Nominator and reporter: Sarah Topol, freelance
Contact: [redacted]

STORY DESCRIPTION “The Deserter” is a groundbreaking longform investigative piece published in The New York Times Magazine that illuminates one of the most underreported aspects of the ongoing war in Ukraine: the plight of Russian military deserters. Through extensive reporting across eight countries and four continents, interviewing 18 deserters over a year, Topol reveals the human consequences of war from the perspective of those who have chosen to defy the system at great personal risk. The article centers on a Russian Army captain (given the pseudonym “Ivan”) while weaving in broader insights about how poverty, societal cohesion, and state propaganda shape the lives of ordinary Russians who face the moral choice to desert.

STORY LINK:

The Deserter: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/09/20/magazine/ukraine-russia-war-deserter.html

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS:

How I Reported The Deserter: Verifying the detailed stories of subjects who must remain anonymous requires a particularly rigorous approach to the process. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/25/magazine/reporting-the-deserter-sarah-topol.html

The Heavy Toll of Desertion From the Russian Army: Here is what we can learn about the Russian military and its soldiers from the story of Ivan and Anna in the New York Times Magazine: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/22/magazine/desertion-russian-army-ukraine-war.html

NOMINATION LETTER:

Dear Members of the Anthony Shadid Award Committee,

I would like to nominate “The Deserter,” published in The New York Times Magazine for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics. In “The Deserter,” Topol addresses one of the most underreported aspects of the ongoing war in Ukraine: the plight of Russian military deserters. Her reporting sheds light on the human consequences of war from the perspective of those who have chosen to defy the system at great personal risk. At each stage—reporting, writing, and publication—Topol faced ethical dilemmas that needed to be overcome. The challenges ranged from gaining the trust of sources to protecting sources from retribution, to maintaining secure communications under persistent hacking attempts. Through her careful and responsible approach, Topol overcame these obstacles with a level of diligence and care that exemplifies the principles upheld by the Anthony Shadid Award.

Critics of the Russian regime around the world have often wound up hunted, threatened or killed, particularly former members of the services who speak out. Journalists and activists, people the public has rarely heard of, have been poisoned, beaten and had chemicals thrown in their faces. Deserters risked being found by Russian security services and pushed back into Russia, facing severe legal penalties — jail time, torture and being sent back to the frontlines — as had happened with several deserters in Kazakhstan and Armenia. There were cases of forced repatriation, threats to their family members still inside Russia, physical harm or execution in their current country. One of the most significant ethical challenges Topol faced was the need to protect her sources, including her main source, a former Russian military officer she identified as “Ivan,” along with his wife, “Anna.”

Topol's approach to source protection went far beyond standard anonymization. She scrutinized and debated the inclusion of every detail in her 35,000-word story, consulting with sources about the risks each detail might pose, while also thinking about which details were necessary to preserve the truth of the story. She ultimately choosing to exclude certain details, for example the gender of the couple’s child, the type of boat Ivan served on, the name of units or companies, their family members' professions, and many more, while also including parts of their backstory. She had to make these decisions in both English and in Russian, given the possibility of details that are evident in translation. This meticulous attention to minor details demonstrated an understanding that in an age of big data, even small facts can compromise source security, while balancing the public’s right to know and reader trust, as any article that is too vague is less likely to have an impact. Writing with nuance and specificity while ensuring the protection of vulnerable individuals is a hallmark of Topol’s work.

At the same time, Topol had to verify all of her sources’ accounts. In addition to combing through the extensive documentation provided by Ivan — hundreds of pages of documents, photographs, IDs, military reports, boarding passes, his personal chat history — she corroborated his story with two other deserters from his base, and the general experience with 16 other deserters, as well as military analysts and experts, both Russian and international. This verification presented a unique challenge: she had to keep these sources’ identities and even their existence hidden from one another to preserve their anonymity. Her solution—a complex system

of separate verification channels—maintained both journalistic integrity and source protection.

Topol was unable to travel to any of the places the deserters described, so she had to use open-source information to corroborate their accounts, including spending hours on Telegram channels for military wives, Google Maps, battlefield reports, Russian military blogger reporting, Russian state-TV segments, and other sources. She also relied on her prior knowledge and decade of reporting from Ukraine and Russia, including past reporting from the frontlines in occupied eastern Ukraine and during the Russian invasion of Crimea.

Topol faced another critical ethical decision in reporting on escape routes used by deserters. In consultation with Idite Lesom, an organization helping military personnel defect, she crafted a narrative that engaged readers while deliberately obscuring details that could compromise these vital pathways to safety. She consistently chose source protection over sensationalism, omitting compelling details that could have enhanced the story but endangered lives. The New York Times was also aware their readers would have questions about anonymity, so we published an additional article about the how Topol reported the story.

The psychological vulnerability of her sources added another layer of ethical complexity. Many deserters suffered from PTSD, lived in isolation, and lacked access to mental health resources. Crucially, they existed in a precarious legal limbo, without official refugee status in their countries of residence. Often, they were cut off from their families and didn't know or trust anyone around them. Topol demonstrated extraordinary sensitivity to their psychological state while still pursuing difficult questions about moral responsibility. Her reporting revealed how poverty, societal pressure, and state propaganda influenced their choices, creating a nuanced portrait that avoided both condemnation and simple absolution.

Topol had to gain the trust of her subjects, who had grown up in Putin's Russia distrusting strangers, and who served in the Russian armed services, where Americans and journalists are viewed with skepticism. She did this by being careful to ask broad questions about their entire service, to ensure they never felt pressured to discuss anything they were uncomfortable with and so they knew she was not writing a sensationalist portrayal, but genuinely wanted to understand what life was like in the Russian army, this also made it possible to corroborate and write about the broader Russian military experience.

Topol also had to consider her surroundings and the safety of her sources. She was careful not to post on social media about any of her travels. She had to choose her hotels and interview locations carefully. Often the deserters were too nervous to speak in coffee shops, because many people in the countries where they were meeting understand Russian, so Topol tried to meet them in public spaces, like parks. Topol did this for their safety and for her own. She wanted the men to feel free to leave, to give them space and control, the ability to observe if they were being followed, to see that she was a woman, there alone.

She interviewed most people she met three times, for a total of about five to 10 hours each. She did this regardless of whether she was going to write in detail about the person in the article, in order to understand the Russian military more broadly and to establish which experiences were common across Russian units, bases, human-resources offices and ranks and which experiences were unique. If a deserter fled as part of a couple, Topol always asked if she could speak to his partner. Topol was curious about the people these men left behind when they went to

the front. After some hesitancy, everyone's wife, girlfriend or boyfriend agreed to speak. This is how Topol was also able to triangulate a lot of the things that were happening at home across Russia at the time of deployment. Topol also spoke to a lot of Russian NGOs and civil-society groups that were helping Russian emigrants.

Russia has gone to great lengths over the years to punish regime opponents even far outside its borders. In one harrowing incident, recounted in "The Deserter," Ivan's wife was befriended by a fellow Russian expat in their new country, who coaxed her to reveal that her husband had defected from the military — at which point the man declared himself an agent of the Russian government and tried to persuade her to give her husband up. Because of these fears, and the Times Magazine's desire to protect their identities, we carried out our months-long editorial process entirely over encrypted channels. Topol flew to New York from her home base in Lisbon to bring Times fact checkers Ivan's documents in person. They used an air-gapped computer to store them securely and only allowed access to the researchers and the translator. Throughout her reporting and after publication, Topol was subject to many hacking and phishing attempts to her email, her Microsoft Office, her Instagram and Facebook. Topol spent hours with the Times security team locking and relocking her accounts.

Topol herself had to be careful while reporting. She carried all her notebooks, papers and laptop on her at all times to ensure they were not searched in her hotel room. She regularly varied her routines to check that she wasn't being followed, given the assaults and poisonings that have allegedly happened to other journalists investigating the Russian security services.

"The Deserter" not only brought to light critical insights into the Russian military and the personal costs of dissent but also had a tangible impact. Readers wrote to Topol that they cried, that they couldn't leave their cars while listening to the audio version, that they had never even thought of writing to a journalist before. She heard from American service members, from readers who wanted to donate money, from people reevaluating how they think about the war, from teachers including it in school curriculum. And she heard from Liev Schreiber that Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and his wife read it and were "very complimentary." Perhaps most important, the story was picked up and translated by many Russian-language outlets — and as a consequence, Idite Lesom, the organization that helps Russian service members escape, says that appeals for help increased 20 percent after the story. This tangible result demonstrates how ethical journalism can inform public understanding while protecting vulnerable sources and even creating pathways for others in similar situations.

Topol's work on "The Deserter" exemplifies the rigorous truth-seeking balanced with profound respect for source safety and dignity. In an era when transnational repression increasingly threatens journalists' sources, her approach to protecting vulnerable sources while maintaining journalistic integrity offers a model for reporting on authoritarianism.

Thank you for considering this nomination.

Sincerely,
Sarah

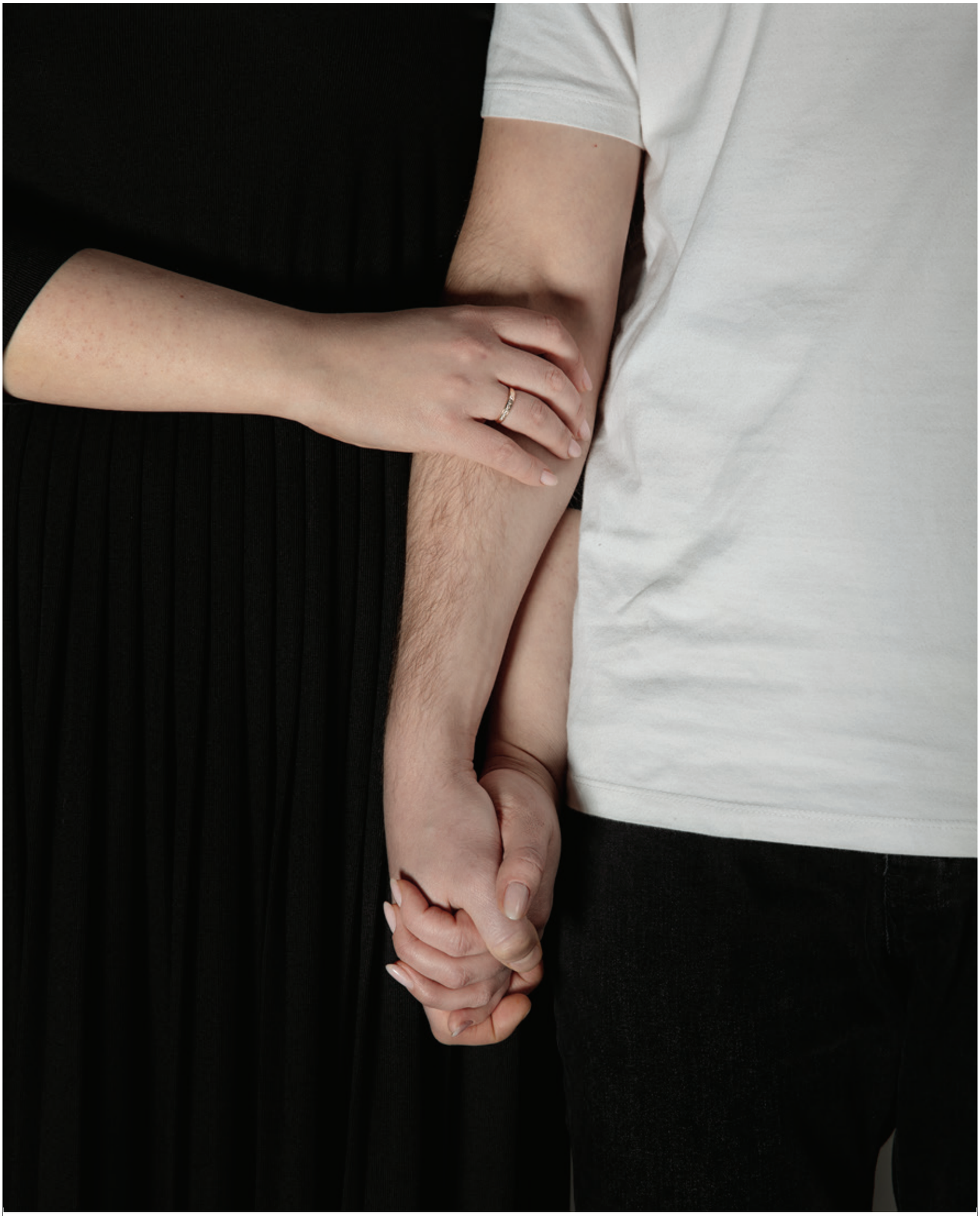
The Deserter

He didn't want to fight
in Putin's war.
He just wanted to survive,
to make it back to his wife,
to live in peace.

But to do that,
they would have

to run.

By Sarah A. Topol
Photographs by Elinor Carucci



Part I

Sept. 22, 2022
Subject: I NEED HELP

Hello! My name is [redacted]. My husband is a member of the Russian army. He several times refused to participate in the special operation, he should have been fired, but he has not been fired so far.

WE ARE AGAINST WAR! WE HATE THIS MODE IN OUR COUNTRY! PLEASE HELP US SAVE HIS LIFE!

He has a foreign passport, but he cannot take it. Please, I beg you, HELP!!! Today or tomorrow he must be sent to war. My number is +7[redacted]

Thank you. Forgive me for writing this letter so chaotically, but I am crying and feeling absolutely hopeless.

— An email to a German refugee organization on the day the German interior minister announced that the country was ready to accept asylum requests from deserters from the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

1.

On the night Ivan met Anna, he was so drunk that he could barely remember her face the next morning — only that she had the most beautiful eyes. Earlier that day, Ivan had been promoted to senior lieutenant. Over a dinner banquet, officers from his unit watched as Ivan "washed down," a Soviet-era ritual that continues to this day. They filled a glass with four shots of vodka, until it was almost overflowing, and threw Ivan's newly acquired six epaulet stars in. Following custom, Ivan stood up and addressed the assembled: "Comrade Officers, Warrant Officers, Sergeants," he began.

He paused, downed the vodka and flipped the cup onto the table, scattering the stars. "I, Senior Lieutenant [last name], present myself on the occasion of awarding me the regular military rank of senior lieutenant."

Once the newly minted officer had said everything clearly, smoothly, without a hitch, the commander of Ivan's unit continued: "Comrade Officers, Warrant Officers, Sergeants, do we accept?"

"We accept!" they called in unison. They put three stars on each of Ivan's shoulders, doused them with vodka and pounded on them hard, so that the pins on the bottom dug into his skin. (If Ivan had messed up, he would have had to drink another four shots and try again.) Afterward, they headed to a club.

In the crowd, under the dim, smoke-addled light, he saw Anna. She was hypnotic. Anna noticed him too. Without exchanging words, they started dancing. The crowds parted, forming a circle around them. Ivan danced for hours like he had never danced before. Later, he would call her Andromeda, like the goddess and the galaxy, a constellation in the evening sky that shone so brightly it eclipsed all the stars. At the end of the night, or more like early morning, Ivan gave her his phone and told her to put in her number.

Anna obliged, but when she looked up, he was gone. She stood there, holding his phone for what felt like an eternity. Another guy came up and started chatting to her.

"Buddy, you're too late," Ivan proclaimed from behind them.

She peered over and saw him, covered in sweat, holding a huge bouquet of lilies — he had sprinted to a 24-hour flower shop nearby.

Anna was in town from St. Petersburg as the maid of honor at a wedding. At the ceremony earlier that day, she caught the bouquet. By the end of the week, Anna would be returning to her university hundreds of miles away; Ivan would leave for a monthlong assignment around the islands of the Pacific, a routine expedition to observe and eavesdrop on U.S.-allied training there. Later, both would agree it had been fate.

2.

The Russian ship was a simple surveillance vessel with radio equipment that looked as if it was from before Ivan's grandfather was born. Ivan had just bought his first camera, and for a month he took photos of the clouds, low and heavy over the waves. He imagined all the things he would tell Anna when he next got the chance. How, when you first go out on a ship, you have to participate in a ceremony befriending Neptune — in which the new sailors, nearly naked, drink seawater out of a glass and get rubbed with ash. How they fished for squid, dove right off the ship into the warm waters, a few guys standing watch with machine guns in case of sharks, while the sunsets streaked the sky with cotton-candy pink and crimson red.

Ivan spent hours on the deck looking for a cellphone signal. When he found one, he ordered Anna flowers, sent her sushi rolls through friends and plotted a trip to St. Petersburg to surprise her. For her part, Anna

For this article, Sarah A. Topol spent more than a year investigating the Russian military, including interviewing the principal characters — as well as many other Russian military deserters — both online and in person. Because of the continuing security risks faced by Russian deserters, "Ivan" and "Anna" are pseudonyms. This reporting was supported by the International Women's Media Foundation's Howard G. Buffett Fund for Women Journalists.

sleepwalked through her classes, rereading all his texts. She marveled at his descriptions of the Philippine Sea, the color of the water; she was sure she had never seen a shade as blue as what he described.

One day, not far from port, Ivan's boat passed 50 meters from an American aircraft carrier that looked straight out of Hollywood. Most of the soldiers had never seen a ship so big. The carrier's hatches were open, interior compartments visible with airplanes and all kinds of equipment inside. The Russians, in flip-flops and swim trunks or underwear, ran out to see. The Americans stood on the deck in blue uniforms with white helmets and gloves, their ship glistening in the sun. Everyone waved.

Ivan grew up on the outskirts of nowhere, in an unremarkable midsize city near a military base. His family considered themselves patriotic. Though they didn't talk much about politics, Ivan was taught that he lived in a righteous country. Nearly every Soviet family had lost a man to the front in World War II, in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War, and both Ivan and Anna grew up on stories of sacrifice. Ivan's father served, as had his father before him.

As a child of the perestroika experiment, Ivan watched Russia sink into a decade of banditry, political tussles and get-rich-quick schemes. While he and his friends played with little green soldiers in the courtyard, their parents struggled with the basics — electricity, food, water, heat. Ivan's mother and father didn't make much, but they could count on housing and a small government-backed paycheck, though after the Russian Federation was established in 1991, often even that didn't come.

Every month, the family drove two hours to a larger city with a wholesale market, walking through piles of plush toys, clothes, kitchen supplies and everything in between. Ivan, like everyone else, stood on a piece of cardboard while the vendor held a curtain around him as he tried on clothes. Whether it was very cold or snowing or raining, Ivan would remove his pants and stand in his underwear, too poor to try on clothes in warm changing rooms at shops. This phrase — "dressed on cardboard" — is still used to describe a generation of Russians who lived through the poverty of the '90s.

Ivan was in secondary school when Vladimir Putin rose to power at the turn of the century and began to establish his system of control — promoting from his inner circle while crushing oligarchs and cracking down on newly gained freedoms. Still, in this new Russia, money was everything. Though Ivan's family had stability, they had nothing on his girlfriend's parents. When he opened their refrigerator, there was so much juice — J7, the kind with pulp that his parents never bought. Her father was a businessman, and though Ivan wasn't sure what exactly that entailed, he wanted to be one too.

But the year before Ivan graduated from secondary school, he spent a week with a family friend's son, who spun him a tale of adventure in the Special Forces — where young men went on training missions for days with just their bare hands to sustain them, living in the wild with a compass and a set of instructions. In wartime, they would sneak behind enemy lines to help lead the rest of the troops to victory safely, protecting their own in defense of their homeland.

Ivan had always been a sucker for romance — for a world where the villains and the heroes were clear. There were rules in the military games Ivan played as a child — under no circumstances could anyone attack a hospital — and that's the kind of world Ivan liked, where things were black and white and every problem had a solution.

Ivan got into one of the most competitive Russian military academies. It wasn't that he dreamed of going to war; he just thought it wouldn't happen. Becoming an officer was a fine path for a kid from nowhere — a degree, free health care, a pension and a guaranteed apartment upon retirement, not that Ivan was thinking that far ahead. He was spellbound by the promise of adventure.

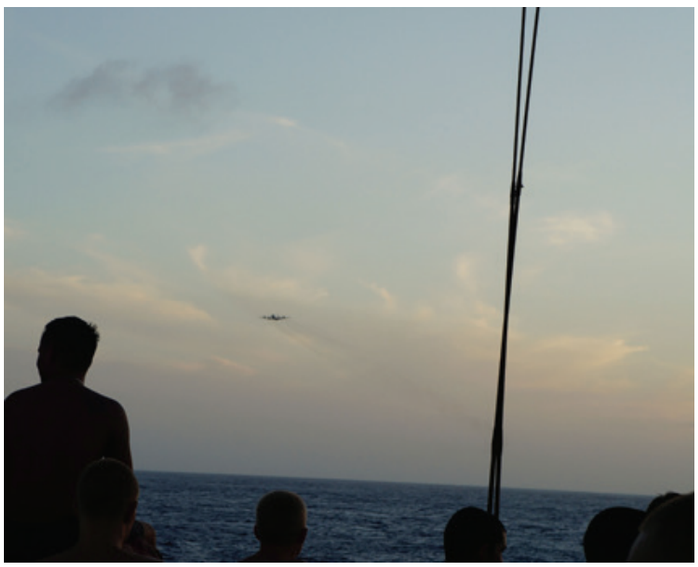
At the academy, cadets lived in barracks with metal bunk beds in neat rows. In the corner, there were mats and a punching bag. The shower was cold water from a hose connected to the tap. Ivan loved it immediately. Angles were perpendicular, beds were made and everything ended with one word — "*Ponyatno*?" ("Understood?") The young men skied in the backcountry, learned terrain navigation and hand-to-hand combat, figured out how much TNT would blow a railway and how much would blow a bridge. They studied languages and built up their physical endurance.

But upon graduation, Ivan faced the perennial problem of the Russian military — its bloated officer corps. Ivan was a lieutenant doing reconnaissance duty, a position far from his specialization, the elite unit he trained for. His shifts were 24 hours on, 24 hours off, drafting training and duty schedules that no one looked at and heating up his food in the microwave. He tried to complain to his superiors — the state had paid for his education and then assigned him here. There was no opportunity to do what he trained for, no chance to put what he learned to the test. Worse, no one cared.

Ivan couldn't just leave the service: If he were to break his contract, he would have to pay back the state for his education, lose his benefits and have a mark on his record. It's not as if he knew how to do anything else anyway. When he looked at the civilian sector for job opportunities with his language skills, he saw ads that said, "Military cadet graduates need not apply." Ivan decided to ride it out, but the lack of good billets made life boring and difficult. He tried to distract himself, applying to different remote rotations; at least he could try to make life more interesting.

After he started dating Anna, Ivan found that he began to think more critically. It wasn't just that she pressed him to be more thoughtful about

The photographs appearing within the text of this article were taken by Ivan during his military service and his journey out of Russia.



Watching planes over the Philippine Sea.

their relationship; she challenged him to think about a lot of things he had taken for granted before. The contrasts didn't hit him all at once, but more slowly — an accumulation of incongruities that built up over time.

Ivan told her about another work trip, when he had been sent to the 2,600-mile-long border with China. On top of a reconnaissance station, he could see both sides of the boundary clearly. On the Russian side, he saw a dilapidated village — not even a town, just a village — with broken roads and half-drunk passers-by. On the other side: *Las Vegas*. High-rise buildings, neon lights, wind turbines. *It looks like the difference between heaven and earth,* he thought. At the time, Ivan and his comrades had asked one another: Why couldn't their country do anything like that? "It's bad," the young men agreed. But like most Russians, they did nothing but remark on it without the expectation that it would change. Apathy is a skill that requires practice over time.

3.

Ivan had never considered himself a big talker, but Anna had a lot of things to say. She had been struck by the economic boom that followed the poverty of their childhood; the future and its possibilities had been dazzling. She had done everything she could to get out of her own childhood nowhere and to St. Petersburg — a city of white nights, deep winters and big dreams. She cared about art, theater, music, literature, international relations; lofty college conversations in big-city bars.

Before she met Ivan, Anna received a scholarship to go to America on a study-abroad program, and she realized that the world was much larger than anything she had been told about in school, that a person is bigger than where she was born or what language she spoke. "These limits, boundaries — they don't even exist," she told Ivan when they were falling in love. "You make these frames yourself."

Theirs was a big wedding. Both Anna and Ivan had wanted to keep it small and simple, to do something at a cafe, nothing pompous, but one thing led to another, and all their relatives came. Anna carried a large bouquet accented with yellow tulips, her favorite flower. He wore his officer uniform; she wore a white trumpet dress that swayed at her ankles, her long veil studded with glittering gemstones. Ivan was solemn during their vows, his eyes beaming. Anna cried straight through the whole thing.

After they married, Anna left St. Petersburg and joined Ivan at his base. She had never spent much time thinking about the military before she met him. Soldiers were just people who wore green uniforms and stood at attention on parade grounds a few times a day. Ivan left in the morning, came home for lunch, left again and was home for a late dinner. It looked like a regular civilian job, except everyone cursed all the time.

Like most Russians, Anna and Ivan saw politics as something dirty, something better avoided. It was best to focus on things you could actually control. And so neither of them had paid much attention to Putin's political maneuvering or his engineering a return to power for a third term despite sweeping protests in 2012. They lived in a tiny studio apartment that they renovated themselves. They had few luxuries, but they were happy. They wrote each other poetry, danced together, sang together, even wrote a book just for the two of them so they wouldn't forget. They started planning for a baby.

When she was young, Anna kept a diary; on page after page, she begged the world to give her *true love*. She loved Ivan with a kind of mystical force, and she wanted to have a family. She worried that his talents were wasted in the army — he was smart, *greedy for life at his core* — but the man she had fallen for had chosen this road, so she took it too.

4.

Ivan's disappointment with the realities of service were bearable until he got a new commander. His subordinates nicknamed him Pig for his jowls and ruddy cheeks. Pig started pocketing the rations earmarked for field training, which the guys were able to sell if they brought their own food from home. Ivan was owed three days' worth after a weekend in the field, so he went to demand them. If they didn't put an end to this now, who knows what would happen. "First it's rations," Ivan said. "Then it's our wages." His colleagues told him not to bother; everyone knew Pig had plenty of schemes.

The confrontation went nowhere, and instead the commander started singling Ivan out, writing him up for minor infractions that everyone committed, like carrying a cellphone around the base, to get him demoted. When Ivan went to the military prosecutor's office to fight his demotion, he was told he would win a case against Pig in court, but he lost. Of course, Pig had a *krysha*, a roof. "How is this happening?" Ivan would ask. "Everywhere I'm told I'm right, so why am I being punished? Did I steal the rations? No. Those are my rations. He stole them from me. And *I'm* wrong?"

Graft was endemic in the Russian military, permeating every level from the top brass to the grunts. "The scale is astounding," said Sergei Fridinsky, one of Russia's chief military prosecutors. "Sometimes it seems that people have simply lost their sense of moderation and conscience." Theft was hard to root out, even if someone wanted to — it was less about criminality and more a mentality. The thinking was simple: *It's one thing to serve the motherland, but you can't forget about yourself.*

Pig was among the many commanders who stole state-subsidized fuel from the military and sold it on the side at the civilian market price. There were a number of methods for doing this — blatantly filling a commercial truck at a military gas station; filling a military transport, siphoning fuel from its tank to other carriers and then adding fake kilometers to trucks to explain the difference on the accounting end. Pig was also ordering his subordinates to saw wood from the base's firing range so he could sell it. Everyone did it.

Russia's turn-of-the-century prosperity had tapered off with the 2008 financial crisis and falling oil revenue. Though the government's official statistics suggest that poverty hovers around 10 percent, an investigation by the Russian outlet The Insider shows that the reality is much worse: Roughly half of Russian families in many regions live below the poverty line. Outside the major cities, more than 10 million people do not have gas

Clouds over the Philippine Sea.

in their houses; they collect wood for heating. Many families still do not have indoor toilets. They defecate in holes in the ground.

There had been plenty of idiocy that Ivan overlooked in his service, literally hours of watching troops paint the grass green, ripping dandelions with his bare hands, plowing and replowing snowbanks for no discernible reason, standing at attention for hours in the freezing cold on the parade grounds. Then there were larger frustrations, like the fact that they were promised weekends and overtime but never got them. Every repair at the base — painting the barracks, fixing broken stairs — was made using money the officers and the soldiers had to throw together, though they were making next to nothing themselves. (According to the RAND Corporation, in 2008 around 30 percent of officers holding the rank of major and below were earning wages at or under the poverty line.) Units were "asked" to donate for repairs, but everyone knew there was no answer outside of "Yes, Comrade!" As a result, men like Ivan sold military fuel or bartered parts to make base repairs.

Few civilians realized that each commander in the Russian military was actually a fiscal hostage. When an officer assumed his position, he signed off on responsibility for all his unit's equipment, much of which had been sold or bartered by the previous commander and so was never actually there. This made it impossible to abdicate his job because it would look as though he stole the equipment, and he would have to use his own money to replace it. The equipment that *was* there was outdated and broke frequently — not because someone did something wrong, but because the parts were old and unserviceable or because the repair unit didn't feel like coming out. Still, the officer would be blamed for "not monitoring the equipment well" and penalized. So instead of reporting the break, the officer would sell some of the military's fuel to repair the machinery. Was that really stealing, or was that simply the job?

After his demotion, Ivan stalked around the base trying to foment a rebellion. He wanted to file a collective complaint against Pig to the military prosecutor, but none of the other soldiers would go on the record with him. "The main thing is that when they discuss something in the back rooms, everyone is like, 'Yes, yes, let's do it,' but when I come up and say, 'Let's take action!' everybody says, 'Oh, come on, why?' " he would rage to Anna. "Because everybody realizes that the same thing that happened to me is just going to happen to them. They're just going to be removed from their position on some flimsy excuse. Everybody's got debt. Everybody's got families. And no one needs it."

Anna didn't understand why it was this fight over stolen rations, in his litany of complaints, that broke him. He could be so categorical, so rigid. She supported his decisions, but she didn't understand why he needed this. She told him to be careful. He was in the system, and he had two choices: "You either play by the rules or get out," she told him. "If you go against your superiors, you risk everything." Was that really something he wanted to do?

At night, in their tiny apartment, they sat at the kitchen table as he tried to explain it to her. The Russian military had promised him better, a better billet, a better life and some kind of purpose. And now after he watched *them* steal so much, they were ruining *his* reputation? How much more could one man take? What kind of military was this?

5.

The roots of the dysfunction could be traced back to the army of Ivan's forefathers. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union built one of the largest standing armies in the world, twice the size of the U.S. military. More than four million troops were organized to repel a large land invasion — a blundering force with a huge officer corps that relied on young men serving two years of mandatory conscription service for the bulk of its manpower. For the Soviets, national service was both political and practical: Homeland-defense strategy for decades hinged on overwhelming the enemy with vast reserves of bodies on the cheap.

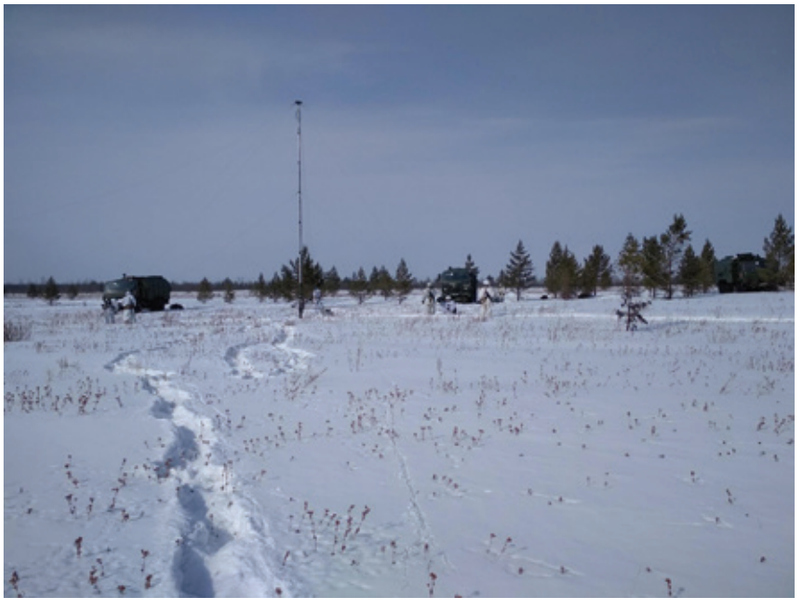
The Russian Army's development from the disarray of the Soviet Union was as impressive as it was disastrous. Fifteen countries emerged from its wreckage. The Russian Federation inherited most of the Red Army's personnel and equipment, but also its baggage — the rusted storehouses, low professionalism and an overreliance on conscripts and officers, with no professional noncommissioned officer corps in the middle to manage things. The new country was faced with a fundamental question: Should Moscow retain a vast army, organized around fighting existential battles with the West, or should it instead create a smaller, more mobile force of professional enlisted soldiers?

In the first decade of post-Soviet existence, with oil and gas prices falling to historic lows, that debate was largely theoretical. There was no money to feed or house the Russian troops, much less to professionalize them. Left to their own devices, units turned fields into farms and foraged for mushrooms in the forests. Soldiers in Siberia were fed animal feed. Criminality abounded. Theft was rampant. Commanders, officers and soldiers sold everything not nailed down at their bases — lightbulbs, steel rods, electrical cables. They even sold their own weapons to their enemies. In 1993, two naval officers stole three uranium fuel rods. They were caught trying to find a buyer. Estimates suggest that as much as 50 percent of the defense budget was stolen by individuals.

As President Boris Yeltsin pursued partnership with the West, the Kremlin unveiled a new military doctrine that positioned its army as a regional force, no longer focused on global domination. The generals disagreed; they dreamed of resurrecting the army of their remembered Soviet glory, and open debate permeated the establishment. Russian troops, meanwhile, fought in a series of conflicts called the southern wars. Most Russians, including Ivan, barely heard about these military operations in faraway places like South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, Tajikistan and Dagestan, except for the one in Chechnya, a secessionist republic where a humiliating stalemate laid bare the limitations and the brutality of the sclerotic force. Waves of ill-prepared conscripts and young officers were sent into urban combat with guerrilla fighters — suffering heavy casualties while perpetrating gross human rights abuses, including forced disappearances, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions.

When Putin came to power, he too was eager to work with the West on security issues, even flirting with one day joining NATO. But he was repeatedly rebuffed, in part because of the Russian military's poor human rights record, particularly in Chechnya, which Putin pacified by destroying its capital, Grozny. (Russians often cite the hypocrisy of such claims, given America's own track record in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

During Putin's first two terms in office, oil and gas prices started rising, so the government finally had money to spend on military reform. In 2001,



At military training in Russia.

Putin appointed Sergei Ivanov, a former official in the K.G.B. and its successor agency, the F.S.B., to the post of defense minister. Ivanov pushed for shortening mandatory national service to 12 months and for greater reliance on enlisted soldiers — *kontraktniki* — rather than conscripts to professionalize the service. But recalcitrance among the top brass continued to thwart meaningful change.

Moscow's early attempts at rapprochement with the West were nearing their finale. In 2003, the Russian Defense Ministry issued a white paper that emphasized that the United States was again the country's main security threat. The military budget increased fourfold. Corruption continued: If earlier military fraud revolved around theft and the sale of state assets, it took on a different dimension under Putin — direct embezzlement of the budget.

In August 2008, while Ivan was on summer vacation from the academy, Russia invaded Georgia — ostensibly to stop Tbilisi from asserting control over the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but more to prevent Georgia from joining NATO. Though the operation succeeded politically, the Russian military's performance was pathetic; there was horrible coordination between branches, poorly executed flight missions, malfunctioning equipment and deaths from friendly fire. (Russia had not held a combat-training exercise for about a decade.) The embarrassment provided the defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, an opportunity to push through "New Look," a major reform campaign designed to make the military a leaner, more professional force by upgrading equipment, cleaning up the corruption and reducing the numbers of officers and conscripts.

Ivan would experience the reform's unintended consequences: Hirings froze, promotions ceased and officer academies paused new enrollment. With no one coming up the ladder to relieve them, officers like Ivan remained stuck in lower ranks, forced to juggle multiple roles. At the same time, politicians talked while the top brass stole, and all Ivan was left with was mindless paperwork — and now character assassination. None of the corruption was cleaned up.

Sergei Shoigu, whom Putin appointed as defense minister in 2012, did nothing to change this. The military increased large-scale strategic exercises, but these functioned more like choreographed performances. Appearances outweighed reality. The most glaring example of this was the emphasis on metrics, verified by the "photo report": Activities had to be photographed for documentation. That meant that a commanding officer was supposed to not only do his job — run an exercise, say — but also produce a photo report about it to send to his commander the same day. The requirement covered everything from trainings to storehouse checks. There was no task more universally derided. The Soviet-era adage "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us" was reborn for the digital age.

One former service member I spoke to, Alexei Alshansky, who was a warrant officer responsible for the training grounds of the Fourth Guards Tank Division of the Western Military District, used Photoshop to "repaint" old spotted-camouflage uniforms into new Shoigu-favored "Ratnik pixels," so that his unit could recycle old photo reports. "I swear, I'm not joking," he told me, laughing, about the proliferation of the practice. "I've even seen photo reports verifying the making of photo reports."

As the slide shows went further and further up the district ladder, Russia appeared to have the most fearsome army on earth. But at the ground level, everyone despised the requirement. For commanders, it doubled the workload; for grunts, it meant an absurd amount of time wasted standing around posing. Many ignored the trainings themselves and just did the photo report. There was no time for both, even for those commanders who actually wanted to work.

The outcome verged on cartoonish — typically one man was chosen and photographed. He was sweeping the barracks, doing the dusting, cleaning the bathrooms, fixing the piping and raking the lawn. Everyone knew it was bogus. *What kind of one-man company were they running? What a great guy who could do everything in two hours!* Photographs of warehouse stores were taken from below, so it looked as if all the shelves were full when only the bottom one was. Early in the pandemic, when it wasn't clear whether the photo report should show a service member wearing a mask or not wearing a mask, Ivan just photographed the same scene twice and turned in both pictures, so the duty officer could pick which one he sent up the chain of command.

6.

Ivan managed to transfer to a hardship posting, where his service counted double toward his retirement. He got a raise, but he still spent all his time making photo reports or filling out useless paperwork. The new base was even more grim than the last. It reminded him of the western movies he watched as a kid: tumbleweeds, fields, deserts, broken swings. The town was pathetic, zero infrastructure, two rundown bars. Ivan and Anna lived

on the main street. From their second-floor apartment, they could see the skate park downstairs. Next door there was an open field. In the winter, it was a hockey rink; in the summer, a soccer field. When Ivan went out with Sasha, their baby, he could sit on the bench and watch Anna inside.

Sasha had been born a week late. Anna had worried about her pregnancy constantly; she joked that she was so unable to let go that she must have willed the delay herself. Ivan decided to stop drinking in advance of the baby's arrival. He wanted everything to be perfect, including himself. He put the crib together and set up the nursery while Anna was in the hospital. He held her hand through her two-day labor, barely leaving her side.

At work, Ivan spent his days shifting papers. He would submit a spreadsheet about drivers: surname, first name, patronymic; license category (motorcycle, car, truck); car owner (service member or spouse). He would enter the data and send in the spreadsheet, but a week later the columns changed places and he was told to submit it again.

"I submitted it last week, didn't I?"

"Submit it again."

A week later, the same thing. That was just one piece of paper from one division commander; multiplied by all the other chiefs, there were a billion pieces of paper.

There were also endless loops of morning, afternoon and evening roll-call assemblies on the parade grounds — 8:45 a.m. for 9 a.m. flag raising, 1:45 p.m. for lunch, 3:45 p.m. afternoon roll call, 6:15 p.m. assembly. Then there were the officer meetings at 8 in the morning and 5:30 in the evening in the command headquarters' "tactical room," where everyone had to leave phones outside and watch slide shows. After those meetings, Ivan would be assigned more paperwork that he needed to submit in the morning so that his commander could go to the internal formation and the base commander could say to him, "Did you do your job?" and he could say, "Yes." No one cared that they ended up sitting in their offices until 10 p.m. working on filling out useless columns. If anyone asked for the overtime they were entitled to, the commander would say: "What? You overworked? Your shoelace is untied. Uniform violation. Reprimand." For an officer, that reprimand was 6,000 to 7,000 rubles, or $65 to $75; no one wanted to pay that kind of money, so no one said anything.

Still, some of the "New Look" reforms appeared to be working, and the Kremlin started to actively use the military to further its foreign-policy aspirations. In 2014, Ivan had watched on TV as Moscow took advantage of Ukraine's domestic unrest and internal divisions to annex Crimea — a small, elite unit of little green men in Shoigu's newly redesigned green-pixel uniforms stormed the peninsula. Their discipline and professionalism were obvious; no Russian lives were lost. Though Europe and America responded with sanctions and sanctimony, the Kremlin was able to thwart Ukraine's aspirations for ascension to the European Union and force the West to acknowledge Russia's opinion on geopolitical affairs.

The operation's success produced a wave of patriotism. Most everyone in Russia, including Ivan, believed that Crimea was theirs, that it had only been given to Ukraine by a drunken Khrushchev. It was a good way to get people to forget about their outhouses. Even opposition politicians, like Aleksei Navalny, did not oppose the move. When unrest roiled eastern Donbas in 2014, the state-run media told Ivan that the Ukrainian province wanted to secede but that Kyiv wasn't letting it. *Russia needs to help the ethnic Russians there*, it intoned. The Kremlin sent in unmarked troops to support the separatists, but Ivan and Anna's TV showed them none of that. To them, in the distant reaches of their base, it all felt so far away.

Across Russia, militarism was rising. After successes in Crimea and Donbas, Russian forces deployed to Syria in 2015 to help Moscow's embattled ally, Bashar al-Assad, stay in power. There, the military reforms again appeared to bear fruit — demonstrating that the Russians were capable of small, quick operations and showing off the country's new weapons, strike fighters and ship-based cruise missiles fired from more than 900 miles away in the Caspian Sea. Russia's emboldened military intelligence agency, the G.R.U., experimented with international influence campaigns.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians had felt their geopolitical influence wane. As former Soviet republics elected pro-Western governments and chose to join NATO, Putin's early attempts to partner with the West ended in rebuke and shame. Now, Moscow was returning to the international stage in triumph, and President Barack Obama, who had ridiculed Putin at news conferences, dismissing Russia as a "regional power," had to shake his hand for photos at the United Nations General Assembly.

Ivan wanted in on a Syria deployment. It wasn't ideology or patriotism; word had spread that most Russian soldiers did barely anything there. Most of the actual ground combat was done by Wagner, a paramilitary group that first cropped up in Ukraine. Though soldiers saw little violence, Ivan heard that the salary for an overseas assignment was double. He also heard that a combat-veteran certificate entitled a man to a monthly payment and two more weeks of leave per year, like a war vacation that continues to pay. Ivan asked to be sent, but he was denied. It turned out that most people had to pay for the prestige of a rotation.

7.

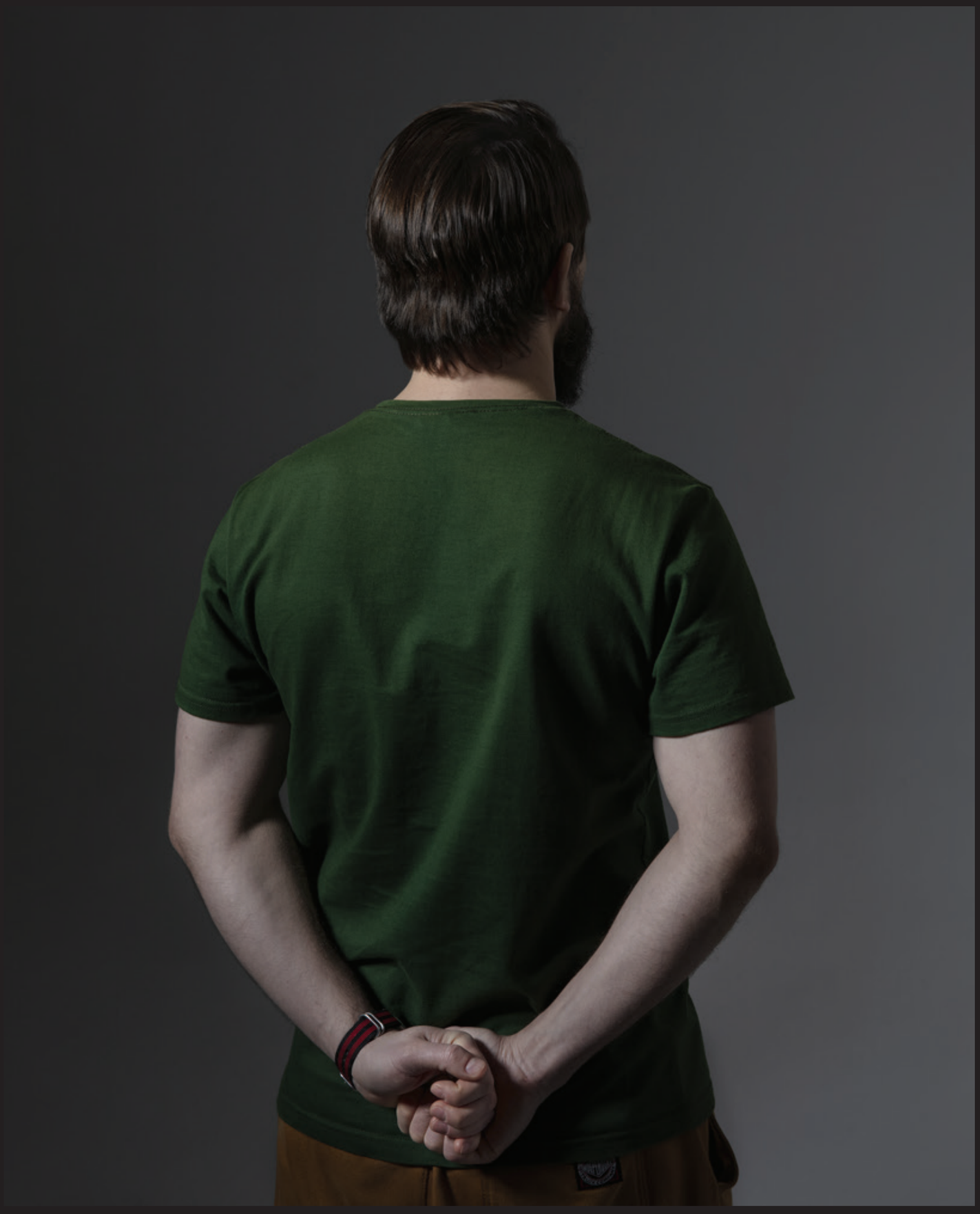
If their new posting was bad for Ivan, it was even worse for Anna. She cooked their meals with the food rations they were allotted. The base's stores of dry cereal were crawling with worms; the service fed them old fish. She didn't like the other officers' wives much and didn't have close friends or work that absorbed her. It was a far cry from her life in St. Petersburg, reading Brodsky over wine in the kitchen with her friends. Still, she remained madly in love with Ivan and Sasha. It was the small family she had always dreamed of. She took a job in the municipality. She was committed to making their situation work. Around town, everyone knew them: Anna and Ivan, Ivan and Anna. She was talkative, opinionated and different.

When they got the chance, they took a trip to St. Petersburg to see Anna's friends. Ivan noticed immediately that the couple's apartment was nice. While they settled in, the husband continued working. He was an I.T. developer, programming something. On his desk, there were two huge, sleek monitors and virtual-reality goggles. Ivan noticed that the man could get up and do something and then sit back down to work. He wasn't chained to his desk watching the clock; it was his choice how and when he worked. They were in St. Petersburg, but the man was talking to a colleague in America in English.

The couples went out for a beer. Ivan had thought he was making decent money as a military man, but he couldn't afford the kind of beer the husband ordered. The guy just glanced at the menu and chose the most expensive one — 400 rubles for a liter, roughly $4.50 — and casually ordered some food for the table. The beer was delicious, much better than what Ivan was used to drinking. He realized that their standard of living was completely different — and of course, he wanted this too.

When they got home to the base, Ivan found that he was bored with this little life they had built. He had always liked taking photos and started dabbling in Photoshop. He began teaching himself coding at night, helping Anna's cousins with marketing their small business and designing friends' websites for fun. Ivan and Anna made a plan: He would leave the military and become a web designer. He was almost done with his 20 years of service and would be eligible for retirement in 2023. He would bank the next two years of vacation and promised overtime, enroll in the military's bullshit civilian-retraining program before his contract ended, "retrain" (study web design himself and make appearances at the mandatory lectures) and take all his accumulated vacation time while looking for a civilian job. Then by the time his contract was ending that summer, he would be settled as a design specialist, with a new job and a higher income. They would move to a new city and start a whole new kind of life.

In February 2022, Ivan registered for a retraining course that would start in September. His commanding officer signed off. All he and Anna had to do was wait and follow the plan. But as Ivan would later say, Vladimir Vladimirovich decided this was a bad plan; he had a better one.



Part II

8.

On Feb. 24, news broke that Russia invaded Ukraine. Though everyone said they couldn't believe it, almost 200,000 Russian service members had been stationed at the border with Ukraine for weeks. The troops had been told it was just an exercise, but for some reason they had been handed weapons, medical kits and gear. Around 4 a.m. local time, they began to roll across the border. The U.S. government estimated that Ukraine would be overrun within days.

When Ivan lined up in formation for assembly, the news was everywhere, but the commander made the announcement anyway: "We have launched an operation to de-Nazify and demilitarize Ukraine." On base, the reaction was muted. Things continued as if nothing had changed — the same morning, afternoon and evening formations, the same unit-commander meetings at headquarters with the colonel, the same photo-report minutiae paperwork BS routine. *Perhaps it will be over in three days anyway, just like Crimea*, they told one another.

But very quickly, it was clear that things weren't going the Kremlin's way. The second-strongest military in the world was failing to capture and hold territory. Russian troops were stalled on highways, unable to occupy major cities and losing equipment to Ukrainian farmers on tractors.

Anna joined a wave of liberal Russians expressing outrage at the invasion on social media. A few hours after she posted a story on Instagram, her supervisor called her and demanded that she take it down. *Did she want to get her entire office in trouble? Did Anna not care about her own family at all?* She agreed to remove it. They had been living in Putin's Russia for more than two decades now; they knew that their opinions didn't really matter, nor could they say them aloud even if they had them.

Mass political gatherings of any kind had been effectively banned for almost a decade. By 2022, solo pickets were the only "allowed" form of political expression. In major cities, thousands of people took to the streets anyway. Many were picked up in police wagons and given 15 days of administrative arrest. In the first two weeks after the invasion, more than 13,000 protesters across the country were detained. Still, many Russians did what they do best: They tried not to pay attention.

In Ivan and Anna's small town, life went on as usual. Most everyone was employed by the government in one way or another; no one was interested in losing a job to hold a piece of paper in the air. If, before the war, everyone used to say, *Yeah, we have a lot of problems, but at least there is no war*, now they began to say: *Well, at least the war doesn't touch us. We live as we live. We have our own problems here.*

Across Russian bases, in mess halls and offices, during the 24-hour shifts at duty stations, bored and chatting to fill the time, everyone seemed to just assume that because this war was happening, then this war was how it should be. They should just continue to practice their patience, that moral apathy they had been honing. Their TVs told them that things were going well anyway. Those who followed the news on Telegram might talk about it with those they trusted: *Did you see that the 90th Guards Tank Division had been ambushed on the outskirts of Kyiv? Or that tanks were stalled on highways because they didn't have enough fuel?* But no one talked explicitly about why. A person could not say that they were against what was happening. At most, they might wonder aloud: *Why do we need this war?*

Well, we have enemies in the West.

But couldn't this have been handled more intelligently? Couldn't the Crimea scenario have been followed? Couldn't we have supported pro-Russian forces in Ukraine or done a coup?

Maybe there's no other way.

Many probably did not have a strong opinion. Collectively, Russians didn't seem to know what to think — the independent Levada Center found that while 81 percent told pollsters they supported "the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine," 51 percent felt "pride for Russia" and 31 percent felt "anxiety, fear, horror." (Thirty-six percent believed that the rest of the world condemned Russia for the conflict because those countries "obey the United States and NATO," while 27 percent said it was because "the world has always been against Russia.")

The West responded with sweeping sanctions. The ruble cratered. But if the move was intended to get the Russian people to rise up against Putin's regime, it failed.

Of course, there were some radical patriots who truly supported the invasion, but there were also careerists. And even if they had a negative attitude toward the war, there were plenty who thought, *Yeah, it's bad, but it's ours,* or, *Well, since my army is fighting, I can't betray it.* The thing about men in the military is that they are military men. They believed the propaganda that Kyiv was overrun with neo-Nazis or that NATO was poised to invade Russia. Or they just wanted to see combat.

But anyone who expressed surprise at Russia's initially dismal performance had obviously never set foot on a base — all those photo reports taken at clever angles, showing full shelves at empty warehouses. A decade of Shoigu's appearance-over-reality theatrics had left Russia's soldiers poorly trained and equipped, the reforms half completed and never fully rooted in military culture. It was much easier to walk in unopposed in Crimea, send in soldiers without insignia to support separatists in Donbas or dominate rebel militias in Syria through air superiority.

Moreover, it didn't seem that Russia's armed forces actually understood what they were doing in Ukraine. Their commanding officers had not been given instructions or battle plans in advance. Rather than following traditional Russian military doctrine, the invasion looked like a botched operation based on faulty intelligence arranged by a few civilians in the Kremlin who had never served a day in their lives. It didn't even follow the basic tactical theory that Ivan learned as a cadet — to go on the offensive, you needed to outnumber your opponent three to one.

Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New York Times

The Kremlin's reaction to failure was swift. In early March, the rubber-stamp Parliament fast-tracked two laws imposing a jail term of up to 15 years for spreading "fake news" about the armed forces or "discrediting" its actions. Two weeks later, it amended the laws to effectively ban criticism of all Russian government actions abroad. Calling what was happening in Ukraine a "war" or an "invasion" was quickly made illegal. Instead, it would be called a "special military operation" (S.V.O.). The few bastions of independent media that had held out through the last two decades were banned or closed one by one. Most of the foreign press quickly fled the country.

By April, the authorities had detained 15,000 protesters. Russian courts had already made a practice of charging people retroactively under other laws for "extremism"; for engaging with "undesirable organizations," like those promoting human rights and personal liberties; and for social media posts made before those organizations were recognized as "undesirable." Many started deleting their social media profiles completely. Others, like Anna, just censored themselves. Some horrified liberals left the country. It was only a matter of time before the authorities would start sending those caught protesting to the front lines.

9.

At Ivan's morning formation, commanders began asking for volunteers to go to the S.V.O. The first group of roughly 30 soldiers from his base shipped out in April. At the beginning, the men stepped forward quietly, on their own; no one forced them to do it. So everyone on the base was surprised when two of them returned not too long after deployment. Ivan sought them out. "It's completely savage," they explained. "A total bacchanalia. Chaos. We are never going back there." The looting, the drinking, the utter lack of military discipline — insanity. Their platoon leader had simply vanished. The rest of the troops seemed to disappear too.

"I'm walking alone," one of them told Ivan. "I don't know what to do. I see some dry rations lying there, so I took it and ate it. I thought, What the fuck do I need all this for? Picked up, packed up and left." The man left his machine gun in Ukraine and owed a large fine for losing it. "I don't care about the fine," he told Ivan. "I'll pay it. Just fire me faster."

A few men became a horde, soldiers stampeding their way back to base. Men who had been scattered along different parts of the front line ended up running into one another at the airport in Moscow. They had fled on their own dime, unauthorized.

Oh, you're alone too?

Yeah.

I'm not fucking going back there.

Soldiers were just walking off the battlefield and returning to their bases.

Across Russia, entire units refused to fight. In late March, 300 servicemen from a unit from Buynaksk, Dagestan, laid down their arms and left Ukraine. By April, 500 National Guardsmen had been dismissed for leaving Ukraine after just four days. That month, it became public that 11 members of OMON, a dreaded unit of riot police officers, had refused to deploy. In July, 150 contract soldiers from the Fifth Separate Guards Tank Brigade were dismissed after refusing to cross the border into Ukraine.

At the time, a soldier could be AWOL for over a week without prompting a criminal investigation, so the early refuseniks didn't face immediate imprisonment for leaving the front. But they could be fired. And for many soldiers, the threat of termination was deterrent enough. These men were often their family's only breadwinner. They would be giving up their entire life's accomplishments, their right to free health care, child care, apartments, extra veterans' payments, to step into the abyss and poverty of civilian life with no training in anything other than posing for photo reports ripping up dandelions.

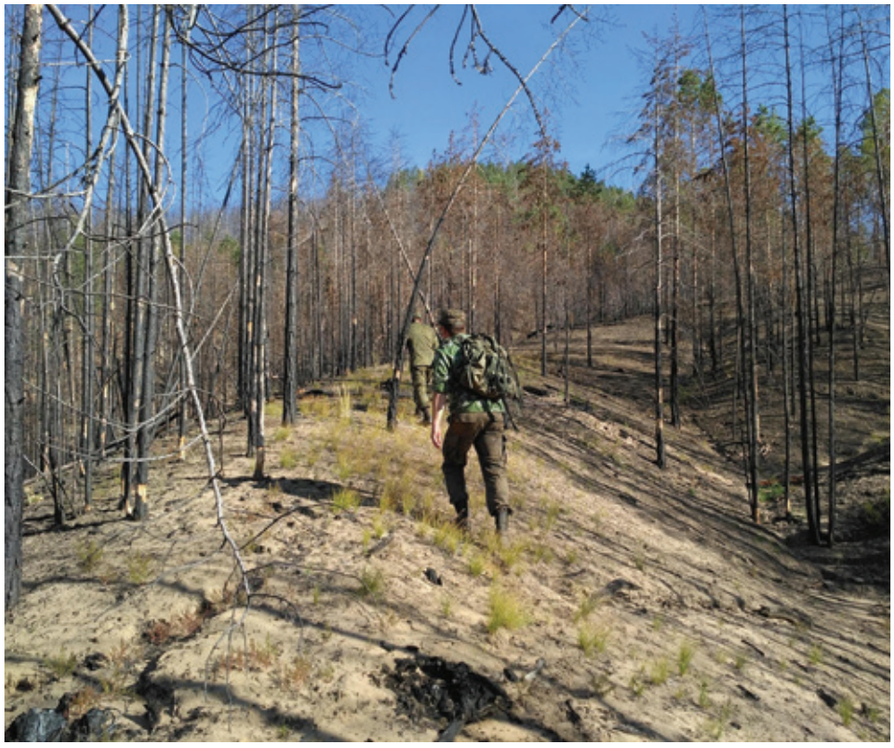
But even those who actually wanted to be fired didn't necessarily get their wish. Depending on a man's supervisor, it wasn't always easy to terminate a contract, especially as rank increased; there was a ton of paperwork and headaches for everyone, especially the higher-ups. So there were men who drank a bottle of vodka, went to the police officers and did something stupid in front of them so that they would be taken to the medical department, where they would refuse a medical examination. According to a provision in the military regulations, this would trigger an early discharge (refusal of a mandatory medical examination is akin to the use of banned substances in Russia). A soldier could lose his driver's license and be forced to attend a drug-treatment center — but if this allowed him to get out, that was not too high a price to pay.

Not everybody was ready to go to such extremes. There were those who thought: *Yes, it's bad, and I do not want to participate in it. But I've got a bit of time left until retirement, so I'll try to sit through it. And maybe no one will notice me, and I'll just stay here on my base.* Those people would have loved to quit, but on their terms, with all the pay, benefits and so on. Sure, the army they served in might be killing people, but they weren't the ones doing it. Just cogs in the larger mechanism. The existential question repeated: Who should be held accountable for the will of one man?

Russians had been honing their skill of tolerance, that patient waiting without truly expecting anything to change. The thing is, they weren't asking for anything more than what they had worked hard for all those years. This would describe an overwhelming majority of Russian service members, and it included Ivan, who believed he could continue to follow his plan. They wanted to stay in a military that was fighting a war, collect their paychecks, get their retirement benefits and leave without ever stepping foot on the front line. The phrase "To have your cake and eat it too" in Russian slang is "To eat the fish and sit on the dick."

10.

Evidence that this hope was misplaced was mounting. After the first few months of the invasion, volunteers began to dry up, and the authorities began an enlistment drive. Placards went up around the provinces, heralding "Heroes of the S.V.O.," calling men to join as private mercenaries or enlisted *kontraktniki*. Recruiters offered huge sign-up bonuses and promises of "coffin money." The Ministry of Defense would ultimately produce sleek television ads that exhorted taxi drivers, personal trainers and security guards to man up, showing footage of their boring lives and asking them, "Is this the path you really want to choose?" Each man then morphed into a kitted-out soldier moving through fog. The video explained that the



At military training in Russia.

monthly payments started at $2,000, roughly triple the nation's average income. Another ad promised "land-tax exemptions," "compensation for household utility bills" and "sanitarium vouchers." The ministry placed ads in subway stations, at bus stops and in store windows. Anna saw them so often she had memorized them.

Strategically, the Kremlin could have started a mobilization right away to build up a reserve force, but it instead made the political choice to get by with the troops it had, hoping the war would not disturb too much for too many. It tried to entice more people into service. The Russian regime passed a law that allowed people over 40 to serve in the armed forces. Even though a man couldn't call it a "war" out loud, the authorities promised that all combatants in the "special military operation" would be considered veterans under Russian law, entitled to a host of lucrative long-term benefits. Recruiters promised cash bonuses for "heroic deeds," like a "knocked-out tank, plane, armored personnel carrier and so on, so on, so on."

Conscripts — who Putin had vowed would never be sent to the front lines — were being cajoled by their platoon leaders to sign contracts so they could be sent out. "We're all a team," they were told. "We have to go defend the motherland." The money was good if you were lucky — if a soldier was "300," Russian military slang for injured, even slightly wounded, it meant three million rubles (roughly $33,000).

After a few months, there were fewer and fewer troops at Ivan's formation; some entire outfits were gone. Unit leaders were asked to make their own lists of men to send out — the base needed to send 50 men, 20 men, five men or 20 again. At HQ meetings at 5:30 p.m., even Ivan's commander was angry: "Why am I always being asked to send people to the S.V.O.?" The chief of staff told his subordinates to prepare a document saying that each of them could not possibly send more people, as it would disrupt the operation of the base.

Every time anyone so much as hinted at Ivan going, he refused. Only when a name appeared on a combat order was a soldier obliged to go to the front. Ivan was able to make excuses for most of his subordinates — this one had to attend one thing or another, this one has a back problem, this one has a heart problem, this one has a family emergency. People could still go to the local medical commission to get certificates saying they were unfit to go to the front. Some people dodged for months that way.

When commanding officers were asked to make lists, they often took only the names of their men who would go voluntarily and turned those in. Other bases weren't as tolerant. There were men who were called to formation at 7 a.m. and asked to "volunteer," and those who refused were forced to stand at assembly for more than 15 hours. The military police were called, and men were handcuffed, forced into buses, taken to the airport and flown to Belgorod. There they were told that they were going to war. With no belongings, no equipment, nothing. They stayed there for another 24 hours, and then they made their own way back to base.

By August, U.S. intelligence estimated that Russia had lost up to 80,000 servicemen in Ukraine, nearly 500 casualties per day. Pressure was building — generals asked the colonels who asked their subordinates for lists upon lists to throw at the front. Russia's military strategy was unchanged from Soviet times. The appetite from the top for bodies was insatiable.

Russian military slang for killed in action is "200." Many of the 200s were platoon leaders, younger officers — lieutenants, senior lieutenants and captains leading ill-prepared troops on the offensive. *If a platoon commander lasts even three weeks at the front, that's happiness*, soldiers said. Rumors spread quickly across group chats from officer school: Brutal careerists sitting fat in the back basements sent young officers to die without a second thought, without intelligence, without provisions. They were being given incorrect information. Their commanding officers were making basic tactical mistakes for no reason. *An order has come from above.*

You have to fulfill the order. You have to. Ponyatno? That's it. What kind of losses would result? Irrelevant.

Cruelty had long been part of the Russian military experience. Since the time of the Soviet Army, there had been no professional noncommissioned officer corps to manage millions of conscripts. Officers used violence to enforce discipline, including a hazing system known as *dedovshchina*, in which second-year conscripts — *deds*, or grandfathers — brutalized first-years as part of the method of control. A 1994 Russian Academy of Sciences report found that a man entering the army had an 80 percent chance of being beaten, 30 percent in a "particularly savage or humiliating form," and a 5 percent chance of being raped.

Though the service time had been shortened and the first- and second-year distinction eliminated, this war resurrected the worst instincts of Russian military culture. The violence was cyclical — the younger officers who had been abused by their superiors in Russia's earlier wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya were now the generals. Reforms proved to mean very little to wartime command. The savagery of *dedovshchina* quickly returned.

It soon got back to Ivan's base that commanders weren't showing much remorse over the deaths of so many of their subordinates in Ukraine. One time, the men overheard their commander on the radio saying, "Now, I will send you my meat further toward your position." This guy was calling his own subordinates *meat*. They threw a grenade in his hide-out to kill him. It didn't work. The guy had always been a bastard, so Ivan had no reason to doubt the rumors.

Another commander earned the nickname the Butcher because of how many men he had lost. Once, the Butcher was sitting in his basement, playing some kind of racing game on his phone, when a platoon commander who had just been on the attack came in and told him, "Here, Comrade Colonel, at the attack there are this many 300s, this many 200s." The Butcher continued playing as he listened, then he sat straight up and shouted, "Duty Guard, order me a pizza!" and returned to his game.

11.

On Aug. 1, their base commander, Colonel S., asked Ivan and his platoon to line up in front of the podium during flag raising. In front of the entire assembly, he informed them that they were being sent to the S.V.O. as infantry. They had been expecting something like this. The whole platoon refused on the spot. They demanded to see a combat order that officially listed their names. "Do you want to be terminated?" S. asked them. "Since you refuse, write me a report of your refusal."

Ivan believed that S. was bluffing, that there was no combat order with their names, but if they wrote a statement of refusal, it would be the pretext to terminate their contracts. Many of his men did it anyway — they were young, they didn't have anything to lose but their lives. But Ivan had worked too hard for too long: He had completed nearly 20 years of service, more if you counted all his overtime. He was ready to start his new life. He was enrolled in retraining, taking coding classes online, trying to set up a Bitcoin-mining business on the side. Everything was within his reach if he stuck to the plan.

Ivan consulted with a lawyer, who told him that the army could fire him only for "refusing orders." So in his refusal report, he wrote that he hadn't actually refused; instead, he had misunderstood the task his commander had set out. He was not refusing to go to the S.V.O. outright; he would go, but in his current position, which would keep him far from the grinding front line. He cited his "failing health." For years, Ivan had a herniated disc; he wanted to be medically excused.

Since his experience with Pig, Ivan had been collecting documents, so he already had everything to prove that he had medical problems and was owed more than 300 days of overtime. He took the paperwork to the human-resources office and submitted a statement requesting his time off. Ivan wanted to show that he was problematic. If the army wanted to fire him, fine, but he would not go down without a fight. If it was more work for the army to terminate him than it was to let him continue serving, maybe it would leave him alone. Perhaps he could draw this out for the few weeks that remained until he left for retraining.

> Anyone who expressed surprise at Russia's initially dismal performance

But when Ivan called the retraining center, he was told that his enrollment had been canceled. He couldn't believe it. He had the confirmation paper in hand, stamped, signed by the retraining center, signed by his supervisor and signed again by the base commander. How could the center just cancel his admission? Was that even possible?

He could only guess that the colonel's office had contacted the center, called him a bastard for refusing to serve. And that was it.

"Can they really deny me retraining?" he asked the head of the program.

"Kind of," came the reply.

Russia's legal system uses the trappings of a rules-based order as window dressing for an authoritarian state. If you follow the complicated minutiae of the law to the letter, sometimes you can stand your ground and win — that gives people hope to keep trying — but other times, the regime changes the rules in the middle without warning. It was as if you were playing chess with an abusive opponent — sometimes you could pull a Queen's Gambit, sometimes your opponent just smashed you in the face with the board. Ivan decided he would fight back: He would sue Colonel S. for denying him his rightful retraining if he tried to fire him.

"Where is the refusal report?" S. confronted Ivan at the parade grounds another morning.

"I'm going to sue you, Commander, sir," Ivan replied.

S. walked up to him, bent down to his ear. "Fuck you," he whispered before straightening up. "That's it. Get out of here. Don't show up at the base again."

Ivan was suspended. His lawyer advised him to continue attending the morning formation so no one could accuse him of being AWOL. They would fight his dismissal in court as wrongful termination. Ivan never technically refused any official order. If he were fired, he would be left with nothing. Ivan would show up to the base for roll call and go home for the rest of the day, waiting for his termination. Ivan and Anna discussed it and tried to put a positive spin on things. It could be a lot worse — after he was fired, they would start their lives again, even with nothing.

had obviously never set foot on a base.

Across Russia, other officers were refusing to go to the front — a far more dangerous trend for the war effort than the refusal of an average *kontraktnik*. Officers who refused couldn't be discharged. They were too valuable — the state had paid for them to be trained for this. Instead, all manner of pressure was applied to ship them out: They were mocked mercilessly in front of assemblies, marched around to the base's political-affairs office for conversations, sent from there to different cabinets of commanders for more conversations. Everywhere it was as if they were reading from the same playbook: *What are you, a traitor? Abandoning your own subordinates? You're not a man. Pull yourself together, coward!* Then threats: *We'll put you in jail. We'll find a reason to put you away. We'll turn you in to the prosecutor's office.* Then harm: *We will take you out, handcuff you to a radiator and shoot.*

The risks of refusing orders once a man arrived behind "the ribbon," as the front was called, were even greater. They had all heard rumors about the pits, the basements where officers were held against their will for refusing to fight. There was also a bulletin board, which soldiers took to calling the Wall of Shame, at the center of Ivan's base displaying the portraits of these men. Everyone knew that the Russian military had no squeamishness about extrajudicial reprisals — throw a man in a ditch and shoot him, then tell his relatives he deserted.

12.

As rumors of Ivan's refusal to be sent to the front spread through their small town, people on the street butted into Anna's life. "Your husband came up with the idea of not participating or something?" they clucked.

Soon the head of Anna's department again called her into her office. "What do you mean, your husband doesn't want to? We must defend our country. He's in the military. That's his job."

Anna wanted to shout at them that it was Ivan's job to *protect* his country, to *defend* the homeland. If something happened on *their* territory, she was sure Ivan would be the first to volunteer. But forcing a man to kill for no reason? There was a big difference. She didn't dare say any of that aloud. "Yes, I understand," she would reply. "We've made that decision. That's it." She tried to speak neutrally, to stay detached, without stirring up unnecessary conversations. She felt she had no other tools, only that she could deaden her bright eyes on command.

Anna and Ivan were part of the state machine. If she wanted to survive, she could not start any fights. But she could not rhetorically cave either. This small shred of dignity was all that remained.

On Sept. 21, Putin appeared on their televisions and announced a "partial mobilization." There had been rumors for weeks — the front was hemorrhaging men. "I will repeat, we are talking specifically about partial mobilization," Putin decreed, trying to pre-empt the panic that followed. "The priority will be those who have served in the ranks of the armed forces and have certain military specialties and relevant experience. Before being sent to the place of service, those who are drafted will undergo mandatory additional military training based on the experience of a special military operation."

What Putin had not announced — but was written clearly on the Defense Ministry's website — was that the mobilization included a "stop-loss" measure, in which personnel remained on active duty involuntarily until the end of wartime conditions. Military strategists weren't sure what took the Kremlin so long. With very few exceptions, no man could be terminated; no contracts would be broken. Ivan had no idea if his commanding officer had submitted his termination documents in time. Would his punishment be his salvation?

Anna was at a girlfriend's house when Ivan called her. "Did you hear the news?"

"Mobilization?" she asked, though she already knew.

"Yes," he replied. She understood everything. She hung up.

"He's announced a mobilization," she told her friend. "I'm off."

Anna got up, went outside and realized she was floating — the kind of shock where she couldn't feel anything happening around her. A man walked toward her. "You understand that mobilization is happening?" she told him.

"What?" he asked.

"You understand mobilization is happening?" she shouted. She needed to get through to him, to someone, even this stranger. She needed him to know that he should run.

13.

Previously, there were plenty of ways to skip mandatory national military service. A man could rack up deferments until he was over 27 — if he went to trade school, if he went to college, if he entered a graduate program. If he was in college, he could sign up for "the military department" and graduate as a lieutenant in the reserves without ever serving a

day. (Defense Minister Shoigu did this.) He could get a health exemption, sometimes real, sometimes not so real. There had been no meaningful penalty for noncompliance with a draft notice — a fine of $50 for ignoring it. But the mobilization threw all that into disarray. If the war's toll had been confined largely to military families, who were mostly from the poorer interior of the country, now the regime was coming for the sons of the middle class.

On the day of the announcement, 1,300 people were arrested for protesting, risking jail terms of up to 15 years. But most showed their opposition by fleeing for their lives. Plane, train and bus tickets out of Russia were selling out quickly at astronomical sums. Everyone worried that the borders were closing. The land crossings to Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Finland swelled with carfuls of men. They waited for days. There were rumors, arguments, stabbings, stampedes. When people died in line, ambulances couldn't make it through the crush to pick up the bodies.

Telegram groups monitored the situation, advising which roads were blocked and which checkpoints had the shortest lines. The Georgian authorities closed one of the pedestrian crossings; only people on wheels would be allowed in. Men traded belongings for bicycles and scooters and dumped them after reaching the other side — a mangled monument to their leader's ambitions. Hotels and hostels in border towns were so full that people camped out on the floors of movie theaters, mosques and railway stations.

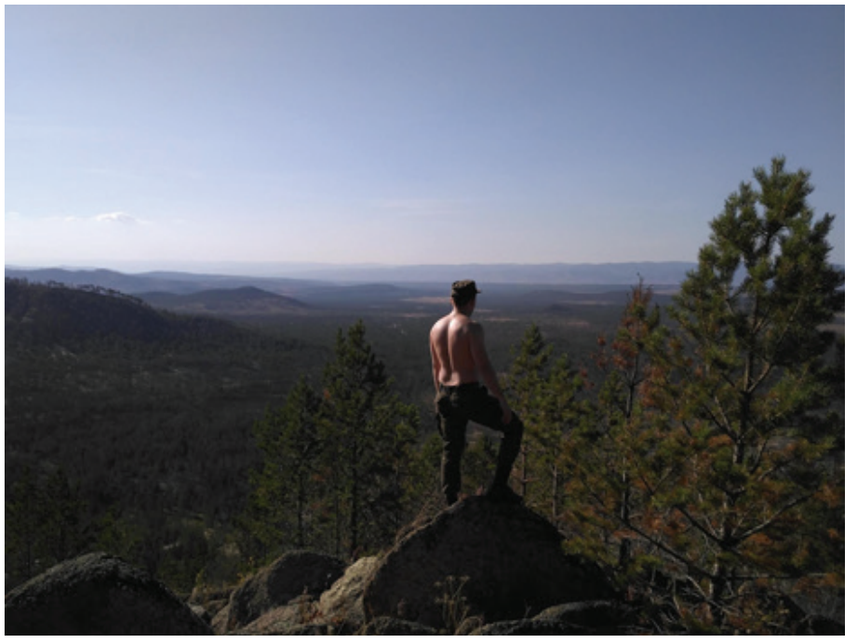
In the first week after the "partial mobilization," an estimated 200,000 people left Russia. But the population of Russia is 146 million, as many as 25 million of whom were draftable, including retired senior officers up to age 65. There were still plenty of bodies to choose from — people without the means to flee or those without a good understanding of their rights. The state called up 300,000 reservists at first, but the total permitted number of mobilized was classified. The opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta said it could number up to one million.

The country's bureaucracy was not ready to handle such a herculean undertaking. Officials did not have a strong reserve force — just lists of men who had done their national service and what their specializations were, which most hadn't maintained or refreshed for years or decades. It was clear that the authorities were targeting poorer regions. Quotas were levied on districts, which simplified the task. But it also incentivized the local authorities to speed up their results — instead of serving specific people with summonses, they started rounding up men en masse. They pressured them to go to the front and demanded that they turn over their documents in order to process them as draftees. In those circumstances, the men hadn't technically been served a summons and could leave, but no one told them that.

Others were served draft notices at their places of employment by secretaries, some of whom were themselves on the verge of tears. People received papers at their homes, at their parents' homes. Doctors were drafted; sometimes the only medical provider in town was ordered to the front. Women too — surgeons, gynecologists, dentists, all sent to Ukraine.

By mid-October, 2,457 protesters had been arrested. Many of the men who were detained were given military summonses; 1,747 administrative cases were opened, and 58 people faced criminal charges, 10 of whom posted their protest online. Thirty-six military recruitment offices and other government buildings were set on fire.

Penance for decades of national silence was beginning. Dutifully, the avalanche reported to local enlistment offices with their summonses, but those offices were also at a loss. Reservists needed to be served, processed, medically checked, switched to active status, sent to training, outfitted, housed and fed, but there didn't seem to be a plan in place to do any of that. The draftees arrived with their friends, their wives, their girlfriends, their children, their mothers. Everyone was stressed and in shock. *Where are they going? With whom? What should they bring? Do they really have to go?* They had dependents, debts, health problems. People were arguing, shouting, demanding. Many were already drunk. It was obvious that the officials had no idea how to answer their questions. In Dagestan, protesters blocked a highway and besieged military personnel



Ivan during military training in Russia.

at the local draft office. In the Sakha Republic, one military commissar was punched in the face.

The men were corralled from enlistment offices into training facilities that were ill prepared to receive them. There were no medical checks or only perfunctory ones, not enough first-aid equipment, zero or limited training, not even properly demarcated areas for sleeping. Families hurried to buy the men supplies — camping-store shelves emptied out. The mobilized gathered money from friends and family to equip themselves with basic boots, jackets and yoga mats to sleep on.

From the outside, it was easy to see the assembled men as a faceless, zombified Russian mass lining up to board helicopters and transport planes to their own deaths, but of course it was never that simple. Many of these civilians — drivers, tilers, plumbers, security guards, computer programmers, miners — never wanted to end up in Ukraine. They barely had any opinion on politics; they did not know or even believe they had rights. Once their summonses came, they did not think they had a choice — it was a command issued by their government.

"I'm an honest person," an actor who was mobilized in the first days told me. "I've never once in my life had any police record, nothing, not even any fines, ever. If someone gives me a paper and an order from the government, I couldn't imagine I would just break the law." When I asked another man, a municipal office worker, why he hadn't run when he was served his summons, he was dumbfounded by my question. How would I have expected that idea to even occur to him? "I work four jobs just to survive," he told me. "I had never left my town. I couldn't even afford to travel to Moscow, two hours away. Where would I have gone? And how?"

14.

The day after the mobilization was announced, Colonel S. called Ivan back into the tactical room where they held command meetings. All the deputies, the commanders and the leadership of the base were in attendance, sitting at their desks. Ivan took a seat at the first table. They handed him a piece of paper.

"Familiarize yourself, Comrade Captain," he was told. "Your name is on the combat order."

Though he saw his name and that he was clearly ordered to leave for the area of the special military operation, Ivan read every single word on that paper. Everyone had to sit and wait for him. He was in no hurry.

"Do you refuse?"

"No, I'm not refusing." He left to tell his wife.

Anna was already there when Ivan arrived at home. "I'm going to be sent away," he told her. "And that's it."

"No, they won't send you," she said. "Write — I don't know what. Write that you refuse. Write anything, everything. You can't go."

Anna started looking for help on Telegram channels, writing to every human rights organization she could think of, searching for keywords like *defector*, *refugee*. She wanted to get Ivan out of Russia, but his passport, like those of other officers, was kept in a safe at the military base. Anna knew it was probably hopeless, but she needed to do something.

The internet was alight with promises. "Anyone who hates Putin's path and loves liberal democracy is welcome in Germany," Germany's justice minister, Marco Buschmann, tweeted on the day the mobilization was announced. Nancy Faeser, the German interior minister, echoed his vow. "Deserters threatened with serious repression can as a rule obtain international protection in Germany," she told a German newspaper the next day. "Anyone who courageously opposes Putin's regime and thereby falls into great danger can file for asylum on grounds of political persecution." American officials made similar pronouncements. Perhaps politicians had forgotten how many people actually take them at their word.

Anna emailed organizations in Germany and France, Russian NGOs — bots or humans, she had no idea. No one answered. She had always been their dreamer, while Ivan was practical and goal-oriented to the point of pigheadedness. He didn't think running away was realistic. He didn't have his passport. Where would he hide? If the authorities wanted to, they would find him anywhere. An officer in war was a valuable commodity.

Ivan believed he had two choices: go to jail for refusing combat orders or go to the front. If he ended up in jail, they would send him to the front anyway, but first they would "befriend" him with a mop and then send him as a *zek* storm trooper — the convicts who were being rushed to the front line. It had happened to the uncle of a friend of his.

Ivan resigned himself to going to Ukraine. "Let's figure out a code to communicate," Ivan told Anna. He assumed that contact would be difficult; everything could be intercepted, so there would be no cellphones, no texting or calling or talking. He remembered some codes from his training. "If I say 103, it means 'It's OK,'" he explained. "If I say 102, that means I'm going on a combat mission, so there's a chance I'll be out of touch for a long time. There's a chance I might not get in touch at all; 102 is downright serious. And 105 is 'I love you.'" Anna dutifully wrote the numbers in her notebook through tears.

Ivan wasn't sure exactly when he was leaving; the military transport aircraft were notoriously unreliable. He would go to work, go to formation, go home, go back, go to formation and wait.

A few days later, he got home and told Anna he had been informed that they would go the next morning. "We have one night left," he said.

Anna did not want to believe it. "Please, can we stay up all night?" she begged. "Let's have tea. Like always. Just be close to each other. Let's not go to sleep, please."

Anna gave him a little icon and a cloth prayer to keep in his flak jacket. "When you're really scared," she told him, "imagine you're in a dome. I'm protecting you. Just imagine my love protecting you from everything."

They stayed up all night, just looking at each other.

"Anna," Ivan whispered, "the hardest thing is that I don't know how I will kill people like us, who have the same Sasha. Why would I have to do that? I won't be able to."

"Please, I want you to live, please," she told him. "Please just survive."

Part III

15.

There was little pomp to their departure from the base. Ivan was one of three junior officers in the transport helicopter. All of them had gotten a reputation for refusing to go to the front. These scoundrels were joined by two dozen *kontraktniki* in what they jokingly called "the flight of the rogue officers." Ivan had always been a nervous flier, but he didn't feel anxiety anymore. He was busy making lists of things he would need to acquire to ensure that he would see Anna and Sasha again.

The troop transport made multiple stops as it crept across Russia. Along the way, Ivan started buying things to augment his military-issued gear. He got kit from an injured Wagner fighter who had just returned from Mariupol. The guy sold him everything he had — body armor with a rope and a carabiner, as well as a tactical belt and a first-aid kit. The mercenary didn't rip him off; he even went to the airport to meet him because he knew Ivan was in a rush. Ivan also bought himself Lowa boots; he had read online that they withstood shrapnel from improvised explosive devices. He wasn't sure it was true, but anything was worth trying. He bought an ax and a knife. He tried to cajole the men around him to equip themselves too. "Guys, you're going to war. You could die. Of course, 'the bullet is a fool' " — he quoted Alexander Suvorov, one of Russia's most famous generals — "but the odds go up when you have normal equipment."

"I can't," they replied. "I'm bad, man." Ivan thought it was depression. Maybe he just wanted to be alive a little more than they did; maybe, as Anna had said, he really was greedy for life.

Ivan's transport truck rolled across the border into Ukraine with little fanfare — just one in a long convoy on a broken road. It had taken them three days to reach this point. They were never briefed on anything, just loaded, unloaded and reloaded into helicopters, planes and trucks.

The front was squalid. Their final stop was a tent encampment somewhere in a strip of forest, but even there, Ivan spotted Ukrainian quadcopters overhead. There was trash everywhere — toilet paper, bottles, rations wrappers, boxes, boots in the grass. Ivan was baffled: *Didn't these men realize that the Ukrainians would see this crap? They would throw their own shit back at them, in the form of rockets at their heads.*

Some lieutenant colonel from troop services with a mustache came by in an old Soviet car to welcome them. "Settle in here, and then they'll come get you," he said as he drove away, and Ivan soon discovered an immutable fact: War can be exceedingly boring. The newly arrived men set about collecting the trash.

The Russians had deployed across the front corresponding roughly to the military district that the troops were from, so a base from the Leningrad region would be at a different spot than a base from the Novosibirsk region. As a result, everyone knew someone when he got to the front. The newly mobilized, *mobiks*, were usually distributed to units from their own region.

When a new shipment of soldiers arrived from their base, the units sent their "buyers" — scouts — to plug holes in their rank and file. They would come by looking for a rifleman or an RPG-gunner or a tank driver and so on. The men who weren't chosen by scouts passed their time talking or drinking whatever they had managed to bring. One by one, everyone was selected, until just the rogue officers were left. *Maybe no one wants us?* That was fine with them. They had no cell reception, but Ivan took photos of everything — the trench, the tents, the coffee — thinking he would find a way to send them to Anna.

After a few days of loafing around, they decided to go to a village they saw on their drive over. They stopped the first civilian car they saw. "Will you give us a ride?" The older man obliged. Ivan imagined it from his perspective — big guys with machine guns sauntering down the street. Who could refuse? The driver had no idea that the officers hadn't even been issued ammunition.

In town, it seemed that everything was set up to service the front. There were power banks charging and a big plastic tank where people gathered to get water. The post office was selling SIM cards so soldiers could call home. A girl at the local shop was even running a currency-transfer service. Families in Russia could transfer money to a Russian account, and for a commission, the girl would give the soldiers the cash. They bought water, bread and sausages. It felt, to Ivan, just like being in Russia. The same small villages, the same old Soviet cars, the same broken roads. Though he tried to ask how things were, he knew the locals wouldn't tell him the truth. It didn't occur to Ivan to consider himself an occupier — after all, he was there against his will. Guilt is a peacetime luxury.

They had been at the front for five days when Colonel S. himself arrived. He was looking for Ivan personally.

"I need you to write a report," S. told him.

"What report?"

"Didn't you file a lawsuit against me? They need you to write an additional report. We'll take a picture of it and send it in."

Ivan couldn't even fathom it. *A report? Like, on a paper with pen?* He didn't have those. They didn't even have water. This clerical work seemed like such absurdity. They could all die right now.

"Comrade Colonel, what report?" Ivan said. "I'm already at war. What more do you need?"

The colonel looked at him.

"What lawsuit?" Ivan said. "It's over. I'm already here."

"Then is everything OK?" S. asked.

"Yeah, everything's fine," Ivan said. He didn't need to consider it. He had been on bad terms with S. in Russia, but in war, he'd better not look for any enemies.

The next day the mustachioed lieutenant colonel returned and found Ivan and his fellow "rogue" officers. "Guys, we totally forgot we had three officers here. Completely forgot," he said. "Let's go. The *mobiks* have arrived. You will train them."

Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New York Times

16.

After Ivan left, Anna remained immobile on the floor of their hallway. The pain came from inside a place she didn't even know was empty, and she began to howl. She lay there without sensing time or space, until she realized she needed to watch Sasha. She got up and walked back into the kitchen. A friend arrived to try to help. Anna heard the sound of an aircraft flying past the house. She understood that Ivan was on it. Her friend put her in bed.

The next day, Anna tried to go to church to pray for Ivan, but she was too ill to make it. She called the only psychiatrist in their town. "I need medication," she told the doctor. "I can't handle it. I just can't handle it." She walked to the drugstore and found a line of women out the door waiting for the same pills.

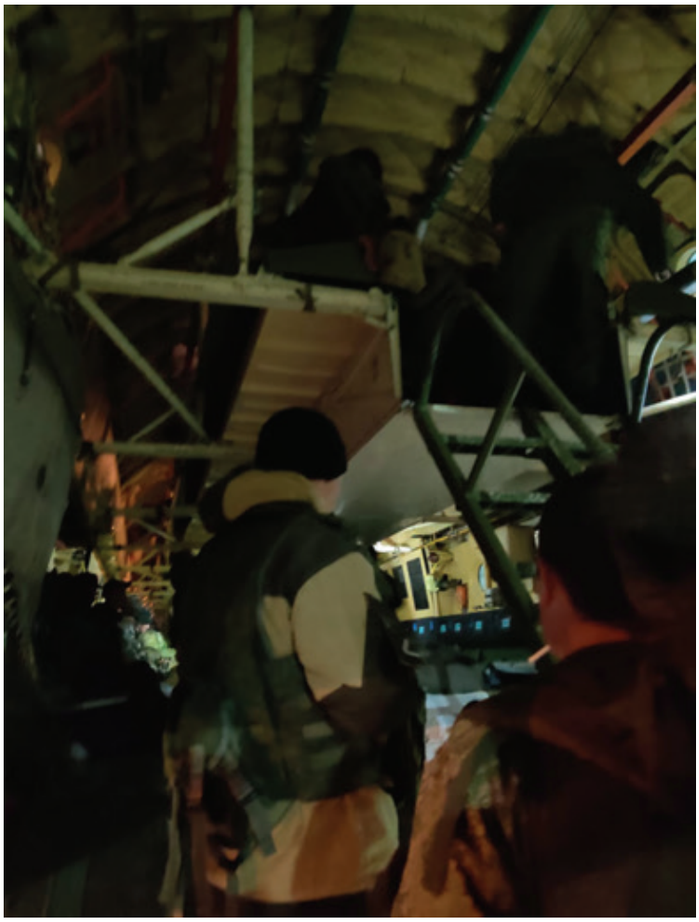
"I'll give them to all of you without a prescription," the pharmacist announced. "I have a son there myself."

Anna took two different antidepressants at a time. They made her ill, but she was hollow anyway — a blunt, stinging pain along with bitter hatred. She despised everybody, but especially people who talked about the war. It filled her with a kind of rage she'd never experienced. She couldn't criticize the S.V.O. or say anything about the government. She couldn't scream or grab hold of the person speaking and shout: *You've never sent a loved one to their death, you bitch. You'll never know what it's like*. Everything she felt was compounded by the communal silence — the feeling that everyone was indifferent or resigned or worse.

She was horrified by the response of some of the women she knew. One of them threw her husband a party the night before he deployed — gathered friends to see him off with a lavish dinner. Anna couldn't believe it. *Celebrations?* "The worst part is he didn't fly out that day — he came back," the woman told Anna. "I was like: 'Why the hell are you back? I've already seen you off!' "

It wasn't just enthusiasm. There were plenty of stories of women who ran pressure campaigns to persuade their husbands to enlist. "Men earn money in war, and you sit at home and get a measly $30," they chided, pointing to a neighbor's new Lada. They threatened divorce. They drove their husbands to their wits' end. There were mothers who escorted their sons to the enlistment office, sometimes against their will. One woman, the story went, sent her husband to Wagner and then took the payout for his dead body; she married another man who joined Wagner and met the same fate; then she married a third and a fourth. She became rich. Her social media was covered in their photos — "Oh, my dearest. You are remembered, loved, mourned."

The government's recruitment propaganda campaign targeted women too. The regional authorities took pictures of the wives and children of dead soldiers who were given coffin payments and ran them on Telegram channels. They didn't seem to realize how awful it looked when a young family stood there holding 10,000 rubles (roughly $100) with the caption: "We helped the widow of the man who died for our country." Still, for such impoverished people, even such a sum meant something. Besides, a mother who received her son's body in a zinc coffin did not want to think that her son was an occupier. She wanted to believe that her son was a hero. State propaganda convinced her and her entire social circle that her son died for a reason — not for the ambitions of Vladimir Vladimirovich, not for his power, not for his money, but as part of World War III — and she could find some semblance of comfort in that.



Inside a military plane on the way to Ukraine.

Russian children were already exposed to war glamour from birth — playgrounds with decommissioned tanks, instilling in them that war is normal, that military hardware is normal — but after the invasion, the campaign entered overdrive. In the 2022 budget, about $130 million was designated for things like military-propaganda lessons, the acquisition of state insignia for schools and the funding of children's "patriotic" events. In 2023, this rose to more than $560 million. In September 2022, the Kremlin rolled out Conversations About Important Things, compulsory lessons that would focus on cultivating patriotism, love of country and the *correct* history. Putin taught the first lesson himself at a school in Kaliningrad.

Two months later, the Education Ministry announced a new course in schools that would become known as Fundamentals of Security and Defense of the Motherland. Secondary-school students would be required

to shoot guns with real ammunition; they would learn how to handle Kalashnikov rifles, throw hand grenades and operate drones.

At school assemblies, administrators lined up children in the form of the letter Z, Russia's symbol of support for the war against Ukraine. Schools installed "hero desks" in classrooms, featuring images of Russian soldiers who died in Ukraine. Active-duty soldiers, as well as Wagner mercenaries, were often invited to speak to students. Publishers began scrubbing mentions of Ukraine from history textbooks. A campaign for schoolchildren to collect empty cans to make candles for soldiers in the trenches was a success.

It didn't stop with children. New patriotic shows and segments aired regularly on Kremlin-curated television. *Russia fights only defensive wars*, people assured themselves, a myth cultivated since Soviet times. Across government offices, state employees were subject to propaganda. At Anna's office, the bosses forced everyone to watch a movie explaining why Russia had no choice but to save Ukraine, showcasing gruesome injuries that the "fascist" Ukrainian regime had supposedly inflicted against ethnic Russians — severed hands, injured children. They blocked the room's exit. Anna put her head down on the table and refused to look at the screen, but her coworkers were captivated. "Is it really so?" they exclaimed. "What a nightmare." Anna wondered how sick in the head they had to be to believe this.

After Anna's first social media post at the start of the war, she decided that she would not post her own content anymore. When she reposted someone else's, the head of her department called her in and threatened her with prosecution for discrediting the military unless she removed the repost.

"If you say anything again, you'll get a criminal record," the department head told her. "This is not a joke. Delete it."

Then her direct supervisor called her. "I'm begging you. I'm asking you as a human being. Please don't put my head on the scaffold. I'm responsible for you." Anna deleted the repost. And so, whether it was propaganda or intimidation, the ensuing silence was the same. Anna stopped speaking to her work colleagues.

But after Ivan deployed, Anna stepped through the mirror. The same people who had cursed and heckled her when rumors spread that Ivan was trying to avoid fighting now told Anna what a hero he was. They told her how much they respected her, how they valued her family's sacrifice. "Don't worry, dear," they cooed. "He'll come back. He's defending the country." She wanted to spit venom in their faces.

17.

Seven platoons formed up in front of a forest clearing. It was mid-October, warm, muddy and lush. The Russians had set up a hive of tents, constructed a firing range out of the earth and organized the *mobiks*. The three rogue officers were assigned their people; the rest were led by lieutenants who had themselves just been mobilized. The men were nothing like Putin promised. Only some of them had military experience. Others had zero training. Ivan set about choosing his three squad leaders, so that when he set a goal, they would be the ones to corral the 10 men under them to the task.

In the encampment, many of the men were drinking. Ivan couldn't blame them, but he told his squad leaders that they should tell everyone that there was no alcohol in his platoon. Drunks were capable of anything. A drunk could see a squirrel run into a tent and throw a grenade at it — and it was worse with civilians who had been handed draft papers out of the blue. "The mobilized, when they are drunk, they are not human," Ivan explained. "If anything shoots, you have my permission to fire. If a drunk walks in our direction and doesn't follow your command to stop, shoot in the air, and I'll come out. If he still doesn't understand, we'll end him."

The next morning, Ivan and his platoon reported to a companywide formation at the training grounds. There were obstacle courses and stations for machine-gunners, snipers and RPG-gunners. Ivan had assumed that there would be specialists conducting the training for the different activities, but instead Colonel S. tasked him with teaching his own men most of it. Ivan had never been in the infantry, but he tried to remember what he could from the academy. He taught his men how to run, how to shoot and cover: *Keep the shooting constant. When you take a position, try to shoot single shots so that you don't use up ammo quickly, so that the enemy keeps his head down. There's no difference between firing three rounds and one. Periodically, without aiming, just shoot once*.

Ivan drilled with every man he had. This had nothing to do with patriotism or benevolence; it was all in the service of self-preservation. *Each one of them could end up being by my side in a fight and making the difference to my life*. But the opportunities for practice were abysmal. While the Ukrainians actually trained with their American Javelins, the Russians treated their missiles like treasure. Ivan heard that the anti-tank specialists got to train on one only once. He was told that a single mortar cost 500,000 rubles, roughly $5,500. (Later, Ivan saw a specialist totally miss his shot and cost everyone their cover. The Ukrainians hit back, and 10 Russian soldiers were killed. But as the Butcher was known to quip before an operation, "The female reproductive organ will bear more children, but the rocket is expensive.")

The Russian military remained the Russian military, no matter the location. Ivan found that he was always being called somewhere to write a report, attend some meeting, stand in a formation — useless tasks, as if they were on their boring base in Russia, not five kilometers from death on a stranger's land. It was always raining or miserable; Ivan was constantly trekking through mud and puddles. It was impossible to remove the grime from his boots. Still, he made it a point never to complain. "Got it," he chirped. "That's right, Comrade Colonel!" He answered every request, attended every formation, kissed every ass he had to. *My life depends on me right now; it's clear what "sabotage" leads to*. The basement pits were never far from anyone's mind.

A few weeks passed before they were told to pack up. They would be going to join their new units. The buyers were coming back, and the guys gathered their kit. Scouts drove in and looked them over.

"Are you Captain [last name]?"

"Yes," Ivan said.

"First Battalion!" the scout shouted, and Ivan climbed into the carrier.

18.

The town they arrived in looked as though it had been a nice place, the kind Ivan would have loved to visit in peacetime. People had taken care of their homes and gardens; they grew grapes on canopies over their carports. Now the whole place was pockmarked by battle — houses leaning sideways, fences collapsing, roofs shattered by shells. The Russians didn't know or didn't care about the street names; they called them by numbers: First, Second, Third.

Ivan was directed to head along First Street to command headquarters — the road was marked by a tank that was wrecked when the Russians drove it over a pile of their own mines. As he walked, he picked up an apple from the ground and bit into it; it tasted so sweet. He saw a familiar face — a sergeant

from his base, call sign Fiend. Fiend recognized him, too. They greeted each other enthusiastically. It was nice to run into someone from home.

Fiend showed Ivan around a dilapidated house the soldiers had occupied. They sat in the kitchen. Rations wrappers and half-opened containers the soldiers had taken from the village cellars lay on the table. Between onions sat a grenade. Ivan took a photo with his phone — amused by the oddity of his new reality. Everyone was smoking, lazing around on the floor. They explained that they had nothing to do but wait.

"What if a shell hits this house?" Ivan asked. "You could at least sit in the basement."

"It's a roulette," they replied. "There have been cases where people hid in basements. The mortars don't hit you, but they hit the concrete foundations and kill you anyway."

"Nah, I'll probably sleep in the basement," Ivan decided. He went to have a look. Ten feet away from the basement entrance, a Grad was stuck in the ground. The men were sleeping next to an unexploded rocket. "There's a toilet there, but don't use it, or it may detonate," the guys called to him.

Back at the table, Fiend started explaining the setup: The battalion's headquarters were across the street. Although they were supposed to be a specialized reconnaissance unit, they were now in charge of initial assaults, the first group to take territory. It had turned into a blood bath. For months, they had been trying to take a windbreak in the rolling farmland that everyone called the Boot for its shape. By early October, they had already been repelled half a dozen times and taken a lot of casualties. They knew they would make another attempt; they just didn't know when. The Boot was heavily fortified; the Ukrainians had dug extensive tunnels. "It's fucked there," a guy who survived the last offensive told Ivan. "It's not like you just walk in, and that's it. There are a ton of guys sitting down there."

Their commander — whose call sign began with an L, so we'll call him Lion — was another man Ivan knew from home. Lion had been a tanker but ended up as a commanding officer in infantry. He left their base in August as a major and was promoted to lieutenant colonel during his time in the S.V.O. At the base, he had been an asshole, but the guys agreed that as far as commanders who stayed safe in the rear trenches go, Lion was a good one. He pushed back against his superiors when he was given stupid orders. Fiend relayed a story in which Lion refused to send his men forward during one assault on the Boot. "There's no option," Lion shouted. "It's a meat grinder there." The guys believed that they had been punished for Lion's intransigent refusals, assigned to worse patrols at the point of contact, but they didn't mind. At least their commander didn't think of them as trash. (By the spring, Lion would be dead.)

Ivan headed to the command HQ to officially receive instructions. Lion was in the basement, the walls covered in rugs.

"I'm here," Ivan reported.

"Well," Lion looked him over. "You can't get the fuck out now, can you?"

"That's right," Ivan replied.

Lion passed him a list of his platoon personnel and dismissed him. Ivan asked his new deputy to collect the rest of the men, who were living all over the village. It took an hour to assemble everyone. When his 30 men lined up, Ivan learned they were all *kontraktniki*.

Ivan addressed them: "OK, men, let's work — let me say right off the bat that I have no combat experience. We'll get it together. Whoever has combat experience, step out and tell me about it."

One man stepped forward. His call sign was Student. He had fought before in one of the southern wars of Ivan's childhood. He was a machine-gunner there.

"Are you ready?" Ivan asked him.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"You'll help me if I need it?"

"Yes."

The assembly was over. The guys explained that over near a fence there was a can. If you put your phone on the can, sometimes you could catch cell reception. Ivan went over, opened WhatsApp and messaged Anna: "103."

19.

It hadn't taken Anna long to quit her job, leave the base and move home to her family after Ivan's deployment. She started trying to renovate their apartment to give herself something to do. Before Ivan left, he removed his wedding ring and gave it to Anna for safekeeping. She wore it on a chain around her neck, like a talisman.

As the child of a deployed officer, Sasha was placed into a good day care right next to their apartment. They could have their pick of any in the city, and Anna chose the closest one. It disgusted her when the other parents fawned over them during pickup and drop-off. She avoided their attempts at conversation.

Anna kept her phone on her at all times with the volume all the way up. It was always charged. She continued to watch Telegram channels and contact groups about Ivan's case. She corresponded most with an organization called Idite Lesom, which worked specifically to help service members escape. The group's name could translate as "Get Lost," "Go Fuck Yourself" or "Go by the Forest." It was started by Grigory Sverdlin, an exile from St. Petersburg who had fled the war and gone to Tbilisi, Georgia. Sverdlin graduated from college as a reserve officer — the same method that Defense Minister Shoigu employed to avoid actual service — and had the idea for the project within days of the mobilization. He wanted to find a way to help people not go to war. It was a way to take civic action to prevent Ukrainian deaths and the Russian Army's atrocities, as well as to save Russian lives. If they were all guilty of paving the way to this war, they could at least atone by trying to prevent the greatest amount of harm.

When he announced the idea on social media, Sverdlin immediately received hundreds of replies and volunteers — designers, I.T. people, psychologists, lawyers, people who had cars and offered to drive deserters, those who wanted to contribute money to help evacuate those who didn't want to fight. Messages poured in. *I live near the border with Kazakhstan, and I know how to bypass the checkpoint. Please keep my contacts, but delete all the messages.* Within a week, Idite Lesom had developed a database of information about the rights of service members, the mobilized and their families, advising people on how to avoid their draft papers and how to leave the country. Idite Lesom had helped junior officers escape Russia, but never anyone as high-ranking as a captain.

Anna lived from one phone call to the next. She slept 15 minutes at a time — 15 minutes of sleep and then awake, 15 minutes of sleep and then awake. In her dreams, there was only Ivan, only war and only death. She started scratching her wrists and ankles. They were covered in blood. They would scar and shimmer like burns.

20.

The guys in Ivan's platoon were, as he put it, decent men. They had all picked their own call signs when Ivan passed around a sheet of paper. Among them were Bear Blood, the deputy platoon leader and first-squad commander; Fiend, second-squad commander; Qyba, third-squad commander; Achilles, Apricot and Student, machine-gunners; Frost, Old Man and Space on the RPGs; Hunter, Paddle, Shepherd and Tin Man, riflemen; Rich Lake, the medic.

When Ivan talked to them, they explained that they hadn't been dragged there against their will. Some were career enlisted; others signed three-month contracts thinking they could make some money and go home. After signing, they were told to report back the next morning for transport to the S.V.O. They never even met the commander of the base they were assigned to; none had received the training they were promised.

Ivan couldn't believe they chose to be there. "You do realize you can die in a war?" he asked. "This isn't a job where your failure is your termination. Your failure in the army is your death."

Grenades in the kitchen of the home where Ivan and his unit stayed in Ukraine.

"Yeah, yeah," they replied. They told Ivan that they fought in another man's war for the economic well-being of their children; after a while, as more and more of their comrades were killed, that war would become theirs as well. It was more than just the money. The government promised that their children could be admitted into schools normally reserved for those with high marks, bribes or connections. Back home, Shepherd was a rancher. He bred sheep and horses. It paid well — about 400,000 rubles ($4,400) a month in profits, which was four times what Ivan made. Shepherd explained that he had five children and eight sisters and brothers. He made a decent living, but he organized weddings for his siblings and helped their children. Now one of his daughters was trying to get into the police academy. Shepherd explained to Ivan that he had been told it would be much easier for her to get in if he was at the S.V.O. Three months for her whole future?

The mobilization had put an end to these ideas. Now every *kontraktnik* was obliged to serve until the end of wartime conditions, which could continue indefinitely.

The platoon got along fine. When someone went to town to buy something, he brought back extras for the rest of the men. People would drop by and grab coffee or a cookie and talk. They didn't have much else to do. Humanitarian parcels were often passed through Lion's basement, though they had already been picked over by others along the way. The good stuff never made it to the front line. Instead they got chocolates and socks, and sometimes they got postcards from schoolchildren, who wrote to them during patriotic lessons. Ivan took one to his kitchen of grenades and onions and pinned it up on the wall: "Soldier, come home!" it said, accompanied by a child's drawing. "Remember, we're waiting for you."

He thought it might cheer someone up, but when he looked at it, he just felt empty.

21.

It wasn't long before Ivan was summoned back to Lion's basement and shown drone footage of the Boot. They could see the trench full of Ukrainians in the frames. Lion told him that two companies had been assigned different segments of the Boot. One company would move first, then the other, like a pincer, to force the Ukrainians to retreat through the middle. Lion's three platoons would divide their section into three parts and do the same pincer move on a smaller scale.

Ivan and his three squad leaders rewatched the drone footage more closely — the ground was scorched from past battles, and overturned armored personnel carriers were scattered around the burned brush. The guys who participated in previous attempts pointed out where the Ukrainians had positions earlier — a pumping station and a vineyard, which housed a sniper's nest. Ivan and his deputies agreed that they would run in shooting, throw a grenade at the Ukrainian trench, take the point and wait for reinforcements. It wasn't a brilliant strategy, but Lion didn't care. They just had to advance — 90 lives for two miles of earth.

Previous attempts to take the Boot had been on foot. They had crawled across minefields and been overpowered. Now, without radically increasing their numbers, they were told that they would ride in with a tank, which would clear the mines with a visor that dragged on the ground and raised the

topsoil. Command said the men would walk behind it. If it snagged a mine, the vehicle would take the impact. Everyone agreed it was idiotic, like banging your spoon on your plate and yelling to the Ukrainians: "I'm here! I'm here!"

They had two days to train, so they went back to the range. During one practice, they were told to line up in formation. The general in charge of their entire operational direction strode out to address them. "Comrades, we've got to get the Boot!" he began, leaning against a tree with his hands on his stomach. "I know exactly how you feel. I have a son in the airborne. I was storming a forest the other day, ran into a wooded area just like this myself." He told them not to worry — another company would come in from the right side. "We're gonna have artillery like you've never seen in your lives! There will be 13 tanks! You're going to be covered from all sides! Reconnaissance reported that there are no more than 15 people in this forest belt! There are only mobilized men guarding it! Don't worry, they are even more afraid than we are! They'll run away as soon as they see you!"

Ivan knew this was a lie. Their own drones had shown them the troop strength and the extensive tunnel system. He knew from school that any stronghold should be attacked by 280 artillery shells, not fired just in the general area but at an actual target. And only after that would the infantry, at three times the defense's strength, go on the offensive. Ivan had watched the YouTube videos of the Third Separate Assault Brigade of Ukraine, formerly known as Azov. He saw how real warriors took territory, the ones who were fighting to liberate it. But Ivan didn't want any territory; he didn't want to do a particularly good job. He wanted to find a hole to sit in. The main thing was just to survive.

The night before the operation, Ivan prepared his supplies. He took apart all the magazines, wiped down the springs, oiled them and carefully hung all the grenades in the proper way. He put extra ammunition in his backpack, along with his first-aid kit. He distributed medical supplies to his squad leaders. They would leave their phones in Lion's basement in a bag so no one could see their geolocation. Before Ivan handed his phone in, he sent Anna a message: "102."

22.

When Anna got the message, she remembered a video she saw online of a psychologist who said that we go crazy the moment we allow ourselves to go crazy. She told herself that Sasha couldn't lose two parents at once. *Take yourself in your hands; you have a mission.* She grabbed herself, slapping herself on the cheeks. Without that, she would stay still, looking at the same point on the wall, like being submerged in water. Sasha was worried, clearly aware that something wasn't right. For that, Anna beat herself more. If Ivan had to survive, so did they.

She scrolled the news on Telegram endlessly. Russians were on the retreat and the defensive. That month, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, previously known as the Butcher of Syria, had been named Russia's overall commander in Ukraine. Surovikin had a reputation for efficiency and brutality. Under his command, the Russians began constructing what would come to be known as the Surovikin line — miles of concrete pyramids, known as dragon's teeth, and deep ditches called tank traps for the defense of their supply lines. They would build miles of trenches with pillboxes — small fortifications that their troops could shoot from. The newly mobilized would be put to work; units could rotate, even rest. There would be reinforcements from men like Ivan. The commander of Ukraine's armed forces, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, stated bluntly: "Russian mobilization has worked. It is not true that their problems are so dire that these people will not fight. They will."

But the mobilization had also awakened the ire of some of the most sympathetic quarters of society — women. Mothers of newly enlisted conscripts, wives of mobilized men gathered on Telegram groups to coordinate humanitarian packages. Memories of the mothers of conscripts from the Chechen war, who moved like ghouls in the dark of the eastern Caucasus Mountains looking for the bodies of their sons, were hard to erase from the national psyche. The Kremlin worried that these women would eventually take to the streets. They were active: They wrote to their governors, to their mayors, to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, to the president's office, to Defense Minister Shoigu, begging for their husbands and sons to be returned.

Anna drove herself to exhaustion sourcing humanitarian packages for Ivan — she contacted everyone she could to collect money for his parcels. When he told her he needed a thermal night-vision scope, Anna started looking for it everywhere. She was not the only wife trying to supply her husband at the front; everything near her was sold out. Everything was expensive. She found one for sale in Moscow and contacted a girlfriend there. Neither of them had any idea what a thermal night-vision scope even was. "It looks legitimate," she reported back to Anna, "or at least like a tube you can look through."

When Ivan called her and told her that everything was fine, she knew he was lying because he periodically sent pictures. She watched as Ivan shrank to half his former size. They didn't discuss it, but she knew he sent the pictures to help her geolocate his body. So many Russian women did not know where their husbands died. Anna knew — she didn't decide, she *knew* — that if Ivan were killed, she would go there herself to collect his remains. She would not let him rot in pieces in some sunflower field.

> The same people who had cursed and heckled her when rumors

23.

At 0500, the company arrived at its position and waited. Ivan saw Spicy, the Second Platoon leader, who would take the middle of the Belt.

"Well, see you tonight," Spicy told him.

"Yeah, see you later." They shook hands.

"Guys, it's going to be OK," Ivan told his platoon as they waited. "We've been practicing. Everything's gonna be fine. Don't panic. If you have any questions, tell me right away. The main thing to remember is to cover each other. The most important thing is not to panic. Do not panic. Panic is the enemy on the battlefield."

Everyone sat there, breathing out, waiting for the sounds of the other company moving in. But it was silent. They couldn't understand where everyone was. Lion radioed Ivan to advance anyway, and Ivan passed the command down the line.

The tank, followed by an infantry fighting vehicle, rolled loudly into open territory. They were less than a mile from the Ukrainian position. Spicy's platoon was moving, too; Ivan could hear the men shooting from their tank. No one fired back. Everyone stopped and dismounted. Immediately they came under fire. "Everyone down!" Ivan shouted. There was a machine-gunner shooting from the Ukrainian stronghold. The Russians returned fire. Ivan's deputy, Bear Blood, was holding his hand screaming. Part of his finger had been blown off.

"Down!" Ivan shouted. "Don't move!"

Old Man went to work. He fired the RPG straight into the Ukrainian stronghold — it exploded. Then it was quiet, except for the radio.

"Spicy is 200," it blared. "Spicy is 200."

It had been about five minutes since the offensive started. The guy Ivan had just shaken hands with. They had been 50 yards apart.

24.

From Ivan's vantage point on the ground, it looked nothing like the drone footage he studied back in the basement with his squad leaders. He could see only the trees, no landmarks, no black dirt, no water towers or high points. The earth began to burst, then there was a double sound that Ivan didn't register until he saw something tuft the earth five meters ahead of him — a splash, then another, moving toward him like stones skimming a lake in reverse. A sniper was working on him. He turned and saw a crater. He crawled backward until he tumbled down into the hole.

Ivan looked around and saw a handful of others from his platoon also hiding in the crater. The hole was huge, created by a bomb, roughly 10 feet deep and 20 feet in diameter. The radio screamed periodically: *This one's 300. This one's 200. We need an evacuation right away. Urgent! Help!* They had changed all their call signs before the offensive in case the Ukrainians had been bugging them. It was Lion's directive. And instead of "200s" and "300s," they should call them "X's" and "O's." But in the end, it didn't matter; everyone was screaming as usual — "200," "300."

When Ivan poked his head out of the crater, he could see Apricot, a machine-gunner; Fiend, second-squad leader; Bear Blood, deputy platoon leader; Tin Man, the senior rifleman. All lying there. He saw someone running toward their crater, totally upright despite the sniper's bullets, and leaping through the air for the final steps. At the last moment, there was a grimace of pain on his face. Ivan watched it all as if he were in a slow-motion film. "I'm hurt!" Achilles shouted as he landed. He was hit in the back, his pelvic bone shattered. They started bandaging him.

They stayed in that crater for an hour, or a few minutes — they didn't know how long — thinking about what to do, hoping for backup. "I have two 200s," Ivan called for support. "There are 300s and a heavy 300."

A Ukrainian tank broke out of the tree line, firing, hitting somewhere near them, retreating somewhere, and then it was quiet again. Ivan looked out and radioed what he thought were the tank's coordinates. The Russians fired from behind Ivan with an automatic grenade launcher and missed. "Twenty meters right," Ivan corrected. They kept firing. Ivan kept adjusting, but the Russian efforts kept failing. They were just totally inept, wasting opportunities. Each time Ivan had to figure out the adjustment, he stuck his head out of the foxhole, playing whack-a-mole with the sniper. It would be a dark comedy if the punch line weren't Ivan's life. Half an hour went by, a dozen attempts, until it was clear that it was useless to keep taking the risk.

What began as an obviously bad idea would grow ever more absurd. Achilles started to turn pale. No one had thought to check him for an exit

spread
that Ivan was trying to
avoid fighting now told Anna
what a hero
he was.

wound. When the men turned him over, it was right there on his stomach. Ivan pulled out hemostatic powder that Anna had sent him and poured a ton of it in the hole where the bullet came out. With gauze on top, they pressed down hard.

"I need a fucking evacuation," Ivan kept shouting on the radio.

"Go back on the fucking offensive," Lion radioed.

They must have been there for hours when they saw the Ukrainian drone. The Russians started shooting at it. The drone dropped its munitions 10 feet from their hole. They managed to knock it down, but they knew they had been spotted. "Where's the trophy money I was promised?" one of the men joked.

"Go get it and bring it back to me," Ivan replied, "and I'll put in an order." At least they still had their sense of humor.

A voice above called to Ivan. He poked his head out of the hole. It was Student, the second machine-gunner. He was 20 feet away, pinned down by his heavy backpack, and he couldn't cut off the strap — one of his arms was mangled.

They had two options — get Student from above and risk the snipers or dig a trench toward him. "Dig!" Ivan shouted at his men. They dug for hours, trying to make ridges and shelters out of the ground, but the earth kept crumbling in. They dug a 10-foot trench, but the more they dug, the more it crumbled. They were tired. They hadn't eaten. It was already the afternoon, and they had set out 12 hours ago. "A man could die," Ivan commanded. "Let's keep digging!" They stopped to take stock and realized that the digging had made their own hole smaller. As the dirt fell into their crater, they were raising themselves up to level ground. It was like a cartoon.

"Guys, let's stop," Ivan commanded. "We're going to dig ourselves to the surface."

Their water had run out. All they had left were cigarettes. It felt as if they were smoking one a minute; everything they touched was clawing at their throats. Somebody had some candy. They passed it around until it was gone. They had no idea what to do next. They made a rope out of their belts. Old Man volunteered to run out and clip in Student with Ivan's carabiner, and then they could all drag him into the crater.

Old Man crawled over to Student, and for some reason he decided to inject him with Promedol right there. The powerful anti-pain drug that the Russians were given at the front was known to relax people; it made Student floppy and impossible to drag. As they struggled to heave him, the sniper started again. Old Man ran back and jumped in the crater. When he stood up, his pants were hanging low off his body. His jacket and belt were split in half. The sniper's bullet had skimmed him. Dumb luck was their only savior.

"Attack!" Lion continued to radio. "Attack!"

"Guys, we gotta do something," Ivan said to the men. "I can't just ignore orders from command. They will lock me up if I go back. What are we going to do?" Everyone knew that there were snipers out there and that if they left the hole one of them would surely die.

"Let's pretend we are attacking," one of them offered. "You go on the radio and talk as if we're attacking, and we will shoot from inside here."

"Let's do it," Ivan decided. "Everyone here in favor of this story? Do you understand what we are doing right now?" Everyone agreed.

"Is everyone clear?" Ivan repeated. "We all say the same thing."

"Yes."

Ivan got on the radio: "I'm attacking. We're advancing! We're advancing!"

All of them pointed their weapons out of the crater and started firing rounds in the air. "I'm attacking," Ivan shouted through their own melee. "We're advancing! We're advancing! I'm trying to move out. I can't get out, and the enemy is firing."

Ivan's tent in the forest in Ukraine.

"There's a tank coming," Lion radioed. "Get behind the tank and follow the tank."

The Russian tank drove past Ivan's crater.

"Is everybody ready?" Ivan asked his men. "Let's at least fake it. Stand up!"

The men stood up, and the tank let off a round. All of them fell over from the bang.

The tank pulled back, its turret right above the crater, and from 10 feet above their heads let off another round. The men were deafened. Everything inside their pit was shaking, little grains of sand jumping up as though gravity had been dismissed. They grabbed their ears, falling down even lower. Slowly, Ivan heard voices more distinctly — it was Lion on the radio again screaming and cursing at them to advance.

"I need an evacuation!" Ivan shouted.

Moments later, explosions, sparks, smoke. Ivan looked out of the crater and saw more men running toward their hole. The evacuation vehicle had been blown up. The commander of the evacuation group ended up in their hole too. "Come on," Ivan shouted at him, "report from your side that the evacuation group was hit. So that this comrade doesn't think we're just fucking around here."

"The evacuation team has been hit. We need a way out. We have a lot of wounded."

Ivan decided he had had enough. If no one came to help them, they would wait until dark and move back.

"We're getting out," he radioed Lion.

"Don't leave without the 200s," came the reply. "If you leave them, you're going back to retrieve them."

After the sun set, the soldiers crawled out of the hole. They each grabbed a wounded man and took turns dragging everyone back. They left the dead — Apricot and an engineer who had been attached to the platoon a few days earlier for the operation — because they didn't have enough hands. Ivan crawled all the way back, the dirt and the rocks shredding the kneepads off his uniform. He turned and saw that some of the men had disregarded reason; despite at least two snipers, they walked upright, without helmets. Ivan, who always wanted to survive just a little bit more, kept crawling.

25.

In the safety of the rear trenches, as far from the front as you could get and still be near the point of contact, Lion had the luxury of fury. "Why did you leave the 200s?" he demanded of Ivan. "You bastard. I should lock you up. Fucking pussy!" Ivan just listened. He knew it was important for the widows to have proof of their husbands' bodies, to try to collect the coffin payment or to have peace of mind. Otherwise, the state could and probably would declare them deserters and try to deny the women the payouts it promised. But Ivan had no regrets. He had to save the lives he could. He also didn't think that was why Lion was so worked up about it. Battalion commanders must get some kind of penalty for leaving bodies behind.

When Lion finished cursing Ivan out, he told him that his platoon would be going to support the Third Platoon, led by Soviet, who had taken the territory they were supposed to. No sleep, no food, just more walking and fighting.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," Ivan replied.

Ivan returned to his men and explained the situation. Four of the men refused immediately, but Lion threatened them with arrest, and they relented. It was past midnight as they trekked through the darkness. Ivan's back had started hurting. They got to the trenches dug near some trees and bunked in for the night. They hadn't eaten in 24 hours. The Third Platoon shared some of their rations. Ivan chewed a scrap of lard someone passed him, and they lay down to sleep, huddling close to one another. They were freezing. Ivan woke up to a mouse biting his finger. He was furious, not that the mouse was hurting him but that it ended his slumber. It was so cold that he couldn't fall back asleep. It began to drizzle. Though it was uncomfortable, the rain would make them less visible.

Ivan heard a buzzing overhead. At first no one realized what it was — a quadcopter with a thermographic camera, which meant it could see them even though they were hidden under trees. It could sense their heat and adjust a mortar. Ivan had only heard that the Ukrainians had these. His battalion didn't have anything like it.

Immediately, they could hear the artillery exits, then the arrivals began falling around them. It was carnage. Wherever they ran, the explosions followed. When a shell missed a direct hit, it hit the thicket of trees above them; branches splintered, and fragments of wood, earth and metal engulfed them. A man near Ivan started screaming: "Arm! Arm!" More screams. As Ivan ran, he thought of Anna. *Imagine that all my love, all my tenderness for you, it will be transformed into a protective balloon that will protect you from bullets, from explosions.* He could nearly see the dome's boundaries surrounding him as he ran at full speed.

Ivan saw nothing, felt nothing, until he tumbled down into a trench. A shell slammed somewhere nearby, inches from the opening. A fragment hit the Third Platoon commander, ripping out his stomach. Ivan was a few feet away. He grabbed a soldier who was stumbling and started walking. The rain had turned the road from clay to sludge. It stuck to their feet, every step they took their shoes getting heavier and heavier. Between the grease, the body armor, the helmet and the guy he was carrying, Ivan could barely move. His back was hurting, and he began limping under the weight. As he walked, Ivan started thinking — in the first attack, just hours ago, he lost two men, now this. Going back to Lion again, what would happen? *They'll say: "You're resting one day. Tomorrow we'll attack again."*

Ivan's back was twinging. He knew a guy back at the base, Roman, whose herniated disc had gotten so bad after wearing a flak jacket at the front that he lost the use of both legs. *Too bad mine isn't more like his*, Ivan thought to himself. *Or* is *it?* Ivan focused on his pain. He turned it over in his mind. What a tantalizing daydream.

He heard on the radio that an evacuation vehicle was coming. He limped along toward the point and saw it there. Men were starting to load up. He passed the soldier's slack body to a medic and stood by to give others a hand up when he saw Fiend. Fiend's leg was wounded.

"Did you know Warrior died?" Fiend asked.

"No, brother, I didn't," Ivan said. Ivan knew Warrior was Fiend's closest friend. Fiend was on the verge of tears.

"Brother, I'm sorry," Ivan repeated. "The main thing is that you're alive, that we're standing here with you."

Fiend clambered up the evacuation vehicle. Shepherd was sitting on top of it.

What's the next move? Ivan looked up at them, thinking.

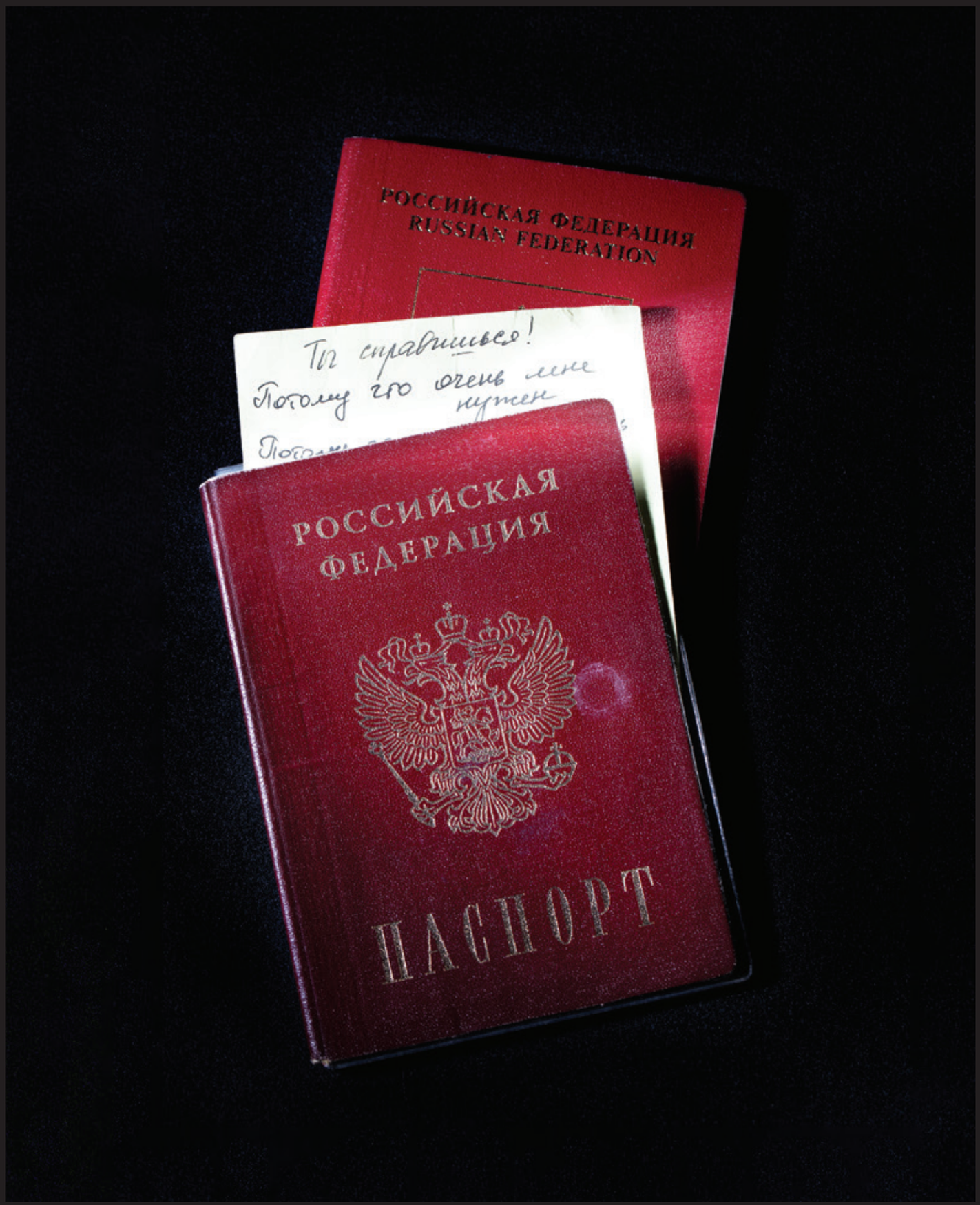
"Is that it?" the driver called down. "Shall we go?"

Ivan turned it over again.

"No," he shouted.

He climbed up.

"*Now* let's go."


РОССИЙСКАЯ ФЕДЕРАЦИЯ
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
Ты справишься!
Потому что очень мне
нужен
РОССИЙСКАЯ
ФЕДЕРАЦИЯ
ПАСПОРТ

Part IV

26.

The Russian evacuation vehicle crashed through the wreckage of the forest — passing the upturned, splintered poplar trees and cratered roads. The men, riding on top wherever they could find space to cling, could barely hang on, moaning. Ivan knew he needed a plan, urgently; otherwise they would send him back into battle right away. Whether it had been writing itself through his mind all along or whether he thought of it on the spot he would never know — but the answer was self-evident: He needed to insist on surgery for his back.

Years earlier, Ivan was holding Sasha in his arms when he fell down, hard. Pain shot up his leg and back. It was a herniated disc. Ivan began trying to remember how Roman limped when he came back from the S.V.O., so he could replicate it. He decided that his gait should be more laborious — he needed to really wince when he put weight on his foot.

When the vehicle pulled up to a field hospital, it was a broken building with no windowpanes, just polyethylene flapping over the frames. There were medics writing down what kind of injury each man had. Ivan observed that most of the assembled could rip open their uniforms and show some kind of blood. He needed to think. He let everyone pass him.

"What have you got?" the medic asked him.

"My back."

"What? You got hit in the back? Wounded?"

Ivan's domestic and international passports, with a note from Anna that says: "You're gonna make it! Because I really need you."

"No, my back's jammed. Hernia."

The guy eyed him.

"All right, I'll put you on the other list."

At the entrance, the men unclipped their belts, unlaced their boots and handed in their armor. The injured were wandering around in their socks on tiles streaked with blood and grime. The nurses couldn't keep up with the mopping. Ivan saw one of his subordinates, Space, talking on a cellphone. He thought he had bagged everyone's phone and left them with Lion before the operation. "Why do you have your phone?" Ivan demanded.

"Well, shit, Commander," Space said. "I had more than one."

"First of all, you're an asshole. You didn't follow orders," Ivan told him. "And secondly, give me the phone now. I need to call my wife."

Ivan dialed Anna. "Everything is fine," he told her. "I'm alive. We're back from there."

Anna was sobbing so hard she couldn't speak.

When Ivan got off the call he went inside. It seemed as if the doctors there were churning everyone they could through an X-ray machine. They told Ivan they would X-ray his back too. "My problem doesn't show up on X-rays," Ivan insisted. "I need an M.R.I." No one listened. The doctors at the field hospitals were overworked, underprepared or underqualified — either way, they had a reputation for making mistakes. (Bear Blood, Ivan's deputy who lost part of a finger in the battle, wasn't even X-rayed properly, so they didn't spot shrapnel in his wound, which would get infected and fester. Months later, he would need to have two additional phalanges removed.)

As the men waited, someone brought them breakfast. The plate was plain — watery potatoes with meat and onions — but Ivan had never tasted anything so good. It was almost sweet, melting in his mouth. There was tea in regular cardboard cups. The firmness of the cardboard felt like a luxury. A galette — which was probably not even a galette — that they dunked in the tea seemed so sweet, too. An hour ago, he was under fire, and now he was sitting barefoot on a bench, eating delicious food — he couldn't stop marveling at the contrast. He was sure in that moment that he would remember this meal for the rest of his life.

Ivan limped all the way to the sleeping quarters. He washed his clothes. There was a shower. The two minutes under the water felt like a dream; he hadn't showered in more than a month. He lay down on a clean cot. It felt so soft. That these realities existed simultaneously was bewildering — *a place where there is always something to eat, which people tried to clean, with running water, and yet at the same time, in the distance, you can still hear the explosions*, he thought, and promptly fell asleep.

27.

The next morning, Ivan was told he would be pushed onward to a hospital in Donetsk for further examination. The men loaded up into a truck. Donetsk was where the military sorted the injured — the fulcrum of the reverse march from Russia's strategy of throwing its men relentlessly at the front. Some were operated on there; others were flown to Moscow or driven to Rostov-on-Don.

As they waited for intake and triage, Ivan relished the line. The same worthless paperwork and thumb-twiddling that had always irritated him became an asset — he had a lot to think about. He needed to get back to Russian soil. He wasn't sure what he would do once he got there, but he knew it would give him the time to figure it out. Donetsk was not safe enough — if you were unlucky, it was still possible to be redeployed to the front line in a few hours.

The doctor who initially examined Ivan referred him to a neurologist. (When Ivan said he needed a neurosurgeon, he was told there were none.)

The neurologist began to probe his leg, raising and lowering it, telling Ivan to tell him when the pain started. Ivan yelped — "There, there!" he feigned.

"You'll be fine," the doctor told him. "It will pass."

Ivan tried to show the doctor his old M.R.I. scan on his phone, but the doctor refused to look at anything not printed on paper. Ivan was to fill the

Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New York Times

‘I’m never going back there again. Never.

prescription and return to his unit. *This cannot be the end of this story*. He raced to print out his old M.R.I. scan. He went back to the original doctor. “The neurologist wouldn’t even look at the results of my M.R.I.,” Ivan said. “I know I need surgery, but he tells me to take a pill. I need a neurosurgeon. Can you send me to Moscow? To St. Petersburg?”

The doctor looked at Ivan’s printout and agreed to refer him to a different neurologist. Ivan could not afford another setback. As he waited for transport, he called his mother. She had an acquaintance who was a military neurosurgeon and specifically dealt with backs. “Give me her phone number,” he said. “I need to talk to her right away.” Ivan’s mother didn’t ask questions, but he wouldn’t have told her anything anyway. Ivan couldn’t have her thinking he was a traitor. It would break her heart, or worse. Ivan’s mother was a patriot; she cared more about appearances than about Ivan’s realities. This did not hurt Ivan’s feelings, because he did not expect it to be another way.

When Ivan reached his mother’s friend, he explained that the situation in Donetsk was bad. “My back really hurts,” he told her. “I’m worried that since I don’t have as much pain now, they will send me back. But as soon as I put on my body armor, immediately everything will get worse.”

“When you’re lying down, if you can lift your leg above 30 degrees, you’re probably not as acute of a case,” she explained to him. Ivan thanked her and got off the phone. He had definitely raised his leg further than 30 degrees at the neurologist. He should have started yelping much earlier. He cursed himself for not preparing — each mistake could cost him his life.

Ivan knew he had to be personable. He chatted up the next neurologist, asking him about the situation in Donetsk. War had been destroying the city since 2014, but Ivan noticed that people were eerily unfazed. Parents still walked the streets with their children, who played outside in playgrounds. Water was intermittent; the hospital stockpiled it in buckets. “I have no pencils, no paper,” the doctor complained. “We buy everything at our own expense.” Ivan nodded and groaned along at all the right places. The doctor examined him and said he could send him on to a civilian hospital to see a neurosurgeon there and to do another M.R.I., but he would have to pay for it out of pocket.

“No question about it,” Ivan said. “I’ll pay whatever I need to pay. I’ll go everywhere I need to go.” He left the appointment and immediately went to the store — he bought some stationery and some cognac and returned. “Please, so everything is normal,” Ivan said as he handed the items to the doctor. “I just wish you’d keep me here a little longer.” The doctor understood.

Ivan got on the M.R.I. waiting list. It would be at least 10 days. He needed to pinpoint exactly what symptoms he needed to qualify for surgery; only surgery would guarantee him a ticket to Russia. Ivan called Roman and asked how he was faring. He said he was much better after rehabilitation — the pain had been so intense that Roman didn’t just limp, he dragged his leg. Ivan realized he needed to correct his gait. Rather than wincing with each step, he would start pulling his leg behind him.

Ivan decided to start saying that before the war, a doctor at home had told him that he needed surgery — to make everyone believe that a higher authority than Ivan had cleared it. As an officer, he figured he could insist on doing the procedure in a military hospital in Moscow or St. Petersburg, where the surgeons were competent enough that the operation most likely wouldn’t harm him, even if he didn’t actually need it. And going through with it would grant him six months of leave for rehabilitation. Maybe the war would be over by then.

When the civilian neurosurgeon finally saw him, Ivan went through his whole routine.

“Yeah, this is a problem,” the civilian doctor told Ivan. “You can either do the surgery at this hospital for a fee or in Russia with your military insurance.”

“No, no, no,” Ivan said. “I would like to be in the military structure.”

He watched as the doctor wrote his recommendations, the words that would get Ivan back to safety: “surgical intervention.” He had no idea if the doctor had bought the ruse or if he was just playing along. Either way, the man was saving his life.

28.

In the first Russian city Ivan reached, Rostov-on-Don, he marveled at the silence — there was no shelling or sounds of war anywhere. Ivan had continued to think about his act as he traveled. He decided to add a cane to his performance. He thought it would distinguish him from the crowd when he returned to the base, signifying that his injury was serious, rather than some kind of sprain. Not far from the train station, he found a shop selling canes.

It was November; it would be winter soon. Ivan was playing the long game. He decided to buy the nicest cane. It was solid black with a retractable spike for the ice. He wandered the back streets practicing how to use it with his left hand while dragging his leg behind him. He went to the post office and put his cane on the table to fill out some paperwork, but when Ivan turned around, it was gone. He was in uniform, so the person who stole it had to know it was a wounded war veteran's cane. *Welcome home.*

Ivan had joined the tens of thousands of men making their way through the Russian military's medical system — loaded onto evacuation trains, transferred and retransferred into hospitals for treatment and rehabilitation, eventually ending up back at their bases. As he moved through Russia, Ivan perfected his limp and his grimaces. Watching the other injured men around him, he realized that surgery might not be the solution he originally believed it to be, that eventually he would be rehabilitated and sent back to the front line almost as soon as the bandages came off.

When he finally got back to his base, he went straight to the colonel's office without showering or shaving. He wanted to look as rough as he could. "I have to have back surgery," he explained, showing everyone his paperwork. "I got an injection to block the pain. It's enough for a while, but I have to have surgery."

"Ah, you have the same story as Roman," they replied, at the office, at H.R., at the medical clinic, offering him a chair. It was easier to sell his act because they had already heard it — why would they think to doubt its veracity? Instead, they sped up his paperwork. An injured captain was a war hero. He was on the next flight to Anna and Sasha.

Anna met him at the airport. She could scarcely believe that he was real, that he was whole, that he was with her again. They took the weekend to celebrate, but they couldn't allow themselves any further opportunity to relax. They knew they were on borrowed time. "I'm never going back there again," Ivan told Anna. "Never. Under no circumstances will I go back to war. I'd rather die."

Under no circumstances will I go back to war. I'd rather die.'

29.

Russians have two passports, international and domestic. When Anna wrote to Idite Lesom on Telegram, she explained that Ivan's foreign passport was locked in a safe at the human-resources office at the base. The person typing on the other end explained that because Ivan did not have his international passport, his only opportunity to leave Russia would be to use his domestic passport to go to another country in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia's answer to NATO, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Once Ivan arrived in a C.S.T.O. country, he would have to remain there. He would not be in Russia, but he would not be safe either.

Ivan and Anna had followed the case of Mikhail Zhilin, a Federal Guard Service officer who sent his wife and child to Kazakhstan and later crossed the border illegally because F.G.S. officers are forbidden to leave Russia. Moscow put Zhilin on an international wanted list, and the Kazakh authorities arrested him despite his request for asylum. In December 2022, they deported him to Russia despite the public pleas of his wife and efforts from NGOs. (Zhilin was subsequently sentenced to six and a half years in prison for desertion and illegal border crossing.)

Anna decided that the C.S.T.O. was not an option. They needed to get as far away from Russia as they could, to a country that would not extradite Ivan once he was declared AWOL or a deserter. He agreed in principle but had no idea how to do it. "How can I run without a passport?" Ivan asked her.

Anna was undeterred. Ivan spent his vacation focused on the practicalities — he needed to find the hospital in Moscow with the longest waiting list. They worked together and separately. Anna went back and forth across Telegram channels, websites and message boards — she decided on the country they should go to. She told Ivan that she would start studying cosmetology; she needed a profession that wouldn't require her to speak the local language. She would leave first with Sasha. That part would be easier — civilians, even the wives of officers, were free to travel. Ivan would find a way to join them. Maybe he would have to run through the forest. Or maybe, if he thought hard enough, he could find a legal way to quit. He just needed more time.

Anna registered for courses and an apprenticeship at a salon. She started organizing paperwork, a passport for Sasha. She felt she was

at the edge of a chasm, stepping into the unknown with no idea if they would make it or not.

They spent the New Year's holiday together. They planned and planned. It would be the last time they saw each other until they met again in their final destination. Anna sat Ivan down. She had been thinking about it. "If you don't make it to us, it's OK, just stay alive," she told him. "I'll know you're alive somewhere, and that's the most important."

"I'll do anything to get to you," he told her. "I'll arrange for some guy to load me into a cargo container ship. I'll get to you somehow."

30.

When Ivan returned to the base, he went back to work as he waited to get on the surgery list. He reported to all the formations, the meetings, the paper-pushing — but now with the respect of a captain injured in war. He kept the curtains closed in their apartment so he could move around without the cane. Otherwise, it would be easy to spot him from the main street downstairs, from that bench at the skate park where he used to watch Anna in their kitchen. It could jeopardize the whole thing.

Every night, he came home and ate his dinner while streaming some TV show on his computer. Then he put everything aside and sat at the kitchen table in silence. Maybe he could get himself declared insane and be discharged. He had heard about a guy at his base who told the base psychologist that he had fallen asleep on duty, dreamed of killing himself and woke up with a gun in his mouth that he didn't remember putting there. Rumor was that the guy would be dismissed for being mentally unfit for service. Perhaps Ivan could get a fake mental-health-exemption certificate.

Sometimes when he had an idea, like trying to be declared mentally unfit, he messaged his Idite Lesom coordinator. Within the group, Ivan's case had been passed to Anton Gorbatsevich, who specialized in complicated situations. Though the team was public, Ivan knew little about the man he was corresponding with directly, but he liked Anton's manner. He was calm, collected and responsive. He inspired trust, even though Ivan did not know his last name.

For over a decade, Anton had been in opposition politics in St. Petersburg. He was soft-spoken and good with people. Anton himself had fled Russia within days after the mobilization was announced. He had taken a circuitous route to the land crossing with Georgia and had been hunted, threatened and extorted by the police at checkpoint after checkpoint, so he understood the urgency and anxiety of Ivan's situation better than many.

When Anton told Ivan that mental unfitness didn't disqualify anyone from serving anymore because of the mobilization, Ivan returned to thinking. One night it occurred to him. All he needed was his passport. So what if he got a fake and somehow swapped it with his real one?

"Hello. I got an idea for a passport," he wrote to Anton. "I can come to H.R., physically in the office, and take it. The issue is only duplication. I've heard there are people on the dark net who can help."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Anton replied; he pointed Ivan toward RuTOR, a Russian site on the dark web. People could make all kinds of passports: 10-year biometric passports with fingerprints, newer five-year passports with chips. A customer could send a photo of himself, and the seller would find a person who looked similar from the database of real, valid passports and change the surname, the first name, the patronymic — at a cost of up to $10,000.

Ivan's passport was issued seven years earlier. To create a good replica, he needed to redo the photograph. In his original picture, he had bangs, so he sat down with Photoshop and added bangs, hair by hair. He played with his haircut, making it boxier. He smoothed out his complexion. He moved his ears little by little. He took off some pounds and gave himself a more pronounced jawline. He pulled sideburns from stock images, added them and smoothed them out. It took him a few hours until he was happy with the result.

Ivan sent the photo to the seller, who showed Ivan what the final page would look like. Ivan would pay 60,000 rubles ($650) and then wait about a month. He had submitted the paperwork for surgery, but nothing had moved. Ivan began preparing anyway, so he could leave as quickly as possible when the fake passport arrived. He needed to sell their things. He started new Telegram accounts to list items so they couldn't be traced to him. Within a few weeks, he was living in an empty apartment. He slept on an old mattress on the floor.

When the passport arrived, Ivan noticed that it was missing the watermark and the hologram. The seller had claimed that it would be an identical replica. Ivan kicked himself for not discussing every single detail but decided he wouldn't complain — probably no one would examine the passport that thoroughly. His real problem was how to swap it without getting caught.

31.

Ivan knew the human-resources office from years of worthless paperwork and reports. The H.R. manager sat at a desk on the right side of the room. Next to him was a six-foot-high metal safe with three drawers. They were unlocked with a key. The passports were kept in folders inside the drawers. Each passport had a paper bookmark in it, with various biographical details.

Ivan thought about returning after hours, waiting for the duty officer to go to the bathroom and picking the lock, but that seemed too risky. He would have to find a way to take the passport under the pretense of borrowing it, but he didn't think they would let him just walk off with the document. Even asking would raise too much suspicion. *What could I need it for that I couldn't do with it inside the room?* he asked himself. Maybe, he reasoned, he would say he needed to write something down for his wife's job application and make the switch while the duty officer and anyone else were present.

To complicate matters, Ivan could use only one arm — the other would be holding the cane as part of his act. So he had to walk in, with his cane in his left hand, take the passport with his free right hand and somehow swap it for the fake. He would also need to remove the bookmark from the original and place it into the duplicate before returning it. How could he do all that with just one hand?

The H.R. manager's desk faced the room. Ivan would have to find a way to reach into his pocket while holding both the cane and the passport. *No, that wouldn't work.* He would need to find a way to sit down, put down his cane so he could have two free hands and *then* reach into his pocket — but that motion could be seen from the side or the back. He decided he had to avoid unnecessary movements. He would have to sit down, put his cane down and start taking down the passport details while making the swap. Ivan thought maybe he could stick his passport up his sleeve. At home, he put on his uniform and practiced — the passport was bulky, bigger than his wrist. Someone could notice.

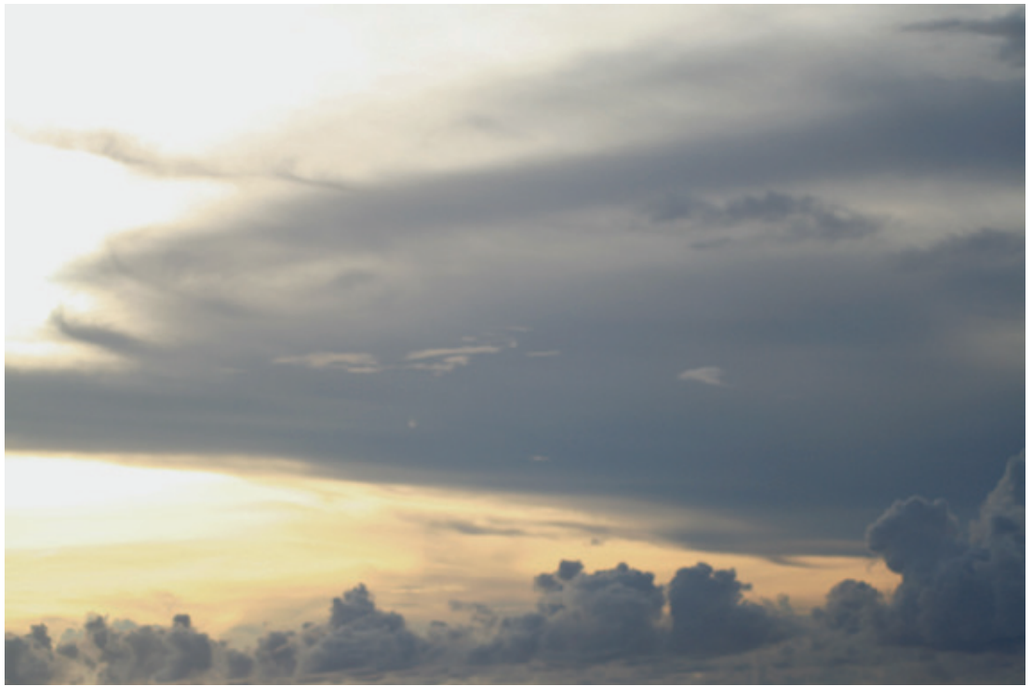
Ivan sat down at the kitchen table to think. He attended meetings with a Moleskine-type notebook; maybe he could take the notebook, as if he were coming from some mindless meeting. He carried it in his right hand. *What if I take it, open it and slip the passport inside?* When he tried it, he realized that the notebook bulged a bit — you could see something smaller sandwiched inside the larger book easily. *Just imagine if it slipped out and there were two identical passports on the ground?* He sat down again to think.

What if I cut a hole in the notebook and put it in there?

Ivan took out a knife and carved a hole in the center of the notebook's pages. He left blank pages at the back, so if anyone asked him to write something down, it would still be usable.

He practiced how he would do it. He would walk into the office; to his right, the H.R. manager would be seated facing the room. "*Privyet!* Can I have my passport please? I need to write something down for my wife. I'll copy it down right here," Ivan rehearsed. The guy would turn, open the safe and hand Ivan the passport.

Ivan would take the passport with his right hand — the same one holding the notebook — and walk over to a table he knew was on the other side of



Ivan often photographed clouds during his travels.

the room. If it was empty, he would sit down. If it was occupied, he would say: "Buddy, can I sit down? I'll write it down quickly!" He was the one with a cane, after all.

"Of course you can, Comrade Captain!" he imagined the reply — he was an officer, injured in war.

Ivan would sit down and lean his cane against the table. Keeping his original passport in his right hand, he would open the notebook with his left, his fingers flipping the cover to reveal the duplicate passport in the hole. Ivan would pull out the duplicate with his left hand and insert the original passport with his right. Once it was in, he would pull the bookmark out of the passport and close the notebook. He would reopen the notebook from the back to an empty page and start to copy the details from the duplicate. As he wrote, he would casually lean back in his chair and ask the guy how the morning formation went that day, so he would see that Ivan was relaxed.

When he was done, Ivan would close the notebook from the back and pick it up tightly by the binding in one hand with the duplicate passport on top. He would return it to the duty officer the same way he had taken it and walk out, leaning on his cane.

He spent a night and a day at home practicing the movements. He timed it, until he could do it fast, almost with his eyes closed. He wanted it to be quick, muscle memory, so if he were nervous, he wouldn't stumble or shake. The trick wasn't just in the double-handed swap, but in moving the pages and cover backward and forward with his fingers simultaneously, like a difficult piano piece.

Once he mastered the movements, Ivan spent a week casing the H.R. office, determining when it was the least busy. He learned that the usual senior human-resources officer had left for the S.V.O. and that in his place was a green young lieutenant whom Ivan outranked. *Perfect.* Ivan waited for the evening, when he had noticed that there typically were fewer people in the office.

When he walked in, the young officer was alone. Once Ivan explained what he needed, the officer handed him the passport.

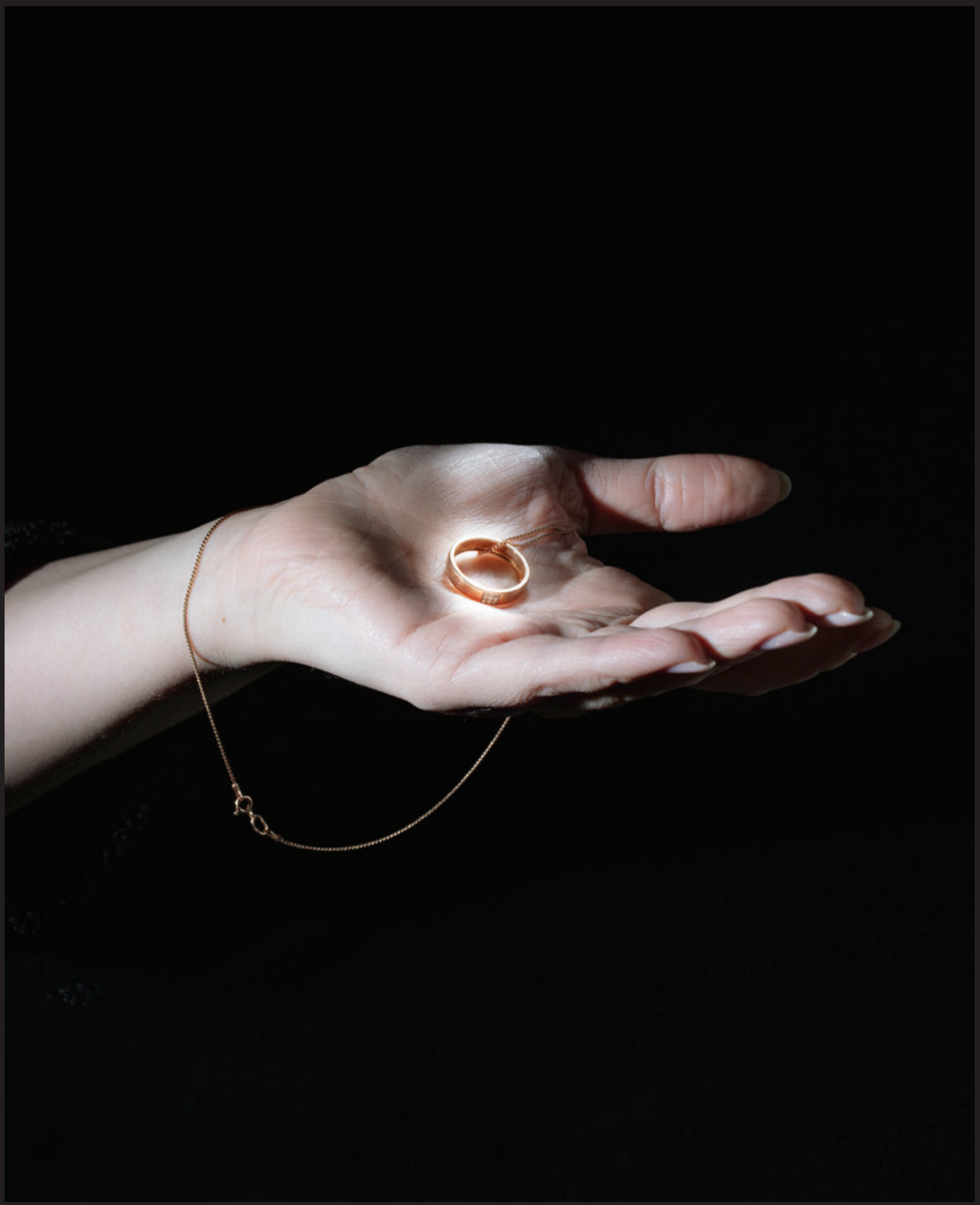
Ivan took the original and sat down. His hands were steady, left fingers flicking open the notebook, pulling out the duplicate, while his right hand dropped in the original and pulled the bookmark out seamlessly. He slid the bookmark into the duplicate. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but it felt endless. The passports were swapped.

Ivan opened a fresh page and began to write numbers. "How did the formation go?" he asked, leaning back in the chair, turning to the officer.

"Well, damn, there was some bullshit there," the kid replied.

"Yeah, like always," Ivan answered, relaxed, slowly writing. He stood up, took his cane, walked back to the desk and handed over the passport. The guy didn't even look at it, just put it back in the folder. Ivan walked out of the room and back to his car, holding the notebook tightly in his hand. He got in and settled behind the wheel before allowing himself to peep inside. He saw the hologram. It was his original passport. His insides melted. He had really done it.

He called Anna. "The bird is in the cage," he whispered. "The bird is in the cage."



Part V

32.

Though Ivan had his passport, he was still stuck. He needed a way to get off the base without arousing suspicion, but he had taken all his vacation time already. He didn't think he could wait much longer.

It was summer, and since the start of the invasion Russia had taken heavy casualties on multiple fronts — 120,000 had been killed and as many as 180,000 injured, according to U.S. officials. (Roughly 15,000 Soviet troops were killed in the decadelong war in Afghanistan.) After the Wagner coup in June, when Yevgeny Prigozhin marched his private army on the Kremlin and openly challenged the competency of Putin's military direction, there was a fear of the private contractors disbanding. The enlistment campaign had driven total spending on sign-up bonuses and salaries to a colossal level. It did not seem sustainable for the state. Rumors about another round of mobilization were constant. Ivan feared that there could be an order barring all men, or service members in particular, from leaving the country. He needed to move fast.

When Ivan convinced the doctor to recommend surgery, it was in the hope that recovery would give him six months away from the front, but now he realized that it could be his ticket out of the country entirely. He had heard that Roman, whose legs failed at the S.V.O., had received permission to leave the base to have his surgery done privately. Ivan thought about it. *Why can't I do the same?* He went straight to the newest base commander.

"Comrade Major," he said, "I've been walking with a cane for six months now. So far no one has sent the documents. They say there are no places. Let me go and get the surgery on my own dime. There's a good clinic in [city name]. They do surgeries there like the one I need."

"OK," the commander replied.

"Can I have 10 days' vacation?"

"Yes, permitted."

In five minutes, Ivan wrote the report and took it back. The commander — one of those same superiors who sat safe and pretty at the base as they forced Ivan against his will to the front line while tormenting him for not being a patriot — added his signature. *My friend, you've signed your own sentence now.*

Immediately, Ivan booked a flight to Moscow. He printed the papers he needed. The things he didn't want found, like his international passport, he slipped into a compartment in his backpack that usually contained a retractable rain covering, which he had gingerly cut out of the lining.

The border dance had to be executed carefully. Anton had repeatedly cautioned that under no circumstances should Ivan use his international passport — or even admit to having one — at the border between Russia and Belarus or at the Minsk airport, as it could provoke additional checks. The most important crossing would be the exit from Minsk. (The magazine is withholding certain details of the route at the request of Idite Lesom.) Belarus's borders were where the security systems were the most synchronized with Russia's and where people had been detained. But at the next airport, in the next country, he would be able to use his foreign passport to board a flight to Istanbul; from Istanbul he would fly on to his final destination. He did not have any of his flights booked in advance so as not to "light up" the web. He would book each leg as he approached it. If everything went according to plan, he would arrive on Anna's birthday.

Once Ivan got to Moscow, his closest childhood friend helped him exchange rubles for American dollars. He took $5,000 in cash and put the rest of his money in Bitcoin. His friend had bought him a new phone but hadn't opened it. Ivan took his old phone to another friend's house and left it there. They bought a new unregistered SIM card in the subway, took the train to another part of Moscow and turned the phone on, ensuring that the new one and the old one had never been next to each other. Ivan opened a new Telegram account and subscribed to some pro-Russia channels to show how much he loved Putin.

They went to buy a train ticket. While they waited, Ivan noticed the police talking to some of the people in line. "Brother, calm down," his friend told him. "You look nervous as hell."

Ivan realized his hands were trembling. *Each step matters.* He went to the bathroom. He forced himself to breathe. When he returned, the police were gone. He bought the ticket in cash and boarded. It was a standard *platzkart*, the cheapest long-distance overnight option, with an open carriage and rows of bunks. After all the stress and sleepless nights, Ivan fell asleep immediately.

He woke up to daylight and checked his phone — it was roaming. They had crossed into Belarus. *Another step down.* His bunkmate came down from the top bed, and they chatted over tea. She told Ivan she was a civil servant.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm a web designer," Ivan said. "I'm going on vacation with co-workers." Just saying the words aloud thrilled him — he wasn't just a web designer, but a web designer who traveled. Not a guy who posed for photo reports or killed people in war. How long had he lurked on the precipice of that life.

33.

Ivan knew what happened when someone deserted. At every evening meeting, the base's duty officer reported on the last 24 hours — showing photo reports on the projector, including a slide that listed everyone who missed roll call that morning. Other slides listed those who were on rotation somewhere, those at the S.V.O., those with a dispensation to receive medical treatment, those who were on trips to take 200s from Rostov-on-Don and deliver the corpses to family members and then those who were unaccounted for. He knew that once his leave ended, his name would flash on the final slide.

Anna holding Ivan's wedding ring, which she wore on a chain while they were separated.

Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New York Times

"Did you call his parents?" the colonel would demand. *"Did you call his wife? What does the wife say? Personnel department, what about the personnel file? Where do his parents live? Did you send a request to send someone to their address? Did they go there?"*

"Yes! They went to the address."

"What did they report?"

"They said the parents are out of the loop. They don't know where he is. He's not at the address."

Ivan had seen the scenario repeatedly. They all knew about the guy who had been hiding in Syria for months, but like so much else in the Russian services, people tried not to talk about it. Another set of guys had been AWOL in Donetsk somewhere for half a year. Every week, their commander would call them and ask where they were. "Yeah, yeah, I'll be right there," they would answer, but never appear.

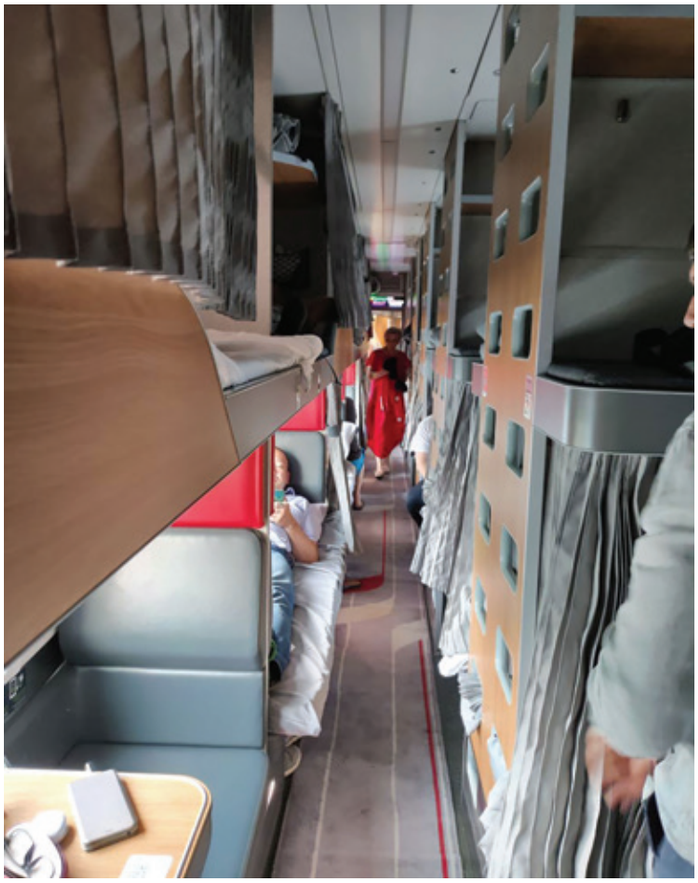
These were all unofficial deserters — not that the Russian authorities released any formal figures. No commanding officer wanted to officially declare a subordinate AWOL; he didn't want to get knocked by his superior because he had lost so many men. So everyone was trying to solve the situation on their own to avoid officially entering the soldier's name into the system. A commander may even have already reported the guy to his superior, but that superior did not want to have problems with his own superior, and so the two were in cahoots not to open a criminal case.

Under Russian law, a deserter must have the *intent* to desert, so a man could be away from base for a long time and be charged with simply being AWOL, which carried a significantly shorter sentence than desertion. And so even under mobilization, long after the two days beyond which he could be declared AWOL had passed, or the eight more that carried a prison term of up to five years, or even the 20 more after that that increased the punishment to seven years — or even more than a month for a sentence of up to 10 years — there was still no case at the military prosecutor's office. A deserter might never be charged with desertion at all and could continue receiving his full salary for months. Because Ivan was a captain, he assumed that the base's F.S.B. officer would be working on his case. Ivan knew the guy from school — *How many times did we go to each other's houses with our wives and children?* He would call around to ask Ivan's subordinates how they would characterize him, if he had any suspicious contacts, if he had any contacts in Ukraine, what his call sign was, whether he had told anyone of his plans to desert, whether he had expressed any opinions about the army or politics.

Both before deployment and after his return, Ivan had himself been involved in the hunt for missing soldiers. One commander would call another and ask him to check the registered house of someone from their unit who had gone AWOL. The commander would send his subordinates. Sometimes it was the military police, but sometimes it was just normal soldiers, borrowed from another unit. Everyone knew the routine: They could try a few times at different times of the day — morning, evening, night. They would bang on the door, and if no one answered, they would stand outside the house or sit in their car and wait for the lights to come on. Then they would report back what they saw.

There were instances when the soldier simply didn't show up to the S.V.O. transport. The base's military police or grunts from the base under other commanders would be dispatched to his apartment. They would see the man inside, but they had no right to break into the house. The soldier did not answer his phone. But there were methods to flush him out. They could cut his electricity at the panel in the stairwell. Let's say the guy is sitting inside, playing on the computer or something. He is surprised when the power fails and goes to check. He walks out into the entryway, and the men grab him. The hallway isn't his apartment. And there, the military has the right to use a certain amount of physical force. They take him, put him in the car and bring him to the base commander. The base commander takes over. The guy ends up at the S.V.O.

Ivan didn't spend time thinking about the morality of trying to flee despite sending other people to the front line. This was the automatic



reflex of a well-developed muscle of moral ambiguity. *That's not my area of expertise. I don't care why the person didn't show up for the service. The mere fact of not reporting for duty is a violation. I'm just doing my job.*

34.

When Ivan got to the Minsk airport, he hung back, watching. This was the most crucial hurdle and the first international airport border he had ever been to. Everyone passed through the two white doors that led to the security screening. Beyond that was passport control. He called Anna.

"I'm going. That's it," he told her. "I'll call you later."

Once through security, he saw white cubicles with glass windows. Women sat looking through passports. He stayed back again to watch. He spotted a woman who looked as though she was in her 40s with a brown bob and a pleasant face. Her line was moving quickly, and she seemed to be barely flipping through the pages. As he approached her, he breathed deeply. He told himself to be calm. *Smile.*

"Hello," he said.

"Please remove your hat." Ivan took off his hat, smiling. He passed her his domestic passport.

"Why domestic?" she asked. "Where's your foreign passport?"

"You can fly to [C.S.T.O. country] with the domestic one."

"I don't know about that," she told him. "I'm going to check." She got up and left him standing there. Ivan tried to stay calm. Around him, people passed without any incident. Everyone, click-click, into the computer and out. *What is this absurdity? Why is she taking so long?*

"You can use the domestic one," she said when she returned. "But do you have a foreign passport?"

"No, I don't have a foreign passport. Of course not. Domestic only."

"Only a domestic one? You don't have a foreign one, by any chance?"

On the train to Belarus.

Why are you suddenly asking that question so many times? Ivan wanted to scream. He started sweating.

"No," he replied.

"It's just faster to register a foreign passport."

"No, I don't have one." She started to type in his information but then began hitting the same button over and over again. "My computer's freezing," she announced.

Fuck, she is probably running me through the database, which is causing the computer to freeze. It will say something like: "Do not let him out. He is a service member. He is forbidden to leave." Fuck, fuck, fuck. Ivan began to shake. He focused all his energy on his hands and fingers, willing them to stay still. He wiggled his toes, up and down, up and down, so no one would see him fidgeting. *They are scanning a database right now. That's it. They are just going to arrest me now.* He waited, sweating. Toes wiggling. Wiggling.

"What's going on?" the woman asked a co-worker.

"Yeah, it's frozen for me too," her neighbor said. "It's the Russian passports."

Ivan could not believe it. Were they going to let him pass? Take him to another room? His shirt was soaked.

The woman kept hitting her keyboard. She reset something, took Ivan's photo a second time and ran him through again.

Ivan waited. And then she looked up at him from her computer and announced that he was free to pass. He was so dazed that he couldn't figure out how the door worked.

Finally, he was out and in the transit zone. He ran to the bathroom and called Anna.

"I'm shaking," he told her. "But I got through, I got through. That's it, you can exhale now."

Anna didn't believe it. Since Ivan left the base, she had been in a state of constant dread. She didn't sleep; she forced herself to breathe, to watch Sasha. She thought Ivan could be stopped at any moment.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he chose a chair by his gate and sat down. *Damn, it's about time. I've been through the most important part. Now a little more.* It was only on the plane, buckled into the seat, taking off, that Ivan felt he could exhale. He was, in his mind, free. The rest of the steps were a formality. Everything mentally complicated was done; the rest was physical, just fly, land, fly, land, fly, land.

At the next airport, Ivan watched the sunrise. He nearly lost most of his money buying a fake plane ticket from a charlatan. He used cash at an airport office to buy a multileg ticket all the way through to his final destination, but when he looked at it closely, he saw that only the flight to Turkey was confirmed; the rest were just reservations. Some opportunist thought Ivan was a sucker who wouldn't notice until he was already on a layover. Ivan raised hell and threatened to call the police until someone found the guy, who slinked around to offer what Ivan was sure was a feigned apology, claiming that he didn't realize he hadn't really made the booking.

Anna was horrified. If Ivan hadn't been able to get the money back, they would have had nothing left to spend on plane tickets. But also: *Was he insane? Did he want to involve the police and flash his ID all over the C.S.T.O.?*

The flight to Istanbul was beautiful, clouds and more clouds. Ivan filmed it all. As the plane descended, he could see green water rippling around lush islands, but then the pilot jerked them up violently and climbed back into the clouds. *(I can't believe this is happening — a moron at Minsk passport control, a swindler at the next airport, a plane mishap in Turkey. Just my luck.)* They circled for a while and then landed on their second try. Ivan waited around all day in the enormous Istanbul airport, worried that his gate would suddenly change and he would have to run across five concourses and end up missing his next flight. When he eventually boarded, he fell asleep almost immediately.

Exiting customs at his final destination, Ivan couldn't really believe it. *Finally. It's finally happening. It's happening. It really worked. You were running from death. Did you really succeed?*

He walked out into the arrivals hall. Anna and Sasha were waiting with a sign — "Welcome," it said, in the language of their new country. In the video a friend took, Anna looked drunk, her features melting. She was bawling, her frame collapsing in on herself. Ivan enveloped her and whispered into her ear. "It's OK. It's OK. I'm here. I arrived. Calm down. It's OK. It's OK here." Anna couldn't stop crying. She knew there was a whole road ahead of them that still needed to be traversed — status papers, safety, a new life. But Ivan was there. He was in front of her. He stroked her hair.

35.

Anna had tasked herself with establishing their new lives in anticipation of Ivan's escape. As soon as she arrived, she set about learning the language, figuring out how to buy groceries, making friends, finding a day care for Sasha. If each step Ivan took mattered, each counterstep Anna took mattered just as much. The most important thing was to legalize their existence. She needed to find the right lawyer, to make sure they could receive protected status. There were a lot of swindlers peddling assistance to the waves of desperate Russians who were fleeing their country.

Anna decided that they didn't need just refugee status; they needed citizenship — an ironclad guarantee that they would never be sent back to Russian soil or have to set foot in the Russian Embassy for any reason ever again. But she couldn't just ask random Russians she met for help. Besides, their asylum claim was more complicated than most. Ivan was not a politically persecuted activist or someone who had fled a draft notice; he had been involved in actual fighting. No matter how long other cases took, theirs would probably take longer. Deserters were not in touch with one another either. Idite Lesom helped soldiers escape Russia, but it was up to the individual to take it from there. They were almost entirely on their own.

She spent weeks trying to understand the most mundane nuances of the logistics of life in this new place — even renting an apartment was more difficult than she imagined. When she first arrived, she lucked out with a less-than-attentive landlord, but now they needed a bigger place, and many listings required renters to have a local guarantor.

Anna saw the man's posts while scrolling Telegram group chats for newly arrived Russians as she was researching rental law. He was so nice, joking and offering advice to everyone about everything. His thoughtful replies drew tons of likes and grateful comments. She wrote him a direct message with a question about the guarantor system. Right away, the man offered to call her to explain the details. He laid everything out systematically, explained things she had spent hours puzzling over. He was buoyant, made so many jokes and suggested they grab a coffee and talk some more.

Anna took Sasha. The man brought his pregnant wife. He made more jokes. They chatted and chatted about the weirdness of this new life in exile. He asked her about Sasha's day care. "Is it a good one? I'm going to need one soon," he said, nudging his wife and laughing. Anna told him everything she knew about the education system. She was so happy to be useful, to share something back after he had spent so long on the phone explaining the property system to her.

After an hour and a half, he took her phone and started making calls to real estate agents for her. "I speak the language," he said. "Don't worry about it. It's easy for me." He touched her arm, just a small gesture, but it meant so much.

"Well, what's your deal?" he asked when he was done making the calls. "I know it's hard for you here. Let me help you somehow. It doesn't cost me anything. I mean, really, people who know me around here, they all say: 'You're a wizard! Here comes the wizard!' You know?"

Anna thought they were still bantering. "Don't you know there's no such thing as wizards in real life?" she asked.

"You've just never met one in *your* life," he told her seriously. "But anything is possible here." The stress of the last years sat in her bones. It curled inside the angry scars on her wrists. She looked at him in wonder. *Are there really people in the world who just help, without asking for anything in return?* She felt, for the first time in so long, that maybe she could have some relief. Maybe he could find a way for them to get their paperwork done faster.

"What's your status here?" he asked. "How are you going to get legalized?"

"I don't know," she told him. "I thought about going to school to get a student visa. Maybe university, but I don't have the language."

"Look, that's a long time, four years of school," he told her.

"Yeah, and we need to earn money to survive too."

"Damn, why is it so complicated?" he asked her, commiserating. "Who's your husband?"

"My husband is complicated."

"Why's it so hard?" he asked, but she stayed quiet. "Did you get caught in the vortex or something with the war?"

"Yes."

"Man, war in general is bullshit. Fuck Putin. I have had so many friends end up there. I helped them to escape the war."

She looked at him. "Our situation is so fucked," she whispered.

"Shit, I know what you mean. I understand. Hey, is there anything I can do to help? I've already helped my guys get out of there. Can I help you translate documents and paperwork? I speak the language well." She promised to email him everything when she got home. "What about your husband, though?" he asked again. "Is he military?"

Anna grew up amid Russia's Soviet hangover and came of age in Putin's Russia. Generations of dictatorship had given way to renewed autocracy. She knew you didn't talk to strangers. Instead, she burst into tears. "My girl, calm down. It's OK. I understand," he told her. "That Putin is a bastard."

She agreed. She started speaking generally about the war. All the horrible things she felt about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "Yeah, yeah, of course. But what's going on with *you*?" he asked kindly.

Little by little, she felt herself unfurling, relaxing; the layers came off. She told him that her husband was military, that they fled the war, that they barely made it here, that it was a miracle he had made it through Belarus, that he had almost been swindled of their savings trying to buy plane tickets. "Really? Holy shit. Oh, my God!" he exclaimed.

Once she started, she kept talking. She told him a lot of things — not Ivan's name, but that he was an officer, all the trouble they had been through, all the trouble he was in. It tumbled out of her without warning. She didn't even know how badly she had needed to talk to someone.

"Well, of course, treason against the motherland. He's looking at 20 to 25." The man wasn't joking around anymore. He was solemn, concerned. "OK, let's think about how we can help him," he started. "OK, so now he's got a criminal case pending against him. Let's say he gets new citizenship here, obtains some documents and renounces Russian citizenship. He tears it up! He doesn't fucking need it. He renounces his citizenship altogether!"

"How?" In all her research, Anna had never heard of this.

"Wait, I'll tell you everything! You and I are going to figure this out. It's possible. Yeah, it's complicated. Yeah, it's hard. But it's all being solved." He paused. "Everything can be solved, only in a different way."

And then he looked at her and smiled. "Gotcha."

Anna didn't understand.

"Your husband is ours now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm here for people like your husband. I live and work here for guys like your husband." He took his cellphone and turned it to her, flashing his screen so quickly that she couldn't quite make it out. A black screen with a red cross? Was that the G.R.U.? "I'm from this organization. So let's go. Call him. Bring him to me."

She barely understood what was happening. She panicked. She stalled for time, trying to make sense of this.

"Who?" she asked.

"Your husband. He doesn't have a lot of options. Either he comes to me nicely — I'm going to supervise him here. He's going to do certain tasks for me. Or ... do you know how it happens?"

"What happens?"

"People just disappear. Here was a man walking down the street; the wrong car drove by, and the man was gone. Today the man is there. Tomorrow he is not."

Anna squirmed in her chair. She looked at him and didn't speak. She picked up a knife from the table.

"You're going to take the knife and stab me in the neck like this, right? *Chick! chick! chick!*" he taunted.

"I'd kill you right now," Anna replied. She called to Sasha, who was absorbed in the cake the man bought for them. "Let's go. Get ready," she said in her calmest voice. Slowly, she started gathering their things.

"Well? Come on, call him. Don't waste time," the man said. "I'm waiting."

Anna looked at the man squarely. "You don't know my husband, you bastard. What, were you trying to scare me to death? Do you know how much death I've seen this year, you bastard? I will help every person who is running from this war. Did you hear me? I'll help anyone, because there shouldn't be people like you in this world. It's because of you this war is happening, because of people like you."

Anna was shaking, adrenaline mixed with rage awash with fear. She threw money at the waiter, took her child by the hand and started walking.

The man followed her out. He grabbed her hand, hard, not letting go.

"Calm down, calm down. Let's smoke. Calm down."

Anna pulled her hand away and steered Sasha toward a taxi.

36.

By the time I met Anna in person a few months later, her wrists were red and welted. She had been on the edge of happiness, but after the incident, her fear had redoubled. She worried that they would be found, that this man would send someone for Ivan. This secret of who they were, what their life had been and the families they had left behind: The shadows stalked her. Worse was the guilt — that she had been the one to give Ivan up. She had taken the happy ending they worked so hard for and smashed it. At any minute he could be killed or hurt, and it was all her fault, for opening up, for being herself, for trusting in fairy tales. She spent days, weeping, in bed.

They wrote Idite Lesom about the incident. The group offered Anna a few consultations with a volunteer psychologist, who told her not to panic — the man was probably a grifter, one of the many Russians who played on the community's fear to make a quick buck. He would probably just have extorted them in return for his silence. But when Anna asked her new friends if they knew this guy, they told her they thought he really was affiliated with the Russian Embassy. He had been on the periphery of the diplomatic circle for years, operating in some gray area that no one understood.

Ivan wasn't sure what to think; he just knew Anna was terrified. They started calling the man Misha-Lyosha, two generic Russian names, as a joke so his specter would loosen its power over them. Whether Misha-Lyosha was an agent of the Russian military intelligence service or just a grifter was almost beside the point. They knew the Russian state could reach them anywhere, or it wanted them to think it could. Either way, the result was the same: They were silenced.

After Idite Lesom put me in touch with Ivan, we chatted online until one day he apologized and disappeared. Then just as suddenly, a few weeks later, he was back. He explained that he had wanted to tell his story, but the incident with Misha-Lyosha happened; Anna grew scared and asked him to stop speaking to me. They moved apartments. They tried again to change their lives. We agreed that I would keep the specifics of their biography vague enough so as to protect their security.

Anna was at war with herself. All she had wanted was her little life. She didn't want their story publicized, but she knew it was important to Ivan, so she agreed. "After that situation, I wanted to flatten myself to the floor so no one could see or hear me," she told me. "I'm talking to you, and I realize internally — man, this is important. And as they say: Am I a quivering, miserable creature, or do I have rights? That's the eternal question. Am I a quivering, miserable creature, or do I have rights?"

No one could fault them for being afraid. Defection is dangerous. Inside and outside the country, Russians who speak out against Putin end up dead. Seemingly unimportant individuals are hunted, harassed, threatened, shot, thrown off balconies in the European Union or the United States. Journalists, activists, people few have ever heard of have been poisoned, beaten, had chemicals thrown in their faces. But the worst punishments are reserved for former members of the regime — who have died in any number of curious circumstances. The higher the profile a person has, the greater the risk. A pilot who flew his helicopter into Ukraine in a public-relations coup for Kyiv was found dead in Spain. His body, riddled with bullets, was then run over by the assassin's car. As Dmitri Medvedev, the former president and prime minister, put it, "Dogs die a dog's death." Was it the work of the regime or of its mafioso enthusiasts? Did it matter when you were dead?

As a result, very few deserters from the Russian military have spoken to the media. I reported this article in eight countries across four continents and interviewed 18 deserters. Many of those who fought in Ukraine had been sent to the "training exercise" at the border in February 2022. As soon as they saw war was happening, they started looking for ways out. "I didn't have much of a choice," one lieutenant explained. "I wasn't told, 'So, look, either you go to lunch or we're going to take over Ukraine.' I was told to get in the car and drive. I was trapped. If I had gotten out when we were crossing the Ukrainian border and run in the opposite direction, I would have been shot. What could I have done? Killed my brigade commander? It wouldn't have made a difference — another brigade commander would just take his place. No matter how many people I ask, 'What would you have done if you were in my position?' they say, 'Well, I would probably do what you did.'"

In the end, the lieutenant tried to break his own hand with a rock multiple times but couldn't manage to do it. Another man I interviewed organized a group of subordinates to shoot one another in the thigh, shin and arm. Others bided their time, returned on leave and ran away from their base. One of them lost his entire life savings to a huckster in Kazakhstan, was forced to return to Russia and fled the country a second time to Armenia. His wife was against it. "Everyone's going," she said, "and you're a coward." She stayed in Russia with their child and doesn't speak to him anymore.

I spoke to a young gay soldier who went from his military desk job to Pushkin Square in central Moscow to protest on the day the full-scale invasion began. On that day, arrest would have been life-destroying even for a civilian, to say nothing of an active-duty service member in a country that defines the L.G.B.T.Q. movement as "extremism." He tried to terminate his contract even before the invasion, but his request wasn't granted, so he fled to Kazakhstan. His boyfriend, a teacher, joined him later. Without a foreign passport, he stayed in hiding with his partner in a conservative country where violence against the queer community is normal. The couple lived in limbo for over a year without refugee status, unable to leave the C.S.T.O., with the daily fear of being pushed back into Russia and jailed — like Mikhail Zhilin, the Federal Guard Service officer, and Dmitry Setrakov, a deserter who Idite Lesom reported was tracked down and kidnapped in Armenia to be returned to Russia. One time, when the police knocked on their door, the young man panicked so much that he started climbing out of the apartment's third-story window; his boyfriend anxiously answered the door, preparing himself to face imprisonment for abetting. The couple have since fled to safety, but many deserters remain stuck in the C.S.T.O.

One young man who worked as a Defense Ministry videographer was sent to Ukraine twice and couldn't figure out how to flee. His international passport, like Ivan's, was locked in a safe at his base's human-resources office. Thinking he had no other options, he decided to use the opportunity to try to collect footage of Russian crimes for history. The deserters I spoke to who don't have passports and are trapped in C.S.T.O. countries believe that their salvation is Europe or the United States, but neither place will have them.

Kamil Kasimov was arrested, forcibly returned to Russia and sentenced to six years in prison for desertion. He worked for a rocket brigade that launched missiles into Ukraine. He was deployed during the training exercise, but he didn't shoot anything himself, didn't know what they were doing, couldn't pinpoint where he had been and fled as soon as he worked up the nerve. In April 2024, the Russian and Kazakh authorities went to the 23-year-old's place of work and detained him, holding him on a Russian base in the south of Kazakhstan, where he was pressured to return to Russia to face charges. "It has become much more dangerous in Kazakhstan this year," Artur Alkhastov, his lawyer at the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, told me recently. "We received unverified information that Kamil was not the only one. There were also attempts to kidnap other deserters."

Even having an international passport did not guarantee salvation. I met one man at an outdoor cafe in Tbilisi, where he chain-smoked nervously. He had avoided deployment for a year and a half. When he was transferred to another unit and it looked as if it was about to be ordered to Ukraine, he escaped. He left his wife and two children behind and did not know when he would be able to see them again. He tried to apply for a humanitarian visa from the European Union. He dropped his application off at embassy after embassy and received no reply. He bought a ticket to Mexico that flew through Europe, planning to claim asylum in the E.U. as the Germans had promised, but he was stopped from boarding the plane despite having a valid passport.

"I often think about whether I should have done this," he told me over Telegram months after we met. "I don't know anymore. I'm stuck and scared. At my most difficult moments, I think maybe I should have just gone to prison in Russia; at least there would have been an end date to my sentence." He wondered if he should use his remaining money to try to actually get to Mexico and cross the U.S. border on foot. (Deserters have told me recently that Russians are being taken off flights to Mexico despite being allowed visa-free travel.) After over a year of hiding in Georgia, the man recently arrived in the E.U.

It's impossible to know the real statistics of desertion. Mediazona, an independent investigative outlet in exile, says there have been almost 7,400 AWOL cases in military courts since the start of mobilization, but experts agree that's only a fraction of the number who have tried to escape. Idite Lesom has helped around 1,500 military men flee the country. (The Russian Ministry of Defense did not respond to a request for comment on desertion in the military.) The Russian authorities, meanwhile, have made it more and more difficult to avoid service. Last year, the authorities raised the maximum age of conscription to 30 from 27, which will increase the number in the pool to at least 700,000 by 2025. A military summons no longer has to physically reach a person; sending it electronically is enough. People who ignore the summons for more than 20 days lose the right to drive a car, get a loan and buy or sell property. Despite this, the number of deserters continues to rise. This March, according to Mediazona, Russian military courts sentenced a record 34 men per day. "The growth in 2024 is unprecedented," it wrote. Soldiers most frequently receive suspended sentences so they can return to base, apologize and be sent straight back to the front line.

37.

In May, Putin replaced Defense Minister Shoigu with Andrei Belousov, first deputy prime minister and one of his most trusted economic advisers. The reshuffle showed how intertwined the military and economy had become

and how committed Putin remained to waging a long-term war. Analysts saw it as an attempt to clean up military corruption once and for all, or at least to signal that the regime was trying.

For two years, Putin had tolerated military bloggers criticizing the Ministry of Defense for corruption and poor management, as long as they did not implicate the Kremlin itself. Many saw this as a check on the military, a productive release valve for frustration with the war, as well as a well-honed tactic pitting parts of the regime against one another as each tries to win Putin's favor — a trademark of his 24-year reign. (The Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin's sin was to openly challenge Putin's rule. For this, his plane was exploded in the sky.)

The Kremlin continues to rely on the age-old strategy of throwing waves of infantry at the front, and the casualty toll is now astronomical. During a Russian push for territory this May, British intelligence estimated that roughly 1,250 Russian soldiers were killed or injured each day — and that up to half a million Russians have been killed or wounded since the beginning of the invasion. Still, Russia continues to recruit 25,000 to 30,000 soldiers per month, about the same number that leave the battlefield as casualties. Last year's increased recruitment drive — which included 50,000 male and female convicts, as well as people who previously would have been exempt for mental or physical impairments — allowed the Russians to continue to stabilize the force. According to the policy group Re:Russia, from July 2023 to July 2024 the Russian regime has paid families of those killed and wounded approximately $34 billion, roughly 8 percent of the federal budget.

Ukraine, meanwhile, is running out of weapons and troops. Ukrainian military casualties are a closely guarded secret; the most recent estimate of 31,000 is definitely an undercount. More than 11,500 civilians have been killed in two and a half years of war, including at least 600 children. Russian troops have been accused of rape, torture and extrajudicial executions. A generation of Ukrainians are growing up in bomb shelters. The Russian regime has spent at least $211 billion to inflict this horror.

In August, Kyiv brought the war home to Russia — the first time the country has been invaded since World War II. The Ukrainians launched a surprise attack, shocking Western officials and quickly pushing seven miles into Russia. They took prisoners, including hundreds of baby-faced conscripts who were manning the border and surrendered in droves, rekindling memories of Chechnya and Afghanistan. Ukraine would come to control at least 28 towns and villages, while the Russians would evacuate more than 132,000 people.

If Ukraine's current story is being told as one of resilience, Russia's has been cast as a tale of bottomless moral passivity. Indeed, acquiescence is its own form of tacit support. For decades, the Russian had been a faceless evil in the American psyche. This time, it seems the reputation was deserved — a terrible country fighting a terrible war.

I had spoken to deserters online before I met one of them in person for the first time, in a park in Tbilisi. I was apprehensive, worried that I would be followed and expose someone, or that I would meet an F.S.B. plant and endanger myself. I arrived early to check the area and saw a lanky young man sitting on a bench. He was more afraid of me than I was of him. He had been a lieutenant when the invasion began. He feigned a suicide attempt, got himself locked up in a mental institution, was threatened with torture and with being chained to the commander's radiator, was told he would be killed and was then ostracized by his own family for refusing to deploy to Ukraine. The lieutenant had never been out of the country, so he plotted to leave methodically, making lists of the things he would need to pack, down to a precise number of socks. Then one night, he vanished, from his base, from his life, into the complete unknown. Now here he was in an empty park, meeting someone who messaged him online claiming to be a journalist.

"When a person says, 'I'm a deserter,'" a coordinator of InTransit, a secretive network based in Germany that helps smuggle activists out of Russia, told me, "people think they are just afraid, and that's it. They don't understand the remarkable things that they've done. They're not only victims, but many of them are really heroes, and they need support."

I spoke to quite a few men like this, whose stories contained less moral ambiguity than Ivan's. They either left after being forced to fight in the initial invasion or tried unsuccessfully to break their contracts and then fled. I could have written an article about any one of them, but Ivan's story painted a more representative picture of the Russian serviceman. Patriotism is often not the main motivation to fight — it's money. And generally, for Russians, if the war doesn't touch their family, they try to ignore it. There is a nationwide desire to eat the fish and sit on the dick. More gracefully and graciously, it could be described as *avos*, a word for the Russian attitude of ignoring the possibility of negative outcomes, with the belief that luck predetermines the result anyway.

Three men in Kazakhstan — Alkhastov, the human rights lawyer, and two former service members — work together to verify stories of deserters in anticipation that this status might one day qualify them for residency in the E.U. (This is done to address the concern of European politicians, which InTransit and Idite Lesom have encountered, that such a decision would invite spies, killers or Russian patriots into their countries.) They hear deserter testimonies in video calls and review supporting paperwork to write reports to share with human rights organizations that petition foreign-affairs ministries.

I told all three of them an abridged version of Ivan's story — each had a different interpretation. "When he was shown the combat order, he did not refuse it," said Alexei Alshansky, the warrant officer who used Photoshop to alter uniforms and who is now an analyst at the Conflict Intelligence Team. "On the day he was shown the combat order, he could have left to Kazakhstan. He was not a wanted man yet. All this time, while he was telling you how he was walking around, agonizing, suffering, looking for solutions, writing reports — all this time, he could calmly leave. This is a man who had every opportunity to not go to this war, not go to jail and keep himself and his family safe. But he made the decision to go to war. How do you morally treat this? Bad."

"You can't demand some kind of heroism from people," Alkhastov interjected. "We must remember one thing: We cannot shift responsibility from the politicians who make decisions and the generals who execute them onto the soldiers."

The third man, the lieutenant who had been deployed to Ukraine during the initial invasion and had tried and failed to break his own hand with a rock (and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal), told me: "A person who was brought up and raised in a military family, then had the goal of graduating from a military school, becoming an officer, cannot see himself without military service. He will never dare to leave Russia. He will never be able to break that core." He continued, with admiration: "That's a hero. This is truly a man who has transcended himself and, in my opinion, made the right choice. He was brought up with the conviction that Russia and the army are everything in life. He doesn't see himself without it. And if he dared to do it, he overstepped himself."

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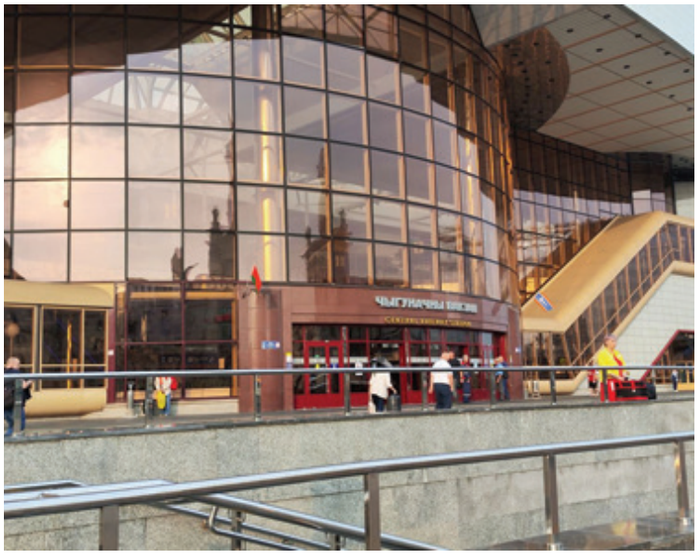
When I met Ivan, I was struck by his earnestness; he had a sincere desire to better himself and his life. His candor seemed born of genuine guilelessness. He was personable, funny and warm, and he spoke of his self-interest openly. When we discussed attending funerals or presenting the coffins of fallen soldiers to their families, Ivan was honest: He didn't go to the services of the men who perished under his command, and he didn't want to, whether it was his duty as the platoon commander or not. (Officially, a military representative must attend a soldier's funeral. Though it's not obligatory, it's considered honorable behavior for the commander to be the one present.)

I thought maybe we were having a miscommunication in Russian, but he assured me that he didn't feel a moral obligation. It seemed to me it was because it wasn't his war, but he never even tried to make that excuse. "That would be the right thing to do, but not everything that is right is what we *want* to do," he told me. "If there was an option not to go, I wouldn't." This is the moral morass of a nation.

Still, Ivan spent ages looking for a piece of paper that had all his platoon members' names on it so he could show it to me. He tried to reconstruct the list for months after I left. He didn't know the name of the engineer whose body they left by the crater, and this really bothered him. He wanted



The central train station in Minsk.

me to write about the soldiers he lost, to use their real call signs, to commemorate these men who behaved heroically toward their comrades in arms. He worried that it wasn't his place to publicize their names, but he also wanted their sacrifice to be known.

"Apricot, the machine-gunner, if it wasn't for him, things could have been even worse," Ivan said. "This man really acted heroically. He didn't go anywhere. He didn't retreat. He started to cover us. He gave the rest of us a chance to jump into that hole." Apricot is survived by two daughters and a common-law spouse. Because they were not officially married, his wife did not receive the coffin payment.

Ivan protected the men he could, as long as it did not risk his own safety. He never sent one of his subordinates to the S.V.O. against his will. When he told me that, he wasn't saying it to show off or to justify himself. He was direct and matter-of-fact. He openly admitted that he helped send others to the front. This did not strike him as problematic.

Ivan shared hundreds of pages of documents that supported his account. He showed me photographs that he had taken and that had been taken of him throughout his life, and we read his personal chat history together. All day, every day for a week, we sat in a hotel conference room and reviewed his life. (Anna did not want me to go into their house.) To tell your story to a journalist in such excruciating detail requires a confounding mix of blind faith, bravery, trust and total self-disregard. The hours we spent going over details and Ivan being asked, "But why didn't you X?" was its own kind of torture — a confessional with no absolution. Perhaps Ivan felt he was performing penance, but he said he simply wanted to save other Russian officers from repeating his fate. (I also verified parts of his story with two service members from his base.)

"Look, basically everyone involved is a murderer in one way or another," Ivan said. "I realize that each of us, each Russian, is involved in this. Every one of us participated. We have allowed this old man to be in power for so many years. And there's also this anger that I had to quit. My contract was almost over. It was officially the end of the contract. I should have been a civilian by now. And all my plans — my whole life was ruined by this old grandfather, Vladimir Vladimirovich. What right does he have to control my life?"

When he looked back on it all, Ivan couldn't believe that there were still people in Russia who knew full well what was going on, what their future could hold, and yet stayed — not because they supported the war, but because they genuinely continued to believe that it wouldn't affect them.

For so many years, Putin had offered them all protection — and now they just wanted to keep their heads down. A stupor of an existence. *Avos*. This learned indifference to the obvious, to the grinding of the bones of their own. Ivan's parents, for whom Putin remained sacred. His friends outside the services, who just wanted to live their lives without being bothered by anything else, while fervent patriots, criminals and regime opponents alike perished at the front. What remains of the country's opposition is now in exile — where they have been joined by those who awakened from this torpor. Over and over again, for generations, Russia's greatest strength has been its habit of destroying itself. And the regime endures.

Anna and Ivan grew up under the reign of Vladimir Vladimirovich; they had never participated in a real election, never thought much about what the Kremlin did or didn't do overseas. Their parents' generation had sleepwalked into autocracy; too exhausted to protest, they focused on trying to stay alive amid the turbulence of changes no one prepared them for. Unlike them, Anna and Ivan came of age in an era of booming oil prices and optimism — they had big plans for their small life. The Russian Army offered a path to socioeconomic stability. There was no shame in serving the homeland. They worked hard to buy an apartment, to improve their circumstances, to have a child, but their dreams would be destroyed by much larger geopolitical machinations. They would, like many of their compatriots, practice a kind of self-mutilating patience that cost them everything they cherished most.

Now they lived in the twilight of perpetual anxiety, a paranoia that was impossible to fully shake. Small, ordinary milestones became minefields. The first time Sasha got bullied, a classmate said Russians were "all evil" and Sasha came home crying. Anna tried to explain that her child — who loved kittens and made it a point to hug the principal every day — had no responsibility for this war. But Sasha brought up Ivan's military uniform. What of the last two years did their child remember? How much would they tell Sasha one day? For how many generations should guilt travel?

This was never a story about heroes or bravery, a valiant victor or a helpless victim; from the beginning Ivan wanted me to make that clear. It is a story about the dangers of an act of independence after a life of conformity, and about how defection from Putin's system is a sentence without end. ◆