

I Am the Machine Gunner

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A Young Man about 20 to 30.

YOUNG MAN

If you didn't know any better it would seem like a snap - just up and go. All you have to do is cut half way across the city and then kick back. Easy as pie.

There's a little resort place there. You rent a cottage, pull some beer out of the fridge - you get the drift. Pine trees, forest all around. I hadn't been out to the woods for two years. I mean, that's not counting the times I went out there to work over some retard.

That's different. I'll tell you what: Life is hard. You gotta take time off, otherwise you get to feeling like a gnat trapped on a bus window. You ever seen that?

Sure you have. Climbs half way up the window pane and slides back down. Starts climbing again and slips on down again. That goes on forever until it reaches the open crack in the window. Or until somebody squashes it.

Pause.

I'd never been to that little resort place before. But what's the difference? They're all the same except for how much the bar charges for tequila. All that really matters is that the sun shines (*sneers*) and no jackass starts a war. (*Short pause. Slowly wipes his hand over his face as if he's extremely tired.*) I got burned to a crisp and my head was exploding with an inferno of thoughts surging in from eternity even as they struggled wildly to keep pace with real time.

Pause. The roar of a forest fire.

Don't even think about death. There wasn't a single, untouched spot of earth where we were. Shrapnel, tracks, shells, empty cartridge cases smashed under foot. I dragged him off towards the sea and he was puking all over my back because his lungs were all

burned out and because he only had a couple of minutes left to live. But that's a lot when you're in pain. Who can say how long that is? Remember that.

Pause. Silence.

That's how long it took him to die. How much can you do in that much time? For him it was enough to finish off a whole lifetime. True, he wasn't very old and he didn't know much about life. He didn't even have his own watch yet. He kept hanging onto his shoulder strap and he'd lost his helmet. A stray bullet ripped off his ear and his hair was soaked in blood and rifle grease. Shells and bombs are going off all over the place and airplanes are falling on us. There are bullets flying at us from the direction of the sea as if the sea itself were throwing death at us to make us keep our distance.

Yeah. My palms were all blistered from the burns and there was blood seeping out of them. The scorched

blood flaked on my skin, cracked up and fell off. Meanwhile he keeps whispering in my ear with his corrosive breath as if he was exhaling ammonia. And he's groaning about something.

We got as far as the sea - dead and half-dead from fear. That evening we must have picked off enough men to fill a whole company. Just us two. On that part of the front for about five kilometers we were pretty much the only ones there. In fact, it felt to us like we were all alone on that whole goddamn Moonzund archipelago in the Baltic Sea.

*Pause. The silence is
suddenly broken by the
horrific sounds of battle.
Silence again.*

I often think about my grandfather. He liked to sit on the balcony in the summer and gaze down at the field where it looked like little tiny people were playing

soccer. And then sometimes he would lift his head up and stare forever into the crown of a big, huge poplar tree that grew right there in front of our window. He hardly had a face left anymore, but there was nothing scary about him, you know? Even when I saw him for the first time I wasn't the least bit frightened. He had a way of smiling with his whole body, his whole being, you know what I mean? He drew in everything around him with that smile. He loved living life - maybe because he'd spent most of his life working. You probably know what it was like back then under the communists; you'd work and you'd work and you'd work your whole life long until you keeled over - then they put you out to pasture. After that you just spent your time going to doctors until you kicked the bucket. The main thing is he never read newspapers. He couldn't stand those things. *(After a pause. In confusion)* Because when I was almost cut in half that time they had to stuff my wound up with crumpled newspapers. And that cheap army paper newsprint, it instantly got all soggy and acidic

and started seeping into the wound. That ink was poison - I knew that and I thought about it at the time. What's gonna happen to me? What happened was he couldn't flex his stomach muscles until the day he died because of that brutal slash he took. So that's how that was. Newspapers.

Pause.

That was scary when the first line went down. They all just went right down. Later on I'd read about the war and I'd see that stupid comparison with cut grass. "They went down like blades of grass." Fuckin' nonsense! Because when grass gets cut nobody's head goes flying. Grass doesn't howl with pain. It doesn't squeal like a stuck pig. It doesn't run around looking for arms that have been shot off. It doesn't spend its last breath trying to crawl after you and it doesn't wheeze out of crooked mouths! You don't have to go around with a pistol finishing off cut blades of grass

and when you see cut grass underfoot you don't go gray with horror. Cut grass doesn't whine and doesn't smell of shit and blood! Later when I learned how to take good aim it got easier. You aim just above the crotch and you fire. You go left to right and then back again. That way you get the stomach and the abdominal aorta. That's a guarantee -

Just get out there for a bit of r&r. It's so easy - just get up and go. And then you just chill out. Don't think about a thing and don't pay any mind to what's going on. Let it all roll by. Rest your idle hands on your knees and doze off staring out the window at the stop lights and the crossroads. Forget about home and the city. You kick back in wonder as you gaze out at the road which, sooner or later, will fall under the control of someone who will toss the first handful of dirt on your grave...

Pause.

How beautiful it all is. So simple and so beautiful. I always had such beautiful dreams. I never remembered them and always regretted that. I got blown out of a trench by an explosion right in the middle of one of them. Landed - splat! - right on the ground. And this piece of wood comes down on top of me. It must have been a nail sticking out of it that punctured my cheek. I only noticed it later when I started groping around for a new round of cartridges. I remember wondering if I might get infected. There's an old wives' tale that if you piss on a cut you won't get infected. Because your piss acts like a disinfectant. And then I think, how in the hell am I going to piss on my face? Shit, maybe I ought to ask somebody else to do it? But, then, I think the piss has to be your own or something like that. So in the end I pissed on my hands and washed my face in it. I never did get any infection. Maybe that old wives' tale is true?

You can cut small trees in half with one burst of automatic fire. And since they made landing right in

the middle of a mine field I had absolutely nothing to do for a whole ten minutes. I'll bet you a good 50 men went up immediately. After that the others started coming in more carefully. They were taking these careful, little steps. They looked like they were walking through a whole field of shit and they didn't want to get their boots messed up. Didn't much matter, though - if it wasn't one place it was another. It was like a little black bush would grow up suddenly and that was that. Sometimes the breeze would blow the spray of blood over me. So much for them.

They never said much at all. Just a few shattered cries. That's exactly what helplessness sounds like. It's when you know what to do that you can keep silent.

Pause.

There was this thing that happened. A couple of us friends went to the movies and Denis was there. He was the most drunk of us all and he put his feet up on the

backs of the seats in front of him. He always did that. Some other guys came in and they say, "Listen, dude, get your feet offa there. People sit here." And Denis says, "Fuck you, man. You can sit where you want, but my feet are staying right here." I don't remember much of anything else after that. It was like things started flashing before my eyes - steps, velvet, stucco walls, doors of some kind. I had this sensation someone was dragging me by my collar. I tried breaking free, of course, but my feet were dangling on the ground like two earthworms in a bird's beak.

Basically, those guys beat the shit out of us. They broke my arm and Denis's jaw. Something happened to his eye, too. He went blind later. Naturally we got our people on it and they checked things out through back channels. Then they came back and said, forget it guys. This one's a dead end. You ran up against some serious folk. These guys are the real thing, big stuff. Try it if you want, but they'll bury you. I wonder if that flashing sensation is what happens in a real battle?

Like in a real war when you don't get around to making sense of anything until you're already blown away?

My grandfather talked to me about the war a lot. He was a machine gunner, was almost killed during the landing at Moonzund, wherever the hell that is. They burned him alive but somehow he survived. Maybe he was just too ornery to burn up all the way. Or maybe when the Germans were finishing off the half-dead they missed when it came to him. I think about him a lot. Especially when things get really thick.

What a gorgeous, bright day. I'm going swimming as soon as I get there. I'll pick up a six pack or two on the way because these little resort places charge an arm and a leg. There's nothing more natural for a human being than water, unless it's your mother or your own home, because nothing lets you be yourself like water. Wanna have fun? Go for a swim. Wanna die? Drown.

Pause. The sound of surf.

I was spread-eagled on the sand. Catching my breath. My overheated machine gun was lying next to me. It was catching its breath too. I crossed my arms and rested my chin on 'em, looking out at the water. One of our trawlers had slammed into a German torpedo boat so there was plenty of entertainment. Wasn't anything I could do to help. I was exhausted. I'd lost my voice. I was so weak I didn't even have the strength to dunk my weapon in the water to cool it off. Out there in the water people are jumping overboard - our guys and the Germans too. Everything was going up in an inferno. Diesel fuel, when it hits the water, just spreads out over the surface and burns. So you've got the sea in flames and people burning up in it. I noticed that the Germans, they were just trying to swim to shore. But our guys, even going up in flames in the water, were trying to take Fritz down - going after him with knives or hanging onto his legs pulling him under water. So what if I drown? you're going with me, too, fucker! And all these guys had their intestines burned out - I knew

all about that. They were all drinking in that burning diesel and that's the end of it. You've got a half-hour left after that, tops, and no half-hour is enough time to clean that shit out of you, so what you do is you use what time you've got left trying to kill as many people as you can! Kill all of them fuckers! Every fucking one of them you can get to! Every goddam one of 'em. You go at 'em with your hands, your teeth, your feet, whatever you've got and you all go down to the bottom! And on your way down you cling onto that bastard so he can't come up for air. You're sucking in salt water and you scratch at his throat so that he does, too, and you die in the dark... I threw up right there on my machine gun. And then I got up and headed back because I was ashamed. Because if those guys who were out there dying at sea were still trying to fight and they weren't thinking about themselves, then I sure as hell had no excuse. True, I was all alone. My partner was killed ages ago, but so what? Anyway, my machine gun was cooled off by now and I still had

plenty of ammo left. It was time to get back to it. Even though nobody gave a flying fuck that I was probably the last man standing for a twenty kilometer radius on that Moonzund front.

Pause. Wind.

It happens like that sometimes. Everything gets to you and you just can't go on anymore so you head out to the country or the bathhouse or something. Or you do like I do, you go out to one of those little resorts and get away from it all for a couple of days, chill out. I mean, you've got the right, don't you? I mean, you can't sit around the city all the time with all those imbeciles. They are all such morons, they'll drive you to the grave or a heart-attack, man. So you get out there and you take a look around and it's all looking pretty cool. There's some good-looking chicks and your little cottage is closer to the river than it is to the night club. In short, everything's looking pretty

sweet. You've got your beer, your fish and you called out and had 'em deliver an order of crabs. Sunset's turning into evening and, fuck me!, things are happening. You go down to the local bar and see if you can't find a girl - basically, life is good, man. And this is when it happens, right now. Not while you're on the road, not while you're getting settled in your cottage, not while you're popping the top on your first beer, not in the morning, not at noon, but right now, at sunset, your fucking phone rings in your pocket! Goddam telephone! You can't not answer it - it's your people calling you. Nobody else knows this number and your people aren't going to call for nothing. If they're calling you, something's up. Something serious. Means they're calling up everybody. God fucking dammit. You've got nothing to do but to go. Right? Yeah? So I went. And it was a good thing, too. Everybody was there. They'd called in everybody. There were about 8 of us in the city that day. Something like 20 of the other guys showed up. Or more. Whatever. We all

squeezed into two cars. They had six or seven. We get out all peaceful like and we say, hey, dudes, what's the problem here? let's figure this thing out. But, man, those guys came flying at us like fucking bats out of hell. The fuckin' shit hit the rotor blades!

A barrage of gunfire.

Alexei, Shkon and Mole went down immediately. Fuck, those dudes were - Alexei and I were friends since school. We used to box together. We were inseparable. His head split into three pieces. One of 'em landed on my cheek and slid down real slow and sticky like, like a huge gob of spit. We took cover behind the car and I got to thinking, these dudes didn't come here to talk, man. They came here to fucking terminate us! This is a goddam war! And my grandfather told me all about the war, what it was all about and what happens in it. He really schooled me on that. Man, he would put me on his knee and he'd talk. I really loved listening to him.

Grandma used to get really pissed at him because he'd tell it all like it was, with all the choice words and everything. If some motherfucker fagged out on somebody, man, he'd fucking call him a fucking faggot. Man, I was transfixed listening to that. Not the motherfuckers because I knew plenty of motherfucking motherfuckers from the older kids at school. No, man, his stories were just really interesting. 'Cause his war, man, that was something else. It wasn't like that shit they write in the books. In his war everything always happened all at the same time. Real suddenlike. And nobody ever knew what the fuck to do. Our guys would be spinning their wheels, scrambling every which way and the enemy, they'd have us hunkered down under heavy fire and they'd keep the noise at ear-split level. That's just like it was with us. Denis went down. Blood's spurting out his throat and he's spread-eagled across the hood of the car. His legs are twitching and he's got a pistol in his hand that he

keeps firing outta habit until a stray bullet whacks him in the head like a hammer.

Pause.

It was right then I noticed the crows sitting in the trees were as calm as any Sunday. Just like somebody drew them in there with a pencil. It was only when I started firing at them that they raised up and flew up over the trees. That was the ones that survived. The others that I nailed hit the ground so fast their own blood came rainin' down on 'em when they were already lying dead in the grass. Meanwhile, the other ones up in the sky, they just fluttered back down on their branches. It was like people watching a good movie in the theater and they don't want to miss a single thing but some jackass in a big hat comes in and sits down in front of you. So you gotta move a bit. And I started singing. I always sing when I'm scared. And I was really scared then. And I was in pain. Because my palms

were burning - they were all blistered up from the hot machine gun. And all cut up from my hands shaking when I shoved the jagged ammo clips into the gun. Plus they were all covered in blood, the blood of my dead best friend there. As for those guys I'm scoping through my sights, it's like they just keep multiplying. No - it's just that there's never any less of them. That really irked me. Here I was killing myself over this fucking machine gun, frying in the hellish heat of this thing, this whole damn mess of death and dust and dripping blood and screams and mines blowing up and people cursing everything under the sun... It was like I ceased to be a human being. I became this weapon or like a detail on a weapon - a trigger or a throbbing barrel that was spewing out death into this grassy field, this idyllic natural oasis. Nobody's gonna get past me. Nobody. I look around and I'm not just looking. I'm surveying the territory through my sight finder. P-e-e-o-o-p-l-e! I'm not going to leave no fucking thing alive here! Everybody's going down. Everybody in my

range. Everybody who wanders into it. Everybody hiding there, everybody who didn't duck, everybody who didn't hit the deck - they're all gonna be dead meat, dust, blood and guts, pig food, chemical waste. There ain't gonna be anything human left moving here! And when I finish with them, I'll send every fucking blade of grass and every chunk of earth flying too. And the trees, every one of their leaves will fall before its time. I'll have their branches doing somersaults in the wind! And then the sky, I'll shoot it into a sieve and when the whole thing is plastered with little black holes it'll come crashing down on the furrowed earth with a deafening racket. After that comes the moon because when night falls, the moon will come up and I'll get it in my sights and I'll blow it to fucking smithereens! And then night, and then morning, and then day and then the cool, cool evening - as soon as my machine gun cools down I'll bring this whole goddam planet and everything on it to an end! And maybe after that there won't be any more war. Maybe then I can take

a break from all this shooting, me - the machine gunner on this goddam front line which is as long as my own whole life and maybe even longer!

For awhile the sounds of battle mix with some sort of jangly punk, maybe Prodigy's "Smack My Bitch Up." Silence.

For a minute it was like I went blind and deaf there behind our shot-up car. I evanesced. I ascended. Like some Jesus Christ or a helium balloon. I saw the dudes on the other side and I saw us, two of which weren't dead, not counting me. Then I looked back and saw our city, it was kind of perched there on the horizon - smokestacks, factories and little houses. It seemed like I could even see the people, little dinky dots racing around from one store to another who had no idea of what was going on right here with us. They didn't give a damn about us. And why in hell should they care

about a handful of thugs shooting it out over money? Nobody living in those little houses up on the horizon was in the slightest danger. And I finally understood what grandpa was talking about; I finally got it through my head, gentlemen! All that bullshit, all that "take one for the team," and "no surrender" and "we're not giving up Moscow!" That all came to me! I figured it out! Because there is a moment when it ain't money and it ain't status and it ain't who's toughest that matters. What matters is that you don't give it up. Because you can't. Because there's all kinds of things behind you - a whole city, man, and all its streets and yards and poplar trees and stray dogs and hoboes and ice cream trucks and little kids who're always hanging around your car. And there's your mother. And your own dudes - they're right there next to you, coughing up blood, biting the dust, dropping their money belts, screaming at the top of their lungs... No, not everybody may buy it, but I think my grandfather would understand me. And he'd be proud of me. Even if he didn't see the

point of this whole situation. Truth is, I don't either. Those sons of bitches nobody killed got in their car and hightailed it out of there. So there were just two of us left - Stas and me. I shot at them as they drove away; I had a couple of rounds left. Then I sat down next to the car and, for some reason, I looked at my watch. I was curious - how long had it all lasted? Ninety seconds... Grandpa, grandpa, fuck me. How in the hell did you do that for four years if a minute and a half here was like this? I was shaking like a leaf on a tree. Stas was crawling around looking for his glasses and later we found them together. We looked over the other dudes, nobody else was alive. After that we wandered off somewhere and finally made it out to the road where we found a little roadside store. We each downed a bottle of vodka like it was water. Finally we flagged down some cars and went home. That is, Stas went home and I headed back to that little resort place. And I kept thinking and thinking. I never thought so long in my fucking life, man. What was I

thinking about? Everything. I finally quit shaking and stared out the window where the forest kind of fanned out before me like a huge banner. The road skimmed along the perimeter like the smooth edge of a vinyl record. The city still lay behind me. And right there next to me in that seat lay something I knew would never again let me just go party hog wild with my friends, or just go earn money and stuff my pockets full of bills. You know, I dodged going into the army when it was my time. I got out of that shit, man. And now I'm riding along and I'm thinking - so this is what war is. And then I thought, fuck, man, this isn't war! War - that's what my grandfather told me about. War is what catches everybody off guard. But what makes you fight like there's never been anything more important and never will be. War, that's a pain that never goes away, it's when you can't even look at the world anymore because all you can do is calculate where a sniper would most likely settle in. It's when you hate seeing the sun. It's the trees and the earth that are

always with you and which smell of scorched gun powder and blood. War, that's sitting in front of a television and rotting from the inside out because nobody gives a fucking damn and all they show is some stupid pop singer that people really hate if they'd just think about it. And the trees sing you songs and at night all your dead friends come to see you and you all have a good laugh and you smile and you wake up and you look out the window all night long and you weep. But me, I've got no fucking problems. It's all totally different with me. What the fuck did I dream all this shit up for and what the hell am I fighting for and destroying everything around me for?

A couple of lone gun shots.

So that's that. There's nothing to shoot about anymore. I even forgot about that last round I was supposed to leave for myself. In the event. Forgive me. You've got to understand - I haven't been fighting for all that

long. Basically, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I can stick a magazine in and I can hone in on somebody with my sights and pick him off. I can break down a machine gun and repair it in 55 seconds with my eyes shut. I know how to pick out a position from which you can kill the biggest number of people. I can cuss a blue streak. I can bury the dead. Why tie my hands? I'll do it myself. (*Crosses his hands behind him.*) So shoot. I'm sick of all this. Aah, so that's what the fuck it is. Fucking gasoline. Yeah, yeah, I pissed you guys all off. So now you're gonna have your fun. Huh? *Herrvorragend Soldat.* Fuck knows what you're talking about. Same to you. Ah? You've got a pistol, too. Then at least you won't burn me alive. Go fuck yourselves you mother sons of bitches -

*A shot. The light sound of a
fire burning.*

I'll try to live. I'll really try to live. This is my war now. It's the only war worth fighting - for yourself, for your own personal life. This front line of mine extends across the entire Universe and it encompasses all my cities, my forests, all those places I have been and all those places where I still must make a stand to the death. And I will. I will stand to the death until death comes itself. There is no other way. No other way. Grandpa, wasn't it you that told me that? I will hold down this front. Don't worry about me. I am an iron man. I am all seasons in one. I am every army there ever can be. I hold in hand every weapon you can ever imagine. I will live as long as I need to. I will not run. I will not disappear. Okay. Come on. I'm ready.

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