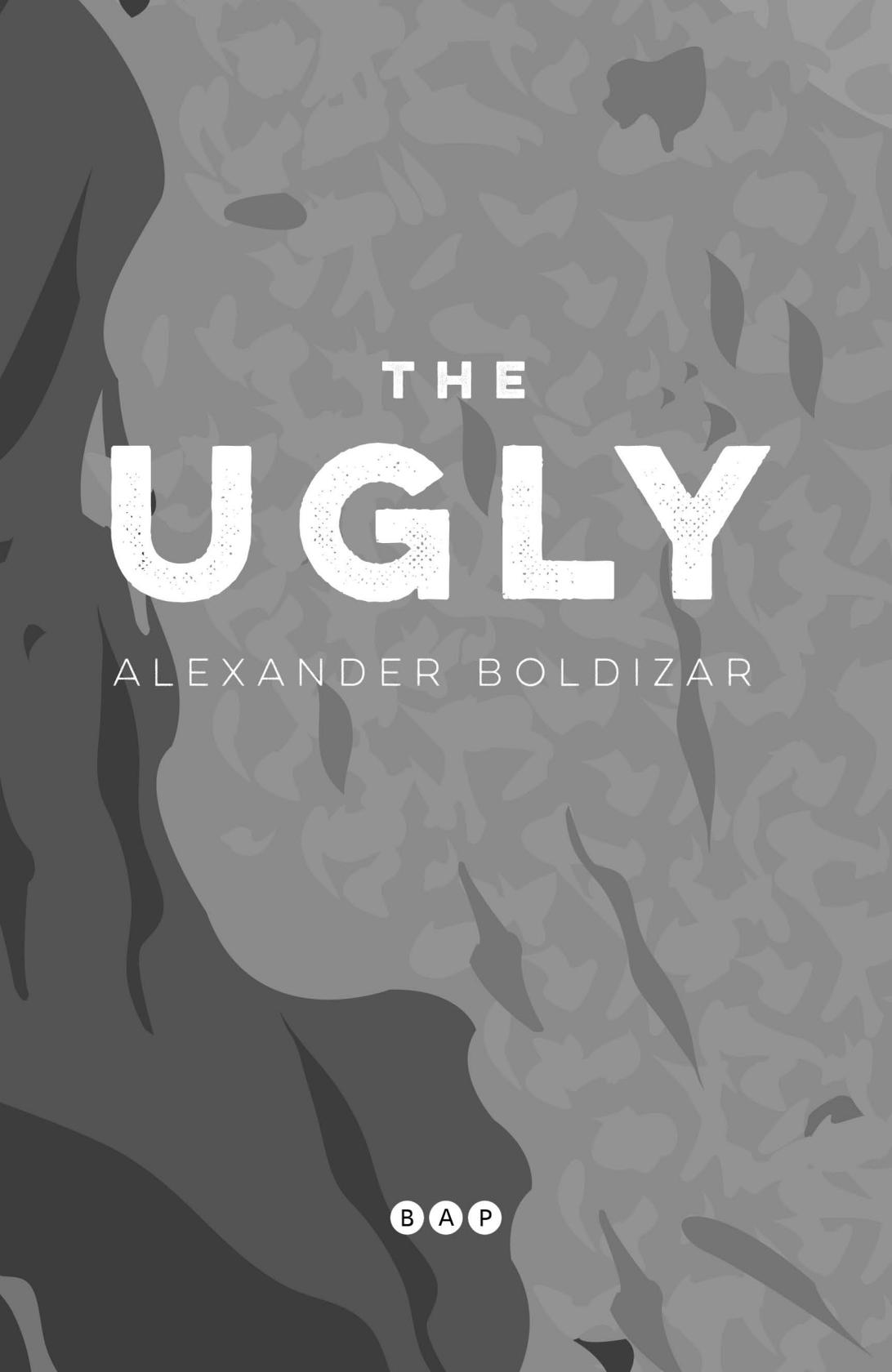




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ALEXANDER BOLDIZAR



THE
UGLY

ALEXANDER BOLDIZAR

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The Ugly
© 2016 Alexander Boldizar

ISBN-13: 978-1-936767-47-2

Cover design by Alban Fischer. Interior by Benjamin DuVall.

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Published in the United States of America by:

Brooklyn Arts Press
154 N 9th St #1
Brooklyn, NY 11249
WWW.BROOKLYNARTSPRESS.COM
INFO@BROOKLYNARTSPRESS.COM

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Boldizar, Alexander, author.

Title: The Ugly / Alexander Boldizar.

Description: First edition. | New York : Brooklyn Arts Press :

Distributed to the trade by Small Press Distribution, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016008435 | ISBN 9781936767472 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Russians--Fiction. | Harvard Law School--Fiction. | Siberia (Russia)--Fiction. | Africa--Fiction. | GSAFD: Bildungsromans. | Adventure fiction. | Black humor (Literature)

Classification: LCC PR9199.4.B655 U55 2016 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016008435>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

For Samson. And in memory of Oliver Boldizar.

Man's deepest social instinct is his antisocial instinct.
—Robert Musil

Credo quia absurdum est.
—Tertullian

THE UGLY

PROLOGUE

I, Muzhduk

Muzhduk stepped into the path of the flying boulder. It was the size and shape of a small woman curled up in a ball, but much heavier, and it came at him like a canon shot.

Muzhduk leaned forward to meet the boulder, knees bent, hoping to absorb the impact with his legs. He staggered backward with the force of the blow, but did not drop the big rock.

The audience erupted with cheering, and a cloud of yellow butterflies scattered from the noise. His opponent was Hulagu, arguably the strongest Slovak in the tribe, and all six villages were present for the Dull-Boulder Throw. All the Slovaks who lived in the mountains of northeastern Siberia were there, lined up along the edges of the saddle-shaped ridge. Even those so old or sick they knew the trip would kill them. Two had died on the way.

The audience watched Muzhduk. He knew some of them wondered whether he would disqualify himself. He hadn't moved out of the way, of course, but no one had ever tried to absorb the shock with his legs before. Arms and chest were normal, but bending the legs was almost like ducking and he could see Hulagu bite his fat lips, wanting to make a charge of dishonor, which would itself be dishonorable.

Muzhduk decided not to disqualify himself. Honor was about avoiding cowardice, not change. At only three hundred pounds, he was much smaller than his father, who was smaller than his father. The

blood of the Uglis was becoming diluted, as they took women from the Mongols, Yakuts, and Russians, but Hulagu was inbred, huge, and dumb. If Hulagu won, the entire tribe would suffer.

It was Muzhduk's turn. He picked up the boulder, lifted it over his head, and launched with both arms. It flew straight, and Hulagu jumped forward to meet it. The boulder hit him high on the shoulder, ripped his bearskin pelt, and bobbed as he tried to keep it from falling. It fell anyway. He hadn't flinched, so the contest wasn't over, but Muzhduk would get to throw again. They traded places on the ridge and Muzhduk picked up the boulder. Hulagu leaned forward in anticipation, but his right arm hung limp at his side.

"Your arm is hurt," Muzhduk said. "We'll finish tomorrow."

"I can see past the end of my nose. Throw the rock, little Muzh."

The audience roared its approval, but Muzhduk didn't have the stomach to throw a boulder at a man with one good arm. Not even Hulagu. "Tomorrow is better."

"You give up?" Hulagu asked, grinning. If he won, he would climb the highest mountain right away, not wait for years as Muzhduk had done. Then he'd have both eyes and be chief. The first thing he'd do would be to exile the Ugli men and rape the Ugli women. As for Muzhduk, him he'd drag over sharp rocks until he was flayed alive. Then he'd stake him to the ground and spray him with urine. It would be the end of three generations of Ugli rule.

Muzhduk threw the boulder. Hulagu couldn't catch it with one arm, but he still managed to get his chest in front of it. The big rock broke his sternum, pushed his ribs into his lungs, and he collapsed. The contest was over. Bells rang to announce the end. Everyone cheered and came to congratulate Muzhduk for holding onto his title. He had gained another year to find and climb a mountain higher than the one climbed by his father or by any other Slovak chief before him. Then he would have two eyes—two claims to the chieftainship, one objective and one subjective. Then the chieftainship could pass to him undisputed.

Muzhduk found his father, Muzhduk the Ugli the Third.

"You won," his father said. "And that is good. But I don't know about your method."

"Mind if I take Hulagu to Fred the Political Officer?" Muzhduk answered. "It's better if he's healthy. For when the Reds come."

Ugli the Third shrugged and turned to watch the start of the long, slow procession of men, women, and animals back to their villages. Most were dressed in furs, though some of the younger women wore traditional red-and-white lace collars. From a distance, the line of waddling shapes had a self-protective, huddled look.

It was a terrible day to climb a mountain. The air was grey and wet—not quite rain, but damp and miserable. Still, it was the day after the Dull-Boulder Throw, and Muzhduk wanted to climb Mount Baldhead. It was the highest mountain in the Verkhoyansk Range, much of it covered in knee-high Arctic pine. He followed the river past the giant rock with the overturned Red tank, up through the first pass where the real trees ended, and then the second where the dwarf-trees turned to lichen, past where the lichen turned to scree, and on to the broken wall. It was only this last part that was difficult, where the mountain folded into sharp cliffs and jagged chasms. Muzhduk had climbed it many times, probably more than any other Slovak in the six villages. He did it for practice and in the hope that from the vantage of his grandfather he'd be able to see something higher. Baldhead had been the second eye of Muzhduk the Ugli the Second. What a simple test it now seemed.

But Muzhduk also climbed Baldhead because mountaintops were the place for introspection. And though it wasn't the actual top of the mountain, Muzhduk had a special spot that he preferred. It was a boulder about twice the size of a man, wedged between two cliffs, a few minutes from the summit. Under the boulder, the sheer cliffs continued down for half a mile, parallel, less than ten feet apart the whole way. He reached it by inching along a foot-wide ledge that dropped off just before the boulder. Crossing the gap required a little jump that always terrified him. He sometimes tried to imagine where the boulder had come from, but the only possible answer was that it had fallen from the sky.

He'd started coming here because he was scared of heights. As a child, he thought that if he made the jump often enough, the fear would go away. Every time his head spun, his stomach rose, and his chest constricted until he couldn't breathe. The fear never went away. Instead, it got worse. He became convinced that he'd been born with

a given store of luck, and each time he came to the rock he used up a little more. One day it would be done and he would slip and fall between those endless parallel cliffs. The fear never went away, and so he kept coming until the boulder from the sky became his favorite place.

He needed to find his second eye soon, to stop these annual challenges. His father had faced a similar problem at his age. Back then no one had known of a mountain higher than Baldhead; everyone wondered how Third would surpass Second. Third wandered up and down the northern coast of Siberia, staying with the Chukchi and Sakha tribes or spending months alone, with no luck. And then, like the boulder where Muzhduk now sat, like the Chukchi shamans in their sixty-pound coats whom the Reds sometimes threw out of helicopters, his father's answer fell out of the sky. During a winter so cold that the plum brandy turned to syrup and you could eat it on toast, so cold that logs gave off blue sparks when you chopped them and healthy trees exploded with cracks like tank-cannon, the Red Army dropped Spetsnaz paratroops into the valley of the Slovaks. Confused by their own maps, the Reds couldn't get out. They froze. Only one man survived, and when he reached the river Lena, the Uglis caught him. He was Frederick Vladimirovich Ekatina, the platoon's Political Officer. Born in an observation station on Wrangel Island in the Arctic Ocean, the son of two doctors, he'd spent decades as a spy before becoming a Political Officer. He knew the world. The Uglis kept him in the basement, and, as a child, it was little Muzhduk's job to clean and feed him. Fred's cot hung from two chains attached to the basement wall and it could be flipped up when there wasn't enough room. Muzhduk usually sat on a mound of potatoes that he could shape into a chair, or on the pile of loose grain that sometimes forced Fred to sleep on a slant. Neither of them could stand upright, because the permafrost ground had made digging difficult.

Fred said that he'd once stayed in a room even smaller than the Ugli basement at harvest. It was in Japan, and his body had touched all six walls at the same time. The higher the capsule-room, Fred said, the more expensive, because fewer people climbed the ladder past your head. Fred knew more languages than the Uglis, who read every book they could steal, and he told Muzhduk wonderful stories about the world beyond Verkhoyansk: America, Africa, Europe, and other odd places. He even knew the answer to Muzhduk's childhood question

about the shamans that fell out of the sky—proof that he knew more than the big library in Yakutsk that his father and uncles had raided in the hope of getting Muzhduk an answer.

Fred said they fell out of the sky because of their coats. Everyone knew shaman coats were covered with metal antlers, iron bars, and chains hanging down the back—that’s what made them jangle—but they also had bird-shaped pendants that, when dipped in reindeer pee, gave the shamans the ability to fly. The Reds were embarrassed by their lack of Progress, so they threw them out of helicopters and said, “Use the coat.”

That’s what Fred said, and Fred knew, because he’d thrown some out himself.

Muzhduk absorbed all the lessons, but when his father climbed down into the cold, shallow basement, lit by empty knotholes and gaps in the floor above, he asked Fred about only one thing—whether there was anything higher in this world than Mount Baldhead. Now, sitting on the wedged-in boulder and searching for an even higher point, Muzhduk understood why his father was so obsessed.

Fred told Muzhduk’s father about Mount Communism, the greatest mountain on the planet, compared to which Baldhead was only a foothill. Immediately, Muzhduk the Ugli the Third set out for the Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic to climb Mount Communism, 7700 meters, 24,590 feet, the highest mountain on the planet.

When his father returned seven years later, he brought wondrous tales of Communism and of a beautiful country to the south called Afghanistan, where he’d stayed for a year to rest and fight some Reds. Having climbed the highest peak, he could now be objectively proud. He could use his spittle to paste money onto the broad foreheads of Slovaks he passed in the valley. His valley. This forehead-pasting was the weakness of the Ugli line and it impoverished the family, but it was the custom for one who had earned the right to be objectively proud. Upon seeing this, the original Ugli, Muzhduk the First, was satisfied. He died. Muzhduk the Second became old, Muzhduk the Third became chief, and young Muzhduk began planning his own quest. This was the way the generations cycled in Verkhoyansk on the river Lena.

But Muzhduk had been planning now for well over a decade, and he doubted that an answer would fall out of the sky the way it

had for his father. There was only one top to the world. So long as he kept winning the annual Dull-Boulder Throw he would be the rightful heir. But the village would always say that he was a man with one eye leading a village of the blind. It could be done, but there was no pride in it. He would be challenged every year, until one day Hulagu or some other muscular dummy would defeat him and lead the tribe to ruin.

Enough thinking, he decided. He stood up carefully, unable to fully straighten his knees as the vertigo hit him. From the rounded top of the boulder he extended one leg onto the foot-wide path carved by nature into the cliff. For a second he straddled a thousand-meter drop. He fought off the nausea, a lifting-gut feeling like he'd leaned too far back in a chair, and pushed off with his other leg. On the path, he pressed himself up against the cliff with the irrational fear that his ass would pull him over the edge, or that he'd lose his mind for a moment and jump. He slid along the cliff until the path wound out and he was safe. He thanked the boulder and the path with a sigh of relief.

The true summit of Baldhead was around the corner. As he walked up for a quick look, for the formality of it, he heard a helicopter. It wasn't military; it was the sound of the new helicopters that had been circling the six villages for several months. They didn't shoot, didn't drop bombs or shamans, and only landed when there were no people nearby. No one knew why they circled. Muzhduk ran to the top of the enormous rounded rock that formed the summit and arrived just as the helicopter was landing.

Two women and three beardless men stepped out. They all, even the men, wore shiny pastel clothes made of cloth, not skins or the wool greatcoats of the Russians. All five were small and thin, the heaviest couldn't have been more than a hundred kilos—light enough for the wind to blow them away. Two of the men were obviously guards, despite their flimsy outfits, and the third was in charge, though he wore a red noose around his neck by which anyone could hang him. They all had clean, mild faces unlike any he'd ever seen.

Muzhduk picked up a boulder and said, in Russian, "Are you Reds?"

All five turned. They stared at Muzhduk and he stared back, until one of the women said, "Hello." She spoke Russian with a strange accent. Then she repeated the greeting in Slovak.

"You're not Slovak." Muzhduk knew everyone in the six villages,

of course.

“I’m an anthropologist. From America.”

“America?” Muzhduk said, wary. Fred the Political Officer had told him about the evil wizards of technology and the alienated factors of production and consumption, about the cities that scraped the clouds. And his father had met Americans in Afghanistan. He said they all sold shoulder-fired missiles.

“Jesus,” said the man in the noose to the other woman, in English. “It’s André the Giant.”

“I speak English,” Muzhduk said, and all of them started in surprise. It would have been fun to pretend he didn’t understand them while they spoke to each other, but they already seemed a little helpless. “Fred the Political Officer taught me. Who is André the Giant?”

“My name is John.” The man held his hand out. It looked like a woman’s hand.

Muzhduk dropped his boulder. “Here in Verkhoysansk, it is rare to meet a stranger on a mountaintop,” he said. “Normally there is only space for one. This means no empty greetings are required. So long as the mountain is high enough. Usually, that means above the clouds, but today is a bad day. We can’t go by the clouds. Is this okay for you?” But he wondered whether the mountaintop rule applied to people who sat in a helicopter instead of climbing all day.

The man looked confused as well.

“Yes,” the first woman, the one who’d called herself an anthropologist, said for him. She squeezed a closed green notebook, and that seemed to calm her. “Yes. That’s okay.”

“Good. Why are you here?”

The noose-man said, “We’re surveying our property.”

“Baldhead is your property?”

“Everything you see,” the man gestured in a circle. “This whole part of the Verkhoysansk range. We bought it six months ago from the Russian government.”

Muzhduk laughed. “The Reds tricked you. I hope you didn’t pay very much.”

“What do you mean,” the man scowled, “they tricked us?”

“My father is the chief, and he didn’t sell anything.”

The man nodded. “We were told that there was an insurgency. When the Wall fell they released the old files and corrected their maps.”

“Which wall fell?”

“Communism.”

“Communism fell?” Muzhduk couldn’t hide his amazement. Communism was his father’s second eye. If it fell, did his father’s chieftainship fall as well?

“Look,” the man said, “we’re fully aware that your people fought off the Soviet Army. But this is our land now, so we want to make an arrangement. We have no problem with your people living here.”

“Thank you,” Muzhduk said, picking up his boulder again.

“Wait,” the man said, waving his hands in front of him. “We can work this out. All I want is to run some tours. Nothing intrusive. I don’t want to mine or build cities or anything like that. Quite the opposite. You have a very rare breed of butterfly that lives only here. I want to set up a conservation area and fly in wealthy tourists. One hotel, that’s it. Butterfly lovers who’d spend money and do no harm to the environment.”

“Butterflies?” Muzhduk nodded at one that had landed not far from them. It had a stubby, juicy body, shaggy like a sheep dog, with long sleek wings that were transparent in the center but trimmed on all sides with thick yellow velvet. “We eat them.”

“Eat them?” gasped the woman who was not the anthropologist, eyes wide. “They’re endangered!”

“We eat them when they’re still worms.”

“For God’s sakes, why?”

Muzhduk smiled. “They taste good.”

The five Americans objected. Muzhduk told them they were wasting their time talking to him, since he only had one eye. They should object to Ugli the Third.

After checking with their Russian pilot on how much the helicopter could lift, the Americans offered Muzhduk a ride down to his village. On the way, they asked how Slovaks had ended up in this hidden valley in far northeastern Siberia. The Americans had read about the Czechoslovak Legion of 50,000 men who broke through Russian lines during World War I and refused to turn back despite cowardly orders to do so. They said that historians knew about the Great March East, when the entire Legion walked from Central Europe to the Sea of Japan, but they thought the Legion had stayed in Siberia for only three years. The history books said they had captured eight train cars of gold

bullion and bought passage on Europe-bound ships in Vladivostok, making it back to Czechoslovakia after a full circumnavigation of the planet, proud that they'd never had to retreat.

Muzhduk explained that while most of the Legion had continued east, his great-grandfather Muzhduk the Ugli the First had stopped here on the edge of the Verkhoyansk Range, on the banks of the river Lena, and shouted, "Big people do not walk so much!" He was a huge man with a forehead like a promontory and a neck like an amphitheater, and when he shouted the echo set off three avalanches. There had been a quarrel. General Stefanik, the leader of the Czechoslovak Legion, insisted that the world was round, and that eventually they would come home to their beloved Tatra Mountains, to villages nestled in cleft valley passes and their women warm within. He said that it was too cold in Siberia, that the Reds were winning the Russian civil war and Reds believed that all men were equal, regardless of how much they could lift. He said that Czechs were not mountain people and that the Czech philosopher Masaryk was waiting for them all in Prague, capital of a new Czech and Slovak Federated Republic.

Muzhduk's great-grandfather and six thousand men said no. The Verkhoyansk Mountains were similar enough to the Tatras, their feet were tired, they no longer remembered their wives. The six thousand stayed while the rest marched on.

The Reds defeated the Whites, but many years passed before they turned to face their Slovak problem. Mostly, they were occupied with other business. But by the late 1950s, they had established a worker's paradise, secured world peace, and were well on their way to the Moon. It was then that they decided it was finally time to clean out Verkhoyansk.

They invaded the valley every five years, but, needless to say, they failed. The Slovaks are strong and brave, a people who'd stopped the Roman Empire two thousand years earlier, holding off phalanx technology, onagers, and civilization with little more than large boulders. From the time they can stand unsupported, Slovak children are taught to throw oak logs and large rocks at each other. They have honor. In the end, the Red Army finally solved its Slovak problem by printing maps that didn't show the valley. And so, everyone lived in peace.

Muzhduk explained all this, and as much more as he could manage during the short flight. In exchange, the Americans told him

about Mount Everest, K2, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, Nuptse, Makalu, Dhaulagiri, Nanga Parbat, and Cho Oyu.

“Those are all higher than Mount Communism?” Muzhduk asked, shocked and delighted. After more than a decade of trying to find a higher mountain, here was a whole pile of them.

The anthropologist crouched around her notebook and wrote furiously, mumbling about lost tribes and colonial peripheries and her publisher, while Muzhduk talked about how, when he would return from his quest, they’d spot him when he crossed the river Lena. By the time he reached his village there’d be a hundred girls, each with a bottle of *slivovica*, using every wile known to Verkhoyansk woman in trying to force some down his throat, and the men would crowd at the Ugli home, jumping drunkenly to give Ugli the Third the honor of breaking his top step under the weight of all his guests. Then, after he’d clapped all the women courteously on the ass, after the top step was broken, and after the girl whose bottle was the emptiest was declared the winner—

The anthropologist cursed when they touched down in the center of the village and Muzhduk stopped talking.

Ugli the Third greeted them before the blades had stopped spinning by knocking unhappily on the window. “What do you want,” he said, then grumbled that he didn’t like helicopters. The Americans stared. He had a hundred pounds and six inches on Muzhduk.

Muzhduk’s father led them back to the house, a square cottage with the tallest and widest roof-tree in the six villages. All the guests could fit in the central room, though they had to pause to let their eyes adjust to the weak light coming in through small fret-shuttered windows and their lungs to the sour smell of pine, earth, and lanolin that mixed with faint smoke from an iron wood-fired stove. Flypaper coils hung throughout the room, heavy with dead Siberian bugs, and tapestries covered the log walls. The only other real room in the house was the attic, where they slept, held up by rough branches that wove through the ceiling to the plank, tar, and scavenged-metal roof. Most of it was tank armor. But all the furniture was carved of wood, good wood that did not creak when you sat on it, and every crossbeam was engraved with scenes of men challenging each other to single combat or relaxing in various positions with women and *slivovica* afterward. And there were great battles against the Reds, as well as the objective-eye

exploits of the family, scenes of walking and Baldhead and Afghanistan.

Muzhduk's mother quickly chased out the smell of earth and smoke with that of strong coffee. She shook bearskins, plumped bolsters, replaced the short nettle-cloth on the table with a white lace tablecloth from Austria-Hungary, and stacked meat and cabbage onto blue-onion china. Everyone sat, and the man in the noose introduced himself again as John. He added that he was an attorney and introduced the two women as an anthropologist and a biologist.

"How did you get these titles?" the Third asked, shaking a thick bottle toward his guests. They declined, so he poured it into his own coffee. "And why do you throw them around?"

The attorney looked at the anthropologist. She hesitated, then wrote in her notebook one word: "status." She underlined it for John's benefit.

"Status," Muzhduk said. The anthropologist winced.

"You think we cannot read?" the Third asked, incredulous, pointing at the upside-down English word. "When we steal women from the Red camps, we take their books too."

"I'm sorry," the attorney said. "I use my anthropologist to avoid offending you."

"Avoiding is the only thing that will offend me. Talk without help or crawl back into your metal shell and fly home."

The attorney didn't know what to say. He straightened his tie.

"And take that off. It makes me want to hang you from the ceiling just for fun—and then I can't concentrate. It's like if she," he stuck out his bottom teeth at the anthropologist, "pulled down her pants during our whole conversation. How could I think?"

The anthropologist stared back at the Third and stopped writing. For a few seconds the only movement was the biologist slapping at a black fly that had found its way through all the flypaper coils.

John took off his tie and jacket and rubbed his hands together. "Okay, you asked about my title. I'm the attorney for, and a partner in, a company called SiberTours—"

"I asked *how* you got your titles. They mean nothing if I don't know how you got them."

"Well," he hesitated, "I graduated with a *Juris Doctor* from Harvard Law School, first in my class, and I'm a member of the New York bar."

“Those still mean nothing.”

John paused to think before each answer, and this was beginning to annoy the three hosts.

The anthropologist added, “Harvard is the top law school in the world, and—”

“It’s the highest?”

“Yes.”

Ugli the Third nodded. “And you graduated. So you climbed to the top of the steps of the highest law school. That is respectable, though it means nothing to us. I know what laws are. Fred the Political Officer has explained the world well. They are for the weak-willed. We don’t believe one person needs to tell another how to live.”

“You don’t have laws?” John asked in disbelief. “What if someone murders your sister?”

Muzhduk’s father made an enormous fist. “Then it’s between my family and his. We don’t bring strangers into such a personal thing.”

“There must be something your people look down upon as a whole,” the anthropologist said. “In the abstract. Otherwise you wouldn’t have a culture. Do you understand what I mean?”

Ugli the Third pursed his lips, though the movement was hardly visible under his beard. “Dishonor. Ducking a boulder instead of trying to catch it. Too much introspection in the valley.” He pointed a thick finger at his son. “Thinking about things instead of acting. But these are not laws. They are honor.”

“Fine,” John said curtly. “But your enemies have laws. Anyway, Harvard Law teaches more than laws. It teaches how to think and use language.”

“Words are toys. You can’t throw words.”

“Of course you can. That is exactly what law school teaches. How to throw words.”

“How do you weigh them? What’s the most powerful word? It’s nonsense.”

“*Harvard*. In my life, that has clearly been the most powerful word.” He paused again. “Like Communism was for you.”

“Enough of this,” Ugli the Third slammed his open hand down on the foot-thick table. His hand was as big as the anthropologist’s notebook, and hairy. “What do you want here?”

John the Attorney explained his plan to fly in tourists to look at

the butterflies. For the first time since the helicopter landed, Muzhduk's father smiled. He had big teeth, each as big as John's thumbnail.

"You are a funny man, John the Attorney. Take some *slivovica*."

This time John accepted, and Third filled John's coffee cup so it was half coffee, half 160-proof plum brandy.

"The butterflies are okay," the Third said. "But you keep the helicopters away from the villages and make the tourists walk the last hour."

"Great," John said.

"But you have to stop killing the worms," the biologist added.

"The worms taste good," Muzhduk the Ugli the Third said. "And if we don't eat them, they'll eat everything else. They never stop eating, especially the mulberry leaves. They make silk for us and then, on the first day in their cocoon, we pick some and have a feast. And after the rest grow, the women use the yellow from the wings for eye paint. This will not change."

"It must," she insisted.

"It will not change." Ugli shook his head somberly. "People who do not eat butterflies will wear their clothes the wrong way, and people who wear their clothes the wrong way are inviting lemmings inside."

"Our company owns this land now," the biologist said, her face white. The anthropologist squeezed her arm, but it was too late.

"Then I hope you are more powerful than the Reds. I withdraw my grant. We will kill your tourists and you."

"Even if we are not armed?" the anthropologist asked.

Ugli the Third frowned. It would make no sense for them to come unarmed to a battle; but if they did, if they were crazy, then what? He couldn't kill someone who was both crazy and unarmed. "Go away," he said.

"Wait," the attorney interrupted. "I can see that you're an honorable people, with your own sorts of rules. The rule of lore instead of the rule of law." He smiled and the Ugli stared at his perfectly straight teeth. Like a horse. "I get it. And you're right, this land is yours and only yours. To give or not to give, as you will. We were naïve to trust the Russians. The, um, Reds. But as a token, I ask that you grant me land the size of..." he looked around, finding the rug under the table, "...of a bearskin. Just one bearskin. To be mine, to not be interfered with no matter what, on your honor."

Muzhduk the Third laughed, finding John funny again. “What could you do with land the size of a bearskin? Even for a small man like you, that’s barely enough space to lie down.”

“A token.”

Muzhduk the Third winked at his son. He was chief. He had both eyes, objective and subjective. Muzhduk the Fourth hadn’t told him yet about the collapse of Mount Communism. “Fine,” the Third said. “I grant you land the size of a bearskin anywhere in our domain. Now go away, but leave your anthropologist.”

“Can you sign this paper?” John asked, handing Ugli the Third a contract.

“My honor!” the Third boomed. He spat on the paper and stuck it on John’s forehead.

They left, taking the anthropologist with them, loaded down with gifts of plum brandy, mountain wool socks that Muzhduk’s mother had knitted, a newborn goat, and enough apple strudel for a week of desserts. Had they left on warmer terms, there would have been too much for the helicopter to carry.

Two weeks later, Muzhduk saw the helicopter circling the six villages. When it landed in front of the Ugli home, Muzhduk the Ugli the Third was waiting, angry. “I told you not to fly this noisy thing so close.”

“But you gave us this land,” John said.

“Where is your bearskin?”

“I cut it into a fine thread. I took the thread and placed it in a big circle that surrounds the six villages. Now this area is all mine.”

The Third’s neck swelled and turned red.

“On your honor,” John the Attorney said, backing up.

Ugli the Third pulled on his ears, rubbed his forehead, and looked dangerously close to indecision. Finally, he said, “If I kill you, then the person I gave my word to no longer exists.”

“That sounds like ducking.”

Ugli the Third growled. “You’ve learned too much.” He stormed into his house, pulled up the trapdoor and climbed down into the dungeon where the family kept Fred the Political Officer. Muzhduk followed him. Fred looked terrible. He was lying on his cot, gaunt

and pale and blind. And old. Ugli the Third should have listened to his son, but he'd been too stubborn.

"Fred the Political Officer," the Third said by way of greeting.

"Yes?" Fred answered. His voice was ragged and dry.

"Tell me about words."

"What words?"

"Words and attorneys. How do you fight words?"

"I can't tell you anything about them. I am almost dead."

"Yes," Ugli the Third said and went back upstairs. He told Muzhduk to sit across from him at the large table. Muzhduk's mother joined them, and the three drank coffee. They drank for hours, until it made them sweat and shake and hallucinate in their peripheral vision.

"I was wrong," the Third finally said. "Words are not just toys. They are heavy but not straight. You caught Hulagu's rock by doing strange things with your body, and you used to move the rug to give Fred the Political Officer more light when nobody was here. So maybe you will succeed with these people who want the butterflies to spread until they eat every bush and tree. Go to that place where John the Attorney learned to throw words. To fight Reds, we had to understand metal. To fight Americans, we need words. Pick up the word *Harvard* and learn it better than John and bring it back. It will be your second eye, more like that of the First, but still objective."

"Why not just kill John the Attorney? Then the promise dies with him."

"There will be more like him."

There would be others on Mount Harvard, surely, thought Muzhduk, other future chiefs of "niches," as the Americans called their tribes, learning to use words as weapons. Harvard wasn't really a mountain, but the first Ugli had only walked to Siberia and stopped. He hadn't climbed anything. And according to John, others had climbed Baldhead and Communism before the Ugli's had ever even seen them. The whole family's second eye was at risk.

And chasing a word to its peak couldn't be wrong. The Verkhoyansk Slovaks had changed a lot living in the mountains of Siberia, but they were still Slovaks. And the word *Slovak* literally means *people who use words*. As opposed to, say, the word for Germans, *Nemtsi*, meaning *people who don't speak*. For a Slovak, even a Verkhoyansk Slovak, it couldn't be wrong to understand words. Could it?

When Muzhduk pressed John for more information, he told them strange things like: “Objective success changes, though you must quickly forget that it does,” and “The top’s always changing. That’s why it’s hard to stay there. Power comes from many tiny micro-interactions, not broad sweeps. You keep your nose to the market, watch fluctuations, ride the wave. That’s the only way to remain the big chief.” And he told them that the name of Mount Communism had changed to Ismoil Somoni Peak.

“Ismoil Somoni Peak!” Muzhduk’s father repeated for days, shaking his head.

The fall of Communism overshadowed everything. The six Slovak villages of Verkhoyansk wondered whether Ugli the Third had lost half—the objective half—of the family’s claim to the chieftainship. Then, on top of everything, Fred actually started to die.

He’d been coughing blood for months, but everyone thought it was just because he lived with the grain and that wheat dust bothered him. And normally when people coughed more than the usual amount of blood, they went to see Fred. Everyone assumed he’d fix himself.

Now he couldn’t even sit up, and his coughing fits sometimes made him pass out. Muzhduk wanted to take him upstairs, give him some sun and air, and his father agreed. But Fred didn’t want to leave. He said he wanted to be comfortable. Muzhduk brought six flashlights to the basement to give Fred some light, but Fred said to turn five off. So Muzhduk spent his last week in Verkhoyansk in the basement, in near darkness, with a wall of grain squeezing him against Fred’s death-cot.

“Thank you for moving the rug all these years.” Fred pointed up to the irregular lines of light filtering through the axe-hewn wood-plank ceiling where the bearskin rug had been.

Muzhduk scratched wheat chaff out of his beard. He’d come to squeeze the last bits of information from Fred the Political Officer, who’d worked in America during his spy days. Instead, he kept thinking of the hours he’d spent down here with Fred. He’d talked more with Fred during his life than with anyone else in the six villages, including women. Finally, he said, “You want to play a game of chess?”

Fred said no. “I want to tell you what I know about America. Before you go.”

He’d watched the Ugkis for twenty years from under the floor, keeping the name *Everest* secret out of bitterness. It was what remained

of his loyalty to Mother Russia. But Fred had heard the talk with John the Attorney and between father and son, and he knew that America would be difficult for Muzhduk. In the six villages even the chief can't tell another Slovak what to do—if half the village wants to fight Reds and half wants to finish the harvest, each does their own thing and doesn't question the other. The chief's opinion carries weight, but if he ever tried to force someone, the way the generals did before the Great March East, his own family would beat him to death out of shame.

Fred told Muzhduk that in America there's no single chief, but everyone tells each other what to do. They have fifty million laws, all written down. In Verkhoyansk nobody writes down anything important because human memory is faulty. In America they write everything, for the same reason. There are rules about what kind of plants you can smoke, when and where you can have a drink, and what you must wear on your head when you ride a motorcycle. They have rules against standing around and not doing anything. If you break a rule, they write it down so nobody will ever forget. And there is nobody to fight if the rule is wrong.

Fred tried to sit up, but only managed to turn onto his side. "That's a rule you must remember: men can't fight, even if they both want to. If your honor demands a fight, you must remember that honor is different there—"

"But—" Muzhduk started.

Fred gripped Muzhduk's wrist. "You absolutely can't hurt anyone physically, not even a dog, because in America pets are people too, and they have an internal army like the Reds, but they're Blue, and everybody helps them catch someone who breaks a rule. Don't trust anyone, not even friends, they all collaborate. If you kill someone, your own friend will call the Blues."

Fred told him things that would help. "The fastest way to learn the laws is to learn about the men who make them. For example: they are rich, unfit, and afraid, so their laws protect property, forbid nudity, and give the Blues a monopoly on violence. But it's complicated, because hypocrisy is important there. They consider it the first step to virtue."

"If you ever get in trouble," he said, coughing with nearly every word, "say that what you're doing is to increase safety. 'Safety' is almost like honor there. Another way is to become famous, or the *most* at

something. My handler and I used to laugh . . .”

Fred coughed at the thought of laughing.

“ . . . that if we ever defected we’d call ourselves the world’s tallest midget and the world’s shortest giant and try to become rich on American television.”

On the last day, Fred still tried to talk, but what came out was a ramble of fragments. About looking at the part of the swan beneath the water, how it paddles frantically, about bureaucrats who will insist Muzhduk have a number, and about his own life in the Ugli’s basement. “In places like that,” Fred said at the end, staring at the grain, “if a wall falls on a man and people want to know why, they study the wall. In this basement I’ve learned you have to know why the man sat beside it.”

Fred died. Muzhduk sat with him for a while, then pulled his hand off his wrist. They burned his body as if he were one of the family, and since the smoke was in the shape of a deer, they threw his ashes into the air. Then Muzhduk the Ugli the Fourth left for his long walk to America.

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