



Igor BABAEV

HERITAGE

Volume One

TURUNGE





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A Novel in Four Volumes

Volume One

TURUNGE

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The heart of a mother is a deep
abyss at the bottom of which you
will always find forgiveness.

Honoré de Balzac

FOREWORD

Memory...

The most precious treasure and the greatest legacy one can possess. It has the power to resurrect, or to condemn to obscurity. Memory is immortal. As long as we are remembered, we remain alive in the hearts and minds of those dear to us.

I dedicate this book to my mother, with all filial love and warmth not given in times past. Her tragic fate left a bleeding wound on my heart that aches till this very day. She is no longer with us, and the only thing I could do was reconstruct, in our minds, everything she lived through, bit by bit.

Going from fact to fact, from event to event, delving into the breadth of history, I – at one point – felt the past sweep me up and carry me away from her life's account and into the depths of time – to the

story of both her kin and my father's. I thus came face to face with the fates of my ancestors, inheriting their concerns, learning of their rises and their falls alike. Keeping it all to myself became impossible. I had to put it all on paper, capture all that happened to the people to whom I owe my existence.

Some of the relatives who bestowed these stories upon me are no longer alive, and I thank fate and time for being merciful enough to allow me to immortalize them, to keep them from disappearing without a trace.

I want my children, my grandchildren, and all who follow to know their roots. I want them to remember and to never repeat the mistakes sealed within the history of our clan.

I

My great-great-grandfather's name was Yusuf – so says our family history. He was a shochet – a butcher. It's more than a profession – it's a philosophy, a way of life. No other people value the notion of the “butcher” as highly as the Jews. The shochet doesn't just butcher fowl and cattle. He performs the milah – circumcision – on newborns, recites prayers, and performs the duties of a rabbi. He also paves the path for immortal souls through the valley of pain and despair, where the Lord brings his creatures.

My great-great-grandfather's parents disappeared – left on a pilgrimage to Palestine and never returned. Then, in the middle of the 19th century, such trips were close to being a moral duty for the majority of Jews scattered across the far reaches of Russia. Their son was left alone. Whether or not he had any siblings was unclear. But he was not sent to an orphanage – the Jewish people do not have those, as they do not throw parentless children into the street. The community

council of the aul where Yusuf lived decided to send the young man to a rabbi in Derbent for education.

Derbent – to a mountain Jew – was what Paris was to a Russian farmer. Everything was topsy-turvy. In the mountains, buildings were built on hillsides without any apparent order, like birds' nests. Here, they lined the narrow streets like a row of soldiers. In the auls, people couldn't conceive of glass on windows; here, shimmering sheets of it covered the storefronts.

Most importantly of all, houses had beds. The mountain people wondered: how could anyone sleep on that? The villagers were accustomed to entire families sleeping on the floor: blankets, proudly referred to as "mattresses" were laid across nearly the entire room and kids would be put to bed atop them in a row, special knit hats covering their heads. Identical blankets were used as covers, topped with cloaks in cold seasons.

To be honest, only a handful of members of Derbent's Jewish community owned beds: the fishmonger, the city pharmacist, the rabbi, and Gershon, the tobacconist. People said that his tobacco was sent to the Queen of England herself.

Gershon visited the famous fair in the central Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod every year. Once, while there, he saw a locomotive and nearly lost his mind. The machine roared, breathing clouds of steam, and the people to whom rides were offered approached it with puzzled stares and befuddled smiles, unsure whether they would be able to emerge from the predicament alive. Gershon said that he was lucky to be one of the forty people brave enough to ride their first train. To be fair, Gershon was regarded to be a notorious fibber. He once told that in Europe – he didn't exactly remember where – people managed to catch hot air from a fire into a giant sack, which was not only able to rise into the air, but lift a basket – with a person in it, no less – along with it. Who would ever believe something like that?

Generally, the four people in Derbent who owned beds happened to be the main suppliers of these fables (referred to as “news” in different circumstances) to Dagestan’s Jewish settlements. Anytime the denizens heard the word ‘Europe’, they knew that many interesting things were happening there, to the north and west.

Nothing of that sort happened in our village. It didn’t even have a butcher. For that very reason, my great-great-grandfather was sent to the big city for education.

All of Derbent’s rabbis were rumored to be especially wise and educated. Their fame was as majestic and steadfast as a sea cliff. The rabbi to whom my great-great-grandfather was sent was considered to be the wisest of the bunch, all because his son happened to know a few words in Russian.

Yusuf brought a gift from the community for the rabbi’s wife: two pairs of stockings and a swath of calico for a dress. She was very happy with the offering, and would occasionally give Yusuf a handful of millet – as a treat.

The rebbe happened to be a good teacher. He would sit the boys, sent to him for education, before himself at the synagogue, where light was scarce even at noontime. Knees served as desks, and the role of the board was fulfilled by a flat stone, on which the rabbi inscribed characters in charcoal. The teacher would pronounce the sound which the character signified, and the children would diligently chime in their response. The rabbi would then read a fragment of the holy text and go on to the next character. Whether the boys were retaining the knowledge of the alphabet or simply relying on tenacious childhood memory was always a mystery to him. The lesson would continue, and the students would place stones in front of them and begin writing. The rabbi would read once again – entire chapters this time around – and each student was expected to repeat after him, word by word.

It wasn't too long before Yusuf had read the entire Penta-teuch. Studies came easy to him. While boys older than him would still struggle with 'God created heavens and the earth,' Yusuf would be tackling Moses's feats in the desert. In due time – after a year, perhaps – Yusuf had read the entire Shulchan Aruch – the Code of Jewish Law – and had learned everything a future butcher needed to know: how heavenly bodies are connected to organs, how to find the jugular in cattle, what happens when you don't remove a bull's tendons in a timely manner – all the essential academic babble.

While reading the Shulchan Aruch, Yusuf matured. He started sprouting a mustache, and had grown by a whole head's length. By the time his education was over, the future butcher had turned into a true dzhigit.

Another six months passed, and the young man passed an exam on his knowledge of the holy texts, the Torah and the Talmud, before the elders. After he demonstrated how to properly sharpen knives, he was taken to the barn. There, wielding a large, sharp blade he swiftly butchered a chicken. The elders were impressed with the ease of Yusuf's movements, and suggested that he test his skills on a ram. The youth handled the task masterfully, accompanying his motions with the appropriate prayers. Then, as called for by the exam, it was time for a cow.

Yusuf excelled at this task as well and his aged observers nodded in approval. His movements were confident, his cuts precise. His manner was calm and measured, as was expected from a master of the profession. The rabbi declared that the lad had learned all he needed to know. Yusuf pleaded in vain to stay and continue studying, but the Rabbi stood his ground. It was time for the young man to return to the aul.

By that time, the village community had sent a shamanat – a messenger – with inquiries about Yusuf's education on several occasions. The old butcher had died, no one knew how

to properly butcher cattle, and going to the neighboring village every time was difficult and inconvenient.

In accordance with the rules, the rabbi wrote an attestation allowing Yusuf to perform the duties of a butcher.

The shamanat sealed the document with a shot of vodka, grunted and took the young man with him.

At the village, the young butcher was greeted with glee. Residents popped out of their dwellings to see what education had done to one of their own. The ladies felt obligated to bestow kind words on the youth. The gentlemen nodded approvingly, noting the confidence with which the lad sat in a saddle. Mothers wished for God to bless them with sons like that. Old men twirled their beards and reckoned that their granddaughters would love to have a husband like him.

A Jewish mountain aul was very similar to a Muslim settlement: the same little houses stuck to each other, without any real semblance of streets. Dwellings in the mountains were very simple, most often two-story buildings of stone and clay mixed with chopped straw, without any architectural excesses. Roofs were built flat: beams topped with smaller branches or flexible cane, also reinforced with clay.

Each dwelling had a door or two, as well as one or several small windows. During rainstorms and blizzards, the window openings were covered with wooden shutters. Like other mountain people, the Jews built homes with less regard for comfort than for security from enemy attacks. In the event of a raid, the dwellings, stuck to the mountain slope like swallows' nests, turned into impregnable fortresses. Windows turned into loopholes, and peaceful villagers instantly turned into fierce warriors. Women and children sought cover in the rooms.

In truth, calling the spaces inside these houses 'rooms' would be a stretch. They resembled clay boxes with no doors, which astounded European travelers who found themselves

in the Caucasus time and time again. All walls were lined with carpets or mats, then covered with quilts for safe measure. One of the mats – try to guess which one – would hide a narrow escape passage, traversable only when hunched to the very ground.

No matter how poor their inhabitants, the houses were kept immaculately clean. Walls and floors were painted with white lime every Saturday. A red or gray stripe, made with clay, gathered throughout the mountains of Dagestan, adorned the perimeter of the room, a notch higher than floor level.

At the same time, the mountain Jews weren't strangers to pomp and desire for comfort, both uniquely interpreted. Niches were built in the walls and used as displays for household supplies. Under the niches stood clay wine jugs and copper vessels of ancient Persian design housing water, oil and grain.

In the kunak, or men's room, weapons were the main wall adornment: sabres, daggers, guns and rifles – the treasures of a mountain man.

In the women's room, one of the walls was always lined with mirrors, scarves of silk or wool hung between them. The opposite side of the room customarily held large, round red copper trays and clay plates, adorned with quirky images of flowers and animals and cracked from the passage of time. These were used only for the highest of holidays, weddings, and funerals. Forged wooden chests were stacked on the floor, largest on the bottom, smallest on top. The thrifty housewives used them to hold wedding clothes and other rarely used items, often from the times of their blossoming youth. Mountain men never looked inside these, as snooping was considered inappropriate, and the women used that fact to hide to conceal their little secrets.

At least this is what travelers that traversed the mountain auls reported about our lands, many of them embellishing re-

ality, as, for instance, Ieguda Chernyi did in his voluminous works.

From time to time, a man would go for a leisurely stroll amidst the houses, puffing his pipe. Roughly half of the buildings housed shops, their keepers sitting by the door, daydreaming and chatting with the neighbors.

Most men gathered in a courtyard by the synagogue or the butcher shop. They would discuss this year's crops and how everything was immeasurably better in the past because folks were more god-fearing.

The boys, who generally didn't participate in the grown, married men's discussions, stood by the fountain, if the aul had one, quipping and nudging at each other, joking and throwing quick glances at the girls and women coming by to get water.

The main source of entertainment for the mountain Jews, however, came from guests. God forbid a stranger, whether a Jew or a Muslim, happened to pass through the settlement – he would be instantly stopped, and a crowd would gather in the matter of minutes. People would take turns asking the stranger where he's from, the purpose of his journey, what auls and cities he passed on his way and what he saw there. If they found out that the traveler had been in settlements where an acquaintance or relative lived, more questions inevitably followed, if perchance he saw that person.

If the guest agreed to stay and rest until the next day, he was always offered lodging at the home of the aul's most respected man, and there, while sitting atop the honorable pillow at the head of the so-called table – generally against a wall on a carpet, the traveler would be forced to tell his stories again.

If the guest turned out to be educated, which wasn't all that rare – even famous rabbis passed by our lands with interpreters in tow – then all of the aul's respectable men would gather, and the traveler would begin telling fables: about Moses and the diamond crown, about the world, up in the mountains

and below them, about hell and it's countless premises, where there is a separate room for each day.

In response, the denizens of our aul would always tell guests the story about the Kusary aul. Sometime the venue would shift to Madzhalis or Cuba - not the one discovered by Columbus, but ours, located in the heart of Azerbaijan not too far from Baku. To prove the story's credibility, the exact year of the events was always cited – in this case, the 5,496th year from the creation of the world, when Persia's Nader Shah invaded modern-day Dagestan.

"Which one is that," the old men would instantly ask. "The one who had eighteen wives?"

"No, the one that had eighteen palaces. One in every land he conquered."

"So the shah wasn't just a ruthless ruler, if he built palaces in every land he conquered?"

"That's debatable," the most respected man in the aul would answer. "Before building these palaces, he wouldn't leave a single stone on the site of the Jewish aul he razed to make room for it. Nevertheless, he was never able to build a palace in Dagestan."

"Why not? Couldn't find any room?"

"No, there was plenty of room. He had his eye on a certain village – which one, exactly, depends on who you ask. There, the most famous tzadik – a righteous man – taught: Rebbe Reuven Ben-Samuil. It is said that whenever a child was born far away, the rebbe would know about it the very next morning - as if the birds had sung the news to him. People would say about Reuven Ben-Samuil - 'no matter which direction you approach him from, you'll find holiness'. But now, he was being approached with spears and swords. Rebbe Reuven sat in the synagogue's courtyard after the morning prayer with his pupils explaining a particularly difficult part of the Talmud. In his hands was a book, though the con-

versation did not concern it – the rebbe was talking about something else. He was deliberating the meaning of ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.’ Rebbe Reuven explained to his pupils that the word ‘beginning’ is an enduring constant, which contains everything within itself, and that the beginning of the universe is the crumbling of an absolute whole into pieces which ultimately led to the birth of man.

While Rebbe Reuven Ben-Samuil was explaining such wise things, eighteen horsemen appeared by the synagogue’s fence. At the head of the squadron, the vizier sat on a strapping bay stallion wearing a helmet adorned with a colorful turban.

The horsemen rode onto the holy ground and stopped in the vicinity of Reuven.” The storyteller would pause, and the faces of his listener would grow pale and long. “The main vizier dismounted and slowly approached the Jews, who sat around the rebbe. The wise man heard both the horses’ neighs and the sabres’ clatter, but didn’t interrupt his speech, even for a second, and did not turn around to see who was standing behind him.

The vizier was intrigued by the rabbi’s poise. He approached even closer to rebbe Reuven Ben-Samuil and yelled something in his language. The rabbi didn’t budge. Then the vizier drew his sword and raised it over the old man’s head; the rebbe did not interrupt his lesson. The pupils were paralyzed in terror, as the vizier slashed his saber in cold blood. But as the blade rushed downward, Rebbe Reuven’s hands instinctively flew upward in fright, lifting the mysterious book upward to shield his head. The saber stood up to the challenge and hacked the book in half, but for the last sheet that bound its two halves together, which remained intact.

Seeing that the rabbi was unharmed, the renowned warrior said to him:

‘I see that your book had an argument with my sword and won. What is this wisdom, contained within it, that saved you?’

Rebbe Reivem Bem-Samiol replied:

‘It isn’t a mere book. It contains the mystery of my people’s faith. You cannot read it, however, as you cannot understand our tongue.’

The vizier paused.

‘Well, if your precious book is stronger than my Damascus-forged blade, then we do not belong here.’

With these words, the Persian mounted his horse and recalled his men.

The next day, Nader Shah’s troops left the village where, by the grace of God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the book’s power was demonstrated.”

“What happened to the book?” the listeners asked.

“It’s being kept as evidence of this story’s veracity,” the venerable storyteller answered. “In a secret place, in Derbent, with one of the rabbis. Those who’ve seen it can verify that it was cleanly sliced in half, except for the last page. It would be impossible to stage something like that.”

“So what was written in it?” one of the naïve youths asked.

The elders hissed:

“Why do you even ask? Think about it!”

But the storyteller stopped them with a motion of his hand.

“No,” he replied. “It wasn’t the Torah. There was actually nothing special about the book. It was published in Venice in 1587. It was about Jerusalem, and the temples that were built there. It was printed in our square, ancient Hebrew characters. And that’s the whole story about the power of the printed word and the strength that does not exist unless we believe in it.”

Such were the tales with which the mountain Jews regaled one another. It was expected that Yusuf, now being the most learned man in the aul, would know far more fables than others and would join the revered line of storytellers.

Yusuf became aware of the fact that his fellow villagers regarded him to be very educated the day after his return from Derbent. Messengers from the wealthiest and most regarded men in the village came to him that morning, respectfully inviting him to visit. The fact that the young butcher knew nothing outside of his profession was irrelevant to the villagers – they were proud of the youth. (There was that one time when a rabbi visiting from Kharkov dined at Yusuf the butcher's house and our host was unable to make any sense of the conversation with his guest. No one, however, paid any attention to that little misunderstanding).

The family home to which Yusuf returned was a typical mountain dwelling, which had begun to decay in the absence of a master. As the butcher was unmarried, an old woman from a neighboring home offered to be the household caretaker for a small fee.

The young man had plenty of work. Anytime someone needed to write a plea or a complaint, they came to Yusuf. If they wanted to teach their young son how to read and write, they came to Yusuf.

Nevertheless, the art of butchering remained the main source of income. In those times, meat was a rare luxury for the Jews. Cattle were usually butchered before high holidays and at the start of winter, and everyone went to the shochet in order to get truly kosher meat. Family heads normally brought Yusuf several rams, or a cow or calf, and then parceled out the meat among four households.

In those days, people would enjoy some of the mutton and beef fresh, then save the rest for winter. In autumn, the community would make sugum – preserved meat – and the butcher would be especially busy. Yusuf would directly help with the preparation of the meat. He would help dry, smoke, and render the tail fat.

Women – both young and old – would come to the butcher with fowl. Being focused on his work, Yusuf paid little atten-

tion to them. Butcher's duties overshadowed emotion during the kashrut.

II

Perhaps there was a ripple in the flow of days, which were otherwise predictable, but there came a time when the peaceful monotony of life in the aul was interrupted. It was Wednesday – a most blessed day for the mountain folk, Jews and Muslims alike, discounting Saturday. Saturday was a day of rest; Wednesday was a lucky day for undertaking new enterprises.

Yusuf was a fine butcher. He would drain the blood, then hang the carcass by its hind legs with his assistant's help, pull it up on a rope draped over a high beam, then skin it. The task required patience and skill, and the holy words of the prayer seemed to flow from the lips of the pious shochet on their very own.

At times, the din of women's voices would reach his ears from beyond the gate. The women were always at it, fighting and arguing. One could be the Queen of Sheba herself, but would still be unable to pass an entire day without gossip

and scandal. But this time, Yusuf noticed something special amidst the usual racket. Someone's gaze was literally drilling through the back of his head, burning his ears and striving to get into his brain. The butcher turned around without realizing why he did.

A girl was watching Yusuf intently. The scarf she was wrapped in struggled to contain a head of thick red hair and her eyes shimmered expressively. Both of the stranger's cheeks were adorned by black dots that looked like dried tears. The mountain women had their own ideas of beauty. Jewish women would paint intricate designs on their faces, reminiscent of modern tattoos. They would use henna and madder, ground using mortar and pestle and then boiled. The fashionable women then took the resulting paste and use wooden sticks to draw lines, dots and circles on their foreheads, cheeks and chins. What is viewed as extravagant today was more than commonplace at the time.

The girl sat atop a wagon next to a lad that was slightly younger than her. There was a resemblance between them – Yusuf decided that they must be brother and sister. The boy, frowning and spitting at his feet, was obviously trying to cultivate the image of a fierce dzhigit, even though he had just shaved his peach fuzz, his skin glistening with tail fat, which Jewish woman used to sooth their sons' and husbands' nicks and cuts.

They stopped right by the butcher's entryway. The wagon blocked the other women's way, so they commenced quarreling, amusing themselves with shrill insults and feigned cursing.

The girl paid them no mind. She was keenly watching the butcher, afraid to miss her turn. Yusuf had already spent the better part of an hour handling the rams belonging to an obnoxious woman, who was preparing for her son's wedding.

Finally, Yusuf performed the necessary rights and passed the carcass to his assistant, who would finish the rest.

The butcher signaled to the lad and the girl. Noticing his wave, the stranger lightly jumped off the wagon and, having grabbed an empty basket, approached the shochet. Her companion followed with a sack draped over his back, which, judging from the fluttering, contained several unlucky birds.

As the visitor approached Yusuf, he straightened up. Unlike most butchers, he hadn't yet had the chance to get stout. His chiseled form beamed with energy, and only his dark piercing eyes hinted about the pain and stifled anguish that gnawed at him.

The stranger stopped three steps away from Yusuf – closer than a woman would customarily approach a butcher at work – and gestured for her companion to lower the sack of fowl to the ground. Her escort silently complied and began to curiously follow the butcher's motions.

The girl, bundled in the scarf, also wouldn't take her gaze off the blade, occasionally stealing a glance at its wielder. After all, looking at men was not forbidden for an aul woman. Had she been engaged, it would have been another matter, and she would only be allowed to look at the ground below her feet.

Yusuf was silent. The stranger snickered.

"What do you have there?" Yusuf asked, pointing at the fluttering sack.

"A rooster and two hens."

Yusuf loosened the rope, and a giant rooster's head instantly popped out. The butcher grabbed him by the legs and lifted him into the air. With a swift motion, he grabbed the feathers on the bird's throat and recited a prayer.

The girl turned away. Yusuf pressed the bird against the block, and swiped his blade. One swift motion and the deed was done.

"Give me the other one," he grumbled. "What are you waiting for?"

The young man quickly complied.

The whole process took no longer than ten minutes. Yusuf's assistant carefully plucked the birds, ran them over the fire, trimmed them and gave them to the boy, who, in turn, passed them to his sister who quickly placed them in the basket.

Suddenly, thunder rumbled. Yusuf looked up, but there was not a cloud in the sky. The butcher looked at the brave mountain girl.

"Why were you looking at me?" he asked.

The girl pretended not to hear his question.

"Take the birds to the wagon," she asked her brother. "And bring the salt. It's there, in the straw."

Salt was a traditional part of the butcher's payment, and leaving it in the cart was reckless.

"What if someone steals it?" the brother replied angrily and ran to the wagon.

When he was far enough away, the girl looked at the peculiar butcher with a squint.

"Who was looking at you?"

"You were. From your wagon."

"Is that not allowed?" the stranger replied angrily.

"You almost drilled a hole in my head," laughed Yusuf.

"Is your head like a pumpkin?" quipped the girl.

"Your tongue's like a razor," retorted Yusuf. "Are you always such a smart-mouth?"

"If you didn't start it, I wouldn't have to defend myself," the mountain girl replied.

Yusuf looked at her, irritated. How dare this girl speak to him like that? The sun stared onto the earth indifferently.

"What's your name?"

"Ava. Ibrahim's daughter," the girl replied, naming a family of high regard in the aul. "My father asked that you do everything properly. Those," she continued, motioning toward the fowl "are for a special occasion."

"They're all special occasions. Everyone celebrates the Sabbath."

"We have a wedding."

"Your wedding?"

"My nephew's."

"Haven't heard about it."

"He lives in a different aul. News only travels so far."

"I see. Tell your father not to worry. I did everything properly."

"He specifically asked that you recite Shema Yisrael."

Asking to recite Shema Yisrael over fowl was unheard of. Butchers only did it before the day of atonement - Yom Kippur.

"That's excessive," the butcher replied and spit.

Spitting was an entrenched custom for the mountain people, signifying the emotional mood of what's been said. Spitting at one's company's feet was akin to calling them a scoundrel. Spitting softly toward one's own feet, however, signified respect for the adversary.

"Tell your baba, your father, not to worry. Everything necessary has been done to the fowl. He needn't worry."

"Is your knife sharp?"

"You can try it, if you'd like." The butcher showed her the blade. "He can come and watch himself next time, if he doubts me."

"Of course not, Rebbe Yusuf," the girl hesitated, her tone turning respectful. "My father trusts me."

"Farewell, then. Let him prosper for a thousand years." Yusuf extended his hand for payment.

Ava untied a knot in her scarf, where she had kept a coin. The brother was still preoccupied by the wagon, shouting curses at the women who had taken his salt. They responded with similar insults. The girl, having just now noticed the quarrel, couldn't contain her laughter.

“What’s so funny?” asked Yusuf.

“I have the salt.”

“You do? Why did you lie to him?”

“I just had to.”

“He’ll hit you if he finds out.”

“No he won’t. My father will protect me. He loves me. Hey, Kamal!” she called to her brother. “I have the bag.”

She shook the pouch in the air, then quickly handed Yusuf the money and the salt, nodding at him once more as she left. He exclaimed wishes of a long life for her father as she hurried away.

On the way home, Ava decided that Yusuf was mocking her and whipped the bulls out of frustration. Having taken her anger out on the poor animals, however, she calmed down and soon forgot about the butcher.

Right after returning home, she went to help her mother and did not hear what her brother told their father about the trip.

She tossed and turned for much of that night, and when she finally slipped away into sleep, she saw Yusuf again. He stood before her in her dream, gigantic – almost reaching the sky, his laugh as loud as thunder.

When Ava awoke, the pouring rain was being thrown to and fro by stormy winds.

She visited Yusuf again, but this time with her father. And then strange things started happening. There would be plenty meat at the house, but Ibrahim would suddenly decide he wanted chicken. Ava’s mother yelled in vain that that was unnecessary. He replied that he simply needed to speak to Yusuf. Ava overheard the conversation and blushed. The mere mention of the butcher’s name flustered her.

It was as if Yusuf was not surprised by a visit from Ava’s father. Their meeting was ceremonial. The caretaker, who watched over Yusuf’s household, served a jug of buza,

a hopped drink made of wheat, a jug of wine, and some food – tail fat with honey. Ibrahim thanked her, and he and the butcher went on to talk about this and that. Ibrahim wondered whether Yusuf had any family left after his parents' departure. Yusuf told him that there were a few relatives, but that they lived in distant auls and that contact had essentially been lost.

"What family was your mother from?"

Yusuf named the family.

"Why don't you marry?" Ava's father asked, shifting the subject.

Yusuf could only counter such a direct question with a firm response that the woman destined to be his wife had not been born yet. Besides, it was too early to think about family life. He had to get on his feet first.

"Yes," Ibrahim agreed. "One should always be firm on his feet. That's hard to do in the city, as there are a hundred temptations there to knock a man off the righteous path. It's much simpler in the mountains: black is black, white is white."

"Isn't that the truth," Yusuf agreed.

"I once visited a respected gentleman in Derbent whose kunak room had mattresses with legs attached," Ibrahim continued. "People these days are spoiled."

"Yes," agreed Yusuf. "I've seen them. They say that all Russians sleep on those. How is that possible? I could see an adult doing it, but what if a child starts squirming, falls off, and breaks something?"

"People aren't afraid of anything. They always want to see something new. But why? It's all just excessive temptations."

And so time flew as they talked. Soon enough Ibrahim said goodbye and left Yusuf's home. That very evening he and Ava's mother had a long conversation. She listened silently, hands clasped, head shaking.

After a day, Ibrahim set off to the butcher's once more. He was gone for a quite a while, returning late and a bit too

merry. The next morning Ava learned from her younger brother that she was betrothed to the butcher.

Many years had passed, and one dark night, when both of them couldn't sleep, Yusuf asked Ava about the day when they had first met.

"Did you know right away that we would be together?" he asked.

"You really think very highly of yourself. I forgot about you the moment we parted."

"Strange. I had a feeling we would meet again." He paused, then asked: "So if your father didn't come by to arrange it, you wouldn't have married me?"

"I doubt it. I thought you were rude."

"I think you're wrong," smiled Yusuf. "If two people are destined to be together, one's attracted to the other, like a falling stone is to the earth. It'll hit the ground eventually, whether it wants to or not."

"I suppose so," Ava agreed. "Many have had eyes on you then. You could have picked any of them. But you waited for me."

"The world is a complicated thing. It's very hard to understand who is destined for whom, or if there is even such thing as being destined for one another. Some people are probably better off never meeting in the first place, but still, they meet, marry, have children..."

The spouses fell silent.

"Do you remember that woman, two people in line before me, the one who brought the goose?" Ava asked suddenly.

"No. Many women came by back then."

"Well, I remember her. People say that she had her eye on you, that I got in her way."

"That's just silly gossip. Go to sleep."

"They say that she wished bad things and curses upon our family and children."

Yusuf broke out in laughter.
“What nonsense!”

III

Yusuf and Ava had one child, a boy they named Illazar. He entered the world in the coldest of seasons – in December of 1868. The newborn watched his surroundings with the same stern gaze as his father.

The bris took place on the eighth day, in accordance with Moses's law. The circumcision could have been conducted at home, but Yusuf insisted that it happen at the synagogue.

Nearly everyone in the aul gathered for the ceremony. It wasn't every day that a shochet got his first born! The boy was laid on a wooden table, Yusuf read a prayer, and the Orthodox Jewish community gained yet another member.

At that moment, it started to snow. As if bearing blessings for the newborn, snow floated down in hefty flakes straight from seventh heaven – Jews believe that seven heavens stretch above our heads.

"It's a good sign, a very good sign," the old women whispered.

When Illazar turned eight, his father started taking him to the synagogue to teach him how to read and write.

As a general rule, the synagogue stood somewhere on high ground. The community did everything to equip it with everything necessary: a table, bookshelves, and an adobe furnace. The temple would be deserted during the day, as prayers would only be read in the morning and in the evening. The courtyard by the entrance, however, was a different matter. Men would gather there in their free time, standing or sitting in groups, puffing on their chibouks and waiting for the prayer.

Not all boys went to the synagogue. That required their parents' willingness, and only some were ready to cut five or ten kopecks from the daily budget in order to pay the tzadik or rabbi. However, the boys that did become students would get either a handful of millet or a couple of chureks - unleavened bread biscuits - every day. Apparently, the path towards education has always been through one's stomach.

In those distant times, the concept of an 'educated Jewish child' only included arithmetic, literacy and the memorization of broad passages from holy Hebrew texts.

Back then, the simple people of the auls were more pious than city folk. On the day preceding the new moon, everyone would recite the prayers of the Lunar Sabbath. Some fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. They would rise at dawn and pray, weeping for the fallen temple.

There could be a rumor that people in some aul or other stopped fasting and reading the Gemara and Halacha and the allegorical parables and legends. This was considered to be freethinking at its most flagrant. A minyan - a quorum of ten pious men - would then gather for prayer, to save their brothers in faith from the loss of their eternal souls.

Otherwise, life in the aul was monotonous. Mondays were no different from Thursdays, and the birth of a lamb in a neighbor's herd was news of cosmic proportions. I cannot under-

stand to this day how information spread through the mountain settlements at all. There were no phones or telegraphs. The mountainous portion of Dagestan didn't even have roads. Nevertheless, our ancestors say that whenever the Russian authorities had news important enough to gather a jamaat of Muslims or Jews from nearby communities, then the jamaat would gather and everyone would come, some by foot, some on horseback, traversing all hindrances that lay in their path. That's a historical fact.

Yusuf often said that Illazar would have made an excellent warrior. Rebbe Yusuf tried to instill essential values in his son: industry, diligence, problem solving, respect for his elders, attentiveness to his guests, and reliability in partnership.

All mountain people knew that Jews consider it a sacred duty to help their neighbor, be it with money or deeds. It was no coincidence that the Kumyk saying went: 'Ermeni bulan asha, dzhuvut bulan yasha' - 'Share your meal with an Armenian, live next door to a Jew.'

Illazar watched his father butcher animals from the very start. Having noticed the boy's interest, Yusuf shared with him all the intricacies of the profession. A point of pride for the butcher was his knife, whose giant blade always polished enough to reflect Illazar's face and the world around it. Proper sharpening was crucial, and Yusuf showed the boy on many occasions how to properly work the blade over the grindstone to make it thinner than paper. The father would carefully run the edge against his son's tender thumbnail, explaining how to properly gauge the blade's readiness.

The knives and grindstones used by butchers did not come cheap, but Yusuf never skimmed on them: even a tiny bit of dullness could condemn the butcher's soul to hell. When Illazar asked why that was, Yusuf would explain in detail.

According to him, a butcher's work was close to the most perilous in the world, even more dangerous than military service. The souls of animals, which the butcher freed from the burdens of their bodies, could haunt him for the rest of his life. To avoid this, one had to recite special prayers. The butcher was responsible for every small scratch, since every unnecessary wound, no matter how minute, meant pain and suffering, and unnecessary suffering is a sin. The catch was that while the eater of non-kosher meat bore this sin, it came back two-fold to the butcher, and, as the wise books said, he who guides another into sin is destined to go to hell and sleep there on a bed of a thousand needles.

Such stories had an effect on Illazar's impressionable imagination, and beasts from hell attacked him in his nightmares. But his father's direction did not go unheeded. Even as a child, the boy knew animal anatomy so well that he could determine a cut of meat, be it a shoulder or a loin, with his eyes closed, just by holding it in his hand.

When Illazar grew up, Yusuf sent his son to study with the rabbi in Derbent for a year. Upon picking the boy back up, the rabbi told the butcher that great talent lies hidden in Illazar, and that he would benefit from further education. But the old butcher simply shrugged, having remembered the moment when he asked to stay in Derbent for the same reason, and the confusion with which the messenger that brought him back to the aul looked at him.

It's necessary to note that the end of the 19th century brought unexpected misfortune to the Mountain Jews. Chemists had invented synthetic alizarin, which replaced the madder grown by Mountain Jew settlements in red dye production. A pood of the plant, having once cost 15 rubles, now sold for 30 kopecks. If that wasn't difficult enough, wineries and tobacco plantations were simultaneously hit by a three year drought, which then changed over to prolonged rainfall.

Many Mountain Jews ended up moving from the villages to the cities.

Discounting that, the butcher's business only kept improving and his fame in nearby settlements grew. Yusuf was highly regarded in the neighboring Temir-Khan-Shura, and had opened a butcher shop there.

For a good while, the butcher straddled both the city and his native aul, hesitating to make a permanent change. But his business grew, and there came a moment where he could no longer leave the shop in his assistants' hands for several days at a time without a tangible loss. At that point, Yusuf firmly decided to buy a home in Temir-Khan-Shura.

Before dawn's break on the day of departure, he hitched two bulls to a wagon steered by his son. As the head of the family, Yusuf would ride on horseback. He strapped on his dagger, the most significant accessory of a man's attire and a symbol of honor and prestige. Not worn during daily activities, a dagger was donned for journeys, be they business excursions or trips to the woods for lumber. (It was, however, forbidden to bring the weapon into a synagogue.) Gunpowder cases worn in chest pockets were also an essential part of a mountain Jew's garb, just as they were for a Cossack or a Muslim.

As Yusuf and Illazar had planned, the towers of Temir-Khan-Shura were in sight next evening. The father spurred his horse and rode ahead, leaving the cart and the slow bulls behind. Illazar watched him wave to the guard at the outpost and enter the city with ease, in a hurry to check on their new home.

The wagon, however, was greeted by a commanding "Stop!" from the guard at the gate. Illazar had learned a bit of Russian during his year in Derbent, and had been to the store in Temir-Khan-Shura multiple times. But it was one thing to travel light, and another to carry the entirety of your household belongings.

The guard had spotted easy prey. Illazar thought that he would be able to explain everything he needed to in Russian, but nearly threw his bag to the ground when the guard, who had been nodding all along, asked: “So what is the purpose of your trip to the city?” So Illazar began from the start. Ultimately, the guard was a chicken richer, and the wagon was in the city.

Illazar remembered his first visit to Temir-Khan-Shura well and the strong impression the city had made on him. This was not Derbent. Temir-- Khan-Shura was a fortress that gradually overgrew with residents and turned into a large settlement. Russians comprised the majority. One could even find Old Believers and Subbotniks, which had been banished by the government to the Caucasus since the 1840s. Subbotniks – Russian peasants who had accepted Judaism – were a unique phenomenon and were greeted warmly by my ancestors. Subbotniks and Mountain Jews intermarried, and a mixed community, which held a special place in Temir-Khan-Shura, had formed.

Illazar noticed boys on street corners selling newspapers – large sheets of paper, covered in ink. No matter how often he saw them, he couldn’t grasp their purpose: books that you can fold in half and hide in your shoe seemed like an evil temptation. Such a book would never stop a shah’s saber.

Illazar tried to remember which turns to take through the labyrinth of streets to get to their new home. He carefully watched his mother, who huddled next to him, seemingly startled by the hustle and din of the surroundings.

In a half hour, the wagon arrived in a neighborhood that looked exactly like their native aul. An identical hillside, with identical dwellings packed closely together like cells in a honeycomb. One of them became their home from now on.

The wagon finally entered the courtyard and stopped, and hired workers swiftly started helping to unload. Illazar

stepped off the wagon and helped his mother disembark. He took a deep breath – the long journey was finally over. He looked over the spacious courtyard and its garden. His father had built a wattle fence covered corral for cattle and a stable on one side, an adobe storage barn for household goods on the other. Otherwise, everything was the same as in their old home.

Next day, Yusuf hosted a celebration to bless the house. It was an entire ritual. Women and girls started arriving early in the morning. Many would go up to the flat roof of the house in groups, smear it with clods of clay they brought atop trays, then make room for the next party. Helpers stood at the bottom, treating the guests to vodka and wine. The howl of the zurna and the beat of the drum filled the courtyard, the girls and women clapping along, setting rhythm to their long, sad songs.

In the evening, Yusuf invited everyone who had helped him with construction for dinner. And thus, the family's move to Temir-Khan-Shura was complete.

Rebbe Yusuf's business grew quickly, and he had to hire several helpers in order to handle everything. People liked buying Rebbe Yusuf's meat – he had a true knack for attracting customers.

The city market was more than a place to exchange money for goods and groceries. Here, people would meet a multitude of friends and relatives. They would talk about news, make appointments, embark on lucrative ventures and discuss the general flow of community life.

There'd be a rumor that the Russian's Czar's troops would wage war against Persia, an instant wave of whispers sweeping the market aisles: "Help!" "Run for your life!" Everyone would rush to hoard salt, matches, and kerosene, and the price of milk would skyrocket. A day would pass, and the rumor would flip: Persia has asked Russia for eternal peace. The unlucky hoarders would rush back, asking for a refund.

Then, another rumor would explode, like gunpowder – that the venerable prince himself would visit Makhachkala from Saint Petersburg. Instantly, debates on what could be expected from this visit would erupt.

Mountain Jews gladly accepted allegiance to Russia, hoping that their times of suffering were over. Hoping for protection from the Russian army, many moved into the shelter of the newly-built fortresses: Temir-Khan-Shura (modern day Buynaksk), Petrovsk Port, otherwise known as Anzhi (modern day Makhachkala), Khasavyurt, Mozdok, Nalchik, Grozny. Gradually, these fortresses would turn into cities, where Jewish people would feel safer than they did in mountain villages, which would remain war-ridden for years to come.

Russian authorities appreciated the loyalty of their new subjects. Jews became guides, translators and liaisons. The Russian authorities were so benevolent toward the Mountain Jews that only a portion of the laws against European (Polish) Jews, passed after the division of Poland and the merge of its territories with the Russian Empire, applied to them. Why that was the case, I don't know – after all, Polish Jews were no enemies to Russia and helped the Russian army during Napoleon's invasion. I think the answer may lie within the 'oriental myth' – the romantic notion that everything in the East is different, even Jewish people.

It wasn't until 1886 that my ancestors were ordered to serve in the Russian army. We were used to carrying weapons and didn't fear military service, but that didn't stop our rights from being infringed upon in this case: Muslims, our neighbors and former rulers, were able to buy their way out of service for 250 rubles, a hefty sum at the time. We weren't allowed such luxury. Additionally, we were hit with a 'percentage norm': after 1887, we lost the ability to freely enroll in higher education establishments.

Nevertheless, many Mountain Jews went into the Russian military voluntarily, understanding that they didn't have any other allies in the Caucasian War. They endured lengthy fortress sieges along with the Russians, starving and showing great displays of bravery while repelling fierce attacks from Imam Shamil's troops.

Shamil's imprisonment meant that Mountain Jews would be free from oppressive Muslim taxes, strict conduct rules established for the 'infidels', and from Sharia law. They were even allowed to use their own courts for matters concerning family and religious issues. But what about the Pale of Settlement? The Russian Empire made no moves to abolish it until its very fall. As the Caucasus was outside of the Pale's boundaries, what right did the Mountain Jews have to live there? Moreover, did the Russians have to show them gratitude for their help in the Caucasian War?

Classifying us became a problem and a source of confusion for Russian bureaucrats: were we to be considered Jews, or highlanders? At first, they decided to leave us alone, particularly since Russia was then ruled by the liberal Czar Alexander II. He made the decision to let the Mountain Jews be, as 'those people have lived in their auls in the mountains of Caucasus for many centuries, and have enjoyed the same rights as the other highland peoples. The Jews work the soil and raise cattle, and it is therefore impossible to resettle them into regions designated for their residence (the Pale of Settlement).' Those were the officials' words. Therefore, not only were we allowed to live in the Caucasus, but also in the Kuban and Terek oblasts (but not beyond their bounds).

Alexander II was killed by the Populists in 1881 and was replaced by the Jew-hating Alexander III. Pogroms followed, and new rights-infringing laws were applied to the Pale of Settlement.

Danger loomed over my ancestors. Anticipating it, Jacob Ben Yitzhak Yitzhaki, the main rabbi of Derbent, wrote

A Brief History of the Mountain Jews in 1889 in order to present it to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He argued that there was a huge difference between Mountain Jews and Ashkenazi Jews, and that our ancestors had left their homeland before the birth of Christ and could not be held responsible for his crucifixion. Why, then, were they deprived of rights in the Christian Empire? Alas, Rebbe Jacob was unable to save his people from oppression and humiliation.

A decree was issued in 1892, ordering the eviction of all Jews without higher education, property and permanent resident registration from the Kuban and Terek oblasts. Many residents had settled there without bothering to officially register and remained, on paper, residents of other parts of the Russian Empire despite owning property in Kuban and Terek.

Though it was clarified within the decree that it did not apply to residents of the Caucasus, the Terek oblast authorities began evicting Mountain Jews. The order allowing us to freely trade in Cossack outposts didn't come until 1894.

Such news was always the subject of lively conversation on the bench in front of Yusuf's shop. Practically all traders knew that he was a founder of a hefty family enterprise. And he separated everything: the kosher stayed with the kosher, the non-kosher with the non-kosher.

Folks would seek counsel from the wise butcher more and more, whether it was about the threat of someone's son being conscripted or the benefits of purchasing a vineyard. He treated everyone like family, attentively listening to their queries. Perhaps people envied him, but, by the Creator... Like Rebbe Yusuf said, he had everything he needed: a sturdy house, a skillful housewife, a clever son, and kind neighbors.

The new location did involve more hassles, even if it seemed like everything would take care of itself at first. The minute business increased, treasury officials came in demanding all paperwork to be kept in Russian. They needed to be bribed, en-

tertained, and showered with gifts to the point that it sometimes seemed that that's where all the money was going.

As soon as he started to turn a profit, Yusuf dedicated part of the barn to butcher's duties. Nowadays, he would rarely do the butchering himself, having passed the duties on to Illazar, who had learned all intricacies of a shochet's trade by the age of twenty. Only one thing worried Rebbe Yusuf - it was time for his son to marry.

In those times, the destinies of unmarried men were in the hands of their parents. Those with means went to matchmakers. Otherwise, if pockets were empty or there weren't too many girls around, parents would seek out a bride themselves and then arrange the marriage with her parents.

Young men would have brides picked for them from the age of fifteen on. Girls could be married off as soon as they turned fourteen.

A fundamental tenet of Judaism states that marriage is not a consequence of love. It insists on the contrary – that true love is birthed out of marriage. This meant that future spouses did not necessarily have to know one another extensively before the wedding. The key task was to select a couple in a way that the young man and woman would be as compatible as possible.

Many have attributed a notorious lust for money to the Jewish people. However, one only needs to examine the institution of Jewish marriage to see that the bride's or groom's wealth is all the way in the tenth place on the list of priorities.

For a groom, the integrity of the bride and her family was the most important factor; for the bride – the groom's knowledge of the Torah. Wealthy Jewish families would often send matchmakers to faraway lands to search yeshivas – religious universities – for a young man that excelled in his studies, even if he didn't have two kopecks to rub together, then have a lavish wedding, beaming with pride over finding a “prestigious” groom for their daughter.

Girls were, of course, prevented from mingling with men in a number of ways, as custom, both religious and social, mandated that a young woman's first (and, ideally, last) man should be her husband. An analogous rule applied to men, whose wife was expected to be their first and last woman.

Selecting a couple that could become soul mates under such stringent conditions seems impossible. Therefore, matchmaking was as ancient a profession as craft and trade in the Jewish community, and a widespread and profitable one at that. The matchmaker was viewed as a guide of divine wisdom, as only she was deemed capable of arranging a fruitful marriage. Her duty was to not only introduce two young people, but to understand and fulfill His will - to join a boy and a girl or a man and a woman in a way that would create a perfect couple.

Such regard for matchmaking can be traced back to the Torah. It remained unchanged for millennia and will probably persist for just as long. Many ancient Hebrew texts postulate that it is impossible to create a successful marriage without the grace of the Almighty.

The Jewish people wrote these works without sparing words. One of note is the story of the Roman matron Claudia, who met the learned Rebbe Yose Ben-Halafta on her way to Alexandria. Rebbe Yose Ben-Halafta's piety was so renowned, that the matron, who thought herself to be quite wise, decided to test it. She invited him for a visit and asked:

"How many days did it take the Lord to create the universe?"

"Six," he answered, "for so is written in the Shemot."

"And what has He been doing since then?"

"He arranges marriages. This person will marry that, and so on."

"But I could do that," said the matron. "I have many slaves, whom I could pair up with very little effort."

Rebbe Yose stayed silent for a while, then spoke:

“You think arranging marriages is easy? For God, it’s as difficult as forcing the Red Sea to part.”

After Rebbe Yose left, the matron lined a thousand male slaves in front of a thousand female slaves, matched them up, and ordered them to marry. Ceremonies were conducted that very evening.

In the morning, the newlyweds started coming to the matron – a black eye here, a broken leg there. Two thousand people screamed: “I don’t want this woman” or “I can’t live with this man!”

The Roman matron sent for Rebbe Yose and told him.

“Your Torah is right, and what you told me, is true.”

“You see!” Rebbe Yose replied. “You thought that arranging marriages wasn’t difficult! Parting the red sea would have probably been easier.”

Rebbe Yusuf told this story to educate his neighbors, who, unable to mind their own business, continually asked why Illazar hasn’t married.

As to Illazar, the matching process amused him. Each matchmaker would start the conversation with ornate wishes of long life, and then, like a seasoned psychoanalyst of the coming century, a fact that couldn’t even cross the minds of the naïve villagers, would begin compiling the client’s psychological profile and try to determine his tastes: whether he prefers the sunrise or the sunset; whether he watches the sun or the moon more often; what girl is on his mind at that moment; womanly traits he likes, along the ones that irk him; whether he likes red hair, or locks as dark as tar and oil.

Each time, Illazar would eagerly describe his taste in women, making his wishes less feasible each time.

Occasionally, he would instantly create a dead end for the matchmaker:

“I want her father’s money to be easily noticeable.”

“We can find that.”

“But I want it to be noticeable with the naked eye.”

“How so?”

“She should be fat enough to not be able to fit through the door of our home.”

“If she can’t fit through the door, how will she come in?”

“Her father can hack a big enough hole in the wall.”

“Your father wouldn’t allow another man to do that.”

“Then how can I marry the daughter of someone who can’t win my father’s favor? I am a good son. If my father won’t allow him to hack a hole in our wall, then I can’t allow his daughter to fill the hole in my heart.”

The matchmaker would only shake her head and get as far away as possible from such a wise-ass.

Yusuf was burdened by the inability to find his son a wife. The houses of Illazar’s peers often chimed with children’s voices, while their house stood silent. Yusuf would sternly call his son, demanding the fulfillment of the ‘father’s right,’ according to which a son’s opinion with regard to his marriage was ignored, and repeat the question: “When?”

“I don’t know,” Illazar would shrug.

“Why not?”

“I’m not firm on my feet yet. Even an oak will yield to a strong wind if it has no soil around its roots. Who knows where my soil is?”

“Do you want your share of the business? If you finally marry, I will share it with you.”

“Alright,” Illazar agreed. “But what about the son of David needing to rise higher than David? I want to grow my business first, then marry.”

Illazar’s ability to dodge questions drove Rebbe Yusuf mad. But at the same time, he couldn’t deny that his son’s words made sense. Perhaps it would be better for him to take over his own business first.

Illazar himself did not know who he was looking for. He would look at girls – at the market, by the river, at others’

weddings – hoping to find his other half, but always came up empty.

As the Torah says: “And man will come together with a woman, and they will never come apart.” But the Torah is the Torah, and life is life – things often happen contrary to expectations. Illazar became more convinced of that every day.

If his parents would suggest that he marry a girl for whom he didn’t feel attraction, he would pretend to have too much work. When he liked the girl’s appearance, but his heart stayed silent, he would fall back on her family’s financial state, or on her brothers’ or father’s lack of piety. Yusuf would sigh and would wait for the next one.

Sometimes, they would go for three or four visits in a single week. Every time, Illazar would have to his formal *cherkeska* and look brave. He became tired of this game, feeling that the decision – choosing the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life – should be more organic and intimate.

And so they went to another wedding of one of Illazar’s peers. After the party, the father called his son into the *kunak* room.

“Illazar, did you see the girl that was serving *plov*? It seems like she could extend your life until your hair is gray.” The phrase meant to see a husband through old age and was a poetic expression that made the Dagestani poet Suleiman Stalski famous.

“And did you see the size of the wine jug she was carrying?” he would continue. “No less than twenty liters. A woman like that will always have a fire burning in the furnace.”

As far as virtues went, ability to work took one of the top spots on the list, as men in mountain auls rarely did housework. Women were responsible for tending to the home, which often involved hauling heavy water jugs from a spring that could be miles away.

“Well?” Yusuf would insist. “If you want, I’ll talk to her parents and she will marry you.”

“Baba, father,” Illazar would say. “I would like to see our stores open in Madzhalis. That’ll mean frequent travels, hiring vendors, buying carts to haul the meat. That’ll all need to be taken care of. Now is not the time to marry. When everything is settled, we can talk about a wedding.”

“But you’re already in your twenties! It’s time!” his mother would say, joining Yusuf’s plight. “Younger boys than you already have growing children. Otherwise, your father and I may not live to see our grandkids.”

“Father, you’ve told me since I was a child, that the most important thing is the business that gives us food and shelter. I always do as you say. Once I settle all business away from home and we are even more firmly grounded, then I will marry the worthiest of brides.”

Illazar was sly. He would never tell his parents that he didn’t like a girl. They wouldn’t understand. The tried and true principle of “endure first, fall in love after” didn’t resonate with him. Sometimes his mother would advise him to visit the fountain – Temir-Khan-Shura had one of those. The local youth gathered there, in the evening when women and girls would come by for water. Young men would camp out on the large stones arranged by the spring, and have long conversations, interrupted by jokes and bursts of laughter.

The fountain was the best matchmaker, not to mention a free one. Young girls would sneak glimpses of the dzhigits, who would return the favor. The girls would always preen before coming by the fountain. Eve’s daughters remain their foremother’s faithful children through the ages – always carrying themselves with allure and seduction.

If a girl couldn’t smile coyly, she would be a maiden for a while. It’s worth noting that professional matchmakers could

handle even the timid ones, but that usually cost the parents a pretty penny.

Ava would often tell Illazar:

“You understand that your father can’t step foot outside the house without being stopped and interrogated, and the first question is always ‘has your son married yet?’ You know how nervous your father gets.”

“Mama, marriage isn’t like shopping. If you buy a shoulder at the market and it’s too tough, it isn’t much of a problem. A wife is a different matter. As the Gemara says, how can two souls become one if they keep stinging one another?”

Ava would always concede such arguments. Who were women to bother arguing with men? Unlike the Ashkenazi, who had a special balcony for women, Mountain Jews wouldn’t even allow them inside the synagogue. The most pious ones would go and listen by the window, others wouldn’t go at all. Why go if they couldn’t go in? Ava was often amazed at her son’s wisdom. How did he know that souls tied to a loveless marriage stung one another? It was true that Ava married Yusuf for love, but that was rare – like finding a treasure. The mother would simply sigh and walk away.

Illazar knew his father’s weak point and unabashedly exploited it. Aside from marriage, a man’s most important attribute was social status, and it was not easily won in the Jewish community. Nobility may have had the luxury of idleness, but the small people had to work the whole time. When his son refused marriage for the sole reason of his work obligations forcing him to travel around the entirety of Dagestan – seeking new pastures, buying cattle, and ensuring that the meat was kosher – it seemed like a strong argument. The son was sacrificing his own happiness so that his parents could have peace, and Yusuf couldn’t keep that fact from tugging at his heart-strings. He would grab his pipe and puff away, having silent

arguments with himself. Illazar wouldn't have to worry about the wedding hupa quite yet.

IV

One day, Illazar and his parents were invited to a wedding. The daughter of Ava's distant relatives was marrying a man from the city, and some six hundred people gathered for the celebration.

Illazar sat at the main table with his father. The young man looked around at the unfamiliar faces at the table: ones with beards white as sheets of paper, ones with beards red, like fire, from henna, ones with beards black as charcoal. 'A Dagestani man carries three colors of time on him,' Illazar thought. Where would those colors lead him? He continued to listen to what the guests were saying.

The people at the table talked about the same problems that were being discussed thousands of years ago: why others don't like Jews, what needs to happen for people to come to their senses, and why Russian soldiers are better than Persian robbers.

The venerable master of the house raised his glass, stood up, and the fun began. The host gave toasts, and the guests ech-

oed back with more. Illazar sat and listened to what these people were saying. He could not deny the mastery of their presentation, but all of their words seemed insincere. The guests' speeches were flowery, loud and grandiose, but Illazar wanted one thing: for someone to note that despite the heat outside, the room was cool – that the builders were honest when they named their price and promised a glorious home. The builders did not deceive the master, and the master did not deceive the builders. There it was – harmony. Happiness in this world required so little.

The tables warped under the weight of dishes, musicians played without respite, and the people danced. Everyone seemed better than they were – kind, pleasant, friendly.

Suddenly the abrus – the celebration organizer – loudly shouted 'Goy shabash!', prompting the zurnas and drums to break out in song. The girls went into the yard and started moving to the beat of the melody. The men stopped eating and went to watch the dancers.

It seemed like every beautiful girl in the Caucasus was at this wedding. One came with a sash embroidered with silver handed down from her mother, another with beads of semi-precious stone, amber, coral or coins. Some wore large earrings of silver or gold, others put ornate henna patterns on their palms and put several rings on each finger.

Illazar noticed one of them right away – a simple girl who was dancing with a young man who had a crooked nose, the audience clapping at them. The girl threw her hands up, and something in Illazar's world changed, as if someone gun-butted him.

Men always notice one thing: some a slender figure, others a flexible, nimble body, others yet, a thick braid hidden in a silk sheath. Illazar noticed all of these at once and none separately.

He could not avert his gaze, as if he had known her for a long time. Unfamiliar feelings rocked his soul. When

the dancing stopped and the old people started leaving, Illazar remained sitting in this wonderful trance.

Once they were on their way home, Illazar tugged at Rebe Yusuf's sleeve.

"Father, did you see the girl in the red silk headscarf? She danced better than the lot of them."

"I don't recall. Why? Did you like her?"

"I don't know. I thought you might know who she is."

"We should ask your mother. Women always know one another."

Illazar's mother, who sat next to them, heard her son, looked at him in surprise, and promised to investigate. The next day, when women and girls came to the groom's house to help clean up after the wedding, Ava picked a moment to quietly approach the hostess:

"Osnat, your son's wedding was so lavish! And such a worthy bride! Congratulations!"

"Thank you, sister. Thank you all for coming, and thank you for the presents. The bride is a treasure. Now we wait. The Almighty has seen everything. If no one wished bad things upon us, then the Lord will give us a gift soon."

"Praise to the Creator, Osnat. You know how inescapable the evil eye is. Lock up the bride. After a half year, the Creator will let us know." As Jewish tradition dictated, a young woman could not even leave the house for six months after marrying. The sole purpose of this was to protect the future child from the evil eye.

"Osnat," Ava continued, "do you know the girl in the red silk headscarf, the one that was dancing so well yesterday? I have never seen her before. Who is she? What's her name? Whose family is she from?"

"The one in red?" Osnat tried to remember. "Yes, that's Du-hai. She's already fifteen – fit to be a bride. There's her mother fussing around. I can introduce you – they would be honored."

It was the eve of Saturday, and the entire family gathered at the large table. Illazar nervously lit the Shabbat candles. They would light up and go out right way, stifled by gusts of wind.

Rebbe Yusuf entered the room and looked at his son, smiling softly.

“Our people are just like these candles. Everyone keeps putting them out, but they always light up again.

“Yes,” Illazar replied. “You and I are like that too.”

“Very true,” the father replied. “I see that you are preoccupied with something.” Rebbe Yusuf looked inquisitively at his son.

“I don’t even know. Did I correctly interpret the signs sent to me by the Almighty?”

“What do you mean?”

“My heart.”

The father looked at his son:

“Do you want us to go to the parents of the girl you saw at the wedding?”

“I don’t know.”

“No, be confident.”

“I like her.”

“You liking her is very important. You can tear down a house, but you can’t build a temple without God’s will. Those who think that the world is only in their hands are fools. I will go meet her parents tomorrow.”

“What if I’m mistaken?”

“People think like that when they’re in love. ‘Blind love’ – it’s an expression. It comes out of nowhere and man is powerless against it.”

“Blind love? I don’t believe in that.”

“Whether you believe in it or not makes no difference. Everything in this world is predetermined. When your mother was betrothed to me, I didn’t know whether I love her or not.

But I trusted her father's choice. Then you were born. Now I know that Ava was destined for me. How could I have known that in advance?"

"Exactly, father. How can I tell destiny apart from temptation?"

"If you trust your heart, everything will be clear. For whatever reason, we dragged you to that wedding and, for whatever reason, you saw this particular girl. Perhaps the heavens are wiser than you and I. I give you my blessing. Marry her."

Illazar looked at his father with gratitude.

Before the wedding, it was customary to betroth the bride.

As with most things, the Mountain Jews combined eastern traditions with Caucasian customs in accordance to the Halakha. Everyone knew that young blood is hot and prone to making mistakes that entire families have to pay for. Therefore the elders helped choose the bride, as they would help reach a decision that would appease not only the young couple but both of their families. If a young man liked a girl, then he notified his father through a trusted friend – for a head of the family to discuss such issues with his son directly, without intermediaries, was considered shameful. The father would then send marriage brokers to the bride's parents.

The bride could also be asked for her consent, usually through one of her friends. A well-mannered young woman was expected to answer that she agrees with whatever her parents choose. Upon reaching the age of twenty, her consent was required.

Marriage discussions were conducted only between the heads of the families. Neither the mother, nor the other women in the household had any sway over the decision of the clan elder. After a hearty meal, the men would come to an agreement, determine the heft of the dowry, swear eternal faithfulness and declare, before witnesses, their intention to marry their children. After that, the bride and the groom

could continue living apart, sometimes in different auls or cities, not seeing one another until the wedding itself.

A month before the festivities the groom's father would give the bride's father a portion of the dowry, her family also supplying the necessities to provide their daughter with a wedding dress and other finery. Every city and aul had its own norms for the size of the dowry. Goods and food were given atop money. For instance, a dowry could consist of a cow, eighteen poods of wheat, three poods of rice, twenty chickens, three yards of silk and a white bed sheet. The groom's mother would give the bride a piece of her jewelry, in order to win her daughter-in-law's love and obedience.

The goods were gathered and the dowry paid to Duhai's father. The only thing left to do was for the couple to stand under the hupa.

Illazar and Duhai married in the summer. Half of Temir-Khan-Shura partied at their wedding, the city temporarily turning into one big table setting. Trees bent heavy with fruit and rivers overflowed, soaking the bride and groom's wedding garb. Wine glasses, emptied often as they were, never ran dry.

Right after the wedding, an old Jewish man read the couple's fortune. He predicted that Duhai would outlive the czar. For Illazar, he predicted loss of wealth and ardent love. The young couple was to happy to take heed to the words told to them by the wise man.

As custom dictates, the bride crossed the threshold – topped with a piece of iron to signify happiness – into Illazar's home and they commenced their life as husband and wife.

Nearly no one hassled them in their first month of communal life. Duhai was barely included in the housework, and Rebbe Yusuf handled his son's work for the time being, so that Illazar spent as much time as possible with his young wife. Duhai was happy, as her parents had hoped.

Illazar's mother approached her daughter in law with gentle trepidation. The newlyweds were given two rooms in the large home. Understanding how difficult leaving the nest and adjusting oneself to a new family can be, Ava kept her distance and refrained from criticism, hoping that the young couple would soon have children.

As passions gradually subsided, life returned to its flow. Illazar returned to his business, and Duhai started helping Ava around the home. One could see her in the courtyard from early morning on, delegating duties to the workers. It was not customary in the Jewish community for a young wife to take over her mother-in-law's home governance duties, but Ava did not object. She treated the girl as she would her own daughter, and was happy that Duhai put effort into marking the household flourish.

There was always something cooking on the hearth, matzah, called 'chureks' per Muslim custom, cooking in the oven.

Illazar followed his father's advice and, treating paper currency with distrust, always turned his capital into gold. In doing so, he became aware of his unexpected talent: using his teeth to spot forged coins. Like a sommelier trying to figure out a wine's bouquet, Illazar would gently bite the coin. If the metal gave way to the tooth, the gold was pure, and its color indicated its quality. The fact that Illazar mastered this elementary, yet very reliable, method scared the crooks and cheats that often sold precious metals, as the young butcher's neighbors started seeking his expertise. He would soon have clients – other traders of precious metals, who paid generously for his advice, giving it higher value than what Illazar was charging.

V

People that would have sought Rebbe Yusuf's counsel in the past now approached his son, Rebbe Illazar, with the same questions. He had become highly regarded and his advice was heeded – people said that the world itself rested on his word. There was, however, one luxury that Illazar wanted to be rid of, and that was the silence in his house, devoid of infant cries and children's laughter.

Contrary to other Jewish families that sported five, or even ten siblings, Illazar and Duhai did not have children. Neither the family business's success, nor the eight solid gold menorahs given to them at the wedding, nor the richly decorated scrolls inscribed with holy texts and placed at the head of their bed could help Duhai conceive.

When Duhai returned to public life after the requisite six months by attending a neighbors wedding, the neighborhood gossips kept remarking that the young woman hasn't gained even a bit of weight, some malevolently, others in pity.

Year after year Illazar and Duhai waited and hoped for God to show them kindness and give them a first born. At one point, Rebbe Yusuf was approached at the Synagogue by a few old men, who asked what Illazar would do with his gold if he had no one to read the Kaddish over him. Rebbe Yusuf was livid. Were it not for his vows, he would have torn out those blabbermouths' tongues. That evening, he summoned Illazar.

"For our people, children are the greatest treasure and source of happiness."

"Why even say that, Father?" Illazar snapped back. "Not everything is within our control."

"Exactly. I keep thinking how we have wronged the Creator, for Him to keep His grace from us. Do you think that I give gold coins to beggars on Yom Kippur on a whim while others think it's great charity to give copper? I constantly think about Him looking at us from above – about the actions that are rewarded, and ones for which we get punished." Rebbe Yusuf paused in thought, then continued. "Do you remember the flower that I once showed you in the highlands? The elders say it brings fertility. Ride into the mountains, gather it, and make a brew. Your wise mother knows what to do. A cup of red wine and the flowers. Let Duhai drink it. This remedy helped many childless couples at our old aul. Do as I tell you. If the Creator wills it, He will be kind to your wife. Do you understand?"

Illazar said nothing at first, then asked:

"Why did this happen to me, Father?"

"Listen, the more blame you lay on yourself, the more God will test you. Do as I say. Then, you can keep asking those questions."

Illazar saddled up his horse next morning and set off into the mountains. He returned that evening, and gave his mother the herbs he had gathered. She started brewing right away. Next morning, she called Duhai and put a clay pot in front of her.

“Drink.”

Duhai took a sip and recoiled.

“Drink, I tell you,” Ava insisted. “I need grandchildren. It’s a tried and true Remedy.” Duhai turned red.

Rebbe Yusuf sat in the next room and prayed. The first month passed, then another. Duhai’s figure remained unchanged.

It wasn’t long before Illazar’s other relatives joined the conversation about the problem that worried the entire family.

“What are you waiting for? Who will read your Kaddish? Your father has you. Who do you have? If a horse is limp, the rider finds another.”

“I don’t understand - what do you want from me?” Illazar would reply, angrily.

“Happiness. The law says: if the first wife is infertile, get a second one. Let her give birth! Remember what Sarah did for her Abraham! She turned to her handmaid Hagar, and Hagar conceived.”

Polygamy was not forbidden amongst Mountain Jews. Households could have two wives, sometimes even three. Wives would try to maintain peace in front of their husbands, though clashes would often occur when the husband was absent on business. Minor arguments could turn into major scandals, and scuffles, often gladly joined by neighboring women, some of whom considered participation to be a welcome duty, were not out of the question, and men would struggle to tear the adversaries apart. Jumping ahead, I should note that once my ancestors met the Ashkenazi and started studying in Vilno, the situation started to change. A firm ban instituted by Rebbe Jacob Yitzhaki in 1860 forced many Jews in Derbent and several other communities to move away from polygamy. The custom, however, did not completely disappear until Soviet rule.

At first, Illazar paid little mind to the notion of getting a second wife, either walking away silently or saying that he will pray for an heir whenever the topic came up.

"I don't need a child from another woman," he would say, struggling to mask his contempt. "I will pray to God. He must hear my prayers, and will show His grace."

"Listen, son, even the wise King Solomon had a hundred wives."

"I'm not King Solomon."

"And that's why you'll get by with just two. I already started looking. Don't undermine the institutions of our ancestors."

"Father, I chose Duhai myself. If that puts me at fault for some reason, then let God punish me. I will not forsake her."

"Do as you will."

After these conversations, Illazar would go to the market, lock himself in the shop and sit there for hours in silence. What could he do? As wise men had said, a man has but the power to make himself strong – weakness comes from circumstance.

Ava watched her son and worried. The rapidly aging mother told Illazar more than once to turn to medicine men, but trips to Persian healers also turned out to be in vain.

One day, Illazar happened to attend a family bris. After congratulating his cousin for the birth of an heir with slight envy, he sat at the table toward which the elders seemed to gravitate. Suddenly, he was approached by an old woman, who, judging by her age, must have witnessed the exodus from Egypt. She was surprised to see a young man surround himself with such aging company.

"And what are you doing here? Go and be merry. It isn't time for you to sit with us yet."

"Not in the mood for merriment, ma'am. Besides, I'm not even that young. Better off listening to what the old men have to say."

“You’re right. The elders do know a lot.”

“That may be true, though no advice they’ve offered me has helped even a bit.”

“What is this problem that no one can help you with?”

“I’ve lived with my wife for a long time now, but still no children. Who will read the Kaddish over me?”

“The Kaddish? Are you by chance Rebbe Yusuf’s son?”

“How did you know?” Illazar asked, surprised.

“Us old people – we live to listen. We may not have the strength to work, but there’s always enough health to talk and listen.”

“A lot of good that does...”

“Pray, and good will come. Misfortune happens because people don’t have faith. Listen to what people say. There’s a woman who lives in an aul far away, past Derbent, who cures all kinds of ailments. If you want to have children, go to her. Her name is Ida – easy to remember. She has a rule though: don’t bring her any money or gold. You can’t buy God’s grace, only the devil’s. People go to Ida as they are born – bearing only hope. Understand? If everything works out, then you can thank her. If it doesn’t, then it wasn’t meant to be. Just don’t offend her: she may be blind, but she sees straight into the soul. You only have one path: it’s either off a cliff, or to her.”

The celebration drew to an end. The young people danced, sang, rejoiced. Falling stars tore the night apart, everyone wishing for happiness.

Several days passed. No matter what Illazar would do, be it butcher a cow or get the shop’s books in order, he would have the old woman’s advice about Ida on his mind. Illazar even asked his acquaintances whether they had heard of this woman. To his surprise, many knew her, though few had met her.

“How could that be?” Illazar thought. “How could I have not heard of someone so important after all these years? Perhaps I’m not pure enough to know of this woman.”

The thought of going to Ida wouldn't leave, like a pesky horsefly. Illazar did not want to mention this to his wife, lest she think that he was displeased with her. He had to cherish that woman, considering how much she had on her shoulders. The old woman's predictions could be wrong, but what if the rumors about Ida were true? He would never forgive himself if he didn't try. He just had to come up with a compelling reason to go without his wife founding out. Duhai was wary of these things, and could easily spot a lie. What would he say, however? It was a far journey – two days there, two days back.

At one point, Illazar said to his wife:

"A client in Derbent told me that there are lush mountain pastures by the border with Azerbaijan that belong to a certain wealthy man. His son lives in Derbent, and I arranged to go take a look at the land. Perhaps we could buy it."

Duhai thought for a minute, then replied:

"Well, if you feel sure, then go. Where is it again? I think my father may have mentioned something along those lines. But, Illazar, people are saying that the roads are dangerous right now. There are bandits everywhere, and you're alone. Maybe it would be better to go with my brothers?"

"Oh, wife. People say all kinds of things. Here's the best brother I could ask for!" Illazar announced, showing her his rifle, which he had bought from an old man at the market a while back. Its wooden parts were adorned by silver plating.

Duhai recoiled in fear. Illazar liked to playfully frighten her.

"Women aren't supposed to look at guns, or they won't fire," she muttered. "My mother taught me that."

"So don't look. Don't worry about me. My horses are excellent."

The city had horse races twice a year for the high holidays and, indeed, Illazar's horse was always the victor.

"You know best."

As Illazar prepared his horse, strapped on his rifle and filled his cartridge belts with gunpowder, his thoughts stayed on Ida. Here he was, packing for a long journey like a fool, not even knowing whether she could help. Just recently neighbors spoke of three bandits attacking a lone horseman and cutting his throat.

Next morning, Illazar rose before the crack of dawn. Duhai made him some flatbread for the road and gave him two jugs: one filled with buza, the other with sour black wine, which he and his father made in huge quantities every fall.

Illazar reached Madzhalis, where Ida was rumored to live, in the afternoon. Not many people lived in the aul. All the men Illazar saw wore papakhas, burkas and cherkeskas decorated with cartridge belts, though it should be noted that he only saw two. One of them, a hunchbacked old man, stopped to examine the strange horseman.

"Where does the medicine woman live?" Illazar asked, following with "And may your home be blessed!"

"Blessings for your home as well," the old man replied. "You're looking for Ida, aren't you?"

Illazar nodded.

"Keep going, then take a right. You'll find her home beyond the large meadow.

Illazar spurred his horse and rode forth. He spotted the house from afar, nestled in the hillside. The door was open, as was the norm among mountain people, and Illazar entered.

"Peace to this home," Illazar announced loudly.

No one replied.

"Are the masters here?"

There was nothing but silence. As Illazar turned his back to leave, he heard a voice:

"Where are you going?"

Illazar turned around. The voice came from beyond the silk curtain that shielded the passage into the next room. Il-

lazar crouched down, barely fitting through the narrow space, and found himself in small room. The walls were completely covered with bundles of mountain herms. At the opposite end of the room stood an old chest, which seemed to be the only item of value in the home.

“Who are you?”

“Illazar, son of Yusuf.”

“Did you bring money?”

“I did not.”

“Then tell me why you came. You’re young and healthy – I hear it in your voice. What else do you need?”

“My wife... We’ve been together for many years, but she’s infertile.”

“Who found the wife? Your father?”

“No, myself. I looked for a long time, before I found her!”

Illazar told Ida how he met Duhai, how he first spotted her at the wedding, how nervous and excited he was before meeting her, how miserable the fact that they couldn’t have children had made him.

Ida listened without interruption, then took his hand and told him:

“I see that you live in a large stone house. I see a garden, a kitchen, an adobe barn...”

Illazar shuddered. Ida was describing everything accurately. How could this be? The woman was blind and had never been at his home.

Ida smirked, as if she heard everything that Illazar was thinking.

“Don’t be surprised. My words come not from here,” she said, pointing at her head, “but from here.” She pointed at her heart. “There’s an illness, and there’s a cure. I’ll tell you what to do. Tear down your old barn. You don’t need it. Break its walls down into dust. You will find nails in the walls. Gather each and every one and throw them into the sea. You’ll then

be rid of your misfortune. But not a word to anyone - not even your wife. This burden is yours alone to bear. Understood?"

Illazar listened, not knowing what to say, and simply nodded.

"If you do everything exactly like I said, you will have a child. Now go! There is nothing more for you to do here."

"Tell me the cause! Who did this?"

"Someone gave you the evil eye. There's your reason."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Don't even think about that right now! Once you do everything, you will have a child. Then you can repay me."

Illazar left, forgetting to even say good bye. He got on his horse and rode back.

How could she know all this? And her eyes, which seemed to look to the left and a bit above his head. He had encountered clairvoyants and sibyls before, but none like this.

He returned home on the second day, when it was already dark. Duhai knew of his return, as if Ida whispered to her from afar. She greeted him at the door and led him to the hearth.

"How was the trip? Did you buy what you wanted?"

"No, we couldn't agree on a price. But I'm not disappointed: the pasture turned out to be bad. No grass, only rumors. As always..."

Illazar ate quickly, climbed to the roof, wrapped himself in a burka and fell into a deep sleep.

The morning after, while others slept, Illazar rose and went to the barn. 'How could she know about the barn?' he thought again. He went to the market, where he hired laborers to tear down the barn, then returned to his shop to check on business.

When Illazar returned home, Duhai flooded him with questions:

"Why did you bring people here?"

"I want to tear down the barn in the courtyard. We don't need it!"

“What do you mean, we don’t need it?”

Ava came out.

“What’s the commotion?”

Duhai turned to her:

“Illazar decided to destroy the barn.”

“God the Creator! What did the barn ever do to you?”

“He hasn’t been the same since morning!” Duhai added.

“As a matter of fact, he wasn’t any better last night, when he returned.”

Illazar just shrugged everything off and went to the barn.

“Reduce everything to dust, you hear?” he ordered the laborers. “Break down every last stone and pulverize the clay. But don’t throw anything away.”

The laborers nodded, spit on their hands, and commenced work. The walls started creaking under the blows of the hammers. Then Yusuf appeared in the doorway.

“What are you doing?” he asked his son. “It was a perfectly good barn!”

“I know what I’m doing!”

Yusuf was dumbfounded. He had never seen his son like this.

“I built this barn. What’s wrong with it?”

“Save us, Creator!” Ava joined in.

“I know what I’m doing!” Illazar burst out. “Leave me be, all of you. I’ll deal with it myself. Go! Just... Father.... And you, Mother... I...” he started stuttering. “This is very important. I can’t explain.”

“Oh, go away,” Yusuf snapped at the gasping women, who instantly grew silent.

“Come into the house,” the old butcher commanded.

Illazar duly obeyed.

“Those silly women understand nothing,” Yusuf began as they entered the kunak room. “Why are you destroying the barn? Can you at least tell me?”

“I want to build another. A bigger one.”

Yusuf paused, then nodded.

“Well, in that case, do as you want.”

Illazar went into the garden. A fog of dust shrouded the yard, the workers' figures resembling ghosts. The hustle, bustle and quarreling continued till evening.

Illazar told the workers to sleep on the roof. He woke them in the morning and the work resumed. By noon, all that was left of the barn was a clay foundation. The workers rhythmically pounded the clay with their hammers, turning it to dust.

What if Ida was right, and everything would happen as she had told him? The yellow-brown dust pile grew larger and larger at the worker's feet. In it, Illazar began finding rusty nails. They were everywhere – like spines on a hedgehog. Illazar ordered the workers to gather every last one of them into a sack he had prepared.

Once again, Illazar recounted Ida's words. She was right. How could she have known about the nails, and how could that be in any way connected to the birth of their child? Besides, how did nails make it into the walls of an adobe structure, which should have only contained clay, sand and finely ground straw?

“Who did this?” he asked loudly.

“Don't know about the nails, but the barn was built by me,” a voice said from above.

Illazar heard his father's laughter. Rebbe Yusuf stood behind him, hiding behind the leaves of a miniature pear tree.

“It's always nice to talk to a wise man. Unfortunately, the only wise man in my house is you. I heard your grumbling. I have no idea why you have such a problem with nails.”

The father reached to grab one of the, but Illazar pushed his hand aside.

“Father, don't!”

“What's with you?”

“Can you tell me where these nails came from?”

“I don’t know! The workers built it. They’re the ones who brought and mixed the clay. If it makes you feel better, you had nothing to do with it. The nails aren’t your sin.”

“Then whose is it? I prayed at the synagogue every day, and there were nails in my barn anyway! Why did I pray then, if my words didn’t do anything?”

“And yet you have hope that even one of your thousand words reached Him,” the father said, pointing at the sky.

“Father, I only seek simple human happiness. I want to be useful here, not there,” Illazar said, pointing upward. “And I understand nothing.”

“But I understand you, now, and the cause for your insanity,” Rebbe Yusuf grumbled. “To think – nails. The whole world is supported by nails. Buildings would collapse without them. And you’re scared of them as if they were wolves.”

Having said that, Yusuf went back into the home.

The sun rolled toward the horizon. Illazar was left alone, the workers having left after collecting their payment. The women had left too, no longer curious what became of the barn. Illazar took the sack and resumed sifting through the heaps of clay dust.

The rusty nails turned out to be plentiful. When Illazar was confident that he had gathered them all, he took the sack into the barn, where the wagon stood, and hid it under the hay.

He then returned to his business at the shop. After a hefty supper, he went right to sleep, as if he wanted to find new truth in his slumber.

The muezzin called the faithful to prayer, serving the purpose of alarm clocks unknown to my ancestors. Illazar leapt up. In the kitchen, Duhai was already clanking pots and pans around and sweeping ashes out of the furnace. It was considered a bad omen to clean them out at night.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Illazar shouted.

“Why would I wake you?”

“Oh, wife! If you only knew...”

“If I knew, I’d answer, but you aren’t saying anything.”

Illazar waved her words off. There wasn’t much time.

“Where are you going?” Duhai asked, puzzled.

“I need to buy new stones for the butcher.”

“He has hands. Can’t he do it himself?”

“Obviously he can’t, since I’m going. Don’t you know that I have to check on everyone? If I don’t, who knows what they’ll do. I’ll be back in a day.” Illazar hurried out of the kitchen.

There was no one in the yard yet. Gyaur, the bay stallion, neighed anxiously, as if sensing his master’s concern. Illazar patted him on the snout. The horse was the soul of the mountain man. He saddled up, strapped on the sack of nails, and rode out of the gate.

In those years, fishing was the main source of income for Caspian residents. The sea was rich with sturgeon and she-maya. The catch was salted, smoked and shipped out for sale in distant auls and cities.

The sea also provided forbidden gifts – contraband. Dark, quiet nights provided welcome refuge, obscuring the contrabandists’ feluccas and sailboats. Dozens of people would run up to docked ships and begin unloading. Hoots, yells and cryptic speech would echo from the docks, aimed at scaring off unwanted guests. Dzhigits, who at some point traded horseback robbery for perilous contraband trade, carried foreign goods ashore. Next morning, the smuggled goods that didn’t pass customs – mostly exotic spirits, rare fabric and expensive jewelry – would appear at the bazaars of Port-Petrovsk, Madzalis and Derbent.

Illazar often bought contraband from the fishermen, and knew the key players in the trade. He once met one by the name of Gasan, who sold hard to find foreign shawls and Portuguese wines.

Illazar appeared on the shore at dusk, spotting Gasan's stocky figure from afar, his shaved head gleaming in the rays of the setting sun, his arms spread in an offer of a friendly embrace.

"Look who it is! Illazar – I hope your family is healthy for a thousand years. What brings you here? It's almost night-fall – prayer time for both Muslims and Jews.

"You don't seem too worried about praying."

"We have work. The nightly catch is coming in," Gasan replied, pointing at a bottle of rum lying on the shore. "If you're looking for fish, you should have told my son. I would have sent some."

"I'm not looking for fish. I need a boat. I'd like to go out to sea."

"This late? Not going to happen. We just arrived and need to dry our nets. We can take you with us tomorrow."

"No, I need one now," Illazar said impatiently, his voice desperate and pleading. "If you don't help, I'll find someone else who will."

"Understood," replied the smuggler, meekly glancing at the boat that he had already dragged ashore. "Fine. You'll go out to sea. Let me get my son – he'll come with you."

"No, I'll go alone. I don't even need the sail – just the oars." Illazar looked over the water. "I'll go out and be right back. Just don't ask me any questions."

"If you have contraband lined up, it's your business. But you won't find anything here. All the ships have left.

"Do as I ask," Illazar interrupted.

Gasan, intrigued, scratched his shaved head.

"You know best."

He exchanged a few words with his comrades, headed toward the boat, and pushed it into the water. The wooden sides seemed to reach out toward Illazar like a pair of clasped hands, ready to grab him. Gasan untied the rope and Illazar jumped in, firmly holding the sack of nails.

Illazar took the oars and began to row, shabbily, only hitting stride on his second or third try. The water's measured splashing distracted him. Gasan saw the boat off with a suspicious gaze, then quietly spit to the side and left.

When the shore disappeared from sight, Illazar threw down the oars and looked around. Water foamed as far as the eye could see, black under the rays of the setting sun.

Illazar shakily stood up, afraid of falling overboard. He was not a good swimmer. He grabbed the sack, sung a prayer, and threw it into the sea. The mystified butcher watched as rings echoed across the water's surface, then grabbed the oars again and rowed to shore, away from this cursed spot, toward hope and the child to be. Right then, rain crashed onto him in a wall-like downpour.

It was nearly morning when Illazar arrived home, soaked and shivering. He could see Duhai's silhouette from afar, at the gate. She stood on the road, knowing that her husband would return any moment. Illazar wondered once again how she could have known this.

"Back already?" she asked, as if nothing had happened. "I'll bring you some dry clothes. Hopefully you won't catch a cold. Do you want me to pour you some water?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll do it myself."

Illazar struggled with the desire to tell Duhai everything, only to be reminded of Ida's words: 'Don't you dare tell anyone, or it will all be in vain.'

Doubt tugged at Illazar's soul. He ate silently, then glanced at the empty space where the barn used to stand not too long ago and felt faint. Chalking it up to exhaustion, he fell asleep without explaining anything to the rest of the household.

Ida appeared in his dream, and, once again, reminded him: "Most importantly, don't tell anyone anything."

The next morning, Ava suddenly fell ill. The old woman fell in the kitchen and couldn't get up. They called a doctor,

who calmly explained that it was a mild seizure, and that that it will pass with time and proper care.

Illazar was torn between the shops and caring for his mother, forgetting about Ida and her predictions. Duhai helped as much as she could, running the household and looking after the sick woman. Two and a half months passed.

One day, it occurred to Illazar that something had changed in his wife's appearance and demeanor – he just couldn't understand what. Upon thinking about it, he realized: Duhai had trouble getting out of bed in the morning, stopped eating, and moved around with caution. A scary thought crossed Illazar's mind: that Ida's advice was for naught. That a curse has descended upon his family in full force. First his mother fell ill, now Duhai...

When the couple was alone, Illazar asked his wife, concerned:

"What's with you? Should I call a doctor?"

"I don't need a doctor."

"But you've changed – I can see it. You look unwell. You're hiding something from me. Are you in pain?"

"I'm not in pain."

"Then why do you walk around like that?"

"I was afraid to say anything. Too early, I thought. I think that the Lord has heard our prayers! I'm pregnant."

"What?" Illazar replied, taken aback.

"Seems like it. I can feel another soul within me."

The baffled husband didn't know whether to cry or dance with joy. He had been waiting for this for all the years the couple has been married.

VI

Illazar strictly forbade Duhai to do any housework. Ava, who quickly recovered upon hearing that grandchildren were on the way, resumed running the household. The daughter in law wasn't even allowed in the yard – the evil eye remained a constant threat. The neighbors were told that Illazar sent Duhai to visit her relatives, after they had requested her presence.

Illazar didn't have a minute to spare during the next seven months. Even at night, he would jump up from sleep and lean over Duhai's belly to feel whether the child is moving. He would visit the synagogue and pray several times a day. The old men at the temple were amazed by such exemplary piety.

Commotion overtook the home as the birth drew closer. The family invited a momoy – a midwife. If anyone could ensure a successful birth, it was a momoy. Every possible thing was done to alleviate Duhai's suffering during labor. The rabbi's students were invited to play the shofar and read

psalms. A boy was sent to the cemetery for a clump of earth from a grave, which was mixed with water and given to Duhai to drink. This was done to increase the likelihood of the baby being a boy. Illazar would surely reward the momoy generously for an heir.

A girl was born, however. This happened in 1897. The daughter was named Melke, which meant “queen.”

After a few days, neighbors put up several tables in Rebbe Yusuf’s yard and women started cooking food without respite. Illazar gave all his workers three days off and paid each of them a ten-kopec bonus.

The celebration had begun!

The Mountain Jews drank, sang and fired their rifles into the sky. The earth quaked from their dances. The long row of tables grew beyond the bounds of the courtyard, standing in the way of passers-by. Illazar’s happiness was left unnoticed by no one.

Rebbe Yusuf’s neighbor, the hunchbacked Yitzhak, who always rode a donkey, shouted loudest of all:

“Why do you need candles in your home, Yusuf? Give them to me!”

“Why would I give them to you?”

“You don’t need them. Who needs candles when you have the bright light that your granddaughter brought you?”

Rebbe Yusuf would only smile happily.

Illazar awoke early on the eighth day after the celebration. ‘What day is it?’ he asked himself, looking out of the window. ‘Everything passes, including happiness,’ he thought. ‘Holidays are always followed by weekdays.’ Once Illazar counted the days during which his shops had been closed, he shook his head and told his workers to roll up their sleeves. People regained their memory, their faces once again concerned with daily affairs.

Illazar started preparing for a trip.

“Where are you off to?” Duhai asked.

“Business, in Madzhalis,” Illazar replied tenderly.

Illazar hurried to Ida’s. If rumors of his great joy reached her before he did, she could have been deeply offended. It was wrong not to reward the one responsible for such a miracle.

Right before he reached Ida’s aul, he saw a black crane in the sky – a good sign. Illazar knocked on the familiar door and entered the room where he was a year ago.

“Is that you?” a voice said.

Ida walked out holding a steaming plate of lamb.

“I made it especially for you.”

“How did you know? I didn’t know until today that I was going to come.”

“I always know when people come to me with good intentions. Well, sit.” Ida swiftly tossed him a pillow – she had to have seen him. “Tell me about the child.”

“Who told you?” Illazar could not believe his ears.

Ida broke out in laughter.

“The birds. I don’t need people to give me news. Walk outside, listen closely, and you’ll know everything that’s going on in the world.”

“May your days with us increase a hundred-fold!” Illazar fell to his knees and started kissing the tips of Ida’s felt shoes.

“Enough. Get up. I’m a blind woman, not a saint. Tell me what you named the girl. Is she healthy? I do feel that everything’s well!”

“Because of your prayers, Ida.”

“So the birds didn’t lie. Two weeks ago, I walked out into the yard and they were singing ‘Illazar is going to have a daughter.’ So what’s the name?”

“Melke!”

“Ah! May she be blessed fourfold! I’m happy for you. God looks out for you.”

Ida smiled, lit the holiday menorah that stood in the wall niche, and whispered a prayer.

“You little one has a special destiny.”

“I’m ready to sacrifice everything for that to be true,” said Illazar.

“What one receives depends on their faith.”

“Then I have received what I want.”

“Don’t rush to say that. Life is long... There’s still time for you to want more things.”

“You’re right, Ida.”

Illazar stood up. The butcher, who had seen much in his time and from whom one would be pressed to get even a single tear, thanked the blind woman, gave her ten gold coins and promised that two cows will be delivered to her.

Illazar crossed over the threshold of his home, and everything in the world snapped into place. He now knew whom he lived for.

In those years, death frequently took children in the Caucasus. Even a common cold could turn into a serious problem. Melke’s parents feared such misfortune, and doted on their little one day in, day out, ceaselessly watching how she ate and slept. They were so worried about drafts that all windows in the room where Melke stayed were sealed. Yusuf’s unwavering calm was the only thing that maintained a semblance of sanity in the child’s treatment. The grandfather wouldn’t allow the little one to be wrapped in ten garments, and insisted on airing out the child’s room. The father was thrilled and praised the Almighty for the happiness that He had bestowed upon his kin.

Growing up, Melke began to understand how her parents live and communicate among themselves and with others. The girl spent all her time with her mother. She saw how she handled the housework and how she delegated duties among

the helpers. Melke naïvely mimicked her mother, as a child would. The girl was growing up to be decisive, strong-willed, and refused to accept failure.

When Melke turned seven, Duhai declared that he daughter must learn to read and write. Rebbe Illazar agreed with this, and hired the best tutor he could find for Melke. Watching his daughter learn to read, syllable by syllable, Illazar contemplated the future that awaited her. A day would come when Melke's marriage would be arranged, when she would marry and find herself in another home. Such ruminations put a damper on the father's mood.

A thought entered Illazar's mind – one that even he found seditious at first. He decided to break the century-old custom of the Mountain Jews: he wouldn't give away his daughter, but bring the husband to her!

This was unheard of, but who could say that it could not be done? There were cases where Jewish families would marry a little boy to either a widow or a grown woman from a poor family, in order to gain free labor – no one was upset by that. Why not take in a poor young man, better yet – an orphan (then there'd be no risk of upsetting his parents), into Illazar's wealthy home and marry him to Melke? Then his daughter would continue to live in her own home, where her loving parents would always be there to support her.

As soon as matchmakers started making their visits to Illazar's home, this idea would occur to him more and more often. He kept telling them that it's too early to talk about his daughter's marriage. First he had to turn down the neighbors, whose sons were growing up, then kunaks from distant auls picked up the relay stick. They would come to Rebbe Illazar from far away, always using the buying and selling of meat as a conversation starter. They were politely, but firmly refused.

Illazar was impossible to please. He would examine a potential groom and declare his verdict: 'His shoulders are at

an angle. He won't love our daughter.' or 'His eyes stick out. He will look at things too much, and could even be too boastful.' or "The tip of his nose sticks out – that shows a tendency for laziness. His wife will be hungry." Listening to such response, Melke was learning to turn suitors away on her own.

Once, at a wedding, when his acquaintances brought up the subject of Melke's betrothal yet again, Illazar curtly announced:

"I will marry my daughter to a man that will come to live in my home! No exceptions."

His companions sat with mouths agape. This was unheard of! No one has done such a thing before Illazar. For two days, the community was overtaken by murmurs. "Illazar decided to defy the legacy of our ancestors... Illazar does what he wants..." But in a few days, everyone calmed down. Let him do what he wants – it's his daughter and arguing would be fruitless. Regardless, everyone assumed that it would be impossible to find a husband under these conditions.

Meanwhile, Yusuf turned fifty-five. In the morning, his wife decided to cook him something special. She got up, as usual, cleaned up the cauldron, and started mixing dough. Suddenly, she saw a shadow scurry across the house from the corner of her eye. Ava called for her daughter in law – maybe someone broke in? While Duhai ran to her, Ava grasped her chest, limped toward a wall, and fell down next to a stack of pillows.

That's where Duhai found her. It looked as if Ava was fast asleep. And that's when Melke had her first encounter with death.

The home was overtaken by yelling, howling, and tears. They ran to the synagogue for a stretcher and called Illazar back from the market. The rabbi came by an hour later. Illazar read the Kaddish with a dark face. They laid poor Ava on the floor, covered her with a black shroud, and surrounded her with candles. By evening, the entire block's residents were

in the courtyard. People ceaselessly read the psalms of David, the women wept. Next day, the deceased was taken to the cemetery.

As they headed for the graveyard, a red-haired dog ran out toward them. Rebbe Yusuf instructed to give it meat and to let it go in peace. The mountain people believed that the soul of the deceased moves into a dog for the first three days. It was like a purgatory of sorts, which a pure soul endures peacefully, before leaving the temporary shelter in due time. Yusuf sighed bitterly as he watched the dog run into the distance.

Arriving home, he notices a dried clump of dough in the kitchen, which Ava was going to use to bake him a pie. Yusuf watched it, tears streaming out of his eyes.

Thus Ava's story came to an end.

VII

One day Illazar was approached at the market by Rebbe Yitzhak – the same man who rejected all other forms of transport aside from his donkey. Illazar had already asked him several times for help with finding a new shochet who would work in distant auls.

Illazar's chain of shops gradually expanded, with stores from Temir-Khan-Shura to Madzhalis, and he needed another butcher. Ordinarily, Illazar would do the search himself, but the store that Illazar decided to open would be in a place where Illazar knew no one. Conversely, Rebbe Yitzhak, who had been born in those lands, was familiar with everybody.

Now, Rebbe Yitzhak told Rebbe Illazar that, in order to find a new shochet, they should turn to the rabbi there – Rebbe Ifraim, a respected man.

Illazar listened to his advice, stroking his beard.

"Fine," he said. "I don't think we should delay. Take me to the Rabbi, and let's finish this."

"Keep in mind that you'll owe me if I do this."

"I agree. What will be my debt?"

"One percent of the income from three of your stores for a week."

"Oh? Do you want to bankrupt me?"

"Do you want to leave me without dinner tomorrow? What's worse?"

"Your sly ways will drive me insane."

The two men sealed the deal with a handshake.

"Why do I not know this rabbi?" Illazar asked, as he and Yitzhak returned home from a day at the market.

"Probably because he's young. He is only twenty eight."

"What kind of kin is he from?"

"Good kin. The father is respectable. Although God did not give him many children: only two sons, though that's better than daughters."

Rebbe Illazar frowned, and Yitzhak fell silent.

"Forgive me, Rebbe Illazar," he said after a pause. "I spoke out of line. I'm getting old."

"Fine. What else?"

"Nothing else. His name's Avroom. He raised good sons. The older, Ifraim, also became a rabbi like I said. The younger one... Well - if you don't object, I'll tell you the story from the beginning."

"What? Is there something to tell?"

"Oh yes!" the neighbor replied, rolling his eyes.

Yitzhak did, indeed have a story to share. The parents of the brothers – the older Ifraim and the younger Hezgie – decided to embark on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to Jerusalem. I already wrote that from the latter half of the 19th century, it was as if something happened to our Jews: they were consumed by ideas. Some strange dream rushed them forward – the dream to find their lost home, as if the one they had was never truly a home for them. They dreamt of return-

ing to Palestine. The sad fact was, however, that many went to Palestine chasing this dream and vanished without a trace. In those years, the faraway journey – on foot, by wagon or by sea, on a sailboat or on one of the new, outlandish steamships – was quite dangerous. There was intolerance toward Jews, wars, famine and, finally, scariest of all, road bandits, who sat and waited to nab a defenseless traveler with their filthy paws.

Nevertheless, aware of these dangers, the elder parents couldn't resist the desire to set foot on their lost homeland.

They left their older son with nothing but an order to care for his younger brother. They left their younger son with nothing but a request to always obey his older brother.

"May the earth that you walk upon guard you, and may your deeds be abundant and fruitful a thousand-fold."

What else could an old father tell his son while leaving him for an indeterminate amount of time?

"The journey is so far and dangerous..." Ifraim said.

"I understand, but you know what, son? The thought that I'm going towards our lost homeland will keep me warm. Maybe you'll understand me when you're older, and you feel a peculiar longing around here." The old man pointed his calloused finger at his chest.

"When you get to this Palestine, I beg you, send word through whatever means possible. Whatever happens, just let me know," the older son begged his father.

Avroom went out into the yard, the brothers following, each grabbing a giant bale. A wagon waited beyond the gate, two bulls harnessed to it – one black, one white.

Giant wooden wheels with no springs, as heavy as mill-stones, creaked and went on their way. The parents didn't turn back once. The brothers stood on the road, looking ahead, until the cloud of dust consumed the outline of the wagon and the old people. When the cloud dispersed, the wagon and their parents dissolved with it, as if they had never existed.

The two sons simultaneously became grass orphans. On one hand, their parents were alive, on the other, that fact may as well have been proverbial. Who knew what lay ahead?

They only hoped, and hope gave them strength to live. By some wonder, short notes came in from the desperate old souls for the first six months. This or that pilgrim would knock on the door of the orphaned brothers' home, and, after blessing the dwelling, would pass a greeting or other news to Ifraim and Hezgie from their parents, whom they passed on the way. These scant communications let the brothers know what was happening with their parents. They had reached Baku, then the Persian border, crossed the bounds of the Ottoman Empire and had reached the foggy Bosphorus. Finally, they saw the minarets of Istanbul.

Young Hezgie would imagine a dusty road, struggling to discern two hunched figures atop a wagon. This was all in vain. Darkness would consume everything.

After the news that the parents boarded a ship headed for Palestine, the updates stopped. Ifraim futilely interrogated the pilgrims that passed through the aul: no one had heard of Avroom and Nehe, their parents, and just shook their heads.

Ifraim took the place of Hezgie's father. The brothers lived on a rabbi's humble salary. Young Hezgie helped at the synagogue – at weddings, funerals, prayer services for the deceased, reading of the Kaddish. As he did so, he developed more and more of an inclination toward learning and an interest for the Torah. Hezgie never raised his voice, as if afraid to offend, and connected everything, be it a joy or a burden, to the will of the Heavens, saying: "That means it must be so."

And so they lived, until word of the brothers reached Il-lazar's keen ears. Melke's father heard hints of a melody in young Hezgie's fate, one in which the man's voice didn't have the leading part, but an accompanying one. The melody

was magic for the father's ears. Could this been a true kinship of two different souls – the proud, bratty Melke and the quiet Hezgie?

"Has the young man ever had to draw his dagger?" Illazar asked the neighbor, instantly dismissing his thought. It didn't matter. Hezgie would live in his home, and no one would dare harm him.

"He'll have to leave and go work somewhere any day now," the neighbor's raspy voice continued. "And what else is there for him to do? He can't live on community charity forever. Ifraim got married. Soon the parental home is going to become too crowded for the two brothers. And there isn't much money to be made being a rabbi in an aul. Ifraim will be lucky if he can support his wife and kids."

"What?" Illazar abruptly interrupted. "The guy's leaving home? When?"

Illazar did not yet know why it happened, but his inner eye saw the footprints of his descendants emerge through a cloud of dust kicked up by the feet of God's servants. The footprints led into the future, splitting into numerous paths.

"I would like to meet Hezgie," Illazar said hollowly. "I may have work for him. How old is he?"

"Twenty, already."

"Twenty... A grown man. And still hasn't married?"

"No. Who's he going to get matched to? His empty pockets are his only property. Besides, he lives a quiet life by the synagogue. It's hard for a man like that to marry."

"That's good," Illazar replied enthusiastically.

"I'm not sure where you're going with this, dear neighbor." The old man fixed his gaze on Illazar.

Illazar raised his index finger, motioning for Yitzhak to listen. Not a bit of sound came through the window. The block was silent, shrouded by sleep. There were just the sparkling stars, hiding behind pipe smoke.

‘What does this all mean?’ Illazar thought. ‘Did I correctly interpret the Creator’s sign?’

“So why are you asking about the poor yokel?” the neighbor repeated impatiently. “Do you have an interest in him?”

“What interest? I just want to see him. What’s his name again?”

“Hezgie.”

“Maybe he needs help.”

“I’d ask his brother about that. But he’s proud – a rabbi. As you can understand, he’ll probably refuse. In any case, why guess? If you want, we’ll visit them next Wednesday. I’ll introduce you.”

“Yes, it’s worth a try. You know how I need helpers at the shop.”

“That might work,” the neighbor replied. “I doubt that the older brother is very keen on feeding an extra mouth.”

“Alright, neighbor. If you’re ready to help the poor youth, don’t delay. Good business is done on Wednesday and tomorrow...” For whatever reason, Rebbe Illazar looked at his pocket watch. “Tomorrow is Wednesday. We’re going to your friend’s house, or else he might...” Illazar paused, looking for a word.

“Escape?” the neighbor asked, jokingly.

Illazar lifted his brow at the obvious irony in his guest’s tone. Maybe he was onto something?

“You can’t escape destiny, Rebbe Yitzhak, if I understood you correctly. Gather your things.”

“I have things to do in the fields tomorrow,” the neighbor started objecting.

Illazar interrupted him, warningly lifting his finger.

“Let’s not talk so much, Yitzhak. Excess words are nothing but noise. We’re going tomorrow and that’s that.”

“It’s a good deed to help a neighbor,” Rebbe Yitzhak said resignedly. “But I have much to do here at home.”

“You help me today, I help you tomorrow,” Illazar replied, trying to alleviate his concerns. “I know a prayer that can work miracles.”

“What is it?”

“Here it is,” Illazar replied, taking a silver coin of his pouch and handing it to the guest. “Take it. Such a small piece of metal, but it carries so much power. You give it to someone, and they’ll do whatever you want. It can help you take care of your fields. And take this one for yourself.”

Illazar took out another coin and handed it to his neighbor.

“Thank you Illazar,” Yitzhak replied, laughing. “You’re a good man. It would be a shame not to help you.”

And so the neighbor departed.

For the first time in a while, Illazar slept calmly through the night, and even smiled about something. He and Rebbe Yitzhak departed at the arranged time, stopping at friends’ homes on the way. The guests were treated to lavish dinners, attended by the most respectable of people, who asked the journeymen about life in distant Temir-Khan-Shura.

At their destination they were greeted by a young man in a faded cherkeska and a papakha that had lost its shape long ago.

“Peace for your home. May it always be stocked with supplies, and may the Creator’s wisdom keep you!” Yitzhak announced.

“What luck brings such dear guests to my home?” Ifraim marveled. “Come in. Hey, Hagar, we have guests. Come quick!”

A woman wrapped head to toe in a shawl ran out of the inner rooms. With a low bow she took Illazar’s rifle from his hands, and carried it into the back. Ifraim led the guests to the kunak room on the second floor.

The guests sat down onto the carpets, feet tucked under themselves.

“Greetings to you!” Ifraim once again looked at the stranger with curiosity.

Yitzhak caught his glance.

“Please welcome this man as you do me,” he said, motioning toward his neighbor. “This is Rebbe Illazar, a highly regarded man. One of his butcher shops is worth as much as all the butcher shops in Derbent or Madzhalis. When people want their hearts to rejoice after a hearty meal, they buy their meat from Rebbe Illazar.”

“I thank the Creator for bringing such a man into my home!” Rebbe Ifraim exclaimed.

The young rabbi showered his guests with eloquent words, clearly intrigued by the visit.

“Rebbe Illazar does the same thing that our rulers do: he feeds us all,” Rebbe Yitzhak continued.

“So you are the very same Rebbe Illazar from Temir-Khan-Shura?” Ifraim asked suddenly. “We’ve heard of your deeds even in this backcountry of ours.”

Rebbe Illazar politely bowed.

“The rumors of a man are always greater than his actions. I thank the Creator for leading me to your threshold. May your cup never be empty.”

“And yours as well, honorable Rebbe Illazar. You must be hungry from your journey. I will ask the wife to put something on the table. Excuse the humbleness of my home, but we will serve what we have,” Rebbe Ifraim spread his hands.

This was typical routine for Mountain Jews. No boasting – just complaints about one’s humble stature and demanding lifestyle.

“Call Hezgie and tell him we have guests,” the Rabbi told the grimy-faced child that appeared in the doorway.

The back rooms went abuzz and a young man entered the kunak room. He was handsome, tall and had a black beard. Slightly abashed by the stranger’s presence, he quickly bowed.

“Ah, Hezgie!” Rebbe Yitzhak exclaimed with a smile. “Praise the Creator, you’ve grown into a warrior! Did those books you read make you grow this much?”

Hezgie smiled.

“Any news from your father?” Yitzhak asked.

“None,” the young man replied, saddened. “It’ll be seven years soon, without a single word.”

“It’ll come – you’ll see. Palestine is on the other end of the world! Right, Rebbe Illazar?” Yitzhak turned to his companion, motioning at Hezgie. “This is Ifraim’s younger brother.”

The young man remained bashful, respectfully bowing his head. Illazar carefully looked him over and amicably returned the bow.

Yitzhak continued to ask the master of the house about the latest news of his parents and Rebbe Ifraim answered in detail. Nevertheless, this was all small talk. Each side awaited the real questions, which would reveal the purpose of the visit.

“Rebbe Ifraim, your words ring loudly in righteous ears,” Rebbe Illazar began after a while. “I plan to open a shop in your lands. I need you to appraise my new butcher.”

“What’s my opinion compared to yours?” Ifraim hesitated.

“Rebbe Illazar comes from a line of shochets, but his abundant responsibilities leave him no time to handle pious tasks,” Yitzhak replied, placating Ifraim.

“I understand.”

“I generally don’t trust the selection of a shochet to anyone but myself, but, knowing of your righteousness, I would like to receive your approval,” Illazar said.

“You give me too much credit, dear guest,” Ifraim answered, humble but noticeably flattered by the venerable man’s praise. “No one, aside from our fathers, is perfect in this world. How could I advise on the selection of a shochet? The responsibility is far too great.”

"I am glad to hear the gems of modesty in your words, but in your aul your word is more valuable than money. I don't offer empty proposals. If customers here are picky, you can placate them. Therefore, your blessing is necessary. Am I explaining myself clearly, Rebbe Yitzhak?" Illazar asked, turning to his guide.

"Clear as the sun at dawn," Rebbe Ifraim quickly replied.

"So you will look at our shochet?" Illazar asked.

"Gladly," replied Ifraim.

Illazar took a sip of warm green tea.

"And what does your brother do?" he asked curiously.

"He helps me around the synagogue."

"Good deeds reflect a pure soul," Rebbe Illazar noted.

"I plan to supply your land with much meat, and worry that my shochet won't be able to handle it alone. Why not let Hezgie become my apprentice? I can pay him and feed him, if he agreed to take the butcher's exam in a year. It's best to do business with people whom you trust completely.

He said this in a seemingly cursory manner, but Rebbe Ifraim replied to the offer with enthusiasm.

"My brother would work for you? Hm... That's a great honor – one that we aren't worthy of."

"I assure you that Rebbe Illazar doesn't throw his words to the wind," Yitzhak chimed in. "His word is firmer than stone."

"These days you never know people's intentions. People say one thing, while thinking another. It wasn't like that before," Ifraim said apologetically. "What do you think, Hezgie?"

Hezgie shuddered. Generally, Ifraim never addressed him like this. The things unexpected guests can do to a man!

"I'm afraid I'm not worthy of such a tempting offer!"

"I also think so, Rebbe Illazar. My brother is planning to become a hired laborer in some big city."

“Hired labor? For such an educated young man?” Rebbe Illazar expressed genuine surprise. “I heard you know how to read.”

“And how to write,” Hezgie grumbled.

“That’s what I mean! My shochet can’t tell a letter apart from a goat. This isn’t right. Come work for me. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Rebbe Ifraim,” Rebbe Yitzhak interrupted again. “Your father would take Rebbe Illazar’s offer, if he were at our table. You should agree.”

Ifraim once again glanced at his younger brother. Deciding a man’s destiny like this seemed rash. On the other hand, this could be a blessing.

“Yitzhak told me about your parents. There’s an example of true faith. To embark on a pilgrimage at such a senior age! Our forefather Moses was three times younger when he led his people out of Egypt. It is a true joy to be at your father’s homes and to speak to his sons.”

Rebbe Ifraim smiled in embarrassment. There was no doubt that the unexpected guest spoke smoothly.

“Hosting such a great guest, renowned for his deeds, also bears great merit,” he answered.

After dinner, Ifraim led the guests to the back rooms that had been prepared for them. Rebbe Illazar noticed how humble the young rabbi’s home was. Blankets on the floor, a cracked mirror on the wall, five teapots standing in the niche without a single teacup.

He slept with ease, and if one were to look at his face, they would notice that his dreams were pleasant.

The next day, the four men – Rebbe Illazar insisted that Hezgie join them – set out to assess the new butcher’s skills. He was a giant red-haired fellow, who took a bull down by himself with nothing but twine. Distracted by nothing, the butcher constantly repeated a prayer. Illazar looked less at the butcher

than he did at Hezgie, as if he was truly interested in the young man's opinion.

The young rabbi was left guessing why his brother stirred such an important man's curiosity, unable to find an explanation.

After the exam, Ifraim gave his approval to the red-haired shochet and invited everyone to his home. There, dinner already waited for them. Rebbe Ifraim lifted the wine horn, praising the Almighty for sending him such guests. Rebbe Illazar smiled. Then Rebbe Ifraim began to lament his poverty, and Rebbe Yitzhak began to object. And then, Hezgie asked to speak.

"Our aul may be poor, dear guests, but there can be cases where poverty turns into riches."

He went on to tell a funny story. Joyful laughter rang within the walls of the poor home. Yitzhak could barely contain himself, while Illazar laughed with more reservation. Only Ifraim was unhappy with his brother's actions. It did not befit a youth to express his opinion at an elders' table. But Rebbe Illazar was not the least bit offended. On the contrary – he lifted his glass and praised the Creator for blessing them with such a great host.

The guest concluded his speech with these words:

"Ifraim, I invite you to examine my fields and appraise my cattle. I would be honored to have you and your brother at my home. You are well versed in the kashrut! To hide from you one would either have to be a mouse, too small to notice, or a falcon, too far too see – everything else your heart sees clearly. Surely you won't offend me and visit my home?"

"Of course, I will visit," Ifraim replied coyly.

"Not I, but we. You must take your brother with you, and that's not a request! There are things you will marvel at in my home," Illazar said as he rose.

Ifraim and Hezgie saw the guests off. The slightly drunk Yitzhak continued to laugh at Hezgie's joke, and kept repeating:

“Trade meat for fig pits! Oh, I just can’t! Figs don’t have pits! The venerable Avroom’s younger son is so clever!”

VIII

When Rebbe Ifraim and Hezgie arrived at Illazar's home exactly two weeks later, he greeted them by the gate, as if he had foretold the guests' arrival.

The men went upstairs and sat on the floor covered with soft carpets. Duhai brought in a giant tray filled with hot chureks and other fare, even some sweets from the East.

Illazar left the guests for a second and went into the women's room.

"Call Melke," he told Duhai.

"What?"

"Let her serve the tea."

"I can handle it."

"Listen to me – let Melke do it."

Duhai keenly looked at her husband. Illazar lifted his gaze to the ceiling: those women are always afraid of everything. They always want there to be sunshine, but have no idea why the sun shines or who lights it. Illazar returned to his guests, smiling.

“Do you bring any news from your aul?” he asked.

“What news could we have in our backwoods? All’s calm and quiet. You have to go to the city for news.”

“Ah, the city. People love to revile it – to say that it’s the root of all evil. If you ask me, all evil comes from men.”

“That’s very true, Rebbe Illazar,” Hezgie replied with a smile.

“Why are you smiling?” the older brother interrupted. “Sit quietly, or Rebbe Illazar might think you’re a fool.”

“Why? Let him talk. What did you want to say, Hezgie?”

“I recall a parable, about three simpletons that came to a big city for work, somewhere in the East. The three of them decided to rent one room and split all expenses equally. Once, one of them had an unlucky day at the market, returning without any profit and started complaining that he has no money. What did the other two do? They said: ‘You don’t have to pay for the oil, if you don’t have money, but then you shouldn’t use the light.’ Then they put a blindfold over his eyes, only removing it when they shut off the lamp.”

“You want me to die from laughter, don’t you?” Rebbe Illazar said with a chuckle. “Ifraim, your brother is chock-full of wit.”

“You don’t say...” grumbled Rebbe Ifraim. “I wish you had met our father – now, he was witty.”

“Palestine is a happy place if people like your father are drawn to it,” Illazar remarked. “I wish him a safe return.”

“Thank you for the heartfelt welcome, Illazar.”

“Thank you for visiting,” the host replied. “But I don’t think we’re finished. Stay a while longer and rest.”

“Oh, it’s time for us to go,” Rebbe Ifraim objected. “It’s a far journey.”

“Well, there’s more than enough space for you to spend the night,” said Illazar, turning to the younger brother. “Right Hezgie?”

The younger brother looked to the older. It was as if Rebbe Illazar had intentionally put him in an uncomfortable position, Ifraim being the proper decision maker.

"It is up to my brother."

Illazar smiled:

"Well, then your brother is staying. I have decided. Right, Ifraim?"

Ifraim reluctantly nodded.

"So how about coming to study butchery with me?" Illazar suddenly asked Hezgie. "Are you ready?"

"I don't know. We have yet to decide anything," Hezgie replied.

"So decide now. How much would you like me to pay your brother for his apprenticeship?" Illazar asked, looking at Ifraim.

The older brother was surprised.

"How can I ask for anything, Rebbe Illazar? Normally the student pays, and you're the teacher... I'll be plenty thankful if you feed him."

"Very well, then. It's a deal."

Illazar extended his hand to Ifraim.

"Are you betrothed yet, Hezgie?" the host asked the younger brother.

"I haven't given it much thought."

Rebbe Ifraim raised his brow in surprise. At that moment, Melke entered the room, carrying a tray with three steaming bowls of tea. Hezgie turned around to see the silhouette of a girl wrapped in a shawl. Illazar's daughter handed him one of the bowls, and he nearly spilled it all over his trousers.

Illazar's daughter chuckled, grazing Hezgie's cheek with her hand, perhaps intentionally. For a moment, he caught the subtle scent of jasmine oil. It was as if he had had a vision. After Illazar's daughter left, they talked for a bit more and then retired to their rooms.

The brothers had their beds made in the kunak room. Hezgie's pillow was stuffed with mountain thyme. The scent of the herb was intoxicating. Peace and calm filled the night, but sleep wouldn't come. Something stirred the young man's soul, as if someone was scratching at it from the inside. A few times, while submerged in half-sleep's dark pool, Hezgie saw his father, sitting on the wagon alone, his mother nowhere to be found. Hezgie would call him, and Avroom would turn and flash a smile, shocking to the son for his father had no teeth.

His brother nudged him awake in the morning.

"Get up and tend to the bulls. It's time to go."

Hezgie ran to the barn. Ifraim followed, running into Rebbe Illazar who asked him for a word in private.

"We need to have a conversation."

Ifraim nodded.

"I would like to talk to you, Ifraim. Yesterday, I failed to introduce to you the girl that brought us tea. That was Melke, my daughter."

"May she be blessed. Happy is a home adorned by such a flower."

"Those are just words, Ifraim. I appreciate them, but I think you understand that she'll have to marry sooner or later."

"I'm sure she will," Ifraim replied, surprised by the turn the conversation had taken. "But what do we have to do with it?"

"I'm talking about your brother, Ifraim. You've seen my daughter. I've seen Hezgie. What will you say to the fact that I think your brother is worthy of being my daughter's husband."

"Oh my!" Ifraim's eyes looked like they were about to crawl onto his forehead. The Creator had prepared such surprises for him! "Thank you for the honor, Rebbe Illazar," he said with difficulty, "but..."

"But what?"

“Hezgie... I mean I, or, rather we... We aren’t very wealthy. We won’t be able to...”

Ifraim paused. Admitting his poverty was obviously unpleasant.

“I won’t be able to offer a suitable dowry for your daughter.”

“That isn’t important.”

“Meaning what?”

“I will give you the dowry for my daughter. And no one will know anything. It’ll be your money.

Rebbe Ifraim grew pale.

“But that’s not our custom, Rebbe Illazar. I can’t accept your money.”

“Don’t be rash. Think about it. I have only one condition, however.”

“What condition.”

“Your brother must move into my home.”

“Here?”

“Yes, here. This is my only daughter, and I want her to be happy. That is something your brother can give her, but I will only let her marry a man who will come to live in my home. Don’t worry – your family’s honor will be preserved. I will accept the groom as a son, and you will be at peace about his fate. Those who enter into my family will always be taken care of.

“But...” Anxiety was causing Ifraim to break out in sweat. “That’s not our custom.”

“Many things in life happen contrary to custom. Every rule has its exceptions. Why don’t you do this out of respect to me, and respect for my proposal?”

“I understand, but what will people say? If the rabbi breaks the rules, what will the community think?” Ifraim’s speech got scrambled as he grew more anxious.

“The people will talk a while, then stop. If you, as a rabbi, say that everything was done properly, no one will question

you. You know our people. If you tell them that snow is sugar, they'll question it for a day, and then start telling you how sweet it is the day after. I'm sure your father wouldn't object."

Ifraim didn't respond.

Illazar continued to persist:

"It will be a good marriage – of that I'm sure. Is that not what your father worked for? Wouldn't it make him happy, no matter where he is? Hezgie's destiny was placed in your hands. Don't deprive him of happiness. Or did you not noticed his and Melke's encounter yesterday? He completely stopped listening to the conversation. I promise that your brother will have an honorable place in my home."

Rebbe Illazar finished and inquisitively looked at Ifraim, who could not take it and averted his eyes.

"This is all very sudden," he finally answered. "I need to talk to my brother."

"What's there to talk about? Whatever you decide is what will happen. Of course, you should ask him, but I doubt that the young man could refuse a flower such as Melke."

"Yes, but still..."

"Fine. We have time. Give some thought to my proposal. I will expect your reply in a week. Deal?"

Hezgie waited for him outside atop the wagon. He could tell right away that something was going on with his brother. Ifraim was scared and seemed to avoid looking at him.

"Did something happen, Ifraim?" Hezgie asked quietly.

"Nothing. We'll talk at home," the older brother answered sharply. "Let's go. Why are you dawdling?"

Hezgie shrugged and whipped the bulls, who lazily started walking.

The young man turned around. Hezgie didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to the welcoming host. At that moment, he saw a figure dressed in black on the roof of the house, who watched them depart. The youth could have sworn that

this was the exact same girl who brought them sweet chureks with tail fat.

The wagon turned a corner and Reb Illazar's home disappeared from sight.

Conflicting thoughts rampaged in Ifraim's mind. On one hand, everything that Rebbe Illazar proposed was good. On the other, everything that Rebbe Illazar proposed was against the law, contrary to custom. A man could not go live at a woman's house. If only the offer wasn't so tempting. He began to pray, hundreds of excuses coming to mind. After all, who said that it was improper? He would need to carefully examine the ancient texts and see what Judah, Nathaniel and Moses wrote about his. All those men, made wise by the Creator, lived so long, but still didn't understand that the world was much more complex than their writings.

Hezgie was the first one to break the silence:

"Ifraim, are you keeping something from me?"

"Yes, brother."

"What exactly?"

"The fact that we should rejoice."

"Then why are you so glum?"

"Oh, Hezgie! There are dark clouds over our home, but the wind is blowing them aside. There are good news. Do you remember the girl we saw in Illazar's home?"

"How could I not?" Hezgie knew how to pretend to be a simpleton when necessary. "She was very young..."

"But what a savvy housewife!"

"Yes, whoever marries her will be happy. Such a fine girl!"

"Would you like me to talk to Illazar about letting her marry you?" Ifraim blurted out.

Hezgie was taken aback.

"Are you mocking me, brother? Illazar's a caring father. He won't let his daughter marry me."

"Why not?"

“You know.” Hezgie looked up at the sky. A raven flew right over his head. “See – I’m telling the truth. The raven is a wise bird. Look at us, and look at Rebbe Illazar. He’s a mountain to our molehill.”

“Hezgie, I can make a deal.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m no kidding.”

“You speak as if you had already talked to him about it.”

“I have. And he agrees.”

“What?” Hezgie’s eyes grew wide.

“But there’s a condition.”

“A condition?”

“You will live at their home after the wedding.”

Hezgie looked at his older brother, puzzled. ‘To go to your wife’s home after the wedding. To become... What do the Russians call a man who lives in his wife’s house?’ He couldn’t recall. And so he sat, baffled. Perhaps his brother was playing a joke on him?

Hezgie looked at Ifraim. No – he was serious, as always. Not a hint of a smile.

“I’m not kidding, Hezgie,” Ifraim repeated, as if he had heard his brother’s thoughts. “The offer was made. You can be the husband to Illazar’s daughter.”

Hezgie didn’t respond. What fate can do to a man! It was only yesterday that he was a young soul wanted by no one, a future farmhand – a bucket without a bottom, as they say. And today, he was a groom.

For a moment, he imagined Illazar’s daughter walking down the street with a jug on her head, making matzah batter. Apparently, the Creator wanted to have a laugh at his expense. The girl was younger than him, and suddenly he sensed a feeling of quivering tenderness growing within him. ‘If I become her husband,’ he thought, ‘then I will do everything in my power to make her happy.’

“What about the dowry.”

“Her father will give it.”

“Why does he need this? Are you sure this isn’t a trick?”

“You’re crazy! Why are you afraid of her?”

“I’m not afraid of her – I’m afraid of her father.”

“Stop it. Everything will be decided soon. Next week, I will go to Illazar to discuss the betrothal.”

Ifraim wasn’t lying, and did everything that needed to be done to make Hezgie happy. Ifraim and Illazar quickly agreed on a day for the festivities.

My ancestors normally had weddings in the winter, when fresh wine would mature. A week prior to the event female relatives were invited into the groom’s home to sew the bride’s wedding garb. Leftover scraps of fabric were used to make dresses for poor widows and orphans. Mourners were sent specially prepared chicken plov – a plea, of sorts, for permission for exultation and merriment in the wake of their tragedy. The mourners were, in turn, expected to bless the wedding.

Every city and aul where the young couple had family received invitations from Rebbe Illazar. Melke personally chose two sogdush girls – bridesmaids that would comfort her prior to the wedding.

The wedding celebration began on Friday evening at the two homes – Hezgie’s and Melke’s. As Hezgie hailed from a faraway aul, Illazar put his family up at an inn. After the evening prayer, Hezgie’s friends came to his room and had a feast. At the same time, Melke’s friends would gather at her house. They sang and danced, lifting the bride up from mourning over her departing girlhood. If, by chance, they encountered a friend of the groom, they would jokingly steal his hat and demand a ransom.

And so, Monday and Tuesday would pass amidst the revelry.

On the night before Wednesday, Melke was taken to the mikvah, accompanied only by close friends. After returning

home, they unbraided her wet hair, brushed it, and braided it back. One of the girls sung sadly:

Yoye te ele mugumun dede...

The rest would join in:

Yoye dujlerusmun dede...

One more night, you are a guest at your mother's...

One more spindle left to weave at your mother's...

After that, Melke was dressed in clean linens, which she would remain in until the morning, when her wedding clothes would be brought over from Hezgie's.

On Wednesday morning, Melke received her dress. An enormous procession of family members and other guests lined up by the home. Men held wine jugs, and women carried trays of foodstuffs on their heads. They would have everything: rice, chicken, turkey, goose, chureks. The offerings were placed in the bride's room.

In the meantime, the naked Hezgie shivered from cold. He stood by his brother, up to his knees in the fierce water of a shallow mountain river, partaking in a ritual cleansing. The water unmercifully burnt and stung his body, but the ritual was unavoidable. As tradition dictated, a barber waited for him ashore, blades already sharpened.

The half-dressed Hezgie was sat upon a stone, and the barber went to work. After twenty minutes, Hezgie's head was clean shaven.

It was now time to get dressed. The friends that surrounded him started beating their drums.

On the first beat, he put on his trousers.

On the second, he fastened his shirt collar.

On the third, he pulled on his boots.

A long line of Hezgie's friends stood before him. They approached him, one by one, placing gifts onto a giant tray at his feet and kissing his cleanly shaved head. A kiss on a groom's crown was thought to bring good luck.

When the ritual concluded, a beautiful horse was led to Hezgie. The groom saddled up, and the procession was on its way to the bride's house to the beat of drums.

There, Melke's mother already waited by the gate, holding a silver sash in her hands. The groom stood in front of Duhai triumphantly. With the words "May you be happy, and may the world see the grandchildren of your great-grandchildren" she wrapped the sash around Hezgie, a symbolic display of regard for her daughter's future husband.

At that moment, a battle cried echoed. The two processions – the bride's and the groom's – moved toward that synagogue.

Melke rode with a young girl, a relative and her mother. The bride's face was shrouded by a shawl. As the procession went on, new people would join – each one with a full cup of wine that they would instantly empty, managing not to spill a single drop. The guests rejoiced and congratulated the couple.

And so, with rave and riot, the procession approached the synagogue. Here, silence followed. The bashful Hezgie disembarked. The chaise on which Melke sat stopped nearby. She was pale with worry and struggled to move. In accordance to ritual, she was approached by two regarded men who carefully carried her into the synagogue's courtyard.

There, the hupa already stood, resting on staffs held by four brawny men. The hupa was made of old blue velvet, decorated with gold stars. Hezgie stood under the canopy. Melke stood motionless to his left, waiting, along with Hezgie, for the rabbi to seal their union.

The newlyweds were surrounded by a wide ring of guests.

The rabbi lifted a cup of wine with his right hand, recited a blessing, and passed the vessel to the groom. Hezgie timidly took a sip and passed the wine to Melke. The equally bashful bride barely managed to lift the cup to her lips, instantly returning it to the rabbi.

It was time for the most festive of moments.

Accompanied by solemn singing, the rabbi placed something in Hezgie's palm. Hezgie lifted his arm, and the crowd murmured as a thin ray of sunlight bounced off a golden band.

"The wedding ring!" the crowd whispered.

All eyes carefully observed the main moment. Hezgie slowly put the ring on Melke's finger, as thunder boomed above.

"A good sign! A good sign!" the women whispered.

Everyone looked up at the sky, but it was completely clear. Then the zurnas howled and the drums pounded. The matrimony was complete, and the party began. Everyone shouted and congratulated one another.

The rabbi muttered the text of the matrimonial ketubah, which specified the dowry that Melke was bringing her husband and how much Hezgie would have to pay his wife in the event of a divorce.

No one listened however. The rabbi finally concluded, and signaled a helper boy, who filled the ritual wedding vessel with dark wine and handed it to the rabbi. He carefully lifted the vessel, showing everyone that it is full, symbolizing the fullness of the embarked-on union, and gave it to Melke. She put it to her lips, then passed the cup to Hezgie, who emptied the cup in one gulp, then threw it against a special stone placed under the hupa – for luck – shattering the glass into many pieces. "Hurrah!" the guests shouted. Once again, din arose, and it started to snow. Its white feathers fell on the happy heads, as if blessing them. There was now one more married couple in the world.

The guests quieted down by midnight. According to the calendar, it was December 1910.

When Hezgie settled in Illazar's house, it was as if he was at his own home. His agreeability matched his wife's strong character very well. Rebbe Illazar noticed the tender care with

which the young man watched Melke's health, how he treated her, how he thanked her for the food she cooked. Not once did he raise his voice or – God forbid – his hand, something that was way too common in neighboring families.

Hezgie earned his father-in-law's trust, even regarding the most sensitive issues. Illazar liked his son in law's quiet demeanor. A man like that won't let you down. It didn't matter that he had to dismiss the idea of teaching Hezgie to be a sho-chet – some people didn't have the natural constitution to deal with blood, and Hezgie was one of them. What mattered was that he was absolutely honest, and could be entrusted with the less cumbersome, but more profitable trade – exchanging gold.

Illazar taught Hezgie how to determine quality with his tooth, familiarized him with the prices, and soon enough the son-in-law was a first-class gold trader.

IX

Life went along its course, but the world around it was changing. Discussions about the growing turmoil became more and more frequent among men at the market.

“Where is our world going?” Hezgie asked, as outlandish new words like ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘proletariat’ entered the public vocabulary.

‘Oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’ were easy to comprehend, but the rest? An unfamiliar feeling of something new and fearsome filled the air.

Jewish minds were not immune to revolutionary temptation. While it had been the topic of discussion in the European part of Russia since the latter quarter of the 19th century, the dangerous pestilence took longer to reach Dagestan. But now, even the Mountain Jews were encountering what historians were calling the ‘new political trend.’

Hopes for a better life and an uncertain outlook instilled a sense of alarm in many. Those added to other, more personal reasons to worry.

These reasons were more than real. Three years had passed since the wedding but the Abramovs - the family name Hezgie bore - had not had a child. Even the neighbors, who meddled in everything, lost interest in assessing Melke's belly when she went outside. Whenever Illazar brought up the subject of grandchildren, Hezgie couldn't help but feel certain guilt.

The old butcher already worried that his beloved only daughter and her husband would have to endure the same hardships that he and Duhai did.

Illazar was perplexed: why did the Creator, who otherwise bestowed ample grace upon his family, refuse to bless it with what's most important? Illazar couldn't help but think that fertility problems might be the fate of his family. He started planning a trip to Ida's, but, upon making his inquiries, discovered that she had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. She left her home once, and never returned, vanishing into thin air.

Illazar futilely went to various fortune tellers and medicine women, asking them if they had heard of Ida's whereabouts. Who could he turn to for help? Everyone just shrugged. Ida had disappeared, as though she had never existed.

Perhaps she left, Rebbe Illazar thought, saddened by the disappearance of the woman that saved him long ago. If so, who could he ask for help? He and Duhai really wanted grandchildren.

One fine day, however, Melke didn't get up from bed in the morning and asked Duhai to make Hezgie his breakfast. Right away, Duhai started fussing over her daughter, feeling her neck and forehead. It became clear that Melke was pregnant.

Illazar and Hezgie thanked the Lord for His mercy.

Neither Illazar nor Hezgie, however, could have predicted that fighting would start before the beginning of August and bring destruction to their good old world.

The news of the start of World War I crashed onto Tamir-Khan-Shura like thunder on a clear day. In a month, the city was full of soldiers. Rumors that Jews could be among those conscripted started spreading.

Yefim Sosna, one of the town policemen, knocked on Illazar's door more than once in attempt to compile a list of men capable of wielding a rifle. Hezgie himself was not immune to the looming peril of being called to the front. Time after time, the expecting Melke would ask her father what would happen if Hezgie were drafted.

"What will he do at that front?" she'd ask indignantly. "Watch others get disemboweled?"

"They say that not everyone gets taken," Illazar would answer. "We'll see." And so they lived, comforting each other.

One day, Illazar came home late at night and happily announced that he had an exceptionally lucrative day. The government wanted to purchase meat from him for deliveries to the battlefield. This was a great success.

This led him to make friends among the Russian military, ones that Illazar thought about asking for help with helping Hezgie avoid the draft. Hezgie was like a son to him, and sending him into battle was the last thing Illazar wanted to do. He did not, however, know how to handle this difficult situation and needed advice.

Illazar had drinks with Yefim Sosna several times and had long discussions about the issue. He then gave Sosna's wife three exquisitely designed Persian Shawls, which the policeman appreciated.

"Look at what you do," Yefim once told the old butcher after a few drinks. "You help the troops. Some help by sending meat, while others by shooting bullets. There is no difference. Hezgie

also helps, as he is your son in law. Why would he go to the battlefield, if he's already there? You see what I'm saying?"

"No," Illazar answered.

The policeman looked around and whispered something in his ear.

Yefim advised Rebbe Illazar to send a request to the czar's name in Saint-Petersburg, requesting that his workers, including Hezgie, be exempt from military service because, firstly, the Jewish population was scarce and, secondly, because they could be much more useful to the military by supplying the army with food.

Those were the instruction Yefim Sosna gave Illazar, telling him that everything is in the bag.

Illazar was taken aback:

"What bag? Who's going to send a letter to the czar?"

"I'm but a small man," Sosna shrugged. "Just a policeman. Probably you, Illazar."

"Who am I to send a letter to the Russian Czar?" Illazar asked in frustration.

"I don't know," replied the policeman, "but without the paper, Hezgie will surely be conscripted. The threat will remain until a decision is made in St. Petersburg."

So Illazar decided to write the letter.

Yefim Sosna burst into Illazar's home early in the morning, while everyone was still asleep.

"Jews, get up!" he yelled from the threshold.

Illazar groggily jumped out of bed and grabbed his shotgun.

"What? Where?"

He stared at the policeman, who held a piece of paper in his hand.

"Here - read it!" He handed Illazar the paper. The butcher simply stared at him, confused.

“What is this?”

“It came all the way from St. Petersburg. The Senate decided that all Jews in Temir-Khan-Shura who are involved in supplying the troops will be equated with servicemen and will not be drafted. There you have it! Time to celebrate!”

Illazar listened, confused at first, then yelled:

“Duhai! Bring vodka!”

Hezgie ran outside, in response to the policeman’s shouting.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” Illazar shook him by the shoulders. “We’re starting a new life!”

One problem had been solved.

They waited for the child’s birth as if it was the greatest miracle possible. The old butcher, unconcerned with inviting the Creator’s wrath, declared that the baby will be a boy, over and over, at every lunch and every dinner.

Hezgie nodded in accord, smiling. Surely God didn’t accept requests from husbands and grandfathers in such delicate matters?

Rebbe Illazar remembered how Duhai was given water mixed with graveyard soil in order to have a boy, and asked his wife to mix some just in case. Duhai did not approve of the superstition, telling him that the rabbi objected.

But Illazar only brushed it off.

The momoy was promised a generous gift for the birth of a boy. As Melke’s belly grew bigger, Illazar and Hezgie would convene for conversations on the roof more and more often.

“As soon as the boy is born,” Illazar lectured, “call all the men that gather in our yard into the kunak room and treat them to wine. Understand?”

“Understand. How much wine? Until they’re drunk?”

“Of course! If a man can stand up after my wine, he didn’t drink enough. Let them lie down. There’s plenty of room

for everyone. Meanwhile, the women will go to congratulate Melke. The momoy will continually be by her side.”

“Why?”

“That’s the way! Why if she has a fever? Five days, no less. After all, Melke will be weak.”

“What do you mean, weak? She lifts two buckets like it’s nothing.”

“Eh, she’s just pretending to be strong. Trust me – I’m her father,” Illazar replied angrily. “Most importantly, we have to make sure that the momoy feeds her properly. Nothing but flour soup for the first five days. Also, no one can approach her. No one!”

“Not even Duhai?”

“The main thing is for the newborn boy to not be seen by a stranger’s eye.”

“And how long does that go on?”

“Until we’re brought gold.”

“Why gold? We have our own gold.”

“That’s the rule. It’ll protect the baby from getting sick. Ida said so.”

“Who’s Ida?”

“A wise woman – peace be with her, wherever she is. You should also prepare wooden boards with these names.” Illazar put a sheet of paper with a long list of names in front of Hezgie.

Hezgie diligently copied them. Among them were Navruz, Grushit, as well as strange names. They all needed to be engraved on a board and hung over the head of Melke’s bed.

“The names will chase away the demon from the newborn’s bed,” Illazar explained.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Hezgie sighed.

“It doesn’t matter if you’ve heard of it. Your main task is to take all the precautions.”

“What if the boy gets sick?”

“Your tongue should fall off for such questions! He won’t get sick! I found a momoy that’s never had a sick child.”

Indeed, Illazar made a special trip to Derbent and brought back the best known midwife. Her services cost a fortune – two bulls – but Illazar couldn’t care less. Ensuring that a healthy boy was born was a priority.

On the evening of November 4, 1914, Melke went into labor, bending over and wailing, as if someone had hit her in the stomach. Duhai and the momoy rushed to her room.

Long hours of exhausting anticipation followed. Melke would either cry aloud or, scared by the momoy, switch to a whisper. Suddenly, the home went quiet. Hezgie and Illazar listened closely. Soon enough, they heard the cries of an infant. Hezgie’s face lit up. Praise the Creator – it happened!

“Momoy!” Illazar shouted happily.

The midwife emerged from behind the blanket.

“What do you want?”

“Who was born?”

The momoy stayed silent as Illazar’s face grew long. He rushed behind the curtain and saw his daughter. A child lay on her chest. Illazar bent over and suddenly recoiled. It was a girl.

Hezgie kissed his exhausted wife. For a few seconds, Illazar watched the fidgety little thing, then waved his hand, beaming with happiness. Boy, girl – who cares? The main thing was that a child was born. A long-awaited child.

The girl was named Hannah.

The name was not chosen randomly. It meant “the grace of God” in Ancient Hebrew, but could be easily adapted into a common Russian name – Anya. It was as if Illazar had predicted things to come, foreseeing that Russians would be around for a while. As Russians had trouble with pronouncing Hebrew names, it was more convenient to pick a name that would easily adapt to their language.

X

The revolutions swept over the Russian Empire in waves, bringing much good and much evil to the Mountain Jews. History has always been like that – the positive always going hand in hand with the negative.

The February Revolution struck down the laws that targeted Jews. Our people were finally free from territorial restrictions and could move freely across the entirety of Russia. How could one not be happy about that? The Congress of Mountain Jews in support of the Provisional Government gathered in June of 1917. It was chaired by the ethnographer Nissim-Oglu (Ilya Sherebetovich Anisimov), a clever and intelligent man. The Congress acknowledged the Mountain Jews as an integral part of the Jewish people, gave women rights equal to those of men, and put limits on the age of marriage. The Congress did not, however, have time to solve all issues.

After the October Revolution in Petrograd and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Caucasus announced secession from Russia. A civil war broke out, cities and villages transforming into a site of constant battle with no victors. To make things worse, a drought lasting from 1922 to 1923 followed. Things were difficult even for the wealthy Jews, who were used to helping their countrymen. City folk had to work as hired laborers or went off to Lezgian and Tat villages for small trade, mostly selling their personal possessions.

After the Soviet rule had finally established itself in the Caucasus, free trade was outlawed and many Jews were declared to be 'non-working elements' and sent off into forced labor.

In these first years of misery, fate was kind to Illazar, allowing him to miraculously shield his family from misfortune. Soldiers – be they from the White Army or the Red Army – went to the Jews as first order of business after they conquered a city, demanding food and shelter. Those who refused, died. Those who helped, suffered losses. Illazar chose to help. Occasionally the authorities would follow the law. They would seize the cattle, but compensate the owner – with Provisional *kerenkas*, rubles or other currency of unknown origin. The pile of colorful papers in the stash grew and grew, but no one wanted to exchange them for anything. Bringing meat to the markets became impossible – the soldiers rode off on the horses and seized the bulls. Livestock numbers dwindled in front of people's eyes. But Illazar managed to do the impossible, finding ways to make ends meet and exchanging paper money into gold when he had the chance.

Duhai and Melke would constantly bring home bad news: someone's relatives were put in jail; another family had their house seized – women and children thrown into the street, the husband into jail after trying to resist. Such stories were plentiful.

Then the famine came. The scarcer the produce became, the more often the commissar would appear in Illazar's yard, dressed in a black leather tunic and flanked by soldiers in Red Army budenovka hats carrying Mosin-Nagant rifles.

"The starving need help, comrade Illazar. It's necessary, you know. You must have reserves."

"You came last week. How much do you want to take?"

"All the cows."

"How will my family live? What will we eat tomorrow?"

"We have our orders, comrade."

"Orders, orders..." Illazar would sign. "And how much are you going to pay me for five cows, mister comrade?"

"Three hundred rubles is the proper price!" the commissioner would declare. "And only because we've come to you before and you always cooperate."

"Three hundred? A pound of meat goes for two hundred thousand at the market, and even that's a deal. And you're offering me three hundred for five cows. You can't even buy a box of matches for that."

"Your call, comrade."

"I understand." Illazar would sign in grief, watching the sky where God was supposed to reside. How could He allow such things to happen?

And he would comply.

Sooner or later, storm clouds are swept away by the wind. The first sign of improvement were rumors that the authorities were allowing artels to be established. The word was widely understood. Artels were cooperatives that gathered former merchants, traders and craftsmen under their roofs. This was the start of NEP – the New Economic Policy.

Jewish schools started to open. The first textbook in the Jewish-Tat language was published in Baku in 1921. Jews started to return to Makhachkala, which had lost nearly half its population during the civil war. Nearly two thousand people came back home.

Those who managed to retain their capital, opened shops, stores or drinking establishments. Illazar, who hadn't moved throughout these trying times, continuing to live in Buynaksk, as Temir-Khan-Shura was now called, perked up. He hired helpers, got some horses, and once again opened kosher butcher shops at the market. It seemed that the troubles had passed.

That very year Melke gave birth to Hezgie's second child - a son whom they named Yusuf, or Joseph (though he was dubbed 'Panovich' at home). Another addition to the family came two years later - with the birth of his younger brother Daniil. And two years after that their sister Raya entered the world.

In 1928, Melke brought joy to all the households and delivered another girl. Hezgie saw the girl and blessed the heavens for sending him such gifts. They called the child Turunge, a name that would subsequently be changed to the Russian Tatiana.

The masterful midwife helped Melke through three more births, allowing another son, Zachar, and two daughters, Rosa (Tomor) and Sveta to join the family.

The children needed to be raised and tended to. Hezgie and Illazar did all they could to feed the growing clan.

Difficulties aside, things were going relatively well. But just as the people started to believe that life was possible under the Soviets, new challenges rumbled in. New slogans overtook the newspapers, peppered with the word 'collectivization'. Portraits of Comrade Stalin started appearing in cities across the entirety of Russia.

Mountain Jews started being rounded up into collectives. Synagogues were closed, rabbis arrested. The alphabet of the Holy Tongue was declared illegal.

The rich and wealthy - in other words, successful businessmen, were suddenly viewed as dangerous by the authorities.

Famine started to reappear in certain Russian cities, and produce and valuables were once again being seized. Just as in the early 1920s, Illazar's cattle were seized and his shop shut down.

The Requisitioning Commissariat was established in the former home of the trader Yelizarov, and was avoided by the locals from then on, as if it was a plague-ridden cemetery. Everything began with the arrival of comrade Yenakurov, the chairman of the Council of Elected Workers' Representatives. He appointed Rahaev, a member of the local Jewish community, as his deputy.

As first order of business, the chairman demanded a list of the wealthy, which was topped by the Abramov family. They decided to start with them.

After a day, Rahaev complained to Yenakurov:

"The soldiers returned from Abramov's empty handed. The old man didn't give them a thing."

"How is that possible? He has more than anyone!" wondered Yenakurov, looking over the list.

"He's saying that he gave everything he had to the Soviet authorities. The family's big, the kids are small, they need to eat."

"He's lying," the commissar replied confidently. "Why do we bother with him? He sitting there, stuffing himself quietly, while the working man starves. If he doesn't want to cooperate, conduct a full seizure, take away the contraband, and all that."

"He really did give up a lot," Rahaev noted.

He remembered very well who had helped the Bolsheviks.

"Stop protecting your own. He gave up a lot, hid even more," Yenakurov said dismissively. "Stop messing around with him. Keep in mind, the Party's goal is to exterminate the kulak way, wipe it from memory. If you're easy on them, things won't go well for you. So decide quickly what to do with the aspiring capitalist accomplice."

Rahaev rubbed his temples, as one would during an intense headache. Few people knew how to talk like that.

"Maybe extermination is too extreme for the first offense. Perhaps talking some sense into him will work."

The next day, Rahaev summoned Illazar Abramov.

Illazar appeared at the requested time. The venerable man was told to wait in the hallway without even a chair to sit in. About an hour passed before the door opened and Rahaev's head emerged from the crack:

"Come in, Illazar!"

In the office, Yenakurov sat directly under a portrait of Lenin, behind a bunting-draped oak table left behind by its previous owner. Rahaev sat in a chair across from him. The secretary – a Komsomol member, according to the pin on his blue shirt – pored over paperwork at a smaller desk in the corner.

Yenakurov didn't bother with a foreword:

"Comrade Illazar! People say you're resisting the will of the working people! Why aren't you giving up your cattle?"

Illazar coughed, then adjusted the cartridge belts on his cherkeska.

"My yard is empty. You know this."

"So it appears – there really isn't much by the house. But you're hiding something."

"I'm not hiding anything. There isn't anything to hide..."

"The neighbors say they can hear two cows mooing in your barn."

"Not two, but one. I'm saving it for my family. I have seven grandchildren. What do I need to do to make you understand that I have nothing more left?"

The Commissar's face turned crimson red, the veins on his neck pulsating.

"Don't you dare defy the Soviet authority, Illazar!" Yenakurov shouted. "Let your conscience tell us whether you've given up everything."

"To the last ram."

“So you don’t want to give it up voluntarily? You’re supposed to have cattle in distant pastures. How many units, huh? He has grandchildren... And what about the children swollen from starvation – the ones by the Volga, and by the Don? Don’t you feel sorry for them? You Bai freak... Kulak scum... I’ll...”

Yenakurov’s face turned stiff.

Noticing the turn things took, the confused Rahaev kept shifting his glance between the commissar and Illazar.

“People are saying that you’re trading gold on the sly, Illazar,” Rahaev chimed in. “Perhaps you really have given up your cattle, but you’ve kept the gold.”

“You aren’t an ally of the new authority, Illazar!” Yenakurov exploded. “You’re its enemy. You’re a kulak!”

Illazar’s eyes got dark with anger. First his cattle, then his shop. Now they wanted to take whatever was left. His heart beat faster, and a piercing pain overtook his head. For a second, he couldn’t hear anything. The room grew blurry, and his vision went dark.

The commissar noticed how Illazar grew pale and unsteady and froze, not knowing what to do in this situation. Even here in the office, Abramov managed to break Yenakurov’s protocol. The frightened Rahaev watched the insubordinate.

“Can you hear us, Illazar?”

Illazar struggled to compose his breathing.

“Think about it. Let us know when decide,” Rahaev said.

Yenakurov angrily glanced at the old man and motioned to the secretary, who ran out of the room and returned with an escort.

“Lock up the dissenter!” the commissar said briskly.

Illazar’s head started spinning again. It seemed that he had been arrested. He struggled to breathe, running catastrophically short on air. When the escort shoved him from behind, Illazar nearly fell over.

“Walk, move, don’t delay,” a rude voice echoed from somewhere far away.

Illazar felt the right side of this body grow numb. Slowly dragging his leg behind him and using his last bit of strength to maintain his balance in front of his offenders, he headed for the exit.

“Tell my daughter,” he said hoarsely.

No one replied.

The escort led Illazar out into the yard and locked him up in a barn with its windows boarded over. The prisoner tried to reach the bale of hay in the corner, but didn’t have the strength to do so.

Once they were alone, Yenakurov looked at his deputy.

“Why are you looking at me like that? What? Did you believe that that kulak gave us everything?

“He isn’t a kulak. He sold meat before the revolution. The whole city went to him.”

“Same damn thing. He’s the enemy – a dissident! Why are you going soft on me?”

“I know his family well. He gave money to my mother when we had nothing to eat.”

“So? Is that a reason to lose the global revolution? If we keep pitying them, we won’t gather anything. I have a party-approved plan of confiscated goods I need to fulfill!”

Yenakurov suddenly paused, like a card player who has an ace in the hole, then lifted his index finger.

“Semichastnyi, come here!” he shouted.

A soldier ran into the office. Semichastnyi was in charge of a squad that handled the confiscation of so-called “non-labor surpluses” from wealthy citizens.

“Here’s what needs to be done, Semichastnyi. Send people to Illazar’s home immediately, while we have him locked up. We’ll get them while they’re hot. Write a mandate for a search. The gold should be there! Tell your men to search thoroughly!”

“Yes sir!”

“Stop!”

The soldier froze.

Yenakurov carefully looked at his deputy.

“You know what, Rahaev? Let’s go there. I’ll show you myself how to handle kulak scum.”

In about an hour, Yenakurov, Rahaev, the secretary and four Red Army soldiers rode to the Abramov home. The soldiers walked in first, guns ready.

The frightened Duhai looked outside, having heard the noise. Upon seeing armed men, she hid behind the door and started yelling.

“Hezgie, Melke! Soldiers!”

Hezgie jumped out into the yard, Melke standing scared behind him. Yenakurov saw them and growled:

“Stop right there!”

Melke and Hezgie froze.

“Everyone out into the yard,” the commissar commanded.

The Abramovs complied.

“You weren’t expecting guests?” the commissar went on, grinning. “I guess you weren’t. But we warned you, didn’t we – the Soviet authorities are here for a while. Right, Rahaev?” He turned to his deputy. Rahaev just stood there, avoiding locking eyes with Melke, whom he had known since they were kids.

“Well, citizen,” the commissar went on. “Empty the coffers. Whatever you’re hiding in the cellar, too. Everything!”

Rahaev watched his commander in fear.

“Search the house!” Yenakurov ordered.

The soldiers scattered around the property. Two ran into the house and started scouring room after room. They tore apart pillows, tipped over jugs.

Yenakurov strolled into the spacious home and toured the rooms. He stopped in the largest one – the women’s room,

which housed several chests and an enormous wooden table with menorahs.

“What’s in there?” Yenakurov asked, pointing at the chests.

The soldiers compliantly moved onto the chests. They broke the locks with the butts of their guns, lifted the lids, and began to toss out the neatly folded clothes, as Yenakurov looked on indifferently.

“What are you doing?” Duhai yelled, unable to restrain herself.

She rushed at the soldiers, but Melke held her back.

Yenakurov let out a satisfied cackle. He made a few more trips around the room, looking over the walls, the floor, the ceiling. He then started jumping up and down on the floorboards, trying different spots around the room. They wouldn’t budge - not even a creak.

“Interesting,” Yenakurov mumbled.

He walked up to one of the chests and lifted a long black shawl with the tip of his little finger. He threw it into the air, caught it, then bent over and used it to wipe his dusty boots. He shut the lid and plopped down on it, watching as the soldiers ransack the house.

“Bring over all the men in the house!” Yenokurov told the deputy, who never left his side.

“Hezgie!” Rahaev yelled.

Hezgie nervously walked into the room.

“Where’s the gold you’re trading?”

Hezgie looked at Yenakurov and Rahaev in astonishment, saying nothing. The commissar got up, paced across the room again, stomped on the floor several more times, then tossed aside the rug. He looked over the floorboards, then turned to the soldier that stood closest to him.

“Rip the floor apart!” He stomped on the floor. “Right here.”

The women gasped in terror, looking at Hezgie, who looked toward the sky. The soldiers dislodged the floorboards

with the bayonets, ripping them off one by one, revealing a small cache. Yenakurov smiled, then bent over and rummaged to find a small sack, cinched by a rope.

“Cut it,” he ordered.

The soldier cut the sack with one fluid motion. Rahaev took out a jug, its top covered with wax and removed the seal. It was filled to the brim with gold coins.

Yenakurov smiled maliciously. He looked at Hezgie carefully, then laid a piece of cloth on the table and carefully poured out the jug’s contents. The commissar sternly looked at his subordinates. Their eyes were glued to the gold.

“Well? Why did you stop? Did you search everything?”

“Everything. There’s nothing else,” the senior soldier said. “Just rags.”

“Understood. Take this.” Yenakurov motioned at the gold. “Hezgie will go with us.”

Melke started bawling, and Duhai followed.

One of the younger Red Army men put a bayonet to Hezgie’s back and ordered him to get into the cart.

The prisoner was taken to the same boarded up barn where Illazar was thrown a few hours before the search. At first, Hezgie saw nothing. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, however, he was able to discern a body lying on the floor and rushed to it. To his horror, he recognized his father in law.

“Illazar! Illazar, what have they done to you?”

Hezgie started shaking him, trying to bring him back to consciousness. Illazar slowly opened his eyes.

“Illazar, are you alive?” Hezgie didn’t know what to do. He ran to the door and started pounding on it, yelling “Open up! Open up! A man’s dying in here!”

After what felt like an eternity, a soldier appeared at the door.

“Why are you yelling?”

“Illazar’s sick. He’s unconscious,” Hezgie shouted.

The soldier approached Illazar and looked at his face.

"He seems to be breathing," the soldier noted, and quickly left.

The doctor showed up five minutes later. He bent over the prostrate old man, listened to his heard, then turned to the soldier:

"He had a stroke," he said. "He needs to go to the hospital immediately. I'm going to Yenakurov."

"Ah!" Hezgie shouted.

He wanted to jump out the barn and scream for help, but the soldier pointed his rifle at him.

"Where do you think you're going? Stop right there!"

Meanwhile, the doctor went to Yenakurov with his report.

The commissar and his secretary were occupied with counting the coins they seized from Illazar's home, Yenakurov visibly enjoying himself. The doctor coughed to get their attention and summarized Illazar's condition.

"It makes no sense to hold him under arrest. He may not live until the trial," the doctor concluded.

Yenakurov was genuinely upset, not out of pity for the old man, but because his dreams of reprisal had been dashed. Putting a feeble man on trial was uninteresting and nonsensical. It would bring him no joy. He did, however, still have Hezgie.

Yenakurov dismissed the doctor and descended into deep thought. He later called the secretary and started dictating a decree, shutting the door to his office. The happy commissar opened the door a half hour later, turning to the secretary, who was still digging through paperwork.

"I want everything to be done my noon tomorrow," he told him on his way out. "You'll head out in the morning. Understood?"

"Yes sir, comrade commissar!" the secretary yelled.

"Just make sure everything's legal," Yenakurov added strictly. "We don't dabble in self-governance."

He then called a soldier.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” the commissar instructed. “You’re going to go to the Abramovs’ home – the one where we arrested two people today. You’ll tell the daughter to come get her old man. That we’re done with him and he’s free. Everyone should know that the Soviet authority is the most humane in the world.”

The frightened Melke, visited by the soldiers late at night as she was caring for the children, didn’t know whether to rejoice or scream at the news that her father was free to go, but was too sick to walk and needed to be picked up. She quickly got ready and headed for the Executive Committee.

Her questions about what happened to Hezgie fell on deaf ears. While Melke bawled, her father was dragged out of the Soviet Executive Committee building, half conscious, by two soldiers and placed on the cart that stood by the entrance. Seeing Illazar in this state, Melke screamed. The man, who was a powerful presence just that morning, was a wreck.

She and her mother barely dragged the sick man into the house and into his bed. They couldn’t imagine what would happen to him next. Duhai fussed over her husband, trying to wake him into consciousness, while Melke repeated, over and over, that God wouldn’t abandon them.

The next morning, Melke headed back to the commissariat. A guard stood by the entrance.

“My husband was arrested yesterday. I brought him his things. How can I see him?”

“That’s a question for Commissar Yenakurov. He’s in charge. You have to wait for him,” the guard retorted.

Melke waited for over an hour for Yenakurov’s arrival.

“Where’s my husband, Hezgie? Give me back my husband!” Melke screamed as she threw herself at the commissar. “And what did you do to my father, huh?”

“Quiet, citizen! Quit yelling!”

Melke calmed down.

"This isn't my decision – it's a legal matter. Your husband is a criminal – an enemy of the Soviet regime. As to your father, we let him go, as you know. We're a humane authority."

"Give Hezgie back," Melke said, over and over, struggling with her Russian.

"Your husband will be detained until the court decides what to do with him."

"What did he do? Let him go! He's a peaceful man. He didn't hurt anyone."

An evil smile came over Yenakurov's face.

"Peaceful as he may be, he was still hiding gold. Don't tell me you didn't know! Keep yelling, and we'll detain you as an accomplice."

Melke was dumbfounded.

"Why would you detain me? What are you talking about?"

"Then we agree. This conversation is over. Go away."

"What did we do? My father has been doing this his whole life," Melke continued, refusing to back down. "The czar didn't put him in jail, why did you? You've made him completely sick!"

Melke's Russian wasn't strong, and she always paused to look for words.

"I told you, this conversation is over," Yenakurov replied, now frowning. "You're wasting your time. You're not going to get your husband. If I were you, I'd run home. Otherwise, you might miss something important."

Melke didn't understand the specifics of what the man said, but decided that staying was a lost cause. She headed back.

As she approached home, something felt wrong. Coming through the gate, she saw Red Army soldiers. A young Kom-somol member stood out front and recited loudly, at no one in particular: "By decree of the Buynaksk Executive Com-

mittee of the People's Commissar, stolen property, including the home and other goods, will be confiscated."

Pillows, mattresses and blankets were flying out of the open windows.

Melke rushed into the house. Duhai stood there, holding the frightened children next to her, while the soldiers scurried about.

"Mama, what happened?" Melke asked, then ran to the soldiers. "What are you doing?"

"Melke, we've been kicked out! What for? What are they doing?" Duhai repeated over and over, in a trance.

The kids started screaming.

The soldiers used the butts of their guns to push them out of the house.

And so, in the span of a single day, poor Melke lost her family home and nearly lost her father. It seemed like life was over.

"Mama, don't cry," Melke whispered, holding Duhai tightly. "We'll go to Anzhi. We'll get out of here. There's a house there. The commissar here doesn't know about it."

Illazar had a home in Makhachkala – or Anzhi, as it was called before the revolution – the capital of Dagestan, which he stopped in when he went there on business.

The women and children reached Anzhi by evening. The city seemed nearly deserted – not a sound or person in the street. Melke quickly found the house – 16 Suleiman Stalski Street. They opened the gate, went in, and sighed in relief. They had no more tears left to cry. At least there was a roof over their heads. As for the rest, God would send something.

And so they started over in the new place.

God had not abandoned them after all. Once Melke made Illazar comfortable and put the children to sleep, Melke and Duhai sat down to rest after a busy day.

“There’s a roof over our heads,” the daughter told the mother, nervously, “but I can’t imagine how we’re going to feed the children. Whatever we took from home will last us several days, a week at most. What will we do then? To be fair, people in Anzhi do appear to be better off than the others. They appear to have managed to save this and that,” Melke continued, gradually growing calmer as she discussed the situation further. “We need to find Illazar’s partners. We can borrow from them for the time being. What do you think, mama?” Melke asked Duhai, who sat silently.

“I think that it’s too early to start pestering. If we need to, Illazar can turn to them when he regains his strength.”

Melke looked at her mother curiously.

“I haven’t told anyone of what happened, or felt the need to do so, because, quite honestly, ignorance is bliss,” Duhai continued, saddened. “Besides, there ‘s a place where we can get money.”

“Where? Did father have partners I didn’t know about?”

“No.”

“So who will help us?”

“Not, ‘who,’ but ‘what’. Our old house in Buynaksk. There’s gold there.”

“What gold? They took everything.”

“Not everything was inside the house. Illazar and I thought about that a while ago. I put some aside – a portion of the gold. It’s buried in the garden, under the walnut tree. I doubt they found it. It should still be there.”

Melke listened in disbelief.

“We need to go tomorrow.”

“No, daughter. Wait. Let the passions cool. We’ll wait a few days and go. We also need to find someone to care for the children and Illazar. He’s still much too weak.”

In a few days, Duhai and Melke asked one of their relatives to live in their home and keep an eye on Illazar and the

kids for a few days and set off to Buynaksk, taking along Anya, Melke's eldest daughter.

The trip to the city was uneventful. They stayed with friends, and asked around the neighborhood to find out what happened in their absence. Hezgie, unfortunately, was still in jail. Their home, however, simply stood empty, which was great news. They could proceed with their plan.

In the evening, after leaving Anya with the neighbors, Melke and Duhai grabbed necessary supplies and, trying to stay as silent as possible, set out to their ransacked house.

The two women entered the garden and stopped by the old walnut tree. Once her mother showed her the spot, Melke started digging. It wasn't too long before the shovel struck something solid.

"We found it!" Duhai whispered happily.

Melke carefully unearthed a jewelry box wrapped in burlap. Making sure they weren't being watched, the women cautiously grabbed their priceless find and hurried back.

In the morning, the women thanked their hosts for their hospitality and prepared to return to Anzhi. They had to think of a way to transport the gold, as carrying an unconcealed jewelry box was too risky. They decided to wrap it inside a shawl, then cinched it around Anya's waist like a girdle. If they happened to be stopped by Yenakurov's people on the way, they would likely not resort to searching a child.

The road home was smooth, with no surprises. When they stepped back into their new home, the travelers sighed in relief. Death by starvation was no longer a risk.

Illazar gradually recovered, the ailment being no match for his strong mountaineer body. Hezgie's fate, however, was of great concern. What would happen to him, and how could they help?

"Life is just," Duhai reassured her daughter. "It always puts everything in its place."

One of Illazar's oldest friends, Yesef, met a similar fate as the butcher's family. Everything was taken, trade was banned and he had to subsist on bread and water, living off the remainders of his capital.

Noticing that Illazar's home had smoke coming out of the chimney, he came to check whether the master had returned. Duhai recognized him right away. She asked Melke to set the table, led the guest into the kunak room, and recounted her horrifying story. Yesef could do little more than shake his head while hearing of the misfortune that befell Illazar's family.

At the end of the story, Duhai blurted out in agony:

"I have no idea what to do now. How will we live without breadwinners? What will happen to the children?"

"Now, now," Yesef placated her. "Everything will settle down. Illazar's with you – that's already half the battle. And you appear to have bread. All in all, things could be worse."

"It only seems like that, Yesef," Melke remarked.

"As to Hezgie, I can try to find out more. I have many friends in Buynaksk. Someone will help. If he's still in the city jail, that means they don't know what to do with him. And if they don't know, then they'll be open to suggestions. That's my opinion," Yesef said reassuringly.

"If you can help, Yesef, I will be forever grateful," Melke said ardently.

"Well, I'll do what I can." The old man hesitated and rolled his eyes.

Melke caught on.

"Wait." She ran out of the room and returned in a few minutes, putting a gold coin in front of the guest. The venerable man smiled upon seeing the gold.

"Clearly Illazar's daughter," he said in a raspy voice. "Takes after her father. A house that has gold has strength. I can help."

With that, they parted ways.

As the old man promised, he had certain connections left in Buynaksk. He set off there a few days after and returned after a week. Melke waited impatiently to hear of any developments.

“Your Hezgie’s still in jail,” Yesef began, “in the same place they initially put him. They’re feeding him bread and water, and no one knows what will happen next. People say that the madman Yenakurov is planning to put him to trial.”

“What can we do? How do we take care of this?” Melke asked, frowning.

“People will always remain people, regardless of their government,” Yesef replied cryptically.

“What do you mean?” Melke asked.

“Gold. Those who can resist its power are few and far between. Yenakurov is made of the same stuff as you and I. The only difference is that he’s also hungry. You know what that means?”

“What?”

“It means that he’s greedy. Only he has the power to free Hezgie.”

“How do you expect him to free Hezgie? He’s the one that put him there.”

“Exactly. He just needs motivation. You think he hasn’t dreamt of living in the house he evicted you from? We need to strike a bargain with him.”

“How do we get to him?”

“That part’s up to me. Give me fifteen gold coins. I think that will be enough to buy out your husband.

Melke pondered this for a while, then left the kunak room. She was absent for a while, then returned and silently put the coins in front of her father’s friend. Yesef gathered the coins into a leather purse he customarily carried on his belt.

“Three of the fifteen are mine,” he said. “The rest are for the commissar.”

Melke nodded.

“Wait for me.” Those were the last words the guest said before he left.

Hours and days of tantalizing suspense followed. Not a single word was heard from Yesef. Melke began to think that the old man himself was arrested, and that the gold disappeared along with Hezgie. Duhai never stopped praying, crying over Illazar, who suddenly took a turn for the worse.

The women nearly lost hope when Melke happened to look into the yard and saw Hezgie standing there by his lonesome. She rushed outside and ran to her husband. Tears rolled down both spouses’ cheeks as they embraced.

The family gradually adjusted to the new place. This was, of course, a far cry from their former life: the house was smaller, the troubles more plentiful. They didn’t have a well in their yard in Anzhi, so getting water involved a distant trip to a fountain. Sometimes Melke doubted that her and Duhai could continue to run a house like this. Hezgie, on the other hand, was lucky to get a job as a warehouse guard.

After about two years they received unexpected news of Yenakurov’s arrest. Men in leather tunics came and took him from his home in whatever he was wearing. People say that he was executed by firing squad for embezzlement. Someone had informed the authorities that the commissar pocketed part of the property confiscated from those he dubbed ‘enemies of the people.’

And thus that story ended. As a wise book says, ‘everyone has their time, their misery, their happiness and reward.’

XI

The advent of the new authority didn't only bring misery and ruin. Melke's friend once told her that all children would be educated in schools free of charge, under the 'vseobuch' program. She had trouble with both pronouncing the strange Russian name and believing that such a thing was possible. It always cost a fair bit of money to educate a boy at the synagogue, and here they were giving knowledge away for free. This was quite unusual.

To their surprise, the rumors were true. The first seven-year schools started opening in the city and attendance was mandatory. Anya was the first to attend school. This became a turning point for life in the traditional Jewish family, in which girls were condemned to a life of housework. The teachers praised Anya, and suggested that the parents allow the bright girl to continue her education at a university.

An education? At a university? For Hezgie, who valued a person's education most of all, this was an extraordinary

notion. Living long enough to witness this was more than he could have ever dreamed of.

Yusuf was next to attend school. Everyone in the family called him 'Panovich'. God knows why he got that nickname. Schooling was conducted in Russian. Therefore, what seemed unattainable to Melke ten years ago, was happening within the ordinary course of things. While the older children studied, the younger ones helped their mother around the house. The little Turunge was especially diligent, never sitting still for even a moment.

The girl quickly picked up her mother's household mannerisms. She may have only turned seven, but she already knew how to make churek batter and cook up lye for the laundry. She was growing up to be a carbon copy of her mother, hustling and bustling around the home as an adult would.

Misery struck the Abramov home in 1935. Arriving home, Melke heard hoarse moaning coming from her father's room. She rushed in, seeing Illazar lying on the floor. He had had another stroke while Duhai was tending to the garden. The doctor was called, but medicine was powerless this time around.

Illazar never recovered from the brain hemorrhage and died after several months. Duhai took her husband's passing with great difficulty. Grief aged her rapidly. She grew frail, and ailments rushed in as if they sat there waiting for that very moment.

It wasn't long after her husband's death, that Duhai also passed away.

Nevertheless, misery always goes hand in hand with joy, which was brought into the Abramov home by Melke and Hezgie's oldest daughter Anya. While still in school, she befriended a boy name Alyosha from the Shcherbatov family, also Mountain Jews. Sasun, his father, was the section chief at the canned goods plant, which, at the time, put him in a very financially secure position. The parents noticed their chil-

dren's friendship, and at one point Alyosha's father appeared at Melke and Hezgie's home.

Anya's parents discerned the purpose of the important guest's visit right away. A ceremonial exchange of niceties followed, after which Sasun got to his agenda.

"Hezgie, our children have been friends for several years. I've been thinking about Alyosha's future and reached a conclusion: he won't be able to find a better girl. I would like to betroth your daughter to your son. Why don't we join families?"

Hezgie nodded and smiled, spreading his arms.

"That's probably the right decision, Sasun. Why not – if the children treat each other well. The parents, however, only guide – the heart chooses for itself. I'm for it, but I must ask Anya if she wants this as well. You must understand that my daughter is planning to continue studying."

The groom's father started placating Hezgie, assuring him that his daughter's wishes would be fulfilled.

After a week, the Scherebatovs, father and son, came to see the bride. Anya came out, greeted them, and said right away that she has no intention to marry, as she plans to enroll at an institute.

"If I'm not allowed to finish my education, I will not live with Alyosha," the girl said curtly.

In earlier times, it was unthinkable for a daughter to defy her parents. But life changed abruptly in those years.

The groom's father agreed:

"Anya, I give you my word that you will continue your education if you and Alyosha join destinies."

And so it was decided.

In 1935, while Illazar was still alive, Alyosha and Anya had a wedding. Sasun kept his word and helped his daughter-in-law enroll in the extramural division of the Financial and Economic Institute of Rostov-on-Don. That's how Anya

Abramova began to study accounting. Thirty years or so before that it was impossible to imagine a similar fate for a girl from a simple Jewish family, and Melke and Hezgie were happy over such great fortune.

A year after the wedding, Anya got pregnant. Edik, Melke and Hezgie's first grandson, was born into the family in 1937. The happiness was intoxicating. The clan grew bigger.

Another year and a half later Anya gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Susanna, and a third child just before graduating from the institute, Valery. One would have thought that Anya would abandon her studies, but she did not. As promised, Alyosha's family made sure that their daughter received a degree and a diploma.

That happened in 1941.

Melke, and especially Hezgie, could barely contain their joy. 'Higher education' – the phrase made the young woman's father's heart beat faster. Anya fluently spoke and wrote in Russian, as a most educated Rabbi would prior to the revolution.

Right after graduating Anya took the position an assistant accountant at the commodity base in Makhachkala, where she excelled, to everyone's surprise, showing initiative, confidence and knowledge. She was noticed, and soon enough the young specialist was promoted to head accountant.

A talent for business blossomed in the young woman. Anya made new introductions and necessary connections. In the face of the emerging deficit in the Soviet Union, she learned how to, as they say, 'hustle', understanding how to avoid supply chain delays under the conditions of socialist property, where nothing belonged to anyone.

There, at work, she met Nahamye Babaev, also a Mountain Jew. He would occasionally visit Anya's workplace, as the base provided materials to the sewing cooperative where he oversaw supply.

Nahamy'e's attention turned to the energetic Anya Shcherbatova.

Meanwhile, Daniil, the Abramovs' second son, graduated from school. Following his older sister's advice, he set off to Rostov-on-Don to enroll in the Agricultural Institute. A new city, new friends, new knowledge – all were impossible for the inquisitive guy not to like.

Raya Abramova got her high school diploma soon after. As with her older sister, her marriage to a young man from the famous Pashayev clan was arranged while she was still in school. Melke and Hezgie consented to the marriage, and, after a merry and lavish wedding, Raya moved in with her husband.

Like Anya, she didn't quit learning. After taking some legal courses, she used her husband's connections to become an assistant at the Dagestan Prosecutor's Office. Melke beamed with happiness. Her older daughters and son reached the goals set by her and Hezgie and were educated.

One by one, the older children left the nest. The younger kids were already able to look after one another. They were three great girls: Turunge, Roza and Sveta. Happily, they ran and rampaged the household.

Turunge, the oldest of the three, became Melke's main household helper.

"Turunge, get some water, then make the dough," Melke would instruct.

"Alright!" the quick Turunge would answer and run swiftly in to the pantry that housed the large tub of water.

Whenever Melke left home, Turunge would take on her mother's mannerisms, put on her kerchief, and the household theatre would start.

"Roza, fluff up the pillows! Sveta, air out the blanket! Roza, bring some water. Sveta, make the dough."

Turunge had a funny knack for imitating her mother's gestures and cadence.

“Sveta, Roza! Why is there dirt in the house? Grab the brooms at once and sweep up!”

The two little ones would grab brooms that were taller than them and start sweeping.

Other girls would cower at their fathers’ appearance, laying lower than grass, standing stiller than water, but not Turunge.

Even when Hezgie would arrive home after the night shift to witness her taking charge over her younger sisters, Turunge wouldn’t change her tone:

“Father, we’re cleaning! Mama told us to do so!”

“Okay, okay, darling, I’m not going to get in your way,” Hezgie would reply with a smile and head into his room.

Just as he never contradicted Melke, Hezgie didn’t interfere with his daughter’s self-expression. Overall, Hezgie didn’t care much about who ran the house. The point of life, in his opinion, was in the reading of holy books and praying for his family and friends.

Three hours would pass, and it would be time for lunch. Turunge would send Sveta or Roza to her father.

“Father, lunch is ready, come to the table!” the little one would say.

“I’m coming, darling,” Hezgie would answer, smiling.

When her mother wasn’t home, Turunge made sure that her father didn’t go to work hungry. She would pack his lunch, always trying to stealthily sneak a treat into his bag so that he would have a pleasant surprise to have with tea.

Hezgie loved tea with honey most of all, and that’s why Turunge would slip him pieces of honeycomb, so that he could spoil himself with his favorite delicacy. Hezgie loved these pleasant surprises. Looking at his daughter, he would always think about the fortunate twist of fate that made Turunge the oldest child that lived at home.

So ended May of 1941.

XII

On a beautiful June morning, Hezgie, having finished his shift at the warehouse, took his usual route home. The weather was warm and summery. Heat had not yet begun to torture Makhachkala.

Hezgie intentionally slowed his pace in order to enjoy this time of year. A light breeze flew in from the sea. Time appeared to have stopped.

Suddenly, raspy static started emanating from the bell of the loudspeaker, which hung atop a street pole, followed by the announcer's thunderous voice: 'Moscow is speaking! Moscow is speaking!'

Hezgie stopped. Makhachkala had had radio for a while now, but it would either play music or stay silent. Hezgie paced around in place, afraid to miss something important. People started to gather around him, all looking at the black loudspeaker.

"Citizens!" a loud male voice spoke after a bout of coughing. "Today, at five a.m., without a declaration of war, a portion of the German army attacked our borders in multiple places."

People glanced around. The voice continued, and the further it progressed into its speech, the ghostlier the quiet, sunny day seemed, with its birdsongs and children's voices. In the blink of an eye, everything turned unreal, as reality was now contained in a single word: 'war'.

Somewhere by the western border of the USSR planes were flying, and the deafening whine of diving bombers sliced through the air. And despite the fact that there was no bombing in Makhachkala and people had no idea what a column of tanks looked like on the road, everyone felt queasy and scared. German invaders proceeded deeper into the country.

Hezgie hurried home, nearly running, not quite knowing what he was rushing to do. He burst through the door. As always, Melke was busy in the kitchen, taking chureks out of the oven.

"They said on the radio..." Hezgie muttered, out of breath. "War started."

Melke put the chureks aside and looked at her husband in disbelief.

"What?"

"War!"

"What war? When? Who with?"

"With Germany..."

Melke gave Hezgie a baffled look. She wasn't too sure where Germany was. All this seemed infinitely far from her kitchen and the usual problems – far from peaceful life. But Hezgie's eyes said it all: something horrible was happening. Melke sat down.

"What now?"

"I don't know."

Melke grew pale. Both her and Hezgie thought about their sons.

“Dear Lord, what did we do to deserve this?”

Free will was paralyzed by a terrifying thought: ‘None of this depends on us.’ Hezgie suppressed the treacherous temptation. No, only the strength of the holy texts can protect them; it alone can provide peace and salvation, as it did when he was in jail, locked in a warehouse awaiting an imminent walk in front of the firing squad. Prayer helped then. He was certain: praying was all there was left to do. ‘Trust and hope...’ he said to himself. He firmly repeated this to Melke, she to the small children, who couldn’t grasp why their parents were so scared.

Life in the city remained practically unchanged in the first days of war. But as soon as a week later, men aged eighteen to thirty started being called to the front.

Reprieve from the draft, or – as it was called then – ‘armor’, was given to students and those who worked at enterprises that provided supplies for the battlefield. Life, however, still managed to find a balance between war and peace. Institutes, hospitals and schools operated as usual. Only strategically important factories were given a third shift, to ensure round-the-clock production.

Melke fussed around the house, when the mailwoman knocked on the door, came in, and handed her a form, briefly saying “A writ for Yusuf Abramov. Please sign for it.”

Melke examined the paper, but couldn’t discern anything of use. The word ‘writ’ was terrifying enough to rid her of vision. The world quickly shrank to the borders, behind which certain death loomed. The front awaited her sons.

The notice floated down from Melke’s suddenly incontinent hands, like a paper airplane. The mailwoman picked it up and, spoke, almost apologetically:

“Such a time we live in. War.”

Time was precisely what Melke was thinking of at that moment. Perhaps it was better for Yusuf to not return home

at all today. Perhaps he should leave the city for somewhere – wherever – only so that he wouldn't have to see that damned paper.

But God did not heed her prayers this time around, and Yusuf arrived shortly after the mailwoman left.

Melke wailed throughout the entire day that Yusuf was allotted for packing, as she gathered food, looked for and packed a piece of soap, the perilous razor, clean underwear. She tried to shift her thoughts to household concerns, but couldn't. Everything that used to seem important lost its significance. Her son – her Yusuf – was leaving for war!

The thought made her heart beat faster, a lump crawling toward her throat.

Days quickly passed. They decided that they wouldn't see Yusuf all the way to the recruiting station. Standing at the gate and watching her son walk away with a knapsack over his shoulder, Melke bit down on the corner of her kerchief to keep herself from crying. As soon as Yusuf rounded the corner she lost control and ran, filling the street with a loud wail of loss and grief.

Next morning, as Turunge brushed her mother's hair, she noticed a silver strand for the first time:

"You're going gray, mama!"

Melke looked at the girl resignedly and whispered:

"My daughter! If only this wretched war would end soon."

She held Turunge tightly and began to cry. Turunge looked at her with fear-filled eyes, stroking her hair and repeating:

"Mama! He'll be back. You'll see."

Turunge finished the third grade, and no one was sure whether the next school year would begin. Melke once ran into a friend, whose daughter taught at the school. She told her that the teachers – men of conscription age – were already called into the army, and it was unclear who would take their place in the fall.

Melke returned home, upset.

“What happened?” Hezgie said, frightened.

Melke simply waved him off. The news that the new school year may not happen meant that the war would go on for more than a day or two.

Hezgie tried to placate her to no avail. Melke thought about how fate would treat her Yusuf. Looking at her suffering, all that Hezgie could do was pray about his older son.

At the end of the summer, the first evacuees started appearing in Makhachkala. They brought news of what was happening beyond the bounds of the Caucasus. Refugees said that the Germans had seized Kiev, and that peril loomed over Moscow.

Soon enough, an assignment list arrived for all Abramovs over fourteen years of age. All citizens of working age were being called to labor. Melke was assigned to work as a packer at the fish cannery: to prepare shipments of fish and caviar for the battlefield.

Hezgie continued to work as a guard at the base, which was becoming filled with military uniforms, rucksacks, boots and other army goods. Strangely, not much in his life had changed, as if God temporarily decided that he had passed the trials set aside for him. He, along with the other guards, was given a rifle, which was not to leave his hands for even a second.

Melke began every morning with a prayer for Yusuf, then tended to the kitchen, the yard, the barn, the stable. Every day, she would cautiously look into the street to see if the mail-woman was coming. Her heart would skip a beat every time she encountered her. What did she have in her bag? Another writ? A letter from her son? The most terrible of news? Funeral notices were distributed daily, and every day the city would cry over the fathers, husbands, brothers and sons killed in the war.

The only joy amongst the horrors of war was the fact that Melke didn't have to worry about her middle son, Daniil, who was a exempt due to the fact that he was a student at a higher education institution.

Hezgie would routinely bring news from the front home from work. The market also became an inexhaustible source of information. Soldiers from divisions quartered in Makhachkala would gather there every Sunday. When they received their pay, the city would transform. Pilots, sailors, infantrymen – soldiers and commanders alike – would fill the streets. They would happily buy sunflower seeds, home-made wine, sausage, and would noisily haggle and joke.

The pilots seemed better taken care of than others. They could afford to buy even the very expensive meat, or trade their rationed chocolate for it.

Most trade was conducted by old men, who would arrive from the distant auls in kubankas, cherkeskas, and two rows of cartridge belts across their chests, cinched by beautiful belts, daggers tucked under them.

Their faces would change when approached by army men. Warriors at heart, they valued military valor above all. They would begin to ask: whether the war would be over soon, where they came from, where they served, what fronts had they been on or where they expected to go.

They would mention their sons' names, hopefully asking: "Have you by chance met them?"

The amused Siberian infantrymen and brave sailors from the Far East would marvel at the exotic getups of the Caucasian old men and answer that they would soon leave and sail away to fight the fascists. In response, the mountaineers would treat them to wine and wished them luck with knocking down the Germans as soon as possible and returning home alive.

Thus passed the summer. Fall came. Schools, amazingly, remained open, and Turunge and Zachar started their stud-

ies. Half of Zachar's classes, however, were canceled – there weren't enough teachers. All were called to the army.

Fall quickly transformed the town's image. Makhachkala became filled with evacuees in a matter of days. Refugees kept coming: some going on to Baku, some settling in the city, some sailing across the Caspian to Astrakhan.

The refugees ran to the market straight from the train station, having nearly starved to death. They would give up their last possessions for a loaf of bread. Women would trade expensive jewelry and other valuable for food.

One day, Anya went to the market to only find empty counters. The hungry people had swept them clean. The same happened to the shops of Makhachkala. In the matter of days, everything that even resembled food, as well as kerosene, soap, matches and salt had disappeared. Meat, bread and grain were being sold under the table at exorbitant prices.

That day, Anya returned from the market empty-handed. Melke was surprised:

"You didn't buy anything?"

"There isn't anything to buy, mama!" the daughter replied irately.

"What – they closed the market?"

"The refugees bought everything up. And they say they have no money."

"War is bringing everyone here," Hezgie remarked. "I've seen them: hungry and ragged. It's hard to look at them and not feel pain."

"And what about us?" Melke asked. "What are we going to eat?"

"We'll manage somehow... We have a yard, chickens."

"Eh!" Melke waved him off angrily, and went back to the housework with twice the effort. Her anxiety was blunted by work. When it became unbearable, she would go to her hus-

band and ask him to pray. Melke remembered Illazar's words from her childhood: 'A man's prayer is louder. It reaches God quicker.'

Hope rested on the strength of men in every case, even in prayer. Such was life.

Looking over the crowds of refugees, the family elders – Melke, Hezgie, Anya, Raya – all understood that war would not be over soon. Melke once sat down on the kitchen bench and started bawling. Anya ran to her, embraced her:

"We'll think of something. War won't last forever. Somehow, this will all end."

"When will it end? Did you hear what they're saying? The Germans are getting closer and closer."

"Well, they aren't going to get to the Caspian."

"Did you hear what the refugee from the plant told me?" Melke asked, exhausted.

"What?"

"She's from Ukraine, from Kiev. By some wonder, she managed to get here. People hid her. But all her relatives... They gathered all the Jews, took them all somewhere beyond the city. They were never seen again. Then they found out... They were all buried in deep trenches. More than thirty thousand of them. Do you understand what'll happen if they get here? They'll kill us all!"

The mother didn't notice right away the young Turunge was attentively listening to the conversation. Melke rushed to her:

"My dear girl! What am I saying? Don't be afraid, baby! Don't be afraid, my darling!"

The mother hugged Turunge.

"Why are you trembling? They won't get here. Nothing will happen to us. If anything, we'll go away from here, evacuate."

That evening, when the young kids went to bed, the elders sat in the kitchen.

"We need to do something," Melke said glumly.

"What do you suggest?" Anya asked, flailing her arms.

"Quit panicking," the father said angrily. I heard our manager at the warehouse talking – the Germans won't get past Kiev.

"Talking..." Melke echoed. "What's the use? We need to get the children as far as possible before those animals get here."

"Everyone's always trying to destroy the Jews," Hezgie whispered woefully. "All our books are about that. Yet we continue to live!" he added firmly.

"You call this life? First they separate you from the others, then they put a yellow star on your clothes, then they kill you. We're worried about food, when we should be worrying about saving ourselves."

"If it gets bad, mama, we'll go to the port. Maybe we'll get away by sea," Anya remarked.

"There's no salvation from this enemy, daughter, they'll get us anywhere we are. Look how far from Germany those damned fascists have gotten, and no one has stopped them. I have no idea what to do. They'll destroy everyone. Everyone!" Melke repeated, like an incantation.

Everyone got quiet, including Anya. Hezgie whispered something in her ear.

"Don't worry, daughter. There have been worse times. God will watch over us."

In the meantime, the enemy moved deeper into the USSR. News bulletins from the Soviet Information Bureau weren't reassuring. Hitler dreamt of Baku oil, and Makhachkala stood in his path.

A year after the war began, at the end of the summer of 1942, a group of German troops launched an offensive near Rostov-on-Don, where Daniil studied.

A great panic beset the city. People would swarm freight trains. Daniil's institute, like many institutions was evacuated

last. By some wonder, he managed to get on a train – not inside, but atop the roof – and reach Makhachkala. Daniil walked through his home city not recognizing the streets, not seeing a single familiar face.

He started inquiring about the fate of his friends, his comrades. Most of his peers were on the battlefield.

Melke would constantly beg her son:

“Stay home. There’s no reason to walk around. They’ll take you in an instant!”

“Mama, why are you worried? I have armor excusing me from the draft, I’m here legally. Who’s to say anything?”

“Armor is armor, but big mouths are big mouths. All their sons were taken, but there you are. They’ll get jealous, and that isn’t good. Stay at home. It’ll be better.”

Daniil reluctantly complied.

By the end of 1942, the Germans had taken a large part of the North Caucasus. The surrender of Makhachkala seemed like a matter of time. Squeezed against the sea by enemy troops, the city was effectively under siege.

A deadly threat hung over the Jews. Contrary to the former enemies of Israel, the Germans persecuted Jewish people not for their faith, but for the mere fact that they were Jewish. Their people, in the fascists’ opinion, were to die in furnaces, trenches and gas chambers.

Soon, horrifying rumors spread across the city, all of which turned out to be true. In September of 1942, the entire Jewish population of the Bogdanovka collective by Mozdok was exterminated, nearly five hundred men, women and children. The Jews in the township of Menzhinsk met the same fate, approximately forty people killed.

The government defense committee issued a special order, which required ninety thousand people to gather daily to construct defensive structures by Derbent, Baku and Makhachkala.

The entire Abramov family, except for the youngest kids, dug trenches and deep ditches. Hezgie helped build tank obstacles on the road leading to the city. Melke, Daniil and Zachar spent several consecutive days digging anti-tank trenches on the city outskirts. Anti-tank “hedgehogs” appeared on the streets, as well as multiple sandbags.

Once, while Hezgie was heading home from his shift, and was almost on his street when he suddenly heard the roar of an airplane. Hezgie looked up, and at the very moment a deafening explosion roared from the distant end of the street. He was knocked to the ground. Hezgie went deaf from the thunderous din. As if watching a silent film, he saw telephone poles topple and stone two-story buildings fall like houses of cards. A wave of soil, sand and dirt covered him whole.

Swaying, he managed to get up and make his way home.

German planes bombed Makhachkala several other times. Old people, women and children were being evacuated from the city. Melke was told that her younger children would be shipped out suddenly, during a shift. She was only given an hour to take the children to the evacuation point at the Culture Building. Melke ran home, forgetting to take off her rubber apron. Turunge was watching the children, as her mother burst into the home to gather the children’s belongings. There was no time to waste. The children watched their mother silently, not understanding what she was doing.

Melke quietly lamented: “They’re being sent away alone. Who will watch over them? What will happen?” She packed a change of underwear and warm clothing for each child. Hezgie was at work, and notifying him so that he could say goodbye to the children was impossible. Melke howled in terror. What if she does something wrong? What if she forgets something?”

“Turunge! Bring me some dried meat.”

The daughter quickly brought the meat into the kitchen.

"Listen to me." Melke sat Turunge across from her. "Right now, you, Zachar, Roza and Sveta will go to the Culture Building. You'll be taken to Derbent. Do you understand?"

"Why?" Turunge asked, terrified.

"It needs to happen, darling. You and your brother need to watch over Roza and Sveta."

"What about you?"

"We'll stay here. Were it up to me, I wouldn't let you go alone. But what am I to do? At least they aren't bombing Derbent. Then, God willing, they'll chase away the Germans, and you'll come back. Understand? Remember – you and your brother are in charge. We need to hurry."

But no matter how hard Melke tried, she couldn't get done in the allotted time. Having gathered the children, the mother ran with them to the evacuation point.

The children were admitted, their names were put into the journal, and they were told to wait. After an hour, when it was dark, they were told to line up, and everyone, both the departing and the ones seeing them off, moved in a messy column toward the station, where the train was already waiting to depart. A command echoed: "Load the cars!" Some soldier, sanding by the open door of a freight car, loaded the children in, one by one. Melke passed him Roza, then Turunge, then Sveta. Zachar climbed on by himself. The mother stepped away, and covered her mouth with her hands so that she wouldn't start bawling. Other children quickly pushed the little ones deeper into the car and away from the entrance, out of Melke's sight.

She screamed in fear:

"Turunge, watch over Sveta!"

She was immediately led away from the cars, her cries drowning among the screams of others. Melke's heart got tight with sadness. Would they be apart for long? Would she see her children again? What if the fascists came?"

Melke's powerlessness made her cry. Her heart beat so fast that it seemed like it was about to jump out of her chest. The last car was already out of sight, but Melke stood firm, looking into the distance. She didn't understand how to go on living.

"Well? Why are you still standing here? It's late, go home. What if they fly in again?" a voice said from nearby.

Melke shuddered. An old man in a black cap stood next to her – a track worker. Melke did not reply, just turned around and went home in a trance.

Hezgie didn't return home until next morning, walking into an empty house. It was so scary and unfamiliar. Not a single child's voice. Confused, he ran into his room and started praying. That was the only thing he could do.

XIII

Two weeks passed. The Germans never managed to break through to Makhachkala after all. Melke was starting to think that – maybe – everything will be all right after all. She received a letter from Yusuf. Daniil was at home. Anya was working. Life seemed to continue. There was a bit of bad news: Raya informed that her and her husband decided to get a divorce. In comparison to the horrors around them – war, famine death – this seemed minute, though it was difficult for Melke not to be upset at the sudden development.

“How will you get by on your own, darling? Could you try to make up – go back to your husband?” Raya’s mother would urge.

Raya would only wave it off.

“What’s done is done. No going back.”

Melke sighed in grief. Her grown daughters were on their own now.

By now, Raya had become the assistant of the deputy prosecutor of Dagestan. The position didn't carry significant duties, but whoever had it was always in the public eye. Many men vied for the young woman's attention, showing her signs of their interest. Raya accepted those as a necessary reality, but was in no rush to part with her newly obtained freedom.

One of her first suitors was one Uritsky, a judge who adamantly pursued Raya. When the impassioned colleague learned of the divorce, his courtship became obnoxious. A newcomer prosecution assistant and a judge – this kind of union sounded ideal to Uritsky. But Raya disagreed. Poor luck with family life significantly cooled her sentiments toward subjecting herself to a husband's absolute power once more.

The situation escalated when the judge proposed to her and demanded an immediate answer. Uritsky's intentions were serious, and he didn't want to take 'no' for an answer. Raya's resistance only stirred him further. It did not occur to the judge that Melke's children were a different breed – strong-willed and stubborn.

Everything was complicated by the fact that, after the divorce, Raya had discovered she was pregnant. She didn't want to tell the husband, with whom she had already parted ways. As she was earning a decent living, she decided to raise the child by herself. Melke would help with the nursing.

While Raya went through this family drama, her brother, Yusuf Panovich, lay in a hospital after a serious injury, hundreds of kilometers away from his native Makhachkala. He took part in a terrifying battle during the counter-assault, one that the rest of his platoon did not survive. By some wonder, the shockwave of an explosion threw him into a crater, where he lay for almost a whole day, nearly succumbing to sepsis. He managed to crawl to safety, his legs sliced up by shrapnel. He underwent surgery, where the doctors managed

to remove dozens of the pieces, but was still unable to walk as well as before.

After examining the soldier yet another time, the doctor at the field hospital shook his head:

“Not going to be a warrior anymore, that’s for sure. What can you do... You fought your fight.”

“So what now? Am I always going to drag my feet like this from now on?” Panovich would ask fearfully.

“I did everything I could, brother. It cut you up bad. Be thankful that we didn’t have to hack them off altogether!

Yusuf was scared at first, but glad later. After all, he was alive. And his legs? Well... Others were left with mere stumps instead of limbs... And what did the doctor tell him? That he had fought his fight?

The phrase filled the soldier’s soul with joy. This meant that he could return home. He wanted to write, but decided to wait, so that he wouldn’t scare Melke. ‘Fought his fight’ – he repeated it over and over, jumping around the hospital hallway on his crutches.

Yusuf’s injury entitled him to a leave, which would be followed by a medical commission, then a reserve transfer – a long process. It involved filing the proper documents with the chief nurse, which oversaw all the paperwork. Panovich, however, having discovered that ‘his war was over’, treated the issue with levity and didn’t bother with the bureaucracy. As soon as the doctor told Yusuf that medicine has done all it could and, from now on, time would be his best doctor, the soldier stated preparing to go home.

It was a long journey with frequent stops. The train would continually stop at resupply points, letting through echelons of military equipment that moved west. Half of Panovich’s traveling companions were injured. Some had been granted leave, others – and they were few – had been transferred to the

reserve and were going back home. He also encountered those who headed to their divisions' deployment locations in order to provide personnel backup.

Passing time, the fighters would regale one another with stories. It was Panovich's turn to tell about how he fought, how he was injured, how he thought he was going to perish, and how fate had brought him here.

"We're running for high ground, and I'm suddenly blinded. Boom! A shell hits nearby and explodes. I'm on the ground – dirt all around me. I can't hear anything. I try to get up but can't. I feel wetness on my legs. Look down – blood. Then I pass out."

"A familiar story," another fighter replied.

"Same for me," yet another chimed in.

"How'd you end up in the hospital?" a third one asked.

"When I came to, it was dark. Suddenly, I heard a rumble in the distance. I gathered that our guys started attacking, and that I must be at the back, and that it was safe to climb out. I climbed out of the crater and crawled toward our people. I couldn't get up, though that was probably for the better. Somehow, I made it. The others had already written me off, so they were happy to see me. Then I fainted again, and came to in a bed. There was a nurse leaning over me, dressed in white, like an angel."

"Yeah, that's how it goes!"

"Congratulations! You got lucky," murmured voices from all around. "What now? Are you on furlough, or what?"

"The doctor said: 'You fought your fight.' There's no use for me in the army with legs like this, so I'm headed home. Going to start over."

Not being well versed in bureaucratic procedure, Panovich had concluded that his war was over. He had no idea that the head nurse, after learning of his absence from the hospital, made a fuss and started inquiring about his place of residence.

In a week, Yusuf reached Makhachkala after a great struggle. His mother, father and sisters had no idea was coming back.

Yusuf finally pushed the familiar gate open and walked in. The few steps leading to the threshold of his family home, despite being quite low, were still difficult, and Yusuf stumbled, nearly falling. Melke heard the noise and ran out. She saw her son and froze. It had to have been a dream. Her legs grew weak and her head started spinning. Hundreds of nights that she had spent praying for his health flashed before her eyes.

“Mama, wake up. Look – I’m alive!”

“Alive...” she muttered, then started crying, tears streaming from her eyes. She hung from her son’s neck, repeating over and over. “You’re alive! I’ve waited for so long. The Lord didn’t deceive me!”

When the initial shock wore off and Melke regained the ability to speak, she grabbed Yusuf by the sleeve and dragged him into the house, refusing to leave his side, repeating:

“You’re alive, my dear boy! You’re back!”

She then noticed that he was having trouble moving around.

“My God, you’re on crutches? You’re hurt!”

“It’s okay, mama. It already healed.”

“Oh my God...”

Melke had trouble recalling what she did later that day. She ran around, cooked, fussed about, constantly stopping what she was doing and running to her son. She’d embrace him and hold him, glued to his shoulder, her body silently convulsing with sobs, which turned into tears of joy. She looked at his legs, demanding that he show her his wounds. When he did, she screamed, but then smiled.

“At least it isn’t worse. You’re alive...”

Many of her friends had received funerary notices. There was no reason to anger God at this point.

Melke beamed, watching her son sit at the table and eat food prepared with her hands. She had never imagined that watching her son eat kosher food, which he couldn't have during the long stretch of his service, would make her so happy.

Panovich had trouble walking, barely shuffling his feet, but managed to leave the house. The neighbors were surprised and happy to see him. It didn't matter that he was crippled – at least he returned from war alive.

"Don't leave the house unless you need to," Melke once told him. "Daniil is still here. People will start talking, get envious."

From then on, Panovich and Daniil would avoid the public eye.

Several months passed. Yusuf's walking has started to improve.

One evening, an officer from the command, a red sash on his sleeve, appeared at the door.

"Are you Joseph Abramov?" he asked upon seeing Panovich.

"Yes."

"Why are you hiding?"

"Hiding? From whom?"

"You're wanted! We got an inquiry about you from your command."

"What? What for?"

"You're a deserter! You left your division without being granted leave."

"What do you mean, left without leave? I'm injured! Look!"

Panovich pointed at his crutches, and started ripping of his bandages.

"Easy, there. I'm not blind," the officer replied, "But where are your papers? The notice of your transfer to the reserve?"

"What papers? The doctor said..."

"It doesn't matter what the doctor said. You need papers."

"There aren't any papers."

"Then on what basis are you home?"

"Because I'm injured."

"Injuries need to be officially supported by paperwork."

Yusuf began to realize that leaving the hospital on his own was not the right move. But calling him a deserter?

"The doctor said that I had fought my fight."

"Why do you keep talking about your doctor? The hospital sent papers over, stating that you left the infirmary on your own accord, and failed to pass the medical commission."

"So what's going to happen now?"

"Your case is already in the system, I can't stop that. I'm supposed to turn you over to the command, though I do see that you're seriously injured. You need to go to the military commission tomorrow – better yet, today. Then run to the doctors! Well, not 'run'," the officer corrected himself. "Anyways, go to the commission. Right away!"

Raya arrived home shortly after the officer's departure. Melke, frightened and confused, started recounting the soldier's words.

"A man was here – a distinguished one. He said that Yusuf was a deserter. That he was wanted."

"A deserter?" Raya wondered. "Why?"

"The soldier said that he didn't do something, left the hospital without papers, that they filed him as a fugitive."

"How did this happen, Yusuf?" Raya asked, turning to her brother.

"I don't understand myself," Yusuf replied. "I was declared a deserter. The fact that I'm crippled, that I can't walk, is apparently not enough. I need written confirmation. Only then will I become a cripple. I don't understand any of this. What papers? What – they can't tell that I fought?" Yusuf pointed at his injured legs.

“Yusuf, Yusuf,” Raya said remorsefully. “They’re right.”

“What do you mean?”

Raya waved her hand.

“I’m no better, for not checking why you’re home. I thought you had passed the medical commission. You need to have a paper that you’ve been released into the reserve. Understand?”

“I had no idea. I’m no deserter, I was in the hospital. Everyone saw me. After all, I can’t walk.”

“Calm down, I understand. We need to do something. We’ll take care of the papers.”

Next morning, Raya took Yusuf to the infirmary where she knew a doctor. The military physician examined the soldier’s injured legs.

“He’s clearly useless to the army with legs like that. I can put that in a medical report, but that’s about it.”

“Is it a problem that the report’s from here, in Makhachkala, and not the hospital where he had the operation?”

“The instructions say that only the hospital where the soldier was treated can release him from service. We don’t have that right. He should have been transferred to the reserve before he returned here. How did he get around the patrols, anyway?”

“How about you write that Joseph underwent treatment here? That you were his doctor.”

“I can’t do that. It’s too easy to check. How could he have been treated here? Everyone knows he wasn’t treated here.”

“All right, but can you at least put a different date on the report? He can’t possibly return to service.”

“You’re certainly right about that. He’s not fit for combat.”

“So write up a certificate that he isn’t. I’m not suggesting you do anything bad. Just date it earlier - the day when Yusuf returned home.”

“That’s against the rules as well.”

“Please. I’m asking you.”

The doctor reluctantly complied.

Yusuf and his sister then went on to the commandant.

“After all, I’m also military personnel. I work for the prosecutor,” Raya declared.

The commandant looked over the report, then nodded favorably.

“All right. I think that as far as we’re concerned, everything’s clean. The fighter is disabled and can’t serve. All that’s left are the papers. The prosecutor’s office opened the case, so they have to close it. We’ll pass the papers on for processing.”

“I’ll personally make sure that everything is done properly, comrade commandant,” Raya chimed in. “The prosecutor will close the case.”

“Good,” replied the commandant, looking at Yusuf. “I don’t have any issue with you, Abramov.”

Yusuf was overjoyed throughout the journey home. He was finally free! The happy Melke ceaselessly thanked Raya, repeating how lucky she is to have a daughter like that. If it hadn’t been for her...

In truth, it may have been better if Raya had not participated in the process. Jewish luck is of a peculiar nature. As his sister has promised, the prosecutor dropped all charges against Yusuf. But, as is the case with all desertion matters, the case had to undergo review. The documents happened to land in the hands of Uritsky himself – Raya’s spurned suitor. Normally, the judge would have barely paid attention to the matter. However, the name ‘Abramov’ struck his eye. Anything related to that family was sure to evoke his anger.

Uritsky carefully examined the materials in front of him. The documents suggested that there was nothing to accuse Raya’s brother of. The fact that Yusuf Abramov was disabled and eligible for release was made clear by the medical report.

However, the manner in which these documents were filed raised concerns. The release was granted by a hospital different from the one where the soldier underwent treatment, and the prosecutor of the first instance seemed to miss this fact.

The judge inquired about who conducted the matter. It turned out to have been Raya's supervisor. It was clear as day: the sister took care of her brother. He had finally caught her. Uritsky didn't care about the facts behind the matter. All he wanted right now was for the case to be interpreted in such a manner that Raya's offense would not only involve closing the case against protocol, but the concoction of a forged release certificate. The latter was a serious crime by wartime standards, even more serious than desertion itself.

Uritsky snidely rubbed his hands. She should have known better than to refuse a man like him. With little delay, the judge filed a claim for document falsification and forgery. Yusuf was far from the main party involved. Raya Abramova was the main defendant.

Uritsky only lacked one thing – actual solid evidence of forgery. The papers he had were enough to prove procedural violation, but not falsification. The latter could only be proven if the decommission case was closed by Raya herself, with her signature and without medical paperwork.

Uritsky decided to talk to the doctor who certified that Joseph Abramov was unfit for military service. The judge did not bother to issue a subpoena, and went to talk to him face to face.

"You examined Joseph Abramov, a soldier in the Red Army who is suspected of desertion?" Uritsky began.

"What about it?" the doctor asked, flustered. "He's disabled. In any case, I was doing this upon request from an employee of the prosecutor's office."

"Who specifically?"

"Raisa Abramova. Did I do something wrong?"

“You pre-dated the certification.”

“But I was asked to do so. Also, I only confirmed the obvious fact that the soldier is disabled.”

“Wait a minute,” Uritsky continued. “You do understand that if the fact that you pre-dated a document surfaces, you’ll be put to trial, don’t you?”

This scared the doctor:

“But I did this in front of an employee of the prosecutor. It’s a mere formality.”

“There are no formalities in our business,” Uritsky declared. His tone, initially strict, grew softer. “I understand everything. You were pressured. So here’s what we’ll do. We’ll pretend that you’ve never issued this certification.”

“How can we do that? That Abramov guy didn’t stop being disabled.”

“Let’s forget about that,” Uritsky conceded. “All you have to do is testify that you were forced to take these unlawful actions due to pressure from prosecutor’s assistant Raisa Abramova.”

“Fine,” the doctor replied compliantly.

“And if they ask you about the certification, you know nothing.”

“Fine.”

This made Uritsky happy. The only thing left to do was to ensure that the certificate about the closing of Joseph Abramov’s case was signed by Raya herself. Uritsky assumed that this wouldn’t be a problem.

And so, a new investigation commenced. Aiding a deserter during wartime was punishable by death. The case was woven out of thin air, but who would care?

The next day, there was a knock on the Abramovs’ door. Hezgie opened it. Three soldiers stood by the threshold.

“Does Raisa Abramova live here?”

“She does. Did something happen?” Hezgie asked, frightened.

"We have a warrant for her arrest."

"What are you talking about," Hezgie protested. "She works for the prosecutor."

Raya walked out, having heard the commotion.

"Are you Raisa Abramova?"

"Yes."

"Gather your things!"

"What's going on?"

"You're under arrest."

Raya looked around in confusion, Melke standing behind her. Raya had heard many times about the arbitrary nature of the system, but to this degree? She also never thought that it would affect her so directly.

"What am I accused of?" she asked, knowing full well that asking escorts such questions was futile.

"Get dressed. You're detained. They'll explain everything to you once we get there."

Trying not to panic, Raya put on her boots and overcoat.

She tried to calm Melke down:

"Mama, don't worry. It's a misunderstanding. It'll clear up soon."

She wasn't taken to the prosecutor's office, but straight to jail. She was summoned for questioning at night. Everything was being done by the book, which Raya was familiar with. But what was she arrested for? She hadn't done anything wrong.

"What am I being accused of?" she instantly asked the captain conducting the investigation.

Raya was finally told about the case. At first, she was confused. Falsification? Aiding a deserter? Fabricated decommissioning of a serviceman? When the investigator showed her the last page of his file, she was dumbfounded. The closed case had her name and signature. That was impossible! Given her relatively low position as an assistant, she didn't have the right

to sign this. She was framed, but by whom? Why? This was not something she could figure out from behind bars.

During the first and last meeting with her sister, when Anya brought her a package, Raya whispered to her in Hebrew, so that no one would understand:

“They’re accusing me of falsifying our brother’s case – of closing it without any basis. But I never signed anything. It’s not my signature.”

Anya nodded – she understood. She returned home and told her mother everything right away.”

“So what if it isn’t her signature,” Melke wondered.

“Mama, that means that Raya’s innocent. She’s being slandered.”

“But how will you prove this?”

“I don’t know. I’ll go up the chain.”

Anya knew firsthand how influential the upper reaches of the chain of command could be. That very evening, she wrote a letter to Moscow.

In the meantime, Raya Abramova’s case was being expedited. She denied everything during questioning, after which she was moved to solitary confinement. The investigator did not delay. He screamed at the young woman, insulting and intimidating her. When that didn’t help, Raya was beaten.

The trial took place three days later and the sentence was severe: capital punishment – death by firing squad. The fact that Raya was well into her pregnancy didn’t help her. It was a ruthless time. The war took innocent lives, and not only in the battlefield. The sentence could be carried out at any minute, and neither the parents nor Anya knew any of this. Raya awaited a response to her pleas, as Melke and Hezgie consoled themselves with hope.

Meanwhile, Daniil had decided to enlist in the army as a volunteer. He showed up at the recruitment office early in the morning, put his student card on the table, and told them that he wanted to protect the Motherland.

Yet again, Melke grabbed her chest, begging the Almighty to have mercy on her son. Yet again, Hezgie spent entire nights praying, asking God for only one thing: to keep Daniil from harm.

Apparently, God had heard his plea. In some sense, Daniil got lucky. Instead of going into the infantry, he was assigned to the flight school in Odintsovo, by Moscow. He was on good terms with the command, stayed out of conflicts, and wasn't the subject of any complaints. He was healthy as a horse, had nerves of steel, and an easy-going personality.

Daniil learned how to fly airplanes, participated in combat operations, and tested new aircraft models. All of the Abramov's thought that Daniil saved the family's honor with his actions.

After sentencing, Raya was transferred to death row. The cells there didn't even have cots. Raya would spend her nights lying on the cold stone floor, her days sitting huddled in the corner. What does a doomed person think about upon hearing guards' footsteps echo down the hallway? 'They're here for me!' This happened ten times a day. Young women who had to endure similar experiences transformed into old crones in a matter of days.

Hunger, dampness and cold had done their work. After a few days, Raya started bleeding and began to scream, causing the guards to send for a doctor. By the time he got there, it was too late. Raya had a miscarriage. They said that it was a boy. She was moved to the prison hospital, where the doctors stated that she could no longer have children.

Poor Raya had no idea that Anya did everything possible to save her and reopen her case. Having received no reply to her first letter, Anya wrote to the chief military prosecutor in Moscow, in which she recounted the story of Uritsky's unsuccessful romantic pursuit. She wrote that Raya did not aid a deserter, as a disabled man could not be labeled as such.

These were Soviet times. Ordinary citizen's complaints were assessed and acted upon. A commission from Moscow itself arrived in Makhachkala.

Serious violations of investigative procedure were obvious. No handwriting analysis had been conducted. Moreover, it was evident that the recipient of the certification was, in fact, disabled, and not a deserter. When the handwriting on Joseph Abramov's certification was finally examined, the fraudulent case was debunked. The handwriting on the certification did not match Raya's. The accusations of desertion themselves were deemed inaccurate. Consequently, Raya could not have aided in a crime that never took place.

The court rescinded the sentence.

Instead of going home after prison, Raya went straight to the hospital. Nevertheless, the worst was over.

Raya recovered after a long treatment process. To everyone's surprise, her position at the prosecutor's office was reinstated. When she first returned to work, everyone looked at her as if she had come back from the dead. Raya looked like she usually did, though the young woman's hair had started showing streaks of gray.

The lust for life and steadfastness toward goals that Melke instilled in her children had done their work. Raya found the inner strength to live through the loss of her child. In a turn of events that seemed like a reward for the hardships she had to endure, she soon met a peculiar man – the deputy minister of the Union of Consumer Affairs Mikhail Hanukov.

The capital-based official's first marriage had fallen apart. His wife suffered from a psychiatric disorder, and spent most of her time in treatment. Hanukov did not intend to be a grass widower for long. He wanted to remarry, and only to a Jewish woman – specifically a Mountain Jew, but did not know a single one in Moscow. When he came to Makhachkala in search

of happiness, he and Raya ended up invited to the same wedding. That's how the couple met.

Hanukov approached the young woman and introduced himself. Raya took a liking to the suave man, who came all the way from Moscow. She began to respond to Hanukov's advances, and he soon sent marriage brokers to Melke and Hezgie's home. Raya consented and the two had a modest wedding – after all, there was a war going on. All the essential traditions were followed, however – the donning of the kerchief, the exchange of the rings.

And so Raya became the wife of Mikhail Hanukov and moved into his three-room apartment in central Moscow.

XIV

The parents were happy with the fortunate resolution of Raya's situation. Death had passed their clan by, and life continued, even if it was half-starved. Melke tirelessly carried the entire household on her shoulders. She made trips to the market and hauled heavy buckets – all on her own. But she didn't complain, happy as long Daniil was safe and healthy, as long as Raya was able to forget the horrors she had been subjected to, as long as her children in Derbent were well fed and not too sad.

In 1943, our divisions begun an offensive in the Caucasus and pushed the enemy away from the city. The front lines moved away from Makhachkala.

The children that were evacuated to Derbent were starting to return home.

One day, a cart stopped outside of the family home and Turunge, Roza, Sveta and Zachar jumped off. The family, while not fully complete, was reunited. Anya was the only

one of the older children at home that evening. How happy she was with her younger siblings' arrival! She asked a neighbor to run and tell her parents, who were at work at the time. Melke and Hezgie quickly took time off and rushed home to hug and kiss their beloved children. They had a modest supper and put the kids to bed. Then, Anya sat down with Melke and started to lament workplace difficulties.

"They're disbanding the base. They said that they're moving it to another place – somewhere very far from home. Commuting there would be a nightmare. I have no idea what to do about work."

"So find another job. They're looking for specialists everywhere," Melke said optimistically.

"Mama, there's a war going on. They aren't just going to let me go. I can't quit the job voluntarily during wartime regime. The best thing I could hope for is to get transferred, and that could only happen if someone sends a plea to the personnel department. Everything's so strict right now."

"But everyone's working to support the battlefield."

"It would be nice if they sent me somewhere close to home," Anya said. "Then we could see each other more often."

The Red October Sewing Cooperative was located around the corner. Much like other enterprises, a special regime was instituted starting from the first few months of war. The cooperative members quickly transitioned to producing coats, tunics and hats, along with anything the army required. They sewed everything, right down to underwear. 'Dressing the front' they called it.

Anya decided to try her luck there. As was the case with other specialty peacetime professions, qualified accountants were in great demand. All the men were in the trenches.

Hoping for luck, she went to meet with the chairman of the cooperative one early winter morning. He happily greeted her and asked to see her diploma. He carefully examined it, then

started asking questions about what Anya did at her previous position. He was surprised to find out that she knew Nahamye.

“How did that happen?” inquired the experienced manager.

“He occasionally got goods from our base. We crossed paths at work.”

The chairman took a liking to the smart, modest woman.

“I’ll speak to Nahamye. If he recommends you, then I’ll send a petition for a transfer to your organization. After you get one, come right back to us.”

On that note, they parted ways.

After speaking with Anya, the cooperative chairman asked Nahamye:

“Do you know an Anya Shcherbatova?”

“Of course. She’s a skilled economist. You don’t find the likes of her very often!”

“You don’t say...”

“She runs the books very carefully, never forgets anything. She’s a sharp one!”

“All right. Thank you.”

After such a recommendation, the cooperative chairman’s doubts evaporated.

After starting at Red October, Anya quickly adjusted to the flow of business. The chairman was not disappointed. Just a year later she was promoted to the more demanding position of accountant-economist. She had all the qualities of a skilled specialist: business savvy, ability to carefully assess every word and number, willingness to put in as much time as necessary, often staying late into the night, and a generally good-natured and compliant character. A few months after that, she was made head accountant of the cooperative.

As circumstances dictated, supply chief Nahamye Babaev and head accountant Anya Shcherbatova interfaced quite often. In time, they developed a trusting relationship.

Anya once invited the colleague to her parents' home for lunch. At that time, life was more friendly and informal. People helped one another as much as they could, and an invitation into someone's home was in no way out of the ordinary.

Heartily putting away Melke's cooking, the guest wouldn't stop showering Anya with compliments, praising her wisdom, good looks and skills in economics.

Melke listened and marveled. Her children were taking such bold strides forward, filling her vocabulary with so many new words. She didn't have to worry about their fates.

They sustained themselves by their garden and the Caspian, which supplied an abundance of fish that Zachar would catch with his father. Sometimes they managed to buy mutton bones. And so, punctuated by work and household routine, 1945 came.

One day Melke returned home, exhausted. Suddenly, she heard gunshots and ran into the street, scared. Could it be that the horrors were starting over?

People were running on the streets. Some yelled indiscernibly, others threw hats into the air. Melke stood on the steps and marveled. What was going on?

Then she heard a distant, yet powerful "hurrah!" followed by more gunshots.

A gang of boys zipped past her down the street.

Melke went outside of the gate and approached an elderly woman who was passing by.

"What happened?" she asked. "What's with all the screaming?"

"The war is over, daughter!" she answered, tears streaming down her face.

The entire city poured into the streets as people passed on the news about the German troops' capitulation. Strangers embraced, congratulating one another with an event that they've been expecting for four years.

Hezgie learned of the victory while still at work. While usually calm and sensible, he left his post and ran into the streets, screaming and rejoicing along with the others. Spontaneous celebrations continued for several days. People weren't ashamed to cry, shedding tears of both joy and sorrow.

XV

The horrible war was finally over, and long awaited peace had returned. The city stood still, awaiting the return of those who survived the terrible ordeal.

Three years after his departure for the front lines, Melke finally saw her son. He appeared at the door without warning, his sunken cheeks covered with stubble.

“Son,” Melke whispered, throwing herself into Daniil’s arms. “You’re back.”

“Why so glum?” he asked, stroking her back. “I’m alive, aren’t I?”

“You’re alive,” the happy mother repeated.

Unbelievably, they hadn’t lost anyone at a time where one would be hard pressed to find a family that hadn’t received a funerary notice for a father, husband, brother or son.

That year, Melke felt genuinely happy.

Daniil insisted on hearing about everything that happened while he was on the battlefield, and Melke told him all the de-

tails. Anya had become the head accountant at the Red October Cooperative. Raya lived in Moscow with her husband. Yusuf was receiving a pension for his disability. Zachar, who was now fifteen, had become an apprentice to a tailor at the same cooperative where Anya worked, with her help. Sixteen-year-old Turunge studied at an evening school, while little Sveta had just started the first grade.

“What are you planning to do?” Melke asked her son.

“I’ll try to finish my studies at the institute in Rostov. I’m a veteran. I’m sure they’ll reinstate me.”

“That’s a right move. You can’t get by without a diploma these days. Especially after the war – there are so few specialists, and all of them are being grabbed up left and right. If you’re a professional, you’ll have an income in your home. We’ll find you a wife.”

Daniil winced. The fact that he was a grown man who had just returned from the war didn’t matter. Everything remained the same in the household, and the family tried to follow tradition in all aspects of life. His mother was trying to arrange a marriage, as if he was some young punk incapable of finding his own happiness.

Having rested up and eaten, Daniil decided to leave for Rostov as soon as possible and leave his mother’s watchful eye. Melke, however, couldn’t get used to the fact that her sons and daughters had grown. She wanted things to be as they were before the war: a house full of children’s voices, family lunches and dinners. Not much was needed to return to the previous way of life.

After conferring with Hezgie, Melke decided to marry Daniil to Galya Yagdanova, who was the chief engineer at the same fish canning plant where Melke worked during the war.

The mother thought that Galya, being educated and holding a high title - a rare achievement for a woman in their time,

was the only suitable match for Daniil. Melke always treated educated people with great regard. This was a result of Rebbe Illazar's upbringing. 'Those in possession of knowledge will always find their place in life,' her father liked to say. Perhaps he was inspired by the traditional Jewish faith in the power of the written word, passed on to Jews through their mothers' milk. Melke fairly assessed that Galya Yagdanova was a relative of the Scherbatovs, which meant that she was indirectly related to the Abramovs.

One day, the mother called Daniil into the kitchen. She felt she thought better there, where everything seemed ordered, understandable and wise.

"Daniil," Melke began, as she used a ladle to stir the soup simmering on the stove. "I found you a bride."

Daniil was taken aback.

"Galya Yagdanova," Melke continued. "It's a wise move for us. She's clever and educated."

"I don't want to marry her," Daniil objected. "I don't like her."

"But look at the position she holds! Chief engineer!"

"I'm not going to marry her," Daniil repeated, "regardless of what you say."

Melke shrugged. Her son was afraid of his own happiness. He may have lived through a war, but hadn't gained any wisdom. A Jew needs more than one head to think. And where does one get a second head? Only through marriage. Marriage lets people save themselves, and to advance their kin. That was Melke's philosophy, which she believed to be fact and tried to convey to her children. Now, however, she was unable to coherently explain them to Daniil, at a loss for words. Sure – he survived the front, but the battlefield only requires courage, while one needs savvy and a pinch of cunning to survive peaceful life. People will always try to trip you. Rivers, even ones as wide as the Volga, dry

up, but human envy never does, especially when it's directed toward Jews.

Daniil, however, had no intention to follow his mother's advice. He got involved in a romance with Kapitolina Lazarenko, a famous Makhachkala singer. Neighbors informed Melke that Daniil was intending to marry a Russian woman.

Once she found out about this, Melke was more than a little upset. For her son to marry a Russian? No! That was unheard of. She showed up to Kapitolina's house and made a scene. The screaming was so loud that the neighbors showed up. It was unclear what the cause was, Melke's visit or something else, but Daniil's passionate relationship ended soon after.

Melke calmed down.

Meanwhile, Daniil went to Rostov to take his exams. While on the train home after his finals, he met a girl. His fellow traveler's name was Tosia. They talked for a while. Not only was the girl from Makhachkala, but their houses were around the corner from each other. He was an Abramov, she – a Matatov. The family was exceptionally well known in the city. Ikhiil Matatov was a People's Commissar-before the war, and helped storm the Winter Palace in Petrograd.

Daniil couldn't help but think that the encounter on the train was no coincidence. He really liked the girl, and told Melke one evening that he had found his destiny.

"Who is she?"

"Tosia Matatova," Daniil answered.

Having heard the family name, Melke nodded approvingly. The Matatovs were famous and well regarded among the Jewish people – a definite plus in the eyes of the Abramovs. There was, however a drawback. Melke thought that the family struggled to get by – the head of the family had been arrested and died far from home, in prison, leaving be-

hind four kids and a widow. In the opinion of Makhachkala's Jewish quarter, losing their breadwinner put the family into a difficult, if not an impoverished position.

Nevertheless, the Matatovs were Mountain Jews, and that alone made Melke happy. Overwhelmed by conflicting feelings of joy and doubt, Melke decided to consult her oldest daughter.

"Your brother wants to marry Tosia Matatova," she announced to Anya when she came to visit.

"Tosia?" Anna asked happily. "I've heard about her, but haven't met her."

"It's a good thing you haven't met her," Melke grumbled in response, annoyed by her daughter's enthusiasm. "They're nearly beggars. Living alone, without a breadwinner."

"As opposed to whom?" Anya retorted. "Everyone has it hard these days."

"You think that's normal?" Melke asked, flailing her hands.

She heard, along with others in the city, that Matatov was jailed for being an 'enemy of the people'.

This did not appear to bother Anya.

"Tosia Matatova is a niece of Havo, the wife of Nachamnye Babayev," Anya explained. "They live in Nahamye's home."

"She's Nahamye's niece? Are you serious?"

Anya nodded, surprised that her mother had not known this.

Melke sank into thought. The hand that held the spoon, with which she stirred whatever she had in the pot, changed its trajectory and started drawing rough lines, like those in a cardiogram.

"Of course. Didn't you know? Like Raya, comrade Matatov was convicted, then acquitted and released. It was too late though – he didn't even get out of the camp. Had a heart attack and died there."

“The horror!” Melke clasped her hands. “So this means that Tosia comes from a good family.”

“Of course she’s from a good family. Aren’t all Jews from good families?” Anya quipped.

“Tosia is Nahamye’s niece,” Melke contemplated aloud, as if savoring the phrase. Visible wrinkles came over her forehead – unspoken witnesses to deep thought.

“Nahamye is an honorable man,” Anya continued, as if she was laying all of the pros and cons of his brother’s chosen bride on the table. “He’s also a financially secure man. If anything, he’ll support his niece.”

Melke turned to Anya:

“Well – that sounds like an excellent marriage.”

“Of course, mama!” Anya laughed. “That’s what I mean! We need to get down to business. It’s not like Daniil will need convincing.”

Melke nodded. What more could she dream of? They couldn’t find a better bride than Nahamye Babaev’s niece!

Melke banged the spoon against the edge of the pot. The copper rang with a triumphant chime.

That evening Melke brought Hezgie into the discussion.

“We need to arrange the marriage of Tosia Matatova to Daniil, before someone else snags her to be his wife.”

“What?”

As always, Hezgie was out of the loop.

“You don’t know? Our son chose her – the niece of Nahamye Babaev.”

“Our Nahamye?” Hezgie was genuinely surprised. “So why delay? Let’s go to the Matatovs and look at the bride.”

By and large, Melke was happy with the way things had turned out. This was far better than having Daniil chase after a married woman, not to mention a Russian.

Soon the Abramovs went to broker the marriage to Tosia Matatova. A wedding took place a month later, and the Abra-

movs, the Matatovs, and the Babaevs were all happy with the new union after the modest festivities.

As customary, Tosia moved into her husband's home after the wedding. That's how the Abramovs and the Matatovs – and through them, the Babaevs – became more than just kunaks, but were united by their future children's bloodline.

XVI

The Babaevs are an ancient Jewish clan. Little is known about Nahamye's ancestors. My great-great-grandfather was named Bobi and was a Rabbi. My great-great-grandmother was called Zulfo – a name as rare as it is beautiful. Grandpa Nahamye's father, my great-grandfather David, was also a rabbi. He owned several shops, scattered around the entirety of Dagestan, where he sold textiles. They always lived in plentitude. His wife, my great-grandmother, was named Ozhi. David and Ozhi had seven children, Nahamye among them.

David was killed by the Turks during a raid on his aul. Nahamye was only five years old at that point. The murdered man's family was taken in by David's older brother Rafail, who was raising his own children. The two large families united, as is customary in the Jewish community. Rafail was a good man and an entrepreneur. Having inherited his brother's textile shops, he decided to open an atelier where the customers could turn their fabric into clothes. He sent his other

brother Danke to Rostov to study tailoring and started setting up sewing shops. When Danke returned, the brothers started sewing trousers, suits, and cherkeskas. Rafail's natural knack for business served him well, helping him advance not only his own children, but also his nephews, including Nahamye.

Grandpa Nahamye's wife's name was Havo, or, formally, Havo Moiseevna. Grandma was born in Derbent in 1905 into the large, prosperous Hanukaev family.

When she turned one year old, she was betrothed to an equally young boy, in full compliance with our Jewish traditions. The groom was the heir of one of the city's wealthiest families. Until she turned eleven, Havo got her clothes and shoes exclusively from her future relatives – the parents of her groom.

Before every Shabbat she was brought fruit and sweets on precious trays. The girl was growing up pampered and proud.

But the arranged marriage never took place. World War I broke out in 1914, and in 1916 the Turkish army, which was fighting on the Germans' side, entered Derbent. The Ottomans slaughtered the entirety of Havo's groom's family, and she once again became available for marriage.

Lio, Nahamye Davidovich's sister who lived in Derbent at the time, found out about the girl before too long. She wrote to her family in Temir-Khan-Shura, saying that she had found a good girl that her brother should come and meet.

When Nahamye was shown his thirteen-year-old bride, she was cheerfully playing rounders with her girlfriends.

A year later, when Havo turned fourteen, she stood under the hupa. Soon after the wedding, the young couple moved to Anzhi. Nahamye wisely concluded that the competition in Derbent was too great for him to properly advance, and that Anzhi had more opportunities. Uncle Rafoil supported his nephew, and provided him with the necessary startup capital.

At first, Nahamye rented a home on Oskarov Street. It was a single story house, with a garden and a few small structures in its yard. There were three rooms. Nahamye and Havo slept in one. Another was taken by Ksenia, a Ukrainian whom Havo befriended at the market. In those difficult times of civil war, fear and famine ruled the land, and many fled their homes for the Caspian in search of food.

Ksenia was among those who sought a better life in Anzhi. Havo offered her room and board. In response to this kindness Ksenia started helping with the housework.

They lived in harmony. Apartment doors weren't locked at night, and everyone kept their windows wide open in hot weather. Fears of burglars were nonexistent. A long table stood in the yard under a large canopy. This was where the residents gathered in the evening. They would set up a samovar, and everyone would contribute to the spread. Men discussed the news, while women talked about their business: who saw whom on the boulevard, who was planning to get married, and so on.

Most men wore boots made of the softest leather. Suits that looked like military uniforms were in fashion: breeches with a jacket or tunic made of light fabric, caps on their heads. Women preferred dark-colored dresses, and always wore kerchiefs.

Nahamye rented a space and opened a store that sold clothing and fabric. In difficult times, as one war would follow another, necessities like food, clothing, and everyday household articles trumped all in terms of value. Finding goods to sell was the difficult part, and something Nahamye excelled in. He was an open and outgoing man who easily made friends and connections, always knowing where to find the best fabric.

Being the first to get on a face-to-face basis with a wholesaler was key. That way, one could negotiate a good price before the competitors rushed in and drove it up, after the seller

sensed an increased demand. Nahamye quickly bonded with the assistant to the chief of the port, who allowed him direct access to the textile seller before he took his product to the market.

Nahamye was generally a shrewd businessman. He frequently traveled away from home in order to buy up product that would be in high demand. He would go to Baku, and even went as far as Iran several times with his uncle Rafail.

In a year, Nahamye Babaev managed to make good money. He was getting regular clients – demanding consumers who visited his shop in search of rare fabrics, knowing in advance that they would be impressed by Nahamye's offerings. If some sort of silk or wool wasn't in stock, he would always get it in a week. Nahamye built two small sheds in the yard: one to serve as a warehouse, the other as a shop. Expecting that Havo would need help, he hired two clerks. He also opened a tailor shop next door.

At the time, Dagestan didn't have factories where hundreds of people would make pants, shirts jackets and dresses by the thousands, and not for people but for faceless mannequins. In the first third of the twentieth century, all clothing was tailored to the customer. That's why his suits 'fit like a glove', so to speak, and were sewn 'on you and for you'.

It wasn't a neighbor's envy or competitor's sabotage that hindered the growth of my grandfather's business. It was the fact that at that point, private property was declared to be against the law.

Nahamye quickly realized that life was radically changing: being a small business owner under the new rule became very dangerous. I've already mentioned the many types of currencies circulating in the early 1920s in rapid succession – assignments, rubles, chervonets, bons, kerenskas. In the midst of this mess, Nahamye could only rely on the currency that always maintained value and which everyone respected – gold coins.

Before the authorities got to him, he quietly closed the shop, paid out his clerks, and converted his money into gold.

One day, a former competitor – now a companion in misfortune – visited Nahamye at home. The host happily greeted the guest.

“Hello, Nahamye!”

“Hello, Zachar. What’s new?”

“I heard you’ve closed your shop.”

“All shops closed, and I along with them. It’s bad to stray from the crowd in times like these.”

“You always find a reason to be happy,” the guest chuckled. “The crowd is indeed important. What are you planning to do now?”

“I’ll try to get hired at a workshop, fixing shoes.”

Nahamye spoke of his troubles with a light sense of irony.

“Have you heard,” the guest continued, “that the authorities are letting people start cooperatives? They even issued a special resolution. They announced that at the City Duma yesterday – the Soviet, as they call it now. They announced new trade politics and are calling on former shopkeepers to unite into trade enterprises. What do you think of that?”

“Doesn’t seem bad.”

“That was my thought as well. That’s why I came to you for advice. The cooperative has already been created. They gathered everyone who worked with textiles. They’re calling it ‘Red October’. Do you know who’s going to chair it?”

“No.”

“You friend Asya.” The guest followed with a Dagestani last name.

“Good for her. Can I help with anything?”

“We can’t work without you,” the guest replied with a smile.

“And why is that?”

“See for yourself. We started getting orders for ladies’ dresses, but there’s nothing but burlap in the warehouse.”

“And what’s the problem?”

“There’s nothing to make dresses out of.”

“What about the burlap?”

“Who makes dresses out of burlap?”

“No one’s telling you to make them out of burlap. You need to trade the burlap for silk,” Nahamye answered.

“How do we do that?”

“There are always options. You need to know people.”

“See? You’re useful already. Maybe you’ll come to work with us on the supply side? We have enough tailors, but no one to get the materials. What do you say - do you accept the invitation?”

Nahamye smiled slyly. Getting rare cloth from the five former owners of Jewish tailor shops was a task only he could pull off.

And so the Red October cooperative was formed in Makhachkala. The former atelier owners unearthed their hidden supplies, each put in a share, and teamed up to kick off production. They used their collective money for equipment – fantastically reliable Singer sewing machines – manned them with tailors and started sewing. Products from the Red October Cooperative were always well regarded in Makhachkala.

Many years after, Bultanov, the head of the Dagestan Trade Council published a book about trade cooperation. It mentions Nahamye Babaev’s role in the establishment of the republic’s first cooperative. The chairmen of the organization came and went, but the supply chief was always my grandfather.

XVII

Nahamye and Havo's family life was not without hardships. Their first few children died before even reaching the age of one, the joy of birth alternating with tragedy. Serious reasons accounted for this: the lack of good doctors, Havo's fragile body, demanding work at the shop.

It was not until 1927 that Havo gave birth to a girl – Fira – who survived the one-year mark.

When Havo was taken to the maternity ward yet again, Nahamye rushed to bring her dinner, as excited as he was worried. Nahamye mentioned his family name to the receptionist.

"Congratulations," she said, as she paged through the patient log. "Babaeva had a baby girl."

The happy father dropped off the food and went to work. As soon as he stepped through the door of the cooperative, he was showered with questions.

"What's the news?"

“Who was born? A boy?”

“You can congratulate me – a girl!”

The news instantly traveled to the sewing section, then to the warehouse, then, via a whisper from her omnipresent secretary, to Asya, the chairman of the cooperative. She thought for a minute – the occasion called for a bonus – and went to congratulate her employee.

Nahamye smiled modestly.

After work, he rushed home. The stocky Ksusha, who ran the household in Havo’s absence, quickly started setting the table, her lips in a constant smile. After a half hour, colleagues, neighbors, friends and friends of friends started coming by.

Nahamye listened to their toasts, accepted their congratulations, emptying his glass over and over.

Next day he once again rushed to bring lunch to the maternity ward. At the reception, he suddenly ran into the exhausted Havo, barely moving around with her giant belly.”

Nahamye was astounded.

“They told me you gave birth yesterday...”

Havo could only shrug:

“As you can see, I didn’t.”

It turned out that there was another woman with the last name ‘Babaeva’ and the hospital, who, indeed, gave birth to a girl. Nahamye thought about the bonus, the gifts, and was briefly upset about what people at work would say. At the end of the day, however, the most important thing was that Havo was fine.

Nahamye went back to the cooperative, where people were already collecting money for Nahamye’s gift. Nahamye shuffled around, not knowing what to say, then blurted out:

“Hold it with all the baby girl gifts.”

The smiles on the ladies’ faces – the supply department was mostly staffed by women – started to fade.

“What happened, Nahamye?”

“I went to the maternity ward and complained. Told them I had no use for a girl!”

Silence reigned for a moment. The employees didn’t know how to react – whether to laugh it off or to write off their supervisor as crazy.

Finally, Nahamye burst into laughter. That was the kind of man Nahamye was – he always appreciated humor and loved joking around. The employees sighed with relief and joined him in laughter. After lunch, he received word that Havo had given birth to a boy.

Yet again, my grandfather set the table, gathered his colleagues, and announced that his complaints were answered. The chief maternity doctor, whose wife had received a free fur coat from the cooperative, exchanged the girl for a boy.

The diligent secretary instantly conveyed the news to the cooperative chairman, who rushed to personally figure out where the jokes ended and the truth began.

“Nahamye, what exactly are we drinking to, after all?”

“I told you – they exchanged my girl for a boy. We picked a name already.”

“Nahamye, quit joking,” the boss replied.

Nahamye then called the hospital, asked the on-call doctor to get his wife, and handed the phone to Asya. Upon hearing the news, the shocked woman announced:

“I swear by Allah, you are a lucky man if you can pull off something like that!”

After that, Nahamye couldn’t keep the ruse going and told everyone about the misunderstanding the day before.

“What will you name your heir, Nahamye?” one of his coworkers asked.”

“Erzol!” he answered, as a smile came over his face.

The birth of a son truly was a monumental occasion, and the father walked around beaming with joy and pride. Na-

hamye's family now had everything: first a daughter and now a son – an heir and future breadwinner.

For a while after the births of Fira and Erzol, Nahamye and Havo took a break from having children. Then, Liza was born in 1936, followed by Alexander in 1938.

A year passed, and the Babaevs were faced with serious concerns about the future of their family. As I mentioned, Havo's sister Susanna married Ikhiil Matatov, who was well known in Dagestan and participated in the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917. In 1921, he was elected to be a delegate during the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), and then worked as a Prosecutor of the Republic and a People's Justice Commissar of Dagestan. His family lived in a waterfront regional committee apartment with seven rooms, heating and a bath – an unheard of luxury at the time. In 1927, Ikhiil Matatov participated in the approval of the Mountain Jewish – or Tat – alphabet. He reasoned that mountain Jews were better off calling themselves 'Tats' in order to distance themselves from anti-Semitic sentiments.

He had everything – an astounding career, ample income, a family. Nothing, however, helped him when someone submitted an anonymous letter in 1939 saying that he owned a private residence. The People's Commissar started investigating, and he was soon arrested.

Nahamye learned of this while he was at work. He instantly asked for time off and rushed home.

"Havo!" he shouted as soon as he opened the door. "They arrested Ikhiil!"

"Oh no!" Havo replied, growing pale.

At the time, having relatives marked as criminals by the authorities was very dangerous.

"We need to send the older kids to camp," Nahamye declared. "It's best for them to not be here, in case they're only getting started."

“Why? What do we have to do with it?”

“Your sister and her children will definitely be evicted from her husband’s work apartment. I’ll take them into our house. We’ll send Fira and Erzol to the pioneer camp. As for us, we’ll manage. Gather the kids.”

Nahamye quickly arranged everything and the children were out of the city the following day.

Ikhiil’s trial took place two months after his arrest. He was sentenced to seven years of incarceration and sent to a camp somewhere in Siberia. As Nahamye predicted, his wife and children were evicted from the apartment even before the trial began.

In the meantime, the convicted Matatov, having found himself at a correction camp, did not sit idly. He was a skilled lawyer and knew the intricacies of Soviet jurisprudence. His case was not political. Ikhiil started writing letters, arguing that his case was based on a clerical error. As a result of his numerous complaints and petitions, the case was marked for reconsideration. It was then determined that there was, in fact, no private residence in Ikhiil’s possession, and Matatov was released.

This happened after the war had already started. German’s stood at Makhachkala’s gates, no trains ran there, and returning home was not an option. Ikhiil Matatov stayed in Siberia to work for the camp’s administration.

In 1943, his family received an unexpected notification, which said that Ikhiil Matatov had passed away after an extended illness. Streets in both Makhachkala and his native Derbent now bear his name.

The apartment in which the Babaevs resided became quite cramped with the arrival of Susanna and her children. After giving it some thought, Nahamye decided that his loved ones should live in comfortable conditions, particularly since he had the means to obtain them.

Recalling what Ikhiil was jailed for, Nahamye was reluctant to openly purchase a home. Makhachkala was small, and everyone was under public scrutiny, so questions would undoubtedly arise if he were to buy a mansion.

The Red October operated a credit union. Nahamye and his colleague, a tailor named Rashmi Gereev applied for a loan. Nahamye gave the loaned money entirely to Rashmi, while telling people that he used it to purchase a portion of a building.

The building was new, and housed fascinating people. Two rooms were rented by the director of the Dagestan Philharmonic, who never seemed to let go of his briefcase and was always accompanied by his wife. Another two rooms were taken by the family of a worker from the Third International factory. Another was taken by a professor at the Makhachkala Pedagogical Institute, who had a then-fashionable goatee, which seemed to move even when he was silent (and the professor was silent most of the time). Rashmi Gereev had two rooms next door to him.

The Babaevs had four rooms, though even that turned out to be too cramped for the newly expanded family. Nahamye went to work, first adding a veranda, then building out to add a larger dining room and kitchen. There was a shaded garden in the courtyard, with apples, pears, walnuts, grapes and figs.

The family moved into their new home in September.

In 1940, Nahamye was sent to Kiev for a six-month professional improvement course. He was still in Ukraine when Havo was taken to the maternity ward yet another time. Erzol and Fira tended to their mother as much as they could, visiting her daily and bringing her lunch.

A fifth child was born into the Babaev family on July 13th – a girl they named Mila.

When Nahamye returned from Kiev, he could barely carry the presents he had brought. The most precious of those was

a crystal chandelier – a rare luxury at the time. Guests of the Babaev home would marvel at its beauty.

Nahamye and Havo wouldn't stop talking and exchanging news, having been apart for so long.

"You know, where I was, everyone says that war is unavoidable," Nahamye said suddenly.

Havo gasped:

"Will it get as far as us?"

"Who knows..." Nahamye replied glumly.

On June 22, 1941 the Babaevs, like everyone else around them, stood on the street and listened to Molotov's speech about the start of the war. The children weren't frightened by the word at first. After all, they had played 'war' many times, falling down and getting up again. For a while, it seemed distant and surreal to adults at first, until young faces suddenly started to disappear as the draft started. A month later, older men started getting conscription notices as well.

Havo was afraid to be left alone with five children, but the danger passed Nahamye by. The Red October did work for the battlefield, providing clothing for soldiers and officers. A savvy supplier was invaluable during times of severe shortages, and Nahamye was granted armor from the draft.

Fira and Erzol were evacuated as soon as the Germans approached Makhachkala. Labor was scarce behind the lines, and everyone was put to work, including the children. The Babaevs worked at a vineyard: Fira as a receptionist, Erzol as a picker. Sometimes, the head of the cooperative would allow the workers to take some of the fruit as a reward, but never more than three kilos.

One time, Erzol and his friends decided to make away with several bales of grapes – famine was afoot, and produce of any kind was highly valued. Erzol was almost caught, forced to run like the wind having abandoned his 'prize'. Had he been caught, things could have been bad. At the time, peo-

ple could be jailed for as little as stealing a few cucumbers off a field. But, as Nahamye used to tell his son, “You’re far less smart than you are lucky.”

They didn’t stay in Derbent for long. When the Germans were driven out of the Caucasus, Fira and Erzol returned to their parents in Makhachkala.

In wartime, all able-bodied citizens worked from dawn to dusk. Nahamye would have to work two jobs. At first, he’d spend eight hours at the Red October – acquiring, receiving, exchanging, and reclaiming misappropriated provisions – running like a hamster in wheel. In the evening, he would rush to the philharmonic building, where the sewing factory was placed after it was evacuated out of Rostov-on-Don. Nahamye worked there as well, bringing along Erzol, who was developing a knack for tailoring. The father would pick the son up from home at seven p.m., and they wouldn’t return until eleven.

Uncle Roman was a memorable character. Before the war, he lived on Krasnoprudnaya Street in Moscow. He left for the front in the summer of 1941, but was decommissioned three months later due to a newly discovered heart condition. That’s when uncle Roman and his wife Tanya were evacuated to Makhachkala.

Uncle Roman, like all Babaevs, was a crafty and resourceful man. Exceptionally social, he seemed to attract people to himself. Only a week after moving to Makhachkala, he was appointed head of the supply department at the Khasavyurt Cannery. He then offered to take his nephew Erzol along. Nahamye agreed.

Dagestan’s canning industry grew quickly right before the war. Refrigerators were still quite rare back then, and groceries were kept in special ice pits, which also housed ice for industrial uses. In the winter, ice bricks were carved out

of the river and placed in specially-dug trenches, covered with hay, and covered with soil.

Erzol's job consisted hauling ice in a cart from the river to the pit in the winter, then to the cannery in the summer. The task required ample physical strength.

After several months, he was transferred to the plant's cafeteria, where he would sort fruits and vegetables – a taxing and tedious task. He was then tasked with redeeming food stamps at the store. Every worker was allotted four hundred grams of sugar per month. The young employee's responsibilities included parceling the sugar into paper bags. The work required patience and precision. Mistakes weren't allowed – even by a single gram – as sugar at the time was worth its weight in gold. It should be noted that Erzol had only turned thirteen.

As he familiarized himself, he was allowed to run the register. Erzol was put in charge of selling mutton bones. The allotment norm was three kilos per person, though everyone tried to get more. People would get angry, argue with the vendor, and even threaten him.

He was once entrusted with selling cherries. The harvest had been so fruitful that they didn't have enough time to process the crop. There was no register, and every evening Erzol would hand aunt Anya, uncle Roman's wife, who was an accountant at the plan, a stack of bills.

Erzol spent a year in Khasavyurt. At the end of 1942, uncle Roman suddenly fell ill. His heart gave out, calling for urgent hospitalization. He, his wife, Fira and Erzol made it to Makhachkala.

Uncle Roman was taken to the hospital right away. It was a chilly humid winter – the kind that only happens in coastal cities. Nahamye decided to bring several makeshift electric heaters into this hospital room – by some magic, local craftsmen managed to make them out of safety razor blades.

One day, a blizzard hit, and the hospital was left without power. The temperature in the hospital room plunged down, and uncle Roman had a fever by morning.

Having examined him, the doctor diagnosed him with pneumonia. Leaving him at the freezing hospital was dangerous, so Nahamye took the patient home and hired a nurse.

Everyone worried that uncle Roman would not survive, but the crisis passed, and his condition improved within several days. The fever was gone. Nahamye, happy with the fortunate recovery, kept making jokes.

Once uncle Roman had enough strength to get out of bed, the nurse was dismissed. Havo made her brother some tea and Nahamye sat next to him, suggesting a game of backgammon. During the game, uncle Roman suddenly broke out in sweat. Havo changed his shirt once, then again.

The sweating wouldn't subside, growing more and more severe. Havo and Nahamye exchanged frightened glances and sent for a doctor. By the time he got there, the patient had completely lost his strength and could barely talk. The doctor had everybody leave the room and went to examine the patient. Everyone had decided that the pneumonia had returned, when the doctor walked out of the room, pale as a sheet, and shrugged helplessly.

"It wasn't pneumonia. It was his heart. It stopped. He died..."

The front lines moved further and further away from Makhachkala. In 1944, the city's educational institutions began to function once again. Erzol started evening school to make up what he had missed. One of his classmates happened to be Turunge Abramova.

XVIII

Erzol studied through his evenings, and worked through his days. Nahamye got him a job as a tailor's apprentice at his cooperative. After two years of daily experience, the talented young man was instantly promoted to the esteemed position of a master outerwear tailor. Erzol had a knack for sensing the shape of a human body. He only had to glance at a customer to achieve a perfect fit. Women were especially pleased with his work, as Erzol was so good at emphasizing the highlights in their figure that all shortcomings were rendered unnoticeable.

In time, Erzol himself started to teach tailors, taking on Zachar Abramov, Anya Scherbatova's younger brother, as one of his students. The fates of the two families, the Babaevs and the Abramovs, intertwined more closely with each day.

The young men developed a friendship. At the time, the difference between student pay and that of his teacher was

negligible. If one were to take it to the market, it would only be enough to buy several loaves of bread. Therefore, the youth tried thinking of more ways to earn some extra cash. Zachar was the first to notice that the market sold winter military breeches with fur lining. The friends decided to start buying these, cut out the fur lining, and use it to make ushanka hats. Zachar then successfully sold the headwear at the same market.

In 1946, the Dagestan Trade Council received an order: to send two tailors specializing in light clothing and one who works with outerwear to Moscow to study. It was determined that Derbent, Buynaksk and Makhachkala would each send a man.

Erzol was not yet an experienced tailor, but Nahamye did everything he could to ensure that he would be the one to go. That was probably the moment when my father's reputation as a skilled specialist was born.

Nahamye couldn't have been happier about his son getting to go to Moscow. Being a talented tailor in the time of total shortages carried a lot of clout and ensured a future income for the home. Nahamye himself managed to make good money, making clothing out of surplus fabric that was unaccounted for. Anya Abramova reliably concealed that portion of his income with the necessary documents. She ran the ledgers with not just skill, but mastery. They were impervious to any audit.

Nahamye and Anya had a sizable age gap between them, but they quickly sensed their like-mindedness and developed a strong friendship. When Anya begun working at the cooperative, Nahamye gained a friend at an important department. Anya, in turn, was making solid money and was able to help her aging parents.

Once Erzol returned from Moscow with a diploma, he was hired as a tailor at the cooperative, where he managed a team

of twenty people. They used parachute silk to make men's and women's summer suits, which sold quite well at the stores.

Erzol gave most of his earnings to his mother – such was the way.

But boys will be boys. Erzol was a social person who made friends with half the city and spent much of his free time with them, often treating the whole crowd to beer and wine. Occasionally, these parties would end in a brawl.

Nahamye noticed this. The son's behavior didn't conform to his father's imagined vision of happiness. Perhaps it was an issue of Nahamye seeing a version of himself in Erzol, and that the two were more alike than he cared to admit. It was as if Erzol housed a source of uncontainable energy.

Time after time Nahamye would talk to Erzol about settling down, and time after time his attempts to influence his son proved to be futile. Erzol would quiet down for a while, but then return to his old ways. Nahamye was most afraid of the possibility of his son being arrested. Havo, who also worried about Erzol's fate, shared his concerns.

"What are we supposed to do with him? He's out of control," she would say, when Nahamye sat down for dinner. "He always hangs out with those punks after work."

"I know, Havo. I know!"

"I know you know! What good is that? Talk to him! He has to listen to his father."

"What do you think I've been doing?"

Havo would angrily purse her lips and stop talking.

Sometimes the conversation would take a different turn.

"Just you wait," Nahamye would threaten. "We'll marry him off in a year or two – then he'll calm down."

"What do you suggest we do before that?" Havo would ask, flailing her arms.

Generally, Havo's love for her son would prove unconditional, and she would always defend him and justify his mis-

steps. While she worried about him, her heart was confident that it was the company her son kept that was at fault, not Erzol himself.

Time after time, she would secretly wash the pants that Erzol got dirty in a fight or mend his torn shirts - just to keep Nahamye from noticing and avoid a scene and her son being yelled at. Doing this, she would pray to the Creator for her son not to find himself in a bad situation that could ruin his life.

"I just wish he would grow up and start a family," she would tell Fira. "Then he won't have time for fights."

One day Nahamye and Anya decided to have a bite to eat - right there at work, as there was much to do. They discussed daily affairs - a deal that was made over a recent fabric shipment. When the topic exhausted itself, Nahamye noticed Zachar in the distance, engaged in an ardent argument with someone.

"You're brother's a smart man, Anya. He's savvy! I've watched him work - it's a sight to be seen."

"You're telling me, Nahamye! If he had hands like Erzol's, he could run the entire factory."

"True as that is, he's a bit of an airhead. What Erzol needs is a wife."

Anya looked at Nahamye intrigued, but didn't say anything.

Another day, she invited Nahamye to visit her parents.

"Melke has been asking for a while why you visit so rarely."

Nahamye smiled and started praising Melke as an excellent housewife.

In a few days they went to Anya's parents' home during their lunch break. The table was set in a blink of an eye. While Melke fussed over the plates and silverware, Hezgie and Nahamye started talking about life, how everything's changing, and what the outcome will be. Turunge then came out of the

room, as always, to help her mother. Nahamye noticed that Melke's daughter was completely grown. She was about his son's age. It was as if Nahamye came to his senses. On the surface, she seemed like an ordinary girl: a thick braid, clean skin, pleasant and smiling. Something, however, has changed, and she now had a special energy around her – an inner strength.

"How are you, Turunge?" Nahamye asked as she served them tea.

"Finishing up evening school," the coy girl replied, "and helping mama around the home."

"What then? What are you going to do after you finish school?" Nahamye looked at Anya inquisitively. "Maybe we'll find a place for her at the cooperative?"

Turunge grew even more aloof. No matter what Nahamye said, there always seemed to be a hint of irony to his voice.

"Your brother works with us too. He's friends with my Erzol."

"Yes," Turunge replied, lowering her gaze.

Hezgie said a few lighthearted words about Erzol and Zachar's innovative plan to make hats out of pants liners, then went on to other topics. They talked for another half hour, before Nahamye looked at his watch and realized that he had to return to work.

At the end of the day, Babaev came into the accounting department to drop off paperwork. There was no one in the building except for Anya. She would intentionally stay late so that she and Nahamye could handle their business in peace.

"I brought you receipts," he began. "We got fifty meters of silk according to the overhead. I measured it – turns out it's seventy. We need to send the leftovers to the floor."

"Good. As a matter of fact, your son's looking for fabric. Erzol will take care of this. Your boy gets things done!"

"Anya, Turunge and Erzol are about the same age. Wouldn't it be grand if he got betrothed to your sister?"

"To Turunge?"

"Well, yes."

"I guess she would make an excellent housewife."

Anya smiled. Contrary to her sister, she rarely cooked and only did housework from time to time. There was too much work.

Noticing Anya's smile, Nahamye continued his ruminations.

"Or is she already betrothed?"

"No, she's still little," Anya placated him. "In any case, that's a question only my parents can answer. It would be nice to know what she herself says, as well."

"Turunge?" Nahamye's eyebrows lifted halfway to his forehead. "Don't they know each other? They study at the evening school together. What's there to think about?"

"I don't know," Anya shrugged. "She hasn't mentioned anything about your Erzol."

"I should talk to Hezgie."

"So talk to him," Anya said tiredly. She still had a ton of work to do.

The notion that her beloved younger sister would follow in Daniil's footsteps and tie her destiny to the Babaevs seemed right. She had no doubt that Turunge would be happy with the son of Nahamye and Havo.

On Wednesday, after the workday was over, Nahamye headed to the Abramovs. He wanted to talk to Hezgie in a way that only two fathers who love their children can talk: sincerely and without dubious equivocations.

Nahamye Babaev liked Hezgie's calm, deliberate nature. Anya's father hadn't betrayed the faith of their ancestors, going to the synagogue and reading holy texts. Contrary to Nahamye, he didn't rush to adapt to the changing world, unconcerned with keeping up with the times and looking contemporary.

When they finished tea, the women left the room and Nahamye was left alone with Hezgie.

"You and I aren't full relatives, you know," the guest began.

"Why is that?" Hezgie donned his usual saddened smile.

"Daniil is only married to our niece."

"So what?" Hezgie asked, confused.

"What do you mean, 'so what?' It would be nice if we became full relatives."

"And how would we do that?"

"You have a bride, we have a groom. Erzol is already sufficiently independent and makes good money. He's only eighteen, but already a manager. He runs a whole section. He's grown, manned up. It's time for my son to have his own home. Perhaps we should give some thought to uniting our children? I'm sure that your daughter would make an ideal bride for my son. Why look elsewhere, when all signs point to Turunge and Erzol being together? What do you think about this, Hezgie?"

"It seems to me that it's a bit early for Turunge to get married," Hezgie said after giving it some thought. He dreamt that Turunge would follow her sisters' footsteps by finishing school and enrolling in the institute to get a higher education.

"What do you mean, early! Do you know how old Havo was when she married me? Fourteen! Your Turunge is already sixteen."

"I need to think," Hezgie repeated stubbornly. "And asking her wouldn't hurt."

"All right. Ask," Nahamye insisted. "We'll come back to this conversation."

Hezgie nodded, firmly shook Nahamye's hand and promised to respond to him in the near future. The conversation ended on that.

After the guest's departure, Hezgie waited for everyone to go to sleep and went to talk to Melke about Nahamye's proposal.

"Can you imagine – the Babaevs wanted to betroth Turunge to Erzol."

"Is that the one who works with Zachar?" Melke asked after a pause.

"That's the one."

Melke put the dishes aside.

"When do they want to have the wedding?"

"They don't seem to be too keen on delaying. Nahamye wants to get everything done quickly."

"Are you sure that it's time for her to be under the hupa, Hezgie? Perhaps we shouldn't rush. Turunge just turned sixteen. She still needs to get her diploma. We can wait."

This time around, Melke's doubts only strengthened Hezgie's determination.

"Why wait?" he smiled. "It a daughter's fate to leave the nest. The Babaevs are an honorable family. If the son takes after his father, then we won't find a better husband for our daughter."

"I don't know their son. Anya hasn't mentioned him to me."

"Why do you need to know him? He's a carbon copy of his father. She'll be happy with him, you'll see."

"Well," Melke sighed. "If you're that sure..."

Melke went back to the dishes. They would have to talk to Anya.

When the older daughter visited her mother the next day, she quietly took her aside by the stove.

"Do you know that Nahamye wants Turunge to marry his Erzol?"

"Really? Nahamye already came here?" Anya didn't like the fact that she didn't have the chance to warn her mother. "To be honest, I already knew this. Erzol works with us. The guy has golden hands. He earns more than most. He took over a section recently."

“What about his personality?”

“Like all men when they are young! I heard he got drunk a few times, got in a few fights. The usual.”

Despite Melke’s precautions, Tosya, Daniil’s wife, heard the conversation. The next morning, after Melke sent her to the market, she stopped at the Babaev’s on the way back and told everything to Susanna, Havo’s sister.

Havo was cooking dinner when Susanna ran into the kitchen.

“Do you know that Nahamye wants our Erzol to marry Turunge Abramova?”

Havo was dumbfounded.

“No! We’ve discussed the fact that he wants him to marry, but haven’t talked about anyone in particular.”

“Tosya just came by. She said that Nahamye was at the Abramovs’ yesterday and talked to Hezgie about marriage.”

Havo looked at her sister silently for a second and went back to cooking.

“If she’s good around the house, then she’s welcome to come into the home. Her older sister has a good head on her shoulders. Look at the business she’s running! Nahamye can’t praise her enough. Maybe the younger one isn’t stupid either.”

“I’ve seen her,” Susanna continued to gossip. “A clean, modest girl. A braid this thick,” Susanna said, pointing to her fist. “She’s good stock.”

Havo didn’t answer, and simply continued to think.

Her sister rushed to head home, but stopped short before leaving:

“I almost forgot. Ask Erzol to help me in the garden on his day off. Otherwise I won’t manage.”

“What – Daniil won’t do it?” Havo asked angrily. She didn’t like her boy being used as manual labor. He had enough to worry about at work.

Susanna, however, insisted:

“He’s away on business again. He’s not here.”

Havo reluctantly nodded in agreement.

As promised, Erzol showed up in aunt Susanna’s yard that Sunday. She was preparing to plant potatoes. It took two hundred years for the root vegetable brought into Russia by Peter the Great to become engrafted in Dagestan.

The aunt handed her nephew a shovel and told him to dig. Erzol spat on his hands and went to work. Susanna followed him, taking cleaning up the newly dug trench, throwing stones to the left, weeds to the right. Erzol half-listened to her chatter. But then her words struck him like thunder.

“I almost forgot! Congratulations on the engagement!” Susanna said acerbically, struggling to stretch her back.

Erzol was shocked.

“What engagement?”

“You don’t know? I can’t believe they haven’t told you! Nahamye went to the Abramovs to you to betroth Turunge, Daniil’s younger sister. Don’t tell me you haven’t seen her!”

Erzol was shaken by the news. He had not expected this turn of events. That’s what they meant when they called it a small world! His cousin Tosya was the wife of Daniil Abramov. Daniil’s brother Zachar – a friend and student of Erzol. And now, one of the younger Abramovs, Turunge, whom he knew from evening school, was going to be his wife! But why haven’t they told him anything or warned him?”

He froze for a moment, then threw the shovel aside and ran home. Susanna didn’t even have a chance to say anything before he left.

Erzol ran into the house, panting. Havo was in the kitchen, as always.

“Mama!” the son announced between heavy breaths.

Havo turned around, surprised.

“You’ve already finished at Susanna’s?”

“Mama? What’s this engagement that aunt Susanna was talking about? Or was she lying?”

“What are you talking about?” Havo replied, upset by her boy’s anxiety.

“You’re planning to have me marry Daniil’s sister?”

“Yes,” Havo said, lowering her gaze.

“Are you insane?” The son nervously struggled with words.

Havo waved him off.

“Your father already decided. I can’t do anything about it.”

Erzol shook his head. A father’s word was law in a Jewish family. Going against it was akin to burning bridges – practically impossible. That was the age-old custom, and no new authority could change anything.

Nahamye Babaev liked to tell his son the story of how, a long time ago, his best friend invited him to a wedding. He looked forward to the festivities all week, but the day before the party, his uncle Danke told him: ‘we’re working late today, and tomorrow too.’ The nephew couldn’t even mention that that he was expected at a wedding, and, of course, didn’t go anywhere.

And now, Erzol had to stay silent as well.

The betrothal took place the next day, in February of 1947, at the Abramov home on Suleiman Stalski Street. Erzol sulked. He was simply presented his fate. Nahamye insisted on his decision, and the son could not defy his will. Erzol wavered, feeling out of his element. Noticing his son’s disappointment, Nahamye patted him on the shoulder.

After a brief pause, he rose, cleared his throat, and announced:

“Dear Hezgie and Melke. We would like to betroth your daughter Turunge to our son Erzol.”

Melke sat still. Hezgie rose with a smile.

“Here’s the groom,” he said, looking at his wife, expecting to hear her opinion.

Melke smiled and quietly replied:

“We have no objections.”

Her middle daughter, the most hard-working one, was meant to leave the nest. The mother’s heart sank.

Erzol sat, eyes lowered, not feeling like himself.

“Melke,” Hezgie turned to his wife. “Bring our daughter here.”

Melke swiftly rose, went to the other room, and soon returned with Turunge.

“Here’s our beautiful girl,” Melke said, pushing her daughter ahead of her.

Erzol lifted his gaze and looked at the girl in silence. The tension melted away. He had seen her before, in school and on the street as he rushed to the cooperative, but hadn’t paid her much attention. Now that Turunge was going to become his wife, everything magically transformed.

“Well, son, what do you think of her?” Nahamye asked.

Erzol looked at his father. Nahamye noticed that the coldness and hurt had left his son’s eyes, as if he was no longer angry at his parents’ decision to arrange his marriage without warning.

“We’ll take her!” Erzol said, briefly.

The air, tense on both sides, relaxed at that moment. Melke clasped her hands, and yelled something to the children. The doors burst open and Turunge’s younger sisters brought in trays of all kinds of food – sweet, savory, hot. Everything was served at once, as had been done through the ages.

Erzol put a silver ring around the finger of his wife to be. Turunge’s hair was covered with a kerchief, and she was now betrothed. Both the Abramovs and the Babaevs filled their glasses. They raised them, praising the Creator, drank, and filled them again – an ancient ritual that looks strangely

new every time, since the future life of the couple depends on how it's conducted.

Hezgie and Nahamye began discussing the specifics of the wedding.

How do these things happen? Noise, commotion, panic. Such an event! Only yesterday, the son and the daughter were looked on as little children. Now – suddenly – they were husband and wife. They grew up in a single day and fled the next.

The Babaevs and the Abramovs prepared for the joyous occasion. Melke gathered the dowry: a quilted blanket, a cover made from natural wool, down pillow, bed sheets, a soft, handmade rug, dishes – everything that has been given to girls through the ages to start a new life at her husband's home. It was a list of everything useful and essential to running a home perfected through the ages.

In turn, Nahamye and Havo carefully conferred to decide which rooms in the large house the newlyweds would live in.

Then came the wedding.

Hezgie insisted to do everything as the ancestors did: first a party at the bride's home, then at the groom's, sogdush girls, the bride's dance to the yells of 'Goy shabash!' and, of course, a hupa.

Makhachkala's Jewish quarter shook from shouts and congratulations. Tables were brought out into the yard on Yermoshkin Street, menorahs burned. There was food, more food, and happy faces.

Turunge would glance at Erzol from time to time, and he would, in turn, look at Turunge. The young man felt as something in his life was permanently and irreversibly changing.

And so they became man and wife.

XIX

It wasn't that Havo was against a daughter-in-law coming into her home. On the contrary, it was something she looked forward to. My grandma dreamt on multiple occasions that another woman would join her household – her son's wife, who will obey her mother in law without question and fulfill her main duty – to give her and Nahamye grandchildren.

But things weren't that easy with Turunge. Havo sensed in her daughter in law an inner strength that resisted her pressure on all counts. That temper had to be curbed.

'Where does she get that from?' Havo would think, looking at her daughter-in-law.

The short and swift Havo didn't spend a single moment standing still. She had an active personality, always finding something to do around the house. Even before the wedding, she ordered for the rooms where the newlyweds would live to have their ceilings painted and floors scraped. She hung new curtains, washed the windows, and fluffed a giant feather bed.

“Do you think Turunge will be good at caring for Erzol?” she would ask Fira. “He works so much. He needs someone to provide him comfort. Have you heard whether she’s a good cook?”

“Mama! Father said that Melke is an artist in the kitchen. I heard that Turunge was always at her side. I’m sure she learned something.”

“Something... She needs to learn everything.”

Observing how Turunge accustomed herself to the new home, Havo had to acknowledge that she did everything skillfully and wasn’t lazy. But that wasn’t enough.

“Turunge, don’t chop Erzol’s potatoes too finely. Erzol doesn’t like that.”

As soon as Turunge would start making soup, an authoritative voice would chime in from behind her back:

“Don’t put dill in there. Just pepper.”

Havo patiently taught her daughter-in-law about the rules of the Babaev household and the tastes of its members.

“You should get up earlier in the morning,” Havo would lecture. “Once you’re up, go get water right way. Take both buckets, and make sure you get enough. As soon as you bring it in, put it on the stove, so it heats up. But put some in the jug. The wash-up water should be cold. He likes it like that.” Havo would fix her gaze on Turunge’s face, as if checking whether she’s paying attention, and continue. “Memorize what he’s used to. He likes lamb. If you buy beef, make sure that it’s from the shoulder and nothing else.”

Turunge would glumly stare out the window – just wanting all of this to be over.

Havo stubbornly insisted for Turunge to do everything according to the order established in the Babaev home, even the small things. This made Turunge feel like an incompetent girl, who found herself in a kitchen for the first time.

“Now try it yourself. Don’t worry – you won’t burn your fingers. Cook from the heart, and don’t worry about your

hands. Also,” Havo continued, approaching the cupboard, “use these dishes for the table. Use these forks and knives. He likes to take his tea in his porcelain cup.

This went on from dawn to dusk. As soon as Turunge would sit for a minute, her mother-in-law’s voice would sound.

“Why are you dawdling? Even a bit of laziness is an opportunity missed. One should always be on their feet around the house. We need to work! Work! If you don’t know where something is, ask. I’ll show you. Housework has never killed anyone.”

This way of life baffled Turunge. Did Havo think that she doesn’t know how to run a household? Turunge has been doing this since she was eight. Who watched the children while Melke worked during the war? Who cooked for her brothers and sisters, for her father? The notion that she wouldn’t be able to take care of Erzol alone was laughable. But Havo either didn’t know this or refused to acknowledge it.

The Babaevs lived like hundreds of other families, running around like hamsters in wheels according to once-and-for-all established customs. Everybody would be on their feet at the crack of dawn, but Havo, earliest of all – heating the stove, cooking, steaming, frying.

In the morning, Turunge wouldn’t even have a chance to offer her husband something to eat before Havo put a plate of his favorite chudu in front of him. Erzol didn’t even think about noticing this. But Turunge noticed Havo’s silent accusations of laziness. While the men didn’t notice such concerns, the women certainly did.

After a quick breakfast, the men would set off to work, and the house was left to the women. Then the conversations would start: who went where, who left whom, prices, weather, crops, famine, possible shortages, more stringent regulations, the future.

So went the days, over chores, hassles, and conversations to quell the boredom. The women would wash the clothes,

cook the food, sweep and scrub the floors, clean the pots and furnaces, fluff up the bedding. This was hard, daily labor unseen by male eyes, never appreciated fully, taken for granted and a part of a woman's destiny.

Erzol worked with no respite, giving his mother all the money he earned. Turunge once tried mentioning to Havo that it would be good for her to get a portion of the money for family needs, but the mother-in-law ended the conversation, declaring that the money will go only to her. If she needs some, she should ask for it, explain why, and will then get it.

Turunge frowned. It wasn't that such requests were demeaning, but they seemed excessive. Why should she have to justify her spending to her husband's mother? It would certainly be spent on the family. Turunge sighed and swallowed the sharp words she had waiting on the tip of her tongue.

She curiously explored a world new to her: the habits and character of her husband, who she hadn't really known before.

Turunge liked that her husband enjoyed his trade and was a masterful tailor. The girl instantly noticed that work was a priority for him. It brought income into the house, as well as respect from others.

Turunge liked when Erzol tenderly embraced her when there was no one around. Those were the minutes in which she felt happiness.

Only one thing was lacking – Havo's approval of what the young wife was trying to do for her husband. Turunge had always felt like a full-fledged housewife. She was used to helping Melke from a young age. Her responsibilities involved cooking, laundry and keeping the house clean and ordered, and having moved into the Babaev home, Turunge tried her hardest to create an atmosphere of kindness, soulfulness and positivity, so that her husband would like returning home. So that he would be warm, and comfortable and fed with her.

After a while, however, Turunge realized that, much to her dismay, Erzol didn't seem to hurry home after work. This was a polar opposite of what she had been used to, living with her parents and observing her father. Hezgie never stayed out after work, hurrying back as soon as his shift at the warehouse ended. When he had the opportunity to be alone, he would lock himself in his room and read holy texts.

Erzol acted differently. Socializing with his friends was like oxygen to him – necessary for survival. Sometimes, Turunge would fall asleep late at night, waiting for her husband. In the morning, Erzol would get up from the bed and wash up as if nothing had happened, yesterday's untouched dinner still waiting for him at the table.

Turunge, unable to resist, once said with slight bitterness:

"I waited for you to come home for dinner yesterday. Sorry – I fell asleep before you got back. I wish you'd return earlier. I cooked dinner..."

"Don't worry, I won't go hungry. I had business to take care of."

"With friends at a tavern?"

"So what if I was with friends? And where else are we supposed to gather at night, if not at a tavern? On the street by the fence?"

"I just wanted to say..."

"Understood. I'll come back earlier today."

"No, I meant..."

"Tell me!" he interrupted. "What else?"

"Nothing!" Turunge replied. "I just wanted to ask you what you wanted for breakfast. What can I make you?"

"Why do you fill your head with nonsense? Whatever Mama makes, I'll eat!"

Turunge was hurt by the fact that her husband didn't notice the hard work she did to care for him.

One day, my mother got up at the crack of dawn. Everyone in the home was still asleep, even Havo. Turunge quietly

went to the kitchen shutting the door behind her to avoid waking anyone. She was planning to light the stove. She really wanted to make chudu, having seen how Erzol can never get enough of them. Turunge could make them well, no worse than Havo. Her chudu made people want to lick their plates clean! She only needed to split a log into kindling, so that the fire in the stove would light faster. Turunge looked around for the axe. Perhaps someone had used it and didn't return it to the right place. It could have been in the closet, but it was too dark to see anything in there.

Turunge climbed up to the shelf and grabbed a kerosene lamp. She lit one match, then another – the lamp wouldn't light. She looked at the tank – no kerosene. Damnation!

Turunge struggled to get the tank of kerosene off the shelf. While she was refilling the lamp, she spilled a little on the floor. She then heard footsteps and, in a moment, Havo's displeased voice:

"Why are you making noise at such early hour?"

"I want to make chudu."

Then Havo's voice got angrier.

"Turunge! What are you doing?"

Turunge looked at Havo, perplexed.

"Who refills a lamp like that?" Havo continued. "You spilled kerosene on the floor!"

"It's only a little bit. I'll wipe it up"

"Why are you using this rag? Are you doing this on purpose? That's not what it's for. I wipe the tables with that rag! Get away from the stove. I'll make everything myself."

"But I got up early just for this."

"Why are you getting in the way?"

Havo grabbed a bucket and shoved it in Turunge's hands.

"Go get water instead. Wash the floors."

"But I wanted to make Erzol breakfast..."

"No need. Do you even know how to make chudu? When I'm gone, you can run the house. While I'm still here, listen

to what I say! You live in our house, so please follow our rules.”

Turunge sulked. She barely restrained herself from talking back, saying that she’s tired of always being in the background and that her mother-in-law is wrong. A minute passed, then another. The young woman took control of herself. It was bad to contradict one’s elders. That’s how her parents raised her.

Turunge grabbed the buckets and went to get water. She returned and, holding back tears, started washing the floor. Resentment gnawed at her all day. Why wouldn’t her mother-in-law accept her?

In the evening, Turunge ran to her mother. She needed to talk to the person dearest to her. Melke was pleased to see her, and started to ask her daughter about her new life.

Turunge couldn’t keep herself from complaining:

“Havo yells at me!”

“What’s wrong?” Melke asked.

“It’s a different thing every time. Today she yelled at me saying I wanted to burn the house down. I simply spilled a bit of kerosene on the floor.”

“So you spilled a little. Clean it up quickly, and it’s done.”

“That’s what I tried to do, but she made a scene.”

“So she made a scene. Why take it to heart? Buck up.”

“I do.”

“And don’t complain! Everything good with the husband?”

“Yes. He brought home a winter coat for me yesterday.”

“Did he make it?”

“Bought it! With a belt. And a silk lining. And he gave me lacquered shoes last week.”

“You see? He treats you well. Pay no mind to Havo. She’ll yell a bit, then stop.”

“But you don’t yell at Tosya, do you?”

“These things happen. We argue once in a while. You can’t do women’s business silently. If you don’t yell, they don’t hear you.”

“I don’t want anyone to raise their voice at me.”

Melke shrugged.

“I try. I care for Erzol, but Havo won’t let me be. As if I can’t get by without her and don’t know where anything is. I have to ask her permission for everything.”

“You shouldn’t contradict her. One should listen to their elders.”

Turunge’s meetings with her mother were brief. Havo didn’t like her to be away for a while. A daughter-in-law should always be at her mother-in-law’s side, ready to help.”

The young woman occasionally longed for her former freedom. After marriage, she was no longer in charge of how she spent her time.

Havo sincerely believed that she treated Turunge with warmth and attention. She headed the household – that’s been customary since ancient times. The daughter-in-law was, first and foremost, a source of labor, and that’s how Havo treated her beloved son’s wife. Was there anything wrong with that?

One weekday, Turunge started washing the floors.

“What are you doing? Leave it,” Havo grumbled. “You don’t have time. Did you wash Erzol’s shirt?”

“No. I’m planning to wash the linens tomorrow, and I’ll wash the shirt then.”

“You don’t need to change the sheets every week!” Havo lectured. “But Erzol should put on a clean shirt every day. He doesn’t work in the field – he works at a factory, among people. I give Nahamye a clean shirt every day – learn from that. Understood?” She grabbed the fresh shirt that Turunge had carefully hung on the back of the chair for Erzol the night before and threw it to the ground. “Go wash it,” she ordered. “See? It’s dirty!”

"I don't recall agreeing to be your servant!" Turunge burst out, unable to hold back the sharp words.

"Who do you think you are?" Havo asked, frowning. "Do you think you're in charge?" The tone with which she spoke did not bode well.

"The shirt was clean," Turunge said on the verge of tears. "What's wrong? How have I displeased you?"

Havo delayed her answer. Sometimes she herself couldn't say why she wasn't happy with Turunge.

"I know exactly what Erzol needs to be happy," Havo finally said. "He's my son. I gave birth to him, and know what he needs better than anyone."

Turunge couldn't object. In the few months of life at the new home, she hadn't been able to learn all of her husband's habits and tastes. In that sense, Havo was right, and she took the opportunity to point that out in this case.

"You want to cook Erzol's dinner? Go – cook. Make him what he likes to eat on the Shabbat."

"I don't know what he likes to eat on the Shabbat."

"You're his wife. You should know."

"I'll ask him when he gets home from work."

"When he gets back from work, it'll be too late. When will you cook? At night? You can't cook at night – it won't be kosher!"

"Last time he said that he didn't know what he'll want on Saturday."

"And that's what he should have said. A wife shouldn't trouble her husband with such issues. He's busy all day – working. You have to know these things – feel them."

"I try, but he's never home at night for me to ask him. He's always out somewhere with his friends."

"And what's it to you? He meets with important people. Why are you interfering in men's matters?"

"Havo, I'm not interfering. I just want..."

“You can do what you want when you’re a mother yourself. For now, be so kind to do what your elders tell you.” Havo’s tone softened. “Surely you know that everyone in this house wants only the best for you.”

“But I... I also only wish Erzol the best. I want to care for him.”

“You do? So take care of him – who’s stopping you? Don’t know what to do? The shirt needs washing.” Havo had returned to the start of the conversation. “Am I supposed to do all your work? I have backups. Hold on.”

Havo brought an ironed, starched shirt out of her room.

“This is for Erzol. Give it to him.”

Turunge swallowed her pride. She took the shirt – the sign of her inadvertent guilt – and followed Havo’s orders without argument.

Havo had a strong character. It didn’t matter what anyone did – it was wrong if she didn’t have a hand in it. She would instantly rush to redo it herself, as she thought was best. Therefore, anything Turunge did was subject to criticism.

Several months had passed like this. One day, Turunge realized that she was pregnant and rushed to share the news with Havo.

The mother-in-law clasped her hands.

“Are you sure? You aren’t mistaken?”

“It seems that way...”

“My daughter!”

Havo’s face instantly changed. She tightly embraced her daughter-in-law.

“I hope it’s a boy,” she said, and rushed to the stove. Before Turunge knew it, she was handing her a cup.

“Have some milk. You need to drink milk every day now, so that you have your own later. Look at how many I’ve birthed. I know what I’m talking about.”

From then on, Havo’s nagging and corrections became rare, then disappeared completely. Remembering her own dif-

ficulties at the beginning of her life with Nahamye and her lost children, Havo forbade Turunge from doing any difficult housework. The grandma awaited the grandchild as if it were manna from the heavens!

Turunge would occasionally go to clean something up or head to the stove. Havo would instantly run over, even if she was in another room. It was as if the woman could see through walls.

“Your main task is to carry the child! I’ll do the cooking! You look after yourself. You’re still young, you’ll have plenty of time to cook and do housework.”

“I wanted to make Erzol...”

“Go, go! Tend to yourself. I’ll do everything. You go think about the child.”

The closer Turunge got to term, the more Havo would dote on her.

“Why did you get up at the crack of dawn?” she complained one morning.

“I wanted to iron Erzol’s shirt.”

“I’ll iron it. Leave it.”

“I already heated up the iron.”

“So let it sit. Go lie down. Why are you obsessing about the shirt? He’ll wear the one he has – it won’t kill him. It’s still clean.”

Havo took the iron from Turunge’s hands. All that the daughter-in-law could do was look on in wonder.

In April 1948 Turunge and Erzol welcomed their first-born. The young mother felt happy enough to be in seventh heaven. How could she not be happy and proud? Turunge had given birth to a boy – a future provider and protector. Melke sang, Nahamye prayed. The Babaevs, being modern people, turned to the cooperative union to arrange for a gift for the young mother.

Then, an unseemly argument erupted between Nahamye and Erzol about the naming of the child. Erzol insisted on giving the boy a Russian name. My father had noticed how the old ways were fading into the past, frequently interacted with Russians at work, had been to Moscow, and saw how people lived there. Being an observant man, he concluded that, in current circumstances, children would be better off with Russian names. But Nahamye insisted that they not stray from tradition. After all, Jewish people should carry on the names of their ancestors.

And so Turunge and Erzol's first born was named Sadug. The new father was not happy with this. Ultimately, however, the name was far less important than the fact that the child existed – lying in his crib and demanding attention. As the boy grew, however, Erzol got his way, and most people came to know Sadug as Slava - a popular Russian name.

Turunge quickly recovered from childbirth and life went on as before, filled with work and worries.

One day Nahamye had guests. Havo ran to the kitchen to make tea, as Turunge stood by the stove making Sadug's porridge.

"Move over, I need to boil water," Havo asked.

"I'll move over when Sadug's porridge is ready," Turunge retorted abruptly, and immediately looked at Havo guiltily.

But the words had already been said, and Havo had heard them. How could she – her son's wife – contradict her in her own home? And in the kitchen, no less! 'Here's what all my caring for this girl has resulted in,' Havo thought. 'She had a child, now she feels like she runs the house.' She didn't say anything out loud, just nodded and went on to do something else. Turunge finished up with the porridge and left the kitchen shortly after.

In an hour, Havo came into Turunge's room.

"Let me have Sadug."

“Why?”

“I need water. Go to the fountain.”

“Let Fira go,” Turunge protested. “I was going to feed Sadug.”

“You fed him an hour ago!”

“He’s hungry. Look at him – reaching with his little hands. Let Fira get water. She doesn’t have much to do anyway.”

Havo turned around and left, slamming the door behind her.

Fira burst into the room a minute later.

“How dare you talk to Mama that way!”

“Why are you yelling at me?” Turunge replied, defensive.

“She asked you to go get water.”

“And I told her that I can’t, because I have to feed Sadug.”

Fira pursed her lips in anger and left the room.

In an hour, when Turunge, Sadug in her arms, went into the kitchen for some reason or other, Fira and Havo were standing by the stove. Turunge wanted to heat some water up for the child. She looked into one of the water tanks, then the other. Both stood empty. She checked the pots and the jug - not a drop.

“Where’s the water?” she asked, perplexed. “I need some for Sadug.”

“Go get some at the fountain,” Fira answered with pointed indifference.

“But I heard you, as you were bringing some in,” Turunge replied.

“We already used it. Look - there’s soup cooking. If you need some, get it yourself. We’ll watch the child. Give him to me.” Fira reached for Sadug.

Turunge brought the baby closer.

“I’m not giving him to anyone!”

“Well, then do everything yourself.”

Sadug began to cry. Turunge was baffled, not knowing what to do. She looked around, catching eye of a bucket of water under the table.

"There it is," Turunge said, pointing at the full bucket.

"That's not for you."

Turunge's face turned red with anger. How tempted she was to shower them with obscenities! But she restrained herself, not wanting to curse with a child in her hands. He would surely sense the anger and start fussing. Turunge took a deep breath and approached Havo.

"I apologize," she said hollowly. "I was wrong."

Havo looked at her silently.

"I'll get the water," Turunge continued. "Please watch the child."

Havo extended her hands toward Sadug and picked him up.

"Come here, my precious boy..." The child smiled, feeling the warmth coming from his grandmother.

Turunge left the room in a hurry. She could hear Havo's tender words to Sadug. Something resembling envy gnawed at her.

That concluded this particular scuffle. Next morning, both women acted as if nothing had happened. The conflict seemed to have subsided, at least for now.

One day, Turunge was coming back from her parents. On her way home, she stopped at the market to grab some fresh greens, so that she could make Erzol some soup. She placed the bunches of cilantro, parsley, dill and celery on the kitchen table.

Havo entered the kitchen soon after.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to make Erzol some soup," Turunge replied abruptly, without turning away from the stove.

"You should have asked me. I already made a whole pot," Havo remarked, displeased.

Turunge ignored her and continued to cook. The mother-in-law pursed her lips, approached the table, and warily examined the vegetables. She took a few leaves, crumpled them

in her hand, smelt them, then silently grabbed the entire lot of greens and threw them into the garbage.

"Those greens are all rotten," she said, leaving the kitchen.

Turunge just stood there, at a loss for words. Sadug's crying broke her trance. The young woman went to her son, but Havo beat her to it. She ran over to the crib, leant over it and picked up the child. This was too much for Turunge. With the words "I'll tend to him myself!" she grabbed the kid from his grandmother's hands.

Havo contritely shook her head and stepped aside.

The next day, Turunge went into the kitchen early, purposely catching a moment when Havo wasn't there. She wanted to peel some potatoes. She looked in the drawer, but couldn't find a single knife. Upon searching all of the shelves, she could only find an old one, with a dull blade. At that moment, Erzol appeared at the door.

Strangely, Havo had not yet been in the kitchen.

"Mother doesn't feel well," Erzol said. "Cook some breakfast."

Turunge forgot about the potatoes and went to set the table. She put out her husband's favorite cup, a plate, and silverware. She went to the stove to get something, suddenly hearing her husband's voice:

"Turunge, you forgot the bread."

Indeed she did. She went to the cupboard and stopped, perplexed. What would she cut the bread with? Not wanting to tell her husband that all the knives had disappeared overnight, she grabbed the dull one and started cutting. The bread broke and crumbled. Annoyed, she gathered the uneven bits and served them to Erzol.

"What is this?" Erzol grumbled. "You can't cut bread evenly?"

Before Turunge had a chance to respond, Havo entered the kitchen.

“Good morning, son.”

“Why are you up so early, mama? You should lie down if you aren’t feeling well.”

“I would, but I keep listening to how no one can feed you properly. Who mangled the bread like that?” she asked.

She grabbed the plate of scraps and returned with a platter, even slices of bread neatly arranged atop it. She placed it in front of Erzol without uttering a word.

“Oh, mama!” he exclaimed. “You’re a magician! I’ve always told father that we’re lucky to have you.”

“Eat, my son. Eat,” Havo said, patting Erzol on the head.

Turunge just stood aside and looked, swallowing her tears.

Everything seemed to be back where it was when she first arrived at the Babaev home. No matter what she did, Havo was displeased.

“She can’t do anything. Can’t cook, can’t buy groceries,” she would complain to Nahamye. “Can’t clean, can’t do laundry.”

One day Turunge was cleaning the floors of her half of the house. Erzol was at work, as always, and the door to her room closed. Suddenly, Sadug started crying in his bed.

“Please bear with me a minute, little one,” Turunge kept saying to the child. “I’ll finish cleaning and be right there.”

The baby wouldn’t calm down, so Turunge put her task aside and went to the child’s bed. She leant over Sadug and instantly realized the cause of his displeasure. She took off the wet diaper, put it in the corner of the crib, and decided that she would change and feed the boy after she finishes working. She went back to the floors, instantly hearing Havo’s panicked voice behind her.

“Why’d you leave the child naked? He might catch a cold!”

“It’s only for a minute. I’m finishing up the floors.”

“A minute? What – you’re going to change him with those dirty hands? Are you insane? And what is this? Who leaves dirty diapers lying around like that?”

Havo hurried to change Sadug. Like a tigress, Turunge rushed to her child, ripped the boy from the grandmother's arms, and hugged him tightly.

"I won't give him to you. I'll do as I see fit in my family. Leave us."

Havo couldn't believe her ears.

"I just wanted to help! What's with you?"

"I don't need your help. I do it well enough on my own, understand?"

Havo looked around in confusion, as if addressing the walls themselves: "You see this? In my own house! To talk to me like that!"

She turned around and left the room, slamming the door.

Three days of calm followed. At least relative calm – fights and grudges stayed within the confines of the women's half of the house. But, ultimately, the women were unable to conceal the conflict, which now had more fuel in its flames, from the men.

Having come home from work, Erzol remarked on the unusual quiet in the house. The usually chatty Havo greeted her son with silence.

"You haven't said a single word today, Mama! What happened?"

"I was instructed to shut up."

"By whom?"

"By your wife." Havo stopped in the middle of the kitchen and gave her son a befuddled look.

"What?"

"You heard me," Havo shrugged. "Sadug was crying, I wanted to help, and she responded that she won't let me touch the child. Your wife does not listen to me!"

Erzol sighed heavily and finished his dinner. He left the home to take a walk, to think of an appropriate course of action. He returned in an hour, somber and angry.

That evening, as they were going to bed, the irate Erzol asked Turunge:

“Why do you raise your voice to my mother?”

“Why does she get involved in all of our affairs?” Turunge retorted sharply.

Erzol frowned.

“Don’t you understand? She’s my mother. Don’t you dare to talk to her like that!”

“Am I supposed to stay silent in my own house?”

Turunge fixed her eyes on her husband. Her firm, piercing gaze was hard to endure.

“It’s her house,” Erzol grumbled.

Turunge huffed. She looked at her husband silently, then turned away, offended.

A day later, Erzol went to see Havo after work.

“How is everything, Mama? Do you need me to get anything at the market tomorrow?”

“If I need anything, I’ll go myself. Besides, we’re stocked.”

“Are you upset by something?”

“What’s there to be upset about?” Havo said timidly. “I just don’t understand, Erzol – how can she behave this way? She’s being so rude to her husband’s mother!”

“What’s wrong now?”

“Everything! She neither tends to herself, nor to her son. She went to the kitchen, abandoned the boy in his room. I went to nurse him, she rushed in, took him from me, yelled at me...”

“Mama, I’ll talk to her.”

“Please do. I beg you. She needs to respect her husband’s parents!”

Erzol sensed the return of irritation’s dull influx. He went to Turunge, who, as always, was tending to Sadug.

“What am I to make of all this?” Erzol began.

“What’s wrong?” Turunge smiled.

“You’re talking back to Havo again. You have to understand – it’s my mother!”

Turunge stopped in her place.

“But she does awful things to me. She won’t let me be. No matter what I do – it’s always wrong. I cook, I clean, I take care of Sadug – she isn’t pleased with anything. I can’t keep quiet about it!”

Erzol slammed his palm on the table.

“Don’t you dare raise your voice to Mama! Don’t you dare!”

And then, the conversation between Turunge and Erzol ended.

Nearly all of the women from the Babaev side took Havo’s side right away. It really couldn’t have happened any other way. They were most angry at the fact that Turunge refused to concede.

Both my mother and my grandma were proud, quick-tempered women. The blood of mountain women ran hot and let itself be known. My father, Erzol, and my grandfather, Naha-mye, were privy to my grandma’s outrage many more times:

“She dares to raise her voice to me? To me – her elder! Who’s the mistress of this house? To me – the mother of her husband!”

Erzol gradually grew tired of these intrafamily discussions of Turunge’s behavior, being inadvertently roped into the women’s arguments. Being Turunge’s husband, he needed to influence his wife. Instead of spending his evening relaxing and talking to his friends, he found himself in the midst of squabbles and mutual hatred. Erzol was getting fed up.

No one knows how long this could have continued and how it would have ended, had Turunge not found herself pregnant once again. The news put an end to all power struggles. Turunge was distanced from housework, and Havo, once again, started doing everything herself – the way she preferred it.

It seemed that Havo wanted this the entire time. A pregnant Turunge did not do anything, and Havo had no challenge to her superiority in the home. This continued until she gave birth.

And so, a year and four months after Sadug's birth, Erzol and Turunge welcomed another son. Nahamye and Havo insisted that the child be given the Hebrew name Odom. But now, Erzol defied the will of the elders for the first time.

"No, I will not allow this!" he firmly declared.

And he named his son Igor. Regardless of the fact, all Jewish traditions were abided by, and a bris took place on the seventh day.

By now, the country had abandoned the ration stamp system, and goods magically started appearing in the stores, albeit at completely different prices. But Erzol didn't complain. He could afford to buy whatever he needed. At a time, where there was barely any ready-made clothing in the country and few could afford to have their garb custom made, a tailor's profession was very well regarded.

Erzol oversaw the work of twenty people. Naturally, he had to compile orders and obtain fabric. Connections were established, which grew into friendships by the tried and true 'you help me, I help you' principle. Soon enough, he could tell how a contact could be useful within a moment of their initial meeting.

Erzol was an attractive, sociable young man. He knew a million stories and could win anyone over with his jokes. He could find common ground in mere minutes, and intuitively planned his approach, over food and drinks at the table. His leisure became his work.

His circle of friends was unusually wide. He was an energetic, charming and free-spirited guy who attracted women's attention. He did not feel constrained by the bounds of marriage, and his wife and two children were forgotten as soon as he stepped outside his home.

Erzol's rationale was simple. His duty to the family was to provide money for the household and ensure that his children and wife are fed and clothed. Marriage would not put a damper on his character, and the old Jewish tradition of standing under the hupa in one's youth did not bring him happiness.

XX

Whilst her husband disappeared at work, Turunge tended to the household and the children. Once, after an especially busy day, she lay down and fell into a sleep deep enough not to hear Erzol return home. When she awoke in the morning, he was still asleep. Trying to keep quiet, she got dressed and slipped into the kitchen.

Havo was already there, amidst clanking pots and pans. As soon as Turunge started her chores, her mother-in-law's remarks started coming:

"Why are you standing here? The kitchen is always too cramped for two housewives. You didn't see where I spilled some water and stepped in it. Now you're going to get dirt all over the house. Grab a rag and quickly clean it up."

"But I didn't step in it!" Turunge defended herself.

"Didn't step in it? Then what's that?" she said, pointing at Turunge's feet. "Look!"

Turunge showed her bone-dry slippers to her mother-in-law. Havo quieted down in irritation.

“Just don’t wake Erzol. He needs to sleep. He worked late last night - came back after midnight. You were probably sleeping...”

“I know when he came back,” Turunge snapped back in unexpected rage. “And I also know where he was. I’m asking you again, don’t meddle in my family’s affairs!”

Havo was stunned.

“That’s how you speak to me?”

“Same way you speak to me!” Turunge retorted.

Havo’s gaze was piercing, her lips narrowing to the width of a thread. She whipped the stove with a rag and turned around. Turunge left the kitchen. Those were the last words the two exchanged that day.

Everything had gone full circle. No matter what Turunge did, she was criticized. Havo became impossible to please: the daughter-in-law laundered wrongly, cooked wrongly, and cleaned up wrongly. Not doing anything did not help either: not being busy meant being lazy. It was a vicious cycle. Turunge resisted as she could. Taking after her mother Melke, she liked to finish what she started, accepting responsibility for what she did.

And so began Havo and Turunge’s battle for Erzol’s attention. It was a clash of the titans. My father refused to admit this, always preferring to take the side of the one who birthed him – Havo.

One day Erzol came home late. Turunge, tending to the children, was changing her youngest.

Upon seeing her son, Havo rushed to reheat dinner. Turunge appeared in the kitchen several times, holding the fussy baby who needed to go to bed. Erzol would smile looking at his son. Havo silently moved something on the cooling stove.

Having eaten, the sated Erzol stopped by his mother’s room to thank her for dinner. As soon as he stepped in the door, he noticed that Havo was not her usual self.

“Mama, what happened?” Erzol asked, frightened. “Are you sick?”

“No, son. It’s nothing...”

“I can see that something’s wrong. What happened?”

“Business as usual, Erzol. It’s impossible!” Havo was on the verge of tears.

“Is it Turunge again?”

“I don’t understand her. I just don’t!”

“What now?”

“She’ll say it’s nothing.”

“Can you please tell me what happened?”

“She talks back! Every waking moment, as if someone’s bothering her.”

“But why? I don’t understand.”

“What’s to understand? You think she’ll tell you?” Havo’s face grew stern. “She doesn’t take care of your sons. Whenever I start nursing them, she takes them away and tells me to leave. Raises her voice.”

“Mama, I’ll talk to her.”

“What good will that do? You’ve already talked to her. She doesn’t listen.”

“I’ll put a stop to it. I promise.”

For the first time, Erzol was so flustered that his face turned red and his hands involuntarily turned into fists. He ran out of Havo’s room. Havo listened to Erzol’s fading footsteps, wondering what he would do.

Meanwhile, Turunge was putting the children to bed. As her husband entered the room, she put a finger to her lips, silently shushing him so he wouldn’t wake the children. Erzol, however, didn’t seem to notice, his face grim. He loudly dragged a stool closer, sat on it, then jumped back up and started pacing around the room.

“What am I supposed to make of this?” he suddenly barked.

Turunge shuddered.

"Just don't shout – you'll scare the children. What's wrong, Erzol?"

"What did you say?"

"I don't understand you, Erzol." Turunge placed her youngest son in the crib and stood firm before her husband, like a lioness.

"You talk to my mother like that? You need to understand – she is my mother. My mother!"

"She always jabs at me. Constantly, no matter what I do."

"You're lying. She does no such thing."

"You don't see it?"

"What do you mean, I don't see it? The woman's incapable of anything but kindness."

"You must not know her very well!"

"Don't you dare talk about my mother that way, you hear? I forbid you!"

Erzol started breathing heavily. Without saying a word, he turned around and left the room, slamming the door behind him. He went back to Havo's room.

Erzol felt comfortable around his mother. She would smile kindly at him, and he would forget about all his problems. His wife wasn't as close to him as Havo was. He and Turunge were bound together by their children, but he couldn't bring himself to love her as much as he did his mother. So when Havo raised issue with her daughter in law, the latter would always be at fault in his eyes. Such was the caring son's simple logic.

The evening ended with Turunge's promise not to defy Erzol's mother from now on.

From now on, Turunge would come out to greet her husband when he returned from work less and less frequently. Busy with her two children, my mother yielded caring for Erzol to Havo, especially since that temporarily quelled their power struggle. But only temporarily.

Once Erzol came home and sat down to eat dinner. Havo placed the plate before him, along with the silverware, and went to the cupboard to get his cup. All this was done without a single word said.

“Why are you so quiet, Mama?”

“I was told to shut up.”

“Again? But I told her!” Erzol jumped up from his seat. “She swore to me that she won’t offend you anymore! How dare she!”

“Calm down, son.”

“No! I’m no letting this go!”

“Cool down, son.”

Havo herself didn’t expect her words to cause such rage.

“Tell me what happened!”

“The usual. Sadug was crying, so I went to him, wanting to help. Your wife grabbed him and held him tight, as if I, his own grandmother, could do him any harm, and started yelling ‘I’ll deal with him myself!’. So I tell her ‘Give me the child! He needs to be changed!’ and she responds ‘I know that without you telling me!’ and kept on screaming.” Erzol breathed heavily, as Havo continued. “I raised five of them, and she tells me that I don’t understand. After all that, she told me to shut up.”

Erzol had come back from a party, toasts still echoing through his head and wine still running through his veins. He resented his wife for offending his mother, his eyes turning bloodshot. Perhaps if he considered the possibility of Havo being unfair to Turunge, nothing would have happened, but something went dark in Erzol’s alcohol-impaired consciousness. He watched Havo struggle to lift a heavy bucket.

“Leave it. There’s someone younger who can do this! Let Turunge work,” Erzol said, stopping his mother.

“As if she would...” Havo replied woefully.

That phrase became the last straw. Erzol pointedly rose from his seat and left the dining room. At that moment, Tu-

runge was changing me, her son. As my father shoved the door open, my mother shuddered and held me tight.

“What happened?”

Erzol stood before her, face red with rage.

“You dared to yell at my mother again?”

With those words, he rushed at Turunge and struck her face, full swing. It was as if a thousand fires lit up in her head.

The young woman screamed, and the blows continued, one after another.

“I’ll teach you! I’ll teach you! Don’t you dare yell at my mother!”

She tried to cover herself, but Erzol’s heavy fist was too accurate.

“Help! He’s trying to kill me!” she screamed.

Havo heard her daughter-in-law’s screaming and was frightened. At that moment, the door opened. Nahamye had come home from work. Turunge’s piercing screams struck his ears. He had only heard such screaming during the war, when funeral notices came in. Horrified, he rushed to his son’s room, where the howling was coming from, and was shocked. Nothing of this sort had ever happened in his home. Erzol was beating Turunge.

“What are you doing?” Nahamye shouted.

He jumped at his son, intercepted his hand and dragged him away from Turunge.

“What are you doing? This is the mother of your children! Don’t you understand that?”

Nahamye continued to yell something, but Erzol couldn’t hear him, his senses shrouded in fog. Nahamye grabbed his son by the collar and shook him.

“Snap out of it!”

Erzol suddenly froze, breathing heavily and looking at his father in confusion.

“What is wrong with you?”

Erzol suddenly felt like a little boy and his rage evaporated. He turned to Turunge. She was lying helpless on the floor, her face covered in blood. Erzol looked at his father, saw his mother through the door, and ran out of the room. He rushed to the kitchen, dumped a jug of cold water on his hand, and collapsed onto a stool.

He was so sick of this! He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, but what good would that do? All this wretchedness was happening because his father had made a mistake! All Erzol wanted was to live as a free man, work hard, party wholeheartedly, and here he was, stuck with a wife, forced to humor her and teach her manners.

A tender hand landed on his shoulder. It was Havo's.

"Son! Drink some water. Calm down."

His mother was the only one who stood by his side, the only one who understood him. No, he wouldn't be able to find a better woman than her. Erzol pressed his head against his mother's stomach, as he did as a child.

Nahamye burst into the kitchen.

"What is going on here?"

Havo had never seen him like this.

"What are you doing?"

Nahamye, who had never laid a finger on his son, was ready to take a belt to him. The head of the family slammed his fist onto the table, unable to comprehend the events around him.

"Have you all gone mad?" he snapped at Havo. "Why haven't you told me about what's happening in our house? I thought everything was fine between Erzol and his wife! What is happening? How could you raise your hand against a nursing mother?"

Erzol chuckled. His anger had passed. He couldn't even recall what led him into a frenzy. He could only remember how much he wanted to punish Turunge and keep her from insulting her mother.

“Do you know how she speaks to our mother?”

“Let them figure that out for themselves! Why are you interfering? It’s their business!” Nahamye shouted, looking to Havo.

“But father...”

“Silence! Say whatever you want to her, but I forbid you to strike her!”

Turunge could hear the argument through the walls. She listened, unable to understand what was going on. Why were they yelling? What caused this?

Was this really her home? She was told that she has no rights here? Who said that? Erzol? That couldn’t be. He was her husband, the father of her children.

If her home wasn’t here, then where was it? It had to be somewhere. She needed to go there – home – to safety!

Turunge tugged at the tight collar of her dress, struggling to breathe. She needed air – fast, before her tears suffocated her.

“No,” she moaned. “No!”

Who was she talking to? What was she trying to forget? Only she herself could answer those questions, and she was nowhere to be found.

“No, no, no,” she kept repeating.

Turunge wanted to strike all of it from her memory – this evening, this pain – every last bit. She wanted to turn back time, to start anew.

“Mama,” Turunge called, feebly.

She needed to go to her mother, and quickly – she would save her, protect her. She would take away the pain.

She moved unsteadily toward the door, yanked her coat off the rack and went into the yard. The brisk air soothed her throbbing face.

‘Home, quickly,’ she thought as she was shutting the gate behind her.

Turunge couldn't hear the rustling of the gravel under her feet. She just walked forward, at what seemed to be a quick pace. The wind blew in her face, as if attempting to stop her. At times, she'd hear Erzol's piercing scream behind her: 'This is how you talk to my mother?' She would turn around in fright and try to speed up her pace.

Turunge turned onto the familiar street, walked into her parents' home, and felt everything ripple before her eyes. She squinted, instinctively shielded her face, and collapsed onto the floor, unconscious.

She woke up to sprinkles of water hitting her face. She parted her eyelids and saw Melke's face looking over her.

"Mama," Turunge whispered.

She couldn't say anything else.

Melke looked at her daughter's bloodied face.

"What have they done to you?" she whispered in puzzled horror. "Who did this? Who attacked you?"

Her screams alerted Hezgie, who ran into the room. Seeing his daughter prostrate on the floor, he started crying as well. The fears and horrors of war and the revolution flooded his memory.

"Tosya! Tosya!" Melke shouted.

Tosya ran in from the kitchen with a towel in her hands. Upon seeing Turunge, she started howling as well. Tosya and Melke managed to lift the beaten woman off the ground, took her to a room, and laid her onto a bed.

Tosya took the wet towel and started to wipe the blood off Turunge's face. Turunge lifted her hand and waved it feebly in front of her, as if telling her to not touch her. She was shaking, unable to explain anything concretely.

"Mama, mama..." she whispered bitterly, as chills overtook her body. The tears squeezed her throat with an iron grasp, and she, once again, struggled to breathe.

"Darling, darling!" Melke yelled in terror, blowing at her daughter's face and fanning her with a towel. "Who did this?"

Turunge shook her head.

"I don't know."

She wanted to say more, but couldn't find the words. Indeed – who did this? She already had doubts about the fact that this had really happened to her. Erzol couldn't have done this.

"It was all of them..." Turunge kept quietly repeating, choking. She then concluded that there was no sense in concealing the truth. "Erzol..."

It was as if the floodgates had opened. She began to bawl, tears gushing from her face. She grabbed her mother's hand and pressed it to her chest.

"Mama, Mama!"

The shaken Melke stared at her daughter, and her bloodied forehead, not knowing what to do next. "How could this have happened?" she repeated, again and again.

"It's not Erzol's fault... It's all her. Her!" Turunge cried hysterically.

"Who is she talking about?" Hezgie asked from nearby.

"She needs to go to the hospital. Now!"

Luckily, Daniil had just returned home, instantly running into the room where Turunge was lying.

"I'll be right back!" he shouted, realizing what had happened, and ran to look for a car.

They slowly lifted Turunge up and carefully led her out. From the corner of her eye, she saw her reflection in her mirror – swollen and bloodied. Turunge, Melke and Hezgie then got into the car and sped through the dark streets. After criss-crossing around Makhachkala's alleys, the car stopped by the brightly lit entrance of the two-story city hospital.

Once there, the mangled woman was taken to the attending doctor's office, saturated with the unpleasant odor of phenol, and laid onto a cot. The doctor himself arrived in a minute – a kindhearted, gray-haired man who called Turunge 'daughter' and asked her to not hesitate and tell him everything that

happened. Her upper lip was swollen, and it hurt to speak. The doctor carefully examined her and shook his head in concern. He finally asked Turunge to try to carefully get up from the cot and sit on a chair before him.

“Your daughter has a concussion and multiple blunt trauma injuries,” the doctor said as he left his office and turned to Turunge’s parents. “A little more, and she wouldn’t be sitting here, but lying motionless. Do you know who did this?”

Silence prevailed.

“So you don’t know who did this?” the doctor repeated persistently.

“We don’t know. She came home and fainted at the door,” Melke replied quickly, glancing at Hezgie out of the corner of her eye. He compliantly agreed with his wife about keeping certain things quiet.

“She lives with you?”

“Yes. Well - no,” Melke corrected herself. “She lives in her husband’s home, but is with us right now.”

“So who did this to her? Her husband?” the doctor asked, fixing his gaze on Hezgie, who froze, dumbfounded, shifting his glance between Melke and the doctor.

“No, of course not!”

Melke wanted to say something, but the doctor interrupted.

“Understood,” the doctor answered, clearly having concluded something.

“What’s understood?” Melke asked nervously.

“Your daughter’s in shock – that’s what’s understood. She needs bed rest and total quiet,” the doctor said compassionately. “Can you provide that at home? Or shall we put her in the hospital?”

“A hospital? Out of the question! We’ll take care of her at home, of course!” Melke said, sounding offended.

“Here’s what needs to happen. You’re going to take her home and give her compresses using this.” The doctor handed

Melke a prescription. "Her bandages will need to be changed tomorrow or the day after."

The agitated Melke started thanking the doctor, while Hezgie helped his daughter put on her coat.

"Another thing," the doctor said to Melke. "If, for any reason, you decide to remember who nearly crippled your daughter, I'll write up the necessary paperwork which you can take to the police."

Melke nodded, avoiding locking eyes with the doctor in embarrassment. The doctor handed Hezgie a sheet of paper, which he folded in four and placed in his jacket pocket.

They returned home well after midnight.

Upon seeing Turunge, the whole household sighed in relief. The exhausted woman was put to bed, and the rest of the adults followed. Only Melke and Hezgie stayed awake, retiring to the kitchen.

"I don't understand, why did you say that Turunge was attacked?"

"What did you want me to do? Say that her husband did this so they'd take him away."

"No. But..." Hezgie grew nervous. "You do understand what happened, though, right? Turunge ran to our door! Because they beat her over there," he nodded in the direction of the Babaev house, seething with anger.

Melke looked at her husband scornfully.

"After all, Nahamye isn't like that..." Hezgie continued, unappeased.

"In any case, things weren't going well at all between Turunge and Erzol lately."

"What happened between them? Do you know something? Tell me."

"Turunge came to me complaining about Havo. I was hoping everything would subside."

"So this was because of his mother?"

“How should I know?”

Hezgie once again interrupted Melke’s silence, without waiting for an explanation.

“So what now?”

Melke sighed.

“I don’t know what happened there, but it certainly didn’t come from happiness.

“So what do we do?”

“We need to reconcile them. She needs to grow wiser.”

“What does she have to do with any of this?” Hezgie was getting angry.

“Like you don’t know? Everything at a home depends on the wife. If she wants peace, there’ll be peace. Or war.”

Nahamye stayed silent, sensing a concealed hint. Melke was right. Then he remembered:

“Who’s watching the children?”

As the word ‘children’ was uttered, Turunge tossed in her sleep in her room, as if she could hear it.

“They’re probably with Erzol. Havo will look after them, I think,” Melke replied, worried.

“The children should be with her mother,” Hezgie said with concern.

“They should! I think we should go get them. But what will we do if they won’t let them go?”

“What do you mean ‘won’t let them go’? The children should be with their mother. We’ll go tomorrow and get them.”

“But don’t even think about going to the police. This is their family business, let them figure it out. There’s no reason to get the police involved. Whatever happens, Erzol remains her husband and provider. If they take him, there’ll be no one to feed the family.”

“How do you expect them to live together after that?”

“We’ll pray for it. Maybe it’ll settle down. Time will pass. Nahamye will talk to Erzol, put some sense into him. I don’t be-

lieve that he's that much of a monster..." Melke sighed in grief. "The main thing is to get the children tomorrow. They bear no fault in this. We should go first thing in the morning. Let Turunge sleep. And afterwards, things will figure themselves out."

As soon as it was light, Melke and Hezgie set off to the Babaevs to get the children. Turunge's parents were heartbroken.

Havo opened the door. Right there, before she had a chance to say anything, Melke started yelling:

"How could he lift his hand against a nursing mother!"

Havo stood there, not knowing how to object, feeling guilty before Turunge's parents. Having heard the commotion, Nahamye came out and stood beside Havo, head sunken. Melke would not back down, frenzied further by her own yelling:

"You, Nahamye, are the only reason I didn't tell the doctor who did this. He suggested giving him up to the police. People go to prison for such things? Where are the children? We're taking them – they're going to live with us!"

Nahamye and Havo quietly took in Melke's rage.

That day, Erzol came home late in the evening.

Havo was already waiting for him in the kitchen.

"They took the kids," she said right away.

"Who?"

"Turunge's parents."

Erzol said nothing in return.

"Sadug needs to be fed five times a day. You think she's going to do that?" Havo exclaimed angrily. "Of course she won't."

Erzol ate silently, frowning from time to time, clearly displeased with the conversation.

Upon hearing Havo, Nahamye came into the kitchen.

"You need to go and ask them for forgiveness."

Erzol continued to eat silently.

"You need to go and ask them for forgiveness. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Erzol grumbled.

"So don't sit! Go!" Nahamye said, having calmed down. "You're lucky they didn't go to the police. Then you'd go to jail!"

"I don't want any of it anymore! If she left, she left. I'll live alone, as before."

"No, Erzol, you will not live as before. Do what you want, but you must go there and atone for what you did."

The next day, Nahamye waited for all visitors to leave the accounting department and headed for Anya's office. Upon seeing Nahamye, her face grew sour. Nahamye quietly stood there, shifting his feet.

"Can I sit?"

"Yes, of course, Nahamye."

"Busy?" Nahamye asked with compassion.

"You know how it goes. The quarter's ending."

Nahamye nodded. Silence hung over them again.

"What happened between them is killing me, believe me," Nahamye began. "You know how fond I am of Turunge."

Anya picked up a document, then chucked it back onto the table.

"I don't understand how such a thing could happen in your home, Nahamye!"

"Anya, I worry about Turunge as well..."

"Nahamye, they suggested that we press charges," Anya retorted angrily.

"Talk to your parents. I'm ready to make it right. I just want them to make up. I always dreamt that my son would have a tightly-knit family."

"She's afraid to come back to him. She says that Erzol will kill her."

"I'll talk to him. I won't allow him to lay a finger on Turunge."

"I will convey your words to my sister and parents, Nahamye," Anya replied, and pretended to go back to the papers on her desk.

On that note, they parted. Anya gathered her things, and decided to spend the night at her parents' house. She needed to tell them of Nahamye's visit.

As the daughter predicted, her elders were glad to hear the news. It meant that they weren't the only ones aiming for peace, and that Turunge had allies on the Babaev side as well. Melke hoped for reconciliation most of all. She believed that everything would snap into place for the young couple – Erzol and Turunge. 'Endure first, fall in love after.' The only things she didn't account for were Turunge's fire-brand character and Havo's motherly love.

In the meantime, Turunge recovered. The cuts and bruises had nearly disappeared off her face and her head stopped spinning. Melke decided that it was time to talk to her daughter.

In the evening, when everyone had retired to their rooms and the children had gone to bed, Turunge was approached by her mother."

"Are they asleep?" Melke nodded at the little ones, who lay on the bed beside Turunge.

"Yes," she replied, smiling.

"What are you going to do next?"

"I don't know, Mama."

"But you understand that this cannot continue forever."

"What?"

"You have to save your family. That's the main thing. You have to," she said, emphasizing the last phrase, "come back to him."

"I won't return to Erzol!"

"What do you mean, 'won't return'?" Melke marveled. "He's your husband. He supports your family, does his duty. What else do you need? You won't get anywhere without him."

Turunge looked at her, eyes clear and wide open.

"I'm afraid of him, Mama! He jumped on me like a madman! You don't know what that's like! It was terrifying, Mama! I'm not going to live through it again!"

“But nothing like that will happen again, my dear!” Melke said, bringing Turunge closer. “Just listen to me. You know how we live – barely making ends meet. We will always help you. Anya and Daniil will always support you, but they can’t keep giving you money forever. Wait a bit, if you’d like, but go back.”

“But mama! It’s not only about Erzol!”

“Then who?”

“Havo.”

“What does Havo have to do with this?” Melke looked at Turunge in surprise, her face growing stern. “You just need to find common ground with her, that’s all!”

“That’s not all, mama! Don’t you understand? Havo was the one who turned Erzol against me. She, and no one else. She will never be pleased with me, and Erzol listens to her. If Havo says ‘kill her’, he will kill me. I feel it!”

The kind Melke seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

“Don’t say foolish things. You haven’t even finished night school. You don’t have a career. How are we going to feed yourself and your kids? You need to return to your husband. For the children.”

Turunge dropped her face into her hands, clearly tortured by her thoughts. Her heart told her one thing, reason said another. What was she to do? Which one was she to listen to?

“Mama, I’m still scared. I don’t know why he got that way,” she said tiredly.

“Know it or not, you need to go back either way. You need to be near him. That’s the only way you’ll reconcile. How else?”

“Fine,” Turunge nodded, defeated. “I’ll go back. But what if he starts again?”

“He won’t,” Melke said abruptly. “You’ll see - he won’t.”

They ended the conversation.

At night, Turunge couldn't fall asleep for a long time, tossing and turning, thinking that perhaps she really should come back. That everything will fix itself and settle down. But her soul was not at peace.

Things weren't all peaceful at the house on Yermoshkin Street either, despite the dead silence that overtook the home after the Abramov's took the children.

Time after time, Havo would listen for Sadug's chatter or Odom's cries whenever she passed her son's empty room. Like it or not, she missed her grandsons. This puzzled her. After they were taken, she would remember the tots more and more often and miss them.

One evening, Havo approached Erzol after dinner.

"What will happen now?"

"Mama, I think that father made a big mistake."

"In what?"

"In my marriage."

"What do you mean?" Havo yelped, clasping her hands.

"Exactly that. I'm sick of it – the squabbles, the fighting. For once, I want to return to my own home and not be met by an argument or scandal!"

Havo was mortified. Would her own son try to find fault with her?

"I don't want to live with her."

Havo exhaled in relief. For better worse, Havo had the same opinion: it was all Turunge's fault. She looked at her son, at his sunken posture and drooping head. Why did fate treat him like this? Why was he cursed with such a shrew? If he wanted to part with her, it would have to be done – that's that. She would not defy him. Erzol made his decision. She hadn't pushed him toward divorce – he had made his intentions clear.

Havo put her hand on his shoulder.

"Relax, son. It'll all be fine."

I wish,” Erzol grumbled, quickly got up, as if in a hurry, kissed his mother and went to his room.

Havo was left alone, fussing about the house as usual. But her soul still couldn’t find peace.

The days went on, as before. Havo was most concerned about the fact that Turunge’s departure did not bring Erzol the relief she expected it to. Something bothered him – she couldn’t exactly understand what. Erzol couldn’t answer that question himself.

Running into Anya Shcherbatova at work, he would catch her hostile glances. When alone with his father, all he would hear was “You need to go apologize!” but Erzol had no desire to do so. He did not feel at fault, and wasn’t considering reconciliation.

He and Turunge were different people, like fire and water. Who ever heard of a husband and wife being forced to be together against their will? The only apprehension he had was that the Abramovs could ultimately decide to report him to the police.

He once shared his concerns with his mother, and Havo placated him:

“Leave it be! Nahamye took care of everything. There’s nothing there – her wounds have healed. What’s there to report?”

“Well, they say they have a medical report.”

“So what? Forget about it. She’s not going to report you.”

Nahamye continued to insist that his son should go apologize, and Erzol was sick of it. He could find no peace, thinking of what to do day and night.

There was only one way out – to run. Run far from the hateful family, far from the arguments and conflict. But where to?

XXI

One night, Erzol was having dinner with his namesake Mikhail Babaev, who worked at the same cooperative as him. The friend was telling him of his journey to Kursk.

“You know, buddy, I got caught for some nonsense.”

“What happened?” Erzol asked lazily, longingly looking at the window.

“Took some slippers with me to sell – to justify the journey. Went to the market, set up shop. Suddenly – a police raid. Can you imagine?”

“So what? Should have grabbed your stuff and hit the road.”

“That’s what I did, but there were so many policemen! So I get detained for speculation. Do you know what kind of quagmire that is?”

“Yeah, brother, you got busted.”

“They started a file, can you imagine?”

"I'd rather not. So what happened?"

"They let me go. I started crying – said it was my first time. Like, that I was hungry, and all that. But they're going to send the file to our regional division anyway."

"So what?" Erzol asked somberly, having lost interest in his friend's story. Nothing in his account seemed particularly severe. He had considerably more serious problems bothering him.

"So what? Bad news for me from now on. The papers are going to come to our police division, saying this and that about Babaev the speculator, asking to investigate, telling them I was speculating slippers at the market. Understand? If they decide to go with it, I could go to jail. And that's no joke."

"I understand, it's serious. What are you going to do?"

"Run."

"Run?" Erzol asked, curiously. "I wouldn't be opposed to that myself. But where to?"

"Where to?" Misha smiled cryptically. "Haven't you heard? The army."

He went on to tell Erzol about the universal conscription law passed in 1949, which required all young people who had turned eighteen to enlist for three years. It was the first post-army call to service.

"Get it?" Misha concluded. "If you enlist, goodbye police. You're defending the homeland! The only question is how to get there."

"Where?"

"The army. I don't have a passport, remember?"

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

Erzol reluctantly contracted Mikhail's ardent enthusiasm. He couldn't stop thinking about it when he went home.

Why not? All his family issues now seemed so simple and easy to solve. He would no longer be looked at with contempt at work – that Anya shot him glances that made him

nauseous. And his father would quit pestering him. Havo would be the only one to miss him. She'd be fine – her sadness would pass. After all, he would only be gone for three years, not his whole life.

Those were the thoughts with which Erzol went to bed. When he awoke, he concluded that he had found the only solution to the situation at hand. Therefore, at breakfast, he announced to his parents that he would go into the army. His father didn't object, but Havo was scared at first. Her memories of war were still fresh and she associated the army with the fear of death that had to be endured by so many. She begun to cry, begging her son not to do it, but he quickly put her at ease, explaining that modern military service was no more dangerous than civilian life.

Erzol and his namesake friend set off to the recruitment office that very day. They entered the commissioner's office and announced that they'd like to join the army. The recruiter asked for their passports, and Erzol handed him one.

"And the other?" the perplexed officer asked.

"He's also Babaev."

Word by word, the guys confused the officer to such an extent, that he ended up giving them writs with instructions to report for duty in a week.

Erzol didn't walk home, he flew.

"That's it. My free life is over. I'm shipping out in a week!" he announced to his father from the doorway.

"So soon?"

"At least things will die down while I'm not here. Besides, the new law means everyone has to go. There's no way around it. There's no sense in delaying."

The recruits were sent to serve in Turkmenistan. Most of the enlisted were from distant auls. Barely anyone spoke Russian, but all heeded the customs of their fathers religiously. The Muslim recruits were given pork sausage as dry rations

for the road – this was how the army politicians went about anti-religious propaganda. The Dagestani, who comprised the majority, wouldn't touch it, so Erzol and Misha Babaev decided to handle it in their own way.

During a stop at Bilajari, they left the trail, taking along two cases of sausage, grabbed a car, drove to Baku and sold both to some speculator at the market. Happy with their successful deal, they stopped at a teahouse to eat, and found themselves alone upon returning to the station. Their division had left.

Erzol and Misha looked at each other. The possibility of being labeled as deserters was far from appealing. They ran to the station manager, trying to figure out what happened. It turned out that the recruits were transferred to trucks and taken to the seaport. Erzol and Mikhail rushed to hitch a ride there. Even from a distance, the friends saw a steamship with a full deck of recruits in Dagestani papakhas.

“That way!” Erzol yelled to the driver, pointing to the ship, which prepared to cast off.

The sailors had already pulled back the gangway, when two figures appeared on the dock running full speed toward the ship. Once they set foot on the deck, the ship departed with a somber horn.

After days of sailing, the recruits, green with seasickness, disembarked at the port in Krasnovodsk. From there, they were directed, on foot, to the train station and loaded into a boxcar. They traveled through the night, receiving a command at five in the morning: “Everyone out of the cars! Line up!”

Once on the platform, the officers conducted a roll call and divided the conscripts into groups. Then, after the command “Company, forward!” rang across the station, the brand-new soldiers moved toward their assigned destination. Marching in haphazard rows they passed the towers of the camp zone and soon found themselves within the bounds of the military

base. There, all the recruits were sent to the baths and then issued uniforms, which weren't new, but were clean.

"Surrender all money and watches to the director of finance!" the quarantine chief shouted, and everyone obediently complied.

When it came to be Erzol's turn, he quietly put the money that Havo gave him onto the table. The director's eyes bulged out when he saw the thick stack of bills held together by a rubber band.

"Eight thousand?" he whispered, after counting the money.

Erzol silently nodded.

"I won't take that much money."

"Where am I supposed to put it?" Erzol asked.

The finance director cautiously looked at the recruit. This was the first time he had encountered a conscript with that kind of cash in his pocket.

"Go to the quarantine chief."

The chief, also surprised by the recruit's financial state, called a sergeant major and told him to escort Erzol to the savings bank so that he could deposit the funds into an account.

Erzol and his escort marched into the neighboring town. Aside from the local populace, the town had become home to many so-called 'non-working elements', as convicts and 'enemies of the people' were referred to in those days, who were sent there for settlement. The prison camp itself was located nearby, its guard towers visible enough from any point of the city to serve as a landmark for the newly conscripted soldiers.

"Breakfast, perhaps?" my father suggested to the sergeant major, nodding in the direction of the hefty stack of money.

"All right," the sergeant major agreed.

They went into some restaurant and ordered a nice lunch. The sergeant major then invited the recruit for a house visit.

There, they were met by a girl (either his wife or his civil companion), who set the table, complete with all the staples: drink and snacks. Erzol couldn't remember much after, but when he woke up, the sergeant major wasn't there. What was he to do? What if they were looking for him in the division?

Erzol ran out of the house. It was the dead of night, and he had no idea where to go. He didn't even know the name of the town, not to mention his division number. He could only remember passing the prison camp's fence. He started wandering the dark city streets. There weren't many passersby, and the ones he did encounter would shudder at the request of 'Could you point me in the direction of the prison?' as if he were a leper. It was nearly morning by the time he got directions to the camp from some local drunk. Once Erzol finally found the division, he went into the sergeant's storeroom and fell asleep.

He woke up around noon, left the room, and found himself in an empty barracks. What happened? So far, either he would escape the division, or the division would escape him. He went into the dining room to find nothing but empty tables, as if in a dream. After wandering around the barracks for a while, Erzol returned to the storeroom and went back to sleep. After about two hours, the door opened and a black man entered the room.

Erzol yelped, startled by the stranger. Upon further inspection, he recognized the familiar sergeant major.

"Why are you in blackface?"

The sergeant major laughed. It turned out that all recruits were urgently summoned to unload a shipment of coal the night before. The sergeant major – being a kind man, went to follow his orders and asked his girlfriend not to wake Erzol.

And that was how Erzol avoided his first workplace infraction.

After the sergeant major took a shower, they, once again, set out to the city, having never reached the savings bank the first time around. On the way there, the guide met an officer he knew.

Erzol looked around curiously – after all, this was his first time in Central Asia. Everything around him seemed unfamiliar. He suddenly noticed a storefront, tunics behind the glass, a sign above saying ‘Military Trade Workshop – Tailoring.’ It was as if Erzol had run into an old friend. Happy and curious, the soldier thought for a second, then stepped inside the tailor shop.

A tan, grey-haired Turkmen wearing a skullcap sat at the counter. Erzol approached him with a wide smile:

“Hello friend,” he said, and went on to tell him that he was a first-rate tailor.

“Dear friend,” the Turkmen replied, happily, “we seek a master tailor like a desert traveler seeks water. Let’s go to the military trade chief.”

They barely made it behind the counter when an officer appeared before the recruit. Erzol looked at him indifferently and tried to pass him. He wasn’t yet familiar with the rules, and the officer was very surprised that a low-rank recruit would treat him in such a manner. The superior could not approve of such behavior.

“Private!” the officer roared. “Why did you not salute me?”

“Wha...?” my father muttered, confused.

The officer’s eyes filled with blood.

“Show me your furlough papers!”

“I don’t have any...”

“What division are you with?”

“I don’t know,” replied my confused father. “There’s a prison nearby, I can show you the way from the fence, but...”

“Follow me,” the officer said sternly.

Erzol complied and followed him to the command office.

It took thirty minutes for the quarantine chief to come to pick him up. He was enraged, his thoughts apparent without his saying a single word.

“You’re a sloven, Babaev!” he roared, after lining him and the other recruits up in the courtyard.

Erzol wasn't familiar with that particular word, but could gather that he wasn't being praised. Nevertheless, upon sounding a 'disperse!' command right after, the quarantine chief suddenly held the culprit back and continued in a much friendlier voice.

"Babaev, come with me."

And so Erzol ended up at Section Chief Colonel Denisov's home.

"So..." The commander carefully examined Erzol. "I heard you got caught. At the military trade workshop. Do you know how to tailor?"

"I've tailored men's and women's outerwear and military clothing for three years," my father replied.

"Really?" the commander inquired happily, squinting at the soldier. "And you aren't lying?"

"Of course not, comrade commander!"

"Well, then come with me.

The colonel took out a segment of expensive cloth.

"Have you ever seen fabric like this?"

"Of course. I've seen even some that was even pricier."

"Can you make me a pair of trousers out of it?"

This was a test. Erzol looked around, noticing a sewing machine in the corner.

"Do you have measuring tape and a piece of soap?"

The colonel brought those over.

Erzol laid the fabric out in front of him, used the soap to trace a pattern on it, and picked up the scissors.

"Private Babaev!" The colonel frantically waved his hands. "This is expensive fabric! Are you really going to tailor by eye? Aren't you at least going to measure me first?"

Erzol looked at him curiously and shrugged.

"Comrade colonel. Why worry? I won't ruin your fabric, and if I do, I'll pay for it. You're well aware of the fact that I have money."

“Fine. Do as you will.”

Marveling at what he thought to be a reckless recruit, the colonel left to take care of his work duties. In the meantime, Erzol cut the fabric and sat down at the machine. He needed no more than three or four hours to tailor a pair of trousers. In any case, by the time Denisov returned, his military breeches were done.

When the colonel stepped into the room upon his return home, he was stunned. As if by magic, a pair of brand new breeches hung draped over a back of a chair. The officer squinted at Erzol in disbelief, then picked up the new garment. He took the pants, went out to put them on, paced in front of Erzol across the room, then squatted several times and looked at the private in amazement.

“Well, Babaev,” the colonel exhaled. “I’ve seen many masters, but never one like you. To make a pair of breeches that fit so perfectly, by eye, without a single measurement. That’s notable.”

“Come on, comrade colonel,” Erzol hesitated.

“Enough talk,” the happy section commander interrupted and dragged the private into the kitchen, where his wife had already set the table for dinner. The colonel pulled out a bottle.

“A toast to your talent!”

Thusly their acquaintance started. After dinner, the officer suddenly asked Erzol:

“Can you make a coat with a fur collar for my wife?”

“Without a doubt, comrade colonel,” Erzol happily replied.

“Well then, I expect a visit from you tomorrow.”

Throughout the entire week, while the other recruits trained at the base, private Babaev would go to the commander’s home and work on a coat for his wife. The colonel’s wife turned out to be a very decent dentist, a fact that Erzol found out completely incidentally. Even before the war, he had got-

ten a gold crown on each side of his teeth – that was fashionable at the time.

“Erzol,” the colonel’s delicate wife, a woman of refined taste, once noted. “When you smile, your crowns shine like fangs. Let me make you another crown on each side – then your smile will suit you better.

Erzol looked at the colonel’s wife in astonishment, then gladly nodded in accord. As Erzol worked on the coat, he gained two more crowns on his teeth.

After some time, he was transferred to the supply division and put in charge of the division workshops, which handled military clothing and shoe repair.

In the meantime, life ran its course in the Babaev household. The sun rose and set over Yermoshkin Street, men went to work, women tended to the stove – just less hampered by confrontation and argument.

Havo missed her grandchildren more and more, but couldn’t find a suitable reason to go visit the kids. When she shared her concerns with Nahamye, he would roll his eyes and say:

“You see!”

Havo would only sigh. Her son’s wife was one thing, but his children - another.

Turunge tended to Odom and Sadug, contemplating what to do next. As Melke said, time healed all wounds, and former offenses gradually faded from memory.

As Erzol continued to serve, and every minute of his day accounted for by the strict schedule, the sadness of family life was gradually forgotten.

When Erzol’s first telegrams came in, about six months into his service, bringing at least some peace to his loved ones, Nahamye would proudly tell others about how well his son did for himself. It turned out that he had been appointed a sort

of chief at a garrison tailor shop, making clothes not only for infantrymen, but also for the commanders, their wives, their grandmothers and grandfathers. It seemed like his service was going splendidly. He even had his own storeroom.

“So he isn’t in the common barracks?” Havo would happily ask.

“Of course not,” Nahamye would answer proudly. “Erzol demonstrated his manhood. His section calls him by the Russian name Aleksei, or the more familiar Alyosha.”

“Why? What does that mean?” Havo wondered.

“I don’t know,” Nahamye shrugged. “Perhaps the Russians and the Turkmen have trouble remembering Tat names? As long as he’s well!”

XXII

Melke refused to come to terms with the fact that her daughter wouldn't return to her husband's home. In my grandmother's mind, family was a sacred thing to be revered and guarded at any cost. As far as she was concerned, married life was her daughter's only chance at happiness.

"Darling, how in the world are you going to live now? You can't do this. I wish only the best to you and your children. You have to save your family."

"What do you want me to do? Erzol's in the army."

"So what?"

"He'll be back in three years..."

"Who knows what'll happen then? You need to take action now!"

"Mama! What do you expect me to do?"

"I heard that many visit their sons and husbands where they're stationed. That's what you should do."

“What do you mean?” Turunge replied, taken aback.

“Go visit Erzol, I tell you. You’ll be alone there – no one to prevent you from reconciling. As long as you don’t scold him or bring up the past, simply showing up is half the battle. If you please your husband, distract him from the mundane, he’ll be yours forever. That’s what needs to be done.”

Turunge silently listened to her mother. She didn’t even know where Erzol was stationed. Nahamye had mentioned something about Central Asia.

“I have no money for travel.”

“Talk to Nahamye. He’s kind, and likes you. I’m sure he’ll help.”

“Mama, I don’t want to ask the Babaevs for money...”

“Nahamye will help. You need to go to Erzol.”

Turunge thought about it. By now, the fear had vanished, and only offense remained. Moreover, most of her time was spent thinking about how to feed the children and get by.

The following day, Turunge left her sons with her mother and went to the cooperative where Anya and Nahamye worked.

“Hello, Turunge!” Nahamye greeted her with a warm smile. “How are you? How are the grandkids?”

“Growing, and a handful,” Turunge replied, smiling. “Have you heard from Erzol?”

Nahamye was delighted at the inquiry. He was prepared to do anything to help the past be forgotten and for his son’s family to be reunited.

“We just got a telegram yesterday. He wrote that all is well.”

“Where is he stationed?”

“Somewhere in Turkmenistan. The city’s called Mary.”

“Is it a far journey?”

“Well, Erzol said it took about three days.”

“How does one get there?”

“First a train to Baku, then a steamship across the sea, and then... I don’t know. Why?”

“Nahamye, I...” Turunge hesitated. “I’m planning to go see Erzol.”

“You don’t say?” Nahamye’s eyes bulged out.

“Yes, I was thinking of going to visit him.”

“Hm... That’s a good thing.”

“Can you tell me how to get there?”

“I’ll tell you everything. This is an excellent idea! His fur-lough is a ways away, but if you visit him, they’ll surely give him some time off from duty.”

“Except... I have no money.”

“That I can help you with. Don’t worry, daughter.”

Nahamye smiled. He went up to his daughter-in-law and shook her hand.

“Well done, Turunge. I approve of your decision. Go. I’ll give you all the necessary directions and money. But where will you leave the children?”

“With my parents.”

“Well... They have their hands full, don’t they? Why not leave the kids with us while you’re away? Havo will be happy to watch them. She loves caring for her grandchildren!”

Turunge hesitated for a second.

“Fine, let her watch them while I’m gone. Then, we’ll see.”

“It’s a deal. Let me know when you’re ready to go, and I’ll buy you a ticket.”

Upon returning home, Turunge went into the kitchen and told Melke:

“I decided to go?”

“You did? You’re doing the right thing, daughter. Everything will turn out well with you two. You’ll see.”

It took Turunge several days to pack. She tried to picture her reconciliation with Erzol – them seeing each other, smiling, embracing – but had trouble doing so. She simply trusted her mother and her life experience, and Melke continued to in-

sist that there, far away from anyone, nothing will stand in the way of Turunge and Erzol's normal interactions and peace will surely return to the family.

A day before her departure, Turunge packed her children's things, ensuring to include all the necessities, and took them to the Babaevs.

"Ah! They boys are here!" Nahamye said, greeting them at the door. "Havo!"

Havo came out of the kitchen, having heard the noise, growing restless upon seeing her daughter-in-law and the grandkids.

"Ah! Come in, come in! Are you hungry?"

"It's about time for them to eat," Turunge said, bashfully.

"We'll take care of it!" Havo joyfully retorted, fussing around the kitchen. She couldn't be happier – her grandchildren were there.

In the meantime, Nahamye took the tickets he bought for Turunge out of his pocket.

"Here are the tickets, but only for the train. You'll need to get the steamship ticket at the port – they don't sell those here. Here, take this."

He handed her a packet.

"What is this?"

"Money. There's enough there – you won't be left empty handed."

Next day, Nahamye, Hezgie and Melke saw Turunge off at the train station, and helped her board.

As Turunge watched the villages, cities and mountains sweep past the window it didn't even occur to her that she was passing the very places her grandpa Illazar passed some fifty years ago in search of Ida the healer. And now, his granddaughter followed his footsteps in search of happiness.

In Baku, she found herself surrounded by a cacophonous crowd. People didn't speak – they yelled, everyone rushing

to find their loved ones amongst her fellow travelers. Turunge had never seen that many people before. She asked time and time again for directions to the port. Finally, the young woman boarded a steamship bound for the other side of the Caspian.

The godforsaken city of Mary greeted Turunge with bright slogans promising a happy life, which coexisted with the terrifying poverty of most of its residents. She missed the route taxi and the bus wouldn't come, so the traveler had to drag her bags alone, on foot. Just as her strength had been exhausted, she had reached a tall fence with an iron gate.

Turunge stopped, not knowing how to proceed from here. At that moment, the guard emerged from behind the gate. Turunge greeted him.

The soldier, a very young man, examined her curiously.

"What do you want?"

"I came to visit my husband."

"Last name?"

"Whose? Mine?"

"Your husband's!"

"Babaev."

"Ah, Aleksei?"

"Erzol," Turunge corrected, then remembered Nahamye mentioning that the Russians in the army dubbed Erzol 'Aleksei'.

"Wait here," the guard said curtly, called his comrade, quickly talked to him about something, then ran off.

In ten minutes, an officer appeared at the point of entry and saluted Turunge.

"Deputy Section Commander Popov. You came to see your husband?"

"Yes, Babaev. Erzol."

"Erzol?" the commander looked at Turunge curiously.

"You call him by a different name – Aleksei."

“Aleksei Babaev... We have a soldier by that name.” He looked Turunge over head to toe. “Come with me.”

Turunge nodded toward her bags.

“Egorov!” the commander yelled. The soldier jumped up and stood upright. “Help the woman.”

The soldier grabbed the bags, and, struggling to drag the bags behind him, followed Turunge, unable to comprehend how she was able to manage them on her own.

It was refreshingly cool in the deputy section commander’s office, and Turunge sighed with relief. The soldier placed the bags by her feet and disappeared.

The officer motioned for Turunge to sit.

“I should mention that this is outside of standard protocol – to show up, without a summons, to visit your husband. Where’d you come from?”

“From Makhachkala.”

“That’s not a short journey,” the deputy section commander sighed. “Fine – here’s how it is. There really isn’t anywhere for you to stay here, but we’ll give him furlough. You can rent an apartment nearby, in the city.”

“Yes, of course,” Turunge agreed, not quite grasping the specifics.

The tall uniformed man left the room. Turunge, left sitting alone, curiously examined the premises. Beyond the door, she could hear the officer loudly issue a command. Footsteps followed, as someone rushed to comply.

At the time, Erzol Babaev was eating barley porridge at the cafeteria, suspecting nothing. He had a great appetite. That morning, he received an order for three silk dresses: for the commander’s wife, his grandmother, and his daughter. He would need to go to the city to get the silk. That meant furlough, and a trip to Ali’s shop at the market. Ali worked by barter: you’d give him a pair of boots, he’d give you a stretch of silk.

Babaev's train of thought was interrupted by the sergeant's resonant shout:

"Babaev!"

Erzol turned around, and, upon seeing the sergeant, rose from the table.

"Come with me."

"What happened, comrade sergeant?"

"You'll find out in a moment, private," the sergeant replied, smiling.

The befuddled Erzol found himself at the door to the deputy section commander's office. He knocked. "Come in," a voice sounded from behind the door. Erzol entered, stopped, saluted, and announced, loudly as expected:

"Private Babaev, here at your command!"

Only then he noticed another person in the room, automatically turned his head, and grew pale – it was Turunge.

"Hello, Erzol," she said in an unusually quiet voice.

"Uh-huh."

Erzol was too shocked to know what to say. An uncomfortable silence hung over the room, so the commander decided to break it.

"Here's the deal, Babaev. Take a furlough. You know the city. Rent a room somewhere. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Erzol replied, his voice hoarse from nervousness. This was a turn he had not expected.

"But I want you back on duty right when your leave is over!"

"Yes, sir!"

Erzol looked at the deputy section commander, then shifted his gaze to Turunge. The initial shock had subsided. He understood that this wasn't a dream, and that his wife was standing in front of him.

First to the commander's station for furlough papers, then, five minutes for packing to the sound of his comrades' approv-

ing laughter and jokes – Erzol went through everything as if he was dreaming, not quite comprehending what was happening. He then went out to the entry point and saw Turunge, giant bags behind her.

Only then he began to comprehend that his wife was really standing by his side.

“Wow! Don’t tell me you carried all that on your own!” He grabbed the bags and left the base under the scorching sun.

The streets were deserted. Erzol walked silently, wondering why he hadn’t been warned. At some point he had decided everything: they were through, the choice was made, and that chapter of their life had ended. And here, it turned out that he had been wrong. Turunge had come, and was now silently following him.

They took a route taxi and got out by the market.

“Erzol, where are we going?”

“I’m going to find Ali-Mali. He can recommend a rental. He knows everyone at this market.”

And to the market they went. Rushing to keep up with Erzol, Turunge would constantly look around. There were so many new things around her. Take, for instance, the melons, lying in a giant pile. Next to them was a platform topped with pancake-round rugs in several tens of layers. Past those, vendors sold spices, apricots and other fruit. Boys with giant wooden trays, piled high with fresh flatbread crisscrossed the crowd.

Erzol stopped at the fabric shop and called the vendor.

“Hey, Ali-Mali, as-salaam-alaikum.”

“Wa-alaikum-salaam, Erzol. How can I help you?”

The merchant wasn’t surprised by his soldier-friend’s appearance.

“My wife is here. Help me find a room.”

“Ah, Erzol-jan. Of course, dear friend. There’s an old woman who lives around here, with a great home but no tenant. It’ll suit you.”

The man whom Erzol called Ali-Mail led them across the entire market and pointed at the home of the woman he recommended. Erzol talked to her briefly, then grabbed the bags and quickly told Turunge:

“Let’s go!”

They entered a courtyard, shielded from the heat by grapevines that draped across it. The hostess led them to a distant room.

“Here,” she grumbled. “And it has access to the garden.”

Turunge looked around and gathered her thoughts, realizing that everything depended on her from now on. Erzol had done what he could.

When they were left alone, Turunge started unpacking the presents and letters from home.

“Here, take this. It’s from Nahamye,” she said, handing him a packet wrapped in a newspaper, along with a letter.

Erzol took the packet, looked the envelope over, unwrapped the newspaper and saw money inside.

“You must be hungry... Should I set a table?”

Erzol smiled and nodded.

“You need to wash up.”

He took off his ragged tunic, keeping on the white undershirt under it.

Turunge then went into the yard, filled a full jug of water, put a tub atop a stool, and started pouring the cool water onto her husband’s hands and neck. Erzol felt pampered, snorting and splashing the water droplets around. Turunge then gave him a towel. Erzol reluctantly noted to himself: say all you want, but his wife knew how to take care of him.

The young wife swiftly set the table with the supplies she had brought from home. Erzol sat down, pierced a tomato with a fork, tore off a piece of bread, and started eating.

“What about you?” he said, stopping. “Eat something.”

Turunge pushed her stool closer to the tiny table and broke off a piece of bread. She sat and watched her husband eat, ob-

serving his glance. Turunge would predict his wishes, putting the pieces he had his eye on onto his plate. Erzol smiled subtly. Any irritation he felt upon initially seeing Turunge somehow dissolved. The young wife's casual manner of caring for him made Erzol forget about past troubles. He no longer questioned the motivation for her visit. He simply enjoyed a respite from the monotony of military life.

When Erzol was full, Turunge suddenly jumped up and ran to the last unopened bag in the corner. She dug through it for a while, then took out a piece of paper and, smiling, handed it to her husband.

"Look!"

"What is this?" Erzol inquired.

"Look how our kids have grown!"

With those words, she unfolded the paper and placed it on the table. Two handprints were traced on the sheet with a pencil, one slightly larger than the other.

Erzol picked up the sheet and examined the palm prints, smiling. He gave the drawing back and looked at his wife, once again thinking that Turunge's presence didn't burden him one bit, and that everything between them suddenly seemed strangely simple and easy.

He didn't, however, think about what prevented him from noticing his wife's care back home in Makhachkala. Erzol smiled warmly and looked at the sheet again.

"Growing, those rascals."

"Growing," Turunge said happily. "Sadug's running around already. His grandma can't catch him."

"And Odom?"

"Odom?" Turunge smiled, as if she could see her youngest before her. "Odom can already walk."

"And they're healthy?"

"Yes, of course! Everyone takes good care of them. And Nahamye just beams when he sees them."

Looking at Turunge, Erzol remembered his father and his home – everything he missed, but had tried to not think about. His wife managed to return him to the place from which he had tried so hard to flee – his native home.

“I’m going to go to the market. We need to buy food.” That was the phrase with which Turunge began the following morning. “The military kitchen isn’t very good, so I’ll make something we’re used to. I’ll make your favorite chudu.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Turunge got ready, got a bundle of money from the hiding place in her trunk, and counted off a few bills.

“You’re pretty well off, aren’t you?” Erzol laughed.

They went into the street. The foreign language and unfamiliar faces around her made even the familiar two-story stone buildings seem strange to Turunge. At the market, Erzol showed his wife dates, baklava, fruits and vegetables in quantities she had never seen before. Some rhombuses made of pastry, smeared with honey and sprinkled with nuts, round cookies sprinkled with a sweet, white crumble, small balls in pink petals. All were there for the tasting. Turunge tried to refuse, but the merchants wouldn’t let her, forcing her to have a taste. Erzol wanted to impress Turunge and showed her everything that he had marveled at in the beginning.

They bought so much food that it seemed like they were planning to stay there forever. Erzol kept trying to get his wife to try more and more delicacies, which were all there in abundance.

Upon returning from the market, Turunge quickly got some water, helped her husband wash up, gave him a clean towel, and started cooking. In an hour, the table was buckling under the weight of Erzol’s favorite foods. He watched his wife and marveled. In his mind, only Havo was capable of such things.

“Why did you hide all this from me?” he suddenly asked.

“Hid what from you?”

“The fact that you know how to do all this.”

“I didn’t hide anything. Perhaps you simply didn’t notice.”

“Well, I certainly notice it now!”

After dinner, Turunge quickly cleared the table, and lifted the cover off the floor platform, which served as a bed. It was already made with the clean sheets she had brought from home. Turunge stepped out for a while, seemingly to take care of something, then returned and drew the curtain in front of the door.

And so three days flew by.

When it was time to return to his duties, Erzol bought a bunch of presents for his loved ones, gave Turunge money for the road, helped her board a bus and went back to the base.

On her way home, she kept thinking that she would surely manage to rebuild her family, to do as her mother had told her. The main thing was that they reconciled. She saw how warmly Erzol accepted her care, not once criticizing her cooking or other housework. Her faith that they could be happy together got stronger as she traveled further.

Turunge arrived at the station and, right away, rushed to her children. Havo greeted her at the door. Turunge was petrified at first, but mustered the willpower to suppress the pointless fear that snuck into her soul. She smiled warmly, and, throwing her bags onto the ground, simply stated.

“And I’m back.”

Havo smiled:

“Well, come in.”

Turunge went straight to the children, squeezed them tight, eyes closed. She had missed her sons very much. It even seemed that the boys had grown in her absence.

Nahamye appeared at the door.

“So, you’re back?”

“Yes, right off the train.”

“Well, good. Come sit at the table and tell me how Erzol is doing.”

The kids seemed to be glued to their mother, and accompanied her to the kitchen, where Havo had already set the table. Turunge sat down.

“How was your trip?” Nahamye started with his questions.

“Good. They gave him leave right away, as soon as they saw me. We rented a room in the city, and stayed there the whole time.

“And what did you eat?” Havo jumped in.

“We ate what we bought at the market.”

“So you cooked for him?”

“Of course! I wanted him to have real homemade, kosher food.”

Havo nodded for her to continue. Something in Turunge’s story had struck a nerve. The daughter-in-law spoke about their time as if he, Erzol, wholly belong to her now. She bragged about how she did his laundry, as if it wasn’t a wife’s responsibility.

“Is something wrong?” Turunge asked inadvertently.

“No! Why would it be. You wanted to go, so you went,” Havo said bitterly.

Apparently, Turunge wanted to rub her mother-in-law’s nose in the fact that she took care of Erzol. Havo didn’t like this. It was as if the daughter-in-law was once again yearning to demonstrate that her son had fully taken her side.”

“And I baked him chudu,” Turunge continued happily.

She was now speaking mainly to Nahamye, who took in each word with a genuine smile.

“A whole heap of them. He was so happy that he ate them all, even though there was enough for three people. So he had his fill of our homemade food.”

“How’s that!” Havo erupted. “You don’t know how to cook our homemade food!”

It was as if Turunge had been splashed with ice water.

The smile faded from her face. Without entertaining a response, she continued with her story, but the conversation quickly faded. The meeting ended worse than it began. The icy notes in Havo's intonations that she remembered from the past once again stung her heart. Instinctively, Turunge couldn't wait to leave this house. Havo left the kitchen and Nahamye remained, thirstily sipping on his tea.

"Well, I'm going to go."

"How? Where?"

"To my family. While it isn't too late..."

"What are you talking about?" Nahamye jumped up. "It's the dead of night. The children are long asleep. Why? Forget what happened. How are you going to go with two little ones in your arms? Stay here. If things are getting better between you and Erzol, then you should be here as well. This is your home! You can go visit your family tomorrow."

Turunge thought for a moment. Nahamye's kindness had melted her heart. She felt her father-in-law's support, and that gave her confidence.

"You're probably right, Nahamye."

"Excellent, my daughter! Go get some rest – you've had an exhausting journey."

Turunge returned to the room where her sons slept. She watched the children's faces with a smile on her face, whispering something and fixing their hair. She could watch her boys like this all night, but fatigue took its toll. Turunge's eyes closed and she fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning, she was awakened by noise in the kitchen. Turunge quickly got ready and left the room. Havo had just left, and the daughter-in-law had the run of the kitchen. She quickly prepared food for her sons, managed to grab a bite herself, and went to wash up the just-awakened Sadug and Odom. When Havo returned, the boys were already finishing breakfast.

“Good boys! Already in the kitchen!” Grandma said, smiling wide.

“If you’re done, let’s go get dressed.” Turunge began to gather her children.

“Where are you going?” Havo inquired.

“I want to visit my family.”

“Well, go. Barely back, and already leaving,” Havo grumbled under her breath.

But Turunge didn’t hear those words.

Melke was tending to the kitchen, when the door opened and Turunge and the little ones appeared on the doorstep.

“Finally!”

Melke hurried to embrace her daughter and grandchildren. She instantly seated them at the table.

After eating, Turunge started telling her about the trip. Melke’s main question was how Erzol greeted her.

“It was all right, Mama. We rented a room, and they let him take a few days’ leave. Everything’s well.”

“That’s great! I hope you’ve concluded that you can live with him?”

“Yes, Mama. I have.”

“I hope that everything will be well when he returns.”

Turunge smiled in accord. Melke admired her daughter. She was so brave! She managed to rise above her offense. She heeded her mother’s advice, did what she suggested, and succeeded. She no longer had to worry for her daughter. For the first time in a while, Melke slept peacefully.

XXIII

Melke told her daughter many times:
“If you want to unite the family, return everything to the way it was.”

Fulfilling her mother’s wishes was one thing, but altering her own personality was another.

Whenever Turunge needed something, she had to turn to Havo, whose face would turn to stone whenever she approached her. This was a true test for the young woman. Instead of approaching with a humble request, as they expected her to do, Turunge would demand things: money for milk – which, after all, wasn’t for her, but for Erzol’s children, or for new clothes, and so on.

Havo found all this to be excessive.

“We have enough groceries. We have baby clothes and diapers – just purchased recently. If the kids need anything, I can buy it myself. Just tell me.”

Havo would do anything for her grandchildren – help them, feed them, buy them toys. Any favors for Turunge, however,

she found unnecessary. After her son told her that he doesn't want to be with his wife, Havo had decided, for herself, that this marriage had fallen apart once and for all. Why, then, give money to the woman who will never be by her son's side? Besides, without money Turunge would be on her mother-in-law's proverbial leash. Whatever Havo would say, would go.

Turunge understood this. The young woman strove to gain independence from Havo. Regaining her freedom became her main goal.

Her older sister Raya lived in Moscow. She would always send packages to her loved ones in Makhachkala, occasionally visiting herself and bringing back rare clothes. Turunge knew that her sister could get her hands on anything.

Moreover, there was Fira, who earned a living by reselling clothes at the market. 'I can do the same,' Turunge thought. 'There's money I can use to buy things.'

That evening, Turunge ran to Melke.

"Mama, I need to go visit Raya. Please let her know."

"What happened?"

"Erzol gave me a little money. I'd like to go to Moscow and buy some things for the children."

The request raised no further questions for Melke. She instantly went over to her older daughter, who had a phone – a huge rarity in those days. Melke was able to reach Raya and let her know that Turunge was on her way.

Raya was ecstatic.

"Mama! Don't worry. I'll take care of my sister. The main thing is for her to get here."

In several days, having gotten her hands on the hard-to-get tickets to Moscow with Anya's help, Turunge boarded an overcrowded train. She didn't even notice the inconveniences, inspired – even seduced – by dreams and hopes for a better life. The main thing was for the children to be healthy,

fed, and clothed. While she was away, she put her sons under the doting care of her parents.

Her sister met her at the train station in Moscow. They embraced, and Raya took Turunge to her home. The driver, an older man in a greased-over hat, greeted them with a glum nod. The capital seemed surreal through the windows of the comfortable automobile: large buildings, wide boulevards, well-dressed women, storefronts with mannequins, which Turunge had never seen before.

The car turned off the main road and sped through a courtyard. Turunge squinted, fearful of an imminent collision. The driver slammed on the brakes in front of the building entrance.

“Let’s go, you coward,” Raya laughed. “I’ll introduce you to my husband. You were still little when he visited.”

“Yeah.”

Turunge looked over at the elderly doorwoman who sat in a glass booth by the building entrance, nodding to her shyly as they passed.

Hanukov greeted his wife’s younger sister with a ceremonial bow. No one had ever done that to Turunge before. She stood in the foyer, not knowing what to do next.

“Why are you standing there? Come in!” Raya said invitingly.

Turunge entered the room and was stunned. She had never seen ceilings that high before, and the crystal chandelier was enchanting in its grandeur.

Raya watched her younger sister and smiled, happy with Turunge’s delight. They lived a good, wealthy life – at least her sister could appreciate that.

“How do you like the city?” Hanukov asked.

“It’s so big! How do you remember where to go? I would surely get lost!”

Hanukov looked at Raya.

“Why are you being so timid? After all, Makhachkala isn’t some village. Get used to it. Soon all cities will be like Moscow.”

“Get out of here!”

“You’ll see. We aren’t working in vain. For the good of the working people, so to speak...” Hanukov had a coughing fit. At times, he would default to party-approved slogans about communal happiness.

“So, shall we have dinner?” Hanukov asked.

Raya had already started to set the table.

Turunge walked up to the bookcase. She had only seen such a collection of texts in the regional library. The floors were hardwood, and there were rugs in every room.

“Too simple for you?” Hanukov asked, smiling.

“If only!” Turunge replied in admiration.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there in time.”

In the evening, after Raya’s husband retired, the sister started with the questions:

“So, how are you over there?”

Turunge began to tell her about her first two years of marriage, the birth of her child, her naïve hopes. Then, glumly, about the beating. Raya’s face sank with her sister’s every word.

Turunge went on to tell her about her trip to visit her husband in the army and their reconciliation.

“I hope we manage to live peacefully from now on. I don’t think he understands what I do and how I do it. This time, he didn’t have a single issue. He was quiet, calm. He changed. If it wasn’t for Havo,” she sighed.

“What about Havo?”

“It’s hard to live under the same roof with her. She can’t stand me. As far as I know, she’d be happy if I didn’t exist. But what can I do? Right now, just as things seem to be getting better, she’s starting to nag again. She either doesn’t like

one thing, or another – no use in trying to figure her out. And, furthermore, I can't get any money from her. I depend on her for everything, even the small things. If I had an income, life would be easier to manage."

Turunge sighed bitterly.

"So money is the problem?" Raya asked. She didn't mention that she had already heard everything from Anya. She had called a week before and told her about Turunge's dire situation. Havo found a way to curb her daughter-in-law – by not giving her a single kopeck.

"You think money will fix it?"

"Yes. Can you help?"

"Do you need a loan?"

"No. I know what to do. There's Fira, Erzol's sister. She travels to Moscow. She gets scarce clothes here, and sells them at our market. She makes good money. Why can't I do that?"

Raya was silent.

"Your husband. He could help. To get bedding, for instance. You know, we don't have any bedding in our stores. If I could buy a few sheets and pillowcases at the warehouse here, they would rip it from my hands at home. Maybe you can help?"

Raya thought about it.

"We can try. Finding it isn't a problem. But how will we get it all there? Listen," the sister said, lifting her finger in the air. "I will send you packages. You won't be able to take much with you, if only because of the weight. But if I ship packages, I can send you whatever you need! At least enough for you to have your own money. But as far as Misha goes," Raya glanced at the closed door, behind which her husband was resting. "We won't tell Mikhail anything."

The following day, Raya dragged Turunge out in the early morning to show her the city. Turunge couldn't stop marveling at the capital's grandeur. Stores, endless crowds of people,

buses, stoplights, sirens – everyone was rushing and running somewhere and no one said ‘hello’ to anyone.

After looking around for a while, the sisters went to a café and ordered ice cream and coffee.

“We’ll have time to buy your things.” Raya wanted to truly show her sister life in the capital. “I suggest we go to the theatre in the evening. Since you’ve traveled all the way to Moscow, we simply must go to the Bolshoi.”

“I don’t mind. Are the tickets expensive?”

“Don’t worry about a thing. Mikhail will get us passes. They aren’t expensive.”

That evening Turunge was sitting in the Bolshoi Theatre. She had never seen such an impressive building, with its tall columns and oak doors as tall as a man and a half. It was a true fairy-tale palace, its inside adorned with moldings and gold. Everything was covered in red velvet: the seats, the curtain, the loges – even the women in the audience were wearing velvet dresses.

Turunge watched the stage intently. Some girls in short, white skirts were running around the stage, standing on their tiptoes, being lifted into the air, tossed upward. She couldn’t quite understand it all, but that didn’t matter. The mere fact that she was at the ballet, seeing what others could only dream of, delighted her.

In the evening, over tea, Turunge shared her impressions with her sister for the first time.

“You have it so good, Raya. Your life is like a fairytale. Your apartment, the lamps – everything! And the theater! I know what life needs – freedom. But that requires money.”

“Back at it,” her sister said, smiling. “I understand. Advancement takes work. Don’t worry – we’ll get started tomorrow. We’ll go get everything you need.”

From the early morning, Raya started calling the necessary people, Hanukov’s connections, arranged a meeting,

and the sisters set off. They bought several sets of bedding, towels and a variety of fabrics.

Turunge smiled happily. She couldn't wait to get back home to Makhachkala and see if her plan would work. Not to mention that her children were there without her and it was hard to leave the little ones behind. But what could she do? All this stuff could become her guarantee of a peaceful life, a ticket to independence. Turunge thought that these were the required conditions for her and Erzol to happily live under one roof.

Turunge arrived in Makhachkala in three days. She took all the scarcities she had brought back with her to a friend, who had a spot at the market, and was given twice what she paid for in Moscow, without any bargaining.

She looked at the hefty stack of bills in the palm of her hand, baffled at how this happened. It was as if the money had appeared out of thin air. A shocking, freeing thought swept in, setting fire to everything and freeing her soul from its burdens. She no longer depended on anyone financially. She had her own money!

This was a feeling that my mother would remember her whole life. From now on, she would pay no mind to her mother-in-law's disapproval. Turunge would cease interacting with Havo and would patiently await Erzol's return.

Havo, of course, noticed the change in her daughter-in-law's behavior. Turunge looked more confident, her gait firmer. Perhaps she had decided that she was allowed to do anything in this home? How could that be? It was as if somebody else had replaced Turunge after her trip to Moscow, and Havo could not comprehend the source of this transformation.

That evening, Havo carefully asked Nahamye.

"Have you noticed that she changed?"

"Turunge?"

"Yes, Turunge."

"No. How so?"

"I don't know. I wanted to ask you. She's acting strangely since the trip. I thought you knew!"

"I think she was happy to see her sister, and to visit the capital, so her mood got better."

"Oh, why would she do that? Two children, and she's going somewhere. She needs to work at home. A woman's place is in the kitchen!"

"Why are you angry? So she took a trip. What's wrong with that?"

"Everything. She's even more stubborn."

"Don't pester her."

"Like I would..."

Turunge put aside part of the money she got from the sale, hiding it away in a safe place so she could use it should she need it. And life returned to its previous, measured flow.

In two weeks, Hezgie paid his daughter a visit after his shift:

"The mailwoman dropped off a receipt for you."

Turunge jumped up in joy.

"It's a package from Moscow! From Raya. She promised she'd send a bunch of different things. Can you help me get it?"

"Of course. You shouldn't be dragging around heavy things. I'll help you in the morning."

"Great. I'll come get you."

The following day, Turunge and her father brought several heavy packages home. Hezgie helped her carry them into her room, said goodbye and went home. Turunge went to unpack the bundles.

At that moment, Havo looked into the room and was shocked by what she saw. Stacks of brand new bedding stood neatly arranged on the floor.

“Where’d all these come from?” she asked, curiously.

Turunge shuddered in surprise.

“My sister sent them.”

“I see!”

Havo shut the door and went into the kitchen. She remembered Turunge’s trip – supposedly to visit her sister, but apparently to buy things. The mountain of new bedding explained it all – Fira did the same thing. That meant that Turunge decided to earn some extra money and abandoned her children to go to the capital!

Havo was enraged. To think that she would pretend to suffer quietly and ask for money, when she already had everything!

That incident became the turning point. There could be no talk of peace. The two women were enemies again.

How and why this happened is anyone’s guess, but the fragile peace was broken, and the delicate truce had fallen apart. The mutual disdain blazed anew, as if someone, somewhere seethed with envy over the peace that had grown between the Babaevs and the Abramovs.

Havo’s hostile looks, Turunge’s tightened lips, and mutual jabs had returned. Both used the limited but effective arsenal of methods that women have used from ancient times to demonstrate their displeasement with one another.

This quickly affected Turunge’s mood. The young women returned to sulking, worrying and nervousness. The foul mood rubbed off on the children, who would fuss.

Turunge couldn’t get away from the question of what to do next. Living under one roof with Havo started to, yet again, seem impossible. The daughter-in-law did everything she could to reconcile. She sacrificed everything she could! And what for? Her efforts had been in vain. She couldn’t even earn Havo’s approval, not to mention friendship.

What was Turunge to do?

The only option left was to choose a different path. To build her own life, guiding herself away from Havo's orders and nagging. The only way out was to gain financial independence from the mother-in-law. Getting that required strength, willpower and the help of her loved ones.

Turunge's decisiveness and insistence was unrivaled. She didn't count on her family's help, and was confident that she would be able to endure any challenges. Hurdles along her way only added to her confidence.

The young woman had once taken a bite of the fruit of independence, and could never forget that moment's rude awakening. She knew what she needed to do. She was forced to move forward, without respite, by the strongest of instincts – motherhood. She, Turunge, would only be able to raise her children if she had the means to do so. Therefore, she had to continue trading in scarce goods. Turunge saw this as her only path to her goal.

One morning, she sensed that she was pregnant again. Time passed, her belly grew bigger, and that didn't go unnoticed by Havo. Realizing the reason for her daughter-in-law's sudden stoutness, the mother-in-law fretted.

"Another child? But Erzol doesn't want to be with you!"

Turunge had learned to expect many things, but not those words. It was as if the ground was swept from under her feet. Several months had passed, and the money that Turunge had earned after her trip to Raya was gone. Asking Havo was out of the question, and she needed to prepare to take care of the not-yet-born child, not to mention that the older sons were growing and their clothes had to be replaced more and more often. This meant that, despite the late term pregnancy, she needed to go to Moscow.

Turunge went to Melke one evening.

"Mama," she began, when Hezgie retreated to his room. "I need to go visit Raya again."

"Are you insane? To go that far when you're about to go into labor?"

"Mama, that doesn't matter. If I don't go visit my sister, I won't be able to feed this child. Call Raya, tell her I'm coming, so that she can meet me."

"I'm not going to call anyone. Don't even think about it!"

"Mama! You don't understand!"

"Daughter, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying what I feel. Everything's wrong. I can't live in the same house as Havo."

"But you visited Erzol. You made up."

"Made up or not... I don't know anymore. Havo said that he won't live with me regardless. How can she know this? Maybe he writes her letters..."

"She's just has a big mouth. Pay it no mind."

"I can't do this, mama."

Melke didn't know how to cheer up her daughter. On one hand, everything she was saying could be chalked up to the pregnancy, and have no real basis. Odd things can happen in that state. On the other hand, the mother knew that Turunge had never been one to panic. Perhaps there really was more to it than she could express with words?

Well, whatever happened, happened. As Hezgie would say, 'if you aren't sure of yourself, put your trust in God and do what you think is necessary.' If Turunge made up her mind to go, then she should go, and Melke should help her in whichever way she could.

With a heavy heart, the mother went to call Raya to let her know that Turunge is on her way.

Raya, the kind soul that she was, rejoiced at the news as always.

Once the train pulled into the station in Moscow, Raya saw Turunge exit the car with a huge belly and ran to her.

“Who travels that close to term?”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s still time.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Turunge. What if you get shaken up along the way, and go into premature labor? What will you do?”

“I’ll give birth. I really need money, and it’ll be a while before I can travel with a newborn.”

Unable to have her own children, Raya took in the mother of her nephews with utmost adoration. She wouldn’t let her sister lift heavy things, tended to her, and did all the work herself. When everything was purchased and Turunge could return to Makhachkala, Raya protested.

“I’m not letting you go, so don’t even think about it. You’ll give birth here. It’ll be better this way.”

Raya wanted Turunge to carry to term in Moscow, and her sister didn’t really object.

After about a week, she went into labor. Holding her large belly with both hands, as if afraid to drop a treasure, she made it to the bed, sat down, and yelled loudly at the hallway.

“Raya!”

Her sister ran out from the kitchen.

“What happened?”

“I think it started...”

“Oh!”

Raya ran over to the phone and called her husband.

“Misha! My sister’s in labor. Call your friend, who said he’d get us into a maternity ward.”

Raya listened to her husband’s response, inserting a quick “okay” here and there, and put down the receiver.

“Don’t worry. We’ll go to the hospital soon. Everything will be fine. The doctors and conditions here are excellent.”

Raya took her sister’s hand.

“Maybe you need a more comfortable seat?”

“No, it’s okay.”

The doorbell rang fifteen minutes later – a driver sent my Mikhail Hanukov. Turunge slowly left the apartment and went downstairs.

In twenty minutes, she was already in the intake department. Raya could not go any further.

“You made it. Don’t worry,” the midwife placated Raya. “We’ll let you know when it’s over!”

By evening, Turunge had given birth to a son. That very night, Raya called her family in Makhachkala with the news.

Four days later, Turunge was discharged. Raya picked her up from the hospital, driven by the same kindhearted driver.

“So, daughter, you gave birth? A boy is a good thing! He’ll be a hero!”

“What are you going to call him?” Raya asked when they got home and the worries subsided. The newborn slept soundly.

“I don’t know. It would be good to confer with Erzol. But he’s in the army...”

“Do you want me to ask Misha? He can find out the phone number at the base. You can talk to your husband.”

“Sure.”

Hanukov arrived with good news in the evening.

“I’ve arranged for a call to the base in Mary at seven o’clock. We should be connected in ten minutes.”

“I can’t believe it,” was all Turunge could say. “And what, I’ll be able to hear him?”

Hanukov laughed.

“You’ll see. Rather, you’ll hear.”

At precisely seven o’clock, the phone let out the expected three short tones. Hanukov grabbed the receiver.

“Hello? Yes. This is him. Yes, please, connect it.” There was a pause. “Hello? Deputy Minister of the Union of Consumer Affairs of the USSR Hanukov speaking. Please call Private Babaev to the telephone immediately!”

There was a pause at the other end. The operator couldn't imagine that someone would want to urgently reach an ordinary private on a military line. From Moscow! A deputy minister!

So the operator ran to the dining hall, where the soldiers were having dinner, ran into the room, spotted Erzol and ran to him.

"Babaev, come with me! Quick!"

Nearly running and confused, Erzol rushed after the fellow soldier, who ran into the communications room and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello? I'm handing the receiver to private Babaev!" He turned to Erzol. "Here, take it. Why are you just standing here?" He nearly forced the receiver into Erzol's hand.

"Yes?"

"Erzol?"

"That's me. Who is this?"

"This is Mikhail Hanukov, the husband of Raisa Abramova. Congratulations on the birth of a son!"

"Whose son?"

"You had a baby boy, a true hero. Turunge will tell you all about it. Here she is."

"Hello?" A barely audible voice came through the receiver.

"Yes, I'm here!"

"Erzol, is that you?"

"Yes! Who else?" Erzol asked, shocked. He couldn't believe that he's hearing Turunge's voice. "How'd you end up in Moscow?"

"I came to visit Raya, and she wouldn't let me go back home, told me to give birth here. Everything's well, the boy is healthy. Erzol, what should I call the child?"

Erzol, confused and befuddled, was quiet for a bit, trying to gather his thoughts.

"Gena!"

“Erzol, that’s not a Jewish name, your father will be angry.”

“What does he know? Register him as Gena. That’s it!”

“Okay. When the boy is bigger, I’ll come visit you, bring you treats.”

“Okay.”

“Well, goodbye!”

“Goodbye! Congratulations.”

Turunge gave the receiver back to Mikhail, who hung it back up.

“See? You talked. And you were afraid that you couldn’t hear him. What name did you decide on?”

“Gena.”

“Great! There’s reason to celebrate!”

That very evening, word of the birth of the third child had traveled all the way to Makhachkala. Havo was not particularly happy to receive the news.

“Why is she doing this? They don’t need children. They have two – that’s enough!”

“Havo, how can you say that?” Nahamye asked.

Havo flailed her arm emotionally and refused to continue the conversation.

Two weeks after being discharged, Turunge returned to Makhachkala with a baby in her arms. When she arrived at the Babaev home, Havo didn’t even approach to look at the child.

Turunge’s heart sank from such a welcome.

“This is Gena,” she finally said.

“What?” Havo grimaced. “Gena?”

Even Nahamye, who always took his daughter-in-law’s side, grew indignant upon hearing the name.

“What do you mean, Gena?” he asked. “You can’t do that!”

But Turunge stood her ground.

“That what Erzol wanted.”

Havo fumed, refusing to respond at first.

"How are we supposed to know that?" she then said, angrily. "Maybe you've come up with that name?"

"I called him at the base."

"The hell you did! We're his parents, and even we can't call him. We're supposed to believe that they connected you?"

"Hanukov helped me! He's a deputy minister."

Only a few days later, when Turunge was out of the room, did the grandmother silently come into the kids' room and bend over the crib, where Gena slept. She meticulously examined the child's face, as if trying to determine who her grandson resembled more: the Abramovs or the Babaevs. The longer she looked, the more her expression softened, but only until her daughter-in-law appeared at the door, and Havo, switching to a frown, hurried out.

Erzol celebrated his son's birth at the base. He and his fellow soldiers put out a simple spread, right there at the storeroom, snuck in a bottle of vodka, and celebrated until the morning, toasting to the newborn and his father.

By then, significant changes had happened with regard to Erzol's standing. The division where he served consisted of ten regiments. Each had a workshop served by a pair of tailors and two cobblers. The divisional workshop was located within the trade block at the headquarters. Erzol headed it, with ten tailors and five cobblers under him. All lived in the barracks, located in the building of a former mill. Erzol was the only one who slept in the workshop itself.

No new clothing was manufactured, and the tailors only knew how to mend: torn soldier's tunics would be patched, damaged boots would be fixed. It took a long time for Erzol to teach them how to properly sew. Aside from their direct duties, they started taking more and more private orders to earn supplementary money, which they used to buy groceries at the market.

They needed to find a way to preserve the stockpiled goods. The men removed the floorboards in one of the store-rooms and dug a deep cellar, which remained cool even during times of high heat. From time to time, Erzol would send soldiers to the fields to trade old uniforms for melons and water-melons, which were grown abundantly in the region.

Additionally, the First Division of Fighter Jets was located near the base. Upon hearing of Erzol's tailoring skills, pilots and their wives would often pay him visits, supplying him with delicacies in exchange for dresses and suits. Even the deputy division commander would occasionally visit the workshop on the sly, asking: "Well, Babaev, do you have anything tasty in your cellar?"

Erzol hadn't forgotten about his Makhachkala friend, who found himself in the Air Force division. One day, the wing commander went to Erzol in order to have an overcoat made.

"I don't really have any free time," Erzol replied, "but I'll do it for you. However, I need a helper. My brother is serving with you – Babaev's the last name – he's a tailor. If you transfer him here for two weeks, they he can take over some of my work and I can make your coat."

"Fine," he replied. "You'll get him tomorrow."

"Let me take the measurements now. You can send the fabric along with my brother."

Erzol made the cuts for an overcoat, and gave it to Misha Babaev to prepare for a fitting. He was a skilled tailor, who could have made four coats like that in the time allotted, not to mention one.

The pilot came for his garment exactly two weeks later. He tried the coat on, looking at the mirror.

"Nice work!" he said, pleased enough to smack his lips, and reached into his pocket for money.

"Comrade Colonel," Erzol said. "You don't need to pay. I only have one request: transfer my brother to the regimental workshop."

“Fine, I’ll issue the order tomorrow. But take the money anyway,” he said, handing him five hundred rubles.

Erzol took the stack and removed two fifty-ruble notes from the top.

“One for Misha and me to celebrate the coat, the other, for you to celebrate your new garment. As for the rest...” and he put the rest of the money into a pocket of the colonel’s new coat.

An order was issued the following day: “Private Mikhail Babaev is to be transferred to the position of senior tailor at the regimental workshop.”

XXIV

Turunge continued to live at the Babaevs', spending all of her time tending to her children and the household. The mood in the home was far from festive. Havo's coldness was so apparent, that the daughter-in-law couldn't relax for a second, remaining in a constant state of tension. The only member of the Babaev clan who regarded Turunge with caring and warmth was Nahamye.

But he was at work throughout the entire day, and Havo became the full-fledged head of the household. Turunge kept trying to improve their relationship – joking, starting conversations, being the first to greet her – but nothing seemed to work on the mother-in-law. My mother failed to understand her mistake: she was expected to comply.

Havo was firmly convinced that she was the only one qualified to run the household, spend money and raise children. An excellent housewife, she managed to both tend to the little ones' necessities and to do something extra for them. Sadug and Odom were already grown enough to run into the kitchen

on their own, where grandma would surely have something especially tasty for them. And in doing so, Havo would never miss the opportunity to nag her daughter-in-law.

“Here, my little ones, you must be starving! Turunge, what are you even doing there? The children are hungry! She can’t handle two, so she gave birth to a third, the crazy woman!”

“They aren’t hungry! They ate a short while ago. I don’t need to be told what to do! I’m their mother. I know better.”

The more Turunge demonstrated that she also knew how to tend to her children and run the household, the more resistance she faced.

Havo kept reassuring herself that that Turunge and Erzol weren’t going to stay together. The mother’s heart told her that her son had become a man, not a boy afraid to resist his father’s orders. Erzol had tasted the fruits of freedom, and nothing would be able to force him to comply.

“She thinks that by having Gena she tied Erzol closer to herself,” Havo would complain to Fira. “But I sense that he does not intend to live under the same roof as her. Neither of them needs a third child! I have no idea why she gave birth to him.”

Bits of these conversations would reach Turunge, causing her to grow more resentful.

“How could she say that! I gave birth to a child, an heir, and that’s how she receives him?”

She was certain of one thing: Havo regarded her as an unwanted presence in the house.

Confused, Turunge sought her mother’s counsel.

“What am I to do? She won’t accept little Gena at all. And she looks at me as if she wants me to drop dead!”

“Well, she’s entitled to dislike whatever she wants. Handle your own business. You have a family. Don’t argue with her – she’s older, and, as you know, our people always respect their elders.”

“Believe me, I try, but she always causes a scene,” Turunge would sigh.

"So don't contradict her. Don't upset Havo. If you disagree with her – be silent, and keep doing what you think is best. Be the wiser!"

"And that's what I do. But it's impossible to do anything without Havo noticing. She sees everything. And she's very unhappy with Gena's arrival. Why?"

"Her happiness isn't your top priority. Erzol's reaction is the important one. How long does he have left to serve? Are you still feeding Gena?"

"No, the milk is gone."

"If you're no longer breastfeeding, then you can go visit Erzol. His reaction is the most important one. He'll accept him – you're on the right path. The third boy should please him."

"You think I should go?"

"Of course! Lest he forget what you look like."

And so, heeding her mother's advice, Turunge started packing for a trip. Once again, her soul was warmed by the hope of their life together.

Turunge decided to let her father-in-law in on her plan.

"Nahamye, I'm planning to travel to Erzol's again. I would like to visit him, tell him about Gena, to see how he is."

"What about the child? He needs his mother's milk."

"There's no more. He can go a few days without me."

"You're the mother – you know best. If you want, go. I'll give you money."

"Thank you, Nahamye. I don't know what I would do without you."

"Of course. I'll tell Havo myself. Don't worry about that, daughter – get ready in peace."

As before, Turunge left her children in Havo's care and set off to Turkmenistan.

In three days, she found herself at the familiar entry point into the military base. She asked for private Babaev to be notified of her arrival.

She saw Erzol from a distance. He hurried to the check-point, waving at Turunge from a distance.

“Hello there! You sure know how to surprise someone!” he said.

Turunge shied away.

“Wait for me here. I’ll go get the furlough papers, and be right back.”

“Don’t rush. I can wait.”

Erzol took care of the task quickly. A mere half hour later, they were on a familiar path to the same home where they rented a room during Turunge’s first visit. It seemed like nothing had changed.

While Erzol went to the market, Turunge made dough, dusted, cleaned the floors, made the bed, and put a light rug that she had brought from home on the floor, to make things cozier.

“You could almost say that I’ve come home,” Erzol said, smiling, seeing the familiar rug.

Turunge ran to the kitchen, quickly prepared the dough and the filling. Overflowing with joy, she made Erzol’s favorite chudu. She finished quickly and came back to her husband, asking if he would like anything else.

Erzol shook his head – everything was fine – and asked:

“Why did you give birth in Moscow?”

“I was visiting Raya. She wouldn’t let me go back, afraid that I would give birth on the road. Everything went so well. Misha Hanukov put me in such a big hospital!”

“What did father say about the name?”

“Nothing, but he doesn’t like it. But there’s nothing to be done. I had him registered as ‘Gena’ as soon as I got back. Like you said.”

“Well done. They call me Alyosha here. The Russians have trouble with our Jewish names. They can’t even pronounce some of them.”

“But what about keeping kosher, and our laws? What about the Adat and our tradition?”

“Times are changing. The traditions can remain, but names should be simpler. You did well! You’ve given birth to your third boy. Not everyone can pull that off.”

Turunge smiled. She was happy that, contrary to Havo, Erzol regarded Gena’s birth with joy, as was appropriate.

She began to tend to her husband with doubled enthusiasm. Everything was easy and simple with Erzol by her side. There was not a trace of the misunderstanding and mistrust that had accompanied her first visit. He was happy to relax in the air of warmth and comfort that his wife happily and skillfully surrounded him with. For the time, Erzol would forget that he was in the army. Next to Turunge, he felt at home, where his slightest wishes were noticed and fulfilled.

“Erzol, would you like some soup? I made kompot. Maybe you need a snack?” Turunge would make these offers time after time throughout the day.

“You’re like Havo!” he once told her. “Fussing around me. Calm down. I’m fine.”

He enjoyed the attention. These were the simple, warm interactions of two people who were truly close to one another. It was another step toward Turunge’s goal – reuniting the family. She was happy to see Erzol accept everything she offered, and considered it to be an accomplishment.

Turunge took pleasure in seeing her husband’s appetite for food she cooked with her hands, and noticed his smile when she managed to predict one of his desires. He’d click his tongue and say: “You are something else!”

Turunge listened to this, and her heart filled with hope: things would be better in the future. As soon as he returned home, she would show him what she’s capable of.

For Turunge and Erzol, the time of these visits would shrink into a single moment. It seemed like she had just arrived, and it was already time to pack up and go back.

Before her departure, Erzol gave her money for the trip as well as presents, which included a lavish handmade Turkmen rug. He had been eyeing it for quite a while on his trips to the market, stroking it with the back of his hand, making small talk with the vendor and praising his inventory. Erzol bargained the price down, as was customary at an eastern bazaar. They argued for a while, then shook hands, happy with the time well spent, and the rug became Erzol's property. He whispered to Turunge, who was present during the bargaining, that the rug is worth ten times the price they had paid for it.

Finally, it was time for them to part. Erzol had to return to the base, and Turunge rushed to catch the evening bus. He accompanied his wife to the stop, waving her goodbye after she boarded.

Turunge's heart was light as she traveled, and the trip seemed quicker than the time before. The things she carried with her were more than gifts. She thought that if she sold the things given by Erzol, used the revenue to buy more sheets, pillowcases, and other scarce goods, which her sister Raya could easily get, and resold all that at the Makhachkala markets, she could make a hefty sum of money which would be more than enough to sustain her until Erzol's return.

She would be rid of her reliance on Havo's charity. She wouldn't have to demean herself, listen to accusations, and catch looks that poked at her face like dry grass. And then, God willing, things would improve. Erzol would protect her, keep her from harm. She would not longer have to engage in trade with him there, and resume a calm, family life, like her parents and, truth be told, Nahamye and Havo, who treated one another very well.

XXV

And so Turunge returned home to Yermoshkin Street and Havo's icy reception.

My poor mother couldn't understand any of it. After four years of her life with Erzol, all of the Babaevs with the exception of the kind and calm Nahamye, took Havo's side. It was difficult to come to terms with this state of affairs, and to pretend to live as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, my mother bowed to fate for the sake of us – her children. That's what she told Melke, while trying to remain calm.

"So that's the way it'll be," Turunge sighed, concluding her story. "I'll manage somehow. I'm not planning to argue with Havo and will pay her no mind."

Melke looked at her daughter in anguish. Where did she get such a fiery personality? Why couldn't she conduct herself as other young women did when they moved into their husbands' homes? They suffered at first, but then things settled in.

Turunge smiled at Melke kindly.

“Don’t worry about me, Mama. I’ll get out of this situation.”

In the following days, Turunge sold a portion of the gifts that Erzol passed on for the whole family, including the Turkmen rug, with a clear conscience. She used the profits to go to Moscow, bought more desirable clothes, undergarments and bedding with Raya’s help and sold it in bulk to the same trader at the market.

How this exacerbated the already tense relationship between the two strong women! Their glances could be used to light afurnace. Turunge nerves were starting to go. In the midst of arguments with her mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law wasn’t too selective with her phrasing, and thought nothing about raising her voice to Havo, which undoubtedly backfired and made the already tense interactions even worse. Havo struggled with these battles as well. She ran out of ideas of how to curb the girl, and, much like her daughter-in-law, impatiently awaited Erzol’s return so that he could serve as judge and mediate the situation.

Strangely, Nahamye – the head of the family – did not notice the coming storm.

A few months after her return from Turkmenistan, Turunge once again realized that she was pregnant. She was so shaken by the discovery that she left the children in Havo’s care and ran to her mother for advice right in the middle of the day.

“Mama, I think I’m pregnant again,” she told Melke from the doorstep.

“What joy!” Melke clasped her hands happily. “Mind a mother’s words, Erzol will be very happy.”

“I’m not worried about him, it’s Havo I’m concerned about! I better keep this from her.”

“Why are you so frightened, daughter? It’s not like she’ll kill you because of that.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Stop it!”

“Oh, Mama, you have no idea how bad things between us have gotten. More children don’t necessarily bring happiness...”

Melke frowned.

“Calm down, I beg you. Carry the child in peace, and don’t worry. If anything happens, call me, and I’ll come help. Do you have money?”

“Yes.”

The frustrated Turunge returned to the Babaev home. She was now more wary of Havo than ever, afraid of the moment when her mother-in-law would notice. She just wanted to shed the burden as soon as possible and awaited Erzol’s return. Turunge wanted nothing else.

“What’s with you? You’ve gained weight!”

“Yes.”

“Are you pregnant again?” Havo flailed her arms.

Turunge nodded silently.

“Have you gone completely mad?” Havo screamed. “How could you allow this? How are we supposed to care for the children? What – you want to hang a fourth one around Erzol’s neck? You shouldn’t have had the third one, and now you’re going for another.”

“But it’s not my fault,” Turunge protested.

“Quiet! I’d rather you not give birth to this child! You don’t need him! Not at all!” Havo rushed out of the kitchen.

This gave Turunge the chills and her face was red with anger. One more straw and she would have pounced on Havo.

Four months after the news of his son’s birth, Erzol, given his honors in military and physical preparedness, was granted furlough to go home. He rushed to let his family know of his return.

As soon as Havo found out that she would see her son, she started counting the minutes till his arrival: getting ready, cleaning the house, fussing around the kitchen, thinking of tasty things to make for her beloved Erzol.

He appeared on the doorstep four days after his parents received the telegram. Looking older and manlier, he smiled widely, his dental crowns glistening in the light.

“Hello, Mama!” he announced.

Havo turned around, and, seeing her son, ran to him with joyful lamentations:

“Oh, my dear son!”

She embraced and looked at her Erzol, in disbelief over her happiness.

“You’re here! You’re such a man now! Are you hungry? Dinner is almost ready.”

Havo didn’t know what else to do, what to offer, how to smile at her son. His arrival had made her simultaneously happy, proud, but, mainly, assured that someone is about to get what’s coming to her.

“Yes, I suppose I could use a meal. I’m not used to all your cooking anymore,” Erzol replied, smiling. “Just let me wash up and change from the road.”

While his mother hurried to cook the food, he went over to his half of the house. Turunge sat in the room, feeding Gena milk porridge while Sadug and Odom slept in the bed.

“Here I am!” Erzol announced.

Turunge looked up, startled, and a smile came over her face. Her heart beat faster with joy, but she didn’t get up, afraid of disturbing the baby.

“Hello! Sorry – I can’t get up, as you can see,” she said, gesturing at the newborn. “How was your trip?”

“Everything’s fine,” he said, entering the room. He stood next to Turunge, towering over her like some fairytale giant.

“So there you are, Gena Babaev,” he said with a note of amazement and joy while looking at his son.

“Yes, he’s growing quickly.”

Erzol stroked the boy’s head.

"I'll go wash up and eat. I'm hungry from the trip. Come by the kitchen when you are done feeding Gena."

"Perhaps it would be better if you came back here. I'm not hungry. I'll watch the kids in the meantime."

"All right."

Erzol grabbed a towel, then left, shutting the door.

Nahamye appeared at the door.

"Ah! Look who's here! Would you look at that? He's a real man now! Looks good, eh? That's what the military does to a man!" the father firmly patted his son on the shoulder. "Let's have a bite, shall we?"

"Can we have a little something before the bite?" Erzol said, smiling slyly.

"Well, the occasion does call for a drink, doesn't it? These things don't happen every day!"

The men sat at the table, rejoicing, joking, laughing. Erzol opened a bottle of vodka, poured a drink for himself and his father, and, looking at each other, they both exhaled.

"Welcome home!"

"Bottoms up!" the son replied with a smile.

And they emptied the glasses in one swig. A lengthy sit-down followed, complete with endless questions about the service, work, friends and relatives.

"So how's my section doing?"

"They're not managing without you, with all the orders coming in. Everyone's waiting for your return. They say when you return, business will boom again."

Nahamye kept joking and laughing loudly. The news of Erzol's arrival instantly spread around the neighborhood. They only lifted their third shot glass when there was a knock on the door, Erzol's friend behind it. Then another. People kept coming and coming.

Erzol suddenly found himself in the familiar surroundings of friendly parties, shrewd jokes, reckless fun and the feeling that here, life was beautiful and carefree.

Turunge didn't leave her room the entire time, and Erzol didn't pay that much mind in the midst of noise, revelry, conversations and questions. Every second, someone would grab him, interrupt him, ask him questions about the army. He would answer, asking requisite questions in return. 'How are you? How is she? How is he?' Tired of drinking, he and his friends took a walk around the city. They returned late, when his mother was the only one left in the kitchen, clearing the table.

"Well, now we can talk, mama!" He gave her a kiss. "How are you? Running things as usual?"

Havo looked at him, full of emotion, her eyes glistening.

"Yes son, all by myself. As always. I'm so happy you're home! I wish your service would end soon."

"There isn't much left. Are you keeping busy at the stove as usual?" Erzol asked, smiling and looking around the kitchen. "Is everything well?"

"Of course. Is there another person in this house that I can count on? Who else can handle this house?"

Erzol chuckled, construing his mother's question as a joke.

"And how's Turunge?"

"Oh, what about her? She lives her own life. No time to help me."

Erzol's careless smile faded. He pursed his lips, as if he had eaten a sour berry. He grimaced, as if from a toothache, but his irritation faded.

"Well, of course," he said. "She has three kids. They need to be looked after, raised. That takes time."

"If only she took care of them! Whenever I look, she locks them in a room, and disappears," Havo grumbled.

"What did you say?" Erzol asked, wondering. "She locks the kids in a room and leaves?"

His irritation grew. Havo wiped the table, finely tuned to her son's mood.

“And where does she go?” Erzol asked after some time.

“How should I know? She tells me nothing. She acts as if there’s no one around her. If she couldn’t take care of two, why did she give birth to a third?”

“So tell her that.”

“She’s a sneaky one! The minute she gets antsy, she dumps the children and goes to Moscow!”

“Her sister invited her. That’s a good thing. She gave birth to Gena in good conditions.”

“Yes, but who’s supposed to handle things around the house? And the minute I try to help her, she screams at me and won’t let me near the children.”

“She screams at you?”

“She never listens to me – always picking battles. The gall of that one! The kids look like urchins. She’s a terrible mother!”

Erzol grimaced, as if he had a piercing headache. The conversation suddenly started making him nauseous. Why did he even ask? He quelled his frustration with his willpower.

Women are strange creatures after all. They ruin their own party. He silently observed the environment he’s been familiar with since childhood, remembering how he and his sister Fira were once running around the table and accidentally knocked over a jug of milk. Oh, did they get it that day... And now, he was happy to remember all of it, and that warmed his soul.

He suddenly remembered the gifts he sent with his wife.

“Where’s the rug that Turunge brought back from visiting me?”

“What rug, Erzol?” Havo asked. “There was no rug. Turunge didn’t bring back anything.”

“What do you mean? I specifically bought it as a gift. So lavish and soft. Handmade.”

Havo shrugged.

"I don't know anything about any gifts."

Erzol was flushed with anger. Havo pretended not to notice the change.

"Why are you surprised? She does what she wants. She doesn't tell me anything. She doesn't even consider me human."

"But I sent a rug with her, and gifts, and money."

"Ah!" Havo waved him off. "I'm not surprised. She took it all for herself. She didn't mention a single word about gifts and didn't give us anything."

"How could that be?" Erzol yelled.

"She doesn't listen to anyone. She's selfish. It's impossible to live a normal life with her!"

A wave of rage swept over Erzol, and the happiness from seeing his parents, his family and friends, which had filled him from the moment he stepped over the threshold of his childhood home, had dissipated. And so did his warm feelings toward Turunge, which appeared when he saw her with Gena in her arms. His mother was being demeaned in his absence! And by whom? His wife! He was barely home, and an avalanche of problems was being dumped on him. And whose fault was that? His wife's! The person dearest to him, his mother, was suffering. And, once again, Turunge was responsible! It was always her!

Goddamn it! Erzol struck the table with his fist, in full force, then jumped up. She would never lie to him again! He wouldn't let her pretend that she's caring for her husband. It was all a hypocrisy! While she pretended to care for him, she kept insulting his mother!

Erzol unsteadily left the kitchen, intending to teach Turunge a lesson once and for all. She needed to know her place.

In a rabid fury, Erzol burst through the door where Turunge had just put the children to sleep and sat by their beds, humming a lullaby.

Erzol found her silhouette in the darkness. His hand slipped around the wall in search of a light switch. A bright light hit Turunge's eyes.

"Where is the money?" Erzol screamed from the doorway.

Turunge, terrified, curled up into a ball.

"Where is the rug I gave you? Where did it all disappear? How dare you not give mother the presents I told you to bring back? You thief!"

Erzol approached Turunge. She abruptly stood up, perhaps by instinct rather than consciously, as if guarding the children with her body, and caught a fist in the face.

Everything in front of her eyes started spinning swimming around.

"Don't you dare hit me, I'm pregnant!" she screamed.

She threw her arms up, trying to shield herself. Her screams were filled with pain and desperation. Everything she strived for, everything she hoped for, had evaporated and crumbled: her dreams, her cares, her warm regard.

"So you're pregnant, too?" Erzol screamed. "Get out of this house! I don't need another freak here!"

He continued to shower her with curses, striking her, again and again, screaming:

"I don't want this child. Have an abortion!"

After another strike, Turunge lost consciousness. Coming to, Erzol looked at his wife, prostrate on the floor in confusion, and then silently turned around and left the room, slamming the door.

When Turunge woke up, she understood that she can no longer live in this home. She no longer wanted anything: not to save her family, not to keep her husband. Her hopes were crushed. Turunge realized that, one fine day, her husband could kill her.

The room spun and rippled before her eyes. With her last bit of strength, she rose, dressed her sleepy children,

and threw their things into a bag. Dressed in the clothes she was wearing, holding Gena and Odom in her arms while Sadug clutched her skirt, she left. She left her husband, his unrestrained rage, her fear of Havo. My mother ran, chased by her fear for herself and for the future of her kids, including the unborn child she was carrying under her heart.

Nahamye learned of the events the following day. There was no scandal, nor were there scenes. Everyone understood that this was a final break. The next morning, Erzol rushed to pack his things, went to the train station, bought a ticket and went back to where he was stationed, trying to forget about what happened as soon as possible.

Turunge gave birth to a girl six months later. She was named Ella. My mother was well aware of the fact that she could only count on her own abilities. Turunge had four children – each smaller than the rest – unable to find a spare minute, not to mention the time required to travel to Moscow. Thank God, her sister Raya helped her by sending over parcels of scarce goods.

Turunge would go straight from the post office to the market and sell the parcels to the vendor. The revenues from these textile sales were the only way Turunge could make ends meet. Feeding four children on one's own was not an easy task.

According to the laws of the Soviet Union, children almost always remained with their mother after a divorce. The father was required to pay alimony to ensure their support. But Turunge categorically rejected any help that came from the Babaevs, unable to overcome her offense and pride. Turunge had confidence in her strength, and awaited the moment when she would stop breastfeeding Ella and be able to go to Raya's. Turunge knew that the only way to provide for herself and her children was to bring back a suitcase of rare goods from Moscow and sell them.

As for Havo, while everything she predicted came to pass, and even Gena and Ella's births were unable to save her son's marriage, she ultimately didn't feel happy. Havo couldn't come to terms with the fact that the kids, whom she treated so well and felt responsible for, were now out of her home. She couldn't get enough of the older grandchildren, Sadug and Odom. Her heart melted whenever they were around.

All of a sudden, her grandchildren became the most important thing of the world. Havo was confident that she was the only one who could raise the children right, give them an education, and help them advance in society.

Turunge, in her eyes, was a worthless mother who kept her children in poverty. Despite that, Havo didn't have the power to change anything about the situation.

Nevertheless, she decided that she would try to get the children back no matter what.

When Erzol finally returned from the army and the happy commotion subsided, Havo began a conversation about the fate of his children.

"These are your own children, your blood. We need to try to rescue them! You must understand, they're stewing in poverty. We need to get them back, to give them a chance at an honorable life."

Erzol shook his head.

"I don't want any of it. I don't want to bring anyone back. I want to live my life. If you want, go find out how much I need to pay them, and let them live there!"

"No! That can't happen!" Havo retorted abruptly. "She doesn't have the means to raise children! Turunge resells things, makes kopecks off it, and the children are nearly starving, dressed in rags. Remember, they bear the Babaev name! This is unacceptable. We need to do everything to ensure that they live an honorable life. The fact that you, the parents, couldn't figure out how to live together is not their fault! You

need to talk to Turunge, convince her that the children will be better off in our home.”

“That’s why I’m planning to pay for the children to be fed and clothed,” Erzol replied, trying to counteract his mother’s insistence.

“You can’t trust that crazy woman with the children! Are you mad? You won’t need to do anything! You can live like you live now. Go, work! I’ll raise them. They won’t bother you with anything. I’ll do all the work!”

“Yes, the children will be better off with us!” Nahamye chimed in, supporting his wife. “What can Turunge do? Nothing!”

He was a compassionate man who always tried to ensure that his grandchildren wouldn’t be in need of anything.

“Leave me alone, both of you!” Erzol yelled and ran out of the house.

He was tired of the constant reminders about his wife, his kids – everything that linked him to the past. Any reminder about his marriage to Turunge brought great pain.

Once, over dinner, Havo started up a conversation with Nahamye.

“We need to rescue the children.”

“From whom?” he wondered.

“She can’t raise them! Don’t you understand? She’s a tramp! It’s unacceptable for Babaevs to live in poverty! You need to go to the Abramovs. Tell them that if our children can’t live together, then we need to divide the grandchildren. We can take Sadug and Odom, they can keep Gena and Ella. They’ll have an easier time with the pair of them, and we can at least provide for the other two.”

“Divide the children? You think that’s normal?”

“They can’t raise all of them. It’s hard to raise four. We can’t abandon them, can we? We need to rescue at least two! Go talk to Hezgje. He’s kind, unlike his women.”

“Yes, but two children? That’s also a burden. You raised five of your own already. Are you going to wash diapers again?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll manage. Have Hezgie convince Turunge to give us the two older ones. Maybe she’ll at least listen to her father.”

The following day, Nahamye went to the Abramovs’ after work. He thought long and hard how to broach the subject. This was a trial for the kind and amicable Babaev elder. Nahamye didn’t know what he was going to approach his daughter-in-law with, but couldn’t stand on the side either. Havo was right: she wouldn’t be able to feed four children without money.

“Is anyone home?” he asked loudly, entering the yard.

Hezgie came out onto the porch.

“Hello, Nahamye! What’s the occasion?”

“Well, there’s an issue,” the father-in-law began, struggling to find the proper words.

“It’s better that we go into the house to talk. After all, we aren’t enemies. It’s your Erzol who’s rabid... You’ve always been kind.”

“Why bring that up? I’m queasy enough about everything that happened as it is. Do you think I wanted things to turn out the way they did?”

“Sorry I brought it up.... Fine, what did you want?”

They went into Hezgie’s room and sat across from one another.

“How’s Turunge? How are our grandchildren?” Nahamye decided to approach the subject from a distance.

“They’re fine, growing. They’re sleeping now, but you can come look at them later. I think Turunge is about to feed Ella.”

“Is she struggling with four of them?”

“It’s fine, she’s managing. She’s a strong one. Such a good homemaker.”

Nahamye scoffed.

“Hezgie, I understand everything, but she has no job, no income. You can’t feed and clothe them as you should. Trust me, I know. Admit an obvious fact: you can’t raise all four. We can help. We can take in the older two kids, and the young ones can stay with you. We’ll be happy, and you’ll be relieved. What do you think?”

“Oh, no, my dear friend... You need to talk to Turunge about that. Those are her children. Whatever she decides, is what will happen.”

“But you can say your fatherly word.”

“I am, indeed, her father. No one’s arguing that. But I won’t pressure her on this issue. Wait a minute, and I’ll call her over. Or we can go see her in the kitchen.”

The two grandfathers went into the kitchen, where Turunge was tending to the housework.

“Hello, my dear,” Nahamye greeted her.

He always treated Turunge with great tenderness. The children she gave birth to, his grandchildren, were dearest people to him on this earth. It was such a pity that his son couldn’t get along with their mother.

“Hello, Nahamye,” Turunge replied, wondering why her father-in-law was in their home. She didn’t expect anything good to come from the Babaevs. “What brings you to our home?”

“Why can’t I visit? No matter what happened between you and Erzol, I’m always happy to see you. You’re so clever. Look at how much work you have – you’re still raising four children. I’m an old man. I’ve seen a lot, and I know that it’s very difficult to bring up so many kids. Especially if you have to take care of everything yourself.

Turunge looked at Nahamye with mistrust, wondering where this conversation was leading.

“It’s fine, I manage. It’s no chore – they’re my children. I birthed them, and I’ll raise them.”

"I know, you're proud," Nahamye agreed, smiling. "But that's not what I mean. Listen to me. Trust me, I wish you no harm. I simply want to help. Four kids, and an unemployed mother. Look at how they're dressed. In times like these, it's hard enough to feed yourself, not to mention children. Here's what I suggest: we'll take in Sadug and Odom. You know that we live well, and that the grandkids will be well provided for. And you can keep the little ones. You'll have an easier time, and the kids will be better off! You and I can always come to visit."

Turunge listened in disbelief.

"Nahamye! What are you talking about? Have you all lost your mind? No – that will never happen! I will raise and feed all of them by myself, without your help!"

"You must understand, that no one wishes the kids any harm," Nahamye tried to convince her. "We won't take them away – just take them in and raise them, to help you. You'll have an easier time with two."

"No! That will never happen! I will never give my own children away to anyone. I am their mother, and they should be with me."

The only thing Nahamye could do was shake his head in defeat.

Havo was working in the garden when he returned home. Nahamye didn't know how to tell his wife that her plan had failed. Attempting to avoid a difficult conversation, he went straight to the kitchen, where Erzol sat with a dear family friend, Isay Adamov. They were drinking, joking, and laughing.

"Hello, Isay. Are you here on business, or what?"

"I just ran into Erzol, and he invited me to sit down."

"It's good that you're visiting. We're always happy to have guests. Well, son, how's work?"

"Everything's good. I met a man who can help us with fabric."

“That’s good.”

Havo entered the kitchen, saw her husband, and instantly raised her eyebrows inquisitively: ‘what happened?’

“I went to the Abramovs,” Nahamye began, staring at his son.

Erzol winced at the mere mention of the Abramov name, and he forgot about his tea. He looked at his father gloomily. Havo couldn’t bear the silence:

“Don’t drag it out, talk! What happened?”

“She won’t even give up two. Flatly refuses.”

“What do you mean, she refuses?” Havo flustered. “Didn’t you talk to Hezgie?”

“Quiet down,” Nahamye interrupted her. “Yes, I talked to him. In fact, I talked to him first. It’s no use. She doesn’t want to give up Sadug and Odom, and that’s it. And Hezgie said: ‘whatever my daughter says, goes.’”

The sulking Erzol entered the conversation:

“I’m confused – who wants to take the children from Turunge?”

Havo pounced on him:

“I won’t allow our grandkids to be destitute!”

“What are you talking about, mama?” Erzol objected. “Turunge was planning to raise them on her own all along, so don’t bother her. Let her do what she wants.”

He sat there with a blank face, and his indifference drove Havo mad.

“How can you say that? That tramp can’t be trusted with the children! She has not a kopeck to her name. My grandkids are walking around hungry and dirty. It’s unheard of for children to grow up in such unbearable conditions. They bear our name. Don’t you understand that? We need to make sure they live with us.”

“But what if she doesn’t want to give them up, mama?” Erzol retorted scathingly.

“That’s not an option. Do what you must – take them all if you need to – but the children need to live with us!” Havo said abruptly.

Erzol finished the rest of his tea in one gulp and rose from his seat.

“Let’s take a walk,” he told Isay.

Isay quickly said goodbye to the hospitable Havo and the sad Nahamye, and, talking about some business of their own, the men left the home. Dusk descended upon Makhachkala.

XXVI

Erzol and Nahamye's mutual friend Isay Adamov was a most interesting person deserving of further mention. Isay's passport indicated a date and place of birth – May 7, 1927 in the city of Makhachkala. However, no one knew Isay's real birth date. Such a register simply didn't exist in Dagestan in the 1920s. When passports were issued en masse throughout the republic, Isay's mother put down the same birthday for all four of her children.

His parents were Mountain Jews. His mother's was named Douro, his father – Botoy Adamov.

Prior to the revolution, Isay's grandfather, Adam Adamov, was a well-respected man of substantial means. He cultivated grapes, holding over fifteen hundred hectares of land, and was considered a major landowner.

The family lived in a two-story stone house with a giant yard surrounded by a tall fence. The yard held an annex for the help.

Botoy was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and his childhood was worriless. This lasted until the Soviet authorities reached Dagestan, and the Adamovs' situation changed drastically, much like it did for other wealthy people. When the collectivization began, Adam, concluding that fighting the new authorities was futile, decided to transfer all his land to the collectives and filled out the requisite paperwork at the government offices. He hoped that this would buy him peace, if not respect from the new government. What he didn't account for was that chairmen of the collectives, who, just yesterday, were still bumpkins, had a much bigger appetite than he had expected.

The new authorities set their eyes on the giant stone house where the Adamovs lived. The new authorities issued a decree that made their desires very clear and final, and the Adamovs were forced to move into the very same annex that their hired help filled before the revolution. The former family home was turned into a daycare center. In an ironic twist of fate, some years from then, the very same daycare center would be attended by the children of workers at the Third International Factory, where Isay Abramov would work.

Botoy and Douro had two children. Aside from that, Botoy's younger brother and sister, whom the older brother took into his own custody after their mother's passing, lived with them.

Botoy couldn't make peace with what the new authorities did to his possessions.

"How could they do such a thing? My father gave them all our vineyards to support the new government at a difficult time, so, of course, they took his house, and threw small children into the street!"

He repeated those words over and over, not sparing the Soviets and cursing everything they stood for. Eventually, Botoy's words reached the ears of those at whom they were

directed. The trial was quick. A case against Isay's father was quickly fabricated, and he was accused of aiding and abetting kulaks. The revolutionary tribunal sentenced him to ten years in prison and sent him to one of the colonies near Archangelsk.

Hard times befell the Adamov family. Grandpa Adam's health rapidly deteriorated after he was stripped of all his possessions in his twilight years. Douro was forced to look for a job in order to somehow feed the children. She didn't earn much, and Isay, along with the other children, had to look for sources of income instead of studying. What work could they possibly be entrusted with, being young as they were? The kids therefore wandered the streets, gathering scrap metal and rags to bring to the recycling center. The family subsisted on the kopecks they earned, and even attempted to put rainy day money aside. Once, Douro even managed to take a trip to distant Archangelsk to visit her husband.

It's worth mentioning that prison didn't bring Botoy down. Incapable of sitting idly for even a minute, he labored with no respite while behind bars. Everyone who served time with him was amazed by his skill and resourcefulness. No one is certain how they arrived at that name, but the Russians called him 'Victor', and Botoy, who had an easy time finding common ground with anyone, didn't object. Botoy-Victor's selfless labor didn't go unnoticed by the camp's management, and he was released after four years. By then, Isay had turned thirteen.

After his release, Botoy got a job at the supply department at the Dagestan Resorts Association in his native Makhachkala. The ambitious worker didn't stay in the shadows here either. He was given a good salary, consistently received bonuses for exceeding projections, and brought the family back to wealth.

The life he built with this work collapsed all at once. Botoy purchased a home on Suleiman Stalski Street in 1949, a sturdy

stone building, which, as it turned out, didn't go unnoticed by others. One evening, two Kumyk men showed up at his door.

"Dear friend, you need to exchange this house for another. We'll tell you which one."

"How is that? Why? This is my home!"

"Listen, you have to exchange it. Trust us."

"Why?"

"Because you will be killed if you don't."

"Go back to wherever you came from!" Botoy snapped back in anger.

He wasn't about to heed the threats of some thugs. Perhaps, he should have.

A year passed from that day. Botoy had been delayed until the evening at a location on the outskirts of Makhachkala. It was already dark as he headed back home, and the streets were deserted. Botoy then decided to take a shortcut through an abandoned yard. It was here that he heard a stranger's voice.

Botoy turned around, managing to catch only a single phrase:

"You should have agreed!"

Three gunshots pierced the silence. Botoy fell to the ground, dead, and the bandits dissolved in the darkness. His body wasn't found until morning. An investigation followed, and the detectives soon traced the murder to a crime ring, which prospered off extortion and robbery. The crooks were arrested and brought to trial, but that didn't bring Botoy back.

But let's go back to the story of Botoy's son Isay. After graduating from his ten-year schooling in 1941, Isay voluntarily enlisted in the army. He was not sent to the front lines, but attached to a military hospital as a facilities operations commander. This was very fortunate. Isay excelled at the position, establishing an uninterrupted supply chain for the hospital. The management took notice of his talent,

and Isay was appointed to the highly demanding position of Deputy Chief of the Provisional Supplies and Equipment Unit in Makhachkala. It wasn't long before he was promoted to chief.

While at this position, Isay learned of the Great Victory. He was demobilized shortly after and got a job as chief of the Red East Cooperative. Taking on the new assignment, Isay brought in aggressive growth.

The cooperative met and surpassed its quotas, and not without the help of Adamov's business savvy and his ability to establish continuous workflow in the division that he oversaw.

By then, Isay had entered the ranks of the Communist Party, which, in those years, was absolutely essential to a successful career. When the Ministry of Local Industry established a City Sewing Plant, the City Committee had to appoint someone to head the business and decided on Isay Adamov. Thus Isay became the director of a factory that employed nearly a thousand workers.

This is where fate brought him and Nahamye Babaev together. One day, Nahamye came to Isay's office.

"Hello, my name is Nahamye Babaev," said my grandfather, introducing himself.

"Hello. Are you Jewish?" Isay asked, startling Nahamye.

"I am," he answered, cautiously. "My lineage leads back to the Mountain Jews."

"It's a pleasure to meet someone who's nearly a family member: I also come from the Mountain Jews. What brings you here?"

The men realized that they could speak candidly.

"Isay, I wanted to talk about business. I think that we can be useful to one another."

"That's good, Nahamye. I suggest we have lunch. We can talk business in the meantime."

Isay liked to joke around, even during a serious conversation, which would often charm his companions.

Nahamye happily agreed, and they headed to the nearest restaurant.

“So, what’s happening on your end?” Isay asked, curiously.

“Same as always: things are difficult. The allotted funds are slim, and there is only enough fabric to satisfy a tenth of the quota. Your business is different – a hefty enterprise with hefty funds. I could buy your surplus. We can do this off the books.”

Isay squinted, intrigued: this was a good proposal. He was well aware of the complexity of the problem that Nahamye outlined. Not only had he heard of supply difficulties that sewing cooperatives faced, but he encountered them firsthand during his time at the Red East.

Isay was a genius supplier. He had a knack for using his vast network, which reached high into the echelons of the Soviet hierarchy, to raise funds in times of total deficit. Moreover, he was able to distribute these hard-to-get funds and raw materials amongst the relevant sections so aptly, that each of them met their quotas without exception, and no one suffered any losses.

The factory director stayed silent for a moment, as he weighed all of the pros and cons.

“You know, I’m not going to take money from one of my own people. I prefer that we do this through the exchange of services. Do you agree?”

A wide smile grew over Nahamye’s face. Going into the meeting, he expected to convince the director to provide one-off assistance for the cooperative, and here he was being offered permanent cooperation.

“How about I sell the same fabric back to you?” Nahamye asked, and the companions erupted in loud laughter.

Isay appreciated Nahamye's resourcefulness.

"Nahamye, I plan to expand our production. We're planning to open new workshops. We're going to need tailors, and I heard that you have some skilled workers at your cooperative. I could send my people to you for training, or you could even send your tailors to me. I'll have a steady supply of workers, and you, in turn, will have ample raw materials.

"Let's shake on it," Nahamye replied.

It was silly not to take an opportunity that was being handed to him on a silver platter.

And so their partnership began.

Isay went on to relegate fabric from his supply to Nahamye's cooperative, then introduced him to the head of the Third International Cooperative, where Nahamye would buy calico, which was a very cheap at the time. The fabric would then be used to make bedding supplies, which were scarce at the time – covers, sheets, pillowcases. The inexpensive raw materials allowed them to keep the prices low, and production grew quickly. With such high volume, Nahamye suffered no losses.

A tight connection developed between Babaev and Adamov. The men would socialize more and more often, and their households befriended one another.

Nahamye was curious about how Isay was able to become so successful. People would say different things: some knew Adamov to be a talented leader who was well acquainted with the higher-ups, others knew him as a man who got into a bind which resulted in his arrest and imprisonment.

This is what happened. Like many enterprising people, Isay would promote officially sanctioned product alongside with so-called 'uncounteds' – product that was made of materials obtained via private channels without the proper overheads and other accompanying paperwork. When store warehouses ran out of official product, the above-quota uncounteds

would be brought in from the factory. Making money was easy enough, as long as the organizers arranged for sufficient cover from the police and other auditing agencies. Otherwise, such activity could easily land one in jail.

But those who don't take risks don't drink champagne. Isay's shrewd nature pined for a way out, and the operation kicked into action.

At one point, Isay's friend, who happened to be the Minister of Education of Dagestan, placed a clothing order for children's health camps, schools and day care centers. Naturally, along with product supplied per official estimates, Isay sold uncounted goods. The volume was so great that hidden ledgers needed to be kept. Their safekeeping was entrusted to Lazar, the husband of Aunt Ira who grew up at the Adamov household along with Isay.

And then, the unforeseen happened. A warehouse chief from Isay's plant was spotted at a transactional meeting for uncounted product. An investigation followed. Adamov was unable to help, and neither were the finest lawyers. Knowing that he was doomed, the warehouse chief succumbed to the investigators' pressure and began to testify against a number of individuals, Isay included.

On January 9, 1948, the factory director's home was raided after the issue of a search warrant. Abramov himself wasn't home, and the police had to deal with Isay's mother Douro and her brother Olshol. It happened that Nina, their future daughter in law, picked that very day to visit.

Walking up to the house, the young woman sensed that something was wrong. Finding no one on the first floor, Nina went upstairs, where Olshol and Douro sat on chairs against the wall with glum. They were accompanied by several police officers and the investigator, who sat at the table at the center of the room with his papers. Upon seeing Nina, the detective's attention instantly switched to her.

"Who might you be?"

Nina was terrified.

"I'm their future daughter-in-law. I came for a visit."

"Who's the fiancé?"

"Amay Adamov."

"Come in and sit down," said the investigator, pointing at a chair, and the search began.

The authorities went to work. They found several hidden bags filled with fabric and other products. This did not upset the masters of the house, who sat calmly, praying to God that the investigators didn't find what was important – a hundred thousand rubles in cash in brand new bills.

Isay was at work as this was happening. As soon as he heard commotion outside his office door, he realized that they had come for him and ran to the phone.

"Hello? It's Isay! Tell my family that I was arrested," he yelled, and threw the receiver back atop the lever at the very moment that the doors burst open and the police came in.

Isay was taken. Placed in isolation, he never stopped looking for a way out of the situation at hand. Adamov refused to believe that he wouldn't be able to get out of this.

His lawyer had met a man at the Interior Ministry named Alkhazov through his connections at the police. He made a promise to him on Isay's behalf:

"If you help him avoid prosecution, you'll be generously rewarded. He isn't a murderer, nor does he pose a threat to society – he simply landed in hot water. Many other do this. Why let a good man rot in jail? He's better off working. And rest assured that your help won't go unnoticed. Once you meet him, you'll understand what I mean. If you become his friend – consider yourself set for life."

Alkhazov scoffed at first, but then nodded in accord.

"Fine. I'll meet with him and we'll talk. I know the investigators who are running his case."

The very next day, Isay was sitting across from Alkhazov.

He silently looked Isay in the eye, then began to speak quietly, paging through a file.

“Please read this testimony,” he said, pushing a sheet of paper in front of Isay with the following written on it: ‘I will help you, as long as you don’t skimp on the reward.’

Isay read over the writing twice and stared at Alkhazov, wondering whether he’s tormenting him or really trying to help.

Alkhazov, skilled at his craft as he was, noticed doubt in the prisoner’s eyes.

“Everything’s possible,” he said pointedly. “As long as we have your consent.”

Isay, still filled with doubt, silently looked at the investigator that was questioning him. He then decided to take his chances.

“How much?” he asked, with as much indifference as he could muster.

Alkhazov wrote a number on the same piece of paper and gave it back. Isay looked at it, nodded, then silently placed his palm against his chest – he was giving him his word. The questioning ended.

Alkhazov met with the prisoner’s lawyer that very day and outlined how Isay must act in order to be freed.

“There’s a tuberculosis epidemic at the Makhachkala prison. As long as prisoners aren’t a threat to society, they’re released if they test positive for the disease. Isay’s medical records need to include the requisite diagnosis. We need to talk to the chief of medicine at the prison hospital. His name’s Zaremoy. He’s reliable.”

At his next meeting with Isay, the lawyer presented the plan that Alkhazov had come up with. After giving it some thought, Isay agreed – there was a chance this could free him. In a few weeks, his medical records included a most unfortunate open tuberculosis diagnosis.

Isay was freed the very next day.

Afterwards, Alkhazov would help Adamov escape hot water in a variety of situations on numerous occasions.

After the concerns surrounding Isay's arrest and release had subsided, his mother decided to get him to settle down by having him marry a nice girl and the search for a bride began. Douro knew that Isay worked with Nahamye and that he often visited the Babaev home. The family was well known and respected, but she didn't hear of them having any eligible brides under their roof. When Douro shared her thoughts with a friend, however, a possibility emerged.

"You know that the Babaevs have a daughter, don't you? Liza! She's available and ready for betrothal. As long as Isay is friends with Nahamye, reaching an agreement shouldn't be difficult. The Babaevs are a fine family. This would be a good match."

After giving it some thought, Douro decided that Liza would be a prime candidate, and that she needn't continue looking. Upon arriving home, she made an announcement:

"I would like for Isay to be betrothed to Liza Babaeva. I can't think of a better option."

Niza, who, by then, had already married, was surprised:

"You didn't do your research, did you? I know Liza very well – we grew up together. She's a great girl, but she already has a fiancé – Enkur. The Babaevs are planning to have Liza marry him."

This was certainly a hurdle, but Douro decided to stick with her plan.

"Not to worry. I'll tell Isay about Liza anyway, and then we can decide what to do."

When her son returned from work, Douro told him about her decision.

"You need to marry. Otherwise, you'll never manage to do it, your work and all."

“And who is it that you’ve selected for me to marry?” Isay inquired.

“Liza Babaeva, Nahamye’s daughter.”

Isay was surprised and intrigued. He had known Nahamye for a long time, but never recalled him mentioning his daughter. Isay was overcome by desire to see this bride that his mother had selected for him.

At the time, the girl was still in school. Isay found out the required address and set out to see her.

Arriving at the school and seeing a guard, Isay stopped to think about how he would frame the purpose of his visit.

“My friend’s daughter is enrolled here,” he began. “I was asked to deliver an urgent message from her parents. How can I find her? Her name is Liza Babaeva.”

The guard treated the imposing man with respect.

“She’s in class in that room over there. They should be done soon.”

As the schoolgirls started to pour out of the classroom, Isay looked on with curiosity, trying to guess which one of them could be Liza. He was about to give up, realizing that he looked foolish. Suddenly, he saw a girl with a head of thick red hair and was unable to take his eyes off her. He heard someone address her:

“Liza, are you coming with us?”

She nodded silently in accord and went on her way. Isay followed, trying to remain inconspicuous. A single thought swam around in his head: his mother was a great woman if she could find him a bride like that out of all the girls out there.

At that moment, he decided to act without delay.

He went to visit Nahamye in the evening and didn’t beat around the bush.

“Nahamye, I saw your daughter.”

Nahamye looked at him attentively.

“I like her very much. Let me marry her.”

Nahamye was more than a bit surprised by this turn of events. He and Havo had thought of Liza's fate, but it never occurred to them to tie her destiny with Isay. Nahamye couldn't even find the right words for a reply right away.

"I'd be glad to, Isay, but Liza is already betrothed to Enkur. We've already discussed everything, and will have a wedding after she graduates school."

"Nahamye," Isay objected ardently, "you know who I am. I don't need to tell you twice. With me, your daughter will never need anything. Who's Enkur, anyway? Not that I'm comparing the two of us, but think about it." Isay was insistent.

The conversation ended there, without Nahamye saying "yes" or "no". Isay left unhappy. Coming out of the gate, he bumped into Liza, who was coming back from a friend's house without a care in the world. This had to be a sign from above. Isay nervously decided that he had nothing to lose.

"Are you Liza Babaeva?"

"I am," the girl replied, startled.

"I know your father well. We interact quite often at work." Isay paused, and then blurted out: "I like you very much and would like to ask for your hand in marriage."

Baffled by what took place, Liza went into the house without saying a word. Isay stayed in the street, following the girl with his gaze. Adamov was afraid to say it out loud, but something told him that the girl was charmed by him as well.

After the first meeting, Isay decided to be persistent. He would visit Liza in school, waiting until she got out of class. The girl ignored him at first, but then began to toss a sentence or two his way before running off.

For a long time, Nahamye couldn't decide what to do. He recounted his conversation with Isay to Havo, who, in turn, told Fira.

The Babaevs had something to think about. On one hand, Isay was a very successful, intelligent man with plenty of mon-

ey. On the other, he had been the subject of an investigation and had spent time in prison. If history repeated himself, Liza would be unhappy her whole life. Not to mention that they had already made an arrangement with Enkur's parents. The boy was a good student and had potential for success – he generally could be relied on to support Liza.

But Isay wouldn't back down, apparently having decided to accomplish his goal at all costs. He would visit the Babaevs more and more often, befriending Erzol, Fira and Havo. Isay was an outgoing and sociable man, and never hesitated to mention his connection and to offer help.

Gradually, his acquaintance with Erzol grew into a firm friendship. My father was drawn to innovative and experienced people, and Isay was just that – a true professional in his field, not to mention smart and shrewd. He understood that by helping the Babaevs with their everyday problems he would be able to win not only the permission to marry Liza, but also the girl's affection.

Erzol once told his friend about his family's problem:

"They married me off without asking for my consent, understand? Imagine my position! I can't go against my father's word! I'm between a rock and a hard place! I don't even want to think about it. We have four kids, but we can't live together."

"Erzol! What's the problem? Get a divorce and be done with it."

"Yes, but my mother keeps insisting that we take the children from her. I have no idea how I would go about doing that. Any court will leave the children with the mother, and make me pay alimony."

"That's true."

"But Mama insists that we raise the children, understand? That we can't allow them to grow up to be vagrants. They have Babaev blood running through their veins. We need to take them into our home."

Isay thought about it.

“There’s a solution for everything, if you try. You’re saying that you’re going to provide for them, and that your mother is ready to raise them?”

“Well, yes. Turunge lives at her parents’ home with the children. They don’t have much money. She makes a profit here and there – sells things at the market – but that’s all kopecks. How to get the children here is beyond me.”

Isay nodded and patted Erzol on the shoulder.

“You, know, there are no unsolvable problems. Give it some time. I’ll think of something.”

The conversation ended on that.

After some time, Erzol decided to move to Moscow. He had relatives there, and he intended to stay with them, gather his bearings, and try to start a new life.

Upon hearing about his son’s decision, Nahamye instantly reacted.

“If that’s what you decided, let’s go together!”

Not wanting to delay the matter for two long, Nahamye requested a vacation the very next day and bought two train tickets.

In Mineralnye Vody, where they switched trains, Nahamye’s friend, the director of the trade base at the Regional Union of Consumer Societies met them. He warmly greeted the father and son and asked them about their plans.

“So we’ve decided to go to Moscow, and try to find work there,” Nahamye admitted.

“Naum Davidovich,” his friend objected. “If you don’t stay with me, I’ll rip up your tickets and you won’t go anywhere. What’s there to do in Moscow? Here, there’s Pyatigorsk, and Kislovodsk. Stay for a few days and look around. Maybe you’ll find something here? If you don’t like it, you can keep going.”

The proposal was unexpected, but reasonable.

“Why not, Alyosha? Let’s stay. Two days won’t make a difference,” Nahamye suggested to Erzol.

While they went to the ticket counter and rebooked the tickets, my grandfather’s friend wrote a recommendation letter to the chairman of the Pyatigorsk Sewing Cooperative, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Kobelev, and sent the father and son to him.

Kobelev carefully studied Erzol’s work record and tailoring diploma, then said:

“Aleskey, come be my head of production! I need educated people like you. You can take the position as soon as tomorrow if you’d like.”

My father liked this proposal quite a bit and agreed without much hesitation. But there was a catch.

“Agreed. But I have to go back to Makhachkala and quit my job there.”

This was easier said than done. The Red October refused to discharge my father. The chief stubbornly resisted, reminding that the cooperative invested ample resources by sending him to Moscow for training, and generally protested the departure of a valuable team member. He barely managed to get the termination paperwork through. My father then resigned from his section and moved to Pyatigorsk.

Erzol didn’t remain at the helm of the sewing collective for long, handing the reins to Nahamye and going on to oversee a community sewing center that he actively helped establish.

He, Nahamye, and his friends – Kutuzov, Kobelev, and the cooperative’s chief accountant – sat down for a noisy celebration of Erzol’s transfer to the new position. The party didn’t last long. About an hour in, Kutuzov dragged my father of the restaurant on business, and Kobelev hurried home. While Nahamye drank rarely, he suggested that he and the accountant stay.

In the morning, Nahamye awoke with a headache, and complained of a hangover.

“Father,” Erzol replied, unable to resist a joke. “This is only a flower or two. There’ll be a whole bouquet. Build up a tolerance and get used to it – that’s the nature of the work.”

The community sewing center housed a few sections: headwear, light clothing, and women’s intimates. It employed a hundred people. The enterprise constantly met and exceeded its quotas, and was recognized as top of its trade within a few months and received the much desired Red Banner award.

My father worked at the sewing center part time, concurrently working as a tailor of men’s and women’s outerwear, paid by volume. He did not want to abandon his profession, which put food on his table, proverbially and literally, for many years to come.

XXVII

In her attempts to provide for four children, Turunge made frequent trips to Moscow in order to purchase scarce goods there. This time around, as always, Raya met her at the train station. Turunge was not alone: she had little Ella in her arms, as she couldn't leave the infant in the care of her parents.

In order to prevent my mother from getting delayed in Moscow and being away from her children for too long, Raya had purchased all of the necessary goods herself and packed the bags. All Turunge had to do was to pick up the baggage and bring it home.

The sisters had a single evening to talk and pour their souls out to one another.

Next morning, Raya accompanied her guests to the train, hugging her sister goodbye and kissing her niece.

"When you get there, make sure to let me know," Raya insisted.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine. I’m used to these trips. Thank you, my dear.”

The train carried Turunge and Ella away from the capital. She traveled in a great mood! She was coming back to her children, whom she missed very much. She found a side seat in the middle of the car, luckily, on the bottom level. Little Ella fussed a little, but soon calmed down.

The loaders who Raya hired expertly stuffed the bags of textiles into the corners, put a portion of them on the third side shelf, then shoved the rest onto the top compartments to the disdain of those sitting under them.

One woman was especially angry, but Turunge had better things to do than to listen to her laments. Her soul was filled with calm and joy. Thanks to Raya, Turunge accomplished everything she had set out to do.

Turunge’s attention was focused on little Ella, who kept trying to escape her mother’s care, crawl off her lap, and set out to explore the train car.

The train started moving, Central European Russia’s muted landscapes passing by beyond the window. Observing how other people lived, Turunge couldn’t help but think about her own future. Everything should be fine – she was now confident of that. She looked at the bags, looming from above, filled with sheets, blankets and pillowcases. People would ravage this inventory at the market – all she had to do was to put it on the counter. This was the key to her future.

She dreamt of the moment when she would arrive and see her boys, the apples of her eye. Her children needed to be the best looking and the best tended to, and she, their mother, had to do everything to ensure their happiness. She glanced at the bags again.

‘How much money will I get?’ She started mentally estimating her profit, but lost track. The most important thing was

that she was now in charge of her own life. Farewell, dependence on others. She would be able to provide for her children herself. The thought alone made her smile.

She wouldn't be easily tamed. Turunge would find a way to prove to Erzol that he was wrong – that they could have lived together had his mother not interfered.

How many times a month would she be able to travel back and forth? How much more could she bring over? She could bring her life in order. And then, the children would grow up. Most importantly, they were with her.

Unwittingly, she fell asleep. A day passed, then another. On the morning of the third day, a loud shout awoke her. "Makhachkala! Makhachkala in one hour!"

Glum plains peppered with gray shrubbery stretched beyond the windows. They weren't far. People across the car were waking up. Turunge looked out of the window again, noticing the first signs of a nearby city.

Turunge thought about the fact that it would be very nice if someone helped her carry all these things out to the platform. She looked around. Should she ask one of the sturdy men in the neighboring compartment? The unshaven redhead – he seemed strong. And his dark-haired friend certainly looked fit enough. They could grab two bags each.

Of course, her mother and father would meet her at the station, but should they be lifting such heavy things? Her father's health had been deteriorating, and he was coughing constantly.

Little Ella, wrapped tightly in a blanket, started to squirm. Turunge began lulling her to calm her down. While she tended to the girl, she herself fell asleep. The train jerked, and Turunge snapped back to consciousness. Ella also opened her eyes, smiling upon seeing her mother. Turunge's heart was filled with tenderness. As soon as she heard one of her children's voices, she would forget about everything. Her thoughts shifted to her sons. How were they doing without her?

Turunge looked out of the window. Train cars, idle on spare tracks, floated by majestically on both sides.

Screeching and clanging, the train pulled up to the platform. Faces of awaiting loved ones started appearing in the window. The car jerked yet again, the inertia moving all the passengers forward, and the car stopped. An announcer's voice echoed beyond the window, marking the arrival of the Moscow train. People began to scurry, rushing to leave the stuffy train car as soon as possible. The most impatient ones already waited at the door, where pandemonium was starting to erupt, as if someone was blocking the doors. Another minute later, the crowd pushed back, and those who initially moved forward with their bags and suitcases started receding. An angry murmur spread across the car. Someone was arguing with someone else, demanding to be let through. Turunge looked out of the window. Something that looked like Melke's kerchief flashed in the window, as little Ella mumbled in her sleep.

This was the end of the journey. The only thing left to do was to somehow carry out what she had brought with her.

"Excuse me, could you help me?" Turunge asked the redhead.

The man turned around.

"Those bags over there." Turunge pointed them out.

The redhead nodded glumly.

"Thank you," Turunge said warmly. "I can't manage on my own."

She looked out of the window again. No sight of her parents. She would go to the market tomorrow to unload the goods. Melke can watch the children.

The people, standing in the narrow passageway, continued pushing one another, but there was no real motion to speak of. Ella begun to cry, and Turunge started rocking her in her arms. "Quiet, my little girl. Calm down. We'll be out of here soon, and then we'll go home."

It started getting stuffy.

Suddenly, an order blared across the car. "In your seats! Everybody, in your seats!"

"What happened?"

Turunge, still holding Ella, got on her tiptoes in attempt to see what's going on. At the end of the car, by the vestibule, she saw two men dressed in blue police uniforms.

"A document check?" Turunge thought. "Or maybe they're looking for someone?" She glanced around at her fellow travelers. "Maybe there's some sort of criminal traveling with us? If you're to believe the people at the market, they're all over the place these days."

"Everybody, in your seats!" the voice sounded again.

"What is this?" a woman protested loudly. "We're here, and they won't let honest people leave! I'm late for work!" It was the same woman who was upset at Turunge for putting luggage over her seat.

"They must be looking for stowaway!" the redhead remarked, laughing.

Turunge sat and indifferently observed what was happening at the other end of the car. The policemen approached each passenger, without any hurry, demanded documents, examined them, and then moved on.

'I wonder how long they're going to torment us like this,' Turunge thought, looking at Ella.

The child could wake up at any moment.

The policemen moved toward the middle of the car. Turunge looked calmly as the horse-jawed captain and his partner went from compartment to compartment, dipping in and out of the walkway.

Everyone had different documents. Some gave release certifications; others had green passports with the hammer and sickle on them.

Turunge jumped up. Where were her documents? She started rummaging through her purse.

The giant policeman – Turunge found herself at a loss about what rank four stars on one's shoulder straps signified – went into the neighboring compartment. She heard a man's nasal voice: "Comrade policeman, I have nothing to do with this. I'm fresh out of lockup. If someone got robbed, it definitely wasn't me." The indifferently rude "Give me your documents" interrupted the chatty conman's speech.

The loud voices awoke Ella, and Turunge began to rock her again. Completely calm, she looked at the other officer, who reached their compartment and replied with a similarly indifferent look. The policeman pointedly looked at the same woman who took issue with Turunge's bags.

"What do you have there?" he asked rudely, kicking her suitcase.

At that time, the horse-jawed captain, having finished with the whiny convict, approached Turunge.

"Your documents," he said, sullenly looking over the remaining half of the car.

Turunge hurriedly looked through her bag, pulled out her passport, and gave it to the policeman. She gave him a shy smile, motioning at the sleeping Ella with her eyes, as if showing off her precious cargo. It was time to feed her.

The policeman glanced at Ella, stone-faced, and opened the passport. He glanced at a page, then looked at Turunge, then back at the passport, as if he didn't know how to read. He turned to his partner, who was checking the documents in the adjacent compartment.

"Egorov!"

Egorov turned away from the rambunctious woman, who kept explaining something while she pointed a fat finger at her passport.

The captain handed Turunge's passport to his partner.

Egorov looked at the passport with the same flat expression, then gave it back to his colleague.

"You're Babaeva?" the captain asked indifferently.

"Yes, Babaeva." Turunge smiled, unable to comprehend what the policemen wanted from her.

Something about her smile confused the inspector. He rummaged through his jacket to find a folded sheet of paper, read it, then went back to the passport.

"Turunge Hezgievna Babaeva?" he asked.

"Yes. Turunge Babaeva."

"Are you traveling alone?"

"With my daughter."

The little one was starting to squirm from the heat. It was only a matter of time before she would start crying.

"Are you carrying anything with you?"

"Here..." Turunge vaguely nodded at the top shelf, then at the suitcase by her feet.

"That's it?"

Turunge bashfully nodded at the few bags that hung over her head.

"Those too."

The officer looked at the top shelf.

"Is that it?"

Turunge's face grew indignant, much like that of the captain who was harassing her.

"Yes. That's it."

The captain turned around. He looked at the compartment where the redhead, his friend, and the loud woman sat and stepped in.

"Whose things are these?" he asked glumly, pointing at the bags on the third shelf.

The redhead and his friend glanced aside, as if frightened and pretending to not have heard the question.

"So whose are these things?" the policeman asked sternly.

"Hers!" the loud woman said, pointing at Turunge.

The officer shifted his gaze to Turunge.

“Yours?”

Turunge was scared. She first shook her head, as if saying ‘no’, then corrected herself.

“Mine.”

The captain’s face grew completely serious.

“Where else? Show me.”

Turunge timidly went to show him.

“Here, here, and here...”

With each word she uttered, the officer’s eyes grew more enraged, like those of a dog who had just spotted a scent.

“Six bags,” the captain counted. “All yours?”

Turunge sensed trouble.

“Yes, they’re gifts. For the family.”

“Gather your things,” the captain ordered. “We’ll figure this out.”

“Figure this out where?” Turunge asked, now panicked. “I need to go. My parents are waiting for me! I need to feed my child.”

She lifted Ella up, as if she was a shield behind which she could find from the incessant officer. She wanted to run out of this stuffy train.

She grabbed one of the bags, as if in a trance. The next compartment was nearly empty by now. The people, whose documents had already been checked, looked on at Turunge with malevolent curiosity, as if they caught her doing something shameful. Suddenly, she rushed forward as fast as she could.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

The policeman yanked her back by her sleeve.

“Stay where you are!”

“What did I ever do to you?” Turunge’s eyes filled with tears. She was truly terrified.

“Am I free to go, comrade captain?” the loud woman asked, giving Turunge an angry look, as if she had been responsible for the delay.

"One minute," the captain interrupted. "Egorov, let the rest go."

"Open the doors!" the sergeant yelled to the conductor across the entire car. The people stirred impatiently, eager to leave lest they be detained again. Those who were free to go, seemed distant and avoidant to Turunge, looking at her as if she was a leper as they passed her, pushing their luggage in front of them.

"You stay behind." The captain grabbed the sleeve of the redheaded man who Turunge recruited to help her, as well as his friend. Both looked at the captain in confusion.

"Was this woman traveling with this luggage?" the tall policeman asked the redheaded man, who reluctantly looked at the bags.

"I couldn't tell you."

"What if you think about it?" the captain said with intimidation in his voice and blocked the exit.

"Who can confirm that this woman was traveling with these things?" he loudly asked all three.

"I can!" the loud woman eagerly answered. "She traveled with this, and this. That," she said pointing at the most distant bag, "I don't know anything about."

"Good," the captain said. "You'll come with us. You'll be a witness. You can sign the report."

"What do I have to do with this?" the woman protested. "Am I her babysitter or something? I'm just saying what I saw!"

The younger sergeant hissed at her, and she fell silent.

"Take 'em away, Egorov," the captain said, motioning at Turunge's bags.

Egorov compliantly grabbed two bags, lifted them, and nearly collapsed under their weight.

"They're heavy, comrade captain," he complained.

"Are you kidding, Egorov?" the captain retorted in contempt. "The broad can handle them on her own, and a man like you can't? Go on, carry them!"

The man in the police tunic grabbed the bags and dragged them down the aisle.

Turunge almost yelled: ‘Don’t drag them! They’re new sheets! You’ll soil them, or rip them!’, but restrained herself. There were other things to think about.

“What’s the protocol?” she asked at the horse-jawed policeman. “I have a child! I need to feed her!”

Turunge shifted her pleading look between the captain and his assistant.

“Don’t worry, they’ll let us go any minute now,” she whispered to little Ella, as if she understood.

“You’ll feed her later. Come on, get a move on.” The captain gave Turunge’s back a push.

Turunge grabbed her suitcase with one hand, Ella with the other. The world, which had just recently been so light and happy, was suddenly scary and bleak.

In the vestibule, Turunge saw her father and mother standing on the platform. Melke’s face grew worried, as she watched her daughter being escorted out by two policemen.

“Mama!” Turunge shout came out as a loud whisper.

Melke rushed to her side, but the giant captain stood in her way.

“Who are you?”

“I’m her mother.”

Then Hezgie, confused by the situation, asked loudly.

“Where are the bags?”

Turunge stood there, not knowing how to answer. Melke was the first to sense trouble.

“Who cares about the bags!” she yelled at Hezgie bitterly and tugged at her daughter’s sleeve. “Let’s go home.”

“The detained will go with us to the station,” the policeman announced.

“What do you mean, detained?” Melke gasped. “What for? What do you want from my daughter? Can’t you see? She has a baby with her! She needs to feed the child!”

“Citizen – take the child and head home. Your daughter will go with us to clarify the issue.”

“What issue? What are you doing?” Melke screamed.

“Babaeva!” the captain barked. “Give the child to the citizen.”

Turunge, in a trance, compliantly handed Ella to her mother.

“What issue?” Melke kept repeating. “Where are you taking her?”

Everyone on the platform turned to look at them. The captain grabbed Turunge by the sleeve and callously dragged her behind him.

“Egorov, grab a porter and follow me,” he said to the sergeant, who shuffled around the platform not knowing whether to follow the captain or grab the bags, which were already being examined by curious individuals who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

Turunge, ashamed to lift her gaze off the ground, compliantly followed the captain.

“Why are you escorting her like a criminal?” Melke yelled after them. “She’s a young mother!”

The captain paid her screams no mind. This was simply business as usual. Friends had already gathered at his home – it was his wife’s birthday, and here he was, having to deal with another speculator.

Turunge’s mind was getting cloudy. She still couldn’t completely grasp what the men in blue uniforms wanted from her.

The police department was located within the train station. The captain entered his office and pointed at a chair for Turunge to sit in. He sat across from her, at a yellow, scratched up writing desk, topped with a cracked inkwell and a seemingly forgotten hat.

He looked the woman in a flower pattern kerchief over without much interest. ‘Is she Jewish or Dargwa?’ he wondered. Turunge felt defenseless without a child in her arms. She had a headache.

The captain got a pack of Belomor cigarettes out of the drawer, blew on it, bit down on the end of one, and lit up. The clock pointed to ten minutes to eleven. It was the middle of the day.

The captain noticed that his detainee was starting to panic. She still didn't understand why she had been arrested. 'Either she's playing a fool, or we messed up,' the policeman thought.

Faint memories of her father's old stories of prison came to Turunge's mind.

The door opened, and the sergeant appeared.

"Comrade captain, where do you want the witnesses?"

"Have them wait in the other room."

"Understood."

The captain took another drag, exhaling right into Turunge's face.

"Well then, shall we proceed with the examination?" he asked indifferently. "What's in the bags?"

It was as if the detainee hadn't heard him. At that very moment, the door burst open and her mother appeared on the threshold, holding a screaming child in her arms.

For a moment, everyone in the room spoke at once. Turunge ran to Ella, the captain bent across his desk trying to grab her coat, and Melke started screaming in Hebrew amidst the tension.

"Egorov!" roared the captain.

The sergeant burst into the room, and the mother and daughter huddled close. Little Ella's screams got louder, which seemed to further confuse the sergeant.

"Clear the room!" the captain screamed.

The two women fell silent, and only Ella's screaming remained.

"Egorov, get everyone out of my office except for the detained!"

Egorov pushed Melke out, and Turunge was once again alone in the room with the captain.

“What the hell is going on?” the policeman asked angrily. Turunge stayed silent, terrified.

“What’s in the bags? Tell me!”

“Comrade policeman, I told you already. They’re gifts!”

“Where from?”

“I bought them in Moscow.”

“So you bought them in Moscow? What exactly is in the bags?”

“Bedding, underwear, shirt, nightgowns.”

“And who are they for?”

“I told you – for my family.”

The captain fell silent, sat down at the desk, and started filling out paperwork.

“Egorov!” he yelled.

The sergeant instantly appeared.

“Open them up,” the captain ordered.

The sergeant approached the nearest bag, pulled out a pen knife and, like an amateur surgeon, sliced open the first bag. Things that Raya took such care to fold up poured out: pillowcases, bed sheets, hard to find negligées.

The sergeant did the same with the second bag, then the third. And so on. Dozens of sheets, nightgowns and pillowcases poured out of all of them.

“Some family! There must be at least five hundred of you. Right, comrade captain?” the sergeant laughed.

Turunge looked at the captain, overcome with hatred. How dare he? This was her treasure – her hope for salvation. They wanted to take it?

“These are all gifts, yes?” the captain asked, sullenly.

Turunge didn’t reply, just bit her lip. The room got even hazier.

“Do you know what this is called? Spe-cu-la-tion! Do you understand?” the captain screamed, and turned to Egorov.

“Call in the witnesses and proceed according to seizure protocol.”

Turunge tried to protest, but the captain barked at her and she fell silent. The door would occasionally open or close, and people in uniform would come and go, looking over the heap of bedding lying on the floor. Turunge would hear Ella’s screams, and catch glimpses of her mother’s frightened face through the crack in the door.

The only thing left to do now was to stay silent.

The word ‘speculation’ was scary in those years. Her father had been to jail for speculating gold, and now his daughter was sitting at the police station facing similar charges.

Turunge was saddened and hurt. Why did this have to happen to her, especially now, when life had finally started to turn around? Had she done something wrong? After all, she hadn’t stolen anything. She bought it with her own money, which she had earned honestly. Who would be hurt by her life being slightly better? She was doing all of this for the children!”

“Comrade policeman, I’m not a speculator! I need to feed my children. This is bread money.”

“Bread money!” the captain asked malevolently. “Do you know how much bread you can buy for this stuff? Way more than you can eat.”

He kept yelling other things, but Turunge could barely understand him. Only one thought circled through her mind: what will happen to the children if she’s detained? Who will feed them? Who would help?”

She watched the two witnesses sign some papers and leave the office. It was just the three of them again: the captain, his assistant, whose name kept slipping her mind, and her.

“Sign,” he suddenly nudged Turunge. “Can you hear me?”

She shuddered. Indeed, she hadn’t heard anything.

She rose unsteadily, approached the table, and everything faded in front of her eyes.

“Read it and sign it,” the captain ordered.

Turunge looked over the captain’s scraggly handwriting in fright, unable to read anything.

“Here,” the captain pointed his finger at the paper. “Home confinement. You will report to the precinct when called upon, understood?”

The phrase ‘home confinement’ sounded reassuring to Turunge. This meant she wasn’t arrested. She had been released. Suddenly, the room seemed brighter. Nothing would happen to the children, and then, God willing, she may even be able to get her things back. She would need to call Raya and ask her what to do. Her husband was well connected! He would surely have valuable advice.

Turunge hurriedly signed the paper with messy handwriting, and looked at the captain hopefully.

“Can I go?”

He looked at her heavily.

“You can, citizen Babaeva, but not for long. You’ll be called when you’re needed.”

“What about my things? Can I take my things?”

“You’re a sly one, aren’t you? Those are evidence now,” the captain smiled.

“What do you mean, evidence? It’s bedding. I paid money for it – all that my family could gather.”

Turunge bawled. At that moment, this seemed like the greatest loss.

In Moscow, the phone rang at the office of Raya’s husband, Mikhail Hanukov. As usual, he didn’t think twice about picking up:

“Hello?”

“Hello, Misha. This is Tolya.”

“Yes, Tolya. I’m listening.”

“Misha, we need to talk.”

“What happened?”

“Something. Let’s meet at the Pushkin monument in a half hour.”

“Alright. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

He got up, threw on the jacket that hung on the back of his chair, and left the office.

“I’m going to lunch,” he told the receptionist.

Hanukov nearly ran to the Pushkin monument. His old friend, a detective from the investigative division at the Petrovka, wouldn’t call out of the blue. In twenty minutes, he was shaking the hand of his friend Anatoly. Some time ago, he helped Anatoly’s daughter enroll at the university, and the two had been friends ever since.

“Misha, I don’t even know how to tell you this...”

“Tell it like it is.”

“I learned today that an arrest warrant has been issued for your wife Raya.”

“Are you crazy? How? What for?”

“I’m as shocked as you are. My friend at the investigative division said that she was involved in speculation with regard to clothing or something. She bought things here, and then her sister sold them in Makhachkala.

Hanukov instantly recalled Turunge’s recent visits to Moscow, how they searched for presents for the large family, packed them. He recalled Raya asking for a car to take Turunge to the train station. Things were taking a turn for the worst, and none of it sounded like libel.

“Do you think my wife has a chance to get out of this?”

“Misha, you know I owe you a lot, but I can’t do anything here. If this were my case, I would get her out of it, but it’s someone else’s, and they’re already proceeding. There’s nothing to be done. I suggest admitting everything. The sentence will be minimal. The main thing is to distance you from this. She was buying these things at your facilities. Do you understand how bad this can get?”

"I understand. Thanks for the warning. Keep me in the loop."

Mikhail rushed home, where he asked his wife straight from the doorway:

"Tell me about your and Turunge's shenanigans. What did you do?"

"What are you talking about? What 'shenanigans'?"

"Did she not come here to buy things and then resell them in Makhachkala?"

"Who told you that?"

"That doesn't matter. The problem is that I'm not the only one who knows anymore..."

"Oh my God! But how could they find out? We were careful to not tell anyone. Besides, who's going to notice when there are hundreds of us in Moscow? Everyone brings bags of this and that back and forth!"

"I don't know. It's unclear why they singled you out. It's as if someone snitched on you. Who gives a damn? The bad thing is that the police know. I talked to Tolya Laptev, and he told me everything."

"So? He's your friend, so he can help!"

"He'd be happy to. You know that he likes both of us and understands everything. He was also plenty surprised by this turn of events. What's terrifying is that, in his opinion, you stand no chance at avoiding trial."

Raya froze upon hearing the last sentence. The darkest memories of her life flooded in – being locked up on death row, praying for a quick demise, the loss of her child.

"But we need to do something! Call your friends and have them refer you higher up. Investigators have bosses too! We can figure something out. After all, we aren't thieves, or killers. We can explain everything!"

"Raya, be realistic. Tolya found out about this too late. Had it been earlier, we could have done something, but it's impossible now. We missed our chance."

Mikhail wandered over to the window and looked out into the street, pushing aside the scarce, tulle curtains. People walked past as usual, and no one cared about his personal tragedy.

“Considering that they know everything, you need to confess. The case is already being investigated by local authorities in Makhachkala. We can’t come to an understanding with all of them. But if you admit it and request an opportunity to absolve your guilt, they might go easy on sentencing. I’m sure of it. If you don’t do this, it’ll only be worse. Think about it: you were using my connections to get goods from my warehouses. One false move, and I’m involved. If we’re both behind bars, then it gets bad. No one will help us then, and we can say goodbye to everything. This way, I’ll think of a way to get you out. I’m sure I will.”

Mikhail paused, struggling to watch his wife’s terror-filled eyes. He didn’t feel sorry for her – it was her own fault, to get caught so foolishly. The damn charity worker. The desire to help others, even family, should never muddle one’s sense of caution. Did she think that his high rank made her immune from all harm?

He poured Raya some water. She shakily took a gulp, and pleadingly looked at her husband. Understanding that his wife was receptive of advice, he continued:

“The main thing is to come forward before they come for you. Do you have any of Turunge’s things left here?”

“No she took everything.”

“That’s good. That means they won’t find anything here. Just make sure to tell them that I didn’t know anything when they’re questioning you. Don’t even mention this conversation. I will try to arrange for better conditions if you’re convicted. Don’t worry, I won’t abandon you.”

The following day, Raya turned herself in.

The process took a little over two hours. Raya was shocked to hear that the investigators knew everything. There was indisputable evidence against the sisters.

Raya followed her husband's advice, instantly declaring that she would like to make a confession. She stated that she didn't resell the goods, only helped her sister buy them so that she could make ends meet after her husband left her with no sustenance. After Raya said that, she was arrested, and transcripts of her testimony, in which she fully admitted her guilt, were forwarded to Makhachkala.

XXVIII

It was a sunny morning. Melke had just put the kettle on the stove and was tending to something in the yard while waiting for the water to boil when she heard a knock on the gate. My grandmother approached it and opened the latch.

“Hello!” the mailwoman grumbled. “I have a registered letter for Turunge Babaeva.”

“Turunge! Daughter!” Melke yelled from right there.

Her heart beat anxiously.

“What?” Turunge yelled back from the porch.

“You have a letter.”

Wiping her hands on her apron, Turunge came out.

“Sign here and here,” the grumpy mailwoman said, handing her a chemical pencil.

Turunge traced her name with a shaky hand and returned the pencil, receiving a small, gray envelope in return. She examined it in fear.

Melke closed the latch and turned to her daughter.

“What is it?”

Turunge opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. It was a summons to appear before an investigator – tomorrow.

Turunge was not herself for the remainder of the day. Everything kept falling out of her hands. Even as she dressed her children and fed baby Ella, all she could think about was what awaited her. It was terrifying.

Melke walked Turunge to the prosecutor’s office, but was not allowed inside the building. Struggling to move her legs, which stubbornly resisted, Turunge ascended to the second floor. She barely found the correct office, walking past people in military uniforms who milled about paying no mind to the miserable woman. She knocked. A voice echoed from the brown leatherette-bound door.

“Come in.”

Turunge pulled on the door handle. She expected to find the same captain that detained her at the train station, but instead saw a heavyset bald man in plain-clothes who sat behind his desk, reading something. After about a second, he looked up from his work and looked Turunge over.

“Sit down,” the man said, nodding toward a chair.

Turunge quickly sat down on the edge of the seat.

“My name is Sergeev. I’m an investigator,” the man said in a dry voice. “The summons, please,” he added, politely extending his hand.

Turunge gave him the document, which he tossed aside onto the table.

“And your passport.”

Turunge took the booklet out and handed it to the investigator. He opened it, paged through it, wrote something down and scratched his forehead.

“You were detained on a train from Moscow?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you travel to the capital?”

“To visit my sister.”

“Did you have luggage?” the investigator asked, hinting at an answer.

“It was taken at the train station.”

“So everything that was confiscated was yours?”

“Yes.”

Sergeev made yet another note and, while still writing, continued.

“What items were in the luggage, and where did you obtain them?”

Turunge removed her kerchief with shaky hands and retied it, fumbling with the knot. She took a deep breath in attempt to compose herself, then, stuttering, started to explain:

“I bought... I was buying things in Moscow, for my children and relatives.”

“How much, when, and where?”

Turunge tried to repeat the same story she had told the captain who interrogated her at the train station. She missed a few details, and said that she acted with the help of a friend, who worked at a warehouse. The investigator suddenly interrupted her:

“Were you transporting these things with intent to sell them?”

“No,” Turunge retorted quickly.

“And who helped you purchase them?”

“I purchased most of them myself. A friend of mine helped a little – with packing and bringing them to the train.”

“And your sister?” The investigator looked at the file before him. “Raisa Hanukova?”

“I only went to visit her. And lived with her. She has nothing to do with this. I’m raising four children all by myself...”

“What happened to your husband?”

“The children and I live separately, at my parents’ home...”

“Understood.” The investigator paused. “So you maintain that the items you were carrying with you were your personal belongings that you were bringing to you relatives?”

“Yes. They were gifts. My relatives gathered up money so that I could buy them something. I only stayed with Raya.”

The investigator opened a drawer and took out another document.

“Here’s a description of what you were carrying: thirty bed sheet sets, forty sets of women’s underwear, thirty men’s undershirts. So many things here,” he said, handing Turunge the list. “Seems like a bit too much for relatives,” the investigator remarked, as if attempting to sound casual.

“That’s the truth.”

“Are you sure that you’ve told me everything?” he looked up from the papers and locked eyes with Turunge. His pupils contracted.

“Yes.”

“Alright, then.” He yawned, took some papers out of a file, then suddenly struck the table with his hand and roared: “Stop lying!”

Turunge shuddered in surprise.

“Here are package receipts for shipments from Moscow. Is that your signature?”

Turunge looked, recognizing her handwriting.

“Yes...”

“Packages were sent once every two months or so. You must really love your relatives,” the investigator noted with a fiendish smile. “Here,” he continued, pulling out another piece of paper. “It’s a description of the packages that were sent right before your departure from Moscow and opened and inspected at the Makhachkala post office.”

Turunge grabbed the sheet with a trembling hand and skimmed over it. She didn’t need to read it – she knew it all by heart.

“And, finally, a copy of your sister’s testimony.”

He handed Turunge several pages.

The writing flickered before Turunge’s eyes. With great difficulty she discerned her name, a list of items that she and Raya bought, and addresses of warehouses they visited.

The investigator pointed at the bottom of the page.

“Do you recognize your sister’s signature?”

Turunge felt faint. It was her sister’s handwriting.

“You see, Raisa Hanukova admitted that you purchased goods in Moscow in order to resell them here.”

The last phrase struck her like a razor, and tears started flowing from Turunge’s eyes. Sobbing, she tried to plead:

“I have four children, and I need to feed them somehow, and I need money to do that...”

“You don’t say! Enough with the crocodile tears, all right?”

The investigator smacked the table with his palm. “Read over the record and sign it. You’ll return for questioning in two days.”

Investigator Sergeev’s last sentence gave Turunge strength: she wasn’t going to prison.

“You are not to leave Makhachkala. You are formally under inquiry. Go.”

Turunge jumped up and hurried out of the office. She needed air. She needed her children.

Melke rushed to her as she stepped out onto the street.

“What happened?”

“Let’s go home... Raya was arrested.”

Melke yelped, covering her mouth with her hand. Tears rushed to her eyes, but she quickly composed herself. She grabbed her daughter’s arm for support and they hurriedly walked away from the prosecutor’s office.

Turunge had no idea that the case was solved almost instantly. All that Sergeev needed was her confession. It was an ordinary case, which could only become unusual if there

was further collaboration with others. Turunge tried in vain to absorb the entirety of fault during the subsequent interrogations:

“I did everything – alone. Please understand that!” she would repeat, crying. “I transported the goods, and Raya only helped me pack them and take them to the train station. Her husband has a car. I couldn’t carry it all by myself.”

Turunge had no idea that hundred of details that she had deemed unimportant all comprised a chain of evidence that the prosecution was familiar with. The sisters had been watched for a long time and seen together on numerous occasions..

Each day, Turunge watched the mailbox in terror, horrified at the prospect of another summons. Melke started checking the mail – Turunge said that her hands shook so badly she couldn’t open the box.

One day, Hezgie and Melke were notified that Raya had been transferred to Makhachkala and placed in isolation for the duration of the investigation. The parents were horrified to hear this. Their daughter was, once again, in the same prison where she lost her unborn child and nearly died herself.

Why a deputy minister’s wife was arrested was not a question discussed by the Abramovs. Everyone was convinced that even the high-ranking Hanukov – who was perceived by Hezgie and Melke to be very powerful – couldn’t do anything.

The parents milled about, trying to arrange visitation rights for her daughter, learning everything they could find about the investigators’ knowledge of the case in the meantime in attempt to determine why such misery befell them.

The investigation into Raya and Turunge was being conducted by Sergeev. The charges were as follows: Raya used ‘back channels’ to purchase goods from government warehouses, which Turunge then transported them from Moscow to Makhachkala and resold them at the market.

The crime was clear-cut – and the Abramovs were well aware of this. It was, however, more difficult to explain the following: why would someone turn in people who posed no harm to society? Who tipped off the authorities? In those years, nearly everyone in the Jewish community was involved in similar activity.

Hezgie and Melke had trouble coming to terms with the fact that Raya was in prison and Turunge was under house arrest. The Abramovs shuddered at the thought that their grandchildren might be left without a mother. Something needed to be done.

Hezgie thought long and hard about ways to help his daughters. He had no friends who could help resolve the case, and no money with which palms could be greased. Eventually, after weighing all the pros and cons, he presented Melke with a horrifyingly hopeless plan:

“We are elderly, so they can’t put us away for long. She needs to raise the children. Who will care for them if she goes to prison? Let’s tell them that we were the ones selling the goods, making the arrangements with the vendors, and collecting the money. We’ll tell them that Turunge only traveled to Moscow and carried the bags. They saw us in the station, so it’ll sound plausible.”

Melke looked at her husband with sadness in her eyes. This seems to be the only way out. She feebly nodded and mentally came to terms with everything.

In the midst of these tragic events, Melke and Hezgie were unable to properly discern a course of action. They weren’t familiar with the laws, only relying on their own assumptions of what constituted Soviet justice. They were blinded by their love for their children and their unconditional concern, which ran through their veins and made them naïve and negligent.

In a few days, the elderly Abramovs were sitting in front of Sergeev.

"We came to declare our confession," Hezgie began, fumbling with terminology.

The investigator looked at them curiously.

"Your words will go on record."

The Abramovs exchanged a silent glance.

"Our daughters were simply following our orders," Hezgie blurted out and fell silent.

The investigator listened attentively.

"We're old people," old man continued, encouraged by the investigator's attention. "We can't take the travel, and are used to staying home. So we decided to do what we're used to doing, and resell goods. We didn't harm anyone."

The investigator put aside his pen and listened, baffled. When the old man finished, he scratched his forehead.

"Is that all?"

"That's all!"

"You're free to go." Sergeev paused, then sighed heavily. "I get it. They're your daughters, your blood. But there's nothing you can do. They committed a crime, and will answer to the law. Your schemes aren't going to work here. Forget about what you've said here, and I won't include it in the report," he said sternly. "Go."

With those words, Sergeev demanded that they leave his office.

The discouraged Melke and Hezgie headed for the door. In the meantime, Turunge concluded that all wasn't lost – otherwise she would have been arrested, as Raya was. With every passing day, she grew more and more seduced with hope that everything would be alright. Perhaps the investigators didn't have enough evidence? Turunge was starting to believe that she would be acquitted – after all, she still had small children.

She knew nothing of the trip her parents made to Sergeev's office.

From time to time, the Abramovs would discuss these events and try to calm themselves. Hezgie and Melke still hoped that their conversation with the investigator may still help their daughters. Someone familiar with the law had told them that the two sister's sentences would be conditional, and that Raya would be released on parole. People also believed that Hanukov would be able to take the necessary actions to save his wife.

Turunge also tried to convince herself that the case would end here. She kept picturing, time and again, what her life would be like had she been able to sell the goods she brought from Moscow.

But she was most frightened by the thought that she might lose her children. Turunge worried that the Babaevs would use this as an opportunity to take the little ones away. She didn't know exactly how they would act, but was sure that they would have a much easier time doing so if she was arrested. Turunge's psyche couldn't cope with such tension for long. Her heart ached from the mere notion of being away from her children, and this pain fueled an uncontainable fire within the mother's soul.

One evening, Nina Adamova, noticed that Liza was going to walk home late at night and offered to accompany her.

"Liza, it's late. There's no reason for a betrothed girl to walk the streets alone."

Liza objected, insisting that it wasn't that late after all. She was an angelic soul - the kindest of the Babaev clan - and didn't want to burden the already busy future relative.

"Why, Nina? Don't worry. I'll be fine. Look how bright the stars are."

Liza was a blue-eyed, pale faced girl with light red hair. She loved her father, her brother, and us (which was the most significant difference between her and her sister Fira). Her

kindness, tenderness, and willingness to forgive everyone evoked Nahamye. She was a gem within the Babaev family – an individual incapable of harming anyone.

She quickly gathered her things and ran out. It was windy, so she bundled herself tightly and hurried home.

Just after she set out, someone emerged in front of her from around a corner. Liza was frightened at first, but calmed down after she looked closer: it was just some woman. She went back to her own thoughts, not thinking twice when she passed the stranger. Suddenly, the figure took a step in her direction and grabbed Liza's collar.

"Don't you move!"

The girl screamed in fright, as Turunge's face emerged from the darkness. Liza sighed in relief.

"Oh, it's you! You scared me!"

Suddenly, Turunge grabbed Liza's hair and started to pull it from side to side, screaming and bawling. Anger overtook my poor mother's tortured soul. She was not expecting pity – at least not from the Babaevs. Had Liza approached her as an enemy, perhaps nothing would have happened. Turunge was expecting yet another dose of hatred to justify her rage. But here she was, being approached with love, as if nothing had happened. Crazed with hurt, Turunge grabbed Liza's collar and tugged at it with all her strength.

"You Babaevs are destroying my life! I know you want to take away my children! Do you know what children mean to a mother? They're my life! Why do you bring me such pain? I hope that the same sort of pain comes back to you!"

With those words, my mother let go of her collar and grabbed Liza's hair with all her might. She overpowered her and started tossing her from side to side.

"I hope you're as hurt as I am!" she cried in a rage.

Liza fell to the ground, screaming from the unbearable pain. That was exactly what the exhausted Turunge needed.

Her very own pain echoed in the innocent girl's screams. That was exactly how she suffered, also innocent. Her frenzy grew stronger, as she started dragging Liza across the ground, the latter trying, in vain, to get away. Their strengths were simply unmatched, and the screams only fueled our mother's anger. Liza begged her to let her go, but only heard my mother's enraged voice, screaming from the pain she carried within.

Suddenly, Turunge flew to the side, and Liza, completely devoid of strength, lay motionless on the ground. My mother looked at her hand, horrified, realizing that she was holding a clump of bloodied hair in her hand. A stream of blood ran down Liza's face.

Realizing what she had done, Mama moaned desperately and let out a muffled scream. She covered her mouth with her hand and ran into the darkness from whence she came without turning around, back to her home and her nightmares. Liza lay on the ground, crying her eyes out and squirming in pain.

"Why? What for?" she kept repeating.

If she only knew that our mother asked herself the same question every night, trying to understand why fate bestowed such misery upon her.

People flocked to Liza's cries, lifted her up, and brought her home to Isay, who had just returned from work. He looked upon his bride's face in terror. When he found out who the culprit was, his fear turned to rage.

"She's insane! She needs to be in a mental hospital!" he yelled.

Hezgie heard these words from his neighbors. Melke was shaken. She knew that this signified a final severance of ties with the Babaevs.

Hezgie prayed for both sides to come to their senses. Melke kept lighting the menorah, begging God to let wisdom and prayer return the members of her family to the righteous path and end her daughter's suffering.

Isay met with his old friend Alkhazov the following day. After Liza's beating, he felt involved in everything that happened and wanted to know how the case against Raya and Turunge was coming along.

Alkhazov, wanting to be the bearer of good news but, instead, startling his friend, told him that Turunge would likely avoid punishment.

"How?" Isay gasped.

"The law won't jail a mother of four, that's how."

"I had no idea our laws were so lenient."

"You mean 'fair'," the investigator corrected him.

"What about – hypothetically – if the mother turned out to be, you know," Isay twisted his forefinger against his temple. "Would Soviet law be so kind to her then?"

"You mean insane?" Alkhazov asked. "If she's insane, she can't be trusted with children. Then the law would take the children away."

"What you call it if a woman – a young mother – nearly killed her husband's sister?"

Alkhazov thought for a minute.

"Who are you talking about? Babaeva? Turunge?"

"Hypothetically," Isay replied evasively, but then couldn't resist yelling: "You should have seen what she did to Erzol's younger sister! She almost maimed her!"

"You think Turunge really did snap?"

"I can't confirm that, but there are signs."

Alkhazov thought some more.

"Can you get an expert opinion?"

"I'm not certain about doctors," Isay hesitated. "But she's undoubtedly hysterical. He has no self control. A normal person wouldn't pounce like that on another for no reason! I'm confident that she shouldn't be trusted with children. Can we rescue them somehow? Judge for yourself – the mother is under investigation, unemployed, uneducated. They'll grow up to be vagrants!"

“Listen, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll go see my friend, who’s leading this case, and find out the facts. Then I’ll let you know.”

“Fine. But don’t delay.”

“You’ll know tomorrow. I promise.”

The friends parted and Alkhazov set out to see Sergeev, whom he had already known for two years.

“Hello, my fellow serviceman!”

“Hello! What brings you here?”

“There’s an issue.”

“What kind of issue?”

“You’re in charge of Turunge Babaeva?”

“The prosecutor is asking for the appropriate sentence, which the court will probably reduce it to a conditional one, so she’ll likely stay where she it.”

“What about the children? Her children.”

“The children will stay where they are – with her.”

“I see.”

“What do you want from this Babaeva and her children?”

“Well, you see, I was asked for a favor... She’s a parasite – no money. Anyways, her husband wants the kids to stay with him.”

“Why would he want the burden?”

“Well, think about it – they’re dirty, hungry urchins. They need to be rescued. But how would he take them?”

“Why are you so concerned with this, huh? Let him talk to her himself. Although a real mother will never voluntarily give up her children.”

“That’s the problem. She won’t budge.”

“He tried?”

“Yes, to no avail.”

“Well, the father could file a petition for custody. Then he’ll have to file it in court and prove that he can support the children in appropriate conditions. She won’t be able to do anything about that, and the court will give the children to the father. Open and shut case, as they say.”

"You think that'll work?"

"Why not?"

"Courts usually side with the mother.

"That's true, but Turunge is under investigation. She's a speculator. What judge would side with her? Think about it." "That makes sense. I've never seen one of those custody petitions. Who would I ask?"

"I'll give you a form and tell you what to write," Sergeev said, reaching for a desk drawer. "You'll only need the father's signature. Then bring it back to me and I'll tell you what to do next. And you'll help me with one of my matters later, deal?"

"Deal!"

That very evening, Alkhazov recounted his conversation with Sergeev to Isay.

"And that's the whole of it, brother. So where's the father, anyway?"

"In Mineralnye Vody, working."

"If he wants custody, he needs to be here. They'll only give the children to him. It can only be for two or three days, but it's necessary."

"I understand."

That evening, Isay visited Havo and told her the latest news he got from Alkhazov.

"Do what you want, Isay, and write anything you have to. The details don't matter to me – my heart just aches for those children! The Babaevs will not allow their grandchildren to be raised haphazardly. It's shameful! I won't let anyone else have them! I'll be their mother!"

Isay looked at her in amazement.

"I will!" Havo continued. "I'll take their mother's place and raise them myself."

Nahamye stood and listened. He had done what was asked of him, and now just went with the flow, observing from afar. He was tired of all these squabbles and fights.

Isay rushed to reach Erzol by telephone. In about three hours, he could hear his friend's familiar voice through the static.

"Hello?"

"Erzol, you need to come to Makhachkala, quickly. Take a few days off – you'll need about five."

"But why?"

"Havo said that you need to sign a custody petition – for the children."

As far as Erzol was concerned, not only was his mother's word law, but it could not even be subjected to doubt. His sentiment could not be explained logically – it was blind, filial love. He deified her and always followed her advice, and this was no exception. If she wanted to raise the children, he would give her the money to do so.

Erzol half-listened as Isay continued to speak, then interrupted:

"Fine, I'm coming. I'll send a telegram before I depart," Erzol said, and hung up.

The terrible ordeal brought Isay and Liza even closer together. She suddenly viewed him as a reliable guardian who wouldn't abandon her in time of need, and would always be near no matter how badly things get.

The wounds healed, and they decided not to delay with the wedding.

The Babaevs and the Adamovs prepared for the grand event, each in their own way. Havo gathered the dowry: a bed, a blanket, a pillow, and a soft, handmade rug. Isay prepared the home. The wedding played out as intended: first at the bride's home, then at the groom's. Makhachkala's Jewish quarter shook from hoots and hollers. Tables were set in the courtyard on Suleiman Stalsky Street and menorahs burned. It was as if the heavens themselves descended to partake

in Isay's wedding and offer him their greetings. They partied until the dead of night.

Once in a while, Liza would turn and glance at Isay. So this is what it was like to be man and wife. Fira said it right: it's like being on a carousel – takes your breath away. Isay looked back at her silently. What was he thinking? How could she find out?

Someone shouted: "Kiss!" and everyone joined them in a cacophonous chorus to the bursts of firecrackers. "Kiss! Kiss!" The guests surrounded the newlyweds and Isay brought Liza close. And so they stood, surrounded by screaming guests, holding one another, like children caught in the rain.

Occasionally Isay would smirk at the guests, who wished them a long life and happiness, one after another, thinking that his life had taken an irreversible turn. He got what he wanted. 'Look how lucky she is! She became Isay's wife! Just look at him! Up and up!' All these were words he wanted people to say about Liza. These devious notions filled his heart with excitement, providing food for thought over how to materialize these dreams and make them the most envied couple in Makhachkala. 'Time will tell. Time will put all their pieces in their place,' he told himself, not suspecting how much of that very same time was allotted for him, his successes and failures, the ebbs and flows.

XXIX

The most difficult task remained – taking the children from Turunge. A battle plan of sorts was concocted to ensure that everything went smoothly. The mother soon received a summons – to come to the police precinct with her children. Seemingly, the investigators wanted to make sure that the children are fed, dressed, and generally well-tended to by attentive parents. They also wanted to confirm their age, as that could soften the sentence or eliminate it altogether.

Understanding the seriousness of this visit, the Abramovs prepared for it carefully. They prepared the best clothes for Slava, Igor, Gena and Ella, who had just turned a year and eight months. Nearly the entire family went to the police station: Yusuf, Roza, Zachar, Anya, Hezgie and Melke.

Turunge and the children went into Sergeev's office at the specified time. She quietly noted that the rest of the Abramovs weren't allowed in the building, the cited reason being that they weren't summoned. Turunge had to take Ella and the three boys to the second floor office by herself. The parents,

brothers and sisters stayed outside, trying to spot Turunge and the children in the windows.

Going into the office, she once again adjusted the boys' shirts. She was in a good mood – almost happy. This was all about to end. They would see her children, and understand how much she loves them and cares for them. Perhaps they'll realize that she did what she was being accused of for their sake. It seemed like the scariest parts were now behind her. She was safe. This was the last meeting and the last inspection. She would finally be left alone.

Turunge sighed in relief and wanted to get the formalities over with. She didn't even bother to sit, just stood there, surrounded by children, when Sergeev entered the office accompanied by two policemen and a heavy policewoman.

The investigator was terse as always. Turunge nudged Sadug, who was being called by the Russian 'Slava' more and more often these days, to move ahead. She wanted them to see her children – how good looking, clean, and well-mannered they were. They were all still little and helpless without her.

The children looked around the new environment with curiosity, sneaking glances at the strangers in blue uniforms. The investigator looked at Turunge, as if assessing her and preparing for something. His bodyguards seemed tense as well. Their demeanor rubbed off on Turunge, who instinctively drew the boys closer to her and held Ella tightly.

The investigator picked a piece of paper off his desk, looked at it, and cleared his throat.

"Citizen Babaeva?"

"Yes."

"I need to read you this resolution."

Turunge felt as if a weight was lifted off her shoulders. This was it – it was over! She was acquitted! They even took the trouble to write a resolution. They saw her wonderful children and made up their minds.

Sergeev suggested that Turunge let Ella have a seat on a chair – that it’s difficult to hold her in her arms. But Turunge only shrugged – she really wasn’t that heavy. Sergeev exchanged glances with the heavysset policewoman, who introduced herself as the police child services inspector.

“Maybe you can give the child to me?” she asked.

“No-no, don’t worry about it,” Turunge replied again. “I’m fine,” and started listing the children. “Here are Slavik, and Igor, and Gena.”

Sergeev winced.

“Turunge...” he stammered, double-checking the name in the resolution. “Tatiana Hezgievna,” he went on, somewhat more gently, “here’s the thing.”

This was the first time Turunge had seen Sergeev like this. It was as if his humanity woke up. Woke up for a moment, and vanished – forever.

Sergeev motioned to the two policemen, who approached Turunge. She looked at them, alarmed and tried to focus on what the investigator was saying. He lifted the paper all the way to his bespectacled eyes and started reading:

“Pursuant to a declaration of Erzol Babaev, the father of your children, and in accordance with his plea and consent, the People’s Court resolves that he, Erzol Naumovich Babaev, their father, be made legal guardian of Sadug Babaev, Odom Babaev, Gennady Babaev and Ella Babaeva.”

Turunge couldn’t understand. What did this mean? Why did they need a guardian if they had her, her mother?

“Therefore,” the investigator continued, putting the paper aside, “the circumstances preventing your incarceration are no longer relevant. You are under arrest.”

Before he was even finished, the two policemen that stood at her side grabbed her arms, trying to keep her still.

The policewoman from child services then tried to take Ella. Turunge resisted, squeezing the child tightly without no-

ticing that she was hurting her. The policemen tried to twist her arms back to allow their colleague to rip the girl out of her mother's arms. It all seemed like a nightmare.

Turunge screamed, and Ella followed. The older children ran to their mother in confusion, grabbed her skirt and started crying as well.

Turunge watched how the policewoman dragged the children away from her, how they resisted, screaming "Mama!" It was as if her strength increased tenfold, and for a split second, she was able to get the two men off her. She only wanted one thing – to get her children out of this office – to hide them, save them. Couldn't someone help?

"Mama! Children!" Turunge screamed at the top of her lungs.

That's when Melke heard her. She shuddered like an injured bird and looked up toward the second story windows. Did she imagine it? But then she heard Turunge's screams again, this time more clearly.

"My children! Help!"

Melke ran to the door, but the guards stopped her. She turned to her son.

"Save your sister!" she shouted to him in Hebrew.

Zachar rushed at the door and was knocked down by the guards.

"Stop right there!" a voice shouted from behind the barrel of a rifle that was pointed at him.

"Turunge!" Melke screamed at the top of her lungs. "Turunge! Where are the kids?" The front doors have just been shut in front of her face, and she pounded on them with her fists.

Turunge screamed again, and no one came to help. She was alone. She and the children, who needed to be saved. The policewoman had already managed to drag away the three boys.

“Don’t take my children! Don’t hurt them! Hurt me!” she screamed. Ella continued bawling, and the guards were momentarily confused.

“Why are you standing around?” Sergeev shouted desperately. Things were not going according to plan. “Get the children away from here – quickly! There’s no reason for them to see this.”

The policewoman, grabbed the resisting boys by the arms and dragged them out of the room.

Turunge clutched little Ella, refusing to let her go, not noticing the fact that she was nearly strangling her. The child screamed.

“Get on with it!” Sergeev yelled to one of the guards, who ran out of the office and quickly returned, followed by a doctor, who seemed strangely comfortable with the scenario and held a syringe filled with a strong sedative. The doctor jumped toward Turunge and, while the guards held her down, gave her an injection, right through her clothing. As Turunge involuntarily relaxed and got quiet, Ella was taken from her arms and carried out.

Everything the young woman saw was through a fog. Her legs grew weak. The doctor scooped her up and sat her down. She felt handcuffs click over her wrists, after which she was escorted out. The last thing she heard was Melke’s voice:

“Daughter! Turunge! Where are the children?”

In vain, the Abramovs pounded on the door. In vain, they screamed.

“Let us in!”

“What are you doing to her?”

“Our grandkids are in there!”

The guards stared at them blankly, then chased them away with the butts of their guns. Melke, panting and discombobulated, felt some kind of motherly intuition that she should look aside. She did, and saw what she shouldn’t have.

To the left of the building was a metal gate, which led into the courtyard. She heard the rumble of a car engine, the gate opened, and Isay briskly stepped out, leading Slava and Igor by their hands. Erzol followed, carrying Ella and Gena. They approached the car that was waiting for them nearby and hurried to get in.

It only took a second for the Abramovs to realize what had happened: the Babaevs had kidnapped their grandchildren, their nephews and nieces! Yusuf was the first to snap out of his trance.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed, running toward the car, but the police stopped him. A moment later, the car let out a cloud of black exhaust and drove away, disappearing into the distance.

Poor Melke continued to run between the gate and the Prosecutor's stoop, yelling and demanding to speak to whoever was in charge. No one listened to her.

Yusuf pointed at the back entrance, visible through the gate, as the door opened and Turunge was escorted out and loaded into a black prison transported, on her way to the investigative isolation chamber.

It was all over.

Turunge was arrested, her children kidnapped. Roza, Melke and Anya wouldn't stop crying. The distraught Yusuf ardently threatened to avenge his sister. Hezgie was the only one who remained silent, though his shoulders involuntarily shrugged every so often.

That evening, Melke and Anya went to the Babaevs'. They were allowed in, but the children weren't there. The women yelled and bawled in vain, demanding that the children be returned.

"What did I do to deserve such misery!" Melke cried, pounding herself on the head. "How could this happen? Who did this? Why did you betray my Turunge? My daughter! Where did you take her children?"

Erzol, agitated by the endless screaming, burst out of the room.

“I did it! And I’m happy I did!”

Melke was taken aback by this confession, unable to speak for a second. These were the words of a man she had considered her son. Horrified, she realized that talking to the Babaevs was pointless, and there was nothing left to fix. All she had left to do was cry and beg God for mercy.

In her cell, Turunge refused to sleep, eat or drink for several days. Her health deteriorated so rapidly that the isolation management had to call in a doctor. He examined the patient, and informed the overseers without much sympathy:

“She had a nervous breakdown, and needs to go to the hospital. It’s just going to get worse from here.”

Turunge was taken out of her cell and taken straight to a psychiatric facility. She was not allowed to see her family, and could only speak to her doctor. The old professor only confirmed the diagnosis:

“She’s in shock. She seems to be reacting to outside stimuli, but she’s exhausted. You understand – refusal to eat for an extended period of time plus stress. We’ll keep her here and treat her.”

Turunge’s nervous breakdown was as bad as it gets. Her children gave her life meaning, and here they were, taken from her all at once. That was not something she could come to terms with. And yet, she had been stripped of all means to resist this injustice. This powerlessness, as well as the inability to be near her children, drove her into a trance. The misery she was subjected to was the worst a mother could fear.

Turunge spent two months at the hospital, while the investigation came to a close, and a court date was finally scheduled.

XXX

Early in the morning, Turunge was loaded into a covered truck and taken to court. As she entered the nearly full courtroom, all heads simultaneously turned to see her. She looked lost, exhausted and emaciated. Dozens of familiar gazes – family, friends, acquaintances – pierced her, chilling her to the bone. It was hard to imagine the shame she felt. She lowered her head, wishing she'd disappear.

She heard a door open behind her, as Raya was escorted in.

They sat next to one another on the defendants' bench. Raya stared at the floor, occasionally lifting her head to exchange glances with Melke, Hezgie and other family members. Turunge kept looking into the crowd, hoping to spot her children. But they weren't there.

Hezgie sat hunched over, avoiding the eyes of others. Melke, wearing a black kerchief, sat upright next to him.

The Babaevs sat on the other side of the aisle, trying to avoid eye contact with the Abramovs. The entire family

was there – with the exception of Erzol. Friends and acquaintances, as well as curious strangers with nothing better to do, comprised the rest of the audience.

At the time, the newspapers had been waging frequent campaigns against speculators, and public opinion of them was far from forgiving. Therefore, such trials often attracted gossips and looky-loos, who came there to look at this illusion of justice and indulge in the misery of the black market traders under scrutiny. The fact that this trial included not one, but two young women, and pretty ones at that, only fueled their schadenfreude. Those, however, were in the minority. The Abramovs knew a whole lot of people, and most of those gathered were sympathetic to the sisters.

“She’s so skinny!” Turunge heard a woman say – a chubby vendor whom she’s seen at the market on many occasions. “She needs to be home, not on trial.”

“Yes,” another woman’s voice chimed in. “They don’t exactly look like they’re living decadently.”

The Abramovs really didn’t look anything like those glib, arrogant speculators that the papers wrote about.

Even Havo felt pity for her daughter-in-law when she saw her, which only confirmed her decision to take in the children. ‘She’s in jail, so is her sister – how could she be trusted with kids?’ she thought.

The trial began with a routine introduction of the parties. The prosecutor windingly recounted the details of the case, what was purchased where and at what price, and brought from Moscow to Makhachkala.

Turunge listened to all his distantly, as if she wasn’t the topic of discussion. After the presentation, a prosecution attorney started asking the same question that the sisters had to answer time and time again during the investigation.

The case progressed in a quick, predictable manner, with the occasional sympathetic remark from the Abramov side,

or an angry quip from the snide gossips. The Dagestani judge – a man slightly over forty, with a tiny, timid chin and a thick accent – seemed tightly aligned with the so-called ‘lovers of truth’. He judged in the way he understood justice – superficially and ruthlessly, unwittingly following the harsh demagogical rhetoric about the war on speculators and parasites trumpeted across the front page of every newspaper. He spoke in the same boilerplate phrases and slogans, altering them only slightly to suit his unrefined taste. But the scariest part of all was that he seemed to indulge in his power over the defenseless sisters, being the sole decider of their fate now that they’ve found themselves in his clutches.

When the prosecution started interrogating Turunge, Melke felt sick with pity for her daughters. But there was nothing to be done. The flywheel of the court machine was at full speed.

The plaintiff continually spoke about the lack of ‘moral character’ on the part of citizens Babaeva and Hanukova, about their ‘scams’ at the warehouses, and their disdain for the principles of ‘socialist property’. In other words, all Melke and Hezgie could do was sit and listen to their daughters being turned into people unfit to live in Soviet society.

Hezgie’s heart suddenly started to beat erratically and his chest tightened. He quickly bent over further and put his hand over his heart, attempting to alleviate the pain. He wasn’t afraid of dying – what happened to him didn’t matter. He was terrified of what would happen to his daughters. Why did they have to revisit his dire fate, to suffer such misfortune? He adored his children, and no powers on Earth could force him to abandon them. He couldn’t picture them, so defenseless, going to jail.

The higher the presenters piled on trite phrases to argue that society needs to stigmatize the sisters and label them as ‘parasites’, ‘drones’, ‘opportunists’ and ‘hypocrites’, the more terrifying and irreversible Turunge and Raya’s situation seemed.

Each and every word brought pain to the Abramovs and their sympathizers.

The parents perked up when the court called on Raya to speak. She stood up, and confirmed her confession in a steady voice. She admitted that she was helping her sister survive, make bread money, and feed four children. Voices echoed across the room – both approving and outraged, and the judge demanded silence. It was easy to notice that he reveled in his principled nature and his sternness – as if he was the embodiment of the spirit of law, ruthless and just.

Turunge was called to the stand next. She shied away at first, but quickly gathered herself and, stammering, began to speak:

“Everything that was said here is the truth. I did it – I brought things back from Moscow and I sold them. But I acted alone. My sister is completely innocent. I’m the only one who needed to do it. The Babaev family is sitting here, and they’re the ones who forced me to do it. We had a family, but their son beat me – while I was pregnant! I had to run to save my life and the lives of my children! They offered no help, despite the fact that I carried and birthed four children. I was forced to seek other means of feeding my kids. It was they who put me in this predicament, and forced me to seek other sources of money! No one, aside from me, is guilty of what I’m being accused of.”

Turunge spoke passionately, as if reading from a script she had written during sleepless nights that left her with nothing to do but think. Her voice was filled with great remorse over the fact that Raya, an innocent soul, was forced to share her bitter fate because of her actions, and would end up in prison once again. Her soul was filled with the screams of thousands of lonely women. She tried to speak about her children in order to inspire sympathy and compassion from the court. For her, tradition trumped soulless laws. She knew throughout

her entire life that a mother is untouchable. How she wished others to understand this!

Turunge's last word shook the courtroom. This was not a criminal's speech. It was a confession of a miserable woman. People started whispering and looking at the Babaevs with contempt.

The judge sensed that the defendant was undermining his authority and that her words inspired sympathy. He pounded on the table angrily, calling for silence. But the crowd didn't listen. People continued to whisper, and their sentiments were with the defendants.

Turunge finished speaking.

"You may sit," the judge grumbled. He noted something on his paper and exchanged a glance with the prosecutor, who asked for the defendants' father to be called to the stand.

At first, Hezgie couldn't even speak in a normal manner. His anxiety was very apparent. He took a deep breath, and blurted out:

"I want it to go on record that I did everything. I am the only guilty one, and no one else."

Silence hung over the courtroom.

"As the head of the household, I made the decision to do all this in order to provide for my family."

"He must be joking!" a voice echoed from the crowd.

The judge listened to Hezgie with befuddled curiosity.

"I'm elderly," he continued, encouraged by the judge's attention, "and can't travel so far, so I sent my daughter to do the shopping. She only transported the things and made sure that no one stole them. Turunge didn't do what she is being accused of. All she did was raise the kids. She only traveled when I asked her to."

He fell silent.

"Is that all you wanted to say?" the judge asked Hezgie after a brief pause.

“Yes,” the old man replied.

“Were you aware of the fact that, by doing so, you were urging your daughters to break the law?”

“I only asked them to help me. I didn’t have the strength to do it myself.”

“So you told her that she needs to go to Moscow, buy things there, and bring them back to Makhachkala?” A wily smile came over the judge’s face as he led Hezgie into unfamiliar legal territory.

“Yes.”

“So you admit that you were an accomplice?” the judge continued.

“An accomplice?” Hezgie gasped. “I did everything to feed my family!”

“Can you present evidence of your daughter’s innocence to the court? Do you stand by your claim that your daughter acted according to your instructions?”

Hezgie stayed silent. How could he tell everything to this overcrowded room full of strangers? That Turunge ran to their home, blood running down her forehead and that they had to get the kids the following morning. That Turunge struggled to make ends meet and to feed her children – his grandchildren. That a thought – a ray of hope – occurred to her one day: to go to Moscow, to Raya’s, and buy the bedding and other things they didn’t have in Makhachkala and that she could sell at the market, without stealing anything or doing anything wrong. How could he explain this to strange men? So Hezgie said nothing, just shook his head.

“Perhaps you can recall who first suggested that goods could be bought in Moscow and then re-sold in Makhachkala?” the judge continued.

“I did,” Hezgie replied.

“No more questions. You may sit.”

He called the district attorney to his side, briefly conferred with him about something and declared:

"The court would like to call on Melke Abramova."

Melke stood up and adjusted her kerchief.

"Please tell me – did you know what your daughter was involved in?" the judge asked.

"We have four children on our hands. We need to feed them, and that requires money. But where is one to get it? We were trying to at least earn something."

"Did you help your daughter?"

"Yes, I asked her to travel to Moscow for scarce goods and asked her to sell it at the market. I would meet her at the station and help her carry things. She wouldn't have managed on her own."

"But you didn't realize that such actions made you an accomplice?"

"What do you mean by 'accomplice'? My husband and I thought of everything. Our daughters have nothing to do with it. My husband and I asked them to do it for us. All Turunge – the younger one – did was tend to the children and help us. The guilt is all on us." Melke glanced at Hezgie. Did she say everything correctly? He nodded in accord. "My husband suggested we try it, so I agreed. There was no other choice. We couldn't let them starve."

"The court understands what you wanted to say. You may sit."

Melke nodded and calmly sat down. In her mind, she did everything correctly. However, while she defended her daughters as best as she could, she did so in such a haphazard, hasty manner that was likely to only make things worse.

Older sister Anya, trying to stop her parents, who didn't even confer with her before the trial, jumped up and asked to address the court, but the judge refused. Anya went back to her seat, feeling absolutely helpless. Her heart was overcome with hurt and fear for her sister, with whom she was very close. The realization that she couldn't do anything made her

desperate. Her soul wanted an outlet for her anger. She wanted to tear her family's enemies to pieces. Meanwhile, the trial came to a turning point.

"The court calls Erzol Babaev into the room," the judge said.

The courtroom door opened and my father entered. As he walked down the aisle, the crowd whispered. Turunge watched him with pain and hope.

"Maybe he brought the children – all four of them?" But Erzol was alone.

He walked toward the podium down the long aisle, as Anya Abramova's voice pierced the quiet murmurs.

"You scoundrel! This is all your fault, you bastard!"

"Order in the court!" the judge yelled.

Everyone turned toward the Abramovs. Melke grabbed Anya by the hand, and she got quiet, along with the rest of the room. The stoic Erzol walked forward and stood before the judge. Everyone froze, waiting for the main witness to speak.

"Did you know what your wife was doing?" the judge began.

"No, I did not. I was in the army."

"I see. But didn't you ever question how she supported herself while you, the breadwinner, are away?"

"While I served in the army, my wife and children were supported by my parents, who had ample means."

"Is that so?"

"Of course, comrade judge."

"Defendant Turunge Abramova says that you beat her. Is that right?"

"No, of course not. I never laid a finger on her."

"And yet, the defendant insists that you beat her. Repeatedly, in fact," the judge paused for effect. "How could you beat the mother of your children?"

"I didn't beat her, I swear. It's all a conspiracy!"

And then, Turunge screamed:

"How can you lie? I should have reported you then and there! I spared you! My mother spared you – talked me into staying quiet!"

"Silence, defendant," said the judge, striking the gavel. "If you don't quiet down this second, I will need to take measures."

Turunge, now pale, with red spots covering her eyes, fell silent, breathing heavily. Her eyes burnt with fire. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Did you know that your wife was experiencing financial hardships?" the judge continued.

"That's not true, comrade judge!" Erzol exclaimed. "She had everything she needed. She was regularly offered help, both by me and by my parents. She had no reason to steal."

"To speculate," the judge corrected.

"Yes, to speculate. She refused our help, evidently relying on side earnings."

"You scoundrel!" Turunge screamed again. "I had no reason? What about when you kicked me out of the house? How the hell was I supposed to feed our kids then?"

"Defendant, please calm down," the judge urged. "Don't get hysterical. Witness, your wife testified that you did not provide her with money to support her children after the divorce. Is that true?"

"That is an error, honorable comrade judge. It isn't true!"

The courtroom rumbled once more as people simultaneously murmured in accord and in outrage. As Melke listened to what her son-in-law was saying, tears ran down her eyes.

"What nonsense!" Erzol continued. "We offered to help her many times. Not only are we capable of supporting her, but all the children as well. I recently filed a custody petition and it was approved. The court was convinced that I have the means

to support the children. Everything would have been fine, had she accepted our help. We kept offering it to her, but she kept refusing.”

The noise in the room grew louder, and the judge pounded on the table once again, silencing the voices. The judge then wrote something on a piece of paper and passed it to his secretary.

“The court is adjourned for sentencing,” the secretary triumphantly announced.

A recess had been announced.

Erzol headed out of the courtroom. The rest of the Babaevs followed, as if sensing that they should no longer be there, and quickly moved toward the door. Anya jumped up as well, and followed them toward the exit. Nahamye stopped at the entrance, having dropped his hat, and that’s where she caught up with him. There was no one nearby when she grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Anya?” Nahamye turned around in surprise.

“What the hell are you people doing?” Anya yelled. “How could you? I trusted you. I brought my sister into your house, had her marry your lowlife of a son! How could you let this happen?” With those words, Anya spit in his face, then recoiled in horror over her own action.

Nahamye said nothing, just wiped himself silently with his cap and shook his head, as if agreeing with the accusations. He quickly turned around and, stumbling and shuffling, as if asleep, hurried outside.

He could barely see where he was going. He couldn’t wrap his head around how his son acted at the trial. What would happen to Turunge now? Nahamye was overcome with shame over the pain that they’ve subjected the Abramovs to.

However, he truly didn’t see his own fault in what happened. It was an unfortunate incident. Women’s personalities... He himself couldn’t explain why things took such an ab-

surd and scary turn. He didn't see that Anya remained standing on the courthouse steps, before returning to the courtroom.

People continued to crowd the hallway, discussing what they had heard. How would this all end? No one knew. One sister admitted guilt. Her parents, the witnesses, said that it was their fault. Everyone pitied the poor Jewish family where every member tried to defend the others. The sympathizers put their faith in the attorney, who asked the court to see things from the point of view of the family, which acted under pressure from external influences related to supporting children.

Turunge was also convinced that this all would pass. During the trial, she caught the glances of several court commissioners. It seemed that two women, who sat on either side of the judge, listened to her attentively and even took a compassionate tone when asking questions. 'Surely they identify with me,' Turunge thought to herself.

A bell rang, marking the end of the recess. The secretary entered the courtroom first, followed by the judge and the court jurors.

Everyone fell silent. The Abramovs, who stood together, reluctantly moved forward.

"They'll give you a conditional sentence, letting them out on parole" someone next to Melke whispered. "They have to." Her heart happily picked up pace. She stood still, listening attentively.

The judge opened his file, took out a piece of paper, and began to read, succinctly stressing every syllable:

"Pursuant to the conclusion of the investigation and the charges, confirmed by irrefutable evidence of the defendants' guilt based on the testimony of both the defendants and the witnesses questioned, the verdict is as follows: Turunge Babaeva, born in 1929, with no party affiliation, is sentenced

to five years of incarceration. Raisa Hanukova, previously tried for other offenses, is sentenced to five years of..."

The courtroom erupted in a frenzied murmur. Melke gasped. Anya covered her mouth with her hands.

The judge, pounding on the table with his fist, called for order.

"Additionally, pursuant to witness testimony concerning Hezgie Abramov and Melke Abramova, the court finds the aforementioned individuals, who appeared as witnesses in this case, to be accessories to criminal activity and, pursuant to their action, sentences them to five years of incarceration each. Guards, please enter the courtroom!"

Melke and Hezgie couldn't move. Turunge started screaming, and Raya, bawling, pleaded:

"They're innocent! What are you doing with these poor old people?"

The crowd of sympathizers erupted in outrage, as the guards pushed through it toward Melke and Hezgie.

Turunge's voice rang over the panic and pandemonium:

"What did we do to deserve all this? Why are they doing this to us? Those bastards! What did we ever do to them?" She and Raya were both escorted out by the guards.

The crowd wouldn't disperse, as if waiting for something else. The guards, having traversed the crowd, surrounded the elder Abramovs and told the confused couple to follow them. In a minute, they were escorted through the same doors that Raya and Turunge disappeared through earlier.

The audience shuffled around, talking about what happened. No one left, perhaps expecting more horrors to follow. Only one bench was empty – the one where the Babaevs had sat.

And then, over the din of the crowd that filled the courtroom, rang the voice of Yusuf Panovich, Raya and Turunge's brother, aimed at no one in particular.

“I’ll kill him!” he screamed, then pointed at the empty bench with his crutch. “I’ll slaughter their whole damn family!”

People throughout the city would continue to discuss the tragic events for a long time. They couldn’t comprehend how something like this could have happened. The world must have gone off its rocker if a father, in the prime of his youth, didn’t realize the tragic consequences of putting his children’s mother behind bars.

The people would recount the events to one another, but no one knew the entirety of the reasons that led up to them. We don’t know them either. This was the fall of the Abramov family, who simultaneously lost both children and grandchildren, the fall of Raya, who once again found herself behind bars, the fall of Turunge, stripped of the thing that she valued most in life – the ability to be with us, her children. And the scariest thing of all was that the parents, who incriminated themselves in attempt to save their daughters, were incarcerated alongside them.

AFTERWORD

As life had it, we addressed the woman that raised us as 'mother'. That woman was Havo.

The tragedy of all that happened would not be comprehended until much later.

From that day on, we, her children, were practically forever torn from our own mother. My dear, dear mother!

As I wrote this book, you warmed me with your kindness and love.

You will be forever in my heart,
and I would like to tell you:

And on my knees before God
In my prayers for salvation
I, yet again, bless the path
That brought my soul to yours.

The following texts and articles
assisted me in writing this book:

“History and Culture of the Mountain Jews of the Caucasus”; Ed. L.A. Mikdash-Shamailov. Jerusalem - Kuba: Caucasus Strategic Research Institute, 2009

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