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The Green

Regardless of which end we begin from, the story will nevertheless be complex. An infinity of colours and hues exists in nature. Yet there hasn't been a single colour which has not been fought over. In this war, broadly speaking, people fought over green. That is the colour of our forests. Mostly they fought against red – the colour of their enemies' blood. Though it happened that yellow also had to defend against green.

They also fought for their belief that they must be free, against the belief of others that they musn't. But that's also somewhat of a generalisation.

It was the very middle of the twentieth century. Still the so-called golden age. But every glittering thing, despite its ornamental exterior, may have a rotten core. They lived in the depths of this thing – the twentieth century – and knew nothing about its glitter.

At the beginning, the area was wide. The exact same war was being waged by a large number of people from the south, in the Ukraine, and to the north, in Estonia. But in the end, only they remained.

They were basically possessed by the annoying idea of having their own state. They had had one for twenty-odd years, between the two world wars; they had agreed to wait patiently through the second one, and were greatly amazed that when it ended they were not given their state.

Anyway, it's like waves that are allowed to spill over the surface of a bridge. You know well that when the waves quiet down, the bridge will not have gone anywhere.

Speaking in narrow terms, they were Lithuanians – a nation north of the Poles and south of Riga. And they did everything backwards. They would surrender when fighting was called for. And when it was time for a truce, they would go for their weapons.

The nature of this war was vertical. Normally when people wage war, they line their units up under their colour, and then send them towards the opposing colour, where other units are standing at the ready. But that would be a horizontal war. If those units were standing in a skyscraper, for instance, between the thirtieth and fifty-eighth floors, and, having seen the enemy's flag between the first and twentieth,

that would then be called a vertical war. The battles would be fought in the stairwells.

They had no skyscrapers. Nevertheless, the armies in this war were lined up across two separate floors. The enemy's army was based on the usual floor of an army, the one that people use for planting winter crops, to meet members of the opposite sex, and occasionally for making love if there is no available bed. The Lithuanians had lined up their units there where no one makes love, no one goes for a walk or, if they do, then it's just one time and for all time, to walk directly into the bottom of a coffin.

“Vertical war” – a rarely used notion. More often this kind of war is referred to as a guerilla war. But this notion is too broad.

From the point of view of the evolution of warfare, it was a step backwards. One wonders if spoiled Europe, with its best strategists and newest weaponry, could have believed that such a backward conflict could have ignited on its very fringes, one that would mock the latest military advances. All of the weapons cast off by the armies that had marched through once upon a time were gathered up and used for a good ten years of tiresome fighting. The leader of this war had completed his artillery studies in Europe. But he didn't have a single piece of ordnance. This book is about him.

What did those people expect? At first, perhaps, they expected themselves to win at least something. Then they expected to sit it all out underground, until someone came to help them win the war. Their greatest hope was, clearly, for help from America. In the end they probably had no more expectations, quite simply they had nowhere else to go.

Not a single one of those people would ever agree that World War Two was ever won. In the very best case it was a tie, but here, where they dug their bunkers, there wasn't even that much.

A war of this kind could be called a civil war. As no nation fought with another, just one large nation fighting itself, and it was only a personal affair, like using medication to expel a ... tapeworm.

It was akin to the pain a big fish feels in its gut after it has swallowed a little one and is still digesting it alive. Or the pain felt by a little one from too much gastric juice in its gut.

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In Fontainebleau in 1938 I had known a different Pieninė – her name was Natalia, I used to get my hair cut by her.

“You’ve been coming to me to get your hair cut for a year now, Žemaitis,” she would say. “Is there some meaning behind this?”

“No, not yet.”

She would say the same thing to the instructor of artillery history. It often happened that I would be getting my hair cut just after he did.

“Monsieur Jouvali, three years I’ve taken care of your head, no one but me. For you three years is nothing, but for me, being twenty-one, it’s a seventh of my life Monsieur Jouvali.”

She was the same as Pieniné, just younger and a bit more naive. And more subtle, because she lived in France and didn’t remember the last war.

“Year after year I dive into your pates, bend back your ears for fear of snagging them with my scissors, I bathe in your hair, and this still means nothing to you.”

“It’s been half a year,” I correct her.

“I mean Monsieur Jouvali,” she turned around to see if Monsieur Jouvali had left. Walking out the door, Monsieur Jouvali waves to her. “Goodbye, Monsieur Jouvali. Don’t use so much brilliantine. You’ll be bald before your time.”

“Why are you here, Nathalie, in Fontainebleau?”

“My name is Natalia, she corrects me. “They’re two different names.”

“So, why Natalia, here, and not somewhere else?”

“You talk, Žemaitis, as if you were calling from Paris. Why are you not in Africa?”

“Artillery tactics are not taught there.”

“Why not Africa, but here, in Fontainebleau, with poor Natalia, who still means nothing to you?”

We observed each other in the mirror. When objecting in this way, she wore a serious face, stiffening one lip.

“There’s nothing to do in Africa.”

“There, things would be perfect for you. They don’t have good military commanders.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Some monkey named Natalia would cut your hair year after year and wouldn’t ask if it meant anything.”

She blows some shorn hair from my neck.

“I’ll cut your hair in such a way that no one in Paris will understand that you’ve spent a year in Fontainebleau.”

She winks conspiratorially and continues cutting.

“Fontainebleau is close to Paris.” She remembers a previously asked question. “But not so close that apartment rents are like they are in Paris. So this is why I love and hate it. People such as you and Monsieur Jouvali pay me a third of what you’d be paying in Paris. Are you still surprised at why I’m here?” She pauses and sighs. “People like me, who always want to know if it means something, wouldn’t even find work in the worst little cathouse.”

She smiles at me with her white teeth. Teeth like those can’t be damaged even by war, it would be enough to take a glance at the inside of her mouth twelve years from now to make one give up the study of artillery tactics in favour of fixing teeth.

“In Paris nothing means anything. I travel there every day and come back the same evening. I love Paris.”

“But you live in Fontainebleau,” I say.

“And for that you should kiss my feet. Would the woman whom you will take to Paris cut your hair in such a way that no one could even catch a scent of the fact that your luggage remains in stinking Fontainebleau?”

I don’t give Natalia an answer, because the one whom I will take to Paris would first have to come here from there and transport her belongings to my place.

“Sleep at the hotel,” instructs Natalia. “Don’t go back to Fontainebleau at any price.”

“What’s the difference where I sleep?”

“Spend the night in Paris, and then come back and ask me what the difference is. Paris needs to be inhaled whole. If you inhale it together with Fontainebleau, Fontainebleau’s stench will overpower it.”

“It’s not that bad your Fontainebleau,” I object.

“Thanks,” she says, and throwing down the scissors, begins combing. “It’s yours too. You can please Monsieur Jouvali, but not me. For me, as for you, it’s just a stopover.

Natalia picks up a razor and, with a drawn face, shaves my neck. This ages her.

“So is she French?” She suddenly asks.

“She’s my sister.”

“In that case you should be in fear of God and inbreeding. And inbreeding,” she stresses a second time. “You came earlier than usual today.”

“She’s not French,” I answer. “And she’s like a sister.”

“That’s a different matter,” she smiles. “Does she already know that you have a small mole over your left ear?”

Folding back my left earlobe, she examines it in such a way almost as though she had found evidence of the one who will go with me to Paris.

“I think that she already knows.”

“But I don’t think so, because three weeks ago it wasn’t here. Yes, Žemaitis. A non-French woman will travel with you to Paris and know nothing at all about you.”

Natalia is truly a breath of fresh air following the male company at the artillery school. She is the mother of all artillery, able to reach fairly distant targets and most of the time accurately. That’s probably why Monsieur Jouvali likes her too.

“Moles don’t usually appear in such a short time,” I say to her.

“You have a mole behind your left ear,” objects Nathalie. “And you’re going to have it for your entire life.”

“It’s not such a great burden,” I feel my left ear, wanting only the conversation about the mole to end.

“She’s not French and, of course, furiously beautiful,” guesses Natalia. “She’s young, having just finished high school, and has yet to see Paris. In Paris you will be like a god for her.”

“Half right,” I answer.

“Then she’s somewhat pretty and is now living in Paris ...”

“She’s ten years older than you,” I say, disappointing Natalia. “Has completed all of her studies and hasn’t been to Paris a single time.”

“You haven’t told me the most important thing, Žemaitis. Her scissors freeze right over the top of my head.

“She’s pretty,” I say.

“Prettier than I am?” Natalia’s hand, still holding the scissors, doesn’t budge.

“She’s not French.”

“And I’m also not French.”

“She’s prettier than Monsieur Jouvali,” I say, thinking I found a way out. “Prettier than he is by a factor of five, even six ...”

“You’re evading, Žemaitis.”

The scissors still hang over my head.

“She has green eyes and brown hair. There’s nothing Roman about her. And also nothing Slavic.”

“I don’t give a damn what she has about her,” Natalia says, refusing to calm down. “I’m asking which of us is more attractive?”

“Damn it, Nathalie, I came here for a haircut ...”

“I am not Nathalie and I don’t care why you came here.”

“Alright, Natalia, she’s seven times prettier than you are.”

“That’s all I wanted,” she drops the hand holding the scissors and continues to cut my hair.

“A woman who is prettier than I am by one mole can take you to Paris.”

For a short time she is quiet and hurries, the sort of hurrying that is not to the advantage of my hair.

“You visit Paris rarely,” she finally utters.

“I’m almost never there.”

“There nothing means anything,” she repeats. “Slavs, Romans, monkeys. If a monkey named Natalia is prettier than me, she’ll find a job in Paris.”

“But if she were to work in Paris, she wouldn’t have a single customer.”

“True,” she says as she rubs brilliantine with her palms and strokes it through my hair. “What’s the name of this other non-French woman?”

“Elena,” I answer.

“So Elena – not a Frenchwoman.”

“No.”

“And pretty.”

“A goddess.”

“Old?”

“Thirty-one.”

“Her nationality?”

“Lithuanian. Like me.”

“A rare nationality.”

“Not so rare.”

“Beside the Poles.”

“Above.”

“Never been to Paris?”

“Not once.”

“Where is she now?”

“In Paris.”

“You are lying, Žemaitis.”

“In Paris. Actually right now her train is arriving. Three thirty. From Berlin.”

“It’s three thirty now,” she says looking at her watch.

“Three thirty is her train.”

“And at three thirty you are sitting in Fontainebleau and getting your hair cut by poor Natalia.”

“She gets off her train at three thirty here in Paris.”

“It’s now three thirty-one.”

“So I guess that means she’s gotten off.”

“The train must be late if you’re still sitting here.”

“She’s gotten off in Paris,” I confirm.

“Well then hustle off to Paris, the platform there is full of awful beggars.”

“She’s come to Fontainebleau.”

“She’s getting off in Paris for the first time.”

“Yes,” I say. “And shortly will get on the train to Fontainebleau.”

Natalia finishes combing my hair and wipes the hair from my face.

“Above the Poles is probably the biggest Fontainebleau in the world.”

“The only Fontainebleau is here,” I answer. “How much do I owe you?”

“Five francs. In Paris it’d be fifteen.”

“In Paris I’d give twenty. Here I’ll pay seven.”

“Five francs,” repeats Natalia. “Keep your money, Žemaitis. She won’t get on the Fontainebleau train. You’ll be forced to go searching for her in Paris.”

“Seven,” I hold out the seven francs to her. “Above the Poles, no one knows that Fontainebleau is worse than Paris.”

“Above the Poles probably there are howling winds and the whitest of bears roaming about.”

I continue holding out the seven francs in my hand.

“She isn’t as pretty as I thought if she’s traveling by train to Fontainebleau,” Natalia says assuredly.

“Few pretty women travel from Paris to Fontainebleau?”

“But not this way,” she says stubbornly, refusing to take even the five francs. She stops working because she has no more customers and begins to walk with me.

“She won’t come,” she confirms to me at the station.

But Elena is already getting off the train.

“Is that her?” Asks Natalia.

“Elena,” I answer.

“Not bad,” she admits. “So why are you standing there, blockhead artilleryman? She’s come all the way from Paris.”

“Through Berlin,” I add.

“Take your miracle as far away as possible from the station and don’t hang around me any more complicating my life. I will not cut your hair any more, Žemaitis. You’re just a plain howitzer. Just a soulless piece of ordnance.”

Translated from the Lithuanian by Darius Ross