

Yuri K. Shestopaloff

In the Mountains

Series

“The Roads We Take”

Translated by Vanessa Bittner

AKVY*PRESS

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The story tells about real events. A group of six mountaineers explores the high altitude region of Tuva, the mountain area on the border of Mongolia and Russia. Unexpectedly, for this time of the year, the temperatures drop sharply and the weather brings snow storms and bitter cold. However, the group decides to stay on their route. This is a story about what makes a difference in life and achievements of people. The narrative is discreet and measured, sometimes with humor, but the thrill and tension are beating underneath, which makes the reading emotional and dramatic.

“... if in prosperity the gods also gave us wisdom, we should consider not only what was happened in the past but what might happen in the future.”

Livy – “The War with Hannibal”



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About the Author

Yuri K. Shestopaloff started his career as an Applied Mathematician and Engineer-Physicist. He received his M.Sc and Ph.D degrees from Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, focusing on developing mathematical methods and algorithms for data interpretation. He accomplished his PhD and the Doctor of Sciences degree, the highest academic degree in European countries, for developing mathematical methods for data interpretation. He has worked as Associate Professor, Full Professor and Chair at Electrical Engineering Department of Academy of Transport. Simultaneously; he held position of Chief Scientist at Institute of Sensor Microelectronics of Russian Academy of Sciences.

Yuri K. Shestopaloff does consulting and research on mathematical methods and computational algorithms in various fields of science and technology. He also consults on system design issues, and leads software development projects. He has published ten professional books and over eighty academic articles on physics, biology, remote sensing, financial mathematics, applied mathematics, wave propagation theory, mathematical methods and algorithms for data interpretation. The results of his researches received awards.

His literary achievements include warmly regarded by readers' rhythmic and melodic poetry with lyrical and thoughtful content, and short stories, published in periodic magazines and also as separate books. Readers' comments and reviews of stories are very positive and inspiring.

Yuri K. Shestopaloff

The Foothills

At what point should this story begin?.. When we go through life, we are always taking actions that in one way or another determine our future. It is as if we sow seeds that will later sprout and bring us either useful fruits or poisonous and thorny plants that will then embitter our existence. It would be good if the effect were short lived, but sometimes one wrong step affects us for the rest of our lives. Generally speaking, hand on heart, there isn't much of that life given to us, and so we need to take care what we sow today so that tomorrow, as they say, we aren't tormented by our carelessness, or naivety, or simply by our folly.

The Kamaz panel truck barreled determinedly and purposefully along the dirt road without slowing down on the ruts and continued the gradual ascent into the mountains. The sky was overcast. Against this backdrop, right over our heads scudded forbidding gray clouds which throughout the journey continually emitted charges of small snowflakes that were piercing when they hit us at high speed. We and our packs often bounced on the bumps, so we had to hold on to the side of the truck or the bench with one hand and clutch the dancing pack with the other. Just then the road was following a mountain river, the broad and white-peaked riffles of which peeked out from between the hills along the banks. The recently fallen snow on the hills was eroded, exhibiting last year's short, reddish grass in thawed bald spots. It was the second half of April and the snow there must have already melted, but the final

days of winter again asserted their rights with frosts and snowfalls.

The road gradually parted from the river and began to climb noticeably upward. We, a group of six climbers, had been traveling about an hour from the mining town Ak-Dovurak to the start of our route through Tuva, from where we were to hike through the mountains about two hundred kilometers, “take” about seven tough passes and, “along the way,” ascend several peaks.

Before this trip the Kamaz had transported coal. When in Ak-Dovurak we had climbed into the back of the truck, which resembled a poorly cleaned coal storage area, Sergei had cheerfully but knowledgeably said “It’s anthracite. I can tell by the sheen.” And I, unable to resist, immediately commented, “Oh, yes. That changes the situation entirely! I thought it was lignite. Of course it’s a lot more fun to get lung disease from anthracite. It’s even more pleasant to choke on!”

The laconic Kolya just smiled reservedly at our idle chatter, while Myshkin apparently hadn’t even noticed the coal dust. In that city life, which we had left a few days ago, he was a rigger at a construction site. He did resemble a rigger from a 1950s movie. He was of greater than average height, wiry, with an ordinary face and businesslike, slightly heavy walk which might be more properly described as solid and rolling. You couldn’t say his face was open, but Myshkin with all of his human eccentricities wasn’t exactly a sealed book.

You could read his face about as easily as you could make out clear handwriting next to printed text.

In that sense, Sergei's character was more versatile, despite his openness and good humor. He worked at a school, where he was a physical education teacher. He was a merry, resilient guy who always had a story at the ready for any of life's events, and proverbs and sayings. Underneath the apparent lightness of his character you could sense wit and firmness, and his body—the average sized, sinewy and strong body of a former wrestler—said something about the character of its owner. Form and content are interrelated. For example, Caesar knew that there is a correlation between a person's appearance and his character. That was why he was wary of Cassius with his lean, muscular body and constantly calculating mind. Caesar was right, but it cost him his life.

When the truck started moving, the icy wind whipped up the coal dust, and we were all like miners after a working shift. The dust got under our clothes and made for an unpleasant feeling on the skin over the entire body. The quality anthracite—if that's indeed what it was—crunched on our teeth and left powder in our eyes. Our backpacks were just as covered in it as we were. I bravely continued to hold my bouncing, thirty-kilogram backpack on my lap, wanting to at least save it from the black soot that accumulated on the floor of the truck bed, where the coal mixed with melted snow.

At the start of the journey some of us had already expressed our own ideas to the trip's leader, Gena, who was responsible for "chartering" the vehicle. Those friendly rebukes boiled down to the fact that he should have taken more care choosing the means of transport, and that this coal-hauling box wasn't the best vehicle he could have found in Ak-Dovurak. There are certainly enough of all kinds of vehicles in that place, since it's home to an ore mining and processing plant. Gena snapped back discontentedly that if we didn't like it we should have looked for one. As it was, we should accept what was available. Then he climbed into the cab with the driver. Gena was of medium height and pretty strong for his average build, but not tough. I have a kind of intuition about that, maybe from my many years of doing sports, but it's probably more of a sixth sense. Gena's expression was intense, and even when he laughed he still looked strained. Even so, he was a little bit simple. It's like when you're walking along a snowy trail and everything is fine, and then suddenly you slip. The same was true of Gena's simplicity. Everything would be fine, and then Gena would suddenly pull some surprise. Not something good; no, quite the opposite.

Gena worked as an engineer in a construction company. I had no doubt he was a good guy, but his simplicity made me uneasy. I made a mental note of that when we were still preparing for our trip, having decided that Gena shouldn't really be relied on. In general, I believe that you can't blindly rely on anyone

in this life. People are different, situations vary and life changes all the time. You have to look sharp.

There wasn't time to look for another vehicle, so we accepted what Gena had prepared for us using his organizational talents and life experience. We tried to make the best of it. We attempted to protect ourselves with a canopy we found in the truck. Myshkin heroically stood up for part of the way, but even his weathered builder's skin couldn't stand up against the icy wind. In short, we all became covered in coal dust pretty soon.

But there wasn't really anyone to blame. Our departure had been preceded by an insignificant episode that may have also influenced Gena's hasty decision. In the morning, we went to the cramped little post office to send a telegram to the hiking club (that was how they could then follow our route, and we needed that to gain our credentials). One of the local residents tried to jump the line by shouting that he was a boss. After listening to his unconvincing arguments I finally took the impudent little man, a Tuvan, under the armpits and carried him out of the line. His fellow tribesmen, insulted on behalf of their comrade, went out to the street and started noisily discussing the event so we could hear their shouts even inside. In the end, they arrived at a collective decision to stab me, of which, apparently in accordance with local etiquette, I was notified by their messenger, a young Tuvan fellow. It was clear that they were just bluffing. They weren't

the kind of people to nobly notify the enemy of their bloodthirsty intentions. Laughing, I advised the messenger to get a longer knife and make it as sharp as he could. But the most disappointing thing was that Gena took their declaration seriously and started to avoid being around me. Maybe he was afraid of falling victim to the hot-blooded vigilantes if they came, as promised, to stab me. His lively but unrealistic imagination turned the idle threat into a reality. Because of that, when I later offered Gena my experience of working with drivers at construction sites, Gena was afraid to take me with him to negotiate. Maybe I wasn't insistent enough and naively believed that anyone could be entrusted with the simple task of finding a vehicle. But I was wrong! Actually, I'm often wrong, although the right answer is always one of the solutions I consider. That's what always embarrasses me.

Soon the spots of bare grass disappeared and everything around us was covered in snow, of which there was more and more. The driver of the Kamaz had been plowing through the fresh snow cover for some time now. He must have instinctively known where the road was. He had probably driven here before and simply remembered where the road passed, or maybe he used some markers that only he knew about to keep him on course. Finally, we reached the top of a hill from which we had a view of a narrow mountain valley covered in mixed forest. The forest strip a few hundred

meters away was dark, almost black against the snowy white background. That was it. We had arrived. We unloaded the backpacks onto the virgin, crunching snow. Gena paid the driver by giving him four liters of grain alcohol and an absurdly large amount of money, which brought cries of astonishment from us.

“Gena! For that much cash and four liters of spirit we could have found an intercity bus with a toilet!” Sergei couldn’t help commenting.

Apparently Gena himself understood that he had made a mistake, and this time he didn’t snap at us but remained silent. I was also surprised by such a one-sided deal but didn’t say anything. There was no point in discussing it; it was already done. Unlike some of the other climbers, I wasn’t interested in consuming the alcohol, but I understood its economic worth as a measure of value for goods and services, and its particular importance for us as climbers, where we might encounter all kinds of unexpected situations.

What bothered me more was the coal dust. I didn’t want to go around covered in it for three weeks. The wind wasn’t strong and now that we weren’t in the moving truck, it didn’t seem so cold. Maybe it was seven or ten degrees below zero Celsius.¹ I decided there wouldn’t be another opportunity to wash. So it was with pleasure that I started to remove all of my clothing down to the underwear and beat the black dust

¹ 14 – 19⁰ F

out of it. After completing that cleaning operation, I started to pick up handfuls of snow and attempted to bathe myself. When I washed my face with snow I saw how dirty it was. The snow was quite black. I began to wash my body. At that time Gena and Volodya were looking at the map. Sergei also did a little to clean himself up, although he didn't undress completely. Myshkin, after giving his face a quick wipe, started taking pictures with his camera. Apparently the coal grime didn't bother him. Some people are just born happy!

Kolya first changed his boots and then, after seeing what I was doing, joined me and also undressed to his shorts, baring his stocky, muscular body, and began rubbing it with snow. Kolya was of slightly above average height and was well and solidly built. If you enlarged him one and a half times he'd be a copy of the legendary epic hero Ilya Muromets. Standing next to me and rubbing himself with snow, he commented in an undertone, thoughtfully but disapprovingly, about Gena's talent for so shamefully frittering away communal funds and property.

"I bet you could hire a whole motorcade of cars here with flags and an orchestra for four liters of spirit. Then they'd even come out and pick us up in three weeks," he summed up his assessment of Gena's entrepreneurial skills. But he said it cheerily with his usual good-natured smile, as if by the by, and no regret or displeasure could be heard in his voice. You could sense he was glad that we had finally gotten to our

route. Kolya was a real hiker, like a mountain vagabond. But he loved order. You can't be a real hiker without that, by the way, because there are too many surprises along the way and you need to be prepared for them. As we know, it is better to prepare in advance, without rushing; you need to think everything through thoroughly and organize yourself accordingly.

I experienced a kind of quiet joy from the impending trip. I'm not sure what I was anticipating, but it had to be something good. Everyday affairs—which I also like but they're different—remained somewhere far away. Now all that made up my world was the snow-covered mountain valley before us, the dark line of the forest about four hundred meters away, the wall of which so sharply contrasted with the bright snow cover, and the overcast, windy day with its low clouds. And we, six men, standing on an open and spacious gentle slope. From above, we probably looked like little black dots barely moving in the white space. And that was my entire world, like when you enter the right of way, cutting off and escaping from your former life which at that time seems to stop and freeze. It contracts into a small, barely noticeable ball somewhere in the depths of the soul. And that's where it will sleep, that little lump, until the time comes for it to awake again and take over. But that will be later; now it doesn't give any sign of life: all attention is taken by simple and routine cares. For instance, now I just needed to bathe, and I gave myself over entirely to that

simple business, especially since it was becoming cold and it was time to start getting dressed.

The bottoms of the feet are the part of the body most prone to freezing during such snow ablutions. Maybe it's because they come into such close contact with the snow, but that's the weakest point. I can roll around in the snow, diving into it, but it's my soles that always begin to feel the cold first. So this time I washed my feet last but they were the first to get cold.

"Don't worry; walking will warm us up!" said Kolya, who had also started to feel chilly from our snow-bathing. Finally everyone had done what they needed to do, shouldered their packs and began to move up the gentle, snowy slope. Judging by the map, we needed to reach the crest and follow it up. We had to get through the foothills, overgrown with trees, and then the real mountains would begin. The timberline in Tuva is pretty low, a little more than two kilometers. Then there is some brushy vegetation beyond which there is nothing but snow and rocks. It was there, in the rocky, snowy and icy mountain highlands, that we would spend almost the entire trip.

At the very edge of the forest Kolya and I gradually caught up with those who had forged ahead. I liked Kolya. I hadn't known him before the trip; we met at the plane. So, gradually, during those two days it took us to reach our departure point, sizing one another up, we sensed that we were kindred spirits.

Of the other participants I knew Volodya, who had been a schoolmate of mine. He had recently finished

-serving two years as an army officer building something big and very important in the Far East, so he hadn't been on a trip in a long time. Now he worked as a department head in a construction company. Volodya was my friend. In school we had sat at the same school desk; we sailed—or, as real sailors say, “went”—on a sailboat in one crew, and generally did a lot together, including studies. Volodya was an unusual person. Such people are very rare. He combined in himself intelligence, a clear social orientation and a striving for social success. The thing is, it wasn't careerism. Volodya took the common cause to heart. He loved big jobs involving a large number of people and requiring energy and an investment of effort. He worked not for the money. Like any strong guy, he needed a job he could sink his teeth into because that was how his active and social nature was. He needed a work team that he could organize for a meaningful project and direct, although he also liked the process itself. There was only one character feature in him that always put me on guard. It was a kind of recklessness. Volodya could jump into things with doubtful chances of success, hoping by applying pressure and shrewdness to somehow turn the thing to his benefit, although there weren't many reasons for such confidence. You might consider that quality an asset when taking risks is a real necessity. In everyday life, if you want to live it to the full, you need to risk one thing or another all the time. But if the risk crosses over a kind of line that you

always need to feel, then such a quality turns into a fault and can lead to big problems.

At one time, Myshkin had studied with Volodya but hadn't completed his education. He used to have a certain distinguishing individuality in his character, and there was even something left, but his flakiness and something between immaturity and carelessness and, apparently, the nature of his work were steadily diminishing this healthy part of his personality. It seemed he understood this and somehow by inertia attempted to maintain his reputation as a worker with a wide range of interests in order to reinforce his imagined social status, but the everyday routine of life quickly sucked him in and he did not resist it. He was basically a nice guy, though. As for the worker-intellectual with broad interests, that was an image that had been created at the time. Films were made about it and, as it usually happens, someone looked up in their development to those positive but not very realistic examples.

Socially, we were all basically the same people who had received about the same upbringing and who had lived in about the same environment as the overwhelming majority of the country's population did. So we understood each other pretty well from the start. I don't know whether that's good or bad. In any case, I think the ability to quickly find a common language is valuable, and being oriented toward social needs when they teach you to think not only of yourself but also about the society in which you live, is also a good thing.

It's bad when some people think about society while others just seek profiteering opportunities for themselves.

Kolya worked as an engineer in a successful and modern shop servicing the railway's signal equipment and numerous communications devices. He was ten years older than me. Kolya was a good guy. Everyone makes mistakes, and so did Kolya, but he made fewer than many others. He also understood people and never went against his own rules. Decency was one of his most important rules.

Then there was me. Formerly a pretty good sportsman, after my studies I was mostly doing scientific and research projects, but essentially my status was that of a moonlighter. I sought out interesting projects where I could. If the subject allowed, I would also do some scientific research relevant to the project. I'd find a contract and they'd pay me, but if I didn't find anything I'd go without money, which also happened in my practice. Whatever was the situation, I tried to stay on the scientific path, because that was what I liked to do.

With the exception of me, everyone was an experienced traveler according to the mountaineers' ranking. If everything went well, Gena, as the leader, was supposed to earn a "Master of Sports in Hiking" distinction, or maybe in mountain climbing, for the trip; I didn't concern myself with such details. It was probably mountain climbing, because we were going to

the mountains, although I don't know how the certification committees count all of that. I was just interested in traveling in the mountains. Formally, I was a novice and they actually shouldn't have taken me along on that difficult trip. But Volodya gave me a reference and Gena, with reluctance and wariness, included me in the group. I had gone on trips, including on my own, but I had never thought of considering mountain hiking and scrambling as a sport. It was just interesting to go on a trip and wander in the mountains.

At first, there wasn't much snow in the forest, but all the same we walked in single file, one after the other, occasionally changing the order of who went first. It was quiet and melancholic in the forest, either from the overcast weather or because that was just the mood that came upon me. In the beginning, it was mixed forest with not very tall trees, apparently due to the cold climate and poor soil. As we gained altitude, the forest became exclusively coniferous, in full accordance with the lessons of the fourth-grade natural history textbook whose contents I could still remember—I was always interested in how things work in Nature. It was very easy to find our way: we went along in the woods, along the crest that was supposed to take us to an altitude of about one thousand seven hundred meters. It wasn't very exciting to walk through the forest, but what could we do if Gena had planned such a route? Well, we could assume that he knew best.

Yuri K. Shestopaloff