ВЫРВАННЫЕ СТРАНИЦЫ ИЗ ДНЕВНИКА

Диана Рейн



16+

Pages Torn from a Diary

Sosnovtsy

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Contents

Gomfoterness	1
My happiness…	5
Wunderwund with a Broken Heart	8
The Servants of Sorni-nai	12
Tomorrow will be a perfect day,	23
Hope Lost and Regained	27

Gomfoterness

I turned the word over in my mind a few more times. Gomfoterness. Not a word that comes out right on the first try. A strange thing. Almost magical, I would even say.

Thanks to it, for instance, I could sit calmly in the tent with Norkin. Just the two of us — imagine that! He lay right there on his stomach, neither grumbling nor droning on about his theory of sorting humanity into categories, and I never once snapped at him. It was gomfoterness that let us talk like decent human beings; we didn't even feel like getting under each other's skin.

Nothing short of miracles.

And is it not this very gomfoterness that's to blame for Gleb and Vasenka whispering together for days on end, hiding from everyone behind the pines and gazing into each other's eyes for hours at a stretch? Who knows — perhaps we'll come back from the hike with a newly minted groom and bride to keep Shakunov company? And then Bronya, Kolenka, Postyr and I are left lonely, and… But does Vasya Postyr even have a wife or a sweetheart? I'll have to ask.

Norkin gave me a light flick on the nose, and I flinched.

"What are you daydreaming about, Lusia?"

"Oh, the noodles," I said, catching his wrist deftly. "Tell me, my friend, how is our poor quartermaster supposed to ration the provisions when you either go hungry or leave half a pot of noodles untouched? Six people, every one of them grown, and as fussy as little children."

Kolya looked at me with just such a half-smile, as though the real smirk were hiding in some corner of his lips where I could never quite catch it in full. His gray eyes, usually so icy that it hurt to meet them, had already thawed over the course of this hike, and now I could look him in the face without fear.

“Well, naturally—who else but you would fret over other people’s stomachs? Hand you a cauldron the size of a swimming pool and a vat of millet, and you’d feed the whole of Binsai. Every last soul, no exceptions…”

“Of course I would! Only you’d be the one lining folk up in a row and hollering, ‘No, friend, you’re one of the fools—step aside. And you, scoundrel, keep it moving—it’s written all over your face.’”

That’s what Gomfoterness does to people. And instead of biting my head off for such a keen appraisal—mind you—Norkin laughed. And I laughed right along with him.

Only then did it dawn on me that I was still gripping his wrist.

My fingers flew open, and his hand dropped like a dead weight.

“So it’s that same Gomfoterness that’s made you so sweet today?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I knew I should have held my tongue, but it was already too late.

“You were the first to volunteer for duty, you lent a hand with the cooking, and look how much firewood you’ve hauled in…” I faltered and fell silent beneath his unwavering stare.

Norkin was gazing up at me, his hand still lying there, outstretched before him. Outside, around the campfire, the others were chatting and laughing. I couldn’t help wondering—had they noticed our absence?

“Gomfoterness is chemistry,” Kolya finally answered, his voice low. “And chemistry lies behind every decision a person makes. Fools say the heart is to blame—we’ll let that rest on their conscience. It all happens right here.” And he tapped his right temple with his index finger.

“Chemistry?” I shot back. “You’re nothing but a heartless stump! Just look at our Vadim — phlegmatic through and through, a pragmatist to the core, at times an even bigger bore than Sosnovsky himself. Do you honestly think it was chemistry that brought him and Lyalka

together? That it swept him off his feet and had him proposing to that little doll? The periodic table, was it?”

Turns out Gomfoterness has a rather short shelf life. There we were, arguing again. I don’t know why I even started this conversation — it’s pointless anyway. What could Norkin possibly know about love? Instead of a heart, he keeps an abacus; instead of a soul, a Newton’s cradle — a broken one at that. Electrical impulses, matter, Brownian motion — he knows all there is to know about those, but empathy? Not a clue. The only reason he talks to me and the rest of the guys at all is that we belong, just as he does, to the category of “tourists.” One step to the left, one step to the right, and you’d find yourself among the “fools” or the “scoundrels.”

“Gomfoterness is the unity of people walking side by side toward a single goal,” he reminded me. “And now let me ask you this: what else could have brought those two so close? Love? In Shakunov? And are you really going to tell me that you’re sitting here with me right now out of love?”

I never pass up a chance to talk about love and romance. I adore films about it, especially the ones with singing and dancing thrown in, because falling in love is the very music of life. I devour romance novels too — most of all when everything seems hopeless, yet the lovers still find their way to each other in the end. But just then, for some reason, I was in no mood to discuss it. I had to get up and go over to the guys before they came trudging over here themselves and... and...

“Fine, you win,” I capitulated at once and started to rise. “Only Gomfoterness could manage something like that, damn it.”

Norkin rose abruptly too, hoisting himself up onto his knees, and barred my way. I froze, belatedly thinking that I might have offended or angered him. Kolya himself rarely stops to consider what his words

might lead to, and, well, the rest of us have long since gotten used to telling him outright what we think, too.

“Lusia, why do you make so light of me and my feelin’s?” he asked once more, quite suddenly, after a couple of minutes of silence.

Again I said nothing.

Kolya didn’t wait for an answer. He knew there would be none. He rose and walked out, and I sank back onto the floor of the tent and, for some reason, began hunting for our journal — probably to write down that curious definition.

Gomfoterness — the cohesion of people, their capacity to act in concert with maximum efficiency toward a common goal. It is especially useful for groups in conditions of isolation.

My happiness…

Where are you now, in what far-off land,

How cold your white, tender hands are…

It's only the fourth day of our trek, yet we already feel like one big family. The wilderness and the cold bind together even people as unlike one another as we are. This isn't friendship — it's… I don't know what to call it. Brotherhood and sisterhood?

Tonight we all sang around the campfire. Only a hiker truly exhausted and half-frozen — one who has at last settled by the flames to a good dinner — can sing with such feeling. I hide my smile behind my diary as I watch my companions.

How I love them.

I sing you this mournful song,

As if surrendering myself wholly into your hands.

Vadim's eyebrows rise in that special way of his as he draws out these lines. He gazes into the very heart of the campfire, as though among the little tongues of flame, among the sparks and the smoke, he can see his wife's face. And perhaps he really can…

And New Year's night seems

A wondrous winter fairy tale…

A mysterious smile wanders across Bronya's face. She glances at the others, bewildered and far away in some way, then lifts her eyes to the sky as though offering it a prayer. Tolya has finally forgotten today's "snowfall" and no longer looks like a whipped dog. And the rest of us, Norkin included, breathe a sigh of relief.

In the snowy expanse there bathes

A whole sea of lights…

Gleb shoots me a quick glance and smiles. In his eyes flickers that familiar smirk of his — the one that either makes my heart clench or

wounds me to the point of tears. Even now, once again, I cannot puzzle out what he is truly like. Cold, indifferent Sosnovsky, who knows nothing but how to plot routes of the highest difficulty category and give orders? Or warm, laughing Gleb — the Gleb because of whom I took up hiking, because of whom I am here now, hundreds of kilometers from home…

Once more his gaze finds me, and this time I lower my eyes. I falter, my hand trembling…

My gray-eyed joy,

Be just a little more tender…

Lyuska, though, is unusually quiet and pensive today. She sits with an empty aluminum mug cradled in her hands, carefully drawing out the chorus, though even her voice betrays a trace of sadness. Or is it only my imagination?

I will drive weariness and sorrow away from you,

I will warm your hands with my tender breath…

Vasya Postyr plucks the guitar strings with practiced ease, and it seems he is smiling right at you. His eyes are kind, almost childlike in their naivety. But his smile is roguish, and you never know what is on his mind. A dark horse. I wonder — does he have a girlfriend? Perhaps it is her he is thinking of right now? And who else deserves to be thought of, remembered, dreamed of when you hear songs as tender as these, if not your beloved?

With my heart I reach toward you the way a blade of grass reaches toward the sun,

Only I simply don’t know how to speak of love at all…

Even Kolya’s lips are moving, silently singing along, though we’re barely four days into the hike — and Tolya’s jab at him today had landed so flat, too. Truly, the wilderness, a campfire, and a guitar in deft hands can melt even the most frost-bound cynic. I sit beside him,

stealing glances, marveling still, but Norkin doesn’t notice. Every now and then he lifts his eyes to gaze somewhere over the tongues of flame, then lowers them again.

How everyone becomes… real out here on the trail. A little strange, but so dear, so cherished. Or does it only seem that way because I want to believe it? Because today I long to see the best in people, to hope that, despite the February cold, they’ve thawed after all?..

My precious, darling happiness,

be at least a little sweeter…

How silly of me, of course! Only just now have I noticed that I’ve been writing all these secret thoughts and daydreams not in my own diary, but in the shared one! The moment the song ends, I’ll slip away to the tent, tear out these pages, and hide them… or better yet, burn them, so that no one ever finds them — not on any account.

How dreadfully awkward!

Do be just a little gentler!..

Wunderwund with a Broken Heart

Oh, my heart tells me this hike will be the hardest of the four treks I've been on so far...

And it isn't because of the Category Three difficulty rating.

And it isn't the freezing winter, either.

It's that I've been appointed the wunderwund! Yes, I know — I already bewailed my fate right at the very start of the hike, but back then there was still something to put in the diary: how we arrived in Alyapka and visited the school; how we met the loggers in the settlement; how, in the end, Sasha had to leave. But now? What is there to write about when everyone simply sits around the campfire, crunching rusks, and waits for dinner?

If this were my own private diary, I'd certainly find something to immortalize, but here...

"Look, by my calculations we made four kilometers more today than we'd planned," Vadya Shakunov raps his pencil against the scribbled pages of his notebook. "And those extra four kilometers we owe to my method of breaking ski trail. If we put in a real effort, then..."

We all groan in unison, drowning out his voice. Shakunov has probably forgotten by now what sheer torture it was to trudge along in the wake of "his method." It's far simpler and safer to crawl along single file, the way we've always done. If only this inventor of ours would come up with some little portable typewriter we could take on a hike without any trouble. Then keeping the diary would be easier, too — and our fingers wouldn't get so cold.

"Where on earth have they got to?" Lyusya can't stand it any longer and rises from her log, straining to make out anything in the deepening dusk. "The porridge will be stone cold."

Gleb and Vasenka went off to gather deadfall and still haven't come back. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they returned empty-handed, either.

Vasya Postyr has polished off his portion; he sets his bowl aside, gets to his feet, and, like Lyusya, gazes thoughtfully off in the same direction.

"Maybe we should go after them?"

"Oh, no need," Vadik says with a grin. "Let them canoodle. Surely they won't get lost."

I remember Smetanin — or was it Kasparov? — saying he flatly refuses to take couples along on hikes. Nothing ever gets done with them around: they pair off and distract the whole group. Maybe they had a point… But Gleb surely had no idea it would turn out like this.

"While those two are off wandering, their supper is bound to go cold," Lyusya grumbles again, stirring the oatmeal in the pot. "And a hungry hiker is a lousy hiker. Tomorrow we won't even make it to the mountain."

Norkin stretches, arms folded behind his head, and peers out from under his cap at the camp steward. Well, here we go.

"She's supposed to be a woman, but she nags worse than a dorm supervisor..."

"Who's a woman?" Lyusya is on her feet in an instant. "Who did you just call a woman? I'll show you a woman right now!.."

Vasya forgets all about Gleb and Nelya and can barely contain his laughter as he watches Lyusya pummel Kolya, who fends her off with his spoon. One more moment and they'll both go tumbling head over heels, straight into the campfire.

What a circus — they went and made me into a wunderwood, and they're not even afraid of how I might portray them in the diary? Well, it'll be their own fault!

Only Vadim glances back toward the spruce thicket once more, taking no notice of the scuffle beside him.

“They really have been gone an awfully long time now…”

Lyusya hears him. She gives Norkin one last jab in the shoulder with her little fist and turns around. Cupping her hands into a makeshift megaphone, she shouts toward the forest:

“Gleb! Ne-lya! Din-ner!”

I’d swear that shout shook the snow down from the very topmost branches of the fir trees.

I don’t understand why I feel so strange. A kind of... as if something were aching in my chest. It comes over me whenever I hear a voice begin to tremble in song, or when I notice that my dad has a few more wrinkles now and stoops more than he used to. My chest ached just the same when I finished school and Katyusha, my classmate, and I went our separate ways. She’s in Kyiv now, and me... somewhere around here.

So why am I feeling it again now? Everything is fine. Everything’s all right with us. But when Gleb and Nelya came out of the forest, something suddenly clenched inside me, right beside my heart. Why? They weren’t even holding hands. They had simply come together. Been together.

But now it was as though some invisible cocoon had wound itself around them, one that kept other people from reaching them, that had shut them off from everyone. From us.

They were strange, wrong thoughts, but I couldn’t shake them off. Even the diary doesn’t help. Oh, damn it! I’ll have to rip out the last pages, because I don’t want the guys reading this.

We’re sitting by the campfire, and everything seems fine. Vadik has his letter out again. For three days now he’s been writing and writing

something — to his Olya, no doubt — but the pages keep ending up in the flames, and he starts all over again.

Vasya has dozed off, eyes half-closed. He's an interesting one. As if he's with us, and yet all on his own at the same time. He slipped into our group smoothly, without any quarrels or misunderstandings. But we could all see it — if he left, we'd hardly notice. And he certainly wouldn't be any worse off without us.

Lusia and Norkin were snapping at each other again, though probably neither of them could have said what the quarrel was even about. Yet their bickering always defuses the tension, because everyone knows there's nothing serious behind it. And my mind keeps returning to yesterday, to the way Kolya pounced on me. It's hard to believe that the Kolya of yesterday and the one sitting beside me are one and the same.

Vasenka has gone off to bed, while Gleb stays behind with us. He is saying something, turning a map over in his hands, and at first glance he seems the same good old Sosnovsky as ever. But no. Something in him has changed. Something elusive. Perhaps there is a new mildness in his gaze, one that doesn't suit him at all. Or perhaps it's his voice that sounds different. I can't say. But Vasenka must know.

If only I could write Katya a letter, the way Shakunov writes to his wife. If only I could go with her to gather deadwood. I wouldn't even mind simply trading jokes and banter. But it so happens that everyone around me already has someone, and I alone sit staring into the campfire, because there is nowhere else to look — and no one to look at.

The Servants of Sorni-nai

Evening was drawing in on the fourth of February as we emerged from the Malik Gorge onto the pass. Despite the inhospitable weather, all was going well; we were pressing briskly ahead in single file, when suddenly...

“Lyusya!”

Vasya Postyr’s voice came flying through the wind and snow, and I caught it.

“Lyusya! Stop!”

I turned, shielding my face with one hand. It was an eerie spot — everything roared and churned all around us; nothing was to be seen but the white shroud, and only Kolya’s backpack ahead of me stood out as a slightly darker shape. As for Vadya, our leader somewhere out in front, I had no idea how he was faring — and I didn’t envy him his lot.

“Nelya’s fallen behind!” Vasya explained, edging up beside me. — We have to go back.

Oh, what could have happened to Vasenka back there? I peered in vain into the white veil behind Postyr, straining to catch a glimpse of my friend. Perhaps she had simply stepped off the ski track? How far behind us could they be by now? And were Tolya and Gleb Sosnovsky with her?

“Lyus, why have you stopped?” Norkin suddenly came bursting out of the blizzard, nearly plowing into my skis. — What’s happened?

The wind had crusted one side of his face with snow, yet he seemed not to notice it in the least, only squinting his dash-like eyes. Vadim appeared behind him. Well, at least that meant we hadn’t lost anyone along the way.

“Vasenka’s fallen behind,” I explained, pulling off my mitten. — Shall we wait here, or go to them?

“I…” Kolya had only just begun when I reached up and brushed the snow from his face with my palm, and he fell abruptly silent. — I… think we should go back. Vadya?

“Yes, we’re turning back, guys,” Shakunov chimed in, wincing against the wind. — They may need help.

We turned about and headed back, keeping the ski trail in view before it could be swept away. But there was neither sight nor sound of Vasenka, Gleb Sosnovsky, or Bronya.

“Look!”

Vasya pulled up so short that I crashed into him, my skis riding up over his. But Postyr never noticed; he simply flung out his arm, pointing ahead.

“Look! Look! Do you hear that?”

Yes, I did. At first I thought it was only the wind wailing on every side, but then I made out a distinct howl. Or rather a moan — long and anguished, as if nature itself were complaining. The second time it struck me full in the head, as though it had drawn closer. I clapped my palms over my ears and dropped one of my poles. My heart leapt, and a wave of terror broke over me. It was as if I stood at the very edge of an abyss, or as though a noose had been flung about my neck — that was the kind of fear it was. Wild, animal.

Before I could collect myself, I had seized Vasya’s arm. He gave a short chuckle and nudged me playfully with his shoulder. Not afraid of anything on earth — just look at him.

“What a scaredy-cat you are, Lyusenka!..”

“Man, just listen to that howling!”

Norkin came up level with us and squared his shoulders, peering ahead as though he could actually see something. His thick black brows all but swallowed his eyes, and against the wind he pressed his

lips together and wrinkled his nose, as if the whole business sickened him.

“Who” who’s howling, Kol?

“These rocks right here, the outcrops.”

I narrowed my eyes and stared hard in the direction he pointed. Vasya, too, put his hand to his brow like a visor, studying the rocks through the snow and wind. But I was the only one who could see nothing at all. It was blindingly white on every side. I blinked like a little fool while icy pellets stung my face.

Norkin noticed it, tapped me on the shoulder, and gestured which way to look. And at last I made them out.

Through the blizzard loomed the dark silhouettes of rocks, each roughly five times the height of a man. Half-buried in snow, they leaned over us menacingly, seeming ready to come crashing down beneath so fierce a wind. It was impossible to believe that nature herself had planted them here to strike terror into human hearts.

The outcrops rose from the snow like bogatyr warriors out of the old epics — six of them, drawn up in battle order. One step more and they would march straight at you, close in a ring, trample you, deafen you... How could we have missed them the first time? How had we walked past without hearing their moaning? I blinked again and again as I gazed up at them, feeling so small, so pitiful beside them.

“But why do they howl so eerily?”

“There are holes in them,” Shakunov replied, appearing behind our backs. “That’s what makes the wind roar. Like blowing into a whistle.”

Incredible — it was only rock roaring, yet it sounded like a living monster.

Kolya pulled a compass from his pocket and checked our azimuth.

“North-northwest!” he announced, as though that could somehow help us.

Vadim wrenched the poles out of the snowdrift with all his strength.

“Let’s keep moving — we have to find the others.”

And off we set, straight toward the “giants,” squinting against the blizzard and straining to make out our poor lost companions. Kolya, meanwhile, kept chattering away:

“No wonder the Mansi legends took root here. Howling giants... You see, these outcrops are so weathered they could collapse at any moment.” He looked at them once more. “Five rocks. Like a splayed hand thrust up out of the ground.”

Five? Why only five? Six! But before I could get a word out, Vasya whooped with delight and raised his stick.

Out of the blizzard the children emerged, dark against the snow like a little heap of stones. Vasenka was practically lying down, Bronya propping her up. Gleb stood close by, but at the sound of us he turned quickly around.

Vasya and I made for Nelya as fast as our legs would carry us, dreading all the while that she had twisted her ankle, just like Sasha Yuzhin.

“Well, what’s this I see? Some of us taking our rest lying down?”

Postyr was joking, of course, but poor Nelya gazed at us with such dread that a lump rose in my throat. Bronya lifted her head, and it nearly alarmed me to see worry on her face. It suited her so ill — how strange, how unlike her, to see her whole face frozen with strain. What could have happened here?

“We have to get out of here. We have to get out quickly…” Vasenka muttered, as though delirious.

Bronya and I took her by the arms, helped her to her feet, and brushed the snow off her. She wasn’t hurt — she had only grazed her nose a little. It was a moment before I noticed the blood on her face

and the drops on the snow. And yet Nelya kept sinking down, trying to crouch, to lie down again, as if she wanted to hide from someone.

“Did you fall, Vasenka? Was it bad?”

She gave no answer, only muttered once more: “Let’s get out of here… get out, quickly.” Sosnovsky turned to us.

“We’re heading back to Malik’s!” he commanded, shouting over the wind and the howl of the crags. “We’ll wait out the storm there.”

There was nothing to be done. I tightened my grip on Vasenka’s arm, but Gleb came over and gently eased me aside.

“It’s hard enough walking as it is,” he explained, carefully slipping one arm around Nelya. “You’d better hold on to us from behind. We’ll get there faster that way.”

He handed Vasenka’s backpack over to Shakunov, and they let Vasya, compass in hand, take the lead. Behind him came Bronya, Vasenka, and Gleb, then Vadim with two packs, while Kolya and I trailed behind everyone like a couple of lost souls.

Norkin kept glancing back at the outcrops, and Vasenka’s mood was slowly rubbing off on me — I longed to be away from this place as fast as I could. But it was wrong. Wrong that we had turned back. How much time, how many kilometers, would we lose because of it? Would we make it in time? And what if the weather never changed? The face of the hunter from Binsai suddenly flashed into my memory.

“An-ana, what if Tumpa-Solyakh wakes up?”

My left ski slammed into a rock with a screech, and, lost in thought, I failed to react in time. All I managed was to throw out my arms, poles still gripped in them, and fall — forward, forgetting every one of Sosnovsky’s lessons.

“Good grief, Lyuska, what’s the matter with you!”

I was struggling up on my own, but Kolya deigned to help me anyway. His hands are strong — strong enough to make you a little

uneasy when they clench into fists in a fit of rage. I straightened up, but my head was still swimming a little from it all — the howling, the white blizzard around me, and... the sight of blood on the snow. The stains had spread across that snow-white blanket as though someone had been killed right here. I leaned harder on my poles to keep my balance and blinked rapidly against the pain and the snow on my lashes. Norkin roughly dusted down my windbreaker.

“I knew it — you shouldn’t take girls on a trek.”

He leaned in a little, peering into my face. Had I broken my nose too? Or was it even worse? I wanted to touch it, but forgot I had mittens on—and besides, I was clutching my ski poles as though they were some kind of treasure.

“Wait.”

Kolya’s quick gray eyes swept over my face once more; then he tugged his mitten off with his teeth, held it clamped in his mouth, and reached out toward me. The sight was so comical that I even found time to regret not having a camera handy. Now that would have been a shot.

With his thumb he wiped something from my upper lip, then gave my cheek a swift swipe with his palm. The touch was careless, but his hand proved warm and not the least bit rough. He rubbed his fingers briskly together, worked the mitten back on, and immediately began talking in a rush:

“It’s only scabbed over a bit, nothing like Nelya’s. It’s all fine now, the bleeding’s stopped. Let’s go before the guys lose us.”

And he hurried on ahead. I tried to keep up, but my movements felt sluggish somehow, and it seemed to me I was moving at a crawl. I ran my tongue over my front teeth, then quickly licked my lips. And sure enough, there was no more blood.

I ought to have come back at him over that “don’t take girls on hikes” of his, but I couldn’t bring myself to force out a single word. The blizzard was howling, the rock outcrops were wailing, my nose hurt—and on top of it all, start arguing with Norkin? No, thanks.

And so I walked on in silence, watching the snow pile up on Kolya’s backpack. More and more of it.

We halted at the very spot where we had spent the previous night. We hurried to pitch the tent so that we could lay Vasenka inside — the poor thing was still so pale and frightened, as though concussed. What had she seen out there among those buttes? What could have frightened her so badly? I half feared that at any moment Gleb would order us to turn back and head for the nearest settlement. While he and the boys trampled down the snow under the tent with their skis, I sat beside Nelya on someone’s backpack, watching them. I tried to draw my friend into conversation, joking and chattering away, but she never uttered a single word.

No sooner had we stretched the tent between two little birches and spread out our gear than Vasenka hurried to hide herself inside, as though it were a little house. What on earth was the matter with her? Maybe it wasn’t all about the broken nose. Maybe the poor thing had a broken heart. I kept half an eye on Gleb, but he said nothing to Nelya, and she dropped off to sleep.

We didn’t bother digging a pit for the fire. We chopped up sticks and branches, laid them out like a log platform, and lit the fire on top. No one felt like eating. Nor singing, nor playing the guitar, for that matter. I, of course, hung the kettle of cocoa over the flames all the same. At least we could warm our hands on the mugs — and that was something.

Somewhere off to the side, the giant buttes went on moaning, though no longer so loudly, so dreadfully. And why not? Tonight we would be sleeping to a real chorus.

“Tomorrow we cross the pass,” Gleb began quietly, his eyes on none of us but fixed only on the fire. “We’re on schedule as far as time goes — no problem there. If only the weather would cooperate.”

He turned to look behind him, and the rest of us involuntarily glanced back after him. Boy, how it roared out there! And here in our camp all was quiet and peaceful — genuine, cozy domestic comfort. Only Vasenka was missing by the fire.

Vadim seemed to have overheard my thoughts, as if by pure chance.

“Gleb, so, um…” He nodded meaningfully toward the tent. “She really did hurt herself, didn’t she?”

He shot Shakunov a fleeting glance, then dropped his eyes again. No, there was definitely something behind this. Had they quarreled, perhaps? A hike is hard enough as it is; heap heartache on top, and you may end up going nowhere at all.

“She’s only a little scraped up. It was the howling that frightened her… Our Nelya is so impressionable, you know.”

Beside me, Norkin drew himself up stiffly, all primed to remind everyone that “girls shouldn’t be taken on hikes,” but I nipped it in the bud by giving his hand a firm squeeze. And he fell silent.

Vadim allowed himself the faintest of smirks.

“Yes, of course… My Lyalka is just like that too…” And his eyes clouded right over with sadness.

Our cocoa began to gurgle, and I seized the chance to busy myself with something. Truly, nothing is worse than sitting in silence, waiting for who knows what, fretting all the while and keeping an eye on everyone at once. Mom has told me more than once, “Lyuska, you have too big a heart,” as if that were a bad thing. But who else would

look after the guys if not me? They couldn't care less about themselves — if I didn't check up on them before every hike, they'd forget to pack their sweaters, their socks, and their own heads into the bargain.

We sipped our cocoa slowly, without a word. At first Vasya kept glancing at the guitar, but he didn't dare take it out. It would have felt awkward, somehow, I suppose. If only Nelya would deign to come out and sit with the rest of us, things would be easier on everyone.

"Do you know why they howl like that?" Bronya asked us suddenly.

No one even had time to open their mouth before she pressed on — the answer was ready and waiting:

"They're guarding a treasure, no doubt about it! The Mansi must have gold deposits hidden somewhere around here, and those giant stone pillars are standing sentinel over them."

He rambled on, but for some reason his voice barely reached me. My mind kept returning to the howling and roaring back there, at the pass—how even I had felt a sudden stab of fear. No wonder Nelya had been so terrified.

Gleb slipped off to the tent to check on her. Tolya went on and on about Mansi treasure, and Vadim, of all people, joined the conversation: he dredged up a legend about some Golden Woman and began to retell it. Vasya simply sat there listening, chin propped on his fist. His eyes seemed so very dark, and there was no telling what he was thinking. Was he laughing up his sleeve at the boys' silly chatter, or did he believe them… or did he perhaps know more than the rest of us? Suddenly I caught his gaze resting on me; he smirked and gave the faintest of nods. As if confiding some secret to me. I gave him a brief smile in return and dropped my eyes to my mug.

Tomorrow we would conquer the pass again—trudge the same path all over again. Come tomorrow we really ought to reach Raup, and to hell with the blizzard.

Norkin's sharp elbow jabbed into my arm.

"And do you believe it, Lusia?"

That we can make it over the pass and finally reach the lake?.. Oh—surely I hadn't been saying that out loud, had I? Or had I?

"What do you mean?" I asked, flustered.

"About the treasure." Kolya narrowed his eyes, a smile barely visible in them. "Do you believe it exists? Or in the legend of Sorni-nai?"

"The what-nai?"

Norkin looked away from me. I'd decided he wouldn't say another word, but he tapped a finger against his mug and explained:

"I just thought you were listening." He nodded toward Vadik, who was still trying to explain something to Tolya. — Shakunov says the Mansi have a local goddess living somewhere in these parts — the Golden Baba. She receives rich offerings, and they lie hidden somewhere nearby. But in winter the shamans don't come here... — A sly smile played across his thin lips. — That's why Sorni-Nai is angry now. The Ostantsy serve her and lie in wait for stray travelers to sacrifice to her...

"Oh, just shut up!" I jabbed him in the ribs, and he nearly dropped his mug, his whole body shaking with silent laughter. — And don't you dare breathe a word of this to Vasenka.

"Yeah, that goes without saying."

And just like that, he turned gloomy again. As if a candle had gone out inside him.

Gleb came back, and the talk died away of its own accord. An uneasy silence hung over us once more. Only now and then did a

branch crack, and the fire would suddenly spit out a flurry of sparks. The tent creaked, the snowdrift rustled, and every so often snow would come sifting down from the spruce boughs.

As though an invisible, hungry goddess were wandering among us.

Tomorrow will be a perfect day,

I'll ask her after all.

I'll ask her tomorrow.

Right now I'm sitting in the tent with my notebook, making a show of writing down something important, when in fact all I'm doing is scrawling across the pages. Afterwards I'll tear them out and burn them when nobody's looking.

Tomorrow will be a perfect day. First thing in the morning we'll set out for Raup, climb it, leave a calling card, and come back to this very spot. It'll be late, and we'll be dead tired, but pleased. Nobody will take anyone else too seriously; nobody will get angry over an accidental shove or take offense at a joke that falls flat. It will be perfect.

When I ask her, Lyusya will just laugh and agree, or maybe she'll even be touched. She definitely won't laugh at me personally, the way she usually does, or get angry. Perfect.

Tomorrow. It will happen tomorrow.

Right now I'm watching her out of the corner of my eye. Nelly has been whispering with Lyusya for ages now, but she barely answers, just listens. What do girls find to whisper about? How, on a hike where everyone is equal and there's sometimes not even time to sleep, do they manage to keep secrets from everybody, to gossip, and to discuss their own private affairs as if they were back in the dorm?

Everyone except Tolya and the girls has already settled down for the night. Bronevsky keeps trotting back and forth, scraping the snow off the tent, because Nelly won't stop wailing that the old fabric might tear. I pretend I'm writing in my diary, which is exactly what I'm doing here — it's just that no one will ever read it.

"Norkin, what are you doing?"

At Lusia's question, I nearly drop my notebook. I lift my head and see that Nelya has already drifted off to sleep, while Kolomiytseva lies on her stomach, watching me. In the dim glow of the two flashlights, I can make out only the tip of her nose, her forehead, and her gleaming eyes.

"I'm writing in my diary, can't you see?"

At once she thrusts out her hand, insistent, and a small white palm emerges from the darkness.

"Let me have a look" it's a shared diary, so I have a right to it.

"You can look later, when I'm done."

I turn away from her, all the while trying to think how I can tear the pages out of the notebook — quickly, unnoticed — before she can take it away from me.

"Oh, don't be such a… such a…"

Lusia breaks off, hunting for the right word. I watch her out of the corner of my eye: the flashlight throws such sharp shadows across her face that I can see her eyelashes trembling.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll ask her. Not now.

"Such a meanie," she finally manages, lifting her chin even higher. — You probably don't even realize just how mean you are. That's why nobody likes being around you — you could hurt someone even with a stone.

I see perfectly well that she's only trying to provoke me, to make me lose my temper and toss her the notebook. It's about time I got used to her methods. Long past time, really.

"You're probably writing all sorts of nasty things about us in that diary too," she won't let up. — Well, we'll just see whether you tear the pages out after this or not.

And I can't help myself.

“Some pages have already been torn out here and there. And I don’t think it was Bronevsky who did it.”

Lusia falls silent, batting her eyes innocently. I swallow hard and go on:

“Our first night in the woods. The diary was in your keeping. Yet all I find are Tolya’s entries.”

That much is true. I saw with my own eyes Lyusya sitting in the tent, notebook in hand. The shared notebook. Later I took it myself and found no new notes written in it — only scraps of paper jutting out between the pages. So perhaps that’s exactly what it means — that Lyusya, cross with me over something as usual, wrote all sorts of things in the heat of the moment, and then decided it would be better to tear those pages out?

“Don’t make things up,” she mutters, realizing I’m telling the truth. — It’s Bronya you should be asking about the missing pages. And honestly, just look at him — what a pedant, counting the pages of the shared diary! Go on and burn the whole thing if you like; I couldn’t care less.

She turns away and lies down with her back to me, drawing the half of the blanket Nelly has left her over herself, until only her fair braids stick out from beneath it.

I go back to my notes, even though there’s no longer anyone to keep up the pretense for, as if I were writing something in the diary. True, Tolya does squeeze past me one more time. Whether he overheard our exchange, I can’t say; he asks nothing and doesn’t even glance my way. Most likely he’s simply too tired.

Today has been a punishing day, and tomorrow brings a strenuous climb up the mountain. We’ll descend to the pass at dusk, and we’ll scarcely have the strength left to put the kettle on. But perhaps Bronevsky will take a photograph of us, and Postyr will grumble that

there’s no guitar, though everyone will understand he’d never have played it anyway. Sosnovsky, of course, will pretend it’s nothing more than an easy stroll for him, though he’ll likely give the weary Nelly a little extra attention. And Vadim will say, ‘You should have done it like this…’ and won’t settle down until he’s said everything on his mind.

And I…

And I will settle down beside breathless Lyusya, who will still be trying to feed us, make us laugh, and draw us into conversation. When she turns to me, she will no longer remember our talk of this day, for the trip to Raup will have eclipsed everything else. She will ask, “Norkin, should I put sugar in your tea, or condensed milk?” as if that were the only thing in the world that could concern her.

And then I will ask her.

“Lyusya…”

“When we return to Sverdlovsk…”

“will you go to the movies…”

“with me?”

And she will be far too weary to laugh at me.

Tomorrow. The second of February. It will be a wonderful day.

Hope Lost and Regained

It was, I believe, the seventh day of our stay in the hut—or perhaps the ninth already. That very point at the crossroads where you lose hope and must either give up or find a new one.

I woke before dawn. Sleep came poorly to all of us in those days; we would often wake from hunger, from the cold, or from the fancy that we could hear Gleb Sosnovsky's footsteps coming back. Vasenka was plagued by such visions more than anyone—she would readily leap up in the dead of night and run outside, leaving the door wide open behind her.

This time I opened my eyes and lay still for a while. Nelya was snuffling beside me, the boys were snoring off to one side, and in the corner, behind my back, firewood crackled in the stove. Naturally, I began at once to wonder whether anyone was minding the fire, for that was our foremost task just then. I pushed myself up on my elbows, turned, and saw Norkin's back.

He sat on the log that passed for a bench, shoulder propped against the wall, and appeared to be asleep. All at once I was angry with him for leaving the stove unattended, and in the same breath I felt a pang of pity. Nelya, Vasya, and Kolya ought to have been in a doctor's care a week ago at the latest; instead, here they were, marooned in the wilderness in the depths of winter, going hungry, freezing…

I rose with care, tucked the jacket that served as our blanket more snugly around Nelya, and made my way over to the "bench."

At my rustling, Kolya opened his eyes and sat up straight. Well, of course he hadn't been sleeping at all. Here, falling asleep was often harder even than waking. Perhaps because the body had come to suspect that another such slumber might never end at all?

“What are you doing up so early?” Norkin squinted, glancing at his watch. “Frozen?”

He was keeping his voice low, of course, so as not to wake anyone, but I suddenly caught myself trying to remember the last time I’d heard him raise it. Shout. Curse. Argue with someone. Say his favorite “loser.” In any case, certainly not in the past few days.

“No, it’s nothing...” I stretched my hands toward the fire and drew my legs in closer. “Go back to sleep — I’ll take the watch.”

Kolya straightened up and stretched, but stayed where he was, letting only his eyes close wearily.

“I won’t fall asleep anyway...”

I stole a sidelong glance, studying the dark patches on his hands. His fingers were bent and swollen, his nails gone black. The same went for Nelya — this was what the frost had left of their hands: aching, itching and, naturally, in need of medical attention. But all we could do was rub them with the fat we had rendered from the venison, and try to ease their work, if only a little.

As if that were not enough, Kolya also had burns on his fingers and palms. On reaching the campfire, he had wanted so desperately to warm himself that he all but shoved his hands into the flames. Poor, maimed hands of Norkin’s…

Beyond the cabin wall something gave a long, drawn-out creak, and we both tensed. Of course, it was only the trees and the wind — no chance of a moose, a bear, or... Gleb.

“A little while longer, and you’ll hear the blades whirring,” I whispered. “Gleb will come down to us like a hero, scoop Vasenka up in his arms, and we’ll fly home in a real helicopter and tell our grandchildren what an adventure befell us.”

I broke off mid-sentence, aware that I was spouting nonsense. Honeyed words were what I used to soothe Nelya, so the poor thing

could settle down a little and drift off to sleep. Kolya hardly needed to hear any of it.

Most likely he didn't believe a word of it.

And the way he was looking at me now made that clear at once — there was no fooling him with that sort of thing. He had long since stopped waiting for Gleb Sosnovsky to come back on the helicopter.

"But he will come back, won't he?" I whispered, before hope finally crumbled to dust. "Right, Kol? He has to come back..."

Lately I had been putting this question to myself more and more often, and every time I answered with the same confidence: yes, of course, how can you even doubt it, you silly thing! But no matter how many times you repeated it, it wouldn't bring Gleb Sosnovsky one step closer.

The silence had stretched on too long to hope for an answer. The silence itself was the most eloquent answer to my question. Gleb was gone — dead, or he had simply lost our trail; perhaps he was wounded, lying in some hospital. And apart from him, not another living soul knew where we were or what had become of us.

I dropped my gaze, and my nose began to sting treacherously; I thought that really, this was hardly the moment to start sniveling. At least Vasenka could neither see nor hear any of it — thank heavens for small mercies...

"He'll come back," Norkin said suddenly, his voice hoarse. "Of course he'll come back."

Slowly he raised his crooked hand to my face and with his fingers wiped away the tears that were spilling down my cheeks all the same. His skin was hard and cold, and almost without realizing what I was doing, I took his hand and pressed his palm to my cheek.

There was so much warmth inside me that I could have shared it with others, pouring it out into mugs like cocoa...

“Sometimes it feels as though we’ll be trapped here forever,” I whispered, shutting my eyes again as the tears kept falling, warming Kolya’s hand. “That no one will ever find us, and we’ll die here one by one, of cold and hunger…”

That was something you could never say to Vasenka. You couldn’t even say it to yourself. The words seemed to have torn themselves loose from the depths, from the abyss of my soul — a place I had never dared to look into.

“What nonsense you’re talking, silly girl.”

Ordinarily I would have welcomed the disdain and arrogance in his voice. Let him laugh at my fears, trample them, tear them to shreds. But his voice now was quieter than ever, almost empty.

As if the real Kolya Norkin had died that night after all.

“Where on earth do such silly notions come from?” he went on. “How can a UPI student, an experienced hiker — and, above all, the quartermaster! — dwell on such things? You really are a silly girl.”

And then he embraced me. Simply took me and drew me to him; my shoulder pressed into his chest, and his free right hand reached across my body and settled around my waist. All at once everything felt snug, warm, and calm. Kolya rested his sharp chin on the crown of my head and repeated:

“Silly girl. Never think such thoughts again. Never lose hope.”

I sat there, petrified. Kissing Bronya on the cheeks — that was fine. Cooing over Sasha and Masha — easy as pie. Throwing a sudden hug around married Vadik, or resting my head, the way you would with family, on the shoulder of the cold, serious Gleb Sosnovsky — that came easily enough.

But even touching prickly Norkin seemed impossible. At times it hurt simply to look at him—frightened me, even—let alone reach out and touch him.

So it really was true. The real Kolya had died a full seven days ago.

“Gleb will come back, I know he will,” he said again, without waiting for my answer or any reaction from me. “He can’t not come back. It’s just... it takes time to find a helicopter and track down that shack. Even Gleb might have mixed up the coordinates. Even he could have made a mistake.” He exhaled slowly, warm breath stirring my hair. “He’ll be back soon, Lusia, just hold on a little longer. Don’t give up. Please.”

I said nothing, only gratefully stroked his wrist with my thumb. If Norkin himself was saying it, then it had to be true. Kolya wouldn’t have spoken such words without reason, or merely to console me. Which meant he believed them too.

Fine snow drifted down through the black hole in the roof that stood in place of a chimney here. It hadn’t let up since the night we reached this place, and at times it seemed to me that soon it would bury us, seal us into this hut that would become our common grave.

Or perhaps that had already happened?

And we were all dead. All of us except Gleb, the one who had walked away.

I closed my eyes, barely catching the faint heartbeat of another person at my shoulder, and felt the hand beneath my palm growing warmer. No. We’re alive. We’ll make it. People have survived worse scrapes than this—so what makes us any worse? As long as we stay together, as long as we don’t lose hope, we’ll be all right.

And soon we will hear the whir of the helicopter blades, and Gleb will come hurrying over, gather Nelya into his arms, and carry her into the cabin himself. We will return to Sverdlovsk, and I will remember this day well into my old age.

How the hot stove crackled in the corner, how the fellows snored on the sledge, how the white flies of snow flickered through the hole in

the roof. And how Kolya Norkin and I sat so close together, having found new hope in each other.