

Extract from the novel *The Red Zone* by Artem Chapeye

Написав Artem Chapeye

Середа, 08 жовтня 2014, 09:59 - Останнє оновлення Середа, 08 жовтня 2014, 10:15



Extract from the novel *The Red Zone* by Artem Chapeye – Chapter R-20

Translation by Patrick *John Corness*

On my left I was jostled by a corpulent woman and on my right I felt the sweltry presence of a fifty-year-old guy. His breath smelled of yesterday's alcohol and he reeked under the armpits, giving off a penetratingly sour sweaty odour. This guy raised his arm to hold on to the upper handrail. On his dark-coloured t-shirt there was a wet patch that was even darker.

The minibus was stuck in traffic on Hlybochytska Street, behind a tram. The vehicles in the left and right-hand lanes were also at a standstill, as the tram was wider than the cars, and we were driving between rows of market stalls. The bus from time to time gave a growl and edged its way forward another metre, almost impacting the tram with its bumper. Gangsta-shanson music boomed from the speakers built into the roof.

“Driver! Let us out!” shouted a man in a peaked cap standing in the aisle near the front door. He had one foot on the step.

“Where are you going? Under that truck?” quipped the minibus driver.

An Orthodox icon of the Mother of God swung in front of the driver, hanging from the rear-view mirror. Along the upper part of the windscreen there was a row of stickers:

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“As you pay – so you travel”, “Eat the seeds in their shells”, “No stopping here or there”, “Shut up! Shut up! Warm up and go”, “As soon as – then at once”, and on the far right an arrow pointed to the seat next to the driver, indicating that it was “Reserved for a Pretty Girl”. One-cent coins were inserted along the edge of the windscreen behind a strip of black rubber.

“Driver! We aren’t moving, are we!” shouted out a lad in a tracksuit.

“Go on, let us get off,” demanded the bass voice of the corpulent woman standing next to me.

“Well, just don’t fall under those wheels,” said the driver, gesticulating and reaching for the two buttons.

The front doors puffed and abruptly opened. The man in the peaked cap jumped out and slipped between the minibus and a lorry. The others followed.

“Driver! The rear door!” shouted the lad in the tracksuit.

“Give the door a kick,” said the driver over his right shoulder, turning right round.

The young lad gave the door a hefty kick on the left.

“On the right!” shouted the driver.

The lad kicked again and the metal flap of the door puffed, opening noisily a fraction of a second later. The sweaty man swung away from me, making for the door, whereas the corpulent woman started pushing, shoving me with her breasts. As I was ejected through the

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rear door I felt like a cork popping out of a bottle. To avoid a lorry covered with a centimetre-deep layer of dried mud, I darted to the right, rubbing off with my shoulder a layer of dirt from the angular wings of the bus. It turned out that under the dust, the bus was yellow.

I passed between the vehicles and the market stalls to reach a relatively pedestrianised zone and started to make my way between the traders' marquees down Hlybochytska Street, treading on soggy cardboard and kicking aside plastic packaging. On Verkhni Val progress got easier. I did not see any accident; the vehicles were simply stuck in a traffic jam. It carried on across Zhytni market, stretching from the old premises with its arched roof to the former bus station, now occupying the entire space.

In a less congested area of the market I caught sight of Ulugbek. He was in a hurry.

"Bek!" I shouted, but he didn't hear me.

The old man crossed Verkhni Val at a lively pace towards Kontraktova Square, to the streets where developments on the area of the former enclosure were visible. I kept running, turning to the right into Kostyantynivska Street, where Ulugbek had disappeared. I saw the lean, hunchbacked man, but I had to carry on running to catch up with him.

"Where are you going, Bek?" I asked, walking along, as I caught up with him.

"It's you. Hello," he said, without stopping. "They've started excavating over there. And they want to demolish the buildings."

Approaching the boundary wall, we heard some commotion to our left. Twenty or thirty metres away, amongst the building rubble scattered all around, a gigantic excavator was digging a trench for foundations. With a heavy-toothed scoop it was digging out the earth to a depth of one metre, the stones it contained making a sharp grinding sound. Then the excavator scooped out a chunk of earth the size of my bakery kiosk, returning to its former position like an arrow shot from a bow.

Here, a few days previously, there had stood ramshackle huts made of planks and plaster-board, which Valera called *gecekondu*, where several dozen lads and girls were living, or rather keeping watch. On one side of the area beneath the wall the children of Armenians expelled from neighbouring streets had built their huts. On the other side, keeping their distance, young people from the *Kozhummyaky* gully had their encampment. During the day their huts had already been demolished once or twice by bulldozers guarded by blackwaters [1] and at night, when the G-ers [2] were afraid to venture into the Red Zone, the young people returned, hastily knocking together new huts and laying fires. They did it openly by the wall, so as to be seen by the blackwaters. But they did not venture into the cleared zone, where those bastards had the right to shoot to wound.

Now four or five youngsters were running around the excavator, shouting and pelting the protective grille of the cabin with stones. The driver ignored this. Among the young people from *Kozhummyaky* I noticed the bearded Igor, who was older than the rest, a neighbour of *Umida's*. I pointed him out to *Ulugbek*.

“Why are there so few of your people?” *Ulugbek* shouted to him, taking advantage of a moment when the noise of the excavator was a little less loud.

“At work,” said Igor, with a shrug of the shoulders that brought to life the tattoo of a flame on his neck.

“Ours as well,” called out *Bek*. “I wrote to everyone I could on my gadget.”

“What about the market traders?” I asked over the racket.

“They aren’t on our side,” Igor shouted back.

“A couple of dozen will turn up,” countered *Ulugbek*. “In an hour, when they close.”

“A couple of dozen? That’ll do!” I shouted. “There’s only one excavator.”

I heard a grinding noise behind me and I turned round.

“Not any more!” shouted Igor. “Here come the bulldozers.”

A string of vehicles appeared round the corner of the old yellow building, evidently coming out of the gates on Mezhyhirska Street, and they turned in our direction into Spaska Street. There were three or four bulldozers, coming one after another, as the street was only wide enough for one of them. The colossal machines were as tall as two storeys. The street shuddered beneath their weight.

They took my breath away. I tried to swallow, but I couldn’t. I raised my chin, clearing the lump in my throat, and I saw the pale blue sky, turned to my right and looked at the dividing wall. Behind the wall loomed the high-rise Hostynny Dvir. In some of the windows I noticed the familiar shapes of telescopic lenses. I touched Igor’s sleeve and pointed to them.

“They are photographing the special operation,” said Igor with a nod.

Rumours had been spreading all week among the inhabitants of Podol. It was said that the developers would soon demolish the streets between Spaska Street where we were standing and the neighbouring Khoryva Street. Lowering my head, unable to swallow the lump in my throat, I saw that I was standing with Ulugbek and Igor across Spaska Street, between the old building and the ditch that the excavator had started to dig out.

Igor, standing on the left, took me under one elbow and on the other side I felt a tiny hand. Looking to my right, I saw a web of fine chestnut hair.

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“I couldn’t help coming,” smiled Naomi up at me.

“Couldn’t not come,” I involuntarily corrected her. My voice sounded dry, my mouth was without saliva.

“Thank you,” said Naomi. She linked arms with me on her left, and with her right hand she put a small video camera away into its case on her hip before joining hands with the protestor next to her.

The bulldozers roared towards us, lining up one behind the other. In addition to the angled dozer blade, five metres wide and level with my neck in height, from each colossus protruded a short, heavy shaft with a rectangular head. A battering ram. The battering rams gave the bulldozers the appearance of narwhals.

Between the second and third bulldozer stood a black truck with its engine running. It was covered by a black tarpaulin. Vehicles like this were used to transport blackwaters, but none of them were to be seen at the moment on Spaska or Kontraktova, even on the tower above the boundary wall.

“We’ll keep them back!” shouted Ulugbek, who was standing two away from me in the row.

“I wonder how?” I whispered. I wanted to spread my arms, but Igor was holding me firmly under my left arm and Naomi held my right arm even tighter.

The leading bulldozer moved very slowly towards us and I felt my knees trembling as the ground vibrated. I turned my head to the right and saw some movement behind me. A further row of people had formed behind us. Unlike our row, where Naomi was the only woman, they were all women, only two or three men. The market traders had turned up sooner than Ulugbek had expected.

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We stiffened, blocking the road, and I felt my arms, linked with those of my neighbours, crossed on the chest like a lock, tighten more and more. The bulldozer moved very slowly, and the row facing it became more compact as people huddled together. The battering ram reached us, but two or three people who were in its way just leaned away from it. It was to my left. Ulugbek did not even have to bend down for the ram to pass above his head.

The ground quaked, and the right-hand side of the slanting bulldozer blade moved forward, coming nearer. The lower edge of the blade was at the level of our knees. We trembled. The bulldozer operator continued to slow the colossus down.

“What are you doing!” came a woman’s shriek from the row behind.

“They’re crushing people!” shouted another woman.

“They’re killing us!” screamed the former.

To avoid looking at the bulldozer blade and so as not to step back, I looked up and saw the face of the bulldozer operator behind the grille and the heavy glass. The man was about fifty years old, with sunken cheeks; he looked perplexed. When the bulldozer operator grimaced, grappling with a lever, gold fillings glinted in his mouth and I realised that the operator was an R-nik just like us. The colossus shuddered and came to a standstill. The driver, in his cabin above us, shrugged his shoulders. The bulldozer continued idling. That’s what was needed, I thought – it worked.

I heard a rustling of canvas and a tramping of feet. Young men in plain clothes came towards us, passing the bulldozer on both sides and I realised that they were R-niks too, like us and the bulldozer operators. The men did not know what to do; they ran up to us and just stood there. Some looked confused, while others hid their embarrassment behind an expression of brazen derision. One took up a position facing me and spat on the ground at my feet. He was a bloated young man with brownish-reddish short-cropped hair and a freckly face, and he seemed familiar to me.

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“You’re from Borshchaha, so am I!” I shouted.

He gave a start and stared at me, and I recognised him.

“How can you?”

The freckle-faced young man looked away.

“Why are you standing there?” yelled a man approaching alongside the vehicle. “Tear them off!”

He was stockier than the rest, and older than them, about forty. The most confident, too. Evidently, the foreman. He set an example by approaching the end of the row and yanking at a slim youth, who cried out in pain and let go of his neighbour’s arm. Without paying any attention to the young man, he seized hold of the next one in the row.

“Help!” screamed a woman behind them.

“Come on!” shouted the foreman to his guys.

A woman in the second row tried to resist him, but two muscle-men ran up and reached over the heads of the lads to push the woman’s arms away, as the foreman was breaking up our row.

“Don’t be stupid!” said the foreman. “We’ll get through anyway.”

Together with two subordinates, he approached from the right, coming closer and closer to me.

“Shame on you!” came the voice of Bek. “You are just the same as us, aren’t you!”

The men looked away, but they carried on. They pushed and pulled, though evidently not as roughly as the foreman, because they were unable to break the ranks. The foreman approached Naomi and I unlocked my arms to stop him doing anything to hurt her. Naomi gently withdrew from me. I folded my arms again, and then a stocky man pulled at me. I yelled out as I felt the tendons under my elbow tensing against Igor’s arm. The foreman pulled again and I cried out once more, slightly loosening the lock. The subordinates covered the burly one, pushing off him the women in the second row and our lads who had been dragged out of the row earlier. The foreman dragged at me a third time; I was ready to give way, and my arm slipped from under Igor’s. To keep my face, I started pushing at the muscle-men who were now shoving me away from the foreman as he was dragging Igor from the row. All the burly men were a head taller than me; they were all more thick-set than our lads, and much stronger. The muscle-men did not even have to defend themselves very much, but they just covered one another cleverly and pushed people away, and it was clear how much fitter they were than us.

I heard a click – the bulldozer operator had switched the transmission again to move the vehicle forward. Ulugbek left the row and approached the ram, raising his arms above his head and linking them over the rod. Two muscle-men leaped across and pulled his arms away. They did not even attempt to hit him or turn him round. They just lifted Ulugbek under the arms, so that his feet did not quite reach the ground, and carried the old man off to one side.

“Shame! Shame!” chanted our people at them.

“Bastards!” yelled Igor. “You are working for the Gross-niks!”

“Everyone works for the Gross-niks”, growled one of the muscle-men.

Naomi, who had been pushed away, was holding the video camera with one hand, steadying it with the other hand by holding herself on the wrist. The free press might be somewhere in the high-rise Hostynny Dvir, I recalled and I rushed past the muscle-men towards the bulldozer, jumped on the ramrod and hung there, holding on with my hands and lifting my feet to stand on

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the upper edge of the dozer blade. I pressed my cheek to the metal rod and I was surprised how very cold it was. The bulldozer shuddered so that it almost shook me under the blade, then it stopped.

Two muscle-men leapt up and dragged me by the feet. I held on to a metal cable on the ramrod and hung on there. One leg slipped out of the grasp of the adversary. I leaned it against the top of the blade, which gave me purchase, and I kicked with the other leg until they let go.

The foreman heaved a demonstrative sigh and unhurriedly came towards me. He nodded to one of his subordinates:

“Get hold of his feet.”

The latter, shielding his face with his hand so that I couldn't kick him, leaped up and seized me by both knees. I saw that it was the freckled one:

“I'm from Borshchaha too, mate!” I said, as I kicked, but he held on tightly. “You used to buy bread from me! You came with your son! A little one, about five years old! How can you! You aren't a Gross-nik!

He turned his freckled face away, but did not let go of my feet. The foreman, who was covered from the rest of us by his subordinates, came up close to me. I was startled, because he did not appear to be in the least angry. He was simply doing his job. The foreman climbed up to me and stood on top of the blade, standing firmly on it, his legs apart, with his back resting against the bodywork of the bulldozer. Once he was stable, he put his left arm round my shoulder and with his right he began methodically striking my belly from below:

“Now then, what are you up to!” he breathed heavily. “Such a kid! What's it about? Kids' stuff! Kindergarten!” panted the foreman, repeatedly beating me with his fist. “It doesn't make any difference. You'll lose. And that's that! We'll get through all the same! You know it yourself. That's it. Get it? Come on! Such a kid! What, you! How? You're a kid! Let go! Let go! Right then! Well done!” The foreman was out of breath, but he got down from the bulldozer only after I did.

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[1] No one remembered anymore why they were called blackwaters. The name had become a generic term.

[2] People from the G-Zone were called G-ers or Gross-niks.