke Glasha raised her head from her own shoulder and opened her eyes, generously adding to the world with their blueness. We looked at each other for a while, open to everything.

Everything in the forest smelt of smoke, the ferns and the pine needles, your sleeves and probably Glasha's short hair chilled by the dew which she was smoothing down with both hands. The smoke made your eyelids sting.

The sun, which had previously been hidden by the trees, suddenly broke through into the forest in a single surge and then the smoke began to twirl as if it was alive in the motionlessly splaying spokes of light.

We walked through a patch of old, wizened coniferous forest, gathering the blueberries which had already dried up and turned sugary in the summer sunshine. We needed to get away from there as quickly as we could, but Glasha's hunger would not let us. Her hunger displayed itself in just the same, childishly capricious manner as her sleep had. Cheerfully, just as if we were feeding a greedy rabbit carrots from our palms, we gave it the sweet, slightly warm berries. I did get a few for myself, but the rabbit was so joyous in its avidity that it was hard not to give the berries to it.

The forest cast a spell on us, bewitching us, as it somehow vanished into thin air and became quite unreal owing to the bluish orange smoke, transparently stretched across the sunbeams.

At a certain moment we looked up from the blueberry bushes and discovered that we were walking through a cemetery, a woodland burial ground among the age-old pines and as old as the forest itself. Time and the woodland mosses had eaten into the three-to-five-metre-tall crosses to such an extent that in the first instant you think dully, "There are crosses growing here!" At the foot of the giant crosses lie smaller crosses like children and even smaller ones like infants, scattered about, having rotted long ago like little shadows of the giants. In some places the broken iron railings around the graves still remained standing. Time had caused them to grow together with the thick trunks of the pines. The iron had penetrated right into the middle of the trunk, and the moss had crept along the cast iron, making it appear part of the forest.

So, this is how they used to bury their dead, with a wrought iron cross on each grave. The crosses were not like the usual ones; perhaps they belonged to the Old Believers or the Catholics.

...Yes, Flariyan Pyatrovich, you might well have been lying there, mown down by a round of machine-gun fire, splattering another's cross and another's grave railing with your blood. And Glasha would have been cut down in that same instance. But that time, too, Flyora saved her. Confident and awkward in his baggy German uniform, carrying his little black rifle, he led her right before the very eyes of the Germans who were lying in wait to ambush the partisans in that very same cemetery.

Now we had changed roles. I was the one who was leading that partisan with his little old rifle, and that is what I keep doing, so to speak. But exactly from what moment in time, from what spot? From the moment when the war ended? Perhaps I replaced him later on? Or, maybe, earlier? Once one of our Soviet tourists played a trick at the museum in Belgrade (when I was able to see, I tried to travel about as much as I could, to take a look at things, secretly suspecting that I was doing it for future use, to have something *in reserve*). It happened that this Soviet tourist took his fellow countrywoman over to a glass case and showed her a white skull. He said it was the skull of Alexander the Great at seventeen years of age.

"But where?..." The woman wished to find out where the skull of the adult Macedonian king was, but then she immediately realised what had been said and burst out laughing with everyone else. But where in fact? Where did we exchange roles, change places, Flyora and I, for example. For I stand completely apart from him. I remember him as if he was someone else, someone who had kept me company, whom I had followed, who had led me out of trouble and had saved me just as he had saved Glasha.



Yes, it needed to have been seen to be believed, how Flyora had dodged and used cunning when he suddenly caught sight of a machine-gun poking through the ramshackle railings, its cyclopean eye trained upon us, and on top of the machine-gun there was a motionless black skull-like helmet! Glasha had not noticed anything. She was walking ahead, fingering the moss-grown tips of the crosses and their velvety bodies with their arms thrown wide above her head in a mute cry. To her great amazement, Flyora suddenly began to wave his arm and shout back in the direction from which we had appeared, "Heh, captain, come here all of you! Look what we've found!"

In a strange voice he stopped Glasha and beckoned to her, "Glasha, wait a minute, I've got something to show you."

He seized Glasha by the shoulder (his hand was shaking, the expression on his face appeared to be one of laughing, but somehow turned to stone). He led her to one side, muttering something senseless, Once again he shouted out, "Heh, you over there, where are you? Come over here!"

They crossed the cutting in the forest, leaving the cemetery behind them. Glasha did not understand what had happened. He neither looked at her nor did he let her shoulder go. It was beginning to hurt her, but he just kept walking faster and faster. Suddenly he cried out, "There were Germans there, you fool, run for it!"

Grabbing her by the arm, he raced into a thick hazel grove.

When they had run a long way from that spot and when she realised what the situation had been there, Glasha started to shiver. Flyora threw his jacket with the aluminum German buttons on it round her shoulders.

Observing his military jacket with its high collar on Glasha, Flyora said, "Mum does not know that I have bartered my coat. The last time I called in at home, she asked me why I had not brought it with me. It had a good collar on it. Let's go back to the farmstead, you know. You're hungry, and I'm hungry, too.

...When we had run away after the cemetery incident, we had noticed a burnt down farm-house or forester's homestead in a clearing in the forest. There might well be potatoes there, even baked ones.

But I suddenly felt that in my deafness I was afraid of the forest. I kept on imagining the black skull of the helmet and the eye of the machine-gun trained on us. The main thing was for Glasha to stay with me, to be by my side.

I said in an angry voice (just in case she started begging me) that I would go alone and she would wait for me in the fir grove. Glasha looked at me beseechingly, not daring to object.

I was already enjoying acting in this way with her, making decisions for both of us, getting angry. When a person is cheerful, especially if his cheerfulness is unbidden and importunate, he always looks as if he is trying to justify himself. Nobody tries to justify himself for being gloomy and sullen. On the contrary, others somehow feel that they are to blame for it. You can get used to that and you like it all your life.

I soon found some food, right there on the road. I had to steal quickly across that road freshly ploughed up and erased by tank tracks. I stepped onto it and right before my very eyes lay a cardboard box. This was such an unexpected sight here in the forest, as if it had come from another world. It even made me jump back behind a tree at first, for I was afraid that it might be something dangerous. But immediately I raced out and grabbed it, as if fearing that my vision would disappear. When I seized the box, it occurred to me that it might well be a trap mine and, when I tore open the carton and bit off a piece of the evenly shaped biscuit, the suspicion did cross my mind that it might be poisoned. The biscuits were very dry, but in my hunger my mouth was watering so much that I was able to eat a second and even a third. I chewed as I was walking along, the faint, vague smell of bread going to my head. I was chewing them, and soothing my conscience with the fact that I had to be sure that they had not been poisoned. I even felt giddy in addition to the usual nausea and noise that accompanied me from the moment when I became shell-shocked.

I got lost and suddenly realised that I was wandering about at random, I could not even cry out to Glasha or

rather I could not hear her voice. I had completely forgotten that I was deaf.

Frightened and confused, I began to run and then I felt quite sure that I would not find her, and I became even more afraid. There had been no necessity to leave her and go there on my own. There was no need to make out that I feared an ambush. It was simply that, *like other people*, I enjoyed being morose and in command. What a fool I had been! What did it matter to me how others behaved! Perhaps Glasha had not meant the same to others as she did to me.

I almost fell upon her. She espied me from a distance and ran across my path, alarmed by the sight of me, racing along, my eyes all white, carrying some kind of box, just like someone who has stolen something and is being chased!

This someone bawled, "Eat your fill, they're not poisoned!"

The light in the forest began to dwindle and collect above the trees. At nights the ground emitted a pungent coniferous aroma. We had walked all day long and now we were settling down to have a long, tranquil sleep. We ate all of the biscuits, which went down well with the sour wood sorrel. Our hunger was only slightly sated, but the very awareness that we had eaten bread that day made us feel better, for bread always raised your hopes!

Glasha was sitting under a dark tree, downtrodden with exhaustion, my German military jacket thrown round her shoulders. It was drizzling and damp. I broke off prickly fir tree branches and put them down by her legs.

The rain clouds were descending lower and lower over the forest, but instead of becoming darker, it became lighter as the nocturnal reflections of the fires slid across the forest. We were almost in my parts now. It was some thirty kilometres to my village.

I had got a pile of fir tree branches, and all I needed to do was to drag them into a thick fir grove. I stood my rifle up next to Glasha and dragged my heavy, prickly burden along blindly, moving the densely growing firs apart with my back, for we needed to get into the grove as far and as deeply as possible, away from everyone and everything. Glasha sat there strangely unconcerned as if she did not see what I was doing, and it already appeared that this was not from fatigue alone.

Everything was ready. I went up to her and took my rifle. Glasha looked up at me and handed me my jacket.

"The rain won't get at us now," I said. As Glasha stared up at me, her eyes lit up and there was something inquiring in them and completely unfamiliar to me. But what was so special about this? It was just the usual thing, we had to get through the night without encountering the Germans and without getting lost, and altogether we were dog tired people. I told Glasha how we would leave in the morning and reach our destination by evening. Glasha regarded me in silence. What else could she do, if I was deaf? Everything was just as it usually was.

She walked over to the dense little fir grove with its brush-like branches wet and glistening and was interested to see what I had put together there.

"Come over here, I've even made a roof," I said, walking backwards as I pushed my way through the prickly wall of firs. Glasha followed in my wake, brushing the fir branches away from her face with her hands. I could see her face and her eyes. All of a sudden, she seemed to have become uncomprehending, unable to grasp what was happening, very surprised by everything as if it was the first time she had been in a forest. She had apparently been deciding how to act while she had been sitting there under my jacket and I had been gathering the fir branches and now she was behaving like this, waiting for everything to be shown and explained to her as if she herself had never thought what was there and what it was like. She had found precisely the way she should behave with Flyora.

There it was, our dwelling with both a roof and a bed all made of fir branches. Glasha stood there, confused as to what to do next. "Crawl in," I said to her.

The palm of my hand hastily informed me that Glasha's hair was wet and warm. Glasha squatted down and crawled into the darkness under the bushy roof. I crept into the prickly darkness as well. Glasha's cold hand touched

my face, indicating where I should put my head. We had enough fir branches to pile them up the sides and cover ourselves as if with a blanket. Lifting the branches and pulling them out from under our backs, we put them onto ourselves and evened them out. Our tingling hands would meet and would show the best way for the fir branches to be placed. We found it even better when I took off my military jacket, covered us with it and then put the wet, prickly branches on top.

In the end, everything was just right. We had a springy shed of fir branches beneath us, a dense, heavy layer of fir branches on top of us, a rifle between us, and our hands pulled the warm jacket up closer to our necks.

Everything in the world seemed mysterious and distinct as if you were looking through binoculars the wrong way round and everything was distanced from you. It seemed as if everything would happen tomorrow, but for the moment there was this alone, only us. The silence was already making me afraid like some sort of incriminating evidence, and I began to talk, to whisper. Naturally, I talked about the detachment, about Kasach. I said that he must be looking for Glasha and wondering where she had disappeared to. So that she could hear me better, Glasha turned over from her back onto her side. Now she was facing me. Now I could feel her breath which was cool for some reason. Or perhaps it was my cheeks that were so flushed? But I did not feel warm at all. I didn't know why, but I was cold. I kept talking faster and faster, as if saying a prayer, whispering that I would hide her on the "island", how we would then find our lot, the detachment. (Glasha checked with her hand to see that my side was covered up and that I was not getting cold). I still kept on mumbling my prayer, talking about Kasach, saying how strict and taciturn he could be, but then when he told you to run off and do something, everyone would gladly run off and do it. And I understood why Glasha was like that, and why I was like that myself. Glasha already had her arm on top of the jacket. I could feel its trusting weight on my neck. Her adult-like simplicity was splendid. She put her arm like that without even thinking about it, but now all I could do was think about the way her arm lay across me and what that meant.

She had wanted to become adult and had done so right before the very eyes of the detachment. I only grew up in dreams, but in dreams I was sure to be frightened by someone at the very last, the most shameful moment, as if someone was amusing himself with me, always deceiving me in the sameway and always managing to do it.

Glasha was quite quiet, her breathing became more shallow, but I kept on whispering, softly uttering my prayer. I was already telling her how it all started, how Kasach and Kostya had organised the escape from captivity by breaking a hole in the floor of the carriage transporting prisoners and how they had all tumbled out between the wheels of the train as it raced across Poland....

Finally, I realised that Glasha was asleep, slumbering cosily, as if she were at home, just as she did in any situation.

Immediately everything had changed. Next to me I had a trusting little ball of human warmth. I turned towards it, no longer needing to be afraid and silently I inhaled it and rejoiced in it. I did not allow myself to sleep, although the whole body was being caught up and drawn into that snowballing sleepiness, and as drowsiness crept over as if sticking to me, I had to shake it off again and again. If we were to get killed the next day what remained of our lives would have been spent in that night. You just close your eyes and the next thing you know, it is morning. No, let every minute last, be prolonged as much as possible, let it be torn up into seconds, into moments. Glasha's arm lay trustfully and sleepily upon me, her little knees were warming themselves against my legs, her breath tickled my lips and made my eyelids tingle as they stuck together, begging to be allowed to sleep. You could even close your eyes, but you must not permit the moments to join up to become minutes and the minutes to form hours and the whole of your body to roll into the single, sweet, dead ball of sleep. You must not allow yourself to sleep, must not permit yourself. You had to restrain yourself, to pull yourself out of it, to drag yourself away from sleep. Where were Mum and my little sisters now, where were they at this moment, what were they thinking about? I just had to see them and

make sure that nothing had happened to them, that they were still alive.

I sank into sleep as if into water. In what seemed just an instant to me I surfaced into the coldness and the dampness, into a dawn ringing with the resonant echo of shooting. It was still dark in our fir grove except for the strings of drops glistening on the needles as if they had their own light, and the trunks of the fir trees, stripped of their bark high up showing up white in the hovering mist like candles that had never been lit or had been blown out. It was even amazing how they had managed to remove the bark almost to the very top.

“Will they find us? Will they catch sight of us?... ”

Glasha’s voice, her hasty whispering betrayed fear and those knowing, brave, smiling eyes looked up at me. She seemed to be telling me that it was she and that for the first time, in truth, it was not in a dream, but they were indeed shooting close by. We, however, were alone and our hands were begging, mingling, permitting, prohibiting, helping. They were both affectionate and rudely clumsy, and funny and strong but bashful. Her eyes were so close that they seemed about to dissolve into a huge patch of blue.

“Don’t look! Can you hear it!... Can you hear shots?”

I closed my eyes and woke up. Once again someone was playing with me, amusing himself with my foolish cowardice. Glasha was wide awake now and had raised herself up slightly, after turning on one side and throwing off the blanket of fir branches heaped on us. She was concentrating on listening. Sleep had left me, but I was still sleepy, and this prevented me from watching her. Now it seemed that I had really woken up. I looked for my rifle which had rolled away under my side and wiped the rain drops from my face, washing it at the same time.

“Shots are being fired,” I said. I had read it in those eyes bent on listening.

There it was, my Beliya Pyaski. I had brought Glasha home to my native village. The village seemed huge because of the sudden emptiness that opened up in it. In disbelief, our gaze was fixed on two or three buildings which had escaped destruction at different corners of the enormous tract of open ground on which the last warm patches of embers were blazing up here and there. My shoulder shuddered under Glasha’s trembling hand, and I thought that she now felt the way I felt when I caught hold of the stump of Sasha’s leg as it crawled away. I walked away from Glasha. It was almost with an aversion for her, for myself, for us who had not come here yesterday or the day before yesterday when we were still needed, when we could have been of service....

I began to descend from the pine-covered hillock to the road which was showing up white across the meadow in the twilight. Taking no notice of my aversion/or us or choosing to ignore it, Glasha walked by my side.

Often, when I was walking on this hillside until darkness fell, I used to look at the village. Just in the same way the lights would blaze up in the different corners of the village, in the windows. Just like that.

The road accepted us quietly as if it had been waiting for me when we went down to it; it showed us the way and ran on ahead. The grown up son of my neighbour Yustin had drowned (it had happened just before the war), and Yustin returned from somewhere a day later, when the coffin was already in his house. He walked along the street, already knowing the misfortune that had befallen him. People, neighbours approached him quietly and walked at his side in silence, just as Glasha was accompanying me. The white road ran ahead, showing you where to go, where your grief lay. But at the same time it did not forget to wind as it had long done, even unnecessarily, past the dried up marshes, past the collective farm barn which had once burned down after being struck by lightning. Just like that winding road, I kept drifting away from my thoughts of my mother, my little sisters, the neighbours, and the village and I kept thinking about something else, something quite different....

My cottage was at the far end of the village, and that was where we were going. The mounds where the cottages had stood were being whipped into flames by the wind, and now the stoves appeared corpulently white; the reflections fell upon Glasha’s face and mine. It was like feeling that someone was looking at you without seeing who was watching you. There seemed to be some sort of age-old womanly quality about these weakened squat

stoves looming white. "And whose is that? It's the Gaishun's lad, Flyora, isn't it? Or whose is it?" As if trying to take a look at or show us, the warm patches in the kitchen gardens suddenly flared up, illuminating the surroundings with bright flames. The deserted courtyards had withdrawn from the street only leaving the little benches where they had been previously and the charred fences and the birch trees with their tops thrown back like heads. (Something white scuttled across the street like a dog, but I could see quite well that it was not a dog, but a pig, and just like a wild one at that.) At one time we had spent the summer evenings under these birch trees. The older people would sit, stand, have a smoke and a chat, taking it easy after the working day, and we, the boys, would race up and down the street, around the kitchen gardens, enjoying the sensation that the adults were in such a calm mood in the evening and that the whole of the human world appeared to be reassured, protected, kind. Even now, somewhere in my being, in the very depths of my memory is recorded the momentary feeling that I noted and registered when I shot up the steps to the loft, hiding from the "blue ones" (we were playing at war) and looked down to see mother and father on the bench under the birch tree. They were sitting like a youth and a girl together (just made for each other, as happy as can be!). It was funny that they should be sitting like that, so touchingly; thinking that no one could see, he kissed her by her ear, and she brushed him off, running her hand over his face. ("Petya, have you gone mad, what will the neighbours think!") I felt good and at the same time a little strange, for it was as if I did not yet exist and there were just the two of them. I sat quietly there and looked upon a world in which I did not exist. I myself did not know why, but I cried out loudly as if I was continuing to play a war game, and in actual fact to remind them about me so that I could appear in this world again. Mum looked round, but father was angry, "What are you squealing for?!"

He was quick-tempered and I loved him and feared him. In general, I always liked stern, unaffectionate people, people just like my father. Even when he went away to fight in Finland, my father did not kiss me. He only squeezed my shoulder and pointed to my mother who was weeping and the twins, with shawls wrapped round them under their armpits like the coachmen used to do, leaning against her legs, "Look after them!"

Now I was approaching that same spot where that had happened, where our house had stood. Here the little flames were no longer flickering across the kitchen gardens, there was only heat quivering round the stoves which meant they had started at this end.... A birch tree towered above me, throwing back its tattered head into the black sky. The gate and part of the fence had survived destruction. The darkened ground around the stoves was giving off light.

Glasha walked softly towards the stove, but I still did not enter the wide open gate. Whose hand had opened it? And what had happened afterwards? Little tongues of flame shot up around Glasha's feet, and she left behind her glowing red footprints. Smouldering embers clung to the toe of her boot, sending out a shower of sparks. Just as her boots had done that time in the clearing. What was I thinking about? My thoughts kept on slipping away from me to one side, ignoring what was most frightening. Resolutely and convincingly, to make myself believe it as well, I told Glasha that everyone had run away, that they were all in the forest. Glasha bent over and was examining something. I tore myself away from the gate and ran over there, scared that I was running. Oh, I know only too well what white coals mean! For an instant, it seemed to me that they were white like burnt bones. No, it was the reflection from the stove, our stove whitened by my mother's hands! And the smell was that of charred potatoes and apples, only of potatoes and apples! They have fled into the forest, tomorrow I would find them, I would see them the next day....

I walked up to the stove and touched it, and it felt surprisingly cold among the warm still dying embers. Just as my boots pressed moisture out of the marshes, here they squeezed heat and light out of the ground. The footprints did not disappear immediately; they smouldered, bursts of flame whipped up by the wind, tongues of blue and red flames racing across them.

Beyond the apple trees the stove belonging to Yustin, our neighbour showed up as a white patch. Something

was hanging on the fence. It began to seem that it was terribly motionless people.

I went back to the gate. Glasha was already there, watching me approach. She sat down on the bench, and I sat next to her. Something womanly and simple seemed to have emerged in Glasha. She laid my head on her knees and pressed hers against my back. Then I lay down properly on the long bench, and it did not seem strange nor did there seem anything shameful about her sitting with my head on her knees, just as a wounded man does not find it strange or embarrassing. From time to time I opened my eyes and saw Glasha with her head thrown back and her face towards the birch tree. I watched the wind fanning the heat across the ashes and driving the blood-red reflections onto the trees, finding and showing up the apples, those reddish-black apples. Inside my head there was a thudding, becoming fainter so that it seemed that the noise was in the kitchen gardens, and then coming back to me. There was a strange hollowness, now filled by me, now drained. That knocking sound, the smell of the burnt apples and baked potatoes enticed me into one and the same dream, which was interrupted and then continued again. I dreamed that it was morning in our cottage and the twins were whispering and letting out muffled yelps on the bed above the stove. In the kitchen I could hear Mum chopping meat on the board, moving the cast iron saucepans, banging about with the frying pan and was very much afraid that she would come in and see me *lying there in the fir grove on the fir tree branches with Glasha*.

I came round with a bright blue colour flooding into my eyes. The cool top of the birch tree was swaying, the yellow half of its crown looking like hair suddenly turned grey. Sparrows in a dark, crowded flock were not flying away, but somehow floating down from the birch tree onto the kitchen garden. I watched them and finally managed to wake up. Below, on the ground, in the kitchen gardens, it was black and frighteningly empty. The stoves were not white as they had been at dusk, but a dirty grey. When I looked at the yellowed boughs and the sparrows I thought I heard the birch rustling and the sparrows twittering. Now everything around me had grown dumb again and there was only my own noise within myself. And that slight feeling of nausea.

I looked around for my rifle. I could not see Glasha. Pushing myself awkwardly upwards from the edge of the bench, I turned over, lifting myself and resting on my arm. Something hot crunched pliantly under my palm, and a terrible blow to my elbow, to the back of my head caused me to jerk up. With my mouth and my tongue I licked off and sucked the acute pain persisting in the palm of my hand, simultaneously swallowing the tasty burnt squashed potato. Startled, Glasha halted by the gate, holding a piece of black tin-plate like a tray on which there were semi-charred potatoes and apples. She put the "tray" down on the grass and guiltily ran over to me, but I pulled my seared palm out of her hands and grabbed hold of the butt of my rifle which was lying on the ground, but it was warm. I pressed my palm against the gun metal, but it did not help, I touched the grass, but it remained warm. I rushed backwards and forwards, looking for something cold but not finding it. With my heel I dug a hole in the ground and thrust my palm into it. The pain was immediately alleviated, drawn away by the soil, but somewhere, deep down, my hand still hurt as if I had been stung by a bee. Glasha fingered the burnt potatoes as if she were to blame. The potatoes that I had not brushed away were still on the bench, and she was telling me something, probably reproaching me and reproaching herself. My hand was beginning to hurt again and, jumping up; I beat out another hole in the ground and pressed my palm into it. The pain went immediately just like water disappearing into sand. What I was doing, acting in a fidgety manner, jumping up and down, kicking the ground, grabbing hold of it, probably looked quite ridiculous, and I was furious that I could not stop myself doing it. Seizing the moment, Glasha took my hand and blew on my reddened, swollen palm. "What are you doing? Are you a gipsy or something?" I pulled my hand away and dug it into the cold black earth once again. There was nothing Glasha could do but smile at me, and I smiled up at her, and we both got on with what we were doing; I sat confined to the ground, and she laid our breakfast out on the bench. She came over to me and took from my sheath a German bayonet dagger and began to scrape the burnt skin from the potato, blowing on her fingers as she did so. She had gathered the potatoes from the

hottest patches, but they were just embers! From time to time as I pulled my hand out of the soil, it did not hurt immediately, but it always started to hurt again, shooting into my elbow, my head, and the back of my neck once more. I transferred my palm to the metal part of my rifle, and that already helped it. Seizing ever new, as yet not warmed parts of the rifle with my scorched palm, I went over to the fire site, to the little stove. The pain was drawn off by the stove with its deep-seated coldness. I held fast to that cold while looking round at all that was left of the cottage: a few large blackened rocks in the corners, an iron bedstead bent in the middle, the frame of a bicycle which had long lacked tires and a bucket that had been flattened. There had been a sewing machine. It was a good thing I could not see it. There had been no need for them to take the bucket or a useless bicycle either, but Mum would have taken the sewing machine, our most valuable asset. Even before the war Mum's sewing had kept and clothed us, and during the war especially.

There were iron pots in the stove. The one closest to us contained the charred remains of food. The one behind it held soup which had almost boiled dry; the pot was still fairly warm, and I carried it in my palms. I was not aware of it hurting me, for I had forgotten about pain. I put Mum's lunch on the bench and pulled a spoon out of my pocket. I tried the bitter soup tasting slightly of smoke and ale a little. I handed the spoon to Glasha and took a peeled potato from her. Glasha tried the soup and gently put down the spoon.

We finished breakfast. Glasha carefully swept the peelings and the cinders off the bench onto the "tray". I carried away the iron pot and put it on the stove. My hand began to hurt again. I walked through our garden, touching the fairly warm trees and searched among the apples for a green one that was not burnt. I bit a piece from it and placed it on my palm. The ground was strewn with black apples. There were so many of them that you had to step on them as if treading on something living. There were the shreds of linen, oddly singed, that had shown up white on the fence at night. The sparks from our cottage and Yustin's had fallen on it. Why had they not taken it with them? Did they not have time? A sense of uneasiness brought me out in a cold sweat.

Glasha was looking at the sky. Yes, they were already flying. A German reconnaissance plane was always overhead when things were going badly for us. The partisans had repeatedly tried to shoot them down, but had not succeeded. They say that they were armoured.

The plane flew away towards the forest where we needed to go as well. When I had to travel by air after the war, all the time I was bothered by the thought that this was how that flying spy had seen the ground, the cottages, us, the people, how that *someone*, that nameless embodiment of evil had seen us. From that height from which everything seems tiny as if in a model, he was precisely the one who could not yet see the ground and the people. It was probably not with malice at all, but with glee that the Messerschmitts chased the refugees as they scuttled away from the road like ants. This is just how they would aim from outer space at the glassy pale blue sphere admired by those first cosmonauts who were happy about being human....

"Listen, Flariyan Pyatrovich, what is happening to you again?"

These were the words with which my former post-graduate, now Candidate of Science and a psychologist, Boris Boky, usually appeared in my flat. I had never seen him. I only know him by his voice, the hand-shake of his slender strong hand, his rapid footsteps and his energetic, noisy movements. For me he was something black, shining, and pointed. He is probably a skinny little black-haired man with a big thin nose. I noticed that people with funny bird-like faces are always given to the use of irony, preferring to mock rather than be mocked.

My Boky's briefcase was always crammed with books and magazines; he would put it down in the hall with such a loud bang as if he had flung it off his shoulder. Immediately he would shout out the news: they had acquitted another camp commandant, they were banging women and children (the families of expelled diplomats) over the heads with portraits of the "great leader", and Lieutenant Calley had been placed under house arrest as a "punishment".

“What’s happening to you again, Flariyan Pyatrovich, in your neck of the woods?”

“In my neck of the woods,” meant right here on our planet. It was not that Boris was taken up with it, but he was “wearing in” (as he used to call it), like a new pair of shoes, an idea, a hypothesis borrowed quite openly from some kind of science fiction novel. From the heights of this hypothesis, we, earthmen, did not exist just by ourselves, but were under some kind of observation by a sort of super civilisation conducting an experiment to decide whether we should be allowed to join them. Or whether to “shut down the experiment”.

Everything that I had once told him as a student and post-graduate, which he had heeded with respect at that time, he was now repeating to me, comparing it with a new and increasingly surprising reality. He was presenting it to me again wrapped in irony. Boky had forgotten that he himself was a teacher now and might very soon find himself acting my part. This somewhat deliberate note was upheld by the fact that more often than not Boris would call on me because Glasha had rung him to ask him if he could accompany me to the institute (when I had to be at the institute at the same time as Glasha had to be at school). It seemed as if Boris would appear to vent his feelings for my benefit regarding his thoughts on us, the earthmen.

“Listen, Flariyan Pyatrovich. A thousand million people are yelling with one voice. A thousand million, you mark! No, no, I’m going to put a stop to the experiment, it’s hopeless.”

“Be patient. It will pass.”

“To start somewhere else? You’re pretending, Flariyan Pyatrovich, that you can be so coldblooded about it! You saw for yourself how something like that can end. Once man has been under the wheel, for the rest of his life he ceases to believe in steering and brakes. But it turns out that you are a psychological exception? Or do you have something to tell us about the disappearance or at least the lessening of the ‘discrepancies’ between technical and moral culture?”

“In the former case, an instinct of self-preservation is sufficient.”

“That has not helped all species of mammals. And then it has still not been proven that mankind experiences that feeling, that it has retained it.”

“Homo sapiens is precisely distinguished by the fact that he can make a rational choice of alternatives. He did not always make use of that ability, but now everything has become so compressed, so accelerated, so bared, that, it has become easier to choose.”

“It has been accelerated! What, with rapid firing missiles, rash ideas? Buttons?”

“But then, something else has emerged,” I countered. “How many generations previously were born, lived, and died—and all in a single formation. It seemed to people that the Neros and the Louises, the tyrants were here forever, that slavery, absolutism, and someone’s despotism would never end. And now within the lifetime of a single person there is enough space for the first, the second and the fourth to come and go. You can grow wiser, both separately and *en masse!* You can have one foot in the crusades and the other in the distant planets. These are not just words, but real feeling—that we have (at least those who had seen the thirties) that we were the living contemporaries not only of those who had lived fifty years ago but of those who will be here in five hundred years’ time. Yes, it always seemed to everyone that their generation was at the very turning point of history. But here there really was a right angle. Surely you must have the feeling that on one plane there were the Neros, the Louises, and the Hitlers, and on the other plane, the harmonious world of Yefremov’s *Andromeda: A Space Age Tale?* And you and we are at the apex of the right angle. And you have both in your field of vision, your own life story and that of your time...”

“I get a different feeling when I read Schiller’s words that when the gods were more humane, man was more divine.”

“When was it that they were more humane then?”



“When they were not darting to and fro in armour-plated limousines, but were sitting on Olympus. People always attributed their own qualities to the gods, imbuing them with their own virtues and vices, but never before did they stuff their own gods with such rottenness, vileness, and baseness as in the twentieth century.”

“Historical progress always preferred to partake of the nectar from the skulls of those killed. Do you remember what Marx wrote about it? This is why we say that that is all prehistory.”

“But what is history? Is it Khatyn or My Lai?”

“Yes, one foot is still there.”

“But aren’t we becoming absorbed in it? Don’t you remember how they frightened Tolstoy by telling him that in this vast country there were a few men who had volunteered to perform the job of an executioner? At first there was one who was taken from Moscow to Kiev and Odessa to put the “hemp ties” round people’s necks. Then a few more volunteers announced themselves, Tolstoy was greatly alarmed. Well, who would be surprised at such news in the middle of the twentieth century? In My Lai it was not even a specially selected team that did the killing, but a normal platoon of ordinary nineteen-year-olds, who had just left their mums and dads. What kind of climate is needed for ordinary people to be capable of that! Doesn’t such acceleration, such concentration, prompt you to anything, Flariyan Pyatrovich?... ”

“Yes, but when was it that they openly rebelled against war? And where? In a warring, in a strong state!”

“When they collapse into fascism, you’d be surprised where your mutineers get to then. No, no, don’t beg me, I’m going to stop the experiment.”

I had never seen him, my constant opponent. I only remember his voice, slipping away into misplaced buffoonery. It was not easy for me to argue with Boky, because all too often I had to argue with my own memory. What Boky could only guess at, *I could see* because I had seen it yesterday....

The reconnaissance plane hovered over the forest where Glasha and I were going, either climbing or descending, spying out houses where people were still living. Perhaps it was already summoning the bombers. It loomed over everything, armour-plated and unhurried. It was as if the eye of a huge insect was looking at you.

A dream stuck in my memory, not the events of the dream themselves, but an unusual, ambiguous feeling. It was as if I were up there in the aeroplane, but I was also down below as well. I could see myself and was afraid of myself. I was chasing a small and unprotected person down below, about in an open field like a table top. Suddenly that furious, frightened little person who is also me rolls over on his back and begins to shoot, firing at the aeroplane. I felt that he had hit me and that I was falling; I was flying right at the person who was firing, now we would come together and strike each other to death and I begged and prayed that either the one who was falling or the one who was firing from below would survive, would escape destruction....

The forest welcomed me with its familiar shady paths and cuttings. First we walked through pines and oaks, then came the firs and the damp alder thicket, and beyond it the marshes with the “islands” where we always hid, where our people would be hiding now. In spite of all that had happened, all those events, the forest was just the same as it had always been. I even wanted to show my companion the hideouts in the woods that Fedka and I had, but I just recalled all those pastimes of childhood with a grin. Where was Fedka Sparrow’s Death now? His father had not let him join the partisans: “Do you want them to come and wipe out the family, have pity on your mother and the little ones!” He had cunningly disarmed Fedka by informing partisans he knew that his son had a whole cache of weapons. They brought pressure to bear on Fedka, and he gave the weapons up. I learned of all this when I called in at home one day before I got shell-shocked. At that time, Mum was very glad to see me, and my little twin sisters were doubly full of enthusiasm and respect as they examined their brother all hung about with weapons. Only

the German uniform distracted them as if there was someone else, a stranger, present in the cottage besides us four. Not in front of Mum, but when she went out into the kitchen, the twins breathed out both at once, "Did you kill him?... That one?..." And they pointed to my uniform. From Mother I found out how Fedka paid his father back. In their garden they had a wild boar weighing about 130 kilos. It was kept in a special pit. Fedka whispered about it to some roaming convivial fellows in exchange for a promise that he would be allowed to join their group. They made off with the boar. To Fedka who was waiting for them by the forest they told: "Be off with you, your father's looking for you. And we've no need for traitors!" Fedka hid in the bushes for two days, while his father walked around on the edge of the forest, shouting at the top of his voice: "Go home, you swine. Go on, you vermin, I won't touch you, although murdering you would be too good for you!"

From Mum's I headed, in full partisan attire, straight for Fedka's, carrying the rifle that he had given me.

"Yet another hero!" the master of the house himself, Fedka's long-armed, stooping Father greeted the one who had led his son astray. "It's a pity you did not get your father's belt!"

Fedka came out of the cottage and walked past us without saying anything.

I followed in his tracks.

He was gloomy, my friend was, sort of drained of enthusiasm, reluctant to talk.

"Well, how's things?" he touched my rifle. "Have you fired it? Or do you spend your time drinking home-brew there? I'm going to get myself a submachine-gun."

He glanced at his cottage where his father was awkwardly dragging a sack of straw up onto the eaves asking someone in a woman-like, peevish, shrill voice, "Where are these heroes then? Where has he run off to already?"

...My hand was still hurting. The burn had caused a thick-skinned deadly white blister to form on my palm. I placed on it everything from which coolness could be squeezed out such as the sticky alder leaves, and the damp moss. We could already feel the marshes underfoot. Glasha and I were plodding on and I was trying to find what was coldest, as though I was to measure the temperature of everything that I came across on the way.

We had left behind the smell of fires, soot, and smoke. Only the baked potatoes in my pockets reminded us of it.

Another smell was already ousting the freshness of the forest, a pungent, heavy odour creeping towards us. That was precisely the odour that we dug up when we were looking for weapons. Involuntarily you wiped the corners of your mouth, but they became unpleasantly sticky again.

But the forest was still just as clean. My eyes did not catch sight of anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly they espied several light coloured, fresh little aspens lashed or cut down by bomb fragments. Below them were black bomb craters which looked as if they were filled with tar. The hollows trailed away across the snaggy ground, towards the "islands". I was almost running now so that Glasha could hardly keep up with me. Uppermost in my mind was that ominous, sticky, familiar smell. Here the marshes were already more rust coloured, with little wart-like tussocks sticking out of them, on which small crooked trees had taken root and were clinging. The mire had been shaken up by the bombs, mud had been thrown about, and brown grass and blackened strings of marsh plants looked as if they had been hung up by someone on the boughs and tops of the little pines and stunted birches that had recoiled in fright. An iron-hard snag had trapped a willow-bush against the water; it had probably fallen from a great height. The round willow bushes like green hay-stacks were to be seen everywhere in the swamps. But there were no corpses to be seen. The smell had become so heavy that even the skin on your face seemed to feel it like a spider's web gently brushing it.

We were already by the first "island" overgrown with dense green alder thickets. (Before the war the villagers used to lay in sedge here for their cows.) All we had to do now was to cross the black strip of sludge out of which the tips of fallen trees and tree stumps stuck like palings. Next to them some kind of little brown islands bulged out of the mire. I did not examine them closely at first, nor did I understand what they were, for they had never been

here before. They all looked strangely alike. Suddenly I saw a big round eye showing up white in the blackness of the swamp and above it a cow's horn. It was only then that I realised what these identical little brown islands were. This was a whole herd of floated cow carcasses floating in the mire. They looked like huge brown and black bubbles. Glasha could not stand it. She crammed her hand over her mouth and ran back, splashing herself with the mud. Because the stench became even more oppressive when you saw those bubbles.

But this was the only way to get to the "islands", and I was not the only person who had tested it. How we would flounder about in that stinking slush! If I had been on my own it would have been all right, but then there was Glasha as well....

Slinging my rifle across my back, I took a pole out of the willow-bush that someone had thrown there for some reason and felt my way towards the glistening bubble, using it like a spear. I had to push them out the way. The bloated carcasses rocked heavily, opposed to being disturbed, but that was all. Glasha observed me from a distance, her eyes revealing her suffering and distress.

And I (just like Fedka at those old graves) cheerfully yelled and sang some kind of senseless words, "And we're here now, we're here now! The dead do not get tooth-ache, tooth-ache!..."

I was no longer paying any attention to the waist-high mud and the muggy stench. I had managed to climb onto the rocking fallen tree, stood up on it and fooled about, showing Glasha how amusing and simple it was. I touched the islet-like carcass with my staff and jumped onto it, but slipped off immediately, my feet apparently not even touching the carcass. I banged my head and ear painfully against my rifle. My legs slipped into a void, and my fingers grabbed eagerly at the revolting slippery fur and skin.

Finally, I felt something firm underfoot. I was already standing, although the mud was up to my chest. Glasha, was looking at me with horror when indicating that I should make for the bank. But immediately, as if summoned, she set out, moving towards me and stretching out her hand. That sometimes happened to her just as it did in the clearing when she went up to Kasach, as if sleepwalking....

I did not move, afraid that I would lose my foothold, that I might startle her or be overcome by fear at last myself. If I were to crawl out on the bank again, no force would make me go back into that stench once more. Glasha kept on raising her arms above the mud in her disgust and wariness. First her boots, then her skirt she wore on top of her trousers became submerged in the slime. The black mire swallowed up Glasha's knees, her taut stomach, the blackness rising up the grey sweater to her frightened breasts. Glasha was squeezing them between her elbows, holding her hands in front of her face, near her mouth. I raced towards her, and just in time, for I caught hold of her hand as she was falling and dragged her out. Without giving her or myself time to come to our senses, I dragged her past the bloated carcasses, seizing dead trees and branches with my free hand mid yelling loudly and desperately: "Wonder yonder, whale-flounder! Wonder yonder, whale-flounder!..."

Not allowing myself to think about anything or to feel anything I pushed forward with senseless and dangerous haste, dragging Glasha to the "island". Her face was screwed up with a grimace of revulsion and horror and all bespattered with mud. Several times we completely lost our foothold, then we flung ourselves sideways as if avoiding a fire, seeing the fear in each other's eyes. We had already come to the sedge so the bank must be near. Only waist-deep in mud now, we could have walked the rest of the way calmly, but we wallowed despairingly as if saving ourselves from a sinking boat and clambered up the bank almost crawling on all fours.

We got out and stood among the sedge near the bushes and collected ourselves just as if someone had dragged us and pulled us and suddenly left us. We stood there pitiful and battered as if we had been licked and sucked by the unclean mouth of a monster. Glasha had tears in her eyes. I set about breaking off some alder branches and tearing the leaves from them to clean us up with, to squeeze the dripping brown slime from Glasha's sweater and wipe her hands. She stood there, weeping, her arms spread wide so as not to touch herself and looking at herself with disgust.

She had always seemed to me to be slender and straight like a ruler with only her high knees breaking the line sharply. But now when her clothing stuck to her shoulders, her bosom, her stomach and her legs, outlining her figure, I could see that her womanly slenderness was not just a straight line after all. Glasha snatched the branches from me angrily, and now I was only breaking them off and bringing fresh ones to her, while wringing the mud out of my own things at the same time.

Suddenly I sensed that there was someone watching us from behind. I was quite right for there was someone standing behind the bush! He had a rifle on his shoulder. There was nothing menacing about his stance, just curiosity in his look. He was waiting to see what the two who had come crawling out of the bog on to the “island” would do next. It is a strange and complicated feeling that you get when you recall the first meeting with a person who later becomes part of your life. You still do not know who or what he will be to you and everything about him still appears to be optional, accidental like the encounter itself, his smile, his gait, his eyes, and his gestures, for instance. Everything in such a person does as it were, live its own life, but that is in the beginning. Why does a person have to have black, Gypsy-like eyes, if the eyebrows and the hair sticking out from under his threadbare winter hat and the thick growth on his unshaven cheeks are all light, flaxen, straw-coloured? Or how out of place that surprisingly long nose seems on which there were two small protuberances (why two?) if that person has such a serene, clever brow, so large and white! What was the reason for such thin, crooked legs, wrapped in puttees, if the whole of the person is well proportioned and strong, and you could see this for yourself in spite of the shapeless grey sweater that he had pitilessly pulled down under a belt with a huge star-shaped buckle on it. At first it all appeared to have come together by chance, did not seem to combine well, and was almost clumsy just like his leather winter hat amongst the succulent greenery.

Yes, at that time when I scrutinised the stranger who was coming towards us from out of the bushes, I did not know what he would come to mean to me, and what awaited us both, what we were to experience. But now when it is all a thing of the past and remains just a memory, I have a jealous feeling that Rubezh could only be like that and that my memory did not need him to be any different. If a person has found a place, *a spot* in your heart for ever, it is not that he just has filled a kind of vacancy that anyone might have occupied instead. He does not take up that gleaming spot of light, but he creates it, and without him it would not exist within you.

My rifle was on my back, so it was like being lied up when the approaching stranger eyed me over calmly. No, I did not think, did not want to believe that he was from the *polizei*, but, all the same, I would have felt better if I had my rifle to hand. For some reason, it seemed awkward to pull it off my back when he was looking at me. It would be cowardly, deliberate, and demonstrative.

The stranger said something, asked Glasha something. She replied and was telling him our story. Both of them were looking at me, the stranger suddenly with concern and what seemed to be embarrassment. Everything was buzzing inside me and I felt weak at the knees. I understood what they were talking about and why the man was looking at me like that.

When you look back on what you have lived through, you only see a single line of events, but when you look ahead into the future there is a cluster of paths splaying out, and you still do not know yet which is the only one of them for you. You live through a month, a day, a minute, and what was a cluster is squeezed up together again, becomes bare like a little branch that has been pulled through a lightly clenched fist. But even after you are left with a single twig stripped of leaves, you will look back again and again, senselessly hoping to return to the moment when everything could still have turned out differently, the moment when that one bare, merciless truth had not yet emerged....

I was already aware of it, had seen the truth— that black tunnel and the entrance into it. But, hoping against hope, I still kept beseeching someone and did not enter it, as if saying “anything but that, please don’t make me face

the darkness in there!" I had already taken refuge in my deafness, which distances me from the whole of the truth, postponed the moment when there was no longer any hope.

The stranger was already walking ahead, indicating that we should follow him. His crooked legs, and feet shod in rawhide sandals tore the thick sedge growing straight out of the water, as they became entangled in it. Glasha scooped up handfuls of water to wash the mud off herself, broke off a branch and wanted to wipe the mud from my uniform which has become rust coloured, but I moved away, frightened by her sudden guilty solicitude, her reluctance to look me in the face. I kept trying not to accept the thoughts that had already entered my head, that I already knew....

We crossed over to the second "island" which was even more densely overgrown with alders, walking along boards immersed in the sludge. (We found out later, that there was a similar pathway to the first "island". The *polizei* and the Germans had drowned the cows when they tried to drive them off the "island". They did not go to the second island where the inhabitants had taken refuge and where the wounded partisans were in hiding, and this saved people.)

Armed with long staffs which our guide pulled out of the bushes and feeling our way with them, we followed the stranger along the invisible, slippery poles under the mud. There were two of them and in places three. You had to put your foot across them so we were not moving straight forwards, but sideways. All that distracted me and helped me to take refuge from myself, to convince myself that nobody knew anything yet, that we would get to the place and then we would find out and not until then!...

They were already awaiting us on the second "island", a crowd of women and children and some partisans with weapons were standing by the bushes, watching us and asking our guide about something from a distance. We climbed off the pathway onto the bank, and they began to ask me questions as well but then realised (or someone told them) that I was deaf, and they left me alone except for the children who began to look at me and study me with even greater interest. They looked just like children usually did in our parts at that time—with mosquito-bitten faces and a hungry look in their big staring eyes. All the same, they were very curious and wanted to understand whom it was that a world in which something dangerous and terrible was happening had flung up on their shore. Our guide said, and the women began to stare at me again, having sought me out once more. They kept on gazing and gazing, probably in just the same way as I had looked at Sashka when he crawled along that red path with an unnaturally long leg dragging behind him, and Sashka could discern from the frightened look in my eyes that something terrifying was happening to him.

I did not see a single familiar face, these were not people from our village, but they were looking at me as if they knew me, as if they had recognised me. Everything in me hummed metallically like a hollow pipe that had been struck, whined within me, in my legs and in my hands which had immediately become heavy, I sat down in the sedge, right there in the water. Glasha squatted down as if she had long expected this, took the wet forage cap off my head and wiped the cold sweat from my face.

I feared the twitching lines around Glasha's mouth which immediately seemed to have aged, I hated the clinging, eager compassion shown by women, and tried to find something else in my surroundings, but even in the children's eyes there was something mercilessly sentencing me to face the truth. With that feeling of hopelessness of someone who has been caught, I sought salvation all the same, taking refuge in the hasty thought that I really was deaf, could not hear anything, and therefore could not be sure about anything anyway. But I found myself encircled by faces and eyes whose expression betrayed how pitilessly sorry they were for me: there was nothing I could do but face the truth. Suddenly a crazy idea came to me and dissolved in me like a relaxing and tranquilising narcotic: *they would not murder* my mother and my little sisters now, *they would never kill* them because they had taken refuge in death. It had concealed them from the murderers, from fresh killers....

I remained hanging by that thread of deception for just an instant. Recoiling from the person in me who was not pitying those who had been slaughtered, burned to death, but pitied himself instead, I, now at my own will, was anxious to encounter the pain. I opened up completely and immediately experienced it in tears. I jumped up, ran further away and lay down in the wiry sedge pressing my face to the ground from which a cold moisture was issuing. But the ground no longer removed the pain; no longer drew it out of me, nor did I relinquish my pain to it. I was actually seeking out that pain now to punish myself for not knowing for such a long time that they no longer existed, for turning my back on the truth. I had not turned up to save them, to take them away from the cruel torture, from death...

People came up to me again and surrounded me, standing over me. I was hovering between merciful oblivion and implacable reality. When I was ill as a child and was in a semi-delirious state I would still remember all the time that my mother was sitting at my bedside. And now I imagined this. The reality and the delirium were like two mirrors, each reflecting the depth of the other, absorbing it and then returning it again as if it was its own. I imagined that I was at home, lying behind our florid screen; unfairly offended by my mother, angry at her, I was crying and imagining how I would grow up and no longer love her, I would not love her. A guilty, kind, affectionately ironical hand touched the back of my head, and stroked my hair. Immediately I forgot my silly, childish malice and grabbed hold of her hand. At this point reality returned.

No, it was not my Mum! But it was not Glasha either, as I had thought straight away. A strange woman sat by me, rocking from side to side, her face dark and swollen and frightening. She was saying something, mumbling away, and I could even hear her voice, but it was not audible to me, I knew that I only thought I could hear.

“Where did you get to, sonny, I already thought that you were not with us any more, that I would not see you. I cried and grieved, I thought they had killed you...”

But I thought I could hear other voices, too.

“Auntie Malanka, Auntie Malanka, here’s a lad from Beliya Pyaski. He’s not yours, is he, Auntie Malanka!”

I was lying there with my face to the ground, but I could still see everything, how the people were standing over me, how they helped the woman with the swollen dark face to get up and led her away. But no, I was hearing it. I could hear!

“Flyora, dear little Flyora,” that was Glasha’s voice. Now she occupied the place where that woman had been, where my Mum had been. And there were other voices, too: “Yustin who is here with us, who got badly burnt, he comes from Beliya Pyaski, too.”

No, it was true, I was really hearing it. But what were they saying about Yustin? Shreds of linen, either his or ours, showed up white on the fence, in the devastated kitchen garden his stove stood next to ours. His son had drowned, and old Yustin walked right through the village, already aware that there was a coffin in his cottage and his son had drowned...

The noise was pulsating in my head just as before, but voices were forcing their way through it and rolling forth; a child was crying and being comforted, and they were talking about Yustin. The effect was just the same as when you covered your ears with the palms of the hands and then opened them. But wait a minute! Yustin? Was he here?

“Where is he? Yustin! He was our neighbour. Where is he?”

I jumped up. I noticed in the look that the children and even Glasha gave me that there was already something frightening about me.

I rushed after the crowd of women and children who were heading for the other edge of the “island”, as if I could still change something, make an amendment somewhere, turn the clock back two days. They took me right across the “island”. It was called an “island”, but in actual fact it was just part of the bog that was slightly drier and

overgrown with sedge and shrubs. I was up to the ankles in water, in the stirred up slime. On the yellowed branches indicating where the families lived, clothing was scattered about and smaller children were sitting and lying there. Their soft crying could be heard, but it was not an attempt to attract attention; they were just moaning because of the damp and the murderous rust-coloured gadflies clinging to their little bodies. There was not even a wisp of smoke to be seen anywhere; the reconnaissance plane probably loomed over the forest constantly.

Something red and blue, something that looked as if it was in slimy wet scales was lying on birch branches under the only big tree on this “island”. Everything went dark before my eyes when the dry wheezing at every sigh and sob came to my ears (or perhaps I imagined it) of the person who was evidently my neighbour Yustin. By him sat an old woman with a branch, moving it as if gently brushing away the air itself, the weight of it, from the burnt man. She did not look up at us.

“Yustin, Yustinko, someone’s come to see you, a lad from your village, your neighbour. Yustinko!”

Several of the women called to the man with burns at once, their voices merging into a common lamentation addressed to Yustin, to me, to this swamp and to the gloomy sky: “Can you hear us Yustin? Someone’s come to see you. They burned his Mum to death, too. They slaughtered all of you, setting fire to you. They shut them in the cattle-shed and set light to it. Isn’t that right, dear Yustin?... You were all their, your grandchildren and your daughter-in-law, and his Mum, all of you. But you crawled out of the fire, you begged them to put an end to you, you ran after them and beseeched them to finish you off because the pain was unbearable. But what did they do, dear Yustin? You ran and begged and prayed that they should kill you. They laughed and laughed, didn’t they, dear Yustin? They laughed and said, “You just go on living, bandit!... Go and breed some more...”

Something dazzling flashed before my eyes and all around it became as white as white can be. The birch trees, the scaly groaning man on the ground, the sedge, the marshes, the people standing near me, and the sky blazed suddenly with an intolerable transparent whiteness which turned immediately to blackness, everything disappearing, myself included. I was in some sort of booth made of reeds. Outside people were walking about, crouching down and busy doing something. I could not seem to grasp whether I was in a delirium or whether everything I had been through was a delirium. But no, everything had taken place and remained just as it was. I was the one whose near ones had all been murdered. Mum, the little ones. I closed my eyes in fright when I heard myself groan.

Outside the voices sounded, husky as if people had sore throats, the voices were angry yet cheerful (I had indeed got my hearing back).

“Heh. Styopka the Conjuror, you could conjure up some bread. What good is your stuffed doll— you won’t get any milk or meat from that!”

“He just can’t get enough playing, now he wants a puppet!”

I was wearing someone else’s shirt of undyed canvas. My own laundered high collared jacket was hanging up on a branch in the cabin to dry right in front of me. My rifle and my belt with the cartridge pouches lay under my elbow; someone had taken my belt off.

Glasha came over, holding a kitbag and stood by the wounded partisans (I was already aware who it was talking and laughing over there); for some reason they had cried out with joy on seeing her. The partisan who walked with a limp, got up from the ground and put a large rag dummy next to him, shouting, “Dear little Glasha, stay with us a while. Haven’t you heard, cripples, how the nightingales are singing away again? We’ve got some fine nightingales, haven’t we, dear little Glasha?”

“Come over here to us, Glasha, don’t listen to that one-legged wretch. He thinks he’s heard nightingales!”

“I hear that from someone who’s got no arm!” the expert on the nightingale’s song replied cheerfully.

As Glasha drew her narrow shoulders together, her laughter rang out just as it used to in our camp.

“Oh, you’ve come round!” After her recent laughter it seemed to me that Glasha only pretended to be glad when

she glanced at my bed of reeds. She sat down, looked at me and called to someone outside. “Katyaryna Alyaxeyawna, he’s opened his eyes, he’s looking round!”

Someone else came to look at me, someone with a big head wrapped in a warm scarf. The head started to cough, shaking off the coughing fit with difficulty, and asked in the voice of someone with a bad cold, “Do you feel better, little lad?”

“Now we’ll give him something to eat,” Glasha said fussily untying the kitbag. Otherwise, we’ve been worried about him.”

For Glasha I was already “he” and “him”. She seemed to have forgotten how to address me directly. But then she had got to know others, they had been teasing her with nightingales!

“What’s this?” I pointed to my clean shirt.

“What of it?” the blue eyes reflected innocent surprise. “It’s all right. I washed yours.”

“All right, go away, I won’t be a minute.”

The trousers I was wearing were also laundered and clean. They had taken them off and put them on again, the devil only knows what they’ve been up to!

In a lying position, I pulled the belt which had become so long round my trousers and tucked my shirt in. My hands and feet felt awkward and limp, my skin felt prickly all over, especially on my back. Something in my hand was getting in my way as if it was struck up; it was the dry scab that had formed over the burn, now dead tissue devoid of any feeling.

“We already thought you had typhus,” said Glasha, fiddling with the kitbag and laying out the food on a piece of cloth.

For some reason my eyes hurt me after that white flash as if something had been sprinkled in them. (By evening, incidentally, they had stopped hurting. Later, when I realised that I was going blind, I told the doctors about that dazzling flash by that groaning, seared man, but they heard out my story politely and somewhat awkwardly and were interested as to whether I had received any physical trauma. Yes, there had been a physical one all right.)

Lunch was awaiting me next to the kitbag; it consisted of a cold baked potato and some apples. Glasha dug something else out of the bag, wrapped up in alder leaves, and smelt it.

“Do you remember the pig, when we were in your village. The one that ran across the street. The day before yesterday the lads went to Beliya Pyaski. Only it’s got no salt on it. We left you a piece, but it got. But it’s not that bad, it’s edible.”

Having taken an apple, I hastened to move as far away from the meat as I could. It made me reel.

The wounded partisans (about ten men under a tarpaulin awning and three who were stronger, outside) made loud comments on my resurrection,

“The main thing is to get on your feet.”

“If there was only something to stand on.”

“You’re going to guard the ‘island’ now, old man, we are not much of fighters now, you see.”

I belatedly said hello to them, and they answered me. Although I was walking on my own legs, and they were lying there or sitting helplessly, they spoke to me as if I was the sickest person there.

One of the partisans was doing something very strange, was making a dummy the height of a man out of rags and sticks, and now on a piece of plywood meant to be the face he was drawing a familiar physiognomy with a small moustache, a gangster’s forelock, and a round bawling mouth.

The partisan in the winter hat, the one who met us on the first “island” and brought us here, stood there leaning his elbow on the barrel of his rifle and chatting both to the clever chap making the dummy and to his creation.

“They just won’t know whether to shoot at you, you raggy scum, or to salute you! Good work, Conjuror, you’ll



give the Germans something to think about. Well, what have you opened your eyes wide for? They've drawn you, and you already want to start yelling. Look, Styapan, he's bawling at you. Make him squint-eyed for that."

Styapan sat there with his crutch under him. He had an amazingly, even unpleasantly handsome thin face. He kept on smiling, and his smile seemed to be reflected in Glasha's face, even when she was not looking at him.

"I've put something like five of these up already," said Styopka the Conjuror, jumping onto his good leg and plucking the "Hitler" on which he had been leaning, off the ground. (Styapan continuously sat down lightly or leapt up although his other leg was in heavy splints).

"They're both one-legged," they shout from under the tarpaulin, "Conjuror and the 'fuhrer' alike!"

"It'll do!" said Styapan, smiling at Glasha. "You should see how the Germans look at them. They are riding along in their vehicles or on their motorcycles and when they see them, they are absolutely flabbergasted. Who could have dared to do such a thing? And they do not know what to do about it. They are afraid to touch it in case it's mined. They cannot knock it down with a hand grenade either because it's the 'fuhrer'. You'll get a good laugh. You'll be shooting them down like quails while they are gaping at it. Have you understood what you've got to do, Rubezh? Then get moving!"

"Yes, I have," replied my guide, "only I'll put some stuffing into him, fill his guts with dynamite. Then he'll yell for me right!"

"Oh, how I'd like to be going with you," Styapan suddenly yearned for action. Glasha immediately looked at him. It was amazing how they always listened to each other. I used to notice everything, even with some kind of extra keen sight. But it was all somehow occurring at a distance from me. There was some kind of strip divorcing me from what had seemed important not so long ago. What I was seeing and noticing, what was happening outside of myself immediately became immersed in an overwhelming feeling of bitterness with which I was completely overcome, and dissolved in that feeling without intensifying it or making it more poignant.

(I particularly recall the eyes of the Conjuror; they were bright and madly cheerful. His face was so beautiful, just like a girl's, that it seemed unreal. He had long black eyelashes. Later on I imagined over and over again how everything happened here in seven to ten days time: how he hopped away on his crutch from where the German machine-guns were rattling away, hurled an unloaded rifle down on the ground, tore a hand grenade off his belt and sat under the tarpaulin, having pulled towards him the kitbag holding the tolite; how the wounded crawled over to him from all sides, as if to a saviour; he laid them down with their heads towards him, urging them to hurry. All of them pressed their faces to the ground and he looked at the world for them for the last time with those crazily cheerful light-coloured eyes of his. The last person to see those eyes was Glasha.)

Thrusting the dummy into the marshy ground and grabbing his crutch off the ground, Styopka the Conjuror proclaimed, "This will be 'Fuhrer' No. 6!"

"In our lot in forty-one," our guide never fell silent (he was quite a talker and it did not matter to him whether anyone was listening or not), "in our as soon as the Germans arrived, first of all they would take away the stocks, but the sunflower seeds (I do not know why there were so many of them in the warehouses in Bobruisk), it wasn't forbidden to nick sunflower seeds or sugar which had got mixed up with sand; some people were standing in a queue to get it and one of ours from Slutsk looked very much like that bloke with the moustache. A German happened to walk by.

He halted and looked! Everybody waited to see what would happen. He stood there staring and thinking and then he gave him a slap round the physiognomy. Was it for daring to look so like the Fuhrer, or was he himself getting even with the Fuhrer? They even said that he was a Pole or a Slovak, but not a German. Well, all right, old chaps, what shall we bring you this time. Just order it as if you were in the little old cafeteria. I've got some stocks tucked away... "

“You’ll soon be choking us with your cold potatoes without salt,” replied Styopka the Conjuror.

And the others joined in, “You’re enough to drive anyone mad.”

“They might have managed to get hold of a bit of bread, but they crawl out somewhere close by and then come back!”

“It’s a good thing that they come back at least. In their place, I would have made off ages ago. But nobody needs you cripples much, so I have to stay here with you, waiting till all’s up with me. That’s right, isn’t it, Rubezh?”

Rubezh (my guide) grinned, not the least embarrassed by such an attack on him. Raking around in the sedge with his crooked thin legs, he came over to me.

“Are you going with us, lad? No, you needn’t today! You take a rest, otherwise you won’t be able even to crawl through the mud. We’ve got plenty of mouths here, you see, and look what big teeth they have, haven’t they?”

The reconnaissance plane flew by high overhead, evenly as if on a string. It was as if it were drawing some kind of invisible lines of its own and that it was not the least concerned with us and the “island”. Once it had flown over, we emerged from the bushes and waved to the women and the wounded once again. They were staying there, and we, four of us, were leaving. We were already separated by the path of sunken poles. Glasha was standing next to Styopka the Conjuror. She had asked to go with us, but the commander of our group (the wounded called him the “commandant” had in his turn made the following request of her: “If you insist, I will allow you to. But someone ought to stay with them. This time all four of us are leaving, going far away into the inferno. We need to have at least some kind of reserves. While we still can.”

Our “commandant” was a Leningrader. They used to refer to that as if it were a personal quality of his. His polite way of addressing everyone, even the teenagers, his shy taciturnity, his willingness to explain at length and in great detail what other commanders would have resolved with a single “yes” or “no” and the very youthful well-proportioned figure of this slightly grey-haired bearded man, all merged for us into the concept of a “Leningrader”, coloured by him and colouring him. In short, we liked the “commandant” and it was therefore to the point that he hailed precisely from that city. Although you had never seen it, just as you had never seen the splendidly mysterious northern lights, you could not imagine either yourself or the world without the remote, unobtrusive existence of that city.

“I wouldn’t take him either,” the “commandant” nodded in my direction. “It is Rubezh’s idea.”

We felt miserable as we walked away as if we already knew what was coming. And then there was that Auntie Khramelikha as well! She brought Gleb Vasilyevich puttees that had been washed and dried, although there had been heavy drizzle all the time over the last few days.

“How did you get them dry, Auntie?” Gleb Vasilyevich was amazed. “We don’t seem to have any fires.”

“It’s a secret,” said the woman. “Enjoy wearing them.”

But a little girl gave auntie’s secret away. “Auntie Khramelikha dried them on herself, under her jacket.”

Our Leningrader blushed. He even took one puttee off his foot as if he did not know what he should do next. Here yet another woman interrupted us and begged, “Don’t leave us all alone here, lads.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Rubezh flustered.

“Your own people are here, too, the wounded,” the woman reminded us all the same.

We crossed the second “island”. There was the spot where Glasha and I had encountered Rubezh at that time. The “commandant” lit up a German cigarette, and each of us in turn drew on it several times. I also took a pull, and my head immediately swam and I felt dizzy. Gleb Vasilyevich cast a glance at Rubezh reproachfully and at me anxiously,

“All the same, we shouldn’t have taken you with us, Gaishun.”

“Never mind, a wolf needs his legs if he is to feed himself,” said Rubezh, “and he needs to feed himself, too.”

I remained silent because I suddenly had a desire to return to the “island”. We pulled the long poles that had been specially hidden out of the bushes and moved along the path. The poles in the marshland slipped away from under our boots and here we were still inhaling mouthfuls of the stench for the cow carcasses were floating right on the top now, even more distended than before. Rubezh was dragging the “führer”, Stepan’s present, as well (“You can barter it with the Jerries for crackers”). Even while shuffling along the slippery sunken fogs this funny long-nosed, skinny-legged Rubezh never stopped talking. He kept on muttering away, talking for himself, and for us, and for the “führer” and even for the bloated cow carcasses.

“Come on, come on, you clowns! This is not like warming yourself near aunties. Drag me along, carry me, you fool! ( This was the “führer’s” voice). Phew! Pooh! Get a good noseful of us stinkers! (Now his deep bass voice was supposed in be coming from the motionless cow carcasses.)

...But the main person whom Rubezh was talking to, it seemed, was fate herself, the lot of the partisans. Rubezh continually chatted to her, either with her or on her behalf, just as if he were talking to a shrew. As a result of his mutterings (and we had already been wandering around the district for two days), it began to seem as if there were more of us in the group, that there was someone else next to us, a fifth one, a stupid, quarrelsome woman from whom you did not know what to expect. That was the partisans’ fate herself.

“I’ll go and bespatter you from above as well, as you haven’t got very wet in the swamp,” Rubezh promised gloatingly in his cantankerous woman’s voice, as he glanced up at the overcast sky. Sure enough, in response to his call, it began to rain down on us. That is what it was like throughout the journey, day and night.

The reconnaissance plane would talk to us, too, “Here I am, buddies. You’ve been missing me, haven’t you? In a minute, in a minute, I’ll just fly over you. Not long now and I’ll be sending you my little fellow planes with lots of little bombs.”

The moon was inopportunistly bright. Suddenly it giggled like a foolish woman. “Oh, how round and light I am! How about me sending you a nightingale? I can, if you like, you know!”

“Now he’s going to caw as well,” Skorokhod, the fourth partisan in our group who looked sickly and pale even under the coating of mud, was becoming infuriated by Rubezh. Right after the first kilometre he limped and tottered, walking bow-legged and swaying from side to side. He was covered in boils, in the most awkward places where it rubbed most. And as if that were not enough, fancy him having such a funny surname as Skorokhod. It was just as if someone was making fun of him! “Well, what did you drag that crank along for?” Skorokhod became angry, as if it were he himself and not Rubezh who had to carry the führer’s dummy.

“I am dragging him, perhaps he is dragging me, after all, and you, too?” Rubezh responded. “If it weren’t for him, you would not be rubbing your boils, you would be sitting in Minsk like a king. What kind of “fledglings” shall we be if I abandon him? What shall we do without our ‘führer’?”

No matter what happened to us on the way; that was supposedly what was to happen for what more could you want from “fledglings”. We had to eat wood sorrel instead of the crackers which we had reckoned. They scared us and we ran. Skorokhod lost his tattered shoe in the mud and was left with just one. There was nothing cheerful about this cheerfulness, just somehow it truly did not seem to matter quite so much what had happened to us and what might happen to us owing to this lack of respect for all those nasty things.

Skorokhod alone used to get exhausted, wet and hungry; and he would become ferocious and frightened—everything in earnest, scorning the buffoonery with which Rubezh had infected both myself and even our “commandant”.

When we stumbled on an ambush for the third time and raced like elk through the charred coniferous forest ringing with bullets and echoes, Skorokhod ran ahead in his one shoe; then he stopped and watched gloatingly,

while he waited for us as if saying, “Well then, are you still having fun?” And, as if out of spite (not Skorokhod, but towards somebody or something in general), the “fledglings” began to choke with laughter, and Rubezh went on to recount in the third person how they had approached the edge of the forest, how they had looked at the well-fed German horses, and Skorokhod was supposed to have howled like a wolf, and how the Germans gave it to the “fledglings”, how they gave them it! And how they bolted “as fast as their legs could carry their arses!” Further, he described how the Germans found the “fuhrer” left by Rubezh, and how the dummy would yell at them for letting Skorokhod and the “fledglings” escape.

I took part in that strange merriment, but an inner horror of myself did not leave me and kept on growing, that that was me. I just could not believe it was me.

We were making our way towards the fires and the shots in the night. Everything all around was transformed by the glows of fires, alarming uncertainty, and what had happened to me. I still could not believe, could not come to agree that I was the one whose mother and little sisters had been killed so frightfully, that it was really me. The fact that the war, the Germans, and death were close by no longer prevented me from *being*. But the I who had lost everyone still did not exist in the world. Nor did the I who was there before exist either. I did everything just as they, Rubezh and Gleb Vasilyevich, did; I would act cheerfully, make fun of the “fledglings” and Skorokhod’s bursts of temper, but there was now something alien, something strange inside me. Others even noticed it. I heard Rubezh saying behind my back, “What an old fool I am to have dragged that boy along with us. It’s painful to look at him.”

Once at the edge of the forest, the road across the meadow lay ahead. In the night the field seemed to be ironed out, lacquered over by the light of the fires and the flares leaping up over the horizon. Suddenly strings of tracer-bullets would tear out of the darkness, out to find and get us. To begin with, they rush along, noiseless, it is only later that you hear the “ta-ta-ta”, like a metal chain being dragged along, being jerked.

When you are standing in the middle of the field your shadow becomes long and multi-layered: the glow of the fires, the moonlight and the flares eagerly pick it out, arrest it and cast even more shadows of you, doubling, tripling and lengthening your presence. Exhausted and famished, we were wandering about, either stepping on our shadows which were as long as the road, or bearing them along at the side of us or dragging them behind us. We were already tired of throwing ourselves to the ground, of racing back and forth every time a flare went up. Our shadows were doing all that for us. When a flare soared up, your shadow behaved like a frightened dog fussing round your legs, squeezing it up against you as tightly as it could. When the flare descended and melted into the darkness, your shadow would shoot out, taking your head and shoulders somewhere into the field. The shadows from the glow of the fires and the moonlight would stir and move around, creeping towards one another, and then once again they would leave you straight away in a cowardly manner as soon as a flare went up nearby.

Finally, we managed to reach the thickly growing corn: Gleb Vasilyevich had kept a straight course towards it right from the edge of the forest. Beyond the corn was the road that we had to slip across. We had sunk our shadows in the sparse, trampled corn and were roaming about as if in deep yellow water. The moon was shining down on us, large and round.

“Just you look here,” Rubezh whispered, “how everything grows during the war. And how many self-seeded cereals there are instead of those planted by people. Everything is growing as if it is in a rage. It is just as if the plants are saying. “If you don’t know how to live, then we will! You don’t know how to do it as you should, then we will!”

“You must be Spinoza, Rubezh,” said Gleb Vasilyevich. He was listening intently to the rattling of the machine-guns, estimating where we should make the spurt across the road.

“They kill a person and the forest immediately grows a couple of inches higher,” Rubezh mumbled to the back of our necks.

“If they get you,” Skorokhod could not restrain himself, “it will go up a whole foot.”

As soon as we stopped for a moment, Skorokhod started to swaddle his unshod right foot in a puttee and bandage it round. He just could not make up his mind to throw away the other shoe.

We were listening to the distant tapping of the machine-guns and the incomprehensible silence of the road bathed in the white moonlight, and next to it a whispering, a muttering and the strange eyes of Rubezh who appeared to be entreating. “Stop me, please, look what’s happening to me, not with me but to me.” I suddenly thought and apparently understood that this person, Rubezh was miserably afraid, he was almost sick with fear. It would have come out in a different way in someone else, but in Rubezh it took the form of constant chatter, either earnest or jocular, with which he stifled his fear. He was not teasing death itself at all as Skorokhod thought, but quite the contrary. It was terror in the face of his own fear, that fear that depressed him and drained him of his strength; it was this very terror that tormented him and made him be like he was; all the time he was preparing himself, making himself ready to reach a pale that he could always see and that he could not manage to forget as others did.

“Now we’ll fish you out of this corn,” mumbled Rubezh, “Where are you, my lovelies?”

And true enough a flare made a cracking sound, close by this time. It soared upwards, described an arc and fell about one hundred metres away from us. We hid in the corn, some squatting, some kneeling, bathed in yellow light as if in an aquarium. The flares cracked one after the other, flying upwards and hanging in the air with a trail of fiery droplets behind them, as if they were looking round to see where they should fall, and immediately dived swiftly downwards.

We could have run away but it was pointless to do so. The Germans were somewhere in the vicinity: we had to get closer to them without them guessing that we were there. We wanted to enrich ourselves at their expense with something more nourishing than potatoes and wood sorrel. That was why we had to stay there at the ready and wait for the right moment. All we had to do now was to make out what kind of Germans there were here and where they had what. True, we had reckoned on going further, but if there were Germans posted on this road, waiting in ambush, it meant that transports, herds, would soon be stretching along it. Gleb Vasilyevich was listening attentively, weighing things and kept fingering his goatee as if getting used to it.

“I don’t like the look of things.” said Skorokhod. He suddenly started unwrapping his puttee and threw it away. He took off his one and only shoe and angrily cast that aside, too. He was getting ready for something.

Yes, it would not be very cozy in the corn when the night came to an end, the night that linked us with the distant forest like a dark corridor. Daylight would cut us off from the forest for a long time, and without the forest we would feel distinctly uncomfortable. We did at least need some little clump of woodland. How could we carry anything off, steal anything across an open field. Here we would have to be careful to keep our own.

When we were still walking through the corn, something loomed black to the right, a patch of bushes it seemed. Our thoughts and our eyes now turned to them. So, we crept quietly towards them in single file. The dew-soaked corn had chilled our knees, and my raincoat (a present from the “island”) was sodden with water and felt like it were made of tin-plate. The flares had gone out. They no longer soared upwards and had sunk to earth, and the glow of distant fires was no longer over the horizon, and the night was turning grey, retreating before the breaking dawn. The corn came to an end, and there were the bushes, disappearing behind a hillock. Without looking, Gleb Vasilyevich set out, indicating with a shove of the arm to those standing closest, and we crawled, Rubezh and I. The flaps of the stiff tarpaulin raincoat caught under my knees and got in my way. It seemed as if the tarpaulin was making such a loud rustling noise that could be heard for miles around.

We were already close to the clumps of birch saplings when a flare crackled and lit up right above our heads. Immediately a machine-gun rattled like a landslide, quite close to us. Something had happened, a live, familiar sound overwhelmed me, and even made my hand shudder. Something had occurred, I could feel it in my hand, but I

did not understand what. With a hiccupping sound, bullets were boring into the hummock, into the ground round my head, next to my very shoulder; out of the corner of my eye I could see the fiery needle of tracer-bullets spearheaded at us, disappearing and reappearing as if trying to sting us....

The machine-gun fell silent as suddenly as it had started firing. But the flares kept on going up one after the other. We could clearly see the Leningrader and Skorokhod lying on the grassy meadow closer to the corn than to our bushes. Aha, so that was what sent a shudder down my arm like something alive; they had hit the butt of my rifle and smashed it. Rubezh and I crawled deeper into the bushes from where we could see how Skorokhod was beginning to stir, lifting himself up and looking in our direction. The Leningrader lay motionless. Then Skorokhod crept towards the corn, jerking the Leningrader who was either wounded or dead, towards him. That was how what had been until a minute before our group, was broken up. What good were we now and what were we going to do? It is strange but the more tense the state in which a person weighs something up and makes a decision as to what he should do and how, the more aloof he becomes, observing with the incomprehensible curiosity of an outsider and even sort of apathetically to see what the person would do next. It is almost as if you are waiting for yourself, as if you have not yet come on the scene.

“That’s it!” Rubezh whispered. “They can’t get across here now.”

The flares were no longer going up, the Germans had calmed down, but the night with its concealing darkness, did not return, and dawn had broken completely. We looked around, appraising our new position. Now we were no longer what we had been ten minutes previous, and we were seeing things in quite a different light, just as you do after a sudden short dream. There was neither forest nor even woodland here, a clump of little birch trees and that was all. We were in the middle of a bare, open field.

“Now you’ll have to wait and see what fate has in store for you,” Rubezh muttered.

And, in truth, there was a sensation that the wisps of dawn mist were taking us further and further away from those who were left in the corn and closer to the road where the enemy lay in hiding. We could already see the gravel road, a yellowish grey strip running across the green of the meadow.

Time passed. Time was passing on the road, too; everything was happening and was changing there, but we could only watch and wait.

We knew that in just the same way over there in the corn Skorokhod was keeping an eye on the road and on our little clump of birches, trying to guess what we were going to do. If we were to make a joint decision, we would have to crawl back to the corn and we dearly wanted to do that; that concealing strip of corn was drawing us like a magnet. But crawling now would mean letting the Germans know we were there once and for all. We still did not know whether it was an accident that the machine-gun close by had blindly strafed us or they had noticed us and were now keeping track of us and waiting....

It was not until morning came that we saw how awkward our situation was regarding the road, for everything here was visible, within firing range right up to the forest itself. Now we would have to wait for nightfall, and so much could happen in the long day. We did have a tremendous aversion for “open spaces” which we had developed over the time we had fought as partisans.

In order to overcome our sapping anguish and nausea, Rubezh and I began to have breakfast. In the bags we had with us for the German canned foods and crackers, there was a dozen battered potatoes, and we chewed away at them. I kept trying to see whether I could use my rifle without the butt. The Leningrader’s ten-loader was over there in the corn but that was out of reach. Thirsty, we looked round senselessly hoping there might be something to drink, but for the moment we do not say a word about water, we can last out for there are far more agonizing things in wait for us!

“Look,” Rubezh whispered.

A German had stood up from behind a yellow mound of earth covered with birch branches probably broken from our bushes. He looked about him and walked out onto the gravel road. It was strange to suddenly see the person who had been shooting at you. Wearing a green waterproof cloak and without his helmet, he moved his arras round in circles. Screwing up his eyes, he cheerfully glanced in our direction. The sun was rising behind us. But the Germans had not guessed we were there, for they would not have been wandering around on the road like that. The German said something. In the morning air the unexpected sound of his voice rang out loudly. The sun was casting a pink light on the soft, wavy outline of the young birches and the gravel road beneath the German's feet. This light fell on the soldier's face and hands, and a taunting rainbow shone from his hands to the ground. The soldier wheezed and strained, and from the dugout they responded with laughter. He bent down and probably took the tinkling mess-tins from someone's hands. Shuffling his feet, he walked along the gravel road and was concealed by the corn.

"You keep watch," Rubezh said in his place, "and I'll have a good snack meanwhile."

In the sun rays the wall of corn had sort of lit up from within, becoming light orange. There where the forage cap of our Leningrader lay, several completely red, broken ears of corn were rocking back and forth. It did not strike you immediately that it was blood. Was he still alive? The red ears of corn swayed gently and heavily back and forth. The grasshoppers had already busily set about their chirring. One of them, a green one, sprang with a click off the broken butt of my rifle and landed on my sleeve.

The Germans probably had their kitchen-trailer over there. The sound of voices and laughter carried to us, and a machine roared. (Any kind of sound we heard seemed very sudden.) Two motorcycles raced past, rattling along with machine-guns mounted on the side-cars. The time flew by as if it were rushing into a precipice. On the road that was. But in our bushes it seemed to stand still amidst the sultry chirring of the grasshoppers. This swift passing of time there and its standing still where we were made things drag by, wearing you out and you wanted to do something: rash, say, jump up and run across the road before the Germans' very eyes. In order to pull myself out of this state, I started to fiddle about with my rifle: cutting it off with a dagger, I took off the strap at one end of which the severed rifle butt was dangling, and tried to see how I would fire it if need be. That instant had not yet come, had not drawn close, it was somewhere up ahead, but that moment would definitely occur.

"Well, where is he then?" Rubezh muttered impatiently. "With that breakfast."

Rubezh's face with its long nose was frighteningly serious. I wished he would stop that muttering. I was already starting to be infuriated by him, just as Skorokhod was not long ago.

My tarpaulin raincoat was beginning to dry, and light patches appeared on it as it did so. It became stifling in it as if I were in a plastic bag, I needed to take it off. I could put it back on again in the evening, but it was no good in the daytime. You could not run in it, nor did we need to run here for there was nowhere to run to. I pulled a grenade out of my pocket and placed it in front of me: there it lay, a round black German grenade with a light blue pin. They had turned it and packed it full of explosives so that a German soldier could throw it at me, hurled it at my feet. But it did not occur to them that it would be a friend to me, for me a last terrible salvation. All I had to do was to flick back that little bluish pin, pull it out, and press the small black ball to the ground with my own body. German grenades took a long time to explode, perhaps as much as six or seven seconds. Its explosion was neither powerful nor far-reaching, just very loud. After three or four seconds you could still roll far enough away from it or sling it somewhere. That kind of a grenade was dangerous, in doing such a thing. There was too much time to change your mind before it exploded. A whole six seconds you would be hovering on the very brink, and that terrifying moment might destroy your resolve to die.

Even if what was ahead of you was more terrifying than death.

It is believed that people are so little worried about their natural end, about death because they somehow learn not to think about it and do not know when it will happen. But on that unbearably long day I felt something quite

different: I lay there, my arms and legs relaxed, conscious how dry the soil smelled, listening to the chirring of the grasshoppers, greedily chewing the last little potato and thinking about the remote happiness of being able to have a swallow of water; yes, I could do all that. I listened to Rubezh's mumbling, became angry or grinned, in a word, I lived as people generally live, but precisely because I could choose to die, and death would shelter me from something even more terrible. Yes, to my good fortune, I was mortal. Although I understood full well about the torture and torment that awaited partisans who fell into the hands of the Nazis alive, it was not that that I imagined to be the most fearful, more dreadful than death. At the moment of taking that ultimate decision, to blow yourself up, the future cruelty of the enemy must not seem quite so close, but hours, even days of captivity away, a whole eternity of life, while the grenade, death was right there. This is the reason why it is not the torture and the torment (which will occur only later) that is more frightening than death, but the aversion to, the unendurable and acute loathing of that first instant when you are standing or lying before them, and they are looking at you. It is not fear but rather aversion towards that alien and complete power over your pain, your life that directs the hand clenched around what is for you the last grenade. Once you have managed to get across that dividing line, that moment when you first have to go against your own will, a person may not even remember experiencing such a feeling later on. But, thank goodness, it does exist, it suddenly becomes part of a person who has to choose his own death, and a person is probably never freer than in those very instants.

Nowadays they write a great deal about and make a real effort to prolong human life. Unicellulars do not die at all, so why must a group of cells necessarily be doomed to aging and dying? It would, of course, be a good thing if we multicellulars could live forever. Only what would we do about life imprisonment then? For people still are imprisoned for life in certain countries. In some places it is being abolished, in others brought back. Or what about the death sentence, that would have to be thought about, too. The long-liver would have to sacrifice innumerable decades or even centuries of life for his striving for freedom and justice and for his and other people's happiness. How much of a Prometheus would he be to decide to risk not twenty but two hundred years of his life? But, in any case, people have had no practice regarding this.

Even today it is true that a person who is ready to meet death is genuinely free. It is not a question of longevity but of whether they would be freer if they were almost immortal? Would they really? In any case, the world being what it is, does it not amount to bondage, this wish to go on living forever?

It may well be so, and yet... if we take seventeen-year-olds avidly claimed by any war, what they sacrifice is nothing short of immortality! For when you are seventeen or twenty your life seems an eternity to you. That is your practice with immortality for you, and age-long at that.

In any case, that Flyora who was lying on the grenade seems somewhat nicer to me than that Flariyan Pyatrovich who later came to take his place, who clings so fervently to his life of blindness, to his painful love, all too reminiscent of a blind man's stick. Look how he had seized hold of Glasha (with his hearing, with his whole being), of Kasach, puzzlingly quiet behind him, and of Seriozha who with his very being, his presence ought to protect him from something, from Kasach....

Flyora lay there on that black German grenade with its bluish head, touching its smooth coldness either with his chin or his cheek, waiting while the happenings on the road (the vehicles were already moving) would suddenly come to a head, and with a frightened and exultantly malicious howl, would swiftly close in on him. That would happen as soon as the Germans found out that Flyora was there, that he could be killed. How they would fluster and rejoice that they could do that! He found it hard to believe that for them, he, Flyora, was so important. But immediately he imagined it all quite differently, that he had stood up, revealed himself, was walking where he liked, while the vehicles just continued on their way, for it was not someone dangerous, but just he, Flyora. He lay there on the black grenade, as if he were spanning a precipice and he knew that the very instant that they started to come



rapidly in his direction, he would slip down into it. He even felt curiosity as he watched the road. Rubezh was muttering something, whispering, recounting the conversations as he imagined them, of those on the gravel road, and of those hidden in the corn, and even of the corn itself ("I have strewn my grains of corn around to the joy of the mice!..."), but Flyora is not listening to him. He is watching his own killers.

The vehicles and armoured cars had passed by, roaring and giving off clouds of smoke. Now large covered wagons like those used by Gypsies and ordinary peasants' carts followed them. Riding on them and walking by them were Germans and Vlasov army men in green, and the polizei in black or simply in civilian clothes. They all had an injured look upon their faces.

Flyora and I saw that close up, our eyes fixed intently upon it, and registered in those days that executioners and killers always bear an injured expression on their faces and in their eyes. They were offended at those they had already killed, at those they were killing and at those they were to kill. The physiognomies of the Germans who followed the carts with Alsatian dogs on leads bore an especially injured look; they were not walking along the road, but along the road side, through the grass, only a stone's throw from the bushes where Flyora was hidden. They were driving along a crowd of people huddled into a hot, dusty lump, peasant men half undressed and women and children barefooted. The Alsations suddenly started to tear towards the bushes, towards Flyora, towards the corn, straining at their short leads; the guards in loose green and black spotted raincoats jerked them back angrily, they urged them on towards the road, towards the crowd. First one guard, then another would rush at the people, making them jostle against one another (growls, children's screams), but when they walked back (even closer to the bushes), the look of injury on those narrow, full, round, thin, pockmarked faces, with spectacles and without them, became even more noticeable, taking on that hue of rage. They walked past, dragging and leading away the Alsations that were rushing towards the bushes. This made it seem to us as if the road with the people on it, the side of the road, and the meadow across which the Germans were walking and running with their Alsations were all listing, about to slip down, to pour down, to collapse on our heads. It was as if we were in some agonizing state of expectation, by now almost willing it to happen....

And then something did indeed happen. Two or three people from that dusty crowd raced towards the corn. Oh, how aggrievedly the Alsations yelped, how exultantly. Some of them tore towards the corn, pulling their handlers along and being pulled by them, and others sped towards the people who remained on the road. Rubezh and I exchanged glances, "That's it, we are finished!"

There were a few bursts of firing followed by shouts and barking. The Germans had let the Alsations off their leads and were now afraid they might hit them. Anyway, where could the fugitives manage to go from this patch of corn in the midst of an open field? Two Germans had run up from the direction of the bushes. Tense like huntsmen, we watched their green clothed backs dotted with sweat. The corn was absolutely seething with the barking and growling of dogs, and their heavy uneven panting. Suddenly a regular rattle resounded, five shots from a rifle. Was that our Leningrader's ten-shooter? Immediately there was a squeal just like that of a mongrel. They had probably wounded an Alsatian.

Everything became absolutely still for an instant. The first to come to their senses and race back towards the road were the two Germans who had run up too far from our direction. But those who were by the road, and there were many of them, rushed headlong towards the corn. And everything was drowned in the frightened firing and shouts.

...When you have previously seen dead people alive, you notice that the world does not immediately accept the deceased: everything all around has to get used to his presence. Then when an hour has passed and even half a day, and the corpses are still there lying in front of you, they gradually become part of that same hostile and troubled world in which Rubezh and I were caught. The traffic was moving on the road, the Germans and the dogs were

walking along and those who had spent the night in the dug-out were running around with saucepans. Only Rubezh and I kept as still as the dead. The Germans had taken Gleb Vasilievich and Skorokhod away like an unexpected, pleasing gift, a trophy, and before that they clustered together by them for a long time. The men and, it seemed, one woman from the column, who had been killed, were thrown by the roadside. We could see them for they had been right before our eyes for two hours now.

A person had been killed, a person had ceased to exist, and then there appeared that something lying on the grass. Possibly, you yourself would be killed before the sunset, and again something would appear in the world and, just as you were doing now, someone else would be looking at it and getting used to it.

Rubezh lapsed into a strange kind of drowsiness. He only managed to say, "Keep an eye out for the moment, all right?" and fell asleep with his face pressed against the ground. His shabby leather hat had rolled off to one side, and his tangled flaxen hair had intertwined with the grass. I watched him anxiously. There is something dead about the pose of someone who is asleep, especially when he is so completely overcome by slumber. It already seems as if he had been lying there too long and everything all around was starting to get used to it. Which of us two would see the other like that? Who would be the first to appear before the eyes of the other? I kept recalling a film I had seen before the war where people were walking up and looking at clean, untrodden snow; they waited, and suddenly a person began to transpire, to emerge in it, an invisible man killed by English policemen.

I was ready to wake Rubezh up. I did not want to see him in that stance. I feared it as though it were the ultimate solitude in the world.

Vehicles were moving along the road again, but when a tank came to a halt by the trench, I gave Rubezh a shove. It was amazing how glad I was when I saw his face come to life, that long-nosed face overgrown with fair stubble.

"Have they been here long? Why didn't you wake me before?"

He whispered loudly and just as if he could have prevented something from happening, had he been awakened earlier. A person always wakes up in a world slightly different from the one he left when he fell asleep. When times are good, he is only too eager to catch up where he left off, but when times are bad, he is overwhelmed by the anxiety of not knowing where the danger has shifted to.

"How did I manage to fall asleep?"

He was wide awake once he had caught sight of the road and the dead.

"What happens if they do us in, too, old chap? Back on the 'island' they will say that we ran away.

"Yes, there was the 'island' and Glasha.

"That will be really bad for them," Rubezh weighed it up.

They were waiting for us there, marking time itself: the past was when we left, and the future would be when we returned. That was surely the only place on earth where they were waiting for us, for me, and what a must it is apparently that a person should have someone waiting for him. Formerly, when Mum and my little sisters were still alive, I never thought about that, just as a person may not think about the sun for a long time, for it will always be there, even if it is forgotten behind the clouds.

Now only Glasha and the "island" was there to remember you, were in need of you and not somebody else.

When a flare plummets down, the ground does, as it were, rise up a little to meet it. Everything that can be seen in the light of the flare cascading down, stretches upwards as if on tiptoe, for some reason peering to see where it had fallen. You also pull yourself away from the ground, lift up your head and stretch in that direction.

Yesterday Rubezh and I spent a long time crawling away from such flares, from that accursed gravel road where

we had lost the Leningrader and Skorokhod, where we had left those murdered peasants whom we do not know. First we moved over into the corn and dragged ourselves stealthily along the corn downtrodden by the fugitives, the Alsations and the Germans. Then we stood up and walked. When we stood on those legs that felt like cotton wool after lying down for so long, the world immediately moved apart and we walked away across the field towards the forest, propped up by our own short shadows, and they joyfully, faithfully confirmed that we were there, that we existed. But two days later the flares were making us flatten ourselves against the ground once more, but this time we were not moving away from them, but crawling towards them. For nothing had changed, and we did at least have to get something with which to return to the starving "island". We had not yet come across anything worthwhile, True, we had espied a cow in the forest, but we could not take it. We did not know what we would find in the village we were creeping to. But we had to do something, give it a try if only like this, crawling along in the furrows of a field of unharvested potatoes, in the direction of a polizei garrison.

"Well, how do you like this after auntie's milk?" Rubezh, who lay two furrows away from me, was trying to cheer himself and me up.

With this remark he probably was referring to that very same cow, imagining perhaps how we would take it back to the "island" on a string, instead of slithering now right into the furnace.

Oh, how the "fledglings" rejoiced, when they, quite to their surprise, caught sight of a cow in a forest glade, half a tonne of meat on its own legs and even with a string lassoed by its horns. It was so amazing that the "fledglings" even sat down on the grass to admire it and probably to convince themselves that they were not dreaming. The cow had most likely run away from the Germans. Rubezh shook the tobacco dust out of the pocket in his breeches, but he did not have any paper. He pulled himself carefully across the grass in search of a dried leaf. He had to have an oak leaf. As he crawled along, he feasted his eyes on the fat sides of our little old brown cow. He set about striking fire. While he was getting himself a light and smoking, he even managed to tell a story.

"There was a family back in our town of Slutsk. There was that fledgling Timokh and he had a house full of girls, a little family similar to my own. My family is in Slutsk now, unless they have taken the older girls to Germany. Anything may have happened. After they took me away in a cart in the spring of 1942, at the time when Slovak troops were fighting against the partisans, and after I found myself with the partisans in that same cart, I have never been anywhere near Slutsk since. I have kept out of harm's way. My little lady knows where I am, and it is better for the children if she has not told them. God forbid that they should let slip that Timokh Rubezh is with the partisans! They are living at home and let them live there while they can. Aha, I was telling you about the "Fledglings", that was the nickname given to that family. They weren't a very bright lot, and people used to say of them in the town that they were like "lard without bread". But what kind of lard was there? It would have been all right if there had at least been bread. No matter what you say there are families for whom poverty and misery is like a scab from which they cannot rid themselves. An amazing thing happened. The Fledglings bought a cow from a gipsy. But if only they had not been the fledglings! Every time they wanted a drop of milk they would pick up a mug and stick it under the row, everyone in turn, just as if it was water coming out of a tap. This was fine for a week or two. They kept milking the poor cow a drop at a time until the supply dried up."

Rubezh had already smoked the cigarette he had rolled in an oak leaf and he set about cutting birch-bark to make a little mug. I dare say the fledglings had given him the idea!

It was then that we saw the woman. She was standing behind the hazelnut bushes, watching these strangers who were crawling round her cow; we realised immediately that the cow was hers.

"Good day to you!" Rubezh greeted her, even pleased to see her,

"Oh, what a fright I got!" the woman walked towards the cow to touch it. "I was looking to see who it was. Then I saw it was partisans, our own people."

She said it as if reminding us. The woman was wearing a long dark skirt, and a jersey, her hair was unkempt, and her feet were bare.

"I'd only just got her out of the pit and let her out to graze, gone a step away and strangers come along!" The woman could still not calm down.

"Where are you yourself from, Ma?" Rubezh asked, continuing to work on the little cup he was making out of birch-bark.

"From the village, we live in the village, that is, lived. When they began to burn everything all around, they came down on us one morning. I looked out of the window and, my God, the courtyard was full of Germans. They entered the cottage and one of them, a local interpreter, asked, "Which village are you from, Uboinoeye or Bobrovichi?" That scoundrel knew it all. At one time the hamlets and smaller settlements had been joined up to form villages; only our farmstead had somehow remained on its own. So, that was why he was asking us whether we belonged to Uboinoeye or Bobrovichi. I guessed immediately that they had come to burn down Bobrovichi or Uboinoeye and slaughter the people. That was why they were interrogating us to find out where we belonged. I looked at him and I looked at my children. I do not know why but I did not want to say we were from Uboinoeye. Perhaps it was because they had killed a lot of people from there in the previous war, and my grandfather told me that when the French came we burned as well. What was I to say, how was I to reply? "Are you from Uboinoeye?" asked the translator. I looked at him. Was he hinting I should say that or trying to catch me, oh Lord? You did not know what to do, for he just stood there grinning, a man with a moustache. "We're from Bobrovichi," I said softly. How my arms and legs went limp. That man with the moustache went on standing there and kept on grinning. "Well, all right..." I heard him tell the Germans something about Uboinoeye, not Bobrovichi, but Uboinoeye. I wanted to do what was best, but I myself had stepped right into the fire. But he had told the Germans "Uboinoeye!" So, he was human after all! Because they were going to kill the villagers of Bobrovichi. I grabbed the children and the little old cow and went straight into the forest. They set light to Bobrovichi and slaughtered everyone there, and in the evening they did the same to Uboinoeye as well. They flew past our farmstead once more and burned it down. There is a family from Uboinoeye here with me, a woman..."

A pit like those soldiers make for their vehicles and guns with a smooth slope into it had been dug in a thick fir grove.

This was where the woman was hiding her cow and now she drove it in there as if showing us that this was her place and not anywhere else. Two girls came clambering out of the pit when they heard our voices, one was dressed in a long men's jacket with the sleeves rolled up and the second was barely clothed in a tattered dress. With them they had a chubby, plump little boy.

"Why is it you've left the yellow sand for all to see?" Rubezh reproached them. "Now then, you little ones, go and look for some moss. One can spot your hide-out from a mile away."

"Oh dear, how right you are!" the woman started in her usual manner. "We tried to cover up the sand, but you can see what kind of workers I've got here."

The two little girls ran off to pull up some moss and, in order to take a better look at us, the plump podgy little boy leaned against the woman's leg.

"This is the little son of the woman from Uboinoeye.

Where's your Mum, Pavlik? They've got their own pit over there."

The woman from Uboinoeye had already emerged from the hushes.

"Don't be afraid to come out, these are partisans," said the owner of the cow.

"What's going on, lads, what's going to happen?" the skinny, freckled woman began speaking immediately. She and the freckled little girl who was walking behind her looked very much alike, only the girl had a very serious,

even stern look on her face, while the woman's face bore a strange kind of smile.

"What happened to you?" Rubezh asked.

"What happened? They just slaughtered us and that's it. They went from cottage to cottage, murdering everyone," the woman said that somehow in such a matter-of-fact manner. "Go into the cottage! Lie down!" And you get shot.

"Why did you stay there then? Surely you must have known what they were doing".

"Some did run away, we fled, you see. Some were afraid to. The Germans told the village elder they had appointed to tell us they would not touch Uboinoe, and that they were razing Bobrovichi to the ground because many of the young men there had joined the partisans. The elder told them people from our village had not become partisans. They said that if they found anyone in the forest they would shoot them. True enough, at first they ordered the men to bring axes and spades and repair the road. Those peasants who did not hide, who came forward, they gathered together and began to drive them to the open space on the edge of the village. Then, with their hands up, they were made to run round and round on the sand, on the sand at that! Those who lagged behind were beaten. We saw what they were doing to our menfolk through the window. The purpose of that was to tire people out, for they knew men would surely offer resistance. This was to make it easier to drive them into the barn. They herded them in and then began to go round the cottages. They switched on some music outside, loud, loud music, and they were ambling around, and shots could be heard. I said to the womenfolk, "You know what they're doing, they're murdering people." We, about ten families, got together in one cottage, so that it was not so frightening. They're going to kill us,' I said. We looked out of the window. They were not shooting at or doing anything to the people in the street, just indicating that they should go into the cottages. We watched three or four Germans going into one cottage and as many entering the cottage opposite. They killed the people there and came out, adjusting their submachine-guns, and then went to the cottages closer to ours. They walked up to the gate, looked at us, and we stared at them through the window and wept and wept. I don't know what, but they had forgotten something, remembered it, and went back for it. I grabbed hold of the children and rushed out into the kitchen-garden. Music was blaring out all over the village. Lazy, chubby little Pavlik came over to the woman who was recounting her story, and now leaned against her leg. We hid behind the well in the kitchen garden. I threw potato leaves and goosefoot over the children and tried to cover them with sand, but from the street the Germans were coming increasingly close to the well. They would drink the cold water, A-ah!' That means it was good. They washed their hands, splashed one another and laughed. But my hair was standing on end. The Germans did not hear when he (she stroked Pavlik's head) and she (she glanced at the little girl with her fixed stare) whispered to me, 'Mum, Mum, we'll run away, we'll run away, Mum, they won't kill us!' They had noticed that I was ready to die. Where was there to go from here? But they kept saying, 'They shan't kill us, they shan't.'"

The expression on the woman's face conveyed nothing of what she was recounting. (But all of it was reflected in the staring eyes of the little girl standing next to her.) It was as if the woman did not believe what had happened, as if she were asking us what she had seen, smiling guiltily and awkwardly. All the time she kept looking round to see where her children were, whether they were here.

"Well, we crawled to the collective farm barns, but they were already on fire, and German bullets kept whistling through the air, whistling and whistling. It was our menfolk they were shooting and burning there. We could hear people shouting and howling, oh my God! How they whined and cried and yelped! We slipped away between the burning walls, among the sheds, accompanied by the patter of bullets on the walls. I covered the children with my own body, raking the sand up onto my legs which were being terribly scorched as we were so close to the fire. My hair was crackling and shriveling up. All the same, Pavlik kept saying, 'Mum, they shan't kill us.' How would we manage not to get killed if we were already getting burnt, and we could not escape for a German was standing in our

way. I could see him through the smoke. I could not endure it, I kneeled, got up, so he would kill me and get it over and done with. We did not want to be burned alive? The children were already beginning to whine because of the fire was scorching them. The German brushed the smoke away, bent down and disappeared. We crawled and ran out of the fire, away from the smoke...”

The smile on the woman’s skinny freckled face looked ridiculous and strange, but it did not seem crazy to us. It was simply that it was no longer strictly defined when a person should weep and when he should smile. It still seems as if people do not believe that it has happened to them, that such a thing could take place, that it is true and that they are asking us whether it is true or not.

How fearful it is when a person smiles.

...The barking of dogs faded away in the distance at one end of the street and then the other. It was a big village. The flares soared upwards and then everything started moving; long shadows like huge levers were turning the sheds, cottages, and trees they were attached to. A round of machine-gun fire would immediately follow in its wake like the creaking of a dry wooden pulley. The tracer-bullets cut a jerky fiery path away into the field behind our backs. This recurred at regular intervals as if some kind of mechanism was triggering it off. This meant that there were Germans here. The polizei did not operate so methodically. In the day time we had seen army vehicles standing in the village. My raincoat became hard like a shell or a coat of mail because of the dew and the dampness. As I lay there, I freed myself of my piece of tarpaulin and did up my belt with the cartridge pouches over my German military jacket, and I left my raincoat by a wild pear-tree in a potato field. For some reason I kept looking round at it as if at some third and very cunning person among us. Rubezh was crawling along a furrow and kept looking round as well just as if that third person was luring him back. A pungent smell of burning rose from the cold ashes in the night air. It appeared that the village in which we were preparing to acquire something to eat was not as safe and sound as it had seemed to us when we had studied it from the forest in the day time. At that time Rubezh had drawn such a fine picture of how we would load our waiting empty bags with lard and sausage from the polizei’s wooden barrels and would arrive at the “island” with them and how we would be welcomed by boys squealing with delight and Styapan the Conjuror dancing on his crutch.

The closer a person gets to danger, the more, after a certain point in time, he throws caution to the winds. It already seemed that the irreparable had happened anyway, that you had been too awkward, and it already seemed somehow immaterial what the outcome would be, so long as it would happen as soon as possible. The deeper we crept into the polizei village, trying, however, to keep away from the buildings jutting out into the field (there were sure to be sentries posted, there or an ambush!), the clearer it became that we were wittingly doing something pointless and dangerous. The first step we made in the village would arouse the whole garrison. True, the dogs barked at the flares and at the rounds of machine-gun fire. But what a howl they would set up when they smelt us.

You crawl through fragrant beds of dill, come up against the hard, cold pumpkin heads, but you get the sensation that you are not pulling yourself stealthily along, but stretching out across the entire field, like a spring with one end attached far back there where the raincoat was left. And you do not know whether you will continue forward in the next instant, or recoil back to where you’ve started. With every passing metre the spring becomes tighter and pulls you backwards ever more strongly. You cling to the soft soil, digging in your elbows and your knees, and every metre of the way it seems as if you have left something behind just as you left the raincoat; in crawling out of it, you shed it like a skin. You are already creeping across the whole of the field. Already the most unfamiliar, the strangest thing is that you continue to drag yourself forward, to move furtively towards the walls and windows of the cottage. How will he act, what will he do in the next instant, that person holding a heavy grenade warmed through in his hand and a shortened, buttless rifle trailing along behind him?

The inside door in the entrance hall banged!... The iron bolts rattled and the outside door opened wide with a

sonorous creak. For the moment all these sounds drowned one another. With surprising agility Rubezh ran over to the corner of the shed and stood there. I quickly crawled over to the hoarded fence and kept quite still.

We heard a man, evidently a smoker, coughing in the courtyard. He spat vehemently and headed for the shed, the white of his undershirt appearing distinctly above me.

“You there, uncle, just come over here.”

Surely Rubezh had not uttered those words? It was Kasach who spoke in such a sharp, ironic tone.

“Who is it, who’s that? Who’s there!”

“Quiet, come over here!... Who are you? Are you from the potizei?”

“And you? Boys...”

“All right. Is the shed locked?”

“I don’t know... What is it you want to do, boys? There are Germans here. They’ve been here for two days now.”

“We know. You’ll lead us out of the village now, together with the cow. Are you with us, uncle? And no tricks! If you show us how to get out, you can run back.”

“Right away, lads, I’ll do it right away. If needs must!”

“I like people with an intelligent attitude. Flyora, come over here. Where’s that belt? Be a bit quieter. Show us the way, uncle. All your doors creak. You must oil the hinges. How is it that the Germans didn’t shoot the dogs? That’s gross negligence. And you’ve got white on you, and the cow. What can we cover you up with?”

“I’ll get something in the cottage...”

“A rifle? You can do that with my neighbour. His nickname is Fledgling. Have you remembered that? Here’s a sack, put it over your shirt.” We were returning to the “island”. We had a splendid cow, large, black and white and with a huge udder. There would be meat and there was already milk for the asking. We almost had to carry it out of the village, the owner holding it by the horns and we holding it under its sides. We hurried away through the kitchen gardens as quietly as we could, and then we ran, pressing ourselves against those sonorous sides going pit-a-pat and giving them a shove. We stopped by the forest, out of breath. To celebrate, Rubezh had asked the elderly fellow for a cigarette and he had been very upset that he did not have any with him. He flapped his arms up and down like a cockerel, feeling for some in the pockets of his black breeches. But here he withdrew his palms as if he had touched something hot for the trousers were obviously polizei issue, and his boots were strong, army ones.

“It’s a good job we got through!” said the elderly fellow. “I did wonder when the flares went up!”

“Well, be off while it’s still dark,” said Rubezh good-naturedly.

“Aha, I will be so they don’t guess what I’ve been up to.”

“Go on then.”

“We don’t have the polizei, but self-defence. It’s two days since the Germans arrived, they are housed in the school.”

“Go on then.”

“It’s a pity I hadn’t got any cigarettes on me.”

“Next time.”

“I’ll be off. I can still get some shut eye.”

“Yes, you do that.”

We ran on, this time to get away from that elderly man. (Those trousers of his did look too “polizei-like”. For all we knew he might raise the alarm and bring his mates in pursuit.)

But we felt cheerful, either because we let him go ourselves, and now we were running to save ourselves (“That is what you “fledglings” are supposed to do...”), and perhaps because we were at last returning to the “island” and

not with empty hands either.

But soon our goading and shoves in the cow's soft sides ceased to have any effect and the cow ambled along, its distended sides swaying heavily, and then it stopped walking altogether. It regarded us with its kindly, perplexed eyes as if saying, "There's my udder, there's the milk, what more do you, "fledglings" need from me?" We were tired as well and sat there in a relaxed attitude, the backs of our necks propped up against the pine-trees, listening in them to the humming, restless quietness of dawn. After fumbling about in his clothes, Rubezh pulled out the flattened little birch-bark mug. On bent legs as if he did not have the strength to straighten his knees, he danced up to the cow's udder instead of walking up to it. The cow even mooed at him as if he were its mistress. Rubezh skillfully stroked the cow's swollen udder, wet his palm and washed the cow's nipples, and rubbed his palm dry on his knee. He set about milking the cow into the little birch-bark cup. I could not help laughing for it was just like his story about the Fledgling family.

"That's how my girls ran back and forth with a little mug," said Rubezh. "I've got six of them."

"Your girls? But you were telling me about a neighbour, weren't you!"

"About a neighbour? Perhaps I was. Everyone is a neighbour to someone. Aren't there very many "fledglings" in the world then?"

Here it crossed my mind that Rubezh had been just the same at home, that at that time he had learned to take any failure, constant misfortunes with sombre laughter at himself. And, I dare say, you often had to be cheerful with a family like that.

Reaching with his lips out of the white stubble, Rubezh tried the milk in the little cup.

"We'll get drunk on this. It's a fine drop of liquid that is! Even the 'fledglings' have been lucky!"

We took it in turns to gulp down the warm, foaming milk, smelling of morning and childhood, and true enough, our voices, our words, and our laughter became louder and louder and got more and more out of control as if we were drunk.

"Where's our little old uncle now?" Rubezh suddenly re-remembered. "He had good box-calf boots. But the trousers were from the polizei all the same."

He looked down at what he was shod in, his rawhide sandals and cloth puttees encrusted in mud.

"But perhaps he's looking for us, wants to exchange his for mine. All right, let's get going, for it's true—we've been celebrating before we should."

We rested again while we waited for night to fall. The most difficult part lay ahead. What would be lying in wait for us in the six kilometres of open fields we could only guess at, but there was not much hope that it would be something good. Once again Rubezh was taken with unrestrained muttering. That was a bad sign. Untying the cow which had been thoroughly milked and had a good graze on the succulent grass of the forest, from the tree, this time he was distressed for the cow, expressing its feelings, "It would have been better if I had stayed here as an aurochs. I've got to run around in the forest all the same. Then I would at least be an aurochs!"

We tried to rub and smear mud on the splendid white patches on the cow's sides.

"You can be seen day and night," Rubezh reproached it.

Night was gradually seeping out of the forest onto its edge and beyond it into the field, from the horizon it was creeping towards the sky, erasing all the patches of daylight that remained. But new spots appeared, those of fires spilling into the dark, damp sky in numerous layers like a rainbow, like kerosene on water. Where there were no fires, where it had burnt out yesterday and the day before yesterday, the sky was black as soot with the last sparks of stars on it.

The alarming emptiness of the field sucked us towards it like a pipe; we could not help beginning to hurry and had already started to run. Rubezh beat the cow with a switch. With a belt round my elbow I kept its head up so that



its mouth was held as far away as possible from the rape and self-seeded corn. It kept thinking that we had already arrived and it could get busy on the grass. I was carrying my undersize rifle by the barrel. You could fire from it without its butt by holding it against your abdomen as the Germans did with their submachine-guns, but perhaps I would not need to use it. We only had this field to cross.

The field had neither been ploughed nor sown for several years now, but the old furrows were still there, dangerous to the cow. Its legs were now dearer to us than our own. We had already been walking for about an hour, keeping increasingly to the left, but the glow of the fires was also creeping leftwards, right across our path, flowing over the fringe of the horizon onto our field. This was making us more and more anxious, for it was precisely there that there was a low ledge of forest that we were trying to reach. The tops of the fir trees could already be distinguished against the troubled sky. The closer we drew to the forest, the quicker we tried to walk. Rubezh whipped the beast with the switch and I dragged and pulled it by the belt. The cow was run off its legs, its hooves clattering like wooden ones as it ran.

All of a sudden, something snapped and the cow stumbled. Our first thought was its legs. Had it broken one!

Like a water-fall the dense, harsh light of a flare going up showered upon us. I even made out a hay stack right by the forest itself. I looked round and saw Rubezh on his feet, alive. Immediately fiery needles raced at us, past us and through us. A machine-gun was firing point-blank, spitting fire from behind the hay rick. It seemed as if dozens of glowing needles had penetrated the expanse which was filled with my clumsy, huge falling body. Letting go of the belt, I fell to the ground. I lay there removing those needles from my consciousness like splinters, convincing myself that here I was, still alive and not even wounded.

The cow was calmly chewing at the rape stems. From that faint sound, I realised that the firing had already stopped. It had ended just as suddenly as it had begun. But the nearby forest no longer appeared to offer us salvation. It was menacing, towering over us heavily as we lay there flattened to the ground. Rubezh was lying motionless and patiently not far away from me. Without getting up, I tried to catch the cow by the trailing belt, but it made a smacking sound with its lips, took a few steps to the side and began to sniff the ground. Reluctant to call or shout to Rubezh, I crawled over to him. It was not until I was right next to him, that I thought there was something wrong. He lay there with his mouth to the ground, his winter hat which had tumbled off seemed like an empty upturned bowl. I touched his head with my hand. Rubezh's hair was surprisingly soft and warm (my fingers registered this and remembered it!).

"Timokh, Timokh!" For some reason it was the first time I had called him by his name and it sounded like someone else's. But this was not Rubezh anymore and someone had appeared in his place. Rubezh had left me on my own, all alone with this dead body in front of the forest where the enemy was hidden behind the hay ricks. With every passing moment the body lying by me was becoming more and more dead, increasingly alien. My hands felt big and sticky from touching him. I tried to take away Rubezh's rifle, but his motionless hand would not release it, held on to it tightly.

As if giving the dead man time for something, I let him keep the rifle and began to rake the cartridges out of his pouches. Rubezh had a German rifle so his cartridges were needed as well. I stuffed the cartridge clips into my pockets, loaded myself up and again began to pull the rifle out of that dead hand. The hand trailed after the rifle and finally let it go.

I moved over to a hummock overgrown with grass so that it would be easier to crawl away or shoot when they came this way from the forest. I remembered about the cow and sought it out with my eyes. It was swiftly going away from us. At first, it appeared white against the dark background of the forest, and when it had the glow from the fires behind it; it looked as black as coal. I could even see my belt jumping backwards and forwards as it dangled down to the ground.

The cow's legs were still immersed in the darkness, while the torso and the head stood out against that sky all aflame. Withdrawing further and further away, pulling its legs out of the darkness as if out of mud, the cow was rising higher and higher, growing all the time. The fact that the cow was moving away, made my thoughts return to what was most important, made me think about the "island". But that person who lay there close by was demandingly expecting something of me. I crawled over to him again. Having pushed my arm under that dead weight, sticky with blood, I attempted to drag it along after the retreating cow. I even managed to heave it along a few steps until I realised that that was not what I wanted to do.

The cow stood out increasingly black against the light hovering above the horizon and grew larger and larger as it pulled its legs swiftly and cheerfully out of the darkness. I set the rifle on one side, I piled some soil up against Rubezh's legs with my hands, sticky between the fingers. The dead man became Rubezh again, for I had already become accustomed to the reality, to the thought that Rubezh had been killed, was dead. I raked up some more earth just as if I had been told by the man to do so. Our cow was disappearing, absorbed by the light and, as if it were melting away, its legs no longer made contact with the flickering outlines of the horizon. I rose to my knees and hastily set about heaping the moist sand closer to Rubezh, but was not yet covering him with it. I was shifting the sand with my hands, my knees, my chest itself, almost with my face as if I were covering myself with soil and all the time I expected that my jerky, incautious movements would cause us to be spattered with another shower of machine-gun fire, But the more aware I became of my imprudence, the more carelessly and hastily I did everything, as if on purpose, as if to spite something or someone. I had sand in my mouth, under my collar and in my hair. Finally, I made up my mind to shove the heap of sand onto Rubezh, prostrated on the tussock, at one go. I did it, trying not to look and not to think, rapidly, hastily so as to complete the job before I became fully conscious of what I was doing. After a certain moment I ceased to feel that I was taking in what was happening; it was as if I had reached saturation and the rest of what was taking place was spilling over somewhere. It is fortunate that man is capable of shutting himself off that way. There I remained all alone, out in the field, wet, dirty and sweaty with sand grating between my teeth. I had been in such a hurry to pile up the sand and cover the dead body, to get away from this spot, to crawl after our cow, but now I had finished and I lay there motionless. Suddenly everything seemed quite unreal and I simply wanted to wait around until it all faded away of its own accord. I watched aloofly as the cow retreated, its slender legs no longer touching the ground at all; it was moving swiftly on them as if pushing itself off from the light that was flickering as if evaporating above the horizon.

(To this day I cannot understand why those who fired at us from behind the hay rick behaved in such a strange way. Possibly it was a German or polizei listening post and not an ambush, and they were simply playing about, because a listening post should only observe and not give itself away. But we had been really exposed to their machine-gun when the field was lit up—it must have been quite a temptation for them!)

At last I managed to crawl away from the forest, from Rubezh, from the endless nightmare in pursuit of the cow whose little thin legs began to wade through the blackness, again to become submerged beyond the line of the horizon. I was dragging along the dead man's rifle, creeping forwards with sluggish, blind indifference, doing the only thing that I could, although I was no longer reckoning on anything.

The cow suddenly stood stock still on the spot. It inclined its head, sniffed the horizon, veered off sharply to the left and back towards the forest again. I crawled in that direction as well to intercept it. The cow ascended the vanishing line of the horizon once again, and because I was watching it from below, as if from a dark pit, it seemed huge to me and completely black like some kind of lone aurochs. Sweat was running down into my eyes, becoming mixed with the sticky blood smeared on my neck, with the sand in which I had been floundering; I looked like someone who was drowning, making those last hopeless movements. The cow was approaching me, but when it was about a hundred metres from me, it turned once again and moved away to the side. It was heading straight for the

forest where the hay stack was, where the Germans were lying in wait, and I could do nothing about it. I could not make a single movement more. Tears mingled with the dirty sweat on my lips and trickled down onto my sticky throat, I picked up a clod of earth and slung it pathetically after the cow which at close quarters had white spots again, became quite real, cheerfully swishing its tail from side to side. Now, however, it was more unattainable for me than when it was going down beyond the horizon. My belt dangled tauntingly around its front legs.

When the cow suddenly stumbled, having trodden on the belt and stopped to sniff the ground, it seemed to me that my sense of grievance and hatred of the cow were to blame. I eased myself rapaciously towards it for some of my strength had returned. Fatigue made me grit my teeth in an unbearable way as if the top ones were pushing the bottom ones out of line.

I was crawling along, grating my teeth, now coming out in a sweat, now bursting into tears, dragging myself towards that repulsive creature, towards my own killer in order to grab hold of the belt and lie still like someone who has attained salvation. If only I could lie quite still for one single minute, could lie there motionless, knowing that there was no need to go anywhere, to run away, that it was possible not to stir.

I frightened the cow by creeping around it and crawling in front of it. It stopped cropping the grass, looked and listened, turned and moved away again, trotted off. With my mouth and ears full of sand, wet and weakened, with my salty lips I whispered, "Daisy, daisy, there's a good little cow..." and for some reason, "tut, tut, tut..."

To me it did not appear to be a cow, but a cunning, mocking killer, in concert with those who are lying in wait behind the hay stacks by the forest. If it moves forward, starts to go away, I shall jump up. Let them shoot me! I was stretching towards the belt as if it would pull me out of the precipice, if only I could grab hold of it. The cow, which had got slightly used to my being there, was chewing again; the belt was quivering on the ground itself some ten metres from me, I could see its eye shining darkly and I was afraid to look, fearing that I would frighten it with the greed and maliciousness in my own eyes. There was already a smile on my wet face, I was whispering some words, stock still with tenderness and hatred. I gradually crawled up to it, smiling and whispering all the time.

I grabbed the belt so suddenly that the cow tore away in a fright, dragging my tired, happy body along the ground. No matter what now, I would lie there, and keep on lying and lying. I lay there for a minute or two, my face turned towards I lie sky smeared with light, listening attentively to the silence of the forest and inhaling the close breath of the cow. The moon was right above my face as it cooled down. Visible on its round disc were the shadows and silhouettes familiar to me since childhood looking as if they were behind matt yellow glass, and they did indeed look like human features, like the figure of someone falling, and of someone recoiling in horror before what he has done...

Now we were moving forward like this: I was behind the cow, lying on my side, pushing myself off with my elbow and the rifle; frightened by my pose and my movements the cow would either shoot off to the side or suddenly drop behind, straining at the belt and going round in circles. If the Germans were watching, they were probably surprised by this circus. But what if they were advancing along the fringe of the forest to that end of it, towards which I was crawling and dragging the cow? Or were they lying in wait for me there? And I with my back towards them would fall straight into their hands!

I did not know what to do so I lay down again and waited. The cow stood over me, startled and pulling at the belt. The distant glow of the fires was casting dark shadows on the convex mirror of its eye. Suddenly a flash was reflected all over the rounded surface of the cow's eye, and it glinted. After crackling, the flare hung over the spot where Rubezh had been left. Another one came in our direction, followed directly by a thin stream of fire. Several bullets pierced the cow's body with a squelching noise. It's body shuddered as if having a big, awkward hiccup as it swallowed them. I darted towards it to help it as if there was still something I could do, something I could alter, and the cow lurched towards me as well and collapsed on its fore legs that had broken under it. It shook its head loosely

and horribly from side to side, almost like a human being, and then its whole body slumped to the ground and remained quite still. Its legs began to jerk unexpectedly and sharply once again, striking me a painful blow on the elbow and thrusting me away.

I kept on holding the belt, flattening myself to the ground.

The round bulging eye reflected the distant glow of the fires which played and flickered in its black depths. But the eye was already dead. From the cow's neck which was flung back, glistening like resin, a fountain was spurting, sometimes failing on the sparkling mirror of the eye and extinguishing it. There was another flash as a flare went up. I pressed myself against the cow's belly, trying to hide, and suddenly I made out the white veins of milk on the udder. The flare had faded, but I went on seeing the trickling white threads on the black resin-like blood. I do not know why but precisely these little white streams which seemed like someone begging someone else for forgiveness had an incredible effect on me. I did not simply weep, but screamed inaudibly as if from intolerable pain. Stained with blood, soil and sweat, completely and utterly exhausted, I looked at those pitiful, clear childish thread-like streams and cried in a way that I had only cried in early childhood, with all my being, sighing and sobbing. I felt such an infinite, childish sense of injury at the whole world that I could protect myself only with it, desiring solely that my situation would deteriorate and that things would get really bad for me and that I would die, to spite them all or to their delight...

The huge fixed eye of the moon hung over the still field, over the black rampart of the forest and over the horizon which was all afire. And reflected in that eye as if in a mirror I could see two people doing something to one another, perpetrating something terrible....

"...And you, Flariyan Pyatrovich, are you going to go on trying to convince me? No, if I had been supervising our planet, I would have drawn my conclusions long ago."

This time, after flinging his heavy brief-case stuffed full of books on the sofa, Boris Boky began to talk about Khatyn which he had visited, about the cemetery of five hundred Byelorussian villages.

"Yes, you saw it as it really was, Flariyan Pyatrovich! Come on, now, explain to me how such a thing is possible. No, I don't mean about fascism as a system, I can still fathom that out, although I would not take it upon myself to elucidate all the metastases discovered on the most unexpected continents. But what about the individual performer, as it were, a human being borne of human being, who actualizes the system? No, there wasn't. There wasn't anyone in isolation. Since ancient times it has been the everlasting 'we': 'we, the Germans', 'we, the Aryans', even 'we, the heirs of Schiller and Kant!' Yes, yes, that same 'we' without which man's collectively made history would have been unthinkable, but here it has a minus sign to it. It is devoid of the awareness and the feeling that above all other kinds of 'we' are the most general and the most important, 'we, people!', 'we, human beings, mankind!' All other 'we's' serve this supreme 'we'; they don't, even the pride at being the 'fellow countrymen of Kant and Wagner', is tinning into savagery and barbarity. Such complacent 'cultural savagery' already appeared especially dangerous to Tolstoy. It leaves no room for thinking about one's close and distant neighbours and not doing to others what you would not wish done to yourself, for others are not 'we'. Their clothing, the colour of their skins, their customs, language, standards and conditions of living are quite different! Tolstoy cites the following example: cannibals despised their victims and regarded them as savages precisely because they only ate fruit and vegetables. For the very fact that they were not cannibals! Likewise, those who organised Oswiecim and Khatyn looked down on those they exterminated. I feel sure that our villages, being different from theirs with their tiled roofs, was one of the reasons why 'Khatyns' occurred. To a rational person, the difference between nations, races and people is a cause for joyful surprise and reflection, but for a 'hairless ape' it is only a reason for despising and biting those who do not look like the Aryan ape it is."

"A People chosen by itself,' this is what it says in 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'."

“This was particularly evident in their treatment of prisoners. First they reduced people to a terrible, almost inhuman state, by starving them and keeping them in the cold, and then some good-natured lout would drive them to the pits to shoot them and would perhaps sigh, ‘No, no matter what you say, it’s true, something about them makes them not like people at all!’ The whole question, it seems, is that of whether man’s ability to feel the pain and suffering of others is heightened by the given idea. Or is the most human of all abilities, that of being able to share another’s pain, to be aware of it as if it were one’s own and to sense it even more acutely is lessened and dulled. If the edge is taken off it, then it is a narcotic differing in no way from heroin, with which the members of the punitive squads in Vietnam lulled their consciences. Well, technology has helped. They want to install electronic monitors and set up a network of mechanical spying devices in the rice fields and on the forest paths. When something warm, something living passes by, a patch of light appears on the infrared screen at the distant air field, and immediately aircraft packed with death-bearing weapons take off. Not only is any sympathy lacking, but there is not even hatred any more either. What kind of feelings can a blob of light on the screen evoke?”

“There you are then, dear Flariyan Pyatrovich! What do we end up with? Formerly, for millions of years the ‘we’s’ roamed around in herds on the cold plateaus, after leaving our blissful abodes in the trees; for some fifty thousand years ‘we’ have been rational beings, so to speak. But as soon as we became such, we rationally scattered to the most distant corners of the planet, as far as possible from the others who were for us no longer like ourselves. Then we discovered each other again, recognised each other and were pleased, at the same time colonising those who were weaker and simpler. Homo sapiens became more and more rational until he came upon nuclear power. And what of it? Aren’t we going round the second spiral now? Isn’t it the same reasonable reflex that is pushing us into and egging us on to scatter once again, but throughout the Milky Way now? No matter what you think, I’m in favour of that. Let’s disperse now and get together some time later, eh?... ”

“All the same, Albert Schweitzer was right when he said that his knowledge was pessimistic, but his hope and belief were optimistic.”

...If I managed to crawl away from that field bathed in perfidious light, managed to get to the forest itself, and in the daytime to the “islands”, it was probably that unbearable childish sense of injury that led me, that guided me out, those tears within me that I seemed to be bearing to someone. I brought them back to the “island”, knowing how pleased they would be to see and expecting it, how they would hasten to welcome me and how I would tell them about everything. What would happen after that, somehow I had not even thought about it, not even tried to look into the future. And what was I bringing them besides the news that everyone had been killed and I alone was still alive? Everyone had perished in whom they had placed their hopes of not wasting away with hunger.

As I ran I ate whatever I happened to come across: sorrel, berries.

The same smell persisted in the forest near the first “island”, but that was a sign that I was almost home. I fished around in the bushes. All the poles were in place. I even counted them a couple of times as if believing still that Skorokhod or Rubezh might have returned ahead of me. I had already reached the water’s edge when someone called to me, “Are you back, lads?”

A woman sat there leaning against a marshland pine. Her legs were stretched out feebly but straight and on her knees lay a dirty bundle. The eyes in her exhausted, wizened face shone penetratingly. (I once heard a prisoner of war telling how he had been smitten by that *death* for the whole of six months, namely that of hunger, of dying of starvation). Those dying of starvation always have that inquiring, penetrating look in their eyes.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it... You’ve come...”

She was too much out of breath to be pleased. The woman sighed deeply and pointed to her bundle, “I’ve been gathering sorrel... It’s good that you...”

She looked around, her eyes seeking out the others, eager to see what we had brought her children. It was not

until that moment that I realised what my return meant for the “island”, what despair and hopelessness I was bringing with me.

“Yes, we’re here... in a minute... yes,” I muttered something, pointing behind me just as I had done that time in the woodland cemetery and retreating, drawing away from the woman and still holding my pole. I stumbled, fell and grinned (I’m falling over my own feet, see), but the woman’s penetratingly burning eyes full of terror had taken a hold of me, kept me back and yet urged me on.

Already I was almost running after hurling my staff aside. I was returning. Where to and what for? I did not know the answer. All I knew was that as things were I had no right to appear on the “island” empty-handed. I could not. I just could not look, in the eyes of those women and children, not to mention the wounded. They all had that same look, suffering as they were from hunger, dying of starvation. They all had those same eyes and protruding lips. Once the first hope had faded, was lost in a flash, they had livened up to see me, I would have seen those eyes that I had deceived with my appearance.

Everything had fallen silent in our coach, except for a woman’s monotonous, endless tale about a trip she had made to the south and with what fun and alarm they had escaped quarantine, and someone was uttering the name of the village or locality.

“Soon we’ll be at Kozlovichsky Woods.”

“And then we’ll get to Rudnya.”

“Yes, Rudnya.”

Once again conversation gradually began to fill the coach, but about Perekhody now.

“They should have attacked in the village.”

“Even I can be Napoleon after the event.”

“I said it at the time.”

“What’s that?” Syarozha’s voice tuned in. “Is it a cemetery?”

“That’s Rudnya.”

The coach braked slightly. The window of the driver’s cabin made a shuffling noise and a young voice sounded, “Look over there! From afar it looks just like an ordinary village.”

“It’s just crosses and pillars, Dad,” Syarozha told me softly, “instead of houses. And birch trees.”

“Here everyone was exterminated,” the driver explained, “just as in Khatyn.”

“And no one was left at all?” Syarozha asked almost in a whisper, as if talking to himself. He probably told himself that that meant that he would not have been left either.

“That sort of thing doesn’t even happen in dreams!” said the driver loudly and youthfully and pushed the window too.

I did not even have to close my eyes to dream it, to see what happened. I could see it anyway. With every passing year my eyes hurt more and more as if an unbearable light were concentrated on them. The light did not come from outside, but from inside, from my memory.

I was walking away, running away. It occurred to me that they might kill me, but the woman would tell everyone on the “island” that she had seen me. I was running away from the wounded, from the children! And Glasha was there. I could see it all before me, I kept on imagining that elderly man from whom I had heard the story in the detachment. There had been a blockade as well. At that time he had been living in a civilian camp, one for families. The members of the punitive squads had driven the inhabitants all over the forest, and he with a three-year-old girl. When the little girl got the “runs” from eating raw mushrooms and berries, the father, or grandfather came to a decision. He climbed a primitive ladder made of a tree trunk with pegs in that he had found near some empty hives and first lowered her legs into a deep, wide hollow in a maple tree and then pushed the rest of her in. The little

girl cried when she lost sight of him. He asked her to show him her little hands. Her dirty little fingers moved in the hollow. He took hold of her hands and lifted her up to the opening of the hollow. "Well, can you see me now? That's how I'll pick you up when I come back. What shall I bring you? A little bit of bread. Well, there's my clever little girl!"

He climbed down to the ground and hid the ladder. He listened but the little girl kept obediently quiet. "Well, I'm off now, I'll be ever so quick!" and off he ran. Just like me, so as to return more swiftly. Suddenly the thought struck him as if he had walked into a wall, "If they kill me, she will stay there for two or three days, crying and dying of hunger and thirst!" He raced back. In his fright and anxiety he became lost. He kept banging himself on the tree-trunks like a blind man, weeping and calling. "I howled, chaps, like a wolf until I found that tree!"