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THE RETRIBUTION

When duck season opened, I recalled an old friend of mine, a hunting buff with whom I had spent many a night on the lakes around Zabolotiv, and went to invite him to come shooting with me.

To my surprise, he refused my invitation.

“Have you quit the sport, or what?”

“It’s no sport — it’s outright murder,” he said with a bitterness I did not understand, and added immediately, probably lest I suspect him of sentimentality, “So it’s a sport you say? Dear me, they still keep calling such murder sport. There is something else that comes to mind now. If you like, I’ll tell you something even my wife doesn’t know about. Maybe after that you’ll give up duck hunting and shoot at cardboard targets instead. That’s what I call real sport.”

It happened during the hottest summer in my life, when, as a horrible punishment — or so it seemed to me — the grass had dried up as far as the eye could see, and I was left alone in a desert and felt as lonesome as a Scythian stone idol amidst the abandon of the steppe.

On the other hand, that was not exactly the case. Grass had not grown there for millennia and neither had man ever lived there either. At first I didn’t feel lonesome: on the contrary, I was thrilled by the exotic beauty of the Karakum steppe, through which the sand dunes wandered into the torrid expanses like caravans of weary camels. And the thistles scattered sparsely across the sand seemed like palms to me, while my tent was like a city. I radioed Nebit-Dag to learn that a group of Turkmen workers was to arrive very soon to prepare the groundwork for an oilfield crew. Meanwhile, I passed the time hunting.

Deep in my heart, to tell you the truth, I abhorred that sport, as you call it, although I never missed a single hunting season. A dull sense of pity always stirred in the back of my mind whenever I picked up a dead duck in a marsh or a still-warm hare in a wintry field. I’d kick dirt over the speck of blood on the snow or in the grass as if hiding it from my own conscience, and I thought in a childishly naive way about the baby bunnies or lone drake that’d miss his mate back at the nest. As a hunter, I was actually indifferent to the kill, pitying the orphaned more.

Hunting in the desert was easier morally. Maybe I’m wrong, but I noticed a certain stunting of the family instinct in the animals there. I didn’t come across any birds’ nests, and the occasional saigas I saw did not pass by in herds but singly. The lizards certainly did not care for their broods, the snakes gobbled up their young, and even the stray ducks would carelessly cover up their eggs with sand and fly on their way, letting the desert hatch their ducklings.

I looked with pity at the little animals and parentless nestlings and did not spare the mature game — I aimed my gun without any scruples.

One day I saw a new prey— a steppe eagle. He sat on a small knoll, his neck craned warily as he watched my abode fixedly. With a jerky flapping of his wings, the eagle rose into the sky and hung there over my head. There was no reason to kill him, but then I remembered that my wife had asked me to bring her some memento from the desert. And here it was — a would-be stuffed king of the birds or an eagle's wing at least.

The eagle hovered over my head, watching me with angry eyes. Those eyes reminded me of the hatred-filled glare of a python I had killed a couple of days ago behind the knoll — how much sheer instinct had this wild desert given its inhabitants, and how little of maternal feeling! — so I raised my gun and fired.

Falling, the eagle raised his wings toward the sky with which he was parting forever. He dropped near my tent and let forth a loud shriek. It was not the usual eagle's cry, but more like a man calling for help. I shuddered all over and did not dare approach the place where the bird, its head raised to the sky, was lying in the throes of death.

This happened in the morning. Just before lunch, when a fitful sleep had overpowered me at long last in my sultry tent, I heard a violent whirring noise in the air outside. I jumped up from my bed. It was probably the airplane that would drop water and provisions for me. I rushed outside and stopped in my tracks, stunned: a huge eagle, probably twice as big as the dead one lying on the sand, was circling ten meters above my head. On seeing me, he shot upward and froze as if suspended in midair by a string.

At this point I realized that I had shot a she-eagle. I had killed a mother, his mate, and here the widower had come to seek revenge. I would have to defend myself, thereby committing yet another murder. The eagle would tear up my tent and get at me anyway. I dived into the tent, grabbed the gun, and rushed outside. In the meantime, the eagle had plummeted to the ground like a stone, snatched the body of his dead mate in his talons, and rose heavily into the air. He winged low over the desert and alighted on the knoll where the she-eagle had been sitting a couple of hours before. He had come too late: probably he had either been feeding his fledglings or hunting for some game as a treat for his mate.

Now he was sitting like a dark silhouette over her prostrate corpse, a hunched shadow — immobile and grieving — chiseled against the sweltering background of the sky.

I went inside the tent and picked up a book, but I could not read: through the gap in the tent flap I could see the dark silhouette. I went outside and fired into the air to drive him off, but he did not even start. He no longer cared if he lived or died.

It was only then that I felt the desolateness of the desert for the first time. I must have killed something vital in myself, for I noticed just then that there was not a single blade of couch-grass or reed all around — only dead thistle and dead sand dunes shifting toward the glowering skyline. It was I who had killed life in the desert.

The eagle sat on the knoll the next day and the day after, a living reproach to my conscience. Finally I went to him, unable to look on his suffering any longer, although I did not believe he'd eat the canned meat I took with me.

The metal of the gun seared my hand; I came quite near him and waved my hand right in front of his head, but the eagle did not stir. He was dead.

I put my gun down at the foot of the knoll and returned to my tent, a desperately lonely man.

In a year, after the first oil derricks had appeared in the desert, I went back home. Now my family life was quite enviable. But from the day of my experience in the desert on, a strange

alarm had cast its shadow between my wife and me. At times I get up in the middle of the night with a sinister premonition that directs my steps to my child's bed to listen to its breathing; then, when I look at my wife's face through the dark, the silhouette of the eagle perched over his prostrate mate flashes through my mind.

And then I wake my wife to make sure she's all right.

As for hunting, it goes without saying – I gave it up for good.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko