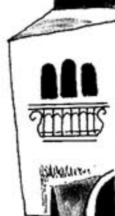
Elchin

stories



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Elchin

stories

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ELCHIN "Stories"

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THE CAR CRASH IN PARIS

I

Karim-muallim[1] had a nightmarish dream. He saw people who had died in the distant past – not his father or mother or family, but old neighbors... the headmaster from twenty-five years ago, his wife's distant relations, one of Nurida's ex-husbands... and, somehow they'd all met up to eat a water-melon? Not a normal melon, but a gigantic one – each melon-slice was the size of a boat... all these long-dead people were climbing over the slices or sitting down on them, breaking off huge chunks and scoffing them, spattering their arms and legs juice. The melon was crimson inside. He saw its lurid flesh in his sleep, then Karim-muallim's imagination rang with the sound of a pistol-shot – then another. His opening eyes promised him it had been a nightmare; but he sat up with a start at the crack of another volley, running to the window to see where the further shots were coming from .

The small square lay in front of the Karim-muallim family's old apartment. By morning, pensioners would read the newspapers they'd bought at the kiosk, while sitting on the benches. Young mums,

grannies and nannies wheeled their children to the square with prams lined up like piano keys. After lunch, the pensioners second shift began – playing backgammon and dominoes until nightfall. Then the square became deserted, and silence reigned. And when the next morning broke, the same ritual began once again with exact replication.

Karim-muallim saw a man with a gun, from his window over the square – and another man with him in thick gloves. Karim-muallim trembled – he'd never in his young life seen a man with a gun before – left alone someone aiming and firing once before it was even light enough to see. Perhaps... perhaps they were shooting a film? Yes, ten years ago they'd made a movie right there in the square. But this time there were only the two men – and no-one else in the square or the adjacent streets either. Although a covered van was standing at the far end of the square. Probably – they're crooks?

The gunman took aim and fired again. A dog yelped under the olive trees, and the gloved man ran to where it was lying and howling. Grabbing it by its ears, he threw it into the back of the van.

Karim-muallim got it at last. These were probably men from the City Health Department – shooting stray or rabid dogs. But shooting them against the background of a glowing dawn made Karim-muallim sick to his stomach – he felt like opening the window and shouting at the men. Although these guys were just doing their job – and their job was shooting dogs. And probably they weren't shooting bullets, but just dope pellets – once they'd anaesthetised the dogs, they'd take them away somewhere?

He stared a little longer at the two- and three-storey buildings across the square – everyone was still asleep. The August morning was still dozing itself, and no-one was stirring. They hadn't put the goods out on the fruit stall yet, and the metal cage around it was padlocked shut.

Karim-muallim suddenly thought the watermelons were like prisoners in jail. He felt queasy at the thought itself and at the

knowledge that it had occurred to him – Karim-muallim didn't like idle chatter or thinking empty thoughts.

Karim-muallim yawned as he scratched his hairy chest – and wondered why no-one had been woken by the shots?

He knew all the neighbours; he'd often stop to chat about how they were doing – or at least greet them before walking on, or give a nod of the head. He remembered them all, because Karim-muallim had lived in the flat in how since the day he was born there – and except for taking his family to Nalchik once on holiday seventeen years ago, and going to the rest-home at Susha nine years ago, he'd never been anywhere else.

Turning his eyes away from the square, Karim-muallim glanced at the wall clock which had been presented to him at the school on the thirtieth anniversary of his work there as a teacher. It was the only award he had ever received in his life. It was twenty to six: there was no point going back to bed, so Karim-muallim went quietly into the kitchen.

It was a two-bedroom flat with a balcony and a kitchen. Karim-muallim walked past one of the rooms, and stood still from a moment; the little boy in his wooden cot beside Shargia's bed was not asleep, and was silently watching Karim-muallim with open eyes. Karim-muallim had never before seen the boy so silent and serious.

Shargia was Karim-muallim's eldest daughter; the little boy was her son and Karim-muallim's grandson. He was a terrible cry-baby. He was born six months ago, and cried every day since then – except when he was asleep. Yet now he wasn't crying? Karim-muallim was perturbed deep down inside: what sort of a morning was this?

Naturally, Karim-muallim wasn't a superstitious man – he didn't believe in fate or portents. Even so the sudden shooting on an August morning... the strange thoughts about the water melons... and now, on

top of that, the child not sleeping and watching him so intently... it all made Karim-muallim feel uncomfortable.

He lit the gas under the kettle and put it on the ring -he washed, returned quietly once more to his room, and began getting dressed. His wife Zahra, his second daughter Zuleykha and his son Hamlet were still asleep. In fact no-one in the house ever rose up before him, no matter how late or early; at a quarter to seven he was invariably on his feet, brushing his suit and blacking his shoes. His family were still sleeping when he slipped out to buy bread, yoghurt, buttermilk and newspapers each morning. He made his own breakfast and went off to school. He did all their shopping for them.

Karim-muallim taught geography to the fifth and sixth forms, but there was no point in going to school during the holidays. Yet out of thirty-five year habit, he picked up his blue bag to leave the house – still quietly – while the little boy watched him go with the same serious look as before.

The city was utterly deserted except for the street-sweeper. On seeing Karim-muallim, he greeted him respectfully. Karim-muallim returned the greeting and continued on his way.

The shops and newspaper kiosks were still shut. Swinging his empty bag, Karim-muallim headed for Primorsky Boulevard. As he walked along the empty street, he seemed to be in an unfamiliar, unknown city. Karim-muallim remembered the names of at least ninety per cent of the world's cities and he also knew by name every street, side-street, cul-de-sac and even most of the buildings in Baku – except for the outlying suburbs. Yet on this August Saturday as Karim-muallim strode through the city's empty morning streets, he felt he was seeing them for the first time – and that the city was peopled only by street-sweepers with brooms.

Karim-muallim was nicknamed "Bag" by his pupils – because he always carried the same bag; queuing for things or buying them. As the kids moved up the school, they noticed that the bag was always dark blue – and so he became "Karim-muallim Blue-Bag"; and as the bag grew older, he became "Karim-muallim Old-Blue-Bag". Of course, Karim-muallim knew they called him that – but he wasn't annoyed about it. They could have thought of nastier nicknames, and when they grew up they'd have bags themselves, and then they'd understand. But there was something which would have made him annoyed, if he'd known – that his colleagues called him Old-Blue-Bag too.

Primorsky Boulevard was completely deserted too – well there were no people. But there were huge numbers of seagulls flying along the coast, swooping down, and dipping their beaks into the water. The absence of people made their shrieking racket so intense and distinct that it didn't sound like their usual racket. The birds had something of their own to discuss. Karim-muallim had no mood this kind of thought – he was more bothered about whether there'd be any sour cream left at the shop. But the birds irked him, or rather, the city sanitary services irked him because they'd not cleaned the shore – so seagulls were scavenging there instead. In fact, he had a good mind to write a stroppy letter – yes, a real stinker of a letter – about civic sanitation to Baku City Council... But thoughts of the dog-shooters interfered with his letter, and then he began to remember his grandson's silent eyes. No, he would write the letter tomorrow instead.

They said that Salman – Shargia's husband – was a talented physicist, but there was no sign of his talent in the way of an apartment, or a car. Instead he had moved in with Karim-muallim's family, and he seemed to have brought a spell of bad luck with him for Shargia and his in-laws. On the good side, at least he wasn't a boozer or a loser – he didn't moan, he went to his work every

day and came home on time. At weekends he took Shargia to the cinema on the boulevard. There'd even been a time he'd taken her to a State Flower Farm at Shuvalan. But he had nothing to his name, except some relatives who were hicks in the sticks – way out in Garbag, where he'd come from. In fact the only reason that Shargia had married Salman – whom she'd met at university – is that no-one else had married her first.

However, Salman was away from Baku – in fact, he was... in Paris.

He worked at an institute which had an exchange scheme with French students – and Salman had been picked to go to Paris for six months, after which a French student would come to Baku in return. Even Karim-muallim was forced to concede that is Salman had been sent to Paris, he might not be complete devoid of ability. However, Salman had been so sulky and reticent about the whole thing that the family barely even noticed he'd gone. But suddenly, as Karim-muallim was swinging his blue bag along the sea front, it occurred to him that it was peculiar to have a son-in-law who was living in some faraway foreign city. The crimson dawn of the morning sky seemed more cheerful to him – the sky's purity and blueness delighted him, and even the flocks of gulls swooping and diving and squawking pleased him. It was a picture of nature of which Karim-muallim could approve.

His lingering on the boulevard, and queues in the shops made him a bit late – the fruit-stall was open now, so he bought a fresh watermelon, and the Television & Radio Programme Guide from the paper kiosk. It all brought him home a bit later than usual.

The shocked expression on Nurida-khanum's face that greeted him on returning home quickly implied that something was seriously wrong. Nurida-khanum was Karim-muallim's elder sister, and

she'd been one of the first female teachers of physical education in Azerbaijan. She lived next door, in the adjacent building in the same courtyard.

Karim-muallim felt self-conscious – with a huge watermelon in one hand, and his blue bag in the other, in the face of this grave, powdered, painted and well-cared-for woman. "What on earth has happened, Nurida?", he exclaimed.

"Don't worry. You'd better come in" Nurida-khanum said, in her deep, baritone voice.

Zahra, Zuleyka and Hamlet were sitting around Shargia – who was at the foot of her child's bed, and sobbing silently. But at least they were all alive and well, and Karim-muallim relaxed a little as he started to imagine what else it might be? Surely Abdullah hadn't died? But Nurida-khanum's face wasn't that of a wife who had just lost her husband.

"It's Salman!" she said resolutely. "He's... he's been in a car crash." Shargia's body spasmed with tears at the words.

"What? A car crash? When did he get back from Paris?" asked Karim-muallim.

Nurida-khanum looked her brother scornfully in the eye. "You think they don't have cars in Paris too, eh?"

Nurida-khanum had always been secretly proud of her younger brother – she often used him as proverbial good example when nagging her husband Abdullah. But there were times when even Karim-muallim fell under the blazing gaze of her penetrating judgmental stare, and those moments rendered him as helpless as one of his schoolroom pupils. She averted her stare, and instead handed him a telegram. Taking it to the window to see it better, he found it to be sent from a Paris hospital – where he'd been taken after a car wreck, but where his life was now out of danger.

"Look!" said Karim-muallim. "It says so clearly – LIFE NOT IN DANGER. They're the best, those French doctors! They can fix you up as easily as drinking a cup of coffee!"

It was the strangest of coincidences. Only just before Nurida-khanum had said the same words to Zahra, while Karim-muallim had been cursing the seagulls on the seafront, and composing a letter of the sternest complaint to the Baku Sanitary Council. Zahra had lived an undisturbed life unmolsted by the slightest incident or upset, and she was unprepared for the onset of bad news. She panicked when the telegram came, and immediately picked up the phone to Nurida-khanum, reading her the whole thing word-for-word. Nurida-khanum, by contrast, was more upset by the interruption of her morning exercises than the content of the telegram, and said so without hesitating. "Well, and so what? The telegram says his life is not in danger. Don't worry – he's in the hands of French doctors. They'll fix him up better for you, better than he was before!" She went back to her daily dozen, but had hardly done a few more press-ups before she was back on the phone, calling Zahra. "Read me that telegram again? Alright – I'm coming now!" She had hardly got dressed and arrived at her brother's apartment before her brother echoed her words exactly.

There was only one comfy chair in the apartment – Nurida-khanum settled into it by dint of right. "Read on!" she commanded her brother.

Karim-muallim read falteringly on. It said that one of Salman's close relatives should go to Paris – but the company who owned the car, and who had been responsible for Salman being in the accident in the first place, were going to pick up the bill for all the expenses incurred in the incident. Karim-muallim looked at his sister once more. At first he didn't know what to say – but he began to fume.

"It's... it's disgraceful! With no good reason they first put him in hospital – and then they try to buy their way out!"

As he looked around the room, Karim-muallim realised his outburst hadn't taken root with anyone – but then he felt the gaze of the child in the cot. The child, unusually, wasn't crying. He almost felt asking what the matter was, because the boy wasn't crying? Instead, he looked to Shargia. She wept, she snobbed, she sniffled – but she didn't say a word. Just like her husband Salman, he thought. Peas from the same pod, and as useless as each other.

Nurida-khanum noticed how his glance had fallen on Shargia.

"No! Of course Shargia can't go! She's still breast-feeding – how could she possibly go?!"

Zuleyka picked up the melody in unison. "Of course Shargia mustn't go! The best thing would be if I went. I can do everything that's needed".

Shargia's weeping grew louder. It was bad enough that she couldn't go to Paris, and that he had to breast-feed her baby, and the baby cried all the damn time... but on top of that, she knew Zuleykha held Salman in contempt. Zuleykha even apologised to her friends, that her sister had married such a hopeless and graceless booby.

Hamlet, Karim-muallim's son, blistered at hearing Zuleykha's words – he sulked wordlessly at the open window. He was older than Zuleykha and Shargia, but they barely accepted his seniority – his response to this came out in expressions of offence, and putting on a superior air.

"In the presence of elders" Nurida-khanum glowered, "the juniors are supposed to bite their tongues. When WE were young" she said, gesturing towards herself and her brother, "nobody in our families started sounding forth with their opinions".

Here Nurida-khanum clearly meant her own parents. In fact she brought Karim-muallim's dead parents into family disputes on such a regular basis, that he'd long forgotten what they'd actually been like, and instead imagined them as they appeared in his sister's interminable reminiscences of them.

Zuleykha was clearly hatching a grudge with her aunt. In her own mind she was the brightest and best of all of them, and she quickly realised that her aunt was scheming to take advantage of the situation, and get an expenses-paid trip to Paris for herself.

At that moment Hamlet left his open window, and took the centre of the room. He looked round to his aunt, his father and mother, and Zuleykha and Shargia – and even the boy in his crib, who was turning his hands around and looking at them carefully.

"You know... wherever I go, my opinion is respected. Except in my own house!", and he strode out of the room, banging the door behind him.

In his younger days Karim-muallim had been a keen theatre-goer. Under the impression of one especially moving performance he had called his own son Hamlet. It was a name that had taken on an ironic turn. Nurida-khanum sighed as Hamlet stomped out of the room. He was the wrong side of thirty, and still hadn't found a profession. He would write a screenplay, and live his day out enacting scenes from it... or get a job at the airport, and then fantasise a life as the Head of Customs... or sit in the library from morning until night with his nose buried in Kant and Hegel, with dreams of fame as a philosopher himself.

"I think we need to have a discussion about this" said Nurida-khanum. "Give the tailor the right measurements, and the dress always comes out right".

II

When Karim-muallim read the newspaper, he read it from cover to cover – and he was now on the balcony, approaching the rear cover.

Nurida-khanum hadn't gone home yet, and was sweltering in the hot kitchen with Zahra, cooking dolmas over the hot gas stove.

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Zuleykha pored through her diary as she lounged on the divan in the main room. It was a diary her workmate at the tram depot had given her. Long ago the pages had been filled with beautiful script, and the pages were decorated with flowers, nightingales, hearts pierced from both sides by arrows (all done by Zuleykha's friend in colored crayons). The theme was unhappy love and the way men cheated – but Zuleykha could not concentrate and fully immerse herself in the diary as she kept popping into the kitchen to listen on what her aunt was saying. However, Nurida-khanum was keeping her own counsel. She hadn't gone home, because although she trusted her brother, she feared Zuleykha's malign influence would cause the Paris problem to be decided without her. However, with her faith in her brother's influence, she was confident that she herself would end up going to Paris to solve the problem there.

Abdullah lay dozing in the next room. From time to time he'd glance at the telegram on the table and grin – shake his head, yawn and doze off again. Abdullah was a barber and Nurida-khanum's fourth husband. Unlike his predecessors was a one-woman man and hadn't run off, so they'd been living together for exactly sixteen years. Nurida-khanum had phoned him and told him to come at once. Abdullah was sleepily waiting for his second breakfast, and weighing up the best options for making a swift exit. He had a five-rouble note hidden in his spectacle case, and if he could plan an escape, it would be a beautiful day. Zuleykha went past Abdullah on tip-toe, trying not breath. Abdullah reeked of cheap cologne, and it made such a vivid contrast to the thrills of her diary that she found the odour utterly repulsive.

Abdullah was a wily man, and it was only Nurida-khanum who could see through him. "Abdullah smells of cheap eau-de-cologne not because he's covered in it from his work at the barber's shop. He drenches his face in it, because it covers up the smell of something else!"

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Shargia sat on the balcony breast-feeding her child. The child, unusually, was not crying – for the first time since it was born. Every time Karim-muallim saw it, he felt shaken with surprise.

The punishing heat of August grew ever more severe – by midday it was getting hard even to breath. Karim-muallim's memory flitted back to the crystal mountain air at Shusha at the summit – in his mind the lightning still flashed, the thunder still crashed, and his thoughts were drenched in a torrential downpour taking place elsewhere and long ago. His eyes sank down from his newspaper and wandered off into the distance. "I wonder if they have thunderstorms in Paris too?"

Yet the geography teacher knew the precipitation statistics for the whole of Western Europe – Paris included. Somehow, though, Paris now gripped his imagination with a mystery that filled his heart with feelings that were new to him. Karim-muallim knew that rains were frequent in Paris – but did they have big thunderstorms there?

Nurida-khanum called the family to breakfast. Zahra was laying the table, and Karim-muallim was starving – but he didn't want to join them at breakfast, or settle down round the table. He couldn't pull himself away from his dreams of thunderstorms and downpours. Weighing over all of them was a decision that instilled a temporary and artificial peace. It was a topic that threatened to burst into a thunderstorm of its own.

The doorbell rang.

Hamlet came in, and went around the family members in turn, asking questions in a whisper. He went to Abdullah, but Abdullah shook his head in reply, and so Hamlet took his place at the table. Everyone was sitting silently, eating their dolma. It was only the infant in the cot, who turned his hands around in wonder, who was learning to ask questions about the world around him.

The gloomy silence was punctuated only by the rattle of forks on plates. Abdullah coughed, twice. Zuleykha turned away, so as not to look at Abdullah – she regretted every moment that tore her away from the sentiments of love and happiness in her diary, and sat looking like a broody hen.

Nurida-khanum was always Nurida-khanum, and she was the one to break the silence.

"It's a pity Shargia has a babe in arms... A nursing mother has so many commitments"

Zuleykha looked at her aunt with a concealed smirk. Nurida-khanum had a daughter by one of her ex-husbands, apparently living in Kazan; but neither Karim-muallim nor Nurida-khanum ever mentioned her, and the daughter never wrote letters or came to Baku. In general Nurida-khanum and all the other members of Karim-muallim's household behaved as if this daughter simply didn't exist – everything to do with her was a sworn secret, but Zuleykha suspected that she had eloped with someone.

"Shargia will not be able to go to Paris..." continued Nurida-khanum.

"Then I shall go to Paris!" exclaimed Zuleykha.

Shargia's eyes filled with tears – but as usual, she said nothing.

Nurida-khanum looked angrily at Zuleykha and then at Karim-muallim – as if to ask, "Well, have you nothing to say?" The final word would be Karim-muallim's, of course – and those at the table knew this; they also knew that Karim-muallim's final word would always be in favor of Nurida-khanum.

Finally Karim-muallim put his newspaper down, joined the others at the table, and munched at the vine-leaves of a dolma – but in his mind he was still being drenched in a torrential downpour at Shusha, and even more strangely he didn't particular want to come

in out of the rain either. He noticed it himself, and nothing of the kind had happened in his life before. Everyday warmth and cold were quite sufficient for him – he didn't need imaginary versions. But the lightning flashed, and the rain kept pouring down, and the cool rain delighted him with new sensations. Karim-muallim could only marvel at what sensations they might be and what they were telling him, but he felt a kind of freshness, a kind of newness – freshness and newness that secreted a kind of sorrow, and reminded him of his past life and his humdrum existence.

"Well... what do you have to say?" putting the question to his wife.

Karim-muallim's question was highly unexpected. For all her long years in that house, Zahra had been on her feet morning, noon and night – cooking dinner, washing the dishes, doing the laundry, making jam in summer, marinating the courgettes, sprinkling the clothes with naphthalene and preparing the flour dishes in winter. Of course Zahra took no part in serious matters; Zahra, indeed, didn't even have any desire to take part in serious matters. Shargia took after her mother in this respect; but Zahra's answer was even more baffling than Karim-muallim's question.

"For goodness sake, Karim! Maybe I should go myself?!"

Karim-muallim's eyes crawled up into his forehead.

"What?"

"Yes! I'll go and I'll bring us back all sorts of nice things!"

This was too much for Zuleykha. "So, you're telling us... that you understand fashion?"

"Sure I do. Why not, eh?"

"So, like...you'd go to Paris all on your little own?"

"Well, after all, Karim, I could go somewhere, for once in my life..."

Only now did Nurida-khanum recover herself sufficiently to say angrily, "What's this only once in a lifetime stuff? You mean you've never been to... Nalchik?"

Karim-muallim averted his eyes.

"Actually, I was wondering if they have thunderstorms in Paris?"

Trying to hide his agitation, Hamlet spoke for the first time since he'd returned to the house. "Do you even know what you're talking about? You think going to Paris is like dropping in at Mashtaga, or something? Paris is... Paris! A person who goes to Paris must have had experience. He must have spent some time abroad!"

Abdullah ignored the conversation. His main thoughts were of escape, opening the spectacle-case, dropping in at some suitable drinking establishment, and then beating his workmate Martiros at draughts. When he heard what Hamlet said, however, he couldn't believe his ears – then he noticed that after Hamlet had spoken, everybody, including even Nurida-khanum, was looking at him in amazement. He pushed his chest out and sat bolt upright – he was overcome with an agitation that suddenly made him tremble from head to foot.

No-one around the table had ever been anywhere abroad. None of them had the slightest experience – except for Abdullah, whose regiment had got as far as Vienna in the war and been stationed there for a month or two. But he barely remembered it now – even though Nurida-khanum liked to bring it up a lot.

Abdullah himself didn't expect to be considered or his experience to be appreciated; he was absolutely convinced that Nurida-khanum would go to Paris, and the rest of the conversation was just empty chatter. Deep down inside, Abdullah was delighted that Nurida-khanum was going to Paris. For ten, or perhaps even fifteen days he'd have his freedom, and live unhindered – maybe not in Paris of course, but at least in Baku. It never occurred

to Abdullah that he would go to Paris himself – but now he had forgotten even the proposals for slipping out of the house, meticulously planned since morning, and he had also forgotten the five-ruble note in the spectacle-case, and the urge to beat Martiros at draughts. Abdullah's breast was suddenly filled with pride and he soared aloft in his own eyes.

After his wife's unexpected words, Karim-muallim now marveled at what his son had said, looked at him, then at the boozer Abdullah... but still didn't lose his patience.

"And so, err, what do you want to say?" he asked Hamlet calmly.

"I want to say..." Hamlet began flushing. "It would be good... It would be good... It would be a good thing if Farida went!"

"WHO?"

"Farida! She has experience in this sort of thing! Last year... last year she went on a holiday excursion to Bulgaria!"

Karim-muallim couldn't understand at all.

"And, errr... who's Farida?"

Hamlet flushed an even deeper red.

"He's been in love with Farida for five years," Zuleykha announced triumphantly. "He sighs for her day and night. But Farida doesn't want to know him. Now she's probably dictated the terms: a trip to Paris!.. He even wants to change his name for Farida's sake..."

Karim-muallim was sincerely amazed.

"And what's that for?"

"Farida doesn"t like his name!.."

Karim-muallim looked sideways at his son and merely said, "Good lad!"

Abdullah broke out into a cold sweat. A soundless groan burst from his chest, as if to say, "Oh, you fool, at your age! You've got nothing in your noodle that could be called brains. You've spread

your wings – and puffed your chest out like a cock! Didn't you ever hear that the world is transitory... that life is an illusion?"

Karim-muallim sat grumpily in his own house... at the table he had inherited from his father... and ate dolma of meat and vine-leaves. He guided the conversation and was amazed at what he heard; but he still couldn't escape the cloudburst in Shusha, nor did he really want to. There was an incomparable freshness in the cool of that rain, it was an alluring freshness – it wouldn't let him go, and there was a kind of special sweetness in it.

He wondered if there were thunderstorms in Paris.

Children leave school, go their different ways. New pupils appear, and they too call Karim-muallim "Old-Blue-Bag".

Karim-muallim glanced at Zahra, Zuleykha, Hamlet, Shargia, Nurida-khanum and Abdullah in turn; then he suddenly thought that it had never occurred to a single one of them to say, "YOU go to Paris!" This unexpected thought, to tell the truth, almost upset Karim-muallim. But to hell with them. Karim-muallim did not need their advice. His glance fell on the child lying in its wooden cot, turning its hands about and scrutinizing them intently. And again he marveled: Lord, why hasn't the kid cried once since morning?

He wondered if there were thunderstorms in Paris.

But at this point Karim-muallim became angry with himself. What kind of question was that? He started, came indoors from his pouring rain, returned to the baking dry heat of the August day in Baku and once more became the old Karim-muallim.

Shargia opened her mouth for the first time that day, and began. "I wonder if poor Salman..."

Karim-muallim angrily interrupted his daughter.

"Salman, Salman"? What has Salman got to do with it?" And Karim-muallim firmly made up his mind. "I'm the one who's going to Paris!"

Hamlet jumped up from his seat. "But I... But I... But I've promised Farida!" Karim-muallim surveyed his son from the feet upwards and confined himself to a wave of the hand and the exclamation, "Ach!"

Neither Nurida-khanum's former husbands, nor Karim-muallim's family, nor her mere acquaintances had ever seen Nurida-khanum weep. But now her eyes suddenly filled with tears and her lips trembled. "But you know the whole world anyway," she said.

"It's one thing knowing," said Karim-muallim, trying not to look at his sister, "but it's another thing seeing with your own eyes."

Nurida-khanum did not say any more; two teardrops rolled down her cheeks (she seemed to be ageing at last) and, rising, she walked out of Karim-muallim's apartment. Abdullah also stood up, glanced at Karim-muallim, shrugged his shoulders – and went out after Nurida-khanum.

Karim-muallim realised that Nurida-khanum would never enter his house again.

Once again, Hamlet surveyed in turn his father, his mother and his sisters, then sadly asked, "What about me?.. What am I to say to Farida?"

"Tell her... that you're a fool!" retorted Zuleykha, and she went through into the big room.

III

It was evening on that same August day.

Karim-muallim was sitting on his balcony, drinking tea – and thinking that the next day he would have to get up very early. He would not go to the market, nor the shop – but to the appropriate institutions to solve the problems of the journey to Paris. The faces of the schoolteachers each in turn rose in front of his eyes. The frank amazement on those 28 faces, to tell the truth, pleased Karim-muallim no end.

Zahra washed dishes in the kitchen, thinking that she must get up in the morning, prepare some halva for her husband's journey. Halva is something that never goes off and it's filling – and it was a foreign country after all, and there was no knowing how you might be fed there. People said they even eat snails in France, and frogs too.

Hamlet left in a filthy mood saying he would come that evening to pack his suitcase and leave the house altogether. Everybody knew perfectly well that Hamlet would soon be back to sit in the kitchen and have his supper – because he'd gone off in a huff like that many times before, but had always returned when he felt hungry.

Zuleykha lounged again on the settee in the big room, reading her diary -fully immersed in the world of elevated feelings. Where Zuleykha saw two cinema tickets neatly attached to a page of the diary, she lost her self-control, sniffed and began weeping. They'd been tickets to the last date she'd had with an ex-lover, and were now the mementos of an unhappy love-affair.

Shargia spread on old shawl on kitchen table and was ironing nappies.

The child lay in its little wooden cot, turning its hands in front of its eyes.

The doorbell rang.

Karim-muallim answered it.

It was the postman, with a telegram. After he'd had the signature and his tip, he quickly left.

It was from Salman. "NO NEED TO WORRY STOP FULLY RECOVERED AND LEAVING HOSPITAL TOMORROW STOP NO NEED TO COME TO PARIS STOP LOVE SALMAN STOP."

Zuleykha tore herself away from the diary, stood up, went to the door. Without even asking, she took the telegram and read it.

"Salman's a fool!" she said. "In his place, I know what I'd do..."

As he went into the room, Karim-muallim thought that he should have suggested at the family council that Nurida-khanum should go to Paris – but how was he to know that things would turn out like this? Then Karim-muallim stopped at his grandson's cot.

The little boy was looking at his tiny hands, which he was turning round before his eyes, then he glanced at Karim-muallim, then at his hands again, and suddenly he burst into tears.

It was all too much for Karim-muallim.

"There he goes! Bawling again!"

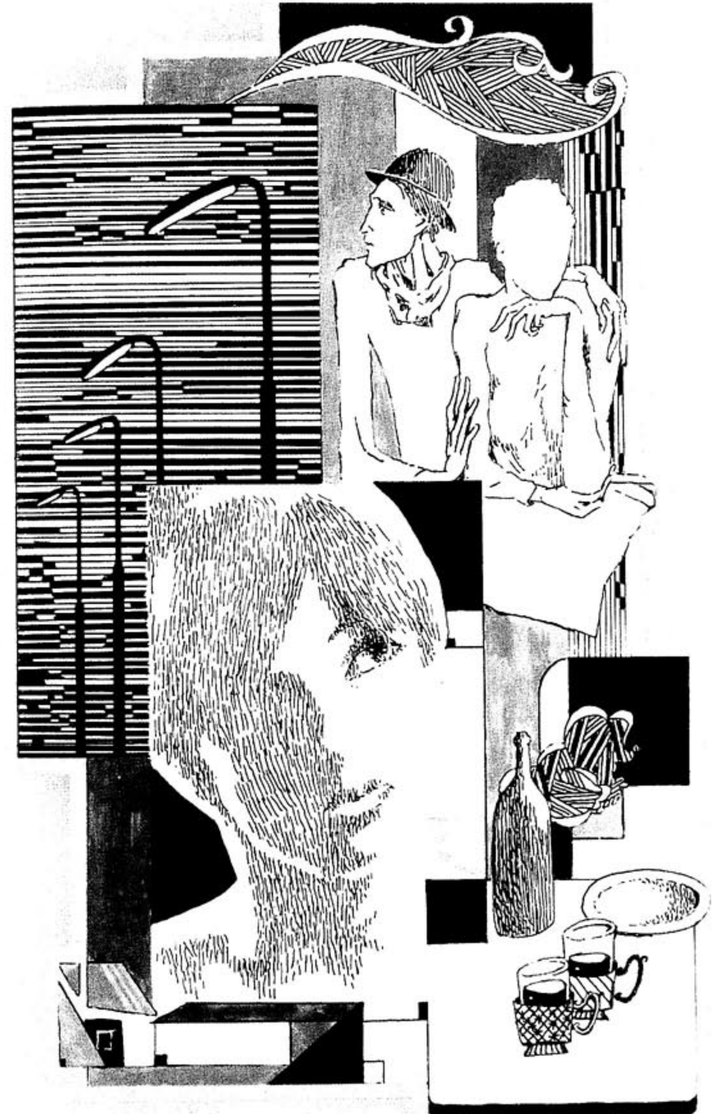
"He's registering his protest!" said Zuleykha with a smile.

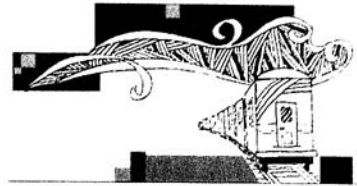
"What protest? To who?" said Karim-muallim, knitting his bushy brows.

"To us. To all of us!" said Zuleykha, and she laughed. Then she went into the drawing-room to resume contemplating the tickets again – the last relics of her unhappy love.

Karim-muallim couldn't understand what his daughter meant. He went to the window and stared down at the little square; the pensioners were sitting playing dominoes and draughts; they had no idea that morning before dawn, the health workers had removed several stray dogs away from that square. Then Karim-muallim remembered his complaint letter to the City Council – today's business shouldn't be postponed until tomorrow. So he took pen and paper, sat down at the table, and... but the infant was crying so loudly that Karim-muallim could not concentrate.

It was impossible to quieten the child; the boy wailed until nightfall, and only finally fall asleep once he was completely exhausted.





TRAIN.
PICASSO.
LATOUR.
1968

Maleika-khanum's husband was coercing me yet beseeching me in the same look – yet in spite of it all he looked pathetic... Especially so, when the conductress asked the non-passengers to leave the carriage. He kissed his wife on the cheek, asking her to ring him immediately on arrival in Moscow and tell him what sort of a journey she'd had. He was kissing her and talking to her – but somehow it seemed as if he was talking to me, and not to her. Of course, I could have reassured him instantly by saying something like, "Don't worry, my dear friend! I swear, that nothing bad will happen to your wife on the journey!" Or I could have added to myself, "Because I'm not in the least worried about your wife"; or I could have said to him, "Don't think of such a thing, even though we're in the same compartment and it's a long journey – rest assured!". Of course I could have added to myself, "And good night to you – if, of course, you yourself are going to sleep alone!"

I could have said all of this to him, but I said none of it. I kept silent. It was my revenge for his sidelong glances in my direction. As

someone rightly noticed, there's nothing in the world worse than that kind of alarm.

Once the train moved off, Maleyka-khanum put her hand out of the window and waved. Her husband waved back, but he looked only at me. Truly, there is nothing worse than that kind of alarms! Then the conductress came along and collected our tickets. She eyed Maleyka-khanum and myself with a professional glance, – as if to say, "Everything's clear!"

I went out into the corridor first while Maleyka-khanum changed – then she came out and I changed. We both settled ourselves down in the compartment and began closely studying the winter evening panorama of Absheron where – as is well known – there is nothing to see.

The conductress reappeared to collect a ruble apiece from us for the bed-linen and ask if we wanted tea – we said yes. I took the latest edition of the Baku "Literature & Culture Weekly" from my coat pocket and leafed through it. They had already written about the international symposium of art critics opening in Moscow, and about the speeches that Maleyka-khanum and I were to make there. It was all in the paper. The only thing missing was a photograph: Maleyka-khanum and I against the background of her husband's ominous and yearning looks!

"Do you read satirical verses?" asked Maleyka-khanum – I said I enjoyed them. Then Maleyka-khanum said, "Your tea will get cold!". As if she was the lady of the house and was entertaining guests! I replied, "Thanks, I'll drink it now."

Maleyka-khanum couldn't take air-travel; she had a heart complaint. I don't go by air either – simply because I get no pleasure from flying. Well, actually I've never flown in my life – but I'm convinced it must be like that.

Maleyka-khanum smiled, saying, "I don't know... but did anyone ever tell you that you're a very reserved man?" "You'll never believe how much I love gossiping!" I replied. "No," she said, "I never will believe it – because in all the years we've worked together, our taped conversations wouldn't cover twenty meters: "Hello – Hello! See you – See you!"

Of course I could have answered "Dear Maleyka-khanum – what is there for me to talk to you about? Our conversation – if it ever took place – would be empty and meaningless. I regard you as an absolute philistine; although I don't even know anything about you..., I just feel that's what you are. We're strangers to each other; so much so that even twenty meters of recording-tape would be too long for us anyway!" I could have said all that to her. But in reality I said nothing, because any words spoken are already a conversation, and I have no need whatever to converse with Maleyka-khanum. Incidentally, it's just the same with Safura-khanum, Samad, Malik, Sanubar, Karim, my cousin Baylar, my girl-cousin Madina and so many more of them.

A man's best conversationalist is himself. A man can only be properly understood by one man – himself. That's my conviction – and it's based on forty years lifetime experience!

Maleyka-khanum turned to the window and said, "You know best, of course, but in my opinion that sort of reserve doesn't get anyone anywhere." Again I bit my tongue – but this time I said to myself, "Steady! Don't get flustered!"

The conductress came into the compartment and asked, "More tea?" "No," we replied, "we don't need any, thanks!" The conductress apologized and said she wouldn't bother us any more – after which quietly, like a conspirator, she closed the door behind her.

Maleyka-khanum stared into the darkness outside, while I leafed through "Literature & Culture". Maleyka-khanum may have been examining her own thoughts in the window, since it was impossible to see anything else in the darkness. However, since the time of Adam and Eve, nothing in the world can be more transparent, in my opinion, than those thoughts of Maleyka-khanum... and all the other Maleyka-khanums. It's possible to see right through such thoughts – because there simply aren't any there.

As she continued looking out of the window, Maleyka-khanum quietly said, "It's probably no accident that people in a railways carriage share their secrets with each other. The darkness outside, the endless movement and the eternal banging of the wheels – it encourages towards sharing their thoughts. A journey takes a man away into solitude – and people run away from that solitude."

At this point, Maleyka-khanum looked at me.

Of course, I could again have not answered her, because the journey – with its darkness outside, its endless movement and the banging of the wheels was certainly not carrying me away into any kind of solitude whatsoever. When I'm left alone by myself – I like it. After all, I'm my own best conversationalist. No one will understand me better than I understand myself. And incidentally, I won't understand another man as he understands himself. Solitude is a condition of a true human life. It's a pity that not everybody understands this...

Of course, that's what I ought to have said in reply to Maleyka-khanum. But I noted a kind of irony in her look – as if she felt sorry for me. And not for the first time. Once, I had been regarded in that way by Safura-khanum, Samad, Malik, Sanubar, Karim, my cousin Baylar and my girl-cousin Madina. Many look at me like

that. At first it upsets me, but only for a moment, only for one single moment – and then I have a kind of thirst for revenge. However, I have always repressed my sense of injury and the desire for revenge that it arouses – because I know I'm right. I know it – and that's enough.

But this time, in the carriage, with Maleyka-khanum looking at me like that, I couldn't overcome the sense of injury, nor the desire for revenge and – I don't know why – I told her about the strangest thing that had ever happened to me in my life. Something I'd never discussed with anyone else before. Did I, perhaps, simply want to surprise her – by prolonging that twenty-meter recording-tape?

"Do you remember the details of Picasso's water-color, Le repas frugal?"

"Yes," she replied, not showing any surprise. "I remember – it's from Picasso's blue period. A man and a woman are sitting in a bistro, in the corner. They have an empty plate in front of them, two glasses and a bottle. The man's left hand is resting on the woman's shoulder and he is touching her hand with his right. They are looking pensively in different directions."

Maleyka-khanum looked at me with the same unpleasant, seemingly pitying stare – as if to say, "Fancy asking ME, if I remember Le repas frugal!"

I didn't respond to her too eloquent stare. I simply told her that she had an excellent memory. "Perfectly right!" I said, "It's about that work that I want to tell you something."

Once, it was in early September. I was at home in my flat and I was tidying up my accumulated papers. Among them I unexpectedly discovered a reproduction of that water-color. God knows where it had been bought; I hadn't noticed it for ages. I glanced at it cursorily, opened my desk drawer and put the water-color inside.

I was busy for a long time that day and was very tired. Finally, I went to bed and suddenly saw Le repas frugal in front of me again. At first I studied the picture, thinking about it. Then I decided to banish the visitation and go to sleep. But I couldn't. The picture stubbornly remained in front of me. I opened and closed my eyes, tossed and turned in my bed – it made no difference – the man and the woman wavered in front of my eyes. I jumped out of bed, washed my face, and went out on to the balcony to get some fresh air – but it was no use! The images from the water-color all but walked around the flat with me. I didn't get a wink of sleep all night. It was from that day that my sufferings began. Those two figures persecuted me with their fixed stares at any time of day or night, wherever I happened to be – at work, in the street, in the cinema, at a concert. Everywhere, and always! It distressed me that they were sitting side by side and were yet so far away from one another. It seemed to me that the frugal meal on the table before them was killing their love. Until recently, they had been close and dear forever! It distressed me that they were sitting side by side and were yet so far away from one another. It seemed to me that the frugal meal on the table before them was killing their love. Until recently, they had been close and dear to one another, but now they were totally indifferent to everything – especially to one another. And if the fat business man, certain to be sitting in some other corner of the bistro, were to wink at the woman, she would go after him to earn a few francs without a qualm, without any emotions at all. And the man, on discovering that she was not beside him anymore, would merely ask the waiter to bring him some cheap wine on credit so that he could get slightly drunk, put his head on the table and weep indifferent tears.

These thoughts gave me no peace, especially when I was sitting at a table laid for dinner. I felt that with each mouthful, with

each morsel, I was betraying those two people who had ceased to be just a picture to me. They already had a real existence, and everything I did, was seen by me in relation to them and their life. My well-being seemed like a crime against them. Life had become intolerable!

How long could I bear this dual burden – my life and theirs? Something had to happen, but this imminent something frightened me. So the more obvious it became that a crisis was approaching, the more afraid I became. I could not foresee what was going to happen, and this uncertainty made me ill; my mounting terror prevented me from thinking and working.

Once, during the night, on September 23, I was lying in bed – completely unable to get to sleep, with all kinds of silly fancies coming to my mind. At any moment now, I thought, the ceiling will break in two like bread and a great basket will come down from heaven through the crack. Suddenly I'm in the basket! I'm being taken somewhere, I'm being carried away forever, into a kind of void. What's persecuting me, what's tormenting me?

The stares of the man and the woman in Picasso's water-color! They're looking in different directions – and it's tearing me apart... By the way, it's not just a matter of fantasy. It just became clear to me that night: having once appeared, Picasso's images would not allow me to live as before – to live as I had once lived in the past.

I got up and switched on the table-lamp. It was ten to three. I went into the bathroom and washed my face. I wanted to wash off the senseless experiences. It was all nerves, I was working too hard! Everything would soon return to normal! However, self-persuasion failed to work. I didn't really believe it myself.

The doorbell rang. And again. At three in the morning!

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Open, it's me," replied a familiar voice.

I opened the door. Before me stood a tall, very thin man. I certainly recognized him, but could not place him. He was wearing a carelessly donned bawler hat and a scarf wound round his neck and stuffed into the deep neck of his jacket. He looked like an artist. All this somehow justified his appearance at that time of night.

"May I, Monsieur?"

"Please."

I detected something strange in his voice – but did not at once realize what it was. We went into the living-room. I invited him to sit down and he did so. And then I realized who was before me. It was the man from Le repas frugal.

I broke out into a cold sweat! I stared at him, wide-eyed. My head was in a whirl. I couldn't think logically, for I was not in a state to think any more. The man held out his thin hand, all skin and bones, with its unnaturally long fingers.

"It's true, we're not acquainted... but we already know one another. My name is Etienne Rasneur."

The touch of his hand brought me to my senses. It was the hand of an ordinary human being. A person with such a hand could not be a ghost. I felt warmth, and agitation and suffering – in short, a hand! This reassured me.

He took off his bowler and passed the palm of his hand over his sharp cheekbones. His voice was chesty, low and somewhat husky.

"Monsieur, forgive me for intruding on you... I am such a predicament just now..."

He spoke with an effort, wringing his long hands in agitation.

"You don't know, Monsieur, but... Therese is leaving me, forever... She hasn't said so, perhaps she doesn't yet realize it herself, but I feel it, Monsieur. I can foresee with horror..."

I didn't ask him who Therese was. It was obvious.

"We met Picasso's family at the Medrano circus. I am an acrobat. Well... an ex-acrobat, to be precise!" He raised his left hand and his eyes were suffused with hatred. "I broke this confounded hand! And that was the end of work for me. You haven't noticed it, because Monsieur Picasso put it on Therese's shoulder."

Etienne Rasneur smiled at some memory of his own and fell silent, still looking at his broken hand.

I never doubted that he was real. He wasn't the figment of a morbid imagination, nor of a dream. Monsieur Rasneur in person was sitting in front of me. His existence was as true as my own, as true as our sitting in this train as it raced towards Moscow.

I noticed that Etienne's hands were clasped nervously, as at the beginning of the conversation. Something inside him was bubbling up that was giving him pain but wouldn't go into words.

"Where did you learn Azerbaijanian?" I asked him, to break his nerve-racking silence.

He was astounded.

"I don't know any language but French."

It was my turn to be astounded.

But you're speaking in my language!"

"I'm speaking in my own, Monsieur."

"Then what... what language am I speaking?"

"You are speaking French too, Monsieur!"

He was amazed, and his answers rang true. But it meant that, while using different languages, we were hearing one another in our own native tongue, the only one in which we could hear. This didn't seem a miracle to me, although we had no interpreter. It was simply a condition of our unexpected interchange.

"What year is it, Monsieur Rasneur?"

"September 1904, Monsieur."

Other questions were superfluous, but even so I asked one more. "And we are, of course, in Paris?" "Where else, Monsieur?"

Etienne Rasneur simply breathed September 1904. He was sitting in my place and chatting with me at night – but in Paris. For me, everything was as before: September 1968, Baku, my flat. The distance in time and space could evidently not disturb our meeting since we had been brought together by an inner need and by something else that cannot easily be defined in words.

My guest simply couldn't calm down. He obviously found it hard to talk – yet he had come to tell me something important.

"Monsieur, do not be angry because I have come at night and woken you up... I don't know what to do. I can't live without Therese, and she's leaving me, she's slipping away against my will... She's still with me, but I can see that... that life is taking her away from me, Monsieur... Understand me rightly and don't think badly of her... It's hard for her, she doesn't care anymore, her desires have died or are dying... She's running away from herself, she's betraying herself without realizing it... And all because of my broken hand!"

I listened to Etienne with a feeling that he had finally explained something of which I had already felt an agonizing premonition. He was appealing to me for help, but I had long wanted to help him, only I hadn't known how, tormented by my helplessness and my desire for a meeting. And now the meeting had taken place and I could offer him the hand of friendship...

"It's a temporary crisis, Monsieur, but it could part us forever. And Therese will never be Therese again; it doesn't depend on her anymore..."

Yes, the meeting had taken place; I could reach out and press Etienne's hand. But what else? A few minutes would pass and he

would return, he would go back to his time, his Paris, his tragedy. And I would remain in my flat, in my Baku, and I would suffer even more from the awareness of an unpaid debt... Debt?! The word hit me like the last hope of a drowning man! I remembered that I had put cash aside away in my desk drawer for an Elektron-2 TV set – over four hundred rubles. It was a way out: lend it to Etienne, if he was agreeable. If he was agreeable!.. He wouldn't be able to pay it back!.. But he didn't know that! He thought that he and I were in Paris, and outside it was September 1904. He didn't know of any Baku, he was not going to live till 1968 – the year of our meeting... Did it mean that I must deceive him in a sense? I could not find any other solution.

I took out the money and offered it to Etienne.

"Pay me back when you can, all right?"

"You don't know me very well, Monsieur... And Monsieur Picasso, who is still young, he is only twenty-three, he only recently came from Spain – he doesn't know us at all well either... Still, I will take the money from you... for Therese's sake... I will pay you back the debt... In my opinion, one may borrow money from a friend without feeling like a beggar. What do you think?"

I nodded in agreement. I couldn't say a word. I waited for him to look at the money at last and... He glanced cursorily at my rubles and put them in his pocket. Without the slightest doubt, he had seen and pocketed a bundle of francs.

We shook hands; he put on his bowler hat and went out. I closed the entrance door after him, and then opened it again. Etienne had gone. He had gone out of my door into his own city, and in front of me was the landing of the staircase down which I went every morning to the street in my own city...

I went back into the room, lay down on the bed as I was and began thinking about Etienne. In effect, I did not know him at all and he had

been right. He may not have been as proud as he had seemed, not so sensitive and not so suffering... Perhaps he was much more to blame before Therese than it seemed... And then the money he'd received from me wouldn't help him in any way, nor her... Incidentally, if he hadn't come to me, and I by simple effort of will had banished him from my heart and her, I would have felt calmer, but I would have betrayed myself...

I stood up, went over to the table, picked up *Le repas frugal* and... and caught my breath. Etienne and Therese looked like the happiest people in the world: they were sitting there in one another's arms, looking at one another, they loved one another, they were smiling at one another... And yet their meal was, as before, a frugal one. It was nothing to do with chicken – that was not the meaning of the water-color, that was not the essence of life, damn it!

This altered work by Picasso is preserved by me and no one else. It was not altered by Picasso, but by us: by Etienne, because he came to see me – and altered by me, because I waited for him and welcomed him like a friend. You just take any reproduction of Le repas frugal, any one you like! They are commonplace; only the one I have is unusual. The only one in the world!

...You know, Maleyka-khanum, I've never told anyone about this before. What's the point? No one will believe it anyway. A man's closest friend is himself. He's his own best conversationalist, he'll understand everything... So that twenty meters of our taped conversations at work are more than a little as far as I'm concerned, Maleyka-khanum. I know that deep down you still don't believe me. A pity I didn't bring that reproduction with me! When we go back to Baku, I'll definitely show it to you..."

The train was rocking evenly over the joints in the rails.

"I believe you..." whispered Maleyka-khanum.

It was said with such emotion that I looked into her eyes. They reflected inner shock, but there was something else that was purely hers, something secret; it was not just the impression made by my story.

"I believe you... Even if you don't show me... You... you remember, of course, Latour's picture? St Sebastian, in which St Irina is mourning him?"

As if I had sensed something terrible... I said... "Yes, I remember". I did indeed remembered the picture: the figures of four women bowed over the body of a naked man pierced with an arrow. In the darkness of the night they are illumined only by the light of a solitary candle.

"You remember in what an awkward attitude Sebastian is lying on the ground? His position is so unnatural. And that unnaturalness is agonizing... You remember?.. It's not like that on my reproduction now... I pulled the arrow-out of Sebastian's body! Here it is!"

Her hands trembling with excitement, Maleyka-khanum hastily opened her travelling bag and took out an arrow some ten centimeters long. Although small, it was a real arrow. An arrow drawn from the body of St Sebastian. With my whole being, I knew that it was the real thing!

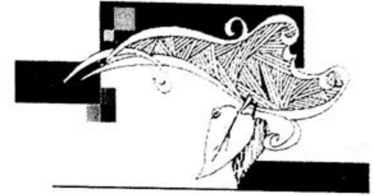
"I used to suffer like you. After I saw a reproduction of that picture, I was lost. I... Sebastian's body, writhing in agony, hovered before my eyes all the time. One night I got out of bed and, not knowing how, even myself, I picked up that reproduction and pulled out the arrow... Sebastian isn't in such agony on my copy now and his body isn't writhing in such agony – there isn't even a trace of the arrow... I haven't said anything to anyone about it either. But I always carry the arrow about with me. I'm afraid my husband will see it, and I won't be able to explain to him so that he'll believe me. And I can't throw the arrow away – it seems to me that I shall betray all that is most sublime and holy in my life..."

Maleyka-khanum put the arrow away in her bag. Deeply agitated, she went out of the compartment.

I was at peace. My heart wasn't thudding, there was no mist in front of my eyes, I was no longer in a cold sweat – except that my head felt overheated, as if it was suddenly going to explode. Why does it seem to us that our best conversationalist, the person nearest and dearest to us, is our own self? Why does Maleyka-khanum carry that arrow with her, afraid that her husband will see it and she won't be able to explain it to him? Has something similarly incredible happened to him too – and he likewise won't tell anybody about it?

Days, months, years will go by. Maleyka-khanum will get fed up with carrying that arrow around with her and she'll throw it in a rubbish bin. She will commit treachery – because she can never show it to anyone. Why?

I don't know whether Maleyka-khanum came back into the compartment soon afterwards – because I climbed up on to my top bunk and for the first time after a long spell I slept the sleep of the just.



TWO IN A GREY VOID

(A Story of a Non-Love)

Have patience, O my heart –
though you are turned to stone.
Ashyg Abbas Tufarganly

Spring was long over, and the sparse yellow-green leaves were the saddest memory of the recent spring. Each day, getting out of bed in the morning, he would see those sparse leaves through the window overlooking the yard, and every morning they told not only of the departed spring, but of departed lives, of the transitoriness of the world; they suddenly reminded him of people he had not remembered for years and who had left this world long ago; their faces, near or far, rose up one after another in his memory, and the eyes in those faces were always closed, their features were veiled by the yellow-green pallor of the sparse leaves as by a yellow shadow; then he remembered hospitals... and a hospital, after all, is the saddest place on earth.

Even before he retired on a pension, and then in his retirement, he had lain ill in hospitals – or had often gone visiting his friends and

acquaintances in hospital, and so many of them were no longer alive. As he looked at the sparse yellow-green leaves, he imagined now one, now another of his friends in their hospital sadness and yellowness, and all of them had their eyes closed, and he remembered all their features, he remembered the smile on their lips – but he couldn't remember the colour of their eyes, because their eyes no longer opened. Their eyes were always closed – or, to be more precise, he knew that one had blue eyes and another had black eyes. But he couldn't see the blue or the black because everything was the same color, everything was tinged with the sad glow of sparse yellow-green leaves.

It was sleeting, and the sparse leaves were wet and trembling – he almost felt their trembling with his own body. He remembered how he had wept in childhood, how other children had wept, how the grown-ups had wept. First, how the girls and women had wept, then how the men had wept; he remembered the funeral ceremonies he had attended in the course of many years. He saw the carpet-draped funeral stretchers or coffins borne on the shoulders of the pall-bearers to the cemetery... he imagined how men had wept... how men could weep whose weeping he had not seen – how their eyes filled with tears, how their lips and chins trembled in an anguished smile. The strangest thing of all was that he would compel – in his imagination – every single man to weep (whether good or bad, harsh or gentle, familiar or otherwise, highly placed, respected, or anyone you cared to mention, of whose picture he chanced to see in the newspaper, even right up to Alisafa), and it sometimes seemed to him that there was something despicable in this... as if secretly, furtively, he was peeking through a keyhole. Yet he couldn't take his eyes off the sparse, yellow-green leaves, wet and trembling in the sleet, the cold and the frost – because, in spite of his 73 years, he was truly amazed to see that all people on earth – in his imagination – wept in the self-same way. All of them

wept, sniveled, shed tears, were shocked, were saddened and grieved in the same way. Most important of all, these people were unaware of their sameness – they had no idea of the extent they were like one another when they grieved or wept – and they couldn't see that they didn't differ in any way at all.

The sparse yellow-green leaves were, in all reality, proclaiming the unity of the human race. They were proclaiming that – from first to last – everyone lives an identical life... they were announcing that this vast life itself, that has no visible beginning or end... it is, in reality, a mere moment in time.

It would stop sleeting – then it would start again. The sleet would hold off for a while, and the cold wind would dry my sparse yellow-green leaves – and in my cold memories it would slice into pieces all the warm feelings and all the excitements, as though they were stale bread – the metallic cold of the knife would cut me to the marrow of my bones, then the day would pass, the sparse leaves would become sparser still, another leaf would be torn from its wet, naked bough... I would turn my eyes away from those sparse yellow-green leaves – because I didn't want to see the path along which the detached leaf was flying to its last haven...

Yet of course, that last autumn will eventually pass, and the cold spells of winter will pass too... spring will come again, the bright green leaves will cover the boughs... but none of this can console me, for though the bright green leaves will cover these boughs, these greenish yellow leaves will cease to be. They will rot. They will vanish. Winter will pass, spring will come, and many of the people on earth who are looking through a window like me will not exist anymore – and one day I will not exist either. Then, perhaps, someone else – in the final autumn of his time – as he looks at the yellow-green leaves of that time, will remember

me. Shall I weep, or laugh, in his imagination, I wonder? What difference does it make?

He had recently begun talking to himself, now and then. Well... recently? But before that? Who was he conversing with before, then? He smiled, and in that smile there was mockery or, more precisely, secret, very deeply hidden malice. But whom was he mocking? Against whom was his malice directed? Against his wife? Against those yellow-green leaves, perhaps? No, no; you can be malicious about everything and everyone – who or what on this earth is without blame? But it was impossible to mock the sparse yellow-green leaves... they couldn't not bear it. They couldn't even bear an unfriendly smile – after all, they were not to blame in any way. Well, alright – they had crept out of their buds, grown up, turned bright green, then thinned out. But why become tinged with that sad yellow?

His wife – sitting in the red cosy chair as usual – was knitting a pair of mittens for someone. There was a decoration on the mitten in the form of a tulip – but his wife had shown that tulip in such a way that it looked more like an anchor than a tulip. His heart ached at this resemblance between the tulip and the anchor, because the anchor suggest stagnation, immobility, oppressiveness.

He and his wife used to go to the theatre often, but it was now a year since he had been to a performance; he had become bored with staring at the stage and thinking that the cast in the same show always spoke the same lines on Thursday, Friday or Sunday. On a spring day, an autumn evening or in the winter cold, the same words had to be delivered. Was the wind blowing? Let it blow. Was the snow falling? Let it fall. Had someone died? Let that someone die. Had someone been born? What of it? It made no difference. The same words had to be uttered; and the fact that the cast could not change words written say, four hundred years previously by Shakespeare, made his heart

ache. So he no longer went to the theatre in the evenings with his wife. Of course, his wife, as ever, didn't understand anything, and just as she had previously agreed to go to the theatre, now she agreed not to go any more.

"For so many years I have lived, been ill, recovered, and done good things; but in all conscience, I have done bad things too, have taken and given offence, have been upset, have waited, have danced at parties, have mourned, have seen a newborn babe and the corpse of the old man, and I have done all this so that one day of yellow leaves in autumn it has become clear that life has passed; I have been baling out with a sieve, I have been flying blind."

He'd had everything in his long life, only... what had been missing? However, that was enough.

He began panting for breath and remembered that many, many years ago he'd had an aunt who suffered from breathlessness, and she used to make a joke of it: "I have a brother; he went away and never came back. What is it?" He'd been a small boy – he'd thought for a long time about his aunt's riddle, he'd tried many words, but he had never solved it, and his aunt had laughed: "Why, its a sigh! You're not very quick on the uptake. It's my unhappy sigh, it's going away and it's not coming back..." And his aunt's remote laughter had been stilled in the yellow of the sparse leaves, had become like wax; then the wax had melted and disappeared in the yellow.

Standing before the window, he looked at the sparse yellow-green leaves; it was nearly time for his walk, and presently he would put on his hat and coat, go out of the house and walk slowly along Primorsky Boulevard: he would meet someone, or would not meet anyone; then he would slowly return, his wife would give him his special supper, he would eat the tasteless, unsalted food; then he'd watch television for a while, or his son or daughter would call him, his wife would

have a chat with the children and say that he wasn't feeling bad... and then what? And then he would lie down for a rest, he'd go to bed so that, on waking up in the morning, he would look again at the sparse yellow-green leaves. The memories would glimmer in the yellowness of those leaves.

Memories also have their autumn – they fade, turn yellow like the leaves, and sometimes they disappear, rot and mingle with the earth.

It was not long to go before the end of autumn – those sparse leaves had very little time left to live.

"Many wise and famous men have lived on earth, and those men spoke about the seasons of the year: some of them are our benefactors, others are destroyers; some gather and bring, others smash and destroy; but the icy breath of loneliness smashes and destroys too, filling man wholly in order to take away life, to smash and destroy it. They said of the seasons that a man has four houses: one is green, one is red, one is yellow and one is white. And how do you interpret that, my dear friend? Interpret it in your own way: white is the color of the shroud, yellow is the color of death (like those sparse yellow-green leaves), red is blind rage. And green – what is green? Blot out the green with black – and as quickly as possible..."

But he couldn't blot out the green with black, because green suddenly began to shimmer with various other hues. In this green that laughed, rejoiced and played with the sunlight, he saw beauty – apple cheeks, a face with a smooth skin, and with each line telling of health, desire, secret passion, and those black eyes sparking in the Green. At first, he didn't recognize the vision, he merely felt something close and dear to him in that face and in those eyes. And then he recognized her...

What had the girl's name been? Where had it been? Apparently, he and his father had gone to a village, and green was the green of that village; in any case, he remembered that he and his father had ridden

in a phaeton, and the bliss of that ride in the phaeton had lasted many years, and the green, and the apple cheeks and the black eyes bad followed after one another...

The girl had been older than he was, she'd been thirteen or fourteen to his ten or eleven. She'd climbed up into a spreading nut-tree; he'd looked up at her from below, he had clearly seen her bare thighs, and she had been laughing: "Will you marry me when you grow up? And then what will you do? Why don't you say something? What will you do with me?" And the girl who had climbed up into the nut-tree had laughed, and her eyes had been sparkling...

His wife looked intently at the finished mitten, smoothed the pattern on it. She was happy with her work and smiled at it; no doubt she'd remembered her grandchildren... she smiled again, shook her head, then looked at him, and there was a glimmer of alarm in her smiling eyes.

He sensed her momentary alarm, and this feeling intensified even more the yellow of the sparse yellow-green leaves, as if those bare black branches were also swathed in yellow.

Yes – his wife had aged a great deal.

The tear-off calendar itself was a tree, trembling in the late autumn season; each day it lost one more yellow leaf.

What was she doing now, that little girl who had stood on the thick nut-tree branch and looked down on him from above, laughing? Could she still laugh after the passage of so many years? No, she couldn't, because she was dead. He had forgotten who the girl was, he knew nothing about the rest of her life and destiny, he had never seen her again; but he now felt with all his being that the girl had died, and before his eyes there appeared a worn-out old woman in a coffin and through the dead wrinkles the old woman's face was like the face of that girl, but not a trace was left of her laughter; and at this point

the chill of death mingled with the yellow of the sparse yellow-green leaves, and the chill that riveted those yellow leaves made them as slippery as translucent yellow ice.

He was not afraid of death; on the contrary, perhaps, somewhere in the depths of his soul he was longing for death, for if you had to die anyway, then, of course, you had to die – what was the sense in living so long? But there was a kind of falsehood in this very question, there was pretence, because in those same depths of his soul there was a terror of disappearance, and in fact the autumnal yellow evoked that terror from time to time, it stirred him to converse about and with that terror.

When he had his first heart attack, he'd still been working; after the second attack, he retired on his pension. When would the third attack come? It could happen today, or tomorrow, or in a year's time... it would be best if it happened at night, and everything would be quiet and soundless. He was firmly convinced that the third attack would be his last.

Something was being said on television, but he seemed to have heard the discussion before; he moved away from the window, went over to the television, changed channels and asked his wife, "Is it Thursday today?" "No," she said, "I think it's Friday." Then she remembered that Arastun would be coming to visit them tomorrow, and he would stay over. "Yes," she said, "it's Friday; tomorrow's Saturday. Arastun's coming – my grandson will stay over with us on Sunday". His wife remembered her grandson and smiled.

...Why "my grandson"? Why don't you say "our" grandson? Isn't he the son of your own son? Isn't it your own grandson? She's his grandmother and you're his grandfather. Why don't you say "our" grandson? And why do you mix up the days of the week?

Oh. never mind those questions...

On television, a girl in a bright blue dress was saying something, and everything she said seemed familiar to him – as if he'd heard it all before; and he'd heard the weather broadcast yesterday or the day before, and he'd seen this concert long ago, and now his wife would say something, but he'd heard that "something" long ago; and, indeed, his wife looked at him and said that nothing had been heard of Alisafa's family for a long time, and it would be interesting to know how they were getting on out there. And it really did seem to him that she was asking that question for the second time, and for the second time she was asking about the health of their old friends, and for the second time he was answering that the day before yesterday he'd seen Alisafa's son Isgandar on the boulevard, and he had said that Alisafa had the flu.

The sight of the red anchor on the little mittens made his heart ache again, for the anchor reminded him of stasis, of immobility, of oppressiveness. Getting to his feet, he went to the window and stood facing the trembling, sparse yellow-green leaves – this time the pale yellow of sorrow began shining brightly, then blazed and led him away. He remembered in full detail a golden day in autumn. He was seven or eight years old; he was jumping over the golden leaves that lay all over the yard, and he had an old grandmother: she always sat on the veranda, and she was always knitting or darning. When the cotton or wool ran out, she would beg him to go over and thread the needle for her. "My eyes can't see the eye of a needle anymore."

How can color change? Yellow, too, can laugh and shine and rejoice so much; he went up on to the veranda amid all that joyous yellow, in the twinkling of an eye he inserted into the eye of the needle the thread which his grandmother had moistened with her tongue and squeezed between henna-stained fingertips, and then he ran down into the yard again; but his grandmother went on sewing and talking to herself.

What was she saying? "If I could just see him married, I wouldn't have any more worries." Had his grandmother been alive at the time of his wedding? He couldn't really remember; she had died, apparently... Or had she still been alive?.. He wanted to ask his wife, but didn't do so, and the yellow glow gradually-faded, the yellow joy gradually disappeared, and the greenish yellow of the sparse leaves again enveloped everything around; only this time there was something kindred, pleasantly sad in the greenish yellow, there were fine, scarcely distinguishable wrinkles, there was a look, a smile, and he realized that they were the wrinkles on his grandmother's face, her look and her smile; dear and close to him, they had had lasted for many a long year. Then he became annoyed with Alisafa, because in spite of his age, he was like quicksilver, always on the go, and the flu had doubtless exhausted him; he couldn't go out of doors, he wasn't buying milk in the shop, he wasn't going early in the morning to queue at the newspaper kiosk, he wasn't playing dominoes on the boulevard with the old-age pensioners... What was he doing, then? He was drinking medicines so that the flu would go as soon as possible, and Gulsum was brewing velvet, almost purple tea and putting it down in front of Alisafa with Cornelian cherry jam. Gulsum had been Alisafa's wife for fifty years, and for fifty years she had been tolerating outbursts of spleen, tantrums, and Alisafa's altogether difficult temperament; but Alisafa knew it himself: "Putting up with my little quirks, that's a real feat, isn't it, eh?" And they would both laugh, would Alisafa and Gulsum.

Formerly they'd met at family reunions – at those reunions Alisafa often stood to raised a glass to the health of his mother and father. "We have never once heard you say a harsh word to your wife – you have always been kind to one another... Who amongst us over the last forty-five or fifty years has called his wife not just by her first name, but always with the addition of "khanum"? Which of us has ever said

to his wife, "Khanum, please give me some tea?" No, no one, only you..."

And suddenly, as if the yellow of the sparse leaves had told him so, he realized that the flu was a pretext, that Alisafa would never rise from his bed again, that it was Alisafa's last illness, that he was soon going to die. Those sparse yellow-green leaves would not fall in time – and suddenly this realization came as a shock to him; he wanted to banish the thought from his mind, he wanted to drive that knowledge out, but he was unable, and poor Alisafa's face turned yellow too, like the sparse leaves. He closed his eyes, but however hard he tried, the vision would not go away and he realized that it was the truth, it was going to happen, Alisafa was indeed going to die and would certainly die in the next few days!

He had more than an hour left before his walk along the boulevard – but he did not want to stand facing the sparse yellow-green leaves any longer. He went into the other room, put on his suit, and knotted his tie as usual. When his wife saw him dressed ready to go out, she put the almost completed mittens on the armchair and got up to hold his coat for him, hand him his hat and see him to the door.

He stood face to face with his wife, and suddenly a vengeful feeling flared up inside him. Against whom? Against himself, perhaps? Or against his wife? Or, perhaps, against the yellow-green leaves? Or, perhaps, against the days lived through from year to year without quarrels or discord?

Looking straight into his wife's watery eyes that were steadily losing their color, he said, "You've always been a stranger to me."

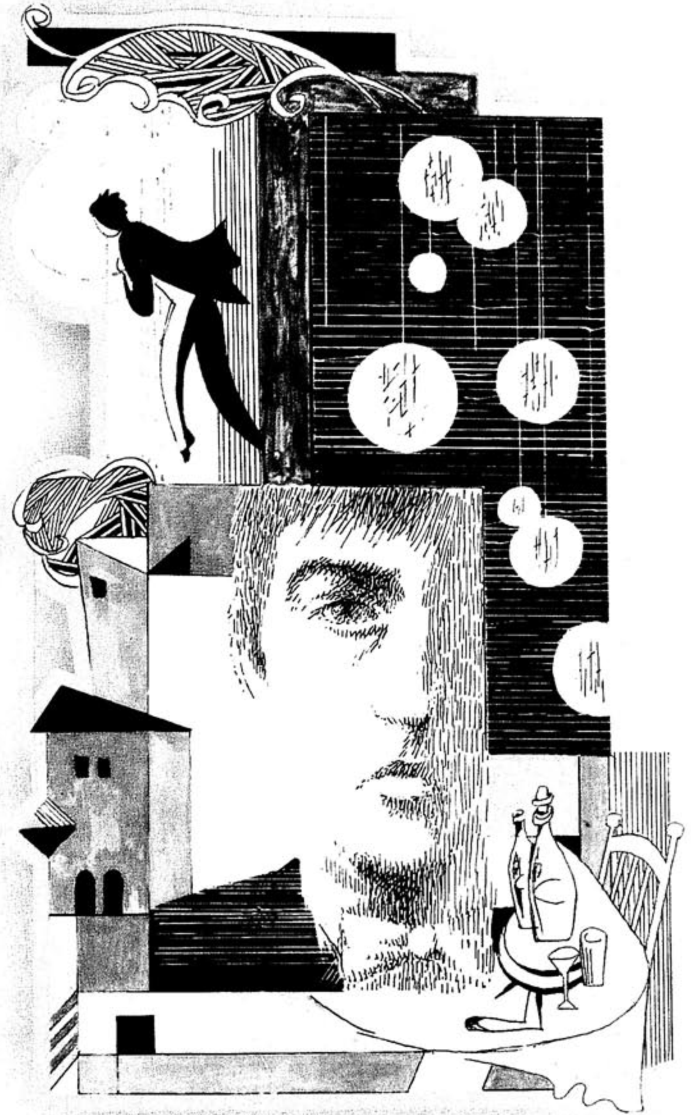
And he turned to stone at the appalling words that had just fallen from his lips.

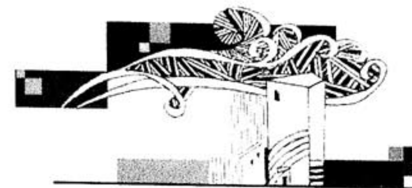
Then he said, "And I've always been a stranger to you." And again he turned to stone at his own words. And he felt ashamed of

what he'd said. Was his wife amazed at it – or alarmed? Or was there nothing unexpected in those words for his wife, and had she known perfectly well for half a century what he had just told her? And had his wife known perfectly well for fifty years-half a century – what he had just told her? Or had his wife, perhaps, only just discovered it; to be more exact, had she only just heard for the first time what he had disclosed? Or, perhaps, does a man truly become foolish with old age, and was his wife smiling as she thought of it?

He went away, put on his yellow coat, wound a muffler round his neck and pulled his hat down low over his brow. His wife went up to him, straightened his muffler, adjusted the collar of his yellow coat and said, "If I had any say, you wouldn't go out like that in such weather," she said, "You'll catch cold"; then she said, "No, you'll have a giddy spell, you'll fall. I'm coming with you." She hurriedly put her things on and took him by the arm; then they went out of the house together.

On that last autumn day, everything around them was enveloped in a void, and it was into this void that they slowly disappeared; only the yellow coat, yellow like the sparse yellow-green leaves, showed up as a blob amid the transparent grayness, and then the yellow-green blob also melted and faded away in the grey void of late autumn.





TIGHT SHOES

"Mad soul, why do you wander. Devoid of reason?
Ashyg Khasta Gasym

Reflected in the mirror, the light of the chandelier was dazzling to the eyes, the glitter of knives and forks and the gleam of crockery were also doubled by the mirror and, as in the hottest time of summer, you screwed up your eyes as if you were looking at the sun. However, it was neither summer, nor was it a sunny day, and if Babir was blinded and cheered, it was not by the reflected light of the chandelier, as Babir knew perfectly well; it was to do with the fine, brand-new black suit that was flamboyantly displaying itself in the mirror for Babir, the snow-white starched shirt, the snow-white butterfly tie with the big wings. Babir could see with his own eyes that even People's Artist Mursal Mammadov was nothing compared with that young man, namely Babir, preening himself in the massive mirror. This absolutely unprejudiced appraisal, although bestowed on himself by himself, raised Babir's spirits even higher, and he realized that the day, or rather the evening, would go well, and he would not get tired, and the wind in the street needn't have bothered to blow with such force, for that day, or evening, would bring Babir a step nearer his

goal: the contents of the suitcase under his bed in the hostel would be augmented by another sum of money, the move to a cooperative house would be one day nearer, and who knew what else might turn up? But in any case let it be something good; and perhaps only one thing was bad: the shoes were a size too small and they pinched.

Turning his eyes away from the mirror, Babir glanced at the glossy black Yugoslav shoes be had bought three days before through a personal contact, and he smiled. Ah, if all the trouble in the world were simply that the beautiful Yugoslav shoes were a bit tight! In two or three days they would stretch, loosen up and stop hurting.

The evening shift was only just starting work – the restaurant was gradually filling up. Ziba glanced once more round the plates, cutlery and ashtrays laid on the tables and made one or two adjustments. Pogosov looked keenly at the patrons as they came in; he could tell the good spenders by their eyes, and he met the likely ones apparently by chance at the door and seated them at one of his own tables. Abulfat, sniffing as usual and fluttering his eyelashes, hovered round the empty tables. Pakiza-khanum, the manager, still at her little desk for the time being, after switching on the table-lamp and donning her spectacles, studied her papers. Alifagha went up on to the band-stand and assembled his clarinet. Ashot had arrived long ago, had taken his place and was wiping the percussion instruments with a velvet cloth; Gulmammad the trumpeter, Malik the tar-player, Almukhtar the oboist and Fatullah the double-bass would arrive presently; Nora the vocalist would appear at any moment, Alifagha and Almukhtar would start guzzling vodka a little at a time, and everything would get going on the bandstand: Nora would start singing Azerbaijani, Indian and French songs; accompanied by Almukhtar the oboist, she would recite a few stanzas of poetry but, as always, no one would understand the words of the ghazal or the

Indian, French and Azerbaijani songs that she sang. The restaurant would soon be packed, Ziba would carry full trays to the tables, regale the patrons with artificial smiles, significant glances and saucy repartee and, of course, the patrons would become more generous, and Pogosov, as usual, would have more customers than anyone else, and his orders would be bigger than those of the others, and Abulfat, as usual, would get the smallest orders (if there were ten empty places left in a restaurant, eight of them would inevitably fall to the lot of the hapless Abulfat), and Abulfat, sniffing, fluttering his eyelashes and bemoaning his wretched fate, would serve the most hopeless ones. Pakiza-khanum would come out from behind her table, put away her spectacles and spend the whole evening on her feet until closing time; her eye would miss nothing. Even Pogosov would be a little scared of Pakiza-khanum, because all knew that, apart from a keen eye and a sharp tongue, Pakiza-khanum enjoyed the respect of the restaurant director – even that of the hotel director, Comrade Gardashkhanly. Much depended on what Pakiza-khanum would have to say about the waiters.

All this was so, but it was irrelevant to Babir. He knew, believed and was convinced that he would not be staying there long. He was not, like Pogosov, going to spend forty years of his life among the tables; he was not, like the hapless Abulfat, going to be plagued with worries for twelve months in the year. He would work there for a year, or say, two – all right, then, five – but after that he would go one stage higher and become at least manager... that he most assuredly would. Waiting would be, as the saying goes, a thing of the past; and then, in no time at all, being head waiter would also be a thing of the past too (they said that Comrade Gardashkhanly himself started out as a manager). Then being director of a restaurant would also be a thing of the past.

The day would come when he would be director of a hotel or – you never knew – manager of a Trust or something of that kind. Then Babir, his hair now beginning to turn silver, would tell his relatives and dear ones about his life, would look back on that restaurant and say that for everything that he had achieved, he was obliged only to himself. He had been father and mother to himself, and uncle, and guardian – he had grown up as a half-starved orphan at Toylu Station, had left for Baku. Now, fifteen years later – not when he would be telling all this, but right now, at twenty-nine years of age, he was working in one of the most prestigious restaurants in Baku, had paid his first deposit on a cooperative flat and was sending his mother twenty-five rubles a month.

Of course, had he wanted, Babir could have been earning even more, then he would be sending his mother not twenty-five rubles a month but, say, forty (although his mother was coping well: she sold syrup and water on Toylu Station). It would easy if he worked in the kebab-houses on the outskirts of Baku or in the settlements of Absheron, but the fact was that he wouldn't find the kind of civilized life there that was to be found in this restaurant and in this hotel; Babir loved culture, and, in fact, all his exertions and all his saving of money ruble by ruble were for the sake of the civilized life – to be more exact, for the sake of a future civilized life. Babir didn't want to sweat grease because of kebabs, or to reek of kebab smoke – or at night, like a mole, to put his nose down and count his takings. Babir understood the lack of culture and futility of such a life, and he had no desire for that at all.

Babir had started out in the restaurant as a porter – then Comrade Gardashkhanly had taken him on as a lift attendant. Next he had become assistant chef, then tea-boy on the fourth floor; he had passed a waiters' course without taking time off work and was now in his

second year as what they once used to call a Kellner in that beautiful restaurant. He had been elected Deputy Chairman of the Union Committee for the whole hotel.

Babir lived in a hostel for workers in the domestic services. It was a fifty-minute ride from the hostel to the restaurant: seven stops on the trolleybus and another ten on the tram; but rather than rent a room somewhat nearer, it was better to save money and build a cooperative flat. Babir had done just that; thanks to Comrade Gardashkhanly, he had signed all the necessary papers – most important of all, in two years' time the two-room flat would be ready. Then Babir would get married, and the bachelor life, like the hostel, would become a thing of the past in Babir's life. Babir would try to manage things so that his wife was from a cultured Baku family and well-educated – she should at least been to technical school. Of course, this wouldn't be easy, but in any case Babir would do everything in his power, and somewhere in the depths of his soul Babir believed that it would be so, so Babir himself would begin studying. That year, in the summer, he would enter technical school; he had already talked to the right people – to be more precise, Pogosov had put him in touch with the right people, and after technical school he would take an extra-mural college course. Then they would have children, and Babir would give the children the names of his mother and father. True, his mother was still alive, but she was already past seventy, she would probably not live till then, and his father had died long ago. Babir had been three years old at the time – when his mother wept, Babir used to mimic his father and say, "I'll give you what for!"

Nora had put on so much rouge that she could have dyed a blouse with it. Pulling the big microphone to her mouth, she was singing an Azerbaijani folk-song – but naturally, no one could make out the words, because when Nora even merely spoke in Azerbaijan, it was

impossible to understand what that tall and extremely thin woman was saying. But each of the musicians in Alifagha's band was improvising in such a way that there was no need to understand what Nora was singing about anyhow. The requests brought in three- and five-ruble notes, and from Pogosov's patrons even ten-ruble notes, and one of the three youths sitting at the window shouted from his place, "That's the stuff!" and applauded Nora. Then, indicating Nora with his eyes, he said something in the ear of Ziba, who was standing nearby – Ziba nodded and smiled.

The wind was still rising, and most of Baku's windows were lit up during that March evening. People didn't want to go out because of the wind, and anyone who did so made for the restaurant if possible.

The hotel was situated in the hilly part of Baku – God seemed to have created that district for the hotel, and especially for the restaurant. Babir sometimes, in a free moment, loved to look out of the window at the shining lights of Baku – those lights in the buildings generated a kind of warmth in his heart, there was something good in them, and it seemed to Babir that the people behind those shining windows were basking in rays of happiness, each in his private corner was passing the hours and days beautifully. Sometimes Babir saw light streaming from the window of his cooperative flat, which would be ready in two years; he saw himself on the other side of the window-pane; he felt almost physically that his "Moskvich" saloon was waiting for him below at the doors of that cooperative house. At the wheel sat the driver who was at present chauffeuring Comrade Gardashkhanly, and then he would chauffeur Babir, taking him to and from work every day, in a word, that car and driver – and let everybody see them! – would always be at his disposal...

Comrade Gardashkhanly clearly liked Babir, and at production conferences he singled Babir out of all those people as a model of

education, responsibility, obedience and diligence; and if this, on the one hand, was deserved by Babir, on the other hand, it testified to the business acumen of Comrade Gardashkhanly, because the other hotel directors didn't know the waiters in their restaurant at all. Babir, however, didn't have to be told anything twice by Comrade Gardashkhanly or by the head waitress, and they knew this; so Babir quietly got on with his job and picked up some fifteen to twenty rubles every day in tips; people liked his civilized manner of serving. Babir went out of his way to be helpful, and everything was fine, and everything went as it should, except that those confounded shoes were too tight.

Alifagha was also in a wonderful mood, but, unlike Babir's, his mood depended on vodka – from time to time he left the bandstand and made for the kitchen. Everyone knew why he was going there and, on returning, he would wink at Almukhtar – and Almukhtar, extricating himself with some difficulty from Nora's grasp, would go to the kitchen too. There had evidently been too many of these forays this time; Alifaga's nose and cheeks were bright crimson and, moreover, Alifagha, as usual on such occasions, suddenly snatched the big microphone from Nora and made the following announcement in Russian:

"Song from the film, "The Wanderer" dedicated to "Z". Clarinet solo by Alifagha Ustajly!" He pointed the bell of the clarinet at the ceiling and began to play in such a way that all the people in the restaurant chorused, "Bravo!"

This was one of the little jokes that Alifagha used to play when tipsy: "Z" was for Ziba. The fact was that Ziba had for many long years had been in love with Raj Kapur, and there was no one in the restaurant who couldn't have known this. Ziba didn't hide her sole grande passion from anyone; she had once been married, then divorced; the opportunity had come her way from time to time, but

Ziba didn't want to get married again. She used to say, "I have an ideal in life, I dream of my hero"; and Ziba sincerely and for many years had loved her ideal and hero in the person of Raj Kapur.

Alifagha was blowing in an inspired frenzy. Babir sought the moment to wink at Ziba for fun, and Ziba glanced uneasily at the restaurant door: that evening, after a conference, there was to be a ceremony in the restaurant's banqueting hall, and the hall was opposite the restaurant. Ziba was afraid that Comradee Gardashkhanly might suddenly come in there too, and Babir shook his head; poor Ziba had evidently gone completely out of her mind. What of it if he came in? He'd see the eternal Alifagha with his frenzied clarinet, but how could he spot that Alifagha was winking at Ziba? Besides, as long as Brilliant Aghajafar was chef of that restaurant, no one would ever say the least thing against Alifagha, because Brilliant Aghajafar and Alifagha had once been schoolmates. Each time Brilliant Aghajafar saw Alifagha, he remembered his childhood and patted Alifagha lightly on the shoulder. Everybody knew that whether Alifagha played well or badly, and whether or not he paid frequent visits to the kitchen, he was Brilliant Aghajafar's man. The trouble was that Alifaga himself knew this very well and took into his band anyone he liked, whatever the instrument or style of playing, and when he was asked: "Oh, Alifagha, my dear fellow! Can an orchestra be made up of a clarinet, an oboe, a trumpet, a tar, percussion and a double-bass?" he would reply, "Since there is one now, there can; that's the first point. The second is that I am strengthening the ties between East and West, because music is universally human, it is for all people on earth and because where there is a tar, there must also be a trumpet. It is necessary that genuine music should be to the liking of all, especially in a restaurant, because – in effect –

man invented music specifically for eating and drinking. That is, to put it in contemporary language, he invented it for restaurants."

The oboist Almukhtar, as usual, nodded his support for every word that fell from Alifagha's lips. Almukhtar was on his pension and an old friend of Alifagha's. So, when there was a vacancy for a pianist, Alifagha gave Almukhtar the job, and the magic name of Brilliant Aghajafar was effective here too.

Brilliant Aghajafar had two GAZ-24s – one in the name of his mother-in-law's cousin, who was a worker somewhere, and the other in the name of Aghajafar's own grand-niece, who worked for a state nursery garden. One car stood permanently in front of the hotel, waiting for Aghajafar, while the other was driven by his son and was frequently to be seen at the kitchen door in the hotel yard. That kitchen door had formerly been a window; Brilliant Aghajafar, at his own expense, had had the window removed and a convenient door built in its place.

None of this bothered Babir – because Babir was bothered about no one, and no one was bothered about Babir; he was altogether a sober and timid man.

But the wind was still rising, and it was at this point that there began the most important event during that windy evening in March.

The door opened, and in came three young men. Pogosov's keen eye promptly registered them for what they were: they had driven in from outside, they didn't look like Baku people, they weren't students or workers in trade, but in any case they had money, and enough of it to maintain their dignity, and they would generously empty their pockets so that the waiter wouldn't think they needed cash – or didn't know their restaurants.

Needless to say, the shrewd Pogosov hurried forward to meet those young men. He had no free places yet – but let them wait a bit, that

little table near the band would be vacant soon. He would put himself out for them, just let them wait a bit; but when the blond one in the middle opened his mouth, Pogosov was amazed, because the young man asked after Babir. To tell the truth, Babir himself was amazed on hearing that the patrons were asking for him, because Babir did not have "his" patrons, since he was not greedy. God was giving him his daily bread, and in any case, ten, fifteen, twenty rubles were added every evening to the money lying in the suitcase under the bed in the hostel – the wages of two or three engineers with a higher education accumulated inside it every month.

Babir didn't recognize the blond youth at first, but when he went to Babir and embraced him in front of the whole restaurant, he realized that this was Zakir – they had played on the dung heaps together as children at Toylu Station. Babir was terribly upset, because during those long years between Toylu Station and this restaurant, a distance had grown that neither train nor car could overcome. Babir saw out of the corner of his eye that the reunion with the Sary[11] Zakir in the middle of the restaurant had not gone down at all well with Pakiza-khanum. Her blue eyes, after a reproachful sidelong glance at Babir, slid over the other restaurant workers to see how they were taking the incident.

Bahir, could not, of course, order Sary Zakir off the premises. He had not seen his old friend for ten or twelve years: the restaurant did not belong to Babir, and however much he might dissimulate, the thick-skinned Sary Zakir wouldn't understand anyway. So Babir had no option but to shake hands with Sary Zakir's friends and make their acquaintance.

They greeted Babir courteously – it was clearly felt that Sary Zakir was proud of his acquaintance with Babir. To have such a smart childhood friend as Babir in a place like Baku and in such a superior restaurant was, of course, not a matter to be taken lightly.

"I swear by your health, Babir, there's such a wind outside, it's not fit for man nor beast! I said – Hey! Let's go in here, we have a fine young fellow named Babir, here in this city, one of ours! I beg of you, how are you, Babir? No, thank God, you look marvelous! And I'm not doing badly myself, may God grant you health!.."

Babir sat Zakir and his friends in the centre of the restaurant, at one of his own tables, and did not ask Sary Zakir what had brought them to Baku – how he had found out that he was working in this restaurant, and how things were at Toylu. First, because he didn't want to encourage them; if you give these country folk your hand, they'll bite your arm off. Secondly, Sary Zakir was not keeping his mouth shut anyway – he was asking all the questions, and answering them himself. Thirdly, whatever things might be like at Toylu Station, they did not concern Babir – his mother was living there and he sent her twenty-five rubles a month, but that was all, nothing else tied Babir to Toylu Station. Preparing his notepad and pencil, Babir asked, "Now, Gentlemen! What are you going to have?"

"Bring whatever's right. The fanciest you've got! Bring the lot, Babir!" Needless to say, it was Sary Zakir who said that.

It occurred to Babir that anything could be expected of these people from Toylu Station – they, had suddenly come for a meal at Babir's expense, free of charge. So he said: "The items on the menu are all different: cheap, expensive, and very expensive..."

"But have you got the most expensive of the most expensive ones, Babir, eh?" Sary Zakir burst out laughing. "Bring them! We've got stacks of money!" He looked at his Comrades as if to say, "Did I put it well to him?" And his comrades, smiling contentedly, nodded, as if to say, "Yes, you put it very well."

True, Babir was not greedy – but the waiter doesn't exist who doesn't like moneyed patrons, and Babir calmed down a little. His

former radiant mood gradually returned to him and he began writing down on Zakir's bill everything on the menu that was highest in price and lowest in weight.

After a short break, Nora went back up onto the bandstand again and this time began singing in Hindi – a song from the film "Baiju Bavra". Nora's image, voice and movements made such an impression on Zakir's table that they were flabbergasted for a while, not knowing whether to compliment Nora on her singing, pass rude remarks or make jokes.

"What's that, Babir?" said Sary Zakir at last.

Babir gave no answer to this baffled question – as usual, he laid everything he had brought out on the table. Pakiza-khanum no longer looked reproachfully in Babir's direction, because Babir was his old self again and was serving moneyed patrons.

Zakir and his friends were also paying no more attention to Nora – because the dishes served by Babir had made an even bigger impression than Nora. When Sary Zakir picked up a bottle of vodka and was going to open it, Babir wouldn't let him. Opening it himself and wrapping it in a white napkin, he filled the glasses of Sary Zakir and his friends. This shook Sary Zakir's company so much that Nora and the beautiful dishes on the table seemed to vanish, and Sary Zakir with difficulty choked back the sob that rose to his throat and said, "I implore you, Babir, pour yourself one too!"

Babir, who had heard such offers many times before, naturally said, "I'm not allowed to," and, moving away from Zakir's table, went off to serve his other patrons.

The other patrons were three men. Two of them had evidently arrived from Moscow, the other was an Azerbaijani – he ordered the dishes and praised them and, naturally, he was going to pay the bill. The two young boys were drinking at their parents' expense – Babir

knew the type and couldn't stand them, but a patron is a patron and it's none of the waiter's business at whose expense he's drinking. The three young women and three young men were close friends – either they worked together, or they were relatives, or they were friends. Babir liked these intimate little dinners, because if there were women, relatives or work associates, the reunions usually went in a civilized manner without squabbles or scenes! The men, in spite of protests from their women companions, drank well and paid well. When Babir was serving these patrons, his former mood fully returned: everything was going as it should and everything was lovely again.

At that moment, Sary Zakir's voice was heard all over the restaurant:

"Babir! Hey, Babir! Babir, I implore you, come over here!"

As if in spite, Alifagha's band, which had exhausted itself, out, stopped playing and, of course, Pakiza-khanum knitted her brows and the stare of the blue eyes fixed itself on Babir's flushing face.

"Babir! Hey, Babir!"

Babir went up to Zakir's table at a rapid, brisk pace to stop him bellowing "Babir" in that bull-like voice – but Sary Zakir was irrepressible and didn't give Babir a chance to open his mouth.

"Babir, by the grave of Abdulkarim-muallim, drink a double shot down with us! Come on, just one double shot – that's all!"

The first thing Babir realized was that his condition had deteriorated in a trice: he had a pain now under his heart, now in the pit of his stomach, now somewhere else; but he felt quite ill, as if he had also been struck dumb. He couldn't understand why it had happened; then he was bathed in a cold sweat. Babir felt the chill damp of that sweat between his shoulder blades. But why? Had he really been so fond of Abdulkarim-muallim? And if he had, why had he only remembered him now that the tiresome Sary Zakir had

mentioned his name? Yet the cold sweat was a real cold sweat – the rapid thudding was of Babir's heart and no one else's. Babir could only ask, "Is Abdulkarim-muallim really dead, then?"

"Alas... Abdulkarim-muallim, may Allah give peace to his soul." Sary Zakir sniveled more from the effects of the empty vodka bottles on the table than in memory of Abdulkarim-muallim. "Seven or eight years ago, he wished us long life – and then departed from us!"

Without saying a word, Babir left Zakir's table and went to the restaurant window. All the lighted windows of Baku stared at Babir's face, and he considered how many different destinies there were behind those distant windows, how many cares, how much suffering and tragedy, and he surprised himself by thinking about such things for the first time in his life as he looked out in the evening at the lights of Baku.

Abdulkarim-muallim had taught Babir physics at school... or had it been chemistry? Physics, apparently... and now, if a miracle happened and Babir were to meet Abdulkarim-muallim face to face, he might not even recognize his old teacher. Babir had no particular memories of Abdulkarim-muallim – he had been like the other teachers, but perhaps Abdulkarim-muallim had been a little more kind-hearted. A little more affectionate? Babir well remembered that how in that faraway time of childhood, when they used to go by the canal-bank that ran through the lower part of Toylu Station, on their way to play in the reeds, he had sometimes thought of his own father, whose face he did not remember. He would imagine his father's face as being like Abdulkarim-muallim's, and his father's smile like Abdulkarim-muallim's too; he wanted to see his father looking different, with a different image. He saw in his mind's eye two photographs of his father that his mother kept at home – but even so he saw his father in the person of Abdulkarim-muallim. That son-of-a-bitch Sary Zakir

had hit the nail on the head – why had he taken it into his head to swear on the grave of Abdulkarim-muallim? Why had that oath had such an impact on Babir? Why couldn't he leave the window and carry on with his work? What had happened? But, be that as it may, no one would ever again ask Babir for the sake of Abdulkarim-muallim's grave. As he looked at the illuminated windows of Baku, he realized that he was now going to go back to the table at which that scourge of God, Sary Zakir, was sitting. He was going to drink a glass of vodka with him in memory of Abdulkarim-muallim's grave.

Sary Zakir thumped himself resoundingly on the chest. "Didn't I tell you, eh? Did I tell you – or didn't I? Babir is a piece of my heart! Did I tell you he would drink with us, or didn't I? We're guests here, but Babir's the master of the house! Could he possibly not regard us as human beings -and not down a shot with us? Did I say it to you – or didn't I?"

Then Sary Zakir wanted to stand up and embrace Babir – but that was going too far, and Babir abruptly pushed Sary Zakir back down into his seat. He drank a glass in memory of Abdulkarim-muallim's grave in such a way that he was noticed neither by Pakiza-khanum nor the others. Only Pogosov, apparently, saw something, but that didn't matter – because there was little that Pogosov hadn't seen in the sixty-three years of his life.

It was the first time that Babir had ever had a drink while on duty in the restaurant, and, strange to say, the vodka was also something unusual: it seemed to flow into Babir's blood. It scared him, and gates began to open in Babir's heart, of which Babir himself had never even suspected. No, Babir was not thinking about Abdulkarim-muallim any more – but he suddenly remembered how in childhood he had wept bitterly over something. Now, as he served the patrons, he felt that he was ready to burst into tears again – or, to be more exact, his whole body,

his whole being wanted to weep. But why? Why was he so overcome, so disturbed? Was there really so much strength in a glass of vodka? Or was it, perhaps, not strength, but wisdom? To master himself, to drown the agitation of his heart and his troubled feelings, he began working even more zealously; he bustled around near Pakiza-khanum in order to pull himself together in view of the manager and get himself under control. Yet his heart was saying something different, his heart was saying: "Get away at once from this sticky air that is cocooning your whole body in a restaurant that smells of burnt cooking oil, spilt wine and stale cigarettes and Nora's make-up! Run outside into the boisterous open air, commit yourself to the wind, let the wind carry you wherever it wants, let it bear you away. The world is spacious, the wind is strong, let the restaurant stay here, but as for the rest – the suitcase under your bed in the hostel, and the cooperative flat – let it all go to someone else; ride, ride away, yield to the wind, my doughty warrior, flee...

Suddenly, the two years, or seven hundred and thirty days, after which his cooperative flat would be ready, seemed like an inescapable eternity; the gloom and hopelessness of those seven hundred and thirty days to come filled Babir with such despair that he virtually ran up to Zakir's party and said, "Pour me another!"

Sary Zakir went into sincere raptures at Babir's daring.

"May all the vodkas in the world be yours, Babir! I implore you, let me embrace you! Come on, come on! Or I swear by the grave of my father Kalantar that my heart will break!" And Sary Zakir rose to his feet this time and embraced Babir in front of the whole restaurant.

Babir knew that Pakiza-khanum's blue eyes were fixed on him and that the other waiters were probably standing and watching him too. He didn't put his glass down – he clinked it with those of Sary Zakir and his friends and upended the contents down his throat – because the poet so rightly said: "Remember my words, mad soul;

do not maintain that it is worth staying in this world". When Sary Zakir, who had hurriedly refilled the glasses, asked Babir to propose a toast, Babir's heart seemed to burst forth like a spring. It flowed with the poet's words, it flowed and compelled Sary Zakir and his friends to weep aloud that windy March evening in an overcrowded Baku restaurant amid so many people. How many heroes have come into the world, the time has come to migrate, quickly it has come and quickly it has passed away; mountains shook at one blow struck by the knight Rustam. The echo went into epic poetry, became word and passed away; for a long time the prophet Solomon lorded it over the whole universe, the throne of King Jamshid collapsed, King Firudin suffered a hundred misfortunes and they all passed away. What became of King Keykavus, where is his son Keygubad? God and Magog were deities – where are they now? The fortress of Nimrod was leveled with the earth, and all passed away; Alexander tumbled Darius from his throne, became king of the world, and how did he end? He died halfway through his life and was left in the earth, like Babir, conqueror of India. He was burned and his ashes were scattered far and wide.

After the words spoken by Babir, after he had replaced the name of the poet and King Babir with his own, he could not contain himself – he went away from the party and again stood in front of the restaurant window; again he moved the heavy grey curtain aside and looked at the illuminated city windows, and the light of those windows now seemed to be coming to him through layers of lead.

Babir knew that they were all looking at him now – the stares of everybody, especially the sidelong glances of Pakiza-khanum, were burning into his back. But they did not touch his soul, and Babir knew that the reason for this was not just the vodka. He couldn't now recall how long ago it was that he had been so replete, so excited. What was

Babir's heart yearning for? Why was it groaning and weeping so? Where had those lines of poetry come from? How had it come about that they had lodged in his memory and why had he replaced the poet's name with his own? Were those words truly from his own heart? And if they were, why had they not disclosed themselves till now?

Nora was singing a French song, and each time she sang in French, she rolled her r's – "r-r-r-r" – at the back of her throat like a crow; but Alifagha said that Nora was singing right, because all the famous French singers rolled their r's in just that way – it was a characteristic French vocal mannerism.

Babir tried not to catch Pakiza-khanum's eye or that of the other waiters, and he hastily served his other patrons, but his hands were shaking, his legs would not obey him and the customers were looking in amazement at Babir's inflamed, moist eyes and trembling hands.

At first, Babir wanted to give up everything and run out of the restaurant, grab a taxi, drive to the hostel, throw himself face down on his bed, weep to his heart's content and go to sleep. He knew that if he did that now, if he ran outside and took a taxi – everything would be all right again on the next day. Under Pakiza-khanum's supervision, Ziba and Pogosov would somehow placate Babir's customers and cope with their bills; then at the meeting, Babir would be given a telling-off – and would think of something, say, bad news had come from his mother or the blond youth who had come into the restaurant was a friend of his late sister and so forth... then he would apologize, and everything would be put to rights. However, all this was being said to him by his reason, by calculation. But what about his heart? His heart was saying something else...

Zakir's table was crowded with half-empty or completely empty vodka and wine bottles, and Zakir's party, after Babir's toast in the words of the poet, wept, then recovered themselves. Sary Zakir stood up,

gripped Babir's hand as he walked past and said to his friends, "Fill the glasses! Fill the glasses! I want to speak! We are raising this glass to the health of our Babir! Ah, Babir, my dear friend, can it be that though you are so smart-looking and the apple of this restaurant's eye, can it be that you have welcomed us so seriously, have not considered it shameful to sit with us and drink? Since by saying those words you have made us" – and Sary Zakir was deeply touched again – "have made us weep, may you live for a thousand years to come!"

Zakir and his friends drank down their vodka, but Babir drank wine because, to tell the truth, he could not take any more. He saw that Pakiza-khanum had gone very pale and was staring straight at Babir with blue eyes that blazed with fury. Babir suddenly lost his temper and, just to spite that snake-eyed Pakiza-khanum, sat in a free place at Zakir's table and said, "Pour another!"

"Come on, quickly, pour another!" Sary Zakir put his plate, knife and fork down in front of Babir as if he wanted to pay Babir for waiting on them all evening.

"That crow never stops cawing, the bitch!" Babir glared inimically at Nora – although Nora, naturally, had no idea what Babir was saying. She was singing another song in French and rolling her r's.

Sary Zakir did not know how to react to Babir's abuse of the singer – to join Babir, and swear at her too?

Her eyes blazing with rage, her face white with fury. Pakiza-khanum was signaling to Babir. He knew what this meant, but he didn't care, because the ashug had well said that the soul does not crave the benefits of the world... and if in this world there were such icy lights in the windows, and those icy lights froze the heart, then the trunk under the bed in the hostel should be pitied. It was the most stifling of all suitcases, the ugliest and the most beggarly, and the owner of that suitcase was also to be pitied.

One of Sary Zakir's friends had a shaggy head of hair and a pimply face. He was wearing a pale blue suit that was too loose for him, and a red nylon shirt; he had a green tie knotted round his neck, and when Babir's eve fell on that tie, the green began to melt and dissolve and turned into the long-forgotten green of a mountain. Babir had been very small at the time, and to this day he didn't know that he had been carrying the green in his memory, in his heart. Toylu Station was an absolutely grey plain, and, apart from the marsh reeds, there was no other green there; but once, in that remote time, his mother had taken Babir with her in a car and they had ridden for a long time; the road had snaked its way uphill, and on the mountain, along the sides of the road and between the houses there had been green such as Babir had never seen before and could not have imagined. The green grass, green trees, green bushes and violet, orange, blue and russet flowers smiling in the midst of all that green had taken the little Babir into such an astounding and joyous world, that after the return to Toylu Station he did not leave that beautiful world for several months. At night, before going to sleep, he covered his eyes and saw the green, and, amid the green, red, violet, orange, blue, white and russet; and Babir's sense of bravement vanished before that vision.

But the green, after melting and dissipating, solidified again, shrank and became the tie hanging from the neck of the youth with the shaggy head of hair and the pimply face. Babir thought with pain that since that childhood journey he had never seen such green, had seen nothing smiling amid the green, nothing so red, violet, orange, blue, white and russet; in fact he had not seen anything at all.

"Eat and drink well," said Babir. "Tonight you are my guests."

Sary Zakir was overwhelmed.

"Did you see that? Did you see it or didn't you? Didn't I tell you that Babir wouldn't let us dig into our pockets?"

Meanwhile, Pakiza-khanum was still making signs.

Sary Zakir's shaggy friend stared at Pakiza-khanum as she signaled to Babir, and suddenly turned to Babir.

"Fix her..." he stammered.

"What?"

"Fix her..."

"What d'you mean, fix her..."

"Fix her up with me..."

For a fraction of a second, Babir was baffled by the shaggy youth's request, then he went into fits of laughter and, as he looked at Pakiza-khanum, he imagined her in certain positions and laughed even louder.

Of course, neither Sary Zakir nor his friends understood why Babir was so merry all of a sudden, but at this point the patrons at the neighboring tables began grumbling.

"Where's the water?"

"But we asked for lemon!"

"Is the chicken tabaka ready yet?"

"Where's the champagne?"

Pakiza-khanum went towards Babir with a determined step and stood right over him, her lips curling with rage.

"Comrade waiter!" she said, and did not know what to say next – whether to order Babir to stand up and get on with his work or simply ask him for the time being; but Pakiza-khanum was not given the time to think this over.

One of the two youths whom Babir had been serving stood up and shouted, "You sit there having yourself a ball and we've been waiting for champagne since morning!"

Babir surveyed from head to foot the young whippersnapper with the mere beginnings of a moustache. Even Babir couldn't

understand what made him rise to his feet, push Pakiza-khanum out of the way and roar, "Go and fetch it yourselves! Go and fetch what you want! You're here, that's your lousy kitchen, and that's where you'll find that crook Aghajafar-Brilliant!"

It was as if the incident was being recorded on film and at that point there had been a still shot; then the film had started running again. Pakiza-khanum didn't know whether to believe her singeing ears. Pogosov confined himself to saying "Pah!" to himself, Ziba looked at Babir with eyes that suddenly lit up with secret passion, as if it was Raj Kapur in front of her. Abulfat, sniffing and blinking, stood stock still, and it seemed to Alifagha that the end of the world had come. He nearly sobered up, because if the end of the world had not come after all, a person like Babir would never have allowed himself, in front of all those decent people, to say such a thing to Alifagha, whose heart was already troubled enough as it was. Had Babir, or whatever his name was, sensed that Aghajafar was on the fiddle? But then before Alifagha's very eyes there appeared the clean-shaven, full and smooth face of Aghajafar with its graying moustache and gold teeth. Alifagha calmed down somewhat, but did not play anymore and waited to see how it would all end.

"Fill then up!" said Babir, turning to Sary Zakir's party.

To tell the truth, they had not been expecting such an incident in that superior restaurant and were somewhat dismayed. But the shaggy youth went on devouring Pakiza-khanum with his hungry eyes.

Pakiza-khanum made quickly for the door, but she did not have to call anyone and complain, because the door opened and in walked Comrade Gardashkhanly in person.

For many a long year, Comrade Gardashkhanly had worked in restaurants, general stores and hotels – he had considerable experience, and just a moment ago, while inspecting the banqueting hall, he had

instinctively detected the silence that reigned in the restaurant. There was a hidden unrest in that silence, so he had opened the door and walked in.

As always when someone appeared who was higher in station than herself, Pakiza-khanum put on her spectacles. This time, too, she quickly donned them, went up to Comrade Gardashkhanly and, her blue eyes glaring with fury at Babir, she whispered something in Comrade Gardashkhanly's ear. Comrade Gardashkhanly, as he looked at Babir sitting with Sary Zakir's party, nodded twice as if to say, "I see, I see," and slowly walked up to Babir.

Abulfat sniffed, realizing that matters were getting complicated; Pogosov confined himself to saying "Pah" to himself; Ziba looked at Babir with now frankly enamored eyes; Alifagha and Almukhtar stood together with the other musicians, waiting to see how it would end. Even Nora, leaning back on the piano, looked in Babir's direction with interest. The most incredible thing was that it was as if a microphone had been installed in the restaurant. Brilliant Aghajafar, who was in the kitchen, knew what had happened in the restaurant – the measures he took consisted in kicking open the door from the restaurant into the yard and saying to his son, who was dozing in the GAZ-24, "Drive off. And don't come back today."

Then the kitchen learned that Comrade Gardashkhanly had come into the restaurant in person, and all of them, except Aghajafar, who had gathered at the kitchen door, were peeping into the restaurant.

Comrade Gardashkhanly went up and stood in front of Babir. Sary Zakir and his friends realized from his gait, appearance and bearing that this fat little man was a very important person. All three rose to their feet, but Babir never budged from his place.

Comrade Gardashkhanly, of course, believed everything that Pakiza-khanum had just whispered to him. He had never expected

such brazenness of Babir – to greet a person such as himself, Comrade Gardashkhanly, sitting, without even moving from his place? Comrade Gardashkhanly did not lose his usual composure and said quietly, "Good! So that's it? Very well! We shall settle this matter tomorrow."

Babir stretched his neck and looked Comrade Gardashkhanly straight in the eye, without waiting to see what else Comrade Gardashkhanly was going to say.

"Oh, oh, oh! He's frightened me!"

Babir carefully took off his white bow tie, dipped the big white silk butterfly with its snow-white, spotless wings into a glass of red wine, and the white silk instantly turned red. Babir took out the bow-tie, dripping with red wine, rose to his feet – and pushed it under the director's nose.

Comrade Gardashkhanly's eyes bulged; that experienced, enterprising, competent man was as disconcerted as a child. He was dumbfounded in the middle of the restaurant, in front of the public – even worse, in front of his subordinates. He did not know what to do, and no one at all dared say or do anything. Comrade Gardashkhanly's bulging, rolling eyes rested on Ziba. Ziba, wiping her hands on her apron, went up to Babir, took Babir under the arm and said in a soft and truly affectionate voice, "Calm down. Let's go. Come on!" and then whispered in Babir's ear, "Come to my place..."

"Whaaaat?!" Babir's shriek shook the whole restaurant. "Go, and take him there to "your place"!" Babir pointed his finger – and all but poked it into Comrade Gardashkhanly's eye. "The devil knows what you get up to in his office! To hell with your hero! That mole's your hero?"

Of course, all the restaurant staff knew perfectly well that the dishes specially prepared by Aghajafar were taken to Comrade Gardashkhanly by Ziba and sometimes – presumably to tidy up in there – she would be delayed in the office.

Experience, at any rate, is a big thing. Comrade Gardashkhanly recovered first and turned to Alifagha.

"What are you standing there for?" he shouted. "Music!!!"

In an instant, all got going together: Alifagha's clarinet, Gulmammad's trumpet, Malik's tar, Almukhtar's oboe, Fatulla's double-bass and Nora's voice. The clarinet shrilled away at full blast, Gulmammad blew his trumpet so that his eyes crawled up to his forehead, but he could not stop. Babir seemed to be shouting from a TV screen from which the sound was lost – his mouth was opening and shutting. The veins on his neck were bulging almost fit to burst, he was unburdening his heart, but it was impossible to understand what he was saying because his voice was inaudible. Ziba, Pogosov and Abulfat carried on with their work again; Comrade Gardashkhanly left the restaurant and went upstairs to his office on the fourth floor. Pakiza-khanum took off her spectacles and put them in their case, but Zakir and his party, realizing that everything had gone away, had long since made themselves scarce. While the patrons, including Babir's former customers, gradually calmed down and began eating and drinking, the kitchen staff, shaking their heads, returned to their places – in terror of the infuriated Aghajafar, they did not utter a sound. Only Babir, standing in the middle of the restaurant, was saying something as in a soundless broadcast – but even the alarmed Alifagha paid no more attention to Babir, because he knew that he would shout himself hoarse and – in the end – go away.

That windy March evening, Babir walked from the restaurant to the tram stop – when he had board a tram, he saw that it was as empty as the streets of Baku, except for himself and the young conductress sitting at the other end.

Babir sat down at one end of the tram. It moved off.

Babir was not thinking of anything in particular; he was tired and felt sleepy, but there was no excitement or restlessness in his tiredness, and in general everything was in order; what had been necessary had happened.

Except that Babir's shoes were too tight, that was all.

The conductress glanced at Babir from the other end of the tram and smiled.

Babir thought that she must have taken him for Mursal Mammadov, and this time he felt pleased about his resemblance to the artiste, and he smiled at his own joke.

Except that he was minus a bow-tie.

The conductress kept looking at Babir, and when, at the last stop, Babir got up and walked past her, the girl said, "I've recognized you now. My cousin had her wedding party in your restaurant."

Not much is needed for happiness.

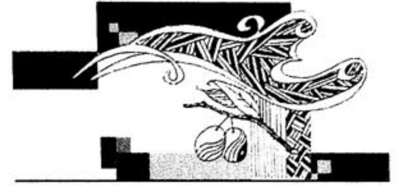
After alighting from the tram, Babir walked across the empty park to the hostel.

The wind would die down, then rise again, and when that happened, it all but tore up the trees in the park by the roots.

Babir stopped suddenly, bent down and took of the tight shoes.

Then with all his might he hurled them one after the other into the darkening shadows of the trees.

Peace descended on Babir's tired soul, and, as he walked to the hostel in his socks, he thought that nothing can be more beautiful than walking in one's bare feet.



HOTEL BRISTOL

The sky cleared slightly and the sun peeped out. It had probably come out like that a million years ago – and would come out like that in a million years' time.

Those words were not his – they had been said about twelve years ago, and at the time they had seemed as empty and meaningless as the person who had uttered them. He had laughed at them inwardly, but now those words – about the permanence of the sun and insignificance and pettiness of human life compared with that permanence – had given him a shock, as if he were a youth who had only just realized what life and death are about.

When they had carried the coffin as far as the big lorry, they stopped. The two young men jumped into the back of the lorry, the coffin was unshouldered and pushed by hand into the lorry. Poor Alisattar-muallim, who was sweating profusely in the autumn cold, said to the young men. "Be careful!.. Be careful!.."

In the coffin, a box of dry boards painted silver, lay Hotel Bristol.

Poor Alisattar-muallim could not stay in one place but kept darting from side to side.

"Be careful!.." he kept saying. "Be careful!.."

What was Alisattar-muallim afraid of? Was he afraid that they would drop Hotel Bristol?

Does your heart weep like your face?

Or are you making yourself weep?

Are you a good person or a bad person?

Are there mostly good people on earth, or bad people?

And he thought how small and insignificant is the life of man compared with the permanency of the sun, how all those "good" and "bad" people are insignificant compared with the human (including Alisattar-muallim's) heart, the world of humankind.

The young men thumped their fists twice on the driver's metal cab – to say, that everything's ready. They had set the coffin down in the middle of the lorry, it was possible to move, and the guests began boarding the buses and cars for the journey to the cemetery. The young men raised the sides of the lorry; the coffin was no longer to be seen, and inside that unseen coffin lay Hotel Bristol.

Poor Alisattar-muallim showed the guests to unoccupied seats, hurried about among the cars, made sure that no one was left without a seat. He shed rivers of perspiration, turned up now at one end, now at the other – he was evidently a very restless man by nature – did not leave it to his friends or relatives, virtually found seats for people one at a time in the buses and, as soon as he saw someone close to him, could not restrain himself and was distressed. Poor Alisattar-muallim.

How will you sleep tonight?

Will you often remember Hotel Bristol?

Was she really very dear to you?

Is your infinite diligence genuine or false?

Will you be lonely, or were you always lonely?

It was the first time that Murad had seen Alisattar-muallim and although Alisattar-muallim's stoutness made his short neck look even

shorter and his absolutely bald head clearly did not go anywhere near Hotel Bristol, it seemed to Murad all the time that he had long known Alisattar-muallim and had seen him many times, and Alisattar-muallim must surely be just such an Alisattar-muallim as this; he couldn't have had a different face or appearance.

This time, poor Alisattar-muallim walked past him and murmured in reponse to the compassionate glances of the guests:

"Such is life..."

"...Such is life..." At this point, Hotel Bristol looked out of the window, glanced at the autumn sun peeping through the clouds, screwed up her grey eyes and said significantly, as always, "The sun probably came out like that a million years ago... It will come out the same way in a million years' time..." Then, averting her grey eyes form the sun, she looked straight at him and said, this time in Russian, "Such is life."

"Not as good, and yet not as bad as one thinks."

Hotel Bristol looked Murad in the eye with a highly experienced, very meaningful smile that had passed the test of time, and she laughed.

"Just so! That was well put..."

Hotel Bristol didn't know that the autumn would pass, that more autumns would come and go, and on one such autumn day, two young men would pull her into the back of a lorry in her coffin, a box of dry boards painted silver.

"And I understood you perfectly..."

Murad also laughed, because Murad's comment about life came from Maupassant, it was from one of his novels-apparently it was the closing sentence of *Une vie*; Murad also laughed, because he didn't know either that autumn would pass, other autumns would come and go, and on such an autumn day, the kind of autumn day that had

occurred a million years ago and would continue to occur a million years from now, two young men would pull Hotel Bristol into the back of a lorry in her coffin, a box of dry boards painted silver.

Hotel Bristol was fastidious and always made a point of letting it be noticed. From time to time she would take a perfumed batiste hankie out of her handbag and wipe her hands and neck; but the dry wooden box painted sil-ver was considerably worn since so many dead had been sent to the cemetery in it before. According to Islamic custom, they were committed to the earth without the coffin and wrapped solely in their funeral habiliments; and now this coffin was taking Hotel Bristol to her last resting-place. On the next day it would take someone else, and on the day after, someone else, and so, when it was finally worn out, it would fall to pieces, it would rot and mingle with the earth, and a new coffin would be made in its stead. Once, when Murad passed through one of the old districts of Baku on his way to work, he saw some roof-makers breaking up an old coffin and putting the boards into a fire under a cauldron of the boiling tar with which roofs are treated in Baku. Murad was haunted for a long time by the sight of the flame licking at the coffin boards as they burned under the cauldron of boiling tar; they were not flames that warmed, he sensed an icy cold in them, and the icy cold of those flames seemed to freeze Murad inside.

...Hotel Bristol interpreted Murad's smile differently and clutched him warmly by the wrist.

"How good that we understand each other... In this cold world, even a mild glow warms the heart. I am happy..." And at this point, Hotel Bristol, as usual at such moments, went into Russian again. "And you?"

"I also..."

"Also what?"

"The same as you..."

Hotel Bristol squeezed Murad's wrist and moved very close to him; her breasts pushed against Murad's jacket, and he felt sorry for them, as if they were apples kept indoors all winter but taken to market in the spring, and when Hotel Bristol raised her head and looked straight with her own grey eyes at Murad, he found it funny that the appeal in her gaze should be so self-assured, and he thought it good when Hotel Bristol took her eyes off him for some reason and looked at the sun peeping through the autumn clouds. Of course, Murad ought to do something – either kiss Hotel Bristol lightly, or move aside, or do something else, but Murad did nothing; he simply gave her a warm smile.

"How is Alisattar-muallim?" he asked in all sincerity.

Hotel Bristol's hot hand with its quickened pulse promptly released Murad's wrist, and, still trying to keep the romantic smile on her face, she said, "Very well, thank you."

"How's his radiculitis?" asked Murad with the same sincerity.

Hotel Bristol was completely put out, but with the stubbornness of a martyr who has decided to suffer to the bitter end, she tried not to let Murad see that she was hurt.

"His radiculitis is better," she said and, unable to contain herself any longer, she left the room.

Murad knew that Hotel Bristol's husband was named Alisattar-muallim, and, like everybody else in the institute, he also knew that Alisattar-muallim didn't know about Hotel Bristol's affairs; he suffered from chronic radiculitis, and it was his sole preoccupation most of the time.

...The lorry moved off, the other vehicles moved off slowly after the lorry, the drivers and passengers in the trolleybuses, taxis and other cars whose path was blocked, stared in impatience and annoyance at

the funeral cortege as waited for the road to be cleared. Finally, all the vehicles following the hearse flowed into the main traffic, and the rear of the procession was brought up by the old Zhiguli in which Alisattar-muallim was sitting. Poor Alisattar-muallim.

How's your radiculitis, does it hurt badly?

Perhaps the whole of human life is one long autumn, and in reality the other seasons of the year are something we only imagine.

Are you consoled by the thought that at least radiculitis is not cancer?

But what has the autumn of life to do with that?

Does it matter so much in the autumn of life whether you have cancer or radiculitis?

...At that time, Murad was still working at the institute, and there was only one room in their department. In that one room there were four desks – senior science staff workers Murad and Alisattar-muallim sat at two of them, the third belonged to junior staff worker Musa, and the fourth to Salminaz, who was the lab assistant.

Hotel Bristol's real name was Maleyka, but whenever she came up in the conversation, Murad and the others called her Hotel Bristol. She had once been abroad on a tour of a country in Europe, and in one of the cities there she had stayed at the Hotel Bristol. She had brought back a packet of the hotel's stationery with Hotel Bristol printed in Latin characters at the top, and she had written her various letters or notes on that stationery ever since. For instance, she couldn't attend a conference, so she would send an unofficial note apologizing for not being able to take part in the conference for this or that reason, and the note sent to the department would bear the heading, Hotel Bristol. Incidentally, the younger staff workers gave the nickname another and more subtle meaning.

How many years older than Murad was Hotel Bristol? She often got into conversation with Murad, talking about history, architecture,

painting, the Italian cinema or the French novel, and sometimes it was simply show; for example. Hotel Bristol, alone with Murad, led the conversation round to foreign literature, and Murad reeled of a list of writers who were, in fact, American cosmonauts whose names he happened to know.

"What are you reading just now?" Hotel Bristol asked.

"There's an English writer, David Scott," said Murad. "I'm reading a novel of his."

Hotel Bristol expressed delight.

"O-o-oh!.. A marvelous writer! Which one are you reading?"

Murad improvised a title: "Life is a Wilderness..." Of course, there was no such novel; of course, Murad didn't know that in the autumn of his life he would be riding behind a lorry, and he didn't know that the fragrance of the wreath and flowers accompanying Hotel Bristol to the cemetery in a box of dry boards painted silver would suddenly remind him of Hotel Bristol's perfumed batiste hankies."

As soon as Murad named the novel, Hotel Bristol exclaimed, "Yes, it's not a bad novel... But have you noticed how accurately he lays bare the feminine psyche in two or three sentences?"

Of course, if the title of the novel is "Life is a Wilderness," then there ought to be at least one woman in it, and the writer (never mind if David Scott is an astronaut) should say something about that woman. But the pleasure of this one-sided game was that an argument had started.

"I wouldn't say that he knows women all that well..." Murad objected.

Quick as a flash, a studied smile appeared on Hotel Bristol's lips.

"You are an authority on feminine psychology?" And after those words, uttered with special emphasis, a significant silence reigned, and Hotel Bristol returned to the novel as a whole. "Of course, Scott

is rather dry, like all Englishmen, but sometimes he notes details one won't find in anyone else. Have you read other works of his?"

"No, I haven't."

"He has one story," said Hotel Bristol, "that came out last year. I'll tell you what it's called in a moment... Yes, "The Stare of the Black Cat!" An excellent piece of work! In my opinion, it's the best thing he's ever written. You simply must get hold of a copy and read it. Pity I've lent it to someone... Each time, I make myself a promise not to lend any more books, but I never keep it..."

Murad sometimes suspected that Hotel Bristol was making fun of him too, but she never made fun of anyone, she just had no alternative; after all, she couldn't say, "Excuse me, I don't know a writer named David Scott and I've never read anything of his." And so in his chats with Hotel Bristol, Murad mentioned President Salvador as a Spanish film director, a French general as a Canadian conductor and an English artist as an Australian ornithologist, and Hotel Bristol knew all these non-existent film directors, composers and scholars, named their other works, quoted their pronouncements on art, science, and literature, and argued with Murad about their achievements.

Salminaz and Musa used to listen in raptures to these chats between Murad and Hotel Bristol and tried to remember the difficult and unfamiliar names of the great scientists, directors and writers in order to use them on an appropriate occasion.

The lorry stopped at the cemetery gates. Alisattar-muallim climbed out of his old "Zhiguli" and hastily went up to the lorry; and it seemed to Murad that Alisattar was indeed in a hurry, like the drivers and the trolleybus, bus and taxi passengers whom the funeral procession had all but held up. He was in a hurry to get the funeral ceremony over as quickly as possible so that they could finally commit Hotel Bristol to the damp earth that had absorbed the autumn chill. Poor

Alisattar-muallim naturally didn't know about Murad's feelings and kept saying over and over again to the young men as they took the coffin off the lorry:

"Careful... Careful..."

They lowered the coffin and again the four of them hoisted the damp-soaked box on to their shoulders, and all followed on behind it; the cemetery was plunged in its usual silence, and that silence was pregnant with excitement and eagerness, and it seemed to Murad that the cemetery had long been waiting for them. Not in the sense that they must all die and the cemetery would be the last resting-place for them down to the last one – that was self-evident – but in the sense that the cemetery had, as it were, been waiting for this particular deceased, and now that she had turned up. Peace had descended on the cemetery, and it had sighed calmly, and it was this sigh that Murad had felt with all his body and soul.

Alisattar-muallim threw a brightly colored silk stole over the coffin, and in Murad's eyes the little white flowers on the stole grew in size and turned scarlet, and the dressing-gown with those big red flowers on it evoked a kind of sadness this time and a kind of warmth...

How had it come about that they had gone to Hotel Bristol's home together?

There had been a dinner after someone's graduation. They had eaten and drunk well -Murad and Hotel Bristol had been sitting side by side, and Murad remembered that on that summer evening, after they came away from the dinner, he and Hotel Bristol had kissed in a deserted little square, and then they had gone to Hotel Bristol's place, and she had opened the door with her key because there was no one at home. Then Murad had felt sick, he had gone to the bathroom, and when he came out, Hotel Bristol had already put on the famous dressing-gown with the big red flowers. Everybody in the institute

knew that Hotel Bristol had such a dressing-gown – it had become a legend; but when Murad saw it with his own eyes, he was numbed with shock. That dressing-gown with the big red flowers was like a magic carpet or Aladdin's lamp, and to see it in real life seemed impossible. And then everything happened as in the bad novels; Hotel Bristol's naked thigh showed in the partly opened skirts of the dressing-gown, the light in the room seemed to go out of its own accord, Hotel Bristol sat beside Murad on the divan and everything turned misty in his befuddled mind. Afterwards, when it all came back to him, he remembered that first and last night, everything was wrapped in that same mist, and it now seemed to Murad that with the passage of the years, the mist had grown old and decrepit too. If there had ever been any living attraction in that mist, it had already vanished and its place had been taken by the tranquility of autumn.

When, in the morning, his friends asked Murad where he had disappeared to after the dinner, he laughed: "I was having a rest at the Hotel Bristol..." This quickly became a byword among the young people at the institute. "A great day for a rest at the Hotel Bristol..." "Why weren't you here yesterday? Did you stay at the Hotel Bristol?"

"The same business as with the Hotel Bristol..."

The gravediggers were waiting, spade in hand, for the body to be taken out of the coffin and laid in the grave; then, after filling it with earth, they could finish work. At this point Alisattar-muallim could not bear it any longer, he went down on his knees by the coffin and sobbed his heart out. Poor Alisattar-muallim. in time, everything will be forgotten, in time, neither you nor I will be on earth, in time, none of these people will be on earth, but the sun will go on rising just the same, because it used to rise in the same way a million years ago, and in a million years after this it will rise just the same, and then, too, there will be people like you and me, and

they will think the same way, or they will not think the same way – what's the difference?

No, Musa, as it turned out, did not love Hotel Bristol either; he divorced his wife, but married Salminaz, and Murad had seen them a month ago. Murad had changed his job some years back, and that day after work he finally made the time and came to visit his father-in-law who was in hospital. The whiteness and cleanliness of the hospital, together with the hospital smell, made Murad's heart contract. There was a chill hopelessness about the absolutely spotless starched overalls. He met Musa and Salminaz in the third-floor corridor.

"Hello, Murad-muallim!.." Salminaz was sincerely delighted at the unexpected meeting, and Musa, who was still working in the same institute as a junior scientist, shy and embarrassed as usual, greeted Murad, then looked with doting eyes at Salminaz.

"How are you getting on, Murad-muallim?" asked Salminaz. "We haven't seen one another for ages... It's only on television that we sometimes see..." And Musa echoed what Salminaz said and again looked at her with doting eyes. "Everything that was best about the institute is a thing of the past, Murad-muallim. Everything's changed. If you come, you won't even recognize it..." Salminaz stroked Murad's greying hair and suddenly asked in a sad voice, "Have you come to see Maleyka-khanum too?"

At first, Murad didn't know whom she meant, then he realized that Hotel Bristol was a patient. It came out that she had been there for over three months and had not left her bed.

"Hopeless!" Salminaz's eyes filled with tears. "She's in Ward Number Three Hundred and Eighteen. Her doctor says she won't last more than a month. Cancer. But she doesn't know it."

Then Musa and Salminaz left.

It was still early autumn at the time, and the leaves of the cherry tree in the hospital courtyard, which was visible from the corridor window, had not yet turned yellow and were as green as the leaves of the olive trees a short distance away. After a little while, the leaves of the cherry tree would turn yellow and fall, but the olive trees would remain the same green in summer and winter. Then the day would come when the evergreen olive trees would also die, and they would be cut down.

The nurse in the spotless white overalls, who was seated at the desk in the corner a short distance away, was talking to someone over the telephone and laughing a great deal; her snow-white overalls were stiff with starch, and it seemed to Murad that snow-white starched overalls with no one inside them were sitting in the chair, holding the telephone, and talking and laughing a great deal.

He opened the door of Ward 318 and imagined that it was not he but someone else going into the ward and that someone else could see a solitary, elderly woman patient lying in bed; consequently, he was not surprised that the woman had changed so much, for the sight of the immeasurably changed woman shook the other person, not him. Murad waited for the woman with the grey hair, without henna, straggling over the pillow, with the yellow and even blackened face seemingly modeled in wax, to open her eyes, see him and not believe what she saw.

Hotel Bristol did indeed open her eyes to see him standing before her, but she was not at all surprised; she merely smiled, as if she had been waiting for him and had known that he would come at any moment and at any moment she would open her grey eyes and see him.

The bottom of the grey eyes became visible, as if bucket after bucket of water had been drawn from them. Now, when he looked, it was the bottom shining.

The grey eyes were smiling in anguish.

Salminaz had said some time ago that Hotel Bristol knew nothing, but those grey eyes knew everything.

We did not know that.

At that moment, the grey eyes were smiling at the autumn of life, and at that moment the grey eyes were smiling at me too.

For many years now he had not seen her, from time to time he came across her signature in the press, had remembered her and had immediately forgotten her again, but now, looking into those grey eyes smiling in anguish, he remembered the former provocative smile in them and felt in that smile a sincerity he had never been aware of before, the kind of warmth in which a tree grows or the chick pecks it way out of the shell; as if she had taken his frozen fingers in her hands and was warming them with her breath.

He knew that the sick woman had no children – had no one at all except for a husband and his relatives. No doubt some of them visited her in this ward after work, but there was no horror of loneliness or pain of bereavement in those agonized smiling grey eyes; on the contrary, they were laughing sadly at loneliness and bereavement.

Two or three minutes ago, when those eyes had still been closed, he had feared that the elderly, sick woman would suddenly remember the past, would suddenly say, "I loved you truly", or "That night doesn't count, I always disliked you"; but, as he looked into the agonized smiling grey eyes with the shining depths, he felt that he, his whole being and his whole life were so small, so insignificant before the sadness and the smile, that he was shaken to the core of his being...

...The gravediggers vigorously stepped on their spades, drove them into the ground and began tossing the soil into the grave; and

so a fresh grave in the cemetery was filled with earth, and Alisattar-muallim sobbed and whimpered as he looked at the earth-filled grave. Poor Alisattar-muallim.

I very much want your radiculitis never to torment you.

I very much want you to live free from all worry till the end of your life, I want the perspiration never to stream from you in rivulets again, and I want you to be as happy as possible, I very much want the darkness and silence of night not to make you tremble, I very much want the olive trees in the hospital courtyard never to die and be made into dry sticks, I don't want anyone to see roof-makers burning coffin boards.

I want Musa and Salminaz never to be divorced, but... winter passes, spring comes, then summer arrives and autumn begins again.

The sky frowned again, then cleared a little and the sun came out: no doubt millions of years ago the sun had risen like that. It would rise in exactly the same way in a million years to come.

THE LAST MORNING

It was probably July, or June was ending, or perhaps August was already beginning – he couldn't remember, or, to be more precise, he didn't know but that summer morning he didn't care and it didn't bother him because he had neither the opportunity nor the chance to think about anything at all: there was an incessant buzzing in his head, his left ear was aching somewhere inside (How long had it been aching like that?.. A week? A month? Or even longer? He couldn't remember and he wasn't even thinking about it...); there was also something wrong with his left big toe – he didn't know what precisely, how long it was since he had taken off his shoe, but his left big toe was hurting. That summer morning, however, the buzzing in his head, the earache, and the pain in his toe were of no importance whatever, because he was racked by an intolerable thirst; it was consuming his whole body from the roots of his hair to his fingertips. With his eyes fixed on the big padlocks on the doors of The Red Carnation, he waited for the snack-bar to open, and the agonizing impatience inflamed his thirst even more.

He had sixty kopeks in his pocket; he would buy and drink two bottles of wine with the money in The Red Carnation, and then

everything would return to normal, the way it did every day. That day, too, he would find someone – it didn't matter whether or not it was someone he knew, the main thing was that it should be someone of his own kind – or perhaps several of them would get together. They would either go to the furniture shop and start carrying loads, or someone would find a friend somewhere from whom it might be possible to get the money for a bottle of vodka – that was the hardest thing of all. With hands trembling like their own bodies, feelings and sensations – or to be more precise, with hands shaking with cold passion – they would pour out that bottle of vodka into tumblers or jars found somewhere. At worst, into empty tin cans picked up in the street or in the courtyards. They wouldn't drink the vodka straight from the bottle, because then one of them might get more than his fair share and another might get less. They would trust one another with money and even temporarily with an unopened bottle of vodka or sweet wine – but at the moment of drinking the vodka or sweet wine never, on any account, would they ever trust one another. So inevitably, if they got any vodka, they had to pour out it out in front of the others. If in the whole of Baku, or even in the whole of Absheron, there were only two of them, they would find one another. These people who didn't know one another and hadn't made any appointment always sought one another out, found one another like two magnets, mutually attracted one another. Neither distance, nor a state of complete intoxication, nor an inability to recognize someone or something had any influence on the magnetic power of such meetings. It made no difference, there would be someone there just like himself and they would inevitably find one another. After the bottle of vodka, or fortified wine or other drink they had managed to get hold of, they often lost one another. Each set off separately to find more drink, and these solitary searches often led to out-of-the-way snack or beer-bars, and they would drink up the

beer left in discarded glasses on the abandoned tables. Occasionally there would be something left at the bottom of the emptied vodka or wine bottles, and they would drink up the dregs. From time to time someone would feel sorry for them and would treat them to a hundred grams of vodka, or a tumbler of beer, or a full mug of wine. After that they would drink up more leftovers – and so they would go round the tables on their own until the cleaners turned them out into the street.

Formerly, when going into restaurants or bars, he'd looked for acquaintances – accosting them, and asking for a drink. He would talk about his bad luck and hard times, he would invent stories about the dreadful things that had supposedly befallen his wife and daughter, and he would weep. He would sometimes manage to win the sympathy of his acquaintances and, after listening to their reproaches and comments, he would drink a hundred grams and then ask for another hundred. Eventually, however, the difference between acquaintances and strangers had gradually disappeared, he had begun cadging drinks from acquaintances and strangers alike and then drinking up the leftovers.

He couldn't remember where he had found the sixty kopeks in his pocket, in fact he couldn't remember the previous day at all, in the grey mist clouding his brain, he remembered only that apparently in the Bayil District (or had it been in Lokbatan?.. God knows...), he had embraced a dead man in his coffin in a courtyard somewhere and he had wept. How he had come to be in that yard and whose had been the body in the coffin he didn't know; he remembered drinking a whole tumblerful of vodka at the wake, but he couldn't remember any more and he didn't want to remember anything that summer morning, because he was waiting with his whole being for The Red Carnation to open. As he looked at the big padlocks on the snack-bar doors, he thought of the bit in a horse's mouth and could feel the thick iron

shackles of those fastened padlocks like bits in his mouth, and he involuntarily bared his teeth.

Suddenly, his whole being was gripped by terror; he was frightened that he had lost the sixty kopeks, and for the tenth or fifteenth time that summer morning he thrust his hand into the ragged pocket of his dirty jacket, took out the sixty kopeks, gathered the copper and silver coins into the palm of his left hand and began carefully counting the money with the index finger of his right hand. His nails had grown too long and were black underneath, and as he counted the money, the flies settled on his face and hands. Chasing a fly away time to time, he finally counted up the money: exactly sixty kopeks. He dropped the money back into the tattered pocket of his dirty jacket and paid no more attention to the flies; they were crawling all over his forehead, nose, ears and lips, but he only chased flies away when he was counting money, as if afraid that they would share the sixty kopeks with him.

When he came and sat down on the corner of the pavement opposite The Red Carnation, the sun had not yet risen though the horizon had been bright red; but he had been completely indifferent to the bright red horizon; he had fixed his eyes on the locked door of The Red Carnation and was afraid to blink in case Abdullah, the snack-bar attendant, should arrive and open the big padlocks without him noticing.

The street was absolutely deserted, and on that absolutely deserted street there were only himself, sitting hunched on the edge of the pavement, and the sparrows in the green acacias, mulberry bushes and plane-trees growing along the street. The birds were making such a din that their twittering filled the whole street, as if they wanted to remind him of dawns in the past, of the life left behind in the past and now almost entirely forgotten. But after a few moments, the delightful chirruping of the sparrows was drowned by the buzzing in his head.

Time passed, very occasionally someone would come out of the houses or courtyards and hurry past. Nobody took any notice of him; evidently no one was interested in a man who had been sitting since early morning in front of The Red Carnation with his eyes riveted on the doors of the snack bar; in any case, none of those who passed by slowed down, as if he was also something like the stone or the asphalt, and anyone who did look at him walked fast after a cursory glance. There was, in those cursory glances, a fleeting glimpse of revulsion or disgust. He was, by now, used to that expression in the casual glances thrown in his direction, and they had no effect on him at all, as if that was the way it ought to be; he saw nothing insulting about them and, in fact, as far as he was concerned, there was nothing left in this world that could possibly insult him.

At the upper end of the street, a woman sweeper appeared, wearing, over her dress, a yellow jacket of the kind used by railway workers and, as she swept the street, she slowly began to make her way down it; then the first trolleybus drove along the street and the traffic began to increase. It was summer; the passing vehicles didn't bother him because the streets were dry; in winter or autumn, sleet or rain would be falling, and when he came and sat down In front of The Red Carnation or some other snack-bar, the cars spattered him with mud.

He shuddered again, pushed his hand into his jacket pocket, held the change in his hand again and began counting it all over again. Abdullah, manager and snack bar attendant of The Red Carnation, was not particularly squeamish: he knew all the alcoholics and demanded that they show their money before buying drinks; if they hadn't the cash, he ordered them off the premises, refused to let them drink up other people's leftovers in the glasses and mugs and, before the very eyes of those alcoholics, would pour the leftovers down the sink near

the counter. Sometimes, however once or maybe twice a month – he would hand one of them a bucket, order him, from morning till midday, to wipe the premises clean with a damp cloth – the whole interior of the buffet, the little kitchen at the back and the cellar where the food and drinks were stored. Abdullah would give him a hundred grams of vodka or half a mug of beer as a reward and then drive him out. Abdullah held the unshakable view that alcoholics were insolent creatures; if you were a little kinder to them, you'd have them round your neck.

The street-sweeper was gradually approaching him, but he wasn't worried about this because he knew all the snack-bar attendants and all the street-sweepers on streets with snack-bars in them like The Red Carnation; he knew the cleaners, he knew which one of them was likely to make scene and which one was sympathetic, and so he was not afraid of the woman who was moving in his direction.

As she swept her way along, the woman drew level with him and, as always, was unable to resist reading him a lecture:

"You've dragged yourself here again, have you, unhappily son of an unhappy father? You've dragged yourself here again? Abandoned one! Your sisters are weeping blood! You poor wretch, why have you dragged yourself here? Someone loves you too, surely? You are not a stray dog, you're a human being, after all! You too were born of a mother. Unhappy man – where is that woman to bow her lead who bore you on a black day? How could you bring yourself to such a pass? Are you a dog, or something? You are a human being, aren't you? Or are you a dog after all? The woman might have been talking to herself. "Have you lived a worse life than me? Did you have harder times than me? Here am I, earning my bread with a broom in my hands... but you, unhappy child, God knows what's been he matter with you! Why have you brought yourself to such a pass? After all,

you're not a dog!" As she contemplated her broom, that was as fluffy as a dewberry bush, the street-sweeper looked sad, and then suddenly flew off into a tirade. "May he turn in his grave, whoever invented that vodka! May Allah punish all on this earth who bear the name of Abdulla. If you die, by God, it will..." For a fraction of a second his glance fell on a badly creased photograph. He wanted to turn his eyes away, but he did not do so; he began looking at it instead, and the buzzing in his head gradually died down, the throbbing in his temples eased off and his whole body was bathed in a cold sweat because he thought that the schoolboy in that badly crumpled and creased photograph might be none other than himself.

Three pupils were sitting together in a school library and studying for their exams one girl and two boys; and now, in a grey mist, he made out that one of the boys was himself. Through the grey mist he vaguely remembered that when he was studying at school, a photograph like this one had come out in the paper, and he looked at the boy on the print. Through the petrified, thick, heavy layers in his brain he realized feel that this was the same paper and one of those schoolboys was himself.

The school years, adolescence and youth, up to the moment at which he glanced at the photograph in the badly crumpled and creased newspaper, had been left behind in a completely-forgotten, never-remembered past. This past had apparently gone dormant amid thick and thin layers of ice – and now, as it began to stir, the layers of ice were cracking, breaking up and disintegrating.

It was so long since he had sensed or felt any kind of inner alarm, it was so long ago that he had flatly rejected and forgotten anything of that kind that the newly-awakened excitement suddenly sent a chill all over his body. This chill, strange to say, was cold and warm at the same time. His dirty hands holding the old newspaper began to tremble as

if the cold chill and hot tremor had quenched the thirst that usually racked his whole being. He looked with a start at the flock of sparrows perched on a nearby acacia tree, he heard their tumultuous chirruping, and then he suddenly detected the very faintest trace of a certain odor. In that odor he recalled something long-forgotten, something that was near and dear to him. It reminded him of something, but precisely what he didn't know; he couldn't identify it and he hadn't the strength to concentrate, to think, to remember from where that odor came.

Of course, this might simply not be beautiful newspaper of times long past, and this boy might not be himself but someone entirely different: his memory could have deceived him, or his allocations could have begun again. But he summoned up all his strength and tried to banish these doubts at least, because suddenly there welled up in his soul a desire he had not known for a long, long time. He no longer wanted to stare at the doors of The Red Carnation – he wanted to listen for a while to the chirruping in the acacia tree. In wanting this, there was something bright and warm, and this new sensation obliterated the raging thirst for a drink that had been consuming his body like fire.

As if independently of himself, he cast a fleeting glance at the doors of The Red Carnation, then looked again towards the flock of sparrows twittering noisily in the branches of the acacia tree; then he wanted to take another look at that crumpled photo in the newspaper, but he did not do so because he suddenly recognized the odor that had stirred his memory...

The street-sweeper came up, took the old newspaper away from him and threw it under her broom. Then, as before she was cursing life. "Unhappy one! Your mother and your sisters will be delivered from shame... Even now you're a living corpse... Perhaps you have a wife and children... They are the ones who are the unhappiest of all!.. And may Allah send down ill fortune on Abdullah and his kind!.."

As if snack-bar attendant Abdullah forced the vodka down his customers throats...

He paid no attention to what the street-sweeper was saying. In fact he did not even hear anything at all. He stayed as he was, sitting hunched on the pavement – his eyes fixed on the big padlocks on the doors of The Red Carnation. As before, and he could feel the iron shackles of the big locks like bits in his mouth.

Lamenting, cursing, swinging her broom from side to side, the street-sweeper once or twice ran the end of it over his grimy trouser bottoms, soaked the day before in some kind of filth but now dry, and over the battered shoes with the new soles knocked off; but he paid no attention. Indeed, nothing could make him budge him from his place at that moment – only when the big locks on the doors of The Red Carnation were opened would his legs acquire strength. He would get up, go into the snack-bar, take the sixty kopeks out of his pocket, hold them out to Abdullah – and the attendant, to avoid touching his dirty hand, would point to the empty plate on the counter as if to say, "Put the money there." Then, having selected from the beer bottles – the worst ones, those with gas escaping from their tops or with cracks in the glass – in a word, bottles he would never serve to his customers, without hiding his contempt, or, to be more precise, openly demonstrating his revulsion, he would again make a sign... this time meaning, "Take that one!". Apart from the undoing of the padlocks on the doors of The Red Carnation, only two other things could get move him from the pavement. If he saw a militiaman coming, he would get up and hide somewhere so that he couldn't be picked up as a parasite and sent on compulsory labor or on a compulsory cure (three times he had been sent on compulsory cures but he had started drinking again afterwards) – or if he saw one of his own kind coming, he would get up and run away, because the man might have designs on his sixty

kopeks. Whenever he hadn't swallowed as much as a mouthful of spirit since early morning – and when, with thirty or sixty kopeks in his pocket, he had been sitting there like that and waiting for the snack-bar to open, he was cruel to people of his own kind. He would hide from them, not letting them anywhere near him. It was like the way a starving beast finds its prey and with uses every possible wile, its teeth and its claws to protect that prey from the other beasts – not letting any of them near enough to try and snatch a piece of it away.

When the street-sweeper, as she brushed the road, swung her broom towards the pavement again. A discarded, crumpled-up newspaper rolled up towards him like a light ball and came to rest at his feet.

He turned his eyes away from the doors of The Red Carnation and looked at the newspaper. He knew that such discarded newspapers seldom contain anything – but on that summer morning he nevertheless reached out, picked up the newspaper from under his feet and began slowly unfolding it. There was nothing inside the yellow, faded sheets. Someone had evidently once used it to wrap something up, had delivered whatever had been inside it, and had then rolled the newspaper up and throw it away.

He was about to throw the paper back to the street-sweeper, since there was nothing of interest in it... but at that point, which he had chosen himself, she carried on sweeping and started up again:

"What could there be in that old paper, you unhappy man? You expect to find money? And even if you do, what'll happen? You'll go, you'll have more to drink, unhappy son of an unhappy father... And then what? One day you'll just die on the street... And who'll find out about you? Who'll weep for you? Who'll bear your coffin and commit it to the damp earth, you poor wretch?.."

He couldn't hear what the street-sweeper was saying; he couldn't even hear the twittering of the sparrows, because that odor hovering

round him had taken him back into something he had forgotten, into the terribly remote past. Sporadically in his brain, like a photo-flash, something would flare up and go out, and during those instants, as in a photograph, he could see distinct scenes from the past...

...his little daughter is lying on her back on the unfolded nappy and drumming her finny heels on the table...

...Safura is ironing freshly washed and dried nappies...

...then, taking the iron from Safura, he irons his six-months-old daughter's tiny frocks and jackets...

...Safura is sitting on the bench and breast-feeding Qulzar, the sunbeams are coining through open window, bright glints of light glide over Safura's smooth breast...

...he is ironing Gulzar's tiny straw hat and he notices the smell of that tiny straw hat...

...smell of a tiny straw hat...

...smell of a tiny straw hat...

Safura's name and Gulzar's have been erased from his memory for how long now – a month? a year? – or, to be more exact, he has known noting about his family; he hasn't had time to remember anything, because the passion for drink and the craving to find it have devoured all his time, have used up all his energy. He hasn't had the strength to remember anything, and he has had neither the strength nor the desire even to think of all this, that is, of time and memory. Safura and Gulzar, like his snow-white surgical overalls and hat, have remained in the remote and already totally alien past. Formerly, when he had left home, or when he had been sacked from his job but was not yet loafing about the streets, drinking up the dregs in the bottom of other people's glasses and mugs, he had worked somewhere as a watchman and he had had a tiny watchman's booth. Every kopek that came his way he blew on vodka, he'd drink it in that booth, and he'd lie

down and sleep in there in those days – the unattainable, inaccessible past sometimes gave him no peace. He suffered when he was sober, promised himself that he would go and dry out – he wouldn't drink any more. He would even, as in the years of his adolescence and youth, make plans for the future. In his thoughts, he would be taking Gulzar for a walk again: they would go to the cinema, to the theatres; in his thoughts, he would be sleeping in the same bed at Safura, and even in his watchman's booth be could feel the starched cleanliness of their bed linen, as if it had left his imagination. It gave him a kind of hope, but then he would come by some vodka somewhere and the plans and dreams of a new future turned pale and faded away.

The street-sweeper finished her work and went away, and the woman's yellow linen jacket seemed to herald an autumn fall of leaves that would soon cover the whole world.

He again glanced sideways at the doors of The Red Carnation and then fixed his eyes or his hands as if he was still holding the newspaper – again fear clutched at his heart that he had lost the sixty kopeks... that they had disappeared from his pocket. But he didn't take the money out of his pocket and count it up this time; he did nothing to dispel his alarm, as if he was taking revenge on himself.

How had it all started? He could never remember even when he was working as a surgeon, drank in solitude away from the others and sprinkled himself with scent so as not to smell of spirits. Later, he could no longer keep his drinking secret, and then he didn't even want to hide it any more. He began railing against destiny, complaining about life – long-windedly and with tears, he would tell acquaintances and strangers that it wasn't his fault... life had worked out that way... His friends and acquaintances tried as soon as possible to find some kind of pretext to get away from him. As soon as they saw him, they

would turn off the road and make themselves scarce, then he no longer had the time or the will to talk for long. He began asking friends and acquaintances to lend him five rubles at first, then three rubles, then a ruble, a half-ruble, twenty kopeks, then he stopped using the word "loan" and simply asked for money. At work, he was first removed from his duties as a surgeon, ended up as an orderly, then was sacked and found a kind of watchman's hut. He took the pledge, drank again, went on the wagon, and drank again, left home... Safura had to face the reproaches of her friends and family: "Why d'you waste time on an alcoholic? Call that a husband? Call that a father to your child? He's ruined your life, what's he to you? Leave him, he chose that way himself, let him die on the street like a dog!.." Even so, she went out and looked for him until she found him. He left home again and disappeared – Safura found him again and brought him back home, but he left once again. After that, Safura never looked for him or brought him back again.

He sat there on the pavement, looking at his hand, black with sunburn and dirt, and his head began buzzing again, the twittering of the sparrows receded again and was drowned out, the thirst that had been racking his whole body blazed up once more, and he vaguely wanted to summon up his strength somehow and try not to miss the chirruping of the sparrows, not to look at the doors of "The Red Carnation" and not to fear losing the sixty kopeks, but he couldn't help himself, he stared at the still locked doors of the snack-bar, twice convulsively swallowed the saliva that dribbled from the corners of his mouth from time to time: his throat and mouth, like the whole of his insides, were in torment, were demanding beer.

When the street-sweeper had finished work and gone away, the marks by the fluffy broom remained on the road surface and the pavement. The broom had drawn many fine lines in the dust on the

asphalt, and in those lines on the clean street there was something that resembled the twittering of the sparrows.

He glanced again at the big padlocks, then at the broom marks on the pavement, and he suddenly remembered a certain look. Formerly, he had remembered it many times, but he had completely forgotten it ages ago, and, in spite of the buzzing in his head, the heat in his body and the pain in his ear and his big toe. He clearly remembered that look, and even felt the now long-past mood that it had evoked. He was in the seventh or the eighth form at school... it was summer, his father had gone to Nakhchyvan on a business trip, had taken him along. He had seen Ilandagh, or Snake Mountain. Then they had returned to Baku – but the short trip had changed something in him: he seemed to be looking in a new way at the streets of Baku where had been born and grown up, and at people he knew well, and at his comrades. All the time it seemed to him that he was on the eve of something beautiful; he did not know precisely what, but the feeling of something imminent warmed his heart, as if the spring breeze was blowing inside him and caressing the fresh willow leaves. On one such day, when he was on the way to visit a comrade who lived in the hilly part of Baku, for the first time in his life he felt on him the roguish stare of a young girl who was walking down the street. She was two or three years older than him, her snow-white bodice snugly filtered her full, healthy figure, as if her body and high breasts were trying to burst out of the snow-white bodice jacket and expose themselves. She had a dark complexion and jet-black eyes, and those black eyes, glittering with latent passion and curiosity, cast a predatory look at him. Then she lowered her eyes, she even blushed, or seemed to, and then walked past him. He never saw her again: but the gleam of hidden passion and curiosity in her predatory look, which he had fell on him for the first time, had graven themselves in his memory. He would remember that girl, he would

see the look in her eyes again, and it would always arouse a special mood of life-loving excitement.

Looking at the traces left by the broom on the asphalt, he suddenly remembered that faraway look and again became aware of that same familiar, intimate odor: his hands and whole body started shaking again, but it was not the tremor of an intolerable craving, it was the tremor caused by recollections.

The traffic was becoming heavier, there were more pedestrians, and the broom-marks on the asphalt were trodden on till they disappeared. At this point, Abdullah the snack-bar attendant appeared – toying with a bunch of keys, he threw a fleeting glance at the man on the corner the way people look at anyone who deserves nothing but contempt, and then he began undoing the big padlocks.

He had not noticed Abdullah arriving – but he heard the rattle of padlocks being unfastened and realized that Abdullah had come to open the doors of The Red Carnation. His whole body, his whole being, strained towards The Red Carnation, but he didn't look in Abdullah's direction, he didn't stand up and he didn't go to The Red Carnation. He was able to bear the buzzing in his head and the heat in his body, as if he was punishing himself again this way, and this secret punishment seemed to increase his strength and give him support (but his body was on fire, on fire...)

Abdullah finally finished opening the padlocks and, before going inside, he again cast a fleeting glance at the man on the corner. At first, he decided that he had fallen asleep and even thought for a moment that he might have died... but then sensed that he had neither fallen asleep nor died. Abdullah had, in his twenty years as a snack-bar attendant, seen many of his kind: he hadn't known their names, but he had recognized their faces. In those twenty years, most of them had disappeared, new ones had come to replace them, and

they too had disappeared, and still more had turned up. They were creatures with a life-span of one or two years, they went away, a new generation of similar creatures of different ages would come along to replace them. That alcoholic over there who had been hanging about near The Red Carnation since early morning had first turned up two or three years ago. Previously, he had disappeared from time to time, but he had lately been hanging about in the vicinity from morning till night. They said that he had once been a good surgeon, hut the barman Abdullah had seen plenty of once good surgeons, good teachers and good athletes; they may have been God knows what in their time, but not they were not teachers, or athletes, or criminal investigators any more, they were identical creatures with the same face. Frequently, in his spare time, snack-bar attendant Abdullah thought with amazement and not without secret pride that there might be anybody you cared to think of among them, but there would never be a barman. The hapless barman pours vodka into glasses from morning till evening, so why doesn't he himself become an alcoholic? It was a mystery of providence... Indeed, Abdullah considered it one of the greatest injustices on Earth that people harbored so much resentment against barmen and looked down on them as inferior beings.

...But his body was on fire, on fire... Amid those flames, amid the buzzing that was splitting his head in two, he could still smell that odor, and its intimacy and persistence seemed to convey a kind of infant smile, like Gulzar's smile when she had been a tiny lot...

How old was Gulzar now? Fourteen, no, fifteen… He couldn't remember exactly, but when he did think about it, that is, when he thought about Gulzar's age – the intimate, personal odor hiding an infant's smile suddenly faded, and his heart was constricted by a sense of shame to which he had long become unaccustomed. For a while,

the sense of shame prevailed over the fever in his body, the buzzing in his head, his earache, and the nagging pain in his big toe. And he remembered the last time he had seen Gulzar.

In flocks, all together, the sparrows fluttered up and flew out of the trees, and the suddenness of their flight was like the suddenness with which the crumpled newspaper had rolled out from under the broom and found him.

He looked up and watched the flocks of sparrows; they disappeared behind the rooftops, and suddenly he was straightened again and instinctively reached for the torn pocket of the dirty jacket; but at the moment he realized that it wasn't the fear of losing the sixty kopes, it was the fear that Gulzar would suddenly come his way and see him sitting on the pavement opposite The Red Carnation.

It was the first time for ages that he had known such an acute sense of shame.

He had last seen Gulzar a week ago. Or had it been a month? Two months, perhaps? He couldn't remember exactly, because the craving was already absolutely intolerable, the buzzing in his head was clouding in a grey mist all the recollections that were struggling to rise again and come to life. In any case, when he had last seen Gulzar, spring had come, the trees were green – or perhaps no, spring hadn't come yet. Yes, yes, it had still been winter, apparently. Gulzar had been wearing a coat, a red coat – and the red of that coat suddenly turned into the red of carnations and became The Red Carnation. Then that red was poured out as beer, dissolved, melted, spread outwards like a stain on blotting-paper, and the smell of beer permeated everything round him...then to the smell of beer was added a vile smell of vodka, and to that was added the smell of sweet wine, and his whole body blazed with an even greater thirst, but he still never budged, perhaps in a secret striving to punish himself.

No, it hadn't been a coat: Gulzar had apparently been wearing a jacket, a red jacket... He could remember nothing distinctly, but Gulzar's face now rose vividly up before his eyes in exact detail, and in spite of the grey mist, in his brain, he distinctly saw the horror in her eyes.

On the day when he saw Gulzar, he had gone to the furniture shop and waited for Aghajafar, the lorry driver who used to do the deliveries: then he and two others like himself had earned four pianos – one up to the sixth floor somewhere, another up to the fourth floor, and the others to some city flats several stories up. Aghajafar had paid the three of them ten rubles, but no one knew how much he himself had been tipped by the owners of the new pianos – at least twenty-five or thirty rubles from each. But that was nothing. Aghajafar sometimes felt that the alcoholics waiting for him outside the furniture shop were no good, and then he wouldn't give them more than fifty kopeks each. They would carry a piano up to the tenth floor and Aghajafar would get fifty to sixty rubles from the customer for the delivery. In a word, Aghajafar was doing very well out of the alcoholics; in summer he would send his family on holiday to Kislovodsk, and in winter, when he went on leave, he would go to his mistress in Odessa and for exactly a month they would have a good time in the beautiful Odessa restaurants. Abulfat, who worked as cashier in the furniture shop, would bow his head, push his spectacles up on to his forehead and watch as Aghajafar talked to the alcoholics. "You're a real slave-driver. Aghajafar!" he would say.

"What?" Aghajafar would reply, and he would point at the men standing and waiting for his instructions. "Those aren't slaves! They're alcoholics, damn it, alcoholics!.."

On that same day, they bought and drank two bottles of vodka with the ten rubles given to them by Aghajafar. Their money ran

out but their bodies were burning, their bodies craved vodka, wine, beer. They split up and he walked on, unaware of where he was going – his legs were like faithful dogs, they would of their own accord... taking him to some beer-bar or snack-bar. Suddenly, as he went round a corner, he found himself face to face with Gulzar. She was with a friend.

When she saw him, she stood stock-still; so did her companion, who was unable to hide her curiosity and kept looking alternately at him and Gulzar.

At first, he felt like weeping; a lump came to his throat, he wanted to hug and kiss Gulzar, he wanted to have a good look at his daughter whom he had not seen for about a year, but when he saw the terror in her eyes and the curiosity on her friend's face, the lump in his throat melted, his craving for drink was joined by a demented bitterness. In a hoarse voice drembling with that craving and bitterness, he asked, since he could think of nothing else to say:

"Where are you going?"

Gulzar didn't answer.

"Where are you going?"

"Go away." said Gulzar.

"I won't!"

"Go away."

His whole body was on fire with the craving for vodka, for wine, for beer.

"Give me some money and I'll go," he said suddenly.

It was then that the horror appeared in Gulzar's eyes and the curiosity seemed to freeze on companion's face.

"Give me a ruble and I'll go... Give me fifty kopeks?!"

When a loud sob, Gulzar pushed him out of the way and ran off, followed by her friend.

He reached out, intending to detain Gulzar by the hem of her clothes, but missed – he lost his balance, fell on to the pavement and cut his forehead open on the asphalt. He felt blood on his nose and lips; it had trickled down from his forehead, and he was instinctively amazed; if there was such a craving in his body, if his whole body was trembling with an intolerable desire for a drink, how could it be that his blood was so ordinary? For some time he lay prone on the pavement, and the blood trickling from his forehead congealed. Someone wanted to lift him by the arm – someone else wanted to push him out of the way, but he did not react, his mind was blank, he had forgotten Gulzar, he even seemed to have forgotten about vodka, wine and beer. A passer-by said that someone should ring for the ambulance, and he heard those words through the mist clouding his brain, bestirred himself, got to his feet and staggered away...

Unable to restrain himself, snack-bar attendant Abdullah kept glancing in astonishment out of The Red Carnation; he would watch the man intently and then carry on with his work. He washed the beer mugs and ranged them carefully in front of him; he opened the big refrigerator standing by the wall and took out tomatoes and gherkins, sliced them up with a long, sharp knife and arranged them on plates... he put the remainder of yesterday's cold boiled chicken, eggs and sausage on the counter and again involuntarily glanced at the pavement opposite. Abdullah was amazed that the drunk who had been hanging about near the doors of the The Red Carnation did not get up, come in and ask for beer. Abdullah was an experienced man and he knew that it was not a matter of money – they often didn't have any money, and then, like beggars, they would come up and pester him for beer. No, there was some other reason this time, and Abdullah finally came to the conclusion that the unhappy man had colic; he

couldn't move. Abdullah had several times seen men like him dying of sudden colic.

He was again frightened that Gulzar would happen to come that way or Safura might turn up, and he wanted to move, to stand up – but he had no strength left and he couldn't get up. In spite of the buzzing in his head, he realized that he would soon forget everything, he would go into The Red Carnation again, he would pay sixty kopeks, he would drink beer, and everything would be normal as before. He thought about this, and again with absolute clarity he saw the horror in Gulzar's eyes.

Abdullah went to tile doorway of The Red Carnation and called out to him:

"Hey!"

Abdullah didn't know any of their names, he called them all "Hey".

"Hey, I mean you... Come here!.."

The man turned his had with an effort, looked at The Red Carnation, and on that summer morning snack-bar attendant Abdullah saw a strange expression in the man's eyes. What was strange about it? Abdullah's mind could not cope with such niceties, but in any case the look in his eyes was such that Abdullah did not call him again and went back inside.

For some time, the man looked at the open doors of The Red Carnation – something evidently needed carrying up from the cellar or there was some sweeping to be done; but he didn't stir from his place. He even wanted to put his hand in his pocket, take out the sixty kopeks and throw them at the doors of the snack-bar as if it were a dog, and amid the fire in his body, the buzzing in his head, his aching ear and toe, amid the grey mist clouding his mind, he was himself astonished at his own impulse; then he raised his head and looked at

the sun. All his senses had long been dulled and, as he stared upwards, he didn't screw up his eyes, he looked at the sun with them open; then, when he turned them away, he could not see anything for sometime: amid the darkness enveloping him, the big round sun before his eyes was white and yellow, alternating with black rings.

That summer morning, the memories passing though his mind were disjointed, were not generated by a definite thought, event, or circumstance; they occurred spontaneously, and he felt dully amazed at their unexpectedness. Now, suddenly, he again remembered Snake Mountain as he had seen it in childhood: he closed his eyes, and Snake Mountain, towering, hare, with its steep crags, rose up in front of his eyes. He imagined that he had floated up to the summit of Snake Mountain and from there, from the peak so high that it made his head swim; he was looking down and could see himself standing with his father far, far below. This vision filled him with an agonized, hopeless yearning – he felt that this yearning would grip him at any moment and hurl him down from the summit so high that it made his head swim -his body, hitting the sheer crags of Snake Mountain, would be dashed to pieces: but, strange to say, he was not frightened at the vision; on the contrary, he felt a kind of relief.

His body was on fire, however, and he made an effort to keep Snake Mountain before his eyes, to prevail over the fire in his body, and he felt that this internal conflict was robbing him of what was left of his strength: he felt that he was going to weep now, and this time, also quite unexpectedly, he remembered how he had wept in Book Passage at noon about a year ago. True, it was a long time since he known a sense of shame; that feeling too had become dulled, had died, had been forgotten; but when, that summer morning, sitting on the pavement in front of The Red Carnation, he remembered how, about a year and a half back, he had wept in Book Passage, he had a

strong sense of alarm, and perhaps he himself didn't realize that this was a sense of shame.

At that time he was still living in the little watchman's hut, but his face was already red and puffy – it had changed, and whenever any of his acquaintances met him, they failed to recognize him; but whenever he happened to be sober and met any of them, he recognized them; when he was completely sober, he would hide from them, but when he was a little merry, he would approach acquaintances and ask for money. He would get drunk again, he would want more to drink, his eyes would search for acquaintances in the streets so that he could cadge money off them: and that was how, as he was walking round the streets, he went into Book Passage and suddenly saw his own book in one of the kiosks. It was on surgery and was the first and last book he had written. He went over, picked it up and began showing it to the people crowding round the kiosk or walking through the passage; and he burst into tears: "That's my book! I wrote that book." People stared at him, then at the book and, in all probability, no one believed that had really written it himself, and that made him weep even more. At this point, someone offered him twenty kopeks; he took the coins, and then, weeping and showing the book to others, asked for more money, but this time he began weeping not from the heart, but calculatedly, to obtain money; and so he collected a whole pocketful of small change – went away and spent it all on drink.

He looked at the open doors of The Red Carnation, then pushed his hand into the tattered pocket of his dirty jacket, took out the sixty kopeks and held them in his hand. The money glittered in the sunlight; and far away, on Snake Mountain, the pebbles, rocks and crags were glittering like that in the sun. Snake Mountain had once been an active volcano, nothing grew on it; precipitous crags, enormous rocks,

countless tiny stones – and all of different colors: red, violet, coffee-brown, yellow, mixed... And all these colors were shimmering under the red-hot sun. The bare mountain, deprived of vegetation, looked like a kind of prehistoric monster, cold, slippery and terrifying... He again saw himself on the top of Snake Mountain; once in his life, as a child with his father, he had seen Snake Mountain from below, but now he closed his eyes and found himself on the summit, and it made his head swim as he looked down.

People had begun going into The Red Carnation, then the still infrequent patrons would come out, and Abdullah, as he amiably served his customers, glanced from time to time at the pavement opposite; he had finally come to the conclusion that the alcoholic sitting on the pavement opposite was too proud – and when he came in (he would do so sooner or later!) and asked for beer. Abdullah would not give him any, and would order him off the premises.

...The man dropped the small change into his pocket again and, summoning up all his strength, struggled to his feet.

His whole body was straining to go into The Red Carnation, was demanding drink; but he forced himself, weaving about and staggering, to walk past the snack-bar, did not go inside, but, with a now firm step, walked on up the street.

His whole body was on fire, was demanding drink, was pulling him back – back to The Red Carnation, but he did not turn round, and because he was torturing himself so much, his strength seemed to be growing.

His body was on fire, was demanding a drink, but the buzzing in his head had stopped, nor could he feel any pain in his ear or toe, and there was a strange lucidity in his brain or, to be more precise, there was a kind of lightness, he talked to himself as he walked along the street, swinging his arms. He did not understand what he was saying,

but he knew to whom he was talking so seriously; it was to Safura and Gurzar, he was saying something earnest to them; nothing didactic, but something serious and important; he was chatting to his former fellow surgeons, then he began talking to his father, who had died ten years previously...

His legs were faithful dogs, and he himself didn't know how he became to be in front of a nine-storey hotel. There was a bar on the top floor, but it was not for the likes of him, and when he or his kind showed up, they were not admitted; but this time no one noticed him, he calmly went through the entrance into the hotel, crossed the foyer, kept marvelously cool by the air-conditioning, walked into the open lift that was waiting for passengers and went up to the ninth floor.

When be entered the bar, the bartender Abdullah (this man, like the snack-bar attendant in The Red Carnation was also called Abdullah) looked at him in astonishment; he only needed a glance at a man's face to know whether he was a drinker or not, and as for alcoholics, he could tell them a hundred meters off and was now truly amazed. Who had let this drunk in so early in the day?

Various beverages were ranged on display in the bar – vodka, brandy, whisky, gin, wine and beer. The man's whole body strained for those drinks and he even hesitated for a moment; he wanted for the last time to drink a bottle of beer or fifty grams of vodka, but his mind, which cleared completely in the last few minutes, warned him that if he drank a bottle of beer or fifty grams of whisky now, it would start all over from the beginning again.

That was what he didn't want. Even at the mere thought that it could start all over again, his body broke out into a cold sweat and he walked with a decisive and precise step up to the window overlooking the street.

The bartender Abdullah had not yet switched off the air-conditioning and, while waiting for his patrons to arrive, had thrown the big windows wide open to air the premises.

The man went up and stopped before the open window and looked down: buses and trolleybuses were moving along the street, but the marble steps going down to the pavement and the pavement itself were quite empty.

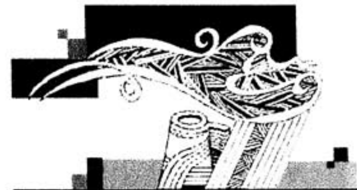
For a fraction of a second, but only a fraction of a second, he seemed to be standing not on the ninth floor of a nine-storey hotel, but on the summit of Snake Mountain.

He then jumped out of the window.

He was fully conscious as he fell from the ninth floor to the ground, but he did not cry out once.

The dull thud of a body hitting the ground resounded down the street along which he had just been walking.

...And it was early morning again, and as the street-sweeper with her fluffy broom that looked like a dewberry bush worked her way down as far as The Red Carnation, she remembered the unhappy drunk who, just as early the morning before, had been sitting on the pavement and waiting for the snack-bar attendant Abdullah, and she thought to herself that the man was probably now sitting in front of some other snack-bar...



THE YELLOW JACKET

On such days...
our house looks like a sailing ship,
the room looks like a cabin.
Fikrat Sadyg[3]

It would, of course, be possible not to write about this strange incident: it was so incredible. But is not a great strangeness remarkable in itself? Sometimes it seems to us that our days are flowing past in a very commonplace way; there is no difference between yesterday and tomorrow, and in fact it is this assumption alone that makes them similar: and for some reason, we are in no hurry to refute it.

As you may remember, on the evening of 6 April 1968 the rain suddenly came down on Baku in torrents, although the afternoon weather had been very clear, very warm and typical of spring. Some will have remembered that day because not long before the rain, the second tournament of the Soviet Union's thirtieth football championship had ended, and in their match with Chernomorets[4], Neftchi[5] had sent four unchallenged balls into the goal of the Odessa team.

Unfortunately, the twenty-eight-year-old composer S. Gayibly was not a football fan – and this was why the jubilant atmosphere of

great expectations prevalent among the fans that day had no effect on him at all. Yet the heavy rain that came down at the wrong time made him feel depressed for some reason.

On waking up that morning, the young composer S. Gayibly had not expected to be in such a despondent state of mind by evening, nor especially during the night. However, it was no great surprise to him. People who consider themselves lonely are more affected by sudden changes of the weather than are married couples.

There was no piano in S. Gayibly's sixteen-meters-square flat in the new seven-storey house on the corner of V. and S. streets. Each time he wanted to work, he was forced to go to the Housepainters' Club and sit down at an instrument that stood forlornly behind a screen. The Housepainters' Club was on Khagani Street, and the distance between it and his home either equaled the distance from Earth to the Moon if not even more – two or three light years – or was a mere moment in time; it all depended on S. Gayibly's desire to work. And the desire to work, as is known, depends on a whole series of factors – we will not enumerate them, although it is said that one can work in any place and at any time.

S. Gayibly had a job in the Housepainters' Club: he was the leader of an amateur group, and once a week, on Tuesdays, he worked with the painters. That is to say that once a week, on Tuesdays, he was in an even more dejected state of mind, because the deputy manager of the club would not give him a moment's peace. He would say, "Listen, my dear fellow, what are you composing there? They sometimes play dram-ba-ba-bam, dram-ba-bam on the radio, but where's the lament of our kamancha[6], where are the moans of our tar[7], where is the thunder of our naghara[8]?" He used to say goodness knows what else, and, what, is more, with such fervor! He was anxious the painters' amateur music group shouldn't fall under the baleful influence of those who

pursue the passing fad or fashion for its own sake. In his eyes, the young composer S. Gayibly was exactly one of those.

So for his creative work S. Gayibly habitually arrived at the club late in the evening when there was no one there except the watchman. This watchman was an inveterate smoker, he invariably asked S. Gayibly for a cigarette on meeting him and for another when the composer left – as if it was a law.

That day, on the way to the club, it struck S. Gayibly that the watchman, of course, always had something to smoke; he regarded the cigarette that he obtained from the composer as his lawful booty. But by what right, one might ask? When he greeted the watchman as he went inside and the watchman, as usual, asked him for a cigarette. S. Gayibly threw his hands apart in reply. The watchman seemed not to believe his own eyes; he smiled and expressed himself to effect that he very much needed a smoke. S. Gayibly said that he had no cigarettes on him, then took a packet of Auroras out of his pocket, lit up slowly and went up the stairs, himself considerably astonished at his own behavior.

He sat down at the piano, but did not even lift the lid. He stared up at the ceiling and smoked his cigarette to the end. He wanted suddenly to be sitting like that in a plane, flying under the clouds, then over the clouds. then...

Of course, he could now have forced himself to tinkle a bit on the piano, but he never forced himself to work, if only because that method never produced any results.

The young composer S. Gayibly lit another cigarette and began pacing up and down behind the partition. Strange, but it was twenty-three paces in one direction and thirty-one in the other, although his paces seemed identical. Altogether, he had been haunted by oddities all that day. In the morning, as soon as he had woken up, he had run to the newspaper kiosk on the corner and bought his copy, ordered the evening before, of the

Baku Worker, had huried up to his room and taken thirteen lottery tickets out of his desk drawer. He had deliberately bought a baker's dozen, trying to assure himself that he was far from all superstitions, although this itself was also a superstition. He checked the tickets carefully. As usual, he had won nothing. He tore up all thirteen and threw them into the rubbish bin in the kitchen. He remembered very distinctly that he had torn up the lottery ticket and thrown them into the rubbish bin in the kitchen. He had breakfast and went into the city. At midday, he called at Azernashr Publishers, where they were printing his first album, which consisted of three miniatures for piano. Then, as he walked past the new general stores, he remembered that he buy an aerosol spray – bedbugs had apparently made their appearance in his flat. He dived into his breast pocket to take out his wallet and see whether he could afford an aerosol can that day. Inside his wallet he found thirteen brand-new lottery tickets... He took them out – they were as fresh and crisp as if untouched by human hand. This reminded him of Aladdin's lamp. In childhood, and in his student years too, he had sometimes dreamed about that lamp.

S. Gayibly went into Central Savings Bank Number 3538 near the new general stores and suddenly remembered an old and weather-beaten advert that used to hang in its time on the building opposite the Conservatoire.

**CITIZENS, KEEP YOUR MONEY
IN THE SAVINGS BANK.
IT IS RELIABLE, ADVANTAGEOUS AND CONVENIENT**

How could you save what you hadn't got? The advert was silent on that score.

He went up the steps and walked over to the table of winning numbers hanging on the wall. He checked his lottery tickets again. Ticket Series 13910 Number 191 had won a ruble; if the number had been two digits higher, he would have won a Luch gold wrist-watch.

Of course, a hundred and sixty rubles would have been more to the point, but he could do nothing about it. He went and got his ruble from the cashier. The edge of the note was torn and had been stuck together with cigarette-paper. He pocketed it and went out of the savings bank.

And again, twenty-three steps one way and thirty-one the other.

For the last time he looked at the piano and went downstairs. As he went past the watchman, he heard instead of the usual request for a cigarette some pathetic words to the effect that everybody was insulting him and even jeering at him, but a watchman was a human being too, after all.

It was raining heavily – what a nightmare!

The young composer S. Gayibly turned up his jacket collar and hurried homewards, making his way along the wall of the buildings. Whatever the weather, he never went by trolleybus, tram or bus; it was, as it were, his protest again monotony – the same route, the same stops, although this protest, in its turn, had also become monotonous.

S. Gayibly's flat was on the corner, and on such rainy and windy evenings, especially at night, the howling of the wind seemed even more intolerable than it was outside.

On the seventh floor above S. Gayibly lived a young poet named Farhad Khoshbakht[9]. He had a one-bedroom flat like S. Gayibly, but he was the head of a family – and thus S. Gayibly privately called him Farhad Badbakht, but certainly not because he was a bad poet – Farhad Badbakht was an excellent poet. Farhad Badbakht[10] called his room a cabin, and S. Gayibly was now speeding to his cabin under full sail.

Everything in the room was as usual: the same Rigonda radio, the same photographs of U. Hajibeyli and I. Stravinsky on the wall, the same window and balcony door.

The radio was telling the children a fairy tale, and at the end it wished them sweet dreams. Then a concert began and new singer sang Zamikhara from the mugham Shur.

S. Gayibly switched off the radio. The rain was lashing at the window; the water was penetrating a crack in the frame and dripping on to the parquet. Farhad Khoshbakht – no, Farhad Badbakht – stuffed cotton wool between the frame and advised S. Gayibly to do likewise.

The wind outside was howling so violently that it seemed as if it only needed a little more for a full plate of gogal[11] to fall off the table. He had been sent the gogal by his mother in the country for Novruz Bairam – and now it had all turned into rusks. It wouldn't be a bad thing it the plate was smashed; then he would throw out the gogal. How much longer was it going to stand there on the table?

There was no real need to stuff anything between the window frames, but it wouldn't do him any harm to plug his ears with cotton wool.

He could hear Farhad Badbakht's footsteps overhead. What a noisy man he was! The very walls were shaking – he was such a big lad. But what of it? He was still Farhad Badbakht and not Farhad Khoshbakht. Incidentally, there was nothing surprising about that.

He must brew some more coffee as usual and drink it without sugar, and then everything would be as always, and the same thoughts would come into his head whether he wanted them to or not.

Shivering in the cold, he went into the kitchen, lit the gas and put the kettle on – S. Gayibly used to fill it in the morning when the water was on.

"I should think so, what a cold spring it is," thought S. Gayibly and he glanced at the coffee-colored linoleum floor. Beside the rubbish bin lay... a torn lottery ticket.

The composer bent down, picked the lottery ticket up off the floor, then opened the cupboard under the sink with his foot. All the other lottery tickets, torn in half, were lying in the rubbish bin. Then he went behind the partition and took his wallet out of his jacket breast pocket. The ruble with the stuck edge was still there.

He lost all desire to drink his traditional coffee without sugar and, contrary to habit, he put the gas out under the kettle.

Again the walls trembled at Farhad Badbakht's tread; he walked from the living-room into the kitchen and began hammering something – God knows what he was making up there. Farhad Badbakht was always engaged in the most fantastic projects: he intended to use part of the staircase landing as a room, or he intended to convert the balcony into a nursery, or he wanted to cut out a hatchway to an attic in the ceiling of his room, set up a ladder and make another room for himself in the attic. But all these plans remained mere plans, and the young composer S. Gayibly knew perfectly well that it would always be that way, because were it otherwise, Farhad Khosbbakht would not be Farhad Badbakht. So thought S. Gayibly, and he went out on to the balcony. His was the only empty and free balcony in the building; he had no empty bottles on there, nor a folding bed, nor a cockerel, nor chickens tethered by the leg to the iron balcony railings, nor a clothes line and, in general, he had absolutely nothing there at all. No objects, just emptiness.

S. Gayibly lit a cigarette and leaned on the railings. It was raining very hard and if it hadn't been for Farhad Badbakht's balcony above his own, he would have been swept away by the torrent of water. But even this rain and the whole scene were too commonplace: the sight of the big black stone building that blotted out two thirds of the view from the balcony, and the grey silhouettes of the identical buildings newly erected in the upper part of the city, and the tiny little cottages, and the old mosque that now housed a shoe-repair workshop.

Just as usual, a girl who lived opposite on the third floor of a big brick house had lifted the curtain and was staring at S. Gayibly's balcony. This was another manifestation of monotony during that night, like the noise of Farkhad Badbakht's footsteps. Then the girl lowered the curtain as if suddenly shy, as she always did. She had been turning shyly like that for

exactly two years and nothing had come of it. In another ten minutes she would lift the curtain again and stare at S. Gayibly's balcony.

S. Gayibly threw his cigarette away and went into the room, lay down on the divan and glanced at page four of the Baku Worker. The weather forecast was under the table of winning lottery-ticket numbers. It announced that a moderate north wind was expected in the evening and the air temperature would be fifteen to sixteen degrees above zero. Similar contradictions had no effect on him anymore, because they had become as commonplace as the contradiction between Farhad Khoshbakht's pseudonym and his life.

He threw the newspaper aside and stared at the ceiling, but he saw the alluring image of the pavement tip there for some reason. You could fall headfirst from a balcony on to the pavement, for instance, and as you fell, you could scream out, or not scream at all, and fall all the time, swallowing up, like Pantagruel, that monotonous night. S. Gayibly rose to his feet. He realized that he must flee that room, he must go into the city and get properly wet under the rain.

At that moment, there happened the unusual, strange incident that made that night the most important in the life of the young composer S. Gayibly.

S. Gayibly had a famous yellow velvet jacket made several years back. It was famous because he invariably wore it both in winter and in summer, and the surprising thing was that S. Gayibly himself couldn't bear it – although he had something else to wear instead of the yellow jacket shot through with gold. Not long ago, he had ordered a fine plain suit and he had even worn it that day when he went to Azernashr Publishers. The editor, a terribly formidable woman, had once looked at his yellow jacket so witheringly that S. Gayibly had promised himself never to appear before her wearing it again. The reason why the yellow jacket never left his shoulders was that it had long become a symbol of his whole life, a symbol of absolute monotony.

S. Gayibly took his yellow jacket out of the wardrobe and quickly put it on so as to flee his room at once. He put out the light, walked round the partition and stopped, flabbergasted, in front of the mirror. He was not wearing the famous yellow jacket shot with gold – he was wearing a different one. He tore his gaze away from the image in the mirror and looked at himself, turned back the hem of his jacket and scrutinized it carefully. He had never in his life worn anything of that color. He was wearing a green jacket. He went into the room, switched on the light and opened the wardrobe. The hanger from which he had just taken his yellow jacket was empty and still swaying. S. Gayibly took off the strange green garment and... again he was holding the yellow velvet jacket shot with gold.

S. Gayibly looked in a cold sweat at the yellow jacket for several minutes and, going up to the mirror, he slowly and carefully put it back on again. As he drew it on, the color changed in front of his eyes. It was now dark blue with a pin-stripe.

S. Gayibly wiped the mirror and shook his head, then went into the kitchen, looked at the jacket under the kitchen lighting, then in the bathroom. It was dark blue with a pin-stripe. S. Gayibly had never owned such a jacket. He went up to the mirror again, took of the jacket, and in front of his eyes it changed color again and became the yellow velvet one that be had always worn.

S. Gayibly went up to the mirror. The jacket was so beautiful that the composer was appalled. He jumped when the doorbell rang and wanted to take off the jacket before opening the door, but be couldn't do so – the jacket seemed stuck to his body, and the buttons, like the magic buttons of Asli[12], fastened themselves up of their own accord as soon as he had reached the last. The bell rang again – and S. Gayibly opened the door. It was Farhad Badbakht He greeted S. Gayibly and asked him if he had a couple of nails. Then, with a look at the jacket, he said, "Congratulations, what a wonderful jacket – but what d'you need it for? You're never out

of the yellow one." Then he asked "What's the matter with you? What are you looking at me like that for?" S. Gayibly mumbled something incoherent then found a few rusty nails in the kitchen and took them out to Farhad Badbakht, who went back upstairs to his cabin.

S. Gayibly closed the door behind him and again tried to take off the jacket. But whatever he did, even when he writhed like a snake in his efforts to crawl out the jacket, it was all useless. Then, without even switching off the in light, he ran out of his cabin on the sixth floor. When the yale lock on his door clicked, he was already outside, he had gone down the staircase so fast.

It had already stopped raining, but the wind was howling as before on the deserted streets. Never had the streets of Baku been so desolate and deserted as during that night.

The young composer S. Gayibly was heading nowhere in particular.

He sheltered from the wind in one of the house entrances and lit a cigarette, and it suddenly downed on him that the cigarette and the matches had been put in his pocket by the confounded club watchman in repayment of a debt. Not particularly surprised at this, S. Gayibly continued on his way.

Someone shouted at him. "Hey, comrade! Careful, mind your feet! where d'you think you're going?!" S. Gayibly started and only then did he see that he was in a kind of little garden, in a cosy spot in front of a small lire. He had nearly stepped on the fire. He could not place the garden. Perhaps it was the marine park, because the howling of the wind was swelled by the sound of the sea.

The man who had shouted at S. Gayibly must have been the one who had lit the fire. He was heavily bearded, with an old quilted jerkin over his shoulders. Perhaps it was the marine park watchman, perhaps it was just a tramp, he was squatting at the lire and toasting a sausage at it on the end of a stick.

S. Gayibly was indescribably astonished by the unexpected light and the unexpected warmth. The man squatting at the campfire and toasting a sausage said, "Why are you rushing around in this weather as if someone was whipping you on? You nearly broke up my bonfire!" Then he said "Perhaps you really are being whipped? A man isn't always whipped by someone else – he sometimes thrashes himself." Then he inhaled deeply the fragrance of the roasting sausage and said. "Whether they're whipping you or not, it doesn't matter. Sit down, warm yourself, be my guest. I've got something to drink as well."

The young composer S. Gayibly squatted down at the fire and held his hands out to the flames. He felt a strange kind of warm freedom – but he couldn't understand what it was.

He took out a cigarette and offered one to the man toasting the sausage. The man said, "I have my own," then look out of his side pocket a single 'Pamir'-brand cigarette, and an old chewed holder – pushed the cigarette into it and lit up.

For some reason, S. Gayibly threw his own cigarette into the fire and began watching the way it burned. The contribution from the watchmen at the Housepainters' was blazing up and turning to ashes.

The man in the jerkin sniffed again at the roasting sausage and said, "Whiff, whiff, whiff..." Then he raised his head, looked up at the dark sky, listened to the wind and the sea for a few moments, sucked at his cigarette and, without taking the holder out of his mouth, said, "Good!" He said it with true feeling. "What?" asked S. Gayibly. The man frowned slightly and looked at him as if to say, "Oh, you clueless fool!" Then he said, "Just look at this night, this fire, this barbecue."

When S. Gayibly returned to his cabin, it was already very late. He slowly climbed the staircase, opened the door, went into the hall and put on the light. He stood there for a little while, then took off the jacket. It came off as usual and remained as it had been when he was wearing it – a

beautiful grey jacket with a greenish sparkle. S. Gayibly looked at it little longer, then walked quickly into the living-room and opened the wardrobe. The famous yellow velvet jacket shot with gold was draped on the hanger.

The young composer S. Gayibly realized it was a proposition – and he must finally make a choice.

He took his yellow jacket off the hanger, hung the handsome grey one in its place and shut the wardrobe. He performed these operations so calmly that he surprised himself.

Then he took his yellow jacket into the kitchen, opened tile cupboard under the sink and pushed the famous yellow velvet jacket into the bucket on top of the scraps of torn-up lottery tickets, picked up the bucket, went quickly downstairs and emptied its contents into one of the rubbish bins in the yard.

The cats, which had been waiting for him to go away, rushed to the bin hoping to find something nice for themselves.

The young composer S. Gayibly put the bucket back in its place, then opened the wardrobe once again to make sure. The handsome grey jacket was hanging in its place.

The poet upstairs had apparently gone to bed – his footsteps were no longer to be heard. The wind seemed to have died down too. The rain had stopped long ago. And the light in the window of the girl opposite was still burning. An odd sort of girl. Interesting.

S. Gayibly lay down on the sofa and, contrary to habit, immediately went to sleep.

The young composer S. Gayibly afterwards told no-one about this incident – he knew that no one would believe him. He said of his famous yellow jacket that he had sold it to a second-hand dealer. He had bargained for a whole hour, and the unscrupulous fellow had still refused to give him more than thirty kopeks. "How much? How much?" asked his friends. And they roared with laughter.

ENDNOTES

1. *Muallim – respectful address to a man*
2. *Sary – blond*
3. *Fikrat Sadyg – Azerbaijani poet*
4. *Chernomorets – football team of Odessa*
5. *Neftchi – football team of Baku*
6. *Kamancha – Azerbaijani national stringed musical instrument*
7. *Tar – Azerbaijani national stringed musical instrument*
8. *Naghara – Azerbaijani national percussive musical instrument*
9. *Khoshbakht – lucky*
10. *Badbakht – unlucky*
11. *Gogal – round loaf*
12. *Asli – heroine of the Azerbaijani folk epic "Asli and Karam"*

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