



Yuri Shcherbak

ON THE BEACH

Tamaz and I fell into the habit of frequenting this solitary place. We tried to come here while the sun was still hot enough to give us a tan. We discovered this place quite by chance – it was one of the best beaches in the world. Or perhaps simply – the best. Whenever we went there we never ran across any people, although not far off there were holiday homes, all sorts of plywood cabins, tourist lodges, and some two hundred meters away stood a grocery which, apart from the general supplies for the table, offered bottled mineral water under the name of *Aivazovsky*. Poor *Aivazovsky*¹! Was it really worthwhile wearing oneself out painting dozens of tons of water, froth and spray only to be honored in the end with mineral water, which didn't even taste good.

To tell the truth, the beach was deserted only because the bathing season had already come to an end; you can imagine what the place was like in summer. But people in these parts seemed to be so spoiled that throughout the summer they got sick and tired of the sea and by late August stopped going to the beach.

It was mid-September – and September that year was just like last love: pure, sunny, a bit sorrowful, warm in the daytime and chilly at night. The sea was clear and cool – something that obviously did not make you feel like you were in a bathtub, and that's just what the majority of holidaymakers preferred most of all. In water like this you had to swim. Before us opened the plane of a serene cool sea – here and there stirred the blue umbrellas of jellyfish, pebbles glistened through the clear water as if through a magnifying glass, little mounds with withered grass hugged the sandy beach, not far away stood an abandoned romantic-looking long boat, the desolate shoreline, colored with a slight tinge of gloom, stood out in the distance, and everywhere you looked there was not a single human soul on this seemingly endless stretch of beach.

After work Tamaz and I tore out of town in our car for a headlong raid on the highway, passing sluggish dump trucks and buses on our way: we made believe we were racing in the London-Sidney auto rally. I was navigator and Tamaz handled the wheel. We were passing through fifty European countries, cutting across the Asian continent (the surrounding landscape of rocky knolls and a reddish, sun-scorched terrain really looked like those countries), and after making detours from damaged parts of the highway, we again burst onto the concrete roadway on which Tamaz accelerated the car to 110 km/h; besides, just for the fun of it, he loved to let go of the steering wheel from time to time, and the car rushed on by itself, guided by nothing else but its own common sense: I suppose that for a car a crash is just as painful and disagreeable as

¹ Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900) - famous Russian seascape painter - *Tr.*

for young men. As soon as we turned left from the main highway I took over the steering wheel. We were entering India — a dusty road ran down toward the faded sea, the bus stop and the grocery, and from there our beach was close at hand. Much as I tried I could not get used to the gearshift lever sticking out from under the steering wheel (when the stick-shift is on the car floor it is considerably easier to operate), and several times I almost put her into reverse, but somehow everything went without a mishap.

We drove the car right up to the sand, opened the door and turned on the radio full blast — mostly we picked up the long-wave programs of Radio Bucharest which beamed beautiful jazz all day, but when it started playing the drawn-out Rumanian *doinas*², we switched over to the Radio Beacon Station transmitting other music.

During the time I worked together with Tamaz we became very close friends. For me it was still difficult to believe that this redheaded young man with fair eyes and the white eyelashes of an albino (which made him look like a Swede or a Norwegian) was actually a Georgian who hailed from the environs of Sukhumi. When we met he was residing in Simferopol where he had married a Ukrainian lass who had borne him twin girls; so as not to involve Ukraine and Georgia in a conflict, the parents named their twins Kateryna and Lamara. I made the acquaintance of Tamaz when we were standing in a long and hopeless line in the lobby of the local hotel. I came by plane from Kyiv, he arrived by car from Simferopol, and as yet we did not know each other nor did we suspect that we would be working together. The line moved slowly toward the reception desk where the woman clerk was answering everyone and all with the monotony of a programmed robot: "No vacancies... no vacancies..." Only some of the lucky ones received registration cards to fill in. Tamaz stood ahead of me — I saw him handing his passport to the desk clerk; she was about to switch on her tape recording with "no vacancies... no vac..." when her voice faltered abruptly. Something unusual had caught her eye. Tucked in Tamaz's passport was a snapshot of his twin girls. Surprised, the clerk raised her eyes on Tamaz and saw a beaming smile on his face. His smile, by the way, left no woman indifferent, and that was something I had the opportunity to become convinced of on more than one occasion. The desk clerk took another look at the passport, closed it carefully, and, as if putting herself right with the guest, said, "There's a two-room suite. Expensive, though. Unfortunately, it's all we've got left." Tamaz looked around, saw me... and we found ourselves in a grand de luxe suite — two rooms, bathroom and you name what. As it turned out, Tamaz had come to town to meet me and I was supposed to be his boss. We had a good laugh, and next day after work we went to look for a nice beach.

Sunday came around. In the morning I was working in the hospital, and at midday we, as usual, drove down to the beach. Even on Sundays we never met anyone here — true, the weather that day was not as sunny as the day before. Here and there the sea was the color of cement, and only some ten meters offshore did it show signs of greenish hues. Tamaz and I got interested in a bright strip shimmering way out in the sea, and this is where we decided to swim. Tamaz was the first to swim there — it was a long sandbank submerged knee-deep in water. Tamaz kept running along the sandbank, now joyously waving his hands like a savage, now wading through the water in a dignified manner, his head stuck up toward the sky and his arms crossed on the chest, which made him look like someone floating over the surface.

"I was the first, I was the first!" he cried out like a joyous child. "This is my island!"

"Let's call it the Tamaz Archipelago," I said.

² *Doina* - Romanian folk song usually in the form of a lament - *Tr*

"No, let it be the Island of Love," he objected, "all under water and no one can guess its real depth."

As if to confirm his words he plumped into the water up to his neck – the sandbank had ended. We fooled around on the sandbank for a long time, then I showed Tamaz how to roll a somersault in the water near the shore. In the end we got so tired we barely dragged ourselves ashore and dropped on the sand. The sand was cold; in the grass we found a heap of rusty iron on which we sat down. It was pleasant to sit on warm iron. Louis Armstrong was singing out of the radio – his hoarse voice fitted in wonderfully with the surrounding landscape. Then came the voice of his trumpet which also must have been put into his coffin, because who would have dared touch the cold mouthpiece with his lips – it would be tantamount to kissing the lips of a dead man – and in the voice of the silvery trumpet there was so much unfeigned joy. It was as if that trumpet was proclaiming the day of universal fraternization and love. We listened silently to Armstrong – and all of a sudden there was IT. We looked at each other. Not far from the shore, just level with our beach, something big and gray was floating.

"Seems like a man," said Tamaz.

I, too, thought it was a man. I felt chilly and threw a towel over my shoulders. We went up to the water edge, but could not make out anything definite. The waves rocked the object toward the abandoned long boat. So we sat down on the beach and started to wait. Some twenty minutes later, the object was washed ashore. We ran toward it, expecting it to be a log...

But it was not a log. It was the body of a dead young dolphin over three meters long. The waves beat against his side and ran down his glistening lifeless body. We stood in silence over him for a while and then, heaving a sigh, trudged toward the car.

The air was filled with the merry vernal sounds of New Orleans jazz – the last ray of true merriment amidst the efflorescence of counterpoint and the slow meditative style of "cool."

"Tamaz, look!" I cried out.

Two large dolphins were swimming along the sandbank. They jumped out of the water, lingered in one place, then swam away, disappearing and reappearing in this place. The hopeless whirling of the dolphins, their desperate jumps and dead pauses went on without end. We looked to where the dead dolphin was lying. The surf had washed him from the shore, taking him back into the sea, and now he was slowly drifting toward us... Tamaz and I quickly ran off to change our clothes. We could not look at the sea anymore now, let alone swim in it. All of a sudden the surroundings we were in stood before our eyes in quite a different light. Only now did we notice that we had been sitting on a landing craft sunk deep into the sand, probably from the time of a great landing operation of the last war; the barge was riddled with bullets, and its steel bow was torn apart by a point blank hit. The crest of the hill still showed empty German pillboxes from which the beach was blanketed with all-round fire. And across from the grocery, among dry prickly acacias, we noticed an obelisk and faded paper flowers. On the hill slope and along the beach – everywhere graves stood row up on row.

We got into the car and drove to town. Up to the turn onto the main highway we drove in silence. Then Tamaz said:

"The troops landed right here. I've been told by a cab driver..."

"Yes." I said, "I've been told the same."

He turned on the radio and picked up a program of symphonic music. We drove along a skip cableway leading to a sinter factory. In front of us the white smoke stacks of the factory shot up into the sky. Illuminated by the sun, they could have been compared with pillars supporting the sky had I not known how those solar pillars polluted the atmosphere. At several points high-

voltage lines spanned the highway overhead. Every time the car passed under them the radio's voice grew low, the music went dead, and instead there came an ominous buzzing sound as if this were the voice of heaven and conscience. Then the music of Mozart would gradually reappear — it was Mozart as far as I remember, a pure and childishly naive and remarkably harmonious Mozart resounding in our car as we waited in front of the closed lifting gate. Over us hung the twisted aorta-shaped pipes of a thermal electric station. A diesel locomotive gave a short whistle, pushing ahead railroad cars loaded with our...

Translated by Anatole Bilenko