

AT THE RAILROAD STATION

Isaac Babel

(1918)

It happened two years ago at a God-forsaken railroad station near Penza.

A small crowd gathered in a corner of the station house. I decided to join in. It turned out, they were saying goodbye to a soldier who was being shipped to the front.

One of them, drunk, his head raised, was playing a small accordion. Another, a hiccuping young fellow - a factory worker by his looks - kept stretching his hands out to the player and whispering, his whole body shaking: "Hey, Ivan, get it goin', get it goin' good ..."

He stepped away and dribbled a few drops of cologne into a dirty glass full of moonshine.

A bottle with the hazy liquid was passed from hand to hand. They all have had too much to drink. The father of the soldier was sitting on the floor a little to the side, pale and silent. The soldier's brother kept throwing up. He fell down, his face splattering the pool of vomit, and fell asleep.

The train pulled into the station. The parting began. The soldier's father, though, did not want to stir — he would neither stand up nor open his eyes.

"Semyonich, get up," said the factory worker, "give your son a blessing."

The old man did not respond. They began to shake him. Hanging on a thin thread, a small button on his fur hat was swinging back and forth. A policeman approached.

"Idiots," he said, "the guy's dead, and you still shaking him!"

He got it right. Apparently, the man had fallen asleep and died. The soldier was looking about him, not knowing what he should now do. The accordion was still in his hand, hanging down, trembling and still making a playing sound.

"That's it, " he was mumbling, "that's it..."

He then stretched out the hand with the accordion and said:

"The accordion goes to Pete."

The station master appeared on the platform.

"Still partying," he said, "a great place to party they've found ... Prokhor, you son-of-a-bitch, ring the second..."

The policeman hit the bell twice with a huge iron key from the station toilet (the bell's tong had long ago been ripped out).

"Why don't you say goodbye to you father," someone said to the soldier, "instead of just standing there like a dumb beast."

The soldier bent down, kissed his father's cold hand, crossed himself, and walked off toward the train. The brother was still asleep in his own vomit.

Soon the old man was taken away. The crowd began to disperse.

"That's our sober life for you," said an old diminutive merchant who was standing next to me, "these sons-of-bitches, they just croak like flies ..."

"Sober life — that's shit.," spoke a bearded peasant in a firm and deliberate voice. "Our folk is a drinkin' folk. 'Cause it's got to have some haze in his eye ..."

"What say you?" asked the merchant, apparently hard of hearing.

"Lookee here," replied the peasant and pointed his hand to the outlying field, all black and stretching to infinity.

"So what?"

"So what - so what. See haze there? That's why our folk need a hazy eye, real hazy."

<The end>

Translated by Gregory Freidin

Note. This story appeared in the 16 July 1918 (#6) issue *Era*, a newspaper produced by the staff of the Petersburg *Echo* and *Molva* which had been closed by the Bolsheviks. *Era* began publication on July 8, and followed the fate of its predecessors on July 17, when it published its last issue. Babel's decision to contribute to *Era*, no doubt, had a lot to do with the closing of Maxim Gorky's *Novaia zhizn'*, the main outlet for his vignettes, which he had been publishing in various Petersburg periodicals since 1916 under the rubric "My Notes" (*Moi listki*). This story was rediscovered by Aleksandr Galushkin who reprinted it in 15-21 February 1996 issue of the Paris *Russkaia mysl* (pp. 11-12).

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