

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MARUŠA KRESE
ME, SCARED?

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Maruša Krese: Me, Scared?

Am I afraid? No. I've been squatting in the snow for three days now. I am sitting on an empty rucksack, though I must not sit, not really. I must only squat. I'd like to lie down for a moment, for a second, for just a half a second. You must never sit, the commissar of our dispersed unit told me only a few days ago. And now he's dead. We didn't even bury him. We fled, fled. I don't know. From the Germans, from the Italians, from our own, from the White Guard. We fled right past his body.

"You mustn't close their eyes," he said. Their eyes, his eyes. I ran past him lying in the snow. I didn't really look at him. If only I had quickly closed his eyes. But I ran. Just ran.

Sometimes I'm cold in the winter. Sometimes. But it was nice then, then, when I felt the cold winter blowing past my face, the tears running down my cheeks. Tears? I mustn't cry. Above all, don't cry. Please. Then I'll lie down, lie down forever. Cold, am I too cold? What is this? Just don't close their eyes, don't close them. I can't feel the fingers on my hands, the toes on my feet. I can't feel anything. I haven't menstruated for a long time now. Am I even a woman anymore?

I can't hear anybody. Are any of ours still left alive? Should I crawl over to the next bush? I saw her. I saw Katja yesterday. She was hiding behind some great snow-covered logs. Was she alone? But where is Ančka? And my brother? My youngest brother. He had just started first grade. All proud, all happy he was, and our neighbor gave him a puppy. He took the puppy to school with him. Only for a couple of days. Until the Italians came and the neighbor with them. The neighbor pointed to father and mother.

"They're reds," he cried, "reds!" Since when had we been red, I wondered, trembling with fear. That was the last time I felt fear.

"Don't be afraid. It's only me."

Someone hugs me.

"Ančka. You're alive."

*

I haven't seen her for a month. She sat by the fire then, with her eyes closed. She was beautiful. Is she still? Is she still alive? I found her youngest brother in a hunter's cabin yesterday. Barefoot, starving, terrified. He was crying.

"My sister said I must never cry. Never. My sister said I was grown up now," the little boy sobbed.

I lifted him up, sat him on my horse, and brought him to our headquarters. We fed him, wrapped him in a blanket, and put a cap with a red star on his head. All night he clung to me like a tic. I couldn't take a single step without him. He doesn't know, he doesn't know anything. He's desperate. Numb with pain. Brothers, sister, parents. Where are there? His father is in the Gonars concentration camp. That's all he knows. We all know that. Should I take him to my family? But they're also on the run, have been hiding for months. From time to time, someone tells me that they've seen one of them. I don't know how to comfort the boy, what to say to him. The hell with it. Let the devil him. How can I tell him his sister is alive? Alive? Nobody knows what happened to her unit. They were betrayed. And what now? It would be dangerous to look for them. Is she alive? She's the most beautiful, that's for sure. Or she was. But usually she doesn't even look at me. Is she arrogant? I know, I know. She went to gymnasium and I didn't. She read a lot and I didn't. Still, if she's still alive, if I find her, I'll never let her go. Never. And her brother? Would we take care of him if he weren't her brother? He looks like her. Too much like her.

It's safe here in the middle of the forest. Are we in Croatia already? The top leadership decided that we should hide until this fiery storm had passed. Is it the right thing to do? We can't just stay here and wait for a miracle to happen. We have to go on. We have to go for help. But where? Where is everybody? It's winter. Spring's late again. We need the forest to grow green. Then it's easier. Then at least we can eat leaves. And grass. The first strawberries. But a long time will pass before then. Is she alive?

Don't daydream! Volunteers, where are you? Let's go!

*

I mustn't fall asleep. It's Ančka's turn now.

"If I snore," she whispered before she closed her eye, "hold my nose." She was out in an instant. And now my time has come to sleep. I can't wake her. Her head is resting in my lap. I'll try to last a little longer. I stroke her hair. When will we find enough water to wash our hair? Everything itches. We're probably full of lice. Mother, where are you? Where are those gentle hands that braided my hair each morning? Where are you? The evenings when you made coffee from chicory for us and roasted chestnuts. You sat next to the stove and darned socks. Socks for seven children. You smiled and listened to our stupidities. Only now do I realize that you must have been tired all the time, that

you were alone, that you had no help from your husband, from our father, who was always grim and demanding, wordlessly letting you know at every step that he had been disinherited at home because he had chosen you. He demanded eternal gratitude from you and you were silent. And the cousins, the sons of father's younger brother who inherited the land instead of father and who married a woman who constantly prayed in the church, they used to put me down at school. They used to laugh maliciously. I never wanted to tell you. And where are they now? Certainly not with us. And, Mother, where are you? Lojze, from the house next door who joined us a little over a month ago, told me that you and father were taken away, handcuffed, father supposedly to Gonars, but that he knew nothing about you, and that my brothers had all fled. Our house had become an Italian station and, even before that, the neighbors had taken from the house everything that could be used. I'm not sleepy anymore, not cold, not afraid. I only worry what happened to all of you. I must not cry. Ančka should sleep a little longer.

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The snow has finally started to melt. The youngest recruits snuck out at night and returned in the morning with some old potatoes they found in the nearby fields. The cook made soup from those strangely unsalted potatoes and the young fighters were heroes for a day. The scouts we sent out to reconnoiter come back. It will be tough, they say. It will be difficult. But we have to move. The Germans are coming to help the Italians. Last night we lost three fighters who fell asleep in the snow. We ran out of slivovitz to lessen the pain of their wounds. Somehow we have to get through to the monastery where there are monks who are on our side. They always give us brandy, flour, lard, dried meat, and a measure of optimism. We have to get through to them and leave our wounded with them for at least a couple of days. The few horses that we still have are too starved to use. What will we do with them?

We tidy up, wipe away our traces, make a battle plan. Her youngest brother asks for a rifle or a little grenade at least. A little grenade. Poor child. Will I be able to keep protecting him? I don't even think about his sister anymore. At least I try not to think about her. It hurts too much.

*

"Stay strong, my children. Do not forget who you are, what you are." That's what our Slovenian teacher told us before he escaped through the window.

We trembled in fear and trepidation. The headmaster of the gymnasium came to the class, the religion teacher, and four Italian officers. And a translator. It struck me that he was even paler than we were. The headmaster looked at each of us, stared deep into our eyes. He hit his willow switch against the table and later against our fingers and shouted at us.

“Who did this? Who brought this literature into school? Who organized this traitorous resistance?”

Traitorous resistance? Who’s the traitor? We who don’t accept the Italian authorities? We who promised our teacher that we won’t forget who we are? We? Traitors? The headmaster says that we have chosen a dangerous path. It’s true. But not his dangerous path. Our dangerous path. That night Mara, Katja, Slavka, and I went into the forest. We never went home after school. Mara’s cousin was waiting for us in front of the school. He warned us:

“Don’t go home. Hell has broken loose.”

They caught our teacher. He had a broken leg. We hid until evening and then we were taken across the lines to my older brother who had disappeared a couple of months before.

“It’s better for you if you don’t know anything,” he had said to us, before closing the door after him.

He smiled when he saw us come. We four frightened girls with our schoolbags, our skirts, and our sandals. It was summer time.

“What are we going to do with you?” my brother and his comrades joked. The next day a farmer’s wife gave us pants that had belonged to her sons. A week later I held a rifle in my hand for the first time and a glass of honey brandy in the other one. A few days after that, I shot my first man and became the leader of our unit. Actually I was the leader before I even held a rifle. They sent Ančka over to help me. She had come from the other side of the country. I embraced her the moment I saw her. She became the sister I never had. Ančka’s sleeping now. I caress her with hands that kill. With hands that are like the hands of my mother. Those gentle hands that combed my hair each morning. Hands. Death. Silence. Silence that kills.

*

Slowly, slowly. We stop every fifty meters, listen, wait, and, only when the patrols turns away, do we move forward again. But how will we get anywhere if we move so slowly? The nurses keep the wounded quiet. I don’t even want to know how they do that. If I were wounded I would want to shoot myself. To be such a burden to others, to be dependent on others, to be, to be... No, I’d rather shoot myself. I wouldn’t ask anyone for help. Is she alive? Is she wounded? I don’t even want to think about it.

“We’ll sleep here,” our commandant decided. We’d come too close to the village and had to retreat deeper into the woods. It was too dark to move onward.

They woke me to take my turn on guard duty. They pulled me from deep dreams. Dreams? Did I really dream? Again I was a boy accompanying his father to the station in a nearby town. I begged him not to go. I begged him to take me with him. Begged. I don’t know anymore all the things

I begged for. He wanted to wipe my tears with the fresh handkerchief mother had given him for his travels.

“You mustn’t use that. Mother gave it to you.”

He looked at me, stroked my hair, and clapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t cry. Now you must take care of the family until I earn enough for you to come after me.”

My friend’s father had emigrated too. We returned home together. We walked slowly, slowly. We didn’t talk. Mother sat in front of the house with my younger brothers and sisters. Mother would be having another child soon. I went into the forest, down to the stream, and cried. After two days I went back. Then I grew up. A letter came from America with three dollars in it. Then another without any dollars. Then one from Brazil. Then nothing.

No, I didn’t dream. Will this night ever end? Will this war? I won’t be able to survive another winter like this. I don’t know if I’ll survive this one. Our friend from the town where we took our fathers decided differently. He went over to the Whites.

“I won’t be cold anymore. I won’t be hungry. My family will be safe.”

That’s what he said. Was he right? No, he must have been mistaken. At least I hope he was mistaken. He’ll be sorry. But if only the moon would shine for a few seconds. And the stars! If on this night, when I must not sleep, I could at least look at the stars. Like on those beautiful nights when I took the cows out to graze, when I lay down and counted the stars. The stars would carry me on a visit to my father. I travelled with the stars across the sea to a country that everyone said was miraculous and beautiful. I asked the stars to tell my father how I am and to tell him that I really am taking care of my family. I asked the stars to carry my greeting to my father. Those beautiful warm eyes. I didn’t know they were beautiful back then.

*

“Why didn’t you wake me?” she asked.

“You were sleeping like the dead.”

“Thank you for the rest. And for the safety. Now you close your eyes for at least a little while.”

“I can’t. Day is already breaking.”

I sit on a rock. Around me only bodies. I walk from one dead man to the next. I close their eyes. It’s all the same. Italians. Germans. Partisans. I close their eyes like a machine. Have I become a machine? What am I? Who am I?

When Ančka finally convinced me to sleep awhile, a partisan fighter ran by us. Then another. Then another. They were fleeing.

“Run!” They yelled to us.

We were being attacked.

“Cowards!” Ančka yelled at them, picking up her gun, and started running in the other direction. “Attack! Attack!” she shouted as if she’d gone mad.

I follow her and also started to shout. I cannot stand my own voice when I shout. I jumped over the bushes and ran for life and death. I would rather die than flee. Other partisan fighters raced after us, fighters who only seconds before had been fleeing.

I sit on the rock and look at the dead. Except for four, everyone from our unit survived. Have I become a machine?

“Where do you girls get your strength?”

Is that praise or something else? The courier came to tell us that it was time to move on.

*

For how long have I not seen a fire? I sit here in the warmth and wait for the soup in the kettle to be ready. In recent days we’ve only eaten bark and our ten wounded fighters have died. Maybe I’ve already gone mad. I don’t know where I get my strength. But this isn’t strength. It’s rage and madness. An instant. Here and now. An instant where you have nothing to lose. You look your opponent in the eyes and you know: it’s him or me. Him or me? Sometimes I want it to be me. I want everything to end.

I heard that they were saved, and she and Ančka become commandant and commissar of the battalion. I don’t know which one is the commandant and which the commissar. It doesn’t matter. Did headquarters make this decision to spite the men? I heard she was alive. I’ll speak to her when I see her. Since I have her brother with me.

The boy walks up and down by the fire, he salutes an unseen commandant and chants: “I am a Partisan. I am a Partisan.”

Poor little thing. He doesn’t know what is waiting for him. But he’s proud now. He can hardly wait to tell his older sister and brothers. Will he live to see that day? I don’t know why I’m more afraid for him than for myself.

Yesterday we attacked the castle where I worked before the war. The duke’s family had left long ago and moved to Italy. The library in the castle burned. I still have some of his books. He used to lend them to me and we’d discuss them. He said goodbye to me each day, told me to greet my family, and always comforted me that I would soon earn enough to travel across the ocean and find my father. A rather strange sort of comfort but it always made me feel better for at least a little while.

The village priest came to have long talks with my mother and finally she relented. I was sent

to the Aloisianum Collegium in Ljubljana. I cried all most night and, when I confided in a schoolmate that I had no intention of becoming a priest, they sent me back to the village the next day. To a village where poverty and mistrust reigned. To a village where you can only come on foot and where a sad story lives in every house. To a village that lies on the shady side of the hill. To a village called Bogneča. If I understand the name correctly, it means the village that god doesn't want. Something like that.

But god? I have my own problems with god. He has only ever betrayed me. So I shall put him aside. Forever.

The man sat down. I admired him. Or perhaps not. I respected him. He had come back from Spain. He knows what war is and he knows what civil war is. He knows what it is when a brother looks in the eyes of his brother, each standing on the enemy side. He knows everything but he doesn't want to talk about Spain.

"Forget it," he says each time I ask him.

"Forget it."

"I saw her," he said. "But you'll have to make more of an effort. She has many admirers."

I thought I would strangle him then. But he just laughed at me. His wife is waiting for him in Ljubljana. And a child. What about them? Can he sleep peacefully at all?

I'll doze. Here by the fire. When was the last time I was warm? I cover the little boy with a blanket. He's already sleeping soundly, holding in his hand the cap with the red star. Good night! Nobody knows what will come tomorrow. Peace. Silence. Fear.

*

When Marija joined the Partisans, she was wearing a red skirt.

"Are you mad?" the party secretary scolded her. "You can be seen a kilometer away!"

Marija wept: "You're not my boss. I'm not in the Party. I ran, ran. I watched from the top of the hill as my house burned. My brother and sister and me. Everyone running in different directions. When we came home, father and mother lay shot in front of the house and the three of us ran away again. This red skirt. My mother sewed it for me on the first day of school."

We all looked at each other. I have to get her to safety.

"I'm going to sleep at her place tonight," I said.

If anyone will be able to sleep at all tonight.

I watch Marija. She used to live in the house next door. I envied her, it's true, and she knows that. I told her openly. A few months before the war started she returned with her family from

America. She saw the sea. She sailed on the sea in a ship. The sea. Will I ever see it?

Marija sobs. I don't know what to say to her. That I admired her father? I remember how we went to him when the Italians and Germans occupied the town. For a while a German flag flew above city hall, for a while an Italian flag. They kept changing it. The town was filled with swastikas and the gymnasium was transformed into an Italian military hospital. They only let us use a few empty classrooms. The teacher of Italian and geography, who came from somewhere in Tuscany, said to us:

"Children, forget about politics. Knowledge of the Italian language and geography will serve you better. Forget politics. Just forget it."

In vain, he tried to teach us a little poem about a hen. There were only three verses. He finally despaired of us.

And then on December 1, when there was the holiday for united Yugoslavia that is now forbidden, everyone stood up and honored the country that was still our homeland with a minute of silence. Even the youngest in the school participated though they knew it was forbidden. We were all sent home under the condition that we could return only when we became members of the Fascist youth organization. We went to Marija's father. He listened to us and watched us and didn't talk for a long while. And then he said:

"You have to make your own decision."

The police occupied the school and we scattered to the winds.

And now her father is dead. What shall I tell Marija? That she still has me? Cold comfort.

*

I think winter is finally over. There is a strange calm recently. The peasants in the village gave us Easter eggs, ham, and cake.

"We've had all the food blessed," they assured us.

We made our way down to the stream, shaved, cut our hair, and slept.

"Tanks are coming toward the Kolpa River," a little boy from the village came running to tell us. He waves his hands. I used to go to school with his sister. Some of us make our way to the top of a hill. Tanks, trucks filled with armed soldiers, jeeps, motorcycles. We destroyed the bridge the day before. Something's moving in the water.

"They're ours," says the gunner.

I take his binoculars. People on horses are trying to cross the river. One man with a beard dismounts his horse and helps another who is sinking. They are ours and the river is deceptive. I see her. She is speaking to her horse, caressing it, urging it on. The river bottom disappears beneath her

feet but she still doesn't let go of her horse. She must be mad. Later she lies limp on the bank. We run to help.

"Comrade, take my blanket," I say, and wrap it around her.

"I couldn't save him," she whispered. "I couldn't."

Her lips were blue. "He's saved my life so many times."

"It was only a horse," I comfort her, though I know the value of a horse these days. I would give my life for a horse. I hold her close to me.

Calm, be calm. She lies by the fire. She sleeps. Her little brother clings to her. He doesn't leave her. He tells her of all his heroic deeds and she sleeps.

And Marija? All desperate, she tells of her red skirt. The river took it away. "Mother, mother," she says. "Mother sewed it. The river took it away. My red skirt."

We won't tell her now that her brother was saved and her sister was taken by the Germans. They shot her there by the well in the vineyard. If the war ever ends, I'll buy her a new red skirt.

It's winter. Another winter. Winter again. Already during the first winter, I said I couldn't survive another one. Now it's the fourth. And I really won't survive this one. Murmurs run through the brigades. Someone is always bringing new stories.

"They say he had a unit of gypsies killed just because they were late," Katja whispers to me as we squat behind the bushes doing our business. "It's true. Marko told me."

"Be quiet. You know the kind of things they say about Dušan. Don't believe everything you hear."

"I think it's time to trust your intuition a little more. You always have the right feeling about people. Don't forget that."

They sent Dušan to us to replace our commandant until he gets back from Vis. Actually nobody knows he's in Vis. It's hard to wait for him and even harder to take this replacement. This Dušan. He's course and arrogant. I fear for the boys, that they'll turn against him. Not long ago I wanted to just shoot him. Well, not shoot him. I don't know what I want to do to him. Even now I see the crying children, the silent women and men, the old man cursing him at the top of his lungs. He just pushed them to the ground. We went through the village from which we had chased out the White Guard. How they ran. I even spotted my cousin among them. At least I think it was him. They were so funny.

"Why are you laughing," asked Ančka curiously.

“Next time.”

The villagers greeted us and suddenly I hear screaming. A woman with a black scarf on her head rushes forward and pulls a chicken from the hands of one of our men.

“Have you gone mad?” I yell at him.

“Not me, that new commandant,” says a young partisan, all red in the face. “He ordered us to go through the houses and get food.”

“Are you mad?” I turn to Dušan. “Now in the middle of winter. They always give us what they have to give.”

“Shut up,” he yells, and I look at the gun in his hand. He probably did kill that unit of gypsies, I think.

I look at a peasant who is guiding a cart pulled my oxen. And another peasant and another cart. And another. People wordlessly load food onto the carts. Flour. Pieces of dried meat. Chickens. Lard. A barrel of wine.

“At least leave them something,” I say. He doesn’t even look at me. I turn and walk slowly away. How many others like Dušan are among us, I wonder. Winter. And another winter. This one the worst. And the villagers?

*

“Ivan betrayed us.” I hear it over and over again. Ivan? Betrayed? Ivan was caught, tortured, and locked up. His young son and wife were also in jail. They threatened to torture his little boy. And his wife. Ivan supposedly talked and then they killed him. Nobody knows where they dumped the corpse. Ivan? Betrayed us?

I put on my uniform, borrowed a pair of pants from a peasant, and with heavy heart set out to see Ivan’s wife. I stood for a long time in front of the house before quietly knocking on the kitchen window. Quietly, quietly, I call her in a whisper. So the neighbors won’t hear.

“Open up. It’s me.”

I embrace her. I look at the little sleeping boy.

“He looks like Ivan,” I say awkwardly. Could you think of anything more stupid to say than that he looks like Ivan. I am a fool.

“I don’t have a name anymore. Now they just call me the traitor’s wife.”

“Stop,” I stammer. “We don’t call you that. We want to help you but we can’t. You know what limited power we have. But I can get you to liberated Črnomelj,”

“How will they look at us there?”

She stares at the floor.

Yes. How will they look at her? This damned war. The things it is doing to us. Ivan, a traitor. I don't know. It's hard to imagine. I know that the whole brigade believes he's a traitor. I don't know. I have no child. I have no wife. I don't know what I would do if they brought my youngest sister in front of me and threatened to torture her if I didn't open my mouth. I don't know. Actually I do know that I would do anything I could to save her. I know that I would go straight to the devil on my knees just to keep something bad from happening to her. I slowly return to the brigade. Through the dark forest where Ivan was captured. Through that terrible forest where just a few days ago we ran for life and death. A sleeping child and a lost wife. I have to do it. I have to get them to liberated territory. I don't care what other people say. I'll speak to them. Remember that they are only human, I'll say. Are we human anymore? We are slowly becoming beasts. And she? She's alone. So very alone.

There were more than five hundred of us. They come from Ljubljana and brought greetings from Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro. Božo, a Montenegrin, was excited. I forget actually why he was here and I am too embarrassed to ask again. I look at him happily embracing all of his comrades. We are like children on Christmas.

“Look, my schoolmate has come. They threw us both out when we came to school wearing red stars on our coats. Now my sister and I serve together in the brigades. She got sick with typhus and became a teacher in the divisional Party school.”

Tears of happiness and relief and suffering. When will this be over? And what next? Party school? Life? Mother of god.

We listen to delegates from other parts of the country. We listen to stories about victories, losses, burnt villages, destroyed bridges. We listen to stories about massacres, about heroism, about the dead, about people hiding with children and wounded in caves high in the mountains. We hear stories about the promised help of the allies and about millions of dead Russians. But now the Red Army is in Poland and the Americans in France. France, my French teacher. Will I ever see Paris? Millions of Jews. I listen. The sea. I'll go to the sea.

I was only in the cinema once before the war. Secretly. I was afraid to tell at home. My father would surely have lectured me and talked about my laziness. The cinema. It was magical. I could just sit there and watch. Even the empty screen. And now it seems that I am watching a film again. What film? Whose? Who directed it? How will it end? And when will it end? I watch us, how we sit beneath the tree, far from any settlements, all ragged and hungry and stiff. Marked for all of our lives. Not one among us has any idea what will happen and almost each of us has worries about our families. We've heard nothing from them for months and months. We count our living friends and cling mad

to each tiny morsel of news, most of which is old and obsolete. But we treat it as if it are fresh and true.

I watch how attentively he listens. And nods. What is he thinking about? He says nothing about Bosnia. I can get nothing out of him. Nothing at all. And the others who came with him are silent about their long journey. What happened to them? But he's a good commandant. Almost too courageous at times.

"You know, I have nothing to lose," he once told me after a battle. "I'd rather lose my own life than bow down to anyone again." To whom did he bow down? I listen. Though am I really listening? Suddenly, in front of my eyes, I see my teachers from the gymnasium. Slowly, slowly, I have put their stories together and now begin to understand what they were trying to tell us. Back then, we often felt pushed to the side, because they sent teachers from all over Slovenia to our gymnasium, those who were not politically reliable. Through them, some of us gained access to forbidden leftist literature. Not only some. Most of us. Now, here in this forest, I look at those gymnasium stories as happiness. Was it happiness? A happy coincidence? But there are no coincidences.

"Tito and Party! Tito and Party!" Mara grabs my hand.

"Lift your hand," she shouts at me.

"Why?"

"People are asking who will enter the Party," she says, pulling up my hand up. "Of course, you will,"

And Marija? She's probably doing the same thing somewhere in Bosnia and yelling: "Tito and Party!" If only she were here. I close my eyes and see the faces of the gymnasium teachers nodding. Some are smiling as if to say: now you understand.

I lift my other hand and say: "Tito and Party!" I hate the sound of my voice when I shout. I watch them. They're all standing up and singing *Hey Brigades!* I can't hold back my tears. I stare at the ground. Janez plays the accordion.

I received a letter. Lovely. From Marija. I don't know how long it took the letter to get to me.

"Freedom" she writes. "Belgrade is ours. If you saw what I saw, saw how the people greeted us when we come to the city. Embraced us. Showered us with flowers. All of Belgrade was on its feet. City dwellers grabbed us from all sides. Where are you from, they asked. From Slovenia. Have you seen my Jovan? My Rade? How they rushed to me, those asking women, mothers and wives. I cannot find words to describe all of this. Do you know how beautiful it is to be free? You forget all the suffering. At least for the time being. And Slovenia will be free very soon. I want to hug you. Now it's high time we go to the sea. There is so much I want to do, so much I have to tell you. Beautiful things.

You know I fell in love. Very much in love.”

Marija. I just keep reading her letter. Marija’s in love. Marija’s happy. I see her smiling. I am happy for her.

And him? Only yesterday did he allow me to visit him. He said nothing. He looked into my eyes for a long time. I searched for words. I didn’t find them. After three hours they told me I had to go. They said he was tired. Tired. I held his hand.

“It makes no sense,” he whispered.

What should I say to him? That it does. That it’s worth living. That the life we’ve experienced is not real life. That real life is a shiny wonderful thing. That’s what I should tell him? And Marija says freedom is beautiful. Freedom, beauty. How many lives have been lost for this freedom. After all that blood, all that fire, that solitude, now beauty comes? We found a dead partisan fighter recently, a woman. Cut up. With a five-pointed star cut into her belly. We buried her. Ivan sang softly at her grave. Life. I’ll never know who she was. Where she was from. And her people.

I can no longer hold a gun in my hands. I simply cannot. I have become a political advisor to the military corpus. So I have advanced. But where have we come to that I should be an advisor? Politics. Once I would have said: “Let god have mercy on us.” Now I am silent all the time. I am silent when they send me from brigade to brigade, from battle to battle. I don’t want to shoot. I don’t want to see any more death. I teach. I teach Marxism. I don’t even remember if I finished reading *Das Kapital*.

“Hold on a little longer. Just a little longer.” That’s what I have been saying to myself ever since I received Marija’s almost dreamy letter. Though it doesn’t help much. I was on liberated territory for a couple of days. I almost envied myself. I went to the theatre, slept in, washed. And I danced. All evening. I met my brother Franci. He was in a bad mood. He wouldn’t allow me to be happy to see him and he killed my joy of dancing.

“You know, they summoned me to be a judge. Quickly, they said. They’d caught eighty White Guard. When we came to Lojze’s, none were left. None of ours, none of the Whites. In vain I asked around. I’m still asking. The hell with all of them!”

Franc, Marija, people are disappearing, our people and the White Guard. Silence. Freedom is coming. Freedom. Him? Is he dying?

They woke us up at the crack of dawn. Everyone is running somewhere. Back and forth. At five in the morning, we had to shave and comb our hair. I got a new pair of pajamas and a rucksack into which the nurse Vida put my things. My things? Funny, since I have nothing. A Russian medal, a cap with a red star, a few letters. Her last letter.

“They’re sending me to Herzegovina. Ančka too. We’re going to teach. We’re training new political cadres. Just think, Ančka and me. And Marija was there. She is happy. In love. Hugs. When will we see each other? I am always with you and always will be. It doesn’t matter where you are. It doesn’t matter what you decide.”

I read the letter. Again and again. She should forget me. What would she do with me? And what will I do with myself? She wrote to me with a bad conscious. She danced one evening. I cannot live without her. I love her too much and she understands me too much. I don’t even need to open my mouth. I miss our silence.

“You look nice,” Vida pats me on the cheeks. She’s confused. She treats me like a child. Even worse.

“Where are they sending us? Why this hysteria all morning? Are we preparing a new offensive?”

“They’re sending you on a journey. On a long safe journey.”

“That letter. Put that letter into my rucksack.”

She smiled at me.

“It’s been a long time. A long time.”

Is this kind nurse full of malice or what? What is she trying to tell me? It hasn’t been a long time. She hasn’t been here a long time. What is she saying to me? I have been unkind to her. I think only of myself, only of my pain.

They put the one without legs onto a stretcher and then blindfold all of us. Darkness again and the unknown. This endless dependence on others. Where are they taking us? To the banks below. They uncover our eyes. They load us onto trucks.

“To safety, to another place.” I hear the doctor Bogdan speaking.

“Will you tell her?” I ask him.

“Don’t worry. Stay well and have a safe journey.”

I will never forget how he squeezed my hand.

We drive on. Quiet shivering in the truck. A cargo of desperation.

They put us on a plane. An American plane. Italy. Bari. We lie on stretchers on the beach. Sea, sun, bay. A lost bay. Or a forgotten one?

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I saw the sea without Marija. It was more beautiful than I imagined it, more beautiful than in my dreams. But it was empty without her. Without Marija, the sea could not be the sea. Will freedom be freedom without Marija? Without Ančka, without Mara, without my brother, without my parents, without... him? Will I also be alone in freedom?

They said that the Americans are taking the seriously wounded to Italy. On planes. Across the sea. Him too. He wrote me a letter. They've taught him to walk with crutches and now he is waiting for a prosthetic limb. Can he bear it? I'm afraid that one day he won't be able to bear it anymore.

"I won't return," he writes. "When I learn to walk, I'm going to go all the way. To America. It is closer from here, from Italy. And easier. I'm going to look for my father. Don't wait for me. If they talk about me, if they say I am a traitor, at least you know it is not true."

And the last words: "Don't forget me. Wait. Soon, soon, I will come back. I will fight again. I send greetings to my people, to yours, to the brigade. Tell them that I will be back soon, really soon. Nobody writes to me. I was right when I said that a man is quickly forgotten. Right away, in fact, when he is no longer of use."

Pious words course through my mind. I am angry with myself. Pious words and parishioners, the catechism teacher in school and his words that were even sharper than the willow switch he always held in his hand. I remember gathering kindling with my younger brothers in the forest and then selling it to buy paints for our Easter eggs. I teach Marxism here in Gorski Kotar and am haunted by their piety. Like a fanatic. Like a true parishioner. I look at the sea, all the way to the horizon, and I plead, I ceaselessly plead for this story to have a happy ending. Happy for him, for our people, for all of us. Plea and pray. The end is near now. Freedom is near.
