



GIA TORTLADZE STORIES

This book is dedicated to all my friends that have perished.

Publishing House "Nekeri"

Gia Tortladze

STORIES

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HAZRAT VALI

*The story was told by Hazrat Vali's
cousin on a rainy evening, at the foot
of Nanga-Patra¹*

It was dark in Diamroi². Nobody visits the gorge of Diamir after dark. The paths running along the top of the cliff are narrow, and one can fall into the yawning gap any moment.

Nobody understands the language of Diamroi people. Strangely enough, every village in the gorge has its own language. On the whole, there are spoken fifty languages in Pakistan. Urdu is their common language though, spoken and understood by everyone.

To my mind, there is no other place in the whole country, whose inhabitants are as crazy about arms as the population of the gorge, especially in the village of Diamroi located at the mouth of the gorge.

Hazrat Vali was coming back from a date.

He was desperately in love with Shafia. The two managed to meet from time to time at the appointed place. They both ran a risk of dying for that. Shafia was

¹ Nanga-Patra – one of the Himalayan peaks.

² Diamroi – a village in North Pakistan, in the gorge of Diamir.

engaged to Mahmad Omar. Their parents decided on this marriage long ago. Such deals are called *mangeta* in Pakistan. Those who infringe on its rules must die.

The customs and traditions have become milder in North Pakistan - in Hunza, Gilgit, Baltistan, and Hushe. Women there can go out into the street alone and even talk with a stranger.

Nevertheless, in the land of Chilas, in the gorge of Diamir, nothing has changed. Women are deprived of all rights. They can go out only in the company of their close relatives.

The medieval customs are still very influential there.

Hazrat Vali went into the house. He opened the door very silently and slipped inside more like a thief than a host. It was dark in the house; only a minute oil lamp was lit somewhere in the corner.

“They’ll kill you,” – his mother, Kurishan, said to him, “Nobody in Diamroi is allowed to date with the woman belonging to another man.”

“Shafia is mine! She can’t belong to anyone else! We shall soon run away from here.”

“They’ll still find you! Karim Ula Beg was found in Lahor and killed there, Badar was killed in Peshevar and the others couldn’t even go further than Chilas!”

“We shall see! We are not going through Chilas; we’ll go across the mountain range and get to Bisham.”

“I have warned you. You are not going to kill only yourself, but also the poor girl.”

“Perhaps, it’s the only way out.”

“Mind, I shouldn’t know when you are going to leave and which way you are going to take. I can’t say a lie, you know.”

“I do.”

Early next morning Hazrat Vali was visited by Inamur Haki, Shafia’s relative.

“My uncle suspects something wrong. He didn’t believe Shafia when she told him she had gone out into the toilet. He said she was hot and tired when she came back. If he realizes what’s going on, they will kill you both – Shafia first, you next. Mahmud Omar’s relatives are also making a fuss about it. They, too, might have smelt a rat. Please, please go away and give up your crazy idea!”

“I can’t go away without her. Let it happen if it is our fate.”

“Let Allah and your late father Liver Han’s soul be with you, and let them both protect you! Remember, we haven’t seen each other today!”

Next day Hazrat Vali couldn’t manage to inform Shafia about his plan. He couldn’t trust anybody, for he knew, nobody would sympathize with him. He was going to commit a terrible crime, thus putting shame on two families – Shafia’s and Mahmud Omar’s.

According to the local custom, it was the woman’s family who had to punish their daughter. As for Hazrat Vali himself, he should be executed by Mahmud Omar’s relatives. Somewhere deep in his heart he felt guilty. He remembered well what his mother told him earlier. His grandfather had killed his daughter, Hazrat Vali’s aunt, Nasira, and her sweetheart in the corn field. Nasira hadn’t been engaged

to anyone. She simply dared to date with a man. It was a terrible insult for the family.

Poor Nasira was only seventeen.

Having killed his daughter, Jangirhan walked tall in Diamroi the very next day. He followed the tradition and honored the custom. Now his family was free of the terrible shame.

It's very strange, but these ruthless people never use a sword or a knife when killing their kith and kin for adultery; they do it with a gun.

In the end, Hazrat Vali managed to catch Shafia's cock in the rye field and tied a sign on its leg.

Shafia had to come to the appointed place at night, and they would leave Diamroi at once. Hazrat Vali prepared everything they needed for the trip: supply of food and water enough for two days, and necessary clothes.

"Once we reach Ravalpindi, I'll get some job there. I can do any odd job if we are together. Ravalpindi is a huge city. Nobody is going to find us there," he said.

The two met each other near the hill of Blind Rahmada.

"We're leaving! There is no other way out. If we don't leave tonight, our relations will be over. We shall be very happy together, Shafia!"

Shafia hugged him and started to cry. They were sitting caressing each other for a while.

"It's time to go!" Hazrat Vali said, "There is a long way ahead. We must put our best foot forward."

Suddenly there came an unexpected light from the side of their village. Shafia was thrown back to the rocks and Hazrat Vali heard a horrible sound. His blood curdled in his veins.

Shafia was lying on her back. The bullet had run straight through her throat. It was only now that Hazrat Vali realized what had happened. Astonished he looking at Shafia, then at the little oil lamp that was blazing at his feet.

“Why on earth have I lit it? Why?!” he thought in despair.

The same light came from the village again. Twice this time.

Hazrat Vali was running down the gorge as fast as he could. He was sucking his thumb and groaning with pain and despair. Something cold was running down his elbow.

The dawn in Ravalpindi is unforgettable, but the dusk is even much better. The sun here rises in the east, as everywhere else, and sets in the west, but they are the most beautiful sunrise and sunset in the world.

The city wakes up at five in the morning. A lot of people fill its streets: dark Lahorians, and even darker Karachians, Indian Mahajirs, Kashmirians, Patanians, local Punjabis, Persian-speaking Hazards. The people from North Pakistan are easiest to be recognized because of their hunza hats which are worn by every self-respecting Mujahid.

There are too few of these people in Ravalpindi, and so they can be spotted very easily. But if any of them want to stay unnoticed, they have to refuse wearing the hat. They can also be noticed and distinguished because of their white complexion and a proud look. All the shops and inns are opened early in the morning, but bazaar opens even earlier, when it is still rather dark. There are two

bazaars there: Sadarbazaar and Rajabazaar. One can walk in the Rajabazaar all day long, bargaining non-stop and never getting bored.

Near the bazaar there runs a narrow street – the blacksmiths’ lane. Every blacksmith there is specialized in some particular craft. Some are making horse-shoes, others – chains, and still others – Pakistani axes called chattels.

Each workshop belongs to a particular person. Some even own two workshops. The owners themselves don’t work, though they are excellent craftsmen. They are drinking a lot of tea all day long, and telling amazing stories while their hired laborers work and do a good job for them.

“What do you say, where has this lad come from?”

“He must be from the north, though his manners reveal that he is from Pushtuh. He works too hard, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. He has been working here for six years already. Before that he was an apprentice at Mamad Hussein’s. He is very honest. I would trust him anything, even my life.”

“The majority of customers are calling at his shop, as I see.”

“Yes, Allah has sent him to me.”

“Has he got a family?”

“No. And he won’t even think of it. Mamad Hussein suggested him to marry a nice Kashmirian girl, but he refused.”

“What’s his name?”

“Hallil-Beg.”

“A good name indeed. The Sultan of Lahore would envy him. Where does he live?”

“He’s renting a room at the bottom of the lane.”

The scarlet sun was setting at the bottom of the lane; in the west, as usual.

“Shafia! Shafia! Why on earth did I light that lamp? Why?!”

Hallil-Beg woke up wet all over. He lit a lamp, changed his clothes and washed his face and hands. He had to make three chattels and five horse-shoes that day. He looked at his right hand that lacked half a thumb.

The sun was rising at the bottom of the lane. It rose huge and golden.

“Today you’ve earned two hundred rupees. If you go on like this, you’ll save a considerable sum of money.”

“I do my best, Nana Muhamed.”³

“Guess what’s the date today?”

“I have no idea, Nana Muhamed.”

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you so absent-minded? Don’t you remember what happened seven years ago? You appeared in our lane all in rags, exhausted and dying of hunger. We’re gathering at Mamad Hussein’s today to celebrate it. Close the shop early and come to his place.”

“I have a lot of orders, Nana Muhamed. I can’t let the customers down.”

“Do as I tell you. Don’t worry, it’ll be all right.”

“All right, Nana Muhamed.”

Two men came to the bazaar – one young, the other elderly. They asked the locals how to get to the blacksmiths’ lane. In the end, when they reached their destination, they entered one of the inns right at the top of the lane.

³ Nana – uncle.

“Can I help you, dear guests?”

“Yes. We would like to have some makai chipati.”⁴

“You must be from the north then?”

“No, we arrived from Pashevari.”

“I see. I’ll bring your order in no time.”

The inn-keeper went away. The two men looked at each other.

“How could the bastard guess?”

“I don’t know.”

“All right, forget it.”

“We must be grateful to Inamur Haki. He saved our family from a public disgrace.”

“We don’t know it yet.”

“Oh yes, we do. Mahmud Omar saw him with his own eyes.”

“Really? How could he avoid killing him?”

“It wasn’t his duty, you ought to know that!”

It was getting dark in the blacksmiths’ lane. Most of the shops had already been closed. Only two shops were still lit up. Hallil-Beg took off his apron and hat, washed his hot face with cold water, removed the dust from his trousers, and looked at the result of the day’s work. “They’ll come in the morning, I guess. So I can close the shop and go to Mamad Hussein’s. I have to, they are gathering because of me,” he thought.

The fire in the furnace was nearly out. He switched off the light, shut the wooden door and locked it with two bolts.

⁴ Makai chipati – a north Pakistani dish.

“Who is the man waiting for, I wonder?” Hallil-Beg thought and suddenly saw the same light as in Diamroi seven years ago.

He dropped his head backward and felt a terrible pain in the back.

“I shouldn’t have left the fire in the furnace,” he thought and fell down on his back.

Two shadows were running down the lane.

Hazrat Vali was lying still. Soon something light and airy escaped his body, paused over it for a while, and flew westward, where the sun usually sets.

That night several dogs were growling in Diamroi till dawn.

Pakistan, Diamir Gorge, 2005

GRANDFATHER FROST

“Listen here man, am I telling you to beg him for money? Just go and ask him to get you a simple job. Let it be a caretaker’s or a night watchman’s job; something like that.”

“No no, Jemal, those years are my sweetest memory. I went round giving happiness and delight to the kids. True, it happened only once a year, but still it was wonderful. I remember their happy faces. They were waiting for me the whole night through. Some were waiting with the sleepy eyes, and others were full of joy and excitement... No, I can’t visit him. That world should remain untouched.

“Jesus! How obstinate you are! If I knew such a person, I would move the mountains! He must remember you, can’t he?”

“I hope so... I had been visiting their place for ten years. In the end he told me he knew I was not real, that I was disguised, but he still wanted me to come... Let's have some more drink.”

“Are you nuts? Who drinks so much spirit on an empty stomach? I'll go down to the grocery and buy some sausage on credit.”

Tazo was staring at the wardrobe where he kept his Grandfather Frost's red garment along with his other clothes. There was the hat and the boots there too. He hadn't worn them for twenty years now. Everyone said they were out of fashion; the new Grandfather Frosts were different, too. Besides, they were accompanied by young girls, their “Grand-daughters Snows”. The name “Grandfather Frost” was out of date as well; they were called something he couldn't remember.

He closed his eyes, recalling the New Year Eve of 1996. It was snowing heavily in Tbilisi. The streets were covered with slippery ice. He generally visited only a few streets in Vera district. He used to visit the families in the morning. Some families gave him gifts for their children beforehand, and to some places he traditionally brought only sweets. On New Year Eves the main event for the kids was the visit of the Grandfather Frost; it was the proof of his existence.

He had paid a visit to the Kordzadze family for the third time already. Little Reziko was looking at him with the eyes full of admiration.

“Grandfather Frost, may I touch your cloak?”

“Of course you may, buddy.”

“Grandfather Frost, do you want me to tell you a rhyme?”

“Sure, my best beloved. I'm all ears!”

“*Kartl-Kakheti, Imereti, Mengrelia and Guria –*

All are native land to me, and to my heart they all are dear!”

“Bravo, Reziko, bravo! You are a very nice boy, and here is your present. I’ve received your letter and brought you the car you wanted so much. It works on batteries, you know, and when it runs into some obstacle, it turns round and proceeds its way.

“Oh, it’s just what I wanted! Thank you, Grandfather Frost! I love you so much! Do you give presents to the other kids, too? They must be waiting for you. You give presents to all of them, don’t you? The things they have asked you for.”

“Of course I do, my boy. If kids behave well, I always give presents to them.”

“How nice! How nice!”

“Are you asleep or what, old man? I’ve been knocking on the door for ages. Zoya opened it for me. She is a nice woman. If I were you, I would marry her and unite my flat with hers.”

“Stop kidding, old codger! I’m already dilapidated; it’s too late for me to think about the bonds of matrimony.”

“Don’t be stupid! Haven’t you heard about the eighty year old people who’ve got married quite recently? Here, take the soft cheese; they have given it to me on credit as well.”

“Who is going to pay for it all?”

“None of your business. Have you thought about my suggestion? Mind, if you don’t go to him on your own, I’ll tell Nodara and we will drag you by force!”

“Okay... But what shall I tell him? Dear man, I’m dying of hunger and be so kind as to give me a little money?”

“O, my god! How stupid you are at times! He owns a lot of factories and the other stuff like that. You just have to ask him to give you some kind of job at any of them; say, a job of a night watchman or something of the kind!”

“I don’t know really... have you got a cigarette?”

“You don’t have to know anything. Just visit him. Will he devour you for that?”

“Okay. Okay... Pour me another glass, will you?”

“Just shave and go, I tell you!”

“Okay, I will.”

It was a sunny winter morning. But there was a nip in the air. Tazo was walking along the street rather reluctantly. He was thinking over and over again about what to tell Reziko, but couldn’t decide on the exact words. All the thoughts mixed up in his head.

“Why do I worry that much? I’m not an actor to remember every word of my part. I’ll play it by ear,” the old man decided in the end and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Tazo was startled.

“Yes, please. I want to see Mr. Kordzadze, Revaz Kordzadze.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I’m afraid, not. But he knows me well...” The old man was at a loss and a bit taken aback.

“Would you please go upstairs? There you will find Tsisana, his secretary. She will help you.”

“Thank you ever so much!”

“You’re welcome.”

Tazo hurried upstairs. The soles of his shoes were wet and they slipped on the marble floor. It was very warm in the building. The staircase was incrustated with sophisticated figures. There were pictures, painted by famous artists, hanging on the walls, and there was a huge crystal glass luster hanging down from the ceiling at the top of the staircase.

“Excuse me Miss, you must be Tsisana, the secretary...”

“Just a moment, please,” the young woman answered and proceeded to talk over the telephone, grinding coffee and pretending to pull her mini skirt a bit down. “Yes, I was there. Reziko brought me the tickets. Mr. Kordzadze, I mean”, she corrected herself looking at the old man. “No, nothing of much interest, I’d say... Okay, I’ll call you back soon. Bye!” She hung up and addressed the old man:

“Can I help you, sir?”

“I’d like to see Mr. Kordzadze, please.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No, but he knows me well. Will you please tell him it’s Tamaz Kapanadze from Belinski Street, the Grandfather Frost?”

“Shall I tell him you are the Grandfather Frost?”

“Exactly.”

Tsisana disappeared behind the double door. A bit later Tazo heard a hissing sound. It was the electric coffeepot. He leaned over the counter and switched it off. He caught a sight of the computer screen with the corner of his eye. It displayed

some card game. “O my god! It seems they even play cards via computer now,” the old man thought.

The door opened and there appeared Tsisana with an irritated and annoyed air on her face.

“Are you sure you came to the right address?”

“Yes, I am. Isn’t it Revaz Kordzadze’s office?”

“It is. But Mr. Kordzadze couldn’t recall you, so he refused you of his audience.”

“Why? Have you told him that it was the Grandfather Frost from Belinski street?”

“Certainly, I have. I’m terribly sorry, sir.”

Tazo went down the street, crossed it at the bottom, headed towards the little park and sat there on a bench. He felt sick and broken, as if several men had beaten him with heavy sticks. He glanced in the direction of the street. Every inch was familiar to him: balconies, windows, trees, the florist’s. He forgot that he hadn’t eaten anything since morning. But it was not hunger that made him so sick; it was something else he could not recall now.

He sat on the bench for a while. Then he stood up, turned up the collar of his overcoat, and walked down the street slowly, with an unsteady gait.

August 7, 2005

Town of Scardu, Pakistan.

BY AND BY

Datiko had been working as a forester for the last fifteen years. He was a forester and a huntsman, two in one. He rarely visited the village. There was a little

hut at one side of the forest, and he stayed there. His house in the village stood closed and deserted. After his wife's death, he preferred to live in the forest. Everything in the house reminded him of his deceased better half, Tina. They didn't have any children, so he remained quite alone. He visited the village only twice or three-times a year, and stayed in the house for only a couple of days. Then he hurried back to the forest, to his actual home.

He got used to solitude. He even spoke to himself aloud, discussing some serious matters.

He kept a tiny animal farm near the hut, with the livestock of one cow, one horse, about twenty chicken and four hives of bees. The horse was his favorite, of course. He had a low-paid job, but he earned enough to buy some flour and sugar.

In autumn he gathered wild pears and various berries in the forest and dried them in the sun for winter. He gathered a lot of mushrooms, too, so he made a good supply for the winter. He had a Russian iron stove in the hut, and he baked bread in it and kept the hut always warm.

He was not keen on hunting, though he had a rifle and could shoot very well.

"These evil people are neither hungry nor thirsty. So why do they kill poor animals?" he grumbled to himself.

Nevertheless, he always walked in the forest with his rifle. It was simply a matter of habit. Sometimes he even forgot to take the cartridge. He had a flair of a wild animal, and could guess the exact direction of the shot. Nobody could escape his sharp eye. He used to raid the hunters quite unexpectedly and deprive them of all their prey. He buried the hunted animals and birds in the forest with a mad expression on his face, and nobody could resist him at such moments. He had to shoot several times, and he had been even wounded once. As a result, he couldn't

bend one of his arms properly. In the end, everybody understood that he would never surrender, and they gave up their evil business. Who would enjoy such hunting?

The villagers now entered the forest only to gather the firewood. But they didn't cut down the trees; they gathered only the dry branches.

Nobody loved the old man, but they all felt great respect and for him, and were afraid of him. He used to inspect the forest too often, but now he felt a terrible pain in his knee. He gathered some herbs, dried and boiled them, and drank the liquid as a remedy before his meal every morning.

He was rarely taken ill. Only once he had caught a very bad cold.

He ran a high fever and had been drinking the garlic juice mixed with vodka all night through. He didn't consult a doctor. He simply stayed in bed for two days and recovered easily. He spent several days sitting by the furnace, thinking about Tina, his late wife. He dreamt about Tina in his sleep, too. Her death had changed the whole of his life. He was gradually becoming quite wild, and took no interest in socializing with anyone. Now he loved only the nature with which he had more in common than with the villagers.

He had favorite places in the forest. He visited those places quite often and spoke to the trees. At times he even heard their responses and thought he might have gone mad. Then he got used to this strange phenomenon. Beasts were not afraid of him; on the contrary, they felt some kind of close links with the old man.

Once, sitting by the furnace, he recalled that he last ate his chicken four years earlier, and the fact gave him a serious shock. He couldn't understand what made him do so. Then he recalled that some of his chicken died of old age the previous year, and he buried them in the forest.

He had a notebook on the shelf. He made notes in it from time to time. The notes were very short and often rather ambiguous. Some of them contained only a couple of words, like: *I made a giant walk, The creek tastes of hawthorn, The old oak is in trouble, The snipes are nowhere to be seen, The wild pears have ripened too early.* He never read the old notes. He even had no idea, why he had made them.

It was already evening. He walked a lot in the forest that day. He tried to take different ways without beating new tracks. At times he found new places he had never visited before and rejoiced with all his heart. He was glad to see the virgin nature.

He put his wet socks and boots near the furnace, and lay down on the sofa. Soon he fell asleep. He was woken up by the morning frost. He put some wood into the furnace and started to string the dry mushrooms. At moments he stopped still, spotting his wife's smiling face in front of him. "If she were alive, the life would be worth living," he thought and gave up his job.

He went out. It was a cold morning of the late autumn. The grass was covered with dew. He thoughtlessly followed the path running along the forest. Then he entered the forest.

He walked along the path covered with high dry grass. He touched the trees on his way. The touch gave him some sort of comfort. He walked and walked for quite a while. Then he sat down on a log and gave an attentive look to the surroundings. The place was quite familiar to him. He felt terribly exhausted.

Suddenly he realized that he was lazy to live any longer.

August 25, 2005

A DREAM

Gogia was blind in both eyes. He learned to play the guitar in his childhood. His next door neighbor, Tamara, had been teaching him for a while. He was still a ten-year-old boy and had learned only several chords when the terrible misfortune fell upon him. Children poured some water into the bottle full of carbide and shook it. The bottle exploded and poor Gogia lost the sight. Doctors had been trying to help him for several months, but all in vain. He gave up his studies, stayed at home all the time and played the guitar. They say, he was brilliant on the guitar.

At the age of fifteen he could already play serious music. He would listen to the melody several times, and repeated it precisely, reproducing every sound.

It was impossible to imagine Gogia without his guitar. The neighbors would take him out into the courtyard of the old Georgian house every evening, and the show began. His teacher, Tamara, gave up playing, admitting she had brought up such a musician that there was no use of her playing any longer.

Gogia composed his own music too. His music was sweet and melodic. The neighbors enjoyed listening to it very much. Stout Tamaz was exceptionally crazy about it. "Come on, buddy, play *The Carousel*, and don't go away without playing *The Palms*, please!" Antonina liked *Chardash* best of all. Lame Tengiz preferred the "tough, underworld songs." He used to bring a stool from home and sat on it. He had tattoos all over his body, and was especially proud of the eight-pointed stars on his shoulders. "Only the genuine thieves and the 'zone fathers' can have

such tattoos,” he used to say, but he wouldn’t say anything else about his life in Tulun prison.

The admirers and the fans came from the whole neighborhood, but only the locals could order the blind different songs.

Time passed, and the twenty-four-year-old Gogia was left alone. All his family members died, and the life became too hard for the poor young man.

The mailman in a leather jacket brought him his pension, but it was not enough for leaving. The neighbors helped him, doing the shopping for him quite often, but all were busy with their own lives and couldn’t take regular care of the blind.

The underground crossing was rather far, and it was difficult for Gogia to get there alone. He couldn’t get used to walking with a stick, and couldn’t remember the exact route. Whenever he tried to walk on his own, he ran into different obstacles every now and then. Sometimes the passers-by helped him to cross the street.

Gogia had his own chair in the underground passage. He was sitting on it for hours, filling the passage with wonderful melodies.

Everybody was fond of him, even the salespeople working in the underground passage: the florists, the news agents, and the shop-assistants in the souvenir shops.

The passers-by often stopped to listen to Gogia; especially the young people. There was an empty tin standing at his feet, and the listeners would drop some coins into it. Gogia played with a smiling face, and nobody could guess that it was merely his usual expression.

Once a group of foreigners stopped beside him. They listened to him for quite a long time. Then they dropped coins into the tin and started to applaud. Gogia was amazed. He stopped playing his guitar and sat still for a while, tears running down his cheeks. Then he wiped his eyes and went on playing.

That night Gogia had a wonderful dream. He dreamt of a huge and bright concert hall. He was sitting in a big armchair standing on the stage, and playing his own compositions. After each piece the hall stormed with applauds and the stage was scattered with the bouquets of flowers.

He woke up early in the morning, looking happy and content. He felt his way to the table and had his breakfast. He didn't feel like going out that day. A neighbor boy opened the door and offered to see him to the underground.

“No Datuna, Thanks a lot. I'm staying home today”, Gogia replied quite amazed at his own decision.

He lay on his bed, took the guitar, started to play and even hummed something to the music. It was for the first time in his life, when he tried to sing.

He fell asleep again, with the guitar in his arms.

He dreamt the same dream – the bright concert hall, storms of applauds and flowers. Then, gradually, the lights went out and only the sounds of his guitar remained. He was playing with the utmost delight. The sounds were absolutely perfect, almost divine. By and by it became impossible to follow the melody which now sounded somewhat heavenly, bright, pure and extremely light. None of the earthly instruments could produce such sounds.

The sounds slowly faded away, and then disappeared thoroughly.

In the morning, when the neighbors paid a usual visit to Gogia, they found him lying in his bed with the guitar in his hands. He had a broad smile on his face and seemed to be fast asleep.

Asleep indeed he was, with the pleasant, divine, eternal sleep.

2005

TEMUR

It was late in the evening. Temur was returning home from the hospital where he had visited his wounded friend. To be more precise, he was still standing in the corridor, waiting for the news. Time and again, he enquired the doctors coming out of the reanimation department:

“How is he? Is there any news? If you need something, just tell me and I’ll get anything. I’ll go by car and fetch anything!”

Then he went back to the people standing in groups. All of them were telling different versions. Still there were several details that coincided: Everyone admitted that Lado had been claiming something to some strangers at the party and they had a small argument. That was all they had witnessed.

Nevertheless, an hour later, someone called from the hospital informing Lado’s friends that he had been brought there badly wounded, and had to be operated on within an hour’s time. They also said he could hardly manage to give the phone number before he fainted.

Lado’s mother, Tamara, was standing in the corner with several of her son’s friends. She didn’t utter a single word. She was extremely pale and her eyes were hollow. Each time someone in a white overall passed by, she started to tremble. It was clear, she wanted to ask some questions, but she couldn’t, for she was afraid to hear bad news.

Temur went up to someone in a white overall again.

“What’s going on?”

“He lost a lot of blood. We need the blood of group two, rhesus negative.”

“Where can we get it?”

“At the blood transfusion station. We also need the physiological solution, and gentamicine. There is a risk of peritonitis.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No, I’m in my fifth year at the medical college, but I am an intern here, and I am on duty today.”

In forty minutes’ time everything had been already delivered.

The nurse said the operation was a success. Two bullets had been removed from the patient’s stomach. The only problem now was that of the peritonitis.

Temur was walking down the street. He could have taken a taxi, but he wanted to walk a little. He had a gun in his pocket.

Those were dangerous times...

“They came with the Shorty,” Temur recalled his friend Gio’s words. “So I can see them tomorrow,” he thought. “I’ll ask them what he has told them. Was it something so terrible as to kill him?”

He found himself at the front door of his house.

“How is he?” Temur’s mother asked him as soon as he entered.

“He’s better now. The only threat is peritonitis.

“Hi, Shorty!”

“Hi, Temur. How are you doing, man?” Shorty seemed a bit confused.

“Get into the car; I have a word with you.”

“Nice car. When did you buy it?”

“It isn’t mine.”

“I see...”

Shorty closed the door.

“Too hot, isn’t it? No air at all.”

“Who were those guys yesterday?”

“What guys?”

“Them that wounded my buddy, Lado.”

“O, they are nice guys, I tell you. They were drunk, you know, and your buddy should have left them alone.”

“I need to see them.”

“You’d better wait a little. When your buddy recovers, we shall settle the problem right away.”

“He has to survive first.”

“O, Yeah? Is he that bad?”

“Yeah. There is a threat of peritonitis.”

“Wow! God forbid!” Shorty said crossing himself.

“I need to see them today, Shorty!”

“No, no! You’d better wait for a while! The cops are aware of everything, you know; they are...”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Temura shouted and stopped the car abruptly. In a moment he took his TT out of his pocket and hit Shorty on his jaw.

Shorty screamed. And he immediately got another blow.

“Are you crazy?” he murmured.

His nose was broken. His mouth was full of blood and the fragments of his teeth.

“Sit still! Don’t move or I’ll kill you right on the spot!”

Shorty groaned searching for something in his mouth. Then he spat out some blood and broken teeth.

“Are you in mind? What have you done, idiot?” he murmured and immediately got a third blow. This time on his head.

“Tell me where they are, or you are a corpse!” Temur told him, aiming the gun at his temple.

“Inn Kiev street, near the park.”

Temur started his car. On the way he warned Shorty again:

“Be careful! Don’t do stupid things or you are a dead man!”

They stopped at a yard.

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Both?”

“Yeah... A friend of theirs lives here.”

“Call them and tell them to come out.” Temur gave his cell phone to Shorty.
“Be careful, ass-hole, they mustn’t guess anything!”

Shorty dialed the number, trembling and looking at the gun.

“It’s me, Shorty... Yeah, it’s my buddy’s phone... Come down, both of you, we need to talk... Yeah, my voice is harsh because I have a sore throat... No way, it can’t wait.”

Temur took his phone, got out of the car and stood near the gate. Shorty stayed in the car. He was so scared that couldn't even dare to move. Some time later there appeared a tall guy walking lazily, followed by his friend. When he saw Shorty, he waved his hand.

Temur raised his gun and shot three shots. The tall fell down at once; the other one managed to turn round, and he immediately got four bullets in his back. He, too, fell on his back and lay still.

Shorty was running down the street as fast as he could.

Temur started the car, drove upwards, then to the right and straight ahead. He was thinking about his buddy: "Now we need to prevent peritonitis!"

Those were very dangerous and ruthless times, indeed.

2005.

FAR AWAY, IN CARTAGENA

To the memory of Bidzina Kherkheulidze

Camillo Chaver was a tall, broad-shouldered, sun-tanned man.

He lived on a farm, Guapore, 50 kilometres from Bogotá.⁵ It was a middle-sized farm, and his sons, Pepé and Miguel, helped him with the farm-work. They had a servant, Minelle, too; Namibian by origin.

He grew oat, and he had a lot of livestock, mainly cows and goats, and he owned good pastures.

He was extremely active. He woke everyone up very early in the morning, and he himself worked hardest of all. His horse was white, with huge brown spots. He

used to ride it round the farm all day long. Nobody could have a free moment till evening. He even abolished siesta⁶ – the oldest of the traditions. “You will have eternal siesta when you decease,” he used to say. He sold his bacon in Cartagena. He hated to go to Bogotá. It took him a week to get to Cartagena, but he still preferred going there. He was fascinated by this seaside town. He felt a sort of nostalgia towards it, for he had spent there a year and a half.

He liked everything in this port: the harbor, the tourists, the exotic fruit, and the liners from Cuba, Honduras and Panama. In the evening, one could see a lot of various people sitting in the cheap restaurants and cafés scattered all along the beach. Some were drinking mulled wine, some others – grog; the sailors preferred brandy. They got dead drunk, and could get to their vessels with great difficulty. Drunken brawls and fisticuffs were too usual. He himself liked the Portuguese wine best of all. It cleared his mind and he felt sort of exhilarated. Then he was searching for the brawls and fights himself. He even felt some kind of drive at those instances. He was an excellent fighter. And he scarcely bit the sand. He was always carrying magnum 44 with him, and a navaha – a huge Spanish jack-knife. But he would never use them. It was only once that he stabbed a giant boatswain between his ribs. After the fight, he discovered two big wounds on his left arm, but he didn't suffer for a long time; a Jamaican whore killed his pain in the hotel “Maracaibo.”

He knew he belonged there, it was his own world, but he never stayed there for more than a week. His family was still his top priority.

He sent his sons to sell oat in Bogotá. He hated this huge city. The boys took after their mother – they were calm and never lost their balance. But they looked like

their father – both were tall, healthy and handsome, and both reminded bronze sculptures.

He hardly spoke at home. He loved Esther, but he knew there was a huge difference between them. Sometimes her calmness got on his nerves. At such instances he rode his horse far from the farm and shot his magnum 44 at the dry tree until he used all his bullets. He killed his irritation in such a way. On coming home, he always regretted his behavior, for the bullets were scarce and pretty expensive.

He had taken part in rodeo several times, but couldn't show good results. So, in the end, he started to hate this cowboy fun.

He was a successful farmer but never considered himself a cowboy. He hated everything that was related to the countryside; even the country music.

Once he brought a gramophone from Cartagena and listened to the urban songs all day long. He was looking forward to visiting Cartagena again. When the date of the trip was near, he felt very excited and delighted. He dreamt of the port at night – its bars and the Portuguese wine, the laughing women with guitars, the drunken brawls of the sailors, the southern dances, and the sleepless nights at his favorite “Maracaibo”.

In the morning he would enjoy some cold beer and a pleasant talk with some sailors on the verandah. It was always him who paid for the beer, and they talked about the high tides in the bay of California, about the dangers of the port Lapas, about the shipwreck at Barbados, and about the disastrous aftermaths of the tsunami on the coast of Paramaribo.

Then his thoughts would carry him back to his farm: “Ester never understood

me; the boys follow in her footsteps too. I hate cows. If it were up to me, I would burn down those oat fields.”

Thus thinking, he walked along the shore. Then he approached the ship “Guainia” and asked one of the sailors:

“Where are you going, buddy?”

“To Vera-cruces”.

“At what time are you leaving?”

“At dawn, when the high tide comes in”.

“Don’t you need a help on board? I mean a free help?”

The sailor looked at him in amazement.

“You must have drunk too much, man.”

“No, I’m sober, I swear. I don’t need your money, and I can work hard!”

“What’s your name?”

“Camillo Chaver.”

“All right. I’ll talk to the assistant captain.”

And the sailor went slowly up the gangway.

Soon the sailor appeared on the deck together with the assistant captain. He pointed to Camillo and said something laughing. Then they waved at him inviting him on board.

“So, my dear man, explain to me what you want.”

“Nothing much. I’d like to get to Vera-cruces. I’ll do any job free. Then we’ll see.”

The assistant captain hesitated for some time. Then he asked:

“Is the police after you?”

“Oh, no!” Camillo Chaver answered crossing himself.”

“Okay. We’re leaving at five in the morning. Be here at five sharp. We can’t wait for you.”

“I’ll be here,” Camillo said beaming all over, “By all means!”

That evening he wrote a letter sitting on the verandah, and asked the waiter to send it. Then he went to bed in the room of his favorite hotel for the last time.

This is what the letter said:

My dear Ester,

I’m sure, you will understand me and explain everything to the boys properly. I am not able to proceed like this any longer. I have always hated the cows, and the goats, and the oat. God be my witness, it’s not my calling. I’ve been trying to get used to it for twenty long years, but nothing came out. It seems, I can never make a good farmer because I am a nomad deep in my heart. I love you! And I ask you to understand me and forgive me. Tomorrow I’m leaving for Vera-cruces. If anything good is going to come out of my venture, I’ll let you know. Then sell everything and join me there. I know, it will be rather hard for you, but if you still love me and want to be with me, you should do as I tell you.. If I don’t find a proper job and can’t settle down there, then I have no idea what will become of us. What I know for sure is that I can never be able to live in the country, and I can’t return to the farm.

Yours forever,

Camillo.

P.S. Give my love to the boys and ask them to forgive me if they can.

At dawn “Guainia” announced by a loud signal that she was leaving Cartagena.

Four months later, there came a note to the farm “Guapore”. The note was sent from the Prefecture of the Mexican town Ciudad-Madderos. It said:

Your husband, Camillo Chaver, deceased from the multiple wounds that he got in a street fight. He has been buried in the cemetery in the outskirts of the town Santa-Cruses.

Best regards,

Emilio Corrominas,

The prefect of the town Ciudad-Madderos.

2005.

A FRAGMENT

Gio was delirious all night through. His face was covered with big round drops. The drops got together and ran down his face onto the pillow. He could feel nothing. Only his body convulsed strangely at times. Someone changed the bottle on his drip twice at night. The drops disappeared in turns in the plastic drain.

It was rather stuffy in the room. The windows didn't open and there was an odd smell in the whole building.

He didn't remember anything. He had been wounded in the evening and was operated on late at night. Another youth had been wounded on the way to the hospital too, but nothing serious was the matter with him.

The city was bombed in the dark. Only the explosions lit up the streets, and the skeletons of the ruined buildings were horrible to look at.

Gio could understand nothing. There were black circles under his eyes, and he could breathe with difficulty.

At times he even stopped breathing, as if forgetting to take the air in. Then he took in the air in quick succession and his respiration became steady and deep again.

Out of the four operations performed that night two were in vain.

The sound of the exploding shells was heard in the distance, but sometimes it came too close. One of the shells fell so near the hospital that several windows broke at once. The corridors were dimly lit, and it was too silent there. A few young soldiers were standing at the wall, smoking cigarettes. One of them was sitting on the floor, tapping at his cigarette with the index finger nervously every now and then, as if trying to knock the ashes down onto the floor. Their boots and guns were muddy all over.

They hardly spoke at all.

“Where is Tolika? I can’t see him anywhere.”

“He’s all right. He stayed behind.”

The tall one, with an unshaven face, put his machine-gun down, took off his bulletproof jacket and sat on the floor with great difficulty.

“I think, they have bitten me all over,” he said.

“It’s not insects, it must be the scabies. You shouldn’t scratch,” his friend advised.

They heard footsteps at the other end of the corridor. Then there came the clicking sound of the stretcher. Three men were pushing it, accompanied by a

tired-looking doctor with the dried up blood stains on his overall. They turned round the corner and disappeared behind the huge, heavy, banging iron door.

When the day broke, the bombing ceased. It was very foggy in the city, and it was freezing. The place looked hollow and deserted. A vehicle drove into the hospital yard and stopped near the wall. Two men got out. One of them was lamed. They entered the building. The young soldiers were asleep sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall.

Those two neared the sleeping soldiers. The tall one was first to wake up.

“How is he?”

“Sleeping. Doesn’t feel any pain.”

“We must take him away.”

“How?”

“The ‘Comet’ is leaving in an hour.”

“How are things back there?”

“As usual.”

“Who’s going to attend him?”

“I’m staying here.”

“So am I.”

The sun was rising. The bombing would start again soon.

2005.

SAMDO

Samdo is a village in West Nepal. It’s the last village in the Guri-kandak gorge, near the Tibetan border. High up in the gorge several villages are inhabited by

Tibetans. The gorge is pretty long. It may take six to seven days to walk from one end to the other. There is no transport there at all.

The locals mostly go in for cattle-farming; some of them grow potatoes too. The people are all poor, but there are slight differences as well. My host, Tsowang Yurmi, has a guesthouse. He lives there with his family, and he can take in ten people at a time. His wife, Kumri, is in the kitchen all day long, cooking vegetable dal-bat⁷ for her visitors.

Tsowang and Kumri have three daughters. Nevertheless, they have no family yet. According to the local Tibetan tradition, the family should have a son to be considered a real family. So poor Yurmi is not considered to be a real man.

I have visited Samdo for the fourth time already with an interval of two or three years. Every time I arrive here, I stop at Tsowang Yurmi's nameless guesthouse. The couple are praying for all their spare time; they are extremely worried for not having a son.

"They even don't invite me to the village authorities' session, for they don't consider me to be a real man," Tsowang complains to me. I try to cheer him up, but I can't manage it well. It seems, I've started to think like Tibetans myself.

"I'm praying nights through, but the Almighty doesn't take a pity to me," the poor man says.

"It's good you are praying," I say, "But prayers alone won't help."

He agrees.

Trip from Samdo to Tibet takes a day's ride on a horse-back. Tsowang often goes on that trip. He takes there sacks of potatoes and brings back rice and other products.

At the end of the month my wife and I will go to Tibet and walk round the Holy Mount Kailash. We'll spend there the whole month praying. We shall pray a lot! We'll leave our girls in Zimtag with my wife's sisters.

In the morning I say good-buy to the couple and feel that we are not going to meet for the several following years.

I have to go back to Samdo only four years later. We arrive in the city of Beshishapar after a tiring seven-day trip across the Larkia range. From there I leave for Samdo and visit my old friend. I'm too tired and need a good rest. I don't know exactly how long I have been sleeping, when some noise wakes me up. Someone snatches my hat from my head too, and I sit up in my bed swiftly, feeling a bit giddy. In the end, when I come to myself at last, I see two little boys standing in front of me. They look alike and both are wearing Tibetan gowns. They have Tibetan daggers in their belts and are holding wooden swords in their hands. They stand still, smiling at me. One of them is holding my hat in his tiny fingers.

I gesture at them, asking them to come up to my bed, but they shake their heads in refusal and continue to scrutinize me. I search for some sweets in my pockets, find a few and offer them to the boys. They are still hesitant, but in the end they take the sweets and rush out into the yard.

Some time later, Tsowang Yurmi, sitting by the Tibetan fireplace, tells me how happy he is now and how proudly he walks in the village. The Almighty gave him two sons instead of one! He watches his sons running about with the eyes full of affection. His wife, with a kind, round, happy and smiling face, is silently baking something.

The warmth makes me weak again and I fall asleep once more.

It's four in the morning, and it's quite dark when I'm leaving the village. I try to go out silently, not to wake up my hosts, but I already hear Tsowang Yurmi's prayer:

“Ium, mane padme hum.”

- Great is thy name, O Lord!

KARAKUM

Agsar lived in Tezebazaar, in a small, flat-roofed, mud brick house inherited from his grandfather. The house was fenced with a mud brick fence running round a tiny yard. The majority of the houses in Tezebazaar were one-storey buildings, all looking alike. Only a few of them were plastered with the mixture of clay and straw, and had two floors, the first decorated with wooden balconies.

From the mount Karatau, which Agsar frequented in his childhood, one could get a wonderful view of Tezebazaar and Berun. The world view of the local children was limited to these two villages. From the top of the mount they used to see the flat roofs of the square buildings that looked alike. In the distance though, wrapped in the yellow mist, they could also see the Karakum. All of them were terribly afraid even of this word, for they had heard a lot of terrible stories about the desert: nightly storms, enormous burning ball of the sun, hot golden sands, low, dry plants covered with thorns, the hole of Akjakar and the Kara Kurt – a huge deadly spider.

Agsar was fourteen when his grandfather took him to Khiva, the wonder of the Asian architecture, for the first time. There he saw the real mosque with colored minarets, spacious squares full of people, buzzing narrow streets where people

could hardly move. But most of all he was impressed by the Khivan bazaar. What not could be seen here: colored fabrics, silk, jewels, horse decorations and saddles, and the stocks of different arms. The piles of fruit were too impressive as well. It was here that he tasted the Asian watermelon of unforgettable taste.

They spent the night in a tea-house. They lay down on the wooden dais on the embankment. Agsar couldn't sleep till dawn, for he was extremely excited.

In the morning grandfather bought everything he wanted, put his purchases into the sacks, loaded his dark blue, obedient donkey with them, and only after that he woke his grandson up:

“Wake up, Agsar. We have a long way ahead us.

Agsar jumped up. He was a bit ashamed to be sleeping while his grandpa was awake. He ran to the river, washed his face and hands, then ran up to the grandpa's donkey, saddled it, and tied its bridle to the saddle of the loaded donkey. Grandpa was sitting on the dais with his eyes closed and his legs crossed, and sipped his tea. At times he glanced at his grandson with satisfaction, and closed his wrinkled eyes again. “I've bought salt at good price today”, he thought and a memory of something forgotten, faded and broken into small fragments came to his mind.

The camels were walking lazily in a long row. They were led by the guide walking ahead. The camels were mainly loaded by salt purchased in Chelekend. They traveled from the seashore across the desert. The desert was divided into two parts – the Karakum of Zaunguz and the main Karakum.

The caravan consisted of forty camels and about twenty guides. The trip took them about two months. Crossing the Karakum, they could stop at the only inhabited place, Darvaz. They filled their waterskins with water and proceeded their way.

The Karakum is a real wonder with its contrasts: an incredible heat in the daytime and sandstorms at night. The travelers solved the problem of clothes long ago – they wear heavy clothes both in the daytime and at night: warm Asian gowns with huge cloth belts wrapped around their waists several times, heavy trousers; high, woolen boots – paipaks – and white, woolen, embroidered hats.

They put kerchiefs round their faces at night, not to be bothered by the sandstorms. They travel eight or ten hours a day, and stop only once to relax. In the evening they put up rough woolen tents and sleep in small groups.

Caravan-guides are highly respected everywhere; Everyone knows how hard it is to cross the Karakum.

They rode camels till Chelekend, and they went back on foot, leading the loaded camels. It was extremely difficult. The way was not only tiring, but also very dangerous. The local inhabitants were too dangerous as well, especially the spider Kara Kurt.

As if startled by something, the grandpa opened his eyes. They were ready to set off. He glanced at his grandson:

“This journey is a trifle compared with the journey in the Karakum. I have gone to and fro some six-times at least. Now they take a different way to carry the salt; They go through Ashgabat and Bayram Ali. Everybody avoids the Karakum. They must be scared,” the old man giggled, “I never was. Once I crossed it all alone with the caravan of eight camels, and came back to Khiva alone, too. Nobody has ever dared to do it. But I did, thank Allah, great is his name! I mean it, kid; don’t think I’m simply boasting.”

“I can do it too, I’m not scared. You will see it! I’ll do it when I grow up”, Agsar said proudly, leading his grandpa’s donkey hastily.

“He takes after me! I wish his poor father were alive to see him,” the old man thought riding his donkey. In a moment he fell into a sweet slumber.

Time passed. Agsar’s grandfather died and Agsar had been in Khiva many a time already, but his first impression and the grandfather’s story of the Karakum were still unforgettable for him. He made several attempts to assure his friends from Tezebazaar or Beruna to go with him to the desert, but all in vain. Even his closest friends, Ali and Abdul, didn’t want to hear anything about the Karakum.

He often thought about his grandpa when he visited the tea-house. He even saw his smiling face and heard his voice telling him: “They are afraid of the Karakum, but I wasn’t.”

Agsar worked by the riverside, near his house. He had a small business of his own there. He made bricks. He lived alone. For some unknown reasons he couldn’t manage to marry anyone yet. He didn’t worry about not having a wife, but he wanted to have children very much.

Ramadan had just started and Agsar wasn’t working. He went to the tea-house and drank several cups of tea, listening to the men talking. When he got bored of their hollow talk, he left. He walked down the lane thoughtlessly. After a while he realized that he was heading to the mount Karatau. It wasn’t hard for him to climb it, but he did it more slowly than before. He looked in the direction of Tezebazaar and Berun. He gazed at the settlements for some time, but then he looked in the direction of the yellow mist, where the desert lay. Grandpa’s words were ringing in his ears: “The desert frightens them.”

Grandpa was right. Agsar was afraid of the Karakum.

That night he searched the whole house. He found the old man's water-skins, put them into the water and kept them there for two days. The water-skins softened well enough to keep fresh water. He mended the old tent too.

When Ramadan was over, he built a caravan of six camels and left early in the morning. On his way he recollected the fragments of his grandpa's story: "When we left the village, the sun was rising on the right, and it set on our left. Those who ignored this rule, had been lost in the Karakum forever."

He was wearing the same clothes as his grandpa used to. At first it was very hard for him, but on the third day he got used to them. He felt neither hot nor cold, and he slept well at night too.

"We took a lot of kurti⁸ with us. It gave us energy and killed our thirst. We drank water only in the evening or while we relaxed." Grandpa was not laughing at him any more. He was giving pieces of advice with a very serious air.

After five days' walk, his feet began to swallow. It was difficult for him to put on his paipaks. He couldn't get used to walking in the sands. He often thought he was walking around the same places again and again. He lost the count of the days as well; he was not sure whether he had been walking for eight days or nine, but he already guessed that he had missed Darvaza.

In the morning, two of the camels couldn't get up. He somehow managed to redistribute their load onto the rest of the animals and went on walking. The distance he could walk decreased every day. He was not able to take off his paipaks at night, and his spine hurt awfully while sleeping. It was a real torture to start walking in the morning. He walked with great difficulty, and the camels lay

down to rest much more frequently. The only thing he could still manage properly was the direction of the sunset – the sun always set at his left hand side.

He lost the count of the days thoroughly. He had no idea how many days had passed. For several days he could not eat anything. But he drank water all the time – in the morning, while relaxing, while walking and at night.

One morning he heard a hissing sound in his ears. He could hear the same terrible sound even in his sleep. He went blind several times a day and he felt giddy. At such moments he stopped for a while, and then continued his way with an unsteady gait. Once he even fell down. He stopped putting up his tent at night. It was too much for him now. He simply lay down on his baggage. He couldn't remember when he had taken off his gown; he simply noticed that he had lost his gown and hat somewhere.

He recalled Khiva, its bazaar and the unforgettable taste of the watermelon. He saw his grandpa, but he didn't give him advice any more. One morning he discovered that his camels escaped at night. He walked all day long. He heard a terrible hiss in his ears. His mouth was dry. His body was hot and the skin on his hands had dried up.

The sun had set and it was nearly dark when he saw a light ahead. He couldn't reach it; he fell on the sand face down.

It was a high morning when a terrible pain woke him up. He opened his eyes and saw some moving figures in the distance.

He felt that his hand hurt terribly. He looked at it and saw a huge Kara Kurt on it. He tried to recall what his grandpa said about its bite and its remedy, but he

couldn't remember anything. His legs felt dead. Neither could he feel his fingers. His eyelids became too heavy, too.

He fell asleep.

In his dream he saw his grandpa. It was hard for him to talk but he managed to utter a sentence:

“I have crossed the Karakum, grandpa, and I wasn't afraid!”

2005.

ONCE UPON A TIME

“Give me some water,” Bakur said with great difficulty and rose on his elbows. His grandson put a bowl full of water to his lips. The old man took a sip and lay back pretty exhausted.

He touched the scar on his chin with a sinewy hand. It was a long scar, running from the cheekbone down to the chin. He had two more deep scars on the forehead.

Bakur was lying in a cool, half dark room. He was lying and waiting for death. His arms were feeble, his chest was lean and hollow, and he could hardly breathe. His aquiline nose now seemed crooked; his dark blue eyes were fallen, but they still expressed an incredible sternness, felt in his gaze. He was lying in a wooden bed. He was well over eighty, but he didn't know for sure how old he was.

“I'm leaving my weapons to you. You should grease the swords and daggers well, and don't forget to clean the flintlock gun as well, don't let it rust,” he said, giving a challenging look at his grandson. He paused for a while and then went on: “You will be the only man in the family now. Nobody knows when your dad is going to come back from the war. You shouldn't obey the women's will. Be the

decision-maker. Meet your kin and enemies as they deserve it. And look after the livestock. Take a special care of the horses; don't let them get fat.

The speech proved to be tiring for the old man. He closed his eyes and fell asleep for a little while. Then, as if recalling something very important, he opened his eyes again and added:

“If you happen to run into the Khornaulis somewhere, take a rapid action and kill them at once, or they will kill you! We have been at enmity with them for forty years, you know.”

Again he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

His grandson was sitting by his bed, watching the dying man very attentively. “Why are we at enmity with the Khornaulis, I wonder?” the boy thought and looked at the arms hanging on the wall.

“When you have enough cattle...” the old man went on, waking his grandson from his thoughts, “Order a new sword. Ours are already very old, their metal might be tired. In the evenings take swords in both hands and practice for some time not to get tired easily while fighting.”

He made several efforts to swallow saliva, but in vain, his mouth was dry. The grandson gave him some water again.

“Keep the powder flask tied to your belt, near your right hand. And keep flint and tinder in the purse, too. You should often change it in the gun. Pick the flint in the upper gorge, it is much better there. And change the strings and strips on the shield.”

Bakur got tired again and fell asleep.

In the morning the fog came down very thick. The battalion was going along the gorge very silently. They had to take a longer way to stay unnoticed.

There was a thick fog in the valley too. One could see nothing, but the battalion knew for sure that the enemy was camping there. The camp was fast asleep; only those on duty were standing on guard. But they could see nothing at twenty feet distance.

The battalion was led by the young prince, who kept Bakur by him all the time.

They went down to the valley and divided into two columns. They could hardly manage their horses. Then there came an order in a very low voice. Three hundred soldiers lit oiled torches at the same time, and attacked the enemy with a loud, blood-curdling cheer. They rushed forward with the lit torches so rapidly that the opposing side had no time even to take their bows and arrows. The battalion put to sword all the guards and put to fire all the tents. The half naked Persians were running about in despair. They couldn't even use their arms, before they were killed.

Lying horizontally on his horse, Bakur rushed into the camp holding up his sword. He was followed by several of his men. The riders could hardly avoid the burning tents on their way. The master tent was at twenty feet distance when Bakur's horse fell down. He continued his way running and ran into the enemy's commander-in-chief who rushed out of the tent. Their fight didn't last long. The commander fell down with a broken head. Bakur was also badly wounded in his head. Everything around him was painted red and he could see nothing because of

the blood running down his forehead. Some unseen hand picked him up and put him on a horseback like a sack. It was Bakur's fellow-fighter, the giant Gvtisso.

Everything was over in a moment. The battalion attacked the camp like a hurricane and left the valley scattered with the two thousand bodies and the burnt down tents. The King thanked Bakur and gave him a lot of valuable gifts.

He had fought about ten fights after that, and he always showed chivalry and heroism. In the last battle he was already seventy. It was then that he got the scars on his face.

The grandson was still scrutinizing the arms hanging on the wall. At times he looked at his grandpa. Bakur was breathing steadily. His face was quite calm too.

“Why are we at enmity with the Khornaulis, I wonder?” he thought again. At that very instance the grandfather opened his eyes again.

“Grandpa!”

The grandfather turned his head.

“Why are we at enmity with the Khornaulis?”

The old man thought for a while. Obviously, he was trying hard to recall something. Then a smile spread over his face. He closed his eyes and deceased smiling at his grandson.

2005

MARGOT

“Good morning, Madam Annette!”

“Good morning, Margot! You have arrived early today.

“Yes. I took a night train and was already at the station early this morning. I even had a little walk before I came here. Is he still asleep?”

“I don’t know. I’ll go and check.”

Margot went down several stairs, found a bench in the garden, sat down, and sank deep into her thoughts.

She remembered the events that took place two days earlier. She had never had such a client. He was a man of medium height, quite handsome, with dark blue eyes. First he invited her to the restaurant. They talked a lot about different things. Then he told her his own adventure in details. The adventure was not very exciting, but it still attracted Margot’s attention. He didn’t hurry to go upstairs; as if the conversation was more important for him. In the end, he suggested her to go upstairs. Margot got a bit irritated by the strange circumstances.

“He doesn’t seem to be in a hurry, but I might be missing the next client,” she thought.

But the man was definitely not in a hurry. When they were going upstairs, he paused for a moment, as if guessing her thoughts, and tried to explain something to the woman with a smile:

“What’s your name?”

“Margot.”

“Don’t you worry, Margot, and please don’t hurry. I’m going to pay you much enough.”

He was different from the others in another way too – he was very tender and affectionate. He talked calmly, and he talked a lot, without a minute’s pause. He paid her a lot of money indeed, and he left in the morning.

“Mother! Mummy!”

Margot was a bit startled. She turned around and at that very moment a little boy with golden hair jumped at her and hugged her.

“Mummy, it’s so good that you’ve arrived! I have been missing you a lot! I even dreamt of you at night, and cried a little!”

Margot gained back her breathe and hugged the boy even harder.

“Mummy, what if you take me with you? You know what happened? I fought with big boys yesterday!”

“Wait for a little while more, darling, and I’ll take you with me, I promise. Now, let’s take a walk in the town and have our breakfast there, if you don’t mind.”

“How nice, Mummy! I’ll go and ask Madam Annette if I may go with you.”

Margot laughed. “Of course you may, darling. I am your mother.”

They walked in the streets for a while. The streets were covered with the autumn leaves of different colours.

They entered a little café, had their breakfast there, and continued to walk.

“Mummy, I’ll buy a nice house for you when I grow up, and we shall always stay together.”

Margot took the child in her hands, kissed him, and wiped her tears.

Now they were walking in the park. It was a bit cool there. Several snow-white swans were swimming in the manmade pool.

“You know, Mom, some of the kids are visited only by their mothers, and some others are visited only by their fathers. And several kids are not visited at all. Tell me, Mom, where is my Dad?” the child asked quite unexpectedly, looking straight into Margot’s eyes.

“Your Dad is far away, darling. His job takes him away. But he will arrive soon, and he will visit you by all means.”

“But I don’t know him. How can I recognize him?”

“You know him, darling. You simply don’t remember him. You will recognize him the moment you see him.”

That evening Margot went back by train and arrived in the city early in the morning. She slept nearly all day long. In the evening she went to her working place on the shore, near the hotel “Green Island”.

There were a lot of people in the street. The women were all in good mood. Most of them were walking up and down the street baldly. Some others were standing leaning against the wall. Many of them hated Margot. They might simply be jealous, for Margot was really very beautiful. Sometimes the clients took women to other hotels. But the majority entered the “Green Island”.

Margot lived in the outskirts of the city. She shared a small flat with Lily. First she worked in a laundry, but her job was low-paid and the money she earned was not enough even to pay the rent and buy food. So she couldn’t see her child for several months. Her hands were always red and she walked stooping. She felt she was getting old too fast. But she was still very beautiful. She was tall, with chestnut-brown hair, pale brown eyes with a mysterious and passionate look.

She had a lot of friends in the laundry, but Lily was closest to her. Lily was the first to give up the laundress’s job and go to the “Green Island”. Margot followed in her steps a bit later.

At first it was very hard for her to get used to her new profession. She dreamt of the beautiful house almost every night. She lived in that house with her son, and she was knitting or embroidering all day long, for she had a lot of servants who did all the housework for her. Margot was fond of one more thing – reading.

She could read anything, especially love stories. This was the way to beautify her miserable existence. Sometimes she stayed at home alone and read all day long. In the evening she had to listen to Lily nagging at her though:

“You don’t think about anything but yourself! How long are you going to work in the street? You must work as hard as you can to get rid of this nightmare!”

Margot smiled and, sank deep into her daydreams; she couldn’t even guess what Lily wanted of her. But these were rare cases. She always got back to the hotel. On the rainy days the hotel keeper let the girls enter the hall and take seats there. They were a real picture indeed – walking with cigarettes and glasses of wine in the right side of the foyer. Some were sitting in the armchairs as if being models for painters. All were in good mood, and pretended to be proud of themselves too.

But they were quite happy in one respect – after a hard night’s work they could sleep till late afternoon, and in the evening, dressed up and covered with a heavy make up, they walked up and down the crowded street in short skirts, holding long cigarette holders in their hands. All of them had their own place, so their walking area was somewhat limited, until some client called them. After that they felt free and could enter any hotel along the shore.

They were best delighted when some touring liner entered the port. They felt her class and the potential of the future clients at first sight. They hated the fishing boats. When the fishing boats entered the port, the streets were full of drunken sailors who had a lot of money but were rather impolite. They paid the girls generously, but were too rude with them. When the fishing boats came, one couldn’t find a single girl in the street.

The best girls went first, followed by the average, but in no time, all of them were engaged – every girl had a client of her feather. At such instances the tourists

frequented the central quarters, for none were pleased to watch the rude and drunken ruffians. Neither the captains nor the other sailors of the higher ranks stayed at the seaside hotels. They, too, went downtown.

The drunken brawls and fights were pretty common. The hotel-keepers had to be very careful, especially the owners of the cheap hotels. In short, the 'Bethlehem' continued for a week. When the fishing boats left, the girls' lives returned to their customary mould, a bit dull and indifferent, but their purses were full.

Margot kept her money in a bank on her and her boy's accounts. It was only Lily who knew where to find Luke in case of necessity, and how to take money out of the bank.

Margo told Lily about the strange customer that night.

"Such a strange man was looking for you when you were away," Lily said. "He didn't want anybody else but you. He said he would be back three days later.

"I know," Margo answered.

"How do you know? Who has told you?"

"Nobody. I simply felt it."

Lily giggled.

"Now don't get involved in a silly love affair, would you? Remember, you have to take the child out of the asylum as soon as you can, and get away from this damned place."

"I have been looking for you for two days already!"

Margo turned round and saw the strange client standing by her side; the same man that impressed her so much.

“I was away.”

“I know. Shall we take a little walk? And in the evening I want to invite you to the café “Frigate”. They are playing live music there. Do you like jazz?”

“I do. But I rarely have an opportunity of listening to it.”

They have an excellent band there. We can take a cruise boat afterwards and taste their delicious cocktails.”

“I don’t now, really... I have to work.”

The stranger smiled. “I am a generous client, am I not?”

“Oh yes, you are. But why do you do it?”

“A pleasant passtime. Anyway, this was what I thought earlier. But our meetings became something more serious for me now.”

“What’s your name?” Margot asked in a whispering voice.

“Enrique De Silva.”

“I have heard this name before.”

“Makes no difference.”

“Enrique De Silva”, thought Margot. “Where do I know the name from?”

She came back at dawn, Lily was already fast asleep. She shut the door, lay on her bed undressed, and fell asleep immediately.

At noon Margot was woken up by some noise. Lily was getting breakfast ready. Margot stretched and sat up on the bed. She was smiling and her eyes were beaming with joy.

“What’s up? You are in a very good mood this morning,” Lily said, putting a big pan with an omelet on the table, “Let’s have our breakfast.”

“Or supper, to be more precise?” Margot said laughing.

Lily looked at her in amazement.

“You haven’t been so cheerful for ages. Has your strange client shown up?”

Margot nodded.

“Now don’t tell me that he is a real prince and made a proposal to you!”

Margo laughed.

“I don’t know, really... but he is a very strange person.”

“What do you mean by ‘strange’?”

“He is very kind and warm. And he always wants to tell me about his past. And yes, I’ve missed the main thing – he is very handsome, and rich, and very masculine. I’ve never had anyone like him.”

Lily sat on her chair, put her chin on her hands, and supported her hands with the elbows.

“I think, you’ve fallen in love with him!” she said, smiling.

Margot didn’t answer anything. She was looking through the window. She could see nothing but the face of Enrique De Silva.

Let’s stop somewhere for supper,” Enrique suggested Margot who was beholding the lit up houses appearing and disappearing in front of her eyes like shots of a colored movie.

They stopped at a seaside hotel late at night, had their supper and took a room.

“Enrique, please tell me, why are you doing all these and where are we going?”

“I simply want to show you my mansion. I feel very comfortable with. I was twenty when my mother died. I adored her. Her name was Margot too. It’s time to

go to bed, my dear; you must be very tired.”

They woke up late next morning, had their breakfast at the hotel and proceeded their way.

“It’s only three hours’ drive from here,” Enrique admitted. “There are only two people in the house – the gardener and Madam Lola, who has been living with us for many a year now. In my childhood I spent most of my time with Lola, so she is like a second mother to me.”

The gate was open. They stopped the car in front of the house and spotted Lola, hurrying up to them.

“Enrique!” exclaimed the elderly woman and hugged him affectionately.

“Lola, meet Margot, my close friend,” Enrique told her pointing at Margot.

Lola looked at Margot closely for some time, and only after that she shook hands with her.

“We will stay here for a couple of days. I want to show Margot everything, and have a ride with her.”

Lola smiled at Margot.

“Welcome, Mademoiselle Margot.”

“Thank you, Lola.”

Margo seemed a bit embarrassed.

They spent the evening at home. Lola cooked an excellent supper for them. They had their supper and went to sit by the fireplace. Enrique brought old family albums and they were looking through them for a long time, inspecting every yellowish, faded away, black and white photo.

When the bedtime came, Margot had a thorough knowledge of Enrique’s family and his ancestors.

“We can have a horse-ride today. I’ll show you my woods. At twenty minutes’ ride from here, there is a wonderful lake. We can hunt ducks there. Are you fond of hunting?”

“No, I’m not. I hate any kind of violence.”

“All right. Then we can simply have a pleasant ride. Let’s go downstairs now. Lola has cooked a delicious breakfast for us.”

“You can go, and I will join you in no time. I need to dress.”

Enrique went down the stairs hastily.

Margot kept sitting on the bed for some time. She started to think. She wanted to recall her dream. She recalled only a few episodes and smiled. She recalled herself in a wedding gown and Enrique standing by her side, Enrique De Silva!

There was wonderful odor in the woods, the fragrance of the late autumn. The ground was covered with leaves. Each tree was of different color. The wood looked like a real oil painting.

Enrique was riding his horse very slowly, holding Margot who was sitting in front of him.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“No. I have never seen anything so beautiful. Luke might enjoy it too”, Margot said, regretting immediately her careless remark.

“Luke? Who’s Luke?” Enrique asked in surprise.

Margot was at a loss. She didn’t know what to say. Then she managed to overcome her embarrassment and answered:

“He is my son. I should have told you about him earlier, but I somehow couldn’t...

Enrique stopped his horse. He seemed amazed.

“You have a son and you didn’t tell me anything about him? Where is he? How old is he? Who looks after him?”

“He is in the orphanage. They take a good care of him there... I can’t take him until I have saved a little money.” And Margot burst into tears.

“Okay, darling. Don’t cry please. Let’s go back home and tell me everything about him.”

Some time later they were sitting by the fireplace, and Margot was telling the story of her life in the smallest details.

“Luke is already five. I’m looking forward to the moment I am able to take him from there. But I can’t do anything more. Now you know everything about me.”

Enrique was sitting silent, thinking about something. Then he whispered:

“Poor boy! How long does he have to wait? He has done nothing wrong.”

He wanted to say something more, but he couldn’t. He had a lump in his throat, and could not utter a word. His eyes were full of tears too.

They returned to the port the very next day. Enrique saw Margot home and told her:

“I’m leaving for three days on some urgent business. I ask you not to go to the shore or to the “Green Island”. I ask you very much! You can have fun somewhere else, before I come back. You can go to the cinema or to the theatre, or anywhere else you wish, but don’t go there any more. Promise, you won’t.”

Margot nodded.

“Now take this,” Enrique said and put something into her handbag. “I’ll be back soon and we shall go to Luke together.”

Margot hugged him and got out of the car with her eyes full of tears.

Lily was newly woken up and she looked at Margot in surprise.

“Why are you crying? Has the bustard offended you?”

“No, no Lily! He is the kindest man in the world,” exclaimed Margot and told her friend every detail of her trip. Lily calmed down. She was listening to Margot telling her a beautiful fairy-tale.

I’ll stay at home today. And tomorrow we’ll go for a walk. Let’s go to the theatre and then sit in a café, shall we?”

“Okay, my dear. It all reminds me of my childhood fairy-tales about kind and handsome Princes.

In the evening Lily dressed up and said good-bye to Margot:

“See you in the morning, darling!”

There were a lot of people at the “Green Island” as usual. The girls, too, were cheerful as always. The cruise ship “Galicia” had entered the port.

“Lily!”

Lily turned round and saw her old acquaintance, Peppe Segara.

They kissed.

“You look great! You are not growing old!” Peppe seemed to be in high spirits.

“I was told you had been put to prison for quite a while.”

“Just for a very little while, as you see. Where is Margot?”

“She isn’t working today. She won’t be working tomorrow or the day after tomorrow either. She won’t come here any more.”

“Where is she now?”

“Does it make any difference? I told you, she quit.”

“Has she got married?” Peppe laughed. Then he turned round, got into his car and drove away.

Twenty minutes later somebody knocked on Margot’s door.

“Who might it be?” Margot thought and opened the door. Peppe was standing in the doorway, smiling at her.

“Hello, princess!” he said and kissed the amazed woman.

“I thought...” Margot tried to say something.

“I know what you thought lovely, but here I am, and talking with you. I’ve missed you”, said Peppe and caressed her.

“Wait, Peppe! I’ve quit, you must understand that.”

“Peppe was amazed.”

“Shall I believe that there appeared a wealthy prince?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he, I wonder?”

“Does it make any difference?”

Peppe sat on a chair.

“Who would ever think... Are you happy?”

“Oh yes, I am. I want to forget everything and start a new life. Don’t I deserve to be happy for a while?”

“I will only be happy for you. You have always been different from the others. I felt quite different with you. The other girls are real whores, but you aren’t.

Come, let's take a walk. Let's sit in a café, have a cup of coffee and talk. It'll be our farewell party."

Margot looked into his eyes. Peppe's eyes smiled kindly at her.

They stopped at a little café downtown. They went in and took their seats.

"Two coffees," Peppe said to the waiter and asked Margot:

"Would you like to have some drink?"

"No thanks."

"Okay then. Bring me a double scotch" he added, looking at the waiter.

It was quiet in the café. Outside the evening was peaceful too. Peppe lit a cigarette and sat silent for some time. Then he asked Margot:

"Are you planning to stay here or are you moving to some other place?"

Margot didn't know for sure what she was going to do, but she answered firmly:

"No, I can't stay here. I hate everything I touch. Everything and everyone seem filthy to me except you and Lily, of course.

There came a long pause.

"If you happen to be in a trouble and need my help, you know where to find me. Don't be hesitant; I'm the same Peppe Segara. I can't change my life."

Margot smiled at him.

"Thank you, Peppe! You have always been very kind to me. And now, please, take me home; I'd like to be alone for some time."

They got into the car and drove slowly. They didn't speak on the way, and Peppe was looking into the rear window all the time.

They stopped at Margo's house.

"I wish you all the best, my dear girl," Peppe said. At that very moment a car

stopped abruptly by their side. Peppe put his hand into the inner pocket of his jacket, and Margot could only see a strange light followed by a terrible bang.

The car started as abruptly as it stopped.

Margot and Peppe were sitting motionless in their seats. The passers-by tried to avoid looking at the broken glass of the car.

In the morning the newspaper headlines announced:

The notorious criminal, Peppe Segara, is shot in his own car!

A month later, a car stopped at the mansion house of the Silva family.

Lola hurried to the car, meeting Enrique.

Enrique hugged her, whispering:

“This is my son, Luke De Silva, Lola.”

Luke was fast asleep in the back seat of the car.

1921

There were a lot of people in the streets.

It was morning twilight.

The line of the horseback riders, coming from Sololaki district, seemed to be endless.

People were standing in small crowds in Yerevan Square. They were talking nearly whispering, in very low voices.

Horse carriages were no longer moving in Golovinsk Avenue.

No one could smell the fragrance of the spring.

There were crowds of people in the street.

There were lots of them near Soboro as well.

It was obvious that something extraordinary, not quite comprehensible was going on.

New epoch was coming on.

There was a great variety of people, dressed alike, mixing up in the Government Building.

“What’s up?” a young man asked.

“Where is the government?” a middle-aged gentleman asked.

Nobody gave any answers.

An overcrowded ship left Batumi taking course due Istanbul.

The new epoch was coming on.

THE BRAND LABEL OF THE MAGLIANOS

Katanzaro is a beautiful, tiny town in South Italy. It’s famous for her potters.

Each family has its individual tradition. The individuality becomes explicit in the shape and coloring of the pottery.

Magliano is one of the oldest family names in Katanzaro and Magliano handicrafts can easily be distinguished from all the others. They say, the family has existed for three centuries already, and it was initiated by Jenaro Magliano himself, whose creations are still the pride of the town museum. The Maglianos are very proud of their famous ancestor.

Their workshop is near their house, and they spend all day working there.

Despite the fact that several of his off-springs followed the family business, the Grandpa Magliano left the Magliano stamp to Pedro, thus giving him the exclusive right of putting the brand label on the pottery.

The apprentices of the masters in each family are their own children or close relatives as a rule. Pedro had two apprentices: his own son, Antonio, and two nephews, Francesco and Jovani. The boys were all of the same age.

There were several machine tools in the workshop – one for Pedro, and the rest for the boys. Pedro was working, of course, and the boys were still learning the craft. It wasn't easy for them – the clay didn't easily obey them yet.

Francesco was a bit better than the others.

It was late evening when Pedro returned home. His wife got supper ready for him and they sat at table. Pedro seemed very tired; he was eating his supper slowly, taking a rest every now and then.

“I'm getting too tired these days,” he admitted.

His wife didn't answer anything. She poured some red wine into his glass. Pedro took a sip.

“I have been watching the boys for twenty-five years already. I have put the brand label on their pottery myself.” He took another sip and ran his hands down his white beard. “I made decision long ago – I'm leaving the stamp to Francesco, he deserves it better than the others.”

“Are you in mind?” his wife protested. “What about Antonio?”

“You can't understand it, woman,” the old man muttered without looking at her.

The very next day the rumor spread in the whole town that the Magliano stamp went to Francesco Magliano.

Antonio was upset all day long. His father tried to talk to him, but all in vain. He emptied the whole bottle of grappa, but was still quite sober. He paced the room up and down non-stop. Then he lay down and tried to sleep. He couldn't. He couldn't find peace. So he went on pacing till dawn. Then, as if something occurred to him, he put on his coat, ran out into the street, and hurried to the workshop. It was half dark there. He sat on a chair, scrutinizing his pottery. Then he came up to each sample, examined it again, and even touched it with his hands. He started to cry. In the end, he turned round rapidly and went decidedly to the door. Suddenly he stopped again and stood in the doorway his head drooping for a while. Then he snatched a stool and threw it at the biggest pots standing near him. It made him feel better. He broke all his pots, threw the stool on the floor and ran out of the workshop.

There was nobody in the street. Antonio went home, took some papers, documents and a little money out of the cupboard drawer, ran into the street again and headed towards the railway station. He bought a ticket for the Rejo die Calambria – Naples train, and sat on a bench, waiting for the train to arrive.

In Naples he stopped at the hotel “Volturno”. He strolled in the city for several days. He felt as if he was walking in a dream. He couldn't imagine his future life. He even thought of suicide, but then decided not to do it. He was drinking grappa all the time, and a lot of crazy ideas came to his misty mind. In the mornings

he suffered from a terrible hang-over, until he went downstairs to have another drink.

One fine day he discovered that he was nearly out of money. So he bought two glasses of grappa to kill the splitting headache and went to the port.

He was looking for a job all day long, but without any success. After several days of failure, he was suggested to do the job of a docker. He immediately agreed, as there was no other way out. His job was very poorly paid, so he had to leave the hotel and rent a tiny room near the docks. It was too damp in his room.

He got awfully tired first. Often he fell asleep not even having his supper or taking off his clothes. And early in the morning it all started again. The worst for him were the days when he had to carry the boxes of fish. He hated the smell of the fish. By and by all his clothes and his room smelt of fish.

In the end, he got used to this horrible smell too.

At night he often dreamt of Katanzaro, his workshop, and the colored crockery with the Magliano brand label. He never thought of going back. He simply rejected this idea.

A year passed, and he was working as a docker again. He never made friends with anybody. In the evenings he went to cheap restaurants to have a couple of glasses of grappa, and went back to his damp room.

One morning he decided not to go to the port. He went into a small restaurant near his house and took a glass of grappa. He spotted a well-dressed man at one of the tables, but he didn't pay much attention to him. His glass of grappa and breakfast were brought to him very soon. Antonio had his breakfast, drank grappa and took a cigarette out of his pocket. He was going to ask the waiter to bring him some matches when the stranger offered him his lighter. Antonio lit his cigarette,

thanked the man and sank into his thoughts.

“You don’t seem to be native here,” the stranger told him.

“Yes, I’m from Katanzaro; I’m working in the port here.”

“From Katanzaro?” the stranger asked in surprise. “It’s a beautiful town. How did you get here?”

“It’s a long story, sir,” Antonio answered ready to leave.

“You don’t sound very content with your job,” the stranger said.

Antonio looked at him in amazement. He muttered something in return and headed to the exit.

“My name is Caesaro De Stephanie,” the stranger said. “You can find me here, in case you need a help.”

Antonio nodded and left. That night he dreamt of the workshop, his machine tool, and the Magliano crockery again. He woke up very early next day. He washed his face and hands, had his breakfast, and went to the port.

“Where were you yesterday?” the chief docker asked him as soon as he saw him. “Today we are expecting a fishing boat, so we’ll have to work till late in the evening.”

Antonio imagined the wet sacks full of the stinking fish. He put his gnarled hands into his pockets, showed his back to the chief docker and went home. On his way home, he was thinking about the stranger: “Caesaro De Stephanie... How can he help me, I wonder?’ He was well-dressed, with good manners... No, I cannot go back to the port,” Antonio decided.

He didn’t go home; he went straight to the restaurant. The hall was practically empty. He gave a rapid glance to it and didn’t see the stranger there.

“Where can I find Caesaro Die Stephanie?” he asked the waiter.

“He is sitting on the verandah, as always,” answered the waiter. Antonio looked in the direction of verandah and noticed a man sitting there. So he went up to him, said hello, and asked very politely if he could sit at his table.

The stranger smiled at him, drew up the chair, pointed at it, and offered Antonio an expensive cigarette. Antonio took one cigarette and gave the package back to the man.

“Leave it to you, you’ll need it,” the stranger said with a smile.

“Thank you,” Antonio murmured and sat down.

“Can I do anything for you?” the stranger inquired.

“I’ve been living here for a year already and I’m working as a docker. But I am not able to work there any more. I can’t get used to it. I’d rather die from hunger than go back to my work,” Antonio said and kept silent for a while. Then he inhaled and went on:

“Would you please help me to find some other job? I would agree to do any job but mine.”

“Would you go back to the port?” the stranger asked. Antonio looked at him in amazement.

“So you wouldn’t agree to do anything,” the stranger giggled.

“That was what I told you, I would do anything but...”

“It was a joke,” he stranger interrupted him laughing aloud. “I’ll find something for you. Where do you live?”

“Near here, in the next quarter,” Antonio answered pointing his finger to the neighborhood.

“Okay. Let’s meet here in two days. Take this till then,” the stranger said giving him some money.

“No, no! I’m not asking you for money, I...”

“Take it. It isn’t a charity, it’s a loan. You’ll pay me back later,” the stranger admitted and put the money into Antonio’s pocket almost by force.

“Thank you ever so much,” Antonio muttered in a broken voice.

“Two days. Don’t forget!” the stranger said and stood up. I’ll meet you here in two days.”

Antonio was sitting at table extremely amazed. Then he ordered grappa, drank it, and went out of the restaurant. He found his landlord, paid him the rent, packed his luggage in a small bag and left. He went straight to the store to buy some clothes. The shop-assistants were surprised to watch him choosing his clothes with a great care. He asked them to wrap it all well, took a taxi and went to the hotel “Volturno”.

Almost nothing had changed there during the previous year. Only the hall was decorated with new flowers. He took the best apartment in the penthouse from where he could get an excellent view of the whole city. He sat into the armchair of his spacious balcony, turning his back to the port the only sight of which got on his nerves. “How could I stand it all for such a long time?” he thought and lit a cigarette. He sat enjoying himself for quite a long time. Then he got up, took off his clothes, wrapped them into a paper, made a small parcel and put it in the corridor, by his door. Then he went into the bathroom and took a bath. He lay in the foamy tub for a long time, and nearly fell asleep. Then he dried himself well with a nice towel, went back into the master room, lay on his huge bed, and fell fast asleep. In his sleep he dreamt of Katanzaro again. He dreamt of the stunningly beautiful crockery, stamped with the Magliano brand label, and Francesco holding the stamp in his hands.

In the evening he had his supper at the restaurant. He didn't feel at ease in his new clothes, he felt rather awkward. So he returned to his apartment, sat comfortably into his armchair, put his legs up on a low table, and smoked his cigarette.

Two days later, in the afternoon, Antonio went to the appointment. Caesaro De Stephanie was sitting on the verandah, smoking an expensive cigarette. Antonio came up to him and greeted him. Caesaro nodded an absent hello and only after that he recognized the young man. He scrutinized him with a smile.

"It seems, you have a good taste," he said. "I could hardly recognize you."

"Thank you," Antonio replied and took a seat.

"I have spoken to several people about you, but nothing proper has turned up yet. What did you do in Katanzaro before you came here?"

"I was a potter, but I'll never again take up this job."

"Really? I could never think you were a potter."

"It doesn't matter now. I'm ready to do any odd job."

"Any?" Caesaro smiled strangely. "Okay. I will need several more days, or rather a week."

"A week?" Antonio was disappointed.

"Don't worry. I'll help you until something descent turns up. This will be enough, I think. You will pay back your debt later," Caesaro added putting a roll of a considerable sum of money on the table. "Where are you staying now?"

"In Valturno," Antonio answered in a harsh voice.

"Great. Stay where you are, I'll visit you there in a week myself." With these words Caesaro stood up, patted Antonio on his shoulder, and hastily left the

restaurant.

Antonio looked at the money. “I couldn’t have earned this amount at the port even for three months’ work. What sort of a job is he going to offer me, I wonder?”

He put the money into the inner pocket of his jacket.

Some light music was playing in the foyer of the hotel. Antonio was sitting in an armchair, reading a newspaper, smoking a cigar and sipping some red wine when he heard a familiar voice from behind.

“Good evening, my friend.”

Antonio turned round and stood up. There was Caesaro standing there with a broad smile on his face.

“Please don’t get up,” he said and sat down into another armchair. “I’ve got good news for you. Now it’s up to you to decide. We’d better go upstairs and have a quiet talk there.

Antonio agreed.

Several minutes later the two were sitting on Antonio’s balcony. Caesaro was not in a hurry. He took out his cigarette and started to smoke. The smile had disappeared from his face which now looked inflexible.

“I’ve spoken to my friends about you. They are suggesting you a very serious business. You’ll be paid well. You will be able to pay me back and keep quite a considerable sum for yourself. If you do your job well, you’ll have a lot of orders.”

“I... I can’t go back to my craft, you know,” Antonio muttered. Caesaro gave him an evil giggle.

“Do you think anyone is going to pay you well for mixing clay?! I’m talking about something quite different.”

“Okay, okay! What shall I do?”

“Now listen to me very attentively and mind, if you can’t do your job properly, they’ll send us both to hell!”

“Yes, but... You haven’t told me yet what you want, and you are already threatening me...”

“You can refuse, of course. But in such a case, you’ll have to return your debt immediately.”

“It would be much better to tell me directly what I am expected to do.”

Caesaro took a big photo out of his pocket and put it on the table, in front of Antonio.

“Who’s this?” Antonio asked in a low voice.

“It doesn’t matter. The name and the address are written here. Read them, remember them and burn the photo. You’ll be given the gun tomorrow. I think everything is clear to you. You should do it within a week’s time.”

“We haven’t agreed on such a thing!” Antonio’s mouth went too dry to say more.

“You’ve assured me several times that you were ready to take up any business. But there is no use discussing the matter now. If you refuse, you’ll have to pay your debt right now.”

“I need some time. I’ll pay you back the whole sum.”

“Don’t interrupt me. There is another detail to be taken into consideration –

you know everything about the target now. Do you think they will let you go alive? You are the witness! They will hire another killer and merely give him two orders.”

Antonio felt desperate. Everything mixed up in his head. The fragments of Katanzaro, his workshop, his father’s face, his crockery, the Magliano brand label, Naples, the docks and the stranger – everything speeded in front of his feverish eyes.

“Don’t you dare to think about going to police! Your time is up. They’ll visit you on my behalf tomorrow and bring you the gun. They’ll give you the instructions. It’s not so hard, believe me.

Caesaro stood up and, before Antonio could answer anything, left his apartment.

Antonio woke up early next morning. He went to the restaurant. The restaurant was closed. So he sat in the hall and waited. He drank three glasses of grappa and thought nobody was going to visit him. He checked the time. It was already nine. He bought a bottle of grappa and went back to his apartment. It was raining outside. So he didn’t go out onto the verandah. He drank some more wine but stayed sober. He lay on his bed. The time went on very slowly. It was about eleven when there came a knock at the door. He got up reluctantly and shuffled to the door. He opened the door and saw a tall, thin, elderly man. The man entered the room not even greeting him. He shut the door behind him calmly, and told Antonio:

“Sit down, we are short of time.”

Antonio sat on his bed.

“Now listen to me very attentively. I am from Caesaro. You know everything about the target. It’s better to shoot at him near his house. It’s in a peaceful street. Don’t go there in the morning; evening is better. People are already tired, you know. Some are even drunk. Throw away the gun immediately. Don’t wear the clothes you’ll be wearing at that moment either after or before you do your job. Put on a cap of a smaller size than usual. Take it off and throw it into the litter bin. Shoot at him twice, and when he falls down, shoot a control shot at his head. It’ll be enough. Then go away quietly, don’t run. In fifty meters from his house there is a narrow street. Study your route well in advance. From that street you must turn to the central one and take a taxi. Don’t get out of the car at the hotel; get out about three hundred meters away. Don’t leave the hotel that day. You should not go out for several days more. Stay here and wait till Caesaro visits you. And mind, you should stay sober! Have you ever shot a gun?”

“Only a rifle.”

“Take it,” the man handed him a revolver. “Unload it and practice shooting. Your hand should not tremble.”

Antonio took the revolver with a trembling hand.

“How do I unload it?”

The man took the gun and took six bullets out of it very swiftly.

“I can’t do it!” Antonio muttered.

“It’s your problem,” answered the man. I also advise you not to shoot at him right away. You just pass him by the very first day and come back to the hotel. It’s better that way. And yes, Caesaro sent it to you,” he added and threw a pack of money on the table. Having done so, he disappeared behind the door.

Six years passed. Antonio fulfilled fourteen orders in Rome, Pescara, Campobasso, Poja, and the majority in Naples. He frequently changed the hotels. For some time now he was staying at the “Fernandina”. He was too nervous before each order and full of regret afterwards. He couldn’t get used to his “job”. He dealt only with Caesaro and never met those who made the orders. Neither did they know Antonio in person. He never took interest in his victims. It was much easier that way. He was never short of money; on the contrary – they paid him more than enough. But he sometimes still missed Catanzaro, his family, and the Magliano brand label. He was free of the old insult and didn’t care who put the stamp on the crockery. All these turned into the sweet memories now, and he felt a bit nostalgic.

He met Caesaro rather rarely now, and their meetings were brief and businesslike. He led a solitary life. They knew him by name in a few restaurants where nobody ever asked how he got his money and simply treated him as a businessman. One day, on coming back from a walk, he met Caesaro.

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ Caesaro said. ‘I’ve got a serious matter to discuss with you.’

Antonio was familiar with such offers, so he answered in a low voice:

“Let’s go upstairs, to my room.”

“No. You’d better come to my place at nine in the evening. I’ll explain everything clearly to you there.”

“Okay,” Antonio answered and they parted.

It was nine sharp when Antonio knocked at Caesaro’s door. Caesaro opened the door himself and showed Antonio into the room. There was a stranger in the room, and Antonio got startled. They had never talked in anybody’s

presence. Before he asked anything, Caesaro began to speak:

“Meet my friend, Alberto. Be sure, he’s the same as me.”

Antonio took his sit. He seemed a bit gloomy.

“Listen to Alberto. He will explain everything to you.”

“You will have to go to the south,” began the stranger, “to Catanzaro.”

Antonio was taken aback. He looked at Caesaro.

“You know I will never go there, don’t you?”

“It isn’t negotiable, it’s already decided,” Alberto interrupted him. “You’ll go there and find the man.” He took a photo out of his pocket and put it on the table. We don’t know his address, we only know his name. Caesaro told me that you know the town well.

Antonio glanced at the photo indifferently, but his blood curdled instantly – Francesco Magliano was smiling at him from the photo.

“Who ordered him?” he asked half whispering.

“None of your business,” Alberto answered. “You’ll do what you have to, and you will be paid well.”

“Whose order is it?” Antonio insisted. Alberto looked at Caesaro, then back at Antonio.

“Does it really matter to you?”

“Yes, it does,” answered Antonio.

“It’s my own order, there is nobody else’s interest,” answered Alberto.

Antonio stood up and started to walk in the room. The two men were sitting in the armchairs. At last Antonio stopped, looked at the picture again and addressed the two.

“I’ll make a good job of it. It’ll be done quite differently.”

“What do you mean,” smiled Alberto. “Explain yourself.”

Antonio thought for a moment. Then he took the gun out of his pocket quite unexpectedly, and shot first at Alberto and then at Caesaro. He shot them in the head, and then he sent a couple of bullets to their bodies, as he had been taught once, but in the reverse order.

He observed them for a while. Both were sitting quite stiff in their armchairs. Antonio picked up the photo, put it into his pocket, turned up the collar of his coat, then pulled his cap down to his eyes, put his hands into his pockets and went into the street stooping a little. He observed the street, went it down till the corner, and turned round the corner to the dark, narrow street. On the left there was a lit up window of a restaurant with the inscription “Regio die Calambria”. He went up to it, shaded his eyes with his hand and looked inside. The restaurant was almost empty. He went in and took a seat at the bar. He ordered two glasses of grappa, drank the wine and ordered a portion of steak. Then he sat at the corner table and sank deep into his thoughts. The gun felt very cold in his pocket.

He rubbed his hands and ran them over his hair. He was terribly hungry. The waiter brought his order some twenty minutes later. Antonio looked at the roast beef for some time, and felt sick. He felt a sort of disgust and lost his appetite. He rose slowly, went up to the counter, threw the money on it and left. He didn't know where to go. He was shivering. He felt a boundless freedom.

It was for the first time he had had such a sensation.

October2,2005

THOSE WERE BETTER TIMES

*The old King was badly wounded,
and Prince David carried him away
from the battle-field almost by force.*

Giorga was a tough guy. He was an excellent singer and dancer, and he was next to none in fisticuffs. Once, at a wedding party in a nearby village, he beat black and blue all the village men. Folks had been talking about the fight for quite a good while.

He looked very peaceful and calm at first sight though, smiling and talking modestly. But you could always trace sturdiness in his eyes.

He repaired the old house inherited from his father all on his own, cutting and carving shingles for the new roof with his own hands.

At the age of twenty, he was left quite alone and started to lead a solitary life. It was only his aunt Teo who visited him from time to time and did the washing and the cleaning for the young man.

But otherwise he was quite alone.

He owned a small plot of land which was enough for growing wheat and vine and keeping livestock.

In short, he was an independent man.

Giorga was twenty-two when the Russian-Turkish war broke out, and he was immediately recruited. He had been fighting for a year and a half, and came back

home lame.

Though lame he was, Giorga still managed to work hard. Soon he made friends and partners with the local fellows and they moved to South Georgia where they mostly worked as lumberjacks.

Having saved a little money, he moved back. He couldn't get used to the wet climate of the west where his wound would hurt him badly.

Now it was difficult for Giorga to stay all alone, with nobody around to say a word. He frequented his neighbors for a quiet talk, but it was not a real comfort for him.

He could never stay in one place for long.

* * *

The evening twilight was falling. It was the period of the day when crickets start chirping. Giorga was sitting on the balcony, smoking rough tobacco, spitting time to time and blowing away the ashes.

In short, he was sitting quite idly.

“Giorga!” a voice called him from behind the fence.

“Who's there?” Giorga replied rising to his feet.

“It's me, Tezika. Come down. Let me have a word with you,” was the answer.

“Come in, man. There is nobody here to interrupt with your word, you know”, Giorga called back rather reluctantly.

Tezika stepped over the garden fence, walked swiftly across the garden and up to the balcony.

“Listen here, how long are you going to live alone? You will go nuts pretty soon, buddy!”

“Boy! Is it why you came? You are not quite fresh there. Say something new.”

“My brother is having guests from the town. There is a girl among them, a real beauty!”

“So what?”

“So come with me and get acquainted with her. Who knows... Anyway, we could talk together and have a little drink”.

“Okay,” said Giorga and stood up.

* * *

“This is Giorga, and that’s my brother Tezika,” said the host, “Come in guys, and take your seats.

Both young men took their seats timidly, at the end of the table.

“My dear friends, let’s drink to the newcomers!” said a tall young man with a huge moustache. He seemed to be appointed toast-master. “I drink to your health, welfare and happiness, young men! Let our meeting be a lucky chance for us all!”

The rest of the feasters drank to the same.

Time and again Giorga glanced in the direction of the girl.

She proved to be a beauty indeed.

Soon somebody started to play the accordion, then the drums joined in and there started a real fun.

“I propose a toast to the Russian Tsar who put to rout the Turks!” the tall man said.

“Long live the Tsar!” the guests cried out unanimously.

“Were our Georgian Kings worse in any way?” said Giorga quite unexpectedly, as if somewhat offended. “Take the King Erekle, for instance”.

There fell a total silence.

“Cat got your tongues? Or am I wrong?”

The beauty sat smiling.

“Times are not what they were,” a young man in a military uniform answered.

“Hero is a hero. Heroism is the timeless notion!” Giorga raised his voice.

“Those were different times, my dear fellow. A good horse, a sharp sword and that’s all what it was. Now you need some brains too,” the officer insisted.

“Whatever next, your father be blessed! The young officer finds fault with King Erekle’s brains, ha?” Giorga raged again.

“What can a peasant like you know about the warfare? It’s not the same as plowing! You...” the officer wanted to add something, but he couldn’t for Giorga gave him a terrible blow on his jaw and knocked him (still sitting in his chair) down onto the floor.

Everything went upside down. Some were trying to sooth Giorga and some others were comforting the poor officer who had come back to himself by the time. The evening was spoiled.

Only the beauty kept smiling as before.

* * *

“Giorga, hey!” Tezika was standing on the balcony trying to get his friend’s attention. “Are you hitting the hay or what?”

Giorga raised his head from the pillow, looked through the window and went out onto the balcony in his underwear. His head was splitting with pain and his mind was not quite clear yet.

“What the hell is the matter with you? Why did you attack the poor man?” Tezika went on.

“He found fault with King Erekle. Son of a bitch!” Giorga got irritated again.

“Come on, buddy! Don’t scold *me* now. I do know who King Erekle was... You have frightened those townsmen to death, buddy!” giggled Tezika.

“Yeah... I must have offended your brother too seriously,” Giorga replied, “but they got on my nerves and I couldn’t help it, you know.” Giorga took a handful of water out of the barrel and poured it down on his face. He snorted and smiled at his friend.

“By the way, the girl was really beautiful,” he added casting his eyes down.

“Would not it be better then to get acquainted with her instead of starting a fight, you damned fool?”

“I’ll do it at a proper time,” Giorga answered. “Now let’s go to your brother’s. I want to apologize for the brawl. Joking aside, he is your elder brother and I have to respect him... What was the name of the...?”

“The officer?”

“No. What was *her* name?”

“Nutsiko.”

* * *

Giorga had been to the town several times before, but it was pretty difficult for him to orientate there. He found his destination stopping and asking people on

the way. But he couldn't find the very house she lived in, and spent the whole day walking round the neighborhood. He was ashamed to ask passers-by where the girl lived, because he thought it might ruin her reputation. It got dark but he still couldn't find her house. So he decided to spend the night in a tavern.

Next day he went on searching for the girl's house, wondering what to say on meeting her. How could he explain the reason of his hanging about in her neighborhood?

He walked the street up and down several times. In the end he stopped at one of the buildings.

A stout, elderly woman was watering flowers in the yard.

"Excuse me ma'am, could you please tell me where Nutsiko Mdivani lives?"

"Who are you, young man? I can't recognize you," the woman said.

"No wonder ma'am, you don't know me... I am a guest here," Giorga answered rather embarrassed.

"She lives in the next house, but she is not in at present," the woman said.

"Never mind, I'll call on her later," Giorga replied.

"Who knows when they are going to come back," the woman laughed. "You must be her relative, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," Giorga answered even more embarrassed and blushing.

"Nutsiko has run away to Petersburg with an officer. Her poor father is still looking for her".

Giorga stood frozen for a while, his mouth pretty dry.

Then, without saying good-bye, he turned round and went down the street.

He went back to his village by train that very day.

It was pouring with rain all the way back.

There were a lot of people in the carriage and it was too stuffy there.

The wounded leg hurt badly.

In Gori a lot more people got on the train.

Giorga sank deep into his thoughts.

He recalled the battles near Kars.

Then he recalled the officer and got angry again.

“He didn’t like King Erekle, the cowardly bastard!” he thought.

Then he sank deep into his thoughts again.

Soon he fell asleep.

He dreamed a little dream about Nutsiko. In his dream he knew that he would never see her again. So he stared at her as hard as he could. A strong jerk woke him up.

“She must be really very beautiful,” he said aloud.

The thin old man sitting next to him gave him a frightened look and moved aside.

September 24, 2009.

ABDUL KARIM

I am in Pakistan. I’m making another effort, five years later, to climb Nanga-Parbat⁹. Now there are two of us – a mountaineer from Shimshal¹⁰ and me. My companion’s name is Sarvar Paliungtar. We are going to join the rest of the expedition at the base camp. We are spending night in a village of Jell. We are surrounded by the local kids all day long. There is much ado and fuss around us.

Some are speaking Urdu, others are speaking the tongue of Shinas. Only Abdul Karim can speak both languages and manages a bit of English.

The locals don't leave us alone. Everything is new and amazing for them – the tents, our equipment and, of course, the camera they all try to peep in.

Abdul Karim talks non-stop. He follows me everywhere I go, and I am forced to make Sarvar interpret all the time.

Abdul Karim is about eight years old and is exceptionally bright and open-minded.

In the evening he suddenly approaches me and comes up with the strangest idea:

“Only we, Pakistanis and Arabs, are good folks. All the rest are bad and evil. I'll kill them all when I grow up; especially Indians!”

I'm looking at the kid in amazement, trying to guess what has made him hate something he doesn't know, something he has never seen before.

I do my best to assure him that he is talking nonsense, that it is unfair to hate the whole world around. I name a lot of countries and peoples that he has no idea about, trying at the same time to explain that there are good and bad folks everywhere.

But the kid turns a deaf ear to me. He insists on his idea, his eyes blazing with evil hatred.

In the end I ask him who has taught him such terrible things.

“My teacher”, the kid answers and looks aside.

I am at a loss. On the one hand, I don't want to say anything wrong about the teacher; on the other hand, I can't help saying something.

“You are misled, kid. You can read in Urdu, can’t you? And, I’m sure, you are taught Koran at school. So read it from beginning to end till I come back from the mountain. You will realize that it says nothing about hatred though you hate the whole world! If you see that I’m right, admit that you were wrong, Okay?”

Sarvar, pretty amazed himself, translates every little word I say.

In the morning we say good-bye to each other and I proceed my way to the camp.

* * *

We have been trying to climb the mountain for the whole month, but all in vain; neither I nor Sarvar can manage it.

On our way back we are totally exhausted. In the village of Jell I try to find Abdul Karim’s house and, before long, I find it with the help of the locals.

Abdul Karim is playing in the yard. He stops playing as soon as he spots me and sits down frowning, not uttering a single word. I wait for a while, hoping the kid will say something to me. But he doesn’t and I set off, not even once looking back at him. The cars are waiting for us near the Hallal Bridge. We put our luggage into the cars and I turn round. Abdul Karim is standing nearby. We take our seats and the cars take a speedy start.

Abdul Karim is running after my car waving his hands and trying to indicate something. I ask the driver to stop.

The car stops and Sarvar follows me to interpret again.

Abdul Karim is standing still, his head drooping. Then suddenly he looks up at me and says:

“I’ve read the book. You were right.”

He keeps silent for a while. Then he again looks at me smiling and adds:

“I love the world!” and runs home at breakneck speed.

We stand still for a while, watching the kid. Then we get back into the car and go on with our journey.

We spend the night in Chilas.¹¹

* * *

I'm leaving Pakistan.

I'm returning back home happy, realizing that somewhere in the remote village of Jell, in North Pakistan, there lives a little boy Abdul Karim who loves the world.

Pakistan, the Diamar Gorge

June 14, 2011.

A NEPALI STORY

In Katmandu, the capital city of Nepal, a huge expedition was getting ready to climb Mount Everest. There were about twenty people in the group.

All the mountaineers were mere acquaintances, but Gialtsen Nuru, Lakpa Sherpa and Fernando seemed to be close friends.

Three days later, the whole expedition was already in Katmandu, and one evening the group decided to go to the open-air restaurant. Gialtsen Nuru told everyone that he was engaged to Lakpa Sherpa, and that they would get married as soon as the expedition was over. “But at the moment, my main concern is to help Lakpa to climb Everest; she will be the first woman to climb it from Tibetan side,” he said.

Lakpa was sitting timidly, watching everyone around, but time and again she would look at Gialtsen Nuru, the famous Sherp mountaineer and her fiancé, with admiration.

Unlike the other Sherps, Lakpa was tall and had most delicate features. All the Sherps were fond of her, but the happiness of mutuality was all Gialtsen Nuru's.

The evening was a real fun. Everyone told some interesting old stories, drank a lot of beer and laughed a lot.

Sherps are very special people, always cheerful and merry in the town, and with great stamina in the mountains.

* * *

Two days later, the expedition packed their equipment and left for the Tibetan border. The base camp was located pretty far. It might take them six days to get there. And then there would start the major event: The expedition would be trying to get to the pick of Everest for a month and a half. Some of the mountaineers would succeed, but some others wouldn't.

Gialtsen Nuru stayed in Katmandu with several men. They were going to catch up with the group a week later.

The expedition took the heights by and by, spending nights in different villages. It was right to do so, for they got acclimatized without any problems.

* * *

Fernando was very attentive to Lakpa from the very first day, but nobody noticed it. His odd behavior became obvious and of common knowledge only on

the fifth day. Norbu Sherpa, Gialtsen Nuru's devoted friend, got very upset and indignant. He took Lakpa aside and said:

“Is anything wrong going on or have I gone mad? Have you forgotten all about your fiancé?”

Lakpa looked at him in amazement, but then she surrendered for she knew that Norbu was aware of everything.

“Fernando loves me,” she said, “He promised me to hire several Sherps to help me to get to the peak, and I will be the first Nepali woman who climbed Everest from Tibetan side... Then we'll go to Bergamo and have a lot of children,” she added turning her head aside, “I love him, too.”

“It can't be true!” exclaimed Norbu Sherpa, “How is it possible to fall seriously in love with a man in five days' time? What are you going to say to Gialtsen Nuru?”

“I don't know,” Lakpa answered, “What I know for sure is that I'm going to Bergamo with Fernando.”

Norbu Sherpa was dumbfounded. Nevertheless, he decided to talk to Fernando.

For two days he couldn't manage to do so. Besides, at times he thought it was none of his business... But when he recalled Gialtsen Nuru's eyes, full of love, he felt confirmed in his decision.

In the end, he arranged to be alone with Fernando and asked him right away:

“Tell me, is it true what Lakpa says, or have you got a different attitude to her?”

Fernando looked at Norbu with an absent look. Then he thought for a while and answered:

“I love her... And it’s my right to love her. We are going to leave for Bergamo.”

Norbu had nothing to reply. He felt that his heart sank... but he also felt it was none of his business.

* * *

Several days later, Gjaltsen Nuru and the other mountaineers arrived to the base camp. The meeting was awkward – all of the men felt uneasy. But then it was all settled, for Lakpa told her former fiancé everything herself, asking him to go away as soon as he could.

Gjaltsen Nuru didn’t leave his tent for three days, refusing to eat anything.

On the fourth day he came out with an expression of someone totally insane, said good-bye to his companions including Fernando, and several hours later he left the campground.

The team lost the best mountaineer and, possibly, the most reliable friend.

The expedition was coming to an end. Only two more days were left until the final step when Norbu noticed Lakpa Sherpa sitting sad by her tent.

When he neared her, she burst into tears. Having calmed down a little, she told Norbu:

“You were right; I have nothing to say in my defense... You also know that my life, despite Everest, came to an end. Sherps will never forgive me my betrayal!”

Norbu was puzzled. “But you are leaving for Bergamo, aren’t you?” he asked in amazement.

“No, I’m not,” was the answer. “It was only a fun for him,” she added, sobbing bitterly.

Norbu was dumbfounded once again, and he left the woman hastily.

Next day he got Fernando and asked him right away:

“Why have you ruined the lives of those two poor people? Is what Lakpa told me true, or did you play a joke on her?”

“Are you kidding? You are not as gullible as she is, are you? Don’t worry, she will find another gialtsen nuru for herself!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Norbu gave him a terrible blow on his jaw.

* * *

Three days later, the expedition went back to Katmandu from where each of the mountaineers left for their country with heavy hearts except Fernando, who left with the wires in his jaw.

After a fortnight, terrible news came from Nepal: Lakpa Sherpa committed suicide – she jumped from the cliff near Namche Bazaar¹², leaving behind the memory of a pretty young woman who had dreamt of climbing Everest and having a lot of children.

* * *

This sad story took place many years ago. A lot of people have visited Himalayas since. There is scarcely anyone who remembers what has really happened. Gialtsen Nuru left Nepal long ago, and nobody knows what has become of him.

But time and again, the sweethearts in Solo Khumbu, in the land of Sherps, can see the smiling face of Lakpa Sherpa high up in the clouds.

Nepal, 2011.

THE KING OF MUSTANG

Monarchy was abolished in Nepal several years ago. But in the north-west of the country, near the Tibetan border, there exists a tiny kingdom, with thirty thousand inhabitants, which still has a king. The King's name is Jidney. He is an extraordinary person – taking care of his beloved people day and night, and always going on foot like his ordinary compatriots. He is not accompanied by the guard or an escort or courtiers; He just walks all by himself, absolutely alone.

Jidney has lively eyes. He is a very smart man, always smiling and comprehending the others concerns from half a word.

* * *

“Jidney, I need your advice. I wish to grow rice on my plot. It might be profitable to sell it down in the lowlands.”

“You'd better find a companion and grow potatoes. Our land is favorable for potato-growing. Besides, we are short of water here, and they have a lot of rice of their own down in the lowlands.”

“Jidney, my father is against my going to Pokara¹³. He wants me to look after the herd of yaks. But I'd rather learn carpentry and come back here with good skills.”

“All right. I'll talk to your father and try to assure him.”

Or something like this: “My son doesn’t want to become a monk. And I want to send him to Samagaon Monastery to serve the Almighty there.”

“It’s his right to decide what to do. Don’t make him obey your will. By the way, be sure that we all serve the Almighty in our own way.”

This is what one can here in the streets of Lomtang¹⁴ when the King walks there.

* * *

He walks calmly, stopping everywhere, with a broad smile on his face. If asked, he gives a piece of advice. In the evening he eats a humble supper – nothing more than the poorest family in his kingdom.

He never interferes with anybody’s actions if they don’t infringe the other people’s rights.

He never calls himself the King. Only his people refer to him by this title. Sometimes, during the major Buddhist festivities, he wears the expensive clothes left by his predecessors. It makes him feel terribly awkward and embarrassed, and after each of such occasions, he prays for two days.

* * *

The province of Mustang is known for its dwarf horses, looking like ponies that walk up and down the streets stunningly decorated.

The local people resemble Tibetans a bit, but they are quite different from Nepalese.

The kingdom of Mustang had been closed to the foreigners for quite a long time, until Diney inherited the crown. Now the King is as happy as a child when guests turn up, and never refuses their request of an audience of him.

The Kingdom has no official status, for it is a part of Nepal. Yet everyone calls it The Kingdom of Mustang.

During the day, when the King gets tired of walking, he starts riding his little horse. He nods his head in a humble hello to everyone he meets in the street, as if a bit ashamed that he has got tired of going on foot.

In the evening, the old King returns to his simple but very cozy residence. He prays for some time. Then he goes to bed and starts meditating about what is going to happen to his kingdom and his people after his death... Will they be able to maintain their originality?

With these thoughts he falls asleep, and with the same thoughts he wakes up in the morning.

We can't even realize how alienated the people have become, and how amazing the difference between them is.

I am eager to tell everyone that in the tiny kingdom of Mustang there lives a king who is not at all different from his people; the king that is adored by his people to whom he listens and talks every day of the week.

This is what mankind should aim at. But, unfortunately, nobody can reach such perfection.

God bless the kingdom of Mustang and its King!

Pakistan

June 16, 2001

IT USED TO BE VERY NICE, INDEED

He was well over ninety. He was able to recall his past life only as separate episodes, as beautiful shots. Then, suddenly, the shots darkened and he came back to the actual reality.

Everybody called him Zachariah in his youth and later, when he grew old.

A small boy of seven, he would put his humble meal into his shoulder-bag, and go to watch on the grazing cattle. The day passed quickly, but when he came home, he would fall asleep at once, feeling pretty exhausted. In the morning everything started at the very beginning, but he was never bored.

He turned over in his bed and imagined the green meadow, then the colorful autumn hills, and then swimming in the pool, sitting on a buffalo back.

He recalled his Grandpa and Grandma, their chirruping speech, their slow, dignified, pleasant and interesting talk with the visiting neighbors.

Suddenly, as if recalling something important, he muttered:

“I wish I knew what language the children speak nowadays. I can’t understand a good half of it.”

His great grandson, with massy hair, worried expression on his face and a bottle of beer in his hand, entered the room.

“Listen here Grandpa, would you like to have a drink?”

Zachariah turned and looked at the youth, but he could neither guess who it was, nor what had been said to him.

Having got no answer, his great grandson left the room.

Zachariah recalled his eldest brother Gigo’s wedding. The toast master had been invited from the nearby village. He didn’t remember his name, but he could

see him with his mental eye – elderly, tall, strongly-built, dressed in the Georgian national garment. He was a real orator. He could tell some exciting stories woven in his toasts so masterfully that it was a real pleasure to listen to him. He was drinking wine out of a clay bowl during the whole party.

Zachariah’s memory carried him to another episode.

The fisticuffs and wrestling were rare, but very just, honorable and heroic. The rivals would always kiss and hug each other when the fight was over.

And how graciously all of them danced! He could clearly see every detail. The dancers were sliding on the ground, hardly touching it with their feet.

“Can they dance like that on the bare ground now? Not, of course!” he thought to himself.

He recalled his first dance, when he invited the village girl he had taken to. He danced with such a drive that the ground almost burned under his feet.

A blackout again.

Some sounds interfered with his vision. He listened. It seemed someone was attempting to sing something. “But it doesn’t sound like a song at all,” he thought.

The sound became stronger and louder until it turned into a scream at the highest pitch of the voice, and the scream was accompanied by loud, bang-like sounds.

Zachariah recalled his elder brother. He was an excellent singer indeed. Each time he started to sing, everybody was their ears. Then they all tried to join him.

The old man kept listening to the virtual singing – to the old Georgian religious hymn “Thou Art the Vineyard”. Then he closed his eyes and thought: “I wish I were there, with them. What on earth am I doing here?” and fell into a sweet slumber.

Now he was already fast asleep. Only the sounds of the fiery Georgian folk song “Chakrulo” could wake him up again.

Pakistan, June 19, 2011

IN THE DESERT

Ali Ibn Said lay dying in the desert. Two of his sons – the eldest and the middling – were standing by his side, watching him very attentively.

The sun was already setting, and the man lay dying in a tent. He could hardly speak but it was obvious he wanted to say something very important.

“You know what a life I lived. It was a sinful life, and I don’t want you to do the same,” the old man muttered.

“I have robbed a lot of caravans in this desert, and I have killed a lot of people. I kidnapped both my wives from a robbed caravan, and I killed their former husbands.”

It was hard for him to proceed, and his sons moisturized his lips.

“I don’t remember ever taking a pity on anybody, though many of my victims asked me to let them live. I know that I’m going to go to hell, for Allah will never forgive me my cruelty. None of my men are alive, and I’ll join them there in no time. Some of them died of old age, and others fell in the battles.”

He stopped talking for a while, took a little rest, and then went on.

“I was cruel to everyone I met in the desert. I was kind only to my wives and you, my children.”

“Allah is gracious, Father; he will have mercy on you and forgive you if you try to repent,” said the younger son.

“Don’t you interrupt me! It’s impossible to forgive me. What’s worse, I don’t regret anything. I have always taken pleasure in hurting people.

Once, a long time ago, I was having a rest in an oasis. My men had come to know that a huge caravan was traveling several riding days away from us. There were about hundred men, women and children in the caravan, and they were carrying a real fortune with them.

We had been preparing for the attack for two days. I gathered a group of thirty men. They were all bloodthirsty and ruthless fighters.”

The sons knew a lot about their father, but they had no idea of what he was telling them now.

“We soon caught up with them. Some twenty men were standing on guard of the caravan. We killed them all so quickly that they even were not able to resist us.”

The old man’s eyes shone with a strange delight; as if he was attacking his victims fiercely while talking to his sons.

He paused again, sipped some water and went on with his story:

“The men died like heroes. I have never regretted killing them. And I’ve never thought about their families. We left the bodies to the beasts, right in the desert.

We divided their fortune between us but it didn’t seem enough for us. So we decided to sell our captives into slavery in El-Bayda.*¹⁵

There was a long way ahead us, and we were short of food. We avoided the populated places.

I remember the greed with which we divided food between us. We took much for ourselves and gave too little to the captives. And we hardly gave any water to them.

I will never forget how a young woman begged me to give some water to her child. I got rid of her with the help of a whip. Next day the woman followed her way without the child.

Now I recall the exhausted and wizened faces of the children who were no longer able even to beg for anything.

I didn't feel any sympathy for them. None of the children reached El-Bayda. We could have dropped in at some places and got some water, but we tried to avoid inevitable fights.

None of us felt sorry for the murdered and perished, or took a tiny wee bit of pity on them.”

The brothers listened to the description of the cruel events frozen all over. It was incredible that those atrocities were committed by a human, and that the human was their own father.

None of them tried again to comfort their dying father, assuring him that Allah would forgive him.

“You should have understood by now that I can't be forgiven. So much so that I don't even regret what I have done. At times I regret killing the children though, and that's why I don't want to die with my natural death. I want to experience the worst thing that might happen to an Arab. I want to die from the hand of my own sons. I want you to cut me to pieces and leave my remains in the desert to feast the animals.

You should know that it's not a request, I have never asked you for anything; it's my last order and you, my sons, have to obey it. Don't be afraid. Allah will not punish you for this.

Doing so, you will kill a Shaitan¹⁶ , and fulfill your father's last will.”

The sun had already reached its zenith when the two warriors, riding loaded camels, set off, leaving the human remains behind them.

After some time, the elder one said with a feeble, broken voice: “Let Allah take mercy over our souls.”

They say, it all happened during the early years of the previous century.

Pakistan, June 20, 2011

STRAY DOGS

Them calls us stray dogs. So what? Let them do as them wishes. On the other hand, us **is** stray dogs indeed, for nobody don't let us enter them homes, and we don't have no masters.

A friend of mine from the neighborin' quarter sleeps in various yards and entrance halls. So what? He is a smart doggie anyway. He can understand not only cursin' and naggin', but a normal speech of them humans. I mean it. And he hasn't even spent no single day at school.

Them who is well-bred in the best families, them who done been taught how to give a paw to them masters or when to give them voices, are still awfully misbehaved. Them runs out into the street for five minute, pee at some wall, pollute the environment and rushes back to them clean and polished parquet floors again.

Have them done been taught at school to pollute them others' habitat and then sleep peacefully, shampooed all over, in them comfortable easy-chairs? And them masters, them giant mans who walks them out, says nothing to that horrible fact. How can us manage to teach them a good lesson for this terrible disrespect? Them huge guys, the masters, is ready to call special organization that 'takes care' of the stray dogs, catches them, turns them into soap or sends them to the eternal sleep!

Nay, I ain't not complaining. I just don't understand why folks regards us as stray doggies and them as thoroughbreds? In what way is them better then us is? Is them smarter, prettier or better-behaved?

Us don't relies on nobody. Us wins our own bread ourselves. It's only a rare case when some good guy offers us a generous food nowadays. Them good guy folks vanished long ago. There was lots of them earlier though.

But in some way us is happier than them is, indeed. Them gets married after them masters' will or with the help of the whole team of the match-makers. But us marries only the bitches us likes and loves. Believe me, if I take to some bitch, I can follow her to the other end of the city without no moment of hesitation.

Can them molly-coddles takes a sweet bone to them sweethearts from one end of the city to the other?

Them can my ass!

Pard'n me for using the impertinent tongue, for me is a stray dog. But every word me says comes from the bottom of me heart.

Everything comes from the bottom of us hearts – both hatred and love.

Them intelligent hounds done been taught to hunt or eat people up for ages. Wretched, ain't it? If a person done no wrong to me, why should me eats him up?

As for hunting, well, all of us done been after us game since us done born.

Us don't dance to nobody else's music. Us can never be led by the noses.
Us hunt when us is hungry!

Well, me is not goin' to sue you for the violation of us rights, of course. Neither is me goin' to beg you to take care of us. It's no use, me knows. But me will remind you of something: don't forget that you should not ignore us. If there is some kind of problem in our district, us can solve it much better than them shampooed cuddle puppies.

So, my dear fellars, think twice before you calls us stray dogs and worship them artificial creatures.

Us has us own place in the city and under the sun. So you mind your P's and Q's while dealin' with us!

Me apologizes for me ignorant talk. Me is a stray doggie, you know, and me lacks good breedin'.

Pakistan, June 20, 2011.

THE CAPTAIN

In Casablanca, in the café Tubkala on the beach, you would often see an old sailor. His tanned face, rough features, thick, gnarled and a bit deformed fingers – all suggested that he had been at sea for a long time.

He spent most part of the day in the café or on the beach. When he got bored with sitting still in the café, he went out and took a slow walk along the shore. His clothes were fit for any sort of weather. Most of all he enjoyed taking a stroll in bad weather. He would put on his waterproof coat and, as if challenging the weather, walk as slowly as he could. At times he paused and gazed at the rough

waters of the ocean, his gaze searching for someone or something beyond the huge waves.

The café was frequented by the young sailors who took their places making a loud noise. They got pretty drunk and left the café with the same loud noise.

At such instances, the old man seemed even more sunken in his sad thoughts. He kept his eye on the young sailors, and sometimes even didn't quite catch what the waiters said to him.

Usually, he didn't drink much. More often he smoked a lot, and gazed at the ocean through the café window.

The rumor went that he used to be the captain of a huge cargo ship for quite a while, and that his ship wrecked and most of his men perished in a terrible storm near Port Elizabeth. Only he and a few of his sailors had survived. The natives also claimed that he could never recover after this tragic event and the nasty feeling of guilt. There were a lot of other stories about the old man, but nobody knew anything for sure.

He was word-grudging. His orders were short and laconic, and if anyone tried to talk to him, he gave them only brief answers just to show that he didn't feel like having a long conversation.

Nobody knew where he lived. In the late evenings, right before the café closed for night, he went out and strolled along the shore very slowly.

The years passed by indifferently, resembling one another, until one fine day the old man came to the café accompanied by a dog. He tied the dog near the entrance and asked the waiter to give him a small bowl. Since then he always fed the dog out of that bowl. The man and the dog took long walks together and went

home together. It was quite impossible to state the breeding of the dog, but it was beautiful and seemed to be quite clever.

Those days nobody could imagine the captain without his dog. They were together all the time. You could see the old man kneeling on the beach, saying something to his companion. The companion listened to him very attentively, as if catching the meaning of every word. The man treated the animal like his peer and never talked to him in a baby talk or showed any kind of disrespect towards him.

In short, the old man's life changed thoroughly. He wasn't seen alone any more, and he even cheered up a little.

Days went by, and everyone noticed that those two proved to be alike. They even walked with the same gait – slow and solemn. Whenever the old man stopped, the dog immediately sat down by his feet, and they gazed at the ocean for hours.

When the winter arrived, the old man made a warm coat for the dog. They walked all day long in the city, always along the shore, of course.

In the café people tried to choose a proper name for the dog, but the old man chose it himself and addressed him as *Mr. Fisher*.

Nobody had any idea who Mr. Fisher was or why the old man gave this name to his dog.

It was already evening, and there were a few people in the café. As usual, the old man was sitting by the window, gazing at the ocean. Time and again he looked at the dog lying quietly at the door and smiled at him. Then he looked back at the ocean.

The door of the café opened with a loud bang and several drunk men came in. They took their seats by the counter and started to talk aloud.

Some time later, one of them stood up and noticed the dog.

“Hey, look at the bastard! I’ve been looking for him for ages, and here he is! He even has a collar!” the man admitted, trying to pool the leash. The dog gnashed his teeth and retreated a little.

“Now gnashing your teeth at me, hah?” – shouted the man and gave the poor dog a strong kick on his side.

The dog groaned and bit the man on his foot.

The events developed dramatically.

“You son of a bitch!” the man screamed, took a small gun out of his pocket and fired two shots at the poor dog.

The dog fell down dead.

The old man stood up slowly, went towards the man, took a large jack-knife out of his pocket and stabbed him twice between his ribs.

* * *

The trial didn’t take long. There were only a few people in the court when the judge asked the accused what the motive of the murder was. There followed a brief but very clear answer:

“He killed my friend!”

After a short pause, he added:

“He killed my last hope!”

Nobody had seen the old man since then. Some people say that having served his time, he went to live in another city. Some others claim that he died in the prison. But nobody is deeply concerned with his fate.

Pakistan, July 2,2011

A PILGRIM

There was a very long way ahead, and very little food left. He was shuffling along the road with great difficulty. His clothes were ragged. Now and again he leaned on his stick, resting a little. Then he proceeded his way. He drank water out of the creeks he happened to come across.

Villages were scarce on his way. He visited them full of hope, and left them totally disappointed.

He asked for charity at every house, but he had never been shown in. He spent nights outside. It was a rare case when somebody offered him a piece of bread. He had been traveling for quite a while now, and everywhere he stopped he was met with indifference, and was even laughed at. Now he knew for sure that sympathy – one of the major traits of humanity – had disappeared forever. Having left one of the villages, he stopped in a meadow and meditated for a long time.

He recalled nearly every village he had visited.

Something sank down his stomach.

He was extremely exhausted.

He looked up into the sky. He kept looking for some time, and then he muttered to himself:

“What has happened to these poor creatures, I wonder?”

He kept thinking for a little while, and then added:

“It seems it’s very early yet.”

He sat down.

He kept sitting for a while, and then he suddenly vanished.

Pakistan, July3,2011

HOME COMING

That day the weather was wretched. It was raining heavily, and the evening gloom was falling rapidly.

A middle-aged man, soaking wet and stooping under the weight of his drenched clothes, was walking slowly along the street. He seemed to be indifferent to the rain since he was walking with a peaceful air on his face.

He attempted to light a cigarette but he couldn't, his cigarette and matches soaking instantly. He threw them away, put his hands into his pockets, shivered a little, and went on walking.

There was nobody in the street. Only a couple of cars passed by, and he also spotted a stray dog running across the street and round the corner.

The man, Otar by the name, knew where he was heading for, but he was not in a hurry. Perhaps, it was of no use hurrying any more – he had been already wet through anyway.

He stopped at the familiar house.

“I haven't been here for some twenty or even thirty years,” he thought and rang the bell.

The door was answered by a woman of forty. She couldn't recognize him at once, but when she did, her face froze in amazement.

“When did you arrive?” she asked in a low voice, having regained her senses.

“Today morning,” Otar answered looking into her eyes.

The rain was pouring down his head, sticking his hair to his face, but the man stood still.

“Come in, you are wet all over,” the woman murmured.

Otar went in, took off his wet, old-fashioned overcoat and put it down at the wall. Only now he felt how very chilled he was. He coughed a couple of times and swept his wet hair back with his hands in embarrassment.

They went into the sitting room. Nothing had changed here, except that everything seemed a bit faded in the course of time. The fire was blazing in the same fireplace, tiled in brown tiles, like some twenty years ago.

Otar wanted to take a seat, but he was ashamed, for he was wet. So he went up to the fireplace and exposed himself to the blazing fire. He felt better now, and he relaxed, letting his thoughts carry him away into the past.

He was deeply attached to this house where he had spent nearly half of his adolescence and youth.

He remembered this room, brightly lit up at birthday parties that used to last till dawn; He remembered the small wine glasses, the high flown toasts so much typical of the young men; the out of place laughter of the girls; the gramophone, and the hard, thick gramophone records; and how they saw the girls home at dawn, walking along the empty streets.

Then, suddenly, it all sank into the mist.

Now he heard the sound of the cargo train wheels, of the shaking about wooden carriages; the human voices speaking foreign languages at different stations; the clicking and groaning of the carriage doors when the huge cans of hot water were brought in – that cherished and blessed hot water that kept their bellies warm for a while, going in gulps down their throats and their stomachs.

He felt drowsy.

He could see the frozen barrack, a glimmering bulb swinging outside, and a cross-cut saw – the only means of keeping oneself a little warm.

They walked along the narrow path cut in the crispy snow, wearing felt boots. They walked to the place of work a bit high-spirited, and came back shuffling, thoroughly exhausted.

He remembered the first tree he had cut down. It fell down with a loud crash. He watched the falling giant, still alive, with his eyes full of frozen tears.

Soon he got used to this horrible scene. With every fallen tree there started a new episode, so much resembling the previous ones abundant in yellowish faces, hollow cheeks, silenced coughing, low and rumbling sound of the lungs, and the typhoid fever that rapidly decreased the number of the imprisoned in the barracks.

There were all sorts of people around: people of different faiths and different cultures: the bearded ones, the ones with Finish knives hidden in their boots, those with close cropped moustaches, and those with round faces, as well as those who got double portions of food and visited the administrative building pretty often.

Suddenly he came back to reality again.

He felt a warm touch of a hand on his shoulder.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Hot water,” he answered, smiling at his odd answer.

Hot tea with sugar and a slice of lemon felt very pleasant. It warmed his stomach first and then the whole of his body.

His clothes had already dried on him.

He didn't feel cold any more.

He felt a pain, but he didn't know where it came from.

It was difficult for him to start conversation.

The woman took the initiative.

“Why didn't you write to me?”

“There was nothing to write about. I simply had to bear it all.”

“Did you?”

“No,” he said and smiled again.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Nothing. I’ve returned. That’s what matters now.

He kept silent and still for a while, thinking about something. Then he ran his hands down his grey face, coughed again and sipped his tea.

The woman looked at his hands and sank into the memories.

She remembered those hands playing the piano with the long, ivory fingers, and the audience listening to the charming sounds of the instrument. She remembered the happy faces of the girls that were in love with him. She remembered Mozart, Schubert, and Rachmaninoff. She remembered the compliments said in his address and him, casting his eyes down in embarrassment.

The sound of strange silenced and deep cough dragged her back to the miserable reality.

She now stared at his face.

Hollow eyes, dark grey complexion, protruded cheek bones, firmly shut mouth, sharp chin and frozen glance.

“Tell me something. Why are you sitting like a dumb?” the woman protested.

“I’m tired, a bit tired,” he said smiling humbly, like he would smile some twenty years ago.

It was drizzling a little.

The procession consisted of ten people.

They stopped at the old grave fenced with a rusted iron fence.

They lowered the coffin into the grave silently.

Two undertakers were helping them.

They drank several glasses of wine, sprinkling the grave with half a glass.

Nobody shed a single tear.

They finished their job and stood still at the gates of the graveyard for a while.

“Let’s go to my place,” the tall man suggested.

“No. Otar was fond of my house; he would prefer to go there,” the woman answered.

“Okay,” the tall man agreed.

“Anyway, it’s good he managed to arrive,” the short fat man admitted rubbing his chilled hands.

It was late autumn.

The streets were covered with dry leaves.

November, 2011, Tbilisi

AUTUMN ARRIVED

It was rather cold. The wind was sweeping the dry leaves to and fro.

A man in a worn-out coat was sitting on a bench in the garden. He was wearing a faded hat that must have been black long ago. He was sitting there with his hands in his pockets and looking down at the ground.

He was concerned with the planets.

“If the sun loses its heat, what will become of all these people on the earth? They will turn into icicles”, he thought.

“The Jupiter protects us... Otherwise, numerous small planets would crash into the earth and the terrible disaster would be inevitable. If, god forbid, the Jupiter loses gravitation, what will become with all these people?” he went on thinking.

“We, the humans, are the result of the disaster...Might it be that another disaster puts an end to the mankind?” He kept thinking and looking at the ground. “What makes them all, those poor souls, sleep so peacefully?” he whispered looking back at high building with the dark windows through which two stout women in white overalls were looking.

“They say he used to be a great scientist. Did you know that?” one of them admitted.