

Damir Karakaš

CELEBRATION

THE HOUSE

Nighttime, dark forest, a skeletal arm suddenly appeared in front of him; he grabbed his rifle and screamed: "You will never catch me!" When he pulled the trigger, he woke up and slowly propped himself up on his elbows: watching with one eye, listening with the other one; he slowly sank back, in the soft nook between two golden-leaved beech trees.

He was lying wrapped up in a grey army blanket trying to peer through the fog and still couldn't see anything; one fog tumbled into another, thicker fog, so much so that he couldn't make out his own rifle next to his lanky, stiff limbs. He started to listen to the silence again; put his hand

behind his ear to capture the sounds: tree veins pulsed deep in his ears. A bit later, the wind began to blow, becoming stronger, colder; there was a moment when it seemed – while he was listening, the view shifted constantly – that the wind was roaring through someone's hollow bones deep in the forest; he immediately thought of all those human bones destined to be scattered around by wild animals for years after the war.

The sun woke him up; it was scorching, so he had to take his flask, wet the palm of his hand and rub his burning nape; then the sun flashed the barrel of his rifle, he quickly tucked it under the scruffy blanket; retreating more into the more, he put a few branches in front of his face to make himself as invisible as possible, while his yellowish-brown uniform – which had earned his unit the nickname yellow cats – blended perfectly with the ever-growing heaps of leaves; but the falling leaves, every time he looked, there was another leaf swaying on an invisible thread, little by little, this began to worry him; once the forest was completely naked, without a single leaf on the branches, everything would be clear, exposed. Luckily, he thought, the hideout – according to detailed arrangements he had made with his wife when he crawled to the house under the cloak of darkness a few nights ago and saw her for the first time in a long time – would soon be ready and no one would be able to find him there; being forced away from that image of a secret, secluded place, his eyes moved to take in the village below: a dozen houses, built from rough-hewn planks and covered in shingle looked like a painting from which uniformed men came in one moment and went out the next; they were searching, same as the days before, their rifles protruding, they were poking haystacks with their bayonets: a soldier caught his eye: the one he always kept an eye on. For a while, the soldier, as if he had nothing better to do, stood stock-still in the yard, then went into the house; his arm twitched before he could even think, so he couldn't actually tell what he wanted to do when he found his arm stretched out; then he wondered, glaring at the village twice, whether she – his wife Drenka – had been faithful to him during all that time of war: he immediately remembered why he married her, it was precisely because he knew she could never betray him: he could always tell by her eyes, since the first time he saw her; afterwards, when they circle danced and their eyes kept smiling at each other; the soldier quickly reappeared, went into the barn, came back out and shook his boots twice. Two other men showed up in the yard after him, wearing dark overcoats and cloaks: the long, sharp bayonets on their rifles shone as if they had soaked up all the daylight: they roamed, popping up between

the hay stacks, disappearing, going in and out of houses: he lay there, watching their every move. The harsh sunlight dispersed through the forest, frequently finding its way to the bayonets, he thought he should take off any metal objects that could reflect the sunlight: first, while lying on his side and wriggling his torso, he took off the top of his uniform, put it into his backpack which also held some ammunition and a foldable pocket razor, the latter made him stroke his week-old beard and think he should shave soon. He loosened, took off and put in the leather waist belt with the holstered gun which he took from a dead comrade in the early days of war. He stretched, kept watching, and with the new viewpoint, he expected something else to occupy his mind, something other than being caught in a leafless forest and taken to be shot in front of the whole village – his family, his wife and children! The soldiers were gone, he couldn't see them anymore, then, as if making a toast to that, he took his flask and tipped it while still keeping an eye on the village, took a few long sips of water which the sun had turned quite lukewarm.

He shifted his weight slowly onto the other elbow and zeroed in on his house again: two boys suddenly appeared in his field of vision followed by a woman in a wide, black skirt (her brother had recently died during the breach on Dog's Peak), he moved instinctively; everything he could take in at that moment, which was true for every time he watched them from this spot, he wanted to keep for himself; the woman was taking down white linen from a wire fastened in the plum orchard behind the house, two boys, roughly the same height, were running around the house shouting each other down. As soon as the woman filled the bucket with laundry, she put it on her shoulder and called the boys; they ran straight to her: for an instant, it looked as if they were carrying a dead man inside the house, so he shook his head to chase away the dark thoughts. He peered at the boys; the woman was walking behind them shouting incomprehensibly. She probably warned them about tripping over the high threshold, which was what had happened to him a few times when he was a child, he fell and hurt his knees, even split his nose open once. Once the yard was empty again, with only the thick shadow of the house and the linden tree still lingering, he felt a pang of loneliness in his chest: everything around him was infused with the presence of that loneliness, the leaves, the trees, the clouds, the fly buzzing around his head again making intricate figure eights as if it was sending secret signals, so he squished it on his shoulder with the palm of his hand.

He was lying on the blanket which had soaked up the stench of dead leaves and damp earth: under his thick eyebrows, his eyes mostly captured the village and the swirling forest above his

head, registering fewer colors each time he looked up. Sometimes he glanced at the Sun's blaring orb, counting time which had never passed more slowly: he was always lying in the same spot, sniffing the poignant smell of dissolving resin, and felt more and more annoyed with anything that moved: the sun, the wind, the birds and their frequent feathery noises when they flew low over the forest.

When the afternoon sun finally set behind dark clouds, he took his rifle, pressed the nutwood gunstock against his right shoulder and stared at the village at gunpoint; there they were again, searching, talking to the villagers – he held them at gunpoint the entire time; the trigger pulsating at his fingertip, he had no intention of shooting, that would be foolish, but this way, as he tuned his body to the target, time passed more quickly. In the evening, however, he listened even more intently; he was happy because he knew she would come any moment and bring news, food and water. He eavesdropped on the silence and the gloom to hear her footsteps which he could tell apart from a thousand other footsteps; she walked as cautiously as a doe, stopping as if something was on her mind, then kept on walking suddenly. He couldn't wait to hug her; if only the kids could have tagged along with her somehow, but it was best if the children didn't know anything yet; he'd see them when the time was right.

She emerged slowly from the thicket, wearing sheep-skin peasant shoes and carrying a shepherd's satchel with blue and red flowers on it tossed over a simple black dress. She looked around quickly, let out a short sigh, drew near him and went down on her bare knees whispering through her breath: "Here I am," and immediately started to take things out of the satchel: pieces of bread, crunchy and yellow like the sun that had just set behind the hill, a piece of cheese, two boiled eggs, peeled, a wicker water bottle corked with a piece of corn cob. "D'ya have enough?" he asked. "Don't let them starve." She shook her head and even before she finished taking everything out, she muttered: "They've never starved." He nodded and started to eat, trying to fit in his mouth as much as he could. "What's happenin' down there?" he was chewing, looking at the heel of the bread in his hand and, without waiting for an answer, grabbed his flask, poured a few drops of water on the ground, filled the flask with fresh water and guggled the water to chase the food down. The woman sighed deeply and said, mixing her splintering words with more sighs: "They're lookin' for ya, lookin' for ya erry day, almost dug through the whole village." He shook the water bottle for no reason and said: "Might as well go chasin' wild geese." He took another sip, screwed the cap of the flask back on while his wife removed a dry burdock from his

sleeve and said, almost inaudibly, with a kind of mashup of voices, as if she wasn't the only one voicing her opinion: "I thought you could turn yourself in and tell them you did nothing wrong." He wiped his wet mouth with his hand first, then coughed and listened to her mild breathing and said, his eyes pointed at the village and eyebrows pulled together for a moment: "I will turn myself in when the time is right, not when they want me to!" Finally, after he'd eaten everything, he pressed his fingertips on the grass picking at the bread and cheese crumbs and stuffed them in his mouth ravenously; he pulled himself closer to his wife, hugged her, stroked the black pony tail falling down her sturdy back; then held his head against hers for a while, feeling a strange kind of peace down his spine, like the time when he was a boy and had to watch the cattle in the forest with his mother, he'd put his head in her lap and she'd pick fleas from his hair. "I will turn myself in after two or three months, not now while the blood is still hot," he said, straightened himself to a sitting position and poured the water from the bottle into the flask again. "So, are you done?" He corked the bottle straight away as well as the flask. "Almost," she answered and the answer echoed within him. "Mijo," she went on, "d'ya think it'll all be all right?" "All all right and then some," he said, adjusting his body into a new position and looking high above her head at the forest which was getting quite dark, as if signalling her it was time to head back soon. Suddenly, she hugged him and held him tightly. "C'mon, you have to go now," he stroked her back and slowly lay next to his rifle, "and take care of the kids," he said, feeling a small lump stuck in his throat when he said 'kids'.

When she vanished from his sight, moving between the trees like a shadow, he began to wonder what he'd say if he turned himself in (he closed his eyes to imagine it more easily); well, he'd tell them without hesitation what happened, that it all started with that celebration, when the speaker with a cylinder hat took the stage in the town of G. (it was the first time he had seen a hat like that) and said (he still remembered those three coarse sentences): "Anyone who endangers the survival of our country will be sentenced to death," followed by, "They are a danger to our future," and lastly (he'd skip this one), "Communism, that's when a brother fucks his sister." If they thought he did something wrong by trusting a lettered man like that, and in his opinion, he very much did not, because he didn't slaughter or kill anyone unless he had to defend himself from the ones who were shooting at him, and, after all, they were at war, people shoot at each other when they are at war, let him have a fair trial, he'd do his time if they wanted; as long as he could get back to his wife and children as soon as possible; to his low-yielding land,

the only one he had; he went back to a sitting position and suddenly looked up, without a clue as to where he was looking: then he pulled at his military coat with endless unease, just so that he didn't have to think about anything anymore; randomly, he clasped up a row of brass buttons, almost failing to do it properly: went on to adjust the collar of his military shirt: an image flashed – axe over shoulder, his tall, square-shouldered sons walking behind him and singing joyfully – he perked up suddenly and thought with relief: it's all gonna be alright. Some day, he thought, fixating on his muddy sleeve, at peace with the armored scale insect which had been scampering over him for some time – he could also be at peace with everyone he fought against in the war – some day, he'd tell his grandchildren all about it in front of the fireplace.

Moonlight still shone brightly when he picked up his rifle and stretched his legs; the round Moon followed his careful steps like an all-seeing eye: he knew the land so well, each and every forest path, no matter how small, every tree, every rock. He had spent years as a boy walking the cattle here. He stepped on the meadow, walked around the hazel bush, full of nightly freshness, and picked hazelnuts. For almost two whole hours, he proceeded to roam around those bushes and pluck hazelnuts, then headed back with pockets bloated, full of fruits. Not a tree did he pass without looking at it carefully; it seemed that a tree would come alive and grab him by the neck at any moment. When he – still feeling the many eyes of the forest drilling into his back – came back to his spot, he tucked himself in his blanket, lifted up his collar while listening to rifles clanking in the distance, then the owl hooting which made the darkness grow even thicker. The rifles had gone quiet, but a thunder clapped and lightening striked somewhere deep in the forest: he worried it might rain: he wouldn't make it for another few days if he got drenched out here; he'd have to move to a nearby cave, but he suspected they were patrolling it regularly: everyone, even the local toddlers knew about it. He put the rifle aside and thought about where to leave it before going into hiding: a fully loaded gun would be enough down there, he thought, a rifle would just get in the way. Flashes of lightening again: a waltz of light and darkness in front of his eyes.

Birds woke him up from his morning slumber, on his right, he could hear noisy shepherds taking the sheep out to pasture, their voices hoarse from shouting all the time, then a crescendo of scythes being sharpened; close on his left, oxen were pulling a wooden wagon with iron-ringed wheels in the forest, shredding the stones in their path. Out of those sounds, more so than out of his head, a memory of his late father appeared; once, he drove beech wood trunks with his

mother and father, with the help of oxen, down this same grooved path full of sharp stones, and Angus's foot was bleeding so much that father took off his woolen socks and put them on ox's painful and lame hind leg.

While picking at the hazelnuts from his hand, his attention occasionally leered towards bursts of machine-gun fire: it came from the other end of the village, behind the belly of a barren mountain whose fading peak was always barely discernible even in broad daylight; he was crushing the hazelnuts with his teeth and looking over the village: soldiers still hadn't shown up for their daily patrol, even though they could burst in the village at any moment, truth be told. He was afraid they might start combing through the forest around the village, he was sure it would happen some day; he looked up at the sky: grey clouds incited rain; a few flashes of lightening, fiery stripes chasing each other across the sky every so often. Suddenly, it all went quiet again: relinquished. Only a sparrow hawk flew in loops across the sky, sharp against the backdrop, as if it could never cease to fly; his gaze followed the sparrow hawk, he sighed deeply and pondered: oh, my friend, if only I had your wings. Grateful and content, he looked at the sky which had been his ally during all these days and murmured: "There's no way it's gonna rain today."

His gaze followed a sloping skyline; if only he could chase time down that slope. While eating hazelnuts and spitting out tiny flakes, time piled on again between each bite; he scanned the lean branches again, the scarce leaves constantly fluttering as if debating whether they should stay or fall, then, he focused on a single leaf swaying, leaving a naked branch in its wake – all of it made him angry at his wife. "What the fuck is she waitin' for?" he said to himself; soon, after he'd calmed down, his eyes followed a bee buzzing around some flowers; then he watched a bird singing on a branch first, then flying down to sharpen its yellow beak on a rock, after that, he watched a flower burn like the sun – like a dot that would give rise to a new day any moment. After a while, it seemed everything in this world had stopped in its tracks again, even his heart: he was lying there while his eyes filled in the day's emptiness for hours. Then he stared at the silky hymenoptera circling its own axis, as if it was the wind that moved it rather than its own will; at one moment, he lightly touched a grasshopper with his thumb and made it jump so far away (far beyond its abilities) that it violated all laws of nature, which only made him more irritated; how could an insect do such a thing, when a man in his position could not; he closed his eyes and after a while, he could only make out sounds by distant memories; then he furiously started punching a thick layer of leaves, and each time he did so, a bird flew out of a bush making

the sound of a quick curtain pull; a gnat flew out his eye, it got in his eye so quickly, he only noticed it when it flew out; he pressed his hand across his eyes, his vision snapped and twisted on the inside: he saw himself, his wife and children, everyone sitting happily at the table picking dry beans; same way he used to sit with his parents.

His eyes were closed and while trying to spare them, he changed positions all the time: turned, twitched, tightened the muscles in his arms, legs, face; he closed his eyes again, that way, he was able to see better (nothing could escape his memory), ran his fingers through the leaves, crushing them; in his mind, wheat was rustling, nowhere to be found in the field; colorless trees sighed deeply and leaned over him, as if in sympathy; then, with a sudden glimpse, he connected the faraway cannon echo and a bird shrieking and shooting away right above him; he turned to lie down on his back, tucked his arms under his head and gazed at the distant, foggy skies. Occasionally, his eyes joined the multitude of shrieking, pointy birds flying out of bare trees, up and down, left and right they went (each one on a different trajectory), as if they were trying to measure the sky; then he felt feverish, luckily, it was a false alarm, he touched his forehead, everything around him seemed to be going too fast; the sky falling high; the wind howling, ignoring everything else in its path; he had a dreadful thought while listening to the howling wild which kept clouding his view, that in just a few days, just a few hours, minutes even, his children had all grown up, so he wouldn't be able to recognize them.

He snapped out of it (still flabberghasted), his Adam's apple twitching; he stared at a big, white sheet hanging on a fence made of dry stakes – the signal – then crawled to the nearby rocks carrying his rifle and backpack, found a large crack, stuffed the rifle and ammo inside and covered it with grass, dirt, rocks and ferns, in the order in which they appeared under his fingers; he came back, waited for everything to turn pitch black: it shouldn't be a problem, he thought, going down the slope to his house unnoticed, then getting into the hideout. He could do it even now, if only out of spite, snap some branches, camouflage himself and run across the clearing, but he didn't want to risk it. The soldiers may have gone, but there were people in the village who would, just to ingratitate themselves with the new regime, betray him: there had always been people among our folk, he thought, who were like two-way mirrors.

When the day silently slipped into night and stars hailed across the sky – the darkness still cozying up to the edges of the forest – he put on his gun belt, tightened it well and slung the backpack over his shoulders. He evened out the sunken ground, tossed over some leaves with his

feet, straightened himself up and did something he hadn't done since he was a boy: he put his hands together and said out loud: "Please God, help me." He'd ask God for help from time to time, most recently, when he had to breach the perimeter, but this was the first time since childhood that he pressed his hands so hard. First, he followed the path that cut deep into the grass, then carefully went down the dirt steps sideways (this was also the demarcation, where the grassy lowland slanted towards the village); strode across the plump furrows, soaked with night's silence; kept his head down as if searching for something and slowly adjusted his footsteps to the hardness of the soil: he felt something finite in each step. Not a dog barked, as though all of them were in cohorts with him; he walked and could already smell the barn in the clear night air; yes, it smelled, but it did not reek, to him, it was the same as smelling lilacs in the spring, young clover or dry hay, and every time he came across a fresh, steaming pile of dung during all these years of war, he'd close his eyes and nothing could transport him back home as quickly as the smell of dung. Hunched up, he dashed to the linden tree: a few moments later, brimming with anguish, he was already nailed to the old, cracked tree bark, looking up at the dark top of that giant linden tree. He stood on his toes, glanced around, then strode to the front of the house, laying low behind the wooden wall under the shucked corn cobs that were strung on the wall and grazed his head: he held his breath so he could hear better; his heart pounding, he looked up at the window, at the flickery yellow light of the kerosene lamp: shadows of a chipped cylinder, whose every crack he knew, were dancing around on the ceiling, voices booming inside the house, dishes clanking; then he straightened his neck and darted silently to the latched barn door: he was careful not to make the hinges creak.

He sneaked between the warm cattle and the walls plastered with the dark: the animals were all standing, looking at him with eyes wide open; only the chicken, cooped behind a wooden partition wall stirred and batted their wings fearfully, but, he thought, at least his wife upstairs would know he'd finally arrived; he slowly closed the door behind him, stroked the oxen; both had a white vertical stripe from the top of their forehead to their red mouth, he sat on a wooden trough between them, stroking their smooth, tight skin, stretching his arm all the way under to reach a spotted cow. "How's it going?" he said with music in his voice and excitement in his throat, the tension leaving his body with each new breath. The oxen recognized him even before he spoke, curled their necks and caressed him with the warm air from their big nostrils, tried to scoop him with their coarse tongues, so he laughed and had to put his elbows up so they couldn't

lick his face and hair; only the chicken kept cackling, but calmed down after a while: he was happy and excited to be in his barn, he was home, with the oxen, right next to his wife and children, he was so thrilled he felt the urge to sing and hold on to that happiness for as long as he could. Upstairs, above his head, children were running, laughing, floor boards creaked and moved, so the thought of singing was replaced with the one about finding a safe place as soon as possible.

He listened to the sound of urine gushing from a cow on the trodden ground, but as he was getting ready to leave, he suddenly rolled up his sleeves, and with the Moon peaking into the barn the whole time, took the hayfork behind the door and took to cleaning the barn; he gathered dung with the tip of the fork: molded the squishy pile carefully, rolled it and mixed it thoroughly with damp hay, grabbed it with the fork and threw it out in steady swings on the heap next to the outer wall (how much manure had he thrown out of that little window). He was always careful not to hurt the cattle when he forked the manure, that's what he was afraid of the most as a boy: that the cattle might suddenly move and he'd stab them in the leg with the iron tip. Then, with both hands, he took fresh hay and spread it evenly under the cattle, cupped two or three fistfuls of sawdust from a conical pile in the same corner and sprinkled it under the cattle's legs to dry the ground for them to sleep. In the end, he took a bundle of hay from a wicker basket and spread it out fairly in the trough: while he was working, giving himself up completely to the quick movements, he forgot about the war and the people who were trying to catch him as if it were the most ordinary day and he'd just walk out of the barn, go up to the house and have a quiet supper with his wife and children.

For a while, he stood there motionless, looking at the cattle nibbling blissfully from the trough; he walked out slowly and closed the door behind him without making a sound: he looked around carefully: someone's dog was barking from an unknown distance; it had been a long time since he had a dog. A warm wind blew behind the house and the long branches in the tree tops interlaced with one another, the leftover leaves rustled as if whispering messages that no one apart from them should know, saying well, there he was, home at last after so long. Still followed by the moon's gaze laden with night's secrets and the wind which stroked his face soothingly, he stooped and turned to the heap of firmly pressed manure that sweltered with the heat of the day, he shifted his weight slowly from one leg to the other: he stooped even lower and carefully moved a piece of rotten plank entirely covered in a thick, crusty layer of murky dung: a round, narrow

opening appeared below, darker than the night all around him. For a while, he stood motionless next to that heap which looked like a miniature shadow of the barn, and watched his house illuminated by the sharp, yellow window piercing the dark; but he wasn't able to think about anything anymore, he just looked inertly at the sky, then the Moon, as if it was the only conversationalist he wanted: then, in a single movement, he slowly crawled inside and covered the entrance with the plank, adjusting it carefully with both hands, putting out the last beams of moonlight.

In the dark, with a short sigh, he wiped his invisible hands on his trouser legs and pressed his head on his knees; the dense stench made it difficult to think about anything for a while, about this being his fate now, his salvation, and when he finally stepped out of there, there would be a different world outside, a world where his enemies wouldn't be his enemies anymore and he wouldn't be persecuted: it would be like being born again; the only clear and sharp thought on his mind, which, slowly, but surely, managed to chase away the stench from his nostrils, was that the most important thing for him was to rest now: a while later, embraced by safety and warmth which grew with each new, wonderful thing he thought would happen once he was free, he curled into the fetal position, closed his eyes and slowly fell asleep.