НА ПЕРЕКРЕСТКЕ

Сборник Рассказов Писателей Южного Кавказа

AT THE CROSSROADS

Collection of Stories of South Caucasian Writers

На перекрестке

Рассказы писателей Южного Кавказа

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AT THE CROSSROADS

STORIES FROM SELECTED WRITERS OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Daur Nachkebia

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Minash

On the way Beslan remembered everything he had heard about Minash and what she had been the witness of.

Minash's son had been lost during that big war. She had received the letter confirming his loss, but had not believed it, although she had asked Makhial, then a young boy, who had just started work as a postman, to read it to her three times. The letter had said that her son was lost, that is, his location was not known, but there was no word about him dying in hospital from wounds or meeting a heroic death in battle. So she waited for him. More than fifteen years had passed since then, but her hope had never died, and now it was even stronger and greater than before.

Evidently, such a long expectation does not pass through a human being without leaving any signs. More so, when you are waiting for someone who many years ago disappeared, as if they had been a dream, whose bones have probably been digested by the earth. Maybe all that had made Minash slightly strange.

So if someone told her about the start of a new war, and that all men would be sent off to the war, she would try to please the guest who brought this good news to her: she would lay a table, bring out her famous Chacha (Vodka) – cleaning the dust from the bottle with the dress she was wearing, she would put the bottle of Chacha in front of the guest, who would expect strong vodka.

Who knows, maybe Minash hoped that the new war would return her son, taken by the first one, as one fire could be stopped by a new one.

Minash lived a long way from the village, and few people would visit her without reason. Her guests were mainly woodcutters, forest men and hunters. Makhial, the postman, also visited her on his old bicycle once a month – bringing her pension. He was the one telling her stories about the end of mankind.

But Makhial did not provide comprehensive information: he wandered around things, dropping hints, telling her that the time was near when all men would be killed, but never specifying when this would happen. After putting into her hand the usual scruffy and shabby rubles and drinking a glass of Chacha, he would mount his bicycle and leave her alone.

Minash's place was always the last stop on Makhial's journey, where he went after he had covered the whole village and distributed all the pensions; and in every home a glass of vodka awaited him. After covering the whole village and getting vodka at every house, the strong Chacha at Minash's place would make Makhial really drunk. He would leave the house, travel for several meters, then suddenly get off his bicycle and walk alongside it with an angry mutter: "what a place…."

Minash was unable to comprehend whether it was the Chacha or the bicycle which was making Makhial walk, but she was happy in her heart that Makhial was having to walk, as he again had not brought the promised "red notes".

What was it about "red notes"?

Generally Makhial gave her her pension in one ruble notes, which were shabby and scrubby. But Minash wanted him to bring it in "red notes" with the bald-headed figure of Lenin on them. Makhial had always promised, but never kept his word. Chacha made him talk, and he would make an oath that next

time he would bring the bald-headed notes. But each next time was the same – he brought the same scrubby rubbles.

Therefore Minash did not believe Makhial's stories about the coming war, but she still spent the next few days expecting the footsteps of upcoming disaster. Many days the dawn was as blood-red as it had been before the previous war, although the next morning nothing had happened and everything was as it had been.

The day after receiving her pension Minash would visit the store several kilometres from her house. She would buy the soap with the nice smell, and sometimes, but very seldom, male perfume.

The fat store clerk would frown at the sight of Minash approaching. Minash really was very difficult. She would ask questions about each item – what was its price, what was its purpose, where did it come from - and would ask the clerk to give her the item to touch. The fat clerk would fulfill Minash's instructions without a word. Minash learned what all the items were, touched them, took them and put them in various positions, sometimes even smelled them.

After satisfying her curiosity she would take some soap and pay for it with the scrubby and shabby rubles. Then she would check the change and mutter: "what a terrible price!" and leave the store using her stick, which was getting shorter and shorter, as she was shortening it with a knife.

It was Victory Day. The Pioneer Group Leader in Beslan's class was a surprisingly fast, smart and resourceful girl. She got the idea of congratulating Minash, who had been forgotten by everybody in the village, on the Victory. A new book was regularly published at that time, "about all the participants of the great war" as its preface stated.

The latest edition was the 1 962th volume of the book.

In their red, rustling ties, carrying the book bound in black leather with golden letters, the group visited Minash that afternoon. The group leader wore red lipstick and was a bit taller than the other group members, as she was

wearing high heeled shoes. She was leading the group onwards with strong steps.

The sun was shining …

When the group leader had finished her speech: "Dear sons of the motherland…", "Who severely battled against the enemy…", "Whose names and heroism will be never forgotten…..," she put the book in front of Minash. Page 1.993 contained the names of those deceased and lost on the Sixth of March, and there was her son's name, written on the page in tiny letters, difficult to read.

Minash pointed her finger at these short, unfinished phrases, as if hoping to feel whether he were alive or not.

But the paper was silent; the letters stood cold and lonely, and the letters purposelessly covered the whiteness of the page.

The little heart of Beslan, who was wearing a white shirt, squeezed as it felt the pain of the old woman. He gave her one glance and then turned from her in fear: the pain was enormous.

Now Beslan and John, the soldier from their group, were walking in the direction of the old woman's house.

They had left the first line of defense, as there was nothing else they could do, and moved forward to the second one, and more than 20 houses were transferred to the Georgians as a result. In the chaos nobody had remembered about the old woman, and there were no neighbours around to look after her.

If she was in the hands of the Georgians they would start talking about Abkhaz running from Georgians in panic and leaving their elderly people behind.

In the darkness they saw Minash's house. There was a weak light in the window.

Minash was washing dishes in a corner. A kerosene lamp was on the wall

– there was no electricity, and the lamp was giving little light.

"Who is there?!" Minash asked, with fear in her voice.

"Don't be afraid, we are here," replied Beslan.

Minash moved away from the cupboard and approached Beslan. For some time she looked him up and down, studying him.

She had become even smaller, thought Beslan.

"I can't recognize you dear, whose grandson are you?"

"Kadir's"

"Aha, Tarskhan's grandson, as you say! I, forgotten by death, call him Tarskhan. May God let you live long before his coming from the other world!.."

"It is dangerous to stay here, Minash, collect your belongings …"

"What has happened? Why should I leave my house?"

"War…"

Minash looked at Beslan with suspicion.

"Oh, my mother! What do I hear! Then Makhial was not lying? I have heard some shooting, and the airplanes have been flying too low, almost touching the pear tree tops. And what a terrible noise there has been, God bless us! My heart has been telling me this was not good, but whether there is a war, I have not thought…."

"Take all your necessary belongings and let's go."

Minash fell deep in thought, not knowing what to do. Then she decided, and started saying:

"Dear, I will die soon, today - tomorrow; it is not worth making you look after me… it is better that I stay..."

"Look at her, this old woman has lost her brains!" John said, surprised.

Minash did not understand what he was saying, but felt by the tone of his voice that something she was doing was bothering him. As a kind of excuse, she added:

"You tried to help me, may your efforts bring good to you!"

"Minash, the enemy will be here in a few minutes, what will you do then?!"

"Whatever happens, it is better for me to stay at home."

"I'm telling you: she has lost her brains!" said John.

They tried to persuade her, but Minash remained firm: "No!" and "No!".

"What is she repeating! Let us take her ourselves! She will not be able to say a word!" John was losing his temper.

Minash understood that things were going against her and started reproaching them, first with a low voice then a higher and higher one:

"Pity your mother, dear! As soon as she heard a noise she would run out of the house. She could not sleep at night, lying in bed, listening. Therefore a fire was lain in the fireplace, and a pot with food in it was hung in the fireplace. She kept the pot of hot water separate: if you returned tired from your journey the warm water would take away your tiredness, and all your sins. It would leave the soul clean and white, my dear…. and now an empty house will greet you! ….."

Minash said all this while looking at Beslan, approaching him, and he felt bad.

Suddenly Minash changed her intonation to one of anger:

"It is your, your fault, men! It is not enough what you have done with me, now you have come here armed; decided that would easily finish with the old woman. Do you believe in your strength?! But I will curse you and you will not be able to even take a step, ever! ….."

But whatever she said, it was impossible to just leave her there….

It was past midnight. The autumn sky was clear and stars were visible, spread over the Milky Way. The bullets of a distant battle sparkled in the night and painted a dotted line in the sky. Then, losing power or reaching their natural limit, they extinguished themselves one after another.

Minash was silent. John had carried her almost all the way. She had kept a small bundle close to her breast.

Beslan felt that he had become vulnerable, as if he had lost the protection of the armour which he had had before. All he had strived for since the very beginning of the war – and he only wanted to be a cold, insensible rock, not allow anything warm to touch his heart - all this attacked him now.

Beslan had been on the other side of fear for a long time – at least he thought so then – as when your sight is not directed to the future, and is not captured by it, fear disappears, as shadows disappear after sundown…

But now his feelings were different, and the reason for this was hope, the hope which had helped Minash live through these long years. Bright traces of life were added to the traces of death in his soul, put there by the war.

Everything was about life: his walks in the night, in which he cautiously listened to each sound, and the uncertainty ahead of him, the bullet which would be aimed at him and was already put into the gun – everything was about life…

Beslan knew that he was trapped, but tried not to acknowledge this. For now he had to carry a heavier burden: the blood which will come out of him if he is wounded; it will be warm, but only the skies will believe that he has really existed ….

Before they finish their journey, the big hope in Minash, which she has carried through her youth, maturity and age, across the lonely years among people, alone with her pain, will die. But the thin thread of life will not be torn off: Beslan has to carry it further… and someone else will carry it further still…

In the morning a carload of refugees left for Tkuarchel. Minash had been put in this car. When parting, she had opened her bundle and given him a packet.

"Dear, you may need this…"

When they got back they opened the packet. It was full of outdated, old, scrubby rubles.

But it touched Beslan. He remembered the bullets extinguishing themselves in the sky, unable to go beyond the limit set for them…

On the third day the news of Minash's death reached them.

The Single-Eyed Sky

"Don't say there is no destiny. There is, surely there is!" said Aslan, all of a sudden.

We were plodding along the dusty Eshera road, passing countless humpbacked hills. Heat, ready to melt the sky on top of us, two sleepless nights, heavy submachine guns – we trudged with our last effort.

Our severest enemy is the sun, cemented in the sky. One can be saved from an enemy bullet, but no one can escape the fiery eye of the sun: it instantly burns exposed flesh like pieces of coal.

Aslan and I were silent for the most of the time, talking to each other only

when passing through the most dangerous places. There are a lot of such places along the road. Mostly sheltered by hills and forests from evil eyes, the road was exposed at certain points. You have to pass through the dangerous sections until you saw the other side, otherwise a bullet will catch you. We have lost quite a few people this way.

"You are saying wise things, who taught you that?" I asked.

"Do not laugh, I'll tell you a story that will make you gasp with surprise."

"Go ahead, I have loved tales since my childhood."

"It's not a fairy tale, but a true story!.."

We fell on the grass near the roadside, under huge oak tree. We threw off our heavy black boots and took off our sweaty shirts so that we could catch our breath in the cool shade.

We had never uttered a word about life and death; avoiding them, we always pretended we didn't believe they were real, they were something invented. When life and death are close to each other they can immediately merge if you make slightest mistaken step, and you are jammed between them – so you automatically keep a still tongue in your head. We hide hope deep in our hearts, concealing it from alien eyes, and bear its burden alone.

But now Aslan was going to violate the unwritten rule we had kept until now.

A thick black cloud hung over Sukhum/i, obviously something was burning. It hung like that, motionless, for a while, oppressing the city; then slowly began to rise, widen and fade away.

"We were positioned near the upper bridge then," Aslan began. "We lived in an abandoned house; the owners, Armenians, had left the house when it all began; so we didn't lack food and beverages. I had never eaten so much jam before, I still feel sick when I remember it... the Georgians were firing howitzers at our positions, not allowing us to raise our heads. None of their shells reached our positions even accidentally, but they hit points further up the

high hills and the slope we were at the foot of. Only spent, smoking fragments reached us, that was all …

"Lying on my back I felt the coldness of the ground slowly and implacably penetrating my body; my blood was freezing. The ground was gravitating me towards itself, trampling the dry, fragile grass underneath me. Its hugs were friendly and strong: it seemed I would soon drown in it, like in the water, and disappear without leaving a trace. Its unbounded thickness will squeeze me and the light will die forever…

"That night I was on guard from 1 to 3 a.m. I selected a secluded nook near the fence, facing the river and the bank. My eyes were almost closed, I had begun to sink into a dream, and then suddenly terrible visions stroked me. I startled, regained consciousness and carefully rummaged around the area … I sat like that for about an hour, struggling with sleep. Suddenly I heard a voice nearby. I still don't know whether this was real or just a piece of the next dream. No matter who he might have been, he was whispering in my ear: "Stand up and go!" This was said as if he were asking for something, but at the same time insisting, almost ordering me, to do it. I stood up and went, half asleep, without understanding anything. I had hardly taken two steps when the strongest thunder shook the earth: a missile had fallen nearby. In the place where I had been sitting few seconds ago, a huge, gaping crater had appeared, the ground had been turned upside down and fumes were coming up."

"You could hardly have seen all this at night," I said impatiently.

"Didn't I say there was a full moon?"

"I don't think so…"

"It's not so important - listen further. I took a few more steps and managed to take cover behind a pear tree standing on its own, and this saved my life. In the morning we saw a fist-sized fragment stuck in the trunk of the tree, which had been flying towards my back…

"The clouds over Sukhum/i turned from black to grey …

"The sky was looking over us like a vigilant eye. When it looks down dumbly like that, something sown in me in the womb of eternity awakes and

convinces me that I and the sky were once united, and only later separated – it had gone up and I had come down.

"I raised my hand to the sky. The thumb. The forefinger – now the finger pushing the trigger to shoot. Middle finger, fourth finger and little finger – now twisting the lock of the rifle. And the palm – measuring out the gunpowder. Our relationship, our indissoluble ties, our anguish for each other is as old as the world: it had appeared when I had.

"Looking at my hand felt like touching an ancient, fundamental truth. Veins, twisted in secret ways, were seen blue through the skin. They conveyed my blood together with that truth.

"My palm with its spread fingers pointed to the deaf sky: "Here I am!""

"Everything can happen in war, but this incident was amazing in many ways. First of all, the voice. Secondly, I was behind the tree at the moment of the explosion. Only a few seconds passed between these two things, the voice and the explosion, and if I had gone on ahead or lagged behind even for an instant, not even my dust would have been left … "

"But you wouldn't have been able to wag your tongue so much either…", I said.

I wanted to turn the story into a joke due to some silly superstition. Aslan was trying to find a name for what is hidden from us, and I didn't like this because it was further complicating the present tough situation.

"You are kidding, and I still cannot get over this."

"Are you afraid?"

"It's not a matter of fear. I have thought a lot about this incident. What made someone in Kelasuri fire a howitzer at that very moment? And the voice? Whose voice was that? And was there any voice at all? Why did the missile hit at the very moment I took cover behind the tree? … I haven't found an answer. I only understand that nothing happens in vain."

"How is that so?"

"It is! It is as if everything has been decided up in heaven. We can't avoid death, as once we couldn't escape our birth, but its owner planted that pear tree in obedience to a higher reason, not his own will. Without knowing what he was doing he followed the established order, in brief, he was used as a weapon. What about everything else? The person who built that house, the people I talked to, the person who assigned me to guard duty that night, the day I was born on…"

"The person who beat you every winter at noon?" I continued, "the first star which appeared in the sky that night? The shoes of your grandmother's niece's granddaughter, thrown in the trash? The dream you had when you were seven years, seven months and seven days old? What about the dog, barking at the mother of the man who shot at you with the howitzer, when she was carrying him in her womb?.."

"What about the splinter stuck between the pointing and middle fingers of my grandfather, when he was cutting the wood?" I was glad Aslan was playing the game now, he had become understandable again, and close to me, as before. "And the bullet that cut the little finger of your father's teacher, who used to pull his ears? The stone, torn off the cliff and fallen into the gorge?.."

"And the first woman with whom you suffered failure? The bird which dropped on you whilst flying over your head? The branch of persimmon broken under your feet? The elephant which died in faraway Africa when you were exerting yourself in the toilet because of constipation? The star fallen from the sky? The scaffold your head will roll down from?.. apparently as soon as the world emerged, it began thinking about you."

Aslan smiled.

"I haven't said that. I meant that everyone's destinies – those alive, or dead, or not born yet – are interconnected in the way that my breath today can cause a storm tomorrow, moving my fingers can result in thunder after a thousand years, or unprecedented snow, or someone's death, or… "

"Or it will lead a fly into a web … this is nonsense, just words. Everything that can be seen with the eyes is real, everything else is invented, dream. A man is locked in his body; there is only emptiness and silence outside. Don't be in a hurry, the worms will be coming out of all of us soon…"

Aslan was quiet, looking away. Then, without turning to me, he pronounced quietly:

"I think that the world lives not only by what the eyes see and believe in…"

The cloud over Sokhumi spread and turned into a white pillar rising above it.

The leaves on the trees withered, wrinkling in the heat, the branches peeped through the foliage like the bones of old men.

Two explosions occurred suddenly, one after the other, near the lower bridge.

"Ours are in trouble," Aslan said.

It was time to pack. Unwillingly we got up, burdened with munitions and weapons, and started.

The sun, pursuing us severely, was not spreading across the sky anymore, but peacefully forming a fiery ball. This ball was slowly drooping, gradually turning pink and growing.

The place we were approaching was dangerous – from the other side of the hill it was plainly visible. One side of the slope ran down steeply to Gumista, the other ascended equally sharply. Rocks, fallen from the heights, lay on the road. There were no bushes nearby, not a single tree, no place to shelter.

It was not easy to make the decision to attempt to cross those few meters. We could take the pathway branching off the main road a little lower down. It would make our journey longer, but we would be able to bypass the unfortunate place.

We started out together, running as fast as fatigue and the burden on our shoulders would allow us to. We ran together, to protect ourselves, as otherwise the sniper on the opposite bank, if he missed one, would definitely hit the other.

We had almost reached a thicket where we would be safe. But suddenly I saw in the corner of my eye that Aslan had fallen down. "He has stumbled, but that's fine, he will stand up" I thought, as I ran to the first tree without stopping and hid behind the trunk.

The shot had already sounded, and I had already heard it, but I hadn't believed it yet, trying to put that moment off.

I turned around. Aslan was trying to stand up, leaning on his right hand, but his load wouldn't allow him to rise, and it bowed him down to the ground.

The second bullet made him fall into the whitish dust.

I rushed over to him. Another bullet disturbed the dust near my feet, and was followed by another shot. I fell next to Aslan.

He was dying.

"Damn you …" he said, but so quietly that I could hardly hear; he probably meant the sniper.

"Don't be afraid, I'll do it right now, right now!" I hugged him close to me so that I could crawl with him into the trees.

But he resisted, trying to escape from my hands to somewhere, and then fell quiet.

I turned him over and closed his eyes. He was heavy, but not in the way he would be later.

Suddenly Aslan's body shuddered: the sniper had noticed me, but Aslan had saved my life.

I hugged him, lying next to him. The body of my friend, who had saved my life, was growing gradually colder.

Thus we, the living and the dead, hugging each other, lay under the single-eyed sky …

In Defense of Habydzh

Whether Habydzh, who was made notorious by the proverb: "Two armies fought viciously, but Habydzh was busy plowing", ever said anything in his defense remains unknown. Maybe he considered it unnecessary, or tried but failed, and then decided it was not worth bothering. How do you explain to people trapped in a war why you insist on plowing at such an important time! Should he mumble "it's high time for plowing, the war will wait"? No one would have understood him. Such a comment would have been dismissed as the babble of a child, not the words of a man!

Habydzh, I dare say, had no problem with all this. He was beaten only with biting words, not in any more serious way.

However, he has now been quietly plowing for several centuries, and the battle still roars not far from him.

On the very first day he was annoyed by the noise when he, a greenhorn, started plowing. The plow had been inherited from his father; as it was covered with soil, it seemed as if grass would start growing from it. It's true that his father also ignored battles and fights. Considering his age, it was surprising how successful he was at his activity. Otherwise he would have left his son something else for a heritage (father didn't even hint about his rifle: he let it rust, and said: "Here is the plow for you!")

Father also ignored battles, but was not honored by being included in a proverb. Apparently he could do things quietly and not be a pain in the neck.

Or maybe during his lifetime battles being fought while people plowed nearby was quite usual, and people did not pay much attention to it. Big deal – the war! Big deal – a plowman! For as long as there were plowmen, people would still go to war. But the example of soldiers, who trust their own fragile bodies and souls to mere chance with light-hearted disregard, is extremely contagious, and many plowmen have left the unplowed valleys, and their bulls, and run headlong into battle…

The young Habydzh pressed the plow onwards with his still feeble might, waved the long branch and the bulls slowly dragged the plow along. And then through the annoying noise of the battle, he heard a sound, the most delightful sound he had ever heard: with a distinct tone the plowed land was laying down, breathing with inner heat.

Habydzh was puzzled. He even stopped, confusing the bulls, who stared at him with the whites of their huge eyes. When he came to himself, he shouted at them and they reluctantly moved on, but he heard the noise again. The noise of battle tried to suppress it. But then and later, in fact for years afterwards, Habydzh heard the same sound and could do nothing but listen to it, as no other sound or noise could ever suppress it ...

Now Habydzh is an old man. Wrinkles have covered his face, counting the time. He is sitting bored in front of the fire, unwillingly listening to what is happening at some distance. He has kept the sweet sound in his heart, but while plowing the ground today his ears heard nothing but the noise of bloody battle. It is awful weather, not a stray cat can be seen outside, but the bastards don't care, Habydzh thought with surprise, and secret admiration, looking at the rifle hung on the wall.

During boring winters, with no plowing to be done, out of curiosity he would sometimes think to go out and see those restless fighters who were stubbornly fighting all the time, but he then remembered the sound which would be waiting for him a month or two later and be upset with his stupid impulse, unworthy of a plowman.

But how powerful, how attractive is the sound of clanging which now reacheshis ears! Almost as powerful as that other sound. Or has Habydzh forgot about that sound, has it faded out of his mind?!

Maybe he should take the rifle down from the wall, clean it until it shines and …

Leave Habydzh alone, sitting in front of the fire with the glow of the flames on his sad face. If he decides to join the military, we will know about it from a new proverb, coined to justify him. In the old proverb he is described as a person insensitive to the sounds of war. But we know: Habydzh was in fact mesmerized by another sound – not roaring loud, but bleating meekly and eternally.

The Wolf

"Everything was different then – quite a number of predators lived in the woods. Most of them caused damage: the cattle which didn't return in the evening were considered lost - the next day bare bones were found…"

Today grandfather had once again started telling this story, which he had told many times, but as usual he made some modifications. At the last retelling of the story the beginning was slightly different: "A lot of different beasts resided in our forests in those days. They caused huge damage to the farmers: if cattle got stuck in the forest at night you would find them torn in pieces in the morning".

Today grandfather's voice was different too – it sounded tired. Probably because he had been working hard in the garden the whole day – pollarding apple-trees, fixing the fence.

Grandfather's sunken voice, the new words, and the different sequence of the words – everything made sense for the boy, and all the words hid a secret in their conception. Every single time these unimportant changes awakened hope in his heart: accumulating from retelling to retelling, eventually they might change the ending – in which the grandfather kills the wolf. It doesn't matter how – perhaps the grandfather will miss, or the rifle will misfire, or the wolf will escape.

Nothing escaped the boy's attention – the grandfather shaking his head, emphasizing the words, looking at the boy eagerly listening to him. It seemed

to him that every single new word intruded into the grandfather's story served a single purpose: to save the wolf from the bullet inevitably pursuing him. Besides, today grandfather had deliberately led his narration to this conclusion: his speech had slowed down as he neared the end, he proceeded with effort - as if he wanted to forget the old version, wanted this story to have a different ending.

Grandfather had often fought with himself and the words. But every single time something stronger had overcome him.

Maybe today it will be different and the words, in their flow, will bypass the final "I killed the wolf"?

"The winter was unusually severe that year. The snow was knee-deep, and lay there for a long time, freezing through, covering the ground with a layer of ice solid as a stone. Beasts searching for food came down from the mountains, covered in sharp frost, to the lowlands, to our forests. At night, and sometimes even during daytime, wolves prowled in our villages, tearing apart heedless cattle. One or two extremely insolent wolves were shot, but this brought us no relief: livestock was still torn apart, we suffered losses. Thus the farmers decided to organize an ambush for the predators. It was done in the following way – some hunters sat on one side of the forest, and on the other the rest walked around making a noise, frightening the beasts. In fear, they rushed in the direction of where the first group of hunters lay in ambush …"

Grandfather added firewood to the fire, and listened. It was quiet in the store room. Earlier grandmother had been heard washing dishes: cups, plates, spoons … probably she was now drying those dishes with a towel, the old man decided.

When the shuffling of an old woman was heard, he continued the story.

"I had had a passion for hunting since childhood. Whenever possible I shouldered my rifle and went off into the forest. I was lucky that Azhveipsh[13] was gracious to me. After a while I became famous as a lucky hunter, whose

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[13] Azhveipsh (*Abkhazian.*) – the deity of hunting.

eye was sharp and whose bullets hit the spot.

"I prepared the powder, cast the bullets myself (it's not a big deal to kill with case-shot, but one needs skill to kill with a single bullet), cleaned the gun so it shone. I killed a lot of animals: wild boar, deer, roes, jackals, bears - their skins, horns, curved fangs decorated our Akuaskya[14] – but I had never encountered a wolf before. When it happened, it was as if I were under a spell – on seeing the wolf, I couldn't even pull the trigger, let alone shoot it. The beast disappeared in a trice as if not it, but its ghost, had appeared before me. I had shot flying birds, but with the wolf..."

When young he was always very upset when he had bad luck. How could grandfather look the villagers in the eyes if luck turned away from him again?!.

At dawn, people went down into the forest. The hunters, and those who just had guns they could use and knew how to shoot, hid in ambush. The rest of them made an unimaginable noise, frightening the beast.

Grandfather positioned himself in the forked branches of a huge oak tree, with a narrow path beneath it.

Fine snow was falling from the sky. Afterwards there was a big snowfall and severe cold, but that day nature was restraining itself. Lonely trees, lining the air with bare branches, stood, estranged from each other.

They had to wait for a long while. The voices of the beaters were approaching closer and closer, several shots stroked the frozen air, but still no beast appeared in grandfather's direction. A couple of hares fearfully dove into the bushes, and a fox ran along the path, looking around in fear a couple of times, but no wolf.

He had almost lost hope when suddenly … he saw it!

It was walking along the path straight towards him. The burly, stately wolf trotted unhurriedly, now and then turning his head away in disgust,

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[14] Akuaskya (*Abkhazian*) – a big wooden house on poles.

unwillingly, in the direction of the shots. The severe winter and lack of food had affected him – he was thin, his bones could be seen under his faded fur. But this couldn't hide the fact that no wolf has never experienced either physical breakdown or low spirits.

When the wolf approached within firing range, grandfather gave a short strong whistle. The wolf stopped as if rooted to the ground, jerked his head and looked around. He was looking without fear, and for a moment it seemed to grandfather that their eyes had met – and the wolf's yellow eyes were looking at him coldly, ruthlessly, with inconceivable blame.

He fired.

The wolf jumped up. It bounced a few meters. Fell down. Became silent.

"It was hit directly in the head …"

"It spun on the spot like a spindle and fell down," grandfather had said when telling the story last time. He had also said that while sitting in the oak tree, "the clouds spread away and the sun peeped through them". But the most surprising thing today was the fact that almost half of the story had been omitted:

"For three years already that inveterate wolf had given no rest to the village: now it would attack a bull, now a horse, or burst into a herd of goats like a hurricane, choking half of them to death. Whatever the experienced hunters did, they couldn't shoot it – they never usually failed, but as soon as they targeted the wolf, their bullets missed it. "Huge!" everyone said, unanimously, when describing the wolf.

Grandfather had listened to people say this before, but not believed it, as he thought the story had been invented by unlucky hunters. He didn't believe it until the wolf tore apart their big white buffalo. It then became clear: a mysterious beast had settled in their forest.

Once at night a wild howling had woken him up. Only the night itself, when it cannot stand its own darkness any more, can howl like that. It sounded as if the beast, howling lonely in the darkness, was expelling the whole pain of

the world.

He sat up in bed with a jerk. Cold sweat was flowing down him.

Next day all the people in the village were talking about this incident, which had aroused fear in everyone.

He too was horrified. His heart beat strenuously when he recalled that howl. He drew an image of the wolf: powerful, good-looking, fearful…

He decided to kill the beast. His heart was telling him: "they cannot live side by side under the moon – it was either him or the wolf …"

Later they went out of the amatsurta[15] and entered the akuaskya where they usually slept.

"You are frightening the boy with these tales!" grandma whispered, "you have grown old but gained no prudence…"

When the lights were turned off in the amatsurta, the night embraced everything. Initially he decided: night will not allow them to take even a step, as the night clustered round them so densely, stubbornly. But grandfather, holding his hand, easily walked forward – the night opened his embraces and made way.

It came to the boy's mind that the trace of their bodies was shining through the darkness and looked around. But the darkness was falling behind them immediately, covering everything visible.

The boy looked up at his grandfather. He was disappearing somewhere in the heights, among the twinkling stars. His rough, heavy hands began to cover with fluff, his nails were growing and sharpening. But they didn't pierce the boy's palm, they touched it carefully, with love.

The boy dropped his head but raised it again and looked up. There, up

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[15] Amatsurta (*Abkhazian*) – a separate kitchen.

among the stars, the eyes of the wolf – grandfather's eyes - were glowing.

The boy tightly pressed himself to his grandfather…

The Guest

Until today I was the only habitant, and owner, of this house. But recently I began to get the feeling that someone else also resides in the house. Some days ago I was finally assured of this: in the morning I found my shaving razor, which I had left clean when I had used it as always, caked in soap, foam and coarse hair.

I walked through the rooms and encountered traces of the someone who has decided to occupy my house. I hadn't noticed before, but now it seemed that someone had already been basing themselves in my house, free and easy, for a long time. Suddenly I remembered how I had once been woken at midnight by a strange noise, and how another time, when I had been busy with my books, cleaning the dust off them and carefully putting then back in their places, one of my doors had slammed. I had thought that it was the wind, the draught, as I couldn't imagine someone would dare enter my house without asking. And how could he get in anyway, when only I had the keys?

However it had happened, he had entered the house and, it seems, not temporarily, but as someone exercising their rights as the new owner. Everything proved this. The guest is not unduly familiar, knowing that he shouldn't try the patience of the owner, and is therefore quiet, gentle, doesn't raise his voice, doesn't interfere where he shouldn't - in a word, he knows his place. But this impudent fellow has changed the location of the furniture, replaced the wallpaper and put a nasty bunch of rainbow-colored flowers there instead of my mild colored ones …

As if this is not enough, he leaves all the windows wide open and never closes the door behind him. Can you imagine! Thieves, or simple strangers, can enter the house. Recently I almost haven't been out, but before I always locked the door and windows tightly, with keys.

Everything in the house was mine and required particularly careful handling.

But someone wants to ruin everything, and I don't know how to turn him out of my house. Initially it seemed to me, judging by his behavior, that he knew he is not the owner, who would handle everything with care. Otherwise he wouldn't leave the door unlocked and shake cigarette ash everywhere – he would know that the house could burn down. No, it didn't seem like he had decided to become the owner of the house, as he did everything as if it were child's play, without thinking.

Every morning he went somewhere, evidently to his work. And then peace reigned in the house and in my soul. As before!

But he always came back in the evening, and not alone but with friends. There was singing and dancing all night long… the poor house was shaking. Several times I thought about going up to them and scolding them, even turning them out. But I restrained myself, hoping the new occupant would go of his own accord. One day he would understand that people like him have nothing to do here, quietly pack his belongings and vanish.

But one day he overstepped the mark. Everything I had collected over the years he threw out and replaced with his things.

It was beyond my patience. The time had come to talk to him face to face and put an end to everything.

I listened carefully, so I could work out where he was. I heard a noise from the far end room. I rushed in, but before I got there he fled to the next room. He was singing something, pleased with himself.

I could not catch up with him, and as soon as I saw his self-confident back he disappeared, as if fading into the air.

In this long, gasping pursuit I accidentally hit it; it fell down – the chair.

I was frozen to the spot: the chair falling on the floor hadn't made any noise. I picked it up with all my might and struck it against the floor. It fell to pieces pitifully and with unexpected fragility. Its broken legs flew apart - but

not a single sound came from its throat.

In the house – in my house! - I was not heard.

The Message

The message stated that I had to wait for him at a specified place and time.

It was much earlier than the time stated, but as I couldn't wait any more I had come earlier. Our meeting is very important for me, and so as soon as I heard about it I became agitated and hurried up.

Initially, when I realized what the message was driving at, I was staggered; I couldn't believe for a long time that all these words referred to me. Why? What for? It's true that I have always lived in anticipation of something similar - that the cold of these words would catch me in my wanderings sooner or later. But I didn't think that the smashing conception of these words would be so unexpected and painful.

I decided to avoid the meeting, and selected other, not my usual, routes through the city. It seemed to me that despite the fact time would inevitably count down to the moment set for the meeting, maybe by avoiding the appointed place I'd avoid at least small portion of what was laid down for me.

Thus I roamed many roads, and lived in a fog for a long time …

But one day I realized: the message stated that I have to be on time, not be late. They are waiting for me. There is no sense in being stubborn; one has to go where his path leads him.

My burden became lighter, as if a stream had picked it up. The message didn't seem so painful anymore, and I was curious about whether the task it had set for me could be executed.

One doubt filled me all the time: was it real, the message?.. Or had I invented it myself, was I deceiving myself?..

But little by little I believed that the message could not be unreal, and then I rushed to the meeting.

I heard his steps, which I will never confuse with others. Something important was awaiting me, and not something which had existed before, and I was ready to accept it.

He got nearer and nearer.

He came up to me.

The one whose message I had received stood in front of me - and it was – me...

Translated from Abkhazian by the author