

Night Buyers

The coming New Years' holidays forced Serega to work as a night vendor at the Christmas tree market. His military pension was usually sufficient for purchases for a month. He paid the rent for the apartment, bought medicines in the pharmacy, and went to the hypermarket once a week: there, the products were cheaper. The trip to the mall was a small journey for the old major. He tried to take a place on the bus near the window and carefully looked at the landscapes passing by. In the hypermarket, Serega did not hurry to the food section, but slowly walked around everything, ascending and descending several times on the escalator. The self-propelled ladder reminded him of the Moscow Metro. He spent several years in his capital studying in the military academy. But as time went on, Serega's skills were not needed for the country, and he was demobilized, taking a small pension as a reward. Serega got used to civilian life after a time. But suddenly, a disease put him in the hospital. Work left him, his financial savings left him, his wife left him, and his agility left him. Serega was left alone, beginning to say goodbye to the white light, but God gave him a new companion in life: a woman, a doctor. The woman took Serega to her home, cured him, and he again returned to his fragile life. They married. Everything has gone well so far.



Usually, Serega did not celebrate the holidays, except on February 23. But he called that day by a strange name: “The Day of the Funeral of the Soviet Army.” On this day, he bought a large bottle of vodka with his friend and colleague Vovka Kitaev; they drank it and reminisced about their military service at the Kapustin Yar space center.

The New Year was a different matter. New Years' Eve is a merry holiday. And family! He would celebrate December 31 with his wife. Champagne was needed. Serega remembered the champagne brand Tsimlyanskoe Semisweet Muscat, which was expensive at more than 500 rubles for a bottle. Although his wife drank very little, and he'd have to call her from the maternity ward where she works as a midwife—one of the

best—she would drink a glass of wine: she also liked champagne. But champagne is what? Its sparkling water...the bottle of brandy is also needed to lift the mood. Hennessy, people said, is good, and Camus. Serega looked in the specials department of the hypermarket: a half-liter bottle cost 2,500 rubles. Prices are painful. Well, all right: it's New Year's, after all!

On January 1, the children will come to visit. A son with his wife. An unmarried daughter. The adults are already living on their own, but Serega needed to provide for their visit. So multiply the New Years' banquet by two. And on the second of January, he and his wife will go for a visit. Relatives would arrived from Donetsk—refugees—there is a war. Although Putin promised that Russia would render assistance to all those in need, with respect to his Serega's relatives, he obviously took his sweet time, and they had been wandering between flats for more than a year in attempts to obtain citizenship. Serega could not help them, but with his wife, he decided to visit them, to support them at least morally. So multiply the original banquet by three.

Serega thought, as they say in the army, comparing the ramrod with the nose, the ten thousand rubles need be whatever you say or think. And then the announcement began: "a night vendor is required at the fir bazaar. The period is from 20 to 30 December. Payment: one thousand rubles per night." And the phone number followed. Serega called—they were happy—a former military man, not a drunkard, not an irresponsible student. He came, signed the contract, and was promised an award if he was successful at sales. By eight o'clock in the evening, Serega arrived at the place indicated, and the market was already bustling with commerce. He became acquainted with his partner and confirmed that the trees were brought in the morning. Serega counted up the trees and phoned the chief. The chief listened, talked with the daytime salesman, and let him go home. Serega was left alone. The trade went briskly, but after 10 p.m. it began to weaken, and at midnight it stopped completely. Serega began to freeze, and he patted himself and clapped to keep warm. The first morning customers appeared after six a.m. There were few of them. By eight o'clock in the morning, a familiar face had come. He, like Serega yesterday evening, counted the trees, called the boss, then gave him the phone.

"Do you agree?" asked his boss.

"Yes," answered Serega.

"You can take a thousand in account of salary."

"No, I'll take closer to the New Year, as much as I can," answered Serega, deciding that the small sums would be spent quickly, but with a big payday, he could go to the hypermarket and immediately buy everything he needed.

"Good!" replied the chief. "You can rest. We will be waiting for you at eight o'clock tonight."

Serega returned the phone to the day seller, bid farewell to him until the evening, and went home. He gradually became accustomed to the routine: the second night passed, then the third, the fourth, the fifth...Serega has adapted and equipped his workplace.

Someone was changing furniture, throwing out the old things from their apartment; Serega took the armchair and the nightstand, put them near the fir trees. From the house he brought a small radio—it became more fun to trade, and music attracted attention—the number of buyers he had increased. He wore a military-quilted jacket, wadding trousers, and felt boots left over from his military service. The boss came and looked.

“Can you work be at the big market? There I have trays; I sell apples, mandarins, oranges...”

“Yes, I do not mind,” answered Serega. The work of the seller began to please him. “Only after the holidays.”

“Good!” replied the chief as he got into his jeep and drove off.

Several more nights passed. *Today is the twenty-ninth... thought Serega. Tomorrow, I'll be replaced, I'll ask them to give me the ten thousand rubles right away. I'll go and buy everything we need.* The flow of customers had dried up. Serega sat down in the armchair, turned on the radio, and took a thermos with tea and sandwiches out of the nightstand. Time slowly passed: midnight came, another hour passed, another...he began to nap. At four in the morning, Serega heard footsteps. A young man slowly approached the fir trees and began to sort through them. After a while, looking around, two more men came up. Serega sensed danger, but it was too late to run; strangers surrounded him, and the one standing in front of him said quietly: “Have you been having good sales? Give me the money now!” Serega wanted to lie, he began to say that he had sold few Christmas trees, but the robber hit him in the face, the second mobster attacked him from behind, striking him in the ear, and the third kicked him in the ribs. Serega fell and the men began kicking him on the ground. At first, it was not that painful: he was saved by a wadded jacket and trousers, and the robbers did not kick him much, did not do it particularly strongly, but one of them bumped Serega in the nose and the other in the stomach. The pain pierced Serega and he began to lose consciousness. Robbers stopped beating him, turned his pockets inside out, and took his money and cell phone.

“How much?” asked one.

Another counted the money: “Seventy thousand rubles!”

“Well! And he said the sales were weak!” The robber went to the nightstand, opened it up, and, seeing the thermos, kicked in into the snowdrift. The broken glass rang. A radio receiver flew into the air along with the thermos.

The robbers turned and went off into the darkness. Serega, overcoming the pain in his nose and stomach, crawled to the armchair, caught his breath, and sat down. Blood was dripping from his nose; his mind was turbid. He scooped up the snow, rubbing his eyes, his forehead, and his cheeks. It became easier. Serega got up and slowly went to the street. It too was deserted, with only a small, tipsy company having fun at a bus stop. At first, they reacted cautiously to Serega, staring at his swollen and dark, grey face, but when Serega said that he wanted to call the police, one of the girls pulled out the phone and dialed the number. The police answered her. The woman began to ask Serega

questions, and he obediently told her his name, surname, and the address of the Christmas tree bazaar. The girl listened for some time to her interlocutor, then put the phone away and told Serega that he should return to the place of the incident. Serega slowly walked back to the trees.

The police car appeared suddenly. Serega slowly walked to meet him. The car stopped and the policemen came out. Serega recognized them immediately. They were the same robbers, only in uniform.

“What, old man, you cannot sleep?” They surrounded him, but did not attack.

“In my opinion, you dreamed it all,” added the second.

“Yes you are drunk, creaker!” exclaimed the third one, holding out a small bottle. “Have a drink, old man! Improve your health!”

“Come on, do not make us apply force,” the first one said again.

Serega picked up the bottle and took a few sips. Vodka burned his throat. Serega raised his hand, attached his sleeve to his nose, and sniffed the air.

“Remember,” the first policeman again pronounced, “you saw it all in your sleep.”

“Yes, yes, I saw it all in my sleep...” Serega said in a weak voice.

The policemen slowly got into the car and drove away. Serega climbed into his armchair. His head was spinning; he felt sick. The urge to vomit had emptied his body, and a stinking puddle formed near the armchair. Serega tried to pull the armchair aside, but all strength left his exhausted body, and he flopped back in the seat.

When he arrived a few hours later, the day seller noted the strange posture of his partner sitting in the armchair. He was motionless, did not pay attention to anyone, stretched out his legs, and lowered his head sadly. The shiftman went up to his colleague and saw, with horror, that his face covered with snow. He touched the man’s shoulder and Serega fell face-down in the cold earth.