



Nabokov Prize Library



Tatiana Trubnikova

Disrupted Breath

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«ИП Березина Г.Н.»

2020

УДК 821.161.1-3
ББК 84 (2Ros=Rus)6

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Disrupted Breath / Т. Ю. Трубникова — «ИП Березина Г.Н.»,
2020 — (Nabokov Prize Library)

ISBN 978-5-907306-54-7

What are the things experienced by the human soul on the sharpest edge of death or life? Isn't this nothing but revealing of the personality's true essence? The story «Shahid» is an attempt to look «beyond»... Breathing is so rapid that it is impossible to breathe in... The heart breaks into pieces of horror. The fate of an ordinary boy viewed through the crushed crooked mirrors of war in the conflict of East and West. The search, the slow clarification of the one's his true path, the lessons taught by life and love, are in the stories «Lollipops», «Christmas Jam», «Chestnuts», «At the Donskoy Monastery». «The Weird Man» is the strangest of all stories in this book. The title of it appeared in my dream. Entire epochs of Soviet life are seen through the story of my heroes. The invention, artfully connected with another invention... You would never guess what happened for real truth in it, in this story. I wish you a risky and unpredictable journey to other people's stories – in my book «Disrupted Breath».

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Scenario writer, a member of the Union of Writers of Russia.

The short story collection «Signs of Change».

Working as co-author of the television series «Love Is Blind», filmed by the Production studio 2V based on the novels of E. Vilmont.

The novel «Dance and the Word», written by Tatiana Trubnikova about love of Isadora Duncan and Sergey Yesenin, was awarded with the literary prize named after M. Prishvin and received a lot of positive reviews from critics and readers. The novel was reissued by «RIPOL-classic» publishing house in the quantity of 2000 copies.

The winner of the contest «THE BEST POETS AND WRITERS OF RUSSIA» with the award of the medal named after S. A. Yesenin Laureate of Literary Award «GOLDEN AUTUMN».

Interviews with the writer were published by «Podmoskovie (Moscow Region)» PublishingHouse, by the magazine «Horizons of Culture», the almanac «Literaturnoye Podmoskovie (Literary Moscow Region)» and other periodicals.

Candies

Abi means «grandmother» in Tatar language. But that's for me she's a grandmother. Once she was just ainny – mother. For my mother. At that time my mother was only six. She had five brothers and sisters. And she was the youngest one, of course. But not for long enough to figure out what that really means. Well, it couldn't have meant anything in 1949. How did abi raise six babies? I have no idea. She was working day and night. The children also worked, since the age often.

But not that summer. That summer my mother was only six. Abi sent her to summer camp. It was located so far away from all the roads that there were no buses to get there. You could only come there by car.

Every Sunday, the camp was filled with joyful expectations, fulfilled dreams and happy farewell. Everybody had their moms and dads coming over and bringing in something delicious. Only my mom was waiting, waiting, and waiting. She knew that she had a little brother and that abi was expecting another one. But can a child realize it, especially when she is so hungry?

Mom didn't hesitate to eat the leftovers the children were giving to her. She was very rarely given something else. The kids are smart: why share the sweets with somebody when there's nothing to gain in return?

Once, when the day was coming to an end and all the parents were going to leave, my mother suddenly saw abi. She was leaning on the fence, not being able to move. And then the triumphant smile appeared on her tired face.

She came on foot.

She crossed all the woods.

There was nothing in her hands.

My mom rushed to her and hugged her. Other children and their parents were staring at them.

And suddenly, abi took mom's palm... unfolded it... and sprinkled the smallest and cheapest candies out of her hand. They were like small yellow Suns. She brought the candies without any bag, right in her hand. They stuck together a little bit, being warmed by her palm all the way to the camp.

When she left, my mom shared the candies with everyone. With everyone who wanted to take them.

Shahid

*I hear the conversation,
Continuously sounding all over the place
And the mountain's stony heart
Beats lovingly in the darkness*

M. Yu. Lermontov

He remembered the life since he was four. And actually not himself, but all the lightness of the sun of one day in his life as well as holiday feelings which was in the wind. And this feeling moved to the child, he suck it. The adults were flying around more than ever. Everybody had festive mood, even endlessly silent mother. As if everybody was waiting for something. The vague hope for some fairytale, something strange stirred in his young mind. Ramadan finished. The whole aul was celebrating this. Eid al-Adha!

He, a barefoot shirttail boy, run out straight on the street. His mother couldn't hold him. She only watched him going outside. And he didn't see it. He easily flew as appropriated to a proud young eagle.

It's needed one good habitual movement of the father's knife and flinging mutton belched out from his gorge a boiling blood stream. The boy stopped. This was the first thing he remembered in his life. The blood was warm; a hot blood wrapped a road dust. The boiling stream boiled out running as a long movable blood wire. The adults were cheering around.

The boy understood that this was a holiday.

He was proudly called Aslanbek. Till this moment he didn't win this name. He was called so in advance. Sure nobody knows what would be the boy's future. But here exists one trivial man habit – to die early in life. It was an adat like bridal kidnapping or circumcision. It's passed down for generations. So he must also do it. To die as a man. Calling Allah. Aslanbek had nice big black eyes like many other native children. He had small direct front. But his hair! It was far from being perfect. It was too light. Nobody in his family had such a hair. Though the father watched his chocked dispirited wife with suspicion. For sure he knew that she hadn't anybody beside him, but such a light hair of his son haunted his mind.

The time still didn't award Aslanbek's appearance with any tricks which could highlight his character. He was still a child. A clean slate without wrinkle symbols, sealed by his habits.

He had three sisters and two brothers. Their father put great hopes on guys. Nothing can be said about the girls. They were ghosts in the life theatre. Like their silent mother Patimat. Aslanbek, being a little boy, understood it very well. The elder brother was called Ahmet. He was already ten. He seemed to be a little daddy for Aslanbek. He wanted even call the brother «dada» as a father. He wasn't so creepy and stern but if Aslanbek should be punished the brother served father's turn. The little brother, still babe in arms, laid in the bassinet and almost didn't cry.

– The true man grows up! – father said proudly.

Father was called Shamil. It was the name which became especially popular among their nation. Tough, strong, he knew and could do everything that should know and do a real man. To dress a mutton with prays, to shut a flipped coin with only one shoot on the go, to dance lezghinka, to keep in leash the whole family, to make whatever was needed with his own hands... He prayed only two prayers to Allah: the long one – on solemn occasions, and the short one – casual. When he murmured

a prayer being kneeling east-facing on a special carpet his lineaments didn't relax keeping his usual hard and closed look. A short beard stared obstinately. He wasn't old at all. But along the dry chaps the years have already laid two long rows. But maybe it was the trace of his hands which smoothed the face and beard after the prayer?

Aslanbek often went out from home. Nobody held him. He could go anywhere he wanted. Already when he was four aul didn't seemed to be a strange world. He was attracted to go farther, where the sun stood up behind the mountain.

Aul was far away in the mountains. There was nothing around besides mountains. Moreover, they surrounded it so close that the eye couldn't relax from it till the endless horizon. There were world's walls around.

Every day Aslanbek set down on a smooth hillside and was watching for hours the mountains changing in color under the sun light. He was simply seating and watching this. Primarily he thought about nothing. It was a fly of thoughtlessness, the minutes which could occur only in childhood and which are remembers forever, when you see not a stereotype, not a pattern, which is already printed and rolled-out by your mind, but you watch and see everything as it is. And then going ballistic of war and blood he often remembered this as the happiest time.

In mediation passed three long years.

The only entertainment besides looking over the landscapes was the following: Aslanbek put something on a big stone, for example some piece of wood and threw therein other stones trying to reach it. Step by step he achieved considerable success in this occupation. Mainly because there was no other occupation. Every time he went farther from the big stone and reached it more often than not.

Once he unexpected found his way into the «Dog Marriage». For unknown reason the couple choose his favorite place for the service. The dogs were angry and aggressive. One most impudent stag turned on him. He gashed with the tooth the boy's hand. The blood run. Once smelled it out the couple become brutal. The six-years old boy understood that he was a goner. And suddenly he heard crying:

– Stones! Stones!!!

He didn't see but heard. And understood immediately. He was simply choked. But somebody clued in. Aslanbek bended and started to flip the stones into the dogs. Very accurately. He plucked the eye of the dog which snapped him out. The dog began to bawl strangely and run away. But the others didn't want to give out. His fund of stones was fast wasted away. And suddenly stones flew from somewhere outside. Till this moment he simply didn't see anything around him but the dogs. It was his contemporary, a neighbor's son, lancing the stones. This place was not far from aul, but adults came here rarely. There was no need. Together with Salman – so was called a boy that saved him – they prevailed the couple. The dogs growling and snapping went away to search some other place.

The tears dropped profusely on the face of six-years old Aslanbek while he was running at home. The blood from his hand dropped into the dust on the road. He was running and crying:

– Nana! Nana...

He dreamed of only one thing – to nuzzle into the mom's dark dress. She could pat his hear and calm him down. And then he could exactly know that he was alive...

The mother was kneading a dough. Her hands were in flour up to the elbow. Shamil was laying on a cover on the low bed. He was watching her working wife. When she saw her son with red hands, she flashed a look to husband.

– Mom!!! – cried the child.

He thought she would jump at him. But she continued quietly beating dough.

– Wash your hands in a wash basin. – said severely father. – Tears are the distaff.

Aslanbek tried not to cry. His eyes have quickly dried. Children understand well when they is no pity for them. They take this and change their minds. Aslanbek remembered for a long time

his mother not jumped at him, not patted. He remembered this for a life. And he never waited for someone to feel pity about him.

Sometimes while sitting on a usual place Aslanbek heard a sough in mountains like some faraway sea wash. Sure it didn't occur to him a mind that it could be a sea wash because he hadn't ever seen a sea. Aslanbek decided to ask the oldest and most honored man in aul, the wok stag Rashid what this sound could be.

There was a little number of wok stages. Only three persons. First Aslanbek thought they lived for ever. Nothing changed. The old men were born the olds like he was born a little boy. And that may always be the case. Later one of the old man died and the boy understood that it was not the case. He didn't know why he didn't go to ask the question to his father or mother.

«What a roaring is heard in mountains?»

«One day the mountains will become a flat land» – the old man answered. But Aslanbek understood nothing.

«It seems to be a moaning...» – the boy cheeped very low.

The old man took a long hard look at him from under the beetling brows. Aslanbek was afraid that he had asked something that shouldn't be asked and run away. The wok stag Rashid was deaf.

Aslanbek's bare foots were flying swiftly. The old man followed him with eyes for a long time...

... The whole family set at the festive table. It was Kurban Bayram again.

There still were blooded knives in the yard. The mutton head lied in the grass. A steam was curling above the big back. The appetizing pilaf emitted a spicy bushy odor. Everybody was assembled. Shamil, Patimat, Ahmet, three sisters, three-years old baby. Only Aslanbek was absent.

– So?!!! – Shamil bellowed. The frightened mother dropped her head into the shoulders. And run out from the room. She was running across the yard, near a blooded head, near the blood which had already sunk in the ground and around which were already circling fat flies, father and farther... She knew where to go.

Aslanbek set at his usual place on a hillside and was watching the mountains. Now he wanted to know exactly what was there – behind the hill? And what was behind that hill? And what was behind that top? But the look was unable to help him. To see it with his eyes he had to go there.

– Go home quickly! – mother asked feverishly.

The boy understood that mother had already got a scolding. He went near her.

– Eat! – a plate with pilaf occurred in front of his face. A hot odor blasted hardly his nose. Everybody was chewing hungrily. Aslanbek didn't want to eat. Going home he saw the cut head in the yard. It would be better if he didn't see it. It was disgust.

– Arist... crat or what? – said Shamil heavily a foreign word looking at his son. Aslanbek understood that it was a swearing but didn't know the meaning of the word.

– If you will not eat it I will do pilaf of you! – father said.

Mastering a sickness Aslanbek put several spoons into the mouth. The blood, flies and mutton head was still floating before his eyes. He was eating because knew that the father didn't joke. He could do everything. The boy knew it the best. He was eating and strangling. It seemed to him that a little bit more and all the meal would come back.

Shamil finished eating the first. He smoothed his face and beard after a sort prayer. All the family put the spoons. And followed his lead. Somebody chewed and with a big hunger was still looking at unfinished pilaf. Only one person was glad to stop dinner – Aslanbek.

... Salman became his dotah-friend. Now they threw stones in his hillside together. They were in competition of who would make a good shot more times. Sometimes Aslanbek was listening for something.

– Do you hear? – he asked the friend one day. – Like the mountains are moaning...

– No. I don't hear anything. – Salman answered.

Little by little Aslanbek's life changed. Domestic duties added: to clean beat of sheep, to bring firewood and sometimes to chap their little stock.

Two or three times a week in the aul came a teacher. Not going but arriving. And this was the main entertainment of boys. If she had no car which she was driving herself, the study would be meaningless. Only for such a spectacle and for that they could approach this wonder and even touch it they would stop at nothing. It was the old and great «Volga». For adults who left the aul many times and saw big cities «Volga» was only a rattletrap car. But children adored it. Till this moment Aslanbek hadn't see any machinery except father's Kalashnikov gun which was called by father «kalash». «If you don't have kalash you are not worth a rush».

Once when Aslanbek was listening to the mountains Shamil began to talk about the boy with his wife.

– I don't even know if he could be a real man, – he said.

Patimat pulled away from back cleaning. But she was silent. She got used to be silent.

– What do you think of him? – her husband asked. – He doesn't like to run and rig like other boys...

– Seems he isn't a wise guy...

– Then why do you like him more than others?! – Shamil raised the voice.

– Me?

– Yes.

The mother took a breath.

– I visited wok stag Rashid. He said that Aslanbek was born like an old man. That it happens. Sometimes.

... Several years had passed. Aslanbek and Salman should be ten.

More and more often Aslanbek heard some breathes and moaning in the mountains. He didn't understand why nobody else hear this.

– It's wind! – Salman said joking.

– These are stones falling down, – his mother said.

– You have noise in ears, – his brother Ahmet said.

Aslanbek missed school often because of sheep tending. Their own as well as common. The feedings were quite large but wasted very quickly. Every time he had to drive a stock farther from aul. Shortly there was no place in the near area where he hadn't driven the stock. He had seen long ago that behind the nearest hill there is other one. Similar. But what was behind the top? Is that another similar top?

Aslanbek knew that there was one more feeding. But if was far away. The ice makes grass tick. But there was no other water near at hand. But only verdurous pastures.

He liked looking at his sheep. He often thought of who will be chosen for the holiday? And why it was particularly this mutton? Why not the next one?

In the family of Shamil's relatives was born a first-born. On this occasion there were killed muttons. The total aul was celebrating. The happy father shot with a gun.

And thus happened something that Aslanbek could never expect. Shamil gave in his hand a knife and asked to kill one of the muttons he tended.

– He is still a little boy! – mother tried to persuade Shamil.

– He is a man! When will you recognize this?!

Ahmet together with father were holding the flinging mutton. Shamil told the appointed prayer. «He knows for sure what will happen just now» – Aslanbek thought about the mutton.

He was standing with knife in the hands and couldn't move. Shamil repeated acidly the words of prayer. But the boy couldn't move his hand as well as his leg. Nearby stand a half of aul. At least Aslanbek thought so. And that more painful was the dishonor of every moment of failure. Salman empowered him:

– Do it to it! And presto! It's so easy.

And whispered:

– Close your eyes when you will kill...

For the third time Shamil enounced a long Arabic rapidprayer in which the boy didn't understand anything.

Aslanbek bended... But in the last moment when the knife had already touched the villous neck suddenly he lost it and took to heels. Salman seized a knife and quickly gashed across the mutton's neck. The blood rushed gaily outside.

Having done this Salman chased after the friend. Shamil enviously followed the boy with his eyes and thought:

«That will be a man». But he didn't say it loud. He only cut open a belly of the dying animal.

Aslanbek laid his face down on the grass of his favorite hillside. There were tears dropping from the opened eyes. It was the tears of shame and sorrow. Everything in his spirit had got mixed all up.

Suddenly a sky was shut down by Salman's head. He set nearby. They kept quiet. There was a bird singing in the sky. There were grasshoppers in the grass. From the aul was heard a distant patter song – illesh. It was performed by some man. The song beat calmed.

Aslanbek also set down.

– Your father is very angry, – said Salman. – But you shouldn't be afraid of him. You must not! Dog bits if it smells fear.

Aslanbek hit his friend with all might and wrestled him down. Suddenly he became far stronger than Salman. The last one was enabled even twitch in his hands.

– You cannot call my father a dog!

Several months had passed. Spring shed its blossoms and changed a soft warm weather into the fervor.

Once a morning when Aslanbek was driving the depleted stock to feeding Shamil asked the son to drink water from jug.

Making nothing the boy did will of his father.

Shamil dabbled water in a flasket, put it into the hand of his son and said:

– You will drive a stock on a feeding near the ice. And you will return in running low of the third day. It will be enough water in grass for sheep.

– And me?

– If you return earlier you are not my son.

With this he put in son's belt a big knife. A real bazalay.

And Aslanbek went away.

He had nothing except whip, matches, bottle and knife.

Aslanbek was so tired that he had drunk all the water before he came into the pointed place. The joy of discovery new frontiers, to be exact discovering mountain walls, was clouded with only one think: what now? Where he should find water?

He walked around. Really there was no water around. The ice was covered with layer of ground and mud. It was impossible to get liquid from there. Aslanbek lay on cold grass. The sun was getting higher above mountains. He screwed up his eyes and through the thick dense eyelashes view a sun ray. He wished Allah to help him. Only he could do such miracle – to send him water. But there was no cloud in the sky. He never spoke to mullah. He only was him from far away. He didn't understand Arabic prayer but liked rounded sounds singing in a long manner... Babay Rashid said that Allah was everywhere. And that he was everything around. How was it possible? Aslanbek could believe that Allah was this ray on his eyelashes. And sky, and mountain, and water... But sheep, flies and this grass on which he was laying – was this also Allah?! And also himself?! He was a usual boy. Knife hit him awkward into the hip. He moved it over.

This big bazalay with which you could do anything – for example, to cut a tree, to defend or kill a sheep... this was also Allah?

The sun became burning. Aslanbek ceased to want to catch sun rays with eyelashes. Aslanbek moved into the shadow.

He fell asleep.

He woke up only when the sun started dropping.

His first thought was: «It's lucky that it's already evening. It's time to go home». But then he looked around and remembered where he was. And what for. He remembered the morning and the father's command. There was nobody around. Except sheep. As it was in the morning, sheep which were still cropping grass. He took fright.

He felt disinclined for eating. At the same time, he wanted to drink very much. Regardless evening, there was a dry air. Because of the fear he wanted to drink much more. Aslanbek was looking at the dropping sun and thought about what he would make before the darkness only if he drove stock just now. Soon it would be late. One brainless sheep could break down. He will get it hot. He remembered once more a severe face of Shamil in the morning. He was dried out. Did father really wanted his death? The boy dropped the last few drops from the bottle. It didn't wet mouth. But he didn't drive the stock home. He left there.

«I will stay till tomorrow», – he decided. «I will search for water in the morning».

He counted sheep. Was there some fallen behind? All the sheep were on site.

When it was getting dark stock made up a bed. Aslanbek had a good night's sleep but his belly smarted a little bit that's why he couldn't fall asleep for a long time. He was looking at the stars' lances. All of them were directed at him. There was so many stars as it could be only in mountains. He was looking for hours and at the long last it seemed he was flying... Or he felt giddy? It's not likely that the boy could understand this. And suddenly he clearly understood that HE WAS ALONE HERE. The primal fear held his hand and legs and he understood that he couldn't move. And he didn't want to move. He was keeping his ears open. Unusually even mountains were silent. As like they were feeling pity. Or buried him. Deep stillness. He was afraid of making movement – suppose some animal would hear this. He knew that in mountains harbored wolves, bears and wild hogs... He had matches. He always took them with him. But he was afraid of making a fire. He was even afraid of moving his hand or leg. Only night and him. A sheer loneliness. It was a heavy load to bear for the little guy.

Frozen and paralyzed he set thus till sunrise. And only when mountains started turning lighter he understood he was saved. And only now he noticed HOW MUCH he wanted to drink. His nose and throat were over dried. There was a rancid smell from his mouth. «As from wok stag Rashid», – he thought. And he felt pity of himself that almost cried. Maybe he had already got old? And would die any time. Tears welled in his eyes. And suddenly he remembered that even his mother didn't felt pity for him. Instead of feeling himself more upset he suddenly calmed. Tears dried out before dropping. He also thought that could lose humidity.

Sheep woke up. Dew. Aslanbek plumped himself down on the grass. He started to lick off tears. The tongue became wet but he couldn't satisfy thirst. Nevertheless, he was sliding the grass, which the sheep were chewing, until the sun didn't raise high and dried grass humidity. The face got wet. Now he felt a little bit better.

He left the stock and passed over the place once more trying to find a river. But there was no water. Shamil knew what he did while sent him to this place. The boy climbed of steep hill below which ice had been slowly melting for decades.

He looked back. Deep inside his sheep were feeding. Now he understood that he couldn't get down. Unless head over heels as to break back. He felt awfully giddy. And now he exactly knew what this was. There was a bad bitter taste in his mouth. There was a knot in his stomach. But there was no pain. His back ached. Strong nausea. He squatted. He felt so bad that almost didn't feel a fear of height. He forgot that should pray to Allah and he will help.

«I will die», – he understood. «I will not go down. I'm going to die here».

A holy month of Ramadan it's a festive time when it was prohibited drinking and eating from sunrise till sunset. But Aslanbek couldn't even think that twelve hours of sawn are so differed of twenty-four hours one, and the twenty-four hours so differed of two-days sawn. He must stay for three days!

He tried to breath as more deep. Thus nauseate was not do strong. A little later the pain set him free. And even the nauseate passed off. Breathing helped him. Although he couldn't breathe freely, it seemed that the belly was glued to his back.

«Why did I got here, why?!?!»

He tapped the knife. «Thank you dada! You know everything, papa!» Aslanbek understood finally how to get down. He cut steps with knife. It lasted long. The ground wasn't soft as it was in the flat land. Here it was ice, stones and plant roots. The boy was quite exhausted. When it left four meters he dropped his knife. Anyway he was flat on his ass. Aslanbek began sliding down but badly touched the ground and twisted ankle. He was laying happy for a long time. His lips were totally dry and white. His foot was sick. The damned sheep were grazing with great pleasure. For the first time he understood that hated them. «It's right to cut their throat», – he thought somehow vindictively.

He was laying without moving. In such a manner his forces were off less. There was desperate poorness. The mountains began to dance. Passing somewhere away...

Aslanbek fell asleep. Or maybe lost conscience. When he woke up there was such anger in his spirit which ten-years-old guy hadn't ever knew. He imagined Shamil laying on his little tappet and his mother backing cakes. They had much water – in jars, cups, basin in which they washed hands...

Shamil really was laying on the tappet. But Patimat didn't bake cakes. She was praying. And crying. Shamil looked at her with askance. Finally, she broke down and raised... she caught a jar with water at the exit and fling out from the home. Shamil understood everything. He sprang his feet, caught her and flopped at the tappet. An iron jar rolled over the floor. The water splashed out.

– Stupid woman, – hissed Shamil in wife's face. – I use «Jehad hands» so as the boy understand what is «Jehad Heart»!!!

– He will die! – Patimat tried to break free of steady hands of her husband.

– He will not die. He has a knife.

Aslanbek was laying and looking at the dancing sky. Breathing – that was all he could do. He found by feeling the lost knife and his hand inadvertently fastened it. The day was declined. He had a strong backache, the mouth was like glued. He suffered of head rush and nauseate but oddly to say he didn't want to drink. All his feeling and wishes were like filtered... And on a rock above him a black-headed eagle. But Aslanbek looked at him coolly as like he didn't understand what eagle was waiting for... Anger also left. Like the last resort in his life. He hated well-fed sheep. They were only light figures on the back of bluing meadow. Aslanbek thought that soon would fall dew. And this raised hope in his spirit. It was getting dark.

Suddenly several luminous points caught his interest. First he thought that it was shaitan coming to take his heart but soon he heard silent faint sounds and understood that that were wolves. During this two days of hunger and thirst his ears and nose became so aggravated that if there was any water nearby he could find it by smell. There were only few wolves. If it had happened yesterday – he would die of only the fear. And today – nothing of the sort! Wolves were looking at him with hungry eyes and he was looking at them. Nothing more. Pulling somehow himself up, overcoming weakness, taking no count of luminous points of wolves' eyes Aslanbek started to collect dry branches on his four. The only question – how many did he need for the whole night? For certain many. In fear sheep were chopping round and bleating. They flocked up.

Aslanbek finished collecting when he couldn't see a yard in front of him. The eyes of wolves became closer. Sadly, there was no moon. He lighted a fire by touch. Wolves turned away. He took few burning branches and bypassed the stock for fear that wolves could take one sheep. But those turned farther away.

A strange thing – only few hours ago he had been lying face down and could only breath and now he felt such a force raise that it seemed he could run up and down from the near mountain quite easily with only force and sleight of foot and hand. On the mountain from which he hardly got down in the morning. The atmosphere was more congenial. The back was just barely aching. He desired so much to run up the hill to test the occurred forces and he narrowly restrained this impulse being afraid of leaving his sheep. Besides it was night. He couldn't see anything. It was no reason. He would try tomorrow. He bypassed the stock with burning branches one more time. Being on the rise of mental and physical forces Aslanbek felt he could sit up for all the night. Ten nights not getting a wink of sleep if it was required. And one more thing – he got a feeling of glory. He couldn't say from where it runs and why appeared. But he was here **TOTALLY ALONE**. He, sheep and wolves. He was happy.

Towards morning wolves went away. Bonfire was dying down. Aslanbek fell asleep.

In his sleep he was murmuring with his hardened lips:

– Drink...

He had a dream. There was water running from the mountain from which he had fallen yesterday. But he couldn't reach and touch it. His knife. One spirt, a sudden movement – and the fairy warm humidity poured down on his face.

He was drinking it spluttering of satisfaction. And suddenly the crystal stream changed to a red color. And Aslanbek understood that it was blood. Blood of a mutton whose neck he had cut. But he didn't stop drinking. Because he couldn't do this. He couldn't get off...

Aslanbek woke up horror-struck. The hand was fastening the knife.

And he understood what Shamil wanted when he had putted bazalay in the hands.

He felt bad again. Even worse than earlier. He didn't remember more of running up the hill. Rise of force was over. Aslanbek couldn't see his face but skin around the eyes got blackish color, the lines became hard. Sheep were calmly grazing nearby. Dew didn't drain yet. The boy stripped himself off to the naked and fell rolling on grass. And lick up this magic drops.

He got tired and simply kept lying naked looking at the sky.

Patimat was praying. Shamil said her:

– Well we will lose a couple of sheep instead a man will return home.

– Why don't you understand that he will not be able to do this?

– He will do this. He has no choice.

– Never. Never.

Patimat cried. She said:

– He will do everything you ask him. You say die – he will die. Ahmet will think about. Will ask – what for? But Aslanbek will die if you want it... Just in case he thinks you want his last?!

– Shut up!!! Or... Talaq!

Patimat threw herself down on knees.

If he said it two times more they would be divorced and she would be dishonored...

Only Aslanbek knew how he survived the third day. He couldn't sleep. Although a dream could save him. He clearly recognized that he would die soon. Such an insight happened not so often. But, as usual, unmistakably. There was no pain except his back. But there was an awful lack of energy. He should put tremendous efforts to move his hand or leg. But he didn't let the knife out of his hands. He was looking at sheep and saw there only the vessel with saving liquid. He desired their blood. He was persistently imagining himself drinking this blood. He couldn't divest himself of this idea as he

couldn't make desperate efforts. By noonday he saw nothing around but sheep. He didn't think that there he couldn't have enough force to kill a sheep. He knew he could do this. He would win in the last spurt for the life. But he continued laying and losing strength. He didn't have any soft feeling for sheep. He didn't pity them. But he knew: Shamil was waiting him to drink their blood. And it was quite enough. Aslanbek was ready to die but not to do that.

The sun was already setting down to the top of mountains in the west. Aslanbek recognized that if he didn't get on his legs now he would die till morning. He spent few minutes to rise up. He felt so giddy that could lose conscience. That would be the end. He came through this sickness. His first few steps were terrible. He was simply staying for a long time. There was no force to flap the whip. Luckily for him the sheep were grazing united and didn't disperse.

The more steps he did the easier it was to do. Sometime later he was able to drive the stock. Sheep were running together.

«They know we are going home», – thought the boy.

They had a distant trip. Aslanbek tried to rate his strength. Now back pain added blade-bone pain. He didn't know his heart was sore. There was absolutely overpowering stench coming from his mouth and skin. He was going with hunched back as he couldn't unbend to the full. His walking looked like old aged one.

He fell not far from aul. Near his favorite place on the hillside. He lost conscience.

Sheep were running on the well-known way alone. At once they were seen by everyone. Was made a hustle, fuss. Patimat run out of home. Shamil stepped out calmly and with dignity.

– Sheep returned alone! – Patimat cried. – Find our son!!!

Instead Shamil was counting sheep.

– All! – he said growing dark and fierce.

Patimat run farther. She found son on «his» place. She made an effort to raise him up. Neighbor women came to her aid and helped to bring the boy. The sheep were lapping down from drinking bowl, knocking and bleating.

Aslanbek was lying in the bed. Patimat tried to pour water into his mouth. But drops were running by his mouth. Shamil came from behind. He broke up bazalay from the belt. He looked it over. There were no blood marks on it. Only ground remains. He flipped it, spread with fingers.

– He will never be a soldier.

... When Aslanbek woke up it was morning again. First of all, he caught his knife. It was gone. Then he looked around. He was at home. Woke up. He was so dizzy of sickness but there was no back pain. He drank. Found his bazalay. And hanged it up on the belt.

... Relationship with father was screwed. But not in such a context which could be known by European. As was right and proper they were based on absolute subjection and respect by the youngest, i. e. Aslanbek, to the elder, i. e. Shamil. But Aslanbek remembered that father had taken everywhere Ahmet, his elder brother, when the last one was at his age. They went to hunting, to neighboring auls... And of what could they be silent for hours? But both understood each other without words. While speaking with Aslanbek father was like discharging duties and no more. Aslanbek felt this. Shamil didn't trust him. And didn't believe he would make good. Aslanbek was ready to die as to prove him the contrary. But he wasn't ready to subordinate for these reasons. Shamil thought that if you couldn't become a reflection of father's will you wouldn't be able to execute the will of Allah.

While Aslanbek was gasping for a drink it seemed he thought only about how to survive. But in fact somewhere deep in his unconscious the brain was working. And absolutely unexpected some things popped to his head when he recovered himself after that three days. That were adult ideas but not such of a ten-years-old boy.

He could die. He knew it exactly because he couldn't forget such a feeling of death which he felt unmistakably on the third day. What then?! Why somebody die being a child and others – being respected old people, wok stags? Maybe elder knew some secret how to survive? But he was sure they wouldn't give the secret away. Not for any price. Least of all to a kid. And if at last he asks wok stag Rashid? Aslanbek imagined that one laughing wisely in his beard but not answering anything...

One more thing. Ahmet had never been hungry and thirsty for three days. But the father trusts him. And Aslanbek – not. In his spirit woke up jealousy and anger but right then Aslanbek thought he should be proud of that testing. In no case of overpassing it, but because of it happened to him. Ahmet didn't have such a fear and pain. Thank you father! Anyhow he would try to prove himself. Worse than that. For sure he would climb that mountain. And would get down without knife.

He was thinking about all this sitting at his favorite place. All the aul got accustomed to his freak. The only his friend Salman understood him. It was a pity he didn't hear mountains moaning and breathing more clearly and heavily...

Salman suggested him to learn shooting. He said:

– It's time.

Aslanbek also felt that it was about time. But from where came such insight he didn't know. Shamil wasn't surprised when had heard his desire to give him a gun. There was almost no improvised weapon for which these mountains were well-known. A great part of it came up here from northern and southern neighbors. Only noble sword-blades were forged here. Aslanbek's bazalay was a local one. Shamil brought for son an old «Makarov» gun. He handed it over and said he wouldn't teach him shooting because Aslanbek was clever and would get it himself.

Now two friends – Aslanbek and Salman – spent time disassembling and assembling their weapons. It took some time before the boy recognized the existence and assignment of the weapon's safety lock.

One week later after he took a gun into the hands, mountains gave back an echo of the first shoots. In this echo the boy heard something that mountains were warning of. But he couldn't make sense of these words. Wok stag Rashid always said that their mountains were more open space than a flat land. One wrong word would reflect enmity and enmity – blood. For which you should pay with blood. And he told. Once a man had been lost in the mountains. He was mortally hungry. That's why he had stolen a chicken in the strange aul. He had eaten it and survived. But the offended man found him. He knew adat very well. He had taken a sheep instead of his chicken. Not to be in debt the other one had stolen a horse. A horse in mountains was like a man. A keeper of chicken and horse had come back and killed the offender. Then a family of the killed man had destroyed the whole family of the killer. Blood vengeance – kanly. Now they say kir. All the aul in which such a disaster happened, got up as this was one folk though distantly related. Two auls had gathered. Nobody had left alive...

Only two week passed and Aslanbek shoot from weapon in such a manner that it really seemed to be extension of his hand and mind. The boy felt some special magic which he didn't know earlier. The pointed gun was an imperative gesture. To throw stones – it was great. But shooting... All it takes is to hold a hand with gun outwards of a disliked person... one insensible motion of fingers – your willing and gesture became a death.

For sure Aslanbek didn't have enemies whose death he could desire. But the only gesture charmed him. As well as a steel weight in his fingers.

Aslanbek knew the meaning of most surah in Koran. But Salman passed him over. He learned Arabic. He assured it wasn't difficult. Avar was much more difficult. Prophet Mohammed told to read Koran only in Arabic. That's why Salman was reading it in the original. He often shared with the friend his ideas which visited him after they had been shooting long enough until smarting eyes and were sitting at Aslanbek's favorite hillside. During reasoning Aslanbek always heard mountain breath much better. It seemed any minute now he would distinguish words...

On a whim he said:

– Salman, one day you will be a mullah. No! Imamah! I don't know who. But you will be the Chief. And everybody will mind you.

Salman thought and said:

– I want only to know Allah. If it's necessary to be the Chief for this purpose, I will be the Chief. La-illahail-allah.

There was no tele receiver in their aul. Father and many other aksakals took it as Satan which cobweb make the mind obscure and dishonor religion. Aslanbek was jealous of Ahmet. Shamil had taken him to the neighbor aul. There was antenna and tele receiver. What would it take to tell about this afterwards! Although it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. Roughly a dozen time the same thing. Aslanbek hated him for conceitedness but was listening and couldn't tear away all the ten times. It seemed there was an entire world in television. And other people were there. Strange clothes. And countries. And big cities. Large road like a canon. Flush like a mirror. The one thing Aslanbek couldn't believe at all – there was a town in America, as said Ahmet, where was saklia as big as a mountain. Saklia stuck to mountain – that was understandable. But how could they stand separated?! Great Allah! What if that was true?! He wished to see it at least once in life. What a strange thing, he suddenly imagined he knew how this saklia was called... he remembered Ahmet didn't say this. And at the same time the word was on the tip of the tongue. Exactly like the words which mountains wanted to say him but he couldn't pin it down...

At that moment Aslanbek thought he would never see saklia like a mountain. In fact, nobody had seen who he knew. Even wok stag Rashid. But he knew everything. He knew Koran from memory as well as that their mountains would become plain one day...

The events that had happened after Aslanbek learned to shoot straight were misty, floaty and at once awfully. Misty because the boy didn't understand what was happening. However, something was going on. Once the aul community gathered. Everybody was troubled. A feeling which was in the air was associated somehow with Aslanbek's first memory in the life – how everybody had been waiting for Kurban Bayram.

Father went away. First Aslanbek thought he would return. As earlier he sometimes had been going away. Many days had passed. The face of his mother Patimat was often sad and wistful. Ahmet was darkling when looking at her. Now Aslanbek understood – they knew something he didn't know. He couldn't bring himself to ask about this.

One day mother run into the house and fell crying.

– What happened to father? – Aslanbek snapped.

– He had been taken away by mountains, – Patimat answered.

– Mom, Г m already big. What happened to father?

Then Ahmet went away. He should be seventeen soon. He was also devoured by mountains. Aslanbek was left the elder man in the family.

Only four years had passed but how much Aslanbek's life had changed. How he was changed! Now the most compulsive thoughts were about women. Sometimes he couldn't thing about something else. He painfully followed with his eyes every woman on the right side of thirty... Senior women were old bones. The sisters had married ad went away in other auls. Patimat became much more silent as she was with husband. The junior brother had grown up. He was already ten. Being senior Aslanbek never bullied him. He never humiliated his young dignity. He didn't force him to kill mutton. He didn't beat him. And he never tortured him with hunger and thirst. Ruslan minded him without doubt as befitted. Aslanbek tried to teach him to help mother in all things, as if he felt that exactly Ruslan should provide her a pillar support...

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