

The Tree that Bleeds

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All three of us—that is to say, Bendas, Sigeta, and I—had gone through over five months of tough army service when we got news from home that deeply saddened us and brought us closer together.

We learned that Medentsy, who was serving in one of the remote corners of central Asia (so he wrote in his letters), had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

It was evening when we read the letter. The bright red sun was setting behind the barracks, its crimson rays reflected in the windows.

Earlier Bendas had brought half a rucksack of ripe cherries from someone's garden and just then we were polishing them off as we lay in the grass behind the barracks, waiting for Sigeta to come off sentry duty.

He came with the letter, which, in his hurry to join us, he hadn't yet read. He immediately made a bee-line for the cherries, so it was still a while before he opened it.

As he listened to Sigeta, Bendas was grasping a handful of cherries; when he heard about Medentsy, he squeezed them so tightly that the juice squirted over his uniform and streamed thickly through his fingers. In the twilight his hand looked as though it was covered in blood.

We couldn't believe our ears. All kinds of conjectures and suppositions passed through our minds. How could such a thing happen? Could the conditions of his army service have been so unbearable?

Could it be that the constant bullying he was subjected to as a rookie led to his illness?

We thought on: Medentsy was serving on his own and couldn't stand up for himself, whereas we had been lucky—we were together and so the army service was easier to cope with.

None of us for a moment considered that Medentsy might be acting crazy. We knew him well—he couldn't have managed that even if he had wanted to. Right away we resolved to stand by him, whatever condition he was in, and to give him whatever support we could.

A year passed and Medentsy was released from the hospital and discharged from military service on the grounds of ill health. But, according to the letters we received from home, he had become a completely changed man.

When talking with him, you have the impression that he is quite normal. Then all of a sudden he starts to talk about strange things, all kinds of monsters, and trees. His gaze is empty, and you have the impression not only

that he doesn't see you but that he doesn't even know who you are. You can't help feeling that a great void has opened up between you, giving off an icy coldness. With deep sadness you realize what a stranger this Medentsy is becoming to you.

We thought it would be different with us. We were delighted that he was back at home, and we couldn't wait to get discharged too.

Oh Lord, how happy we were to see Medentsy. But he treated us casually, as though we hadn't seen each other for just a few minutes, rather than two years. Clearly, Medentsy was still unwell. We continued to visit him. Once, when we asked about his army service, his expression changed markedly. He went pale and said in a quiet voice:

"There was yellow sand everywhere. Blown by the wind, the grains of sand filled the air, and they got into my eyes, my nose, and my mouth, and there was no water.

"Then I caught sight of a road, all lined with flowers. I followed it and came to a big gateway. I knocked and the gate opened. A man came out with a big black book, which he held open. 'Who are you?' he asked. I gave him my name. He glanced at the book and said, 'There's no one by that name recorded here,' and he closed the book and went back through the gate, which immediately closed behind him."

Medentsy didn't tell us any more, but we realized that he had probably been at death's door and had survived only by a miracle. We never broached the subject of army service again.

Yes, they were right when they wrote that Medentsy was a changed man, but we hadn't wanted to believe it then and we still didn't, because we longed to see the old Medentsy again, the one who could talk for hours on end, telling amazing stories that he had read in books or heard from the old people in whose company we would often find him.

Medentsy was becoming more and more introverted and dejected, and that worried us. We were even more concerned that he was searching for something. For a long time, we didn't know what that was exactly, but we could tell it was becoming an obsession with him.

The fact that he didn't share his secret with anyone certainly added to his anxiety. For our part, we didn't venture to ask any questions. Then, one day, of his own accord he confided in us what it was that was troubling him.

Medentsy was looking in our town for a tree that bled, but he couldn't find it anywhere. He spoke in such secretive tones that we were afraid to ask why he was looking for it.

After a while, one of us—Bendas, I think it was—remembered that once, before we went into the army, Medentsy had told us about some tree that bled.

Then we all remembered where it was that he had talked about it—by the town library. In front of the library there grew a certain small, exotic tree. None of us, not even Medentsy, knew its name. Its bark was steely

gray in color. It was quite short, and its trunks were so thoroughly twisted and intertwined that they looked like snakes.

This small tree had dried up all of a sudden, and we couldn't recall what the leaves used to look like. It seemed to keep on growing without any leaves. Could it be this tree that Medentsy occasionally had visions of, we wondered?

But we didn't say anything to Medentsy, so as not to cause him even greater anxiety. We often joined Medentsy in his search in the town for his tree. We wandered through the suburbs and the town center as the sun mercilessly beat down and the boiling hot tarmac stuck to our shoes like black chewing gum, filling the air with a stifling smell.

On days like this, even the cars went crazy, racing through the streets and throwing up clouds of gray dust in their wake.

Very likely the heat drove Medentsy crazy too, because instead of waiting for it to pass he continued to wander around the town, and we couldn't leave him on his own.

Medentsy's tree drove us all a little crazy. We talked about it incessantly, trying to identify all sorts of symbolic meanings and associations, until someone settled us all down with a few curt words or a response that brought us all back to reality.

And then we reasoned soberly that Medentsy probably ought to get medical treatment. But whenever that was mentioned, he began to rant uncontrollably and we had great trouble calming him down.

We realized, sadly, that the hospital he had once been in must have been a living hell for him, if the mere memory of his treatment aroused such panic and fear.

Then one day Medentsy told us he had seen his tree but could not approach it because his way was blocked by a fearsome monster that kept assuming different forms.

With great agitation he told us that it was trying to pierce his chest in order to suck out his blood, so he was forced to run away from it and take refuge at home.

When he woke up in the morning, he felt a wound in his chest, but it was no longer bleeding. Medentsy lifted his shirt and showed us his chest. There was nothing to see, but we nodded, pretending to see an open wound and feeling great sadness.

We sometimes wondered if it would have been better if Medentsy had evaded military service, because then his life would surely have been different, until someone added, "But can one really escape his destiny?"

The monster that was preventing Medentsy from approaching the tree was becoming more and more arrogant. Now his blood wasn't enough—it strove to control every movement he made, every step he took.

We understood that his illness was worsening, so we made efforts to cheer him up, recalling our childhood pranks and adventures. Then, tactfully, we suggested that he leave his tree alone.

Our words took him by surprise, and he gave a start. He looked frightened and we realized—too late—that Medentsy probably took all our good intentions as manifestations of the sly monster. Abruptly he left us and headed home, as we sadly watched him go.

On another occasion he prayed fervently to God for help, and his prayers alarmed us greatly—there was so much grief and despair in his voice.

At times like this, Medentsy's quest did not seem unreasonable at all, because it wasn't the tree he longed to find but something quite different. Once, not having seen Medentsy in town for a long time, we called at his home. Only his mother was there. Tearfully she told us Medentsy had suffered a severe attack and had been taken to the hospital. He never returned home.

We wanted to see him at least once again, and so we set off for the small town where he was receiving treatment. We had the feeling that something was bound to happen that day. I don't know why, but we decided not to take the local bus to the hospital but to go there on foot.

We were shown the way through a small patch of woodland, but we didn't end up at the main gate, as we had been told would happen; instead, we found ourselves in an enclosed corner of the courtyard, fenced off by wire netting some five meters high, painted green.

We walked alongside it through tall grass more than waist high. Strangely, the ground on the other side of the fence was trodden flat like the floor of a bird cage, with not a blade of grass to be seen.

Beyond a few trees we could see a long building, its windows reflecting the rays of the sun as it slowly sank behind the mountains. Abruptly, the door of the building opened and strange beings, dressed in dark hospital uniforms, began to emerge into the courtyard. In appearance they were still reminiscent of human beings, but they had long since ceased to be such.

Before us the ghostly figures wandered like sleepwalkers about the courtyard or else stood rooted to the spot, gazing emptily into the distance and perceiving nothing.

Feverishly we searched among them for Medentsy, but they were all so alike that we couldn't pick him out.

So as not to draw attention to ourselves, we moved on. Then we decided to make our way to the gates, so as to pass along some food for Medentsy.

We walked alongside the green wire-netting fence, but it seemed to be endless, as though it was keeping not only Medentsy but the whole world from us. It was Sigeta first, I think, who said he was very hungry and proposed we take a bite to eat for ourselves.

"But the food is for Medentsy!" objected Bendas.

"We have always shared everything, so why should we draw distinctions between us now?" asked Sigeta, leaving Bendas embarrassed.

"I can't object, then," he replied.

Sigeta, it turned out, had brought a bottle along with him. Moving a short distance from the green wire-netting fence, we sat down on the soft moss under the trees and began to eat our lunch. Scarcely speaking, we ate in silence, but when the bottle was passed around we all drank to Medentsy. Having flung the empty bottle at the fence, Bendas suddenly proposed that we go back home.

"Are you drunk, or what?" Sigeta asked him. "How can we go home without first seeing Medentsy? Why did we go to all that trouble to get here?"

"So we could understand that we don't have to see him," said Bendas, and he set off at random into the woods.

"I don't want to let him go off on his own," said Sigeta, and set off after Bendas, and I followed closely behind.

We caught up with Bendas and together we walked in silence all the way to the station. We were all thinking of Medentsy, of how he was left in a world foreign to us, bleeding on the boundary between forgetfulness and the meaningless progression of an alien life.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Oksana Bunio

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