

A Berry-Picking Trip to the Taiga

After days of relentless cramming for the university entrance exams, chemical formulas, anatomical diagrams, and physics problems kept spinning inside my head. Desperate to clear my mind, I decided to head out into the taiga to pick wild berries.

Two years earlier, my family had moved into a new apartment building, where I befriended two guys around my age. Both were students at the Polytechnic Institute, training to become engineers. One was named Pyotr, the other Mikhail. City boys through and through, they nevertheless jumped at the chance when I suggested a trip into the woods.

Early the next morning, we boarded a commuter train bound toward Lake Baikal, heading for Andrianovskaya Station.

Despite the early hour, the carriage was packed. Late August through mid-September usually brings sunny, golden autumn days to Irkutsk, sending crowd after crowd from the city and neighboring villages off in search of mushrooms, wild berries, and cedar nuts.

Inside the train car, conversations hummed with memories of past excursions into the forest. Sitting near us was a bearded man in his forties, wearing a faded canvas shtormovka jacket of an indefinable color. He was recounting a bear encounter to his group:

"It happened back in 1967, not far from Andrianovskaya," he said. "I was walking with my dog when she suddenly burst into a bark and lunged into the brush. I walked over and saw her barking at a bear cub. Blood ran cold in my veins. The mother bear heard the barking and charged straight at us.

The dog bolted, and I scrambled up a pine tree. The mother bear reached the trunk and started slamming her paws against it, trying to shake me down. I clung to that tree with everything I had. You can't imagine what went through my head up there. Thank God she didn't climb up after me. After a while, she calmed down and ambled off. I stayed perched on that branch for another two hours, too terrified to come down."

"What a coincidence!" I turned to my friends. "That's where we're heading too!"

"I've got an even wilder story," a neighboring passenger chimed in. "I ran face-to-face with a bear out of nowhere. Usually, they avoid people, but this one showed real interest and started walking right toward me. I dropped to the ground and played dead. I'd heard they sometimes leave you alone if you do that. But this one didn't leave. He grabbed me by my padded telogreika jacket and hauled me under a fallen tree, then threw branches on top of me. After a bit, he lumbered away. I waited, then crawled out from under the brush. I'd only taken a few steps when he reappeared right in front of me. He swiped me with a paw, and everything went black. When I came to, I found myself buried under branches all over again. You know, they like their meat aged! I listened closely—silence. Carefully, I wriggled out from under the heap. Luckily for me, a large group of mushroom pickers walked by right then, and I hiked back to the station with them."

About three hours later, the train pulled into Andrianovskaya Station. We set off along a forest trail leading toward the bog blueberry patches.

The path wound between towering Siberian cedars. Beneath our boots lay a thick carpet of long pine needles and soft moss, with occasional patches of lingonberry bushes whose berries were still hard and white.

Halfway there, we passed a young guy hiking back toward the city. A bear had stumbled into his campsite, devouring and ruining all his food, forcing him to turn back. We shared some of our bread with him and pressed on.

As evening fell, we picked a spot to set up camp, built a fire, ate, and settled down by the flames to sleep.

In Siberia, people sleep right beside the campfire because sleeping inside a tent is simply too cold. Sometimes campers build a large fire, let it burn down, scrape the hot embers aside, and pitch a tent over the warmed ground. But that takes a lot of effort; usually, people just sleep around the fire in their padded jackets.

In the middle of the night, the cold bit through and woke me up. The fire had died down, leaving only scattered glowing embers. I decided to gather more wood. About fifteen meters from our camp lay a fallen pine. The night wasn't terribly dark, making it easy to spot. As I began snapping off branches, the loud crackling woke Mikhail. Catching sight of my dark silhouette against the tree, he shrieked, "Bear!"

The raw terror in his voice sent a sudden wave of panic through me. I tried to yell, "It's me!" but my voice completely failed me.

Hearing the scream, Pyotr grabbed an axe and started shouting too.

I ran back toward the camp carefully, not straight at them, but at an angle so they wouldn't accidentally hit me with the axe.

Finally, my voice returned. "It's me!" I shouted. I threw the branches onto the embers; they caught fire, and the warm glow of the flames lit up the clearing..

Seeing it was just me, they breathed a sigh of relief. Afterward, we sat around laughing about what had happened. But a thought crossed my mind: It's a good thing none of us had a gun.

We didn't end up picking any berries that day. Either it was a bad year for the harvest, or someone had already cleared out the patches before we got there.

The White House and Its Secrets

The Scientific Library of Irkutsk State University — the famous White House — boasts a rich and dramatic history. Built in the early 19th century based on a design by architect Giacomo Quarenghi as a mansion for the merchant Sibiriyakov family, this Empire-style palace soon became the official residence of the Governors-General of Eastern Siberia. Over the years, its halls hosted distinguished guests, including Tsarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich (later Tsar Nicholas II) and Bishop Innokenty Veniaminov.¹

¹ <http://library.isu.ru/ru/about/history.html>

However, the building faced its fiercest ordeal in December 1917, when the White House turned into the main stronghold of Soviet power in the city. For several days, Red Guards and members of the Military Revolutionary Committee held out under siege, fiercely defending it against junkers and Cossacks. The mansion endured heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, leaving its facade pitted with bullet holes and damaging its interior.²

Less than a year after those battles, on October 17, 1918, the university opened its doors in Irkutsk, and in 1939, the Scientific Library moved into the historic White House.

When my older brother was a university student, he worked as a night watchman at the White House. After he graduated and I enrolled as a freshman, the job passed down to me like an inheritance.

My shift ran from 8:00 PM to 8:00 AM. While the library remained open to visitors, I sat at a desk in front of the staircase leading to the second and third floors, handing out keys to the staff from a wall-mounted cabinet right behind my chair. Once the library closed for the evening, the doors to the book depositories were locked and sealed. Upon taking over the shift, my duty was to inspect all the doors personally and verify that every seal was intact.

During the night, I was officially permitted to sleep.

Because actual battles had raged at the White House during the Revolution, rumors circulated among the Scientific Library staff that the building was haunted.

The cleaners working late-night shifts after closing would tell stories of hearing footsteps, doors shutting on their own, and even the moans of the injured.

Indeed, at night I often heard the floorboards creaking. One night, I woke up to what sounded like a door slamming nearby. I went to check the nearest depository door, but it was locked and sealed tight. I went back and lay down. Just as I closed my eyes — slam! — the noise came again. I got up, walked up the stairs, and looked around: nobody was there.

I returned to my sofa and lay back down. Suddenly, the door slammed once more. Half-jokingly, I wondered if ghosts might exist. I walked up to the depository door to investigate. Right then, a car drove past on the street outside, and the door rattled shut. It all clicked: the vibration from passing traffic was causing a draft or shifting the frame just enough to make the door slam.

Reassured, I went back to the sofa and lay down. But before I could catch a wink of sleep, someone began pounding insistently on the main entrance door of the White House.

I walked over to the entrance and peered through the glass to see a man in a military uniform. I unlocked the door. He introduced himself as the chief of the fire department responsible for the library and asked point-blank:

"If a fire breaks out in the library, what are you going to do?"

"I'll call 01 and report it to the fire department," I replied.

"Well, call them! You've got a fire!" he barked.

I looked at him with sheer disbelief. Is this guy crazy? I thought. How do I even know he's actually a fire chief?

"Call them, call them — don't hesitate!" the military officer urged.

² <https://humus.livejournal.com/8872689.html>

I dialed 01 and reported a fire at the library. In fifteen minutes, a fire truck pulled up outside with sirens blaring. My nocturnal visitor met the crew and started barking orders. The firefighters hauled hoses into the building, unrolled them, and dragged them up the grand staircase. Needless to say, I didn't get any sleep that night.

Yet, working at the library had its undeniable perks. Thanks to my night shifts and good relationships with the staff, I could read books off-limits to ordinary mortals. For instance, I could read Sigmund Freud, whose works were banned at the time and issued only by special permission.

Overall, I worked as a night watchman at the Scientific Library for about two years.