

MODERN AZERBAIJAN PROSE

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Contents

Modem Prose of the Ancient Land (<i>A Preface</i>)	3
A necessary explanation for the first two stories	7
Sabir Ahmadli	
Voice from the Sea	9
Black Flags.....	14
Issi Malikzudaeh	
The Neighbors	22
Magsud Ibrahim beyli	
A Cozy Place in the Public House	36
Akram Aylisli	
Heart is Strange	52
Anar	
Last Night of the Past Year.....	70
Elchin	
Hovsan Onion	85
Ze idulla Agayev	
Solitude	98
The Well.....	106
A slap	115
Kamal Abdulla	
Three, Four - Shut the Door	126
Afag Massud	
She.....	145

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The works of writers, included to this book, were translated into English sharply from the native language -Azerbaijani (only the story of M. Ibrahimbeyli was translated from Russian as he creates in Russian). It's very important, as majority of those not numerous works of Azerbaijani poets and writers had been translated into English through the second language - Russian, naturally, losing their national color.

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MODERN PROSE OF THE ANCIENT LAND

Dear English-speaking readers!

I don't think that all of you know whereabouts of Azerbaijan - newly founded independent state at the western shores of the Caspian Sea. The land of eternal fires! The cradel of the world's oil industry!

The people of Azerbaijan are famous with their rich traditions. Literary traditions of Azerbaijan take their beginning since the old times. Our first fundamental book -national epos "Kitabi-Dada Gorgud" ("The Book of Father Gorgud"), which consists of 12 chapters, appeared forth... 13 centuries ago!

Azerbaijani poetry gave the names of such huge figures as Nizami Ganjavi (XII century), Imadaddin Nassimi (XIV c.), Mohammad Fuzuli (XVIc.), Molla Panah Vagif (XVIIIc.),Mirza Alakbar Sabir (XX c.) and others to the treasury of the world literature. When comparing with the poetry, Azerbaijani prose is very young - if we don't take into account the works of folklore (sagas, eposes, tales, national bards' dastans, etc.), then the first realistic prose works appeared only in the XIX century, the founder of which was Mirza Fatali Akhundov. Our literature is proud of its prose and playwright branches. The names of Jalil Mammadguluzadah, Jafar Jabbarli, Husseyn Javid, Mammad Said Ordubadi, Suleyman Rahimov, Ali Valiyev, Mirza Ibrahimov, Ilyas Afandiyev, Ismayil Shikhli and others are known well not only inside the borders of Azerbaijan.

And now, through the book in your hands, you are in touch with new names. It must be added that many of these authors are very popular as in Azerbaijan, also in other countries: first of all the names of S.Ahmadli, M.Ibrahimbeyli, A.Aylisli, Anar and Elchin. All of them are honored by the precious title - People's Writer of Azerbaijan!

S.Ahmadli, the oldest author in this book, is the master of short novels and stories. He always differed from others by his courageous works, which as a rule appeared sharply in time. If we compare his activity with, for example, American writers, we can say that he is the Hemingway of Azerbaijan literature. Reading his works one must be clever enough to understand his ideas, having been masterly hidden under as if his simple sentences. His activity can be concerned to the term of "iceberg writer". Two short stories of Sabir Ahmadli, presented in this book, appeared immediately after bloody January 20, 1990 events, when Soviet troops occupied...its own city, bringing mornings to hundreds of families during one night. The author could be arrested and punished severely because of his strong protest against the policy of the Red Moscow. But he was brave enough to hang his black flags opposite the red ones of the huge power and its blood-greedy army.

There are writers, who never touched neither the sanguinary events of January 1990, nor the events, being carried out in Garabag, an unseparatable part of Azerbaijan, since 1987 up to now. They try to explain their silence with the words that they do need some time in order to understand and to value all of these blows to the

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

hearts of the Azerbaijan people. I don't believe in their sincerity; they'll never write about all of these wounds, having been opened in the hearts and souls of my nation. As they are afraid of the shadow of Moscow even now, where a lot of standards of the former Soviet Union had been changed towards the democratic values of the present world in Russia. But Sabir Ahmadli was never afraid, dedicating more than twenty short stories and three novels to those events.

M.Ibrahimbeyli is pure writer of a city life. He is the citizen of Baku from top to toe. He creates his works in Russian.

A.Aylisli mainly writes about the burning problems of villagers. In his stories and short stories he managed to create the literary image of his native village (in this he is close to America's Faulkner). Of course, he very often "returns" to Baku, but the writer's sympathy is in the village, among the peasantry.

Anar is one of those who can be considered a writer, a playwright, a critic, a scenario writer, a producer and a public figure. He did much in valuing the creative activities of Uzeyir Hajibeyov (the well-known Azeri composer and writer), Jalil Mammadguluzadah and Nazim Hikmat (the well-known Turkish poet). He also dedicated some of his works to his parents - popular Azeri poets of the XX century Rassul Riza and Nigar Rafibeyli. Anar mainly writes about the lives of townspeople.

Elchin is younger than the last two ones, but these three writers are concerned to the group of "60s", as since the 60-s of the last century some new and fresh air appeared in the Azerbaijan literature. Being a Doctor of Philology, Elchin is now one of the most active Azeri critics. In his prose Elchin very often appears in the villages surrounding Baku and masterly shows the inner world and interests of the people, living there. But Elchin is master of writing of plays (mainly comedies) and historical novels as well.

Late Issi Malikzadah is known as a writer and scenario writer. His prose differs from others by its humor, the sample of which is included to this book.

Kamal Abdulla is known as one of the linguists of Azerbaijan. But he is also busy with literary criticism. His new approach to the epos "Kitabi-Dada Gorgud" and revaluing it found their reflection in two books. He is an essayist, a poet and a playwright, creating his works in some specific way and specific style, differing from others.

The youngest author in this book is a lady - Afag Massud. The granddaughter of Ali Valiyev (mentioned above) and the daughter of the well-known critic late Massud Alizadah, she successfully joins together classical and modern traditions of Azerbaijan prose. We, of course, are proud of our women poets and writers and it can be mentioned that though being very young, nevertheless Afag carries the heavy burden of women writers on her fragile shoulders and carries out very successfully.

The author of this preface (and the translator of these works into English) was brave enough, including his three stories to this book.

My thanks to Missis Betty Blair, the founder and editor-in-chief of the magazine "Azerbaijan International", published in the USA, who encouraged me to these translations, published two samples in her magazine and then...forgot about her promise. But I do understand her, as she is busy carrying out the heavy burden of her magazine - very valuable press body for my native republic.

My special thanks to Miss Shanon Emerson who looked through my translations

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

and helped me to prepare them for publishing. Being originally from Ohio, USA, she now lives in Seattle, Washington. Shanon lived in Baku for nine months and edited these stories and plays though she was very busy here. And I was glad to hear her words of admiration about the modern Azerbaijan prose. That was great for me, as I had heard the opinion of the first reader as well, who is the carrier of English. And Shanon isn't an ordinary American reader. She writes poetry and keeps a journal.

Thank you, Miss Shanon Emerson! And then, thanks to all those English-speaking readers who will read these works and will be in touch with modern Azerbaijan prose - modern prose of the ancient land!

Zeidulla AGAYEV,

Doctor of Philology,
writer and translator.

December 5, 2002

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

**A NECESSARY EXPLANATION
FOR THE FIRST TWO STORIES**

At midnight on the eve of January 20, 1990, Soviet troops entered Baku and attacked from all directions, including the sea. It was an unprovoked attack by Soviet troops on unarmed citizens in Soviet Azerbaijan, and it sent shock waves throughout the Republic.

There had been earlier attacks in other Soviet Republics, but never on the scale that took place in Azerbaijan. In 1996, Soviet tanks attacked Almaty, Kazakhstan, and two people allegedly died. In April 1989, an attack was made on Tbilisi, Georgia, with official deaths stated at 16.

But in Baku under the pretense of "restoring order to the city", the Soviet army entered the city and brutally attempted to quell the independence movement, which had been gaining momentum. They mowed down everything in sight with their tanks and submachine guns.

Peaceful demonstrations were shot in the streets. Tanks crushed cars loaded with passengers still inside. A nine-year-old girl and her father, returning from a wedding, were shot while riding the bus home. Even people looking out of apartment windows and balconies were shot and killed. Unbelievably, soldiers opened fire on ambulances.

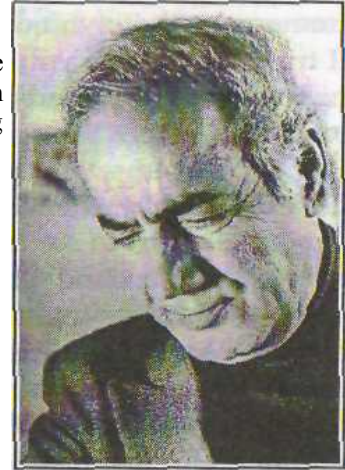
Officially, 132 people were killed that night, but Azerbaijanis suspect that the number was drastically underreported, perhaps by several hundred. Nobody really knows how many victims died in "Black January". Corpses were gathered before daybreak and hauled off to ships until they could be dumped at sea.

Azerbaijanis, though still under Soviet rule, went into shock and according to national tradition, mourned 40 days. The city was draped in black. Windows and balconies were covered with black materials; black strips of cloth were tied to windows, car antennas and trees. Adults boycotted their workplaces; children stayed home from school. The nation writhed in pain - in essence, these were the labor pains that would give birth to a new independent Republic. Even staunch communists burned their Party membership cards openly.

Sabir Ahmadli, who was honored as an Azerbaijani People's Writer during the Soviet period, heroically dared to publish the first literary short stories about this crisis, even though the dissolution of the Soviet Union would not take place for another 18 months. This collection of short stories came out as a book of 20 short stories, two of which are introduced to our readers in English: "Black Flags" and "Voice from the Sea".

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

Sabir Ahmadli (1930) - a writer and a publicist. He is the member of the Azerbaijan Writers' Union (AWU) since 1955. His first book was published in 1961. Known as the author of novels and short stories about the burning problems of our times. Published more than 20 books. He was given the honored title of the Azerbaijan's People's Writer in 1992.



Sabir AHMADLI

VOICE FROM THE SEA

Dear Mother,

First of all,hello. In case you're wondering about me, well, I'm not very far from Baku. I'm near the city of Darband¹. The weather is cloudy and rainy. But don't worry; I'm not cold at all. It's snowing at the sea, but that makes no difference to me. I'm not alone here, Momma.

It would be better if I told you everything just like it happened. I know you haven't been able to sleep or rest. I know you've been searching for me in all the hospitals and morgues in the city. Not a single son would dare tell his mother the agonies that I'm going to tell you. But I want you to know everything.

One moment....Oh, oh!

¹ *Darband, an ancient Azerbaijani city where many Azerbaijanis still live, is located north of Azerbaijan's present border in the Russian Federation of Daghistan.*

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

On the night of January 19th, that disastrous night, remember how you didn't want to let me go out of the house? I tried to reassure you that there was no need to be afraid, as I would be with friends and they would feel hurt if I didn't go out with them.

We were walking down Tbilisi Avenue, somewhere near Bilajari Heights, when the army started attacking the city. We were among the first to see the troops. Tanks descended on us. None of us could understand what was happening. We thought they were simply trying to frighten us - that once they reached us, they would stop. The bullets of the soldiers streaming after the tanks seem to be just flares...

One moment...Oh, oh! There are so many seals in the sea, Mother! One just passed by, swimming towards another body.

Yes, mommy dear! A lot of young boys around me were killed. I couldn't believe it. It was only when the bullets seared my own chest that began to understand. The tanks moved ahead, submachine guns blasting steadily, mowing everyone down. Then more armored vehicles appeared in the streets. The electricity suddenly went out, leaving the carnage in total darkness. What was going on? What had happened to my friends? I raised my head to see if I could find them.

Ambulances stopped nearby. Soldiers got out and began gathering the bodies that were lying in the road. There were dark, bearded men among them. They were wild and frantic. They began searching through all the shrubs and bushes. Whenever they discovered anyone lying on the ground, they fired their pistols and submachine guns again, killing those who had only been wounded and making sure the dead ones were really dead.

I heard their voices, "Bistro brat! Chtobi do ultra nichego ne ostalos! Chisto!" (In Russian, "Take them away quickly! Don't leave any evidence for the morning! Clear it away!")

They swept down and gathered us up, piling us inside the covered vans and moving on. I didn't know out whereabouts in the city, though I could tell that we were heading down towards the docks.

Military helicopters circled above. Two tankers were anchored nearby the bridge. Other military vehicles followed us. Their "freight" was being transferred to the ship immediately in order to make way for more vehicles that followed.

Mother, one moment....so many seals are swimming around me here in the sea!

They took us aboard the Hydrograph tanker. The plan had been highly masterminded. This time they had stretchers. Again they checked us, shining lights into our faces, right into our eyes. Bending down, they tried to find out if any of us were still breathing, but they rarely fired their pistols, as they didn't want to attract attention. They were saving their bullets. Seagulls were flying all around. On board, they covered us with canvas. Many of us were tied with rope and carried down into the cargo hold of the ship.

The ship moved away from the pier. It was already dawn. They knew they had to leave, but they didn't know where to go; they started getting worried. The Caspian Coast Guard was not allowing the military ships to leave the bay. Oil tankers cut off their escape and blockaded the bay. They began communicating by radio. We could hear everything from where we lay in the icy, steel hold. We could hear the

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

Soviet military forces ordering the Caspian Coast Guard to open the way immediately.

But they refused, insisting that they must inspect the ships. "What are you taking away?" they demanded.

"We are taking the families of our military men," the reply came. But the Caspians insisted on checking the military ships before they would allow a single one to leave the bay.

For three days, the Caspians held the military ships at port, not allowing them to enter the open sea. On the third day, a special Deputy Commission arrived and came out to the "Sabit Orujov" tanker¹ where we were being kept. Even the Commission wasn't allowed to check the military ships that moved in closer, threatening our ship. "If you don't open an exit, we'll open fire!"

The Caspians stood determinedly, "Your ships are full of corpses. During the night, when the army burst into the city, you carried those you murdered down to the piers. Now, you want to cover every trace of your crime." The gun turrets of the military ships took aim at the Caspian ships.

On the morning of January 22 (the third day) all the Caspian ships began blasting their horns. Their bleak mournful cries could be heard throughout the entire city. That's when they were burying the victims, Mother! The words of the Koran were being read. The voices penetrated even into the prison holds of the ships. On hearing that the victims of this event were to be buried up on the hill overlooking the city, someone mumbled, "If we could only be buried there, too, I wouldn't complain."

The fourth day, the military ship opened fire on the Caspian ships. Our ships answered. But the civilian ships could not withstand the torpedo attack. Holes appeared in many tankers; some of them caught fire. The blockade had been broken.

Our tanker headed out to the open sea...but waits, Mother, one moment. Be patient, Mother, oh, how many seals there are in the sea! Even white ones...²

¹The "Sabit Orujov" is the triple-decker ocean liner that served as the headquarters for the Caspian Coast Guard, it was so heavily damaged during the January 1990 events that it is no longer considered seaworthy and lies anchored at shore next to the Terminal Port across from the Absheron Hotel where it has been converted into a restaurant and bar.

² White implies Russian.

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

We sailed all night, at dawn, the ship's cranes began their work, lifting the cargo out of the holds. The bundles were carried to the edge of the boat. "Raz! Dva! Vzyali!" (One, two, heave away!) And the corpses were thrown into the sea. Afterward, body parts - arms, legs and heads - followed.

It was great torture! As if it wasn't enough what they had done to us, in addition to kicking us and shouting, "Vot vam Shahidlar Khiyabani!" (Here's your "Avenue of the Martyrs!")

Then we saw helicopters circling above us, Mother. Had they come to help us? They swooped down nearly touching the waves. Their doors opened and more men were pushed into the sea. They had no parachutes and so they soon disappeared into the waves, never to reappear. Oh, they weren't the men of airborne troops, they were ours. But they were brought by helicopters. Mother, it was if the entire sea had turned into a vast graveyard, from Astrakhan in the north to Lankaran in the south.

My dearly beloved Mother! Do you remember one evening my sisters, you and auntie from the neighborhood were sitting with us? It was spring; our exams had already begun. I told you my wish. I told you how I wanted to go to Odessa and enter the Sea Academy. You didn't approve. "You must lay beside me, my sweet one," you had told me. "You're the only brother of five sisters; you are the only man of our house."

Now look at my fortune, Mother. It's the first time I've acted against your wishes. Now I'm a sailor, Mother; I'm sailing. We sailed for five days, then we were thrown into the sea. Some in Shah-didli, others in Turkan, not far from Baku. You know the sea doesn't keep corpses; it always washes them ashore.

The Turkan fishermen saw them. The villagers understood. The fishermen surrounded us with their boats. But the coast guard cutters were keeping close watch. The fishermen and the things they saw just disappeared.

Just one moment. Oh, how many seals are here in the sea!

It is snowing here at sea. Spring is coming. Snow is falling on my head. It's very stormy near Darband. But neither snow nor wind can hurt us. The waves can't drown us, nor can the hurricane silence our voices.

Along the cliffs, the Darband lighthouse shines brightly. I'm sailing towards the shore embraced by the waves. If God so permits, the citizens of this old Azerbaijani city will see me and if they do, I know they'll save me.

Kiss my sisters and don't wait for me.

Your sailor son,

February 1, 1990.

BLACK FLAGS

When General Yazov¹ was told they would bury the martyrs in Highland Park, he burst out in anger, "I'll bury all of you there myself."

He was the main person who was carrying on the leadership in Baku, and in some of the regions in Azerbaijan, according to the State of Emergency established by the USSR Supreme Soviet. In order to begin and end this operation, he was sent to Baku from Moscow. It was he, who bathed the city in the blood of hundreds of people on the night of the 19th to the 20th of January.² The shooting was still going on. The tanks were running quickly up and down the main streets of Baku. Nobody knew the exact number of people killed.

"Comrades! The greatest treason, unseen in history up until now, has taken place. By the order of Gorbachev – without the consent of the Azerbaijan Government and paying no heed in our refusal - the Soviet invader troops wildly entered Baku, killing hundreds of peaceful people, crushing them under the caterpillars of their tanks. We bow our heads before those who have given their lives for the freedom of our motherland. We must bury them as our national heroes; their unrelenting ghosts demand it of us. These civil funeral rites must be a great ceremony of protest of the Azerbaijan people, to the mercenariness and betrayal of the government, to the belligerent army!"

The arrests hadn't begun yet. At a meeting in front of the building of the Central Party Committee, the leaders of the Azerbaijan People's Front called for the marking of the martyrs' Funeral as a sign of the people's deep mourning.

The chairman was dressed in black; two black flags were hung from both sides of his chair. Those who had created the State of Emergency were now busy covering the traces of their wildness. Wishing to diminish the number of people killed, (they hid the corpses or dug their graves in the dark cellars of distant barracks.

According to the order of the General and of the military commandant, the burial had to be as ordinary as possible. This was not to be a place for impulsiveness or outrage. "Bez kakikh-nibud eskssensov,"¹ was the highest order. In fact, they would prefer not to see any burial process. Every kind of meeting, party, demonstration was prohibited. However, the General knew it was dangerous to stop the burial altogether. He understood this well. A new massacre would likely occur, and before the blood of the martyrs was dry, a new torrent of blood, and much more of it, would flow in the streets of the city.

¹ General Yazov – The Minister of Defence of the USSR in 1990

² (in Russian) "Without any excesses"

Modern Azerbaijan Prose

When the bloody eye of the morning opened, the General was greatly surprised; somebody had already painted an executioner's block and an axe, another had written slogans along with caricatures of the Moscow leaders. None of these were far away, but near the building of the Azerbaijan Communist Party Central Committee. These things did not bother General Yazov too much. He went crazy, though, when he saw thousands upon thousands of black flags all over the city. The General didn't understand - he roared like a wild animal - how, during half of a night, had the people managed to do all of this? They had had very little time and they were under fire by the Soviet Army. How could they carry out all of this? It was amazing, how could the people find such a huge amount of black material?

The martyrs, the first row of victims, were buried in Highland Park. Even the people who wanted to bury a son, father or brother in their own village, had obeyed the call, "All martyrs are to be given to the land together." Fate had joined them together; they had walked towards the wild tanks, standing shoulder-to-shoulder against the severe army.

General Yazov's anger might not have been because that spot was one of the more beautiful locations in Baku, but because of his jealousy for the statue of the Russian communist leader Kirov. How was it so? The martyrs wanted to share the square with the height of the statue?

The people acted as they had decided they named the park with the statue seal, "The Avenue of the Martyrs."

The General was still wondering, "Where and how had they found all that black material during the night?" Wasn't it true that not only the party and governmental offices, but also trade, all the stores and markets were under their, Russian, control? There was a confidential order for this matter, too. To prevent the funeral process they had ordered all black material to be put under lock and key, as if they wanted to undermine the deep mourning of the people this way.

All through the streets of the city things were covered with black flags. There were even mourning flags on top of the tallest buildings. Doors and windows, balconies and verandas were decorated with black flags. There must have been thousands of ribbons tied on doors, radio antennas and hoods of cars, which somehow had remained safe after the tank attack.

Men, old and young, were standing in the main intersections with numerous black ribbons in their hands. The black ribbons under the trees and bushes showed the very places people had died under the caterpillars of tanks and BTRs. If a passer-by didn't have a mourning sign, he would stop his car to get the ribbons from the men standing in the street corners, tie them to his car and move on. "Oh, my brother, give one of them to me," a guy who didn't have time to find black material would say. They tied black ribbons to their antennas, through which they listened to the world.

The plants and factories of Azerbaijan were closed; the high schools and universities didn't have lessons. The manufacturing industry was paralyzed. Oil was not extracted from the sea or land. The General - who wanted to make Azerbaijan his slave by killing

hundreds of its sons and daughters - couldn't achieve his goal. The center, Moscow, demanded production. As a result of their deep mourning, the people were far from wanting to work. This was not the unemployment of ordinary mourning. Maybe the black flags were the symbols of the martyrs' objection against their enslavement? The generals had meetings every day where they shouted at the managers of the factories and plants, demanding that they begin working again. General Yazov, on his way to the barracks and to the city every day, just stared at the buildings. The black flags increased in number day by day, waving in all the highest places in the city.

"Oh, how long will it last?"

"At least forty days. And increasing every Thursday!"

On Thursdays, General Yazov's armored car, guarded from the back and from the front, encountered the crowd. The black flags - on the TV tower, on the seaside boulevard, on the ships, on the resting-places, on all hospitals - had come together in the streets and were placed on the sidewalks with blood-spots, renewing the mourning of the people.

Where did they find the black material? And such great mass of it? The General became more and more furious as he saw the black flags as the only perpetrator of the mourning.

The General had always been fond of seeing the chairs, squares, villages and cities in the blood-color: in red. The red power was the symbol of mastery and happiness. But now all those red slogans and flags had been changed into black. The General was burning in the fire of jealousy. As if these black flags had forced his beloved symbol out of its place.

"Didn't I order? Didn't I command? From where does the black material come?"

Baku is the city of wild winds. Its rain and snow are crazy. Only days after the funeral there were bitter and stormy rains in Baku. This made General Yazov happy, he thought the winds would rip the black flags and the rain would wash their black color away.

General's face was too red, as though he was made from bloody flour. His eyes seemed to be covered with meat. It was as if he was made from the red bricks of the Kremlin in Moscow. Maybe the remainder of those meals he'd had in Baku, several years ago, was now reflected in his face? At that time, the tall general had been invited to Baku as a consultant to a "war film." He lived in Baku for several months, where he was served highly. Now he had forgotten those days, the roasted meat and fish... Now even his dreams were interrupted by thousands of moans and shouts from the darkness of the city. Black flags were waving in the General's dreams.

General Yazov could never forget the famous Baku wind khazri. If it could be harnessed, its wild energy could stop ten the mighty army better than a laser blast. "Eto khazri,"² naturally, the General thought in Russian, "unglues one's Milder-straps and tears women's dresses, it could likely destroy a bulletproof jacket." But, somehow, all the black mourning flags were still in place. They are stronger, even, than the crazy khazri.

The city was covered in black; all the people were wearing black. How many black dresses did they have? Men didn't shave and they covered their faces in black.

² (in Russian) "This khazri"

Even the people themselves, it seemed, had become black flags. They were walking black flags, with black eyes and black eyebrows. Thousands of black eyes, full of grief and anger, were peaking from street corners, windows and balconies, watching the General's soldiers. The soldiers were armed from head to toe, with tanks and BTRs

The roofs of apartment buildings were covered with TV antennas made from different pipes and iron cables that looked like crosses. The roofs of this southern, Muslim city could have been Christian cemeteries. As if those martyrs weren't given a place in the land so they rested there. Maybe this made the General angry too?

Though all was in black, the General found some mollification for his ire. His soldiers sitting in the tanks that circled the streets and the soldiers walking in groups through the mourning city were not in black! There was nothing black in their faces or in their eyes.

The machine guns fired during the night, the helicopters circled above the buildings. The soldiers aimed at the black flags, flame-colored bullets set the flags on fire or shot them full of holes. "Anyhow, I can't understand it, where had they found such a great number of black flags?" There were two generals and "a black man" with them in the car. They asked him about it.

"They brought them from their homes."

"It's impossible! How can they keep so much material in their homes?" There was a heavy accusation behind this strange interest: "How so? Our orders were to stop mourning and to begin working! Why weren't the black flags gathered? Do they hang new ones to replace the damaged ones? How can they find such a large amount of black material?"

Returning to Moscow, the General would blame the local government for disobeying his, the military minister's, orders.

"Your Excellency General! The women had the flags."

"I don't understand. We know that the women stood in the way of our tanks, but it's strange that they hang flags. Maybe, knowing that we wouldn't touch the women, or wouldn't arrest them, you put the crime to their souls?"

"But it is true. The black flags which you see everywhere are the chadras - yashmaks and headscarves of our women."

"Weren't chadras taken away? Didn't the Azerbaijani women free themselves from backwardness during the seventy years of Soviet power? I lived in this city, you know, the girls and the women walk openly, without chadras. We banned the chadras as the symbols of stupidity and thoughtlessness long ago. And look! You yourself put up the statue of the 'Free Woman,' taking off her chadra." Their armored car was passing by the Nizami metro station where the statue stood.

"The older women kept theirs. They always put it on in the mourning."

"Oh, they knew that they'd face with tragedy..."

"Maybe. Saying "chadras dolyo"³, they threw out their chadras in the early 1920s. Evidently, not all of them. Some

³ (in Russian) "Throw the chadras"

kept them in their suitcases or trunks as trousseaus.

"In order to cry during the tragedy which the red government would surely cause sometime in the future. In order to make the mourning flags."

It was really this way. The day after the massacre many women came to the mourning department of the Azerbaijan People's Front. They used their wedding day mementos in the mourning of the martyrs: black flags, white kafans.⁴



Issi Malikzadah (1934-2000) - a writer and a scenario writer. He was the member of the AWU since 1968. His first book appeared in 1964. The author of 12 books. Known as the author of short stories, stories and scenarios

Issi MALIKZADAH

THE NEIGHBORS

When Nassib Nur came home smiling, Salima knew there was something in her husband's smile. Nassib Nur was smiling for a reason. She wanted to say, "What are you up to? Your spirit is as high as the mountains," but she didn't. She saw the package under his arm and believed that was the reason for his smile. Nassib threw his old bag on the sofa and opened the package.

"Look what I bought for you!"

"Oh, such a nice suit, it's wonderful! But it's for a young man." Salima said.

"And I bought it for a young man. Shahin's birthday is in ten days, he'll be twenty-five. What? Have you forgotten?"

Salima had been thinking about her son's birthday for a month now.

"You always find the best presents, thank you." Nassib was delighted by his wife's warm words. "But don't tell Shahin. Have patience for ten days, we'll give it to him on his birthday."

Of course, Salima wouldn't say anything to her son. Now, she should have praised her husband and applauded him, but instead she brought up something else, surprising Nassib.

"Listen, Nassib, did you buy the cord? I asked you in this morning to buy cord for our clothesline. Where is the cord?"

Nassib was still admiring the suit.

"Is this the time to ask for cord, Salima? Look at it!" he showed her the suit, "Made in Yugoslavia... size 52... It cost one hundred and ninety manats, but speculators sell it for three hundred and fifty. I bought it for the real price. The head of the store called me,

⁴ *kafan* - a white material with which the body is covered before funeral

he said, "Nassib muallim⁵, I've have what you ordered, come and get it." Now you see how your husband is respected..."

Nassib thought his wife should have said, "May you always be respected." But she didn't.

"For God's sake, don't forget about the cord. Ours has deteriorated; I can't hang clothes on it anymore." She looked at the suit again and added, "Let's see if Shahin is pleased with us."

His wife's words touched Nassib's heart. Shahin was the only son of the family, he was born after two daughters and he grew up spoiled. He didn't like every present they gave him. Every day he came home from work full of complaints. The smile disappeared from Nassib's eyes, Salima was sorry for making him angry.

"Everything will be all right," she said. "Shahin is young; maybe, he wants to marry, to live well."

Nassib took off his glasses, cleaned them with his handkerchief and put them on again.

"What do you call living well,' Salima? Have you forgotten how we lived on eighty manats? Eight hundred manats of that time...I was just a worker in the printing house then. Modern kids are very selfish and violent. One hundred and forty manats a month is not enough for Shahin, you see. He doesn't give us a single coin, yet he eats with us and we buy his clothes."

When the doorbell rang Salima immediately hid the suit. As always, Shahin returned from work knitting his brows. He began babbling before he even sat down.

"I don't have anyone who can help me, who can protect me, and I will have to live with my one hundred and forty manat salary for the rest of my life."

"Your salary will increase as you get promoted." Salima wanted to calm her son.

"Some stupid guy, who started at the plant after I did, was made shop superintendent. But I've been working as an operator for two years." Shahin replied angrily.

Looking at her son, Salima decided it was time for Shahin to get married, maybe, it was high time. But he'd never talked any particular girl or said anything about marriage. Shahin was a nice, handsome guy; he could marry the most beautiful girl in the world if he wanted. Why didn't he make any attempts? Why didn't he stop his parents from worrying?

"That guy with the wooden brain will get ahead even more, because he is from the Saftarguluyevs," Shahin continued.

"One day the Saftarguluyevs will be stopped, too. Now the control is more strong in our republic."

"Oh father, what control are you talking about? Look at our neighbor, Arzuman, is he a better man than you? ...Why do you look like that? Don't you know Arzuman? He lives in the building across the courtyard. He's our district militia officer... Do you know how he dresses his son? His son graduated from the university; maybe he also gets one hundred and forty manats. But when you look at his clothes you'll open your mouth in surprise, He also drives a new *Zhiguli* car."

"And he got married," Salima said very gently.

Shahin nearly shouted, "He has been married!"

Nassib Nur's voice and manner of speaking was always mild, but now he spoke

⁵ "muallim" means "teacher", at the same time a respectable address in Azerbaijan.

even softer.

"Oh, sonny, we were young once too. In our times..."

Shahin interrupted his father, "In our times? What did you do anyway? Namely you, comrade Nassib Nur! By the way, what kind of pen name is that? Nur - Light! What could you light? Where have you put your light? Isn't your surname Nassibov? Nassib Nassibov! You have been working as a Corrector in the editorial department, you only wrote one feature story and that was when you were young."

"Don't touch me, son. I raised two daughters with your mother. Gave them each an education. They got married and have their own families. You also got your university education. I'm pleased with my fate, you know. I retired, but they wouldn't allow me to sit in my house. They called me back and I returned, because I'm necessary there."

"But hundreds of unnecessary people swim in the milky lakes," Shahin muttered.

"I don't want to drown in that lake one day... But, as to my writings... I'm lucky that I realized I wasn't talented. And that I understood it in time, when I was still young."

"Don't pay any attention to him, you know Shahin -he's kidding again. In time he will calm down. With God's help he'll get married, then..." Salima said, trying to change the subject.

Shahin interrupted his mother too. "I will never marry! How shall I keep my wife, my family?"

Nassib couldn't stop himself and spoke again, "Don't open your appetite for bread earned by dishonesty, sonny. One day it will be severely punished. The way of those who earn their living in dirty business, will be closed."

"You're sleeping in an elephant's ear, Nassib Nur! How long can you live in this world by simply calming yourself?" Shahin was almost shouting.

Suddenly Nassib found himself shouting too.

"What do you want from me? Do you want me to kill myself?"

"Yes! Go and kill yourself! Go hang yourself!" Shahin spoke without shame.

But he immediately regretted what he said. His glances stopped on the trembling knot in his father's throat.

"I'm sorry father' Shahin said. "It came out by accident."

Nassib slowly got up, sighed deeply and went into the other room.

Shahin waited for his mother to speak; he wouldn't utter a word even if she used strong language. But she just looked away and sat silently.

Shahin went to his room.

A while later Nassib poked his head through the door. He asked Salima, with a quick motion of his hands, where Shahin was. Salima pointed toward Shahin's room. A smile crept into Nassib's eyes. Salima was surprised to see him smile; again, she knew there was a reason for it.

With one eye in Shahin's door, Nassib came in and sat down with his wife. "I want to frighten the youngster," he whispered, "I'll behave in a way to make him believe I'm really going to kill myself."

"Oh, don't make him suffer too much."

"I'm not really going to die so he won't suffer. Let him think that I plan to hang myself."

Shahin was worried about what had happened with his father, he returned to the sitting room. Noticing his son, Nassib began examining the ceiling, and then the floor. He walked up and down the room thoughtfully; he went to the kitchen, then the

bathroom. Shahin was watching his father, his strange behavior made Shahin suspect.

"What is father doing?"

"You've wounded your father's heart in vain, son. Now I want to kill himself. You told him to hang himself," Salima lamented.

"Oh, I'm very sorry for that. I should beat my wooden head to the wall." Shahin went toward the bathroom and then returned to his mother. "He's looking at the walls for something."

"Ah, he's choosing a place to hang the cord."

At that same moment Nassib appeared at the bathroom door with a piece of cord in his hand. He looked at his wife and gestured toward the cord, "What's this? What kind of cord is this?"

"You were supposed to buy new. Didn't I say our cord was wearing out?" Salima silently gestured back to him.

Nassib went to his room, then back to the sitting room and finally into the bathroom again.

Shahin looked at his mother in fear.

"Why are you just sitting there? Isn't he your husband?"

"Nassib! You, Nassib! What are you doing in there?" Salima ran to her husband.

Shahin embraced his father and pulled him out of the bathroom.

"Forgive me," he said, "forgive me, father."

Nassib shouted at his son, "Go away! I'm not your father! If not today, tomorrow, if not tomorrow, the day after! Early or late I'll kill myself! Then you'll finally be comfortable, you damned son!" Salima dragged her husband to the bedroom, where they remained. Shahin sat in the armchair in the sitting room to guard his father. He knew Nassib was a man of his word, if he said it, he'd do it; if not today, then tomorrow, if not tomorrow... No, if Nassib doesn't change his mind, this family will be ruined very soon.

Shahin sat in the armchair, half-dreaming, all night. In the morning he went to see Arzuman, the district militia officer. Though they were neighbors they weren't close, they didn't visit each other. Whenever Shahin saw Arzuman he always greeted him with the respect of a neighbor, and Arzuman greeted him with the same respect. Shahin didn't remember how or why he'd decided to talk to this officer, but he told Arzuman everything,

"Please change my father's mind. If you want, threaten him a little. In an... unofficial way, you know... You're our district militia officer and at the same time our neighbor."

"Just relax, don't worry! I'll speak with your father," Arzuman said smiling.

As soon as Shahin left, the officer wrote an official draft document and had it delivered to Nassib.

That evening Nassib Nur was in Arzuman's office.

"Why have you called me?" Nassib asked the officer, "What's the problem?"

Taking out a pen and piece of paper, Arzuman began without an introduction. "Neighbor, I was informed that you wanted to kill yourself."

Nassib looked at him in surprise, as if didn't understand him.

"Did you attempt suicide?"

"Suicide?" It took Nassib a second before he began laughing, "Oh, yes, I

remember that... Has Shahin told you? You see, what kind of crazy boy he is..."

"Did such a thing happen?" Arzuman asked.

"Well...it happened..." Nassib answered laughing.

Arzuman began writing and went on, "There must be a serious reason for a man to want to kill himself."

Nassib was still laughing.

"What serious reason, man? Shahin played some monkey tricks and I wanted to frighten him. That's it." "How wonderful...to frighten the child with death! And hill happened then?"

Nassib noticed that Arzuman was writing while they were talking. "Look here, Arzuman, why did you call me here? What are you writing there?"

"It's a record of the first investigation," Arzuman answered officially.

"What record, man?" Nassib was still smiling, but it was a different smile than before, "What's the investigation, neighbor?"

Nassib didn't know how to speak to Arzuman, how to address him, they weren't close. Arzuman clarified this for Nassib.

"I'm in the service. And I have a surname and a rank." When Nassib Nur saw the captain's gloomy face, he understood that the problem was serious. He couldn't believe it.

"OK, so...first you found a cord..."

"A cord? If you can call it a cord! A deteriorated piece. About half a meter, or so."

"I'll write half a meter."

"How in the hell can a man hang himself with half a meter of cord?"

"A skillful one can hang himself with half of that... Next time, bring that cord."

"Oh, comrade captain..."

"The material evidence must be part of your case, you see..."

"But I really didn't want to kill myself... It was simply a joke. I only wanted to kid... I wanted to die in a joke. Oh, what am I saying? You've made me entangle everything."

"Those who lie will always entangle things, we know it ll. I'll be fifty very soon, more than twenty-five years I've worked in the militia. I have experience and, Citizen Nassib Nur, I see the inner world of a man when I look at him. You can't deceive me."

Nassib Nur was angry now.

"Pay attention to your words! I've never deceived anyone in my life. And I repeat: it was only my joke with my son. I wanted him to think I wanted to kill myself."

"How old are you, man?"

"Sixty two."

"You're sixty two and you are a man of words. Have you ever seen a man die this way?"

"No, I haven't"

"And how the hell could you 'pretend' to die this way?' Or you're kidding me? Do you treat me like a child? I've seen more in this world that you, you must know."

"Let's say I wanted to kill myself. Does it make any difference for you?"

"I must take preventive measures, you see, in order to stop you. So you don't to

kill yourself in future. If it happens in my territory I'm responsible for it. Otherwise, I haven't been of service to my citizens. For this, they can lessen my rank, or even fire me... Oh, yes, Nassib Nur, you've created problems for yourself and for me. But you have a wonderful name: Nassib Nur! Thus, you're lighting every side. If we arrest you at night, you'll light our way, eh? Interesting...very interesting! Well, that's enough for today."

Nassib took out his handkerchief and, first, cleaned his glasses, then he wiped the sweat from his face, throat and gray eyebrows. I wanted some of what they said, but not all.

Nassib took some sleeping pills, but he still couldn't sleep. He couldn't even find comfort in his work.

When he had time he wrote his explanation, he couldn't finish it though, he was too nervous.

At home he started in with Shahin again but he was cut short when the doorbell rang. They were surprised to see Arzuuman at the door. Though they were neighbors, Arzuuman had never been to their flat.

"Oh, I was so busy all the day long I forgot to call Nassib Nur," he said. "Just now I was passing your place and thought I'd get the explanation myself."

Nassib was already angry, and seeing Arzuuman in his flat made him crazy.

"I've not finished yet."

Arzuuman shook his head, "How hard is it for you to write seven or eight pages in a day? And you're a man of words."

Nassib didn't want to shout at his neighbor in his home, he overcame his anger and spoke calmly.

"Who told you I'm a man of words? Where have you read my writings?"

"Don't you work at the editorial office?"

"What about it? I'm a corrector...a corrector!" Arzuuman sat at the table.

"Well, go to that room and finish your explanation, I'll be waiting here. We can't stall this case."

Nassib went to other room with Salima.

Shahin sat across from Arzuuman at the table, smiling the way his father had smiled the day before.

"Uncle Arzuuman, what does it mean? What explanation?"

"It's necessary," Arzuuman said.

"Is it a joke, or..."

"It's necessary," the captain repeated his words.

"But I didn't come to you for this."

"It's nonsense," he said.

"Sign the record... And you must write an explanation, too... A long one. I'll call you again. And don't forget the cord. Bring the cord, it's material evidence. And don't leave the city without my permission."

That evening Nassib and Salima scolded Shahin. Shahin believed some of what they said, but not all.

Arzuuman looked quite surprised.

"Maybe you came to invite me to your wedding-party?"

Shahin lost his self-control,

"I...you see... I came to you as...as a neighbor..."

"You must trust that I respect you and your father, but most of all I must

take care of myself. If Nassib Nur commits suicide there will be trouble for many people. First of all, you'll be guilty."

"I didn't make a written complaint. You don't have the right."

Shahin went to his parents; they immediately began questioning their son. Shahin left the room in a hurry.

"How could I know he was this kind of man? But he can't do anything! Nobody can ignore this!"

Shahin left the flat and slammed the door behind him.

Nassib and Salima finally returned to Arzuman. He told Salima to leave the room.

"I don't have the right to investigate in your presence."

"Here, take my explanation and that's it. Don't disturb me any more. I'm not a child, leave me be, please."

Arzuman took the papers.

"Come to my place, ask for the heads of my children, all right, I'll cut them off and give them to you. But for this matter, don't ask, 'please.' Do you think my heart was made of stone? Now...so...we have a record, an explanation...and please, bring the cord too."

Nassib got the piece of cord from the other room.

"And here is the material evidence." he said.

Arzuman stood up.

"Yes, we have the record, the explanation, the cord...oh, yes, you must write that you won't kill yourself in the future."

"Have pity, man..."

"But I must put that paper with your file, too. I see that you are tired, never mind, write it later and bring it to my Office. Then you must get a slip from the doctor; a psychologist must examine you. Then we'll see. Of course, we're not going to put you in jail, but we must send your case to the comrade's court anyway." Then with one eye closed he shook his finger as if Nassib was a child, "Shame on you, man? And you are a man of words! You must inspire people for life, for creation, instead you think about suicide. How can a man of words act this Way?"

"I only wrote one feature story in my entire life." Nassib was exhausted.

"It doesn't matter, you can write, anyway. Well, I'll be waiting for you in my office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. If you want, I can send a call-paper to your office, they'll allow you to leave for a couple hours."

"No, no! There's no need! I'll come myself."

Then Arzuman left; Nassib stared at the door for a long time - thinking. He wasn't afraid of Arzuman, but he was afraid of wasting time answering his senseless questions. The captain couldn't send some stupid letter to Nassib's work - he worked with some many different people, if five of them didn't believe it, three would. Of course, Nassib could complain about it to the upper offices but he wouldn't. If he started filing complaints now, Arzuman would never forget it. He was a human being who sucked un-boiled milk, he would pick the right moment and somehow harm his family.

"Maybe he wants something from you," Salima said.

"What? Are you saying I should give a bribe to that dull man?"

"You call him 'dull'..."

"I've always hated and still hate those who offer and take bribes."

"Why a bribe, Nassib? A present! We've been neighbors for many years, consider that he invited us to a birthday party and we gave him a gift. Don't give money, money is a bribe, give something else. Say, why not give him the suit you bought for Shahin."

"What are you saying, Salima, are you crazy?"

"Arzuman won't take something cheap. And this would be a good lesson for Shahin. It's his own punishment, let him have it. He shouldn't have said what he said to you. Give the suit to Arzuman and save your nerves, Nassib."

The next morning at nine o'clock Nassib entered Arzuman's office and sat there for a long time. He didn't have the patience to sit at work so he asked for permission to leave. He wandered the streets and had tea along the boulevard. He was still bursting with anger when he got home that evening.

"I circled the suit around my head before entering his office"⁶ he said.

"We'll pretend that a dirty dog has stolen it from us," Salima said. "But you say that he wouldn't take it."

"At first he acted like he was getting angry. He asked what was going on and if I was offering a bribe. What bribe, I said, it's a present. Aren't we neighbors? "I don't take anything from anyone," he said. But he took it! He took the suit! He said he'd taken it because we were neighbors, and that we'd be more kind to each other in future. Then he tore the record and my explanation... Salima, don't tell Shahin about it."

"Of course, not. Don't you know me?"

The doorbell rang.

Again, Shahin came home very angry. He didn't say anything until he finished his glass of tea; finally he looked at his mother.

"Very little time remains until my birthday... Shouldn't you get ready? My friends will come." He sat in silence for a while. Shahin wanted his father to turn toward him, but Nassib Nur was watching the TV. Shahin tried to speak over the sound of the TV, "I've just seen a nice suit on Arzuman's son. Made in Yugoslavia. He told me it cost one hundred and ninety but those speculators sell it for three hundred and fifty... Did Arzuman come again? Does he want an explanation again?"

Nassib still wasn't paying attention to his son, so Shahin spoke louder.

"His father bought him that expensive suit! His father! At least you could buy a suit like that for me on my birthday! Will you? Why aren't you speaking?"

"Nassib, will you buy ten meters of cord?" Salima calmly, asked her husband. "I can't hang clothes on the line."

Nassib Nur nodded but his eyes never left the screen.

...Returning from work Nassib Nur passed Arzuman in the courtyard. Arzuman greeted him with a warm smile.

"We've been neighbors for so many years, but we don't know each other very well. Dear Nassib, you're a very deserving person. And your name is a suitable one: Nassib Nur! May God help you, in fact, you are a light man... Thank you very much for that suit. But my son says there are special shirts that match that suit very well. I don't understand these things my son says... French shirts -"Mercury?" Brother Nassib, is it possible to find that kind of shirt?"

⁶ When a person gives something without his *will*, he circles it around his head.

"It's possible, but I don't have time. I'm going to hang myself." Nassib opened his bag to show him the new cord.

"Look, look here, the material evidence is here!" Nassib went toward his house. Arzuman stood in the courtyard, patting his forehead with his two fingers.



Magsud Ibrahimbeyli (1935) - a writer, a playwright and a scenario writer. He is the member of the AWU since 1964. Writes in Russian. His first book came to light in 1963. Published about 20 books. He is the chairman of the Azerbaijan Pen Club.

Magsud IBRAHIMBEVLI

A COZY PLACE IN THE PUBLIC HOUSE

Take the set away!" Agassaf-aga shouted, in stentorian tones, seating his next client in the chair. He was one of Agassaf-aga's loyal clients; he had been waiting for "his" master for two hours. "I was expecting you last Friday -I wondered where you were..."

"I went to Ganja...business trip."

"Oh, they have great khash⁷ in Kirovabad⁸, natural khash," said Agassaf-aga in a dreamy voice, "yellow and rich and transparent and they put pieces of stomach in it. In Azerbaijan, only in Ganja can they make natural khash, 'you see... Does that hurt? You can't find anything good here in Baku- I tried to eat khash at a place near the railway station. When they brought it I looked at it and said, 'Aren't you ashamed to serve khash like this?' I spat and walked out."

⁷ Azerbaijani national food. Prepared of a cow legs and other inner organs. Useful when eating early in the morning in cold weather

⁸ Soviet name of the ancient Azerbaijani dry Ganja.

"Khash must be cooked at home," the client said.

"My wife's headaches from the smell of garlic, you see," Agassaf-aga said with regret. "She is nervous... Shall we wash your hair?"

Agassaf-aga poked his client's head under the faucet. He mixed shampoo and fragrant oil in his palm. Agassaf-aga smelled the concoction and smiled.

The kapron brush made circle after circle in the soapy suds on his head; the barber washed his thick hair several times. Agassaf-aga always took great care when washing his clients' hair.

"Compress! The set!" shouted Agassaf-aga tucking a new napkin into the man's collar. He stooped towards his face. "Oh, now look here," said Agassaf-aga, "what kind of irritation do you have here? You've got very nice skin, only one person in ten thousand has such skin, don't spoil it. Perhaps you shaved with the electric razor again? Am I right? Those things are no good. Now it's the fashion to use them, but you'll see, in two or three years everyone will return to the old way of shaving... Does that hurt? I don't think it does but I want to make sure... I read the newspaper yesterday... They're still writing about Kennedy, after all these years, they still write about it. Do you know if these journalists get money for it every time or not? Yes, of course. Let them write as much as they want, but I know exactly who killed Kennedy... What do you think, did Johnson kill him?"

"I would say," answered the client, carefully moving his soapy lips, "but I'm afraid they'll arrest him."

"Whom? Johnson? They'll never put him into prison - he's the president now. But I can tell you, Johnson killed him." Agassaf-aga wiped the razor with the napkin. "Do you know where I lived before? I lived on the Fourth Parallel Street, then I got a flat in Montin. And I had a neighbor there, named Davud. He was put in prison three times. Then his relatives got together and took him to the mosque and forced him to swear to the Holy Koran that he would never engage in evil things again. Davud swore. And really, he did change into another man. Opened a workshop and began to repair shoes... Shall I make your temples straight or slanted? That's OK, but straight matches you more. Straight or slanted? Well... Davud repaired shoes all day long and everyone was pleased. Then, one day when I returned home from work they told me he was arrested. What happened? Why was he arrested? He stabbed a man with a knife. He went to court. The prosecutor was laughing, the judge was laughing, and men and women were laughing. And they gave him three years. It turned out that a client came to his workshop - the workshop was small - and started causing trouble. Davud said that the client had done it to spite him, but the client swore in court on his mother's name that it had been an accident. They gave Davud three years. You know, people like that, like Davud, will do something sooner or later. Now he's repairing shoes again, but I know that he'll eventually find trouble again. Don't expect anything good to come out of people like Davud..."

"Wait, wait," the client said, surprised, "what's the connection with Johnson?"

"Oh, he looks like Davud," Agassaf-aga said with a solemn voice. "I saw his picture and I understood that there wasn't any goodness in this man. How alike they look!" Agassaf-aga was already applying a foaming spurt of eau-de-Cologne to the client's smooth shaven face. "I don't advise you to powder, my dear, let the skin breathe."

The client paid him; Agassaf-aga put the money in his pocket without looking at it.

"Come often, I'm always glad to see you."

There were five or six men in a queue at the door. Most of them were clients of Agassaf-aga. "Five minute break," he said to them in a brisk voice and disappeared behind the red velvet curtain.

He sat down and put his legs up on a special shelf he'd nailed to the wall for this purpose. He had varicose veins and every hour and a half or two hours they became painful. Agassaf-aga felt the blood rush from his legs and he moaned with pleasure. Agassaf-aga could barely open his eyes when the barber who worked the chair next to him came in. The other barber is a young boy who just returned from the army. He lived in the same building as Agassaf-aga and Agassaf-aga considered it his duty to teach the boy this profession and, generally, how to be wise.

"I don't like you today, Gazanfar." Agassaf-aga spoke to the boy without turning his head. "The blood stopped in my heart when you shaved that doctor. Couldn't you see that he has coarse hair on his face? Did you see it? Well, you covered it with soap and put a hot compress on top and you covered it with soap again... Do you know the kind of noise it made when you shaved him? It sounded like somebody scraping a file on iron. Is that good? Who is he to you? Is he your enemy? Or doesn't he pay you real money?"

"But he didn't say anything," answered Gazanfar, abashed. "He never said the razor bothered him."

"And he wouldn't," Agassaf-aga immediately caught up. "Why would he? But the next time he'll go to another master. He won't sit to your chair any more. At your age I already had loyal clients. And it's time you do too."

"You are another case," Gazanfar said. "You have talent; all masters in Baku know it. The gift of the gods!"

"A barber has but one talent," flattered, Agassaf-aga said, that is diligence. And attention. If you remember which client liked which eau-de-Cologne, or if he likes a hot or cold compress after shaving, then that client will wait in line for two hours just to sit in your chair. Most importantly he must feel that you are not in a hurry when you work with him. That is offensive. And you must talk to him; you must ask him if the razor bothers him. But you say, 'I'm shaving and he's not saying a thing.' Maybe he's ashamed..."

Agassaf-aga passed Gazanfar, who was respectfully frozen at the door, on his way back to the chair where a young man with a splendid haircut was already waiting for him.

"Today only cut the back of my hair," he said, "and I want to be shaved."

"Shall we touch the moustache?"

"You can," he said after some hesitation, "only the very tips above the lip."

Agassaf-aga nodded and began his solemn performance. Already after the first touches there appeared a blissful expression in the boy's face as he relaxed.

"Oh, I've offended the man for nothing," Agassaf-aga thought loudly.

"Whom did you offend?" the boy roused himself.

"Johnson," said Agassaf-aga in grief. "He's an aged person, ill, but I talk about him and unproven things. Maybe it's true... Thousands of times I offered myself, be so kind, learn my opinion while the newspapers wouldn't write, don't fabricate... I'm keen on politics. I like politics."

Agassaf-aga and Gazanfar left the barbershop together today, as usual. If the weather was nice they usually walked to the metro-station together and, every

time, Agassaf-aga told Gazanfar that walking saved a man from diabetes.

"Did you see yesterday on the boulevard? Solid men were walking. What do you think, they don't have personal cars? They do. Why is he walking every evening? He simply wants to live. He doesn't want to be ill with diabetes. And I understand. He has everything - money, flat, car. But he doesn't have health."

Gazanfar listened respectfully and nodded.

They stopped at the khingal-khana⁹ near the railway station. Agassaf-aga always said that a clever man had to eat well before returning home. "It's absolutely unknown what's waiting a man at home. If my wife has prepared a tasty dinner, I'll eat it even after kabab or khingal, but if she hasn't prepared anything? What then?"

Gazanfar knew that Agassaf-aga only option was to have dinner before returning home.

They went down to the basement. The bartender came out from behind of the counter and respectfully shook their hands.

"I don't advise the shashlik," the bartender whispered to Agassaf-aga, "the meat is tough. Khingal is wonderful today."

"Two khingals," said Agassaf-aga. "Yes, bring us two and keep another couple hot, we'll have them when we finish. And three hundred grams of vodka."

They each ate two helpings of khingal and each drank three hundred grams of vodka. They had beer with the vodka. Agassaf-aga affirmed that if you drink beer or water immediately after drinking vodka or cognac you'll never get cancer of the gullet. Agassaf-aga could make sense out of medicine perfectly well.

"I wanted to become a doctor," Agassaf-aga said to Gazanfar, "but then I understood that I was a barber, and I am a master of this job you know." Agassaf-aga was getting tight-"I've got a wonderful profession. I'm master Agassaf-aga. Everybody knows me, and I respect myself, and that's all. I spit on people who don't respect me."

Gazanfar knew that when he said "people" Agassaf-aga meant his wife, of whom he was afraid.

Gazanfar tried to pay but Agassaf-aga looked at him sternly and said to the waiter, "How many times must you be told that when this boy is with me, don't take any money from him." He thrust his money at the waiter. Agassaf-aga swayed a bit from all the food and vodka, the waiter respectfully helped him up the stairs.

When they reached his porch Agassaf-aga invited Gazanfar to come in. When Gazanfar tried to refuse, Agassaf-aga muttered angrily that elders had to be obeyed...and Gazanfar submissively followed him up to the third floor.

Agassaf-aga had a large, three-room flat, where he lived his wife and two children - Samid and Fazil. The rooms were furnished very nicely; Agassaf-aga had gone to Moscow to get the furniture.

Agassaf-aga opened the door with his key. They went to the dining room. The dishes hadn't been taken away from the table yet, it looked like there had been five or

⁹ *Khingal* — Azerbaijani meal prepared of meal and rolled pastry. *Khingal-kliava* — a place, where khingal is offered.

six people dining there. Agassaf-aga went to the bookshelf and got out the nards*.

"Now I'll find out how you play," he said to Gazanfar. The boy began to arrange the draughts and Agassaf-aga went to the kitchen.

"Give us tea," he said to his wife. "Did you have guests?"

"Employees from the school," she said. "What, playing nard again? What a nightmare!"

Gazanfar knew that when Agassaf-aga wasn't at home his wife invited guests over. She, evidently, felt better having guests when her husband wasn't around. Agassaf-aga's wife had a university education, she graduated from as an external student. During her education Agassaf-aga hired a domestic servant, and every evening he walked with his children in the public garden in the neighborhood. As soon as his wife graduated from the university she changed toward her husband, she began to disregard him. She was now an English teacher. How she managed it, Gazanfar didn't know, as far as he was concerned her Azerbaijani and Russian were worse than her English was. She got the job through one of Agassaf-aga's loyal clients; he was the deputy of the minister.

Gazanfar and Agassaf-aga silently played nard. Agassaf-aga was always taciturn at home. His wife came into the dining room and noisily put two glasses of tea on the table. Agassaf-aga glared at her, but she paid no attention to him as she left the room to use the phone.

"You are right, my dear," her voice was heard, "this of course, isn't a seal, nep isn't that..."

"Not 'nep', but 'nap'," Samid said grinning. "I've told you a thousand times," she covered the receiver with her hand, "don't talk to me while I'm on the phone." "So, 'nap' is correct. And this morning you said..." "Who will bring sugar for tea?" Agassaf-aga shouted with a weary voice. "I've come from work, you know!"

"What's the matter with you? Don't you hear that I'm on the telephone?" She was looking toward the dining room. "Get it yourself if you need it, I'm not a servant!"

Agassaf-aga struck the table with all his might. Draughts and dies jumped up and rolled along the parquet.

"Whose home is this?" he violently shouted. "Why are you speaking to me this way? Who am I - a thief, a killer? Why are you speaking to me this way, I am asking!"

Gazanfar stood up and tiptoed out of the flat. He could still hear her voice from the staircase.

"I've already told you thousands of times, there's nothing in my house for that barber. Don't bring him here!"

"It's not your house, but mine! I'll invite whomever I like!"

This happened every day. It ended as suddenly as it began. Agassaf-aga went to his bedroom, put on his pajamas, and lay in bed with delight. He felt the blood pulsing in his swelling veins and it was uncommonly pleasant for him. His thoughts were flat and habitual. He thought about his wife, he couldn't understand why she was so displeased. "I earn more than all our neighbors. I don't refuse her anything. Do you want to go to Kislovodsk in the summer? Please, go for three months or even for four months if you like. Dinner for your colleagues? Please, if you want, invite them every day. We have everything, thank God! What is the man of the family supposed to do? To earn money! No son of bitch earns more than me! Most likely, everything is connected with her mother, the deceased, God forgive me, was a stinker. And that's it."

This thought at last restored his emotional balance. Agassaf-aga turned on his right side and had every intention of sleeping when he felt Samid's hand.

"What, my darling?" asked Agassaf-aga, "What, my charming?" He loved his children. His worst mood disappeared when he saw them.

"Father," said Samid, "I need some money."

"How much?"

"Honestly speaking, I need five manats. But I'd be happy with three."

"Why three?" his father was surprised. "I'll give you five." He gave five manats to his son. "Why do you need money?"

"Well," Samid said uncertainly, "we want to buy a ball, a real one for our football team."

"And why are you so sad today?" Agassaf-aga asked his eight-year-old son Fazil, who was standing there too. "Here is one manat, take it and buy ice cream."

"How is school?" he asked Samid, although he was already plunging into a dream.

"Good," his son answered cheerfully.

"Your mother said you got a bad mark on...what's the name? I always forget the name of that subject... Very important subject... Something connected with 'three' or 'four.'"

"Trigonometry," his son laughed. "Everything is fine. You don't need to worry father."

Agassaf-aga finished his educational talk, kissed his sons and prepared himself to sleep...but his wife came in.

"We're going to the cinema today!" she declared.

"When?"

"At ten."

"Oh, we still have time." Agassaf-aga was happy. "I'll sleep for an hour, then we'll go, thank God the theater is close."

"No," his wife snapped. "We are going to the center, to Azerbaijan Theatre. So, get up, shave, restore yourself to a normal state."

"Listen," Agassaf-aga moaned. "I'm tired, my legs are aching, can't we go on my day off?"

"I want to see the movie on the first night just like everybody else, and today is the first night!"

"I won't go to the cinema," shouted Agassaf-aga. "Even if I die in this house, it makes no difference to you."

"Will you stop?" Samid said entering the room. "We are pestered already; the neighbors are laughing at you."

"You see," she complained to her son, "my problem is that I want to take this man to the movie! And still I'm guilty that he works as a barber. I'm guilty!"

Samid waved his hand and left.

Agassaf-aga put on his best suit and his brown Yugoslavian coat. His wife peered at him critically and forced him to change shoes. She also made him change cuff links. At last she was satisfied. She took her coat from the wardrobe and asked her husband to hold it. Lately, before leaving home, she asks him to help her get dressed.

They had wonderful seats, tenth row. Agassaf-aga was already very pleased to be at the theatre. He looked at his wife with pleasure - she was well dressed,

earrings in her ears, bracelets and rings on well-groomed hands, and not any imitation, all genuine, as they had to be. Agassaf-aga liked to buy expensive presents for his wife, his income allowed it.

"It's nice that we've come to this theatre. The sound is good here and always the people are very decent." Agassaf-aga pointed to a couple making their way to their seats. "He is the vice-president of the Academy of Sciences," he whispered.

The vice-president said hello to Agassaf-aga.

"This is general Mammadov." Agassaf-aga was greeting another man, who he introduced to his wife.

Agassaf-aga knew a lot of people in the theater and they all greeted him warmly.

"How do you know all of them?" asked his wife.

"I know all of them and they all respect me highly."

His wife shook her shoulders with contempt.

When the movie began Agassaf-aga took his wife's coat so she would be more comfortable. He started eating the ice cream bar he'd purchase. He was quite content, his legs didn't ache, the movie was interesting, and the ice cream cooled his tongue.

Somebody laughed behind them.

"Stop champing," his wife whispered. Agassaf-aga started to eat noiselessly.

The children were sleeping when they got home. He went into their room to look at them and, as always when he saw children, a warm wave of tenderness filled his heart. "My image." He straightened the little one's blanket, kissed them and left the room. He wasn't ready to sleep so he put on his coat and went out.

Across from their building, in the public garden, Agassaf-aga sat in his usual place. Often he came here after the fights with his wife. There was a couple was sitting on the next bench kissing selflessly, they weren't interested in what kind of impression they made on Agassaf-aga. Agassaf-aga looked away, confused.

"They are kissing each other now," he thought feeling suddenly bitter, "but after they get married I'll see them again, and will they want to kiss each other in the public garden? Oh... I've also kissed." Agassaf-aga thought of his wife and felt sad.

He was glad to see Gazanfar.

"Can't you sleep?" Gazanfar asked, sitting beside him.

"Don't be angry with her," Agassaf-aga asked. "She isn't a bad woman, she's just very nervous."

"I'm not angry at all," Gazanfar said. "I feel sorry for you. Excuse me, please, you are such a master, the whole city knows you, they respect you. You are a very kind man but your life is worse than others. She doesn't respect you. She shouts at you around other people. She graduated from the university with the help of your money. Who would she be without you?"

For a moment Agassaf-aga was numb from Gazanfar's impudence.

"Listen to how you are speaking to me. On my word, if I didn't treat you as my son I would never forgive you for this. You're still young, you understand nothing. A wife is a trifle, the most important thing in the life is the children. You see, I've two sons... They'll grow up, they will be my friends, they'll understand me, love me, and consult me on everything. Now, of course, they are closer to their mother, she's raising them...but when they grow up... Did you understand?"

Gazanfar shook his shoulders with distrust.

"You believe me... I only suffer now for the children..."

"But life is passing by," Gazanfar said.

"Life is still ahead. Well, it is late already, let's go home...getting up early tomorrow. In the morning Agassaf-aga, as always, got up earlier than everyone else. He quietly walked to the kitchen and did his morning exercises. He lifted his older son's dumbbells, which each weighed one-kilogram. For breakfast, he toasted some hunks of bread and made strong Ceylon tea. He got dressed and went to the bedroom - his wife had just woken up.

"Did you remember that today Samid is sixteen?"

"Oh, oh, oh!" said Agassaf-aga and went to the children's room. "My congratulations! Be the happiest and the cleverest and I will be happy! Will you have guests?"

Samid nodded.

"Fine fellow! Guests must always come to a nice man. Everybody will have a place in our flat."

Agassaf-aga was in a great mood as he went down to the courtyard. Gazanfar was waiting for him.

"But you, in fact, don't be touchy in the life," he said to Gazanfar in their way to the shop, "a wife respects her husband or she doesn't. Listen, what difference does it make to me if she respects me or not... The most important thing for me is that I have wonderful children...my future friends. This is the main factor. Well, does your wife respect you?"

"Yes," Gazanfar said. "And she will respect me for my entire life. I am the most important man in the world for her"

Agassaf-aga looked at him with regret, then laughed and waved his hand dismissing him.

"Young! How young you still are!"

During his break Agassaf-aga didn't go to the cafe, instead he bought six bottles of champagne and brought them back to the shop. Gazanfar had enough food from home for both of them, they sat in the back room and contentedly ate dolma drown in yogurt.

"Does your wife prepare food for you every day?" asked Agassaf-aga.

Gazanfar nodded.

"Good cook," Agassaf-aga said, "but be careful, you may become fat. Well, let's go back to our work. Thank you."

Agassaf-aga told almost every client that his elder son turned sixteen today and that nearly all his class would come to celebrate. He also told them how at first he didn't want to buy wine for them, but then changed his mind and decided it shouldn't be bad if the children drank a glass of champagne, and that he thought it was better than them drinking on the sly. The clients congratulated him and said there was no harm from, a glass of champagne, and commented how wonderful it is that Agassaf-aga had such adult son.

Baku was experiencing an early spring this year. There was an elusive fragrance of acacia in the evening air. Agassaf-aga gave the bag of champagne bottles to Gazanfar as they walked home. Agassaf-aga walked slowly, breathing with delight.

"All the same, a man needs very little," he said to Gazanfar. "If only all were healthy, others are nonsense. Look, spring is coming again. It's interesting, how many of them will I still have during your lifetime?"

In the courtyard Gazanfar congratulated Agassaf-aga on the occasion of his son's birthday.

"Thank you," Agassaf-aga smiled, "God willing, we'll drink to the health of your sons. It's time, high time."

Agassaf-aga opened the door with his key and entered the flat. The dining room was already prepared for guests. In the kitchen, Samid pounded sugar. His wife was busy at the stove.

"Why should I ask your father? You're an adult. Be so kind; ask him yourself, there's nothing wrong with it."

"What are you talking about?" Agassaf-aga asked as he came into the kitchen.

"Oh, nothing," said his wife.

Agassaf-aga ate dinner in the kitchen. He ate plov - very tasty plov - that his wife prepared especially for their son's birthday. Agassaf-aga poured half a glass of cognac and made a toast to the health of his son and to the happiness of the family, he drank slowly.

Agassaf-aga decided he would lie down for a bit before the guests arrive. When he went to the bedroom he saw that the beds had been taken away.

"The children will dance here, we put the beds in the boy's room," his wife said. "Listen, Samid wanted to ask you about something, but he's ashamed..."

"Why is he ashamed?" Agassaf-aga smiled. "We mustn't be ashamed around each other. What's the matter, sonny?"

"Father, you see, I've invited almost all my classmates, boys and girls - as you permitted. But they're ashamed of you... Couldn't you go somewhere until twelve o'clock? Don't be offended."

"What is there to be offended about, I don't understand," Said his mother. "As soon as I put everything on the table I'll go to the kitchen or to the neighbors. Every family does it this way, there's nothing to be offended..."

"Why are you persuading me?" Agassaf-aga calmed them. "What do you think, I don't understand that I'll embarrass the guests? You've got your interests, and I, mine. I was going to walk in the city anyway."

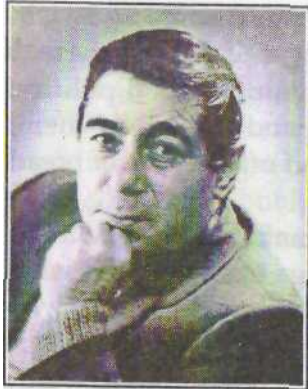
The public garden across from the house was illuminated with pale lights. A pleasantly warm spring wind was blowing. That was the kind of spring wind that forced poets to write poems - good or bad ones - and sweethearts to say words, the true meaning of which they only understood in autumn, if at all. Agassaf-aga was sitting in his usual place, he loved to sit here and watch children play. Eventually the children disappeared and older men appeared.

Then Gazanfar arrived and sat beside him. They were glad to see each other.

"I feel fine," said Agassaf-aga, "today my son is sixteen... God willing, Gazanfar, you will feel the same some day. You know, I've got a piece of land in Pirshaga, at the seashore. For years I've wanted to build a house there.

And I swear to you, I'll build it soon. You'll come and visit. My sons will grow up, we'll go hunting and fishing there... Every evening my sons and I will talk about life and politics. And every evening I'll receive guests and, for all of them, my sons and I will always be affable and offer a slice of bread and a soft bed..."

Agassaf-aga went on and on. Gazanfar listened without interrupting because he knew Agassaf-aga truly believed what he was saying. And it is impossible to dissuade a man who truly believes-that is a real sin.



Akram Aylisli (1937) - a writer, a playwright and a translator. He is the member of the AWU since 1967. Azerbaijan's People's Writer. His first book appeared in 1961. Published more than 25 books, including translations from Russian. Known as the author of short stories, stories, novels and plays

Akram AYLISLI

HEART IS STRANGE

If Sarvar had returned from the army at a different time of year, he may not have been bored so quickly by his native village. But, he returned at the end of the fall. He came home to find all the fieldwork done and his father's yearly kitchen garden in kolkhoz¹ lying fallow. Fruit from the gardens had already been gathered, leaves had been burned; some five or six quince remained on the tops of trees in Sarvar's courtyard. Yellow haystacks in the kolkhoz¹⁰ square were only distant memories of the fall in Buzbulag village.

On his first day back, Sarvar walked through the village and found people he hadn't seen during the three years he spent in the army. He saw everything within a few hours of arriving. He saw, again, that women and girls carried water from the springs, men had tea in the chaikhana and children played dominoes in the village club. He noticed that toward evening the men still gathered under the plane tree where they talked about football and politics, and, as it was three years before, on their way back home they invited each other to supper. A few of them even invited Sarvar to supper. On his way home he saw a group of boys who had just learned to smoke. And on the other side of the street he saw a group of girls who had just learned to whisper and laugh on the sly. He heard his father being referred to as "Cat Aghalar and his mother as "Khanum-wifh-Chicken" - as always. After noticing all of this Sarvar was overcome with boredom.

Sarvar soon realized that it would be difficult for him to spend the winter in the village. There was no action, no car noises there. The snowy mountains wouldn't change a bit during the next four months - Buzbulag would be cut off from the world. The house, the chaikhana, the chaikhana, the house.... That winter scared Sarvar, it threatened him. With this fear on his mind, Sarvar slept, in his dreams he saw a warm and bright summer night...

...He was in his father's kitchen garden, sleeping on the porch. There was a

¹⁰ *Kolkhoz -from the Russian words "kollektivnoye khozyaystvo" ("collective economy")*

milky moonlight shining on the garden. He saw large, white melons that looked like white sheep sleeping under the night sky. In his dream, Sarvar was looking at the melons and at the big bushes on the mountainside. They were as dark as shadows and resembled blackberry bushes. The shadows trembled and whispered, and seemed to be getting ready to do something dangerous. They moved toward the garden very quickly, from the blackberry-bush-shadow there appeared a huge black shepherd who raised his stick up and all the melon-sheep suddenly moved. They followed the shepherd toward the mountains. Sarvar wanted to shout, but he couldn't. He wanted to move from where he was lying, but he couldn't. Then, in the dawn light, Sarvar realized that the shepherd was Ajdar. He was standing on the very top of the mountain, waving to Sarvar, saying, "Come to Baku...Come to Baku...to Baku... to Baku... to Baku..."

But let the dream remain a dream and Ajdar, Ajdar. The fact is, when Sarvar woke the next morning he had already solved his winter problem. He washed his hands and face with joy. He ate his breakfast in a hurry and went to the house, which had not had a master in years. This was Ajdar's house, its courtyard and roof were thick with grass. In the chaikhana, Sarvar learned that Ajdar was now in Baku. Teymur was also in Baku speculating in the Komurchu market. Sarvar went to high school with Teymur; they were in the same grade. Because these men were in Baku, Sarvar was confident enough to make his own arrangements for the journey - without consulting his father or taking any money from his mother. He had never sold anything in the markets before but he had heard that nuts and almonds were the most profitable. After hearing this, Sarvar went to see the neighbors who had nut trees and almond trees in their courtyards. He stood at the gates of these houses and spoke to the owners as an experienced trader. Soon they came to an agreement about the prices. Sarvar received 50 kilograms of almonds from Aunt Shovkat and 65 kilograms of nuts from Aunt Gulgaz. He then went home to convince his mother to agree with his plan; she finally did. Somehow they explained everything to Aghalar kishi¹¹ and got his approval. After this, Sarvar began to imagine himself in Baku, selling his goods, earning money, wearing a new suit and coat, and eventually going to Leningrad. He longed to be back

¹¹ *kishi* - respected address to aged men

in the city where he had served in the army, walking the streets that he had rarely been able to enjoy when he was on holiday from the service. Then he remembered Ajdar and the event that had connected the two of them. It happened seven or eight years ago...

It was summertime, the time when melons were beginning to turn white. During that summer one of the hens that Aunt Khanum kept in the garden, inside the iron fence, disappeared. They noticed the hen was missing in the morning. Aghalar kishi and Sarvar looked everywhere for the hen but couldn't find any sign of it, not even one feather. The next night another hen disappeared. This time Aghalar kishi decided not to sleep all night, instead he would stay up and guard the hencoop. With his rifle ready, he hid himself among the bushes and watched from behind the branches. But he was tired and eventually he fell asleep. One more hen was lost before the dawn.

Aghalar kishi was very angry; this was a bad situation. They knew it had been a person who took the hens; no wild animal could get inside the iron fence. The main problem wasn't that someone had stolen those poor hens; the problem was that somebody was playing a game with Aghalar kishi. The player of the game would likely be severely punished. Aghalar kishi gave the situation much thought, he thought about his enemies in the village and in the neighboring villages, but he couldn't come to any conclusions.

Aghalar kishi never did see that hen-thief, but Sarvar did. One of those nights the thief himself walked right up to the center of the garden, close to the chardag.¹² Aghalar kishi was asleep and snoring, but Sarvar was wide awake, lying on his stomach watching the white melons in the moonlight. He heard someone call his name from behind. It surprised him, he was so afraid he didn't have enough strength to call his snoring father. Then he heard a whisper under the chardag

"It's Ajdar, don't make any noise, come down please, don't be afraid."

It took several minutes for Sarvar to calm down and even to move. Finally he looked toward Ajdar under the chardag. Ajdar put his hand over Sarvar's mouth and silently begged Sarvar to keep quiet. Then Ajdar took his hand away and carefully helped Sarvar to come down. They walked for a while in silence along the edge of the garden and stopped under the nut tree.

"Sit down," he said.

Sarvar sat down.

"Thank you, you are a real gentleman, you didn't make any noise," Ajdar smiled and touched Sarvar's shoulder.

They looked at each other for a while.

"Were you frightened?"

Sarvar didn't answer.

¹² *Chardag* — garden shed.

"Can you bring me a piece of bread? I'm very hungry, you know... But, look, be a real man, don't wake Cat Aghalar."

Without saying a word, Sarvar left to get bread. He brought two lavashes and a piece of cheese.

"Did you... take our hens?" Sarvar asked this tentatively after waiting for Ajdar to finish eating.

"Yes, I did."

"They were looking for you in the village."

"I know."

"Some five-six militiamen came."

"Oh!"

"They asked us about you. My father told them you were in Baku. Weren't you in Baku?" "I was." "But why didn't you stay there?"

"They'd found my place. Some scoundrel informed them."

"What will you do now?"

"I'll hide myself for some time, and go back when everything is calm."

Sarvar stopped asking questions, as everything made sense to him now.

Three or four months ago, while he was working at the district cannery, Ajdar took three thousand manat from the government and disappeared. Everyone in Buzbulag knew about it. Then somebody said they saw Ajdar speculating in one of the Baku markets, the news quickly spread around the village. Sarvar had heard hundreds of stories about Ajdar during those months. And now, to sit here in the field with him was very strange. He had been thinking about Ajdar a lot.

"And where do you live?" Sarvar asked, again very politely.

This time, instead of answering, Ajdar looked at Sarvar's eyes for a long time. He looked inside his eyes.

"Will you tell anybody?"

"No, of course... What are you saying? I won't tell anyone!"

"Swear."

"To what?"

"What do you believe?"

Sarvar thought for a while, but couldn't think of anything to swear to. Ajdar helped him by motioning toward the moon.

"Do you believe that?"

Sarvar raised his head and looked at the moon. That night's moon was so big, so strange, that it was impossible not to believe it.

"Yes, I believe." Sarvar said heartily.

"Swear?"

"I swear by the name of the moon that I'll won't tell anyone."

"Now, stand up and follow me..."

They walked for a while until they reached the foot of the mountain. It was a place referred to as "snaky" by the Buzbulag people. Here, among the numerous blackberry bushes, Ajdar had made a shanty camp for himself. In order to enter we had to lie face down and crawl along under the bushes. The moonlight didn't shine through the thick bushes; Ajdar lit the area with his small battery lamp. Sarvar was very surprised not to see any snakes that night. After creeping along for a while they reached an open area surrounded by bushes, this was where Ajdar had made his shanty camp. It reminded Sarvar of a spider's web.

Ajdar had cleared everything away from the entrance to the camp. He had made the ground smooth by splashing water on it. There was a weak spring behind the camp that Ajdar used to create a small pool of water, where the moon's reflection looked like dissolved lead. At one end of the camp there was a hearth with a black, smoky kettle. And beside that was the pile of hen bones stolen from the kitchen garden.

As if he'd intended to surprise Sarvar even more, Ajdar whistled, as one would call a dog. No dogs came, but a hedgehog did. Sarvar wasn't surprised to see the hedgehog, but he was surprised that it showed its head openly. Usually, to see a hedgehog's head, children had to drop him into water. Children played thousands of "games" with these poor creatures. For the first time in his life Sarvar saw a hedgehog walking openly in the presence of humans. The hedgehog immediately hid his head, as if he knew what Sarvar was thinking or had picked up his smell. Ajdar was enjoying the scene.

"He is my brother," Ajdar said. "He is a fatherless child as I am, and a very honest hedgehog. The snakes are afraid of him so he stands guard while I sleep."

The things inside the camp were familiar to Sarvar: Ajdar's sheepskin coat, an oil tin, the oil-lamp, a water pail and a pan from his mother, Khavar, who passed away. These were things Ajdar had secretly retrieved from his home.

Every day in the army Sarvar thought about the spider web camp, the weak spring, the hedgehog, even the black kettle and the smoky oil-lamp. For a month and a half after his father fell asleep guarding the hens, Sarvar ran to the foot of the mountain with food for Ajdar. Those days were the most beautiful days in his life. Though there was always fear in his heart. It was not easy, of course, to keep such a big secret. People had been looking for Ajdar everywhere, Often militiamen came to the village searching for him. At school, especially during his teacher Zinyat's lessons, the situation was even more difficult. At each lesson this woman spoke about bravery, courage, about being vigilant against all enemies. According to Zinyat's teachings, Ajdar was an enemy, a real "spy." Sarvar wasn't a child at that time, he was in the sixth grade and he understood what it meant to steal money from the government. In spite of all this, Sarvar never thought of turning Ajdar over to the militia, he didn't believe that Ajdar was truly "an enemy" or "a spy." He was quite ordinary, tall and thin, Adjdar was very much like his own mother Khavar,

Sarvar spent that entire month of September in fear, but at the same time in a strange joy. Often he couldn't sleep more than one or two hours a night. However, Ajdar slept all day long. To keep himself busy, Ajdar gathered grass from the mountainside that he used to make interesting and often strange things. Several times he destroyed the pool near the spring just to rebuild it. He even wrote poetry:

*Fatherless hedgehog, guard me well I came to my own home as a
refugee Leaving my house, my courtyard Live as a fox under the
bushes*

"Oh, cruel world, look into space, the moon is on... Oh, cruel world, look into space, the moon is on..." This was the beginning of Ajdar's last poem. Sitting in his camp and looking at the moon Ajdar repeated those words at least ten times. But he couldn't continue the poem. Or Sarvar never heard what was next. When fall arrived and the rains began, they said goodbye to each other. Ajdar took only his sheepskin coat and the hedgehog. Sarvar thought he might take the hedgehog to

Baku, but instead Ajdar kissed the little creature on his wet nose and carefully placed him on the ground. Then he kissed Sarvar's nose too and hiked up the mountain behind the camp. He quickly got to the top, he waved and said, "Come to Baku... Come to Baku... to Baku... to Baku... to Baku... to Baku..."

Now they were standing opposite each other in the New Market in Baku. Ajdar had become very fat. He was breathing with difficulty as he angrily looked at Sarvar. Sarvar didn't understand the meaning of his anger.

"Why are you here?" was Ajdar's first question.

"To sell something. After I make some money, I want to go to Leningrad." Sarvar answered.

Ajdar examined Sarvar's ironed trousers and his white and red striped woolen shirt. Only Buzbulag's old women could make such wonderful woolen shirts. Ajdar was deep in thought, calculating something.

"Do you plan to trade in the bazaar dressed like this?" Ajdar took something from his pocket that resembled dry grass and smelted it. He began coughing and he couldn't stop.

"What have you brought?" he asked, still coughing.

"Almonds and nuts. All in all one hundred and fifteen kilograms."

"Where is it?"

"At the Komurchu bazaar with Teymur."

Ajdar looked toward the street thoughtfully and stopped a passing taxi. He told Sarvar to get in.

"Go, put your goods in this car and bring them here," he said.

It wasn't long before the sacks of almonds and nuts were in the New Market. They put them near a man whom Sarvar didn't know. They left through the upper door of the market and slowly walked down to Bassin Street. It was snowing; the snow melted as soon as it hit the steaming ground. Ajdar and Sarvar walked along the tramline without speaking. Ajdar was taking Sarvar somewhere, he wanted to ask where but he couldn't. He wanted to remind Ajdar of "the hens event," and to talk about that summer, the camp, that hedgehog. He wanted to recite Adjar's poem in order to alter Ajdar's mood or just to make him laugh. But he kept quiet, he was afraid Ajdar would misunderstand him. He wanted to remind Adjar of the kindness Sarvar had shown him that summer. He wanted Adjar to be kind to him now. Sarvar couldn't think of anything else to talk about, so he continued to walk in silence through the snow. The silence soon became too much for him.

"Look, Ajdar, I haven't come here to be a burden for you. If you have a job, you can go... I'm not in the city for the first time, I was in Leningrad for three years."

"Oh, you were!" Ajdar said and again fell silent.

They turned the corner and entered a courtyard with an old house. A white-haired woman was ironing clothes on the verandah. Ajdar left Sarvar in the courtyard as he went to the verandah. He spoke to the old woman at length and then called Sarvar to come to them.

"Come here, you'll stay here," he opened one of the doors, "this is your room and that's your bed... Have your tea, sleep, have a rest. Walk around, go to the cinema... And this is Aunt Margo, get acquainted, she is Georgian. She lives alone... If you need money, you can get some from her... Don't think about the market, it's my business."

This did not satisfy Sarvar, he felt that Ajdar still considered him a child.

Teymur worked in the market, yet Ajdar wouldn't allow Sarvar to trade. This bothered Sarvar but he knew he couldn't go against Ajdar.

He walked all around the city. He returned home in the evening and waited for Ajdar. But Ajdar didn't come that evening, nor did he the next. Sarvar waited until noon and then went to the market. He didn't find Ajdar there either. He couldn't even find his nuts and almonds. The man they had given them to was gone.

Sarvar hurried back to ask Aunt Margo where Ajdar was. She didn't know or she intentionally didn't tell him. Teymur was his only hope. Finally, just before the market closed, Sarvar found Teymur.

"Hey Teymur, have you seen Ajdar?"

"I have. He left for Tbilisi this morning."

"How? How could he go to Tbilisi?"

"Simply went and that's it. Should he ask our permission?"

Sarvar nearly wept like a child.

"Didn't he say anything about me?"

"Oh yes, he said; Let Sarvar walk in the city, rest a while and then return to the village. He said you aren't a man for trading."

"But...what about my money, my things?" Sarvar shouted.

Teymur was indifferent to his shouting. He continued to speak calmly.

"I don't know about your money problems. I can only tell you what he told me. He said that you could return home only on odd days, not on even ones. On those days, in the seventh car, there is a conductor, Ajdar's lady-friend, he said not to let you buy a ticket, he told the conductor about you. The train leaves at one in the morning, tell the conductor that Ajdar sent you... don't forget, the seventh car..."

The conversation would have ended there if Sarvar hadn't studied with Teymur for ten years. In the last sentence of Teymur's speech, namely the last word, Teymur got a little careless. He let a brief smile creep onto his face. It may have been the shortest smile in the world, but in that smile Sarvar could see the onetime swindler in Teymur. Sarvar grabbed Teymur's coat.

"Look, Ajdar hasn't gone to Tbilisi, or anywhere else," he said- "You are telling a lie. You know where Ajdar is but you're trying to hide it from me."

Teymur tried to twist out of his grip,

"Do you think Ajdar has a place at all? He's lived illegally for more than ten years, didn't you know? He doesn't have any registration or passport."

"You say that he's gone to Tbilisi, eh? Be a man. Have a conscience! I see, I do see that you're lying, I see it in your yes!"

Teymur was silent. Sarvar felt something to change in Teymur, he spoke more softly now.

"I thought he was a normal man," Sarvar said. "How could I know that he had become a dirty scum, a beggar... He's taken my fruit, more than one hundred kilograms, and disappeared... Is that fair?"

"You're guilty too; you could have sold them yourself..."

Sarvar again lost his patience.

"He didn't let me, he's dishonest! How could I have known the man he sold them to is a shady dealer and a swindler?"

Teymur silently gathered his goods from the counter and tied the sacks closed- He asked the guard to look after them as he left the market, he didn't talk about Ajdar for a while.

"Do you pay attention to the weather?"

"Yes, it's very cold."

"But it's very clean, you see... As our Buzbulag's weather."

"I wonder if it snowed in Buzbulag too? When I left it was raining," Sarvar said.

Teymur decided it was high time to talk about their friend Ajdar again.

"Ajdar has twinges of rheumatism in this weather." "What twinges?"

"Don't you know? Ajdar is seriously ill... He has asthma or something like that. When it's cold, he can't breathe. In such weather you won't see him in the market, there's a restaurant in the cellar, there, somewhere toward the sea, where he likes to sit."

"Are you saying he could be there now?"

"Maybe, who knows... But please don't tell him I told you."

Sarvar didn't ask any more questions, he left Teymur and ran toward the sea. He found Ajdar in the dark corner of that cellar-restaurant.

"Aha! The guy who has gone to Tbilisi is in fact here! You shady dealer! You scoundrel!"

"Sit down you, Cat Aghalar's son, don't babble."

"Stand up," Sarvar said, "stand up and let's go, give me my things, I won't sit with a scoundrel." Ajdar caught his hand and pulled him to the chair,

"I've sold your things," he said. "Don't you see, I'm drinking them now," he picked up the vodka bottle in front of him.

"If you don't give me my money..." Sarvar showed his fist to Ajdar.

Ajdar carefully caught his arm.

"You'll punch me afterwards, outside. You can't do it inside, Cat Aghalar's son!"

"So, you dare to laugh at my father, eh? Well, we'll see, we'll speak outside!"

"I'd sacrifice my life for Cat Aghalar because he raised a son like you!"

Ajdar poured vodka for Sarvar and ordered some more food. But Sarvar didn't touch the vodka or the food.

"I should have gotten you arrested back then," Sarvar said. "If you had been arrested, you wouldn't have become such a scoundrel!"

Ajdar didn't get angry, he only laughed.

"Why did you want to go to Leningrad? Tell me honestly, do you have a girlfriend there or do you want to trade in the markets?"

"It's not your business," Sarvar said, "just give me my money"

Ajdar remained silent for a while. Then he took some almonds out of one pocket and some nuts out of another and put them on the table. He looked at Sarvar.

"Do you recognize them?"

"Yes, I do. I'll take all of them back from your throat!"

"Drink your vodka."

"I don't drink!"

"Eat your bread."

"I don't eat!"

Ajdar took one of the almonds from the table.

"It's from Aunt Shovkat's tree, am I right?"

Sarvar was surprised.

"And this nut is from Aunt Gulgaz's tree, which is near our courtyard. Near your

back courtyard, not far from your pish-pisha¹³ tree. There was a fig tree beside that pish-pisha; its leaves were dark blue even in the fall. And there was a cherry plum too, near the hencoop, which flourished during the fall. Is that tree still there?"

"Why not, it's there... Don't tell me riddles. Give me my money!"

"And is that pish-pisha still there, too?"

"It's there, does it make any difference?"

"I kissed Mursal's daughter under that pish-pisha..."

"You're drunk, chattering about nonsense."

Ajdar was breathing heavily. He coughed and terrible sounds came out of him. His voice suddenly became strange.

"Go and tell that pish-pisha tree that Ajdar is dying!"

Sarvar saw that there were tears in Ajdar's eyes. Ajdar was crying, tears were dropping to his jacket. Sarvar felt sorry for Ajdar, deeply sorry. He wanted to say something to comfort him, but he couldn't think clearly. He took the vodka and drank it in one gulp.

"Eat your bread."

"I don't want it."

"Do you want another bottle of vodka?"

"As you wish."

Another bottle was brought to the table.

Sarvar had a lot of that vodka. He saw that Ajdar couldn't, he was already drunk.

"What date is it today?"

"Thirteenth."

"It's my happiest day."

"Stand up," Sarvar said, "let's go, they are closing."

The restaurant lights went out and they stood up. Ajdar put three ten-manat currencies on the table. It was cold outside and the ground had frozen. The empty street was glistening in the moonlight.

"What time is it?"

"About twelve."

"You are to go today."

"Why?"

Ajdar turned toward the boulevard and went to the sea, breathing heavily.

"You can't be a speculator."

"I didn't come to be a speculator."

"Then why did you come?"

"Didn't I tell you? I came to walk. I want to go to Leningrad."

"I also came to walk once," Ajdar said. "As you see, I'm still walking."

"We are different... I haven't stolen the government's money!"

Ajdar made a terrible noise. Sarvar suddenly stopped, he was sorry for what he'd said. Catching his breath Ajdar leaned over the iron rail along the shore. Sarvar felt sorry for him.

¹³ *Pish-pisa* —pussy-willow tree

"I didn't steal any money," Ajdar said when he was able to speak. "Mursal asked me for that money... He said he needed it desperately. I took the money from the safe in the office and gave it to him. I thought I'd saved him... How could I have known it was a trick? The next morning a special commission came and checked my safe and my accounts. Of course, I couldn't tell them about Mursal so I ran away so they couldn't arrest me... Thus, Mursal was rid of me, he didn't want me, an orphan, to marry his daughter. Since then I've been running and hiding."

"I'm sorry for what I said...I didn't mean to say it that way." Sarvar spoke after Ajdar fell silent.

"It's OK. I'm thinking about other things now."

"About what?"

"I saw a very strange thing today in the bazaar and I can't get it out of my mind. A very small housedog was chasing a very big street-dog. The housedog was white and extremely small, no bigger than my hand. It didn't even look like a dog."

"What about it?"

"What? A ball-size little creature was chasing a very big one! People looked and laughed."

"You're drunk," Sarvar said, "you're delirious."

"Do you know why the big one was running away?" Ajdar asked.

"I don't know. Let's go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere you want."

"Then we will go to the railway station," Ajdar said.

After walking for a while Ajdar sat down on a bench.

"What time is it?"

"Half past twelve."

"Oh, we don't have much time!"

"For what?"

"Before the train leaves."

"Why are you driving me out? You have wasted my money, is that the purpose?"

"No, but I do know that you can be arrested here, you could be arrested very soon"

"But why hasn't Teymur been arrested?"

"Teymur will never be arrested."

"Then why must I?"

"Because you are very honest, you don't know enough about the world...."

Again Ajdar began wheezing and coughing. Sarvar felt bad for Ajdar but he didn't know what to do. If he left, how would he go? Should he stay and why? Sarvar realized in the restaurant that he wouldn't get any money from Ajdar. Sarvar looked at his wristwatch.

"I'm going," he said.

"Is it true?"

"I never told you a lie!" Ajdar stood up.

"Your money is with the conductor,' he said. "The seventh car, as Teymur has told you. Five hundred thousand manats, it will be given to you when you reach the village. Go straight on this street and you'll be in the station-square. Go quickly. I'm ill, very ill, I can't walk now."

It was a bundle of ten manat bills placed between the pages of a notebook, in the middle was pale, pencil writing:

*I didn't want you staying here,
Staying and being like me, oh dear.
One time, you'll know my word
Coming to my grave in this world.*

Sarvar folded the paper carefully and put it in his pocket. He wasn't surprised that Ajdar had written his message in poetry. In high school, Sarvar wrote poetry for a girl. From that moment on he understood that there were some things that could only be said with poetry.



ANAR

Anar (1938) - a writer, a playwright, a scenario writer and a translator. He is the member of the AWU since 1964. The Chairman of the AWU since 1991. Azerbaijan's People's Writer. His first book was published in 1963. He published about 30 books. Known as the author of short stories, stories and novels.

LAST NIGHT OF THE PAST YEAR

As always, Aunt Hamida was celebrating the New Year at home. She had turned fifty long ago. Since the time which she remembered celebrating the New Year, she'd only been away from home once on the thirty-first of December. And that wasn't on purpose. Aunt Hamida and her husband, Gazanfar, were returning home from Moscow when their train stopped near Mahach-Gala because there was too much snow on the tracks. Along with all the other passengers, Gazanfar and Hamida welcomed her forty-seventh year in the train.

Then, Gazanfar passed away in nineteen fifty two...

They had four children. If Sahib hadn't died when he was two, they'd had five was fourteen, Dilara was seventeen, Rustam was twenty-one, and Gulara was twenty-five.

All the children still lived at home with their mother except Gulara.
Tonight was the last night of the year. It was quarter to nine.

Aunt Hamida was in the kitchen cooking plov. Tofig had been spending his time on the phone or in the kitchen with his mother.

"Mother, Seyran will also come." "Who is Seyran, sonny?"

"Remember the boy you like so much? You always say he dresses very carefully."

"Yes. Very nice."

Tofig was excited, for the first time in his life he was going to celebrate the New Year with his "company". These were the pupils from his 8th grade class. Two or three months ago the children had decided to spend New Year's Eve together.

"Let's celebrate at my house," Tofig offered. "There won't be anyone there except my mother, and she won't disturb us." "But what about your older brother and sister?" "They never spend New Year's Eve at home."

As if he was revealing a secret, Tofig informed his mother that the girls from their grade also had permission to spend New Year's Eve at Tofig's house. Everyone thought well of Tofig's late father, Gazanfar, a famous oil-master.

"Mother, Vassif's sister may also come. She isn't in our class but she wants to come with her brother."

"Very nice, sonny, let them come, I'll be glad to have them."

"Will we have enough food?"

Aunt Hamida laughed.

"Plenty, plenty, even if we have fifteen more people there will be quite enough food."

Tofig called somebody else and stayed on the phone for a long time. He hung up and quickly dialed someone else. Again, he was on the phone for a while. And as soon as he hung up the phone rang... It's becoming difficult to gather everyone together; one wants to come late, another early, one lives far away, the other doesn't know where Tofig lives, one doesn't have a telephone, and another is embarrassed. Some of them suddenly decided not to come at all. Most of all, of course, the girls were worried.

"Mother, do you see, Firangiz doesn't want to come."

"Why?"

"She says she thought that only our class would be together. She says she's embarrassed to come with my older brother and sister here."

"Well, what can we do, sonny?"

Tofig is glaring at Rustam and Dilara.

"They've never been at home before...I don't why they are here tonight. Why is everyone celebrating the New Year at home this year?" Tofig whined.

Aunt Hamida smiled.

"We can't force them to leave, sonny."

Tofig left the kitchen knitting his brows. He called someone else.

"Haven't you been on the phone enough? Maybe somebody wants to call us, too." Dilara remarked to Tofig,

It's strange that Dilara is at home this evening. It's the first time in four and five years that she's been at home on New Year's Eve. Rustam is at

home too. He hasn't spent this night at home since before their father's death.

When Gazanfar was alive they celebrated the New Year with great hubbub. The house was always filled with guests. After Gazanfar's death, there were two years when they didn't celebrate at all. In fact, Gulara and Rustam hung out with their friends and Aunt Hamida, with little Dilara and Tofig, went to bed early. Then Dilara was old enough to celebrate New Year's Eve on her own, and now it was Tofig's turn. But tonight everybody was home except Gulara. She would probably go to her father-in-law's house. Of course, Gazanfar wasn't there; he'd passed away seven years ago. If Gulara were at home, the entire family would be together. But this never happens anymore, there is always someone missing.

The clock is struck nine. Tofig went back into the kitchen. He was starting to feel offended and worried.

"What's the matter, Tofig, can't you gather your guests?"

"Oh, no..."

Tofig looks like he has a lot to say, though he speaks awkwardly.

"You know, mother...Rauf invited us to his place. His father and mother are going somewhere until the next morning. We'll be by ourselves." It was difficult to say this to his mother.

Aunt Hamida patted his head.

"Very nice, sonny, if you want, you may go there."

Tofig's eyes sparkled, he didn't think he'd hurt his mother's feelings.

"But.. .will you have any food there?"

"Oh, yes," Tofig answered joyously. "We'll find something. Some canned food or something."

"Oh,my! What is canned food or something? Let me give you some plov to take."

"No, mother, we don't need any plov. If I take a stew-pan under my arm everyone will laugh at me."

"Well, go then," his mother said smiling.

Really, she thought, why do they need plov? They'll eat canned food and feel free and happy. They could eat plov here but they wouldn't feel as free. They would laugh a little and leave early.

Tofig kissed his mother and left.

Rustam was asleep, or at least his eyes were closed. When he left for his room he told his mother that he was sleeping and didn't want to be disturbed." Aunt Hamida knew why he wanted to sleep the New Year away. It had been a week since Rustam had spoken to his fiance, they were angry with each other over something.

Dilara couldn't find anything to do with herself, she paced from room to room, looking through old magazines and watching TV. She often went to the telephone, but in remained silent.

Aunt Hamida kept busy in the kitchen.

The doorbell rang and Aunt Hamida opened the door. Gulara was at the door with her husband and son, Vagif.

"Oh, come in, come in, welcome!"

"Glad to see you."

"Come in, I'll be back in a minute."

They took off their coats and entered the dining room. Aunt Hamida was thinking that if Gulara's family had come ten minutes earlier the whole family would have been together. That would be great! Even if Tofig left after they arrived, Aunt Hamida would be happier. Pity that Gulara and her family arrived after Tofig left.

Aunt Hamida washed her hands and went to her guests.

"Oh, I didn't expect you."

"Why not? We came to congratulate your New Year."

"Thank you very much."

The clock struck half past nine.

Suddenly the doorbell rang again- Dilara's school friend Leyla came in looking rushed and breathing hard.

"Dilara, do you know..."

"You, girl, take a breath." Aunt Hamida calmed her. "What has happened?"

"Oh, I came running over. The director told me to find Dilara immediately. What's a party without Dilara? He said."

A hidden joy played in Dilara's eyes, but her face remained motionless.

"Pardon me. Now you think about Dilara. At last! If you needed me, you'd have included me in the program beforehand. Now, maybe somebody hasn't shown up and you need a replacement."

"No, dear," Leyla tried to change her approach. "The director didn't know you weren't included in the program and when he found out he got angry."

Now Aunt Hamida understood why Dilara was at home.

"Get up, put on your coat," she said to her daughter. "There's no time for posing. Go if they call you."

She could see that Dilara would go without her insistence.

Within minutes Dilara and Leyla were rushing out the door and saying good-bye.

Aunt Hamida apologized to her guests and went to the kitchen. Gulara followed her.

"Mother...one of Suleynan's friends invited us over and we need to go there. Do you mind if Vagif stays here?"

"Let him stay."

"I'll put him to sleep before we leave. He won't wake up until morning- But keep an eye on him."

"Don't worry! But why put him to bed so early? Let him be with me, we'll ring in the New Year together and then I'll **put** him to sleep."

"Oh, he doesn't understand the New Year or anything rise. It's time for him. to sleep, let him sleep."

"Well, I say..."

Gulara went to the bedroom. Together, Gulara and Suleyman get their son to sleep.

"Well mother, we're going. They are waiting for us. Let me kiss your face, oh, how well, and as they say, Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you, too."

"Be happy, Aunt Hamida."

"Thank you, sonny, thank you very much. Live a long life and grow old together."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye, goodbye."

She closed the door and returned to the kitchen muttering, "Goodbye, goodbye, thank you, you are welcome."

She continued to prepare plov for fifteen people. Then she suddenly remembered something, oh, yes, Rustam... Aunt Hamida went into Rustam's room and shook him.

"Rustam, ay Rustam!"

"You..."

"Wake up, you can't sleep through New Year's Eve. If you do, you'll sleep all year long."

"Oh, leave me be for God's sake!"

"Look here, get up, I have something to say to you, get up!"

"What happened? Let me sleep." "Get up, I have a job for you. Come and help me." Rustam gets up unwillingly. Grabbing his arm, Aunt Hamida pulls him into the dining room where the phone is. "Dial." "Who?"

"You know who." "No!"

"I say, dial! Look, all my children, including you, have always obeyed me. If you don't do what I say tonight, New Year's Eve, I'll never speak to you again!"

"Oh, mother, for God's sake...no... But..."

"I said dial, and that's it!"

"But..."

"If you don't want to break my heart this evening..." Rustam hesitates.

"I'm serious. Or I'll get so angry with you..." Rustam grabbed the receiver and glared at his mother, "Look, only for your sake..."

Hamida thinks, "That's all. He'll call now." Aunt Hamida goes to the room where little Vagif is sleeping. She can hear the clicking of the telephone as Rustam dials. Vagif is sleeping peacefully. Aunt Hamida sits beside him.

She can hear Rustam's voice.

"Yes... Hello..."

An icy pause.

"As you see...yes..."

Pause.

Oh, is that right?" Rustam scoffs.

Aunt Hamida thinks the girl must have said something hurtful.

"And the same with me. You can be one hundred per cent sure," Rustam says in a cold tone.

"What a pity..."

Why are they speaking in such a dry and bitter manner? Don't they love each other? They do love each other, Aunt Hamida thinks.

Rustam starts to whisper. Aunt Hamida can't hear anything now. She only knows that Rustam has been talking for a while and the cool tone is no longer in his voice.

Then he again speaks loudly.

This is the usual Rustam. Very kind! Sensible!

"Yes. Oh, I also was thinking that..."

He's now laughing heartily.

Pause. But this is a very hot, very kind pause.

"Yes?"

Rustam breathes deeply. The breathing reveals his comfortable, assured mood.
 "Who is there?"
 Quite possibly she's invited him to her house.
 "No, you know, I've told my mother that I'd be home tonight."
 Aunt Hamida wants to stand up and say it's OK if he wants to go, but she doesn't move.
 "I don't know, you see. Who will be at your house?"
 Aunt Hamida doesn't stand up. There isn't any need for it. Rustam will go.
 "No, I don't have anything in common with them. If you were alone..."
 Oh, he will not go?
 "By God, I don't pose. You know... but no, I don't like them."
 He will not go.
 "I wish you a happy New Year beforehand, may you have..."
 He will not go.
 Pause. A long pause.
 "You say, I must come?"
 Oh, he will go.
 "No, we'll meet tomorrow morning."
 He will not go.
 "Well, don't start again. I'll see, maybe I'll come."
 He will go.
 "Yes, well then, in half of hour."
 He will go by all means.
 "What? What time is it? Twenty minutes past eleven? I'm on my way!"
 Rustam hangs up the phone and goes to his mother.
 "Mother..."
 There are seven years between Rustam and Tofig. But both of them blush in the same way. As poor Gazanfar did. When he was embarrassed his cheeks became rosy.
 "Oh, sonny, go... Give them my best regards."
 He put his new suit on and returned to his mother,
 "Where are the little ones?"
 "Dilara went to her school to sing at the party. And Tofig went to his friend's house where his classmates will gather."
 "Look at Tofig! Oh, really! He also goes to parties..." Rustam was surprised and impressed.

"Don't be surprised he is also a grown-up now."
 "Then that leaves you alone?"
 "Why alone? Look, Vagif is here."
 Rustam smiled.
 "Oh, I see that you have a wonderful partner." Then he suddenly became serious, "It isn't okay. If I knew..."
 "What would be?"
 "Anyhow, you are alone..."
 "I am not alone at all. I'll speak with that girl."
 "With what girl?" Rustam asks, confused.
 "With the one in the TV."
 Rustam laughs.
 "Rustam, you know I go to bed early. I'll be asleep in my **bed** before long. When

you get back knock loud enough to wake me up."

"Why, won't you wait for the New Year to arrive?"

Rustam was very little then, he wouldn't remember. When Gazanfar was alive the New Year's Eve parties at their house lasted until dawn.

Rustam shakes her hand and leaves.

The table is set for twelve people; Tofig's friends came in **the** afternoon and set it up. They put a big plate in the middle for plov. Strangely, Aunt Hamida filled the big plate with plov even though no one was coming for dinner. There was enough **there** for at least fifteen people.

"You sit down here. Let Rahim and Nazifa come to this side. Master, you sit down there. Teymur, change your place. Sit down beside your wife. Children, you move to that side. Sultan, you sit down here. You will be the toast master tonight."

Aunt Hamida laughed at herself.

"Little by little I'm going crazy." She went to the balcony, the street was empty. Everybody is somewhere tonight. Is there anybody in the street? Oh yes, there are two, leaving the store with bottles under their arms.

Bracing themselves against the cold and laughing loudly, they looked to be in a hurry. Aunt Hamida went inside and turned on the TV. The announcer is saying something.

"And why is this poor girl here?" Aunt Hamida asked herself. "Can't she celebrate the New Year?"

Aunt Hamida moved her chair closer to the TV and began talking to the girl inside the TV.

"Oh, my daughter, are you here? Everybody rings in the New Year in his house, but you..."

The girl interrupts Aunt Hamida, "On the list of our successes this year we can mention the new ballet of the young composer Youssifov..."

Aunt Hamida thinks, "Young composer Youssifov. Now that **young** composer is sitting somewhere in a noisy party with friends his own age, he might not even watch TV. Now everybody is busy."

Aunt **Hamida** again addressed the girl, "My daughter, go to your house. You will speak about the successes of our culture tomorrow. What will happen? The successes won't go anywhere."

"...Some famous works appeared in the field of painting, too..."

"It's twenty minutes to twelve; you can make it in time if you take a taxi. Go to your friends, comrades. Perhaps, somebody is waiting for you, too. You are young and beautiful, maybe you have a fiancé. He's missing you now. He wants to be with you on this night. Isn't it so, my daughter?"

"...Fazilov's work, dedicated to the shepherds, is original and natural..."

"Very nice, my daughter. Let it be natural, but you go home, do you know how pleased your fiancé will be? Well, now, I know you also want to run away. Though all of Baku...why only Baku? All of Azerbaijan is looking at you now, but you would like to be beside that one person, wouldn't you?"

"...Among the new films..."

"Oh, yes, I understand, it's your job, you can't leave it. But this night is it possible..."

Then Aunt Hamida realizes that this girl's "company" will celebrate the New Year according to Moscow time, an hour later. Aunt Hamida imagines that the girl's fiancé will drive up to the mountain and take her from the TV studio, and they'll hurry

to the party. The girl won't even be able to change her dress. She will be in the dress she's wearing right now, and she will celebrate the New Year with her fiancé and friends. But Aunt Hamida will not see that party...

Aunt Hamida stops thinking about the girl. Now she's thinking about the radio announcers. Maybe there isn't anybody on the radio, maybe they are using tapes. Hamida doesn't know.

It's interesting for Aunt Hamida to think about who else might not be home tonight? The workers at the information office, for sure. Aunt Hamida goes to the telephone and dials 09. The line is busy. She dials again. A woman answers.

"Information office."

"How do you do, my daughter?"

"What?"

"I say, how do you do?"

"How do you do..." The woman sounded confused.

"Happy New Year."

The woman didn't know what to think.

"Thank you very much. Who's speaking?"

"A stranger... I simply wanted to ask how you were this evening..."

"Who are you, really?" The woman **interrupted** her impatiently.

"Oh, just a person you don't know..."

The woman got angry.

"Don't tie up the line," she said and added, "the New Year hasn't come yet, but apparently some people are already drunk!" and she hung up.

Aunt Hamida laughed. She put the phone down and returned to the TV. The girl on the TV had disappeared. It was already the New Year according to Baku time. It was a pity for Aunt Hamida that the girl had disappeared from the Screen. Now she was alone in the room.

The telephone rang.

"Mother?" It was Rustam

"Yes?"

"Happy New Year!"

"And to you, dear sonny!"

"Whom were you speaking with? Our telephone was busy for a long time."

How could Aunt Hamida explain to Rustam with whom and why she was on the phone?

Then Tofig called and congratulated his mother. Then Gulara called with best wishes and asked if Vagif had woken up.

Perhaps Dilara didn't have chance to call, otherwise she would have.

Aunt Hamida switched on the radio and immediately switched it off, she didn't like the music. She liked Bulbul's songs. She thought they had some of Bulbul's songs in tapes.

Aunt Hamida went to the tape player. "I wonder," she thought, "could a person live alone with just this tape player for the rest of her life?" She pushed those pessimistic thoughts away. "No, I don't have only this silly tape player. I have wonderful kids, who love me very much." Suddenly a strange thought came to her. She tried, in vain, to stay far from that thought but she couldn't. She wanted to do it. She was afraid -she was alone at home, but she still wanted to do it. She wanted to speak to Gazanfar, that is, to listen to him. She wanted to hear Gazanfar's voice.

Gazanfar had recorded his voice when he was alive. After his death, though, nobody in the house was brave enough to listen to what he'd said. Now Aunt Hamida was ready to listen.

At last she obeyed her will. She opened the drawer and took out the tape.

She could hear herself and the children laughing and talking at the beginning. Then suddenly it grew quiet and all she could hear was Gazanfar's mild voice.

"Listen, Hamida..."

Aunt Hamida felt awkward somehow, as if Gazanfar was speaking to her from another world.

"I'm neither a poet, nor a philosopher. I'm an ordinary worker. If s true, I had some fame for my job, and respect among those who knew me. But I want to repeat I'm an ordinary person, don't think that I want to speak in a complicated way or try to be a philosopher. No. But I have had a great life experience. I have seen, how to say, all faces of life, and want to tell you one or two things. One day I'll leave you..."

Aunt Hamida's voice could be heard in the background, protesting.

"Enough, don't begin again, for God's sake, let God not to give us a single day without you."

These words were so natural at the time.

Gazanfar's was laughing now.

"Well, well, my lady, say, in forty or fifty years. Listen. One day I'll leave you. The most valuable thing for you is the children. If I'm here, I'll help you raise all of them myself. But if not... then I entrust them to you. I won't say, make sure they all get a university education. I won't say, make all of them doctors or engineers. But I will say, make them personalities. Let them be good people.

Then, Hamida, the day will come when they will grow up and, like birds that fly from their nests, they will leave you one after the other. Don't call them unfaithful then.

You must know, wherever they go, living with different people, that they will take something from me and something from you, as we took from our parents and grandparents. You will say that Gazanfar again speaks as a philosopher. But, this is simply what I think. People pass things from generation to generation. The job, which was begun by one but wasn't completed, isn't lost; it continues in the next generation, those who come next will complete that job. Nothing is lost, nothing disappears, nobody dies in this world. And the good and the bad things pass from generation to generation. As to me, Hamida, we live a good life, earning our food with honest labor. Let our children take everything good from our lives and carry it to their own families, to the new generations. This is life itself. ...Well, let's see if this taped"

Gazanfar's speech ended here. Gazanfar also ended here. Aunt Hamida could listen to that tape from the beginning again but it would never change - she could listen to it a hundred times, but Gazanfar would never say more.

But Aunt Hamida wasn't sad at all. On the contrary, her grief disappeared; endless warmth and affection entered her soul. She was calm like never before, as if somebody had opened the meaning of her life to her.

There was very pleasant feeling in Aunt Hamida's heart. She didn't clean the table. "Let them stay, the children will see them," she thought.

Then she went to little Vagif, patted his coal-black hair, kissed his forehead and slept with sweet, comfortable and assured dreams.



Elchin (1943) - a writer, a scenario writer, a playwright a translator and a critic. Doctor of Philology- He is the Deputy-Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The member of the AWU since 1968. His first book came forth in 1966. He published about 30 books. Known as the author of short stories, stories, novels, plays and scenarios.

ELCHIN

HOVSAN ONION
(An absurdity)

Participants

A man - 80 year-old, a personal pensioner of the All-Union significance.
A woman.

The 1st passenger.
The 2nd passenger.
The 3rd passenger.
A conductor and others.
Time - August 1990, 38°C of heat.
Place - "Baku-Buzovna" electric train.

Blowing a whistle, the train drives with speed

'Hovsan is a village not far from Baku. The village is famous by its specific bitter onion.

A woman (*Laughing heartily*). Then... (*Laughs*) **Then...** oh, you! (*Laughs*)
Did you pass away then?

A man. (*Laughing*) I don't know... I think, no. Or, may be died? I don't remember...yes... he said that...said *that*. (*Nearly faints away of laughter*)

A woman. (*Howls with laughter*) Did he...Did he say just that way? (*Howls again*) Oh, me! Look what he said

A man. Well! Well!

A woman. (*Breathing heavily*) Maybe you are adding something, you boaster!

A man. Oh, God, no!

A woman. As if I don't know you! It's your old nature. Additional decorations...

A man. No, by God, no!

A woman. As if you believe in God! (*Laughing*) Was Mukhtar there when he spoke that way?

A voice from distant. My grandfather went to Kislovodsk for resting in 1914. Once he remembered Hovsan onion there and couldn't stand. He sent his servant back to Baku, ordering him to bring a sack of Hovsan onion. The servant went and brought the onion...

A man. Which Mukhtar?

A woman. How so 'which Mukhtar'? Your cousin, eh!

A man. Oh! Let me see.. .Mukhtar.. .Yes, he was there.

A woman. (*Laughs*) Does he also remember those words?

A man. Who? Mukhtar?

A woman. Who else then?

A **man**. Oh, God knows, twenty years or more that Makhtar had passed away.

A woman. Oh, oh...

The 1st passenger. (*Looking out of the train window*) Look at it, eh! Be so kind, say, have you seen such dump anywhere? Look at it; all ground is a large dump place! But these places *were* wonderful flowerbeds, you see, flowerbeds! Look at it flow, oh, look at it!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

The 3rd passenger. Oh, God, may I be your sacrifice! This time of a year one kilogram of cucumber is six manats! I say six manats! Sixty manats by our old money! Divide one hundred twenty to six...Two and a zero there. Mmm... Twenty! I can **buy** only twenty kilograms of cucumber to my month's wages.

The train blows a whistle

The 1st passenger. Look at it now! Mazut! Wood! Paper! Look at! Look!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

The 3rd passenger. I swear on Hazrat Abbas¹⁴, a kilogram Of tomatoes is for five manats! A kilogram of melon - for four manats! Potatoes - for two manats!

The 1st passenger. A dead dog! A dead rat! Rinds of watermelon!

Nadezhda Krupskaya¹⁵. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

A pause

A woman. (*Laughing*) Tell it to Sakina, oh, yes, to Sakina! She is the fan of such chats...

A man. What.. .Which.. .Sakina do you mean?

A woman. Oh, me! What happened to you? Don't you know? Your sister!

A man. Oh, Sakina had left long ago...

A woman. Sakina? Where did she go?

A man. To the world of justice. She finished with this world and left us...at her grave...Was it her grave? Oh, yes, it was Sakina's grave.I planted a pomegranate tree at her grave and it grew dry...

A woman. Why?

A man. How can I know? It grew...Became a very nice tree...Oh, it gave wonderful blossoms! Once there were a lot of pomegranates! Small, darkred ones! But strong khazri¹⁶ blew once and shed all of them to the ground. As if the tree shed tears of darkred blood, the tree was surrounded with darkred color.. .It changed into a very nice tree...

A woman. What had happened then?

A man. Oh, I could find no time...I wasn't able to water it in time, you see...I went there three-four years ago and saw that it had already grown dry...

A woman. And you planted a willow tree at my grave..

A man. Was it yours?

A woman. Yes. But you didn't plant it yourself, you charged with it and somebody planted...

A man. Yes, I remember. It also grew well!

A woman. What happened to it then?

A man. By God, do I know? I ought to find some chance and go there.

The 1st passenger. Look at it, see, they threw a bicycle! An old bucket! A large

¹⁴ A sacred person of Mussulmen.

¹⁵ N.Krupskaya had been the wife of Vladimir ilych Lenin, the founder of the

¹⁶ Khazri - northern strong wind, being characterize for Baku.

copper asphalt basin! A bath! Look at them, oh!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

The 3rd passenger. One kilogram of cherries is for eight manats! Eight, you see!

Eighty manats by the old money! Oh, hell...

The 1st passenger. Ah! Alas! Oh! Look at that dead crow!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

Anastas Mikoyan¹⁷. There is a shoe factory named after me in Baku!

The train blows a whistle.

A man. I forgot my teeth back at home...As I had put them into a glass of water last night and went asleep, they are still there...

Nadejda Krupskaya. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

A woman. Didn't you have breakfast when you got up in the morning?

A man. In the morning? Do you think that I remember it? When I got up in the morning I felt a headache.

A voice from distant. After sending of his servant, my grandfather couldn't stand it. His heart wanted Hovsan onion very much and he didn't wait for the return of his servant, thus, went to Baku himself. Eating Hovsan onion he returned to Kislovodsk again.

A woman. You could take medicine.

A man. I think I took.

A woman. (*Laughs*) You always take care of you! I know you. What did you take?

A man. I donnow..,I simply found a pair of them, even not looking at them, swallowed into...

Nikita Khrushchev.¹⁸ (*Whispering*) Sh-sh-sh...More *lowly*)

Stalin. (*It's felt that he is very careful*) Stalin...Stalin was a Turkish spy...

A woman. They gave Alakbar's daughter.

A man. Our Alakbar's?

A woman. Yes.

A man. Damn! Alakbar's daughter has a grandchild of thiiiiis height now!

A woman. Does he go to school?

A man. I don't have an idea...

A woman. (*Laughs again*) When he spoke that way...You worked in Zhdanov district then, didn't you?

A man. It happened after finishing of the war, I returned from Iran...I don't know if I was in Zhdanov or came to Baku -to Kirov district of the city? I don't remember...but I had returned from Iran...

Anastas Mikoyan. Long live the beloved person of our nation, our friend and brother Nikolay Ivanovich Yezhov⁷! Hurrah, comrades!

¹⁷ Former Soviet party leader.

P.S. Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan, an Armenian, was one of the cruel enemies of the **Azerbaijan** people. Living and noting in Baku as the representative of the red Moscow, he was one of the leading figures of massacre of Azerbaijanis. That's why he is surprised that the Azerbaijanis gave his name to a factor in Baku.

¹⁸ Former Soviet party leader.

Stormy applauses. The train blows a whistle.

A woman. *{Laughing}* Did you tell those words to Saftar?

A man. Saftar died.

A woman. To Farman?

A man. Died.

A **woman**. *{Laughing all the time}* **To** Amina?

A man. Oh, me, she passed away long ago!

A woman. To Assadullah?

A man. Assadullah? Who is he?

Mikhael Gorbachev. We are in the right way, comrades!

Mikhael Kalinin¹⁹. We must strengthen the visual propaganda.

The conductor. *{Singing in a low voice}*

I splashed water to the streets...

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

Show your tickets!

The 1st passenger. _O-o-o! An underbodice! Just look at it! A tyre! An old teapot! A pot! Here is your ticket! Oh, damn! An **Old** sofa! Look at them!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look. Here is the ticket.

The 3rd passenger. And here is mine, take. If I say a lie may I sleep at night and not to get up in the morning that I always bought a kilogram of hen's gizzards for one manat! Let the God make me blind if I didn't buy them for seventy coins! But now a kilogram of it is for fourteen manats! Divide it into fourteen, what will you get? Do you hear? What will you get? I eight kilograms! I can buy eight kilograms of gizzards for my month's wages and that is it! I won't have money even for drinking of a glass of water!

A man. Mine is free of charge.

A conductor. Show your document.

A man. Here you are.

A conductor. What is this, man? It's a lottery!

A man. Take this one then.

A conductor. *{Singing his song}* I splashed water to the streets...

I splashed water to the streets...

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

A voice from distant The servant came to Kislovodsk ,and saw that my grandfather couldn't stand and had gone to Baku himself. The servant took the Hovsan onion and returned lo Baku again.

A woman. Don't you remember Assadullah? Didn't you have a friend, a colonel?

A man. I can't remember...Are you speaking about Karim?

A woman. Not about Karim, about Assadullah! Assadullah!

A man. I don't remember...But Karim passed away...And Fati, too...Ibrahim also died...And Fatma...And Sona...There was another Ibrahim, do you remember? a lame* one, he also died...And Dilshad...Ahmad died...Another Ahmad also died...And Soltan...And Farid...And Farid's son...And Fazil died..-Shall I

¹⁹ Former Soviet parti/ leader

continue? And Fatullah...Do you remember him? His moustache always swang about...No, Fatullah didn't have swinging moustache, that was... mmm... that was Malik! Malik also passed away...You must remember our executive committee Ismayilov, who always brought me tobacco during the war, that Ismayilov also died...And Alasgar...And Brezhnev¹ also passed away... And Khrushchev... And Andropov²⁰... And Kossigin²¹... What was the other's name? Mmm... I'll just remember! Mmm... Pelshe²²! Pelshe also died...

The train blows a whistle.

Nadezhda Krupskaya. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

A woman. Was vine productive this year?

A man. Which vine?

A woman. That one, which is near the door...

A man. Oh, that grew dry long ago...

The 1st passenger. Alas! Alas! Alas! Look at faces!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look.

The 3rd passenger. All watermelons now are poisoned! If I lie, may I drop under this electric train! They gave watermelon to sick men in order to treat him. But now all watermelons are poisoned! They insincerely announce on TV that they check all watermelons, well, don't be afraid and eat them! God damns the liers' fathers! They never check! I swear TO Holy Koran, to our other sacred men that my words are true. If you eat watermelon, it kills you! And what do you think, how much is it? One kilogram for two manats and a half!

The 1st passenger. O-o-o! A dead body of an ass!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look.

Andrey Vishinski²³. Long live the Azerbaijan Communist Bolsheviks' Party!

Stormy applause. Long live the honored proletariat of Baku!

Stormy applause.

They enjoy life to the full, comrades!

Stormy applause.

A man. Did he return my lottery to me?

A woman. I don't know...

A man. I've just given a lottery to him, haven't I?

A woman. Why must I know? (*Laughs*) You would know...is there

²⁰ Former Soviet party leader. " Former Soviet party and KGB leader.

²¹ Former Soviet power leader

²² Former Soviet party leader

²³ Former Soviet KGB leader

anything that you don't know?

A man. As if you are a nitwit one! A woman. (*Laughs*) Certainly, I'm.. .If I were not a nitwit person, you wouldn't deceive me making love to Alashraf's daughter!

A man. Oh! How well that you remembered her to me! Oh, I was anxious for a long time that I wanted to remember something! And now here you are! She was a nice komsomol member!

A woman. Who? Alashraf?

A man. Oh, me! No, he was the people's enemy! I mean the girl. She was an excellent komsomol member! And her body was a snow-white color, stiff as a ball...

A woman. Her name was either Firuza or Husniyya...or something like that...

A man. Yes, something like that.. .She was charming!

A woman. (*Laughs*) You! Damned! Very unusual man! Remembering her you heat your bones now...

A man. (*Laughs*) You're right...

A voice from distant. Coming to Baku the servant saw that my grandfather had returned to Kislovodsk. He had up and lay the onion sack over his back and moved towards Kislovodsk.

A conductor. (*Singing in a low voice*)

I splashed water to the streets...

But I think that the twenty-eighth congress²⁴ is something artificial. One can not call it as a historical congress!

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

No, by no means it can be called historical one!

The 1st passenger. Eggs' shells! Alas, how many of them! A tomato box! Old shoes!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look.

The 1st passenger. Ah! Ah! Ah! The portrait of Andropov!

The flag of the USSR! Suslov²⁵! Oh, alas! How many Brezhnevs! Look at them, man!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look.

The 3rd passenger. I swear to my mother's grave, may the God forbids me caring if I say a lie, strawberries are also poisoned! Now you offer a child some strawberry and child dies eating it!

Nadezhda Krupskaya. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

The 3rd passenger. Meat can be bought with coupons! Do you understand? Butter with coupons! Frogs - with coupons!

Nadezhda Krupskaya. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

A woman. (*Laughs*) What did you say them when they said you that?

A man. Me? Haven't I just told you about it?

A woman. No...

A man. (*Nearly faints of laughter*) I said that...I said that...

The train blows a whistle

²⁴ *The XXVIII Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.*

²⁵ *former Soviet party leader.*

A voice from distant. Rains bagzn in Kislovodsk. My grandfather had a tedious time. He charged and they gathered his dresses, packed his suit cases and he returned his home in Baku.

A woman. Oh, you had answered them wonderfully!

A man. (*Laughing heartily*) Yes!

A woman. And you once gave a slap to Alisattar!

A man. Alisattar?

A woman. He was your deputy then...

A man. Yes, you are right. But did I give him a slap?

A woman. Who then, if not you?

A man. It seems that he gave me a slap...

A woman. I don't know.

The 1st passenger. Look at them, man! Alas! Alas! Jinn! Satan! Monster!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

The 1st passenger. Ogre! Witch!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

The 3rd passenger. A kilogram of butter is fifteen manats! If I tell a lie, may this electric train share me to pieces!

A conductor. Very little, very little remains till Buzovna! Coming, my lover won't have dust...

A voice from distant. (*In a hurry*) The servant came to Kislovodsk and found out that my grandfather had left for Baku. And he took that onion sack and again returned back.

A man. (*In a hurry*) Did he return my lottery?

A woman. I don't know.

A man. Let me have a look...

A voice from distant. (*In a hurry*) the servant looked at those onions in the sack in Baku and saw that the onions became rotten! Became decomposed!

Nadezhda Krupskaya. I loved Vladimir Ilych Lenin!

The 3rd passenger. A chicken in the market was for two manats! I even bought a pair of them for three manats! May the sword of Ali²⁶ kill me if I lie! Now one chicken is for twenty manats! For two hundred manats by old money! Mmmm...six and zero there. I can buy only six chickens for my month's wages! And that is it! Then I mustn't have any bread or water during a month!

The 1st passenger. (*Shouting*) Oh, I remained here, man! I remained inside this dump, eh! I remained inside this dump! Look at me! Don't leave!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look.

A voice from distant. (*In a hurry*) My grandfather spat on the servant's face. Said, you, a kneading trough son of the bleeding trough!

A man. (*Uneasily*) Where is it then? Where is my lottery?

The 1st passenger. (*Shouting*) Don't leave! Don't leave! Look at me!

The 2nd passenger. I don't look!

Mickael Gorbachev. (*In a hurry*) We are in the right way, comrades!

Karl Marx. (*In a hurry*) The proletariats of all countries, unite!

²⁶ *Ali had been the most famous follower of Prophet Mohammad. Being a great intellectual at the same time he was a well-known military leader who always was in the first lines of battles with his miracle – sword*

A conductor. (*Singing in a low voice*)

I splashed water to the streets... I splashed water to the streets...

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

Coming, my lover won't be in dust...

The train moves on whistling



See information
about the author
on the back face
of the cover

Zeidulla AGAYEV

SOLITUDE

The courtyard was quiet these days. The cold had forced the members of the seven families who lived in the apartment complex to move from their verandas to warmer rooms inside. No longer was it possible to sit out on the verandas and just chat. Sometimes, when the wind died down and the sun peeked out from behind the dark gray clouds, the children would appear in the courtyard and, of course, get carried away, squabbling amongst themselves. But the parents no longer criticized or blamed each other with complaints of "why don't you look after your own child?"

It was the presence of a bulldozer, particularly, its shovel, which leaned against the walls in a neighboring courtyard, that filled them with hope. That's why, there were no more arguments. Nor was there any need for Aunt Halima to lecture everyone. Sitting on her veranda, Aunt Halima's domineering voice could easily be heard even by "Shameless Safura" who lived in the opposite corner of the yard. Very often the women simply sat on their verandas and listened to Aunt Halima's injunctions or replied to her questions. Sometimes they just stood in the center of the little courtyard and nodded with great respect.

There were two reasons why Aunt Halima had gained their esteem. First, she was the eldest woman in the courtyard and secondly, she, obviously, was a model mother - her son was a professor at the university! That alone was proof that something was extraordinary about her. Who among other women of the yard wouldn't have wished their child to have succeeded as Aunt Halima's son Habib had. Aunt Halima was clever enough to understand all this, so, sitting on her veranda, she would lecture about her daughter-in-law, Latifa. And the women would listen attentively, nodding their heads.

But these days the severe, cold winds blowing over the Absheron peninsula had been relentless, refusing to die down. The children no longer played in the courtyard, or quarreled or threatened each other with menacing fistfights, causing their mothers to get into arguments, too. Even if there had been a fuss, no one would have stopped it, as Aunt Halima had fallen ill and burrowed herself away in her inner room those past two weeks.

One day, when the wind abated, and the sun could be seen somewhere behind the gray-black clouds, the women heard Aunt Halima's voice complaining from the veranda.

"When will this winter ever finish? I'm so tired of this cold!"

Everyone in the building had heard her and hastened to cheer her with warm words. The first who appeared in the courtyard was "Shameless Safura".

"Oh, Sister Halima, I'm so glad that you're feeling better."

Zamina who had recently become engaged came out. As did dark-skinned Nazila. In fact, all six women of the courtyard gathered in the center of the yard within a few seconds to offer id words of encouragement to Halima.

"May you always be on your feet, Sister Halima. Be far all disease."

Aunt Halima thanked them with the dignity that was so characteristic of mothers who had great sons. She then urged to return to their apartments as it was cold outside. Then she glanced up at the gray-black clouds in the sky, then shivering bare branches of the trees, and finally towards the bulldozer. Despite the fact that the grippe had left *her* weak for two weeks, she forced herself to get dressed to go out. "Have to dress and go... have to go to my son's place... I just have to go!"

Early morning the next day, Nazila's son would come to her bread, yogurt and fresh greens'. Aunt Halima would to give him some money, but she didn't have a single coin. And it would be several days before she could expect her pension. She had never asked her neighbors for money before, not would she do it this time. What would they, those strange people, think of her - Aunt Halima, whose son worked at the university? And, in addition, she had to kiss her grandson today.

After dressing, she moved slowly to the corner of the room, picked up a little box, took great pleasure in looking at the multi-colored little toy tank inside and placed it into her once-beautiful bag. She then closed the door and went outside.

It was as if the wind had been waiting her arrival. It punched on her from every different direction. The cold penetrated her bones. She stood motionless for a few moments, leaning against the frozen stones of the wall. She wanted so

'Fresh greens - such as basil, mint, tarragon, and spring onions, which traditionally accompany meals.

badly to return to her flat, but remembering Nazila's son and her own grandson, she pushed forward.

Finally, she arrived at her son Habib's door, many blocks away. She paused a moment to calm her pounding heart. Then she put her shivering finger to the doorbell, but withdrew it immediately. She knew that her daughter-in-law didn't like long rings. She had become weak from the strenuous walk. It was cold. It had taken all her strength to resist the winds and stay on her feet, but she composed herself and managed a smile by the time Latifa finally opened the door.

"Come in, come in," Latifa offered, looking at her in amazement. "What is this? How did you come in such weather?"

"Weren't you expecting guests?" Halima's voice was so weak she could scarcely speak.

"Guests in this storm? Are you crazy? We'll invite them on Saturday... Why don't you take off your coat?"

Halima was very tired from her walk. Her heart was pounding and she knew that she didn't have much strength, so, sat down on a chair in the kitchen.

"Let me catch my breath."

"What's the matter with you, woman? You look so pale," Latifa observed.

"I've been feeling badly... for two weeks... in bed... I was..." She couldn't bring herself to admit that she couldn't afford to buy medicine and that she was lonely in her damp room with its empty walls.

"It's difficult to live in that dampness. Simply, I... have to take it easy."

"Haven't they pulled down that apartment yet?" Latifa asked, putting the kettle on the gas stove.

"In fact, we've been watching the bulldozer pull down neighborhood houses. But don't you see the weather? After they finish pulling those others down, they'll issue orders for ours."

"Such good news!" Latifa smiled.

Aunt **Halima** reached for her once-beautiful bag on the floor, opened it, took the multi-colored tank out and placed it on the kitchen table. "For Elgun. May he become great like his father."

"Thanks," Latifa said, glancing at the toy for an instant. "Habib bought one just like it from Moscow last summer."

Little Elgun appeared at the kitchen entrance with sleepy eyes, muttering something. Latifa wanted to take the child to the toilet, but suddenly Elgun ran in and took the toy from the kitchen table. Aunt Halima embraced her grandson heartily.

"Say, who bought this tank for you?" she asked.

"**Youuu...**"

"Why?"

"For my birthday."

"Oh, good boy! Do you know how old you are?"

"Four."

But their sweet conversation was interrupted. Latifa took the toy from her son's hands, put it on top of the refrigerator and took Elgun to the bathroom. A few minutes later, she returned.

"But you haven't taken your coat," she told her mother-in-law.

"I'll be heading home."

These words came from Halima's lips quite suddenly and unexpectedly. She had intended to take her coat off, to have the tea offered by her daughter-in-law, to chat with her son and grandson, even with Latifa. In a word, to spend these sick, weary, stormy days with her nearest relatives. But then these words had suddenly tumbled out. Nor had Latifa insisted.

A minute or so passed. Aunt Halima was the first to break the silence.

"What time is it?"

"A few minutes passed three," replied Latifa .

"Will Habib be late?"

"Why do you want Habib? He finishes his lecture at five, then he must go to the TV studio. He's giving a speech on TV this evening about raising children. Pity that you haven't got a TV-set. But you can watch him at your neighbor's."

At that moment Elgun ran into the kitchen.

"Give me my tank, granny!"

Aunt Halima stood up, took the toy from the refrigerator and handed it to the child-

"Oh, you are leaving... Why? Sit a bit. Tea will be ready," Latifa mumbled.

But Aunt Halima wouldn't sit down again.

"I... I didn't even switch off the gas. I must return...umm... I only came to greet my grandson, Elgun-bala."

At the entrance, Latifa suddenly asked, "You said that you'd be given a new flat?"

"Yes, God willing. As soon as the weather,, the bulldozer..."

"They'll be giving you a two-room flat, won't they?"

"Of course, why not? I'm not alone in the list. Elgun is also with me, you know."

Habib had come up with that idea. By listing his son as living with his mother, they would be able to qualify for a two-room flat. It was for this reason that Aunt Halima had continued living in that miserable damp flat.

Latifa went on, "My sister lives in Yassamal with her family. They are renters now, you know. Habib says that we'll give the new flat to them. Then you can live with us, you know..."

It was very difficult for Aunt Halima to hear Latifa's words. Nazila's son was standing before her eyes. Tomorrow morning Halima would need some bread, yogurt and fresh greens.

"My daughter, I... need some money. My pension will not arrive for a few days."

"Oh, I see," Latifa whispered. She stalked to the bedroom and returned a minute later, extending a small bank note. Halima took the money with her trembling fingers.

"Woman, you're old and diabetic, we know. You don't eat meat, no sugar. It's strange. How is that you manage to spend all your pension?" Latifa complained.

"If I wouldn't buy the toy for Elgun," thought Halima, "I would be happy enough not to listen these words. These poisoned words."

Halima wanted to say something, but she could only gasp. The pounding of her heart soimded so loud in her ears! The bank note slipped out of her weak, trembling fingers. She left without a word. The door was closed behind her. The sound echoed in her ears, Aunt **Halima** took some steps, leaned against the wall while the stairs became blurry through her tears.

Fortunately, the cold and frost had chased everyone inside their flats. Nobody was on the stairs as she left. Nor did Halima want to be seen by anyone now. What would they think about her wretched son, Habib, now? The grief and sorrow, which had been deep in her soul for years, turned into bitter tears and sobs.

She was weeping for herself, for her dry dignity. She had always praised this Habib and this Latifa to her neighbors, to those ordinary women in the little courtyard. In the meantime, she was suffering there in that damp flat for this Latifa and this Habib! The hope, which the shovel of the bulldozer had always brought, evaporated with Latifa's words "my sister with her family... renters..."

Aunt Halima slowly descended the stairs and headed out into the empty street of the windy city. Every step was torture. She inched along groping for the trees, bracing herself against the wails of houses along the way. The severe wind attacked her from all sides at every corner. And now the empty, once-beautiful bag even slapped her in the face.

Suddenly, she felt dizzy. She longed for her damp flat, her old bed in the corner. She moved ahead, inch by inch, passing near the bulldozer with its shovel. Suddenly, everything blurred as she reached the entrance to her little courtyard.

When Aunt Halima opened her eyes, she didn't understand where she was.

"How are you, Sister Halima?"

It was "shameless Safura". Oh, they were in her flat. Halima was suddenly sorry for having branded Safura with that name, "shameless".

"How are you, Sister Halima?"

The question came from everyone's lips. Aunt Halima looked up into the faces of the six women, standing around her bed.

"Where are your husbands?" she asked.

"They are playing dominoes in your flat, Sister Halima." And Safura added, "You'll stay with us until there's a new flat. Yours is too moist and damp."

With great difficulty, Aunt Halima managed to hold back her tears. Yet still a surge of pride allowed her to overcome the truth.

"Everything happened so suddenly, so strangely! Habib, my son, the professor..." "Oh, we know him."

"Yes... He saw me off... up to the door of our courtyard, and went away... He... he had to go to the TV studio... we'll see him... my son... Y...yes, he left... What happened to me when I wanted to enter the courtyard? I don't remember. Maybe... the ground was slippery or... something else..."

The six women said nothing as they listened to Halima's words. And they nodded, understanding everything.

THE WELL

The Science Secretary of Defense Soviet found him in the faculty lounge. He was in the corner, alone and deep in thought, he'd even forgotten about the glass of tea in front of him.

"Oh, now you can put away your thoughts, Matlab muallim, my congratulations!" The secretary said this and handed him a post card.

The other faculty in the lounge immediately understood what the secretary was referring to. They rushed over to congratulate Matlab muallim and asked to hear what was written on the post card.

"The Doctor of Science! That's it! Congratulations, Matlab muallim! When shall we mark it?"

"Oh, now you are relieved of your heavy burden... This was the last hurdle and you've done it! In a few months you'll be a professor, too."

"And after that we'll congratulate you as an academic."

Each person said something wonderful, something sweet. Matlab stayed at the table, he shook hands with his colleagues, smiled at this or that, talked of a very nice party, patted somebody's head with his right hand. But...

But he wasn't happy at all. He couldn't be happy. It was as if he wasn't that Matlab, the one who had been waiting for this news for a year, the same Matlab who

rarely slept through the night and met dawn with open eyes.

He didn't understand his own feelings. Everyone told him he was tired and pensive because of Moscow, because of the news he was expecting from Moscow. He had worked for years, preparing his thesis before he defended it here in Baku.

After that, everything depended on the unknown scholars in Moscow. What would they say? Maybe, they would invite him to Moscow to ask him hundreds of questions. He had never worried about his knowledge, he knew his field well, he only worried about his poor knowledge of Russian; he'd have to answer those questions in Russian. But even with his poor Russian, he believed he would be able to explain everything again and again, he knew he could prove his background. It had been nearly a year since he defended his thesis in Baku, and then sent the documents to Moscow. He often thought that maybe they had lost it or put it aside as garbage from the province.

His friends and colleagues easily explained what might be happening in Moscow:

"It's clear, many anonymous letters were sent to Moscow and they're checking them one by one."

"Oh, Moscow! They're awaiting you with open arms. We know it!"

"Or with open pockets."

"Oh, they've sent your thesis to somebody for additional resolution; now wait please, for many years."

It was so nice with exact sciences, any moment you could prove that, ladies and gentlemen, two times two is four. The same couldn't be said about the humanities, including, of course, Matlab's field: literature - the science of conceptions, directions, and interpretations. You interpret something one way and the guy across from you interprets it another way. Here was the bitter result: Matlab was waiting for approval of his thesis from Moscow.

And at last, at last it had come! The breathless anticipation was over. But...

No, Matlab couldn't be happy, he couldn't swallow the knot of sorrow stuck in his throat these last few months, on the contrary, the knot seemed to get bigger.

"Thank you, Safar muallim, my gift for you...will be...for this news," Matlab responded to the Science Secretary. Then he put the postcard in his pocket as if it were an ordinary scrap of paper. He'd only had one sip of his now icy tea, and that sip of tea couldn't pass the knot of sorrow in his throat.

He paced the hall, pondering the reason for his unhappiness. He absently acknowledged each congratulatory comment and slap on the back from his colleagues. He read his lecture, with great torture, in the large classroom, which he usually enjoyed. He couldn't understand the source of this grief he was feeling. He did notice that the classroom seemed darker than usual; Matlab could hardly see the students in the last rows.

Matlab walked slowly down the stairs, putting on his hat and coat. Outside the knot in his throat began to tremble and a strange groan came from his soul:

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Garanfil!"

A cold sweat covered his body; it was the sweat of joy. He felt happy for a moment because he had just discovered the reason for his grief. It wasn't today's grief or yesterday's grief; it was the grief of the last seven years. It was the grief of the well, the well Matlab dug with his own hands and climbed into with his own feet...

It could have happened yesterday, he remembered it so well. It was a special day

at the university: a performance by Leyla khanum, one of the most talented singers in the town. The dean asked Matlab muallim to make a speech about Leyla khanum. He did his best, he spoke well, and it was not difficult because he liked her as a singer. Leyla khanum performed four songs, adding something new and fresh to each of them. Students and teachers took great pleasure of her singing, as did Matlab, but he felt that Leyla was singing especially to him when she took Matlab's hand in hers. He was charmed by her and followed her around like a devoted slave.

This was the beginning of Matlab's second youth. His four-room flat in the center of the city suddenly felt cramped to him, even Baku, a large city, felt small. His wife, Garanfil, his daughter, Shalala, and his young son, Adil, became strangers to him.

Leyla continued to charm Matlab, making him a prisoner to her every whim. One day, it finally happened, Leyla embraced him with her snow-white arms and Matlab couldn't go back. Matlab would later realize that Leyla didn't hunt for cheap adventures, it had pleased her that Matlab was a scholar, whose name appeared in newspapers and magazines, and whose voice was often heard on the radio and TV. Matlab's success was a good weapon for Leyla to use against her first husband, "a stupid prosecutor" who'd never valued her beauty and charm. "Now look at me," she'd wanted to say to him, "on the arm of a well-known literary critic and scholar from the university!"

...Garanfil calmly walked out of Matlab's life; she didn't even shed a tear in front of him. She took the children and moved to Ganja, where her parents lived. Matlab heard that she'd gotten a job as a nurse at the kindergarten Adil attended, and Shalala was going to a middle school in Ganja.

Leyla, with her beauty and wonderful songs, moved into Matlab's apartment. Matlab wrote his doctoral thesis in his room Leyla rehearsed songs in the room next to it. Matlab turned thousands of pages in the archives and in the library, and Leyla tried on her new dresses in the studio. At first things were good, Leyla played the piano and sang to herself. But soon more and more composers and players came to the house. It became too noisy and too stormy in the studio, and, no doubt, Matlab became jealous. By the time Matlab was brave enough to protest it was too late, Leyla wouldn't listen.

"It's my profession! And in the future, don't enter my room without permission! You're a scholar but at the same time very you are backward...Look at me, I must be stupid to waste my youth with you!"

Everything grew dark suddenly, Matlab felt as though someone had grabbed him by the hair and beaten his head against the wall. Matlab now understood that Leyla had never really needed him at all, she only needed his apartment in the center of the city. It was true, Matlab worked at the university, but he was a stupid teacher - as Leyla mentioned - he didn't take bribes and lived only on his damned salary, part of which went to Garanfil and the children. Matlab couldn't buy new dresses for Leyla, he couldn't take her away to other countries, or to health resorts. Matlab subsisted only on his teaching salary and occasionally other work. Leyla felt she had to show him his real place in the family, away from her personal life and admires.

Matlab figured he would put up with her immaturity for a while. First, he had to think about his doctoral thesis, and then, maybe one day Leyla would become more reliable.

The defence of the thesis was now behind him -the postcard confirming he was a Doctor of Science was in his pocket - but still Matlab wasn't happy. He

worried about Leyla's ambitions and behavior. He imagined Garanfil crying and his children helpless. And this damned knot of sorrow kept him from breathing like an ordinary man.

"I'm so sorry, Garanfil!" It must have been the tenth time today that that cry from the heart formed in his dry lips. But this time he suddenly realized the solution to his problem. He quickly decided what he had to do. Tomorrow he will go to Ganja to ask forgiveness, and if necessary, fall to his knees and beg Garanfil to come back to him. He finally saw the harm he'd caused in the past seven years. God knows how difficult it has been for his Garanfil and the children. But better late than never! He'll bring them back. By the time he was standing at the door to his flat he had decided once and for all he had to sail to his old shores. Even if this flat remained in Leyla's hands, even if he could take "only his hat from here, he would leave Leyla and the last seven year of his life.

Oh, how wonderful it would be if his family heard his good news and they were waiting for him inside. Shalala and Adil would hug him like they used to, and, always shiny, Garanfil would look at him through tears of happiness!

...Leyla was in her room with the light on but Matlab didn't say "good evening" to her, he didn't want to share the good news from Moscow with her. He walked lazily to his room like man who hadn't slept in a hundred years. He wanted to sleep, as long as possible, and in the morning he would call the head of his department to ask for time off to go to Ganja.

The doorbell rang. Matlab knew it wasn't for him, his relatives and friends never came over, some of them had been "asked" not to by Leyla, others simply hated Matlab because of what he'd done to Garanfil and the children.

When the bell rang the second time, more insistently, Matlab went to the hall. There he met Leyla, who was dressed in her multi-colored dressing gown, she rushed, passed him and uttered bitterly, "I'll open myself! Nobody asked your majesty..." The young composer Massim Sharbeyli was standing at the door.

"Oh! Massim Tairovich!" Leyla welcomed him in such a sweet tone; Matlab recognized that tone from seven years ago.

The longhaired Massim Sharbeyli was often a guest in Leyla's room these days; maybe Leyla was preparing some of his songs. Matlab returned to his room full of hate, mostly for himself. How could he, father of two wonderful children, husband of the charming Garanfil, lecturer at the university... how could he stand this? The constant misunderstandings, the questions about visitors to his own home. How could he live within these walls without the breath of children? How? No, now it was high time to wash away the dirt of his sins. High lime!

He heard Aunt Halima, his neighbor, calling to him from the balcony. She always called from her balcony when she wanted to speak to Matlab, she knew Leyla's window was on the other side of the building so she wouldn't hear them. **Matlab** went to the balcony.

"Good evening, Aunt Halima."

"Good evening, my son. Congratulations, the postman brought the news about your doctorate. May you see the benefit of it!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you very much, Aunt Halima. Your gift is in me," Matlab appeared joyful - he didn't mention the postcard that was in his jacket pocket

right now - but the grief in his voice didn't go unnoticed.

"You seem strange, my son, has something happened?"

Matlab forced himself to smile.

"Getting such news after a year's wait.. one might faint," he lied.

"Oh yes, and sonny, here is a letter from your child."

Matlab asked the postman to give any letters for him to Aunt Halima. Leyla overreacted any time a letter came from Ganja. "Wait! Just wait a little bit! Let me get my honored title, and then **I'll** give birth once a year, filling this damned house with children, maybe after that your bitches will set us free..."

He immediately recognized Shalala's writing. He heard his heart beating.

"Look what you've done to yourself and your children, my son," Aunt Halima went inside wiping tears with the back of her hand.

Matlab sat in the armchair and turned on the table lamp. His hands trembled as he opened the envelope. Shalala began the letter without a greeting. Why?

"Mother got married."

Mother what? Married? How? Matlab's brain wasn't clear enough to understand the meaning of these words. He read them again. And again.

"Mother got married."

Garanfil...married? Whom? Why? So fast?

But it wasn't fast; it had been seven years.

"And you have your own family, your own warm nest. But my brother and I remain helpless. What was our sin, father?" It took Matlab more than an hour to read these sentences, to understand them, not to believe them, and to read them again, and again.

Oh, unfaithful Garanfil (*Was she unfaithful, Matlab?*), you should ask me first (*Did you ask her when you met Leyla? And, in the next room with Massim Sharbeyli or with anyone else, does Leyla ask permission?*).

Matlab returned from his dreams to reality. Yes, Garanfil had built a nest for herself; she had become a strange person for Matlab. Now it was time to save the children, to protect them. Shalala had grown up so fast, was she in the ninth or tenth grade? "What was our sin, father?" The only guilty one was Matlab and now he was determined to fix everything, he had to bring the children to Baku. But first he must read the letter to Leyla (*again Leyla?*) and get her permission. If Leyla doesn't agree, he will tell her to leave.

He had tears in his eyes when he went to Leyla's room. The knot of sorrow in his throat became heavier and heavier.

How strange, neither music nor song was heard from the room. Or, had Matlab become deaf? Oh, no, he clearly heard his own heart beating and the familiar sound of the wall-clock in the hall. ...And Leyla's sexy whispers? He was ready to kick the door open and strangle them with his own hands, but something strange happened. His heart trembled, he felt as though it jumped out of his chest. He grabbed the wall to keep from falling to the floor. He continued to clutch the wall until he was back in his room. Death, his majesty Death put its heavy wings on Matlab, he understood this immediately. He was also clever enough to understand that a person like him had to die this way, alone, like an owl. He was caught by death so unexpectedly he didn't have enough time or strength for regrets. But he could still think. It was impossible to leave the world this way, he had to do something. At least he had to die as a real man dies.

Shalala's letter was still in his hand. The paper with words worse than an

atomic bomb.

He took a pen and began to write on that same paper. He couldn't see what he was writing, as if he was blind. He was writing his will, a will at forty-two? (*He could write his will at eighty two, but he had to write it now, there would be no tomorrows.*) He would leave everything to his children, the house and everything in it, and the money in his bank account.

He begged God for three more minutes so he could finish and sign the will.

Finished at last! But, no!!! A thousand times no! It couldn't be left here under Leyla's long, white fingers and red, blood red, nails! Couldn't be...

He stood up painfully, his bones thundering. He didn't have enough strength to moan. Leaning on the wall, clutching it with his teeth and nails, he made it to the hall and finally out the front door. He stumbled to the neighbor's door and rang the bell with the last of his strength.

At first Aunt Halima didn't recognize the coal-black man in front of her, but she quickly realized who it was.

"What happened to you, sonny?" She yelled for her son and his wife, "Seyran, Sevda, call an ambulance at once! Quick, come here!"

The black statue before her moved its hand toward Aunt Halima and gave her the paper. He almost collapsed but she caught him.

"What happened to you, sonny?" Seyran and Sevda came to the door.

"Don't be afraid, the doctor will come soon, I've already called," Sevda said.

"Sevda, get a glass of water, quick."

Matlab's lips trembled; they heard his deep whispering,

"Nothing can help me now...It's too late... Let Garanfil... forgive me..."

Aunt Halima began to weep.

From Matlab's flat the sound of the piano was heard. Leyla began singing her new song...

A SLAP

As the iron door screeched closed behind - him, Agamehdi breathed a sigh of relief. Only then did he notice the emptiness of the street in front of him. Certainly his friends would be waiting for him, to take him in their arms as soon as he took his first step outside this damned building. He'd imagined their cars lined up along the road - thank God everyone had their own car, everyone except his good friend Shakir - and how they would immediately put Agamehdi into one of the cars and take him away from here. As he looked at the street now it was quite empty - it wasn't a street in a city of two million inhabitants; Agamehdi continued to stare, through the heavy rain, at the empty street. "Even the devil can't understand the climate of Baku. Look at this rain in the middle of summer," he thought. Agamehdi couldn't pull himself away from the door yet. "He must not have informed them of my dismissal today," he thought angrily of the officer.

One thing was clear though, he was glad to be called out of the cell at the very

moment that they had called him. Yes, he felt lucky, if he had been called a minute later that man from Nardaran²⁷ would have killed him right there. Alashraf had said to him, "What did you say? You wretch!" as he moved toward him with heavy steps. It was just then that the cell door opened and they called Agamehdi out. Shortly after the outburst, when he was leaving the cell, Agamehdi was able to pull himself together, he looked toward Alashraf's corner and said, "I'll remember your words, fine boy. You'll answer for this later."

How had he not noticed him before? There was a man across the street, a man, standing in the rain, who looked so much like his grandfather. Maybe not just a man who looked like him, it was his grandpa Ganbar kishi²⁸. He was wearing his gray raincoat. It was too big for him. His coat was soaking wet -he must have been standing there for a long time - water was dripping from every corner of his old fashioned hat. "But," he thought, "it was impossible, Ganbar kishi had passed away long ago - when Agamehdi was in the seventh form in school -and the dead ones don't come back. Maybe those cold and humid walls had made him crazy. Was he mad? Had his eyes begun playing tricks on him?"

The man, bent under the weight of the rain, called to him, "Don't stay in the rain, sonny, come on." It was his father's voice. "He has changed so much," thought Agamehdi, "as if half of him has vanished."

Saftar greeted his son coldly, extending only the tips of his fingers. This was not what Agamehdi had expected, but he said nothing. How had his father become so old in only three months? The change in him was more than age; he was weak and unhealthy. Agamehdi was right, his father was Ganbar kishi, Ganbar kishi right before his death.

"You've lost a bit of weight," Agamehdi said. He wanted to add, "How do you stay on your feet?" but he contained himself.

"Lost a bit of weight?" Saftar kishi knew that losing weight wasn't good.

Agamehdi quickly changed the subject. "Where are the boys?" he asked, as they walked through the rain.

"Boys?" Saftar asked, as if he hadn't understood him.

"Yes, Tolik, Agazal, Shakir, and the others. They didn't come, why not? It's not like them, didn't you tell them?"

"Is this an historical event? You are dismissed, should we meet you with an orchestra? In fact, I haven't seen any of your friends, the ones you called or the ones you didn't call, for two months; but the devil takes them, they came after the accident..."

"The accident happened three months ago, on the fourteenth of April, but you say two months, what are you talking about?"

He began thinking of that day all his friends were at the police station, looking through the doors and climbing the windows. "Don't be afraid," they said to comfort him. "What's a single slap? They'll probably lecture you and then dismiss you. Or maybe they will send your case to the comrade's court of the butchers."

They didn't stop kidding even then. Gradually, though, they began to say less and less about Agamehdi's dismissal. Neither Nargiz, nor Hikmat forgave him.

Hikmat, with his small head and glasses - the glasses that flew fifteen meters. Agamehdi hadn't expected the force of his slap to be so strong, but it only took one slap

²⁷ Nardaran - a village near Baku

²⁸ Kishi - means "man" in Azeri, respectful to aged men

to land Hikmat on the ground, helpless to do anything but watch his glasses fly from his face. Even now Agamehdi couldn't remember if Hikmat had finished his sentence or if the slap had come so suddenly that it cut him off before he could finish.

If he had ten crazy daughters, Agamehdi wouldn't let any of them marry Hikmat. What did Nargiz see in him? What could she see in that stork-like boy? Hikmat was obstinate. He'd appeared out of nowhere that day and stood before Agamehdi, "I beg you, don't prevent me and Nargiz..." It was at that very moment that the slap erupted like thunder.

Nargiz's courtyard was across from Agamehdi's meat shop. Agamehdi had first noticed her when she was in the eighth or ninth form. After that he learned more about her family. Where was this stork with glasses then? Once she finished school she had two years before she could enter the Institute of Foreign Languages. She worked at a printing house a few blocks away. After Nargiz finished the secondary school, Agamehdi began to follow her, to send love letters to her, several times he sent fresh meat to her family's house, two or three times he even drank Chekh beer with her older brother -of course, Agamehdi had paid for that. In mid-March, a few days before the Novruz²⁹ Holiday, he sent his mother and older sister to speak to Nargiz's parents. "Our daughter will get a university education was their answer.

In Agamehdi's family this answer was explained as the future "yes". It must be the same in this girl's house, they thought, and they decided to go there again in a few months. It was good that they had not said Nargiz loved another boy. Let them do what they wish, let her continue her education, let her get her diploma, but Agamehdi did not need her to work, she could stay at home and raise her (and Agamehdi's) children. Then suddenly, on the fourteenth of April, that boy with the glasses appeared, saying that he was part of the picture.

The glasses made a semi circle in the air and finally fell some fifteen meters away. At the very same moment, the door of the courtyard across the street opened and Nargiz ran into the street.

"What are you doing, you scoundrel? Do you think you're stronger than him?" the girl shouted. Agamehdi was angrily closing his shop as noticed three or four men from the chaikhana³⁰ come running. Nargiz bent down, "What happened to you, Hikmat?"

Hikmat was ashamed of being so weak, of lying there on the sidewalk; he wanted to get up. He could feel the blood coming from the back of his head.

"Call an ambulance, please," Nargiz shouted. "Don't be afraid, Hikmat, don't be afraid, I'm here."

Agamehdi didn't watch anymore. He went to his new *Zhiguli* car and drove away. The district police officer found him in Shukur's chaikhana.

"That boy is badly hurt and you're responsible. It's against the law, you know." As the officer explained these things to him they made their way to the police station. Once Agamehdi was there he was not allowed to go back home.

²⁹ Novruz – national holiday in Azerbaijan (March 20-21) , ancient New Year holiday

³⁰ Chaikhana – a tea house

What Agamehdi did not know was that his parents had gone to the hospital and asked Hikmat to forgive him. Agamehdi's mother fainted when they were there. Hikmat was in serious condition, he had lost a lot of blood and had a high temperature.

"I...what..I'm a man...let Nargiz forgive him. Our love was scorned."

Agamehdi's parents went to Nargiz, but she wouldn't even listen to them.

"If Hikmat forgives him, I'll hate Hikmat too."

Agamehdi knew nothing about this. His arrest seemed like a joke to him and he was not upset. He believed that his relatives and friends would do their best to free him from jail. He knew he would open his meat shop again, across the street from Nargiz's home, with pride. Agamehdi wasn't silent in his cell either. He spoke to every prisoner about his story from beginning to end.

"I don't worry at all. Let my father, friends, and sisters' husbands be safe and sound, they'll free me."

The last time he was telling his story to a boy from Barda, the boy got very excited.

"Wow, I can't believe it, fifteen meters?"

Agamehdi continued with pleasure, he even began to embellish a little at the end of the story.

"Let me out of here...let me...I have some problems with a couple people. I must settle them."

"Who are they? What did they do?"

"What do you think? First of all, our district police officer Bayram, that son of a beast. He carried me away to the police station but he never said I had been arrested, or that I could inform my parents and friends, or even that I could run away and hide until things calmed down... Then I will find Hikmat, that stork. I have to ask him, how did this happen? How can a man be arrested because of a simple slap? I will slap the other side of his face this time."

"Oh, you are a giant," the boy from Barda said in admiration.

"I'll solve the problem with Nargiz in another way. I like her; I'm sitting in this cell for her. She must be mine."

"Oh, my!"

"Yes, if she refuses to marry me, I'll kidnap her. I'll put her in my car and take her away. Believe me, I'll amuse myself plenty living with her for three or four months. Then I'll say goodbye to her. Let her know what it means to arrest a man like me."

"What did you say? Amuse yourself?" a voice from the far corner of the cell was heard, the voice of the man from Nardaran.

"I said, I'll amuse myself for three or four months, say goodbye..."

"You have no conscience or honor. You are not an Azerbaijani man." Alashraf approached him with heavy steps. "And you call yourself a man?"

Just then, the cell door was thrown open.

"Agamehdi Ibrahimov, get your things and come with me."

This was a victory. "Get your things and come with me," was the sound of victory, at last. If they were taking him back to the investigator they wouldn't have told him to bring his things.

Now Agamehdi was walking through the rain with his father, who looked so much like his grandfather.

"But it happened three months ago, on the fourteenth of April - you said two months. What are you talking about?"

"Me?" Saftar kishi hesitated. "Oh, I...felt bad back then, a little."

It was clear, he could hardly speak, he didn't say anything to comfort Agamehdi, his only son.

"You should have told my friends, then we wouldn't have to walk in the rain like this."

"Don't worry, there's a bus stop over there." Agamehdi could hardly hear his father's voice, "And those friends of yours, son, they were vodka, wine and beer friends."

"Oh, so you're saying that Tolik, Shakir, Agazal..."

His father got angry.

"Yes, son, Tolik and Shakir, I don't know...Agazal and others are pieces of the same cheap material. You are another piece of that material."

Agamehdi had known he would have to hear some harsh words, though he hadn't expected his father to start in so soon after his release.

"Oh stop, father, what am I supposed to do? Should I return to prison again? What did I do after all? I slapped some vagrant in the street..."

"You are stupid, so very stupid! You made me go to the doors of strangers - at my age. I sacrificed for your mother...your mother," he sighed deeply, "if she hadn't begged me, I wouldn't have done anything for you."

Maybe the world had changed in the past three months. In the past, his family listened to anything Agamehdi said; he was greatly respected. What was happening now? His father seemed nervous. Again, Agamehdi changed the subject.

"How is mother? I saw her several times in my dreams," but Saftar kishi didn't hear him. They stood, silently, in the rain and waited for the bus. Once they were on the bus, Agamehdi decided he wanted to get off at the stop near his meat shop.

"You go home, I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes."

Saftar kishi knew what his son was thinking.

"Sit down, Agamehdi, Nargiz is engaged to that boy -forget about that courtyard - she has already begun evening classes at the institute."

Something was shattered inside Agamehdi. He had not expected this.

"When we closed your meat shop we discovered that there were 200,000 manat missing," Saftar kishi was looking away as if he was talking to himself. "You are lucky that we managed to speak to the inspector and return the money...if they'd kept that information in your file you would be in jail for at least eight years."

Agamehdi felt his insides breaking again; the number of blows was increasing. They got off the bus and headed to the street where their family lived. Saftar kishi coughed quietly.

"I think you should know now - so that you don't shout in the courtyard where the family can hear you - I sold your car...I had to sell it."

"What?"

"You understand our situation; we needed the money to save you."

Agamehdi felt another blow. He had only driven that car for two months.

The rain stopped when they entered the courtyard. Agamehdi saw his two married sisters and other relatives on the veranda. He thought that everyone would run to him, to embrace and kiss him with tears of joy and happiness. Especially his mother and sisters, surely they would rush to him. In jail he often thought of his

sisters, imagining them weeping all day and night, saying "Oh, my beloved Agamehdi." As soon as they saw him safe and sound in the courtyard they must fly to him, like birds. This did not happen. His aunt's grandson Akram and his cousin Agazaki came to him with heavy steps to shake his hand.

"Thanks be to God that you have returned home." Agazaki took the amber rosary out of his pocket. Agamehdi's older sister Sanubar embraced his neck and wept.

"Well, that will do," Saftar kishi said as took off his wet coat and threw it to Sanubar. At last, Agamehdi saw tears in his father's eyes.

Agamehdi was looking at the stairs that led to the veranda. Waiting for more people to come from there, but no one came. Then he heard his other sister speak.

"I will not greet him. When I die, don't even let him come to my grave. Don't let him. I don't have a brother. I don't."

Agamehdi's dull eyes looked around at everyone. "What is she saying?"

New tears appeared in Sanubar's eyes, she embraced her brother again, weeping bitterly.

"Oh, my only brother, our mother couldn't handle it, she couldn't accept your imprisonment, you tore out her heart..."

A fierce roar came from Agamehdi's lips.

They went to the graveyard in Agazaki's old *Moskwich*,

which reeked of petrol. Akram sat in the back. Agamehdi stared at the muddy road, he could not speak.

"Next Saturday we will mark the forty days...who could believe...she loved you so much...she just couldn't take it."

Agamehdi wept uncontrollably as he embraced his mother's grave. Akram stood off to the side smoking and Agazaki circled his rosary. It was a while before Agamehdi could calm himself.

"You know, Shakir bought **your** car." Agazaki said as he came up to him.

"Shakir?" Agamehdi slapped his knee. "Oh, Shakir, I wouldn't have expected that from him. He could've loaned us some money, couldn't he?"

"Don't you understand how people have to live?" Akram said. "You understand my situation as well as Agazaki's, we wouldn't have sold your car if we didn't have to. A car is a luxury for modern men, you know."

"We gave some money to your lawyer, to the prosecutor and the investigator. You know how it is in this country now. Three times, Agamehdi, three times I drove this old car to Shamkir where the boy with the glasses lives. Your father, Akram, and I drove there, each time with our hands full after shopping, but Hikmat refused, he wouldn't even obey his parents. He said that the girl, what is her name, oh yes, Nargiz, must forgive Agamehdi first."

"My lawyer said that she'd forgiven me," Agamehdi spoke in a low voice. Now he was ashamed. Even though they were his relatives, up until the time he was arrested he'd stayed away from them. He even laughed at Agazaki's old car when he had the chance, saying, "Take that ugly, dirty car away or we'll choke on the petrol smell."

"You say that she forgave, but let God perish such forgiveness. When did she forgive you? On the second Thursday after your mother's death. Your lawyer told us about it."

"Yes, that was it." Agazaki affirmed.

"It would be better if she hadn't," Agamehdi said bitterly. Hotter if I was still in prison and my mother was alive."
Only now did he wish to be called out of his cell half an **hour** later. Alashraf would have had the chance to give y,imehdi the beating he deserved. Agamehdi finally **Understood** that it wasn't Hikmat whom he'd beaten up, but instead his own family, his relatives...
Agamehdi stood before the gate to his home. He didn't **have** the courage to open it.



Kamal Abdulla (1950) - a poet, a critic, a playwright, a translator and a Linguist. Doctor of Philology, professor, the Rector of the Baku Slavonic University. He is the member of **the** AWU since 1983. His first book appeared in 1983. Up to now he published 2 books. Known as the author of **poems**, plays, **essays** and critical articles.

Kamal ABDULLA

THREE, FOUR - SHUT THE DOOR

(Consists of 5 scenes, the drama of two people who want to understand each other, but can't, who want to find each other, but fail.)

Characters in the play:

A Man

A Woman

The Voice of a Boy

The Voice of a Girl

ACT I

A room in semi-darkness. For a while two lights are searching for a man and a woman, sitting in opposite corners of the room, separated by a curtain. We hear children's voices from outside. (From different sides) These voices remind the man and the woman of their childhood. They listen with interest.

Children's voices:

One-two

Who is who?

Three-four

Shut the door.

Five-six

Do not mix.

Seven-eight

We are great!

Nine-ten

We are men.

The children's voices blend together, then only one boy's voice and one girl's voice can be heard clearly.

Voice of Girl: I won't play with you.

Voice of Boy: Let's play.

G: You pulled my hair.

B: I didn't.

G: You pulled my hair. I'm going to tell teacher Sarah, I'm going to tell her.

B: Then, I will tell on you, too. And I shall tell her that...

G: You will not. You will not.

B: If you don't tell, I won't either.

G: No, you won't tell.

Man: *(as if in a dream)* Of course, I wouldn't tell. *(How could I tell, because I didn't see how your hair touched my face...)*

Woman: *(as if in a dream)* No, your face touched my hair...

M: My hand touched your hair...

W: Your hand felt my hair...

M: My lips touched your hair and I felt that I became a Man.

W: Your lips touched my hair and I felt that I became a Woman.

M: That day, there were only two of us on the earth, just you and me.

W: Two of us...the whole world, with its different sides, belonged to us!

G: One-two!

B: Who is who!

The two lights that focus on the man and the woman start to tremble, then dance under the heavy, torturing music. Suddenly the music stops at exactly the same moment all the lights are switched on.

M: We think we're living too. One says go, one says stay. I hate going. It's difficult to follow the path that must be followed. There are two paths before you all your life. The first path goes the way it must go. The second path crosses that way in two or three steps.

W: Let's cross the way or just remain in our places. Others will think we are also moving.

M: Shall we go the way others have gone? What will that path tell us? Remember that if nobody walks on the road, the road is invisible. Nobody will know if the road is coming or going.

W: It's not difficult to deceive. You are always in the same place. You must move your entire life. You can't live your calm and mild life forever...ya know.

M: Never repent your deeds or you can't live.

W: As I couldn't live.

M: What is wrong with you?

W: Nothing. What could be? What could be in addition to all this? I am on this side of the curtain and you are on the other.

M: That's nonsense. What's important is that we are listening to each other

again...

W: Yes, we are listening to each other again...but... I'm displeased with you.

M: Why?

W: You think that if you remain on the other side of the curtain, it means you're lucky.

M: What can I say...I didn't really think about it.

W: You didn't think about it? You did! You can't deceive me. You can't. You saw me off. You felt like it was your victory.

M: Then... I'll also say...

W: *{frightened}* What? What will you say? *{Pause}* No, you won't say, you can't say! Do you know what we must do? We must end it! We must reconcile.

M: Did we quarrel?

W: As if quarreling has horns? Wasn't it a quarrel when I passed to this side? ...Why are you silent?

M: I'm thinking.

W: Well? Will you come here or stay there? You've always liked being in the way.

M: But now it makes no difference whether I go or stay. I hate going anywhere. I don't know, don't know. And I'm afraid of those who know everything.

W: Fear has a hundred faces. It likes to deceive a person into thinking it doesn't exist, as if there is nothing to fear. You try to pretend you're not scared, but it's only pretend. In fact, you pretend because of your fears.

M: I'm scared.

W: You don't sit quietly, you shout with all your might. You shout because you're scared.

M: Yes, I'm scared.

W: Or you bravely pass by some person when actually you walk scared.

M: Certainly, I'm scared.

W: Or when you are silent it's only because you are scared.

M: I'm scared.

W: Suspicion eats at your heart from inside, yet again it emerges from your fear.

M: You... Yea, sure, I'm scared.

W: To lose or to win! To come or to go! To love or to curse! To die or to live!

M: I'm scared, scared, scared.

W: Now you are speaking to me, but...You are scared of me, too.

M: You hate me.

W: See, it is not you, nor is it the spirit inside you. You wouldn't say that. Never!

M: How strange!... I remember when you come to my mind - each hour, minute by minute.

W: Yes, it is strange, you can't understand that I don't exist. I only exist in your brain, nerves and desires. Please understand this. Go away from me. Go away, if you want to go. Or maybe you don't... Can't you let me be free, even here? At least give me some comfort here! Let us both be free of you. Or decide not to live in fear. It is better to

go together, let's go, everything will be wonderful. Don't be afraid. Come...come...come...

ACT II *Darkness. The same children's*

voices.

One-two Who is who? Three-four Shut the door. Five-six Do not mix. Seven-eight We are great! Nine-ten We are men.

The children's voices blend together, then one boy's voice and one girl's voice can be heard clear!]/. Two lights are searching for them, but can't find them.

G: I've got some chewing gun.

B: Give me some

G:No.

B: Give me, or I'll hit you. G: Teacher Sarah! Teacher Sarah! He hit me. B: I didn't hit you! I haven't hit you yet. G: He hit me, he hit me. He wanted to take my chewing gun. I didn't give him any. And he hit me.

The lights find the Man and the Woman in the corners.

M: You wanted to blame me. What was your aim?

W: You'd better not to ask me about that.

M: Now it's obvious.

W: We could have been three or four. You didn't want it. M: There is no need for this. Oh, the cold is coming from outside. (*Stands up*) G: Three-four... B: Shut the door!

The Man sits down again as if he hears the voices.

W: Now what? Have you made up your mind?

M: (frightened) What about?

W: Will you go with me?

M: Did it just get warmer in here? Do you feel that?

W: You are the laziest person I have ever known. How can you live this way?

M: How can I do it all of a sudden? A person needs to prepare himself gradually.

W: It's extremely beautiful on this side of the curtain.

M: My side isn't bad either.

W: Now you will say, let our bad day be this way. M: What other news do you have?

W: I remember you always wanted to go to different places. Several times we were going to move to a distant city.

You talked much about the upcoming move. But right before we left you seemed to lose your courage. You didn't want it anymore. You were afraid to going. You are all talk, that's all you can do.

M: Did I hurt anyone?

W: (*roughly*) You are wrong and you are lying to yourself, "did I hurt anyone?" Yes, you did, you hurt me! Me! We were taking the only step we could take as far as I was concerned. And I had fully prepared myself for that proper step. Do you think it was easy to move in one direction and then to turn 180 degrees? And you...it now seems to me that every time you planned something you knew all along that you wouldn't go through with it. The process of preparation was a game for you. All those changes, adventures, "coming"s and "going"s. But for me it was very important, I lived through each step. Your game had become my life. You hid your lies in these games, nobody knew about them except me.

M: Now who's saying let's go?

W: I am, let's go. Let me say it this time. I have a right to.

M: It's difficult for me...I...don't know... By God, I don't know why I must stay, what keeps me here. But when the day comes that it's time to leave - you know, you just said it - I lose my will. I don't have the strength to take the step. It's not up to me.

W: How long have we known each other?

M: I don't know...since kindergarten. Why do you ask?

W: ...And you deceive me every time. What is your final word?

M: Don't worry! Everything will be all right. One day, everything will be all right. Why are you in such a hurry?

W: Oh...you are so cold, so far from me. You're indecisive from head to toe. Yes, yes my dear, I was alone. All my life you seemed to be paying me back for something. For what? Why?

M: You've begun to fantasize again. Did I say I'm not gonna go? I didn't. I asked you not to rush me. This is all coming quite unexpectedly, I mean, your suggestion. How could I know you'd come for me? Can't you be without me even there? It is strange.

W: I don't want to answer that question.

M: Because you don't know the answer.

W: "I'll keep my silence" again. Then I'll also keep silence. Now you are teasing me!

M: Can you distinguish colors?

W: I'm leaving. You haven't changed a bit. You're the same as you always were. Why haven't you changed? I'm going crazy. I'd hoped that you might have...missed me...a little.

M: I miss you... I miss you very much. Everything became clear to me after your death. Believe me. It's my greatest wish to live those days with you again.

W: It's also my greatest wish...

M: But I can't.

W: Hesitation was always your strong suit. Maybe you are right.

M: No, don't rush, don't rush. I haven't told you everything yet. Give me a chance, everything happened so suddenly. Don't you see that I've lost control?

W: Let's go. Come with me. You won't be sorry. What do you have there? Be smart!

M: I've always been searching, all my life...you know...

W: Again, you haven't answered the question.

M: I will. Don't worry. I'll answer you.

The lights again begin to tremble. The Man and the Woman disappear in the darkness. The light frames come closer to each other, then meet and suddenly go out.

ACT III

The Children's voices in the darkness.

One-two

Who is who?

Three-four

Shut the door.

Five-six

Do not mix.

Seven-eight

We are great!

Nine-ten

We are men.

The children's voices blend together, then one boy's voice and one girl's voice can be heard clearly. Two lights are searching for them, but can't find them.

G: I mean it. I mean it.

B: Don't tell a lie. You didn't see. Don't lie.

G: It's true. You put your hand in the water and made it dirty. Teacher Sarah!
Teacher Sarah!

B: I'll give you some candy.

G: Where? Let me see. Let me see, eh...

B: You won't tell anybody, will you?

G: I want to see the candy.

B: I'll give you some, after your promise.

G: I promise. I promise. Give me the candy.

B: I don't have any.

G: You cheated me. You cheated me.

B: Don't tell anyone.

Again two light frames search for the Man and the Woman in the darkness and at last find them.

W: *(as if in a dream)* Oh, how many times have you cheated me! And for no reason!

M: *(as if in a dream)* That's not true. They thought that I deceived them too, everyone thought it was your fault that I deceived them.

Trembling lights stay on their faces.

M: One thing I have been wondering, do you exist or not? Maybe you're only in my fantasies?

W: You know, the things you are able to think about really do exist.

M: What about I leaven and Hell. Do they exist?
W: Heaven and Hell exist too.
M: How about flying saucers? Do they exist?
W: Yes.
M: Angels, devils, Jesus, all the ancient and future legends?
W: I told you, all of them.
M: But him! What can you say about him? Does he exist?
W: Damn them who don't believe! I said ideas, things and beings - all things that busy your brain - do exist. It does not matter whether you see them with your eyes or not. Don't you believe me?
M: Sure, why not? I'm just asking.
W: One must not kid about this... Do you have any other questions?
M: Tell me, please, if...if I follow you, can I be there for a day and then come back for five days, as you have done to see me?
W: With whom do you live behind that curtain?
M: I don't have anybody like that. Suddenly something enters your brain and you become interested. How will it be then?
W: It'll be good! It'll be good! Oh, I see, you are approaching the problem slowly. -
M: There are so many interesting things to think about. Tell me...
W: What? You ask as if you are embarrassed.
M: Nothing, I wanted to ask something, but I forgot.
W: Forgot what?
M: Hmm... I wanted to ask how to go there? How to join you?
W: That's the easiest part, but you have to agree to come here. Do you agree?
M: I have to think about it. It's not a simple matter.
W: Of course not...but...if I were you I wouldn't think so much. Do you understand that it reveals your attitude to me?
M: How is that?
W: Yes, yes, if I were you...
M: You...you are not grateful.
W: You are not grateful!
M: Oh, my God!
W: Ungrateful, ungrateful. You told me...you told me if I went you would come too. So I went, I believed you. I left this world. But you? You cheated me. You forgot your promise.
M: I didn't make any promises.
W: Yes you did. We promised each other, but you forgot it too soon.
M: Well, what can I say? Do you refuse? W: You offered.
M: Oh, you talk like it's so easy. W: As easy as drinking a spit of water. M: But I wanted to ask something. W: Be quick. Ask. You have already asked everything. M: Don't you have any regrets? Even a little? W: I didn't even think about it. M: Did you imagine that place the way it is now?
W: I imagined it as it is now! What else? Tell me. M: I'll decide. Be patient. And my last question. Can you...can you love?

W: I can love. I can love.

Both frames of light suddenly disappear. ACT IV

The children's voices in the darkness. One-two

Who is who?

Three-four

Shut the door.

Five-six

Do not mix.

Seven-eight

We are great!

Nine-ten

We are men.

The children's voices blend together, that one boy's voice and one girl's voice can be heard clearly. Two lights are searching for them, but can't find them.

G: You are such a bad boy. You are pushing me. I'm going to play here.

B: It's my place, I came here first.

G: Oh, I saw this place first. It's my place.

B: Go away, or...

G: *(nearly crying)* He pushed me, pushed me. Teacher Sarah. He pushed me.

B: Now, take it easy. Don't shout. It's my place... G: No, my place. Teacher

Sarah... B: Well then, this part is yours and this is mine. G: No, it's all mine!

B: And what about me?

Again two light frames search for the Man and the Woman in the darkness and at last find them, then the light stays on their faces.

W: *(as if in a dream)* Oh, those words you spoke to me, those promises... Where are those words, where did those words go?

M: *(as if in a dream)* Words, promises, names...all are myths.

W: How did you know my name? You knew it before I said it...

M: I knew your name long, long ago...

W: Oh, I'm tired. You make me tired.

M: I agree.

W: Oh, at last! You'll do what I ask?

M: Every time.

W: Then get ready. Aren't you afraid?

M: No, I am not afraid. Sooner or later one must answer...

W: Does anything tie you there?

M: No, I don't think.

W: I expected this answer from you, I always believed.

M: You didn't believe.

W: I didn't believe.

M: You didn't want to stay there while I'm here.

W: You wanted the place that also was mine.

M: They say death is inside life, that death is the continuation of life.

W: It is not so.
M: Of course not. Life is inside death. That's correct. We are inside each other. Let us divide. Be yourself and I will be myself.
W: Maybe we could see each other then.
M: Maybe. We'll see if the sun finally shines. Life had very few shiny days.
W: You know that life is a long night, and this long night is divided into breaks called "day."
M: Will I be able to see that light?
W: You won't. But the light will allow you to see me in the darkness.
M: Well, I agree. What must I do?
W: Is this your final decision? You won't change your mind like before?
M: No.
W: Since this is your final decision, I'll tell you a secret.
M: Oh, you are a treasury of secrets.
W: Listen carefully, no jokes. The last moment in this act is the most important. The last act. Listen carefully.
M: You are frightening me again.
W: Listen to me, be careful when the last moment comes. Remember, if you think about somebody at the moment you will return in search of them, just as I return for you. Until you bring that person here, you'll return hundreds of times. What's the matter? Can't you hear me? Don't forget the last moment. Try not to think about anyone, let them live their lives in happiness. We have nothing to share with them.
M: It's impossible.
W: You must try. You must. Take it easy, don't be afraid. We don't need anybody here.
M: You say I can, but I don't know.
W: You can. You must. You were my last moment and let me be your last moment. Don't think about those who will remain behind.
M: I don't know. You shouldn't have said anything...now it will be very difficult.
W: Don't think about anything. Don't be afraid, I'll help you. Forget what I've told you, it's better to forget, then it will be easy.
M: It's impossible to forget. Such a strange game! Maybe we can build a bridge so we can return.

W: What bridge? Don't do that, don't think that you are more clever than others.
M: Well then I won't say anything.
W: Do you remember what I told you?
M: Yes, yes, I remember. You're more nervous than I am.
W: That will do. In a very short time your agitation will end.
M: Your advice.
W: Settled then?
M: What did we settle? Remind me.
W: Are you kidding me?
M: Don't get angry. You've lost your patience since your childhood. It's settled. What shall I do? What?
Light frames disappear.

ACTV

The children's voices in the darkness.

One-two

Who is who?

Three-four

Shut the door.

Five-six

Do not mix.

Seven-eight

We are great!

Nine-ten

We are men.

The children's voices blend together, then one boy's voice, and one girl's voice can be heard clearly.

G: I'm afraid. It's so dark here. How do we get out of here?

B: Don't be afraid. Do you see anything?

G: No, I can't see a thing. You brought me here. Teacher Sarah, teacher Sarah...

B: Don't cry, you chicken! All girls are chickens. Don't you see anything?

G: You brought me here...I can't see anything in here.

B: Let's go this way.

G: No, I won't. I'm afraid.

B: Well, let's go that way then.

G: I won't go that way either. You did, you did... you, you, you...

The lights are searching for the boy and girl and suddenly they find the Man and the Woman

M: *(as if in a dream)* I'm having the same dream every night, I see myself going through a long tunnel and at the end an executioner is waiting for me.

W: *(as if in a dream)* This shirt suits you. I chose that color for you.

M: Red...red is our color. Our color...now I can go with you. I'm ready to go now. Nothing keeps me here now. Shall I say goodbye to this world or not? Goodbye! I don't need tears and flowers. But *(in whisper)* I'll be back. If it's not possible to come back it will break my heart. I will die.

W: You'll be back, if you can. Did you forget what I told you?

M: No. Be quiet! How can I forget?

W: Then come on, come on. Don't be afraid.

M: Nothing left to be afraid of. Why do you say, "Don't be afraid"? What is that?

W: Here you are, your first step. Don't forget my words. Come on. Oh, wonderful... Don't look around. Come on. Come on.

M: The road, again! Again I see the beginning of the way

and that red light at the end. Nobody knows what will happen when one reaches that red light. Tell me, will we know each other after we pass that red light?

W: *(in different, rough voice)* Do we need to know each other?

M: What? What did you say?

W: *(with her own voice)* Nothing. Do you see anything?

M: No, I don't. But at the same time I see everything. When will this game come to an end? :

W: Oh, you've taken one more step. Don't suffer, and don't be in a hurry. Come on. Oh, you are wonderful... Slowly... slowly...

M: It's strange. You spoke about the last moment, the last moment lasts hours...

W: Do you see that?

M: I see it now. Oh, my God!

W: Now you are taking your last step. Suffer a little bit more, now, just now you will feel comfort. You will feel as light as a bird. This huge world will seem as soft as if a feather, as if you could lift it with one hand. And all your thoughts and troubles - those that you want to say and those that you don't -will go far, far away. Listen to me. My voice is a guide for you. Don't forget my voice. Follow my voice or you might fall down. Come on. Don't think about anybody. No one else exists. You and me. One-two, who is who. One-two, who is who. Everything will be ours. Only ours. Don't forget my voice, don't... Slowly, calmly...no, don't hurry! You're hurrying. Once more. Slowly. Don't forget my voice, don't forget. Stay with my voice. Everything will be nice. It will be wonderful. There's nobody else. Only you and me. One-two, who is who... Three-four, shut the door... shut the door...

M: I don't see anything. Everything looks like a red darkness here.

W: Don't hurry. Everything will be fine. Everything...

You'll see. You'll see... *her voice disappears, the light on her goes*

off)-

M: What happened? Why is it taking so long? I told you it wasn't easy. You always make me hurry. Why don't I see anything? Where are you? Come back. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to. You cheated me. You deceived me. I can't see you. You...you can't exist. Why is it so cold here? We didn't agree on this. I want to go back. This must be way. Or not? Shall I go this way? No. Or that way? No, that's not the way. Where is the way? It has a beginning and an end, but where is it? Where is the way? You cheated me. You deceived me. Why? Why? Everything you told me was a lie. What did you want?

W: *(only her voice is heard)* Where are you? Where have you gone? Don't forget my voice. Follow my voice.

M: *(doesn't hear her)* You deceived me, I see nothing. Why do you need me here?

W: *(only her voice);* Where are you? I am here. Why did you run away from me? Where are you?

M: *(doesn't hear her):* Where are you? Why do you need me here? Speak, I want to hear you. I see nothing. Everything is over.

W: I can't hear you. Where are you hiding? You tricked me again. But why? Why? Why did you do it?

M: Everything is over, the end! I have come, *(the curtain rises quickly and disappears)* Did you hear me? I have come. You are not here. It's cold here! Cold...

W: You are not here again.

The light on the man's face disappears. Everything could end here, if the voices of the

Boy and the Girl weren't heard in the darkness.

B: I found the way. The light is over there. Look there, there is a light.

G: I see nothing. I only hear you. Where are you? Where? B: Listen to my voice, don't fall. Follow my voice. G: I see nothing. Teacher Sarah, teacher Sarah... B: Give me your hand. Where is your hand? Don't tremble. Come on. Come on, let's go

G: No, I won't come. I'm afraid. You brought me here.

B: Don't cry. Follow me. Follow my voice.

G: Teacher Sarah, teacher Sarah...

The voices slowly weaken and everything becomes silent.

THE END



Afag (1957) -a writer and a translator. She is the member of the AWU since 1981. The Chairman of the Center of Translation and Literary Relations of Azerbaijan since 1991. Her first book was published in 1971. She is the author of 9 books. Known as the author of short stories and stories.

AFAG MASSUD

SHE

He jumped away again when his hand touched his wife's curly hair. He hid his head under the blanket and waited. His heart was beating quickly. He thought for a moment about how he would leave this damned bed. It was as if his brain was frozen. He knew that he was incapable of doing anything with his body, his body didn't obey him. For a long time he had wanted to be free his body - this damned, dirty body - but nothing had come of it. This body, his body, wanted Her, only Her.

Now as his heart was breaking in anger and heat under the blanket, he wondered when his body would get tired of Her. He remembered that it was always his body that liked Her. Yes, since the very first moment his body wanted Her. At first Her legs, then Her neck...no, at first Her neck then Her legs...

Stifling in heat and sweat he understood that he couldn't blame his body for anything. He liked Her with every part of himself, with his millions of damned, unseen veins. They had made him happy. They had destroyed his life. They took away wife and children. And they had made him crazy. Those little, cursed things. Thinking about all this he felt his veins boiling inside his body; they were hungry again.

His wife sighed deeply and poked angrily at her side for a while. Then she took her pillow and blanket and left the room in her bare feet, closing the door behind her spitefully. After his wife was gone, he could hear the rain. It was raining again. He became calmer as he listened to the noise of the rain.

"It's strange," he thought, "it has been raining for more than a week." Then he heard the sound of raindrops coming from the ceiling and filling the corner of the room with the weather from outside. He decided to ignore it. He pushed the blanket away, put his hands under his head, closed his eyes, and again he saw Her.

She was again standing at the other end of the shaded corridor, talking to

somebody else but looking at him and smiling. From where he was he could smell her familiar scent. His head was spinning: it was raining again somewhere. It was strange to him that since he'd met Her it always rained. It had been raining day and night for two years. Even their roof couldn't handle all the rain; it leaked from many different places.

His wife didn't sit with them at the breakfast table. She was somewhere else in the house, opening and closing something impatiently. It sounded to him like she was hitting the wall with something. He ate his bread as though he could see his wife's angry face, thinking that maybe she was hitting the wall with her own head. The children, sitting across from him with their mouths full, were looking at him as if they felt sorry for their father.

Minutes later he was a few blocks from their house standing face to face with Her under the heavy rain.

"Oh, allow me to worship you. I beg you, at least for an hour," he implored. Maybe it was a result of the rain or something else, but he noticed that Her face seemed pale and unhealthy.

"I couldn't sleep at all last night." Her voice sounded rough.

"Why? I worship you..." A dirty car drove by them and splashed them with muddy water. He noticed black circles under Her eyes. Her eyes seemed sunken into her head as if they had been imprisoned.

"If you don't come with me again today, I'll go crazy. I want you..." Now he felt that if he didn't shout his heart would explode. He caught her arm and shook it. He shouted through his teeth with all his might, "...do you understand?"

She looked down; the rain that was on Her eye lashes now dropped slowly to Her cheeks. He wiped them away.

"Let's go, I worship you, let's go...let's go..." He repeated these words many times, hating his own voice. She repeated them too.

They were now far from that street, in an uninhabited flat, lying on a dirty mattress- His body was warm and comfortable. His pulse was normal. His heart was beating as if it was the perfect ticking of a clock.

Lying there comfortably he began to realize in some part of his brain that he would never overcome his body. He knew there would never be an end to this condition. Even if he were tired his body would demand. If his body were weak and unhealthy his veins would insist. The priest had been right, everything ended here: himself, his family - in one word -everything. His heart was throbbing again.

"What will be the end of it?" She had asked it. Her head now resting on his arm. Lying on Her back She gazed at the ceiling, as if She had read it from there.

"Of what?"

"All of this." "Nothing."

"Let's wait a little while."

"What for?" she asked.

"Maybe it will pass on its own."

"It hasn't passed yet."
"No, it hasn't."
"It's already been two years."
"Yes, two years."
"Maybe we should just stop everything." Her voice trembled.
"What?"
"Just everything."
"How?"
"We won't see each other."
"What will happen then?"
"These feelings will go away if we don't see each other. Every time I see you my heart jumps down to my feet."
"It's impossible. We've talked about this hundreds of times. I'll follow you everywhere, no matter where you go."
"I don't know what I want from you. If I knew I'd take it and that would make everything easier."

"I'm tired." "Of what?"

He felt hot water on his arm. "You're crying again."
"Yes..."
"Why? I worship you." "I don't know..."
She turned and put Her face on his breast. Her tears were pouring out as if from a glass. "I miss you," She said calmly. He kissed Her hair. "I miss you so much. I'm dying..." She said, at first calmly then loudly weeping in anger. He embraced Her. She became silent for a while.

"Everything will be all right with the help of God," he said patting Her head slowly.

"All right? How?"

"As other things are. Everything is finished somewhere, somehow. It all comes to an end, disappears. It's impossible that this won't end." There was a long silence. Both of them were thinking and neither of them could step outside of the circle. They were whirling inside the circle unconsciously.

"Nothing will end." She said it.

"Then we'll get married."

"It's impossible. We have come to this point thousands of times."

"Then I'll take you and run away."

"Where?"

"To far lands."

"Wherever you go, you'll be found."

"They can't find us. We'll go to Iran, then to Turkey..."

"But, what about the children?"

He thought about the children for a while. They appeared before his eyes along with his wife. They were staring at him as they embraced their mother, waiting for his word.

"The children will stay with their mother."

"I mean my own children." Holding Her shoulders, he raised Her and looked at Her face, which had become rotten from her ever-lasting tears.

"Everything will be all right," he repeated. He embraced Her and kissed Her. He'd probably said those same words thousands of times, he thought, but he repeated them as if they had just occurred to him.

It was evening, and he was half asleep sitting in front of the TV. His entire body was empty now, his muscles resting sweetly. Then suddenly the TV was turned off. He opened his eyes and jumped in astonishment. His wife was standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"Go and sleep in your bed."

"Why did you switch off the TV?"

"You weren't watching it, anyway."

"Turn it back on!"

"I won't."

"You damned..." In anger he pushed his wife away and turned the TV back on. "...how can I live here with a crazy woman?"

Moving slightly, his wife touched the door, the glass in the door was cracked. Maybe his wife was angry because of the crack; maybe she was still angry from yesterday, or from the outburst the day before. She spoke with such hate.

"Oh, how nice, how wonderful! One crack in the ceiling, now another in the door. If one big hole opened in the floor, this house, this hell, would be divided into pieces and both of us would get rid of each other!"

"Shut up, you owl!"

His wife went into the other room; again it sounded like she was beating one thing against another. Thunderously she then entered the corridor and opened the front door as if she was leaving, but she came back in.

"Call Her tomorrow. Let Her look after your children and prepare your meals."

"Who is She?" he wanted to look at his wife's face when he said this but she was on the other side of the door.

"You know."

Then the front door was slammed shut; the sound woke him fully. It was nearly midnight and his wife was going down the dark, empty street alone.

"Wait, where are you going at midnight?" he asked from the balcony. His wife stopped, looked back, put her hands into her coat pockets.

"To die!" she said.

It was cold on the balcony. He closed the door and returned to his armchair. After sitting in front of the TV for a long time he began to think about the possible places where his wife, that brainless hen, could go at such a late hour. Then suddenly he saw himself as if from a distance. He imagined his wife going somewhere with someone in the black car. Having thought of this, he heartily stroked his head with both his hands. What had he done with himself? He wanted to see nobody, was interested in nothing, he stayed away from his friends and his relatives didn't pay any attention to him. The family was in such bad shape, dust lies on the last sentence of his thesis. He realized now that She had taken him far away from the others. Thinking of Her, Her dreary eyes appeared before him. Again his heart returned to its place, his knees became weak. "Oh, God, give me reason..."

"Mommy!" His son had woken up. He got up and went to the bedroom, dragging his slippers along the floor. The boy was standing on the bed, looking at his father

guiltily, rubbing one of his eyes, "Where's mom?"

"Why do you want her? She's sleeping." "I have a stomachache."

"Come, I'll take you... there."

"No, I can't..." His son couldn't go on, rubbing his eye more wildly. The smell in the air confirmed his son's condition. In order not to soil his hands, he awkwardly held his son by his ankles like some foreign object. He took his son's clothing off in the bathroom and bathed him. The boy kept asking over and over, "Where is mom?"

He woke up feeling cold in the early morning. It was still raining; the TV program had ended long ago, now the TV was making strange noises.

...After this came a blank paper. Everything ended here. What would he write next? In general, why was he writing anything at all? Maybe nothing had happened up until now, and nothing would happen in the future? Many faces, voices, parties, a great number of useless papers, gifts, spare car parts, no money, then a lot of money. He put his head in his hands. Now, from here, from this calm, dim room, everything seemed small and extremely senseless to him, as if he had been running his entire life in a crowded, noisy stadium. While he had been running he grew up, became fat, wrinkles appeared on his face, hands and feet, his eye-brows turned white and his back became crooked.

He felt that the only time he stopped running was in his writings. The things that happened then he remembered well. Each word, each voice... Her face again appeared before him, She again repeated, "I'm dying without you." He threw the pen on the papers in anger and stood up. Maybe it was from anger or from standing up in a hurry, but his back remained crooked. He grabbed the top of the chair to straighten his body, "Oh, damn you, old age!" Walking slowly he went to the sofa and drank some water from a glass on the table. He lay down on the sofa and rested his tired head.

It was raining.

He wondered if, maybe, he would write about everything as it was in reality. How that flaming love gradually had become the demand of his body. And how he had been ashamed for a long time because of that love, because of his minutes of weakness. His hairs stood up. How could he write all of this? The rain was coming like cats and dogs and when it hit the windowpane it made strange noises. Then the wind blew fiercely, rattling the windows. "Just the same weather as that day...yes, it was just the same," he thought.

There was nobody but Her in the white-walled, white-bedded hospital. They intravenously injected a watery medicine into Her arm. He came to Her and sat on the edge of Her bed. Her face was very pale, as She had lost a lot of blood. Her lips were dry and pale. Silently, She gazed at the ceiling with empty eyes. "Why are you here?"

"...."

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

It seemed as if She hadn't heard him at first, then She turned her head slowly towards him, looking at him with Her quiet eyes.

"Why won't you say anything? Maybe, I should go?"

"No..." She said this word without moving Her lips, as if She was speaking with only Her eyes. He took Her hand and patted it. Her hand was as fragile

and warm as a bird's wing.

"How are you now?"

She looked at him for a while, then whispered, "...miss you-"

She kissed his hand and pressed it to Her face, "I miss you..." This time Her voice was heard more clearly, "I miss you... I miss you very much," She said and kept silent. Then, as if something had opened inside Her and broken, She hugged him with Her needle-ridden arms and wept, "I miss you... I can't stay without you... I miiisss youuu..." Her weeping soon become more like the bellowing of some wild animal.

Then, he remembered the doctors and nurses had hurried to Her, hearing her cries. They tried to hold Her and to calm Her but they couldn't. The needles went deeper into Her arms. Her blood spilled out. Her dress was torn into pieces in the hands of the doctors. He remembered one of the doctors showing him the door by a simple glance. As he was Walking along the hospital's death-stained corridors, he heard a clap of thunder from that day's ongoing thunderstorm. He heard Her voice again, full of ache, "I miss you... I can't... without you..." He heard Her voice in the hospital courtyard, even in the crowded streets, and at home. Even carrying Her corpse between the neglected graves, he could hear Her voice.

The next huge clap of thunder filled the air with its awful rumble. His eyes filled with tears. The door slowly opened, it was his oldest daughter.

"Father," with the gesture of her finger she called him to the next room, "can you come here for a minute?" He got up with difficulty and kept one hand on his bending back as he followed her. She led him to a room full of people. His daughters, sons-in-law, his son and grandchildren cried out together, "Congratulations!" and then applauded.

Then his wife entered carrying a big cake in her bony arms, "Why are you staring at us? Happy birthday to you, happy seventy years!"

He kissed his grandchildren, his daughters, his son and his wife. He thought that he had killed Her and driven away his family, and he thought about how one man's death might be able to bring happiness to others. All evening long, under the roaring of the thunder, everybody remarried **quite** happy. They looked relaxed and spoke of many things. Sometimes they touched his feelings, too, saying something and laughing loudly along with him.

He took his cup and raised it slowly to his lips, but he couldn't drink. He felt the thunder as if it roared inside him, as if an emptiness also was inside him, a blow from within shook his body.

Somebody was watching him through the darkness, through the stormy night, with a grief-stricken face. Gradually Her face became more visible, shades were clearly seen. It was She, as She was thirty years ago. She was looking at him with Her pale face, moving her lips as if She was saying something; he could almost hear Her voice. She spoke in a whisper, in order not to be heard by others, "...miss you..." She was saying, "...I can't without you..." He stood up, went to the window with his weak legs and opened it. At once the angry storm outside filled the room with all its strength, the curtains whipped up and brushed the ceiling, the tablecloth waved like a stormy sea, bringing everything on it crashing down, it was all thrown together. At the

window, with his body tossed around by the strong wind and the cold rain, the old man stood looking at the black night. The heavy antique chandelier was moving back and forth under the force of the wind, until finally it broke free of its cord and came down on the table with a thunderous roar as it broke into pieces. Everyone shouted with wild voices. Then someone pushed him away from the window and he fell onto the sofa. The window was closed at once and silence returned to the room. Maybe it was his wife who came from the other room with a candle, her face full of fear, staring at him and asking him something. Soon the others also came up to him and looked at him in the candlelight, with the same look of fear on their faces. He wanted to say something, his lips moved slowly, "I miss..." he said and his heart nearly stopped. It was said by Her.