

ON A CLEAR MOONLIT NIGHT

1.

Arlovsky stared out gloomily from his seat beside the silent, morose driver as snow began to fall, becoming blizzard like within minutes, continuing its ferocious onslaught throughout the rest of this lengthy climb. The snowplough struggled valiantly, engine groaning, gears screeching, headlights barely penetrating through the impenetrable, white curtain as it climbed through the windswept drifts, ever higher and higher. For more than an hour he had been jolted, backwards and forwards, up and down, side to side, in this propellor driven *aerokosli*, built to navigate through winter snows with typical Soviet negligence for comfort.

Finally, halting at the summit of the thickly wooded roadway through the mountain forest of pines, Arlovsky, the sole passenger dropped in slow motion from the cab, sinking almost knee deep into the powdered whiteness, staring, bewilderingly, all around, his eyes being fiercely stung by the flailing ice crystals, unsure of where to go. With relief, he made out the security cabin by the light that suddenly appeared as a door opened and the man he was to relieve of duty exited swiftly. The two soldiers trudging with great difficulty through the cloying, freezing wetness that sucked hungrily at their legs, passed each other; a mutual grunt, their only communication, barely audible above the clamour of the idling plough. Fuck you, too, Arlovsky thought, knowing his comrade cared just as little for the man sent to take his place in this wilderness on this day of all days.

2.

Inside, hurriedly, Private Boris Arlovsky pulled the heavy door closed behind him, vainly attempting to keep the cold without as the ear piercing sound of his transport noisily faded in the distance on its journey back to Vyborg. Twenty four hours until it returned once more. One entire, monotonous day in which he had to stay awake in this God forsaken, remote, frontier outpost.

Though every item of his bulky, winter clothing was annoyingly restrictive, as with the snowplough, they were solely manufactured to do a job; in this case, protect against the bitter cold, and he gave not a thought to removing a single thing. All were needed to maintain bodily warmth, including his military *ushanka* with its ear flaps as well as his reindeer fur-lined, army issue boots.

With a deep, resigned sigh, he surveyed his miserable surroundings, cursing himself, yet again, for his negligence in rifle maintenance, the previous day, which had resulted in the punishment of guard duty in this backwater hinterland.

At least half of the cabin interior was taken up by timber, piled ceiling high, finely chopped, fuel for the *burzhuyka*, his sole source of heat. A crude table and single chair made up the only furniture. No cot, for a sentry man, on duty, was not, of course, permitted to sleep.

Was he expected, as part of his watch, to replenish the wood pile, he wondered. Sod that!

A few old newspapers, months out of date, offered his only respite from unavoidable boredom. Un-shouldering his rifle, a standard issue *Mosin-Nagant M9/130*, he propped it against the table along with his backpack containing the usual, barely palatable, dry rations and some spare ammunition.

3.

It was then that he noticed the half eaten packet of *sukhar*, the hard tack biscuit that was a Soviet army staple, only considered edible if a soldier was actually starving for it was more than capable of removing a tooth or two when being consumed and promised several, painful visits to the latrines afterwards.

But these seemed... different; larger, fresher, *softer*. Upon closer inspection, he found, to his utter amazement, that they contained jam and, obviously, had been left in error by the man he had just relieved; a gift from a loving mother or fiancée at home, no doubt. In his haste to depart this wretched place, his fellow *ryadovoy* had neglected to take this wonderful treat and, now, on his way, with alacrity, bumping and grinding, down the mountain, was probably realising his error and cursing himself. Private Arlovsky's mouth salivated at the thought of the sweet, sugary indulgence that, by chance, was now *his* to enjoy.

But, wait, what if the next day's relief turned out to be this same predecessor, the very man he had just swapped places with? There'd be hell to pay at the changeover. Maybe, just one? One small taste would hardly be missed. No, he banished the thought. He'd only incur further disciplining, might even have his sojourn in this wilderness extended as punishment; stealing from a comrade was frowned upon. With a pang, his thoughts turned to his own beloved *mamushka*; a wonderful cook. What would she be doing, this night, Christmas Eve, January 6th, back home in the Urals? His eyes began to brim with tears. Fuck Stalin, he cursed. Fuck this shitty war. Fucking Christmas and he was forced to spend it alone in this shit hole, far from those he loved. Life sucked.

4.

Suddenly, he was jolted by the sound of a loud ringing; the telephone, a miracle of technology in this wilderness. Tripping over himself as he rushed to answer it, he listened silently to the strident voice on the other end, barking orders, demanding obeisance. He snapped out a "Yes!" to confirm his understanding and, instantly, the phone call was terminated, leaving Arlovsky to ponder on what he had been told: two Finnish soldiers had escaped from the prisoner of war camp on the Saimaa Canal, the previous day, and he was to be on full alert as it was believed that they would, almost certainly, be heading for the border. If they attempted to cross near his security post, they were to be shot on sight.

For a few, brief moments, Arlovsky's nerves tingled with anticipation, adrenaline surging, and he reached for his rifle, checking it was fully loaded and, unlike the previous day, with its surprise inspection, spotlessly clean. Instinctively, he moved to the sole window of the hut and stared out but was met with the same impenetrable blanket of falling snow and, beyond that, total darkness, no moon visible. Relaxing somewhat, he considered his situation: it had taken him more than an hour to climb the mountain in the plough so two men, on foot, would surely take several hours to reach this part of the border if, indeed, they came. For, surely, there were easier ways to cross the frontier into Finland. And did that prick of a sergeant, bellowing his orders, have any idea of the conditions up here? All this, he reasoned, calming himself, taking a seat at the table and, with admirable restraint, pushing the succulent looking biscuits away, out of reach and temptation.

5.

He began to think of home again and, to distract himself, he rose and refuelled the stove, then picked up the newspapers and, after sorting them in date order, began to read the oldest, dated September 1939, citing the outbreak of the war in Europe, confirming Russia's alliance with Germany, yet no hint, not one single word, of the friction between his country and Finland that was to result in the invasion just a couple of months later.

War. He was sick of it. What was this evil that empowered faceless men, who would never think to place themselves in danger, feel justified in grabbing young men, like himself, from their homes and thrusting them into the jaws of death without a second thought? Once again, he cast covetous glances at the sweet *sukhar* but stoutly resisted seduction and, as the hut grew increasingly warmer, slowly, inevitably, Boris Antimov Arlovsky, Private in the Soviet Union's Workers' and Peasants Red Army, fell soundly asleep.

When he awoke, he was startled by the unusual brightness that filled the cabin and also, to his alarm, by the ice cold numbness he felt. Stumbling up, every joint aching from the awkward way he had slept in the rough hewn chair, blood circulating painfully in his feet, panicking, he rushed to feed wood to the stove that was in danger of expiring.

In violation of his duty, he had allowed himself to fall asleep and he cursed himself for his weakness. Anywhere but here, he would have been shot for this dereliction, he knew. Satisfied that the stove was good, he strode to the window and, looking out, was amazed to see that the snow had ceased falling, the moon visible having escaped the clouds; the reason, now, for the light enthused hut. Bathed in a magical glow, the landscape that his eyes beheld was beautiful in the extreme.

6.

He had to push heavily against the piled snow to open the door, staring out at the ghostly vista, illuminated in all its splendour by the Moon. He was entranced by this wintry magnificence: snow covered trees casting shadows upon the pure white, undulating topography as far as the eye could see. It was truly breathtaking, reminding him, heartbreakingly, of his distant home in the Ural Mountains. Who could believe that such natural beauty still existed, masking the wholesale slaughter taking place on several fronts?

Suddenly, heart fluttering, he beheld two minute, darkened figures as they entered his vision in the distance. Hares? Deer? Floundering in the deepness of the snow, leaving behind them, tiny, black dots of footprints, they aided each other; as one fell, the other would haul him to his feet, the action repeated in return a few moments of struggle later.

No animals, these, Arlovsky knew, heart galloping excitedly. Their progress was arduous, slow but relentless, in their determination to get back to their homeland. The escaped prisoners; there was no doubt. For a few more minutes, the Russian watched on, envious, in his own lonely situation, of the brotherhood that these two fugitives displayed but, with a start, remembered his orders.

Rushing back inside, he fetched his rifle for, though he could not help being moved by this exhibition of Finnish heroism playing out in front of his eyes, it fell to him, Private Arlovsky, to stop these escapers; to shoot them down as they fled. They were the enemy, after all; the adversaries of Russia in this Winter War and he classed himself as a crack shot. Back home, he'd been noted for his hunting skills.

7.

Carefully, kneeling in the snow, allowing his body to settle as it sank, he took aim, sighting, through his telescopic lens, the tiny, silhouetted figurines. Undecided which of the two to take down first, he delayed, the luminescence afforded by the moon making these men easy targets as, for some strange reason, they now stood, rooted to the spot, looking in his direction. Belatedly, Arlovsky realised that the light, spilling from the open cabin door, had warned the escaping Finns of this checkpoint; that they had been spotted. After such a dogged climb, so close to their target, within reach of their Fatherland, they had ceased striving and, exhausted, now awaited their inevitable fate. But something gave the young Uralian pause and, finger on trigger, he hesitated.

He, himself, had been a part of the Seventh Army's invading force the previous December; had seen, firsthand, the courage and defiance of the Finnish soldiers in defence of their Fatherland, fighting against overwhelming numerical odds and superior firepower.

That these two, half starved fugitives had almost reached safety despite the treacherous conditions, crossing frozen tundra for hours before climbing high into the snow covered mountains was further testament to their indomitable spirit and, despite his orders, Private Arlovsky felt only admiration for such bravery. A lone, silent tear of frustration betrayed his hatred for this abhorrent task that had fallen upon his shoulders; the order to kill, bawled at him as if he were a child.

8.

As he wavered, gun levelled, gloved finger poised, a whispered sound carried on the freezing night wind: the voice of his own conscience. What have these men ever done to you? Doesn't their courage deserve more than a bullet in an unprotected back? One day, Boris, you may face them again, *fairly*, on a field of battle. Allow them, this night, this *Christmas Eve*, the liberty that their valour deserves. Who knows, maybe these wretched souls will make it home to their families though Christmas, for the Finns, has long passed.

Slowly, he lowered his rifle, rose from the snow, saluted the fugitives with a wave of his gloved hand, and, stepped back inside the warmth of the hut, bolting the door behind him; in this way, flouting the blood lusting madness of his superiors. Screw orders! Screw Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin! The rebel, Boris Antimov Arlovsky threw more logs into the stove. Then, he sat at the table... and, no more doubts, recklessly, reached, greedily and joyously, for the jam filled *sukhar*.