

Higher Up

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The day flew by. It had been a while since the last time things were that frantic. The hospital was packed to the gills. Patients poured into the intensive care unit as if a battle were raging outside the doors. There was a little girl with severe multiple injuries, a fall from the fourth floor, unstable fractures, contusions, internal organ lacerations, thank god her skull wasn't damaged; there was an infant – six months old, esophageal stenosis, respiratory arrest; another infant – pneumothorax, chest tube, ventilator.

When the dust settled a bit, Rudnev went to check on the nameless boy. The boy was twitching in his sleep. Sedation often turned dreams into nightmares. Now that the boy no longer needed an oxygen mask, Ilya could take a closer look at his face. He stared unblinking at the unfamiliar child, seeing his own son in the boy's features. Any second now the boy would wake up, open his eyes, part his dry lips, and Rudnev would tell him he was sorry, over and over again.

"Let me know when he wakes up," Rudnev said to the nurse on duty.

"Are we transferring him?"

"It's too early for a transfer. And please put up a screen, I don't want to frighten him."

"Ilya Sergeyevich – when he woke up, he kept calling for someone and crying."

"Who was he calling for?"

"No idea. We administered propofol. To calm him down."

"Did you ask what his name is?"

"No," the nurse said, turning away. "I'm telling you, he's still totally out of it."

He had to attend to two scheduled surgeries that had been pushed back. Masha assisted him in total silence. She followed instructions and didn't ask any questions, but the look

on her face was somewhat timid, pitiful even. Could Rudnev have mistaken timidity for resentment? He didn't think he'd ever offended Masha. Sure, he'd snapped at her on occasion to keep things moving faster, but that was perfectly normal for their kind of work. He felt as if he'd forgotten how to read people. More and more often now he was tempted to give up; what difference did it make whether it was resentment or shyness, manipulation or sincere emotion?

The inguinal hernia surgery followed an appendectomy, then another, and another, and each procedure took no more than half an hour. Zaza kept making jokes about Ilya getting lost in the wide-open field the day before and calling for help. He imitated the terrified, supposedly last scream in Ilya's life, and it was so funny the operating room shook with laughter. While the surgical masks swelled with mirth, Zaza tied and removed the appendix. The faces of nurses and doctors, stony and exhausted by the brutal morning, softened and relaxed, but no one had noticed, except for Ilya. The girl who'd fallen from the height – nicknamed The Goner – was facing a long recovery and (assuming she would be lucky, assuming she would survive) a whole slew of surgeries. Saving her life – challenging, grueling – felt like yesterday's news, and everyone had forgotten about her. Now, Zaza was pulling out a swollen, rotting appendix, muttering "what the flying fuck did I just cut off?", and everyone felt some relief from this tiny victory.

"We don't cry over the living, we only smile at them!" Rudnev said sharply, entering the ICU.

The girl's mother wiped her white cheeks and nodded.

"Talk to her."

"I'm talking!" The mother said defensively. "Is she better? Can she hear me?"

"It's hard, but she's fighting," Rudnev said.

"She has no bruises!"

"Her heart is more of a concern right now. It was damaged as a result of her fall. And now it has to work that much harder because of the damage to her other organs," Ilya said, checking the little girl's vitals. "Is her dad around?" He asked, thinking that he hadn't seen the father in the ICU.

"He had to leave."

“Tell him to stick around.”

“Yes, of course. He’s very scared, you know.”

“Of what?”

“Of being here. He’s terrified.”

“I understand,” Rudnev said, forcing a smile. “Men are the most cowardly creatures in the world.”

“Do you understand? Do you have children?”

He exhaled.

“No, I don’t have any children. But please, try to explain to her father that he should be here. It’ll help his daughter.”

And himself, Ilya added silently.

He turned to the third bed.

“Where’s the screen I asked for?”

A pair of terrified eyes stared at Rudnev. He stepped closer and stood by the boy’s bed while the screen was wheeled over.

“How are you doing, soldier?”

The boy did not respond.

“Does this hurt?”

Rudnev lightly touched the patient’s chest, where broken ribs rubbed against each other. At the touch of his fingers, the boy’s breathing grew shallow, almost feverish. Rudnev took away his hand and watched the boy squeeze his eyes shut, chasing away the pain brought by the stranger.

“Don’t be scared.”

Ilya waited for the boy to open his eyes, but eventually he had to leave.

The morning courtyard was empty, only a young shaggy dog sniffing through the leaves. Noticing him, the dog shook off the leaves and eagerly bounded over, jumping and nudging Ilya's hand with its nose. The silent human didn't want to play and had no treats. He didn't even move; he simply stood there like a statue, and his eyes were closed.

The dog barked to attract his attention, and the human responded. His voice was short and hoarse like a growl, and his eyes turned mean. The dog bowed its head and lay down by the man's feet.

The sky grew lighter. Voices came from the direction of the main gate. Someone in the guard booth coughed loudly and hoarsely, having smoked too much. Crows coughed overhead.

"Go away," Rudnev said again.

The dog gazed at him with its kind eyes, shining as brightly as pools of water. The dog was seemingly pleased by the new day. Like an idiot, the dog had no idea how long this morning had been. The dog was such a happy moron. Rudnev crouched by its side and placed his hand on the dog's wet, angular back. Ilya's shift was over; his work was not.

Children's drawings adorned the staircase: a six-winged butterfly, a bear gathering bright-colored mushrooms, a cabin by the river, and the obligatory pirate ship in the water. A woman peeled herself from the railing and stepped toward Rudnev.

"Are you from the ICU?"

Her unblinking eyes demanded an immediate answer.

"You can't come in."

"When can I visit?"

"We have a dead body in there. No visitors are allowed."

Her face twitched. It looked strange, as if the woman badly needed to sneeze but couldn't manage it. She stood there, hand pressed against her lips, then began to howl softly.

"Is he the one who died?"

"What do you mean, he?"

"The boy! The boy!" her scream rattled down the staircase like a handful of ceramic shards. "They told me he was here!"

"What is his name?" Rudnev asked, assuming she didn't know.

The woman wept. She cried without restraint, letting her tears flow. She tried to dry her eyes, but immediately burst into sobs again.

Ilya needed an answer or at least a confirmation that they were talking about the same person.

"I don't... I don't know!" She finally managed to say.

"A boy of about four? Towheaded?"

"Ahhhhh!"

"Are you a family member?"

"It was me, I did it!"

Rudnev knew now exactly who she was.

"Did you hit him with your car?"

The woman couldn't speak; she only nodded. Rudnev continued in a cold, curt tone.

"This boy – he's recovering. He has a ruptured spleen, an injury to his intestines, two broken ribs. He's lost a lot of blood, but he's on the mend now. We took out his spleen and repaired his intestines. He's alive!" Ilya said, finally locating the right word.

It worked.

"And now go home. I have work to do."

"No, I'll stay here."

"What's your name?"

"Darya."

"Listen, Darya, you should really go home and get some sleep."

"Where would I go?" She asked. "I need a hotel. Where is the closest hotel? I can't go anywhere. They just finally let me go."

"Don't worry. The boy will live."

"Thank goodness! They kept me for two nights. I told them I wasn't going anywhere. I signed the papers. I'm from Moscow. I'm so tired!" She said, beginning to babble. "So tired."

Hurriedly, she began to explain to Ilya what had happened: she said none of it was her fault, she was driving slowly, steadily, and the boy popped out of nowhere, in the dark, and this was in the middle of a forest, and so there shouldn't have been any pedestrians there.

"Give me your phone number and go get some rest. I'm sorry, but we're in the middle of..."

"Gosh, of course, of course," Darya said, squeezing her small eyes shut.

Rudnev turned off the highway and drove along an empty road. Clouds gathered high in the delicately blue sky. The forest hummed deeply by the roadside. Ilya stared far beyond the path. His thoughts flew by, humming like the forest, getting tangled, making it difficult to choose one thought in particular. He wondered if he'd find the right spot, considering that he had no specific information aside from imprecise coordinates and Darya's confusing affidavit. And what would happen if he found it? Then what? He didn't expect the boy's grieving family to still be waiting in the bushes. Did he even have a family? Was there anyone who knew this little boy?

Ilya had quite a few things to process when his GPS announced he had arrived at his destination. Rudnev slowed down, looking for signs of a recent accident. The road was clean and just as calm. The car moved slower as if the gas pedal revolted and pushed back Ilya's shoe.

He saw something flicker on the opposite lane. Rudnev stopped the car to take a closer look, but it was just a puddle in the pothole. He watched it ripple. He thought that Darya may have given him the wrong address, and now he was foolishly driving through the woods, looking at puddles. That seemed to be true until he noticed tire marks ahead. Rudnev parked the car by the side of the road a few meters away and stepped closer.

Two black stripes split into four, connected again, and veered to the right. He found a handful of plastic shards and two red flakes right where the tire had left a thick black spot. Ilya picked it up. It wasn't plastic, but rather a flake of paint from the bumper.

Off to the sides he found two cigarette butts; at first, he decided these were left behind by cops on the scene. Then he changed his mind: no one else had been there. The cigarettes belonged to Darya. Both were only half-finished. She must have taken three nervous puffs, then tossed the cigarette on the ground and lit another one.

A long horn broke the silence. Rudnev saw a pair of headlights moving toward him and stepped aside. A small van drove by, bathing him in the warmth and stink of exhaust. Ilya went back to his car. A herd of cars followed the van, raising clouds of dust, as if they had waited for Rudnev to locate a proper spot so they could flood the road all at once. And now he had a plan: follow them to the closest village. His desire to continue the search was instinctive, primal. Ilya started the car.

He didn't have to drive far. He took the first exit into a local road, compact and firm enough to indicate a village, a sawmill, or some other sign of civilization lay ahead. When the paved portion of the road ended, his heart beat faster. Rudnev couldn't explain why, but he knew he was going in the right direction.

Storm clouds gathered above his head in dark, oppressive formations, pushing down toward the ground. Rudnev saw an old man walking along the dirt road, carrying a basket. Ilya lowered his window and called out:

"Grandpa, how far is the village?"

The man turned to the sound of his voice, saw the car, and took a step back. His much-mended quilted jacket with two remaining buttons kept falling off the man's shoulders. He stepped off the path and waved for Rudnev to pass.

"Is there a village nearby?" Ilya asked.

"Yup. What'd ya need?"

"Any village will do. Get it, I'll give you a ride," Ilya said and pulled up closer. The old man peeked into the car with suspicion. "Get in, grandpa."

The old man climbed into the car, settled in the middle of the back seat, and looked into Rudnev's face.

"Who's that you're visitin'?" He asked.

"No one," Rudnev said. "I'm looking for someone though, or for someone's family, actually."

"You police? Or a bandit?"

"Which one do I look like?"

"Well... you look decent-like."

"I'm a doctor."

"A doctor, huh?"

"We got a new patient, a little boy. He was run over by a car somewhere around here."

"Can you look at my old lady, doctor?" The old man said, clearly not listening to Rudnev.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She is in bed."

"For how long?"

"She won't get up."

"I'm asking if she's been in bed for a long time."

"Since Saturday. And before that, she crawled around for a month."

Ilya nodded. *All roads lead to a patient*, he said to himself.

A wide open space stretched ahead of them. A cemetery appeared on the left. From the hilltop, the faded bluish-gray crosses seemed to watch Ilya's car driving past them. Beyond the crosses, the village emerged, and Ilya could tell immediately that it was an empty, dying village with feeble, unstable houses.

"So, do you know of any missing children around here?"

"Not many children now. Used to be plenty runnin' around," the old man said, ignoring his question.

"Has anyone gotten lost lately?"

"There are some dead ones, but lost ones-- don't know."

"Had a lot of children died?"

"How should I know? One drowned last year. And the ones who burned up last year..."

"Who?"

"Pashka."

"Pashka who?"

"Pashka Heron, that's who!" The old man snapped, surprised by Rudnev's ignorance. "The one who sold syphoned diesel juice."

"Grandpa, seriously. How would I know all your local Pashkas?"

"You askin' – I'm tellin'. He got burned up. And his kids, too. Hold it!" The old man said, pulling on Rudnev's sleeve. "That's his house over there."

Rudnev stopped by the charred remains of a yard, and the old man told him the whole story. The old man's words made the back of Ilya's head tingle as if cold ants ran around under his hair. His throat felt dry.

"That's my hut just around the corner over there. My old lady's over there."

Ilya entered the house expecting gruesome conditions and a dying person begging for death in a malodorous, yellowing bed. What he saw surprised him. The old man turned out to be a tidy, diligent homemaker. The room was clean, well-lit, the wood stove filling the air with a pleasant scent. Behind the wood stove, in the corner, lay the old woman.

"She is poorly, my old lady. Hurts so badly. By day she just smacks her lips, smacks and smacks, and breathes, hard. And at night she groans like someone shot her. I can't sleep with her goin' on like this. I go in the yard or to the banya. Every night I give her a pill and leave."

The old man handed Rudnev a bag of pills.

"Did your doctor prescribe these meds?"

"Nope. The doctor was here once. Took her blood pressure. But he won't come here anymore. Got these at the pharmacy. Asked for something for the pain, and they gave me these for the pain."

Rudnev fiddled with the bag.

"Do they help?" He asked.

"Ehhh," the old man said, waving his hand. "Useless crap."

"How's her appetite?"

"She ain't eating. And she doesn't go to the outhouse. She's just getting swole."

"Do you have family in the city?"

"Huh?"

"Do you have any help? Kids? Grandkids? Do you have anyone who can take her to the hospital?"

"Got a son, yeh. But not here, and he's sick hisself."

The old man nodded, lost in his own thoughts. Rudnev waited for him to say something, but the old man pretended to forget their conversation. Feigning distraction, he went to check on his wife.

"There's the doctor! Doctor!" He said.

Rudnev bent over the bed. The old woman parted her lips and tried to say hello. At least that's what Rudnev thought she said as he watched the tip of her tongue touch the roof of her mouth. Her eyes were small and teary, but her gaze was open and straightforward; deep lines radiated from the corners of her eyes.

"What's your name?"

The old woman swallowed.

"It's Katerina," the old man said.

Rudnev pulled off the blanket. He saw a tiny, nearly melted body burdened by an enormous belly. The old man turned away and took a few steps back. He paced around the room, tidying up, opening a window, poking the coals in the stove, and pulling some reddish wool from a basket.

Meanwhile, Ilya tended to Katerina. He listened to her struggling heart, palpated her distended belly, warmed up her swollen feet. His actions were simple and accomplished the same thing as the old man's fidgeting: they justified Ilya's utter helplessness.

Ilya could've said a lot of things, but instead he chose to say something pointless:

"She's got a lot of fluid building up inside. We have to take her in."

The old man's eyes darted around the room as if he couldn't hear anything.

"I'm taking her in!" Rudnev shouted.

"Where to?"

"To the hospital."

"But how? But... Where would she go? Don't," He said, running his hand over his forehead. His fingers left behind a trace of blood.

Only then Rudnev noticed a skinned hare spread on a piece of newspaper on the table. The wet pelt was stretched over the wood stove.

"Make your choice, grandpa," Rudnev said. "She needs to go to the hospital. And you can rest a bit."

"Won't she croak at the hospital? How is she getting back? How?"

Rudnev made three phone calls, greeting cheerfully and saying goodbye quickly. During the third call, Ilya nodded vigorously: it was all arranged. He tore a piece of the newspaper from under the hare and wrote down his number and the name and address of the hospital where he was taking Katerina.

The old man began to pack his wife's things but got confused and didn't know what to do. He brought some undergarments over and showed them to the woman, but she kept saying no, almost imperceptibly shaking her head. When the old man gave her a choice of two

bathrobes, she said: "Not going." Rudnev came over and began to speak in short, simple sentences.

When the doctor said she wouldn't be left at the hospital and would be coming home soon, Katerina acquiesced. Ilya didn't rush her, waiting for her to be sure.

"Shall we go?" He asked again.

"Fine," Katerina said, nodding.

The old man finally collected all the necessary things and documents. He was sturdy and mobile, but now his movements seemed stiff, as if driven not by his own will but by some other force. He moved in sharp, harsh bursts of action, without stopping, as if someone wouldn't let him rest. It was obvious that he was old, that he was tired by his trip to the woods, but he wouldn't let his exhaustion take over. He seemed unbothered by the heavy coat, by the boots he pulled on again, getting the right and left boot mixed up. The boots kept getting bunched up under his heels and slipping off, but he continued shuffling toward the car as if nothing stood in his way.

With a great deal of fuss, they placed Katerina in the back seat of Ilya's car. She crossed her hands over her forehead, then asked to be seated upright: "I don't want to lie down." They helped her sit up, so she could look out the window. Changing her pose gave her a bit of strength and made her feel she was going to the hospital to be treated, not buried.

The old couple held hands and gazed into each other's eyes, saying goodbye. The door closed softly. The car began to move. Rudnev glanced into the rearview mirror and saw the old man shuffle after the car as if pulled by a towing rope. Soon he stopped moving and watched the car driving away.

The weather was getting worse. The clouds thickened, about to spill out. Driving by the burnt house, Rudnev slowed down.

"What was he like, the owner?" He asked Katerina. He saw her looking at the house.

"Pashka? Tall, skinny. Like a heron, that one was."

Rudnev jumped out of the car and walked toward the burnt house. The wooden stove had been disassembled, with only the foundation bricks remaining in place. The rest of the bricks lay in two piles in the yard.

A dozen charred logs had been left behind the blackened square where the house used to be. All of them were hollow, like a handful of used matches. The floor boards had been burned up, the floor was scraped down to the soil underneath, and the entrance to the cellar yawned like a giant mouth – as if the entire house had disappeared into the hole.

According to the old man, the fuel that Pashka Heron used to peddle blew up so violently that the sound of the explosion woke up the nearby village. The explosion took no mercy on the wooden beams or the bones. They found the remains of the father who slept on the other side of the house, but the kids' room had perished in the fire, leaving nothing behind. Aside from Pashka himself, three more souls had been taken by the explosion: two little girls and the youngest boy.

An attempt had been made to put out the fire, but no one was brave enough to approach. Two villagers lost their eyebrows when they tried to pour water over the fence. People brought over buckets full of water, soaking their feet. The banya next door caught fire, but they managed to save it. But the house--the house continued burning through the night.

Rudnev went back to his car. He gently pressed the gas pedal and the car glided over the bumpy road. As they were leaving the village, Ilya glanced to the right, toward the crosses. Once again, they seemed to watch him. Katerina cried softly in the back seat. Ilya thought that he knew nothing about her aside from her name: not where she was born, nor how many children she'd brought into the world. He knew only that this village cemetery was her precious homeland, and that she longed to be there, among her own kind.

Rudnev closed the windows to stop the raindrops and road dust from seeping into the car. A gray bird flew out of the bushes and stayed close to the car, fluttering and diving as if riding a wave. Ilya kept his foot off the pedal until the bird flew away. Up and down it went. Up and down.

"Poor kids," he said softly.

"No kids. There were no kids in there," the old woman said.

The forest edged closer to the road, trembling and fluttering along. Her bare neck stretched, Katerina stared out the window, as if the cemetery was still there for her to see.