

The Captain

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Genre – true story, (auto)biography, naval, prison, cancer, survival story

I always wanted to be a sailor. As far back as I can remember, from early childhood. I was born in Kopeisk which is in Chelyabinsk Region. When I was three months old, the family moved to the village of Topolya in Ukraine. My father was a first mate on the tugboats. I don't remember him at all. He died when I was three. My mother never got over it and, to her dying day, she held the sea solely to blame. She truly believed that, sooner or later, the sea would take me as well, and she did everything in her power to prevent me going into my father's line of work.

School discovered I had an aptitude for maths and physics. My mother thought I ought to become a teacher but I never even considered it. I never had any doubts as to my chosen profession. Perhaps my grandfather was to blame. He was in the navy at one point and after discharge became the village blacksmith. I can still see him clearly in my childhood memories: I would go and see him often and listen with bated breath to improbable and mysterious tales of his life at sea. In the semi-darkness of the forge, lit only by flashes from the fire, my dream was tempered and took shape to the sound of clanging metal. My father's death didn't seem a tragedy. After all, I didn't know him. I couldn't remember what he looked like. He was only ever a myth to me, a harrowing tale of the sea. To a great extent, my grandfather took my father's place and it's thanks to him that I became who I am today.

When I finished school, I attempted to get into the Leningrad Naval Academy but failed the medical. Which as an athlete who had taken part in a number of weightlifting competitions, I found laughable and absurd. I immediately signed on as a trainee seaman with the Baltic Sea Shipping Company and qualified as an ordinary and then as an able seaman, which was no mean feat. I can

clearly remember my first captain, Anatoly Vitoldovich Andrizheyevsky, a Russified Pole. He thought I should have another go at getting into the Academy but instead I did my military service despite being exempt as a merchant seaman. After a year in the Navy, I passed a medical selection commission and was about to enter the Lenin Komsomol Naval School but, having already taken the exams, I retrieved my documents and went back to the Navy, served the prescribed two years and returned to Civvy Street. By then I had realized that a military career wasn't for me.

And yet year after year the call of the sea grew stronger and more insistent. I graduated from maritime college. The instant I received my diploma, I started at the Higher Marine Academy in Kaliningrad. I studied and worked at the same time, putting to sea with the whalers, the Besposhchadny-33 and the Vyderzhanny-36. I was lucky. Fate brought me into contact with some wonderful captains: Men and Sailors with capital letters. My seafaring soul was shaped and seasoned on their watch. One of them, Anatoly Ivanovich Moskalenko, is still alive today. I worked in the whaling fleet and on super trawlers, legends of the Black Sea Fishing Fleet, like the Boris Alekseyev, the Foros, the Kapitan Orlikova. Many years have gone by but I have only to close my eyes and I see a succession of magnificent ships drifting on a shoreless sea. I am proud to have been on each one of them and each one left its mark on my life, taught me something new.

In 1992, after the collapse of the shipping industry, I was lucky to find work with foreign shipowners. The trawlers were behind me. Now I was working on bulk carriers and container ships, delivering freight all over the world. Now I was a captain myself but, looking at the endless blue swell from the captain's bridge, I felt like a little boy whose stupidity and recklessness had made him sneak up and take the helm of an enormous ship. And so I remained apprenticed to the sea.

Looking back, recalling a life that has positively flown by, I can only think how lucky I have been. How one step in the right direction determines our entire fate! From time to time, I wonder what I would have done if I'd known how it would all end up. Could I have turned my back on the sea and become a teacher as my mother wanted and so have avoided five years of hell in India?

It's funny even to think of it. I couldn't have turned my back on the sea for all the tea in

China. I am grateful to the sea for every day I've lived. The sea was in my heart from the moment I was born and I will be true to it to my last breath.

1 January 2011

Name: MV Blida

Type: Bulk carrier

Tonnage: 20 000 tonnes

Crew: citizens of Algeria, Malaysia, Ukraine, Philippines, Saudi Arabia.

Port of Destination: Mombasa, Kenya.

All shades of blue, the sky is like an extension of the ocean. Stare at it too long and you'll fall in, along with your cargo. It's the first day of a new year. For the Algerians who make up half the crew, New Year isn't a holiday. Never mind that a pipe in the engine room burst just before New Year. They mended it, opened a bottle of alcohol-free champagne, drank it down and dispersed to their cabins.

The ocean is almost calm. You can't even call a Force 4 a gentle swell, especially not for a multi-tonne bulk carrier loaded with stone. The water opens in a bloodless wound before the ship's bow, its white caps seethe astern, then it stills again. All around, wherever you look, whisper boundless expanses of azure water. Feelings and emotions are dulled by the heat. A nap for an hour or so would be nice but the sea loathes the lazy. And it doesn't forgive mistakes.

At noon, I, Ship's Captain Valentin Mikhailovich Dudnik, together with Chief Engineer Stanislav Sergeyevich Yatsenko, put together the noon report.¹ A regular but tiresome procedure. There are more forms and papers every year. You can't help but wonder how merchant seamen did the job a hundred years ago...

A call came through at 1245. The second mate reported that an unidentified and potentially dangerous vessel had been detected in our path. Incidentally, in this area, all unidentified vessels are

1 Ship's noon report.

potentially dangerous. Pirates have stepped up their activities of late. They are nothing like their historical, swashbuckling forebears, tricked out in gold and feathers. The Somalis prefer khat² to rum and Kalashnikovs to sabres. They are highly organized and supremely well-armed. Under the Maritime Labour Convention, the company that owns the ship is supposed to provide protection but for economic reasons the issue had never been resolved. My own request was turned down with a smile on the grounds that “the entire Indian Ocean is dangerous. Where on earth are we going to find so many guards? And in any case, the ship’s worked the same route for six months now without incident.”

The distance to the unidentified ship was 12.5 miles. It wasn’t responding to radio inquiries and was approaching at speed.

Without hesitation, I took the decision to turn the ship around and we headed away. The maximum speed for a loaded bulk carrier is 10 knots, however. How could it possibly compete with the predator on its tail?

When the distance had fallen to six miles, there was no longer any doubt that we were being pursued by pirates. High-speed powerboats were lowered from the unidentified ship. They shot forward, slicing through the ocean like sharks.

I tried to reach the shore authorities by radio. The only weapons we had on board were fire hoses and serious resistance to an enemy who was armed to the teeth was out of the question.

The powerboats soon began circling our ship. The pirates opened fire. They didn’t aim to kill any members of the crew. Their main goal was to intimidate, to break our will. In no way was this an impromptu attack. The pirates had planned everything thoroughly. Much later, they showed us photographs of our ship taken two weeks before the attack, boasting that they had agents in the ports.

The ship came under attack from both sides. I didn’t realize straight away that, in addition to the bark of the guns, another noise could be heard from above. A military helicopter was circling up

2 Khat: an evergreen shrub, the leaves of which are used as a stimulant.

there at a safe distance.

The pirates started shooting into the sky and the helicopter swung its bulk around, sped away, became a dot and disappeared, melting into the indifferent blue sky.

Trying to keep calm, I ordered the crew to take shelter, fully aware that it wouldn't really help but would simply delay their capture slightly. But I was sickened at the thought of having to surrender to a bunch of armed criminals.

Less than two hours later and the ship was captured. The stuffy steering room smelled of sweat and fear. What would happen next? Sailors sometimes told one another rumours about the empty, lifeless ghost ships that drifted in these parts. After so many decades of safe sailing, the sea was once again a war zone.

A commotion, yells, orders in a harsh and unfamiliar language could be heard outside the room, followed by dull thuds on the door.

The pirates burst in.

I stepped forward: I had never hidden in my life and I didn't intend to start now. Furthermore, the sight of these grubby wretches crowding the entryway made me angry rather than afraid. I barely refrained from laughing in the toerags' faces.

"You the captain?" One of the gunmen jabbed his pistol at me. The barrel swayed slowly from side to side like a cobra poised to strike.

"I am."

"Why didn't you halt your ship, Captain?" the pirate yelled. He gave off a thick animal scent. Short and raw-boned, with large protruding teeth, he revolted me. But there was something frightening in his eyes, as though madness had been building up in this man since he was born, stewing deep in his brain.

I shook my head, not taking my eyes off the barrel of the Beretta.

"You should have halted the ship," the pirate said again almost affectionately. And pulled the trigger.

Not only did I not fall, I didn't even lose consciousness but miraculously I was transported to a two-dimensional world, drained of colour like an old photograph. What was happening around me had nothing to do with me any more.

Gradually, objects began to regain colour and volume. I was surprised to find that I was saying something, talking at one point to the pirates and then to the crew, but the meaning of what I was saying escaped me. The ringleader must have missed, whether intentionally or not, and the bullet, passing above my ear, had deafened me.

"You'll do as you're told, Captain!" came the gunman's voice. "Otherwise, I'll kill the lot of you."

The Ukrainians were locked up in the bridge. The Algerians fawned and, like whipped dogs, attempted to curry favour with the pirates. As a result, they were allowed to have the cabins.

The ship rattled and groaned. Its captors were stripping the crew of all but the clothes they stood up in. They took everything, including personal belongings and sailing charts. They even tried to make off with the welding gear.

"Leave it," the ringleader tossed out carelessly, "They can use it!" His face dissolved into a vacant, placid smile.

It wasn't long before he deigned to tell me his plans.

"We'll go to Somalia, to Garacad. Your company will pay 100,000 dollars per head. Got that? You'll get them to do it!"

"My company doesn't have that kind of money..."

I smiled in a bid to be polite although merely looking at the ringleader filled me with barely controllable rage.

The Somali looked at me for a while then said, "My name is Ali. I have captured fifty-six ships. You don't have a bloody clue, Captain. I say. You do. Your company will pay. Or we kill the lot of you."

"But until you do kill us," I began, slyly, feeling my way, "we have to eat and drink."

“You have water,” Ali said. “Over there in the tank. I saw it. You’ll drink that.”

“But the rust...”

“You’ll drink it. As for food... This isn’t a hotel, Captain. There will be rice. And pasta. You got a cook?”

I nodded. “Okay. And also we could... we could catch fish...”

“You could,” Ali said, cutting me off, “do what I tell you. And you’ll catch fish only if I tell you to as well.”

Shortly after we reached Somalia, more pirates turned up to guard the ship. They were neat and tidy and they weren’t chewing khat. They knew English and radio code. They barely spoke to us and did not prevent their comrades committing outrages. The Algerians got the worst of it. To begin with they sought to win their jailers’ favour but only earned their contempt. Stopping at nothing, pirates would occasionally come on board in search of sexual pleasure and would shut themselves away in the cabins with the Filipinos and Algerians. One of the pirates, in charge of negotiations with the shipowner, constantly brought a fifteen-year-old boy with him for his own gratification.

The ship was driven into the port of El Hur. The heat was horrendous. We were out of diesel fuel and the pirates had provided scarcely any more. For most of the time, the ship had no power. Looted and abused, it was like a phantom.

Now and then, when they were in a good mood, the pirates let the crew fish. On those days, fried fish rendered the sickeningly familiar rice and pasta more palatable. The cook worked right there, over an open fire. The kindling came from wood that could be found on board.

The pirates scoured the bulk carrier like rats and brought out everything that came to hand. One of them, sleek and fat, who went by the name of Mohammed, was forever trying to find something in my cabin.

“You,” he once said to me, “open the safe. And quickly!”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’ll open it but then what? There’s nothing there. Your guys have

taken it all.”

“You can dig your heels in, infidel cur,” Mohammed said with an unpleasant smile. “Get that safe open!”

“Whatever you say,” I said, relenting.

The safe was, of course, empty. Mohammed looked at me dully for a while. I did not look away. A terrible weariness descended upon me. I was trying to provoke the pirate. Let him hit me, kill me even. It would put an end to this hell.

“Fine.” Mohammed suddenly backed down. He even seemed to become shorter in stature. “Go. Get outta here!”

Around 30 pirates were on the ship at all times. They were all armed. A machine-gun nest was installed among the navigation aids on the bridge. All around, on every side, there were captured ships. I later learned that more than 30 ships were being held hostage in the pirates’ port. Ali would show up infrequently, increasingly enraged: negotiations were proceeding with difficulty. The shipowners continued to drag their feet.

“Listen, Captain,” Mohammed once remarked thoughtfully, “you will help us. We are, how do you say, expanding our business, understand?”

I stared at the floor, saying nothing. Ali had been out of sorts all day.

“Fine, don’t say anything... We want to get to Singapore. In the Indian Ocean, understand? You don’t understand an effing thing. What sort of captain are you?”

The next day an enormous, cocksure pirate came on board.

“Tell your men to prepare to depart,” he began unceremoniously.

“Where for?” I inquired impassively.

“Wherever I give the order for. Start her up!”

“Hang on, hang on,” said Chief Engineer Yatsenko, butting in. “Can’t be done. It’ll take at least 12 hours, d’you see?”

The pirate slowly removed his pistol from its holster and pointed it at me.

“I said start the engine, scum. We’ll move ahead. A hundred miles or so, that’s all. Or should I shoot you all right here? Or at least one of you to start with? Who would you not miss, Captain?”

“Now listen,” I said, attempting to object. “Each one of us is worth 100,000 dollars.”

“Uh-huh,” the pirate smirked, “that’s alive.”

“Exactly. Alive. I’m not sure your ... your bosses will be happy if you write off 100,000 dollars for no good reason. I imagine they’ll insist on compensation.”

“What is this? You want to die, is that it? You want death? What about you?” The hulk poked Yatsenko with the barrel of his gun.

“I think we need to get in touch with your leaders.”

“I’m the one who decides who we get in touch with,” the pirate roared. He lowered the gun and suddenly jumped down from the bridge.

A little later, I managed to get through to the head of the gang. I told him about the incident.

“I’ll look into it,” he replied and hung up. Six weeks later, the jittery pirate was killed.

A few weeks later, the order came to put into the ship’s final mooring – a remote jungle village. The pirates hadn’t even thought to show the crew a map. The echo-sounder wasn’t working and, as we travelled, we navigated by the sun, moon and stars.

“We could run aground,” I warned Ali.

He merely shrugged. He’d been in a foul mood constantly of late. Negotiations were dragging on.

“If you do, everyone will sleep on the shore, beneath the palm trees.”

“But we won’t make it,” I retorted.

“You will,” Ali replied, unmoved. “We’ve got a five-star hotel there. It already has guests, okay? They survived. And you’ll manage too.”

Fortunately, everything worked out. One morning Ali burst onto the bridge, accompanied by a pair of brawny guards. He was furious. His eyes were restless, his mouth kept twitching. He looked like he was about to have a heart attack.

“Captain,” he smirked. “And you, the engineer, you come with me!”

We were taken on deck. Oddly, I felt no fear, just a tiredness that I’d already had enough of. The heat was oppressive. It was melting the deck.

“Over here!” They stood us against the wall.

“And now,” Ali pronounced almost triumphantly, “you die. We are your firing squad.”

He issued several brief orders. The guards raised their machine guns.

“Go on then, pray to your god! I’m a good man,” Ali laughed.

“Screw you!” Yatsenko lost his temper.

I took a breath, looked at the boundless blue sky and finally declared, “Fine.”

“What’s fine?” said Ali, taken aback.

“Go on, shoot. Just ... let it be just us and that’s it, okay?”

Ali stopped smiling. He looked glum.

“It’s a joke,” he got out in the end. “Back to the bridge. Get lost!”

The next day Ali came over to me as if nothing had happened and held out his hand.

“Hey, Captain. You’re all experts here, right? Sailors ... A word to take pride in and all that.

My tooth hurts.” He opened his mouth, jabbed in a finger and said, “This one.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said drily.

“You must take it out.”

“I’m not a dentist.”

Ali reached for his gun. “You, Captain, should have been shot long ago. When we get the ransom, I will put a bullet in your belly. Would you like that?”

He turned to the crew.

“You there!” He pointed at the first mate. “Come here. Take my tooth out.”

The first mate struggled for half an hour. Ali moaned and yelled blue murder, astonishingly like the sexton in the Chekhov story, *Surgery*.

“Enough!” The pirate shoved the first mate away. “You’ll take my whole jaw out. Can

someone can pull this tooth out for me?”

Yatsenko stepped forward. “I can.”

Ali smirked, his mouth bloody. “And a good thing too. Just don’t think about doing anything else or it’ll be worse for you.”

The chief engineer dealt with it rapidly as if he wasn’t removing a tooth but taking out a screw.

Ali left and didn’t appear on the ship for a few days.

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I remember hearing shouts. Women’s heart-rending screams. I tried to open my eyes but my face was so swollen I couldn’t make anything out properly. Someone was yelling in the next room, an animal’s dying howl as if he was being sliced open with a blunt scalpel without anaesthetic.

Then they worried at me, removing my clothes. I vaguely remember being in a hospital ward. The pain had subsided a little. I could no longer feel the dreadful pressure in my bladder and the desire to pee had passed. Now it felt like something cold and alien had taken up residence inside me.

And someone was shaking me by the shoulder again.

“Leave me alone,” I said with difficulty.

“Captain, can you hear me?”

“I can’t and I don’t want to.”

“You’re not passing urine,” said a male voice, aloof and tired. It was a voice entirely suited to discussing the outlook for the sowing season at the end of a working day.

“We’ve put in a catheter. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

So that’s where the cold snake coiled up inside me had come from! A plastic tube stuck out of me as if I were a feeble old man on his death bed. Then again, I am dying, aren’t I?

“We’ve been speaking to your consul,” said the same aloof voice. Notes of displeasure had

now seeped in. “You shouldn’t have bothered him about such trivia. We were planning to examine you ourselves, we’ve taken bloods...”

“PSA?” I whispered.

“Yes, of course. The results will arrive in a few days but, in the meantime, you have nothing to worry about. They’ll look after you here.”

The doctor departed, leaving me alone with the pain. I shut my swollen eyelids and let the darkness whirl in an endless black dance. The darkness was full of flashes of various colours. Stardust before my eyes. My body was a sack of broken glass. Every movement caused me pain. It hurt even to breathe – the air cut my lungs like a knife. My heart was barely fluttering, every now and then producing a faint pulse.

“Captain...”

That voice again... It won’t let me be for even a second.

“Ca-aptain... You still alive? Still not kicked the bucket?”

A stench engulfs me. A man or a beast in human clothing – surely, a person simply couldn’t give off such a foul smell – leans over me. A hot reek rises from his breath.

“Come on, Ca-aptain...”

This monster must be talking to me. So, it turns out I’m a captain? No, that can’t be.

I’m a dead man, still able to feel by some strange whim of fate. Let it all be over. Let the night-time come! But stardust is still whirling before my eyes. Blood is still flowing sluggishly through my veins. I can hear the dull, sputtering pulse in my temples.

“When you do kick the bucket,” the monster told me, “I’m taking your pillow. You have a very soft pillow, ca-aa-aptain...”

I was woken by the pain. My head wasn't on a pillow. Someone close by was sniggering. I struggled to open my eyes and saw a short, extremely dark-skinned Indian man. He bared his teeth like a ferret and spat out, "I thought you'd already kicked the bucket. What a lovely soft pillow you've got. Know who gets those, jerk? People who are about to peg it. But you can lie on a mattress for a bit just as well, right?"

"Give it back," I rasped. I could tell there were other people in the room. I could feel them breathing but not one of them said a word.

"Jerks are meant to lie quietly," the man said with a snigger. "Shut those little eyes and sleep, you piece of piss. Maybe I'll do you a favour and smother you in your sleep."

What did he say? What did he call me? Instinctively I ran a hand over the sheet and groaned. The material was soaked right through. While I'd been lying there oblivious, the catheter must have filled up and urine overflowed.

"Nurse!" I called. "Anyone!"

"Anyone!" the Indian repeated in mocking imitation.

I heard someone's feeble laughter. Who was it? Was it someone I knew, someone who a few weeks ago used to greet me, share their food with me but now couldn't wait for me to die?

The door opened and a sleepy guard appeared in the doorway.

"What's going on here?"

"Call... call a nurse," I muttered.

The guard came closer. His face dissolved in a smile.

"Oh..." He screwed his face into a sympathetic expression. "Do you have a little problem, Captain? But you're not on your ship now and I don't take orders from you."

"I'm begging you..."

"So that's how it is! Then it's my pleasure to be of assistance. But I do have one small request: a few rupees. That's nothing to you. You're so rich after all."

"But I don't have any money," I whispered.

“What a shame. I’m very, very sorry.” The guard came so close to me that I could smell the acrid animal smell of sweat coming off him. “Then you’ll have to dry out on your own.”

He turned round, took a few steps towards the door, stopped and, without looking back, said, “And you, no noise. I don’t like it.”

I guessed the guard was speaking to my tormentor who was sitting on the next bed and pretending the whole scenario had nothing to do with him. At the jailer’s words, he started and gave me a single meaningful look that did not bode well at all.

The guard left. It was quiet on the ward. I lay unmoving, trying not to breathe or even to think. It felt as though the whole mattress was soaked in evil-smelling urine.

“Well, then, jerk.” The words were spoken just above my ear. “You’ll kick the bucket tonight. D’you get me?”

I mustered all my strength and sat up. To an onlooker, I must have looked ridiculous: a doddering old man, scruffy and dirty, but something in my eyes made that bastard back off.

I whispered, “You’re the one who’s gonna die. I’ve killed a lot of people here and I’ll be the end of you as well.”

I stretched an arm out, clenched it into a fist and prodded the Indian in the chest. “I know one point on the body... You just have to fall asleep, I’ll press it and you won’t wake up again!”

Despite the pain and weakness, I almost burst out laughing, what I said was so ridiculous. But my tormentor wasn’t laughing. He stared at my fist as if it were a snake.

“You’d better shut it, Captain,” the Indian said, changing his tune.

For a moment, I thought that piece of shit was going to hit me but instead he began to rush nervously around the ward.

“I need a private ward, you bastards! I can’t lie here with this stinking terrorist and his mates. Hey! I need a ward! I need...”

The door was flung open. There in the doorway stood the same guard as before, another two

behind him.

“I asked you to behave,” he said almost silkily and added a few words in Hindi.

The Indian delivered a furious tirade in response, pointing a finger at me over and over again. The guard heard him out patiently, nodded and then, suddenly and without warning, he kneeed the man in the groin, making little effort, lazily almost. The latter yelped, doubled over and toppled sideways.

The other guards entered the ward. They were holding bamboo canes. The one in charge uttered a brief sentence in Hindi and they set about thrashing the man on the floor, aiming for his head. I looked on with growing horror as they brutalized the squirming thug. He howled and tried to cover his head with his arms but one blow landed on his elbow. There was a crunch. His arm hung limply and the bamboo canes rained blows on the prisoner’s skull. He was no longer trying to protect himself or even shouting. It was as if each blow ran an electric current through his body. The guards’ faces were utterly unperturbed as if they were beating a carpet.

“Fine,” said the one in charge eventually.

His underlings backed away, giving the man a few kicks in farewell. Their leader went closer and squatted beside the prisoner who lay in a mind-bogglingly vivid pool of blood, flowing from his riven skull.

“Can you hear me?” he asked softly and affectionately.

The prisoner mumbled something.

“However did you manage to fall off your bed?” the guard asked tenderly. “That’s careless, and at night too. There aren’t any doctors around just now. What will you tell them tomorrow?”

Again the man muttered something indistinct.

“That’s a good chap. You must be more careful!”

The guard abruptly issued an order. One of his underlings produced a set of handcuffs and attached the prisoner to the iron bars of his bed so that he was half-suspended, half-seated.

“It’s for your own good! So that you don’t fall again,” the guard added, his voice just as

concerned. He gave an improbably broad grin and looked at me, “There you go, Captain. Do you want to say something?”

“No,” I managed in a whisper.

“Shame... You ought to say thank you. After all, I came to your rescue.” The jailer cast a sidelong look of disgust at the man handcuffed to the bed. “He’d have done for you in the night, that’s for sure. But you’re not grateful... I’ll bear that in mind. All of you, get to sleep!”

The guard spun around and left the ward.

Peace reigned apart from the soft moans of the beaten, bleeding prisoner.

The sheet was only changed in the morning, after the doctors’ round. By that time, urine had soaked into the mattress. The prisoner who had been beaten up and had been moaning all night long was released from the handcuffs and taken away somewhere.

I had another blood test in the afternoon. A gloomy nurse arrived and clumsily inserted the catheter. I felt something tear inside and, strange as it seems, I experienced satisfaction as well as pain. Evidently, my body would give up very soon and there would be nothing to endure any more.

Wanting to die paradoxically went hand in hand with a maniacal longing to survive at any cost. I had only to close my eyes to remember my family. Did I have the right to die without saying goodbye to my loved ones? After all, it would mean I’d given up and my whole life would have lost its meaning.

A doctor looked in towards the evening. He perched on the next bed and gave the poorly scrubbed bloodstain on the floor a look of disgust. He said, “Your results are ready.”

I waited in silence.

“You should have mentioned that damned PSA straight away. You’d have saved everyone some time.”

“I did.”

“Perhaps you did but not to me. Anyway, it’s completely abnormal. Over 100.”

I stared at the doctor unable to believe my ears. Over 100? I mean, it wasn’t possible!

“As a rule this means that what’s happening in the prostate isn’t very good. But to understand it, I need to do a biopsy and...”

“I’ve heard that here there’s the possibility of scanning new growths” I said.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s hardly necessary. And it’s expensive too.”

“What do you mean ‘hardly’?”

“It’s clear in any case.” The doctor looked at me and suddenly he smiled. “You’ve become really scruffy. Like that American actor, Tom Hanks, in the film about the desert island. I’ll arrange for you to have a shave.” And he strode rapidly out of the ward.