Call Sign God

Mila Hehelska-Shudra

The story describes events from 2014; any resemblance to real persons is coincidental, yet possible.

\*\*\*

"Let’s go! Boys, to the cars! Move it!" shouted our platoon commander over the roar of engines—there’s a beautiful Ukrainian word for this: chotovyi.

"With God!" he exclaimed, and we laughed a bit nervously.

I tossed my half-smoked cigarette into the dust at my feet and jumped into the van with the other guys.

The sun was already scorching, and we were thirsty, but we sat as if on nails, afraid to breathe. At first, the convoy of vehicles moved slowly, with the blue-and-yellow flag boldly flapping ahead of us. An armored personnel carrier with "Fight and you will prevail" written on its side passed us.

"It's scary," said someone, I think it was Schoolboy, though I’m not sure. "I don’t trust the Russians. We’re like targets at a shooting range for them, sitting ducks."

We passed a small forest strip; near the tank with numbers painted over in white paint stood Russian soldiers—not local separatists, but genuine Russians with white armbands on their sleeves. They lowered their heads, not looking at us.

"It’s all good," the platoon leader tried to reassure us. "This is a ‘green corridor.’ Plus, we have their prisoners with us, they know that. The Russians won't shoot their own."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't be scared. You’re a fierce Ukrainian, aren’t you?" added Tur, a big guy from Donetsk, tossing in his two cents.

The boys exchanged glances, but no one laughed at his joke. The air around us tightened like a single nerve, so thick you could slice it with a knife and eat it.

We sat shoulder to shoulder with our comrades, surrounded by fields. The guys from western Ukraine marveled at the vast fields in our Donetsk region, saying:

"It’s like the sea."

"These are the ‘broad fields’," I laughed back.

I was used to such landscapes, traveling every summer from Kryvbas to visit my grandma and grandpa. First to Dnipro, then to the villages by bus, and all roads through fields like this: sunflowers, corn, wheat, buckwheat, and later they started planting rapeseed.

Fields. Fields. They blurred before your eyes. By the time you reach the village, you’ve seen so much that those boundless, blinding sunny horizons become cloyingly familiar. But now, we didn’t even look at those fields. We sat in silence, just breathing, and all we saw was the road and green camouflage.

It felt so wrong to be fleeing our God-given land, leaving it to these invaders. So many boys fell here! Can it really be for nothing?!

Someone in the group was praying; I couldn't hear the words, but I felt his lips moving.

"We’re like targets at a shooting range for them..." Words that might have been from Schoolboy—or perhaps the Musician, a skinny lad from Crimea who played the piano—kept replaying in my mind.

I remembered when, during the Soviet era, there were arcade machines at the bus station, different ones, but as a kid, I loved the sea battle one the most. I’d stand on a stool, insert 15 kopecks into the coin slot, aim carefully, and wait for a tiny ship to appear in the center—timing was key, you had to wait but not too long, letting it come closer...

A blast echoed somewhere ahead in the column.

...and release the torpedo.

It began! They fired at us from all sides, using everything they had. Sanya the Red, our driver, tried to break through. He maneuvered the steering wheel, zigzagging between burning vehicles. Screams, metal, fire, dirt, pieces of human bodies flying in the air. Someone's severed hand hit the side window. Red turned towards the field, and I saw blood trickling from under his helmet. He slumped onto the steering wheel, but the van kept moving. Suddenly, a shell landed next to us, and the blast wave threw us aside. The van flipped over, flipped again, and stopped. I kicked the door with my shoulder and jumped out. I pulled the platoon leader, who was nearest to me in the chaos. I dragged him, but couldn’t free him; his leg was trapped by the deformed seat.

Little ran past me—he hated when we called him that, such a young guy from Kyiv—I saw him on Maidan. He had thought up a cool call sign, Dark-something, but we couldn’t remember it and just called him Little, which annoyed him. I shouted to him:

"Help me pull out the platoon leader!" He turned around, spread his arms, and fell. I reached him—he was gone.

I tried again to pull out the commander.

The shelling continued. Russians and separatists shredded our 'green corridor' to pieces.

"Run, Toha! That’s an order," croaked the platoon leader, "Poet, run!"

Poet was my call sign. In truth, I wrote poems rarely, just dabbling now and then, but I loved reading them: Shevchenko, Malaniuk, Pluzhnyk, Oleksandr Oles, Stus, our Lina and Lesia—I loved them, so the guys called me Poet, because I read them poetry between bombardments.

I ran. My ears buzzed and roared. I opened my mouth, hunched over, and ran, carrying God. Boots pressed into the stubble, and at that moment, I wanted to compose poetry. I knew I would never write anything meaningful, but I wanted to, and words were exploding somewhere inside me as I ran, and I couldn’t stop them:

We are grasses

Grasses

We are grasses

I didn’t stop, dragging God, and didn’t stop.

We are grasses

Grasses

We are grasses

They killed us

Near Ilovaisk

I jumped into a field of sunflowers. Bullets whistled, shells exploded, the earth rumbled beneath my feet.

We are grasses

Grasses

We are grasses

They mowed us

Near Ilovaisk,

Now forever

It’ll be paradise.

I pushed through the sunflowers, dragging God behind me.

We are grasses

Grasses

We are grasses

We’ll rise as reapers

– In spring…

From the earth

And return

From the war.

I fell, covering God with my body. Clods of earth fell onto my back, and sunflowers were uprooted along with their roots.

My father always said: "Hold onto the ground with your feet," and I held on, with hands and feet and teeth.

And my mother read me fairy tales about warriors: when they were utterly exhausted, they fell onto their native land, and it gave them strength, and they listened, putting their ear to the earth, to hear how close the enemy army was or if a dragon was flying, and I listened too, while the earth trembled beneath me.

"The earth quakes—a dragon is coming."

I lay there until the ground stopped shaking. Then I sat up, leaning against the sunflower stems, looked up, and saw them all looking at me—the sunflowers had lowered their heads and were not looking at the sun, but at me and God.

I remembered how we, as kids, hid on the garden plot in the sunflowers and smoked, not in the corn, but precisely in the sunflowers. We’d sit like this on the ground, warm-warm, passing a cigarette around in a circle, like Indians. Back then, the sunflowers didn’t look at us, they looked at the sun, but now they were gazing at me. I wanted to smoke, pulled out a pack, my hands trembled: cigarettes tumbled to the ground like untested recruits who hadn’t yet sniffed smoke.

I don’t know how long I sat there, swatting away flies and watching the sky grow darker through the sunflowers.

Then I heard sporadic gunfire and voices. The noise and hum in my head eased a bit, but the voices sounded distant, and I couldn’t tell if they were real or just in my head. I listened—it was Russians. I reached for my gun, but couldn’t find it—just God on my knees. I thought he was dead, then remembered God cannot die.

The Russians were finishing off the wounded.

I lay still, trying not to breathe. God shielded me with His body.

First, you save God, then God saves you.

One of the Russians, noticing me, suggested throwing a grenade.

I wanted to turn, roll over, cover God with myself.

Another said there was no need to waste a grenade on dead Ukrainians, and they left.

As a child, I clung to my father's finger. Later, my son was born, and he clutched mine with his tiny hand. Now God held my finger. God squeezed my finger with His hand, and I realized He was alive. God is alive! But He was dying.

I couldn’t let God die here in the sunflowers. And whether God led me forward or I led God isn’t clear.

\*\*\*

It got dark. I don’t remember what happened next until I regained consciousness.

Nearby, two women were speaking in Russian. I cracked my eyes open cautiously—a hospital ward. I thought I was in a Russian hospital.

My first thought was— I should escape.

I closed my eyes, but the women noticed the movement of my eyelids, and one of them went to call the doctor.

I tried to feel my body: my head hurt unbearably, but my arms and legs felt intact. Though, I thought, feeling doesn't mean they’re there—sensations can be phantom, I once read about it.

The doctor walked into the room:

"How are you? You’re awake? How do you feel?" he asked in Ukrainian.

I opened my eyes and saw a tired, worried face above me.

"Am I in Ukraine?"

"Yes, you’re in Ukraine, in Mariupol. Volunteers picked you up on the road. Don’t you remember?"

"No, I don’t remember. Where’s God? Is He alive?"

"Who?" the doctor asked, puzzled, probably thinking I’d lost my mind.

"Is God alive?" I asked again.

"God’s alive, yes," came a response from the adjacent bed—it was my platoon commander, with the call sign God.