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Etude and Bell Tower

So to join up you dropped your pants. It was that easy. You dropped them and then the block commander—that was his official rank, not “sector commander” or some such military designation, but “block commander,” a title better suited for a neighborhood crime patrol—he squatted down so his face was level with your crotch, and you were either admitted to the ranks or you were killed. Of course, no one was ever killed. Everyone was always admitted to the ranks because if you weren’t one of us, you had no business being there in the first place. In my case, there meant the bell tower of the cathedral on the southeastern side of the market district. I had an offer to go to the skytower closer to downtown, which was a hotbed of action. But I told the recruiter I was afraid of heights and that I didn’t think I could lean out an open window seventeen stories high without vertigo getting the better of me.

The truth was I remembered the bell tower from a recital I once attended in the city in my youth. It was the only other time I’d ever been to the city. I remembered the fruit and vegetable stalls just up from where the cobblestone alleyway met the sidewalk. My thought was that at night I could sneak down through the tower and the cathedral sanctuary to pilfer a potato or an onion. That way I would be eating something other than the rations we were served. At home in the provinces I’d heard stories of boys going hungry from the insubstantial portions of jerky and tomato soup supplied to each outpost. I knew there were no sheep in the city like we shot and stewed at home. And, unlike the others, I never sank so low as to eat the grubs that were plentiful in the wood rot all around us. So to the bell tower I went, where the block commander was kind enough to remove the cigarette from his mouth before approving my cock.

“What did I tell you?” I said when he stood up. “I’m a garden spade, not a flat-head shovel.”

“That’s only the first test,” he said, unsmiling. He appeared to be my age, twenty seven, with short-cropped hair and a carrot-colored nose. Later he told me his name, Oscar, and that he was raised a kilometer to the east in the city’s outermost arrondissement. I once asked if he ever recognized anyone

who happened into his cross hairs. He said no and that it bothered him more than if he had.

“You can shoot?” he asked me.

“I can shoot.”

He wanted to know where I’d learned. I told him the name of my home province. It was Oscar’s job to be suspicious of volunteers. He made some crack about the poppies rumored to be grown there and waited to see if I corrected him. So I did, but he didn’t seem relieved. If anything, my answer only aggrieved him. He spat out his cigarette, not bothering to extinguish the lit tobacco, and poked a finger over his shoulder.

“That’s Stéfan and the other’s Hector.” Our two comrades lay on stacked bales of hay at their assigned parapets. One looked over and jerked up his thumb in friendship. He was porcelain-faced and far too pretty for the army. The other refused to take his cheek off his gunstock and merely waved over his shoulder. Oscar bent his head forward in a confidential whisper. “Stéfan you won’t find objectionable. He’s a boy. But Hector aspires to his name. He’s our ideologue.” Oscar drew back and spoke openly now. “They take the south and west. I draw east, which leaves you north. You object?”

“What’s to object to? No sunrise, no dusk. My fellow garden spades!”—I was trying to appear an enthusiast—“Being new here, I know there must be a downside to the north. Am I right?”

“You’ll lose the humor, if you please,” Oscar snapped. He looked at his watch. “You’ve got forty-five minutes before the pedestrian rush. Then you can show us what the provinces are made of. You understand the rules?”

“Yes.”

“That should be yes, *sir*, because I am your commander. But since there are only four of us present we’ll dispense with the obsequies, as long as you don’t need a reminder of the rules. Recite, please.”

I cleared my throat and tried to remember what the recruiter taught me.

“I’m not to hit anyone. I’m to hit the brick, cinder block, and pavement first. Windows are an option only if no one is within five yards. I should avoid storm drains and man-hole covers for fear a ricochet may strike a bystander.”

Oscar was staring at me, trying to ferret out any possible sarcasm. Or maybe he was hoping for a trace of some.

“Your recruiter trained you well. Who was he?”

I said his name—a young man from my province, some years my junior, who’d left and returned home with promises of food, shelter, and revenge for the indignities of the centuries. Those were his actual words, the indignities

of the centuries. When I told this to Oscar, his grim face cracked and he finally smiled.

“Him,” he said with contempt. “He and Hector spring from the same stream. In all the times I’ve heard him speak I’ve yet to hear a word I would ever mistake for his own.” Then, as if realizing he was a block commander, he resumed his seriousness. “Forty minutes.” He tapped the face of his wrist-watch. “Get some rest.”

I stretched out on my bales and propped my chin on the parapet edge. The truth was I had no interest in avenging the centuries’ indignities. I was here strictly for the money. In the past year my family’s harvest yielded just enough to feed our family. But then my wife’s menstrual cycle failed to come round. When that happened my mother took me by the collar and gave me the business. “Now you’ve done it!” she said. “Another mouth! Now it’s up to you if you want to make amends for this indulgence of yours. You have no choice but to enlist. You are likely to be shot the first day and then where will we be?”

I had no intention of taking a bullet. I knew there was a demand for snipers. I knew I could split a bird’s heart from a soccer field away without musing a feather. All I had to do was demonstrate this to the recruiter, and once he sent word up the chain of command, I was in. Provided I could pass the dropped-pants test.

From the parapet I saw my firing range. It was a block of business fronts, mostly shoemakers, tailors, a pharmacy. There wasn’t much foot traffic, only a brave few who scurried from doorway to doorway with bags of candles or kerosene for those nights when electricity was in short supply. I’d heard that shopkeepers had stopped accepting cash to barter their stock for foodstuffs. I thought of my wife and her protruding belly and I was glad she was in the sticks. There was a cellar beneath the cow stall in the barn that was big enough to accommodate her and my father in case a renegade division came upon our farm. My mother could deal with them. They wouldn’t hurt an old woman. At least that’s what we’d banked on earlier whenever the insurgencies arose. They would shoot the men and abduct women under forty, keeping them as indulgences until the next village promised a fresh bounty. As my mother told me, insurgents had a taste for pregnant women. “Because they’re perverts!” she insisted when I questioned how she knew this for a fact.

Forty minutes passed and Oscar was screwing a scope onto the bridge of a beautiful new rifle. When he handed it to me, I smelled the barrel.

“Never been kissed,” I said, and I hoisted the butt to my shoulder.

Through the scope I saw the magnified concrete and pockmarked boughs lining the street—planted, I assumed, by the city fathers in better days. “What is it?”

“Mauser 86SR,” Oscar answered. He stood at my back while I drew along the street.

“It’s light. And I like a manual bolt. And what’s this? The stock is ventilated. Fancy. I suppose it’s Russian.”

“German,” he told me.

I was surprised. “How are they snuck past the embargo lines?”

“I couldn’t say if I knew. Stéfan claims they’re floated down the Danube, Hector believes they’re trucked over the Carpathians. My guess, however, is that they’re dropped from yankee planes. However they’re financed, it’s clear that our patrons have deep pockets.”

“Then they won’t feel it as they fill mine,” I said. “Ammunition?”

He tossed a bale off a nearby stack and kicked open a crate with his boot. Inside were the magazines, the bullets resting in sweet, silent rows. Oscar passed me one of the clips.

“Nine rounds,” he said when he caught me counting. He looked at his watch once more. “Just right for our needs. Too easy otherwise to get carried away. You get carried away, you hit someone, then someone will try to hit us back. Our job is to instill panic, keep the shop shelves empty, starve the unclean into leaving.”

I snapped the magazine into place. Then I lay back on the bale and waited. Within minutes pedestrians began to crowd the doorways and peek out from under the overhangs. It was nearly three o’clock, when the bravest of the fruit traders manned their stalls. Maybe they weren’t braver, just greedier. In return for their stringy green onion stalks or meager cabbage heads they would accept jewelry, baseball cards, dust ruffles and stolen hotel towels. All of these items they then sold for cash on the black market. That’s why both sides, however much the one hated the other, agreed to hate profiteers most of all.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Oscar said.

I caught a woman’s prancing feet on the walkway. I waited until she was out of my line of sight and then I worked the bolt and pulled the trigger. There was less kickback than I expected—just a short hammer pull and the burnt cartridge smell. I didn’t have time to see what I’d hit, but I could see the woman was prostrate on the ground. I pulled the bolt and shot again. This time a small chunk of curb several inches from her toes popped up and dis-

solved into dust. I drew several degrees to the west, behind her, and hit a window ledge. By this time those heading for market had taken cover. They were prepared at any moment to lurch behind trash cans and awnings. Because the streets were fairly empty, I could fire without delay. I let several shots go in a line that dotted the soiled facades of the buildings. Then, for a finale, I aimed down one of the stalls and drilled three heads of lettuce. When I looked up, I expected Oscar to be impressed. But he was simply there, leaning along the tower wall.

“You’ll do,” he said. As he returned to his post, I was left wondering whether he’d hoped I would fail the audition.

That was how things went over the next few weeks. Six times a day, at six and nine a.m., at noon, and then at three, six, and nine p.m., the four of us strafed our small territory, making sure we hit no one while disrupting the lives of everyone. Across the city, there were fourteen other sniper squads, some with as many as ten men to a post. We weren’t allowed to leave the bell tower except for bathroom breaks. That left us with little to do but sit and talk, except that no one talked. By night we slept to the sound of church mice nibbling our bales. During the day chugging trucks and cockroach-shaped Volkswagens provided a constant parade that kept us from thinking about how rarely we spoke. Every other week we were granted a night’s leave. The higher-ups didn’t want us seen entering and exiting the cathedral, however. We were forced to take our holidays after dark, which proved unfortunate since the cafés and cantinas closed at dusk. All in all, city life was far less glamorous than what the recruiter promised.

“My fellow garden spades,” I said whenever the lack of conversation grew oppressive. “Why is it, do you suppose, that our enemies should prefer the shape of a flat-head shovel?”

No one spoke at first. Then Hector, the more bellicose of my companions, said, “They aren’t circumcised because the blood in their pricks fuels their barbarous souls.”

Stéfan chuckled at this, but as I was lying on my back with my head pillowed by my windbreaker, I could see the disgusted look on Oscar’s face.

“That’s a wife’s tale,” I told the boy when Oscar chose not to express his disdain. “For them, the abomination is disfiguring the body. To cut the flesh is to wound the soul. We continue this gruesomeness in the belief that it’s cleanly and a precaution against infection, but that is a medicinal folly.”

“Professor,” Oscar said softly. He was sitting up, twisting some baling wire around his wrist, fashioning a makeshift bracelet. “You talk too much. We

aren't here to teach or learn. We have a job. We do it and nothing more."

After that, I knew we were condemned to remain strangers with nothing but the shape of our penises between us.

My time in the bell tower should have ended in this endless tedium. Neither the block commanders nor our esteemed higher-ups wanted war, so we felt confident that we would never be called upon to shoot at a moving target. That made our duty easier, for we didn't think of those we terrorized as real people. Of course, I did at first. I'd never before seen a human body through a scope. It was only natural in the beginning that I should empathize with the housewife whose moldy loaf and lone tomato were spilled when I opened fire. I myself had suffered through seasons of hunger, and I knew the ache of an empty stomach. But such feelings stopped quickly. I reminded myself that I was a loyalist. If not to the cause, at least to my family.

Then one morning events occurred that brought a change to our bell tower. We met our six a.m. quota of confusion, then breakfasted. We were preparing for our mid-morning strike when the sound of music found its way to our ears. I poked my head over the wall. My first thought was that a traffic accident had occurred. Down below, oddly angled, sat a baby grand piano. Beneath the keyboard where a pianist would normally tuck his legs was the bubbled front of a Volkswagen. It appeared as though the car had nosed its way under the casing to nudge it aside. But then I saw that several metal braces crudely attached the piano to the Volkswagen; the protruding bolts brought to mind Frankenstein and all those legends of body parts stitched together. Adding to the strangeness was the fact that the top of the little car had been sheered away and the seats removed, replaced by a pair of two-by-fours that rested on the door frames. A roly-poly man in a tuxedo sat atop the two-by-fours. He was hunched over the baby grand, and his hands were dancing up and down the keys. The sound he made was furious and violent, a windstorm of noise that scratched the walls.

"What is that?" Stéfan asked. My station mates leaned along my backside.

"It's noise," Hector complained, his face twisted in a groan. "A screech, a caterwaul."

But it was Oscar, his head bent forward, who answered the question. "It's Prokofiev," he told us. "The First Violin Sonata, I believe. Of course, there is no violin, so you are only hearing the melody as arranged for piano."

We looked at him, but there was no emotion, no hint of another life he might have lived. There was just a sort of vague familiarity in his eyes.

"You recognize that racket-maker?" Hector demanded. I should mention

that Hector suffered from an unflattering harelip, so that when he spoke with inflamed passion—which is to say, whenever he spoke at all—the top of his mouth threatened to unzip itself all the way up to his nose. The more he spoke the more his teeth pushed out from his rubbery gums until you wondered whether he might be trying to squeeze his entire jawbone through the rictus.

Oscar was nodding. “I know who he is. He was once affiliated with the conservatory, back when the conservatory was open. He used to teach technique there. Before that he was a professional. He’s played his share of concert halls, if I’m not mistaken. Even if he didn’t, he could have—listen to him. Do you hear those bass notes? They require a nimble brutality, if there is such a thing. It’s too bad he doesn’t have a violinist. The melody makes for an upsetting contrast; that contrast is what the whole mood of the sonata is about, I suppose. Prokofiev was capturing the discord between dream and nightmare.” He shrugged, realizing that his words meant nothing to us. “It’s a protest, of course. The man is making his point. But the selection is too obscure. Who cares about Prokofiev anymore?”

“What should I do?” I asked.

Oscar stood and straightened his flak jacket. He looked at his watch.

“It’s almost time. We do our usual work, with accompaniment or not.” The piano’s noise rose again in another thick sledgehammer of sound. “It’s a shame we can’t wait for him to finish this particular figure. The third movement is more plangent, a wind in a graveyard.” He stopped long enough to perk an ear out of the bell tower. “That’ll have to wait for another time and place, unfortunately. To stations.”

I stretched across my bale and sighted down the far end of the block, the usual starting point of my barrage. The corner facade had been hit so often that it appeared scarred by chainsaw serrations. Oscar began his countdown and gave the command. I wasn’t surprised that the firing drowned out the music.

When the calamity settled, however, I *was* surprised to discover the tuxedoed man still sat atop the Volkswagen. His concentration was unbroken, despite the splattered eggs, overturned bicycles, and howling dogs that filled the street. I looked to Oscar’s face, which flickered with enthusiasm.

“Ah, we’re just in time for the finale,” he said. “Listen—the bass part will rumble like a hollow belly!”

By the third day it became apparent that, however gifted the pianist might be, his repertoire was limited to this one piece. Each morning the ass end of

the baby grand would poke slowly around the street corner, prodded along by the Volkswagen it was grafted to. The car never moved faster than ten miles an hour, presumably because the shaky wheels screwed to the piano legs couldn't be trusted on the irregularly laid cobblestones. The pianist would halt his contraption just a few yards beyond the fruit stalls, and then he would hoist himself onto the two-by-fours from the hole where the driver's seat had once been. Sometimes he played as long as five hours a day. On others, he would disappear after only two or three renditions of the sonata. We maintained our strafing schedule as commanded, but it was clear that the man was oblivious to our work. In the times we weren't firing, Oscar gathered us together to teach us about the music. He always whispered, as though our talk might distract the man in the way our bullets didn't.

"My guess is that he chooses Prokofiev for the statement the selection makes, not for the sake of the music itself. Because Prokofiev, you should know, began as a modernist, an innovator who desired to wrest music from the clash of sound. But Stalin denounced his atonality as unpatriotic, and he was forced not just to melody, but to the most insincere form of melody that there is—the national melody. Think of it! You as a composer have a world of scales and tones and techniques at your disposal, and yet every time your fingers stretch to make a chord you must worry whether the authorities will deem your efforts counterrevolutionary. After a time, how do you even decide what keys to press? How could you live with that dual loyalty, first to your imagination and then to the state?

"In the end Prokofiev did what any of us would in that situation. He compromised. He gave the higher-ups the patriotic themes they demanded. But he expressed his own imagination in the contrapuntal rhythms. That! Do you hear that? Three bass notes that seem to bully the melody, to taunt it with its flatfootedness. Much later they would call those bass figures 'Stalin motifs'—but that was long after Prokofiev, and long after Stalin. They died on the same day, didn't you even know that? Stalin was fat and bloated from the purges, which is quite the paradox if you think about it. The paradox ate his brain—literally, I've heard it said. And there was Prokofiev, impoverished and near starving because he couldn't convince the bureaucrats that he wasn't a formalist. Do you know their definition of a formalist? Anyone who made art out of personal longing rather than patriotism. Imagine such a thing! As if you could take the personal longing out of the art!"

The truth was I didn't care about this man Prokofiev or his problems. I was more interested in Oscar himself. When I first joined the bell tower he

seemed to revel in his dourness, like a man who peppers his food knowing full well the heartburn it will give him. But now he was alive with eagerness, and the most dangerous kind, too. When he spoke about the music he betrayed the fact that there was something he cared about more than fulfilling his immediate duty. His chattiness made Stéfan nervous and displeased Hector. But I suppose I was guilty of encouraging his talk. It took my mind off the boredom.

He talked about so many things, all of them having to do with pianos. He insisted that the most beautiful part of the instrument isn't the keyboard or the casing or even the action but the wrest plank, the board that holds the tuning pins. "From a distance the wrest plank looks like a map," he would say. "A topography map—hills and mountains and the fine lines of flowing rivers." Oscar told us, too, that the fibers on the felt tips of the hammer shanks should run parallel to the strings to avoid gouging grooves in the fabric. He even taught us not to think of grands and baby grands as more complicated than uprights just because they're bigger. "Take your finger off a key on a baby grand," he said, "and it's gravity that pulls the whippen and damper back into place. But on an upright, all the levers and jacks sit vertically, so you need a whole other series of springs to return the parts to their proper place."

Of course, none of this made a bit of sense to us. But I kept listening because I was enjoying those words of his. There were so many, and they were all so odd, almost magical in their sound. Hearing them was like holding a foreign coin, trying to decipher the legends and the imagery. What were those words? I only remember a few. *Arpeggio*—that was one. "An arpeggio is a swirl of notes. Imagine spinning a color wheel. It's the same effect, only in sound." *Cantata*: "From the Latin word meaning 'sing,' thus meaning, obviously enough, a composition with different types of singing, choruses and solos, recitatives and arias But now I must define these for you!" And one more: *étude*. "Very simple," he said. "A study. More correctly, a study designed to teach a specific technique, but the generic meaning will suffice: a study."

It was from this crazy quilt of words that I pieced together Oscar's story. As a child he had shown some proficiency at the piano, although he was never adept enough to become a concert performer. "To do that," he told me, "you must have what are called 'spatulate' hands." He stretched out one of his. "I have fork fingers. They won't spread further than an average set of tines." To my eyes the span of his fingers didn't seem abnormally narrow, but I didn't argue because I didn't want to interrupt him.

Instead of performing, he concentrated on music theory, hoping to estab-

lish himself as a composer. It wasn't that absurd of an ambition. In those days the government ran the conservatory, and it peopled it with young men who competed for pensions. Most of these positions involved teaching, but one in every six boys earned a composer's sinecure. With the money, the boys were obligated to produce one concerto and one sonata per year, no more and no less. And the compositions had to evoke patriotic themes.

"I should have been an ideal candidate for that position," Oscar said. "But I squabbled too much. In one of our first assignments, we were to compose a piece in the key of C major. You know why, don't you? Because in the key of C, you only have to use the white keys. But I was fond of accidentals, which they kept calling wrong notes, as if any note could be wrong if you heard it in your head. 'If it's so wrong,' I argued, 'why are the black keys here?' It was only one exercise, one *étude*, but I was bullheaded. Of course, that didn't endear me to them.

"You see, they were forced to teach us a very simple theory of harmony. They would tell us, 'You are to stick with diatonic intervals and avoid chromatics.' Why? Because diatonic intervals sound sweet and whole, while chromatics give off a sense of dissonance and confusion. The prejudice is written in the very names given to the arrangements of sound. You know what they call the first, fourth, and fifth of any scale? They're *perfect*. But if you move one of those notes down a semitone—from a white key to the black one below it, perhaps—it's no longer perfect, it's *diminished*. Then there was the other word they were fond of: resolve. 'If you must use a 7th,' they said, 'it must resolve into the tonic.' Why? Because resolution is what music is meant to give us: a sense of unity, completeness, order. Order was their most favorite idea of all. 'In all aspects of composition the effect must be to reassure the listener that there is an order that is pleasing because it reflects the natural structure of our way of living.' That was the golden rule.

"Of course, they weren't the first to invent such things. Had we been students in medieval times we would've been taught to avoid the tritone. That's any interval composed of three whole tones, and it was determined back then to be so injurious to the ears that it was demonized—*literally* demonized, too—they called it 'The Devil's Interval.' Now imagine for a moment working under such a restriction while trying to produce an etude in C. The tritone in that scale is the space between F and B. How do you avoid it? Why, you would be told to drop the B to a B flat, and as probably even you know, B flats are black keys. You see what I'm saying, don't you? Had our teachers for some arbitrary reason believed in the imperfection of the tritone we'd have *had* to

move from a white note to the black one below it! Or, by the same token, had we known this history we might have been tempted to taunt our elders. We could have said to them, ‘Yes, but, haven’t you considered that your logic of resolution dooms us to go to the Devil?’”

It was because Oscar entertained such thoughts that he knew he’d be denied that composer’s sinecure. He couldn’t keep his fingers off the black keys, and he couldn’t find it in himself to resolve his 7^{ths}. “Oh, and yes,” he added, “whenever I came within a measure’s vicinity of a tritone, I couldn’t help but smile—devilishly, as you might expect.” When it came time for the conservatory to award his class their posts, he was relegated to a pair of part-time jobs intended as a rebuke and a humiliation. It would be his duty, he was told, to maintain the conservatory pianos. That meant tuning them, glueing cracks and loose joints, replacing snapped strings. The rest of his time he was to work in the listening library as curator of the school’s phonograph collection. Each day he was to pick a shelf from an archive’s worth of shelves, and he was to swab the dust from each disc, one by one, making sure that neither human oils nor static electricity interfered with the ability of subsequent composition students to appreciate the importance of harmony and order.

Oddly enough, Oscar didn’t mind the work. Being stationed in the listening library allowed him to study from the conservatory’s LPs, many of which reveled in the musical sins that the faculty denounced. It was through those albums, for example, that he became so familiar with Prokofiev. And there were others, too: Shostakovich, Schoenberg, Mussorgsky. He was ambivalent on the point of Stravinsky: “I considered myself a modern, but it struck me that I preferred *Firebird* to *Le Sacre du Printemps*. I mean, I could appreciate the historical value of *Sacre du Printemps*, but how could I be a modern if I didn’t enjoy listening to it?”

It was a question I couldn’t begin to answer.

As for tuning the pianos, it was here that Oscar exacted his revenge. “There is a phenomenon of sound called a beat,” he said. “It’s not a rhythmic beat, but more like a pulse. When strings vibrate at different frequencies, the faster ones take over the slower, and the tone will seem to bulge. You wouldn’t think it, but for many notes on a piano, especially those in the treble, there’s more than one string. There has to be, otherwise the sound wouldn’t be loud at all. So when you tune a piano, there’s three times the work for many of those keys, and the trick is to ensure that all the strings vibrate at the same frequency so the pulses evaporate. What I would do is monkey with the tension in those strings so the vibrations were out of synch, but just barely,

just audibly. A player would come along to strike a chord, and the sound would expand and contract until the ringing would feel like a drill bit in a back tooth.”

Of course, the faculty complained about his lack of tuning proficiency, but Oscar blamed the humidity. The conservatory furnaces were hard to regulate, so all he had to do was insist that the thick heat was drying out the soundboard and loosening the tuning pins, thus making the strings slacken and go flat. “Come summer, I would tell them they were hearing false beats. A false beat is when a pulse occurs in a single string, usually because of a rusty spring. I would tell them that if they wanted that pulsing to stop, they had to supply me with reliable parts. Of course, there was no money for replacing rusty springs, so they had no comeback.”

He spent three years playing these kind of mind games. The most entertaining times, he said, were the recitals. Whenever the conservatory threw open its doors to justify its existence to the authorities, the faculty would fret about whether their instruments were tuned or not, and they would insist that Oscar sit behind a curtain next to the school’s prize concert grand. If a professor thought a certain note beat too blatantly, he would order Oscar to sneak his way to the pinblock to slip his tuning lever over the offending screw. Then Oscar would adjust the note while the student playing tried to maintain his concentration. “At those times I was as close to a performer as someone without spatulate hands can be,” he said. “At the very least, I was duetting with those students.”

He’d probably be in the middle of a duet, too, had this latest insurgency not arisen, forcing the government to close down the conservatory. Oscar understood the thinking. What good was music in a time of war, he’d ask me, even if war wasn’t what we were supposed to call it? The conservatory doors were chained shut, and the faculty and students sent home. The ones with means learned to barter their belongings for food. Those who didn’t, like Oscar, had only one recourse. They joined the army.

After four days of storytelling Oscar woke me during a midnight lull.

“The pianist is a fool if he goes on,” he said. “He has made his point. The higher-ups won’t permit it much longer. They can’t tolerate his bravery. He’s forcing things to a head.”

Nine days into the music, Oscar again shook me from my slumber.

“It’s been decided. A courier has been dispatched. He must stay home tomorrow. Should he come back, the consequences are his.”

But the following morning saw the Volkswagen’s return, and the playing

went on uninterrupted. You could see the coloring in Oscar's face evaporate.

"He's being selfish. He thinks he's only putting himself at risk, but it's the piano that's going to suffer. They shoot him, they'll destroy that instrument." He was staring out over the rooftops. Some distance away was the gray outline of the skytower that loomed over the downtown district. "After the conservatory closed, it didn't take the foragers long at all to break in and haul off everything of value. I have no idea what the records might've fetched from a profiteer, but I'm sure that the pianos I kept tuned were worthless. At least, they were worthless when they were in one piece. I've heard rumors that the casings were broken down for firewood, the strings and pins sold for scrap."

He was shaking his head. "If we lose this campaign," he told me, "we will belong to an imaginary country. But you know what? If we win, we will as well. All we're fighting for is a fiction. But those pianos, they were real. And this one's real—for now at least. But he's put it in danger."

I didn't know what to say.

After that noon's strafing we broke for lunch. We were eating our jerky ration when a runner climbed the rope ladder that we kept dangling from the trapdoor. The courier was all of ten years old. The higher-ups used the sons of conscripts as messengers under the theory that a child could move through the arrondissements more easily than an adult. The boy handed his dispatch to Oscar. Stéfan gave the boy some chocolates sent him by his mother. When Oscar finished with the directives he folded the envelope and stuffed it into his back pocket.

"I'll be back after dinner," he told us. But since he wadded his bedroll into his backpack and grabbed an extra day's ration, we doubted it. Two days later, when Oscar still hadn't returned, we began betting on how long before a new block commander arrived. In the meantime, we did the work expected of us. And we listened to the music.

"Why do you think he left?" Stéfan asked the night a chill wind kept loose straw blowing in the air.

"For the only reason anyone would abandon his duty," Hector told him. "Oscar was a coward and a traitor."

"You should learn to speak for yourself," I said. "Maybe he found something to live for beyond the cause."

"There is only the cause," Hector spat back. His voice sounded empty and mechanical, so I turned over and tried to sleep.

The next morning we were greeted by the young runner's return. This time he demanded a treat before he handed over the envelope. Because Stéfan was

the only one among us with enough chocolate for a bribe, the boy gave him the message.

Stéfan looked it over, looked at Hector, then looked at me.

“You better read it,” he said, giving Hector the note. You could see the joy descend over Hector. It looked like a bee swarm. He snapped the paper taut between his fingers, displaying it to me.

“I’m the new block commander,” he declared. “I’ve been promoted.”

“Congratulations,” I said with a shrug. “You’ll serve well.”

He folded the paper and tucked it into his shirt.

“Can you guess my first order? I’m sure you’ve been anticipating it. I’m to shoot him and destroy that instrument.”

I felt Stéfan eyeing me.

“They certainly know how to choose a loyalist,” I told him. It wasn’t a good thing to say. The smile on Hector’s face bled away, and that harelip unzipped itself further than usual until this time it resembled a wolf’s snarl.

“You would do well to obey. Oscar tolerated your jokes because like you he was ambivalent. But I’m not.”

And with that, he went to his bale, stretched out, and napped contentedly. Even in his sleep he was gloating.

Some time later I approached him.

“You’re to kill him?”

Hector sat up, his palm caressing the cheek of his rifle.

“Of course not. That would undermine the strategy. I’ll merely strike his left hand. The bullet will no doubt go straight through the bone and destroy the keys, too. I bet I can reduce it to kindling with three shots.”

“And cripple him,” I added.

Hector shrugged. “He had his warning.”

Either oblivious or indifferent to his fate, the pianist didn’t fail to disappoint. Shortly after the dawn strafing, we heard the now-familiar shriek of his worn brakes as the Volkswagen nudged the piano into place. A moment later we were serenaded by a cluster of tones we’d come to expect. Now more than ever, Prokofiev’s third movement indeed sounded like a wind in a graveyard.

“You’ll move voluntarily?” Hector demanded. He stood beside my station, his Mauser balanced against his chest so its long tripod legs poked at his kneecaps.

“And if I don’t?”

Now it was his turn to shrug. “Then I’ll have the honor of shooting two

enemies. Just because you're a garden spade doesn't mean you can't be the enemy."

I rolled off my hay and acted out a matador's veronica to let him know the bale was his for the taking. All I had to do was retrieve my own Mauser. As soon as I'd cleared my weapon from the parapet, Hector laid belly down on the straw and began tightening the nuts on the leg stands. When the gun was steady he put his eye to the scope and began adjusting the focus. The entire time, the discordant sonata wafted up toward us, as it had for almost two weeks straight. For the first time I appreciated what Oscar had meant about the clash between the melody and the low bass notes pounded out by the pianist's left hand. There were two ways of looking at the world in that music.

Then the barrel of my Mauser made contact with the back of Hector's neck, and he shuddered. "You'll let him finish out this movement," I said.

I shut my eyes and gave myself to the twirling melody, which soared and then sank, pulling me along in anticipation of a resolution that, for all the dissonance in that sonata, I knew was imminent. Only when it finally came and the chord congealed in a tangled but stable complexity of tones would I open my eyes. When I did, I was relieved to see that the mess my trigger finger made hadn't disturbed the pianist's concentration.

At least that is how, awash in the aftermath, I imagine events having happened. The truth is that as my eyes were pinched shut I wasn't thinking about harmony and atonality or consonance and dissonance. I was thinking about me—or rather, I was thinking about what my mother would think of me were I executed for killing a block commander. "He died for what? For eighty-eight keys strapped onto four bald tires? What craziness is that?" The sound of her giving me the business was enough to make me realize how unlike either Oscar or Hector I was. Simple enough, I was a traitor, both to the cause and to art, for I was living in the name of nothing more than my own survival. That's a trait common to my people, the people of the provinces. Call us formalists if you like.

So now I spend my days on the seventeenth floor of the skytower downtown. It remains a hotbed of action, though my new commander insists I'll soon be reassigned to a field platoon if my aim doesn't improve. He doesn't believe me when I tell him about the vertigo.

In the hours between strafes I lie on my side and try to catch hold of the sense of imbalance that twists my stomach. To ease my dizziness I imagine Oscar out there, somewhere, in a room with newspaper covering the win-

dows, perhaps, or in a wine cellar with a lone candle for illumination. I can hear him saying those words of his, *arpeggio*, *cantata*, *étude* and all the others, speaking each as if its music could substitute for the music that, in all likelihood, he'll never hear again. In those few patches of time I call sleep I dream of him describing how the felt threads on a hammer shank should run parallel to a string and how a wrest plate of tuning pins resembles a topography map. How the insides of an upright are actually more complicated than the insides of a baby grand—I never would've guessed that.

And Hector? Oh yes, I know all about him. For maiming the pianist and destroying an octave's stretch of keys with only three pulls of his gun bolt, he was made a lieutenant. That means he has his own squadron of thirty-five garden spades who rout the countryside to avenge the indignities of the centuries. From time to time rumors come my way. I've heard it said that he's an intolerable hothead in conversation and is prone to bloodlust and perversion, particularly with pregnant women.

Reports from the field are that he's much despised by his men.

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