The Runner

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I am running. Neither slowly nor quickly. I'm not chasing anyone, but I'm not fleeing from anyone either. My path is not a short one. I try to run where there are fewest people — along the riverbanks, in forest belts, parks, either early in the morning or at dusk. Concrete bridges are the hardest to run across for me. I'm not a courier, I'm not competing with anyone, I'm not rushing to catch the last trolleybus; and it's obvious that I'm not carrying an Olympic torch from Athens. In my country, different fires are blazing right now — much more deadly ones.

I am not one of those runners whose names are widely known.

My name is Sashko. Sasha. Sashok. It's the name of one of history's great generals, but it's unlikely I was named after the Macedonian. My father worked his whole life at a factory as a welder and drank heavily, while my mother sold vegetables at the market, so we didn't have many books at home. However, in our apartment building, right next to the first-floor library, there was a radio-electronics club. There, I could do what I love most — be in a cozy place.

Because, in truth, I never liked running. Instead, I always loved sitting. After school, after college, after work, always. Sitting and soldering microchips, taking apart and assembling radios, phones, any kind of electronics. The smell of tin and rosin is far more pleasant to me than the stench of a sweaty body. And in my rare youthful dilemma of whether to buy new sneakers or a new soldering iron, the soldering iron always won. A versatile tool that will always earn a living. Provided, of course, that your hands grow not from your backside.

The soldering iron transformed my understanding of life's meaning. Once, as a teenager, I was bedridden for a long time from an illness, and with nothing else to do, I observed the wall clock. I watched how, like people, the second hands sprinted around the dial, the minute hands moved steadily, and the hour hands crawled along its face. Bustling in pursuit of time. Sometimes they rushed forward, sometimes they lagged behind, yet rarely catching up with anyone, just like Achilles chasing the tortoise. But I always stood in place, like the pin upon which the hands were mounted, soldering microchips methodically. I did my job. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that a person who runs is doing something wrong in life. But from childhood, I was forced to hurry: hurry up, move it, come on, quick, you won't make it, you'll be late! And Platon, my only friend, my confidant, my rock, a man with a needle in his backside, as my mother said, tried to drag me in turns to soccer, basketball, handball, and at the end of the sixth grade, even to hurdling. But the most he ever lured me into was the gym. And only because weights can be pressed lying down. I didn't even chase after my wife. We met in the swimming pool. I swam after her.

And I never imagined that one day I would be running ten kilometers every day.

Life is indeed full of wonders and paradoxes.

Perhaps even I surprised myself when, in the spring of 2014, after the Russian invasion of Crimea, I joined the military. It was as if destiny itself pointed the right path and gently pushed me along. "Let's go," said Platon, my comrade, my confidant, my only friend, "and see if they'll give us a tank!" But only he got a tank. They wanted me in the headquarters to repair electronic devices. But what's the point of doing the same thing in the army as in civilian life? In the corner of the room, I saw a stout officer with a moustache watching the recruits closely and jotting something in a notebook. Not hesitating, I asked him directly, "Are you from intelligence? Take me with you," to which he replied with a smile, "You probably think it's romantic with us? Like in the movies, right? But with us, it's hard and monotonous work where you have to run a lot. Can you handle it?" I said yes, I can, though, in truth, I knew that anywhere, even in the army, if you organize everything properly, running isn't absolutely necessary.

We were trained by officer-instructors who went with us to the front after two months. I remember those times as some of the best in my life, because never before or after have I been surrounded by so many truly brave and honest people. Anyone can have a family. But a group like ours is only for the lucky ones.

We ended up in a place called Happiness. A small town in the Luhansk region. The front line stretched along the Siversky Donets River from the bridge to Stanytsia Luhanska. "This river," said our commander, "on the other side are the separatists and Katsaps. There are a hell of a lot of them. To your left, for 12 kilometers, there are none of ours. To your right, for 10 kilometers, there are none of ours either. So act like there are many of you, if you want to survive!" We wanted to. We went behind enemy lines: blew up bridges, destroyed equipment, mined roads, passed coordinates, and spent several days in ambushes. Interesting work, cozy, I liked it. Later, I was appointed team leader. In six months of operations, our group had no KIA or WIA. My commander thought we were incredibly lucky, but I believe it was because we never rushed.

On one of those gloomy days of the first military autumn, across from Vesela Hill, the enemy secretly prepared to cross the river and advance. Orders were received to conduct reconnaissance in force and uncover their artillery positions. We crossed at night and gave the separatists quite a fight. Eventually, the enemy infantry called for artillery support. Shells and mines landed densely but far from us. And as we seemed to be in safety on our riverbank, I heard that whistle and splash of a mine hitting the water, then another — and the incredible force of an explosion hit my chest and legs. "Could this be it?" was all I thought before losing consciousness.

I awoke in an unbearably white and silent hospital room. I tried to get up but couldn’t. Because I had no legs. Both were amputated while I was in a coma. Strangely, I felt just mild annoyance. The real disappointment and longing came later. Back then, just returning from the edge of oblivion, I was overwhelmingly happy to once more embrace my wife and daughter.

Time in the hospital passed monotonously and quickly. Once my wounds healed, I started watching instructional videos on YouTube with others about using prosthetics. The guys were different in age, ranging from eighteen to sixty, with various amputations: missing one leg, both legs, one arm, an arm and a leg, both arms, both arms and legs. This war takes away many limbs. I don't understand why it needs so many. We watched the videos, repeated the movements, and it seemed like an easy task to walk on prosthetics. So, when I received my first prosthetics, I was fully confident I’d stand and start walking right away. But I fell. And fell many times. When a person has no legs above the knees, the brain turns off muscles unnecessary for walking. The legs atrophy, and stumps change shape. You must engage other muscles in the work, sometimes entirely wrong for moving limbs. It was painful. Very painful.

"I will love you," said my wife when I returned home. "But I won’t pity you." Her single sentence inspired me more than hours with the staffed psychologist. I started walking slowly, albeit awkwardly and unsteadily, swaying like a drunkard, clutching fences and lampposts. I was ashamed of my weakness. So, I decided that going far was just as unnecessary as running. After all, you could love, solder, and earn a living reclining. Gradually, my family and I adapted to life without my legs. The only thing my wife complained about was my excess weight.

But one day, Platon, my friend, my rock, my confidant, came home on leave from his tank and dragged me to a cross-fit competition. I refused as much as I could, but there was no way. No one could withstand Platon's pressure. Just as people eventually start resembling their dogs, soldiers over time begin to resemble their weapons. Thirty push-ups from the floor, twenty kettlebell lifts, thirty sit-ups, then the rowing machine. "Can you do it without breaks, soldier? Are you up for it?" There were no real winners there. One without legs, another without an arm, Oleg, an “Azov” member from Mariupol, without two arms and a leg, but all competed together with us. We looked at each other and celebrated every success. In fully packed stands, they cheered for us not as the disabled but as athletes. Perhaps these were the first applause I heard in my forty-year life. Platon — he put me on my feet like a little child and made me walk again.

And I started running the day he died. My godfather. My support. My rock. My only friend. In childhood, almost everything apart from soldering, we did together. But even when I was soldering in the club near the library, Platon was outside the window hitting the wall with a football. And so it went on until we split ways: I went into reconnaissance, and he climbed into his tank and perished there. When I learned of Platon's death, I felt as though I was burning in the tank myself. I rushed out of the house and collapsed on the threshold, fainting.

Since then, whenever memories overwhelm me, I always hear the increasingly louder thud of a ball striking a brick wall — and that thudding grows into the sound of explosions shredding the eardrums. It was only when I walked that these damn explosions, and with them the memories, faded away. And the faster I walked, the quieter the explosions and Platon's ball became as it kept hitting the brick wall. So, there was nothing left for me but to run. First a few meters. Then ten. Twenty. Then a hundred. Then two, three. And eventually, I covered a kilometer. My main task in the beginning was not even to endure the pain but not to fall. Because falling is very painful. I still, when I walk, sway a bit like a sailor who just returned from a round-the-world voyage. I find balance between what’s gone and what has appeared in its place.

I’m sure you’ve seen me at least once (or heard of me — our little town, though on a plain, echoes and rumors spread here like in a mountain village) — in any weather, dressed in a light yellow windbreaker and green sweatpants. My running style is hard to miss. I'm not running away from anyone nor chasing after anyone. I run not too fast, but not too slow either, choosing desolate places. Concrete bridges are the hardest to run across because they have the hardest surfaces. My name is Sashko. But sometimes it seems to me that I was called something entirely different before. I run so that when the time comes, I have the strength to complete this exhausting marathon from the place of the final battle to our capital and shout: "Rejoice! We have won!" Even if I fall dead afterward.