

# the ficuses in the open

# sehrguey ogoltsoff

СОДЕРЖИТ  
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ  
БРАНЬ

18+



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**The Ficuses in the Open**

«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

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**Огольцов С. Н.**

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1992

This here artifact is an attempt at honestly depicting the besieged Stepanakert town in winter 1992 when physical survival was the foremost objective common to all. Содержит нецензурную брань.

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## Introduction

Although the number of *personae dramatis* is pretty limited—they are just a family and their closest relatives and neighbors as well as a pinch of colleagues from the demised establishment, and though the action mostly consist of monotonous household chores, this here artifact is an attempt at honestly depicting the besieged Stepanakert town in winter 1992 when physical survival was the foremost objective common to all.

*All that was so abysmally long ago that  
no conceivable reason remains to suss output  
if all that was exactly that way  
or differently,  
or at all...  
it makes no difference now*

## Month one

### December 4, morning

The night was quite serene, even the machine-guns up there in the Krkjan part of the town kept pregnant silence...

The day before yesterday I dropped into Department Store to pick some present for Roozahna on her birthday. She turned one decade old.

In all the murky void of the Department Store only 2 customers—a man brought his son to the toy-department for the kid to see sunny side in the current snafu.

The sullen saleswoman placed on the counter a dozen of random picks from the rows of plastic clones lined over the shelves at any Department Store in any Soviet city for years.

'Anything else, jahna?' asked Daddy.

There was no answer just a listless gaze of the boy at the magnanimous yet useless deathbed sweepstake.

(...rub your shoulders with the Grim Reaper for a while, and you become a spendthrift...)

Even in Maxim, the Chief Editor of *The Soviet Karabakh*, the one and only paper in this here Autonomous Region, there cropped up somewhat extravagant streaks. Stately strolling, to and fro, in front of his subordinate gents, Wagram and Lenic, who in the attitude of wisely eager beavers sat at attention at their respective office desks, he cared to proclaim, 'To stick it out down here, to see it through thick and thin is the unquest opportunity for a journalist.' To spiff that piece of wisdom up with a ring of ponderosity, he jingled his regal bunch of keys dangling from his fatty hands in the constant clasp over his mighty butt.

My backache loyally sticks by me, and the shortness of Lydia's sofa makes me feel it even in sleep... Yesterday, I rummaged through her bookshelves and—wow! what a catch!—there's *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* in Russian for which reason I picture myself pouring over the volume tonight on that shortie of a sofa.

### Same day, evening

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

In the morning, I had one more job interview with Arcadic, the Head of Russian Section (and pretty bold already), at this unquest paper in the town.

Keeping, in a well-trained manner, his eyes elsewhere, he trotted out that the periodical did need my professional skills and the coming week would see me in the position of a renderer, after all of unavoidable managerial chicanery and staff-reshuffle castlings would get seen to to create a vacancy. There's no way to accelerate the process, you know.

From my current standpoint (which as always is here and now) the employment still looks like a pretty far off pie in the sky, but when jobless practice your patience, buddy.

In the afternoon, Sahtik sent me to fetch a jar of milk from the Milk Factory. Coming there, I found neither Valyo nor any one at all who I knew. To skip the unavoidable schlepping of the empty jar back and bringing it over again after a better-timed arrangement, I just stashed it away in a quite quiet nook, hanging the bag with the jar up on the back side of the eternally open door to the always dark corridor on the second floor in the Administration Block. Not a chance, anyone would ever nose it out. Eternity handlers are too rare a specimen in this here cut-and-run world. Undisturbed and unseen will the bagged jar hang on the unvexed door handle till my next visitation, betcha.

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

'Oh, sure, here you are!'

Now, his return to the town ended my career of a security at their place. Fare thee well, *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA*, and thee as well, O, Procrustean sofa!

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

### **December 5.**

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

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

Fortunately, when I stepped out of the Milk Factory gate, Sashic was passing by his car and pulled up for me to hop in as he was heading uphill to the downtown. There I walked to the paper's 2-storied Editorial Building where Ms. Stella, the Responsible Secretary, handed me two articles to be translated into Russian.

Albeit authored by different names they were remarkably alike—Patriotic Jarring Rattle of an Empty Oil-Drum rolled along all bumps and pot-holes. I went at both articles hammer and tongs to render their double din to Russian.

Being (technically) a startup oddball, I occupied the vacant desk whose sitter was on her pregnancy leave. Wagram, a reporter at the Russian Section, fluttered in, perched onto his desk, and shared his utmost surprise at all this crying shame of procrastination at my inauguration to the position of Renderer. Some stupid bureaucratic tricks, you know. A monkey business for kids!. And he took wing again.

A sudden close burst of a protracted salvo made me startle and started off my individual response caused by the like occurrences.

It feels like the combination of a sudden whop of heat upshooting through the abdomen to chest and of a piercing grip at the back of my neck—splashclutch!—and when the sensation reaches its peak, the grip slowly slackens and kinda dissolves together with the inaudible fizzle of receding heat-wave.

(...too many words, buddy. Put it straight, 'I got scared stiff and felt all funny, full of butterflies in my stomach.'...)

As it turned out, the salvo was to style up the funeral of the four youths killed by a single shell in their dugout in Krkjan, the Azeri part of the town on the commanding height in the the northwestern outskirts...

When I came home from the paper, Valyo's kids, Segó and Gaia, were on a visit to our place. Sahtik and I played cards with them, the childish game of 'believe-or-not'. Roozahna—still under punitive restrictions after the latest of her pranks—was not allowed to participate and bravely took her medicine, sticking around in the role of a scornful on-looker.

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

At 10 pm, Sahtik and the kids started for the Shelter, a former tailor's in the ground floor of a dingy two-storied apartment block a little bit up this street. The room enjoys swell popularity in the neighborhood because its only window is not facing the heights from where they shoot *Alazan* missiles at the town. About dozen of women with two or three kids each spend nights in that 6 by 6 meter room.

In the darkness I saw my family over to the Shelter carrying Ahshaut in my arms. It was a talkless walk under the snappy din of shooting out in Krkjan, beneath the indifferently gleaming stars above. We proceeded slowly in time to the slumber breathing of the child wrapped in his blanket and pressed to my chest full of bitter mute butterflies in my heart.

### **December 6, morning**

Starting at midnight, for about two hours I tread, to and fro, the sidewalk—a too lofty term for all the ruts and holes and the crooked tree roots all too ready to trip you by their bulges through the crumbled asphalt—and carried water home with a couple of pails 'cause my missus's in the mind for a cap-tail washing. Up and down.

Down—to the Three Taps beneath the huge bass-relief of comic-tragic masks behind the Theater. Up—back to our kitchen where all the containers in our household waited a-gape to get their fill. In and out.

The dog-eat-dog gunfire kept swelling up in Krkjan—up and down the entire slope—bazooka booms, now and then. To and fro.

At one of my downs, I marked across the road, right opposite to our three windows, silent forms in white garbs contrasting ghostly to the darkness. They lugged a couple of drums, polished metal a-glitter under the lamppost, from the upper in the Twin Bakeries to its twin, 10 meters down the street. Seems like, my mother-in-law's gossip that they've air-lifted by choppers some flour down here came from a reliable source. Up and down.

On the back porch of the Theater, a group of men stood chatting and smoking. An unfriendly, split-up loner descended to the foot of the stairs to have a reefer all to himself. In and out.

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

A split second later, the warning was confirmed by a stray bullet from Krkjan that whipped the crossroad by the Three Taps. 'Oh!' commented the males in the lee of the Theater.

About four in the morning, the town was pervaded by such an incredible calm that Sahtik and my mother-in-law left the Shelter to bring the kids home... The mother-in-law shared the news of a twenty-year-old youth killed tonight in Krkjan fighting.

### **The same day, evening**

About 11 am, I took Chief for a walk to the central park... A sunny day under the pale blue sky. Motionless waves of the hills snoozing in the late autumn's haze. The empty alleys in the park under the thick rag of fallen leaves—withered, brittle, whispering at each of your steps... The ever-present gunfire—distant, yet strident.

Leaving the park, we met Yuri, a co-owner and part-time attendee in the video games pavilion by the park's entrance stairs, now closed, no customers for digital shooters.

That's an unmistakable small shop-keeper, oriental and plump, all sweet smiles and blissful squints because of being so happy to meet you. A single handshake from his embracing palms—soft and full of immense tenderness—is enough to send your train of thoughts straight to Orgasm Terminal. (What the hell did he get married for?)

After exchanging the custom regards and greetings, he presented me with one more puzzling enigma when bowed down to Chief and kissed his hand for a good-bye...

Chief and I crossed the circle of mighty pines within the ring road of Piatachok and were sauntering up Lenin Street when I noticed Galyo descending in a group of four. He acknowledged me with a wink. Returning from their night shift of shooting in Krkjan, I suppose. Though his pals looked more like peasants than gunmen.

Till August Galyo and I worked at the same state organization, SMU-8, constructing a pipeline in the Mountainous Karabakh, but then big shots from the CPSU Central Committee took power in

Moscow. Next morning at work, I handed in the application to fire me by my volition because I don't want work for the state ruled by those clowns. They laughed at the administration, yet conceded. In a couple of days the SCUS putsch in Moscow was put out but I stayed jobless. That's when I started to raise walls of our future house... When the walls were finished and the general situation in Stepanakert grew grim, my mother-in-law advised me to look for a job at the local newspaper, as I was such a book-worm. She and the Head Editor bore the same family names and were from the same village of Harav...

We walked as far as the Corner Shop and at the news stall by it I bought a Russian copy of the local daily with my maiden rendering on page 4 – a whoopee feature by a self-assigned literary critic to trumpet in one-horse-burg style a skinny booklet of patriotic rhymes turned out by a local poet (seated in the next office down the corridor) as the greatest achievement of the poetry alive.

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

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

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

### **December 7.**

At 3 am the whopping detonations in the lower parts of the town frightened Roozahna out of her bed and into a fit of uncontrollable tremor. Sahtik could hardly talk her into keeping calm. Before six in the morning two more *Alazan*

volleys ripped up the night. Ahshaut slept soundly through everything.

At dawn roaring monsters get back to their lairs replaced by screaming humans as those in the two noisy crowds scrambling at the Twin Bakeries just opposite the three inadmissibly large windows of our one-but-spacious-room flat. All day long the fluctuations in their squash-and-shout made kinda sea roll background to our domestic affairs.

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

I visited the Building Site of our future house to collect a bagful of apples and an armful of tree roots chopped off at digging foundation trenches before I started laying walls. Since August, they got dry enough for the tomorrow's barbecue.

On my way there I saw a pair of Soviet Army armor-vehicles bowling busily along, each one decked with a squad of 5 to 7 soldiers. The braves had black warpaint on their mugs, the combat smear applied in quantities reflecting their personal preferences—from a finger-thick mud masks over the whole visage up to a soft touch or two at the cheekbones. Tastes differ. Yet, no one escaped the pre-mission swarzeneggerization, not even their captain in a civilian knitted hat. On they rolled past the gazing sidewalks, obviously wallowing in the public attention.

If some complete stranger to here and now saw us dawdling along or going about our daily chores amid the ever-present din of assault rifles in Krkjan he'd take us for a town of deaf. Yet, don't be fooled by our out-of-place looks, Mr. Stranger, we do hear the enraged rounds and each of us has some kind of their inner funny feeling...

By 9 pm it turned completely quiet. Some creepy quietness.

May it be, I'm too strict to Roozahna?

### **December 8**

Yesterday at 11 pm, Sahtik had to bring Ahshaut back home: he couldn't sleep in the Shelter because of another babe crying in the same room. She left him with me and went back to Roozahna who gets funky when in a strange crowd alone.

From midnight till one am, I again was bringing water from the Three Taps: Sahtik's capital washing is still in progress.

My legs got used to navigating on their own over the serrations in the sidewalk terrain, letting me enjoy the quietude of the night. No shooting at all. How sweet the peace is!

(...as sweet as a piss after six cans of bitter beer...)

At dawn two mighty explosions in Armenavan – another uphill neighborhood next to Krkjan. The bangs did not disturb Ahshaut, he slept on bravely... Later in the morning, the two of us had a walk to the Bazaar to buy some herbs for the today's feast – synchronized celebration of Roozahna's (almost a week after the proper date) and Ahshaut's (upcoming in a fortnight) birthdays.

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

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

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

Silence outdoors.

### **December 9**

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

A not too distant voice called out, 'Hit here!'

Ahshaut slept okay through all the night.

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

During a lull between the attacks, I had a oddly long dream.

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

It's a quarter to 10 am, the night is over, Ahshaut is playing with his wooden blocks. Sahtik has dropped in and stepped out to ring up her sisters. Roozahna, reportedly, sleeps in the Shelter.

My mother-in-law went to her work place to wash the floors there, which, actually, is her job.

### **Same day, evening**

At 11 am I turned up at my soon-to-be work place just to find the renderers' locked up. I went upstairs to Ms. Stella's office room who informed me there was no stuff for translations.

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

A senseless plan if I were asked, yet I preferred to keep my humble opinion to myself in the hope that the long walk and change of place and doing something—however senseless it might seem—would do her more good than just sitting and waiting for nothing good.

Then Sahtik spoke of her funny feeling when scared suddenly. She feels an icy curd that starts up inside her and gets tighter and tighter until it gets real hard.

(...quite contrary to the heat decompression of my innards after the splashclutch...)

We set off through the autumnal drizzle never letting up all this day.

Roozahna mouthed off nonstop about missiles, shelters and stuff until Sahtik, shedding off her despondent meditation, ordered her shut up. My seized up back grumbled under the weight of the bag with victuals and kids' clothes, so I kept silent too and only Ahshaut bubbled up with joy at having an all-out walk and now and then issued yells of delight...

Walking back alone, I was as slow-go as the ceaseless rain itself. Yet, a couple of times the sun peeped through the clouds to perk me up and set the tiny raindrops a-glitter. By the Department Store I met my former workmates at the gas pipeline constructing firm, a couple of horny-palmed lads of Baluja village. Vartan asked if I had enrolled a phedayee

group and by his up-palmed hand he kinda sawed across his chest alluding to my beard.

'No,' said I, 'I have not, and beards can't be privatized by guerrillas as their league badge as long as both artists and drifters have the time-honored right to sport it.'

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

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

Near the Theater I was saluted by a group of my former pupils from the Seidishen Village School. They looked like adolescents already because of that fluffy down on their upper lips. Kids can't but grow up. These village boys are growing up into a war.

At 8 pm I went out to make a call to the Orliana's on the payphone round the corner. No one was over there to answer. Everybody's gone down to the basement shelter, I guess.

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

### **December 10**

It was a hard day's night and through my sleep I heard only one missile attack (they say there were more) followed by the too loud bangs of the legitimate artillery guns fired from the Soviet Army garrison next to the Upper Park. Retaliating for a maverick *Alazan* missile?

I fell back to sleep and had a loathsome dream of sticking it in but feeling nothing, neither felt she (who?!) and didn't care a pin to conceal her resentment. What was my wrongdoing to be punished by means of so scalping a nightmare?

At noon, I ventured to the Orliana's to take Sahtik and the kids back. Heading downhill, I dropped into the Theater to participate in the referendum on independence for this here country. Sahtik voted on our way back.

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

At 3 pm, the so-long-and-eagerly-craven-for event took place in the Chief Editor's office: Maxim signed my job application. Starting tomorrow, I (nominally) am a sidekick reporter at the local newspaper but actually in charge of Armenian-Russian translations because throughout its glorious history *The Soviet Karabakh* was always bilingual, vernacular issues duplicated in Russian for the Big Brother to check their consistency with the current imperial course. This wise provision allowed me to kiss good-bye my being unemployed and embrace the position of a translator for the following 3 weeks, till January 1, and then (quoting Maxim) – 'as God will dispose'.

After that concluding invocation, I left his office and on my way home paid attention to the noise in the streets.

'You should've seen' a Soviet Army officer said to his mate marching along, 'what mess that *Alazan's* made of my hotel room'.

In the next couple of gossips—a half block nearer to our flat—a Russian military officer's wife with a finger-thick mask of makeup responded to her companion, 'Yeah, I agree!' loud and shrill, so as to drive it home to the passers-by how readily she can agree.

From 4 pm till half past 8, I was fixing up a basement compartment in the 5-story apartment block over the crossroad by the Twin Bakeries.

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

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

I went over and found the mentioned compartment, dark and silent. A flickering match disclosed the mains running loosely along the bare concrete walls. I went home after a bulb, attached it to the mains and in its steady light turned about to have a look. The view made me give out a tiny whistle of comprehension. Now, it was clear why no one had staked a claim to the room. Some dreadful lump of work had to be done to carve out a relatively habitable place in that 6 by 6 meter room filled up to the ceiling with heaps of discarded ventilation fragments, boxes, tins, bottles, bits and pieces of all descriptions, earth, masonry blocks, worn-out tires and suchlike whatnots.

The fluffy layers of black dust coated the landscape, cobweb festoons sagged copiously, criss-cross, to bring the picture to utmost perfection... So it was the only compartment to choose from.

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

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

Shtik rallied them by advertising the advantages of an underground basement shelter where the din of explosions is almost inaudible and where the ceiling is made of reinforced concrete slabs and not of inch-thick planks.

Armo took to shoveling the earth and litter into pails, the rest of us—the two boys and I—were taking it out. By our concentrated shock-work, we freed a place enough for half a dozen cots and a table. Then the women came and swept the concrete floor, hung some blankets and old rags to screen off the trash-store in the other half of the room and it acquired a look of a sufficient war-time shelter.

It's half past 10 pm, all of my family are over there now.

Armo, the landlord, ducked out of moving to the block's basement room because his wife, on her second thoughts, balked at the idea and lined him up into sticking to their accustomed place. Yes, a cellar under the floorboards is not as safe as a shelter in the basement, yet down here she queens over those of her neighbors who, having no cellars of their own, seek refuge in hers. Locking them out altogether is inconceivable in the present situation and equally unthinkable to leave the cellar with her jams and pickles entirely to the neighbors' mercy.

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

Good night, everybody.

**December 11**

The night turned out not too good for me, instead of sound sleep canceling all the troubles, I got stuck in oozy insomnia.

At 6 in the morning, a major missile attack broke loose from all the quarters. Severe bombardments were repeated each two-three hours today.

At 9 sharp I was in the Editorial House to fill in the forms for my employment. There chanced to be only Ms. Rita, the Secretary of Chief Editor. Her another position is that of Acting Personnel Manager when not making coffee for Boss and his visitors.

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

At twenty-past-ten, Wagram triumphantly pranced in. Know what? An videocassette sprang out of his pocket. See, eh? The interview he recorded the day before with a Deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet on a visit down here. Max in his office? (Let him know what a champ of a reporter works for this paper!)

A sad pity. No fanfare to blare out of the hero's arrival. *Alazan* bursts made Boss sit home tight.

Such a trifle as the key to the Renderers' doorlock was missing from Wagram's pocket. Very likely, left home. (A rising star of journalism has more important things to think of, right?)

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

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

On coming home, I asked our neighbor lads, Romah and Arthur, for help and ferried a door from our Site to fix it up in the underground shelter for my family. The raw doorway did bestow the compartment the looks of a primeval cave.

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

On the way, Robic, an Arega's lover and her husband's bosom friend, cut short our quest and fetched the aforesaid heater out from his house's basement. In the ensuing shoptalk about their school and schooling in general, Robic and Sahtik looked noticeably sad. I stood by wondering if it was caused by the unconscious libido field between the two. Desire's sad by definition.

Then the three of us—Sahtik, I and the recovered heating device—returned home and (borrowing a trite expression from poets in days of yore) 'veiled the Olympus' summit with a golden cloud'. Scholarly speaking, one may with sufficient accuracy state, that in the case of perfect sexual adjustment even wartime conditions cannot impair the performance.

Another of the missile attacks tried to precipitate us but in vain. We cum in a dignified manner and with the maximum pleasure attainable, adding our concluding grunts to the hilarious yells of the folks pouring into to shelter in the underfloor cellar beneath our bed.

Half an hour later, fixing up the door in the Underground compartment and then the live wires for the heater, I was as sloppy as never before.

Now it's five to eleven with an antiphony of *Alazans* and cannon bangs measuring the time outdoors.

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

We shook hands as Brethren of the Order of Lonely Hearts. He also sleeps at home alone having left his wife and children someplace amid the town in her father's shelter.

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

### **December 12**

An exemplary calm night was followed by a no worse day. The machine-gun shooting has turned already into one of nagging yet petty trifles of no account.

At 9 am, I visited the TMC where they glibly clapped the missing stamp-smear of theirs into my military identification card.

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

in the room I borrowed from Wagram the key to duplicate it;

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

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

About 3 pm, I was told I might leave: there was no more work for today.

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

At 8 pm, the mother-in-law commenced to bake breads in the gas oven. I saw Sahtik and the kids to the Underground. There, Sahtik complained of unbearably cold draughts breaking in to the compartment from behind the hanging rags.

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

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

(...all things considered, my statement was true... well, to some extent. You bet he'd never dive in that dust maze to check if I was lying...)

At home, my mother-in-law surprised me by asking pensively if I trusted in God after all. I guess her queer query was prompted by some priest's visit to the Underground where he distributed leaflets of a printed prayer and books for kids, short stories from the bible with gaudy pictures.

I answered there were too many of Them, the immoderate number postponing my choice as of yet.

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

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

*Fiat nox.*

### **December 13**

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

*...dwarf Santas in red coats lined-up in close rows to form alive maze in a tremendous hall with mirror walls where a plushy pop-singer with his sugary hit was sticking out from among the narrow lanes in their dwarfish labyrinth until the gaudy number got swept away by a black-leathered angel of hell riding like hell for leather and finally coasting at 2 or 3 meters above the ground as if arisen by the teeth of wind...*

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

After the midday break, they summoned me to a general meeting in the Boss' office. It was a solemn thank-you-and-good-bye affair to fling the gates wide open before a resigning veteran journalist.

Boss, Arcadic and one more member of the editorial upper circles took the floor, respectively, with their tribute speeches varying only in the thickness of orators' glasses. They squeezed themselves out dry to put across one and the same idea of impossibility to list the grand qualities of the departing vet who all his life kept moving in the wrong direction deceived by them those commies—not his fault, see?—yet our paper's door shall all the same be kept open for him forever and a day... In the end Ms. Stella presented him with a bunch of creamy rich carnations.

At home, I wallowed in our happy family life till 10 pm, and then saw everybody to the Underground. When I was back and scribbling these notes, two powerful but mute flashes ripped up the darkness outside our communicational window. I had the usual fit of heat fizzling up my chest. The heart went pit-a-pat. Beastly female shrieks sounded in the street and I went out.

Some forty meters up the street, there was a house on fire. Clinking of splintering glass and squeals of squaws in the crowd of by-standers mixed up with angry demands from non-interfering men to equip them with fire extinguishers, all that being out-noised by the businesslike crunch of the fire devouring the house in high, about 2 or 3 meter tall, tongues of flame. I recollected the red-clad Santa Clauses from my dream.

Then there arrived a team of firefighters (undreamed of) and in a couple minutes put the fire out. My mother-in-law was in the throng partaking in subsiding lamentations. (Her house is only ten meters away from the damaged one). Among the onlookers I also made out Sahtik, took her aside and expressly asked to go back to the children.

In absence of further entertainment, the crowd started to disperse. I spotted Nerses walking away and took him over to arrange a visit to his place tomorrow at 3.30 pm. (The fortnight about St. Yuri's Day when serfs are free to seek another master is not over yet.)

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

## **December 14**

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

It is a day-off today. Roozahna was taken by her biological father's sister to her grandparents. Sahtik, Ahshaut and I had a downhill walk to the Department Store. On the way we met Garric, a worker of Sashic's, who eagerly shared the latest gossip about a missile fragment they found marked 'Made in Turkey'. Presently, they seek means of shipping it to the Soviet Empire's capital as the corroborative evidence of exterior forces involvement in our sovereign scramble.

(...they pin too much hope on the dead horse, I think. Moscow will give no more ear to this case than Ankara...)

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

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

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

Yes, ours was a commonplace marriage of convenience for both the man nearing his forties who drifted from a strange land in our mutual USSR and the local woman ten years younger, divorced, having a pre-school daughter to raise. However, as usual, I was in luck to meet such a partner in life, as well as in sex. At my point in lifespan, the grounds for romantic feelings are scarce and dwindling, yet, by heaven, I believe it's not a made-up trash to say that I love her. Sure, I do. And even if not madly, I love her properly and deeply and with real vigor – yep! – when needed.

Historically, there are no records of a female making a good wife as well as being a superb sex partner. It's either one or the other. You just can't have this 2 in 1. I am a lucky dog to find in Sahtik both qualities.

At half past 3 pm, I visited Nerses. He gave me the latest address of Larissa and Vanya, his daughter and his son-in-law, respectively. They were our dear weekend friends before their flight to Vanya's Cossack fatherland at the outbreak of armed confrontation down here.

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

About 4 pm Roozahna came back followed at once by my mother-in-law. We had a peaceful family evening. Sahtik, Roozahna and I played a pencil game, then all five of us had supper after which I made a fresh start with two pails for the round of water bringing.

It's ten past ten pm. By now, they're in the Underground now. All's calm outdoors.

### **December 15**

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

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

shellbursts of a bombardment brought me back to the reality inside our room as dark as the thunder or even blacker.

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

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

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

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

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

Up roar of dogged shooting out surges up in Krkjan.

### **December 16**

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

I soothed myself by the speculation that no matter of which kind they were there was my name on neither one. What's the use of getting uptight after the threat is over? And I beseech you, Mars, O, God of War, if one of those be more accurately addressed then let me get killed at once and clear.

No silly tricks with curability, regenerating, reanimation and suchlike blithering drivel. One through my head would perfectly suffice, methinks.

The intensity of bombardment grew until it forced my mother-in-law to leave for the Underground and trust me handling the last batch of bread put in the oven before I saw her over.

Today at 9 am, I was at my work place to find nobody in the whole Editorial House. For a couple of hours I fiddled about the locked up drawer in my desk. All my attempts at making a skeleton key fell flat. Full of the shame and sadness, I gave up on the undertaking and just raped the lock open with a screwdriver.

From eleven till twelve am, Wagram, Lenic and Arcadic peeped in, respectively. Lenic asked if I would like to visit a room down the corridor to watch a game of chess. Most politely, I reclined.

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

At noon I left a note on the desk for all who might be concerned about my pending return at one pm... Sashic and Carina with their children were at our one-but-spacious-room flat, having lunch. I presented Sahtik with the paper issue containing three voluminous renderings of mine. Sashic promptly toasted the event but, not wanting to be back to work with vodka on my breath, I abstained.

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

At a stone throw off the Editorial House, I met Arcadic strolling away with an unknown youth. Arcadic told me to go home as there was no work that day. I nodded most humbly and slowed down as if pondering about alternative things to do, which maneuver was followed by stealthy penetration the Editorial House smuggling *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* under my coat breast.

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

What a smart thing this *BHAGAVAT-GITA* is! And so mightily moving! It cut the anchorage and put to motion the very corner stones in my concept of the origins of modern civilization sending them to much more eastern quarters.

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

And the digits that I was taught to think of as Arabic turned out to be born millennia before any of Arab mathematicians came to existence.

And would not the Fathers of Church be delighted by the definition of Trinity as exposed in the *GITA*? They could only dream of so refined subtleties!

Yet as usual, after my initial admiration there pops up one or another bitchy bitter word of 'but'... At being told for the first time that the human soul is an immeasurably wee spark residing in the heart of each and every individual, I just shrug my shoulders and say 'Okay, maybe'. (I can trust anything when I am not hungry.) I wince at the brow-beating reiteration of the same suggestion. However, when the idea is blared out for the third time, I feel I'd like to know how it conforms to the organ transplantation, eh?

Suppose, a saint's heart is inserted into a sinner's body (or vice versa), where should the migrant soul be sent after the receiver's death? To hell or higher planets?

Still and yet, the supplementary discourse on impossibility to kill one's soul is an awesomely rewarding stuff in the present situation... At this point, I looked out of the window to the right from my desk to behold this here current situation and saw:

- a provincial hotel in ages-long need of repair;
- an elderly squat woman idling on the steep porch stairs;
- a girl of ten piggybacking her thrice younger brat of a brotherlet;

a fuzzy cur limping across the lane that separates the hotel from the Editorial House.

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

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

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

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

I was doing yoga at home when Sahtik and Ahshaut came back. He inquenchably disagrees to keep to the Underground longer than it can't be helped...

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

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

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

### **December 17**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **December 18**

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

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

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

From 9 to 12 am I rendered one article at work. Lenic came after the midday break. He narrated of his vigil in the Bread Factory, queuing for three-and-half night hours just to buy the regular quota of three loaves.

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

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

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

The local radio announced the gas supplying would be stopped to repair the blown up pipeline. After the work, I collected our heater from under my desk in the Renderers'. I took it over to the Underground because, according to Sahtik, the heater from the recent distribution belied its mighty looks by poor performance.

In the Underground, I picked and brought home a masonry block-stone to make a substitute heater for my work place. Fortunately, I happened to have a second-hand heating element.

Until my supper at seven pm, I was carving ruts in the stone to insert the glow spiral. The job gave me an excuse for not having yoga today but, to tell the truth, I skipped it too readily. My eternal sloth.

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

The complete quietude outdoors lit by the giant gas torch mutely flaring in the distant hills over Armenavan.

### **December 19**

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

Before the midday break, I finished rendering the Declaration of the Anti-Impotent Party (AIP). Wagrum remarked, whenever three Armenians settle down somewhere the place sees a political bum and creation of at least seven parties. Well, that was a good one from his kit.

Boss and his Secretary Rita dropped in, in turn, and were obviously impressed by my block-stone heating device. I dared a slight dispute with Boss when he proclaimed laziness as a distinctive feature of oriental man while I argued that the quality in question belongs to all of the human race.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Now it'll ...' I thought just that much before off went the crash of blasts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A tranquil night smirks outdoors.

### **December 20**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ahshaut's fast asleep.

### **December 21**

This goodly day-off Ahshaut became two years old. What a tall guy: 92 cm!

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

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

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

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

Past 4 pm, Lydia came to our place bringing some grapes and roses. The feast got a fresh start. It's ten past ten pm.

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

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

### **December 22**

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

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

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

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

At supper Roozahna went off her rocker. To restrain my choler, I left the table and munched the meal sitting at the sideboard.

Nine pm.

After Roozahna and my mother-in-law left for the Underground, Sahtik stayed home knitting yet five-minutes ago a solitary shell-blast made her flee.

Now, only Ahshaut and I am here. He sleeps undisturbed.

Outdoors all is quiet again.

### **December 23**

The pallid moon up in the morning sky resembles a fugitive piece of dull, ungleaming, snow over the distant mountains...

Wagrum came dolled up in a spiffy outfit with a red-and-white scarf loosely thrown around his neck, smart gray suit and a pair of black gloves.

'The reds are on the run' declared he resting his buttocks on his desktop with we'll-beat-everybody puffs at his cigarette.

Soviet Army soldiers were leaving the gray huge Block of the CPSU District Committee—cheek by jowl with the drab Editorial House. On the wide square in front of the CPSU Block loomed a phedayee

CAMAZ-truck with no number plates, as is their custom. A pensive lad in a black sheepskin coat hanged around with a sub-machine gun in his arms. Three more *phedayees*, unarmed but in combat fatigues, stood apart in a businesslike jaw-jaw. Beno, a crony of Sashic's, was among them looking very brave in his khaki cap.

A cagey drove of old women and shifty youngsters neared the District Committee Block from the rear. They penetrated it through a ground floor window and embarked on looting the quarters left by the troops stationed there since spring.

A dozen iron cots floated out of the window and up the lane – one wooden chair and three empty cognac bottles diversified the spoil.

A small group of Soviet Army soldiers did their best to look another way, waiting, between the Block's and Editorial House' corners, for a vehicle to pick them up. At last an army jeep pulled up in

the lane separating the Editorial House from the Hotel. A helmeted officer got out and staggered to the awaiting group strangely resembling by his motions a khakied automaton, inhumane and eyeless.

Becoming aware of the civilian looters, he leveled at them his sub-machine gun, clicked it and, slightly rolling from his toes to heels, barked out, 'Get away with you!'

At this point a squad of native policemen arrived to the scene wearing black sheepskin coats, armed with Kalashnikov guns, and only their commander in the uniform greatcoat carried no visible weapon. The looting dried up, a policeman posted at the broken window. The army jeep whizzed away.

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