

I was fifteen and my brother Vasily twenty when we snuck out of Razhudny into the bogs to see Heaven one morning. Vasily'd had a premonition that it would be out that day. Our shadows twisted as we passed the only electric streetlight in our village; Vasily's seemed more hunched than mine, though he stood a foot taller than me. The two of us made an interesting pair of silhouettes against the dull hints of orange to the east.

It had been two years since the War. Baba, who had suffered every day over the thought that his eldest son might be dead, had forbidden the escapade we now took without his permission. Vasily had donned a mask of compliance when Baba lectured him on his safety, but I could tell that he resented the way Baba still spoke to him. Here he was, a veteran from Bagration onwards, who'd seen more death than Baba could ever dream of, being talked down to like he was that boy of 16 who'd been dragged away screaming by the conscription.

"Come now, Vasha," Vasily urged. "Any slower and we'll miss it. We have to get to the outlook before the sun begins peeking over the horizon or it'll be too dim to see."

It was a treacherous journey. The earth insistently pawed at the bottoms of our boots as we waded through the wetland. But just as the twinkling of the stars began to fade against the forthcoming brilliance of the sun, we arrived at a clearing in the trees.

"Look, Vasha," Vasily said breathlessly. "Beyond Venus. See it? It's that blue and white speck slightly above it. It's out this morning because the skies are clear."

And I did see it, and became mute with wonder. Heaven's aroma diffused itself across the bogs, drawing forth every creature. A bird landed on my shoulder, a butterfly on Vasily's forehead; all of God's creations assembled around us to behold the blue-and-white pearl blinking at us from beyond Venus's soft glow.

"Heaven," Vasily breathed, voice barely above a whisper. "Abode of the angels."

All around us, the creatures were saying the same thing in their own hushed languages. Soft tweets came from the birds around us and chitters from the mammals. Even the insects fluttered their wings in wordless recognition.

"I've only seen it one other time, in Poland," Vasily said, and at this I grew quiet, because I wanted to know what entranced him in his memories. After a long pause: "January. We found the convergence of the train tracks and came upon the camp."

I thought he'd finished reminiscing when suddenly, "God!" burst from his lips, like an accusation. "You take memories of my childhood at your leisure. Why can't I forget the things I saw there?"

Heaven twinkled from beyond the foliage as my brother began to cry.

"We advanced thirty kilometers past the site; none of us wanted to sleep anywhere near it. But that night, for the first time, I saw it in retrograde behind Saturn. Feodorovich went mad and started shooting at it. We begged him to stop, but he was insensible."

God's creations listened to Vasily's sobs in silent serenity. And then, to my astonishment, Vasily put his head in my lap as he used to before the War. I didn't dare to look down at him, afraid that seeing him in this diminished state might alter my perception of him forever. But I heard him nonetheless.

"How could such a thing happen with Heaven above us?"

In his voice was the universal entreaty of countless broken children that came before and countless children yet to come. And though I could not answer, the first breeze of the day lifted the weight on my lap and Vasily's butterfly into the air.

I trekked back to Radzhudny alone as the sun broke over the horizon.