

Mikhail Sholokhov

THE BRAT

(Translated by Assya Humecky and David H. Stewart)

MISHKA DREAMED THAT HIS GRANDFATHER cut a huge branch off the cherry tree in the garden, walked toward him brandishing it, and said sternly, "Come here, Mikhailo Fomich, I'm going to lick you where the legs are fastened on."

"What for, granddad?" asked Mishka.

"For stealing all the eggs from the coop, from the tufted hen's nest, and for spending them on the merry-go-round."

"But granddad, this year I didn't take any rides," Mishka cried in fright.

Grandfather only stroked his beard with dignity, then suddenly stamped his foot. "Lay down, roughneck, and take off your pants!"

Mishka cried out and awoke, his heart beating as if he had had a taste of the branch already. He opened his left eye a little—the hut was light. The morning star glimmered in the window. Mishka raised his head and heard voices in the front hall: mother squeaked, babbled something, choked with laughter; grandfather coughed; a strange voice went "Ho-ho-ho . . ."

Mishka rubbed his eyes and saw the door bang open. Grandfather came hopping in, his glasses jiggling on his nose. Mishka first thought that the priest and choir had come (at Easter, when the priest came, grandfather was just this busy); but then behind grandfather a strange, huge soldier shoved into the room. He wore a black greatcoat and had a ribboned cap without a visor. Mom hung on his neck bellowing.

In the middle of the hut, the stranger threw mom off his neck and whooped, "Where's my offspring?"

Mishka got scared and crawled under the blankets.

"Mishka dear, son, what're you sleeping for? Daddy's home from service," mom cried.

Mishka hadn't time to blink his eye when the soldier grabbed him, threw him

up to the ceiling, squeezed him to his chest, and began to scratch his lips, cheeks and eyes painfully with his red moustache, which was somehow wet and salty. Mishka tried to tear himself away but in vain.

"Look how big my Bolshevik is. Soon he'll outgrow his father. Ho-Ho!" cried father and kept fondling Mishka—first holding him on his hand, turning him and then throwing him up again to the ceiling beam. Mishka tolerated this for a while but then frowned like his grandfather, looked cross and grabbed his father's moustache. "Let me go, Daddy!"

"What if I won't?"

"Let me. . . . I'm big already and you make over me like I'm a baby."

Father set Mishka on his lap and asked smiling, "How old are you then, you pistol?"

"Going on eight," he snapped, looking from beneath his brows.

"Do you recollect, sonny, the year before last I made steamboats for you? Remember how we launched them on the pond?"

"I remember," Mishka cried and timidly hugged father's neck.

Then the merriment really started. Father mounted Mishka on his shoulders holding his legs, then circled round and round the room and suddenly kicked and neighed like a horse so that Mishka stopped breathing with delight. Mother pulled his sleeve and yelled, "Go outside and play. Go on I say, you jailbird!" Then to father, "Let him go, Foma Akimich; let him, please. He won't even let me see you, my precious. It's been two years and here you are busy with him!"

Father put Mishka down and said, "Run along and play with the kids. When you come back I've some presents for you."

Mishka shut the door behind him. First he wanted to stay in the hall and listen to the conversation inside; then he remembered that none of the kids knew yet that his dad was back. He raced toward the pond, across the yards and along the vegetable patch, treading the blooming potato plants. He went for a swim in the smelly stagnant water, rolled in the sand, then dived one last time. Hopping on one leg, he pulled on his pants. He was ready to go home when Vitka, the priest's son, came up.

"Don't go, Mishka. Let's take a swim and go play at my place. My mommy said you could come."

With his left hand Mishka hiked up his slipping pants, adjusted the shoulder strap, and said slowly and indifferently, "I don't want to play with you. Your ears stink."

Slyly closing his left eye and pulling his knit shirt off his scrawny shoulder, Vitka said, "That's because of scrofula—but you're a peasant. Your mother had you behind a fence."

"Did you see it?"

"I heard our cook tell mommy."

Mishka scraped up some sand with his toe and looked down at Vitka. "Your mommy lies. But my dad fought in the war and yours is a leech. He gobbles up other people's food."

"Brat!" said the priest's son, twisting his lips.

Mishka grabbed a water-smoothed pebble but the priest's son held back his tears and smiled sweetly. "Don't let's fight, Mishka; don't get mad. Want me to give you my dagger, the one I made out of iron?"

Mishka's eyes sparkled joyously and he threw aside the pebble, but then remembering his father he said proudly, "My dad brought me a better one from the war."

"No lie?" Vitka drawled incredulously.

"You're the liar! When I say he brought it, he did bring it! And a real gun."

"Well look at you! What a rich one you've become," said Vitka enviously.

"And he also's got a hat with ribbons on it and golden words written on it like in your books."

For a long time Vitka tried to think of something that would astound Mishka. He wrinkled his forehead and scratched his white belly. "My poppa will soon be a bishop and yours was a shepherd. So there!"

Mishka got bored standing so he turned and went toward the vegetable patch. The priest's son called, "Mishka, Mishka, I'll tell you something."

"Well, say it."

"Come here."

Mishka approached suspiciously. "Well, spit it out."

The priest's son started dancing in the sand on his thin bowed shanks, then smiled and cried with hateful glee, "Your father's a Commie. The minute you die and your soul flies to heaven God'll say, 'Since your father's a Communist you go to hell!' And there the devils will start frying you on skilletts!"

"Think they won't fry you too?"

"My poppa's a priest. Oh, you're an uneducated dope; you don't understand a thing."

Mishka grew frightened. He turned and ran home in silence.

Near the fence he stopped and shouted, threatening Vitka with his fist, "I'll ask gramps. If you're lying, don't walk by our yard."

He climbed the fence and ran toward the house. Before his eyes was a skillet with Mishka frying on it. It was hot to sit on, and all around sour cream boiled and foamed and bubbled. A quiver ran down his spine. —If he could just get to grandfather more quickly to ask!

To make things worse, the sow was stuck in the gate, her head through one side, the rest on the other. She heaved with her legs against the ground twisting her tail and squealing piercingly. Mishka dashed to the rescue and tried to open the gate, but the sow was gagging. He got on her back. Gathering all her strength, she tore out of the gate. With a relieved grunt, she galloped along toward the threshing floor. Mishka dug her sides with his heels and rode with his hair flying in the wind. Near the threshing floor he jumped down and promptly saw his grandfather on the porch beckoning with his finger.

"Come here, my boy."

Mishka could not guess why his grandfather called; then he remembered the devils' skillets and ran toward him. "Granddad, granddad. Are there really devils in heaven?"

"I'll whale the devils out of you! Oh you're a regular plague. What're you bronc-busting the pig for?" He grabbed Mishka's hair and called to his mother in the house. "Come out here and feast your eyes on this brainy one."

Mother ran out. "What'd he do now?"

"What do you mean, 'do now'? I looked up and there he was galloping the pig around the yard raising the dust."

"Was it the farrow sow he was on?" she sighed.

Mishka hadn't time to open his mouth to defend himself when grandfather took off his belt. With his left hand he held his trousers and with his right he shoved Mishka's head between his knees. All the while he whipped him, he kept saying sternly, "Don't ride pigs! Don't ride pigs!"

Mishka started to bawl but grandfather said, "You son of a bitch-cat, don't you respect your dad? Here he's worn out, taking a nap, and you're raising a rumpus."

Mishka fell silent. He tried to kick grandfather but could not reach him. Mother grabbed him and pushed him into the house. "Sit there! May a hundred devils take your mother. If I take hold of you, I'll skin you worse than granddad."

Grandfather sat on the kitchen bench looking at Mishka's back from time to

time. Mishka turned toward him wiping the last tear with his fist. Pressing his behind against the door he said, "Well gramps, you just remember this"

"What's that, you good-for-nothing? threatening your grandfather?"

Mishka saw granddad unfasten his belt again; he opened the door a little just in case.

"Threatening me?" he repeated.

Mishka vanished completely through the door. Peeping in, he cautiously watched grandfather's every move and then announced, "Just wait! Just wait, gramps. When your teeth fall out I won't chew for you. And don't even beg me to!"

Grandfather went onto the porch and saw Mishka's head plunging through the green bushy flax in the patch, his blue trousers flashing. For a long time grandfather threatened with his cane, but a smile hid beneath his beard.

To father he was Minka, to mother Minyushka, to grandfather in a tender moment he was a little scamp; the rest of the time when grandfather's grey tattered eyebrows hung over his eyes, then—"Hey Mikhailo Fomich, come here and I'll take your ears off." And to everybody else—the neighborhood gossips, the kids and the whole village—he was Mishka and "the brat."

His mother was unwed when she bore him. Although in a month she took vows in church with the shepherd Foma by whom she had the child, still the name "brat" stuck to Mishka like a burr and became permanent.

Mishka was scrawny. In the spring his hair was like petals on a blooming sunflower, but in June the sun burned and ruffled it into brownish tufts. His cheeks were covered with freckles like a sparrow's egg. His nose peeled and cracked from swimming in the sun. The one good thing about bandy-legged Mishka was his eyes. Peering through narrow slits, they looked out blue and sly, like unmelted chips of river ice.

It was for his eyes and impetuous fidgeting that his father loved him. As a gift, father brought his son an ancient, stale Vyazemskii cooky and some worn jack-boots. Mother wrapped the boots in a blanket and stored them in the trunk, but the cooky Mishka smashed on the doorstep with a mallet and ate to the last crumb.

The next day Mishka wakened at sunrise. He scooped tepid water from the iron pot and spread yesterday's dirt across his cheeks. Then he ran into the yard to dry off. Mother was busy with the cow and grandfather sat by the house. He called to Mishka: "Get going, you scamp! Under the barn."

A hen was cackling there probably because she had dropped an egg.

Mishka was always ready to assist grandfather. On all fours he scuttled beneath the barn, emerged on the other side and vanished. He cantered along the garden and ran to the pond looking back to see whether grandfather saw him. Grandfather waited and sighed; then having waited long enough, he crawled under the barn. Smearred with chicken droppings, squinting from the steaming darkness, and painfully cracking his head on the beams, he finally reached the end.

"What a fool, Mishka. Upon my word! You look and look and can't find anything. Think a hen'd lay here? It's over there by the stone; that's where the egg should be. Where on earth did you crawl to, you scamp!"

Silence answered him. Brushing bits of dung from his trousers, he crawled out from beneath the barn. He peered at the pond, saw Mishka, and threw up his hands.

The kids surrounded Mishka at the pond and asked, "Has your father been to the war?"

"He was."

"And what'd he do?"

"You ought to know—fought."

"You lie. He killed lice and chewed bones in the field kitchen." They burst out laughing, pointed their fingers at Mishka, and hopped around. From this bitter insult, tears filled Mishka's eyes. And Vitka, the priest's son, hurt him even more: "And is your father a Communist?"

"I don't know."

"I know he is. Poppa said this morning that he'd sold his soul to the devil and also that pretty soon they'll start hanging all Communists."

The kids fell silent. Mishka's heart skipped. Hang his dad? Why? Clenching his teeth he said, "Dad has a big rifle, he's going to kill off all the burzhuis."

Vitka, putting one foot out, said triumphantly, "His arms won't reach that far. Poppa won't bless him and without holiness he won't be able to do anything."

Proshka, the grocer's son, pushed Mishka in the chest and screamed, "You better not brag about your father. He used to take things from my father when the revolution started and father says 'If there's a change in government, I'll kill that Fomka first of all!'"

Natashka, his sister, stamped her foot. "Hit him, kids. What are we waiting for?"

"He's the Commie's son!"

"Brat!"

"Wallop him, Proshka!"

Proshka raised a branch and hit Mishka across the shoulder. Vitka tripped him and he fell backwards heavily on the sand. The kids howled and leaped at him. Natashka screamed in a sharp voice and scratched his neck with her nails. Someone kicked him painfully in the stomach.

Mishka threw Proshka off, jumped up, and weaving across the sand dashed for home like a rabbit running from the coursers.

They whistled after him and threw a stone but did not pursue.

Mishka caught his breath only when he dived into the green prickly growth of flax. He sat on the moist, fragrant ground, wiped blood from his scratched neck, and began to cry. From above, making its way through the leaves, the sun tried to look into his eyes and dry the tears on his cheeks. Like his mother, it affectionately kissed his tufty red head.

He sat a long time until his eyes dried, then he rose and wandered slowly into the yard. By the shed father was tarring the cart wheels, his hat tilted back and the ribbons hanging. He had on his blue and white striped shirt. Mishka angled up and stood by the cart. He was silent. Growing bold, he touched his dad's hand and asked in a whisper, "Father, what did you do in the war?"

Father smiled into his red moustache and said, "I fought, sonny."

"But the kids . . . they say you only killed lice." Tears caught Mishka's throat.

Father laughed and took Mishka into his arms. "They're lying, my sweet, I was at sea. I went to sea on a big ship, and then I went to fight."

"Fight who?"

"I fought the rich, darling. You're still little and that's why I had to go to war for you. There's even a song about it." Father smiled, look at Mishka and sang softly to the tapping of his foot:

"Oh Mikhail, Mikhalya, Mikhalyatko mine!

Don't go to war—let father serve your time.

Father—he's old and has lived a long life

And you—you're still young and haven't a wife."

Mishka forgot the insult inflicted by the kids and laughed because father's red moustache stood out from his lip like the brush that mother used to make brooms. And under the moustache his lips smacked and his mouth opened like a round black hole.

"Don't bother me now, Minka," said father. "I've got to fix the cart and this evening when you go to bed I'll tell you all about the war."

The day stretched out like a long untended road on the steppe. The sun set, the herd passed through the village, the dust settled, and from the darkening sky the first star glanced bashfully.

Mishka was very anxious and his mother, as if deliberately, lingered long with the cow, strained the milk slowly, then went to the cellar and fooled away a whole hour. Mishka stayed underfoot.

"Are we going to eat soon?"

"Don't be in such a hurry, you ravenous fidget!"

But Mishka wouldn't budge an inch from her: she went to the cellar, he followed; she went to the kitchen, he followed. He stuck like a leech hanging to her skirt.

"M-o-m-m-m, let's eat sooner."

"Go on away! You're as bad as mange. If you're so starved go fill your insides with bread."

But Mishka kept it up. Even the slap that mother gave him did no good. At supper he hastily gulped his stew and dashed quickly into the living room. Tossing his pants behind the trunk, he took a run and dived into the bed under his mother's quilt, the one sewn from vari-colored pieces of cloth. Holding his breath he waited for his father to come tell about the war.

Grandfather was on his knees before the icons whispering prayers and bowing his head to the floor. Mishka raised his head: grandfather, bending with difficulty and bracing himself with the fingers of his left hand, bumped his forehead on the floor. Then Mishka's elbow hit the wall with a bang. Grandfather whispered on and on, then again bumped to the floor. Mishka banged the wall. Grandfather got angry and turned.

"Damn you . . . God forgive me. You knock once more like that and I'll give you a knock."

There would have been a fight but father came in. "Why're you lying there, Minka?" he asked.

"I'm sleeping with mom."

Father sat on the bed and began to tug his moustache silently. After a moment's thought, he said, "But I made your place in grandfather's bed."

"I won't sleep with grandpa."

"And why not?"

"Because his whiskers smell too much like tobacco."

Father again tugged his moustache and sighed, "No son, you'd better stay with grandfather."

Mishka pulled the quilt over his head and, peering out with one eye, said in an injured tone, "Yesterday you slept in my place and today too. You go with grandfather." He sat up on the bed, put his arms around his father's head and whispered, "You stay with grandpa because mom probably won't sleep with you—you smell like tobacco too."

"Well all right, I'll go, but I won't tell you about the war." He got up and went into the kitchen.

"Daddy."

"Well?"

"You can sleep here," sighed Mishka. "Now will you tell about the war?"

"All right."

Grandfather lay down by the wall and put Mishka on the edge of the bed. Later father came. He sat down on the bench and lit a smelly cigarette.

"Well you see, this is how it was. Remember behind the threshing floor the grocer used to have a patch?"

Mishka remembered that he used to run in the tall fragrant wheat. He would climb the stone wall by the threshing floor, then go out into the grain. The wheat would hide him completely, and the heavy black-bearded ears tickled his face. It smelled of dust, daisies and steppe wind. Mom would say to him, "Don't go far or you'll get lost."

Dad was silent; then, stroking Mishka's head, said, "Remember how you used to ride with me beyond Sandy Hill? Our wheat was there."

Again Mishka recalled that along the road beyond Sandy Hill was a narrow strip of wheat. Mishka went with his father, and the whole wheat field had been ruined by livestock. The grain, trampled into the ground, lay in dirty heaps and the stubble swayed in the wind. Mishka remembered how father, so big and strong, twisted his face horribly and teardrops ran on his dusty cheeks. Mishka also cried watching him.

On the way back father asked a gardener, "Tell me, Fedot, who grazed in my grain?"

The gardener spat at his feet and answered, "The grocer was driving his cattle to market and let them onto your strip."

Father moved the bench closer and began:

"The grocer and the rest of the rich ones had taken all the land, and the poor had no place to sow. That's how it was everywhere, not just in our village. They used to push us around. It got to be hard to live, so I hired out as a shepherd, and then they took me into the service. I had it bad. The officers smacked you in the mug for any little thing. Then the Bolsheviks turned up, and the main one is a fellow called Lenin. He don't look so very smart, but he's got a very educated brain even though he's of our own peasant blood. The Bolsheviks gave us some riddles that made our mouths fall open. 'What are you peasants and workers standing around for? Drive the overlords and bosses out; take the old broom to 'em and sweep 'em away. Everything is yours!'"

"With words like that, they argued us to a standstill. And then we began to figure things out—it was true. So we took the land and estates from the overlords, but they got sick of the hard life and raised their hackles and came at us peasants and workers. Understand, son?"

"And that same Lenin—the headman of the Bolsheviks—raised the people like a plowman raises the earth. He gathered the soldiers and workers and began to kick the lords around. The fur and feathers really flew! The soldiers and workers were called Red Guards. That's where I was—in the Red Guards. We lived in a huge house called Smolny. Son, the front entrance hall is so awful long and there are so many rooms that you could get lost in the place."

"One night I was standing guard at the entrance. It was cold out and I had my greatcoat. The wind blew right through me. Then I saw two men come out and walk toward me. When they came up, I recognized one was Lenin. He came up and asked kindly, 'Aren't you cold, Comrade?'"

"I told him, 'No, Comrade Lenin. There's no cold and surely no enemy that can break us! We didn't take power into our hands just to give it over to the bourgeois!'"

"He laughed and shook my hand firmly. Then he went slowly on to the gate."

Father fell silent, took a pouch from his pocket, and rustled the cigarette paper. Striking a match he began to smoke. On the end of his bristly whiskers Mishka saw a sparkling tear like a drop of morning dew hanging on the tip of a nettle leaf.

"That's the way he was. He was worried for us all. His heart pained for each soldier. After that I saw him a lot. Passing by, he'd see me from way off

and smile and ask, 'Still think the burzhui won't crush us?'"

"'There ain't one yet that can, Comrade Lenin,' I used to tell him."

"And son, it came out just like he said. We took the land and factories, and the rich—our bloodsuckers—we booted! When you grow up, don't forget your father was a sailor and shed his blood for the commune. By then I'll be dead and Lenin'll be dead, but our job will live forever. When you grow up will you fight for Soviet power like your dad?"

"I will," shouted Mishka. He jumped on the bed and tried to throw himself on his father's neck, but he forgot grandfather and put his foot on his stomach.

Grandfather grunted and reached out to grab Mishka's hair, but father lifted him in his arms and carried him to the other room. Mishka fell asleep in father's arms. Dozing, he thought first of this wondrous man—Lenin—about Bolsheviks, war, ships. Through his dozing he heard hushed voices, sensed the sweet odor of sweat and tobacco—then his eyes fell shut as if pressed by a hand.

He barely fell asleep when he saw a city in his dream: broad streets, chickens on the scattered ashes. In the village there were lots of them, but in the city so many more. The houses were just as father had described—huge, roofed with fresh reeds; and on the chimney of one house stood another and on its chimney still another, and the chimney of the topmost house stuck into the sky.

Mishka was going down the street, his head thrown back, looking around; and suddenly from nowhere a horribly tall man popped up in a scarlet shirt.

"You Mishka! Why're you loafing around without anything to do?" he asked kindly.

"My granddad let me play," he answered.

"Do you know who I am?"

No, I don't."

"I'm Comrade Lenin."

Mishka's knees buckled. He wanted to lose himself but the man in the scarlet shirt took him by the sleeve saying, "Your conscience, Mishka, isn't worth a broken penny. You know I'm fighting for the poor folks, so why don't you join my troop?"

"Granddad won't allow it," Mishka justified.

"As you wish," says Comrade Lenin, "but without you things aren't right. You've got to enlist in my troop and that's all there is to it."

Mishka took his arm and said very firmly, "Well okay, without permission

I'll join and fight for the poor folks. But if granddad starts licking me with a switch you'll have to stick up for me."

"I sure will," said Comrade Lenin and with that he went on down the street. Mishka felt choked with joy and couldn't catch his breath. He wanted to yell but his tongue stuck.

Mishka twitched in bed, kicked grandfather and woke up.

Grandfather made a lowing sound, chewed with his lips. Through the window the sky was softly brightening beyond the pond, and clouds piled up from the east in blood-pink foam.

From that time on every evening father told Mishka about the war, Lenin, and the places he had been.

On Saturday evening the executive committee watchman brought a short man into the yard with a greatcoat and leather leggings under his arm. Calling grandfather he said, "I brought you a roomer, a comrade Soviet fellow-worker. He just came down from the city, and you have to put him up for the night. Feed him, will you granddad?"

"Sure. No reason not to," grandfather said. "Do you have your credentials, Sir Comrade?"

Mishka was amazed at grandfather's knowledge. Sticking his finger in his mouth, he stopped to listen.

"I have, granddad; I have everything." The man with the leather leggings smiled and entered the house. Grandfather followed and Mishka came behind.

"What've you come to do here?" asked grandfather on the way.

"I've come to conduct the election. We're going to elect the Soviet chairman and members."

A little later father came from the threshing floor. He greeted the stranger and told mother to get supper. After supper father and the stranger sat together on a bench. The stranger unbuckled the leggings (actually a briefcase), took out a packet of papers and showed them to father. Mishka was impatient; he fidgeted and wanted to peek. Father took one paper and showed it to him. "Look, Mishka, here's Lenin himself."

Mishka snatched the picture, stared at it and opened his mouth in surprise: on the paper stood a short man not in a scarlet shirt at all but a coat. One hand was in his trouser pocket, the other pointed ahead. Mishka glued his eyes to the figure and took it all in in a moment: firmly and forever he put into his memory

the arched eyebrows and the smile hidden in the corners of the mouth. He memorized every line of the face.

The stranger took the picture from Mishka's hands, locked the briefcase and went to bed. Already undressed and in bed with his coat covering him, he was falling asleep when he heard the door squeak. He raised his head. "Who's that?"

Bare feet smacked the floor.

"Who's there," he asked again and suddenly recognized Mishka near the bed. "What is it, little one?"

Mishka stood silent for a moment, then gathering courage he whispered, "Uncle . . . you know what? . . . let me have Lenin."

The stranger said nothing but lowered his head.

Fear seized Mishka. What if he's stingy and won't give it to me? Trying to stop the quaver in his voice, hurrying and gulping, he whispered, "You let me have him for keeps and I . . . I'll give you a good tin can and all my knucklebones too, and . . ." With a desperate gesture Mishka said, "And even the boots dad brought me."

"Why'd you want to have Lenin?" the stranger asked smiling.

He won't! flashed through Mishka's mind. He bent his head to hide his tears but remembered they couldn't be seen, then said softly, "Because I've got to!"

The stranger laughed, got the briefcase from beneath his pillow and gave Mishka the picture. Mishka put it under his shirt, pressing it hard to his heart, and dashed from the room.

Grandfather awoke and asked, "What're you wandering around for, night-owl? I told you not to drink milk at bedtime. See how you've got to scurry. Go do it in the garbage; I'm not here just to take you outside."

Mishka lay silent, squeezing the picture with both hands, afraid to turn lest he crease it. So he fell asleep.

He awoke before daybreak. Mother had just milked the cow and sent her along with the herd. She saw Mishka and threw up her hands. "What bug's eating you? What're you up so early for?"

Pressing the picture under his shirt, Mishka dashed past his mother and started under the barn. Burdock grew around the barn and the sharp nettles stood in a green impassable wall. Mishka crawled beneath the barn, scraped the dust and chicken droppings with his hands, tore an age-yellowed burdock leaf, wrapped the picture in it, and held it down with a stone so the wind would not blow it.

It rained from morning till night. The sky was covered with a dove-colored canopy. In the yard puddles foamed and streams ran races down the street.

Mishka had to stay at home. Dusk was falling when grandfather and father dressed and went to the executive committee meeting. Mishka pulled on grandfather's cap and followed. The executive committee met in the chapel. Groaning, Mishka climbed onto the crooked dirty steps of the porch and went in. Tobacco smoke crawled along the ceiling of the packed room. The stranger was sitting at the table by the window telling the Cossacks something. Mishka stealthily made his way to the back and sat on a bench.

"Comrades, who is for Foma Korshunov as chairman? Please raise your hands."

Prokhor Lysenkov, the grocer's son-in-law, who was sitting in front of Mishka, shouted, "Citizens. I move the withdrawal of his candidacy. He's dishonest. Already when he was a shepherd, this was known."

Mishka saw Fedot the shoemaker rise from the window sill and start to yell waving his hands, "Comrades, it is not to the advantage of the wealthy to have the shepherd Foma as chairman, but he is proletariat and for Soviet power and . . ."

Crowded near the door, the well-to-do Cossacks began to stamp and whistle. A racket broke loose in the room.

"No shepherds for us!"

"He came from the service—let him hire out as shepherd to the village."

"To the devil with Foma Korshunov."

Mishka glanced at his father's pale face. He stood near the bench. Mishka himself turned white from fear for his father.

"Quiet, Comrades. I'll expel you from the meeting," the stranger yelled, beating the table with his fist.

"We'll elect our man from among the Cossacks."

"We don't need him . . ."

"We don't want any . . ." A Cossack swore unprintably.

They raised a row, and Prokhor the grocer's son-in-law was the worst of all. A huge red-bearded Cossack with an ear-ring and dressed in a torn, patched coat jumped onto a bench. "Brothers! Look how things are going. The rich want to put the pressure on and seat one of their own men as chairman! And once that happens, then . . ."

Through the squalling Mishka heard only single words shouted by the Cossack with the ear-ring. "Land . . . distribution . . . clay and sand to the poor

peasant . . . black soil for themselves”

“Prokhor for chairman!” they cheered by the door.

“Pro-o-okhor!!!”

Finally they quieted down. The stranger, frowning and scattering saliva, yelled out something over and over.

“Must be swearing,” thought Mishka.

The stranger asked loudly, “Who’s for Foma Korshunov?”

Many hands raised over the benches. Mishka raised his too. Jumping from bench to bench someone was counting out loud.

“Sixty-three, sixty-four,” and without looking at Mishka he pointed at his raised hand and shouted, “sixty-five.”

The stranger jotted something on a paper and yelled, “Who’s for Prokhor Lysenkov, please raise your hands.”

Twenty-seven rich Cossacks and Egor the miller raised their hands together. Mishka looked around and raised his hand too. The man who was counting came to him, looked down and grabbed his ear painfully. “You little rascal. Get, before I whack you. He’s even voting!”

Everyone laughed. The man led Mishka to the exit and shoved him out. Mishka remembered what his father said when arguing with grandfather; and sliding down the slick dirty steps, he cried, “You have no rights to do that!”

“I’ll show you my rights!”

Like all injuries, this was a bitter one.

Coming home Mishka had a little cry and complained to his mother, but she said angrily, “Don’t go where you’re not supposed to. Sticking your nose in every hole You’re a real affliction to me!”

Next morning they sat down to breakfast but had no time to finish when they heard music muffled by distance. Father put down his spoon and said, wiping his moustache, “Why, that’s a military band!”

As if blown off his bench by the wind, Mishka vanished. The hall door banged, and beyond the window his footsteps pattered.

Foma and grandfather also went out into the yard, and mom leaned out the window. Into the end of the street rows of Red Army men flowed in green undulating waves. In front musicians were blowing horns, drums boomed. The sound rang across the village.

Mishka’s eyes went everywhere. He hesitated, then started and rushed up to the musicians. His heart throbbed pleasantly and a lump came into his throat.

He looked at the gay dusty faces of the Red Army men and at the solemn musicians with their cheeks bulged out, and in an instant he decided, "I'll go fight with them."

Remembering his dream, he suddenly grew bold. He grabbed the kitbag of the nearest man. "Where're you going? To fight?"

"Where else? Sure we'll fight!"

"And who're you fighting for?"

"For Soviet power, you little fool! Well, come on here."

He pushed Mishka into the ranks. Someone, laughing, snapped his tufty head; another took a dirty piece of sugar from his pocket and stuck it into Mishka's mouth. On the square someone from the front rank yelled, "Halt!"

The Red Army men stopped, scattered about the square, and lay in groups in the cold shadow of the school fence. A tall clean-shaven Red Army man with a sword came up to Mishka. He asked, wrinkling his lips into a smile, "How'd you stray in here?"

Mishka looked important and hiked up his sliding pants, "I'm going with you to fight."

"Comrade Kombat,* take him as your aide," shouted one of the soldiers.

Everyone roared. Mishka began to blink, but the man with the odd name frowned and shouted sternly, "What're you neighing about, fools! Of course we'll take him but on this condition . . ." Kombat turned to Mishka and said, "Your pants only have one strap. That's no good at all. Your appearance will shame us. Here, look, I've got two straps and so has everybody else. Now scoot and have your mother sew on another one and we'll wait." He turned toward the fence and shouted, winking, "Tereshchenko, go bring the new Red Army man a greatcoat and rifle."

A man lying by the fence got up, raised his hand to his cap, answered "Yes sir," and quickly went off along the fence.

Mishka sternly looked at Kombat. "Now look, don't fool me!"

"What do you mean? How could I fool you?"

It was a long way to the house. By the time Mishka had run to the gate he was panting, breathless. Near the gate he pulled off his pants, and with his bare legs flashing he dashed into the house.

"Mom! My pants—sew on a strap!"

The house was silent. Above the stove flies buzzed in a black swarm.

*Abbreviated name for Battalion Commander.

Mishka ran around the yard, the threshing floor and the vegetable patch—no father, no mother, and no grandfather. He ran back into the room and his eye caught a sack. He cut off a long strip with his knife but there was no time to sew it on and besides Mishka did not know how. Quickly he tied it to his pants, put it over his shoulder, tied it in front, and threw himself under the barn.

He rolled the stone away, saw Lenin's hand pointed at him, and whispered catching his breath, "See now, I did join your army!" Carefully he wrapped the picture in the burdock leaf, stuffed it into his shirt, and tore down the street. With one hand he held the picture and with the other he held up his pants. Passing the neighbor's fence, he shouted, "Anisimovna!"

"What is it?"

"Tell my folks to eat without me!"

"Where you flying to, scatterbrain?"

Mishka waved. "Into the service!"

He reached the square and stopped as if rooted. Not a soul was there. Cigarette stubs, food cartons, someone's tattered leg wrappings were by the fence. At the far edge of the village the music sounded. You could hear the tread of the departing troops rumbling along the beaten road.

A sob tore from Mishka's throat, then he cried out and ran with all his might to catch them. And certainly he would have, but in front of the tanner's yard by the street lay a yellow, long-tailed dog baring his teeth. By the time Mishka went round by another street he could no longer hear music or the marching feet.

About two days later a detachment of forty men entered the village. The soldiers had grey felt boots and oil-stained working-men's jackets. Father came from the executive committee for lunch and told grandfather, "Get the grain in the barn ready, dad. A requisitioning detachment has come. Grain collection is starting."

Soldiers went round to each yard, stuck their bayonets into the ground in the barns, dug up buried grain and brought it in cars to the community barn.

They came even to the chairman's. The man in front, puffing his pipe, asked grandfather, "Bury your grain granddad? Tell the truth now!"

Grandfather straightened his beard and said proudly, "My son is a Communist!"

They went to the barn. The soldier with the pipe measured the grain bins and smiled. "Granddad, we'll take this bin; the rest is yours for feed and seed."

Groaning and sighing, grandfather harnessed old Savraska to the cart, filled eight sacks, regretfully waved his hand, and started for the community barn. Mother was sad about the grain and cried a little. Mishka helped grandfather sack the grain and then went to play with Vitka, the priest's son.

They had just sat down in the kitchen and spread out their paper horses when the same soldiers came. The priest, tangled up in his under cassock, ran out to meet them, scurried about, and invited them into the house. But the soldier with the pipe said sternly, "Let's go to the barn. Where do you keep your grain?"

The priest's wife, her hair disheveled, dashed in from the next room and smiled craftily. "Just imagine, gentlemen, we have no grain at all. My husband hasn't gone round the parish yet."

"Got a cellar?"

"No. We've always kept grain in the barn."

Mishka recalled climbing with Vitka from the kitchen down into a roomy cellar and said, turning his head to the priest's wife, "But Vitka and I always go down cellar from the kitchen. Have you forgotten?"

The priest's wife paled and laughed aloud, "Child, you're all mixed up. Vitka, why don't you go play in the garden?"

The soldier with the pipe screwed up his eyes and smiled at Mishka. "How'd you get down there, youngster?"

The priest's wife wrung her hands and said, "Do you actually believe this stupid little fellow? I assure you, gentlemen, we have no cellar."

The priest, swinging his cassock skirt, said, "Wouldn't you comrades like a bit to eat? Let's go in."

Passing Mishka, the priest's wife pinched his arm painfully and smiled a kindly smile. "Go on, children, into the garden. You'll be in the way."

The soldiers winked at each other and went around the kitchen knocking the floor with their rifle butts. Near the wall, they moved the table and took up a burlap cover. The soldier with the pipe raised up a floor board and looked down shaking his head. "Aren't you ashamed! You said there was no grain, and here the cellar's full right to the top."

The priest's wife looked at Mishka with such an expression that he got scared and wanted to go home at once. He went out. In the hall she jumped after him, sobbed, and grabbing his hair began to fling him about the floor.

With difficulty he tore himself loose and ran home without a backward glance. Choking with tears, he told his mother everything, but she only threw her

ands to her head. "What am I to do with you? Get out of my sight before I lick you."

From then on, after each injury Mishka would crawl under the barn, move the stone, unwrap the burdock leaf, and wetting the paper with his tears tell Lenin his grief and complain against the one who had injured him.

A week passed. Mishka was bored. There was no one to play with. The neighbor children had nothing to do with him. To the name "brat," another was added, which the children borrowed from the grown-ups. They would cry after Mishka: "Hey you Commie. You Communist abortion, look here!"

One evening Mishka came home from the pond. Before he entered the house he heard his father speaking sharply and his mother wailing and grieving as if someone had died. Mishka sneaked in and saw father roll up his greatcoat and pull on his boots.

"Where you going, daddy?"

Father laughed and said, "Quiet your mother, sonny. She's breaking my heart with her howling. I'm going to war and she won't let me."

"Me too, daddy."

Father fastened on his belt and donned his ribboned cap. "You're a funny one. We can't both leave at once. When I come back you can go. Otherwise the grain will ripen and who will harvest? Mother's busy with the house and grandfather's old."

Taking leave of his father Mishka held back the tears and even smiled. As before, mother threw herself upon father's neck, and he finally pulled her off. Grandfather only croaked, kissed the soldier and whispered in his ear, "Fomushka, my boy. Maybe you don't have to go? Maybe they'll get along without you somehow? We'll be lost if you're killed."

"Drop that, father. It's not right. Who'll defend our government if everyone crawls under a woman's skirt to hide?"

"Well then go on if you've got a just cause."

Grandfather turned away and secretly wiped away a tear. They all went to the executive committee office to see father off. In the yard there was a crowd of about twenty people with rifles. Foma too took a rifle and, kissing Mishka for the first time, began walking with the others toward the edge of the village.

Mishka went back home with grandfather; mother staggered behind. In the village there was an occasional dog barking and a rare light. The village was covered with darkness like an old woman in a black shawl. Rain sprinkled down

and beyond the village in the steppe lightning played and distant thunder boomed and rattled.

As they approached the house Mishka, who had been silent the whole way, asked his grandfather, "Gramps, who's father going to fight?"

"Leave me alone."

"Gramps!"

"Well?"

"Who's daddy going to fight?"

Grandfather drew the bar across the gate and answered, "Sinful people've shown up in our neighborhood. Folks call them a military band but as far as I'm concerned, they're just bandits. And they're the ones your father went to wage war on."

"Are there many, Gramps?"

"They say about two hundred. You go on to bed now, scamp; you've had enough fooling around."

In the night Mishka was awakened by voices. He felt the bed—grandfather was not there. "Gramps, where are you?"

"Be quiet. Sleep, you restless one."

Mishka got up in the darkness and by feel reached the window. Grandfather was sitting in his underwear on the bench with his head out of the window listening. Mishka listened too and in the mute silence he heard distinctly the chatter of shots beyond the village and then the gunfire as it began to crash regularly. It was as if someone were hammering nails.

Fright seized Mishka. Pressing up against grandfather, he asked, "Is daddy shooting?"

Grandfather did not answer. Mother began to cry and wail.

Until dawn the shooting beyond the village continued; then everything grew still. Mishka curled up like a doughnut on the bench and fell into a heavy joyless sleep. At dawn a group of riders galloped along the street toward the executive committee office. Grandfather woke Mishka and ran into the yard.

Above the executive committee office stretched a black pillar of smoke, and fire leaped about the buildings. Riders began scurrying down the street. One rode up and shouted to grandfather, "Got a horse, old man?"

"Yes."

Well harness it and go out beyond the village. Your Communists are laid up like stacked wood. Load them and let their relatives bury them."

Grandfather quickly harnessed Savraska, took the reins into his trembling hands and rode from the yard at a gallop.

Shouting rose over the village. Dismounted bandits were dragging hay from the threshing floor and killing sheep. One jumped down near Anisimovna's yard and ran into the house. Mishka heard Anisimovna howling thickly. His sword clanking, the bandit ran onto the porch, sat down, took off his boots, tore Anisimovna's printed holiday shawl in half, threw away his dirty leg wrappings, and wrapped his legs in the halves of the shawl.

Mishka entered his room, lay on the bed with his head buried in the pillow, and got up only when the gate squeaked. He ran onto the porch and saw grandfather, his beard tear-soaked, lead in the horse.

Behind him in the cart lay a barefooted man with his arms outspread. The head bumped against the tailgate and thick black blood ran along the floor boards.

Mishka stumbled up to the cart and looked at the sabre-gashed face; he could see the bared teeth, one cheek hanging loose sliced off with the bone. On one blood-covered bulging eye a green fly sat preening itself.

Quivering faintly with horror, he had no need to guess; he turned his eyes and saw the blue and white stripes—a sailor's bloody shirt on the man's chest. He jerked as if someone had struck his legs from behind. Wide-eyed, he looked once more at the motionless black face and jumped into the cart.

"Get up daddy. Daddy dear." He fell from the cart and wanted to run but his legs caved. He crawled on all fours to the porch and fell with his head on the sand.

Grandfather's eyes had sunk; his head shook, wobbled; his lips whispered soundlessly. For a long time he stroked Mishka's head. Looking at mother who was lying flat on the bed, he whispered, "Let's go out, grandson."

He took Mishka by the hand and led him onto the porch. Passing one of the doors, Mishka shut his eyes and shivered. In that room on the table daddy lay silently, solemnly. The blood had been washed away. Before Mishka was daddy's bloody motionless eye with the big green fly on it.

Grandfather slowly untied a rope by the well; then he went to the stable, led out Savraska and wiped his foaming lips with his sleeve. He put on the bridle and listened: in the village shouting and laughter. Two riders passed, their cigarettes sparkling in the darkness. A voice said, "Now we requisitioned *them!* They'll remember in the next world how to take grain from people!"

The sound of horses' hooves passed on. Grandfather bent down to Mishka's ear and began to whisper, "I'm old . . . can't climb on a horse . . . I'll set you on and you go with God . . . to the district town. I'll show you the way. That detachment ought to be there . . . the one that went through with the music. Tell them to come to the village . . . the band of Whites is here. Understand?"

Mishka nodded silently. Grandfather set him on the horse, tied his legs to the saddle so he would not fall, then led Savraska across the threshing floor, out by the pond past the bandits' sentry, and into the steppe.

"Over there. Up to that ridge. Just ride along it and don't turn aside. You'll go straight to town. Go along with you, dear one." Grandfather kissed Mishka and softly slapped Savraska.

The night was moon-filled and clear. Savraska trotted slowly and whinnied. Feeling a light burden on his back, he slowed his pace. Mishka touched the reins, slapped his neck, and bumped up and down.

A quail whistled gaily in the green thickets of ripening grain. Below the ridge, spring water tinkled and the wind was cool. For Mishka it was frightening to be alone on the steppe. He hugged Savraska's warm neck and pressed against it shivering.

The ridge crawled higher and lower and again higher. Mishka was afraid to look back. He whispered, trying not to think. Silence thickened in his ears and his eyes were shut. Savraska shook his head, whinnied and quickened his gait. Mishka opened his eyes a little and saw a pale yellow light below. Wind brought the barking of dogs. For a moment joy warmed Mishka's heart. Kicking Savraska with his legs he yelled, "Get on!"

The barking approached and on the hill the vague outline of a windmill appeared.

"Who's there?" came a shout from the mill.

Mishka silently spurred on. Roosters began to crow above the sleepy town.

"Halt! Who goes there? I'll shoot!"

Mishka pulled the reins in fright but Savraska, sensing horses nearby, whinnied and rushed ahead, disobeying the reins.

"Halt!"

Near the mill shots rang out. Mishka's cry died in the horse's clattering feet. Savraska groaned, reared and fell heavily to the right. For a moment Mishka felt a terrible pain in his leg, and his cry froze on his lips. Savraska heaved against the leg more and more heavily.

Hoofbeats came nearer. Two men rode up with clanging swords, jumped off and bent over Mishka.

"Good Lord, it's a youngster."

"Did we really get him?"

One stuck his hand into Mishka's shirt and blew tobacco into his face. A happy voice said, "He's in one piece. Seems like the horse smashed his leg."

As he lost consciousness, Mishka whispered, "A band is in the village. They killed daddy, burned the executive committee, and grandpa tells you to come right away."

Before Mishka's fading gaze colored circles began to swim. Daddy passed by twirling his moustache and laughing—and on his eye sat the big green fly preening. Grandfather walked past shaking his head with disapproval, then mom, then a short man with a high brow and his arm outstretched with the hand pointing straight at Mishka.

"Comrade Lenin," shouted Mishka in a feeble voice. Gathering his strength he lifted his head, smiled, and reached out his arms.