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The Blockbuster

Translated from Croatian by Marija Perišić

The Sawmill

The abandoned sawmill was the only inhabited building in the village. A couple of surrounding houses gaped empty, barren of people and things alike. The place was so desolate it was hard to imagine people had lived in it just months ago. In daytime we'd sometimes come down from our sentry post, look around, and wonder how it had even occurred to anyone to build a home on this terrain. But once upon a time people had come here for work. The steep slope that led to the village was perfect for supplying the sawmill with wood, and the river that wrapped itself around the back of the hollow provided a natural transport route. During our stay in the village, I often imagined the sound of logs tumbling down the slope, the chopping of axes, the blunt echoes spreading through the woods, the hissing of steam coming from the sawmill's boiler room, the whirring of the rubber belts on the wheels of the circular saws, the splashing of timber in the water, and I'd think how strange it was to be there and not hear any of those sounds. The sounds of life. But thoughts of that kind only ramped up the unease. The place was deader than an empty soul, so dead not even our presence could liven it up.

If I'd had any doubts then, I'm sure now that our presence in the village didn't serve any purpose. We were a small unit of scouts, and we were about as usefully deployed as a lamb tied up in front of a cattle pen surrounded by wolves. In hindsight I can easily think of hundreds of other, better locations for a forward sentry post. Establishing it in a hollow surrounded on three sides by a thick pine forest truly wasn't better than leaving a pot of meat in front of a hungry savage. Yet we were placed inside that pot, and we were meat. And as one might imagine, the savages weren't long in coming.

It was the evening of All Souls' Day, neither more nor less gloomy than other evenings that time of year. The winter shut off the daylight by dinnertime, and since the moon stayed hidden, deciding, perhaps, to hold off showing its face until a happier time, the visibility was poor, even with the snow covering the ground. The attack didn't begin ferociously. They just fenced us in with their trucks, creating a blockade at our rear that cut off our retreat. Once the regular army raised this wall behind our backs, the rest of them could descend on us at leisure, confident that no soul could leave the hollow alive. For us it

wouldn't be the first time facing the enemy, but enemy contacts didn't become easier with time. We'd been cooped up at that sawmill for days, leaving only on short patrols, and all the while we repressed the knowledge that sooner or later this day would come, because repressing it made waiting easier to bear. If you try hard enough not to think of something, you can act as if it weren't there. We tried, as far as our eerie location permitted, to act as close as possible to normal life.

In daytime we broiled sausages and potato halves, and even spam, roasted on the fire, tasted good for a change. Amidža, who considered anything with a shape edible, helped himself to herrings in pineapple sauce, a donation from the Scandinavian Caritas, which no one else was brave enough to sample. Bread we kept wrapped in plastic bags covered with snow, so the cold kept it as hard as a stone, but after a few minutes on a searing metal plate, a loaf would taste better than anything freshly baked in a bakery. In the attic of one of the houses, Branković found a piece of smoked bacon forgotten in a hasty flight. We made it last a good while, cutting thin slices from it, not too often, and only when all of us were gathered around. Dinners were sweetened up with canned peaches, or else with chocolate, which was sent to us by kindergarteners from the cities, who attached touching letters and clumsy drawings to their gifts. In later recollections, the food was the subject of many complaints. I didn't have any, probably because I'd always preferred junk food to home cooking. Not until I was past thirty-five did I develop an appreciation for meals eaten with a spoon.

The patrols we tried treating as ordinary walks through the woods, and returning to the heated room was an experience. The temperatures were so low in the mornings that the water bucket froze in spite of being kept an arm's length from the steel barrel that we used as a stove. The outside of the barrel was so hot we lit cigarettes on it, yet the water in the bucket stayed frozen. Sometimes the logs we used as firewood exploded in our improvised stove. Prior to our arrival someone had put firecrackers inside them—probably children, who did it as a prank—so every few days one of the logs would go off. We were told it was a custom in the area. Supposedly someone had been stealing firewood from a neighbor, and the latter had come up with a smart plan. He stuffed some of his logs with firecrackers and left them in his yard as a bait. When explosions came from one of the neighboring houses, the thief was identified. The custom was preserved, if for no other reason than it amused the kids. To us, the explosions served as a reminder that we weren't on a picnic after all. From the first shot that came from the forest, we knew we had no way of returning fire. Our rifles didn't have a range of more than fifty meters, and even if they had, we had nowhere to establish a defensive position. If we came out of the sawmill, we'd give them easy targets, while we couldn't see further than our noses in the direction of the forest. They had searchlights mounted on their trucks, which kept the sawmill and most of the yard well lit, and while they advanced downhill slowly and confidently, shouting encouragements to one

another, we panicked, trying to think of what to do. For all the anxious anticipation that had accompanied our stay at the sawmill, it had never occurred to us that we might find ourselves completely encircled. We'd heard tank fire half an hour earlier, but the meaning of it was only just dawning on us. They'd taken the no-man's land and cut off our escape on the right, putting us in a position of ants on a floating leaf surrounded by water. A rocket, fired from the forest, exploded on our roof. Fragments of roof tiles and wooden beams rained down on us.

"To the basement!" someone shouted, and we tumbled pell-mell down the stairs. Through the fear that squeezed my throat and crushed my lungs, I tried to think clearly, and though I couldn't come up with a better plan, the basement was an obvious trap. "There's no way out of there!" I yelled. "If we go down there, we're dead!"

No one heard me or wanted to hear me. I ran with the others. We threw ourselves against the basement wall, looking at one another, while from the outside came shrieks and rowdy laughter. I wondered if they were as bloodthirsty as they sounded, or if they, too, felt the fear and tried to suppress it by acting savage. I remembered what Colonel Kvaternik told us when we first got to the front line: "A normal man in abnormal circumstances behaves abnormally."

"Guys, listen to me." Šime seemed as calm as though he'd been in any number of similar situations. The truth was that he wasn't calm at all, but unlike the rest of us, Šime could keep his head in a crisis. To look at him, one would think he'd had years of military training. Nothing about him betrayed that only three months ago he'd worked in a video rental store. His calm and resourcefulness must have been recognized by someone from the brigade staff because he was assigned the command of our group though he'd never held a rank before. "The basement has a window. See? Up there."

"Window" was too good a word for the cramped opening near the ceiling, maybe large enough for a child to squeeze through. In that moment, though, it looked like the pearly gates. It faced the side opposite to the yard, the side that wasn't lit. Upstairs, a hand grenade went off, followed by the pounding of their boots. They'd taken over the building and were looking for us. "Get them! There he is! There he is!"

They shot at different rooms, randomly and in short bursts, yelling, though they had no idea where we were. They knew only that there were just a few of us. That much was obvious, since the sawmill couldn't house a large number of people. Most of it was an open-air production area covered with a corrugated roof, while only several dozen square meters belonged to an actual brick and mortar building, which contained the former manager's office, a locker room with a shower stall, and the basement with a squat toilet.

“One by one, and let’s be quick about it,” ordered Šime.

He positioned himself under the window and clasped his hands together to give us a leg up. Čerkez and Speedy got through the window more easily than I’d expected. They darted out of the basement and slipped into the darkness. We couldn’t hear the thumping of their boots, but the lack of shooting outside made it clear they’d managed to get away.

Our morale got a much needed boost. “*Rear Window*, eh, Šime?”

In the semi-darkness of the basement, I could see his wide-open eyes and the gratitude appearing in them. Anyone else would have needed to focus, but I knew Šime. He needed a distraction.

“Hitchcock, ’54,” he replied with a sigh. “Jump, Amidža!”

Amidža passed through the window as easily as I’d pass through a door. Amidža had stopped growing by high school. In consequence he was the picture of a scout—small, fast, and agile as a cat. His boots rasped briefly against the wall, then he too was gone. I was preparing to follow when our getaway route was discovered. “The window! The rats are getting away through the window! This way, this way!”

I froze in place, unsure what to do. Šime was still standing under the window, seeming to decide whether to encourage me to jump up. The brief indecision was ended by Branković. He ran in Šime’s direction, and Šime swiftly propelled him toward the ceiling. Branković managed to get hold of the window frame, but his feet scraped against the wall, seeking purchase. Šime and I pitched in and began pushing him through the opening. Just as I cursed myself for a fool, thinking how it could have been my ass being shoved through the window, a shot came from outside. Branković slid between us like dead weight. Twenty-four years old. He’d returned from leave only a week earlier. We had a talk that day, and he told me that he’d decided to marry. He’d been with his girlfriend for three years, but it had always seemed to him he was too young for marriage. We were drinking brandy when he said, “We’re the same age, she and I—I may be too young, but the time is right for her. We’re already working on a baby. Hell, if I keep giving it to her, I don’t mind if it sticks.” That expression, “if it sticks,” repelled me that first time I heard it just as it did on every later occasion. I’d loathe myself for being incapable of finding something better to remember Branković by, but every time I’d think of him, the expression would come to mind. The sight of his dead body made my stomach rise. A second ago he was a friend. Now he was a limp corpse impeding our survival. We carried him off to the corner as if he were a bag of unseemly refuse spoiling our otherwise cozy surroundings.

“This way! I got one! This way, I’m telling you! They’re getting away through the window!” The shrieking outside was drowned out by the sound of something tumbling inside the sawmill, then the banging began on the basement door. While Šime and I looked from the door to the window to each

other, a hand grenade landed between us. We had nowhere to get away from it. Wherever we went inside the basement, the shrapnel would get us. The grenade hissed, rolling on the floor between us while we stared at it, caught in a paralysis. I thought of grabbing it and hurling it back where it came from. If it exploded in my hand, it would tear me to pieces. If I didn't touch it, maybe it would just wound me? But if it just wounded me, how much longer would I live to regret not taking a chance? How our brains connect the un-connectable, I'll never know, but I suddenly saw the solution. On the other side of the room was the squat toilet without a door. I kicked the grenade, and it landed in the toilet hole and exploded inside the drain pipe. Šime looked at me in disbelief, a smile spreading over his face. I turned to the window. In the scant light that came from outside, I saw another grenade fly in. I ran toward it and, while the grenade was still in the air, bumped it back through the window with both hands, awkwardly, the same way I'd do with the ball when playing volleyball as a kid. I'd never learned how to pass the ball with my fingertips like the other kids and always did it forcefully with my palms, to malicious cries of "Carried ball! Carried ball!" If sometimes I even performed the pass correctly, it would still come under dispute because I was known as a weak player. I was laughed at even by those who weren't any better than me, probably because it made them feel better about themselves. Where are you now, assholes? I thought as my carry made a kill. The explosion shut up the voice shrieking in the yard just as the basement door gave in. We returned fire, for the first time that evening. I remember thinking that we weren't going to die without firing a single bullet and how it had seemed like the upside of an otherwise hopeless situation. I was resigned to dying. Cries, swearing, and curses came from all sides. Their pain and fury mingled with ours, spurring us to new heights of desperation. We fired at the door and screamed. We must have been an amusing sight, provided a mischievous higher power was watching—two frantic losers, screaming and shooting blindly. We couldn't even see each other. Bullets whistled between us, a prelude to their entry and our death. For a moment everything went quiet. Without thinking, I turned, ran, and jumped toward the window. Later I often thought about that jump. Is it even possible to jump two meters up and zoom through a narrow window like a punted ball? If I used anything to bounce off of, I don't know what it was. Maybe Šime had lent me his shoulder. All I know is that in the next moment I was running through the woods with my hands stretched out in front of me, trying not to injure myself by running into a tree.

Escape

Out of the trap I was, but I had no illusions about being safe. If the enemy was ready to take over the area, they'd let no survivors stand in their way. I was sure from their numbers that the attack on us wasn't meant as a small, isolated operation. Their first rocket had knocked down our communication link, and for radio communications we were too far from our base. All they had to do now was wipe out whatever remained of us and their nighttime raid could proceed uninterrupted to the position held by our brigade.

Though I'd spent a while in the area, I found it impossible to orient myself in the darkness. The way leading straight across the sawmill yard went southeast, toward the enemy territory. Our troops were stationed southwest of the village, which meant that to reach them one had to strike left, where he'd come across the river. I just had no idea where it was I was running. I'd managed to climb all the way up the slope and was now meandering through the woods, lost. I was doing my best not to think of what happened at the sawmill after my exit. My thoughts were on Amidža, Speedy, and Čerkez, who'd managed to get away. The chance of bumping into one of them was minuscule, but I held tight to the hope that they were crouching in the darkness somewhere nearby, wondering themselves which way to go.

In the years to come, I'd often cry myself to sleep thinking about the way I'd left Šime. Did I ruin our chances by running away? Would he have done the same in my place? I knew he wouldn't. If he'd wanted to run, he could have, yet he stayed and fought. He continued shooting while I climbed the wall and left him behind. Could both of us have survived if I'd stood by him? Would he have managed to squeeze through that narrow window? Such questions would keep me up at night for a long time to come. I'd get up from my bed and pace around, take showers and inhale deep breaths, drink water by the liter and swallow pills by the handful, trying to shake off the restlessness that clawed at my legs. But on the night of the escape, I never once thought of Šime again.

The enemy's biggest worry had to be that one of us would reach another forward post and alert the brigade. What they couldn't have known was that there was no other forward post and the way ahead of them was already clear. They only knew that some of us had managed to escape the sawmill and scatter in the woods, and the knowledge was making them go on. Tactically speaking, I had two objectives—avoid getting killed and alert the brigade. In truth, only the first part meant anything to me. I didn't care whether the brigade would be attacked. Armed and together in numbers, they could deal

with any opponent, while I stumbled through the darkness alone, pursued by terror and hunted like a beast.

I traipsed through the woods wondering how I'd even gotten there. Only months ago, I was leading the normal life of a twenty-something—going to movies and concerts, studying at the university. My free evenings were spent in pubs with my buddies, until one such evening, as we sat around the table and watched the news, a galling scene came on the TV. Out of sheer spite, just to demonstrate their power, the enemy had cut off the water supply to a disabled children's home. Those children's faces were the final straw. I never could stand bullies who thought they could do whatever they wanted to those weaker than themselves. I jumped to my feet. All of us did. We spilled beer on the table, soaked the cigarettes, and marched straight to the community center to put our names on the list of volunteers. Within a month, all of us got our draft letters and were sent to the front. I was placed in a scouting unit though I'd earlier served a draft term in the former country's army with the signal corps. It was the early days of the war, and our units were filled any which way because the volunteers were too few.

Only when I groped for another tree did I notice that I'd lost my rifle. I couldn't remember whether I'd left it in the basement or dropped it while running up the hill. I may have just tossed it aside before jumping through the window. Not that I'd have any use for it now. I was barely dragging my own weight, scrambling onwards through the minus-twenty-degree weather. The cold burned my throat, but I couldn't force myself to breathe through my nose. When I couldn't take another step, I slid down the trunk of a tree and lay down in a ditch. Soon I heard them calling to one another. They'd spread themselves out in a row, combing the terrain for us, letting out shrill cries and curses, obviously trying to scare us. I thought they were doing a terrific job. No amount of drill could have taught them what to do. It was a behavior that could only arise from the primal instinct of a hunter, ready to activate itself at the first opportune moment regardless of thousands of years of civilization. At times they'd fall silent, then the calls and the shouting would start again.

"There he is! I see him! What're you looking at? Come out, we won't hurt you! Hahaha!"

I dragged myself up and stumbled ahead. My strength was faltering. If this had been one of my beloved movies, I would have been able to run all night long. As it was, I decided to lie low and pray to God that they don't find me. Yet even if I wasn't found, where would I go? Back to the sawmill? It was the only landmark I could think of, but which way was it from here? They were so close I could hear the squeaking of snow under their boots. I couldn't tell whether they could see me, so I huddled at the bottom of the tree, clinging to the roots, shaking with cold and fear. Afraid that they'd discover me by my labored breathing, I clasped my hand over my mouth. My pulse drummed so wildly I was sure my heartbeats echoed through the woods, producing a racket that could be heard for kilometers around. At

less than ten meters' distance, a shadow halted and turned to me, darker than the surrounding night. I felt it looking in my direction.

“There’s one there! Come out! Come out, you fucker!”

God, I thought, if you’re there, you must have a good reason for this. I don’t think I deserve this fate, but if you think so, let it be. Let it be . . . what, exactly? An execution in the snow, where none of mine would ever know my grave. None would know my pain and fear. None would help me carry this burden.

Oh, how I wanted someone to be with me then. Someone, anyone to share my final moments. I wanted to press against a body, against a woman from a backwater village behind an impassable road, unknown to me and to the world. I could almost see her face in the darkness, her sad look as she bade me goodbye. Loneliness had never been more grueling. Alone in the woods, cowering, unresisting, slaughtered like a lamb, offered like a sacrifice, helpless beneath the sky. Offered to whom, though? God? And for what? Peace? I couldn’t make my own peace with the inevitable. A torrent of warmth was spreading down my crotch. I was pissing myself uncontrollably, not even trying to clench my muscles and stop the flow. Later, whenever I’d feel pressure in my bladder, I’d remember the moment of being paralyzed by fear and experiencing the bizarre pleasure caused by the warmth of my own urine. On one memorable occasion—the All Soul’s Day of the following year—I was woken up by the spreading wetness while sound asleep in my own bed. I wasn’t even dreaming of anything. It had streamed out of me without prompt. These days, I sometimes wet my bed on purpose. I do it half-asleep, pleased that I can.

“Come out, you hear!”

The voice called me back to awareness. I decided to get up and die on my feet, no matter how shaky and soaked in piss they were. I opened my mouth to swear at him, say something nasty about his mother. I wanted him to know that our relative positions—me dying while he got to walk away with his life—didn’t mean he deserved to be where he was. Fate could have easily arranged it differently, and our roles could have been reversed. It could have been me holding his life in my sights. Like so many times before, my mind went to a place completely inappropriate to the seriousness of the situation. I was in grammar school when a classmate’s father died and a few of us kids went to give the family our condolences. Everything went well until we rang the doorbell, then we exploded into hysterical laughter as though something above us was toying with our emotions and amusing itself by making a mockery of our wills. Now, my mind went to *Casablanca*. I stared at my executioner, thinking about people who sacrificed love for a higher cause. I concluded there was no cause for which I’d sacrifice anything at all, least of all my life. To live!— my only goal, my only desire. No wonder no one made movies about people

like me. If only my pursuer realized how unimportant I was, how little my death would change, we'd be at the beginning of a beautiful friendship. We'd be sitting on the same airplane, flying far away, leaving our problems for someone else to solve, and in the meantime we'd amuse ourselves talking about Bogart, who'd never known how profoundly his roles would be lived by ordinary guys. We'd sink into our seats and watch a glassy-eyed blonde say goodbye to a stranger standing on the runway.

When I opened my mouth to scream, all that came out was warm vapor. My voice wasn't there. Rage had reverted to fear, and what I'd tried to present to myself as courage had never been more than desperation. I stood mutely under the tree as the shadow turned away and whispered to others, "Nothing here. Let's go."

I don't know how much time passed until I finally gathered the courage to move. I walked quietly, trying not to make a slightest sound. The crunching of snow underfoot grated on my ears. I headed in the direction my pursuers had come from, hoping that they'd come from the sawmill. I was right. Creeping above the hollow, I could see the village they'd already abandoned. The few who remained walked around the sawmill yard turning over the stacks of timber, poking the barrels of their rifles into every hole. They hadn't given up on finding us. There was no way I could cross the bridge that connected the village with the territory behind and stay unnoticed. The road to the bridge led straight through the yard, and two trucks with their soldiers still waited on the other bank. I made my way around the hollow in a broad arc and headed toward the river. I was shaking all over. My soaked underwear was no longer warm. The stain on my crotch was covered with thin, rimy crust. The only way out led across the river. I slid down the steepest part of the bank and allowed my body to splash into the black water. Funny how easily some experiences are forgotten—on the beach, in the summer, I still love to jump into the sea when the water is as cold as possible. Only the dark depths sometimes bring up a feeling of unease.

My uniform got soaked in minutes and made swimming difficult. I managed to withstand the cold of the water, but when I emerged on the other side, my entire body was seized with cramps. I ripped off my jacket and discarded it, stomping onwards like an automaton, my feet moving with a will of their own. If I fall now, I thought, I won't get up again. I wanted to turn around and look at the village to prove to myself that I'd truly crossed over to the other bank. But the other bank wasn't any safer. I was walking through the area that had been the no-man's land until tonight—the area that the enemy had swept through only hours ago. Were they encamped somewhere? Did they establish checkpoints, and was I just walking toward one of them? Far ahead in the darkness as thick as ink, I saw a muted light. A village, but whose? Whoever's it was, I had no strength left. I couldn't walk that far, and even if my feet agreed to cooperate, there was still the risk of walking into an ambush. A fever was beginning to grip

me. I was immensely thirsty. I put a handful of snow in my mouth and sucked on it, spitting out lumps of dirt. While I sat on the ground panting like a dog, thunder came from the direction of the village. Artillery fire. The flashes of explosions rose high, illuminating the thick, low clouds. I was so feverish I couldn't tell whether the fire was battering the village or coming from the village. I knelt and pressed my face in the mud. The ground was oddly squelchy given how cold it was, and I realized I was wallowing in the enemy tracks. They must have been passing for a long time to beat the frozen ground into a mush. I felt like crying, but neither water nor sound would come forth. A thought was bubbling up in my mind—did the guy in the woods see me and let me go? Or was he just barking random threats at the darkness? If I'd seen him, I would have let him go. Ah, but that was a lie, wasn't it? I had to be honest with myself now that I'd received the gift of life. I'd have taken him prisoner. Or was even that the truth? I guess I'd have taken him prisoner in different circumstances. If I'd been cleaning up the perimeter during an offensive, I'd have killed him without hesitation. In the heat of battle, one fewer of them meant one more of us. The hard reality of it left no space for qualms. I collapsed.

The Man With No Name

“Get up, you! It's mornin'!”

Someone's strong arms were pulling me into a sitting position. “Had a good nap? Let's go, rise 'n' shine.”

The blow I received to the head wasn't painful. I just felt myself fall backwards. I opened my eyes and became aware of my surroundings. I was lying on the ground, wet and chilled, while above me stood four men in camouflage uniforms. Three of them, none older than twenty, kept their rifles pointed at me. The remaining guy, no older than the rest, stood with his hands tied in front of his body. His face was covered with dried blood.

“We're pickin' 'em like 'shrooms, huh, Ilija?”

“Yep, just like 'shrooms. You there, can you talk, or are you deaf 'n' dumb like your pal? Name, rank, unit?”

“Save your breath, Ilija. Tie 'em up, and let's get goin'. Others will take care of 'em. One of ours, he ain't. You can tell by the patch on his sleeve.”

“Ha, check out what it says on his sleeve. Blockbusters! A movie buff, ain’t ya? You’ll fit right in!”

Several minutes later, I was walking next to the other prisoner with my hands tied in front of me. We were flanked by two armed guards, one on each side, while the third guard walked behind us. I glanced at my unknown companion. His camouflage uniform had no insignia. He didn’t wear any on his knit cap, either. The right sleeve of my uniform had an embroidered patch with my unit’s name on it, and I was just asking myself why. So as to make life simpler for the enemy? The panic I felt about being captured was strangely eased by the anonymous guy’s presence. His expression radiated calm. If he hadn’t been tied and bloodied, I’d have taken him for one of them. Even now, he looked as though he might crack a joke, after which everyone would laugh and clap him on the back. If the joke were about a soldier who escaped encirclement only to fall asleep behind enemy lines, it would be no more than I deserved.

I began stumbling on the uneven ground, so stiff with cold that my legs threatened to give way under me. “Hey deaf ‘n’ dumb, give your pal a hand. We don’t want him hurtin’ himself!” It seemed to me they wouldn’t mind trampling me if I fell, so I forced myself to keep up. I listened to the sure footsteps of my taciturn companion and tried matching his pace.

Our captors continued chatting among themselves. “So, Ilija, you’re sayin’ *Yojimbo* is better ‘n *A Fistful of Dollars*?”

“Sure am, and that’s a fact.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re sayin’. Still ‘n’ all, Kurosawa wears on me. I got no patience for that Eastern rigmarole. I say give me a solid Italian any day, and you can keep the Japanese.”

“Meh. You’re only sayin’ that cuzza Clint. Spaghetti without Clint, like a day without sunshine.”

“Hell yeah, Clint’s the man. Gotta say, though, I liked his seventies stuff better ‘n his western period.”

I trudged along, increasingly gripped with a desire to join the conversation. Their speech was a bit strange to my ears, but not the topic. They’d obviously grown up on the same movies I had. If the circumstances were different, we’d be ordering beers by now, passing along joints, and discussing the classics. The thought made me shiver and reproach myself. The enemy couldn’t be a movie lover. The enemy was a butcher, and wherever the three of them were taking me, it wasn’t for a panel discussion. Yet I itched to chime in, show off a bit, mention how well I thought Clint reconciled the sixties with the seventies. Or maybe I’d tone it down, avoid appearing like a know-it-all, and just let them know we had more in common than they imagined. If I endeared myself to them sufficiently, maybe they’d let me go?

Yeah, I thought, and maybe they'd also throw in a change of clothes, a pack of cigarettes, some canned food, dry socks, a rifle with a clip of ammo, and an escort to my brigade.

Still, I decided to try my luck. "Clint," I offered, "was the best Man With No Name that Leone could possibly—"

But it wasn't meant to be. I stumbled again and hurtled forward, dimly aware that my anonymous mate had tripped me up on purpose. Exhausted as I was, it was all I could do to protect my face. I crashed to the ground like a sack of cement. Our guards halted, taken aback as much by my comment as by my nosedive. I curled up on my side, unsure whether to expect a helping hand or a kick in the ribs. Everything happened in a heartbeat. Anonymous reached for the guard closest to him, snatched his knife with both hands, and rammed it ferociously into the man's stomach. If the guard had been carrying his knife the prescribed way, Anonymous wouldn't have been able to draw it so quickly, but the guard had worn his scabbard upside down, with the handle of the knife down. It was what many soldiers did because it made drawing easier and faster. In this case, it was also a fatal mistake. Already Anonymous was turning around, wrenching the blade free from the first guard's gut only to plunge it into the second guard's chest. The newly stabbed man gurgled. Anonymous swiftly jerked the blade back and pushed him onto his last standing mate, who was walking behind us. The two collided awkwardly, and Anonymous simply ran over the gurgling man and used the momentum of the leap to shove the entire length of the knife through our remaining captor's throat. Before I knew it, we were running across the fields, Anonymous holding me up by my armpit while in his free hand he gripped a stolen Kalashnikov. Every several hundred meters we paused so he could listen and look around, then we'd change direction and break into a run again. We didn't slow down until we vanished deep beneath the trees. Gasping for air, we collapsed to the ground and looked at each other. I tried rewinding the sequence that had freed us from captivity, but the fragments just wouldn't come together into a reasonable whole. If I'd watched a similar scene on TV, I'd have reached for the remote with disgust. The samurai from *Yojimbo* could pull it off, or maybe The Man With No Name from Leone's spaghetti trilogy, but certainly no one else. "What unit are you with?" I said, struggling to breathe.

Anonymous looked at me with wide-open eyes. "I don't know," he said.

"Wha—how do you mean that?"

"I just don't."

"How were you captured?"

He stared ahead for a bit as if parsing the question. "They picked me up last night. I fired a bazooka at a tank. The tank returned fire. The explosion flung me into the air."

“And then?”

“Then these guys turned up and woke me up.”

“Man, talk about being caught napping! Where are the others?”

“What others?”

“The others from your unit.”

“I don’t know. I think I was alone.”

“You took on a tank alone?”

“I think so.”

“What brigade are you with? Where are you from?”

Based on his accent, I thought he’d be local to the area, but he said nothing, just stared at me deeply and sincerely. I looked back at him with a funny premonition. “What’s your name?”

Nothing. No answer. A shade of uncertainty crept into his expression for the first time since I’d met him.

“That wound on your head.” I gestured. “Are you okay?”

“Just a scratch. A rough landing, I think. My ears are buzzing a bit, but I’m fine.”

“What do we do now?”

“What brigade are you with?”

“The 199th. I have no idea where they are, though. Or where we are.”

“199th?” Anonymous—or as I now thought of him, The Man With No Name—got to his feet. “Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

“The 199th . . . let’s go. If you ask me, though . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Nothing wrong with Leone, but Kurosawa was an artist.”