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The Russian draft-dodgers who fled to Alaska in a dinghy

Sergei and Maksim eluded military sentries and braved a gale to avoid fighting in the war in Ukraine



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By Charlie McCann

As the wind gathered strength, Sergei (*pictured above, left*) and Maksim scanned the water nervously. Five days had passed since they left their hometown on the Siberian coast and struck out across the Bering Sea in Maksim's tiny fishing boat, which was powered only by a small outboard motor. The voyage had been perilous. With its mercurial storms and frigid temperatures, the Bering Sea is one of the world's most dangerous bodies of water. The pair had travelled down the coast of Chukotka, Russia's easternmost province (it is so remote that it is often excised from maps of the world). They had braved lashing storms and somehow managed to evade detection in a heavily militarised region of Russia. Now they were tantalisingly close to the end of their 300-mile odyssey. Alaska lay just 20 miles away.

Then, in the distance, Sergei saw something that made his heart quiver: the white caps of enormous waves. He consulted the weather app on his phone and saw that they were about to run into a gale. This was the same storm they had encountered a few days earlier. Then, they had raced back to shore, where they waited three nerve-racking days for the weather to die down. Now, in their haste to flee Russia, they had inadvertently caught up with their nemesis. Maksim's boat, a flimsy 16-footer, was no match for the behemoths that threatened to flood the vessel or capsize it.

Sergei didn't answer the knock at the door. He already knew who it was. The Russian military was conscripting men to serve in Ukraine

As the waves began to slap the hull, spraying Sergei with water, the boat began to pitch and roll. If they were going to return to shore, now was the moment.

This time they headed straight into the storm. “We didn’t even think about turning around,” said Sergei. He had already tried once before to make this crossing, on a solo journey a few months earlier, and been forced back by pummelling winds. He and Maksim knew they might not get another chance. They were confronted with a choice: throw themselves at the mercy of the Russian army or plunge ahead. They chose the storm.

Eight days earlier, on September 26th, there was a loud knock on Sergei’s door. He already knew who it was without having to answer. All the men of Egvekinot, a port town in Russia’s far east, had heard the same knock in recent days. The government was conscripting men to fight in the war against Ukraine. Sergei, a slight man with big hazel eyes capped by heavy brows, wanted no part of it. When the knocking stopped and the sound of footsteps outside had disappeared, he looked out of the window and saw a man and woman in green military uniforms get into a car. Fear burrowed deep inside him. (The pair didn’t want to reveal their surnames for fear of reprisals against their families.)

He rang his friend Maksim and asked him to come over. He didn’t explain why – it was safer not to discuss these things on the phone – but Maksim guessed. He’d heard the same knock on his own door earlier that morning, and seen the same green uniforms through the peephole. He hadn’t answered it either.





Sergei and Maksim have known each other since they were teenagers; their relationship has been sustained over the years by their shared belief in the crookedness of the Russian state. Both thought the war in Ukraine was not just pointless but evil. It was inconceivable that they would fight for a government they despised. When Maksim came round, Sergei proposed a drastic solution: they should flee to Alaska by crossing the Bering Sea in Maksim's fishing boat.

Sergei was already in trouble with the law. Maksim, a shy man, with thinning, black hair and cheeks flecked with acne scars, always kept his political views to himself, but Sergei never did. Everyone in Egvekinot, a town of 3,000 souls, knew what Sergei thought. A trucker who ran his own haulage company, he railed to the townsfolk against state corruption, accusing government agencies of stealing money earmarked for road-building. When Russia invaded Ukraine, he

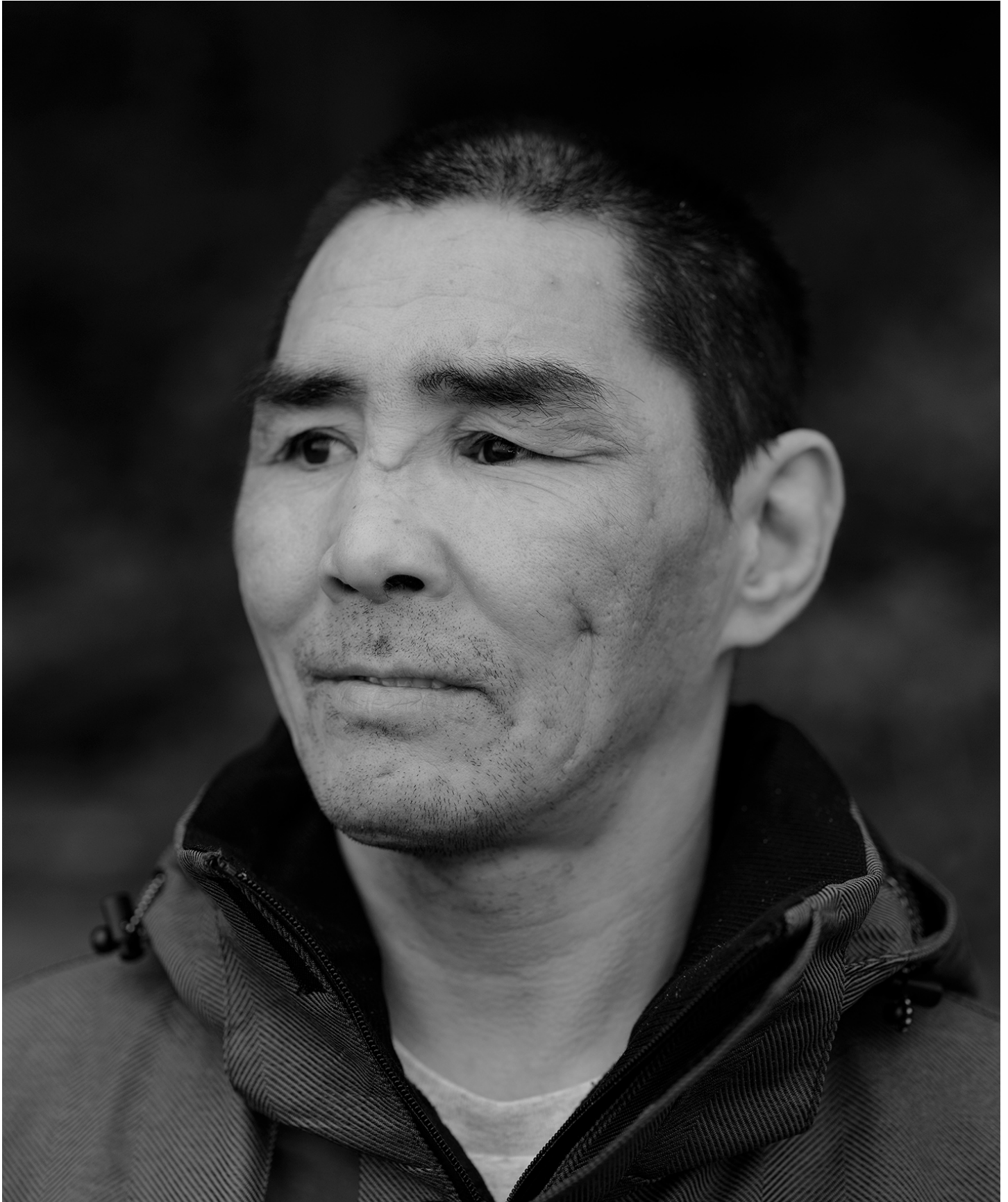
buttonholed teachers and librarians – public servants tasked with peddling state propaganda – and questioned their justification of the war. He offered up his own analysis: Vladimir Putin hoped the conquest of Ukraine would entrench his power.

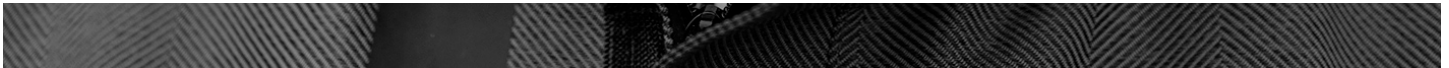
They took precautions. Most people in their town believed state propaganda, and would be “delighted to catch you out, to brand you a traitor, an enemy”

Last June the police decided that Sergei had talked enough. They hauled him off a plane and detained him for two days, interrogating him about his activities and supposed connections to Alexei Navalny, Putin’s imprisoned rival (he told me he didn’t have any). In August the fsb, the internal-security agency that succeeded the kgb, charged Sergei with extremism and instructed him not to leave Egvekinot without permission. That was when he decided to flee. By the time of the mobilisation, he had already tried to escape once, attempting the crossing to Alaska by himself in a schooner, but he encountered strong winds and was forced to turn back. With the knock on the door still reverberating in his head, he decided to try again. Maksim agreed to go with him. As he saw it, he could either die in Ukraine or try to escape to America. “There was no choice,” he said.

Over the next three days, they made arrangements. It was more than 300 miles to their destination: the island of St Lawrence off the west coast of Alaska. Maksim readied the tiny boat for their foolhardy voyage. He stocked up with provisions – bread, sausages, eggs, tea, coffee, biscuits and packs of cigarettes – and fuel. Both wound down their affairs, giving away possessions and, unable to change their roubles into dollars, transferring their savings to friends and relatives.

Sergei listened out constantly for another knock on the door; his mind picked over past conversations in case he'd given anything away. They had decided to inform no one of their plans, except for one of Sergei's daughters, who lived far away, in the Siberian city of Omsk. Most people in their town believed state propaganda, said Sergei, and would be "delighted to catch you out, to brand you a traitor, an enemy".





At the end of each hectic day, Sergei binged on strong beer. During our interview, he slapped himself in the face to convey its potency. He drank about 15 bottles a night, more than he had ever drunk in his life. The shopkeeper thanked him for his patronage. Finally, at 4pm on September 29th, they stepped into Maksim's boat and set off.

While one steered, the other kept watch. They hugged the coast of the Chukotka peninsula, an appendage dangling from Siberia's rump. The landscape was familiar at first. These were the waters they had grown up in, in which Maksim fished almost every day. The sea teemed with orcas, walruses and whales. They spent the evenings on shore, with Maksim's relatives on the first night, and acquaintances of Sergei on the second night.

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After that, they pitched their tents in the wild. When they were asked where they were going, they told the same story: they were looking for dead walrus in

order to sell their tusks. Back in the boat, they said little to each other. “We just thought, if we can only make it without getting caught,” said Sergei.

They were particularly concerned about the second half of the journey. The coast of Chukotka is heavily fortified. Their route took them past towns bristling with border guards. They took precautions, turning off their phones to ensure their signals wouldn’t be picked up. But, as their journey continued unimpeded, they got the impression that the authorities simply weren’t paying attention. Sergei thinks it probably never occurred to the top brass that anyone would attempt such a crossing.

Maxim stocked his small boat with provisions and fuel. The two men wound down their affairs, gave away their possessions and set off for America

Then came the gale. Sergei noticed that the vessel was taking on water. The bilge pump whirred constantly. At one point they were being tossed between two walls of water. Sergei closed his eyes, and thought, “I shouldn’t be here, this is not a place where any human should be.” They survived thanks to Maksim, a deft crewman, who ensured they skirted around the worst of the storm.

Several hours later, they had outrun the tempest and crossed into American waters. Finally, they could breathe again. During our interview, Sergei glossed over hairy moments with wry humour. Yet when he described seeing St Lawrence

for the first time, he paused, momentarily overcome, and quickly wiped away a tear. I asked him what he thought of America. “We knew it was a free country with functioning laws,” he said.





They made landfall in the town of Gambell, and scores of people arrived to ogle the strangers. At first the locals, eyeing their camouflage jackets, wondered if they were Russian soldiers. They explained, via Google Translate, that they were seeking political asylum, and the crowd responded warmly. “Welcome to America,” they said, sharing out pizza and juice. “You’re safe now.”

Their relief soon curdled. The Gambell police force explained they had to take them into custody. The next day Immigration and Customs Enforcement picked them up and deposited them at a jail in Anchorage, Alaska’s biggest city, for two nights, then a detention centre in Tacoma, Washington. “They didn’t even let us have a smoke,” Sergei said.

In Anchorage, Lisa Murkowski, one of Alaska’s senators, paid them a visit.

According to Maxim, she told them, “You need to have a little patience.”

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America is treaty-bound to shelter those fleeing persecution. But in recent years it has interpreted “shelter” in an extremely narrow sense: many asylum-seekers are initially held in custody. Some are not released for months or even years. No

one explained this to Sergei and Maksim. “We didn’t know what ‘a little’ meant,” Maksim told me.

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They spent months in one large room with 70 other detainees. They ate beans and rice and rice and beans, and read whatever Russian-language books they could get their hands on. Twice a month the librarian delivered new books. “That was a holiday,” said Sergei. They devoured the classics: Dostoyevsky, Pushkin and Tolstoy.

After over three months in detention, they are both now out on bail – Sergei was released on January 13th and Maksim five days later. A Ukrainian priest in Tacoma, who ministers to Ukrainian and Russian refugees, is acting as their sponsor and housing them. They politely demur when a volunteer helping them apologises for the American government’s treatment of them. “No problem, it’s good,” Sergei said in English. He accepts that the American government needs to know who has crossed the country’s borders. But when pressed, he revealed his true feelings: “It’s repugnant. I never thought something like that could happen to me.”

The pair prefer to think about the future. “We’re feeding our hope,” said Sergei.

In a few months they will be able to work. They had initially thought of moving to Anchorage, which has a familiar arctic climate. “We’re people of the north,” said Sergei. But ever the entrepreneur, Sergei says now he will go wherever there is “supply and demand”. Just five days out of detention and he is already fizzing with business ideas. Having noticed the vast quantity of plastic and aluminium waste in Tacoma, he wants to set up a recycling scheme. So far, Maksim’s ambitions are smaller. He simply hopes to be reunited with his fishing boat.^A

Correction (*January 24th, 2023*): This story originally stated that the fishing boat was 13 feet long and that the Alaska senator who visited the men in detention was Dan Sullivan. In fact, the boat was 16 feet long and the senator was Lisa Murkowski. Sorry.

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photographs: **eirik johnson**

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