

Jan Rybak

Khan Tengri from the North. Unheroic Notes



Annotation

One of the most vivid and memorable stories about travelling and climbing from the collection of mountain.ru website. The text undoubtedly has literary merit and can be enjoyed by those interested in tourism and mountaineering as well as by everyone else.

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Khan Tengri from the North. Unheroic Notes

He who has done nothing heroic can only be honest.

Jan Rybak. Thought first and last

Mountain

There comes a period in every normal person's life when he has to climb his seven-thousandth mountain. For some time now, I have had a restlessness in my soul. The number 7000 beckoned me. I became thoughtful and absent-minded. I weighed my strength and gathered courage. I tried myself on my Nepalese love at first sight - Pumori, periodically distracting myself with fleeting romances with other, quite attractive peaks: Baruntze, Tilicho, Korzhenevskaya Peak. The itch was getting stronger and stronger, and finally I felt that the moment of truth had come - my family would let me go, my job did not object, I had a company. This year I am going to climb the seven thousandth mountain! There was also an irrational reason, which, because of the importance of the planned event, I did not risk to neglect. I noticed that on the round, anniversary dates of my life, there are events that determine it, my life, for many years. My greatest fortunes, beginnings and breakthroughs fell on those years. So it was in my twenties, so it was in my thirties, and now, in my forties, it was pleasant to realise that in the forthcoming ascent the unknowable would be on my side....

The attentive reader may notice that Khan Tengri is absent from the short list of the only and desirable ones. That's right, he was farther down on my list, perhaps,

only unbeatable Victory, and it's not because Khan is a bad mountain. On the contrary, Khan is an awesome mountain. Too good for me - too steep, too cold, with too much elevation difference between base camp and summit. Too many people love it, too easy to get to and so - too many people, too many rails. Too many "too's." I wanted something quieter, quieter, something more intimate, I would say. But one supposes and one disposes. Like a virtuoso billiard player, sending the ball into the hole in a few calculated strokes, He (well, the one who disposes...) drove me to Khan Tengri. At one point I was even offered to go to Victory, but that was too much, I threatened to quit the game, and we got together with Him on Khan. Clearly, the billiards is only a metaphor, and the lever to move my plans was financial difficulties, mine and my team's. As we moderated our appetites, the list of summits was reduced at the expense of the most promising and tasty ones, and in the end there were only Khan Tengri and Lenin Peak. Two peaks, opposite in all their properties and parameters. We chose Khan for its swiftness of outlines, stropy character and beautiful name (may the leader of the world proletariat forgive me). As they say, if to fall from the horse, so from a good one..... And so, a couple of months before the trip, just when the sweet moment of buying tickets was approaching, another unforeseen financial disaster befell my team. It happens. It happens to entire countries, even seemingly prosperous ones. My friends called me on a warm May evening and officially declared bankruptcy. I realised that I was alone with Khan Tengri. In the old days I would have shrugged my shoulders tiredly and postponed the failed ascent for a year or two, but this time I was possessed by a reckless "now or never", and I decided to realise my dream at all costs. Now and only now!

Partners

At first I had hope that in my wide circle of acquaintances I would find someone willing to share the climb of such a notable mountain with me, but pretty soon I found myself standing alone at an internet crossroads looking for anyone, "Hey, anyone at all..." You might say I just went to the panel. And so, at the moment when I started to prepare my unstable psyche for solo climbing, I found a lonely soul tormented by the same problems on a mountaineering forum. A certain Volodya from Latvia, who had his regular team broken up, was looking for people willing to go to Khan. We exchanged letters. To the rich initial information my potential climbing partner added only that he was 39 and that last year he had climbed Lenin Peak. Natural tact and the paltry supply on the partner market prevented me from asking further. About a week later, another fish was caught in the wide-open seine. Michel, to whom I had suggested I join the trip or at least find someone suitable among his many mates, called. He told me that his friend Eyal just dreamed of taking part in the expedition to Khan Tengri and even tried to do it three or four years ago. He had begged some Israeli mountaineers to take him on board, but these snobs had turned him down, citing his youth and complete lack of mountaineering experience. "You can understand them..." I thought and asked: "How old is he now, and what does he know how to do?" "He's somewhere around 22-23, and he's a good rock climber. But, if you don't mind, he'll give you a call and you can talk to him yourself" - Michel replied and added - "In terms of fitness, he's a beast. I can't keep up with him." No, I don't mind. Why not talk to a man, especially if he's a beast. In terms of fitness.

My conversation with Eyal had left me in a state of turmoil. Subconsciously I was determined to refuse him, but I couldn't find a reasonable excuse. The guy is young and athletic, he climbed multipitch in Yosemite, so he knows how to handle ropes on the rocks. But who needs it on Hana, where everything is rappelled. Doesn't know how to insure on snow and ice? Not good. But it's not necessary on Khana for the same reason... He has no mountaineering experience, but at the age of 15 he climbed Kilimanjaro, at the age of 17 he trekked alone in the Himalayas, climbing above 5000 metres, and claims that he had no problems with acclimatisation. True, it's all with

and I've seen a lot of things in my life. I lack personal contact - to see a person, to talk to him, to feel what he breathes. We agree to meet on the rocks in Beit Oren, to climb together and discuss all aspects of our possible, so to speak, co-operation. I don't say yes or no, leaving myself an escape route.

It's Friday. A hot afternoon. At three o'clock in the afternoon, when the first shadow had already fallen on the hot Batoran trails, Jesus Christ himself came out of a noticeably shabby car. "That's who I haven't hiked the mountains with yet..." - I thought, looking at the lanky young man with the stern biblical face. Bare, dusty feet (how did he drive?!), a reddish, slightly bifurcated beard and lush, wavy hair left no room for doubt: in front of me was the Son of God. Or let's put it this way: he could have been anyone - a yogi, a beatnik, a rock guitarist, or Jesus himself, but he looked least of all like the mountaineer you'd imagined him to be after watching films "Vertical" or "Vertical Limit..."

I looked around. The guy was calm and intelligent, not talking nonsense and not making a big deal out of himself. He was an excellent belayer - almost without looking up, he tracked my every movement. He gave out the rope without any slack, but he didn't pull it once. He did not climb too steeply for a man who climbs in Yosemite, but the reference to "three years thrown away by the army" (his expression) sounded logical. However, he climbed all the routes that I had climbed too, with the only difference that he had seen them for the first time, and for me Bate Oren is my home. I didn't really care how he climbed. It was important for me to make sure that he was who he said he was, because I had recently experienced a severe mental trauma: I had met a man whose story about him, supposedly a great and promising climber, was as close to reality as an advert for a Bounty bar is to the life of starving Papuans on an island where the last coconut palm had rotted away.

That same evening, I called him. "Eyal," I said, "I don't mind you joining me, but I want you to think it over for yourself. I'm certainly taking a risk going up a mountain like this with someone I don't know and who has no experience, but it's my choice and my problem. I want you to realise that you are taking a double risk yourself - firstly because you have no experience and secondly because I don't have enough for two. I am not a guide and I am by no means a superman. For me, this mountain is my little Everest, which I may or may not be able to climb. So - take your time, think again." "Yes, I will think..." - he said, and I could sense from his voice that he was hesitating as much as I was. When he called the next time there was no more doubt in his voice. "I have signed up for a two-week course in Bezenghi. In the second half of July, just before our trip to Khan Tengri," he told me in a cheerful tone.

I wonder, though, how we will communicate there: Volodya speaks Russian and Latvian, Eyal speaks Hebrew and English, and I speak Russian, Hebrew and, with a limp, English. The subsets of languages we speak have no common overlap. I'll be the translator, and every joke I'll have to tell twice.... However, with a certain amount of healthy cynicism, one can imagine some marvellous advantages of my allocated position. Take, for example, the procedure for making general decisions. I, say, think I should go to the left (literally, literally...), while my fellow travellers go to the right. Well: I tell Eyal in Hebrew that Volodya and I have decided in favour of the left option, and I tell Volodya in Russian that we decided it together with Eyal. In the end, by a simple majority, the group decides to go left.....

A cry of the soul

And so, August has come. A time when the merciless sun bakes the Land of Israel. A time when a rare bird flies to the middle of the Dead Sea, and if it does, it falls burnt to death in its salty waters. A time when you want to take off

the last shirt and give it to anyone, and preferably to the enemy. The ubiquitous Jews retreat from the molten streets under the cover of air conditioners, before the invention of which life on planet Israel was impossible. On weekends, they push out the Mediterranean Sea, which has turned yellow from heat and urea. The country is burning out in the sun like the upholstery of a sofa thrown into a landfill. The weather forecast is recorded on a looped tape, but there is no news and, in fact, I don't care about it because it's VERY hot. The Arabs are still shooting in Gaza, but somehow sluggishly, without excitement, and more and more often at their own people. August in Israel is a dead, hopeless time.

And now, imagine: at this ruinous time, when my unfortunate colleagues are munching on a project as appetising as a dead man's legs, I board a white-winged liner and drift away to a place where everything is the exact opposite of the decrepit world I am leaving. Where everything is on the edge and to the limit. Frost so cold that flesh turns to stone. The sun is such that my face turns to shreds. Ploughing so hard you forget your name. If fear, it's no less than fear for life itself. And if there's a victory, it's the kind that money can't buy. Everything here is from edge to edge horizontally and from earth to sky vertically. There are no transitions and halftones - life at full speed.

You who ask me why I need all "this", do you realise what an inexpressible sense of liberation overwhelms me when I board this liner? What number of primitive generations, polished by nature to fight and die, exult in me? What a "ruinous delight" is it to dare to do what I almost certainly lack the strength to do, but which I have dreamed of all my life? Don't tell me you don't understand it, don't make me sad. A man cannot be so hopelessly estranged from his origins.

Fathers and children

I hate it when children are speculated on!

"How can you take such risks - you have children!" - I had heard this song more than once and more than twice, and whereas before it had caused me deafening irritation, now, more and more often, it made me yawn.

And how can you, dear ones, measure the risk I am taking? How can you compare it with the risk of dying of heart attack, hypertension and diabetes? Why don't you give the best of your precious bodies to your children? Don't exercise for the sake of their cloudless childhood, get nervous to the point of heart attack at morning meetings, overeat and over-drink? Would the death of a cigarette-smoking, alcohol-soaked, or obese parent orphan the children any less than the death of a parent who is a mountain climber, skydiver, or submariner? Are you saying that time spent in the mountains is stolen from children? Oh, come on! You'd think that if you spend it on the beach or the sofa, it would enrich them immensely....

Do you know how proud a son is that his father is a mountaineer? Do you know what that means to a 10-13 year old boy? Are you sure your presence in his field of vision for an extra three weeks a year can replace that for him? And it makes absolutely no difference what kind of mountaineer his dad is - a steep pioneer of the Himalayan walls or a conqueror of high snowdrifts in low mountains. He will learn the basic ABCs: that it is good to be courageous, that fear and weakness must be overcome, that the Earth is beautiful and it is unforgivable laziness and stupidity to leave it unexplored.

The evening before I left, I went up to my son's house and sat by his bedside. It's a tradition my family started many years ago, which, to be honest, is mostly my wife's responsibility, but in the last month before the trip, I'm trying to make up for lost time. We talk quietly, and I tell him for the tenth time about the mountain and the route, while he tries to build a coordinate system in his childish head, still lacking a lot of basic information, in which he will place the mountain and myself.

– Dad, he asks me, how much lower is this mountain than Everest? A kilometre?

– Almost two.

– So it's not a very high mountain?

– No, it's a very high mountain.

– Are you sure you can climb it?

– No, I'm not sure at all. I've never been to such high peaks before. But that's the fun of trying to do something new, something you don't know if you can or not. It's like a game. What's the fun of playing with someone you keep beating?

– How many people can climb this mountain?

Good question... Its subtext is clear: "Dad, after all, are you a tough climber or can every dead guy do what you do?..."

– Not too few climbers can climb this mountain, but actually, it's a mountain for experienced climbers. A short silence.

– Would XXX's dad (calling out the name of a school friend) be able to climb this mountain?

A specific question designed to clear up any ambiguities and set the record straight! I laugh.

– No, Daddy XXX definitely could not climb it. He is not a mountaineer and does not do sports in general. And in general, in the whole of Israel there are only 15-20 people who climbed to the summits above 7000 metres.

– In all of Israel?! Wow...

I feel like he's blown away - there are so few people in his entire "vast homeland" who can compare to his father.... There they are - the missing co-dinates. Before I've even climbed the mountain, I've already visibly grown in his eyes! I feel like a cheat.

– Is it very dangerous up there on that mountain?

I wonder what "very dangerous" means. I don't want to get into statistical calculations.

– This mountain is not one of the most dangerous mountains, though it all depends on what route you take - I answer evasively - we deliberately chose a route that is harder, but safer. You know? We deliberately reduced our chances of climbing to the top to reduce the risk.

– It's time for bed, Tomka," I say, and we sit in silence for a while.

– Dad, don't think I care if you climb the mountain or not. I don't want you to go anywhere at all.

I feel like my whole carefully constructed theory of the universe has rocked and collapsed.

I feel devastated.

Everything that could and should have been discussed, we have already discussed, and now we are flying silently down the motorway to the songs of the Night Snipers. Trapped in a tiny capsule, we're hurtling through constellations of roadside lights, and I feel my ordinary, everyday, cosy, like worn pajamas life letting go of me with every kilometre left behind. I grip the steering wheel tighter to feel the connection with the shaken reality and say in my mind a phrase that makes a sweet dumbness run through my whole body: "I'm going to Khan Tengri!". Tanya stares silently out the dark window, thinking about something of her own. We are sitting half a metre away from each other, but I can physically feel the chasm that separates us growing.

At the airport, we stand in front of entrance number three, and the crowds of people flow around us, with scraps of phrases, laughter and the rustle of trolleys being pulled across the waxed floor. We're waiting for Eyal.

Finally, he appears: lanky, thin, scraggly, wearing an honestly earned T-shirt with the inscription "Bezengi" and drags me to meet his father, who, for some unknown reason, stayed outside waiting for us. I reluctantly obey. The last thing I need is to meet the father of my climbing partner, who is 17 years younger than me. After that I will no longer be able to build a relationship with him as an equal with an equal, and the weight of responsibility, not balanced by the possibility of influencing his actions, will weigh on my shoulders throughout our expedition.

There were two men waiting for us in the street by the parked car, one of whom quickly stepped towards me and shook my hand. He was tall, but stooped and stiff, and, smiling shyly, mumbled something to me in a professor's inarticulate voice. As it turned out later, he was a professor, and he taught some kind of computer science at American universities. He was so unprincipled older than I was that I felt like a child killer, a drug dealer who had addicted his son to a cursed potion. As I glanced left and right, I mumbled something reassuring, and he replied, apparently sensing the awkwardness of my situation, that he was relying on Eyal's common sense, that he was no longer a child and had the right to choose what he wanted to do with his life. His eyes were troubled, and his smile was a little guilty. We said goodbye, they got into the car and drove away, and I was left with the feeling that I had been abandoned with a child in my arms.... I thought about the fact that if something happened to me on the mountain, it would only be a very difficult experience for Eyal, and if something happened to him, no amount of logic and common sense would save me from remorse for the rest of my life.

I quickly realised that Eyal was not a child, but a strong and independent person, and I forgot about those stupid complexes.

Uzbek Airlines

Prejudice owns us. I was not serene, putting myself at the mercy of Uzbek Airlines, but they, these lines, showed themselves at their best. Everything was on the level - a brand new A-300 with all the necessary amenities, and food with a hint of national flavour, and miniature, smiling, cute Uzbek stewardesses. Take-offs and landings were on time and completed successfully. We spent the five-hour flight Tel Aviv - Tashkent in mutually enriching conversations on all kinds of topics, including our own biographies, all 150 years of world mountaineering development and the forecast for the next 150, as well as the prospects of our ascent, which seemed so undeniably beautiful to Eyal that he spoke about it as if in the past tense. And, of course, (without it!) we talked a lot about politics. Finally, I got some idea of the man with whom I was flying to conquer the highest and most severe peak of my life. He was a young man from a good professor's family, who by his 23 years - minus 3 years of army - had managed to visit, and often repeatedly, all continents except Antarctica. He was liberally educated, well-read, and infinitely liberal, as befits a good boy from an intelligent Jewish family living much of the time in the United States. I say this, though ironically, with benevolent understanding. I sympathise with young liberals with a warm heart and an honest mind, because by the age of 40 they make fine, sober-minded conservatives without cannibalistic tendencies. I can't stand 40-year-old liberals with a still hot heart and consider them to be an extremely harmful breed of creatures.

The transit hall of the Tashkent airport amazed me with its absurd splendour. After passing through registration and passport control, organised according to the vapid Soviet models, we stepped out into a spacious gallery. The walls, lined with noble grey marble and enlivened by a golden pattern running over the top, rendered me speechless. The staircase of palatial proportions was flanked by obscenely splendid balustrades. At its foot in the centre of the hall gaped a fountain, dried up in time immemorial, still beautiful in its posthumous archaeological beauty.

And all this lovely airline donkishness was rudely desecrated by long rows of man-hating metal benches. Transit passengers were encouraged to spend long hours mortifying their flesh while contemplating the beautiful. Isn't that the path to ultimate perfection?! When I was already halfway to nirvana, we were invited to board a flight from Tashkent to Almaty.

On flights, which the Uzbek airline, out of old habit, considers domestic, it still allows itself some intimate familiarity with passengers. Everything

it's simpler here, it's friendly. And the small inbred aircraft, and the dry rations, and the girlishly inept stewardesses. They were very different, these girls: one was modest and diligent, and the other was defiantly bitchy. I savoured watching her serve of "fellow passengers", half of whom were foreigners. When she noticed the appealing gestures of another spoilt individual, she swam leisurely towards him, her pretty nose smoothly lifting upwards like the fuselage of an aeroplane about to take off. When she came within the distance at which politeness was inevitable, she squeezed out a smile, like toothpaste from a dried-up tube. At the same time her eyes seemed to say, "I'd like to smack you on the head, you miserable goat..."

Having fulfilled her deeply hated passenger's wish and hissed longingly "Ply-ee-ee-z..." she floated away just as leisurely.

At the same time, on the same aeroplane, a mind-blowing Kazakh woman was parading in front of the passengers flying business class. A real mannequin with a figure flowing like oriental silk and the peaceful face of a man to whom life had promised everything and had already begun to fulfil its promises.

The eternal class hatred of tourist class to business class flowed through my veins!

Ode to Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan won our hearts even on the plane ramp. These hearts were prepared and softened by the image of a heavenly, literally and figuratively, Kazakh stewardess, and we accepted her country easily and wholeheartedly. We liked everything - the modern airport, and the round-faced soldiers in miniskirts, and the unexpectedly nonchalant customs, and even the severe but fair passport control, equipped with computers and video cameras on a scale that only a rich oriental imagination is capable of. We liked the fact that a discreetly smiling young man was waiting for us at the entrance with two neat signs on which our names were written - mine in Russian and Eyal's in English. And, of course, we liked Almaty - green, sparkling with fountains, summer, cheerful. Quiet, tastefully dressed young couples strolled along the shady streets. A stream of imported cars, expensive clothes shops, almost sterile cleanliness by Asian standards. If I was pleasantly surprised, Eyal was blown away.

"No, it's not Asia, it's not Asia..." - he wailed, looking out of the window of the jeep in which we were being driven from the airport. "Pay attention," I told him, with an inexplicable pride, "this is basically a country with a Muslim population. And look at the way they're dressed. See? No burqas, no headscarves. Normal modern people." I said it as if I had raised the population of Kazakhstan with my own hands. "There!" - I said, "if there's one good thing you can say about the former Soviet government, it's that it kept its unfortunate peoples from religious fanaticism." "But that is all that can be said good of it..." - I added quietly, so as not to be misunderstood. Eyal nodded his head in agreement.

In the shadow of Kazbek

To end with praise, which, though contrary to my character, is absolutely unavoidable in this story because of the unusually large number of good people I met on this trip, I will tell you about the host. We are talking about a whole organisation made up of nice people, and this despite the fact that an ordinary organisation is capable of recycling the best human material into known what. In Kazakhstan we were hosted by Kazbek Valiev's firm. There were only two reasons that made us turn to this particular firm, but both were quite convincing: the lowest price among all those offered to us for approximately equivalent services and the relative safety of the northern route served by Valiev's firm.

Just to say that I was satisfied with the level of service would be a black ingratitude. All the employees of this firm, whom we had the good fortune to encounter in Almaty, on the way to the Base Camp and in it itself, were so nice, friendly and helpful (in the best sense of the word) that I never realised whether Kazbek Valiev selects them according to this principle or grows them himself on his homestead. He himself, by the way, does not look like an affectionate teddy bear.

I don't know what traumas distorted my psyche in my early childhood, but I am suspicious of subjects with whom I enter into business relations. When it comes to unfamiliar companies, and even those to which all services are paid in advance, this suspicion takes a form close to manic, and only my fatalistic worldview and sense of humour help me to survive the period of dependence on a supposedly hostile organisation. Imagine my delight when I received everything I was contracted to receive in the promised quantities and on time: the food was excellent, the tents were spacious, the mattresses were soft, the radios worked, the helicopters flew. And the most incredible thing: I was never forgotten anywhere! The company worked like a well-oiled machine. But perhaps the most pleasant thing was that in Base Camp I felt not so much a client as a welcome guest, and I didn't care how justified this feeling was. I was smiled at, I was helped, I was escorted to the mountain with a kind word and welcomed with hot tea. My huge thanks to all these people!

Karkara

Our stay in Almaty was like a rapid slide down a bobsleigh chute - everything was rolled out, thought out, and organised. Straight from the airport we were brought to the office, where, finally, my long epistolary romance with a girl called Yulia came to its logical conclusion - we met face to face. The virtual persona appeared to me as a classic stern secretary. I have lived for many years in a country where people are so hot and the distance between them is so short that any communication is like a small volcanic eruption. Here, you come to work in a wrinkled T-shirt and clap your boss on the shoulder. In the most prim and proper e-mail exchanges, the second to third message begins with "Hai!" and ends with "Bye!" Therefore, an intensive month-long correspondence, albeit a business one, seemed to me a sufficient reason to "loosen my tie" a little, figuratively speaking. No way! The icy triangles of e-mails kept falling out of the Inbox folder of my Outlook. So when a pretty blonde girl with a slightly shy smile appeared in front of me, I was pleasantly surprised.

We were led through the wood-panelled and mountainous expanse to the third floor and there, in Yulia's office, our immediate future was described to us in detail and with care. At first the conversation was started in English, but Yulia and Eyal were chattering so much in English that I began to lose the thread of the conversation and quickly stopped this outrage. The discussion of our affairs now took place in Russian, and for Eyal I translated all the essential points into Hebrew. I was always half a phase behind: after listening to Yulia, I would address Eyal in pure Russian, then I'd realise and switch to Hebrew. When I finished translating, I would turn to Yulia in Hebrew, and only when I caught a timid "I don't understand" in her eyes would I switch to Russian.

Yulia took our passports for Kyrgyz visa (oh these visas! I will tell you more about them in another place and time...), and we returned to our jeep and rushed to the supermarket with the honest Soviet name "Yubileyny", where, as Yulia assured us, we could find all imaginable and inconceivable products of mountaineering food. In our foray into the supermarket we were accompanied by the same young Kazakh boy who had so successfully met us at the airport. Two minor disappointments befell me in this food temple - there were no instant juices and no special freeze-dried foods. What Julia proudly called "high-altitude food" turned out to be ordinary Bistrov porridge, Galina Blanca broths and instant second courses. These dishes are good for going "outdoors", but at an altitude of 5-6 thousand metres, where water boils long before the desired 100 degrees, they need to be cooked.

In short, this supermarket is pretty good, but it doesn't sell anything mountain specific.

The mountain of food in our trolley was growing like dough. We took everything by the dozens, everything by the kilograms. Bistrov owed us a percentage of sales. And now we're owed advertising fees. The scrupulously and economically calculated layout, which took up so little space on paper, materialised into something unbearable. Time was passing, the list of products was still not over, and in the meantime, we still had to have time to cross the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border, which is closed on the notorious lock at 10 o'clock in the evening. Our escort, losing his oriental imperturbability and not daring to push us, dear customers, began to push the saleswomen, who in response with an independent look twitched their shoulders. I was rushing around the super like a hare in the spotlight, the products were no longer counted, but were grabbed by handfuls and raked from the shelves with both hands.

Finally, sweaty and dishevelled, we rolled the grocery trolley out of the supermarket door. Just for a minute we popped into the office, where our passports, ennobled with Kyrgyz visas, were already waiting for us. Caring Julia escorted us "to the porch" and wished us a successful ascent. And here we are already leaving Almaty along the motorway drenched in honey sunshine, on both sides of which endless watermelon and melon markets stretch.

Despite the sleepless night, I stare out of the window at the velvet rows of poplars along the road, at the distant smoky chain of mountains on the horizon, at the small villages, where a backward villager in national clothes flashes by, at Central Asia, where I had not had a chance to visit in my first life. And only when our jeep was frozen in the middle of the endless Kazakh steppe, covered with a blue bowl of sky, I allowed myself to relax. I woke up when we were winding between low coloured mountains, deserted and lifeless, only overgrown with tufts of dry grass. Then we crossed a wide flat valley and entered the wet foothills of the Tien Shan with lush grasses, islands of spruce forest and rushing rivers with shrivelled grey water. A couple of times we passed young dzhigits riding on dry, wiry horses. They gave us signs only they could understand and laughed merrily, flashing white and silver teeth on their sun-baked faces.

In 3.5 hours, having overcome 270 km, we passed the village of Karkara, and together with it we left behind such an important attribute of civilisation as an asphalt road. The remaining 12 kilometres to the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border took us more than half an hour on a bombed-out dirt road. For the first time in my life I saw a driver driving around the road on a "clean field", which was more suitable for driving than this, if I may say so, "motorway". Now perhaps it's time to say a word or two about borders and visas, two things that accompany a traveller like a toothache to a sweet tooth. As I have already mentioned, you can approach Khan Tengri from two sides - from the north and from the south. Its northern side is on the territory of Kazakhstan, and its southern side is in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, if you have chosen Almaty as your starting point, it is logical to assume that you will only need a Kazakh visa to arrive to the northern base camp of Khan Tengri. This is important, firstly because each visa costs about \$100, and secondly because crossing the borders of the former Soviet empire is a below average pleasure. I knew that from Almaty we will go by car to the base camp Karkara, located in the foothills of Tien Shan at an altitude of 2250m, spend a day there in acclimatisation walks and then we will be thrown by helicopter to the North Inylchek glacier, to the foot of the great and terrible mountain Khan Tengri.... What I didn't know was that several kilometres of the road just before Karkar's camp pass through the territory of sovereign Kyrgyzstan. Either the Soviet cartographer was drunk and his hand shook, or (what is much more likely) the roads in the former Union were laid without taking into account the future right of nations to self-determination, but this unpleasant fact came to the surface at the very last moment, when our Kazakh visas were already ordered and were in the process of registration. Until recently, there was an unspoken agreement on this curious section of the border, according to which the Kyrgyz did not require a separate visa from those travelling to Karkara, but this year they decided to put their border economy in order, and putting order in Asian countries is inevitably associated with the erection of new unexpected obstacles for the

of gullible aliens. And only with the passage of time everything gets settled, and the spontaneous system of bribes and patronage establishes convenient detours through the minefield of idiotic laws.

Anyway, a couple of weeks before my departure, I received an e-mail from Julia, written in such official language that it clearly showed my fear of an inadequate reaction to the information it contained. Eyal and I were informed that for reasons beyond the control of the company, the visa order at the unfortunate section of the border has changed not in our favour, and it will cost us an additional \$80 per person. All bureaucratic worries are taken care of by the company. In order not to lose the face of a self-respecting client, I reserved indignation in my reply, although it was absolutely clear to me that violence against my pocket was inevitable. What wasn't clear was what kind of pleasure could be derived from it ... Because of several kilometres of stupid dusty dirt road we had to carry a full-fledged Kyrgyz visa, and our usual Kazakh visa had to undergo an "upgrade" and turn into a double one. But the border crossing itself gave me the very pleasure that partly justified the violence against my pocket.

So, crossing the border!

On the Kazakh side, the border post was in the process of being completed or rebuilt, which is generally characteristic of this rapidly developing country. What amazed me to no end was the computer equipment of this point, which was not inferior to the capital's airport. We were filmed on a video camera and entered into the bottomless computer networks of the Kazakh border service. All this was happening, by the way, at the end of the world, in a pure field, in the sheep wilderness. I willingly believe that not even a fly would fly through such an elaborate border checkpoint, but since there were no border fences visible on either side of it and all the way to the horizon, whole swarms of these flies could fly back and forth across the border, carrying anything they wanted.

In general, on the Kazakh side everything was quiet and decent, i.e. boring. The soldiers were dressed according to their uniforms, the officer did not pester with stupid conversations, no one was rude or begging. There is simply nothing to tell. On the Kyrgyz side, however, a feast of life awaited us. We crossed the barrier line and stopped. Three half-clothed Basmachas rolled out of a shabby carriage, which was like an outpost and symbol of the Kyrgyz state, and began to look at us with joyful animation. I am not sure that what all three of them were wearing could have made up one complete set of Kyrgyz border guard ammunition. In the tanned faces of the border guards I could read a simple-minded banditism touchingly combined with childish curiosity. Then, after a pause, as if to emphasise the importance of his person, a fellow officer came out of the carriage with a masterly gait. He was distinguished from his team by his Slavic face, relatively complete, though not the first freshness of his uniform, and a meaningful expression of the cunning eyes of an old servant and a cunning cuss. He playfully looked round our company, as if trying on what he could do to us. Or, rather, assessing what he could afford to do to us. Our driver got out of the jeep and handed him the consignment notes for the cargo, that is, for Eyal and me. The "Master of the Taiga" asked the driver questions with a slightly jocular suspicion, and he answered him with contrived confidence, but a little nervously.

And then Eyal got bored of sitting in the jeep while having such a wonderful encounter with representatives of a country he did not know. The door opened and he stood before the "outpost commander". Only a man who had served in the Soviet Army could imagine the impression such a person would make on an old Soviet officer: a lanky, patched Jew with a sleepy, serene face and with his barefoot boots unlaced. I froze in sweet anticipation. The man's face was petrified with amazement. He opened his mouth, then closed it. His cheekbones flared on his tanned cheekbones, and his eyes narrowed into slits. I sensed Eyal was going to be sent to "shave a point" for the rest of the month.... "You should tie your shoelaces!" - he hissed, looking up at Eyal from below, but unusually haughty. Just that he didn't spit.... "What did he say?" - Eyal inquired good-naturedly. "Welcome..." - I ironically explained. Good

the serviceman's mood was visibly spoilt. We were asked to show our passports.

And then Eyal made another simple-minded mistake. He pulled off his crumpled T-shirt with the battle inscription "Bezenghi" and took off his weighty wallet belt. The military man grinned happily. The grin seemed to fall out of him on its own, contrary to his wish and previous mood. "Wow!" - he said - "Wow-oh!..... What a nice purse! It must have a lot of money in it?" The good mood came back to him again.

"What is he saying?" - Eyal asked. "He liked your wallet. Hide it away..." - I replied, and Eyal tucked his treasury inside his wide hiking trousers with quiet dignity. After taking our papers, Ali Baba retired to his carriage, accompanied by his driver, while Eyal and I remained in the company of the bandits. Eyal was in the mood for socialising and moved determinedly towards the smashing trio, who looked at each other cheerfully and flashed their silver teeth. "Where are you from, eh?" - One of them asked Eyal. "From what country, eh? Country, huh? Eh... Where, eh?" - as he realised the linguistic gulf separating them, the border guard's speech became more and more incoherent. He waved his hands helplessly, searching for a gesture to clarify his question. "What's he asking?" - Eyal turned to me.

"He asks where you're from," I explained. "Yisrael. Ay em from Yisrael," Eyal said poking himself in the chest with his finger to remove any doubt. "A Jew, is that it?!" - questioned the Kyrgyz warrior in amazement. Eyal didn't know what the word "Jew" meant, so he poked himself in the chest again and repeated, "Yisrael. Ay em ju." "Well, Israel means Jew!" - said the Kirghiz affirmatively. His comrades looked anxious. Before them stood a living agent of world Zionism, and they were agonising over what sort of behaviour would be considered worthy in the face of such an unusual guest.

"And we are Muslims!" - suddenly said one of them proudly, chin up and setting aside his foot in a dusty boot. "Oh! Moslem!" - exclaimed Eyal. "Ai em joo een yu ar moslem!" - he was delighted to hear such a wonderful dialogue between two brotherly peoples, Jewish and Muslim..... I silently enjoyed this ironic scene and did not interfere. The meeting of two civilisations in all its glory!...

Kazbek Valiev met us in Karkar. It seems that meeting his clients in person is his style, and it is a pleasure. Especially for me, for whom, unlike Eyal, he is a man of legend. He came over, shook our hands, and, after asking a few routine questions, explained where we'd be staying, eating, and sleeping. Despite his formidable appearance - a harsh bear with an impenetrable face - he spoke quietly and thoughtfully. However, his hidden authority and strength of character were quite noticeable.

The camp boys came from all directions and grabbed our rucksacks and dragged them towards the tents. I don't like that. I was brought up on machoist principles, and when someone tries to hand me a rucksack, I feel put down. Even well-fed gorillas - porters of expensive Swiss hotels - don't risk touching my backpack with their cleanly washed paws....



We liked Karkar's base camp. And who could not like these slender phalanxes of tents - like guardsmen in white and red uniforms lined up on a green meadow before a decisive attack. Who can leave indifferent these soft mountains overgrown with dark Tien Shan spruce, this air inviting to flight, this sky, serene as a pioneer's dream. Whose soul will not melt from the warmth of fat crunchy sticks, drunk with fragrant tea from a white, marshmallow-like bowl, on the rounded side of which flutters the fluttering shadow of a summer curtain wavering in the cool breeze.



The tents were double, with a spacious vestibule in which we piled our half-unpacked rucksacks. The sleeping space was covered with two blue foam mattresses of bourgeois thickness. Never in my life had I been so obscenely comfortable in the mountains. The only thing that slightly poisoned my life was the hordes of little "pinchers" - nasty, mochi-like creatures with bifurcated tails. They were quick and friendly in taking our stuff, and I couldn't put my hand into my own rucksack without shuddering. The sweet moment of revenge came only on arrival to the base camp of Khan Tengri. For two more days the nasty creatures crawled out of my rucksack to the frosty expanses of the Northern Inylchek. Every last one of them died out like mammoths in the ice age.

The morning was sunny and cool. The wind blew evenly and without interruption. It was spacious and a little anxious, as it should be on the first morning of a new adventure. Every journey is like life: it has ups and downs, victories and defeats. Sometimes it is like a continuous light holiday, sometimes it reaches its highest point and collapses, and sometimes it turns into a shabby burden and quietly rots. But the beginning of the journey is always beautiful, as only childhood, which we invent for ourselves when we become adults, can be beautiful.

I got up leisurely, visited the iron-rattling latrine, and washed myself with ice-cold, bone-chilling water. For breakfast we were served oatmeal, so rich that the spoon not only stood in it, but tinkled if you bent it back and let it go. Cheese, sausage, delicious cheese rolls, jam and plenty of hot tea. I was used to the anaemic breakfasts of the engineering officer and the heavy man's rations broke me quite quickly.

"Why aren't you eating?" - The waitress, a frail, serious girl with eyes the colour of Tianshan lakes, asked sympathetically. "And we don't work, that's why we don't eat..." - I answered guiltily for the two of us. After breakfast we packed into light assault rucksacks the "dry rations" given to us in the kitchen and went for a walk around the neighbourhood. We planned to gain a kilometre of altitude, which would help us to survive tomorrow's landing at four thousand metres.



We didn't have any special adventures, we fulfilled our acclimatisation plan, having climbed up to about 3300 metres and covered a decent kilometre on the

I tried to keep up with Eyal at first, but on a long climb I died and spent a long time sitting on a large boulder. At first I tried to keep up with Eyal, but on a long climb I died and sat on a large boulder for a long time, unable to ward off the flies that swooped down from all sides like vultures on carrion. Eyal was waiting for me on a gentle knoll overlooking the spacious valley and the first snowy peaks. "You'll need a lot of patience" - I told him, having taken a breath - "you've jumped four thousand metres in Bezenghi, and I - straight from the computer. A whole year you sit - F1, F2..., and then, bang - and on three thousand". Eyal shook his head understandingly, but I thought that such a difference in acclimatisation would certainly become a problem on the mountain.

We returned to the camp at half past six in the evening, laid out the boulder mats in front of the tent and spent the remaining hours before dinner in blissful idleness. Before dinner a minibus from Almaty arrived and brought another batch of fresh clients. This bus was to bring our virtual Latvian companion Volodya and his girlfriend. I easily "identified" them among the newcomers and we got acquainted. We liked the companion - a calm, athletic man with no visible flaws. We discussed some details related to food and general equipment, and a good first impression was replaced by a second - even better one. The guy had experience and a sober logical approach to things. Plus, he had that marvellous quality of being able to compromise.

Buzlag Archipelago

We had spotted our helicopter the day before, on the approach to the camp. The camp itself is located on the right bank of a noisy but harmless river on the Kazakh side, while on its left bank there is an unassuming Kyrgyz village. Either the helicopter pilot had found a nice widow in the settlement, or just stayed in one of the houses, but only his helicopter was parked at a house on the outskirts of the settlement like a simple car. It looked quite funny.

On a windy morning it flew up into the streaked grey sky, flew over to our side and, propellers rumbling and swaying eerily, landed on a special area behind the canteen. A serious, honoured MI-8, painted in the colours of the Israeli flag, which immediately inspired confidence in it. The same industrious boys who had so unceremoniously humiliated me with their patronage yesterday, quickly loaded an incredible amount of useful stuff into the helicopter. I'd never flown in a helicopter before, and I hadn't realised that I could cram so much stuff into it. Not to mention the fact that it was supposed to take off afterwards. Finally, the honoured clients boarded, the engine roared, the iron dragonfly strained, then strained even more and, as if having changed its mind, smoothly quieted down. The cynical foreigners made a couple of nervous jokes, and I thought that our flight was postponed until tomorrow. The door opened and Kazbek Valiev looked into the helicopter belly, smiling enigmatically. After a theatrical pause, he apologised and said that the guys had forgotten to load mattresses, which would be useful for us on the Northern Inylchek. The people murmured with relief. The mattresses were loaded through the rear luggage hatch, successfully filling the last cubic centimetres of free space. The engine roared again, the helicopter shook a little, sort of bounced a little in place and finally swayed into the air like an autumn leaf falling upwards. Then it tilted its forehead, went into horizontal flight, and we flew up the green valley towards the unfriendly grey statues in snow-white robes.

The Tien Shan amazed me. I had heard about its harsh nature, but what I saw surpassed all expectations: a pristine pile of giant peaks covered with lumpy ice snakes. Not a single stroke of colour softened this black and white canvas. The grey flat sky covered the earth like a dead man's shroud. Below us stretched the universal refrigerator. We did not fly over it, we flew through it, smoothly manoeuvring between giant rock pyramids wrapped in heavy snow mantles. The ice domes beneath us were cracked like frost-bursting fruit on the Snow Queen's table.

A soft paw squeezed the back of my neck, and my breathing became light and frequent, as if I were inhaling not air but mythical ether. We flew over the pass so low that it seemed possible to jump down onto the downy swaths of snow, untouched by man or beast. Eyal bent down to

to me and shouted over the rumble of the propellers: "Four eight hundred!...!" I felt the altitude like a heady lightheadedness and like a throbbing hoop that squeezed my temples with a still soft insistence. The helicopter dived over the saddle with visible relief into the wide valley of the Northern Inylchek that opened up beneath us. We flew over the grey glacier, like a polar sea, and I craned my neck and flattened my nose on the porthole, trying not to miss the moment when the mountain, quite deserving of the epithets "legendary" and "great", would appear in front of us.



The helicopter made a turn and an outline as recognisable as the Great Pyramid of Giza came over the starboard side, covering the sky. "Khan Tengri!" - I yelled to Eyal, trying to poke my finger through the porthole. The helicopter hovered, rocked, and sat down. We jumped onto the muddy glacial shell, and in a matter of minutes, young and extremely energetic people with sun-bleached faces rushed in from all sides, gutted the helicopter and dragged all its contents to a nearby moraine. They carried both our rucksacks and the food bag, but this time I did not resist, preferring not to overstretch myself as soon as I arrived at this decent altitude. Eyal's altimeter was showing almost exactly 4000 metres. During all this commotion, no matter what I was doing or who I was talking to, my head was turning towards Khan Tengri like a compass hand. I could not take my eyes off the calm power of his lines, the cascades of ice and stone that ran down to the foot of his incredible three-kilometre-long North Wall. It was huge and self-sufficient. It invited no one, and it certainly did not invite me, casting rapturous glances at it from my ant-like position. There is nothing more ridiculous than the term "conquest" as applied to this giant. An ant climbing an elephant might as well claim to have "conquered" it.....

A Kazakh-looking girl came up to us and said in decent English that her name was Nadiya and that she was our interpreter. Her brown eyes looked at us with attention and calm dignity, she seemed to me a person lively and intelligent, at the same time not giving herself in offence, which immediately favoured me to her. Not being a great expert in Kazakh names, I decided that Nadiya is a name Nadya, thoughtfully dissected for perception by foreign ears. Thus, in many countries of the world Tanya becomes Tania, and Manya - Mania.... I spoke in Russian and, with some condescension, made it clear that I did not need adapted names. The girl smiled and said that her name was Nadia after all, but if it was convenient for me, a dear guest, I could call her Nadia. She said that we would now be taken to our tent and that we could contact her if we had any questions.



The base camp really resembled an archipelago. It was located on a moraine directly opposite the northern wall of Khan Tengri, but separated from it by a wide glacier bed. Dozens of tents (I counted about forty) were scattered on the undulating expanse of the moraine like small islands. A long wide crevasse cut the whole camp into two parts and a wooden bridge was built across it.



On one side of the crack were all the "official institutions": kitchen, canteen, "polyclinic", "communication centre" and even an internet cafe.



It was also home to the entire service staff and the few clients who got, so to speak, a "flat in the city centre". The vast majority of the clients lived on the other side of the crack, in the "residential neighbourhoods". Eyal and I were settled at the very edge of the camp, in a tent, orphaned from view behind a large glacial hill. The only obvious advantage of this place was its proximity to a toilet, which might make it easier for us to make possible night raids.

This important structure, roughly built of unplanked planks, loomed over the glacial crevasse like an eagle's nest over a precipice.

The tents were exactly like the ones in Karkar - double tents with a vestibule. They were set up on wooden platforms and had two thick blue mattresses inside.



Until lunchtime we lie at the entrance to the tent. We bask in the sun and watch Khan Tengri. I master it, absorb it, try to merge with this mighty mountain. The sight of it opens my lungs and makes my head spin. It's strange and pleasant to think that for a month I will wake up and see THIS in front of me. We are discussing with Eyal our route, which can be seen from here like a palm. A steep snow ridge, visible to us almost full-face, rises up to Chapaev Peak. Its whiteness is broken by several rock belts. The upper one, the one that lies under the peak itself, seems impassable to me. "It's steep..." - I say - "those rocks, over there, under the summit, how will we climb there?"

"Creepy," Eyal confirms, but there's a spark of excitement in his eyes, "though, rocks don't scare me.

Rocks are my thing. But when I saw this ridge, I thought: God, what am I doing here..."

The bell rings to summon the campers to lunch. I climb up to the dining hall, stopping occasionally to catch my breath. Stone chips slip under my feet, and muddy streams wash them down the slope. By the path, in front of the entrance to the canteen, there is a stand with pioneer camp hand basins from my childhood - cast-iron pots with long "pips" hanging down like nipples under the belly of a Roman she-wolf. I put my hands up and, to my amazement, they are touched not by a freezing stream, but by a warm, almost hot stream. Slowly I begin to realise where I am.



The canteen is a huge military-looking tent without a floor, but with windows covered with a polythene film. It works like a climate amplifier - when the sun is shining, the tent is stuffy and the tarpaulin walls are hot, but as soon as the sun hides behind a cloud, the canteen goes into an ice age and frost, like a thorny creeper, starts creeping up your legs. This tent is almost never empty. It serves as a cabin, a reading room, and a hangout where climbers from all over the globe show themselves and watch others. The excitement reaches its peak three times a day - at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Our first lunch struck me with unexpected civilised splendour - egg soup, potatoes with meat and fresh vegetables. For dessert, watermelon. The way our roughly hewn table covered with unpretentious oilcloth was served simply put me in a stupor. In front of each of us was a plate on a napkin, on the right side was a knife, on the left - a fork, and between them, completing the letter "P" was a tablespoon. Just like in the best restaurants in Paris, which I had seen in the cinema....



No sooner had a hungry customer emptied his plate of the first course than the plate was immediately taken away and another plate with the second course appeared in front of him. When the table ran out of salads and bread, they were immediately replenished by the caring and diligent kitchen staff. If a supplement was requested, it was brought, and if what was requested was already over, something else was brought instead. During the whole meal a girl with tired Russian eyes and an unchanging kind smile was walking along the central aisle. In one hand she had a teapot with brew and in the other a large, empty kettle with boiling water.

"Tea? Tea? Chai tea?" - she chirped as she approached each table in turn. And we drank this hot drink cup by cup, replenishing the liquid sucked out by the high altitude. The first Russian word that foreigners arriving at the camp learnt was undoubtedly the word tea, and when "tea Tanya", as I nicknamed her, appeared in the dining room, "chai-chai-chai", pronounced with all possible accents, would rustle through the dining room. In my opinion, it was not us climbers who were the true heroes here, but those cheerful and never-resting guys who breathed life into this oasis in the middle of the glacier.

deserts. Ice water, cold and hard work were their lot during the two-month climbing season.

On the same flight with us came three Canadians (one of whom turned out to be Russian), several English-speaking people ("Anglo-Saxons", as it is now customary to say), whom I will refer to hereafter for the sake of simplicity as British, and two Russian men from Moscow, in whom Eyal flatly refused to recognise as mountaineers. "Those two from Moscow don't look like mountaineers," he told me categorically in Hebrew as we discussed the people around us, taking advantage of our isolated linguistic position. "Nonsense!" - I said.

"you just don't know what Russian climbers look like. Russian climbers are a special branch of evolution, a product of isolationism, like the marsupial animals of Australia. They're no better or worse than Western climbers, they're just different, and they look different." Eyal shook his head doubtfully, "They're funny and they don't look like climbers..." I thought Eyal himself looked even less like a classic mountaineer in his glossy-magazine form, but I kept silent.

Eyal felt like a fish in water in the multilingual clamour of the canteen. Being a native Israeli, that is, a man who was not silent and not prone to complexes, he moved from company to company, and by the second day he was a familiar face to both the British and the Canadians. It was not so surprising, because he spoke English as his native tongue, but he also managed to make friends with four Spaniards, who knew only "fak" and "shit" in English. He himself did not speak Cervantes. In his presence I was shattered by complete linguistic paralysis, and when he, for example, was having a relaxed conversation with the British, I stood beside him and tried to give my face the cleverest possible expression in order to smooth out the impression of the gnarled phrases that occasionally fell out of my mouth like Karelian birch trees. A person who doesn't speak your native language well always looks much more stupid than he really is. We sat at the same table with the Canadians, and Eyal quickly found common ground with them (or rather, with the two who were native Canadians). I listened to their chatter, sometimes losing the thread of the conversation. Then I would wait for the right moment and ask Eyal to retell me the key passages. The whole trio was cool - they had hiked extensively and fruitfully in their home in Canada, the Rocky Mountains. The Russian Canadian had, naturally, his strictly Soviet mountaineering experience as well. "They're great," Eyal said, nodding his head at the Canadians and then, already referring to the Russian Canadian, "but that one is kind of weird. Don't you think?". He was clearly addressing me as an expert on the mysterious Russian soul. I knew what he meant. There was a kind of evil energy in the guy, which contrasted sharply with the open good-naturedness of his companions. He ignored us, and if he answered a question, it was through gritted teeth and without looking us in the eye. Deciding to satisfy Eyal's curiosity, I rather insistently drew this guy into the conversation, and he, with poorly concealed irritation, explained to us that he had come to Canada after several years of living in Israel, where he had been insulted on the "fifth point" by some official. He confirmed this with a couple of Hebrew expressions, and I immediately started replaying in my mind the remarks that Eyal and I had exchanged about the people around us, and specifically about him. We certainly hadn't said anything offensive, and besides, the guy claimed that he hadn't learnt Hebrew and had forgotten what he knew.

I didn't feel responsible for the stupid remark of some third-rate official, so I sluggishly objected to him in the vein that there are assholes everywhere.

Perhaps the only company Eyal didn't try to join as an honourable member were the Koreans. There were a lot of Koreans. They were everywhere. Like fat droplets in water, they floated on their own, not mixing and hardly interacting with other members of the climbing community. As one of the Brits, returning from his first outing, replied with a sigh when asked about the route, "No technical problems, but a lot of Koreans...". The Koreans had their own separate table, their own separate interpreter and even their own separate cook, brought by them from Korea itself. When all two dozen Koreans were seated around the table, a large cauldron and numerous bowls with all sorts of unidentified culinary delights were ceremoniously brought in. As Eyal had enlightened me,

who (who would doubt it!) has been to South Korea, the indigenous delicacy of the Korean table is rotten cabbage. I answered him with a phrase that in Russian would have sounded like this: "Well, Eyal, you're bullshitting! For real! They don't send chefs from Korea for this...". Eyal laughed and explained that this cabbage is festered in a special ancient Korean way, unavailable to the average European cook. I had no choice but to take his word for it. Most of the Koreans were practically beginners, but there were some more experienced ones, and even, according to rumours, a couple of bison - Everest conquerors. Anyway, they had Russian guides booked to take them up and down the mountain, as did the Brits. Apparently, there was an old-style discipline in their group that would have been the envy of even the

"paramilitary" mountaineering formations of the Soviet times. In the last days before leaving the camp, I observed an amazing scene. During the afternoon, when there were only a few idlers in the canteen, including me, a friendly trial was held in the "Korean sector". Two elderly Koreans, with the stern faces of yakuza authorities, sat on one side of the table. Opposite them, on the other side of the table, the "accused" sat with his hands down on the table and his head downcast. One by one, the authoritarians made sharp remarks with condemning intonations, while their faces remained as cold and stern as the reverse side of the moon. The unfortunate man never looked up, never dared to object, and the corners of his narrow lips were turned downwards. I tried to imagine their conversation: "Climber Cho Twoh Rish, who allowed you to cut the rope with your climbing mate, climber Chan Ob Ice?!" - asks the first authority figure. "Cho Two Rish, for gross violation of climbing discipline, we are crossing you off the list of living climbers of the Republic of Korea!" - announces the verdict of the second. That's what it looked like, and there's no way I could have imagined this scene performed by Western climbers. The round-faced, red-furred Brit sitting next to me watched this "showdown" with mocking interest. They may well have been great guys, these Koreans, but they were from another planet.

The most colourful inhabitants of the camp were those whom I called "Spaniards". Two of them were Basques and the other two were Catalans, and they would have been terribly offended to hear someone call them Spaniards. But I will save this story for later, because during the first days of my stay in the bazlag I hardly crossed paths with them. I only heard that they were tough and reckless, as befits swarthy Pyrenean macho men.

After lunch, Tian Shan showed us its true face. The whole sky was covered with clouds and heavy wet flakes fell down. By the evening it got colder and the flakes were replaced by fine snow. Everyone showed up hungry for supper, mashed potatoes and meat, and asked for more. I topped up with bread and cherry jam and poured tea.

Sleeping that first night was like an old black-and-white film that had been torn thirty times at the splices. I tossed and turned, glanced at my watch, thought semi-nonsense thoughts, and occasionally passed out unnoticed. In the morning I woke up from the cold, pulled on a fleece suit and woollen socks, and crawled outside to run errands. The snow crunched under my foot, fresh and dry as starch. The whole camp fluoresced silently in the night, covered in a white blanket. High overhead hung the prickly nests of constellations. In the distance beyond the glacier rose the pale hulk of Khan Tengri.



The morning was fantastic: everything was covered with a white fluffy blanket - the glacier, the tents, the laundry hung out to dry, which had turned into a garland of frozen carcasses overnight. The deep blue sky added a blueness to the shadows, and the mountains were so snow-white clear they seemed to make a quiet ringing sound. I ran around the camp with my camera, paused in front of particularly beautiful views, and, holding back my breath like a steam boiler, shot and shot until the film ran out.



After breakfast, Eyal and I went about our chores in preparation for tomorrow's departure. I listened carefully to how my body was reacting to the violence of being thrown by helicopter to a height of four thousand metres. When I stood up abruptly, I felt a slight dizziness and goosebumps running up and down my limbs. Any, the most insignificant walk was accompanied by a monstrous shortness of breath, and I was not at all sure that I would be ready to go out on the mountain tomorrow. The day before, together with Volodya, we had discussed our plans. Eyal was eager to fight and was ready to go to the mountain the very next day after arrival, Volodya wanted to stay in the camp one day for acclimatisation, and I would stay for two days. We decided to act according to the weather, but be ready to go out on the second day. In my heart I hoped that the weather would keep us in the camp for another day and give me a chance to recover properly.

Before lunch we found out where the camp chief's tent was and went to him to get petrol for our primus and gas cylinders. Only that morning I realised that the head of our camp was Yuri Moiseyev. That's the one! In 1988 the trio of Kazbek Valiev, Yuri Moiseyev and Zoltan Demian made one of the most beautiful ascents of the Himalayan eight-thousanders: the first ascent of the South-West buttress of the Dhaulagiri West Face (8167m). In 9 days, alpine style and without oxygen. If that doesn't tell you anything, it is unlikely that you will also understand the interest I had in this man. I explained to Eyal the reason for my excitement. Like any "Western" young man interested in mountaineering, he knew only Bukreev from Russian climbers, and that only because of the scandalous echoes of the 1996 tragedy.

In the tent that Nadia had pointed out to us, which served as both a communications centre and a warehouse for rented equipment, we found an elderly grey-haired man with a soft, almost apologetic expression and lively brown eyes. I asked, just in case, if Yuri Moiseyev was really in front of us, and I was confused by the fact that I did not know how to address this man adequately. On the one hand, it is thirteen years since I have addressed anyone by his patronymic, and such an address seems to me as incongruous and uncomfortable as the sock of a camisole of the year before last.

On the other hand, I realise that my feeling is the result of a completely different reality, and here and now, addressing a respected person, who is much older than me, by name would sound inappropriate familiarity. Oh, these conventions!

I must say that we were simply enchanted by Moses. There was nothing, not even the slightest There was no "stardom" in this man. He spoke to us simply and kindly, and talked to us about the route as if it was equally difficult for him and us. But he had behind him the northern wall of Khan Tengri, winter ascents to the seven-thousanders, and Kanchenzhanga.

He did not advise us to go to the saddle during the acclimatisation walk, but to limit ourselves to climbing Chapaev Peak. Here, it seems, I have to make a small but forced digression and tell you about the route. As I have already said, there are two relatively simple "classical" routes on Khan Tengri. The simpler one is located on the southern side of the mountain. It ascends along the snow-ice couloir between Khan Tengri and Chapaev Peak (6370m) and leads to the saddle between these two peaks. The height of the saddle is about 5900m. Up to the saddle this route has no technical difficulties, i.e. it is "walkable by feet", but it is rather avalanche-prone. Its lower part is shot by avalanches and ice slumps coming down from Chapaev Peak, and people skip it early in the morning and as fast as possible.



From the north the route ascends along a steep rib directly to the northern summit of Chapaev Peak (6150m) and from there descends to the saddle. At the saddle both routes join into one, which leads to the summit of Khan Tengri along the rocky West Ridge.

The northern route (called the Salamatov route) is much safer than the southern route, but it is just as hard physically and technically. The steep snow and ice ridge is broken in two places (between the 1st and 2nd camps and under Chapaev Peak) by even steeper rocky belts, the passage of which at these heights, and often with a heavy rucksack, is quite a problem. Besides, walking back and forth across Chapaev Peak does not add to your health either. Once this route was categorised as 5B, but this rating, of course, did not imply that the whole mountain from the foot to the top was pre-wired with railing ropes, as it happens now.



When I was going to climb Khan Tengri, I was very confused about this issue. I mean the railing ropes. It was obvious that if Khan Tengri was not rappelled, there was no way I would be able to assemble a team that would have a chance to climb it. After hesitating, I convinced myself that, in fact, my plan was to climb the 7,000-metre peak, and the railing ropes did not make the mountain lower than it was. I realise that I'm going for a kind of "adapted" Han Tengri, but I treat him accordingly. The old Khan Tengri is no longer there and will not be anyway, and I can't even afford it. Just this is a new mountain and there is a new route on it. That's how I decided for myself, although it's all rather sad.

Before lunch, I sit in the dining room and watch two girls and a guy from the kitchen staff setting the tables. They are discussing their "kitchen" problems, usually hidden from the customers' eyes, and I feel like I am backstage at the theatre.

"Put the knives there and there," the girl said with a nod of her head, indicating to the lad the "unfinished" tables. "Why do you need them" - the kid waved away sluggishly - "there's nothing to cut anyway...".

"Put it up, put it up, don't think about it. That's the way it's supposed to be. If we don't put it down, I'll be fired...". "We're short of knives again," says the second one. "And you take from the table of ours (meaning the guides), ours will do without...".

Going to the first camp

Those who go out early on the route make arrangements with the kitchen guys in the evening, and they feed them in the morning with something simple right in the kitchen. We agreed with the kitchen for 6am, but our alarm clock didn't go off. But neither did the kitchen ones. Canadians and Muscovites were supposed to come for an early breakfast with us, but they overslept too. What a mystery! I woke up at 5.55, pushed Eyal up and got dressed with a swiftness I hadn't noticed since my time in the army. I put on my plastics, grabbed the rucksack I'd packed the night before, and rushed to the kitchen, occasionally bending in half on the steep climb from lack of air. In the freezing kitchen tent I was greeted by a sleep-dazed staff. A little later, Canadians, Muscovites and Eyal piled in. We were fed scrambled eggs and tea. At 6:45, in the grey pre-dawn twilight we descended to the glacier. It took us 40 minutes to cross it and come under the Chapaevsky rib. The glacier was easy. As a matter of fact, I have rarely seen such simple glaciers for walking. We didn't meet any cracks, only in 2-3 places we had to jump over water-polished troughs, which were dried up overnight and resembled a tray where balls from the sports lotto drum roll out. I was in a bad way, and I could hardly keep up with Volodya, while Eyal immediately galloped far ahead. As lively as a goat let loose. However, he honestly waited for us in a wide hollow between a moraine rampart and a gentle snow slope, from which the ascent along the rib began.

This is where we put the cats on.



To my surprise, on the ascent I got into the rhythm quite easily, and Volodya and I leisurely cut wide serpentine on the firm slope frozen overnight. One hundred metres of gentle ascent brought us to the tip of an old avalanche outcrop, and here we sat down for a break. On our left we could see snow-covered and frozen debris formed by the stopped avalanche. I didn't like these rubble piles, but the condition of the snow at the moment was excellent. Besides, we are all suggestible: if the serpentine route is trampled by experienced people right up the avalanche outcrop, then obviously nothing better can be thought of....



The slope became steeper from our resting place, and I did not want to linger here, so I pushed myself as hard as I could. I told Eyal not to wait for us, but to go as fast as possible to the big bergschrund to which the tracks of our predecessors led, and which crossed the slope away from the avalanche path.



As the sun heated up the slope, the snow became sticky, hanging in clumps on my feet and slowing my already slow progress. Finally, the path, which had been flowing with a wide, steep serpentine, became narrower and went decisively to the left. We came to a large bergschrund, where Eyal had been waiting for us for a long time, slowly stiffening.

You can relax.



I felt good, kept a decent pace and my mood soared. Sitting on my backpack, munching dry sour apricots, I stared at the snow slopes sparkling in the morning rays, running far down to the dark glacier bed, at the giant ice patches of the Northern Wall causing sickening head spinning and thought simple thoughts, that here I was, climbing on Khan Tengri himself, and despite this, I was still the same me.... Something like that.

I took out my camera, awkwardly removed the cover, and with a desperate gaze followed her rapid fall. After sliding 20 metres down the slope and jumping over a half-filled crack, it stopped, blackening invitingly on the snow, pure as the Immaculate Conception. It was clear as day that there was no way I could go straight down. I could only go back along the trail, down below the closed crack where the lid had slipped over, and from there traverse below the very spot above which we were now sitting. I looked reproachfully at the summit of Khan Tengri. I didn't feel like going back. "Where are you in a hurry?" - said Volodya - "we'll go back to the base, then you can pick us up." I reluctantly agreed, though I thought that during the day the sun would melt the black lid into the snow and it was not sure that I would be able to find it.

Eyal, meanwhile, decided it was time to move. There was a horizontal railing along the ridge, and a trench in the deep snow running up from the far edge of the ridge. The slope was quite steep in this place, and there were rails along the trench too. As a matter of fact, the whole ridge, from this ridge to the top of Chapaev Peak, was completely railed.



Eyal reached the edge of the bergschrund and stood there for a while looking at something perplexed. Then he fastened his jumar to the railing and shouted to me: "Only camels can be tied with such a rope...". When I, in turn, came to the railing, I realised what he meant. The rope I was to entrust my life to was a simple black capron rope. It was a good rope to bale up one's unsightly belongings when leaving one's home for good. If I had a good sturdy camel, I would prefer to tie it with a static ten rather than with this misfortune. So I thought, climbing up the steep slope and gingerly loading the jumar. However, as

As it turned out later, we had worried in vain. As Moiseyev explained to me, all the Himalayan 8,000-metre peaks are used for ropes with these ropes today.



A hundred metres of steep ascent ended on a spacious shoulder, mostly covered with snow, but with a large rocky area where a dozen tents were located. This is the so-called lower (as well as the main) first camp. Its height is 4500m.



The upper first camp is located 100 metres higher. There is much less space for a tent there and there is no flowing water, but by stopping there you shorten the transition to the second camp, which is much harder than the transition from the base camp to the first camp. We decided unanimously to go further, to the upper camp.

We sat down, rested, had a few words with the people and went on. And here, something in me ran out. The altitude finally made itself felt. The pace dropped sharply and, literally "on teeth", I crawled to the upper camp. The guys were already putting up the tent they had brought with them. The rocky shoulder on which we had settled could accommodate no more than five tents, but at the moment there was only one, although the lower camp was full of people.



Having finished setting up our lodgings and boiling water for ourselves, we stretched out in the midday sun with our panamas over our faces.



The sun was blazing hot, the North Wall shook in the rippling currents of the air, and the blue Hawaiian lagoon sky was filled with swirling clouds like steam over a boiling cauldron. What bliss! What weather! I even felt embarrassed about the "harsh nature of the mountains": where was the chilling wind that threw the daring alien into the abyss from the steep ridge?

Where is the frost that makes metre-long icicles grow on your moustache? Where is the blizzard that covers its tracks before a man's foot can leave them?

Some disturbing movement was born on the left side of the colossal North Face. The snow stream, inexorable and unstoppable, moved down the rocky couloir in an incomprehensibly slow and eerie silence. With a powerful arc flowing over the wall, it fell on the rocky ledges, exploded on them and continued its smooth fall, gradually wrapped in a shroud of snow dust. The heavy rumbling thunder struck my ears and penetrated all the way to my spleen....

I lay there for three hours at least. It's important for acclimatisation to stay at this altitude longer. Eyal, on the other hand, squirming impatiently and saying that he didn't want to miss his lunch, ran downstairs. Finally, I decided that it was time for me to go too. Leaving Volodya, who wanted to acclimatise a little more, I went down to the lower camp and from there - to the bergschrund, and it turned out that it was very uncomfortable to descend on the stretched "camel" railing. On the first rope I somehow managed to stand on the abseiling, but the second rope was so taut that I just had to click on the sliding carabiner and carefully descend, holding on to the railing.

At the bergschrund I remembered about the lid that had flown away. I looked carefully at the undulating snow slope below the kergschrund, but the lid had gone like a cow. I walked back and forth, making sure that I was standing above the very spot where I had last seen her, but below me there was pure white silence. Trying to suppress the annoyance scratching somewhere under my spine, I say to myself, the hell with it! Let it be the biggest loss of this climb. And at the very moment when I reluctantly decide to spit and walk away, I notice a thin black line about where the lid flew off. Bingo! I guessed it had melted into the snow in the sun, but somehow sideways. It was on a rib. Having memorised the poor landmarks, I went down from the bergschrund along the path to the place where it was possible to traverse and with a small descent to the necessary place. A friendly group of Koreans walked past me, and I thought it would be nice to have a pair of eyes on me when going out alone on a closed glacier.

I stepped off the trail and immediately fell into knee-deep snow. That's the difference between climbing on a prepared, well-trodden route and walking in the snow! Firstly, it is hard, and secondly, you have to think and watch where you put your feet. Getting stuck in the snow and fearfully extrapolating the boundaries of the big crack, which in some places peeps up the slope, I overcome fifty metres separating me from the place where the lid fell. Then, in confusion and angry helplessness, I stand over the iridescent web-winged creature that had flown into these merciless spaces and died quietly on a fluffy but deadly cold featherbed. I mistook it for the camera cover from afar. I look at the glass dragonfly or at the peak of Khan Tengri, shaking in the violet sky, and the whole scene seems to me to be filled with some vague but ominous meaning. It's as if the Mountain has played a cruel joke on me. When you are on the body of a stone giant, whose mere slightest movement can remove you from this world without a trace, sweep you away like a pathetic warm speck of dust, your materialism is severely tested.

"That's how it is for you, you'll lie down on the snow somewhere and die..." - I said to myself, turned round and walked back, but not in my own footsteps, but going a bit downhill to make it easier. I took a couple of steps and my face broke into a smile. At my feet, at the bottom of a deeply melted hole lay my unfortunate lid. Wasn't that mystical?

If it hadn't been for the dragonfly, there's no way I would have been able to see it from above, and I certainly wouldn't have gone looking at random. The mountain is definitely playing tricks on me!

Exit to the second camp

The next morning we leave for the main acclimatisation exit. Our minimum programme is to equip the first camp with all the necessary equipment and set up the second camp at 5500m. If weather and health permit, we will also climb Chapaev Peak lightly for acclimatisation.

I'm going into this thing reluctantly and cautiously. We're running too fast. Too fast for me, at least. But the weather pushes us back, the guys are rushing up the mountain and, in the end, I go out too, deciding that after spending the night at the first camp I'll decide whether to go higher.

So, we get up at 5.30 and head out with the first rays of the sun on the fringing peaks of Inylchek.

The rucksacks are heavy. We carry the tent, all the sleeping gear, all the warm clothes, a lot of food and petrol.

However, we are moving quite fast and (thanks to the frosty night and early rise!) on perfect firn. The weather is fantastic - not a single cloud, not a single breeze. It's a perfect summit day, but no one has climbed yet, as the multi-day bad weather before our arrival delayed all the groups. Now, in both base camps they are anxiously waiting for news from the mountain from the climbers who have rushed into battle. The weather spoils us, but I don't feel that the mountain favours me. He rubs me on the scruff of the neck, plays with me like a bully with a kitten, and then kicks me with a swing....

It took me 3 hours and 40 minutes to reach the lower first camp. Here I took a break, as I was already quite exhausted. Both Canadians and Muscovites are in this camp. Muscovites' names are Vitya and Igor, and I look at them with interest. The men do everything slowly and thoroughly, sticking to a strict plan, the author of which is obviously Vitya. They do everything together and even wait for each other on the ascent, which is long gone from the practice of today's mountaineering. I reckon that in terms of their pace, thoroughness and other qualities, they are much more suitable for me than my brisk partners. The longer I watch them, the more interesting features I notice.

Firstly, they are the exact opposite of each other in character. Victor, who is older, is a calm and in-depth doctor of sciences. He is by no means silent, but he is not a joker. He likes to give lengthy lectures, mostly on political and economic topics, but his knowledge is broad and extends into a wide variety of fields. In one of our first conversations he touched upon some economic topic, and his words fell into my soul, which was bored with intellectual conversation, like a spark on dry straw. I talked for a long time, piling home-made arguments and banal facts on top of each other, and he listened attentively, only occasionally asking clarifying questions. Later, when I found out that he was a doctor of economic sciences, I realised what a fool I looked like and understood the full measure of his tact.

Then, I watched in amazement as he effortlessly switched from fluent English to equally fluent Spanish, and to top it off, I discovered that he had travelled to many countries. His and Eyal's stories about India had completely changed my perception of the country, which may now be the destination of my next Big Walk.

Igor, on the other hand, is a turbulent and restless person. An unquenchable fire burns his soul every minute, throwing him into fierce arguments, from which exhausted opponents scatter like cockroaches. He jokes, puns, and teases the girls. His eyes sparkle on his burnt-out face. Waves of his indiscriminately beating energy crash against the cold breakwater of Vitya's academic calm, but not once and not twice I notice on Vitya's face a trace of doomed fatigue ... In short - a marvellous pair, these Muscovites!

Hard, with stops, I scramble up to the upper camp. Eyal comes down to meet me. It turns out that he was worried about my long absence and asks if I need help. He tries to take my rucksack away from me. Doesn't he think I'm human anymore?! Actually, I'm upset. I'm more and more convinced that he's a great guy and I'm lucky to have him.

The rest of the day we spend "sunbathing" in the sun and absorbing the very cosmic energy that modern charlatans like to talk about.

This time we were not alone, and several young Russian porters stayed with us for the night. They are still young boys. I watch with interest their household rummaging and listen to their peculiar talk. It seems that half of them are called Sasha. In general, the whole base camp is full of young Sashas of all colours. Some kind of

an invasion of Sashas. Some of them, moreover, are San Sanychs, that is, as if they were Sashas squared. I am trying to understand what kind of natural selection could have led to such an obvious dominance of the Sasha population, but nothing scientifically grounded comes to my mind.

The first night at 4600 was intermittent, like a dotted line, a little delirious, but very warm. A tent by the firm Basque with three people inside turns into a good greenhouse. In the morning I went "out of the neighbourhood" on important business and found that walking on such business in this camp is an uncomfortable and somewhere even dangerous procedure. Just after the last tent site, the rocky shoulder begins to slump downwards and then plunges into a kilometre-long abyss. A person who has come out on business (I mean serious business, of course) is torn between two contradictory desires - on the one hand, not to defile a nearby tent with his neighbourhood, and on the other hand, not to fly down, I apologise for the naturalism, just like that - with a bare butt.

The day before, we had realised one simple thing - we were not able to walk together at the same pace, and since the whole rib was wired, it was safe to walk alone. Eyal came out first, followed by Volodya and then me. I took everything I could out of my rucksack. I even put out (for the first time in my life!) my camera, having decided that I would pass this section anyway on the next exits and probably more than once. When I was about to leave the tent, I suddenly took out my rucksack and left my notebook and pen in the tent. Of course, it was completely crazy, but it was not so obvious to me there. In the rucksack I had all the sleeping and warm things left, plus 6kg of food. That's 14 kilos in total, I think. I also left my ice axe, which I regretted more than once. The weather was fine, and the snow at this altitude does not get wet even on a sunny day, so I was walking well. The lower part of the ridge was a snow slope with a steepness of 40-45 degrees on average. There were no peculiarities or obstacles. You jumar up slowly, stopping every 20-30 metres to catch your breath and, at the same time, admire the scenery.

So it went about 500 metres in height. Then I came under the very first rocky belt, about which I read at night in scary books about Khan Tengri. By eye - eight metres of layered rocks covered with snow and, again by eye, not difficult. Though with a rucksack and at 5,000 you can't accelerate very fast. The rocks are wired with two ropes: one taut - for ascent, and the other loose - for descent. For the sake of sporting interest I climb, using the jumar only for insurance. Fingers in pole gloves fumble for frozen hooks. The load is monstrous and my breath is enough for two or three movements, after which I take a long time to get ready for the next leap. But it is much more interesting than jumaring the rope, and I climb the first section even with some masochistic pleasure. A kind of happy smile with a twisted mouth. Then, a short snow traverse to the right, and another rocky step, steeper, but not high at all, only three metres. I try to climb "elegantly", but my fingers slip on the ice crust covering the rocks, and I fall on my side and load the jumar. I wish I had brought an ice axe - it would have been much easier.

The action was over, and the harsh everyday life stretched on. Just above the rocky belt I take a break and chew dried fruit. I feel the altitude pressing the back of my head. I have to go. I continue to scramble up the snowy ridge, only occasionally enlivened by short and simple rocky sections. I had been climbing for four hours already, and gradually I was getting tired multiplied by the height. Suddenly the ridge flattens out and becomes wider, so much so that in the middle of this flattening someone has trampled a platform for a tent. Then a huge snow and rock dome, 300 metres high, rises in front of me. There, at the top, is Camp-2.

I rest before the last throw, sitting on my rucksack on a trampled ground. The normal time for climbing from the first camp to the second is considered to be 6-8 hours. I am pleased to state that I am not, so to speak, beyond the limits of decency, and this despite the fact that we are talking about the first exit to this height, and even a heavy, "cargo" exit. However, everything was just beginning. The dome turned out to be steep and somehow absolutely endless, and

With each step upwards, my strength drained out of me like water into sand. The sun hung directly over the dome and was blinding, literally beating down on my head. I wanted to turn away and climb forward with my back..... Under its harsh rays I felt as if I were being interrogated, especially as the upward progress was already looking more and more like torture. At first I stopped for breath every 10-15 steps, then every 5-6, and finally every 2-3 steps. Absolutely exhausted, I crawled under the last rocky belt. Well, Vasenka, just a little, I said to myself.



A wide snowy space opens up in front of me and ahead of me, a hundred metres away, like a handful of dragee thrown on the snow, are the tents of the second camp. Immediately behind them there begins a not wide snow ridge, like a bridge, spanned to the foot of massive dark rocks under the Chapaev Peak. From Chapaev Peak to the left, the notorious Saddle stretches in a giant arc, sagging under the weight of multi-metre snow cornices. The summit of Khan Tengri rises above all this majestic landscape like a massive head of an oriental lord. His face is a dark immovable mask that promises us mortals nothing good. The word Khan suits his cold and ruthless appearance perfectly. For all its overwhelming majesty, the summit of Khan Tengri does not seem steep from here, and while the blood returns to my limbs, numb from the last spurt, I glide my gaze along its harsh faces and couloirs in search of the way to the top.

I get to the tents and find my friends lying on mats spread on the snow near my tent, which was already set up. With a wheeze of "Zionists don't give up!" I fall into the snow. Volodya laughs.

So, it took 7 hours, of which 3 hours were spent on the last 300 metres of the climb. In principle, I could have been satisfied with myself, if it hadn't been for the astonishing quickness of my comrades. Eyal spent 5 hours on the same crossing, and Volodya spent 4.5 (!!!). I found this development very instructive. On the very first outing Volodya and I, both of us without acclimatisation, were walking at approximately the same pace and much slower than Eyal, who after the Caucasus felt at altitudes up to 4500m like a fish in water. Yesterday, on the ascent to the first camp, Volodya was already much faster than me, but still inferior to Eyal, and today, when we climbed from 4600 to 5600 metres, Volodya overtook Eyal and came to Camp-2 first. Eyal complained for the first time that he could feel the altitude. One can only marvel at the speed with which our Latvian friend adapts to the altitude! He is a natural high-altitude climber.

This day the Canadians and Vitya and Igor came up to the second camp, besides us. All those who came were equally grey-faced and taciturn, and only Igor was joking loudly, swaying dangerously.



Most of our leisure time that evening was spent wrestling with the primus.

The Bolivian story was repeated in a softened version. The primus lit up without any problems and even boiled something for us, but when we tried to repeat this achievement, our "fire flower" began to wither and, despite all our efforts, soon wilted completely. I was really depressed about it. I generally hate all kinds of "iron", preferring the free flight of thought and spirit to crude material entities that break, leak, stink of all sorts of rubbish, and all this at the most inopportune moment. Just the thought that I, half alive with fatigue, would have to take this thing apart with bent fingers, and then strain my empty head, in which a small ball of dull pain rolls over and over, in an attempt to understand what this bastard wants from us, just the thought of it brings a murky despair to my throat. And then I discover that our Eyal is not only healthy lungs and strong legs, but also hard-working, skilful hands. With the patience of an Egyptian slave, he cleans all the holes in the damn iron. We manage to boil a whole pot of water before history repeats itself....

Gradually we realise that we are doomed to clean the primus after every cooking, or even more often. This pampered creature cannot work on coarse Kazakh or Bolivian fuel, but only on fine grades of European fuel. Besides, the pump handle fell off at the first touch, just like the nose of a syphilitic in the last stage.

I hate it!!!

I swore it was the last time I'd use petrol in the mountains. Gas, only gas! In the evening, feeling like I'm falling apart, I take my temperature: 37.4.

Celsius. I eat pills: Acamol, Diamox and something else. Volodya goes to sleep in the tent with the Russian guide, together with whom he is going to go to the saddle tomorrow. Well, a big ship is a big voyage. Eyal is not feeling well, and he and I plan not to go anywhere tomorrow and just sit in the camp for acclimatisation.

I slept unexpectedly well, and this surprise was not pleasant for Eyal. In the morning he claimed that I had snored like a bindleman all night. Faced with my cynical indifference, he promised to spend the next night in the tent of the Canadians, who were going down tonight.



The first thing I did was look out of the tent. The morning had not just come, it had blossomed like the bud of a beautiful cold flower. Blessed is the one who was caught by it on the way to the summit!

We spend the first half of the day fighting with the primus, or lying on mats near the tent and watching the infinitely slow progress of two tiny figures up the rib of Chapaev Peak. Their movement is as imperceptible as the movement of a clock hand. I don't understand how they hope to make it to the saddle and back today.

Towards noon the heat becomes unbearable. Inside the tent, too, it is scorching, but of a different kind. I try to hide in it from the direct sunlight, but I can't stand it for five minutes. It's like stepping out of the frying pan and into the oven. Finally, it hits me and I cover the tent with a sleeping bag. Now you can live, plus the sleeping bag will dry out. Life in the camp is sluggish, and a slight revival comes only when someone new comes up to us from the first camp or comes down from the saddle. Here, two Britons, led by Moiseyev, came up. Why so few? There was a natural selection and some of the British did not reach the second camp. Then, in the afternoon, a man, not young but strong, came down from Chapaev Peak, and people rushed to congratulate him. It turned out to be the same Ivan

Ivanych, who today, the first of the season, climbed to the top. He is surrounded on all sides, and he stands swaying. They asked him how many hours he had been on his feet today. He tried to answer, but the words stuck in his throat and he only waved his hand hopelessly. Eyal and I were just about to have tea, and I poured him a full mug, which he drank in one long gulp. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his glove and looked at us meaningfully, clearly coming round.

– Where are you guys from? - he asked me.

– From Israel.

– Yes?! - His eyebrows went up in surprise. - I've been climbing mountains all my life, and I've never seen a Jewish climber before!

To say that I was not offended by Jewish mountaineering would be untrue. I could see from the man that he was a man of the past, had travelled a lot and seen everything. And yet, look at that - not a single Jew.... I just shrugged my shoulders in silence.

Volodya and his guide came down, absolutely exhausted. They didn't reach the saddle, they only raked up to Chapaev Peak and turned back. The guide was overloaded, and Volodya was crushed by the height. He drank tea, packed hastily and left for the first camp.

The dragging and pointless day ended with a spectacular sunset. Eyal has gone to sleep in the Canadians' tent, and I've been fighting with the primus for two hours, trying to heat water for dinner. The primus stinks unbearably, even though I've opened both tambours. I went to bed hugging my hard-earned bottle of warm tea and with the ineradicable taste of petrol in my mouth.

Yesterday I felt so decent that we agreed with Eyal to get up early and go to Chapaev, but the next morning I was as good as dead. All night I had a splitting headache and hardly slept at all, listening to the gusts of wind throwing charges of dry snow at my tent. The weather had turned bad, and so had I. I think I'd swallowed some petrol fumes yesterday. At 6am, the plan was for me to start making breakfast, but that was beyond me. I realised that I was letting Eyal down, but I continued to lie in complete immobility, mindlessly exhaling columns of vapour into the frosty air of the tent through the tiny hole in the hood of my sleeping bag. After a while, there was a clumsy scuffle in the vestibule, and Eyal padded into the tent. He looked puzzled and worried.

"Eyal," I said in the voice of a dying swan, "I've got petrol poisoning. I'm not going to Chapaev, I'm going down." Eyal enquired exactly to what extent I was poisoned, and I assured him that I had no intention of dying. "It's not very good weather up there," he said, "and there's been fresh snow overnight. I don't know whether I should go up." He said this in a slightly questioning tone, as if asking for advice. "I don't know, I don't know," I answered-"in my opinion we have fulfilled our programme, and you shouldn't go up there alone, but if you decide to go I can wait for you here." "Can you even go down on your own?" - Eyal perked up. "No problem!" - I ruthlessly deprived him of his excellent excuse for not going up the mountain. Throughout this conversation I continued to lie there, spun up

like a mummy, while Eyal fired up the primus and cooked breakfast. The weather seemed to mock Eyal, changing dramatically almost every minute. Heavy hesitations darkened his face as we sluggishly chugged our healthy and healthy oatmeal porridge. Finally he made up his mind and went to pack his rucksack, while I stayed behind to boil water for him to take out. As I was bottling it, he came back and said that the weather had deteriorated to 20cm of snow and he had changed his mind. "Well that's fine," I responded cheerfully to the news, and we started packing for the descent. Eyal had a great idea - to leave his heavy rucksack here in the camp and take my lighter one down, loading both his and my things in it. Actually, down we almost there was nothing to carry.

I pulled on all my clothes, except for my down jacket, which was to remain in the second camp, and at 9.20 I followed Eyal out, not even trying to keep up with him. It was quite chilly, with snow drifting down, and occasional streaks of mist. Wherever the tension of the railing allowed, I abseiled down, and where it didn't allow, I just walked down with my back to the slope,

fastened to the rope with a sliding carabiner. I regretted again that I didn't have an ice axe - if I flew, I would fly a couple of tens of metres to the nearest station or knot, and if the station or self-guards couldn't withstand the jerk, much further.... It is possible, of course, to tie a rod, but this is theoretical. In practice, when the ropes are often tied and it is necessary to pass knots sometimes several in a row, and all this - with wooden fingers in gloves... You'll be descending like that until the second coming. On the rocky belt, on the belay, I manage to unclip the "eight" from the carabiner and almost lose it. I picked it up at the last moment. Before the upper first camp I meet Koreans and Britons going up. A whole column - 10 people, accompanied by guides. I had to unbuckle from the rope and stand aside, letting this wheezing, wheezing and heckling caravan pass. Again (for the second time!) I scold myself for the ice axe left at the first camp.

At 11.30 I went down to our tent in the first camp. I found my rucksack left by Eyal, my camera and ice axe. I sat there for a while, resting and munching on dried fruit. When I was about to leave, the hero of yesterday's day - Ivan Ivanich - came down to the camp. He came down quite briskly, despite the big and obviously very heavy rucksack, but when he approached me, it became obvious how exhausted he was. He asked me to wait for him so that we could continue down together, so I waited and we did walk together for a while, but then on the descent to the bergschrund I faltered and fell behind, while he continued to run down at his own pace. The weather improved noticeably, it became warm, and below the first camp the snow that had fallen during the night was turning into mush by the minute. Ivanych Ivanych was preoccupied. He shook his head sadly: "it's a bad time to descend, it's going to fall from somewhere".

After sitting for a while in the lower Camp-1, we started our descent to the bergschrund. I fastened myself with a sliding carabiner and started to descend with my back to the slope, but my crampons immediately got clogged with snow, I slipped and flew down. Immediately I scrambled up and stood up, breathing heavily. I tried to push the railing into a "figure eight", and after some effort I managed to do it. I had to descend almost pushing the rope through the "eight", but it was compensated by the possibility to relax and "hang" on the railing. I descended to the lower station at the bergschrund, tried to unhook myself from the railing, and then I got an unpleasant surprise: the railing was so taut that I was unable to unhook it from the "figure eight".... For a while I concentrate and labour ineffectively, then I hang tiredly on the rope and look at the damn iron with angry despair. What a disgrace! What an idiotic situation! I imagine how I'll look from the outside when the next climbers come up or down to this spot. Like a dead fish on a hook..... Anger gives me strength, I desperately struggle with the "eight" and finally - I'm free! I quickly get away from this place, feeling as if Khan Tengri himself was looking mockingly at my back. Ivan Ivanovich was already gone, and I started my descent from the bergschrund alone.

The first section of the trail down from the bergschrund is under large ice-snow overhangs, and the middle of the day is the worst time to walk under such things. I manage to descend only ten metres before I hear an ominous rustling above my head and see a wide snowy stream trickling over one of these overhangs towards the trail from above, just ahead of me. Without wasting a second, I turn round and run back under the cover of the bergschrund. Where did I get the strength from?! Half a dump truck of snow slowly poured down the slope, but it didn't reach the trail. I am standing, breathing heavily. My hands are trembling a little. Waiting for further developments. Everything is quiet, and I force myself to go out on the trail again, trying not to think about anything, but to "scratch" down as fast as you can.

As soon as the diagonal oblique part of the trail is passed and 300-350 metres of serpentine leading to the side moraine are directly below me, I fall on my butt and, braking with my ice axe, rush down. My predecessors have left me a couple of excellent bobsled tracks, and I only occasionally hop from one to the other. At the bottom of the descent I suddenly fly out onto a hard firn section and start desperately scrambling. After 10 metres I manage to do it, and the rest of the slope I overcome on my own two feet, as befits the crown of creation. Ivan Ivanych is waiting for me at the bottom, sitting on a large moraine boulder and sceptically watching my exercises.

All the way across Inylchek to the Base Camp Ivan Ivanych entertained me with detailed stories from his long and difficult life. He moved along the glacier, jumping over crevasses as he went and unmistakably choosing the easiest way in the labyrinth of ice hills and hollows with that confident automatism, which is achieved only by many years of life in the mountains. At first he asked a couple of routine questions about the life of "ex-pats" in Israel, without much interest, and I answered with routine phrases without much enthusiasm. I was genuinely fed up with the subject. And then he started talking about himself, and it was interesting, because he was a refugee from Chechnya, and I always wanted to hear about that war first-hand. Contrary to what one might expect from a man who had suffered and was interested, he did not accuse or berate anyone, but simply calmly told me the story of Dzhokhar Dudayev's rise to power. A kind of Copolla-style saga, clan-based and criminal. The "national liberation" fig leaf cleverly covered the shameful underside. I accepted this concept easily, as it fit into my picture of the world. I wonder if I would have believed him, a man from the epicentre of events, if he had told me a story about freedom fighters without fear and reproach?

When this extremely curious and informative topic was exhausted, Ivan Ivanovich told us a little about himself, about the fact that he had worked as a mountaineering instructor all his life and about his present life in the Stavropol region that had sheltered him. Gradually his story turned to the alcohol and vodka theme, lost its structure and dynamism, but gained personal involvement and sincere interest. Breathing heavily, slipping on stiff legs and dreaming of a mug of warm tea, I wove along the glacier cut by midday streams, listening to Ivan Ivanovich's bitter lamentations about the hopeless backwardness of the Stavropol villagers, who prefer stinking moonshine to noble pure alcohol, the consumption of which he, Ivan Ivanovich, has been trying for years to bring into their backward life. Thirst, fatigue, the sun beating down on my head and this surreal, resentful muttering wove together in my brain into one bizarre delirious pattern. At exactly two o'clock in the afternoon, we're at base. Just in time for lunch.

On the coastal moraine we were met by a festive delegation, and, shining like the moon in a full moon, cook Bakha handed a fairly earned small cake in the shape of the mountain Khan Tengri to the upset Ivan Ivan Ivanovich.

The dining hall is bustling and full of new faces - new customers have been thrown into the camp during our absence.

Eyal and I sit down at the "Russian" table, tea is served, and then hot borscht is brought, and I drink it in one gulp. For the second course, they bring potatoes and chicken, but the first time I bring it to my lips, I feel a heavy lump in my throat. My eyes want it, but my stomach won't take it. Eyal chomps the potatoes and crunches the chicken bones with gusto, and I give him my portion with regret. Then, as he methodically begins to destroy it, I realise and take half of it back..... The tamed body graciously agrees to accept one potato and a chicken wing. For dessert they bring watermelon - a hit in ten! We gnaw it down to its transparent green membranes. I sit steamed, with glistening eyes, immersed in the discordant hum of the dining room as if in the gentle waves of the southern sea. My body sucks in oxygen, vitamins and various valuable liquids like a squeezed sponge. Here it is - the high! At the end, in honour of Ivan Ivanovich, the kitchen puts on the tables a lush cherry pie with clear traces of cherries. Life is good!

Our tent stands orphaned at the edge of the camp, extinct and frozen during our absence. But a group of young Finns and Finnish women moved into the neighbouring tent, which had been empty earlier. I lay in the tent until evening, sewing up bologna trousers torn by cats and listening to the dreary rustle of rain, which suddenly ended this long day.

respite

For the first time since I left home, I slept through the night like a dead man. I got up for breakfast. It's damp, foggy, but I'm at peace. The weather doesn't bother me today. I take soap, towel and toothpaste, and am in a festive mood, though I can hardly move my legs,

I go up to the kitchen. I brush my teeth - again, for the first time since I left.... Usually, in the mountains, for fear of getting cold teeth, I make do with mint gum, but here we have hand basins with warm water, so I can treat myself. For breakfast, oatmeal with currant jam and bread and butter. How happy the simplest things are for a man who has come down from the mountain! At breakfast we look at the newcomers.

My attention is attracted by a man who has the emblem of the Kazakh Karakoram expedition to three "eight-thousanders" on his jacket. I ask Tanya, the "tea lady", and she says that this is Alexei Raspopov. I watch him with interest. He is already one of those climbers about whom they say: "the one". Next to him sits a beautiful light-coloured girl who looks like a snow maiden.

There are now four Finns at our table - two guys and two girls. They are young, still clean and correct. Their white faces radiate the light of unmarred youth. Eyal and I are the two overgrown bears beside them. Two Americans appear, so typical that their Americanness can be seen from a hundred metres away. One of them was a guide with a 100 per cent American name, Scott, and the other was his client, whose name I never remembered. Scott amazed me with his "one hundred per cent": a dry face covered with long and forever tanned skin, small slightly ironic eyes of an absolutely self-confident man, plastic movements - as if not a body, but a dense rubber mould. He could be on the cover of any extreme magazine. He looks like a composite image of an American mountaineer, as well as a celebrity whose name Eyal and I are struggling to remember.

Scott has his own company, and when Scott is photographed, and he does it a lot and willingly, he always makes sure that the name of the company embroidered on the chest of his jacket gets in the shot. In general, he's a nice guy who always has everything and always works. His client looks much less impressive, as if nothing human is alien to him. I suppose this man is a simple American millionaire, if he can pay for a month's trip to Khan Tengri in the exclusive company of the brilliant Scott. However, his appearance is decidedly lacking the bulldog features befitting a shark of capitalism. He is soft-spoken and looks at Scott with a questioning deference in which Scott shines like a steel blade on a piece of velvet.

Scott has one great toy, a satellite phone, which he lets him use at cost price - three dollars a minute. Base Camp has "public" satellite phone, but, compared to Scott's phone, it has two serious disadvantages: first, it is more expensive by as much as two dollars, and second, it never works....

As I mentioned, there was even an Internet café in the camp, but for some mysterious, almost irrational reason, communication with the outside world remained one-way for the first two weeks of my stay. Every night I sent my wife another email, like a sailor tossing a bottle with a cherished note into the sea, and my chances of getting a reply were the same as that sailor's. The camp's chief computer officer was a young but very serious guy, whose name, as it is not hard to guess, was Sasha. Every evening, having inspired our hearts with vague hope by his lengthy and inarticulate explanations, he plunged into the otherworld of electronic signals, space bridges and mail servers. His communication with the computer did not resemble the rapid-fire passages of a professional. Rather, it looked like careful shamanism, witchcraft, whispering ancient conspiracies. After half an hour, Sasha sighed heavily and shook his head worriedly. Evil spirits even today don't want to let e-mail from the Big Earth to our oasis lost in the icy desert....

When we came down after setting up the second camp, our natural inclination was to immediately send home triumphant reports of our remarkable success. However, a cruel disappointment awaited us. Sad Sasha explained to us that during our absence the satellite phone had finally broken down and had been sent to Almaty for repair. The patient had passed away after a long illness. It was the height of irony when the camp's chief communicator and postman himself used the telephone of these unspiritual but

of a frustratingly inept Yank to wish his mum a happy birthday....



In the afternoon it snowed from the grey skies with a smooth Pasternakian whirling. Big fluffy flakes descended on the ground in a continuous sad stream. And after dinner it suddenly became clearer, as if an invisible hand passed across the sky, sweeping away clouds, clouds and other unnecessary rubbish. The dense blue of the evening sky was reflected in the starched, fresh blanket that covered the quiet camp. When the last ray of the sun sank behind the horizon, we admired the nocturnal Khan Tengri, a pale-faced giant in a prickly frame of stars.

It was bitterly cold on the glacier on this clear night. Several times I woke up from the cold and pulled on some extra clothes, and in the morning, having searched with my hand in the vestibule, I felt a thermometer: -7 degrees! And this in a tent, in Base Camp.

This morning Volodya finally separated from our company and left for the ascent. In a day he climbed straight from the base camp to the second camp. The weather was favourable - not a cloud in the sky all day. Clear and cool. Eyal and I agreed to go out tomorrow morning, although if it were up to me, I would rest tomorrow too. I had developed some unhealthy shortness of breath. After a quick climb up a slope, my legs feel cotton-woolly, so that I want to sit on the ground. I assume that this is the payback for the "accelerated" acclimatisation. Each of us has our own pace, and nothing can be sped up.

In the evening Eyal and I had a serious conversation. He was eager to get to the mountain as soon as possible and wanted to go out together with Volodya. I carefully discouraged him, pointing out that Volodya had a decent experience and knew what he was doing, while Eyal had no idea how his organism would behave above 6000 metres. And Volodya had two days of rest, not one, as he had descended a day earlier than us.

"You have your way, Eyal," I told him, "but I'll be resting for at least two days." Eyal thought for a long moment. "Would you mind if we split up? How do you feel about that?" - He asked. "Actually, it's not my policy to walk alone," I said, choosing my words carefully. "So you're against us splitting up?" - Eyal asked again. I sighed: "Understand Eyal, you're in much better shape than I am right now. I can't be so insistent that we walk together. It doesn't look too good from a position of weakness. But if you want a straight answer, yes. I'd feel more comfortable for both of us, and it's also nicer to feel like we're a team." "No problem," Eyal said, hesitating a little.

"you're probably right. Since we started this together, we'll finish it together."

And then he relaxed and began to rant with passion about how much free time we would have AFTER RETURNING FROM THE TOP, and how great it would be to go to that wonderful lake Issyk-Kul, about which everyone was telling him. He tried to draw me into the discussion of this topical issue. Oh, naive youth! Everything that extended beyond the forthcoming ascent was "beyond the event horizon" for me. The proposed trip to Issyk-Kul interested me no more than the weather in Shanghai or the exchange rate of the Mongolian tugrik.

When Eyal once again uttered the dreamy "when we get down from the top!...", I could hardly contain my laughter.

In fact, I've never thought more highly of our chances at Khan Tengri than I do now. Everything was going without a hitch. It had been only seven days since our arrival at Inylchek, and we already had both camps set up and equipped with everything we needed. We have two weeks ahead of us, in which we can fit two full-fledged attempts of climbing. We couldn't dream of anything better! However, in order to talk about such a peak in the past in advance

time you have to be a very young and very prosperous person.....

So, we are slowly preparing for tomorrow's departure. We made an audit of our food stores and selected some for replenishment in the upper camps. In addition, we decided to abandon the compromised primus and switch completely to gas. The only problem was that Volodin's only gas burner sailed up with him. In the end, we managed to get the Korean burner off the camp.

"Sasha, who turned out to be the main businessman of the camp. He rented out various equipment, sold titanium Russian ice drills, as well as alcohol and juice packs. After breakfast a helicopter from "Big Earth" arrived and brought a repaired satellite phone, which, however, did not work that day. Eyal and I composed farewell letters to family and friends, saying that we were going to the mountain for a week, and left them in the computer, hoping that the information blockade would be broken sooner or later.

Towards evening the tired Britons, led by Moiseyev, came down from the mountain. At dinner they joked noisily, sharing their impressions, while I had a minor misfortune. During the meal it was discovered that I had a toothache and could not bite on the left side. Since it didn't hurt when I was calm, I wasn't too concerned. I figured I had scratched my gum or something. It would go away overnight, I decided.

I went to bed in high spirits. Although the unpleasant shortness of breath had not yet completely gone, I was feeling pretty good, and I was overflowing with pre-launch excitement. Han Tengri! At that moment I was ready to lay down my bones to reach its summit. My rucksack was packed and the kitchen was agreed for 7am. Clouds of fanciful shapes and colours were floating in the evening sky, and an openwork arc of delicate cirrus rose above the anxious horizon. "Let the storm blow harder!" - I thought. A joke, of course....

Three sad days in the Golden Temple

*"At last I realised with all clarity that.
The summit of the Beautiful refuses to accept me." (Yukio
Mishima. Golden Temple.)*

In the middle of the night, I woke up to a toothache. It was a continuous twitching pain, leaving no doubt that it was bad. A dry snowball rustled around the tent. There was a thud somewhere. I wanted to go to sleep and let it all - I mean the toothache - turn out to be a bad dream. I took a pill and fell asleep, but woke up again in the morning with pain and lay there until dawn, contemplating the situation and resigning myself to the necessity of cancelling the mountain hike. It hurt under the crown. All this was, was, was. Now it's called the fashionable French word "déjà vu", which in translation into simple Russian means "the same G..." It can't be, I tell myself. A bomb does not fall twice in the same funnel: I had it already during the expedition to Aconcagua. Then it caught me in the upper camp and I didn't have an antibiotic handy. Now I'm at Base Camp and I have a full course of the strongest antibiotic. Today I will start taking it, nip the inflammation in the bud and tomorrow I will go out on the climb. It's all for the best, I told myself. An extra day of rest would do me good.

The alarm clock rang and Eyal woke up. "Eyal," I said, "I have a problem. I have a toothache and I won't be able to go to the mountain today." Eyal hesitated. Wow - just yesterday we had decided to go climbing together! "Okay," he said, "I can wait until tomorrow. Can you go to the mountain tomorrow?"

"Who can know?! Maybe I'll go tomorrow, maybe in three days, or maybe I won't be able to go at all. It's an inflammation. Who knows how things will go here, in the cold, at 4,000 metres," I replied, "now I'm not sure you should wait for me anymore." Eyal hesitated. Outside, a fine snowball was drifting down from the heavy, hungover sky, but people climb up to the first camp in almost any weather, and they would have no trouble with fellow travellers. Here and the Americans said yesterday that they would go today to acclimatise. At last he made up his mind. "You know, I

I'll go," he said, "if you come out to-morrow, you'll let me know by communication, and I'll wait for you at the second camp. You're not offended?" Of course I'm not offended. What offence could there be? It was the right decision. I wish him luck and help him repack some stuff from my rucksack into his. He leaves, and I stay in my sleeping bag, staring stupidly at the ceiling of the tent.

At breakfast, I could barely eat the liquid porridge. The pain was no joke, and my morning illusions were gone like smoke. After breakfast I went to the camp doctor, having absolutely no idea how he could help me. The doctor listened to me with philosophical calmness, approved the antibiotic and recommended me to take a tablet of paracetamol with every antibiotic tablet. He found me four paracetamolines, not without difficulty, and handed them to me with the look of a man giving away his most precious possession.

He examined the packaging of my antibiotic with professional interest, became unusually animated and said that it was a fourth generation antibiotic and he, the doctor, was holding it in his hands for the first time! "This stuff," he said, "kills anything that moves!" "Along with the patient," I thought to myself.... "Doctor," I sat down in front of him and looked into his eyes, "how do you think I can go out on the mountain tomorrow?" A classic scene: "DOCTOR HOW LONG I LIVE..."

The doctor looked up and away. "You're a grown man," he said with a slight irritation in his voice, "you should know that you have inflammation, pus, and it's all in your upper jaw. Near the brain, by the way. And whether or not to take the risk, and what kind of risk to take, is your decision. From a professional point of view, I don't recommend you to go to the mountain".

The doctor was certainly right in his doctor's rightness, but I had my own truth - ascetic. "So, Doctor, I am not asking you for permission, but for information. I want to know my chances. You have experience. Maybe you've already seen such cases. I'm thinking of going up the mountain while continuing to take the antibiotic. What do you think?" - I pestered him like a bath sheet, but the doctor only wrinkled his nose as if he had a toothache, not me.... "I don't know, I don't know. It's altitude, you can't know anything in advance with it. And by the way, an antibiotic doesn't completely destroy the pathogen. It just suppresses the inflammation, and when you stop taking it, the altitude can reignite it. So anything can happen," he said firmly, and I realised that the conversation was over. All right, I decided to myself. If the pain subsides by tomorrow morning, I'll go up the mountain and keep taking the antibiotic. My wife made two six-thousand metres on antibiotics.

Meanwhile, the weather had improved, the sun was shining, and I took my camera and went for a walk to the upper reaches of the glacier. For the first time since my arrival here, I didn't have a "big goal" in front of me, so I just walked around, enjoying the views and the total lack of people.



The majestic walls locked North Inylchek to the east, and chaotic piles of ice and snow poured down from the steep side valleys onto its tranquil surface.



It seems that even the Everest region is inferior to the Central Tien Shan in severity and

the pristine landscape. Khan Tengri turned to me the other way round. Somewhere there, in the area of Chapaev Peak, the stubborn Volodya was now wading through the wind-driven prickly whirlwinds of snow.

A calm indifference reigned in my soul. I sank down on a large, slightly sun-warmed rock.

It's time to stop flirting with high-altitude mountaineering, I thought. It's not my thing, and I'm not lucky, so why bother? There are a lot of lower mountains and a lot of interesting routes. What is this number - 7000? Why is it so important for me to cross this particular line? Just because it once seemed impossible to me and now it seems possible? What if it really is impossible? And anyway, here I am, running up and down, climbing and abseiling kilometres of ropes without setting a single station or tying a single knot. We have never even taken a rope with us - it is still lying in the corner of the tent. Why would I do that? Just for the sake of numbers?

I suddenly realised that my dream of seven thousand had died, but a clear sense of duty remained. I can't go home empty-handed. I just MUST get up to the saddle.... Oh! Now, that's a telling disclaimer. That phrase should never be uttered under any circumstances. Whoever said "only up to the saddle" will only climb up to the saddle. I wrinkled my nose, trying to chase the harmful thought back, but as you know, a word is not a sparrow.

I walked slowly back. The sky was a brew of clouds of all shapes and sizes, and there was no telling what it would be by the end of the day. Physically, I felt great. The shortness of breath was gone. Could it still work?

Lunch made me depressed. I chew and cry - it hurts like hell! I swallow pieces of meat whole, like a boa constrictor. Base Camp is a large village where everyone knows everyone else and everyone is aware of each other's plans. Twenty times I have to explain where Eyal is and why I stayed at the camp. They look at me with sad eyes and clap me on the shoulder, saying "nothing, nothing..." Tomorrow these people will go to the mountain, and others will come down to the base and everything will start all over again.

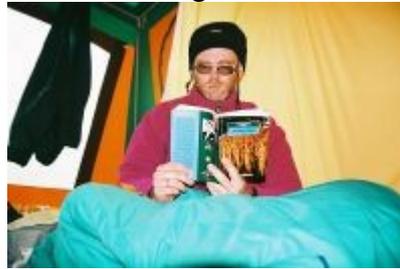
How dreary!



After lunch, I'm left sitting in the empty canteen. Where to go? To lie in a tent? Tanya, a "tea lady", came to me, sympathised with me, then helped me financially - she brought me some orange exotic pills of killing power. For a couple of hours, the pain subsided as if it never happened. Thank you, Tanya!

At four o'clock in the afternoon - a communication session, and Volodina Ira and I come to Nadia's tent. Ira is all nervous, literally wringing her hands. She's worried. She has never done anything like this herself, and it is hard for a person "on the outside" to separate the climbing routine from the really dangerous moments. Volodya got on the line. The radio is whistling, wheezing and breathing heavily - he has just now raked the Chapaev dome on the way to the saddle. Cool! Yesterday he climbed from the Base Camp to the second camp in one day (1500m drop - from 4000 to 5500), and today he is already going to the saddle. Well done, big devil! Eyal didn't call back at four, but got in touch at six. He said that he wanted to go straight to the second one, but it was hard and he stayed overnight in the first one. He also said that the crows had dug up our sausage from under the snow and eaten it all. Those bastards! Well, to hell with it. It wasn't good enough, that's why we buried it. The better ones we stashed in the second one. Eyal asks me to throw more sausage, stew and breadcrumbs in the first one. I'll throw it in, I'll throw it in, I just need to get out of the Base....

My tooth ached all night. Fourth generation, fourth generation... Doesn't help a damn thing! The weather's rubbish. In the morning everything was foggy, then it snowed and snowed intermittently until the evening. Green boredom. You can't stay in a tent for long, and in the canteen, though it's more fun, but it's so dubnyak that it gets to your bones. My down jacket was thrown into the second camp, and I put on everything I could, but I was still freezing without moving.



Thank God I have a book. I sit down on the rough-hewn bench in the dank dining room, pull my neck and arms deeper into my gortex jacket, so that only the two or three fingers necessary to turn the pages are sticking out, and plunge headlong into the dusky world of Yukio Mishima. It's hard to imagine anything more removed from the reality that surrounds me at the moment. The story of the relationship between a young monk, unsociable, with a slurred tongue, and the beautiful ancient Golden Temple he serves, which has enamoured and enslaved him to such an extent that the dusky young man decides to burn it down with him in order to rid himself of his slavery.

A painful world of repressed desires, unspoken words and dark, rotted passions. A beautiful book written by the most Japanese of all Japanese writers, who, at the age of 45, slashed his stomach with a swift samurai sword after a failed opera putsch. The most extravagant passing of a famous writer imaginable. Either - a desperate aesthetic attempt to reverse the history of a once predatory, but long ago and firmly domesticated state, or - the embodied childhood dream of a brilliant monster about a beautiful, painful and bloody death. I imagined what a man feels when he cuts himself with a cold and razor-sharp blade - stomach, liver, all that soft and warm belly. From shock he feels no pain and only stares with bulging eyes at the smoking, slippery viscera falling out onto the dirty floor. What a strange quirk! Only a nation unburdened by the problem of survival could afford such a waste. There is nothing more alien to the Jewish national character than such a death.

I read a lot, think a lot about life and death, and am constantly shaking from the cold....

At lunchtime the "Spaniards," that is, two Basques and two Catalans, came down from the mountain, and at once the dining-room was warmed by their noisy presence. All the few toilers in the kitchen flocked to them like butterflies to a flower bed. The supply of southern hormones that overflowed in these guys was not at all affected by a fortnight's stay on the rugged Tien Shan steps.

Just a couple of days ago, these guys were the big disappointment of the whole camp. They were expected to do the feat, to rush dashingly and unstoppably to the summit. They were unusually athletic, running from camp to camp with a speed that would inspire inferiority complexes in less brilliant climbers, and were among the first this season to reach the coveted saddle. They set out to storm the summit on an impeccably sunny day, when the heavy head of Khan Tengri was melting in the purple sky, and the whole base was watching their rapid advance with bated breath. When I looked into the "radio room" on some economic business, Moiseyev was sitting there, and I asked him how our Spaniards were doing, expecting to hear the victorious news. But Yuri Mikhailovich only waved his hand annoyingly and said: "they turned from 6500..." and added something in a low voice.

However, when this exuberant foursome came down to Base Camp, threw something inarticulate about "two attempts, terrible wind and doggy cold" and began to drink and walk around without a care in the world.

and merrymaking with a vigour which I had always considered purely Russian, few could resist their charms. The three of them, the younger ones, smiled incessantly. When any female creature approached them, this smile automatically stretched wider, inversely proportional to the distance to this creature. At the same time, the expression on one of the boys' faces would become oily and delighted, his lower jaw would drop, and his breathing would become ragged, like a setter's at the sight of a partridge.

The fourth, the older and more serious one, differed from his comrades in that he spoke English not at the level of Ellochka the ogre, but at the level of her educated friend, and also in that he showed a pronounced tendency to talk about global political topics. During the two days that the Spaniards were waiting for the helicopter and I was quietly rotting away with my dental problems, we had long conversations with this guy about everything in the world. Perhaps we would have become buddies if it had not been for the ideological gulf that separated us and was revealed in the course of these conversations.

His name was Pablo, if I'm not mistaken. I learnt a lot of interesting things from those conversations. In general, life at base camp is an amazing opportunity to talk to people from all different countries and try to understand what they are like. In the first conversation, right after we had exchanged some background information about ourselves, I launched into some crude, though quite sincere, flattery. I told him that I had been to Madrid, and that I loved it. Pablo frowned as if I had praised his wife's former lover and said that Madrid was a symbol of Spanish imperialism and its invasive policy towards small but freedom-loving Catalonia and its capital Barcelona. Oops.... What a screw-up! I immediately tried to remedy the awkwardness by patting Barcelona on the head too, even though I had never been there. The subject interested me, and I began to develop it cautiously, like a sapper digging up a mine ready to explode. Pablo and his comrades, as it turned out, belonged to the progressive, left-wing, freedom-loving, anti-globalisation and anti-American part of humanity. It's such a trendy soup-kit these days.

Of course, only a sable in the Polar Regions has not heard of the Basque struggle, but I had no idea that sunny Catalonia was also fighting for separation from Spain! "Yes, we are!" Pablo told me with stern pride, "they (the Spaniards, that is) take offence at us, just like the Basques. But we don't explode bombs, we fight them by peaceful means." "Pablo, Pablo," I asked him, "why do they offend you so much, these Spaniards?" "They don't like us," said Pablo thoughtfully, "they think we are rustics and don't like our language. They don't like us speaking our language in their Madrid." Whoops.... It turns out Catalans have their own language! Live and learn. "Are you sure, Pablo, that because of such an offensive, but still unimportant thing, it's worthwhile to start such a grand divorce with plate smashing, after Spain itself has become a part of the United Europe?" I realised from the long thoughtful pause that Pablo didn't often look at the issue from this angle. "Maybe not," he said sullenly, "but we want to be independent."

During our other conversation, the ball was thrown to my field. The story of the Holy Land in Pablo's mind was as simple as the structure of an infusoria slipper. Touching on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he shook his head concernedly, "Sharon is a very bad prime minister." He said sympathetically. "Well, why not?" - I replied, "in my opinion, he is one of the most successful prime ministers Israel has ever had." Pablo's face reflected genuine amazement. Obviously, it did not occur to him that a man who looked quite intelligent, though overgrown like a Siberian mammoth, could not share the opinion of the entire progressive European public. Eyal is not here, I thought. The two of them would have dealt with me in a heartbeat.... Listening to my explanations, Pablo shook his head incredulously, occasionally agreed with my arguments, and finally admitted that he had never had the opportunity to see this "hundred-year war" through the eyes of an Israeli.

By the way, all these conversations, which I am recounting so smoothly here, took place in absolutely monstrous English and were accompanied on both sides by sniping, meowing and desperate gesticulation. That's just for the sake of completeness.

If that was all it was, we'd have parted company.

friends. However, wanting to test the depth of my moral and political decay, Pablo mentioned the American president as a symbol of everything most hateful in the America he hated, which was tearing to shreds the unfortunate, tainted Iraqi land. Oh, that Bush! His simple Texan face sticks out in the middle of the world like a metal mast in a thunderstorm, and the lightning bolts of popular anti-Americanism strike it from all sides. Only a lazy man would not kick an American, and only a dead man their president..... "Well, Bush, of course, is not a seven-footer..." - I gave Pablo a pawn - "but they got that goat, Saddam, right," - I made a "move on the head". Pablo fell silent and looked at me with a suspicious Chekist look. He tensed up, and for a moment I thought that he was going to transfer our spiritual combat to the physical plane. Common sense prevailed, but the warmth and intimacy of our conversations was irretrievably lost. From then on Pablo greeted me with cold courtesy, as if I were a respected but irreconcilable adversary. Oh, these swarthy revolutionaries with their firm hands and supple bodies, the product of passionate women, tart wine, and indefatigable sunshine! How easy it is to love them! How great is the power of the aesthetic!

Behind the tarpaulin wall of the tent, heavy flakes of snow were still falling, and life went on as usual. Eyal, despite the bad weather, managed to make his way to the second camp, and Volodya is sitting in a cave on the saddle and waiting for an opportunity to go climbing. After lunch, the rested Brits left for the first camp. They are pressed for time, and Moiseyev leads them to the mountain, despite the persistent snowstorm, which will end unknown when. And I am the only one - meeting and seeing them off, reading and flapping my tongue, listening to "condolences" and bringing the newcomers who arrived on the last flight into the course of events. I turned into a detail of the camp landscape, into furniture, into a stray dog lounging by the kitchen. Boredom, boredom. At lunch I catch an ironic glance of a steep climber on the Karakoram eight-thousanders. It seems that public opinion has already written me off. I'm humbling my pride. You don't owe anyone anything, I tell myself. It doesn't matter what others think, it matters what you think. And yet, I'm bored to death. Half of my antibiotic was "thoughtfully" left in the second camp, and if the inflammation does not subside by the day after tomorrow, I will run out of pills, and then it is not clear what to do. And there is still no communication with the "Big Earth", and this is especially painful when you are depressed and dying of boredom and idleness.

In the evening I thought the toothache was subsiding and I went to bed almost in a celebratory mood, but at three in the morning I woke up and took the painkiller again. Oh, my God! When is this going to end! I am just rotting away from it all - from idleness, from the unknown, from sympathetic glances, from all this monstrous bad luck. I bit into my miserable pillow, improvised from the things I hadn't put on for the night, and immediately groaned in pain.... Fucking hell! I can't even do that... I'm going up the mountain tomorrow. God won't give me away, the pig won't eat me. But gradually I pull myself together and force myself to reason logically, without emotion. I will wait as long as it takes. I'll wait until the inflammation subsides, and I'm sure it won't come back if I keep popping the pills. By reducing the daily dose, I'll be able to stretch them out enough for the climb. Sure, this whole upsetting affair has hollowed out my chances of climbing the mountain, but it still hasn't nullified them.

I roll over onto my back and think about how stupid and frustrating this whole grand event, which had started out so beautifully, had gone wrong. The painkillers start to take effect, and I fall asleep. It's a cloudy morning. The sky is covered with clouds, and the summit of Khan Tengri is periodically hidden in fog. People now walk more and more in the afternoon. This is a new fashion - not to sit extra in the first camp. In the base camp it is much cosier and more nourishing. During breakfast I felt that my tooth did not hurt with that bitchy persistence that it used to. I'm not in a hurry to rejoice, but I'm getting ready to go out tomorrow. While Moiseyev is sitting on the mountain with his Brits, the camp is run by an athletic-looking woman whom the younger generation of climbers call Elena Petrovna. I buy a gas cylinder from her for my

on the way. One full tank and the remnants of the one we left at the first camp should be enough for the whole ascent. I try to choose a newer one, without visible deformations. The thing is that here it is customary to refill disposable gas cylinders thirty times. Russian ingenuity in action. Naturally, after such sessions of forced feeding, these cylinders here and there get all sorts of bloating, bumps and fluxes. They are used until they take the shape of a ball.

At lunch, the doctor and Lena are talking me out of going up the mountain, and while the doctor is sticking to the patient-friendly medical terminology, Lena is painting picturesque pictures of my slow and painful death. "It's the upper jaw," she explains to me, "the pus will burst through there and straight into the brain. And you're out of here, writing letters."

"No, Lena," I tell her, "I've already made up my mind, and if I spend this night without painkillers, I'm out after breakfast tomorrow."

"Well, then," says Elena Petrovna with a kind of coquettish cynicism, "let me ask you a direct question: do you have a safety net in case you're up there with that and that...?"

"I've got a safety net, I've got a safety net," I laugh at her tenacious household grip.

While I was sitting in Basic, I met a lot of new people. First of all, it was a Russian German, Zhenya, a sturdy man of the Nikita-Mikhalkovsky type, I would say. He came here alone, without a company and agreed with the Russian guides that he would use their tents on the mountain, which are there permanently until the end of the season. He's the one I communicate with the most, because of the language affinity. Sometimes I have a snarky conversation with three Austrians who have just arrived and are making their first acclimatisation and climbing trip today. Their leader, the younger one, says he's been on Muztagat, Ama Dablam, Mack Kinley and Aconcagua. His two companions look to be in their "fifties" and also seem to be quite experienced. One of them, whose name is Robert, sits in the dining room with a lean face, by which you can unmistakably recognise a mountaineer temporarily excommunicated from his masochistic hobby. It turns out he is coughing, and the doctor has promised him a quick death on the mountain from pneumonia. Like me, he takes an antibiotic, is tormented by idleness (only his second day!) and is raring to go on the mountain. I feel much more cheerful in his company.



In addition, one day the camp was flooded with Poles. Unlike the Koreans, they were very much "from this planet", they easily joined the team and ran up and down the mountain in small groups. All of them were young and had no idea what altitude was and what they ate with. There was a boy named Tomasz among them. So, I have never met a more sociable comrade in my life. There was a popular bench in our camp just behind the dining hall. It was situated on the edge of the moraine, above the glacier and facing Khan Tengri. On a warm sunny day people used to gather on this bench, talk and admire the plunges of the Northern Wall shrouded in a bluish haze. I even developed an old man's joke about it: when I came to this bench and found someone alive there, I would say: "Is that Khan film on again?!" So, when I found Tomasz there one day and gave him my unrivalled witticism, I was seized by such an unstoppable flow of words, such a long, absolutely inexhaustible desire for unselfish communication, that for a moment I wondered if he was a Jew. Tomasz lived the life of a poor but free student in Germany. He worked for a pittance in a mountaineering equipment shop and dreamed of big mountains. Khan Tengri seemed the right mountain for him to gain his first high-altitude experience..... It is not easy to bore me with conversation, but since we spoke in English, I left him absolutely exhausted, as if I had fought ten rounds against the Polish middleweight champion.

Apart from that, Tomasz turned out to be a simple, open guy, ready to help any human being at any time of the day or night.

Another person with whom I spent time in useful conversations was Vitya, who had come down to Base Camp for one night to breathe oxygen before going out for a decisive assault on the summit. Igor could not find the strength to come down and stayed waiting for him at the first camp.

The upper camps are gloomy today. Eyal spent the whole day in the second camp and Volodya in the cave on the saddle. Since the weather did not allow him to go out for the assault today, he has at least one more (already the third) night to go. He is sitting alone in the cave, and one can only imagine how such a stay in an icy "loner" at an altitude of almost 6000 metres presses on the psyche. The fact that between the second camp and the saddle Chapayev Peak sticks out, dictates a fundamental difference in the tactics of ascent from the northern side, compared to the southern side. Those who come to the saddle from the south usually do not wait for bad weather at the height, but try to descend at least to the second camp. There it is done quickly and easily, and just as easy to get back to the saddle. From the north, going from the second camp to the third camp takes a whole day of hard ploughing, and to descend you need to gain 300 metres and climb to the Chapaev's dome. That is why those who climb the saddle from the north usually sit on it till the end and go down only in two cases: either when all resources, material and mental, run out, or when they manage to wait for a window in the weather and make an attempt to climb. This morning the Koreans tried twice to make an assault, and both times the strong wind drove them back to the camp. Volodya says that on the saddle the wind literally knocks them off their feet.

By evening at our Base camp the weather had deteriorated completely - fine, dense, wet snow with wind. But I had no toothache at dinner for the first time and I am going to go to the first camp tomorrow in any weather. I have nowhere to retreat to - I have one and only one shot left. The toothache disappeared abruptly, as if it had been switched off, and now I'm all geared up for the climb. In the evening I lie in my tent, and through the whistling wind I hear shouts, laughter and barbaric music. The Spaniards are leaving tomorrow, and in the dining room vodka pours until late at night. And I have turned the last page of the Golden Temple, and tomorrow I'm going out on the mountain.

"The Temple itself could not be seen from the top of the mountain - only smoke and long tongues of flame. I sat down, cross-legged, and looked at this picture for a long time. I felt calm, like after a job well done. We'll live, I thought.

A slightly plastered Phoenix bird.

I am the plastered Phoenix bird. This is roughly how I feel as I struggle to move my feet along the flowing streams of water of the afternoon Inylchek. Physically, I feel like a sick person who has got out of bed after a long illness, but in my soul I have sun bunnies bouncing around. I'm enjoying the action and the movement. I am finally back at the beginning of something significant. I have risen from the ashes, albeit with a plucked tail and burnt wings.....



Actually, I was going to leave right after breakfast, but over breakfast Vitya started to persuade me

me to go out with him this afternoon. I hesitated. In such sunny weather in the afternoon the whole slope up to the first camp would turn into a wet mush. And there is no strength to sit in the camp. On the other hand, it is more fun and safer to go together. I agree and even agree that I will go on the ascent together with both Muscovites. It's funny that exactly what I thought about at the first acclimatisation exit happened - I joined their group! Actually I was going to spend the night separately, because their tent was a two-bed tent, and I had ready camps, but it is much more pleasant to go with the company on passages. Towards the end of breakfast "Elena the Beautiful" came up to us and asked if I was going out after breakfast, to which I said no, that Vitya had persuaded me to wait until lunch. "You let yourself be persuaded too easily, young man..." - Elena Petrovna sniggered mockingly. I laughed - yes, I'm a mild man with a good character!

After breakfast there was a series of farewells. Firstly, the Spaniards left, slightly swollen after last night's party. I said a heartfelt goodbye to Pablo, and I think he even forgave me my unconventional political orientation for a European intellectual. Then Tanya, the "tea lady", said that on the 10th of August her shift would end and she would leave for the Big Earth. Since I would still be on the mountain at that time, we said goodbye and I made a memorable entry in her diary. Shortly afterwards, Nadia comes up to me and, with a questioning look in her eyes, asks if I would mind writing her a couple of everyday phrases in Hebrew. She collects phrases in different languages in a special notebook. Like, "Hello", "how are you?", "how's the weather" and the like. I readily agree and write her a few phrases in Hebrew. Who knows, maybe the next Israelis who enter this camp will be dumbfounded by a greeting in their own language.....



At lunchtime, in the communication session, the exciting news came: Volodya is at the exit of the couloir, an hour and a half away from the summit! I'm keeping my fingers crossed for him. Ira is wringing her hands and bombarding me with questions. I try to reassure her: everything will be all right - Volodya will reach the summit and come down to the camp safe and sound. I'm really sure of it. Eyal is crossing the saddle today, and I am following his progress with mixed feelings. I certainly wish him the best of luck. I sincerely want our tiny expedition to end with a successful ascent, and the little white and blue flag I handed to Eyal before he left Base to be unfurled on the summit of Khan Tengri. Still, the slippery worm of jealousy grinds at my heart. This was my dream, my mountain, my 7,000-metre peak.....

Farewells are over, and Vitya and I descend to the glacier. In spite of general weakness and snow sticking on the ascent, my motivation comes out of my ears, and in 3h. 20m. we pile into the lower first camp. Igor immediately surrounds us with care and drinks us delicious fruit tea. Here I meet Tomasz, a Pole, who is as energetic as a ripe date with honey. He informs me that he is going to go to the second camp right now, at night. I try to dissuade him from this rotten idea, but for some reason it is important for him to do it at night.

After sitting with the guys for a quarter of an hour, I move a hundred metres up to my tent. Here I find Zhenya, the one from Germany. He is staying in the tent of the guides, and I borrow their mat from him, as all ours have been scattered by my companions on the upper tents.

to the campsites. Zhenya sourly remarks that the mats are not his, but I allow him to kick me in the middle of the night if the guides suddenly come to the camp against all forecasts. It was getting dusk and quite chilly. I crawled into the tent, made an awkward movement, and immediately my calf cramped up. What a nasty thing! And this is after the easiest transition, and what will happen tomorrow? And after all, on the first outings there was nothing like that. I massaged the muscle and it seemed to go away. I make myself comfortable in the vestibule and cook dinner without hurry, enjoying the silence, solitude and feeling of pleasant fatigue. The gas burner is humming quietly, drops of condensate are falling from the tent fabric. I eat a mug of soup with stew and breadcrumbs. Then I drink a lot of hot herbal tea with lemon wafers. It feels good, damn it! For the first time in the last week I feel like I'm living.

I climb into the sleeping bag, tighten the cord so that only my nose is sticking out, and from inside this light cosy cocoon I listen to the sharp gusts of wind that have risen outside. Judging by the dry rustling of the waves, it is snowing. What an insignificant barrier separates me from the outside world, from the ocean of dry frosty air, in which prickly bundles of snow are whistling with a long whistle. Remove a couple of millimetres of capron and a couple of centimetres of synthetic down, and in a matter of minutes my warm body would turn into a hard, glazed deck.

Sleep does not come, and I ponder these and other interesting things for a long time. I think about the fact that as long as I am healthy and strong, I like this solitude. It's new to me, but I'm beginning to realise why people love solo climbing - the feeling of freedom. Like any freedom, this climbing freedom is a toy for the strong. Like all freedom, it comes with a risk. That's the way the world works. You can't sit on your arse in two chairs: you're either insured or you're free. The only kind of people I envy with a hopelessly hot envy are people born free. There is a breed of people who feel no resistance to the world around them. Every movement comes easily to them, their actions are done on time, and they never have to look sadly at the passing train. All my life, trying to get closer to this freedom, I push back my border time after time, but every time I find myself in a new room, maybe a little more spacious than the previous one, but fundamentally no different from it. Freedom is a state of mind, not the availability of something that was unavailable to you before. Simply chewing through life's tunnel in a new direction does not make you a free person. Like any human ability, freedom can be learned, but no amount of hard work can replace a natural talent - the talent to be a free person. Today I already know that I will not live long enough to attain the degree of freedom that would satisfy me. But even the smallest progress in this direction is the greatest pleasure and the greatest reward for me.

I tossed and turned for a long time, but by morning I was sound asleep and got up in a cheerful state of mind. The weather is cool and a little unsettling. The sun was shining, but the sky carried high puffy clouds, and waves of sharp wind carrying dry snow dust flew from Chapaev down the rib. I, taking my time, eat breakfast and get ready to go out. There is no hurry. Firstly, I have to wait for the Muscovites who will come up to me from the lower camp, and secondly, it snowed during the night, and I have no desire to put my chest to the ammunition - to break a path for the people. As I discovered only in the morning, there were Americans sleeping in the next tent, and I decide that the heroic conqueror of Everest, Scott, may well undertake this honourable mission. Soon they are indeed off up the rib, stopping and ducking every time another whirlwind of snow dust rolls in from the upper slopes. Despite Scott's troping, he has to periodically wait for his client.



I went back to my business and forgot all about it, when suddenly, to my annoyance, it came back. Scott's client walked past me with a green face, stepped back to the edge of the platform, and spat out everything that had been building up on my mind. "What happened?" - I asked Scott. "The guy had a little too much to drink last night..." - Scott replied with a wry grin. He didn't look upset at all.

At 9am Vitya and Igor came up and we went out. There was nothing to do - we had to trail. I find out that even what Scott had trodden had been covered with snow. After an hour I start to give up, and Igor replaces me. We're going slowly. I feel better than yesterday, but my legs are weak - weaker than on the first outings. But the altitude doesn't pressurise me yet - I have acclimatised properly.

Higher up it gets easier, as the wind has blown away almost all the fresh snow. What really spoils life are the snow dust charges that come at us with dull regularity. My hands start to freeze and before the rocky belt I change my gloves for thicker ones. Before the rocks I wait for a long time for my turn.



It turned out that climbing was not Vitin's speciality, and he takes a long time to adjust before making the next step. Igor was the first to climb through, quite skilfully, and now he grumbles and takes photos of our fuss from above.

Somewhere above the rocks we meet Volodya, who is descending to Base Camp. Yesterday I learnt that he had made it to the top. I congratulate him - I clap him on the shoulder and shake his hand. For a man who has climbed to the top of Khan Tengri after three nights on the saddle, he looks surprisingly fresh. We make an agreement with him that he will leave me and Eyal his tent at the first camp. I also borrow his burner and walkie-talkie. I promise to return everything to him in Almaat before departure, and he wishes me good luck and goes down to his Ira, to rest, to quiet mattress joys on the shore of the crystal lake Issyk-Kul.

Our trio crawled into the second camp only at six o'clock. The first thing I did was to cook dinner. I prepared a big bag of snow, so that it would be enough for the morning, and got into the tent to stoke water. I cooked potatoes with sausage and onions, and then had a long tea with absolutely delicious halva. Have you ever had halva with sultanas dipped in bitter chocolate? If not, you still have something to live for.....

After dinner I went for a walk around the camp and to photograph the sunset. There was a lot of people in the camp. It is even strange to think that all this cheerful party (one and a half dozen tents!) settled down in the middle of rather steep route on Khan Tengri. I am amazed at how warmly everyone welcomed me here. They were used to me being a sad attribute of the camp canteen, and it seems that nobody expected to see me here. The dead man has risen from his coffin.

In the evening, my leg cramped up a couple of times again, so I made myself some hydran and drank it for prevention. It is a special powder that restores the salt balance in the body. Then I heated up a bottle of hot water and went to bed with it. There was nothing sexual about it, believe me.



All night long the strongest gusts of wind rattled the tent. I slept intermittently, and dreamed strange dreams. It was as if I were someone else in the tent, looking down at the real me, the one who was asleep. Sometimes there were even two of us strangers. For all the delirium, the dream was very vivid.

At 12 a.m. I realised that I wouldn't make it to dawn - the need would overpower me. I had not bothered to prepare a bottle for such an occasion, so I gathered my will in a fist, pulled on a down jacket and plastic and went out "before the wind". What's "into the wind"? To the hurricane! I go behind the tent for a couple of steps, exactly enough not to scoop "yellow snow" tomorrow. I'm standing knee-deep in a snowdrift. The wind is roaring, the snow is flying parallel to the ground. The jet, too...

I return to the tent and crawl shiveringly into my sleeping bag. After a while, the alien me again sits down in the tent by my body and talks about something long and heartfelt.



I woke up in the morning with a headache and took a pill. I looked outside, and it was so windy that people were walking around the camp, bent at 45 degrees. I made oatmeal for breakfast, but it didn't go in me. I pushed it down my throat, but I could feel it begging to go back down. I sat down with my back against the tent wall and clenched my teeth. We'll get along, we'll get along! Indeed, after about five minutes the oatmeal calmed down, and I went outside to find out what was going on.

The British are going up, despite the wind. Persistent Moiseyev drives them to the saddle. Besides him they are accompanied by four guides and porters: Vadik Popovich from N.Tagil, Vasya, who is local, Kazakh, and two young guys. I think their names were Sasha.... I became friends with Vasya while I was in Base Camp. He kept asking me about life in Israel, wondering why we couldn't give the Palestinians everything they wanted and then see what would happen.



I wish Vasya a successful ascent. His eyes are sad, and I understand him. It's not like you can't walk a dog in such a windy day. Vitya and Igor decide to stay till tomorrow, and I don't know what to decide for some time. On the one hand, I'm pressed for time, and the case

I could go with the Moses team. On the other hand, I feel pretty lousy, and the weather is crappy. I have a feeling that a day at this altitude will do me good. And I don't want to run away from the Muscovites. They're good guys, I'm used to them. In the end I decide to stay for the day.

By twelve o'clock the wind had died down and I decided to go for a walk up to the rocky belt. It is useful for acclimatisation and to keep the body from stagnating. I took only my camera and a bottle of water with me.

Going upstairs almost in a crowd.

The people realised that the wind had died down, and almost the whole camp (that's a few Finns and half of Poland) went to Chapaev.

The Finns are going to reach the saddle, while the Poles have decided to spend the night on Mt Chapaev.

Poles, I've noticed, are generally prone to non-trivial approaches and solutions.



I climbed up almost to the rocks, but I didn't get close. There were about a dozen people hanging on the rocky belt, and the rocks there were ruined - every now and then pebbles flew out onto the snow.



In the middle of the ascent I contacted the base camp. From the second tent the connection with the base camp is bad. From the tent there was no connection at all, so I had to get out and go to the north-western slope. I spoke to Nadia and she told me a strange thing. As if my wife had called Valiev's office in Almaty and asked Yulia if I was alright. This was quite strange, because before leaving Basic I had managed to call home through the

Scott's satellite phone, and Tanya knows that I've only been gone on the mountain for a couple of days. I asked Nadia if my wife had told me that something had happened to her, but Nadia reassured me and said that Tanya was just worried about me. I still had the feeling that there was something left unspoken: Tanya knew what was going on, and it was too early for her to worry about me.

I clicked half a film and went down to the camp. Under the rocky belt, at an altitude of about 5800m, I felt that the altitude was pressing on my head, and I came to the tents exhausted and with a headache. Probably, I was right not to climb the saddle today. But who knows what is right and what is wrong here. Only later, in hindsight, we are all clever.



The weather fluctuates like a young lady's mood on critical days. In the morning the wind knocked me off my feet, in the afternoon - quiet, sunshine and light clouds, and by evening - everything was covered and it started to snow. But it was not the end! Just before sunset it suddenly became clearer, and we witnessed an enchanting sunset. After dinner I take a long walk around the camp - watching the sunset and walking myself for the night. Just like a dog... I don't want to crawl out again in the middle of the night.

At the evening communication we were told sad news: there was a giant ice collapse on the southern side, under which 11 to 14 people (as it turned out later - 11) died. The cornice from Chapaev Peak collapsed - an exact repetition of the tragedy of 1993, when Valery Khrishchaty died.

Now I understand why Tanya called Almaty. From the first news, it must have been difficult to understand where exactly the collapse had occurred. I imagined the uproar this message had caused at home, and I felt really bad. Especially for my parents. Tanya understands very well where I am and what I do, she knows the geography of the mountain and the location of the routes, but for them it's all a Chinese language. From the Russian news they probably only understood that a lot of people died on the very mountain I was climbing. Tanya may have called to reassure them (and it turned out to be so). The camp is bleak, but we're pretty much cut off from the world here, and everyone keeps going about their business. The cold, hypoxia and our own problems are not conducive to prolonged sympathetic reflection.

Today I reduced the antibiotic dosage to one pill a day - only in the evening. And I've only got four of them left. Whatever happens tomorrow, and whatever the weather, I just have to get to the saddle.

During the night, the weather turned fierce. The wind gusts came with such a roar as if an electric train was passing by. In the middle of the night I put earplugs in my ears and only then managed to sleep. In the morning I got up with a slightly swollen head, but, in general, the condition is good. It was time to go upstairs. However, when I looked outside, my determination of yesterday melted away "like smoke from a white apple tree". The weather's rubbish. It's foggy and snowing. After breakfast I moved to the neighbouring guide's tent, where Zhenya settled down, and we kill a couple of hours in heart-to-heart talks "about life". At 10 a.m. the weather improves and Muscovites and I start to get ready for the mountain. At 11, when my rucksack was fully packed, to my delight Eyal came down from the mountain. He was visibly exhausted and while he was rambling on about his adventures, I made him a pot of tea. I must say that since he had gone to the saddle he had never been in touch, and I had only heard conflicting rumours through those who had come down from the third camp. It turned out that he, for some not quite clear reason, did not go to the cave of our camp, but went down to the south side, to the Kyrgyz caves. That is, to those used by those who come up from the south.

Naturally, it was impossible to contact the camps on the north side of the mountain from these caves. The result of his efforts was three nights spent in the third camp and two attempts to climb, which he made in the company of Canadians he had befriended at Base Camp. On the first outing they did not get far, stopped by a strong wind. Of the four, only the "long-haired" Canadian continued the ascent and managed to reach the summit despite the terrible weather. On the second attempt the remaining three managed to get almost to the fourth camp at 6400m, but the strong wind and frost forced Eyal and Mark to turn back. Eyal showed me the black frostbitten rim of his ear and said that one particularly strong gust of wind had knocked him off his feet and almost thrown him off the ridge. At the last moment he managed to grab hold of the railing rope. I don't know why he wasn't insured. The man had suffered so much that I didn't bother him with unnecessary questions. Anyway, he and Mark returned to the caves, while Anatoly managed to get to the top.

While Eyal was telling me all these entertaining stories and pouring tea, the weather deteriorated completely. A natural blizzard came up, and the Muscovites and I only had to unpack our rucksacks again. Eyal wished me success, returned the "passing blue-and-white pennant" and expressed his iron confidence that such an experienced climber as me would definitely hoist it on the top of Khan Tengri.... The optimism of this hairy Israeli is absolutely indestructible!

Then he packed some things into his rucksack and disappeared in the swirls of snow in the direction of the first camp. We agreed that he would take down Volodya's tent there and carry it down, while I would take down the upper camp. So, I was left alone on the mountain. All my team, with whom I got involved in this senseless and beautiful event, has already "shot off", and only I am still on the way to the goal.

A little later, Scott came from the first camp with his client. Well done, though: he was lying down, puked and climbed out to the second camp despite the bad weather. Then, Anatoly came down and made a loud scandal to my Muscovites because of some misunderstood abandonment. It was an unpleasant story. Besides Eyal and Anatoly, Vasya came down from the saddle. "Well, fuck it, this high-altitude mountaineering!" - Vasya said glumly, and against the hangover sky and the prickly whirlwinds of snow his words seemed more convincing to me than ever. "I've had enough," he said, "I've had enough of this joy - how..." and he made a slashing motion with the palm of his hand at his throat. "I'm a techie. Rocks, ice, working with gear - that's my thing, but kneading snow, busting my belly button and bending over at six thousand I've seen it in my grave!" He was angry and convinced me that he was not offended at all that he had not climbed to the top.

The rubbery, nothing-filled hours before dinner stretched on. In my diary I wrote the following entry: "It is 14.50, there is a blizzard outside, but the tent is warm and bright. I'm sitting, eating chocolate-covered halva. "I feel good. It's interesting that here I have a pulse in a calm state - 107! Like during a run..."

To give you an idea of the full measure of the marasmus and idleness into which I was immersed, I will also cite the verses I composed there:

"Tien-Shan. I'm sitting alone in a tent.
Napping, writing, eating chocolates.
The weather's a bitch, and I'm looking out
Isn't it time to run for your life? And
yet, it's a shame to run away,
Never made it to the saddle,
Though the railings were
covered with snow.
And the frosted chilo."

Did you feel it? I kept a very detailed diary on the mountain. I had plenty of free time, but I had a spoonful of it.

About Chapaev (not an anecdote).

At least half a metre of snow fell overnight. In places shaded from the wind you can fall through knee-deep, if not waist-deep snow. And the weather, what weather! Silence and

blue-blue-blue concave sky. I look with annoyance at the steep slopes of Chapaev Peak covered with pure fluffy snow. Now I have the weather and my health is fine, but so much snow has piled up.... A bad dancer's feet get in the way, I think. It can't be helped, we can't sit here any longer - either up or down. Now all of us who are going up would get together and take turns tramping, but a short survey of the population does not bode well for me. The Americans decide to go down, and apart from me and the Muscovites, only two people are going out: an Austrian, Robert, the one who had bronchial problems, and a young boy from the Romanian Neishanl Geographic expedition. They are going to climb Chapaev Peak for acclimatisation and return to camp. They are in absolutely no hurry and seem to be waiting for us to come out first and do all the work for them. A well-known modern mountaineering game has started: "Who will blink first?". Muscovites are also waiting, rightly reasoning that, unlike us, Austrians and Romanians go out light, without heavy rucksacks, so the honour of laying the first furrow on the unploughed snowy virgin land should belong to them. The only problem is that they can afford to go out whenever they want or not to go out at all. We've got nowhere to go. I'm sitting on pins and needles. Precious time is running out. The Romanian and the Austrian are sleepily strolling by their tent, the Muscovites - by theirs, and I begin to realise that if I don't come out first, we'll be like this until lunchtime, and then we'll have nowhere to go. With our pace we won't be able to reach the saddle by daylight. Besides, yesterday Vitya thoughtfully said something about "shouldn't we go down...", from which I concluded that his motivation is not at the highest level now.

At 9.45 I zip up the tent, put on my rucksack and go out in the direction of the ridge, where the first rope of the railing is fixed. The first couple of tens of metres lead me to despair. There is no hint of the trail left. After taking a few steps knee-deep in the loose snow, I suddenly fall through my thighs. I take off my rucksack and, panting from exertion, gradually get out of the snowy captivity. After the second fall I finally get used to probing the old path with an ice axe. This path is buried under a half-metre layer of fresh snow, but without it it is impossible to advance at all. So I swim up to the first rope, which I have to literally dig out from under the snow. I fasten my harness and start climbing up the slope. The snow is up to my ankles and I have to pull the rope out of it. After half an hour, I sit down in the snow, absolutely exhausted and look at the camp with anger. Do they think I'm a Bukreev or a Messner? Frankly speaking, I hoped that, as the first fighter to rise from the trench, I would lead by example the whole of our small army into the attack. I must admit I was wrong. How long can I hold out? It's clear as day that alone and with such a rucksack I won't have a whole day to traverse the whole rib to the top of Chapaev's peak. If I don't die before....

Work, work, I say to myself. Get up, you bastard, we have to work! We have to plough! I get up, pull the next few metres of rope out of the snow, and continue crawling upwards, leaving behind me a wide furrow, in some places enlivened by loose craters - the places of my falls and breaks. I had never been so determined, in spite of the obvious hopelessness of my endeavour. I had a strange conviction that I had to go to the saddle today not even for myself, but for all those (?!!!) who believed in me, for my family, after all. That's a pretty strange train of thought. You'd think that someone had equipped me for this expedition or encouraged my participation in it....

The truth, however, is that what a man is able to do for others, he is not able to do for the sake of his own selfish passion. Keeping myself in such a passionary state, I had almost reached the horizontal narrow ridge from which the main part of the snow rib leading to the rocky belt starts. In an hour and a half I had climbed hardly a hundred metres. And then I saw two tiny figures crawling down from the camp to the start of the route. An Austrian and a Romanian followed my example! I sank down tiredly on my rucksack and sat defiantly the whole time they were climbing towards me. When they reached me, they had such sour faces, as if they really expected me to make a hero's trek all the way to the top. "Trekking is group work!" - I admonished my foreign colleagues as I continued to sit. "It was terribly hard..." - I added, just in case they were still entertaining the idea of my

superman. They shook their heads in agreement, albeit sadly, at my remarks and obediently "were harnessed to the plough." Now they were taking turns in the plough, and I was following in their wake, quietly rejoicing at my good fortune. It was amusing to see a young Romanian gentleman trying to patronise Robert, obviously believing that at such an "advanced" age (about 50, I think...) a man is in need of patronage. He tromped a lot and diligently, and in his spare time he pestered the Austrian with all sorts of useful advice. Besides, he did not forget that he was a part of the expedition organised by the Geographical Society and took a lot of photographs, placing Robert in the centre of various picturesque compositions.



When he reached the narrow, two-foot-wide horizontal scallop, he began to explain to Robert how to pass such extraordinary obstacles, reached the middle, swayed and plunged down. The horizontal railing was stretched, and he hung on it two metres below the crest. Slightly embarrassed by this turn of events, the guy climbed back to the ridge and carefully, without wasting precious energy on further ranting, reached a safe place. The Austrian, who had been listening to the young man's advice with polite attention (this is Europe!), walked along the ridge with the easy gait of a man who has lived his whole life surrounded by Alpine scenery. Later, when we came under the first rocky belt, the Austrian skipped it without delay and as if almost without noticing the change of relief, and the young Romanian national geographer, uncertainly scratching the rocks with his crampons and picking them with an ice axe, guiltily told Igor and me that he had fulfilled his programme for today and it was time to return "to base". By this time I had already reunited with my Moscow friends.

Igor and I felt quite well, considering the circumstances, while Vitya was suffering from a heavy cough. When after that narrow snow ridge he sat down in the snow for a long time, I thought he would turn down. However, I underestimated his persistence. After sitting for a while and recovering, he continued upwards and gradually got into the pace. The first rocky belt turned out to be the most difficult part of the whole route - three metres of sloping slabs overlapping each other like shingles so that an ordinary "hiking" ice axe was practically useless on them. I tried to climb them, using the jumar only for insurance, but with a heavy rucksack it was impossible for me. The ice axe scratched the rock with a nasty grinding sound, and I fell sensitively, slipping off the icy slab. Not showing off any more, I climbed up, leaning on the jumar. From these efforts at the six-thousandth height I saw "bloody boys" and their fathers, mothers and grandparents dancing in my eyes....



The rocky belt was followed by a rocky slope covered with deep, loose snow that literally squeezed all the energy out of us.



It led us to a new strip of rocks, much less steep than the first one. Above it was again a short snowy section and again rocks, also not difficult. When we passed them and found ourselves at the base of a long snow slope, above which there was only deep purple sky, we realised that we had Chapaev in our pocket. We sat down to take a break and throw something to ourselves "in the firebox". Vitya periodically had a long cough, I also began to cough, and Igor began to explain to me excitedly that, being on the slopes of the peak of Chapaev, whom he called Petka for some reason, one should not tell jokes about Vasily Ivanovich. As if I had the strength to tell jokes! I can never remember a single anecdote at all, for that matter.....

The exit to the dome of "Petyka", turned out to be absolutely endless. Above six thousand metres, some kind of tap in our bodies was shut off. We were moving in a tight group, periodically, according to our health, changing the leader and literally gnawing away at the height metre by metre. The effort was simply monstrous. Every step made my navel unbuckle. At some point I noticed that I was moaning. It seemed indecent to me, and I kept silent, but when my friends drew closer to me, I was amazed to hear that their progress was accompanied by the same heavy groans. Walking at this altitude is fundamentally different from walking below 5000 metres. In "low" mountains, walking upwards, you simply drive yourself into a certain, suitable pace, in which you can walk almost as long as you like without stopping. Your breathing adjusts to your steps - a certain number of inhalations and exhalations for a certain number of steps. Around 6000 metres this becomes impossible. Trying to adjust your breathing to your steps just devolves into some agonising stomping around. Instead, I've developed a different tactic. I take 10 to 15 fairly vigorous steps on what little oxygen I have in my blood. When I feel that my supply is running low, I stop, leaning on my ice axe, and breathe hard for a long time until my strength comes back to me. If I manage to walk 14-15 steps in a row - great! On steep sections or in deep snow, I have to stop every 5-6 steps.



At 19.30 we reach the northern summit of Chapaev. 6150 metres. In the soft evening rays a landscape of fantastic, primordial beauty opens before us. Khan Tengri rises above the saddle in all his ginormous stature.



Looking from Chapaev Peak at its endless rocky slopes, you realise that only from here, from the saddle lying at our feet, the real ascent begins. All that was before, all this hard, persistent labour, all this spitting blood, was only a prelude to the main day, which, God willing, we are only to live. A chaos of majestic and rugged mountain ranges stretches south of Khan Tengri. I try to find the familiar outline of Victory, but I cannot, although I think it should be visible from here.



The flat snow dome we are on passes to the south into an open snow and ice ridge leading to the main summit of Chapaev Peak. Glancing along this sharp ridge, with fluffy cornices knocked down, I remember my naive idea - to walk to the main peak on the acclimatisation exit. What a way to go! From here it looks like a serious technical ascent.



The northern summit is marked by a rare-looking ice axe stuck in the snow. It is the grandfather of all ice axes. We take a photo near it and start the long descent to the saddle, bogging down knee-deep in fluffy snow. It took us two long hours to get down to the tents of the third camp. We were so exhausted that even the descent turned into an agonising torture for us.



Descending from Chapaev, we came to the place where a well-trodden path rises from the southern Kyrgyz caves to the saddle and runs along the whole ridge, through the third camp, to the foot of Khan Tengri summit tower. The trail traverses the ridge on the south side, away from the monstrous size of the cornices hanging down on the north side. The only thing,

The only thing that worried me as I moved my stumbling feet along this sometimes very narrow path was not to stumble from fatigue and fly downwards. Where the undulating, milky-coloured snow slope was lost in the deep valley, shrouded in twilight.

Vadik Popovich met us at the tents and gave us hot compote. After drinking a mug, I felt that all my insides, shriveled up like a frozen Peruvian mummy, opened up and filled with life. The ability to look and marvel at what I saw was returning to me like water to a dried-up riverbed.



The sun was hanging over the horizon, and the heavy hulk of Victory, painted in a sunset combination of blue and pink, towered directly against us. I looked at all this incredible panorama and thought that maybe only suffering allows natural beauty to penetrate us to the necessary depth, touching the most sensitive and delicate strings. Satiated admiration can never evoke the same piercing response in our souls.

And a miracle happened. The overhanging rock tower of Khan Tengri poured blood for a few seconds, burst into a deep marble flame, and quietly faded away, sinking into the deep shadows of the creeping twilight. We stood stunned by the grandeur of what we had seen, frantically clutching our useless and ridiculous cameras in our hands. I'm glad I didn't have time to kill this incomparable memory by stapling it to a pathetic piece of glossy paper.

Vadik was waiting for the return of the three Britons who had left for the ascent, accompanied by Moiseyev and two porters. All of them managed to climb to the top, thus doubling the number of successful climbers from our side of the mountain. It is now 10pm, it is getting dark, and they are still out there somewhere on the lower slopes of the summit pyramid.



Vitya and Igor started to set up the tent, and I went down a slightly noticeable path about 20 metres to the south side to the entrance of the ice cave dug by our camp guides at the beginning of the season.

The cave was a much more comfortable dwelling than I had anticipated. A short, low trapdoor led me into a spacious chamber in which I could stand to my full height. To the left was a deep sleeping alcove. It was elevated, so that it was comfortable to sit on the edge, and could accommodate four men loosely, or five if they lay down tightly. A kitchen table had been carved out of the ice against the entrance, with some poor utensils and soup packets covered with spiky Korean characters. To the right was a small niche for backpacks and other things. There was no one else in the cave, so I had all this splendour to myself. Sleeping alcove

was covered with thin silver mats. I sank down on them and sat there for a while in prostration, gathering my strength. The heavy fatigue made reality seem to float away and then come back to me in waves. On autopilot I prepared my dinner - broth "Galina Blanca", dressed with instant mashed potatoes and pieces of dry sausage. I take my time and drink several mugs of herbal tea. I go to sleep in my down jacket, syntepon trousers and inner boots. My sleeping bag is a bit too liquid for such an oak tree, but it is light.

Sleep comes over me in a warm wave, and from somewhere in the corner of the cave appears my nocturnal guest, who has been visiting me regularly since the day I went up to the second camp. I have become accustomed to his (or my?) endless and meaningless nocturnal musings, the contents of which I cannot remember in the morning. How warm and cosy it is to sleep in an icy cave! Neither the flapping of the frozen tent tent, nor the howling of the wind, nor the deafening roar of snowfalls reach me in my winter den. I feel myself behind the Snow Queen's back. A frosty calm surrounds me.

Only once did I wake up in the middle of the night and lie awake for a long time listening to the dull ache niggling somewhere at the base of the unfortunate tooth. I had pumped ice-cold air through me for twelve hours yesterday and may have renewed the inflammation by overcooling the sore tooth. If I get up tomorrow with a toothache, I have no choice but to make the return journey, and as soon as possible.

Diary of a caveman

Yes, I kept a diary, and a pretty detailed one at that. Especially in the cave, when I had a lot of free time. Now, when I am writing all this, I am almost six months away from the days spent on Khan Tengri, and I admit that many things appear to me somewhat differently, or I want to see them somewhat differently. Re-reading my diary, which I wrote in the cave, I felt some vague and absolutely not logical feeling of protest about some of my remarks. And it was this feeling that gave me the idea of putting it all out there, exactly as it was written in the diary. The only thing worth explaining is the plan that the Muscovites and I had at that time. We arrived at the camp so late and so exhausted by the twelve-hour trek that it was out of the question to go climbing tomorrow morning. We decided to rest one day and the day after tomorrow, if the weather permitted, to make an attempt to climb. If the weather did not allow it, we would go down. I don't remember Vitya's and Igor's reasons, but I was supposed to run out of antibiotics by that time, and in another day - of gas in the burner and food. It seemed to me a good enough reason not to stay on the saddle.

In my diary, however, I wrote this:

"There is no toothache in the morning. The dawn in the cave is the most beautiful: waves of blue light pour in from all sides, like at the bottom of the sea. The weather is unstable - a little wind, a little fog, a little snow.



I just had breakfast, when Vadik Popovich and two porters came down to me, one of them (Sasha) with frostbite on his fingers. They prepared tea and compote, and left some things as a reservation. We sat for quite a long time, till 10 o'clock, and it was good -

not boring. When they left, I wrote notes and read some evangelical pamphlet (here it is, the hand of the brothers of Christ! In an ice cave at 6000m!)



Then Vitya and Igor came to visit. We sat and chatted about life until two o'clock. We drank tea. Then we went to their place for lunch, as they were freezing in my den. Their tent is cramped but warm. We ate instant (but this time they didn't dissolve...) pasta with tinned fish and drank tea with my breadcrumbs and biscuits (eh, what will I eat tomorrow?). We chatted about politics and at 5.30 I went to my cave.

We agreed to leave in the morning at 6-6.30, weather permitting. Deep down I am afraid of this mountain. Every movement here requires so much energy, and this mountain is so high.....



I don't want to climb to the top anymore, I'm just fulfilling some strange duty to myself, to my family, to my dream. Up to this point I've played fair and given what I can, but now, putting tomorrow as the deadline for the climb, I feel like I'm cheating. I could have held out on the saddle for a couple more days. Either way, I'm glad I made it to the saddle. It was very (terribly!!!) hard, and it was a climb. If my trip was a loss, at least it wasn't a blowout. It was really cool to see Sunset Victory from the cofferdam, sleeping and living in the cave. Last night at sunset I saw Khan doused with "blood" in all its glory. It is an unforgettable sight! I was here and I saw it!

For dinner for the second day, I'm making myself a bolthole of Galina Blanca, potatoes and sausage slices in a mug. Today I added more slices of frozen onions. Cheese freezes through, even if you put it in the sleeping bag for the night. The matches that Volodya had left me were also getting damp, and now every third or fourth one was lit. They'll run out soon. Luckily, this morning the guys left a burner with a piezo element, so now I use it like a giant lighter. They also left a plastic shovel, so now I can shovel the snow that is slowly drifting into the entrance.

In general, how much depends on luck: if I had left base camp a day earlier, I would have walked the whole time with the British, including yesterday's attempt in near-perfect conditions. Had Eyal stayed on the saddle for another 24 hours and he might have been in on it too. Although those who are truly strong both physically and mentally are much less dependent on luck. They wait for the weather as long as necessary (I would be crazy to sit in a cave for 4 days like Volodya) or climb in not "ideal" weather (like Canadians). Luck is the helper of the weak. What can I say, I am tired of cold and loneliness, however conditional it may be. I want to go to the warmth, to my own. I miss you.

In the evening (when it's time to go to bed) the wind blows straight into the cave. I'm covered with mats. The problem of peeing is either against the wind or into my cave..... I found a compromise and peed across the wind, on the slope right at the entrance. For a more serious case, and even at night, I prepared a polythene bag.... I don't see any other way out. I'm going to bed. Good night, my nightly visitor! I took paracetamol and optalgin as a precaution, even though nothing hurts at all. Crazy? Everyone swallows."

That's how I spent my day on the saddle. Didn't that sound a little heroic? Well, if I knew then that I was going to put it in the story just like that, without any notes, I would have embellished something, of course....

Again about Chapaev (and again not an anecdote)

I slept badly, intermittently. I had short dips into sleep, accompanied by particularly vivid and passionate conversations with myself. When I came to the surface from this sticky delirium, I heard a steady, quiet rustling, as if snakes were crawling - it was the dry, hard snow being swept outside. A couple of times I lit a torch, and in its ray the silvery New Year's dust swirled at the entrance. It went on and on, but suddenly, I don't remember exactly when it happened, but definitely after midnight, the quiet rustling disappeared. The cave was completely silent. It's daylight, I thought, and a sweet chill under my spine chased away my sleep. I wanted to get up and start cooking breakfast, but it was too early. I checked the alarm clock again - I'd better not oversleep! After tossing and turning for a while in an inflamed, pre-holiday mood, I suddenly fell asleep.

At 4.50 a.m. I woke up again and listened. The silence was dead. That was it - my hour had struck! My head is heavy, in my head, cloudy from sleep, only this thought is beating, but the motivation is coming out of my ears. I get dressed at once, as for climbing - I adjust everything, trying my best to think well. I'm getting ready as if I'm going into battle. I want to go out "before the wind", and only then I find out that the entrance to the cave is completely blocked with snow. A terrible guess comes into my head! I rake the cave, starting from the top, where the snow layer is thinner. The frosty haze throws a handful of prickly snow in my face. It's flying! Not believing my grief, I rake the rubble with a shovel and, bent in half, get out. I couldn't see a thing - everything was covered with gloomy predawn fog, from which fine white crumbs were falling and falling. Up above, above the saddle, sometimes the moon disc, pale as a worn coin, shines through. Sometimes the slopes of Khan peep through. So, the fog is not dense.

I do not hold out much hope, but out of good faith and so that in case of anything "it would not be painful...", I continue to collect: I heat water for tea and have breakfast. I make myself a lot of tea and drink it with breadcrumbs and cheese. At 6.30, as agreed, I crawl in whirlwinds of snow to the ridge, to the guys. It's snowing like before! When I climbed out on the saddle in deep snow, I saw my grandmother from the other side of the world. The organism has not woken up yet, and here right from the doorstep is such a ploughing. All movements - like in slow motion cinema. That's it. The climb is over. We have to get out of here, and the sooner the better. I make an agreement with the guys for 9-10 a.m. and go back down into the cave. Without any emotions I get into my sleeping bag in plastic boots (!) and immediately fall asleep. Finita la comedy....

A couple of hours later, I wake up. The snowstorm is rustling and blanketing my entrance with fresh snow. I wonder how we're going to shovel out to Chapaev in this weather. I laid out the non-liquid groceries on the "table". I ate the whole stock of chocolate with some exasperation, and my soul, grey and flat, like the extinguished computer screen, somehow turned pink. Just when it was time to leave, the snowstorm seemed to have settled down. I climbed out of the den and couldn't believe my eyes - it was sunny!



It's so warm that people are already walking along the ridge towards the summit tower. They had come from the southern caves, and I wondered how they had managed to get here. They didn't

or else we went out when it was still snowing. But I didn't look out of the cave, maybe the fog had lifted long ago. The boys and I are glumly discussing the situation. Angry annoyance is what I feel when I see this thick, dense blue above me. The ridges stretching to the horizon are as elegant as white wedding limousines, but I am a penniless beggar, and I am separated from them by an invisible but absolutely insurmountable barrier.

We can't climb now, at 10 a.m., and to waste the last of our strength on a completely hopeless attempt is the height of folly. We have to leave, but it's humiliating to do it when the summit smirks mockingly back at you from the blue sky. Igor hesitates for a long time, then decides to walk to the first granite rocks at the foot of the summit tower - he wants to touch it and bring home a piece of Khan Tengri. I stand fully packed, and I don't want to wait for another unknown number of hours. If it's climbing, it's climbing, and if it's leaving, it's leaving. I tear the last thread linking me with this peak, say goodbye to the guys and leave along the ridge towards Chapaev Peak.



As I pass the long ridge leading up to the dome, the weather changes. It's just crazy, this weather - it's unbelievable how quickly it can change. Nature is in a fever. I approached the snow dome in a fog. Despite the fact that the impending turmoil could make my life very difficult, I felt better. The sucking annoyance disappeared: after all, there was no weather for climbing today. However, I had not yet realised to what extent this mess would complicate my life. Soon I found myself treading deep, loose snow, while a luminous cloud of fog enveloped me from all sides, from which a steady stream of fine white grit was pouring down.

For the first hour, I hike all alone up the slope from milestone to milestone, on untouched snowy ground. It feels as if you are suspended in space in a frosted ball of light. Finally, in the breaks of fog I notice two muddy figures following my footsteps. They are two Poles - a boy and a girl. At another rest stop they catch up with me, and the guy, without stopping, continues to trot. For some time I follow their footsteps, but the snowstorm intensifies, and, having fiddled once with a change of gloves, I find that their footsteps are completely covered with snow. It was amazing! I could still see their backs about twenty metres up the slope, but the trail chain was completely covered, and I had to hike alone again. The Poles disappeared in the thickening fog, and I was once again suspended in a blinding cloud, where there was no top or bottom, no right or left, but only an infernally slow and agonising progress: pull my foot out, shift my body weight, put my foot down, hang on the ice axe and - breathe, breathe, breathe.

Leaning on the ice axe, I close my eyes to get some shelter from that maddening hot glow. I feel it like an almost physical pressure. Sometimes, the urge to free myself from it, to pull myself out of this glowing, viscous ball becomes unbearable. I can't see anything but two, sometimes one, milestones that flicker through the fog in murky reddish patches. The glow drives me to hallucination. The flag, which I stare at, suddenly disappears, dissolves into the shimmering pink haze. I strain my vision so hard that my eyes begin to water, and suddenly the lost red spot materialises away from the place where I was staring. Losing my sense of time and space, I move from one red spot to the second, from the second to the third, and so on - without end, without the slightest hint that this end might exist. The universe is curled up in a tight luminous cocoon, and I wander round in it, from flag to flag, immersed in a maddening tension, in counting steps, and in a tearing

breathing. My lungs are trying to suck in all this dry and rarefied outside world. There's no escape from this hell. There's no turning back.

The only thing I can and must do is move, shift my feet, chew through this shining nothingness.

Four hours of labour, sucking the juice from every vein, and every thought from my brain, it took me to crawl out onto the Chapaev's dome. I didn't even have the energy left to be happy about it. I just sat on my rucksack, in a warm pink cloud and was a living creature that had fulfilled its function - relaxed and thoughtless. From the side of the second camp Alexey Raspopov and some man came up, they took a little break and went into the fog towards the saddle. I took out my walkie-talkie and contacted the camp. Eyal came on the line and said that he was waiting for a helicopter to fly to Karkara. I listened indifferently to his consolations about the failed climb. After that murderous ascent and in view of the long, cold, exhausting descent ahead, the climb itself did not seem to me something significant. Besides, I had decided the day before that there was nothing more pointless and useless than regretting the unfulfilled. The best way not to wallow in the past was to think about the future. The moment I began my descent, I no longer belong to Han Tengri. The beginning of this descent is the beginning of my next ascent.

It takes me two hours to descend from Mt Chapaev to the second camp. I abseil from rocky belts, through the fog and the dry rustle of snow sliding on frozen slabs. At the crampons I get off "autopilot" and try to concentrate. My attention is scattered, leaking out of my brain, exhausted by the height, like sand through my fingers. Finally, I am on the last ropes in front of the camp. A warm afternoon gloom hangs in the air. My ski goggles are fogging up and I'm travelling almost blind. Besides, I'm "worn out" from fatigue. Half a hundred metres from the first tents I blindly lose the path and immediately fall into the snow almost up to my waist. A couple of Poles, who had been watching my uneven descent, came out to help me, having decided that I was not all right.

I get to the tents. Zhenya welcomes me and treats me to tea from a thermos. I climb into my slightly sagging tent and make myself a life-giving broth. Then I make myself a sort of "Since I'm out of sugar, I put sultanas in my tea. I drink the warm drink and lie down in a half-sleep.

The camp is buzzing with excitement. It is created by a cheerful, vivacious man - San Sanych, nicknamed Tarakan. I have heard a lot about him from the regular inhabitants of the Base Camp, I realised that he is a well-known and respected person here, but I have not had a chance to see him yet. San Sanych walks up and down the mountain, leading herds of meek Koreans. He is overflowing with vitality and energy, and he is spouting bizarre tales from his unruly past left and right.

His merry murmuring was interrupted by the descent into the camp of two young Australians with frostbitten hands and feet. The whole camp ran down to their aid. This pair of Aussies had sat at the same table with us the day we arrived at Base Camp and I remembered the girl well as she seemed similar to my wife. Then they went off up the mountain and literally disappeared up there. From time to time, our camp leaders would reminisce about them: "Where are our kangaroos?! Where have our kangaroos gone?!" - and we'd start frantically trying to get them on the phone. Then we'd get some vague third-hand news from the mountain. Like, "our friends saw a couple of young kangaroos in the second rocky belt..." and everyone calmed down. The last time they were seen was at the third camp at 6400m, and then the news came that they had climbed to the top.

In spite of frostbite and extreme exhaustion, the boys held on very bravely. When San Sanych took off the girl's gloves, his face twisted and he let out a loud cry of annoyance: one of her fingers was already visibly blackened. But, as it turned out, the guy was much more badly hurt - his four toes were badly frostbitten. It seems that they did not suffer from pain, because the tissues were frozen through. San Sanych took them to the guide's tent, gave them first aid and gave them tea.

Towards evening Igor and Vitya came down. Igor is the first to arrive. He staggers with fatigue and asks me if they can sleep in my tent. They don't feel like pitching a tent

for one night. I show him my living conditions and he agrees that it is impossible. During the fortnight in which only one person had ever slept in the tent, the ice under the bottom of the tent had melted into the shape of a trough, and now I lay in this trough like an Egyptian mummy in a sarcophagus. On both sides of the tent there were mountains of stuff piled up in disorder, which continually slid down on me, and I periodically dug out from under them. The floor was so uneven that even a bowl of soup was impossible to put down - it immediately slid into this "trough".

In the evening, San Sanych gathers all the Russian-speaking camp staff in the guide's tent. They forget to call me, and I listen sadly to the echoes of their merry revelry. After hesitating, I decide not to invite myself - it's not a rubber tent.

I fall asleep quickly and sleep soundly.

Down, down, down...

I got up at 8 a.m., prepared oatmeal and tea. The sun is shining in the yard and invites everyone to climb. I feel a little shaky and some reddish spots flicker in front of my eyes, but now I don't care about everything: tonight I will already be sitting in the base camp. I was going to leave at 10 o'clock, but no such luck.

The attempt to take down the tent was a complete failure. My conscientious friends stretched the tent on hard-working snow bags dug deep. Thawing and freezing repeatedly, the whole top layer of snow around the tent turned into an ice shell, burying these bags firmly under itself, and the tent skirt also froze "up to the ears". An attempt to uproot the tent with an ice axe brought ridiculous results, and I had to borrow a shovel from the Muscovites. When in an hour they said goodbye to me and went down, I was already squatting in the middle of an impressive excavation. Like an experienced archaeologist I was digging up the damn bags from all sides and carefully removing multi-kilogram blocks of ice, trying not to damage the fabric of the tent. It took me an hour and a half of painstaking labour to get my tent out of ice captivity. During this time you can dig out a small Mayan pyramid. Finally, about 12 I leave down with a heavy rucksack, spots in front of my eyes and a sense of accomplished duty....

At the first camp I got a pleasant surprise - I arrived right in time for the tea party my Moscow friends had organised. No one is in a hurry, the weather is not driving us back, and we are leisurely sipping tea, talking about various mountaineering matters on the verge of pure philosophy. The topic chosen for the argument is the most burning one - the role of willpower and physical fitness in high-altitude ascents. Igor inspiringly convinces me that the free human spirit can do absolutely anything, and the fact that, for example, I am lying here like an old car that has run 100,000 miles without overhaul is just a lack of willpower. "You have no idea what you're capable of!" - exclaims Igor, with an expression that suggests that he is indeed still capable of a lot - "You could climb eight thousand metres, but you just don't believe in yourself, in your strength!". I try to imagine what I'm capable of doing at this moment, and the list of such things seems extremely meagre. "Igor," I say, "of course, willpower means a lot, but agree that a person also has innate limitations. Take me, for example." Igor nods his head in agreement, agreeing to take me as an example.

"If I kept sitting on the saddle and then climbed all the way up Han, what do you think would happen? I'd just die, that's all! If I'd had the willpower, I'd have just managed to drive myself to death." "There!" - exclaimed Igor cheerfully, "I tell you you just don't believe in yourself! Will and only will - that's what allows a man to climb the "eight-thousanders"! Take, for example, the motor racing driver Schumacher..." - I raise my eyes at Igor in amazement - "...do you think his opponents have worse cars than he does? Why does he beat them time after time?" "Yeah, why?" - I ask interestedly. "Because he has more willpower!" - Igor exclaims victoriously. I am suppressedly silent.

Igor's enthusiasm had reached such a degree that all resistance was becoming

useless. I, a proven and tireless debater, feel my grip weakening like the hands of a rock climber who has overhung himself in an awkward position. I sluggishly wrap up the argument, leaving the provocative Schumacher example unanswered. I would like to see how his willpower would have helped the great racer if he had gone to the start in a hunchbacked Zaporozhts.....

I struggle to lift my own humpbacked Zaporozhets off the ground, its valves knocking, carburettor misfiring, and the outside world seen through the windscreen covered with some obscene stains. Judging by the sailor's gait Igor himself walks around the camp, he doesn't have a Porsche of the latest model at his disposal either....

When I had finished my descent to the glacier and was sitting on the boulders taking off my crampons, the frostbitten Australians from yesterday, accompanied by Tomasz, a chatty Pole, came down to me. Tomasz explained to me that he himself had cancelled the climb because of a knee problem and had decided to accompany the injured couple to base camp. He carefully took some of their belongings from them and in general was very involved in their fate.

I gladly joined their caravan, doubling the honourable escort and lightening their burden still further. The Australians were deeply sympathetic to me for the quiet dignity with which they bore their hardships and for the courage and tenacity with which they besieged the summit. They spent two nights in the fourth camp, before and after the assault, and one can imagine what they suffered there. After the first aid they had received yesterday, and because of the descent to warmer heights, their frostbite had taken its toll, and now the lad was travelling with a heavy limp. They were weakened, and their blackened faces with drooping eyes were devoid of expression, but they invariably responded to every address with a polite, grateful smile.

Tomas and I walked in front of them, trying to find the gentlest and most comfortable passages on the glacier crossed by hills and creek beds. When we had to jump over these streams, we built the Australians handrails from ski sticks and sometimes literally carried them to the opposite side. On the coastal moraine we handed the injured people over to the rendezvous team.

Then, back in Almaty, I heard that the guy's frostbite had grown into a serious problem, on the verge of having his fingers amputated. Unfortunately, I don't know how it all ended.

Having put the Australians in safe hands, Tomas and I piled into the kitchen. We sat drinking tea and soursop. I asked the guys about a bath (and I apologise for the intimate detail, I haven't bathed since I left my home in distant Nazareth three weeks ago), and they said that there was such a possibility, but that we should go right away. I "ran" (I hope you understand why I put the word "ran" in inverted commas) to get my bathing gear and, properly equipped, arrived at the bathing tent.

This is the first time I've ever been in such an exotic bathhouse and I'm curious about everything here. The tent is divided into 3 sections. When you enter, you first of all get into the middle one - the changing room. There is a bench and clothes hangers. In the left section there is a sauna, but I was not taught sauna culture in my childhood, so I do not go to the sauna, although I suspect that I am depriving myself of some vital pleasure. In the right-hand section there is a huge, gigantic vat of boiling water on the gas cooker, a similar vat of glacial cold water in the corner, and a large mixing bowl and a ladle for dousing on a bench between them. I spend a long time washing myself in the hot puffs of steam, then step out into the cold air of the changing room, feeling like I'm literally breathing on the entire surface of my skin. My body just moans with pleasure. While I'm getting dressed, a tired Vitya and Igor walk in. "Aha! Hello unwashed Russia..." - I greet them noisily, "you have no idea what awaits you..."

At dinner I eat a pig's dinner of pilaf and then chat with Vitya late into the night, drinking coffee. It's snowing, and our kitchen tent shines with yellow windows, like a ship lost in the winter night sea. I fell asleep, as if I had been hit on the head with a huge soft pillow, and slept like a dead man.

The whole of the next day was spent in minor hassles. I returned everything I had borrowed or taken for money and repacked for departure, as we had been promised a helicopter for tomorrow. Tomorrow, by the way, is Friday the 13th!

A beautiful day for helicopter rides..... However, at lunch I heard a rumour that the flight was postponed to the 14th. I didn't really care, but the Muscovites were worried - they had tickets to Moscow for the 15th.

After lunch, Vitya and Igor took two full bottles of vodka with them, and the three of us went to Moiseyev's to say goodbye and to find out what was going on with the helicopter. It turned out that there is a big tension with flights now, because rescue works are still going on from the southern side of Khana. So tomorrow only the frostbitten - both Australians and one Pole - will be taken out of our camp, and all the others will fly the day after tomorrow.

Then Yuri Mikhailovich takes us to the kitchen and arranges an appropriate frame for our vodka - pickles and sliced tomatoes. We drink and have a heart-to-heart conversation about various mountaineering matters. I am once again amazed at how pleasant and open he is, this Moiseyev. It is evident that the company of putting the British on the top of Khan Tengri did not pass with impunity to him. He looks tired and his voice is almost gone. When he speaks, he tenses up and sneezes, and for a moment I think: Why are we mocking the man? But he seems genuinely engaged in the conversation, and we continue talking. He reminisces a little about the famous ascent of Dhaulagiri with Kazbek Valiev and Zoltan Demian, and then, with much more enthusiasm, talks about his recent ascent of Aconcagua. I understand: that, though great, happened a long time ago, and Aconcagua - it was now, recently. And it is exotic, whatever you say.

We talk about oxygen-free ascents to the eight-thousanders and, rather unexpectedly, Moiseyev turns out to be a supporter of Igor's theory about the potential omnipotence of the average person. "Any healthy person," says Yuri Mikhailovich, wheezing and breaking into a whisper, but with deep conviction in his voice, "can climb 8000 without oxygen. It's all about psychology, in readiness, in understanding yourself..." I catch Igor's triumphant look. I'm not arguing with Moiseyev. I have enough sense not to argue about climbing "eight-thousanders" with someone who has made them many times, but I quietly remain in my opinion. There have been too many examples in recent years when experienced and extremely strong-willed climbers have driven themselves to death on such ascents. Unnoticeably we finish both bottles, and the conversation gradually fades out.

Before dinner, Igor and I sit in the empty dining room in the company of a young Russian guide. I don't remember his name, but it would have suited him perfectly, Kolya. He was dressed in a military uniform, and his lean appearance, some hidden sharpness and a characteristic accent testified to some paratrooper-Afghan-Chechen past. That's roughly how it turned out. The guy turned out to be a former special forces officer and for a long time fed us with fascinating stories about the severe technical climbs he had participated in. I thought about the distinct difference in attitude that exists between Russian and Western climbers.

There is a huge element of duty in the Russian attitude to climbing, as if climbing is a harsh and necessary job. It's almost a war, or something. In retreating before the summit, there is always the bitterness of military defeat. To retreat is shameful. For the Western climber, climbing is just a game that brings the participant severe pleasure. There is excitement, ambition, self-expression, but never a sense of duty. That's why they give up the summit with much greater ease. The game is the game. The Austrians amazed me in this respect. On the last day before departure, I met their leader, Christian, and the man who spoke no English, in the canteen. "Well," I asked, "are you going out on the mountain tomorrow?" "No," said Christian rather indifferently, "we've had enough. We're flying home." My mitten just opened with surprise. I knew they had only just climbed Chapaev and hadn't even gone to the saddle, and they still had plenty of time to spare. And this is Christian, who had been on Muztagat, Ama Dablam and other serious peaks! I suppose there's something I don't know. There could have been some hidden reasons, but there is no doubt that Western climbers come out of the game much easier than their Russian colleagues.



It was my last day at the base camp - August, Friday the 13th. Everything, absolutely everything speaks of the approaching end of the season: the thinning ranks of climbers, the tired eyes of the staff, the toilet box swaying dangerously on the edge of the crevasse, and the sagging, sagging tents. In three weeks the sun has melted the glacier and its level has dropped, but the ice under the tents is in the shade, so all the tents now stand on ice tables like mushroom caps or huts on chicken legs. When I roll over from side to side at night, the wooden planking beneath me creaks and tilts dangerously, and the tent threatens to slide off its icy pedestal. Everything is coming to its logical conclusion.

The day is mostly filled with chatter: with Moiseyev, with Tomasz, with the Austrians, with Vasya. Vasya, who at the second camp spoke disparagingly about high-altitude mountaineering, now, after his fellow Brits have climbed to the top, looks annoyed and slightly depressed. I understand him. The same events look different from the cold of an assault camp, from the relative comfort of a tarpaulin canteen and from the cosy armchair at your home computer. Back then, at base camp, I seemed like a wiser man, forever done with the childish dream of the Seven Thousand, but now I know that time will pass and I will try again. Simply because I love it all. In this month I have lived a whole life, with all its ups and downs, tragedies and comedies, meetings and partings. The most valuable result of any expedition and any journey is that you never return home the same way you left it. You change, you learn new things about the world and yourself. Life is like riding a bicycle - you stop pedalling and you fall. The mire drags you down, your brain rots, and after a while you're no good for anything. Pedal, people! Don't give up.

In the evening, after dinner, Igor persuades me to buy a half litre of vodka and drink it "goodbye". I stubbornly resist. I believe that here, at the altitude of 4000m, after all those tortures I have done to my organism, a quarter of a litre of vodka will be just a control shot in the back of my head. I'm ashamed to admit, but I'm not sure that I've ever had so much alcohol in my body at once.... It's one thing to drink in company, when you can slack off and your drinking companions will be only too happy about it, but it's another thing to have a fair fight "eye to eye", when everything is shared equally to the last drop.

"Igor," I say, "it's Friday the 13th. It's a bad day. I'm going to drink myself into a pulse, fall into a glacial crevasse on the way to the tent, die there like a dog, and it'll be your fault. I'm not kidding!"

A year ago, on Friday the 13th, I fell off a cliff and broke a rib, so this is all very serious." Igor, however, was relentless and indefatigable in his determination to say goodbye properly. As a matter of fact, when Igor is on a roll, he can talk a legless man into buying boots and an armless man into buying gloves. "Ah, to hell with it," I thought, "to go out, so to go out. After all, it's impossible to join Russian mountaineering without getting drunk at base camp!" They bring us a half-litre, clean as Alyonushka's tear, and we drink the first one. I feel warm and good, and after the second one I pass into that special state when the field of vision narrows down to a narrow circle, which, like a searchlight beam, I use to catch faces and details, unusually sharp and full of deep meaning. Hearing, on the other hand, becomes inclusive and detached, when you hear everyone at once, and everyone individually. Sounds surround you from all sides, like the sound of the sea surf. A blissful smile spreads across my face. When I am drunk, I am full of love and forgiveness.

We talk to Igor about life and about Khan Tengri, and every word seems full and significant to me. After the third, Igor leans towards me with the look of a man who has decided to say the most important thing. "Jan," - he utters - "you won't be offended if I tell you something?" By the intimate solemnity of his voice I unmistakably determined that it would be about the national question.... "Speak Igor, I'm listening to you," I nodded my head importantly.

"Jan, I must confess to you that I know many Jews, but, in all my life, I have never met a single bad Jew," Igor looked at me with caring concern. I tilted my head to the side, trying to understand what exactly could be offensive in that statement. What do you mean there are no bad Jews? What are we, not human or something? "Igor, I don't take offence, of course, but you have to admit, it just can't be true. Personally, I know far more bad Jews than I would like to. It can't be that you haven't met them...". "I swear to you...!" - says Igor fervently, "do you know how many of them I've known?" "Igor," I say, "you simply must come and visit me in Israel. I'm inviting you. I'll show you Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, the canyons of the Negev, and lots of bad Jews. I promise you a whole deposit of bad Jews!"

"I can't," Igor nods his head with drunken sadness, "I promised to take my family to Egypt, and I have to fulfil that promise." I keep urging him, and after the fourth, he waves his hand enthusiastically: "Fuck Egypt! Let's go to Israel, to the canyons of the Negev..." I glance happily at silent Vitya, who doesn't participate in our rampage. "Look, Vitya," I say proudly, "we have a real drunken bazaar!". Vitya laughs. Igor and I walk out of the dining room, holding each other gently. "I'll walk you to the tent so you don't fall into a crevasse," Igor says gravely. "No need, Igor," I say, "I'm perfectly fine, I'm more sober than a Muslim at the end of Ramadan." "No," says Igor, raising his finger admonishingly, "it's Friday the 13th, and I have to get you to your tent in one piece..."

Even in my drunken state I realise that it is useless to argue with him. As he and I wander towards my tent, I realise that Igor's navigation system is more damaged than mine. "Igor," I say, "how are you going to get to your tent now? Come on, I'll walk you to it..." "No," Igor objected firmly, putting his hand out in front of him in a protesting gesture, "I'm fine, and I'm absolutely fine." I thought vaguely about how we would spend the whole night taking turns walking each other from tent to tent, and gave up.

To tell the truth, I didn't expect to wake up after yesterday, but I not only survived, but even got up this morning surprisingly fresh and awake. Moreover, even the spots in my eyes that had been bothering me lately were gone. I thought that maybe Igor was right, and I just didn't know myself yet.

I pack the rest of my belongings into my big rucksack and into Eyal's bag, which he had left for me to return to Israel. Back at base camp, I found a note from Eyal in my tent in which he expressed regret that we had not been able to meet and explained that he was going to go to Issyk-Kul in the company of three Canadians with whom he was hanging out on the saddle.

Unlike me, he was not returning home at all after Khan Tengri, but had a one-way ticket from Tel Aviv to Almaty to Delhi. Once, I asked him how long he was going to spend in India. "Until the anger passes..." - Eyal said thoughtfully, obviously referring to his recent army past. In addition to his original Indian plans, he had already picked up the idea of climbing Ama Dablam at base camp and, given that the distance between word and deed was kept to a minimum, I had no doubt that he would attempt it. I even graciously lent him one of my jumars so that he could use it as a rope.



On my way to breakfast, I dragged all my stuff onto the glacier to the landing pad, and after breakfast we were informed that the "chopper" was already in the air. Noisy farewells and cross-pollination of email addresses began. Apart from me and the Muscovites, Scott and his client, the tea lady Tanya, who had finished her endless labour shift, and the Pole Tomasz with two young Polish women, quiet as mice, were also on this flight.



They seemed deaf and dumb against Tomasz's background. The helicopter landed, blowing away all those who had not ducked down properly. We loaded in, cast a farewell glance at the sadly orphaned camp, and took off with a heavy rumble. Despite the fact that in recent days I had wanted to vomit at the sight of rocks, snow and dirty ice, I was still very much attached to this strange tiny inhabited island. It's hard to part with people you've grown accustomed to, knowing you'll never see them again.



The long white chain of the Tien Shan range turned into a distant white stripe and disappeared, overshadowed by the green foothills.

We landed in Karkar, and I was literally crushed by the avalanche of bright colours that came over me. The green of the grass, the blue of the sky, the bright flashes of wildflowers, everything was deafening, over-the-top, over-the-top after that cold black and white monastery I had spent almost a month in. I understood Van Gogh eating his paints. It's that kind of heightened, almost painful sensitivity to colour. And the air! You could spread it on bread like butter. And again, food associations... Communion, by absorption!

In Karkar we are given tea with "khvorost" and we load our belongings into a red minibus. Valiev gives me back my documents and asks me where I went on the Khan.

"Two nights on the saddle," I say. "Two nights on the saddle, that's serious," Valiev says calmly, but his face remains impenetrable. He hands me a note from Eyal. I follow Eyal's trail like a cheap adventure novel, tracing his movements by the notes he leaves. In this note, he informs me that he did not go to Issyk-Kul with the Canadians because Anatoly had made it clear that Eyal was not a welcome addition to their tight-knit Canadian team. Having abandoned the idea, Eyal travelled to Almaty with the firm intention of changing his ticket and flying to Delhi at the earliest opportunity.

On the way to Almaty, I asked Scott about his firm and his future plans, and he readily told me that in the autumn he was taking a group of clients to the Mexican volcano Orizaba, and in the winter, for himself, he was flying to Mount Vinson in Antarctica. It's the last of the infamous "7 Summits" that he hasn't climbed yet. We are approaching the Kyrgyz border and

we stop at the barrier. A soldier comes out of the guardhouse and leisurely approaches the driver, and the driver opens the window and hands him a packet of cigarettes. The guy takes the cigarettes and raises the barrier. Scott laughs wildly, "look, look," he says to his client.

"he let us across the border for a packet of cigarettes..."

People! Never jump to conclusions about the life of a foreign country based on a passing detail.

Camel champagne bathtub

Already halfway to Almaty, I was nostalgic about glaciers and snow. 35 degrees in the shade! I was quietly fuming like a candle burner. The heat was "spitting me up", as one mountaineer I know likes to put it. The first thing we did in Almaty was to drop off the Americans. The whole process of transfer to hotels was well thought out, all the clients were ranked. We drove up to a huge, heavily chic hotel. Tutankhamun would have been happy to be buried in such a structure. I thought that they were going to put me here together with the Americans, and I got cold feet when I imagined how much it cost to spend a night in this flagship of the Kazakh hotel business. Since the package I had bought included only one night, I had to pay for the second night out of my own pocket. To my relief, Julia who came to my rescue wrapped me back to the bus, explaining that something more modest, though quite decent, was waiting for me. And so it turned out to be. I was put up in the hotel "Zhetysu", which is located on Abylai Khan Avenue. In general, I noticed that the Kazakh people, hungry for their own nationality, rushed with enthusiasm to immortalise their khans. Every street in Almaty bears the name of some khan, and I, who grew up on the "White Sun of the Desert", can't help feeling that I am in some huge Basmachi camp.

My hotel was a classic soviet building revitalised by the fresh wind of free enterprise. When Yulia told me that I would have to pay thirty quid for the second night, I thought I would probably move in with Vita and Igor, although the name of their hotel, Sport, smelled of cheap station b...vom and sweaty armpits.

When I entered my room, dumped my huge rucksack on the creaky floor and sat down on the edge of the small misogynistic bed, tears of sympathy welled up in my eyes. Everything, literally everything, whispered to me about my discreet Soviet childhood: the faded wallpaper, the wooden table with scratched polish, dried up in a longing for port wine, and the small parquet floor, orphaned by a red shabby carpet. Exactly the same carpet had once hung on the wall of my room, and I'd blown bubbles and stared meaninglessly at its average Asian patterns.... The loo had a half-sitting bathtub, but no washbasin and the guest was encouraged to wash over the bathtub. The tiny toilet looked so pathetic that only a completely soulless bastard could sit on it.

Just so you know, I've moved into much more modest apartments in my life.

But not for 30 quid.....

In the midst of my bath, the phone rang. I jumped out of the bathroom, shouting and pouring jets of water on the palace parquet. Igor called from his hotel, and we agreed to go to a restaurant in the evening and have a farewell drink.

Dressed in clean clothes, steamed, I went out into the stuffy Almaty evening and hopelessly tried for a long time to hail a taxi on the spacious Abylai Khan Avenue. In a quarter of an hour, only one car with a "taxi" sign passed by me, and it didn't stop. In the place where I cast my fishing rod, there is some strange semi-underground activity of buying and selling flats. Like this, right by the road, in front of the hotel. There's a lot of people crowding round, chatting. They offer me to buy some property in the city centre, but I politely decline. Isn't it clear that an unshaven subject in a worn-out "resort" trousers and a washed-out red T-shirt is not buying property left and right?...?

Tired of waiting for a taxi, I waved to the first private driver I saw, and he immediately stopped. Here,

where the dog is buried! As Vitya and Igor explained to me with a laugh, absolutely all private drivers here work as cabbies, not caring about any formalities and insignia. The real thing An "official" taxi is a fop and expensive.

The man I sat down with recognised me as a sucker and asked me for 300. I offered him 200, and of course we agreed on 250.

The Sport Hotel, as it should be, is located in the building of the Central Stadium. Its rooms stretched in a chain around its gigantic bowl, like the chambers of gladiators, in which they, sweating with fear, await their last exit to the arena. Such a room cost \$2 a night, accommodated four guests, and had nothing in it but bunks. In such a room it was good to tie a piece of strong clothesline to a hook under the ceiling on a cloudy autumn morning.

After a short search we found a tiny but decent looking restaurant. We were served by a very thin, dark-haired boy. Just a kid. His gold teeth seemed to have replaced the milk teeth in his mouth. We ordered ourselves a salad and a lamb kebab. Igor and I asked for a bottle of Bear's Blood for two, while Vitya showed intellectual individualism and took a bottle of some special Cabernet. We sit, chatting, remembering Khan Tengri. We drink to the mountains, to our "fighting friends" and to future ascents. "Bear Blood" flowing through my veins makes me a sentimental, romantic young man. I talk about Korzhenevskaya Peak in the velvet voice of a lover.

I guess someone wasn't going to climb those Sisyphean 7,000-metre mountains again? Never, ever again?

The guys put me in a taxi and we say goodbye. What nice people you can meet in these damn mountains! I collapse on the bunk in my hotel room. My God, this morning I woke up at Base Camp on North Inylchek..... What a long, tiring day! I switch on the TV, but I can't stand it for five minutes. I flick the switch and sink into sleep, as if into a warm night sea.

The phone call drills into my brain, insistently pushing me out of oblivion. Stifling darkness. Total loss of sense of space and time. Where am I? Israel? Odessa? In the middle of nowhere? I pick up the phone by feel. "Would you like to spend the evening with a girl?" - a soft female voice seems to write this phrase with a glow stick in the thick gloom enveloping my brain. "No..." - the autopilot replies, I lean back on the pillow and sink, sink, sink..... "Why not....?" - flickers the last sluggish thought, like a splinter disappearing into the maelstrom. I cease to exist.

I can see the white peaks of a distant mountain range right from my room window. I lie in bed for a long time, staring at the whitish ceiling and finding no reason to go out of my sleepy lair into this restless world. Relaxation. Finally, nature takes its course, and I reluctantly wander to the loo. The toilet bowl is dying a slow painful death and various organs are failing. I report the breakdown to the "higher authorities" and go out into the stuffy Almaty morning in search of breakfast. It seems that all the cafes are still closed, and I just stroll along the morning streets rustling with southern greenery. Alone in a strange city, free as a bird. What a strange, long-forgotten feeling. Finding an open cafe, I sit down by the window and order an omelette with sausages. A frail Kazakh girl with a morning laziness in her movements brings me a cup of fragrant tea. Her two friends, a Russian and a Kazakh, look at me with interest, trying to guess where I came from and how the wind brought me to their land.

My hot, amber, honey-like Central Asian day was filled with slow circling through quiet alleys, observing human life and thinking about the eternal. I was also (not infrequently) eating, trying to make my meals as authentic as possible. In the couple of days I spent in Almaty, I ate more mutton kebabs than I had in my entire life. I have tasted from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, and no one else can convince me that if you thread pieces of chicken meat on a wooden stick, it will turn them into kebab. This pathetic travesty is only fit to be poured over

with a non-alcoholic beer in the company of a rubber woman.

I don't know much about Central Asia. In culinary terms, my knowledge is limited to shish kebab, koumiss and long, striped Asian melons as long as rugby balls. I was delighted when, in my aimless wanderings, I came across a supermarket

"The first thing I did was to go to the dairy department and pick up a packet of koumiss. The first thing I did was to go to the dairy department and pick up a packet of koumiss. Then I went to the confectionery department. Here I found myself in quite a quandary. Inexpressibly luxurious, richly decorated cakes stretched in rows. Piles of fabulous cakes and honeyed oriental sweets confused my guidance system, and I ran along this festive counter like a missile that had lost its target. Finally, I pulled myself together and began to reason logically. What does a normal oriental lord do, sitting on high cushions surrounded by his lushly hipped wives? I am sure that with one hand he brings a bowl of koumiss to his mouth, and with the fat fingers of the other he stuffs into his mouth pieces of baklava, as tender as the breath of a newborn Arabian foal. Determined to have a life-size "One Thousand and One Nights" in my room, I leave the hotel.

"Jubilee" with a bag of koumiss and a box of baklava.

In the dairy department I noticed another local gimmick - a drink made from camel's milk called "shubat", but after hesitating I decided to postpone its purchase until tomorrow. A little of everything, I decided, fearing for my stomach.

The koumiss was a sour, refreshing drink, and the baklava reminded me of one of our Arabian sweets, but with a more delicate flavour. After drinking the milk of a steppe mare, I stretched out on the bed, clicked the remote control and watched a touching and sad film on "National Geographic" about the fate of the proud and naive African Karamoja tribe. Once agile hunters and tireless dancers with naked chocolate bodies, they were caught in a civil war that had nothing to do with them. The crushed remnants of their cheerful tribe are dying out of hunger and disease, and grey-faced, gaunt women hide their fecund bodies beneath coarse hoods to satisfy the sanctimonious customs of the aliens from the north, who, as they slaughter the infidel barbarians, are invariably concerned with their morality. The film makes me melancholy.

My siesta was unceremoniously interrupted by a knock on the door - Volodya and Ira, who had returned from Issyk-Kul, appeared. We had a little chat, I returned Volodya's equipment and we agreed to meet in the evening for a farewell dinner.

We had a farewell dinner in a cafe with a symbolic name "Tian Shan". It's an open-air cafe. To be more precise - a chain of small cafes, as long as the Tian Shan range. We chose a table near a huge aquarium, in which tight trouts were cutting circles, keeping themselves in an appetising sports form. Spiny crayfish with their tails tucked up peered at us with surprised eyes on thin stalks. We were brought the invariable mutton kebab and a shot of brandy, which we immediately slammed to the health of Khan Tengri. Finally, I heard about Volodin's ascent firsthand. He started from the saddle in the company of San Sanych, nicknamed Tarakan, and two of his Korean charges. San Sanych asked Volodya to go first, and Volodya ran. When he turned round once again, he saw that Tarakan's Koreans had turned back, and further all the way to the summit Volodya walked alone. 8 hours for ascent and 3 hours for descent. It was as easy as a turnip....

A tiny shot of cognac left a keen sense of understatement. Besides, we had not yet drunk to future ascents. So we went to Yubileyny and bought, on the recommendation of a young man, a bottle of supposedly the best local semi-sweet. Something like "Turaiskoe Brilliantoe". Then, in the approaching dusk we found a melon stall and bought a melon, but not a long striped one, but an ordinary one, though large. I have no luck with striped melons - cry me a river! We took our loot and piled into my room and had heart-to-heart talks until the melon started coming out of our ears and "Thuray Diamond" started pouring out of our noses.

Between you and me: what a load of bollocks this "Turai Diamond" is ...

The morning brought with it the taste of flaccid melon soaked in Turai Fuflov. I rinse my mouth for a long time, trying to get rid of the memories of last night's party. I take a shower and go out into the not-so-hot morning streets in search of breakfast. I sit down at a summer table and order a glazed eggplant and tea and a shortbread cake. The cake seemed to have known better days. It was an old, life-weary brownie with sand falling off it. It lay so confidently on top of yesterday's Turai, as if it had been waiting to meet it all its life.... And yet, I do not lose hope that this last day of my journey can bring me joy and comfort. After breakfast I go to Medeo - a high-mountainous sports complex, which in its time became one of the symbols of Soviet Kazakhstan, like Baikonur or Semipalatinsk. Well, maybe a little more modest....

The Great Skating Stadium itself made a depressing impression on me. Surrounded by hot, smoky, summer scenery, its huge grey bowl seems like a long and hopelessly stranded ship. I wandered through it without interest and left it without regret. Then I let myself be persuaded by one hyperactive driver, and he took me to the mountains, to the place where the local high-mountain resort Chimbulak is located. Besides me, five women of all different shapes and ages are lured into the car. All of them are dressed in pink dresses and suits. Pink is now a favourite colour among Kazakh women, and Almaty fashionistas roam the streets in white and pink flocks, like flamingos on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Excited by such an abundance of women, the driver decisively takes on the functions of a tour guide. He drops us off at a huge dam blocking the whole gorge "from ear to ear" and proudly tells us the story of its creation. Vitya, who always knows everything about everything, once told me about this dam and claimed that it was created by a directed nuclear explosion. Our driver firmly denied the nuclear nature of the explosion, but his face became concerned.



Four consecutive cable car cascades lead from the village of Chimbulak to the foot of the Ala Tau glaciers. It is an incomparable pleasure to float quietly in the cool air above the dark blue candles of Tien Shan spruces. A fluffy carpet of meadow violet flowers is carelessly thrown at the foot of coloured rocky mountains.



I got off at the last station, where only the most curious and frugal holidaymakers go. A sociable Abrek tries to tempt me with tea, carbonated drinks, anything. In an irresistible impulse to be useful, he tries to help me to take a photo against the background of the mountains, not realising that my camera is equipped with a self-timer, that I am not looking for anyone's help and that I came here to say goodbye to the mountains. That is - I want to be alone. I follow the trail to a big old snowbank with a melted dim lake, climb higher up the slope and sit on warm, mossy rocks. The mountains soothe me, and there is no trace of the morning's irritation. "Turaiskoe Fuflovoe" is peacefully curled up and no longer bothers me. Grace!

I noticed a faint stirring below: two smart pink bugs crawled out onto the snowbank. It was my mother and daughter, who were travelling with me in the taxi. Without seeing me, mum casually sits down to pee. Everything is natural in this sunny god's world, where the cool sail of the sky twitches and black velvety butterflies swirl their endless spiral pattern. I continue to meditate. Mum and daughter leave to climb a loose steep-sided moraine overlooking a snowfield, and they are succeeded by a Korean kindergartener, who takes a long, interesting and unchildishly serious look at the harsh nature of the mountains. It's time to rescue mum and daughter. I sigh, descend to the snow and climb up the moraine.

The mountaineers greet me with joyful relief. Back to Chimbulak I descend on foot along the spruce forested scallop.



The smart, quiet village is decorated with quaint wooden manor houses of local lords. It's 3pm and I'm finally hungry. I sit down in an open cafe, on the terrace under a cloth awning, and order myself a sauteed mushroom, kebab and tea with lemon. At a neighbouring table there was a strange short-cropped creature of indeterminate gender. The large blond face was intelligent and purposeful. The creature was writing notes in a thick bound notebook and occasionally sipping tea. I determined from certain features of the relief that it was a woman. A writer or a journalist - "offhand" I guessed. Possibly a feminist or unconventional woman. An interesting and noble creature, not often found outside European academic reserves.

While I struggled with the lamb meat, the creature finished its tea, resolutely slammed the puffy notebook shut, and paid the waitress.

From Chimbulak to Medeo I was to descend along the motorway. As I passed the last of the outskirts of the mansions, a figure loomed up ahead, in which I immediately recognised the very same one

"mysterious stranger." After a little hesitation, I decided to catch up with her. Firstly, the descent promised to be long and boring, and secondly, I was interested in her. It was not so easy to do it - the stranger flew with a wide masculine step. While I "pressed on the gas", trying to catch up with her, various opening phrases were running through my head, and all of them seemed idiotic to me. I've never been able to dash up to a stranger, much less a woman. As I approached her, she turned around.

"Are you going down to Medeo?" - I asked, well aware that there was nowhere else to go down that road. She nodded warily. I looked like a big overgrown man of no freshness, and that was clearly reflected in her eyes. "I'm going down to Medeo too," I said, "can I keep you company?" I spoke in a calm, benevolent tone, leaving no reason for a person to refuse my company, and she agreed.

To my surprise, I discovered that she spoke Russian slowly and with a strong accent. We got to talking and I learnt that she was Czech and was studying at the political science department of the Institute of International Relations. As I expected, she turned out to be an interesting person, this Czech woman. In her spare time she travels around the world, preferring "hot spots" and those countries that are at turning points in their history. She wasn't interested in countries that were well-fed and quiet," she informed me with a dismissive grimace. She was a strong and determined person, stuffed to the gills with liberal university ideas.

I listened with interest to her story about her trip to Transcaucasia - Georgia, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. It seemed that the girl was not afraid of anything in this life. I even thought that maybe her emphatically masculine appearance was just a well-thought-out mimicry,

not at all superfluous in this kind of travelling. Her political views were not remarkable for their originality and were quite suitable for a European "excellent student of political science": all the poor are good, all the weak are right, and the rich and powerful are to blame. The ironic remarks that I occasionally allowed myself, she met with the calm condescension of a person who had been taught the truth in the last instance.

Perhaps the most interesting thing was to hear first-hand the story of Slovakia's separation from the Czech Republic. Of course, she did not deny the Slovaks' right to self-determination, but she was still of the opinion that they had started it all for nothing. In her opinion, the Slovaks had a good life in the company of the Czech Republic.

"big Czech brother" and they owe a lot to him. Considering that she herself was Czech, I did not find her opinion surprising.... Even the most ardent liberals are no strangers to humanity, and this is readily apparent when it comes to things that affect them directly.

"That's all fine, but what does it have to do with Khan Tengri?" - the reader may ask irritably. Everything, absolutely everything that happened to me this summer had to do with Khan Tengri. This girl informed me that her friends, also Czechs, had stormed Khan Tengri from the southern base camp. I knew that there were 5 Czechs among the dead in the avalanche, but I did not tell her about it.

Who knows, maybe it wasn't her Czechs.

On the way back to the hotel, I went into Yubileiny to buy some shubat. I searched the whole dairy department three times - the shubat was like a camel's tongue. I could still put up with the loss of long striped melons - a melon is a melon - but I could not leave without tasting camel's milk! When I asked, the dairy worker apologised and told me not to worry - the shubat would be delivered tomorrow.

"Tomorrow will be late..." - I said gloomily - "I'm flying out tomorrow." "And you buy it from the tray on the street" - advised the pitiful worker - "they sell exactly the same bottles there". I don't really like buying dairy products on the street, especially when I have a flight of many hours the day before tomorrow. I was well aware that the camel's milk had not benefited from the long, hot day it had spent in a dodgy-looking street fridge, but I had no choice.

I found this exotic drink in one of the stalls opposite the Tien-Shan café, added a bag of puffy buttery croissants to it and brought all this wealth to my room. Apart from wanting exoticism, I was purely humanly hungry. With a wide fan I threw on the table puffy croissants and rolled the cap off the bottle. And then the unexpected happened: shubat burst out of the bottle with a powerful foamy stream. No champagne does not stand next to this drink! It was beating outward, as from a fire brandspooit. I tried to clamp it with my hand and release the pressure..... No way! I might as well have tried to ride a wild camel! Barely able to contain the foamy pressure, I dashed to the toilet and directed the jet into the bathroom. I felt a sense of relief akin to that felt by a beer drinker in a similar situation. The bathtub gradually filled with fluffy clouds of foam, but the flow kept going. When it finally stopped, there was not more than a third of the furious potion left in the bottle, and the bathtub could have been used to bathe a small camel. With a sigh, I looked at the remainder and returned to the table.

Everything, absolutely everything breathed betrayal: the shubat had sneakily escaped, and the croissants, beautiful on the face, were evil on the inside. I drank them with a drink that was as sharp as fermented kefir, with less than one glass left. After a meal like this, it's like having two fingers in my mouth. I sank down on the bed tiredly, and then I burst into wild laughter. What a strange day this has been. It started with "Turai Fuflovogo" and ended with camel champagne, but it was a long and full day, which included silent soaring over the purple flower carpet, and coloured pointed mountains with melted pillows of glaciers at the foot, and a chance meeting with an interesting person. It was a full day of a free man.

I love you, Khan Tengri! With you, every day was life.