

A Drop in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



A DROP IN THE SEA

*Armenian contemporary
prose*

Yerevan, 2022

SUSANNA

HARUTYUNYAN

GRANDFATHER'S DEATH IN MY ACT

The clock in the hall showed 10:45. This sunflower-sized Iranian clock was worth a dollar in the market. My aunt had gotten it for free on her way to our house as she was buying coffee – a worthless gift that she didn't want to take home. I was staring at the plastic disk and the numbers, as big as lies, where the hands had stopped, thinking how much it would cost without the import expenses and taxes. They must have been lying around like trash on the streets of Tehran. But that cheap Iranian clock had marked a cruel transition in a man's life – it had stopped.

“It doesn't work. I stopped it,” my uncle's wife said with a plaintive tremor. “It's a rule – when a man dies, the clocks in the house must be stopped until forty days have passed.”

It was 11:00 on the clock in my aunt's room. This one was a Soviet-made clock. My aunt had received it as a prize during her

school years for winning third place in a chemistry contest, and she kept stressing that she had earned it and would take it with her as part of her dowry when married. But we weren't afraid of losing it because it was unlikely that anyone would marry a woman past fifty just for a mechanical clock. Although it really was a good clock – it had announced all of the great Soviet holidays up to the independence rallies in 1988. It had earned its keep by announcing life's events and had the right to rest, even if it was due to a death.

“It's a rule,” my aunt said. “I stopped it as soon as I learned about it.”

In my uncle's room, the clock hands were stopped at 10:07. This one was a handmade clock with an obsidian frame, the black shiny surface of which reflected the objects in our house since 1970. My grandfather had purchased it from the Yerevan *vernissage* when returning from the kolkhoz market where he had sold two tons of pears and his pockets were bursting with money. He had taken pity on the craftsman who had not sold anything that day. And the clock was silent with an underscored gratitude and deference.

“I . . .” stammered my grandmother's sister. “Everyone had lost their heads. I was the first to run to the clock and stop the hands.” The clock in my grandfather's room was a pre-Soviet cuckoo clock left by the previous owners of the house. My grandfather used to oil the cuckoo pipes, the silver pendulum hanging from a leather strap, and other metal parts that were in the clock's belly. Here, someone had caught the cuckoo at exactly 10:00 and stifled its call by tying a lace handkerchief around its beak. The tiny window was torn open and the cuckoo was hanging from

a spring, blocking some of the numbers on the dial, while the silver pendulum was innocently still.

“The clocks are stopped at different times in each room,” I said surprised. “How many times did the man die? Perhaps he didn’t die?”

“No,” my grandmother’s sister insisted, “he did. It’s just that everyone found out about it at different times. But, of course, if you don’t know about his death yet, he’s alive for you.” My grandfather had three surgeries in the winter months. We thought that he might not make it to the spring. But my grandmother refused to become a widow and got ahead of him. She was determined – she had a fever one night and died the next morning.

The relatives and neighbors sitting around the coffin on the day of the funeral wept and envied her that she lived and died without suffering. They brought in my grandfather when the priest was saying a prayer. My grandfather was an old and proud man. He walked slowly and heavily like a bear, making the floorboards squeak under his weight, clutching his walking stick in his hand. He was going to give her his final farewell, without a single teardrop, almost expressionless. Leaning over his walking stick, he walked with a composed, calm, and slow gait. Step, step, step He was moving his body like a snail, pushing the walking stick against the ground, stopping after every other step, taking a breath, then tearing the stick off the ground with a trembling hand and placing it a bit further, his hand trembling on the walking stick while the stick trembled sympathetically. The priest was swinging the censer back and forth, giving us all a headache from the pungent smell of incense.

“When a woman survives her husband, she isn’t as wretched,” our neighbor said, looking at my grandfather’s slumped shoulders. “Look at him – he has turned completely into a motherless child. Lucky is the man who goes before his wife.”

“My brother has no one now,” grandfather’s sister intoned between sobs. The duduk player gathered air in his cheeks and slowly blew into the hollowed-out apricot branch with finger holes. The air between the mouth and the tip of the instrument matured from grief, turned into melody, and wept bitterly, reminding everyone of the irrevocable loss. The women howled in collective lament, not for my grandmother but for my grandfather and his state of misery.

“Calm down!” the priest ordered. “Listen to God’s word,” and he started to pray with all his might and proceeded with the ceremony. My grandfather was unable to stand like that for very long. He slowly sat down on the chair in the back, and the priest made an approving sign with his head.

“Look at him,” grandmother’s sister whispered in my ear with resentment. “He won’t even spare a single tear. And for such a woman like my sister!”

“He’s a strong man, what do you want?”

“What does strength have to do with it? A good partner is as dear as a mother. Is a teardrop too much? She had endured her dragon sisters-in-law, her monster mother-in-law, and for fifteen years had taken care of her terminally ill father-in-law. If nothing else, she gave birth to six children But look at him!” she threw an angry look at my grandfather. “I’ll be glad when you’re dead, you rascal!”

“Stop talking, the priest is looking at us!”

“No, but just look at your grandfather’s face! No pain, no sadness. See how calm he is? He must have something on his mind. He won’t stay alone for too long. He’ll marry!”

My room had been locked that day. I had some love letters and money hidden in the room, so I had locked it and had taken the key with me, and so the clock had been ticking away, unaware of what had happened. My grandfather was alive in my tiny fourteen square meter room.

“Hurry!” grandmother’s sister ordered. “Stop it before anyone has seen it – otherwise they’ll harass you.”

I had devised my own clock. I had seen how they do it on the television show, *Skilled Hands*, downloaded the animal signs from the internet, glued them on the board, then painted the board green, peeled off the animal signs, producing stencil images, and affixed the hands . . . Capricorn was on the twelve o’clock line and Cancer was on the six o’clock line.

I took the chair, put it under the clock, got on it, stretched, and pressed my palm against its cold metal hands. It made its last tick under my palm. That’s it, my grandfather is no longer alive.

“After grandma’s funeral he kissed me over twenty times,” I said emotionally. “I’d say good-bye, move away, and he’d call me back and kiss me again and again. I was laughing, telling him that I wasn’t going to the army. Little did I know – he was the one going! I even got a letter from him. “He’s so antique,” I thought to myself. “Who writes letters in the age of internet, telephone, and fax machines?”

“What did he write?” grandmother’s sister inquired.

“He wrote . . . just a few lines: ‘I had decided to die in mid-Oc-

tober, but I didn't want to ruin the harvest season. I thought to myself, let them work, let them store away their harvest for winter so they can eat at the funeral repast with a calm conscience and mention me kindly. Nothing will happen if I die ten days later. But ten days later they brought a dead man from Moscow. I thought, we can't have two funerals in one day. People won't know which funeral to attend. The man who had died in Moscow was young, and it would have been unfair if I shared his portion of tears. The day of my death was confirmed then for the first week of November, at 9:30 in the morning."

"So . . . at 9:30," the old woman looked at the stopped clock with guilt.

I recalled my grandfather's pitiful state at my grandmother's funeral and her sister's hissing at the old man barely leaning against his walking stick.

"The poor man had decided to die. And you were saying he was going to marry!"

"Well, yes, didn't I say that he wouldn't be alone?" My grandmother's sister wouldn't give in.

"Isn't it the same? Was he alone? He managed his life pretty well."

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

A RED-CRESTED DAWN

“Like a priest’s worn-out Bible,” thought Teresa, looking at the woman who had just gotten out of the car. “I’ll bet she is just like our Aunt Siroush, who eats up half the meat before her soup is ready. Look at her huge and ugly tits!” The woman who attracted Teresa’s attention stood at the clear, cool spring, surrounded by the children, and looked so proud of her youthful good looks, as though she would never grow old. She took a photo of a beautiful young woman out of her bag, showed it to the children, and was amazed by the way they expressed their admiration for the young lady’s beauty. The woman then distributed ice-cream to the little ones, who gulped it down, melted cream trickling down from their chins to their chests.

“Oh wow, she’s so gorgeous! Who is she?” The kids strained their necks for another glimpse at the beautiful young lady in the photograph.

“Ah, that’s my daughter from my first husband,” answered Teresa’s sister-in-law, Uncle Aram’s new wife, quite indifferently. “Her Armenian was so proper and eloquent,” the woman continued, “one would think that Mashtots created the Armenian alphabet in her honor.”

The dog kept jumping tirelessly up and down and barking loudly at the newcomers.

Teresa was busy sharpening a knife against the wall of the

house. Sliding back and forth on the grey basalt, the knife was crying like an animal in the slaughterhouse. Soon the grass at Teresa's feet was covered with dust, and the grass bent lower to the ground under its weight. Teresa shook the dust off her shoes and raised the knife up against the sun. Then, licking the tip of her index finger, she touched the blade and – ouch! She frightened herself – the knife had been honed to razor sharpness.

The children were merrily carrying a bag that they had removed from the trunk of their uncle's car.

Uncle Aram arrives

Teresa's brother-in-law had arrived with a new wife, his third, along with his two former wives. The first wife had left him, taking their daughter away with her, and his second wife was still wearing the mother-in-law's gift – a ring – on one of her fingers. Although Teresa hadn't seen any of them yet, she knew that all the members of her brother-in-law's entourage had arrived with him. She knew this from Uncle Aram's movements. They were clumsier than usual, his rueful kindness as he pinched the children's cheeks, and the servility and fear with which he opened the car-door for his new wife. . . .

Uncle Aram glanced at Teresa and, giving her a wave and a homely smile, continued to remove bags from the car. Suddenly, one of the bags turned over and something yellow and round that looked like a melon or a ball rolled out of it. The eldest of the twin brothers remained close to the bag while the other one ran ahead to catch the yellow thing. The older twin (older by five minutes) put his right foot out and the melon bumped into it.

The children threw the bag on the ground, laughed and pushed one another, and jumped over the bag. The strongest

of the boys perched on the bag and gave everyone a triumphant look.

Teresa headed for the basement. Right at the top of the stairs, she stumbled and twisted her ankle. This was where her husband had passed away. A heavy drinker, he had mixed a bottle of vodka with a bottle of insecticide in a jar, guzzled the whole thing and, groaning with pleasure, died shortly afterwards. After his death, Teresa inherited his old house and all its inhabitants: the hens, the dog and the cat, the twins from her husband's first wife who had died during childbirth, as well as her own offspring. The roof of the house was starting to collapse. It needed to be mended long ago. When Teresa's husband was alive, he used to say that he'd have it mended sometime – always later. Teresa knew very well that *later* would never come. The children would grow up, become men, and stop cheering, as they did now, about the melons their uncle brought. Who could say for sure when exactly that later time would come? Would it come at all? Teresa continued to wonder what type of person her baby boy and the twin brothers from her husband's first marriage would eventually become. Would she be able to endure it, broken-hearted as she was, with a continuous pain in her back? Would she make it to *later*?

Teresa grabbed a bottle of wine from a dusty shelf, opened it, smelled the wine, then put the bottle back on the shelf. Then she took a bottle of vodka, opened it, smelled it and quickly put it back. Teresa then picked up another bottle of wine. She was convinced that her brother-in-law, with his poor table manners, would mix it all up, as usual, his wife's favorite vodka, her choice pieces of chicken neck, and the sheep's lung.

“Don’t you have white wine? Apple wine, not grapes, if you don’t mind.”

His wife would look at him in surprise.

“Sorry, hun, that wasn’t you... You like apple vodka,” and he would laugh his head off at his own stupid joke.

A brother-in-law, Teresa was thinking, is like capital punishment. Freezing cold water keeps dripping on to your brain, non-stop, blob-blob-blob, until it makes you go completely mad. Honest to God, there is nothing positive in this man; even his blood type is negative. He was kind to the children, though, and helped Teresa and the children sometimes. Uncle Aram paid them a visit with his new wife each year and every visit was like compassionate murder.

The children ate the ice-cream, rubbed their mouths with the palms of their hands, then wiped their hands on their bellies and grabbed hold of the bag. The bag handles broke and some old clothes fell out of it. The children, looking merrily at the old things scattered on the floor, bent down to collect them into the bag. Teresa looked surprised.

“Those are our old . . . I mean to say, our spare clothes,” Uncle Aram’s new wife said. “We can’t wear them in the city any more. Either the color is out of fashion or a button is missing. Look at this coat, it’s pretty new, you know – only the buttonhole is ripped. You can wear it in the garden or when you go to fetch the cattle from grazing.

The mischievous boys had found a pretty red dress, laid it on the ground like a corpse, the arms folded across the chest, and started to cackle with delight. In fact, the scene made them roar with laughter. One of the twins solemnly tried to imitate a

priest, uttering R.I.P. in a deep voice, and the children continued to howl hilariously. The youngest of all, with his hands on his belly, threw himself on the ground rolling with joy. Teresa liked the red dress. She liked the color of it. Red symbolized fire, blood, pleasure, sunset, and sunrise, ripe fruit and wine, passion and pain. It was the color of life. The cut and hue of the dress were pretty. *It must have been striking when it was new*, Teresa thought.

“Come on, kids, shoo the hens this way,” Teresa cried out to the children, pointing at the net with a hand-knife. Teresa was wondering how she would fix dinner for so many stomachs with only a one-kilo rooster at her disposal. The strong drinks and the pickles that she put on the table would give everyone a good appetite. The fresh country air, too, is great for a good appetite. Trips, too, can make you hungry. Life itself is an appetite stimulator. One is never really satisfied, whether one eats or not. Lucky are those who have been sated! Do such people exist at all?

The children left both the bag and the red dress lying on the grass and rushed to hunt the hens which were running hither and thither. The rooster acted like a real man. Having spread his wings and clucking non-stop, he tried to soar up into the air like an eagle. The flight didn't last long, though, and the rooster fell down on the ground. Roosters aren't eagles, anyhow. The rooster quickly rose up into the air again but immediately fell down. He ran a few steps, spread his wings, then flew up, fell down, did it again. Do what you will. The fact is that chickens are not birds of the air and cannot fly over the fence. The rooster bumped into the fence and fell down, bumped again and fell again. The harder he hit the fence, the harder he fell down. The rooster tried

so many times that he ripped the feathers from his breast. They floated gently through the air. Finally, the kids caught the rooster, and it made them happy. They were very proud of themselves, indeed.

“Bring the rooster over here,” Teresa said to the children, still staring at the red dress on the grass and pointing to the fence with the knife that she continued to sharpen against the wall.

A gust of wind rushed up underneath the red dress on the grass and lifted it up. The dress began to dance, the arms flapping like storm-tossed sea waves and the hem whirling like wind-blown sand. The children instantly forgot all about the rooster and concentrated on the dancing dress, cheering and clapping their hands in delight. With a head on its shoulders, it would have looked human. The wind had donned the dress, filling out its hips and breasts. The button was heavy, anchoring part of the dress to the ground, while the rest kept flapping in the wind, fluidly trembling and flirting, beckoning and coaxing, like a treacherous river.

Teresa placed her right foot on the rooster’s trembling claws and placed her foot on his wings. “Lucky is the one who wore this dress when it was new,” Teresa thought with bitterness. Holding the hot head of the rooster tightly in her hand, she stretched his neck and cut it open with her knife. The blood gushed out from the rooster’s neck like the first rays of the sun springing into the world at dawn.

Translated by Marina Yandian

THE MIGHTY END

The humid, weepy summer was unbearably hot – airless and stifling. The sky was choked up with tears from day to day, to crying its heart out. Drizzle and drizzle – all of the time.

“The roots are rotting in the soil from this heat and humidity,” remarked mother, observing the yellowing grass. “Soon the sky will spill its pain over the earth. Why’s the sky so overcome that it can’t stop weeping? Next thing you know the potatoes will start rotting, too.”

The moment we went in it started pouring again.

“Don’t ask me, it’s your sky, you should know what’s wrong with it,” I said taking a swig of water from the paunchy carafe on the table. “I’m tired. That’s it, I’m going to sleep.”

The shelter, dug into the ground, was dark, and the air inside was warm and a little musty. It left a bitter aftertaste in your mouth and constricted your chest. But the shelter was the only safe place in the entire village, and I happily stretched out on the cot, which smelled of dampness. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep.

My mother’s coarse, uneven breathing woke me up at night. When I called out to her, she groaned, “I’m dying.”

“Wishful thinking,” I said in the sternest tone I could muster. “Dying’s easy, living is the tough part....”

That morning, we bid farewell to the last group of the wounded. My mother’s own wound was very small, so insignificant, in fact, that it appeared to have been a mere scratch, and mother

wouldn't allow me to bandage it. "Why waste the bandages," she said then, "save them, we may need them later." And here she was now, moaning, "I'm dying."

I didn't believe her, so I turned over and wrapped myself tightly in the blanket.

"We shouldn't have stayed," mother said with self-deprecation. "That good-hearted driver insisted a thousand times, 'Get in the truck, come with us, there's nothing here worth staying for.' I'm like a predator. I get so attached to one place that I can't part from it. And how are you going to fend for yourself without me?" she asked, as if chiding herself for maternal neglect.

"Cut it out," I muttered, annoyed. "As if this darkness isn't bad enough – and now you with all this silly talk."

"Please be sure to cry over my body," suddenly asked my mother.

"Whatever..."

"What, you can't spare some salty water for your own mother?" she flared up.

"No, I can't. If I cry, the water will eventually dry up but the salt will crystallize and cover my soul like frost. I will dry up and crack, just like a salt-marsh."

"This isn't the time for idle talk," she said didactically. "You are my sole heir. It's your duty to mourn my death."

"Honestly, I have other things to worry about at the moment. Why don't you let me get some sleep. There's so much to do in the morning. We've got to go door-to-door, check every house. What if some frightened child has been left behind in one of the houses or people have abandoned dead bodies and such?"

"But I'll be more than just some dead body to you. I've lived

a decent life and fully deserve to have my passing mourned by my heir," she kept insisting in a calm tone.

Annoyed, I finally sat up, pulling the thin, moldy blanket around me, "I'm so hungry right now that if you give me something to eat I promise I won't just cry over you, I'll tear my hair out in grief."

"Well, there're beets under the cupboards, and" But I didn't let her finish.

"Do you think you're feeding the pigs? Beets!" I screamed, livid. "How about something sweet that you've stashed up?"

"Nothing."

"As if I don't know you! I am sure you've put something away. Think carefully!" I wouldn't let it go. "From what you used to give to the wounded? I want something sweet!"

"How about something stronger?" Though her voice was weakened, she tried to chide me. "I'm dying here, and you're pestering me for something sweet."

"So?"

"Can't you get it into your head that I'm dying?"

"What do you want me to do about it?" I started toying with her. "It so happens that I'm not a priest, so I'm afraid you're going to have to wait."

"One has to live a godly life to die with a priest."

"And what, pray tell, was so ungodly about your life?" I thought to reassure her. "You never stole, never whored around. What sins have you committed?"

"You are my sin," she said dejectedly.

We both fell silent for a while. I thought she'd fallen asleep – her breathing had grown more even. It was dark. I had no idea

what time it was. I curled up next to my mother, pressed my feet against hers, and felt how cold they were.

“I’m dying,” she whispered again.

“Maybe, you’re right,” I said, “Your feet are ice-cold, like a dead person’s.”

“And I can’t breathe,” she added with a choking sound, like letting out a sob after crying for a long time.

“Are you sure this is how one dies?”

“How should I know? This is the first time I’m dying.”

“I’ve seen many things but never seen a corpse crack jokes,” I chuckled. “Nothing’s going to happen to *you* – but you’re going to drive *me* nuts.”

“In any case, please make sure you cry over me,” my mother started again.

“Oh! I can only imagine what an unbearable child you were,” I sighed in mock-desperation.

“I was a wonderful child,” my mother said with emotion. “But promise me you’ll cry over me.”

“Oh, I’m getting sick and tired of this.” I was almost yelling at this point. “I’ll cry, I promise. And you think that tears are an expression of grief? People cry for many reasons – pain, joy, love, hate, helplessness, happiness, unhappiness.”

“And you, what do you cry over?” she exploded.

“Nothing,” I cut in, cold and dry, “my soul has gone numb. Once you’ve seen war, nothing can make you cry. Have you seen how they drive needles under the nails of crazy people to awaken a feeling of pain in them? Right now, I doubt I’d cry if I was being crucified.”

“Oh, dear Lord,” my mother started wailing. “What is this

generation you've raised? I became very soft-hearted the day my mother died. My soul softened, and I cried. And there were so many funeral wreaths there....We couldn't make room for all of them in the house, and I started placing them by the wall outside. I sobbed the whole time. And people just kept coming and coming.... My mother died and suddenly everyone noticed her existence.... I am an Armenian, I can't hide my emotions, least of all my grief. I wept loudly, and other women joined in. We cried in a chorus, and my grief was transformed into a song of lamentation...."

"I don't know where you're going with your story, but don't count on my following your example. I can't even carry a tune."

"You don't have to be a nightingale to express your grief. A human voice will do just fine."

"Don't try to change my mind. I freeze over when I'm grieving – I lose my ability to talk, let alone sing...."

"So you won't put your grief for me into a song?" my mother asked, palpably disappointed.

"Not a chance."

"What's my life worth then?" she sobbed.

"Mom, I think you're messing with my head," I yawned.

"Well, you'll only have to tolerate me for a little bit longer," she said, clearly offended. "You'll see, Archangel Gabriel will come for me soon." She cleared her throat, barely holding back tears.

"Mom, has he promised you that he's definitely coming?" I interrupted her, laughing.

"No," she stopped. My question had startled her.

"If he hasn't promised, why are you setting your sights on strange men?" I joked.

“Shame on you!” she burst out laughing. “Why are you in such a playful mood all of a sudden?”

“What else is there for me to do?”

“What do you mean, what else? Your mother’s dying.”

“She’s not dead yet.”

“You can mock the Archangel and me all you want. When your time comes, you’ll follow him, meek as a puppy.”

“Well, there must be something special about him if everyone follows him so complacently.”

“How can I abandon her alone with this half-baked brain of hers?” my mother worried.

“How about we make it through the night and then we worry about it, ok?” I implored her.

“That’s not in my hands, is it?”

Later that night, mother became delirious. She would periodically regain consciousness and start instructing me on how I should bury her – with everything properly done, in an expensive coffin with silk and velvet, with weeping relatives and unshaven men, with tables packed with abundant food but no sweets, with tears and wails, with an exaggerated account of her sufferings on earth, befitting the mournful occasion.

Mother died that night. I buried her by myself, first wrapping her in a rug eaten through with dampness. I loaded her body on a cracked, weathered cart, dragging it myself, since we’d eaten what was left of the cattle over the winter. The cart squeaked the entire way, and the shovel made hollow pangs as it knocked against the sides.

Luckily, the day was sunny and warm. I was sweating from dragging the heavy cart, my neck hurt from the tremendous

effort, and my muscles tightened and felt sore.... A cliff had disintegrated into blasted rubble, blanketing the floor of the gorge with detritus. The unevenness chafed my feet. My heart ached but there were no tears.

By the time I got to the cemetery, the sun had begun to set. It was still light out, and yet I had no tears. Leaning against the side of the cart, I pondered where to dig mother's grave – next to my father, my grandmother, or in a new spot, so that I could secure some space for myself next to it. I felt sorry for my mother. The beautiful death she had envisioned didn't materialize....

**Translated by Margarit
Tadevosyan-Ordukhanyan**

HOUSE OF HORROR

Mr. and Mrs. Verdyan were happy, and every time the landlord looked the other way the husband would give his pregnant wife a thumbs up, grinning gleefully. The landlord, in turn, made sure he cracked a smile of satisfaction only when his back was to the buyers, just to make sure they did not suspect anything.

“There you go,” the notary finally said, pushing the contract to the middle of the table.

When the husband winked at his wife and picked up a pen, the notary asked offhandedly, “Aren't you wondering why the

house is so cheap? Real estate is very expensive these days, after all.”

“No,” Mr. Verdyan responded casually. “That’s what house hunting is like – someone gets lucky sometimes, other people don’t. It can never be a good sale for both sides.”

The notary was overcome with sincerity as he glanced at the pregnant woman’s belly. “You know, a person’s home should be as pure as his soul. But there are evil forces and ghosts just pouring out of the windows of this place, like a river flooding in the spring.”

“Did anyone ask for your advice?” the landlord interrupted angrily after a few seconds of quiet but annoyed grumbling. “Why are you trying to sink this deal? All you have to do is stamp the contract. So let’s keep quiet and do that, shall we?”

Mr. Verdyan paused for a moment, then said, “If those forces were really so evil,” then they would have long since reduced the house to ruins. But this house has been standing for so many years...”

“Fifty years, fifty.” the landlord said quickly. “And not a single stone has been dislodged, not even from the wall around it...”

“But tell them, tell them how many people have owned the place before you... Misak spent two nights there and died unexpectedly. Anushavan ended up with a burst gallbladder – they say it was caused by a sudden scare... That Haykuni couple divorced for no reason, not to mention your own aunt who got that house for free from the village council because she was a refugee from Karabakh. She’s is now in a mental institution...”

“She was traumatized by what the Turks did to her – don’t blame that on any supernatural forces....” Turning to the buyers, the landlord explained, “Please ignore everything he’s saying.

There are people out there that simply can't bear to see someone else have some good fortune... All he wants is to keep me from making a little money, that's all."

"Why would I care about your money... this is the truth... you see?" the notary pointed at the pregnant woman's belly. "Children will be living in that house too! Oh, and by the way," he glared piercingly into Mr. Verdyan's eyes, "they even brought in a priest, and he blessed the house, sprayed it with holy water, but it didn't help at all!"

"I don't get it, why are you acting like this is your problem?" the landlord said, his frightful gaze resting on the pen that had been rendered motionless.

"Please don't argue," the buyer said in a calming voice. "I know that ghosts and evil spirits have possessed that house. It's always that way with houses in valleys, and that house is in a valley, after all."

"And you're buying it anyway?" the notary's face expressed surprise, his gaze now turned to the pregnant woman's face.

"We're not buying it to live there," the woman explained.

"We're launching a business – Horror Hotel!" the husband informed them, excited by the idea. "People who love horror will come and stay there, freezing in fear and trembling with terror.... We'll make a ton of cash, basically. And the best part is that every cent will be pure profit. My employees will be the evil spirits and ghosts. Isn't that amazing? They won't ask me for food, clothes, salaries, not even for vacation days. I won't have to deal with trade unions or pension funds..."

"What if they are angry with you for taking their house away from them?"

“But I’m not taking it away from them. They can keep staying there and treat the guests any way they like. I’m giving them an opportunity to express themselves. I won’t even renovate the place. They’ll pour into the rooms through the cracked walls and twisted pipes. As you say, they’ll flood right onto the customers. Can you imagine that? Anybody with a love for extreme experiences will go crazy about this!”

“Yes...” the notary sighed with concern as he stamped the contract. “What has this world come to? There are crazy people everywhere. It is a rare thing to see a normal person nowadays.”

Even before they had registered the name of the hotel, the Verdyans launched a big advertising campaign. The video that was constantly on everyone’s TV screen called on customers to “Experience Hell while still alive,” and asked them, “Have you ever wanted to have your own personal ghost?” using a variety of expressions intoned by an actor with a manly voice. Soon, there was such a large queue of people lining up to try this service that customers had to register months in advance. There were even those that did not want to sleep in the bedrooms of the house. They preferred to occupy the collapsing attic so that they could experience the paranormal beings up close and personal.

The Verdyans would assign people to their rooms before darkness fell, provide them with food, and leave Horror Hotel just before dusk. “This is when the real fun starts,” Mr. Verdyan would tell each of the guests, just before leaving at sunset. “You will be all alone with the ghosts from this point forward, so defend yourselves any way you can.” And when they would hear the shouting and screaming from Horror Hotel on their way out, the

husband would shoot his wife a gleeful look, saying, “Thanks be to God, another satisfied customer.”

“Yes,” his wife would respond. “What wonderful evil spirits! They never let us down, never take a sick day.”

And they would go home, thinking about how they would transfer the day’s profit to their bank account and calculate the interest that would accrue.

The villagers, who had until now been afraid of even taking their animals to pasture in the valley, shook their heads with envy. “Why didn’t we think of that? We had such a wonderful resource and we just handed it over to someone else – and real cheap at that! Smart young people can turn evil spirits into a source for good, and we get nothing from our many saints!” They would say such things to each other remorsefully.

But there were those who were less envious. “We don’t need that kind of money,” “nor do we need that kind of screaming. Those horrified guests shout so loudly that you can hear them from kilometers away!”

“For the love of God,” sighed the ones with the most life experience, “people have suffered a lot more for the sake of money...”

And then, a child was born to the owners of Horror Hotel. For a mother, the child’s best age is when it is still in the womb, because as soon as it is born, its needs are born with it. The hotel owner’s wife would no longer be able to help her husband if she had to stay at home with the baby, so they were forced to bring the baby with them to work. At first, the baby’s crying, then his laughter and the clicking of his toys caused the evil spirits to gradually leave the house. “We’ll go bankrupt if this goes on,” Mr. Verdyan worried. “What can we do? Evil spirits have

always feared life,” his wife sighed. And then, one day, the house was ghostless. All that was left were the people. To make things worse, a busload of people arrived that very day. Mr. Verdyan looked at them with regret, spotting the frightened but resolute expressions on his guests’ faces. They were in the mood for a good scare, already jittery at the thought of coming into contact with ghosts.... And the money, the money... it would be so horrible to lose all that. Mr. Verdyan didn’t miss a beat. He walked up to the group and smiled, saying, “Just one night.... Staying any longer than that could be dangerous.... Please give me your passports.” He carefully registered their vital information and returned the documents. Then he gave them some advice as he handed them the keys to their rooms: “Don’t go up to the roof – the old hag living there will chew you up and spit you out in a second. I’d suggest that the ladies stay on the east side so that they can get the first rays of the sun and free themselves of the ghosts’ clutches.”

“The cellar? Oh no! Even I never dare to spend a night there...”

And his trick worked! The people never realized that the spirits had left, and customers kept coming, bringing their own fears and ghosts with them. They would go into their rooms and scream and shout in terror all night, suffering at the hands of evil spirits and clamoring for help, throwing their shoes at them in defense, then feeling liberated and satisfied in the morning as they returned to their everyday lives. The owner of Horror Hotel continued to distribute his guests into rooms, cunningly giving them the keys and some friendly advice: “Don’t go down to the cellar, don’t go up to the attic....” Sometimes, he would have bouts of insomnia and, in the middle of the night, he would

look out the window of the house he had rented nearby, staring at the hotel listening to the sounds that came from there, and wondering whether or not that house had ever truly been possessed by ghosts and evil spirits. Perhaps it had always been a place to exile one's own ghosts and fears, to avoid coming face to face with them....

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

GOD HAS PASSED THROUGH HERE

When the Europeans came to see the girl, they were still naïve because the driver hadn't told them yet: "When we get there, we'll be offered strained yogurt. Folks in these parts eat strained yogurt with rose-petal preserve and that's the best. When'll we get there? In about twenty minutes, when the highway ends and we turn right. Then we'll take the first side road. It's about fifteen minutes long, after which . . . No, we won't come to the village, yet . . . but it will be closer. When we get off the first side road, we'll turn left and get on the second side road, which is twice as long as the first one, so we'll be on it for about half an hour. And then the village will be even closer. Once we get off the second road and keep going straight, we'll get to an incline, after which . . . Yes, we will

be closer to the village. But not quite there . . . We'll have to go up the incline . . . If we make it, we'll reach the mountain's jaw. You'd think the village would finally appear because it has nowhere else to go. And it will, of course, but not right away. If we make it up the incline, we'll reach the path that'll take us – it's three kilometers on foot – to the cliff, which we'll have to climb . . . It's worth the suffering . . . Strained yogurt with rose-petal preserve . . .”

When the Europeans came to see the girl, they were still naïve. The driver hadn't told them any of this yet, and he wasn't really inclined to. For the moment, he was just mumbling a song: *There's no one else with me in this place but God*. The car was dancing over the stones. Sometimes, when the driver braked suddenly, the passengers in the back would be thrust forward, banging their stomachs against the backs of the front seats; this would bring up the food they had eaten seven days ago. The driver warned them, pausing his song: “Tell me if you get sick – don't vomit on my neck.” The visitors took it as a joke, laughed heartily, and thought they'd arrived as soon as the car turned off the highway. One of them kept steadying the camera hanging on his chest. He hoped to photograph weeping rocks and mountains cracked by the sun, to impress his technocratic countrymen with nature's ways. But when the car turned off the highway, two kilometers in, after passing over rocks as sharp as Satan's nails, the thick American tires were shredded and the passengers now had to carry the car instead of the car carrying them. And when they reluctantly got out of the car and looked at the world of stones around them and the steep incline ahead of them, they whistled in surprise and fear. They began sweating in the sun and had no choice but to push the car, ripping

their shoes and pants on the sharp rocks. They were still naïve because they thought the hardest part of what was left for them to do to reach the village would be going up the incline, because it was impossible to imagine a higher and steeper place than that. But . . . there was a steeper place – it had simply been impossible to imagine. So when the Europeans finally came to see the girl, they were exhausted, beaten by the rocks, shoes and clothes torn. But at the moment they were still not there. They were still naïve. They sang the national anthems out of despair, encouraging each other, moaning, pushing the car, and spitting dust and stone. And when they reached the top they saw that there was yet another unimaginable, rocky incline, with rocks blacker and sharper than Satan’s nails, with the glimmering, coiling vein of the gold mine between the nails – and one of them cursed and wept, removing his hands from the car and beating his head. The car rolled back, almost crushing everyone else. Panic-stricken and shouting, they drove their feet against the ground, ripping their soles and heels. Red in the face from all the tension and howling foreign words, they somehow stopped the car. Even then the terrified Europeans were still naïve. The driver kept looking at them with pity, he wanted to say something to comfort them and alleviate the cruelty of the stones and the sun. He said, “The sky is so close here that it rains when angels weep.” Then he looked at them and added: “But that happens in October, when the mountains are covered in snow and dreams can’t find their way to the sky.”

When the Europeans finally reached the village hidden in a hollow at the top of the mountain, they were still naïve. Swallowing the sun and scorched air, bleeding and with clothes torn

like the persecuted escaping from Hell, they had already lost hope that there was such a place that could be reached. As they dragged their bodies past a pile of stones – staggering, hungry, sweaty and cursing and still naïve, the old men weeding behind a stone fence straightened their backs, and one of them wiped his soiled hands on his shirt and, squinting his right eye against the blinding sun and with the other eye examining the foreigners, he asked, “Who are the visitors this time?”

“Europeans,” answered the man next to him, smirking at their tattered clothes, the cameras hanging from their necks, and their sweaty backs and legs weak with exhaustion.

“And where is Europe?”

“Oh, thousands of kilometers away!”

“U-u-uh,” the first old man, who was weeding bean beds, drawled indulgently.

* * *

When the Europeans came to buy the girl, they were naïve, because everyone knew that she’d already sold her body once at sixteen.

It was her father who brought the buyers from Yerevan. To be precise, he brought the second buyers. The first ones came by helicopter . . . It was August when they came. The sun had burned the mountains and the peaks looked like grief-stricken souls. The small and large stones had covered themselves with moss so as not to crack and their singed skin smarted underneath the moist roots of moss. It was an ordinary summer, and the helicopter, together with its passengers, melted and dripped down on the cliffs. The father met the second group in Yerevan and brought

them to the village on a lame donkey that had been attacked by a pack of wolves a few months ago and had lost its right hind hoof. The visitors took turns sitting on the lame donkey, respecting one another, granting the privilege to moan and groan to the elders, tormenting themselves, and admiring the height of the mountains, and the closeness to God. They suffered, but did not complain. They said: "At this height, the entrance is easier for heavenly beings than for earthly men." From that day on they'd boast that they had taken part in the building of the Tower of Babel because they'd reached the knees of God and gotten tangled in his beard. Praising nature, getting sunburned, envying those who lived in this pristine place, they arrived in the village to buy the girl. These were polite Russian men who kept kissing the women's hands from the moment they arrived until their departure. In the village, they called such men *castrates*. Hiding behind trees and rocks, the village children followed the visitors and laughed at their hand-kissings, their "sorrlys," and "thankyous."

The father slaughtered a lamb born in the fall (it had been coughing and might have been sick). They put the table outside, somewhat away from the scarecrow, where the sunflowers had thrust their heads so high up into the sky that the angels might have thought the birds flying around them were spies.

The guests ate the steaming lamb stew with great appetite, throwing the gnawed bones to the cats gathered under the tree.

"Which one of your daughters are you going to sell?" the Russian asked, taking a piece of *lavash* from the youngest girl's hand. The host pointed his index finger at Noem, who was washing greens in the spring to bring to the table.

"I like this one better," the Russian said, picking up some

more *lavash* and eyeing up the youngest. “The one you’re pointing to is a bit faded and pale.”

“Nonsense,” the father disagreed. “Wait till night falls . . . You haven’t seen such a wonder. No one has ever seen such a wonder!”

Noem had known for a few months that they were coming to buy her and that she would have to get undressed. She even tried to get undressed in front of the mirror, and her mother made her do it twice in front of her brothers and sisters, so that she’d get used to the idea and not make a scene in front of the guests. But she felt nervous now that the buyers were here.

At around eleven at night, when the mountain exhaled the moon from its mouth, the mother came to fetch her.

“I feel ashamed,” whimpered Noem.

“You have no conscience,” the mother reproached her. “Your father nearly killed himself going back and forth to the post office and sending letters. He spent so much money, slaughtered a lamb . . . What are you ashamed of? You have undressed in front of your brothers so many times! What’s to be ashamed of?”

“My brothers are ten years younger than me. I see their naked bodies too when I bathe them, but these . . . a bunch of old men,” Noem sat huddled on the edge of the sofa, crying. “I don’t need any money.”

“I don’t either,” her mother said. “But we aren’t talking about just *any* money – it’s a *lot* of money . . . You can build a church with that kind of money. What’s to be ashamed of? Imagine you have gone to the doctor, say, your chest hurts or you’ve broken your leg. Aren’t you going to show it to him? Aren’t you going to let him examine you? But it’s all right if you don’t want to,”

she said, sitting down on the edge of the sofa and sighing. “Your father’s knee? Let it hurt. The bones get soft like chalk anyway. He has lived healthy for fifty years – he can live with a little pain now . . . There are people who are born sick, what about them? We aren’t fascists after all! We don’t want to torture you. If you don’t want to . . . although what’s there to be ashamed of? Men become sexless with age like angels. And your father . . . Well, you’re of his flesh. Are you ashamed of your hands, your legs, your eyes, your heart? You would’ve saved us if you’d agreed. We’d have gone to live in the city. Everything is made for people there – for their convenience. You call *this* life? But it’s alright, you don’t have to,” she stammered tearfully. “We’ve lived on the edge of this mountain for a hundred years, and we’ll live on it a hundred more . . .”

The Russians were standing by the door and listening to the sound of tumbling stones mixing with the breath of the mountain, greedily sniffing the air and the sky, waiting for Noem to come out from the back door of the house.

“My God,” gasped one of them, seeing the girl running through the garden, “What a marvel!”

“A living moon,” another said eagerly.

“Didn’t I tell you?” the father boasted, “You didn’t believe me. What’s the moon compared to this? They say it’s artificial, made by extraterrestrials to keep an eye on Earth, while this here is all natural, created by God.”

Noem ran through the rows of sunflowers and stopped near the scarecrow. The scarecrow stood proud and tall with its straw hair piercing the sky’s eye, like a thorn. Its three-meter-long dress made of varicolored rags reached to the ground, hiding

its body, made of boards. It had no arms because it was only a scarecrow and its straw hair was enough to terrify the birds. A rusted iron pail hung from its neck, which was now just above Noem's head. The children believed that stars would fall into the pail at dawn, but her mother dutifully cleaned it once a month, emptying the bird droppings under the trees. The girl clutched with both hands onto the scarecrow's dress gown stiff with dirt.

"Come home, you'll catch cold," her father shouted in the direction of the scarecrow.

Noem pulled the scarecrow's dress. It slipped down. The girl took it from the ground, wrapped it around her naked body and walked home through the rows.

The charmed men were sitting in a room, and their eyes burned when Noem entered. The oldest, with blue eyes and a beard, resembling a kindly sorcerer from a fairy tale, approached Noem.

"Can you lie down somewhere, say, on the couch or the table? Wherever you like."

"Of course she can," Noem's father responded instead of her.

"Please, go outside," said the other man, "We don't need you anymore. We'll take it from here."

The father left the room and one of the men locked the door after him in order not to be disturbed.

Shivering, Noem laid on the couch. The men encircled her. One of them turned off the light.

"Forgive us," said the old man, bowing over Noem. "Due to the specificities of your body, we have to carry on in the dark," and he carefully pulled down the dress from her chest. One man

carefully moved her toes, another man started examining her chest, leg, and then her arm with a microscope . . . Yet another pinched her thigh, and another made a scratch near her elbow with a needle.

“Can you please bend your knees? The position you’re in isn’t convenient for us . . . we have to see everything and ascertain everything. You see, my girl, it’s sacrilege for a man of my age to touch a woman of your age, but I must examine you – that’s my profession. We can produce any effect now with the help of medicine and chemistry. We’re going to spend a large amount of money to acquire you, so we must examine everything.” The old man switched on his small flashlight, shining it in the girl’s face, brushing her hair to the side, feeling a spot on her neck, and rubbing it with a wet cotton ball. Leaning down, he breathed on her face for a few minutes without removing his gaze from her neck, then he rubbed her with the wet cotton again, breathed on her face some more, and finally, satisfied and victorious, mewed under his nose: “Wonderful! Excellent!”

They each approached, looked curiously at her neck, breathed anxiously on her face, not believing, and each in his own turn rubbed her neck again, slightly to the right or left of the original spot. They waited, took the microscope, and examined her cell by cell, all coming to the same conclusion: “Wonderful! Excellent!”

Then they turned on the light. Two of the scientists approached Noem, one held her arm while the other said: “Don’t be afraid, it won’t hurt,” and he pushed the needle into her vein.

* * *

“There is no deception,” said the blue-eyed old man, coming out of the room, “Everything is all right, everything is perfectly natural . . .”

“I know,” replied the father smoking by the window, “the local doctor says that seventy percent of her body is phosphorus. That’s why she glows like that at night.”

“It’s possible,” said the old man. “But it’s a fact that she’s a wonder.”

They drank wild apple wine, sitting in the garden beneath the heads of sunflowers. The lawyer, papers and stamp tucked under his arm, kept tapping the glass to get rid of the bubbles in the young wine.

“My girl,” he said, taking Noem’s hand, “regardless of what your parents think, you must know everything before signing the papers. I’d like to tell you the most important things you need to know before selling yourself . . . We are Christian Armenians, after death we have to be buried in the ground and go either to heaven or to hell. There are no other options. You must know that after this transaction you’ll lose all of that. You won’t have a grave or a gravestone in the form of the ancient Armenian cradle and your parents won’t come to your grave to burn incense for you. After death, all of your relatives and neighbors will be buried in the village cemetery, but you won’t be there. After death, your body will belong to science. Scientists will study you, in order to understand why some people, like you, can emanate light like the moon does, while others can’t. By study, we mean that after death you won’t be buried, that they’ll break your body, cut it into pieces, dissolve, decom-

pose, boil, treat it chemically and with high temperatures. They must mutilate you, my girl, to understand why you aren't like everyone else. Do you consent to this?" he asked. "If we sign the contract now, the government will immediately pay half of the sum, while the rest will be paid to your parents after your death, after handing over the raw material, so to speak. Think about it, my girl, do you consent to this?"

Everyone was anxiously waiting. Her brothers, sisters, and neighbors had gathered near the scarecrow, and even the cats had left the bones under the tree and joined them.

"A psychological study could also produce some excellent results. It wouldn't hurt to discuss that as well," one of the members of the group suggested to the blue-eyed old man, while Noem was thinking.

"I wouldn't advise it," said the lawyer, who'd been invited from Yerevan, leaning forward. "Armenian women don't open their souls completely even to God . . . That's going to be an unnecessary expense – a loss of time and money."

"I wouldn't have agreed anyway," said the father, taking the plate with sliced fruits from his wife's hand and setting it on the table. "Despite everything, only God may touch my daughter's soul. Humans are unworthy of that."

The group of scientists left early in the morning. It was so early that the rooster hadn't called yet, but the stars in the cool mist around the mountains had already disappeared. The guests said thank you for everything – for the hospitality, for the generosity, and for signing the contract.

"We really enjoyed you. We're very interested in you," the old scientist said, shaking Noem's hand. "Until our next meeting!"

We'll be waiting . . . for your death," he joked.

"We will too," laughed the father.

* * *

They hadn't even spent half of that money when the Soviet Union collapsed and the ruble was devalued. Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union and entered into a new partnership with the European Union.

When the Europeans came, they were naïve because they didn't know that the Russians had been there before them. The Russians, who'd come before the Europeans, came after the Ottomans. The Persians, who'd come before the Ottomans, knew that before them and after the Seljuks came the Tatars and the Mongols, and even before that – the Arabs, who came, it seems, after the Greeks. They had come at the same time as the Egyptian pharaohs, before the Romans, who had come before the Byzantines, who came after the Assyrians, who came after the Khuris. But even before that – Noah had passed through here and he had stopped, because God himself had passed through this place. And Noah was the only one who'd left something instead of taking something away. Otherwise, it would've been impossible to know that God had passed through here. And then the Europeans wouldn't have come.

Translated by Shushan Avagyan
*First published at Dalkey Archive's Best
European Fiction 2018*

THE SUN IS THE FACE OF THE LORD, AND WE BEHOLD IT EVERY DAY

My shadow curled up as I sat on the ground. I was feeling tired. I had been standing by the roadside for a fairly long time, but I hadn't seen a single car or person pass by. The sun was blazing hot. The dry, parched ground burned the soles of my feet. The air was boiling hot. I seemed to exhale balls of flame from my lungs. What was I thinking, setting off in the heat of the day?

I was feeling sorry for the time I had wasted, so I decided to go home. I could have laid down and slept for a while, weeded the cabbage beds until the heat subsided, maybe even watered the trees.

The moment I turned towards the village, I heard the distant roar of an engine behind me. It couldn't be a car. I stopped and swung around to take a look. I saw a military truck in the distance, and my heart leapt with joy. Rushing into the middle of the road, I started to wave my arms frantically.

The truck pulled over, up the road a piece. I ran up to it. The door handle was quite high up, and so was the footboard. I waited for the driver to open the door and offer me a helping hand, but he made no move. I decided to wait a few more seconds, but then, fearing that he would drive off, reached for the handle. I tried a few times, but my efforts were in vain. I was

mad. I felt like telling him off. *Would it be too much to ask to open the door for me?* But I didn't have the guts. God knows what sort of man the driver was. If I hurt him, he would leave, and I would have to stand there and wait even longer. I stretched as far up as I possibly could to reach the handle. My spine clicked loudly, and I felt a sharp pain in my big toes under my weight. It felt like my spine and neck would split off from my body, but I somehow managed to reach the handle. I finally managed to open the door with just the tips of my fingers.

The driver looked at me and smiled. He was a tall, well-built man, his neck and jaw lost in a mass of straggly hair, his mouth hidden behind a bushy beard. His eyes were large and round. As he looked ahead, his pupils became motionless, almost hypnotic. He clutched the steering wheel in his huge hands. There was oil residue under his fingernails.

"Get a move on, we're running late!" he said. His eyes brightened and crinkled at the corners. His beard twitched upwards from both sides. He might have cracked a smile.

"The footboard is pretty high. I can't raise my foot up there." I glanced at his strong arms, hoping that at least now he would think to stretch out his hand to help me into the cab.

"Your skirt's narrow and restricting your movements. Tuck it up so to step up more easily," he advised.

"I wonder why God made you six-foot four with huge hands if I have to pull up my skirt to get into your truck?" I couldn't help grumbling aloud. I folded up my skirt, put my knee up, and stood on the footboard.

"Not that much, gal, you've almost taken your dress off," he laughed.

“I’m no *gal* to you,” I snapped irritably. “I have a son twice your height!”

“Some people have sons three times taller,” he laughed, and his eyes filled with tears. He started to cough, unable to finish speaking.

“What a waste of time.” I took my seat without looking at him. “I’d jump off and split if I hadn’t waited so long.”

“Why’s that?” He became serious all of a sudden. “We’re just having a good laugh, that’s all... I haven’t heard myself laugh in a while. Don’t be sore. I liked you right from the start,” he said, turning the key in the ignition. The truck’s engine began to shudder. “What’s wrong with sharing a joke with a woman you like?”

“Oh, come on!” I waved him off. “Maybe I’d better just wait for another lift.”

“It’s up to you, but if you get off now, you’ll scorch in this sun before too long. I’m the only one coming from there,” he pointed his thumb over his shoulder, “...and going back. I expect there’ll be no one else for some time.”

“So now you’re a national hero?” I asked, my voice dripping with contempt. “Our village is within spitting distance of the front line, so we know better than you who’s running in and out.”

The truck started rolling down an old, cracked asphalt road.

“Huh?” he looked at me expectantly. His eyes were aquamarine, like the shallow part of a lake, and fragments of his entire life seemed to settle to the bottom of his weary eyes like so much silt.

“I mean this is the first time I’ve seen you,” I replied. “You must be new to these parts.”

“Do you really think a man my age can be a newcomer?” he shouted at the top of his voice. “I’ve been driving back and forth every single day for the past ten years, since the war started. Then he leaned towards me and shouted, almost into my ear, “Every day I set off when the sun’s up, and go back when it’s down.”

“And death doesn’t scare you either.” I curled my lips contemptuously.

“No, it doesn’t. Death is the best punishment. Why should I be scared?” His voice grew so sincere that it now sounded naïve. “Besides, why should I think about that? My job is to be alive and well. I don’t know about you, but I for one plan to hold tight to this wheel until a ripe old age and carry on driving to the battlefield and back. I’ll be ferrying dead bodies to be buried, delivering letters from loved ones to whiny conscripts, rushing the doctor to the wounded, and taking deserters back and yelling at the cowards. It’s hard, but I’ll keep driving back and forth.” He remained silent for a moment, then continued with a touch of irony in his voice. “And I will sometimes give rides to unkempt women like you, taking them to town so they can spend their yearly savings on a tasteless dress and return to show it off around the village.”

“I want to buy clothing and other things for my children, not myself,” I began to explain in a leisurely manner. “I never have enough money to buy things for everyone, so I always buy things one at a time and always struggle to settle everything.”

“How many children have you got? Are they grown-up?” He looked at my reflection in the mirror.

“No, they’re still kids,” I replied, yawning. “My daughter is five years old. She can’t manage the broom very well yet, but she’s

supposed to sweep the house and the yard, so I get her big red ribbons in town. My youngest son doesn't like boiled eggs, but he promised to eat them, so he gets a toy gun and a school bag. My eldest son's voice has turned croaky but it hasn't broken yet. He's in charge of the little ones and shouts at them if they start fighting, and I buy him hairspray for that."

"Do you have a husband?" He tried to catch my eye through the mirror again.

"Uh-huh."

"Is he a good boy?"

"How should I know? He's not a boy anymore," I mumbled incoherently.

"Do you love him?"

"You're weird, you know!" I let out a growl, and looked at him quizzically. "Can you really love someone whose face you've been seeing for twenty years on end?"

"Twenty years is not a long time." His eyes gleamed under bushy eyebrows.

"Not at all," I agreed, "but what I see is only a human face, not God's face."

The roof of the truck had absorbed a lot of heat, and the air in the cab made me drowsy. I gradually dissolved into that heat. I didn't feel like talking. My head was leaning against the headrest. I felt tired and slightly dizzy. The truck rumbled over a bumpy road, rocking me to sleep. Soon I began to nod off, and it was at this time that a fugitive idea struck terror into my heart: the war might reach our village before I returned home. Who would take my children out of the village, and where would I find them afterwards? Fear roused me from sleep, and I stretched out.

“This life – what does it want from us, anyway?” I sighed, addressing no one in particular.

“Why so bitter?” he asked. There was genuine surprise in his voice. “After all, I am the one returning from the battlefield.”

“What kind of life is this?” I grumbled.

“You shouldn’t be saying things like that.” He stretched out his rough hand and punched me lightly on the shoulder, saying, “War and peace are like the sun and the moon: although they’re knit together, they can never cross. Like it or not, the day is divided into two equal parts: day and night.”

“Where, eh?” I rubbed my shoulder where he punched it. “We keep marching in procession behind the dead. My soul has been ripped to shreds and ruined like a pilgrim’s feet, but the holy place is still nowhere in sight.”

“Up there,” he pointed a thick finger out the window, “in the sky.”

“Up there,” I tried to imitate him. “What’s up there?”

“My dear, even chickens look up at the sky when they drink water. Have you ever really looked up?” he scolded.

“I have.” I sat up, lifting my head from the headrest. “It’s blue sky up there, and it can turn black or red whenever it wants,” I said drily.

“The sun’s up there too!” my fellow traveler added graciously.

He leaned forward, becoming tense as he caught sight of a large pothole further down the road.

“Oh yes,” my voice was faintly mocking, “the sun is the clock and you are the pendulum.”

“Look, my dear! The sun is the Lord’s face, and we see it every day,” he said, patiently explaining, like a parent to a slow-witted

child. "I am just a man who gets up with the rising sun and goes to sleep at sunset."

A brief silence lingered in the air, and then I asked, "Have you ever killed anybody?"

The muscles at the bridge of his nose twitched, and his brows drew together in an angry frown.

"I mean, an enemy," I clarified.

He slammed on the brakes, and the huge car jerked to a halt. I flew forward and my head almost smacked against the windshield. I turned towards him but wasn't given a chance to lash out.

"What the hell kind of woman are you?" He flung his arms out wide and shouted furiously. "The hell with calling you a woman! You sit down comfortably here and start sounding off about war and killing people – to a man you don't know. I'm already sick of your moaning. Fuck you!" He continued growling under his breath, probably needed to curse me more in his head.

While he yelled, I forced myself to stay silent. I wanted to get where I was going to as soon as possible. Men like it when you pretend to be a frightened slave. They need to yell and dominate to boost their ego. I focused my eyes on his face so I wouldn't shout back. His beard was turning grey from the corners of his mouth to his sideburns. The grey spots were like twisted dry leaves. The whiskers around his chin were still dark.

"Your beard's starting to go grey, you are becoming a wise man," my voice had turned suddenly melodious and tender.

"I'm not wise." He stopped shouting, disarmed by the sound of my gentle voice. He added in an aggrieved tone, like a sulking child, "But I have seen a lot in my life and understand perfectly well all the aches and pains a wise man must endure."

No sooner had he said it than he put his hand on my shoulder, caressed my neck with his thumb, then pulled me towards himself, and kissed me. I drew away immediately. He removed his hand from my shoulder, laid it on my knee and began stroking it. He must have had calluses on the palm of his hand. They lightly scratched my knee.

“Take your hand off my knee,” I demanded coldly. “I don’t want runs in my tights. This is my only pair of tights – I haven’t got any other.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he agreed straight away, “let’s pull them off to keep them undamaged.”

He slid his hand up my thigh.

“Thank you very much!” I jerked his hand back, opened the door and jumped out of the truck.

I found myself at the edge of a wheat field. I stepped into it. I grazed my arms on the spiky heads of the wheat stalks, but didn’t pay them any attention. I felt a pang of painful regret, and I could hardly walk.

Suddenly someone hugged me tightly from behind, and I was immediately lifted up and shoved to the ground. The rough-stemmed wheat stalks broke under my back with a loud crack. The truck driver fell on me and started kissing me passionately. His hands began chaotically pulling up my skirt. I meant to hit him in the stomach with my knee and roll him off, but I didn’t do that.

He tried to urge me on as we headed back to the truck, saying, “Make it quick! We should hurry to get the soldiers’ corpses to their relatives.” He made a path for me by trampling down clumps of wheat stalks with his heavy boots.

“What corpses?” I asked, baffled.

“Those in the back of my truck.” He pointed to his truck. “Stuffed full with eighteen to twenty-year-olds, covered with a thick tarp.”

“Good Lord!” my knees buckled from fear. I felt dizzy, and knelt down on the ground. The driver carried on, but stopped after a few steps, turned around, and was surprised to see me on my knees. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m scared.” My voice had dropped to a whisper. I curled up into a ball and pressed myself against the ground.

“What can I do?” He shrugged his shoulders and pushed on towards the truck. When he got there, he turned around again, and shouted towards me,

“Are you coming now or should I go?”

“Yes, I’m coming,” I tried to shout back. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m coming. . .”

Translated by Marina Yandian