

Brothers in Arms

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While the former Soviet peoples have grown apart immeasurably over the past decade, there are still unbreakable ties which bind them

It was already late, around midnight. The sky, the sea, and Baku itself had merged into a single black mass, welded together by the cold. I walked along the Caspian coast, looking for somewhere to eat. I was hungry and half-frozen. There was only one caf, where the lights were still on and, thankfully, the door was open.

At one table sat a man of about 30 with dark-brown eyes. He was dressed in a scrubby dressing-gown and watching television. He didn't even notice that I'd come in. I said hello and, on hearing my voice, he got up and nodded back a greeting. Unlike the barmen in most Baku cafes, he didn't have a pendulous pot-belly hanging over his belt. In fact, he looked more like a military man. From the grimace of irritation which flashed across his face, I could see he was in a vile mood.

"You're not a local. Where are you from?" he asked in Russian.

"From the Urals."

"From Russia?!" The corners of his lips folded downwards.

Then, shaking his head and reasoning that a customer is a customer, whatever his origins, the landlord of the cafe began to prepare a meal. Soon, the smell of frying meat and potatoes filled the little cafe. He brought the supper, and grudgingly sloshed a shot of vodka into my glass. After a while, he sat down at my table and told me his name was Vagif.

We drank a toast to my arrival. Vagif poured us each another shot, then left the table abruptly and returned with a packet of cigarettes. He smoked one after another, keeping his silence while I ate.

"You know," he said at length. "I had a friend in Russia once. We fought together in Afghanistan: I shared everything with him -- my bread and my blanket. We were like brothers. I even dragged him off the battlefield when he was wounded. A good few kilometres I dragged him. Do you understand what that means?"

I nodded understandingly while Vagif wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his dressing-gown. "I thought, as soon as the war's over, I'll come home and save up to get married. And then our own war started here, in Karabakh. There were Russian soldiers fighting side by side with the Armenians.

"I joined up. They gave me command of a detachment. One night my men captured two Russian mercenaries. It turned out that my friend was one of them. He'd been badly beaten up. His face was covered in bruises and he could hardly stand on his feet. But I recognised him straightaway. A blond-haired guy with a birthmark over his lips - you recognise someone like that immediately.

"I nearly embraced him, but then I remembered myself. Our eyes met, and he recognised me. A smile

appeared on his lips but, before he could call out my name, I ordered my men to take them away to the cells.

"In the evening, I called him in to be interrogated. On his own, without witnesses. 'Do you remember Afghanistan?' I asked him. 'What are you doing here, you bastard?!"

"He answered: 'Vagif, I didn't know I'd end up in Karabakh. They told us we were being sent to the North Caucasus. And I'm an officer, you know it yourself...I couldn't refuse."

"How many men have you killed?!"

"Vanya said that he hadn't killed anyone, that he'd only arrived the day before. I made him swear on it. He swore. After that he dropped to the floor - he lost consciousness. It turned out they'd broken his ribs.

"I bought him a train ticket and sent him back to Russia. I even gave him money for the road."

The vodka was working its usual magic, and I was becoming sentimental. Vagif continued his story.

"Vanya phoned me today. For a while, he didn't say anything at all. I kept quiet too, because I knew it was him straightaway. And then he said, 'Vagif!' And I said, 'You've got the wrong number!'"

At this point, I interrupted his story and said, "But Vagif! So much time has passed since then! Why can't you forgive him?!"

"You know," he said very quietly, "if he phones me tomorrow and says he's in trouble, I'll drop everything and go to him."

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