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Voroshilovgrad

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[...]

I woke up early, realizing that the opportunity for escape was gone and that there was simply nowhere to run now. To wake up straight into the sunlight that bravely flooded the room and then leave this place behind seemed impossible.

At night I could have still run, but not now. My mind cleared. Trying not to wake Kocha, I got up and started outfitting myself. I put on my fatigues. Under the bed I found my combat boots, beat-up but quite serviceable. It seemed like a good idea to wear them today, in case of skirmishing and bloodshed. I threw on a t-shirt and stepped out. In the scrap heap I found a suitable pipe. Solid heft. Just what I need, I thought, and prepared to face destiny.

Destiny, however, took its time. I sat in the chair outside and after two hours of sunbathing grew sleepy and hungry. However, I knew that the martial enterprises ahead ruled out the very idea of food. And in this state of mind I fell into sweet morning slumber.

Right next to me, a few feet away, the air suddenly parted and I sensed an inexplicable breeze. A hot, heavy animal heat wafted over me. It seeped into the dream so that for an instant I believed I had escaped. I rallied and jolted back to reality. But even awake, I still felt the lingering sun-lit sleepiness of the road, the burning fire and ashes before me, and the sweet restlessness in its wake. Even without opening my eyes I guessed what stood before me breathing out this hellish heat. And what stood, right next to my chair, heavy and hot like August air, was the intercity bus *Icarus*.

It was impossible to confuse this odor with anything else — this is how corpses smell after the resurrection. There it was with silenced engine and darkened windows. Nothing was visible inside, though, to be sure, something was there — I heard cautious, muffled voices. I stood up abruptly and peered inside. Suddenly the door opened. Retard stood on the steps. He was in an Argentine team jersey, blue over white, and he stared at my combat boots.

“What,” he asked, “you are going like that?”

Well,” I replied, hiding the pipe behind my back.

“What's the pipe for?” Retard continued to wonder. “To chase the dogs away?”

“It’s nothing,” I mumbled, and tossed my weapon into the bushes.

“I see,” was all he said. He stepped aside and nodded toward the bus to say, come on, get in.

I stepped inside and greeted the driver. He nodded indifferently. I climbed another step and examined the bus. It was dim; initially I did not even see who was there. I fidgeted, looked at Retard, again peered into the dim interior and waved uncertainly, greeting the passengers of this ghastly conveyance. It was as though I had given a signal. The bus exploded with joyful whistling. A raucous din rolled down the aisle and someone shouted:

“Yo, Herm, man, yo, you sonuvabitch!”

“Yo,” instantly the powerful throats switched on, “yo, you sonuvabitch!”

Cautiously, though friendly, just in case, I smiled in response, still confused.

Retard pushed me lightly in the back, and I tumbled into their friendly embrace, only now making out the faces.

They were all here — Sasha the Python, his eye missing; Andryukha Michael Jackson, with blue church domes tattooed on his chest; Black Dick Simon, with his ear bitten off and his reattached fingers; Dimych the Conductor, his eyelids tattooed; the Balalaeshnikov brothers, all three of them, with one cellphone among them; Kolya the Gimp, with his bald spot dyed white and Hitler mustache; Ivan Petrovich Kibble, with his angular head of many fractures; Grinder Carpo, with his meat grinder, Vasya the Knocker, with bandaged fists. And further in sat Accordion Gesha, and Sirozha the Masher, and Jora the Horse, and Gogi the Believer — in short, all the golden boys, the 1991 Ameliorators, the dream team, which had chewed to pulp all the sport clubs from here to Donbass, even winning the regional Cup. They were all here, the Honored Masters of sport in one sunny valley. All here before me, cheerfully clapping me on the back, ruffling my hair, and laughing happily, glinting out of the shadows with their golden and steel teeth.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked when the first surge of joy died out.

For a moment, silence. Then suddenly a loud roar swept over me — my friends exchanged glances and laughed, clearly enjoying the look on my bewildered face.

“Herm!” shouted Gogi the Believer, “My boy! Are you for real?”

“Yeah, are you for real, Herm? The Balalaeshnikov brothers chimed in, falling backward onto the rickety seats. “Are you for real, bro?”

And all the others too roared loudly, clapping me on the back. Sasha the Python nearly choked on his Camel, and Sirozha the Raper sobbed into the chest of Vasya the Knocker's, who, to his credit, didn't much care for it. Jora the Horse laughed pointing at me and Grinder Carpo laughed, spiritedly spinning his grinder about. And then Retard came up from behind and quietly put his hand on my shoulder. All fell silent.

“What day is it, Herman?” he asked. Someone started laughing, but got shut up with a smack to the head.

“Sunday,” I said, not seeing what he was getting at.

“Exactly, Herman,” said Retard. “Exactly. And this means that today is what?” He asked, looking over at his friends.

“GAME!” They blurted out all as one and then roared gleefully again.

“Get it?” Retard asked me.

“Uh, gotcha,” I said not getting it, “I thought you stopped playing long ago.”

“Actually, we don't play anymore,” Retard said, “but today, Herman, is a special occasion. Today we *are* playing. Moreover, today we are playing the *gas men!*”

And once again the whole company roared with excitement.

“So come on, bud,” Retard pushed me slightly, “take your seat. We need you today.”

I went down the aisle, found a free seat, sat down, and looked around. The bus started. The driver turned around on the broken pavement, bypassed numerous potholes, crawled onto the road, and halted.

“Hey, man!” Vasya the Knocker shouted to the driver, “Give us some music!”

“Come on, man!” happily chimed in the Balalaeshnikovs. “Give us some music!”

“Come on, sweetheart!” Gogi joined in loudly. “Give us some music!”

The rest of the team, too, clamored for music, and when the driver turned around frowning at them, they threw at him their old tattered shirts and socks caked with dirt. He surrendered and blasted some god awful *AC/DC* from the early 80s back into the grime and blackness, back to nowhere, through death to birth, closer to God and the devil, who sat in the rear seat in the smoldering bus and sang along. The bus started abruptly, the players fell backwards into their seats, shouting happily over the loudspeakers, pulling off their striped sweaters and undershirts, and, out of their great sports bags came jerseys with numbers stenciled on the back. They rummaged for their ammunition — black shorts, bandages, and shin-guards — changing in this murk, bumping their heads and falling back into the seats each time the bus hit a pot hole.

“Hey, what about Herm?” the youngest Balalaeshnikov, Ravzan, shouted suddenly.

“Right, what about Herm?” they remembered, and went back digging in their bags.

And Jora the Horse tossed me a jersey, damp, like overnight train bedding. And Andryukha Michael Jackson pulled off his shorts, under which he had yet another pair just like the first one, and gave them to me as if he was giving away something very precious.

And Sasha the Python, glaring with his one eye, pulled out brand new socks and also tossed them to me. Come on Herm, they all shouted, dress, let's fuck up those gas men today, fuck them good! I pulled off my fatigues and put on the uniform. The jersey was too big. Standing in shorts, I looked like a recruit in basic training, but all this was unimportant. Something was missing. I somehow felt I was incomplete, and vainly peered under the seats, looking for answers to all my questions.

“Guys!” Ravzan shouted again. “He’s barefoot!”

“Oh, fuck!” the guys agreed. “He is! Give him cleats! Somebody, give him cleats!” they begged one another.

But nobody had extra cleats, neither Sasha the Python, nor Black Dick Simon, not even Andryukha Michael Jackson, who pulled off yet another pair of black shorts and gave them to the eldest of the Balalaeshnikovs. There was a sense of disappointment, the whole idea suddenly lost all meaning. Because what was I good for without the cleats? I couldn't play in army boots, could I? I looked at Retard and shrugged. The rest of the team also looked at Retard as though expecting a miracle, as if hoping that now he would feed us all with five loaves, put one pair of magical cleats on all eleven of us, and lead us to a complete and incontestable victory. Retard also felt the general tension, sensed the weight of the moment. He knew that the team's spirit, its fire, hung in the balance. He bent over and from somewhere under the seat pulled out his battered briefcase. It was the kind of case that, in the eighties, would normally be owned by boy scouts, engineers, or high school military commanders. He put it on his knee, balancing between the seats on one foot, slowly opened it, and calmly took out his old spare Adidas, which he had played in fifteen years before. The team stared at the Adidas spellbound. These were Retard's legendary cleats! Multiply stitched with fishing line, missing two studs, almost colorless now, they smelled of the steppe grasses that had been ground permanently into the worn leather. And holding them out, Retard said, “Here you go, Herm, specially for you.”

The team roared approval of their captain and slapped each other on the back. I took the shoes and sat down.

Meanwhile the bus raced along. The sun threw sharp barbed rays through the windows. The light made the friends' eyes flash wildly and gleamed blue on their skin, as though they were drowned. The Balalaeshnikov brothers were changing in front of me. The youngest, Ravzan, had a cat's head tattooed on his left shoulder. On the right thigh he had a woman burning at the stake, and on the left he had some demon impaled on a knife. The cat, who initially was obviously supposed to be wild, predatory, and independent, appeared instead a rather well-fed domestic,

perhaps because since the application of this image Ravzan had also gained quite a bit of weight, spreading the cat across his forearm. The woman at the stake looked like our high school chemistry teacher. The middle Balalaeshnikov, Shamil, under the left nipple had several tattooed stars, like those on a brandy bottle. Under the stars a Gothic inscription said, "There is no God but Allah." The skin of the elder of the brothers, Baruch, was also covered with stars, crosses, and crucifixes, and the area of the abdomen showed an eagle with a suitcase in its beak. This was supposed to symbolize Baruch's propensity for escaping from penitentiaries. It looked like Retard's briefcase. Checking out the rest of my old friends, I noticed, softly outlined by the bright sunlight, a similar riot of images on bodies that had been battered by life and rivals. Their backs and waists, chests and shoulder blades displayed skulls and sickles, women's faces and incomprehensible numbers, skeletons and images of the Virgin, grim oaths and dignified clichés. Black Dick Simon looked an ascetic; on his chest one could read, "My God is Adolf Hitler," and on the back, "Crime is the point; I rule this joint."

Gradually the crew calmed down. All seemed to feel the nearing of the great battle and reflected on whether they were ready to do it again — to jump higher, play harder, push themselves to the limit, and fuck up the gas men good.

Meanwhile, the driver slowed down and, rolling off the highway, took the battered road that turned off to the left and vanished behind the nearest hills. I looked out the window, trying to recognize the once-familiar landscape. When was I here last? Spring, fifteen years ago. We came with this same crew, only that time my friends didn't resemble zombies with painted limbs. They were all younger, if not kinder. How many times did we drive up and down this road among the hills, trying to get to the God-forsaken country populated by gas workers?

How many years had the gas workers been sitting here, trapped like explorers on an ice floe?

They came here somewhere around the late eighties. It turned out that gas fields nestled in the most arid places, between the rivers, where the paved road and Soviet rule ended, in dry, rich, dark earth. An entire gas workers' colony was sent here from somewhere in the Carpathians. They were supposed to dig in and pump gas here for the good of the motherland. They came here like gypsies, in a long wagon train, from the northwest after crossing the Dnieper near Kremenchug. They lived in mobile construction trailers and transported these trailers by heavy, marsh-green, military flatbeds. The vast expanses of fertile land, the sheer mass of black earth, and general absence of life astonished the gas workers. This was definitely not the Carpathians. They remained — the nation needed gas. Gas, however, was eluding them, like a Mujahedin detachment, leading them into the depths of the sweet blue steppes, playing with them, teasing them, but not allowing them to catch it. In the early nineties the searching halted for a while; however, somebody in the new government quickly appropriated this business and the colony remained.

At first, the locals approached the gas workers with caution — when they drove their trucks to town to buy bread or see a movie, the locals played dirty and ambushed them,

thoroughly beat them up, and threw them out of the dance clubs. One should give the gas men their due — they quickly adapted to their new living conditions and came to the city only in groups, once in a while starting their own fights with the locals. Several times the local racketeers nearly burned their trailers together with the gas rigs, but the police advised leaving them alone, the gas workers reported directly to the Ministry, so they also received their orders directly from Kyiv.

Besides, they quickly formed a soccer team.

Between the gas rigs, in the sun-burnt fields, they made a flat area where they wiped out all their visitors. They played rough and reckless, nobody dared to stand up to them. No one but us. We played them like equals, and if we lost on the field, we made sure to even the score at home. That wasn't about sports; more fundamental things were at stake. The gas workers came to the town like a commando squad, on trucks plastered with mud, and trampled down everything under their feet. If they got beat up, they might slink out of the stadium and dissolve in the blue haze of the steppes filled with ghosts and natural gas. Or, sometimes they started a fight right on the field. This is when the local government received a hysterical call from the Ministry in Kyiv.

Gradually the gas men grew wilder. They rarely used the highway. At first, they received movies and library books, the latter they would tear up and roll into cigarettes. Later when the owners changed, a helicopter dropped canned food and tabloids, attempting to keep their work habits from getting any worse. Most of them got used to the solitude and monotony of the landscape; in any case, there was nowhere else to go. Think about it: where could you go from Nirvana? I had no idea what their life had been like in recent years.

Surprisingly, everything seemed to be repeating itself, turning back — back to nowhere, back to the void.

A large, orange sun crawled above. It touched the roof of the bus, hauled itself over the neighboring hill, and slowly drifted westward, dragging its beams behind like seaweed. It was somewhere around three. We crept along unpaved roads, meandered in green fields, and strained to discern gas rigs on the horizon.

The driver allegedly knew the way. After all, everyone knew these places well, so for a long time nobody paid attention to where we were and where we were heading. At first, the driver confidently drove his overheated vehicle up the next hill, maneuvered among the fresh dense grasses, and went around the blackthorn and holes. Gradually it grew hotter — dust came through the windows and settled on the passengers' cropped heads. The driver became irritable and nervous. He forced the vehicle down the emerald roads, wandered around and was finally lost in this infinity unfolding before us and promising nothing good. The sun blazed, the birds settled on the roof when the *Ikarus* stopped at the crossroads, and the rigs were nowhere in sight. For some time now Retard had stood next to the driver and gave directions, nervously looking

out of the side window. It did not help. We had an impression that we were moving in space without a perspective — it just went on and on, with no coordinates, just grass and corn, dust and gas — that same gas that so persistently haunted our present opponents.

Sitting in the *Icarus* amid sleepy friends and dead silence, I felt the presence of this gas somewhere at ocean level, in the soil around. I imagined how it fills out all cavities and gaps, how it moves like underground rivers, how it breaks free in the midnight and flares, burning the skies like alcohol burns the throat. Gas does not allow emptiness to grow; it helps to keep the delicate balance that exists around us, so I thought in that heat. Gas, like spring water, looks for a way out, forcing its way through the soil, through abandoned wells and fox holes.

Toward the evening the driver stopped in the middle of a flat valley and refused to go any further. Retard didn't insist; we needed to look around. Lazily and despondently the team straggled out of the *Icarus* oven.

The Balalaeshnikovs pulled out a two-liter Pepsi bottle with pure alcohol in it. I looked at Retard. I thought, are they really going to drink, what about the game, but Retard gave me a stern look and drank from the bottle first. My buddies littered the grass and lay there silently. The driver stayed in the bus, feeling, obviously, responsible.

It was quiet and hot, but the heat was gradually subsiding. The sun rolled farther and father, making our shadows long and sad. Swallows swooped over the grass. The Balalaeshnikovs took the second bottle out. I went to talk to Retard.

“Alex,” I said, “give me a lift.”

Initially Retard didn't understand, but then he got it. He went to the *Icarus* and leaned into it. I hopped on his back and, holding onto the side view mirror, firmly planted my feet on his shoulders.

“Damn, watch it up there,” Retard asked, quite peaceably however.

Because he was short, I had to jump.

I threw my leg up on the mirror, pulled myself up, and crawled onto the roof. A fish thrown onto a hot skillet must feel something similar turns into something less comfortable. The roof was burned and covered with a thick layer of dust. I stood up.

“Hey, Herm,” shouted Ravzan from below. “Wait, I'm coming up too.”

“Oh, and me too,” joined in Shamil.

“Me too, me too,” Baruch wouldn't be left behind.

They quickly rose from the warm grass and deftly, like lizards, climbed onto the roof. Soon all four of us stood on top and looked for any signs of a road.

Long hot streaks of fading light fell across the horizon lighting up the grass and corn stalks. Our shadows sprawled under the evening sun like grease stains on wrapping paper. The sky was lit up from below like water in an aquarium. Haze hung on the horizon as if there was water there that had evaporated and risen from invisible pools. It was hard to see anything at all, the sun rays pierced the shimmering air, hopelessly blurring the view. However, our eyes gradually got used to the light, and a dull blue background emerged through the sunlight fading into evening darkness. From the distance it looked as if a large amount of light materialized and gathered in one spot. This light towered and grew, propped underneath by strange structures thrust into the air.

“What’s this?” Shamil asked, pointing to the barely visible structures.

“Drilling rigs,” I said.

“You betcha, the rigs,” Baruch laughed.

When we finally arrived, it was a quiet, peaceful evening. The sun set beyond the corn plantations and warm air rose slowly into the sky. The gas men had not been able to wait any longer, and counting the game a forfeit, had started a bonfire in the middle of the soccer field. They were sitting by the fire cooking some glop in large cauldrons. Behind them rose the rigs, and their muddy tractors and sleeping trailers stood around the perimeter of the field. and Sheep wandered around, and German shepherds came to the fire, taking food from their hands. It was still daylight, so the fire burned completely invisibly in the setting sun. The gas men sat on the trampled soccer turf and prepped their mutton. They looked like Mongols who were resting after a successful raid on the gas rigs of the Kyevan Princedom. They saw our bus roll in and, tense, lifted their Mongol asses off the ground and silently waited to see what would happen next. Almost all of them were short, had close-cropped hair, wore gym pants, and were bare-chested. Many had gold teeth, some had crosses on their necks, and none had tattoos. [Tatoos as a mark of prison (in the US called “prison tats”)?]

They looked at us with hostility and distrust.

“That’s it, we’re here” said Retard and, holding his briefcase, got out of the bus first.

We jumped out after him and, clustered together, started crossing the field.

The gas men set out to meet us. Slowly we converged. The gas men frowned and spat on the grass. We balled our fists and cracked our knuckles. Dogs ran around barking furiously. Finally, the gas men's foreman, a bow-legged guy with gold teeth in a [wife beater] and dark blue gym pants, gave up. “Get out of here!” he yelled at the dogs, and they reluctantly ran off and hid behind the trailers. All went quiet.

“Hi, ass men,” said Retard.

“Gas men,” the foreman corrected him.

“Same fucking dif,” replied Andryukha Michael Jackson, and the whole team nodded in agreement, same fucking dif.

“You’re late,” the foreman said somewhat sharply.

“So what?” Retard asked.

“You forfeited!” said a bespectacled man with scars on his stomach, apparently an accountant.

“Who says?” Retard asked again.

“Federation,” the accountant told him defiantly.

“What federation?” Retard stared. “Federation of Ass Men?”

“Gas men,” corrected him the foreman.

Our team laughed tensely in unison. When we stopped the foreman spoke again.

“Alex he turned to Retard, “don't fuck with me, you’re really late.”

“And what now, you aren't going to play with us?” He wouldn't budge.

“The game must be counted as forfeited,” repeated the foreman less confidently.

"Come on," pressured Retard, "are you playing? Or are you afraid?"

“We are not afraid!” blurted the foreman. Clearly Retard knew which buttons to push.

“Yeah, we aren't afraid!” the accountant joined in.

“Then let's play,” said Retard.

The foreman turned to his men. They formed a circle and began to discuss something whispering softly, the cropped foreheads together. Finally the foreman came back.

“OK,” he said. “We’ll play. We aren’t afraid. But you’re still late!”

“Well, write out a complaint,” replied Retard, "to your federation."

And that was that.

The gas men put out their fires, removed the caldrons with the mutton, and prepared for the game. Our driver took it upon himself to be our referee. The gas men were only twelve in number including the accountant. Like the apostles. You could say that their bench was fatally short. Only the accountant was sitting on this bench; he wasn't allowed onto the field because of his nearsightedness. Leaving the accountant in reserve, the gas men scattered on the field. They looked so similar that it was difficult to distinguish them from one other. The foreman put on ladies leather gloves and went to the goal. Retard gathered us around and put his briefcase at his feet.

"Listen up," he said, “everybody give all he’s got. Got it?”

“Gotchya, Alex,” Vasya the Knocker answered for the team.

“Gotchya,” confirmed the Balalaeshnikovs.

“Gotchya,” I added.

Retard chose Black Dick Simon, long and thin, to be our goalie. He ran to the goal, jumped and hung on the crossbar. The Balalaeshnikovs were to play defense.

All the other players took their usual positions. Retard told me to play with him in front. Grinder Carpo and Vasya the Knocker, who had no place in the first string, wandered disappointed behind the goal, where the rest of the reserve waited. Carpo, menacing, brandished his grinder. Vasya fell into the warm grass and fell asleep peacefully tucking Retard's briefcase under his head. The captains met in the middle; the driver was hanging about, holding an old, heavy leather ball with lacing on it.

"Listen up, Alex," the foreman began importantly, "No massacre on the field. Protests after the match."

"If you say so, if you say so." Retard didn't protest.

The sun was dying down, anyhow. It was time to start.

We started.

The game went wrong right away. The gas men, perhaps after their mutton dinner, ran heavily and did not move forward. On our side the Balalaeshnikovs for some reason got jittery. They missed the ball, got into each other's way, and argued with the referee.

Early in the fifth minute Ravzan missed again and immediately got slapped on his head by Shamil. The referee stopped the game and did not come up with anything better than to call a penalty on our team. He even wanted to remove Shamil for unsporting behavior, but the victim personally put in a word for him, stating that it was a family matter, and advised the referee to stay out of it.

Then one of the gas men scored, it seemed, accidentally. The ball slipped through thick grass, past Simon, and flew into our goal. All the gas men cheered. The dogs howled in response and the sheep wailed. But they didn't celebrate for long — in the next attack Retard ran across half of the field alone and put the ball into the foreman's goal. The foreman dove, but too late and too clumsily, and in the end got tangled in the net like a big catfish. Both teams had to pull him out. We had to start all over again.

The gas men stubbornly wouldn't move forward, while our team preferred a positional struggle, so that if one of the opponents received the ball, we tackled him and ran to the judge to argue. That judge of ours turned out to be half-blind. He couldn't see the ball in this twilight at all, so just took our word for it. Soon Retard scored again. It happened quite by surprise. One of the gas men mistook him for a team-mate in the darkness and screwed up. For Alex it was a matter of honor to score from twenty meters. We were in the lead now.

Finally, the gas men mobilized and moved up, abandoning the lonely foreman to the company of the mournful, hungry, bleating sheep. Retard scored the third goal during a rapid counterattack. He simply went back to our goal, rescued the ball from gas men, took it across the entire field, went around the foreman at a high speed and ran directly into the flock of sheep. But

right after that the Balalaeshnikovs knocked down three gas men in their zone — Ravzan knocked down one and Shamil did two, and the referee called a penalty kick at our goal. The gas men scored. Retard was terribly mad, but wouldn't sit the Balalaeshnikovs out.

Overall it looked as if we were all in his way. By the end of the half, he beat the foreman twice, and similarly, the gas men went by Simon twice. In such case, a commentator would have said that the audience had to be enjoying what was happening on the field. In our case the accountant was our only audience, and he openly enjoyed all this.

During the break the hosts drove trucks closer to the field, started the engines, and turned on the headlights. The field lit up with powerful theatrical spotlights. The shepherds' eyes and the accountant's frames shone in the dark. Retard gathered us around, squatted down and put the briefcase in front of him. He took out a bottle of alcohol and sent it round. All looked at the captain respectfully.

“Give it all you have, guys,” Retard kept repeating, “give it all you have.”

All applied themselves to the bottle and nodded in agreement. The Balalaeshnikovs stood aside and exchanged unpleasantries amongst themselves; it was unclear what exactly the matter was.

The second half didn't change the pattern of the game much.

Sirozha the Rapist, who came off the bench to substitute the Python, tried to calm the Balalaeshnikovs down — he yelled at them, drove them forward, and cajoled them to pay attention. He played in their positions and was generally underfoot. It all ended up with him trying to knock the ball out of our goal and instead scoring for the gas men.

After that he asked to be sent off the field. He was replaced by Grinder Carpo, who did nothing particularly useful for us. The game rolled to its logical conclusion. The gas men kept back — a draw, apparently, suited them fine, and our team did not have enough energy to turn the game around. Retard did all he could to tear down the rivals' defenses, but one's as good as none on a mine field. Hard as he tried, he couldn't go around eleven angry gas men alone for the sixth time. The game was supposed to be over, but the myopic referee could not see well enough to tell time, so we overplayed a good five minutes. Everybody was casting glances in the direction of the bus that loomed darkly in the distance, wondering if we could get out of here in one piece. Even Retard seemed to be resigned. For the last time Simon took the ball to the enemy's half of the field, Andryukha Michael Jackson took the pass and, dribbling past two gas men, ran forward. He nearly came alone face-to-face with the foreman, but a gas man in the last second tipped the ball over the end-line and we had a corner kick. Both teams gathered at the foreman's goal. Even Simon came, dropping his goalie gloves. Retard kicked with his left and the ball curved perfectly right into the gas men's penalty area. It caromed off one of them, bounced to another, ricocheted off him towards their goalie, who barely got it with his foot. The ball took off like a shell shot from a cannon, rebounded off my head. And flew into the goal. I didn't even see how it happened — I was standing with my back to the goal.

Victory was ours. Exhausted gas men helplessly fell into the grass. The foreman wiped sweat and tears off his face, and our team hoisted me on their shoulders and ran across the field to the bench.

Fearing the wrath of the gas men, the referee hurried ahead of us. Last of all, Retard limped in grinning. The dogs ran after us sadly howling into the dark skies into which even the trucks powerful headlights sank without a trace.

Joy filled our hearts, joy and a sense of justice. Everything had happened as it should have. Who would doubt our ultimate victory? Our journey had been destined to end with triumph. That's why none of us were surprised.

I shook my friends' hands, marveling over this whole adventure that had ended so well, surprised that so many years had passed but everything was returning to its rightful place, everything was as before and progressed accordingly. It both comforted and excited me. Here it was — the joy of recognition, the joy of return, precisely what I'd been missing in the last years, since the last match, in fact. And thinking all this, I saw in my peripheral vision that the gas men had recovered from defeat, had risen to their feet, and now were slowly but unstoppably moving in our direction. It looked as if they were not going to let us go that easily. One of our guys looked where I was looking and also saw what they were doing. Our cheering stopped. We went to meet them. The teams came together. After all, I thought, that's how it was supposed to end anyway. Even the accountant was ready for a fight. He left his glasses behind, apparently to keep them from being broken, and so groped his way in. Gasping for breath, the gas men stopped. We stopped. The headlights beat right into our eyes and made our figures translucent, almost invisible, as though we were ghosts gathered here to clear the air with other ghosts. In the headlights crowns and crosses glinted occasionally. The foreman stepped forward.

“Alex,” he turned to Retard. “The last goal doesn't count.”

“What the fuck?” Retard judiciously asked him.

“Offsides,” said the accountant.

“You dumb ox,” Andryukha Michael Jackson said in response. “I'll feed you to your sheep.”

“Don't fuck around, brother,” the foreman said grimly. “Offsides.”

“Offsides?” Retard asked again.

“Offsides!” the gas men repeated moodily but stubbornly.

“Well,” Retard said and suddenly pulled out brass knuckles.

And the rest of us got out brass knuckles, nunchucks, and baseball bats. And the gas men too pulled out from behind their backs picks, leaded web belts, and pieces of brick. A kind of overtime was about to begin.

Suddenly the two Balalaeshnikov brothers came forward, Ravzan and Shamil.

“What the fuck?” asserted Ravzan. “What ‘offsides’? We had offsides in the first half.”

“No, we didn’t,” said Shamil, correcting him.

“What do you mean, ‘we didn’t’?” Ravzan asked. “We had it. In the first.”

“Fuck, no!” Shamil stood his ground.

“Brother,” Ravzan got twitchy, “bullshit. Anyway, you weren't even there. And I saw it — clean offside.

“No,” Shamil repeated firmly.

“Brother, shut up. OK?”

“There was no offsides,” Shamil insisted.

“Why are you bullshitting?” Ravzan started losing it. “Why the fuck are you bullshitting?”

The teams didn’t dare to interfere.

“So what?” Shamil accepted the challenge.

“Well what?” Ravzan started heating up.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Shamil started getting hot himself.

“Not a fuck!” Ravzan replied and suddenly hit Shamil in the jaw.

Shamil dropped to the turf, but quickly picked himself up, grabbed someone's baseball bat and threw it at his brother. Ravzan bent backwards and the bat went by his ear. Ravzan yelled and charged.

Ravzan slugged him again and kept punching, but Shamil twisted away and wrestled his brother over. Now he was punching Ravzan. Suddenly Baruch jumped out of the crowd, kicked his brothers apart, seized them by their collars, slammed their foreheads together, threw them on the grass, and punched them both. Surprised, Shamil and Ravzan punched back at first, but then they grabbed Baruch's feet, and dumped him down on the field. Then they sat on him and began to punch him together. But not for long — Baruch, like a snake, writhed out from under their heavy bodies, leaned into both of them, and began to squeeze them like sacks of potatoes. After about five minutes all three rolled apart gasping and spitting bloody saliva on the grass. The gas men looked at all this in shock. They stood in silence, not daring to move.

Finally, the foreman cautiously called to Retard.

“Hey, Alex,” his voice was dry and frightened. “To hell with you. Get out.”

“What about the offsides?” Retard asked again just in case.

“No offsides,” the foreman said dispelling all doubts. “Not.”