

Unlucky in love

THE Party said we were forbidden from fraternising with the folk in the village, so that's exactly what we did. Tell a lad not to do something and it's the best encouragement he can get to do it. Every cadre had its own girls, but few were pretty, many looked and behaved like carthorses, and most preferred a woman's intimate company. The village girls were prettier by far and preferred men.

We were wise enough not to attempt visits at the weekend even though that's when the girls were out in their simple finery and open to more than just flirtation. But our cadre leaders, many of whom, like the girls, also preferred the company of their own sex, assumed that's when we would visit and were extra vigilant. So every weekend night they patrolled the camp perimeter, the lanes outside and the forest around the camp (as much for their own reasons as to catch illegal out-borders) and caught no one. There was no one to catch. Did it not occur to them we were wise to their thinking? Obviously not. They were regarded as quite stupid by all of us, and we assumed the Party appointed stupid men as cadre leaders because they were stupid and prepared to undertake the brutal acts required of them simply because they could not think. They had no imagination and thus no feelings. The most they were capable of in that regard was bawling like a child when sentimental patriotic songs were sung at cadre meetings.

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We were careful to vary our routine and never broke out in groups of more than three. Three is an easy number, a good number. Sometimes we crawled through the wire on a Monday night, the following week we waited until Wednesday. That the cadre leaders were unaware of the many gaps in the camp fences puzzles me to this day. I've often wondered whether the Party leaders, who were rarely stupid, knew what was going on and encouraged our illegal courting in the village to make us develop cunning. Cunning is certainly what we learned.

On a night when three of us decided on a visit, we kept an eye out for the snitches (of whom there were quite a few, though I never knew one to prosper from his or her snitching) and played it by ear. We always went out on the night of a new moon or close to one. Light was not what we wanted, although that also

made it harder to see any patrol. Occasionally there was one, though if during the week any cadre leader was out and about he was more likely to be rutting with a friend in the bushes than intent on doing his duty to catch out-borders.

Once through the fence, we soon found ourselves beyond the tower searchlights (which were pitifully dim), but were careful not to talk and to make as little noise as possible. For ten or fifteen minutes we followed one of several forest lanes in silence (and I always enjoyed the smell of the pine trees) and only relaxed when we could see the village lights ahead in the valley. .

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The girls knew to expect us and often waited in the town square to see who might turn up. Because our visits were haphazard, unplanned and unannounced, we could never be sure of seeing the same girls twice, so no real friendships were forged. We thought that a shame if on one visit we went off with a pretty one who laughed a lot, because we knew we'd rarely get together again. But if whoever we struck lucky with one night, who sweated too much and didn't wash and whose breath stank, we were relieved not to renew her acquaintance.

Falling in love, as my friend Jakov did, or thought he had, was rare. I never fell in love, but on one visit Jakov was stricken with a passion for some, frankly quite bovine lass, with straw-blonde hair. She, it seemed, was equally stricken with a longing for Jakov. That was easy to understand, because he was a handsome lad, with regular features, good teeth, brown eyes and a cheerful manner.

A week later as three of us got together after an evening party lecture and before supper to plan another excursion, Jakov appeared and insisted he was going to come with us. It seems he had arranged to meet the girl again, and it could not be some other night because her father would be out for the evening playing cards in the tavern.

'Can I come, too?'

We were not keen, but he did not give up.

'I've got to see here again.'

'Jakov's in love!'

He ignored the gibe and repeated his request. Kiri was against it. Kiri was superstitious and thought to break our routine practice of only three in a group would bring bad luck.

'I'm not coming if there are four of us.'

Fair enough, we told him, you stay in camp and there will be just three of us and there can be no bad luck. Kiri agreed and went off back to his bunkhouse.

There was, though, bad luck. Was it because our usual practice had been disrupted even though we were only three because Kiri decided to stay behind? I don't know. But it was a bad night.

We later made it through one of the gaps in the wire fence and were soon outside and on one of the forest lanes heading for the village. Suddenly in the dark we heard:

'Who goes there?' and the sound of the bolt of a rifle being worked. The demand was repeated:

'Who goes there? Reveal yourselves!'

Well, that was the last thing we intended to do. Without a word we ducked into the forest and ran as fast as we could. Then I heard a yelp, a crash and the sound of dry wood cracking. One of us had fallen over (and it wasn't me). I stopped to listen.

'Stop you little bastard! Got you! Name! Cadre number! Who are you?'

I knew I could not be seen in the dark, but the voice was too nearby and did not want to alert the man, whoever he was, by moving. I heard the butt of a rifle hitting someone, then a cry of pain.

'Get up! Who were your friends?'

'I'm alone.' It was Jakov.

'Are you fuck! Who were the others?'

Jakov said nothing and was struck again by the rifleman.

'You're coming with me!'

We heard the two of them walk back up the lane to the camp, Jakov obviously in pain. Slotan and I waited for ages before we dared to return.

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The next day the commandant had the camp assemble on the parade ground. He gave us a lecture on discipline, loyalty, obedience, our duty to the Party and all the rest of the shit the Party gives us. It went on for over an hour and we stood the whole time. Then Jakov was brought out, blindfolded and tied to a post. Then he was shot.