

Refuge

Yusuf Kataev

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I look at the man sitting before me. He is a very polite man. He is in his mid-thirties. He is meticulously dressed in a plaid shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Lying on the table in front of him are piles of papers, on which he occasionally writes notes. He is cheerful, in a very good mood. Often, he strokes his scratched hand.

Having noticed that this caught my eye, he smiles and explains: "The cat. My cat scratched me. You know, these Siamese cats are so malicious."

He smiles and waits for my reaction. I am a polite man, too, and besides I am too proud to show him how I am wounded and I force myself to smile at him in response and I say something like "oh, yes-yes, these Siamese cats, they are really malicious." The man is pleased. He begins to write something again.

Cats. The cat-scratched hands. I suddenly remember the bloodstained lumps of human bodies. Have you ever seen that? First you do not understand, you mistake it for crimson clothes, scattered here and there, you hardly even notice them. But in the last moment, you understand, that this is a human body, broken. Blood on the ground, grayish lumps of brains.

Surely, the vagrant cats in Grozny in the winter of 2000 did not suffer from lack of food. They did not need to scratch someone because they needed attention. Their food rolled everywhere. They had their own demon chefs behind the steering wheels of the Russian combat planes or behind levers of the Russian artillery. The city has been filled with corpses.

November, 1999: Lenin's Avenue in Grozny. It is a cold autumn day. There Russian planes come out of nowhere, over and over again. Within minutes, three or four powerful explosions are distributed. Planes fly low. They have nothing to fear, the Chechen insurgents are armed with only simple arms. Soon the planes leave. We run to the automobile tunnel where the bombs fell. Behind this tunnel is the beginning of the well-known "Minutka," the square in the Chechen capitol. Fifty meters into the tunnel is a huge hole, next to an overturned burning lorry. Clothes and fragments of furniture roll around. The explosion must have been strong because it is scattered in a radius of 20 to 30 meters. The explosion turned out to be a water pipe and now the pipe sticks out upwards, as if it were a surreal monument to this absurdity. "These are deep bombs," a man confidently speaks, "Only they can leave such holes."

Around the burning automobile some bodies lay, one young man shows signs of life. We rush to him. "Momma! Momma!" he begins to shout. "Momma, where are you?" We pick him up, we wipe blood from his face, and we check his wounds. He is lucky—he is only in shock, there is no visible damage. But his parents and his friend (who he had asked to go with him to help them move their things from the city to a relative's home in the village) are dead. We moved their bloody bodies aside, with the hope of being able to bring them to relatives in the next passing car. The man, having come to, rushes to the bodies of his parents. The air around him was impregnated with grief. He does not shout at all, he growls like a wounded animal. He caresses the bodies of his parents, squeezes their hands. He mutters incoherently, he shouts something to the sky, shaking his fists. Such suffering, a heart could just about burst from the monstrous pressure. I move away so that I will not see any more of it.

Thomas. Yes, right, the man with the scratched hands is Thomas.

He is an employee of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Azerbaijan where I have ended up. Me, the simple Chechen who has run from that Hell that the Russian invaders have brought to my home, my land. I want to tell Thomas the story of what I saw at home. I want to tell about the charred corpses of women and children, about the destroyed houses, about that feeling of powerlessness and bitterness. I am an honest person who could be trusted, and now I shall tell him and all people in the free world everything, and he will be shocked, he will set aside his pile of papers, he will ask again, hasty to ask questions. His eyes will be filled with pain and compassion. In fact people in the West do not know the truth of the matter. They probably cannot simply believe that, in the 21st century, there is still such barbarity that in one stroke the whole city is erased, along with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants.

But American Thomas is not concerned with me. He was scratched by his cat. He listens to me, but in his eyes I see fatal melancholy. To him all these people, with these extinct eyes, arrived from unknown Chechnya and by telling him about their sufferings, they have bothered him terribly. He would like to finish all of this somewhat quicker, to get up from the desk, go home, take a bath, and have supper and watch CNN on satellite TV.

Yes, I suddenly realize all this and I stopped my telling. What sense is there in speaking about death and destruction to this person who is bothered by his scratched hand? But I am a polite man and I smile toward him and I say: "Oh, yes, I know these cats..."

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