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LANCE COMES BACK FIGHTING
Inside His Controversial Return

Hunting Down the Man Who Shot Me

In 1993, the author was in Moscow covering a political protest when it turned violent, leaving 123 dead. If not for a couple of brave strangers, he would have been No. 124. Years later, he returned, searching for answers.

by OTTO POHL

BLOOD IN THE STREETS
The author being carried to safety while the gunfight continued around him. The first man who tried to pull him out was killed.

ANATOMY OF A TRAGEDY Clockwise from top left: A pro-parliament militiaman carries the RPG that may have touched off the battle; hostilities started escalating days before, as protesters burned a truck; American Mike Duncan, later killed, pulls a victim to safety at Ostankino; earlier in the day the author snapped this shot of soldiers trying to keep protesters at bay; a Russian newspaper features a photo of the author under a headline that translates, "I'm a journalist! Don't shoot...."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ALEXEI BOITSOV. THIS SPREAD: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ALEXEI BOITSOV; SERGEI MAMONTOV; ALEXEI BOITSOV; OTTO POHL

I SAW MY FIRST CORPSE OF THE DAY AROUND three o'clock. Glossy blood rimmed a hole in the soldier's not-so-bulletproof vest, and a thick red S was smeared on the tiles behind him, where he had been dragged by his comrades. I ran outside, pushing my way past the protesters who had shot their way into the government building. As bullets pinged off the sidewalk, I crouched behind a low wall with my camera. After two weeks of largely peaceful demonstrations, the standoff between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the parliament was exploding around me. I should have been scared — a 24-year-old just a year into being Moscow bureau photographer for the *New York Times*, my first time in a war zone — but adrenaline had taken over. So when the pro-parliament protesters then piled into buses heading to Ostankino, Moscow's central television tower, to broadcast news of their revolt to the nation, I jumped aboard. It was October 3, 1993, the day hope of a democratic Russia would die. It would nearly kill me, too.

At Ostankino a crowd gathered around a man who welcomed them through a bullhorn to "the new free USSR." I wandered around, my press badge carefully hidden, and took pictures of the remarkably diverse group. There were Cossacks in parade uniforms, pensioners in fraying cloth caps, and young idealists in Beatles T-shirts — all united in anger at Yeltsin for what they saw as his unconstitutional dissolution of parliament two weeks earlier. It seemed as if the Yeltsin government might topple without another shot. But then I caught sight of the Interior Ministry soldiers inside one of the television buildings. These weren't the same grunts who had allowed the government office to be stormed earlier. These were Yeltsin's elite troops, outfitted with body armor, bulging biceps, and balaclavas.

There was a crash across the street. I squinted into the setting sun and ran over. A protester had rammed a truck into the glass entrance of another building, and a self-appointed leader grabbed a bullhorn and crunched through broken glass into the dark interior. His demand for the troops inside to surrender was met with stony silence. Outside, the armed demonstrators began to take up positions, holding Kalashnikovs and Molotov cocktails. I pushed through the crowd until I was next to the truck and photographed a young man unscrewing the protective cap from a rocket-propelled grenade, or RPG.

Soon there was a flash of light, and then an enormous explosion inside the building blew me back. By the time I hit the ground I was enveloped in bursts of machine-gun fire. I rolled onto my stomach and pushed against a concrete planter perhaps 15 feet from the front of the building. Gunfire ricocheted around me. I was sprayed with glass every time the Yeltsin troops shot out through the windows. Red tracer bullets scratched lines in the sky inches above my head.

The scariest thing about being caught in a gunfight is that you have absolutely no control. There is no one to reason with, no one to convince that your presence is accidental and best remedied by a speedy departure. I huddled behind my camera bag and lay still.

A few minutes later the shooting faded. I could hear the moans and shouts of the wounded. I noticed a twitching boot near my face. Following the leg, I saw it was a man in camouflage, lying facedown. I could hear him groan, but I had no way of helping him without risking my own life. Fresh waves of shooting raked the square, and soon the boot lay still.

After about an hour of sporadic gunfire I looked up and saw motion among the piles of dead and wounded: a man in blue jeans, white sneakers, and an Atlanta Braves baseball cap walking, upright, across the field of fire. He was dragging out the wounded. Before long he crawled along the row of planters until his face — fresh, brown-eyed, and square-jawed — was only a few feet from mine.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a perfect American accent.

"I'm fine."

"You're American too?!" he said, his cocktail-party enthusiasm out of place. There we lay, trapped in an adventure that had metastasized beyond our worst nightmares, but he seemed unfazed. "I guess this is what we came to Moscow for, isn't it?"

It was about then that a bullet grazed the back of my skull, just above my spine. I screamed, and as I reached up to check the wound, another bullet pierced my side. I gasped for breath and blood gurgled through a hole in my chest. There is no present tense to being shot. One moment I was fine, whole, and the next it felt like a hot poker had been stabbed through my rib cage.

The guy in the Braves cap — I'd later learn he was Mike Duncan, a 26-year-old American attorney — looked at me in horror.

"Don't pass out on me," he said. "I'll get you out."

"Let us go!" he shouted toward the soldiers inside the Ostankino building, waving his hat above the planters. "We're Americans!"

One swore back in Russian as bullets ricocheted around us.

I felt disconnected, like I was watching the scene through the wrong end of a telescope. Pain was distant. I noticed, almost with detached interest, that it felt as though my organs were moving against each other, like a pile of cutlets slithering on a butcher's table. That was probably just the air and frothing blood in my chest. Later I would learn that the first bullet had scraped my skull deeply enough to require eight stitches, and that the second had shattered three ribs and punctured my right lung, sending bone chips through my diaphragm. I never even felt the shrapnel that left a two-inch gash in my shoulder. I tried moving, but my arm slipped in a pool of my own blood.

Mike made me start counting to keep me from losing consciousness. He started with "one." I said "two." My head grew heavy, so I laid it on the ground and counted slowly.

"Four."

"Five," said Mike.

"Six."

It took all my strength to focus on the numbers. At 20, another volley of gunfire cut us off.

When it was silent again, I lifted my head and looked over at Mike. Like the man in the camouflage, his feet were twitching, but otherwise he was still. A halo of dark red blood seeped from his head, his Braves hat covering his face.

I GREW UP HEARING ABOUT THE SOVIET DANGER. I WAS BORN and raised in quiet, hilly Ithaca, New York, but my parents had immigrated from Germany in the 1950s. They would show me maps of the large swaths of Germany and other parts of Europe that were now behind the Iron Curtain — distant, inaccessible, lost. At Cornell I studied political science and immersed myself in the minutiae of the seemingly intractable Cold War. Then, in my junior year, the Berlin Wall fell. It was a euphoric moment for me, both personally and as an aspiring journalist.

I moved to Moscow in January 1992, right after college. Gorbachev had just dissolved the Soviet Union, and while Moscow staggered under a wildly free market — a haircut could cost as much as a month's wages — there was also a sense of incredible possibility. Russians devoured newspapers filled with what had once been state secrets. Borders opened, the KGB was effectively neutered, and when President Yeltsin traveled to Washington to address a joint session of Congress he was interrupted 13 times by standing ovations.

Still, life remained difficult for ordinary Russians. Food had vanished from state stores, and babushkas stood on street corners selling old shoes and family jewelry just to buy dinner. People quickly learned to use the new tool of democracy to vent their frustrations and began to elect candidates to parliament who promised to ease their pain. To an outsider, these politicians seemed like a dangerous horde of reactionaries, nationalists, and Soviet nostalgics, but their opposition to Yeltsin's pro-market policies created a democratically legitimate political impasse. For the first time since the beginning of the century, broad political power existed outside the Kremlin.

It didn't last. On September 21, 1993, Yeltsin decreed that parliament be dissolved. But rumors of his decision had leaked ahead of his announcement, which gave parliament members time to barricade themselves inside their building. Pro-parliamentary protests began breaking out across the city and grew more forceful by the day.

On the afternoon of October 3, as I was photographing these escalating demonstrations for the *Times*, Mike Duncan and his friends were lounging around their central Moscow apartment, watching *Spartacus* on VHS. Like me, Mike had been lured to Moscow by the bounty of a newly democratic Russia. He had arrived that June to set up a law firm and quickly found clients as Western companies rushed to the new frontier. That afternoon he was in high spirits: His company had just turned its first profit, and he was traveling to the U.S. in three weeks to plan his wedding and to bring his fiancée back with him to Russia. Between *Spartacus* tapes someone flipped on CNN; the news showed skirmishes between protesters and police at the Russian parliament building. Mike, eager to witness history, made the trip there and then to Ostankino. It was there that we — two young Americans, seeking our fortunes in Russia — would meet for a few deadly minutes.

The bullet that struck Mike's head killed him instantly. I was saved a few minutes later by Alex Vlassoff, a former French paratrooper who was providing security for NBC cameramen that night. He propped me up in his van, peeled away my shirt, and administered first aid to

my chest wound: a plastic bag taped on three sides around the hole. It was a crude but effective one-way valve — the bag sucked to my chest when I inhaled but still allowed air to escape — and it saved my life. I gave Alex my name and contact numbers before he delivered me to the hospital, and then I descended into a feverish, disjointed, painful two-week blur in three different hospitals. I was incredibly lucky. Aside from the almost comically Frankenstein stitches on my body, the Moscow surgeon had done a great job. My only lasting damage was a one-inch gap in one of my ribs. "Don't play contact sports," doctors told me.

While convalescing back in Ithaca I had long, sad conversations with Elisabeth Clark, Mike's fiancée. I had been the last person to see him alive, and my recollections of that evening were both painful and precious to her. As for me, I was eager to learn more about him. Millimeters had separated our fates, a thought that has haunted me. Mike had pulled about a dozen people to safety before coming for me. At least 47 people died at Ostankino — part of the official death tally of 123 over the course of two days of violent clashes — and Mike's selfless actions stood out so vividly during the melee that Russian newspapers ran articles about the young American's heroism.

It has since become clear that October 1993 was a pivotal moment in Russia's post-Soviet history: It was the last time there was any real opposition to the Russian government. In the aftermath, Yeltsin jailed the parliament leaders and quickly gathered the reins of power. By the time he handed the presidency to Putin six years later, parliament was a rubber stamp and civil society was on life support. Now, with Russia swaggering on the world stage again like a young tough at the county fair, October 3 no longer seems like a stumble on the road to a healthy nation. Rather, it had midwifed the kind of government that reinstates military parades with goose-stepping soldiers and invades neighboring nations with impunity.

Long after leaving Russia I met the woman who would become my wife, and she asked me about my scars. For the first time I realized how little I actually knew about those 1993 events. The story I had told over the years had worn into the soft groove of anecdote. I decided I needed to go back and absorb the sharp details.

In 2007 I began planning a return trip, and in my research I quickly realized that Russia had hardly engaged in self-reflection either. I scoured the internet but found mostly self-serving autobiographies and wild-eyed conspiracy theories. It was as though the nation had repressed its memories of the people, mostly Russian citizens, who were murdered in the streets. The more I read, the more questions I had. What happened to the soldiers I had briefly glimpsed through dirty glass before they mowed down mostly unarmed civilians? Were they repentant? And what about the people who had lain around me? Who were they?

But more than anything, my mission was personal: I wanted to find the guy who shot me.

BEFORE I LEFT FOR RUSSIA, I DUG OUT THE phone number I had for Alex Vlasoff, the Frenchman who had saved my life with his first aid. I called him and asked whether he could help me find information on the Russian soldiers from that night. Alex told me he had retired from paramilitary activity and now worked for Swiss watchmaker Breguet in Moscow, but he still had connections and was eager to help.

I flew to Moscow, and Alex picked me up at my hotel. He had gained 20 pounds and lost most of his hair. With his black T-shirt and leather jacket, he looked prepared for a commando raid. His girlfriend was in the passenger's seat.

I squeezed his shoulder from the backseat. "Great to see you," I said. I'd thought about this moment for months, during e-mail exchanges and brief conversations on bad cell phone connections. I didn't know whether to affect the chummy demeanor appropriate when seeing an old friend or the more earnest greeting called forth by a deep gratitude. Fortunately, he didn't give me time to stew in my indecision.

"I've got to go to a meeting with the Breguet people," he said, "but come with me."

We went inside a restaurant opulently styled to resemble a 19th-century French castle, with dark-wood wainscoting and gilt-framed paintings. There we sat, as close as we did the night he saved my life, only this time sipping espresso in self-consciously lavish surroundings. Hearing Alex describe to his colleagues how we'd met made the story seem even more distant and implausible than it did when I told the story back in the States.

Later that evening I asked Alex about the contacts he had promised me. I didn't want to pressure him — I hated to be dependent on him all over again — but he was my main hope of reentering the night he'd pulled me out of. He made a few calls.

"I can't seem to get any of them on the phone," he said when he was done. "They would be perfect, though. They used to work with Lysyuk."

"Who?"

"Sergei Lysyuk. He was the commander of Vityaz, the special forces that defended Ostankino in 1993."

I was about to ask more but I noticed through the window that Alex's car was about to be towed. We ran outside, and by the time Alex had moved his car he needed to head home. We promised to talk soon, and I waved goodbye.

IN THE WAKE OF THE 1993 VIOLENCE, YELTSIN HAD APpointed a man from the Russian prosecutor's office named Leonid Proshkin to head an inquiry into what happened at Ostankino. Proshkin and his team began to review the evidence, but their effort became largely moot when in February 1994 the reconstituted parliament offered amnesty to the coup's participants. In 1998, a few years after Proshkin was fired from the prosecutor's office for unrelated political reasons, he published an article entitled "The Attack That Wasn't" in a Russian tabloid called *Top Secret*. The article described ballistics tests that convinced him that no RPG had been fired by the protesters. Instead, he believed, the troops had detonated a small device as an excuse to open fire. It was a damning accusation, but with neither an independent media nor a powerful parliament, there was no one to follow up on the story. Yeltsin never even bothered to deny the allegations.

Proshkin now works as a private lawyer, and I found his office number online. When I called him, he remembered my name from his investigation and immediately invited me to his dacha, where he was hosting a barbecue with friends.

I took the train north from Moscow, and Proshkin picked me up at the station. A large man with florid cheeks, a silver mustache, and the air of someone accustomed to giving orders, he drove through rolling countryside and into a jumble of large cottages near a lake. In the backyard of his compound, an old businessman friend of his was grilling meats in a plume of smoke. We ate chicken and pork and toasted, in rapid succession and in the traditional Russian order of toasts, to meeting, friendship, and peace.

We talked about 1993, and I reenacted my position in front of Ostankino by lying on the ground. Proshkin admitted that his conclusion about the RPG had done little more than inflame the debate between opposition leaders and government supporters. He unpacked some documents he had stored in a spare bedroom. In one slightly mildewed tome entitled "Criminal Case No. 18/123669-93, Volume 2" there was, in alphabetical order, a summary for every person killed or wounded at Ostankino. This dry, detached prose is the institutional memory of the Russian government.

I learned that the name of the man who had died next to me, with his boot in my face, was Dmitri Yaremko. He was 18 years old, from the southern region of Abkhazia, and had recently moved in with relatives near Moscow. He was shot through the chest, suffering a lung wound very similar to mine, and died from blood loss. In his pockets he had 5,805 rubles (then about $5), a pamphlet entitled "War on the Constitution," and lunch tickets to a local cafeteria.

Where are the Ostankino soldiers now? I asked Proshkin. Many of them were sent to Chechnya and died, he said a bit dismissively, and the rest returned to the small Siberian towns from where they had been recruited. I feared this was going to make my search nearly impossible. But I still had some leads.

WHILE ON A BUSINESS TRIP TO MOSCOW IN 2006, I HAD heard about a photographer who was near me during the 1993 gunfight. Phone calls to old colleagues still living in Moscow revealed his name, Alexei Boitsov, and his phone number. He met with me in his cramped office and showed me pictures he had taken under fire, some of which included me in the frame. Unscathed except for a bullet that hit the heel of his boot, Boitsov had escaped when I was being rescued. He then told me a horrible coda to my story: As I was dragged to safety I called out that Mike needed help. A man standing nearby heard me, rushed in, and was shredded by a burst of Kalashnikov fire. I was stunned. Had I contributed to two deaths that night? Back in Moscow now I looked in the prosecutor's book and discovered who that man was: Yuri Mikhailov, 35, with a wife and two children.

The book listed the wife's name, Lyudmila, and I located her in a hospital near Ostankino, preparing to undergo a cataract operation. She invited me for a visit. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I bought flowers and went to see her.

She came out of the hospital wearing a blue and white terry cloth robe and floral slippers. We sat on a bench in the afternoon sunshine, and she unpacked her memories. The day of the demonstration, her husband was eating dinner and drinking vodka when the breaking news came on the television. "It touched him deeply that he wasn't there in 1991," Lyudmila said, referring to a coup attempt against then President Mikhail Gorbachev. When he saw the events unfolding at Ostankino, he told Lyudmila, "I should be there," and left. It was the last time she saw him alive.

I asked if she knew the details of his death. She knew only that Yuri had rushed in to save a foreigner. A sweet woman with a steely optimism, Lyudmila spoke in rapid-fire sentences. She never let her story slide into self-pity, or even self-reflection. I didn't press her for more details.

I struggled with the idea of telling Lyudmila that I may have caused Yuri's death, but in the end I wimped out. I simply couldn't do it. Coming to terms with this horrible past doesn't mean wrecking the walls someone else has carefully constructed around their memories. I realized I was also unsure of my own motives. Was I hoping for permission to feel better? Was I looking for forgiveness? I simply couldn't tell.

AFTER MY TALK WITH PROSHKIN, I RAN INTO DEAD ENDS trying to find the soldiers. I met with a colonel in the FSB, the modern version of the KGB, who kindly but firmly dismissed my search as "inconvenient." I gave a television and radio interview in the hopes of finding more information, but no one called. My last hope was the commander whose name Alex had given me: Sergei Lysyuk.

A little Web surfing revealed that Lysyuk was now head of a Vityaz veterans group. I called the phone number listed on the website, and Lysyuk himself answered. He agreed to meet me at a cafe a few days later. I hadn't seen a photo of him, but when I spotted a man in a black suit emerging from a chaffeur-driven car, I figured it must be him. He was a large balding man, and his hands were huge, with fingers like soft sausages.

We went inside and ordered cappuccinos. I explained that I had been wounded on October 3.

"Where?"

"Ostankino. I was working as a photojournalist."

"Did you lose a camera?" he asked. I nodded. I had abandoned my camera when I was pulled out.

"So that was *your* camera," he replied.

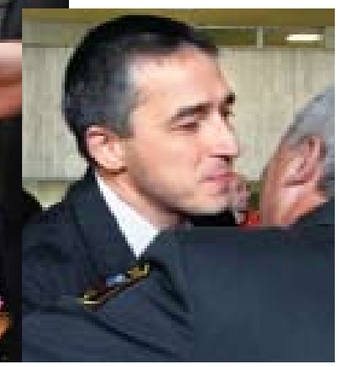
Lysyuk saw my reaction. "So then those are your pictures as well."

"You have my pictures?"

"Of course. We used them in our commemorative book about that night, but we never knew who to give the photo credit to." I sat, stunned, suddenly feeling the story I had told so many times heave to life. Lysyuk told me his version of the events. For him, the RPG was accepted fact. "It killed one of my soldiers. What else could have done that?" he asked.

As we finished our coffee, I asked Lysyuk whether or not I could meet some of the other soldiers on duty that night. He nodded.

We met again a few days later in a Viennese- *(continued on page 128)*



FOURTEEN YEARS LATER The author (at far left) at a reunion of Russian soldiers who served at Ostankino; Igor Chekulaev, who had been second in command of special forces

GUEORGUI PINKHASSOV/MAGNUM PHOTOS

GUEORGUI PINKHASSOV/MAGNUM PHOTOS

"WERE YOU WEARING A BASEBALL CAP?" THE EX-SOLDIER, IGOR, ASKED ME. ANGER WELLED UP IN ME. HE REMEMBERED US.

style cafe in a new downtown mall. Lysyuk gave me a CD with some of my photos on it. I didn't see the ones I took during the battle — they probably hadn't turned out — but I recognized the crowd scenes from just before the shooting started. Lysyuk had something else for me. It was a medal like the one given to his soldiers, the ones who had shot Mike, Yuri, and me. I was revolted by the thought that they had been honored for their actions — I imagined a self-congratulatory ceremony taking place at the same time as those who died around me were being buried — but it also made the soldiers real, human, tangible. Hanging from a colored ribbon, the medal was embossed on the front with a rendering of Ostankino and a menacing tank. On the other side it read: "To the defenders of Ostankino." Lysyuk handed it to me. "It's pure silver," he emphasized, and ordered cheesecake for both of us.

THE NEXT DAY, LYSYUK ARRANGED FOR me to see his former second-in-command from October 3, Igor Chekulaev. After retiring from the Russian special forces, Chekulaev had founded a security company that employed 300 guards. I met him at his office. He wore a tight, black designer T-shirt that emphasized his large arm and neck muscles.

The only wall decoration in Igor's office was a big oil painting of soldiers, twisted and bloody, a memento of a battle he had fought in Chechnya. As I told him exactly where I had lain at Ostankino and how I had been wounded, he shook his head in disbelief and slowly leaned forward on his desk. He had a buzz cut and a square jaw.

"You were wounded?" he asked. Lysyuk apparently hadn't told him much about me. I pointed at my chest.

"God, you were lucky," he said.

I nodded and explained that I wanted to hear his recollections.

"Well, it's been 14 years," he said. He was cagey, clearly a little embarrassed to have someone crawl out from the crosshairs to confront him. He made it clear that orders were strictly followed: He and his soldiers had been armed with only 30 bullets each; they had fired only at people who fired at them.

He drew the diagram of the Ostankino building and marked his position during the battle. His X put him right through the window across from where I had been lying. I felt like someone was pushing on my chest.

"Do you remember someone yelling at you about being a journalist, asking to leave?" I said.

"Did I hear someone scream? Who knows. Journalist, not a journalist — who knows who anyone was. Once the shooting starts — how can I explain this to you? — it's battle."

"But you remember it?"

"Yeah, someone was yelling." He paused and cocked his head. "Were you wearing a baseball hat?"

Anger welled up in me. He remembered us exactly. "No, that was the other one. He died." The next question almost jumped out of me: "Do you know who shot him?"

"What's with these strange questions you're asking?" he said instead of answering. "Why are we having this conversation now?"

I showed him photos of October 3, and he became engrossed in our shared memory. Was this before the explosion? Which building is that? From where did the truck come? It felt like we were paging through an old family photo album.

"Were you afraid?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. He had been 26 years old, and it was his first firefight. "Especially after the first attack. I thought it was all over. Terrifying."

"These must be yours," I said, pointing to a photo of bullet holes in the Ostankino windows above my head. He shrugged and started asking his own questions. How did I feel about the protest before I was wounded? Why had Mike come there? Had my wife seen these photos? "That was some evening," he finally said, when he was done with his questions.

There was a long pause. I could hear traffic rumbling past his office. Suddenly words rushed out of him like water from a burst pipe.

"We must remember those events, we need to. Back then I was married to my first wife, but we got divorced. Now I am remarried, but she doesn't understand any of this. I can sit at home and have no one to speak to. It's so important, your work. Because sometimes you just want to sit, watch that movie again, remember, have a drink. You understand, right?" He looked at me and put his hands on his desk. "Thank you for coming today."

I realized then that I couldn't hate Igor. He wasn't just an object for guilt or anger. I had found one of the only people on this planet who could really help me understand my past. As horrible as the thought was: *our* past.

The phone rang, but he didn't answer it. He got up to get a bottle of cognac from inside a sideboard. He offered me some and then poured a stiff shot into his tea.

I asked Igor what had happened to the other soldiers. He said he saw them once a year at Ostankino. "There's a memorial service?" I asked, surprised.

"You should come," he said.

ON THE MORNING OF OCTOBER 3, I stopped on the way to Ostankino and bought six red roses — in Russia an even number of flowers signifies death. First to arrive at the square where the massacre occurred were the mothers of two young lovers who had been killed next to each other. The mothers walked over to the spot where their children died and spread out flowers one by one. They stood silently for a minute, hands clasped, then made their way to the other side of the square, behind a temporary fence, where a Russian Orthodox cross had been placed. A guard came over and ordered them to leave. The two mothers turned away, deflated.

A few minutes later Sergei Lysyuk arrived. The guard appeared again, now all smiles, and embraced Lysyuk and waved him inside. The guard, it turned out, was the head of Ostankino security. He was in full battle dress for the government's version of the anniversary — the one in which heroic Vityaz troops valiantly defended the building against Russia's most dangerous elements. I followed the two of them inside, feeling a bit like a traitor.

Slowly the foyer filled with retired soldiers. The group was quiet, with manly nods of acknowledgment to newcomers. Cellophane crinkled on bouquets. As they laid flowers in front of a plaque commemorating their one comrade who died in the skirmish, Nikolai Sitnikov, the soldier killed by the initial explosion, I looked through the second-floor windows. I was seeing the square from the same angle the soldiers had when they fired into the night, and I finally understood why Mike had been able to rescue so many people: From this perspective, a horizontal beam blocked part of the square from view. But the concrete planter I had been hiding behind was in plain sight. After the others had offered their flowers I took two of my six roses and placed them in front of the Sitnikov plaque.

We walked downstairs and into a room where a spread of bread, cheese, fruit, pickles, and vodka awaited us. The ceiling was low and the men were large. Everyone poured vodka into plastic cups, and Lysyuk raised a toast to Sitnikov.

As the toasts continued my gaze wandered outside, where a large group had gathered to remember the victims. The gulf between the two ceremonies seemed absurd. If I had learned one thing from meeting people from both sides, it was that, on a personal level, they had suffered in the same way. The soldiers had "won," of course, but I could feel that they weren't returning every year to celebrate.

I found myself raising my cup and proposing a toast. "I didn't know any of you 14 years ago," I said, "and now I have returned. On this trip I've come to understand the pain of those both inside and outside of Ostankino." I was stumbling over my Russian. The soldiers looked at me expectantly. I cut short my toast and raised my glass. "To the Russian people," I said. Everyone downed their drinks.

As the soldiers began to disperse, I walked outside. The air was fresh, and I felt relieved. The memorial service for the victims was already under way. Earnest men with beards and the embroidered capes of the Russian Orthodox Church were intoning prayers in front of a cross. A man swung incense. People in the crowd clasped portraits of the victims.

I had come to Moscow seeking truth and resolution, but discovered that neither the country nor the survivors had found either. I did find solace, though, in the faces looking at me from the placards. I had never known them, but they were now my friends — partners in what I had once thought of as "my" story. I waited until the service had ended and the crowd had dispersed, and then I placed the rest of my roses under the cross.