Aka Morchiladze

Mameluke

I've known Peter Goldsmith since the time they were shooting in our streets. I believe he was one of the first foreigners who arrived to Tbilisi in those years.

I don't really remember the names of all those international organisations and foundations he used to represent in Georgia, but we definitely are friends – we've been through much together and experienced things together.

That night he phoned me:

'Hi, buddy, I'm deeply shocked.'

He had a strange voice, as if coming from the other world.

'What's up?'

It was pretty unusual for a foreigner to call you in the middle of the night.

'You're all nuts! Beso's left.'

Beso was the driver in Peter's office – a young man from Imereti, about our age. He was always clean shaven and wore a cheap shirt, well-ironed though.

I laughed:

'You're changing jobs once a year and suddenly Beso surprises you?'

Bese had been Peter's driver for quite some time. He was rather quiet, not typical for a guy from Imereti.

'You don't get it,' Peter sighed. 'God knows where Beso is now, at least I don't know. He drove me around in the morning, then in the afternoon he dropped me at the office and apparently left the keys with the manager and asked him not to tell me he was leaving. His phone is switched off.'

'So what? He was a good chap but you can find another driver, as good as him.'

'You still don't get it, do you? Beso's left memoires for me. I've just finished reading them.'

Beso did say 'thank you', 'yes' and 'of course', but rather timidly, not a talkative chap at all …

'He's written them in English. At least I can follow the writing. You can read them without a problem. Anyone can, in fact, if they wish. Now I'm kind of upset, but tomorrow we've got to go to Beso's place. We need to find him.'

I understood why Peter was so worried only when I read Beso's writing. He had used a common notebook with Micheal Jordan and 'okul defteri' in Turkish on the cover.

Peter drove his white jeep himself. We spent a long time looking for the house in one of the suburbs where we believed Beso's family lived.

The neighbours told us they had returned to their small town, which they had left looking for work in the capital.

Peter persisted until he found Beso's wife. He didn't travel to that small town, but managed to talk to her on the phone.

The only thing we found out was that Beso had gone abroad.

Just like thousands of others.

That vague 'going abroad' was even more upsetting. Made you think.

That evening Peter and I got drunk. What else could we do? We got drunk and talked a lot. We talked so much it wasn't just a talk. One could have written a book.

However, I haven't written a book about that talk. I just translated what Beso had written. I'm not much of a translator, but neither was Beso very good with his English.

That's not really important at all. It's the story itself that matters.

Peter keeps browsing the informational sites and then phones me:

'So far nothing new,' and sighs deeply.

1.

Hussein, Islam Sultanov's father, was the last khan of Kirbal. When the Communists took over the huge Central Asia, they set to turning it bright red, the colour of their flag. They started negotiations with Sultan Hussein, and kept talking until they killed him.

Kirbal was a small, mountainous country. The Communists needed it because the roads over its lofty mountains led south.

At the time Islam Sultanov was simply called Islam. He was the youngest son of the peaceful Khan, probably four or five years old. As opposed to his numerous brothers, he didn't hide in the mountains, neither did he attempt to flee to Afghanistan or Persia. Practically immediately, he and his mother were caught by the Communists and sent out of their native land. The mother and the son spent a long time on the train, ending up very far from the Kirbal Khanate. They were sent to Tbilisi, to a little semi-basement flat in a steep street. It was here they were given the surname Sultanov.

Islam Sultanov went to a Russian school in Engels Street and his mother was quite well-known thanks to her embroidery. She had mastered an ancient Persian skill and sold finely embroidered handkerchiefs. Also, she could make exotic food, unfamiliar to the local residents, and could brew strong tea. She worked as a cleaner in a workmen's canteen.

Islam Sultanov learnt Georgian in the street, as well as Armenian and Kurdish. As for Persian and Arabic, he had been using the languages from the moment he began to speak.

In 1938 Islam and his mother were arrested, the year he turned seventeen. He hadn't seen his mother since then. The following twenty years he spent in the cold, white North.

By then Kirbal had been made into an autonomous region of one of the Central Asian republics. Islam Sultanov grew old without visiting his homeland ever again.

As soon as he was released in 1957, he discovered he was banned from living in big cities. Closely watched by two KGB officers, he was allowed to stay in Tbilisi for a week and then he was sent to one of the small towns in Western Georgia where he knew no one, had no relatives, no acquaintances, no home.

He had chosen the town himself from the four offered options. He had the impression it was the most humane, thus acceptable. As he used to say later, he had heard about the place in his childhood and thought he could try his fate there.

Surely that was an exaggeration. He was already forty by the time, but still.

He was given a job of a mechanic in the local cinema, which was in the Workers' Club of the town. He was familiar with the job from his Siberian exile. The flat he was given was in the same building.

He didn't have a lot of personal belongings. He just needed a stove to warm his little room, where he could get in through the backyard of the Club.

In those years there were only private houses in the town, which looked more like a village. There weren't any five-storey ugly houses for workers yet, those that were later built on the outskirts and turned into a real headache – the source of all the evil for the small place like that town. Initially there were green gardens, fruit trees and grapes with slightly sour taste – that's what the town looked like.

Also, there were three schools and a traditional Friday market, a relic of the times when kings ruled the country. That's all there was in the small town.

Islam Sultanov was the only foreigner in the town.

The place looked nothing like Tbilisi where five or six languages could be heard spoken in any one street.

Right next to the Club, in a two-storey house with a wooden balcony and an orchard with peach and apricot trees and a pergola covered in dark grapes, I was born in about a year after Islam Sultanov's arrival.

Mum wasn't taken to the maternity hospital. She gave birth at home because my Granny was an experienced midwife.

2.

I don't exactly know why I'm remembering these things, but it comes kind of naturally and even reads like a piece of literature. For a provincial lad, I was rather good at writing at school, which was quite unusual in our town.

Before the Soviet times there was a famous college in the town. A lot of eminent people moved to the capital after graduating it. On the edge of the town there was another famous institution – a prison, which had been functioning for over twenty years, so by the time I was born there was no trace of culture or education to talk about. The prison must have had a huge impact on the area.

When I was little, I didn't understand either the meaning or the significance of the fact, but later, with time, the prison affected my life in the most adverse way.

Somehow I don't feel confident telling this part, possibly because I've never spoken in English, having learnt it from books. Also, the language spoken in my town pulls me in its direction. When I write, I hear the local lingo.

Of course Georgian is the language of my town, but it's a dialect, so when I write, I turn it into the standard Georgian and then translate into English.

Our local dialect is a little show-offish, playful, a bit affected, somewhat fraudulent and a little too common.

Because it had been a market town for long, deceit had become its integral part. And if we remember about the prison in its immediate vicinity, it won't be surprising at all. What's more, the western Georgian dialects are too well known for their double and even triple meanings, often tied into unimaginable knots.

Despite all this, I will try to render our speech in the easiest possible way.

Islam Sultanov wasn't aware of the intricacies of our local dialect. Actually, he had problems understanding it though his spoken Georgian was quite fluent. It was plain, unembellished and unaffected. Later I found out that only royals and their households spoke like that.

What does one remember from one's early childhood?

First time I saw Islam Sultanov was in our yard: he had come to buy some eggs from my Granny. I might have seen him earlier, but for some reason the scene of him getting those eggs stuck in my memory forever.

Only later did I discover his ban on living in big cities had been lifted for some time, but he decided not to move house. He had nothing in Tbilisi and, having been already advanced in years, he must have feared starting his life from scratch.

At least that's how it seemed at the time.

'He's a deeply frustrated man, maybe even disheartened,' Granny told me one evening when I, already a teenager, came back from the cinema mechanic's little room and was rummaging in the kitchen for a snack.

By then we were good friends. Islam Sultanov used to borrow books from the Club library and then advise me which ones to read.

I don't really remember how we became friends. I think it started when he taught me how to make ropes and tie some specific knots, something I guessed he had learnt in the camp.

He had no friends in the town, was never invited to wedding parties or wakes. He lived on his own, walked about on his own and it looked as if he wasn't really fully trusted. For one thing, he was referred to as a Tartar, like any Muslim was called in my country, and secondly, his biography was considered rather too dangerous to allow one to befriend him.

He never married. Now I think of it, I had never seen him as much as talk to a woman. At the time I believed there was something wrong with him, probably the result of so many years spent in the camp when he was exiled. But I wouldn't dare ask him directly.

I often saw him spread a threadbare mat of a mysterious origin and pray just like Muslims do, something I saw on TV many years later.

His appearance didn't really fit our image of a Tartar. His face was delicate and well-cared for, of olive colour. His grey, thinning hair was combed back and his hips were a little too fleshy. He used to carry beads he had made himself and which he played with all the time. His gait was unhurried and dignified, but he rarely lifted his head, staring at the ground as he walked.

There were two showings a day – at seven and nine o'clock in the evening, or half an hour after the first screening. Often the movies were too long, especially the Indian ones, where the songs seemed much longer than the roads we take in our life.

God knows how many times I watched the movies from a little window in the mechanic's room, up there. It was my advantage and a privilege. Sometimes I would take along a reliable friend, the one Islam Sultanov had approved of and encouraged our friendship.

Dad never commented on my frequent visits to Islam Sultanov's little room. At the time he was a taxi driver, taking passengers from the nearby villages to and from the town. Mum used my love for the cinema to explain my friendship with the Tartar. But I had no explanation as such. I believe there is a period in an adolescent's life when he is attracted to someone older, often a complete stranger. The person seems softer and more understanding than one's immediate family, or even far more knowledgeable. At least that's what I thought at the time.

Dad died when I was finishing school.

There were five of them, travelling in a lorry from a mountain village after a party. Apparently, the driver failed to control the vehicle in one of the bends along the river. It was getting dark, the weather was getting worse and they were hurrying home.

Many used to die exactly at that bend and probably still do, but that's my guess.

The basalt banks are covered in crosses and the portraits of the deceased.

Three died but two survived the accident. They had partied at a relative's place, probably celebrating an engagement.

Those were terrible days.

Do you have any idea how women cry in our town when someone dies and how the lads feel down in their hearts when their dads die? Women don't just cry, they actually scream. Their lives are finished when their men perish and they never take off the black clothes to show they're still mourning, even if they decide to go on living without the beloved ones. My Granny died in five months, deciding her life was worth nothing after she lost her son. In our town the custom was not to watch TV or listen to the radio for a whole year if anyone died on your street. It was an expression of grief. But the boys are unable to feel the entire scope of their grief. They just feel the sadness they can't put into words and are aware they are to take some new position in their lives – fill in the huge emptiness left after their dads' departure. They usually carry sweet memories of their dads' wrath and recollect their friendship with deep sorrow.

3.

I went to Tbilisi in August to take entrance exams at the Philology Department of the University.

Of course I failed. My score wasn't enough to be accepted as a student.

The whole idea was doomed from the start.

Mum wanted me to go a college in Kutaisi.

Much time had elapsed since the lads from small towns were easily accepted on most popular departments.

Besides, it was quite unusual for a boy of my background to choose philology. There was no comparison between the language skills and knowledge of literature of the city and the provincial young people. By then, incidentally, we were already called the villagers.

Every one of us, born outside Tbilisi.

It was a losing game.

I wouldn't have been able to immediately start my studies that autumn anyway. I would have been either conscripted to serve in the army or I had to find a job. Dad used to make a decent living driving his taxi, but Mum's income at the dress-making atelier was surely not enough to support us. I had a younger brother and sister to take care of, so how could I sustain myself in Tbilisi? In those years one could study part-time, in the evenings. It was specially for the working folks, but first I had to find a job and wait for the next year to try my luck at the university again. But before then, I was sure to get a conscription paper.

In short, it was all highly problematic.

Islam Sultanov wasn't involved in my preparations to become a student. He was a little surprised but didn't offer any advice, and certainly didn't try to discourage me. He had never gone to university himself, so wasn't knowledgeable in the area.

I returned home crestfallen. Mum hadn't accompanied me to Tbilisi, instead it was my uncle who took me. Those thirteen days the entrance exams lasted, I stayed with my distant relatives. My uncle had left on the second day, leaving me with them. I still remember how embarrassed I was and what awkward situations I had to face. I was used to different kind of toilets for one, besides, it was my first time in a proper flat. I had spent all my life in a country house and suddenly I found myself confined to much more limited space.

The relatives were quite sweet. I haven't seen them after that though.

My uncle was a good man too, but was baffled at my choice of studying philology. He didn't believe becoming a teacher of the Georgian language and literature was fit for a man. He used to say there were other possibilities, for example a Forestry College or a fruit juice factory, or suggested I studied in the Kutaisi College. He was rather set on that College.

I hardly got around the city. I was pathetic, trying to find my way to the University.

In our town at the time it was a shame not to become a university student. Girls were luckier because they were more careful in choosing the most appropriate department. But on the whole, failing was sheer embarrassment. In that case the family usually said the score wasn't enough, otherwise until the next entrance exams everyone would be reminding a poor girl that, on top of not being married yet, she had also failed her exams. It was slightly easier for boys because they could work for some time and then try some meaningless engineering department.

A university degree was paramount, nobody knew exactly why though. Probably for one's social standing. But when one got married, no one bothered to remember about it, but it mattered before one started a family.

In mid-October I was summoned to serve in the army. I wasn't a student, so what could have saved me from it?

Mum did try to get the papers saying I was an orphan, the only bread-winner. But, first, everyone knew she worked in an atelier and secondly, she would never be able to collect enough to bribe the right person to free me from the army. There was only one relative who helped us from time to time and held a high position in the regional party organisation.

Mum had still spent considerably when she prepared a gift for the regional army conscription commissioner, who our relative asked not to send me to some remote place. Instead, he pleaded, I could serve in a peaceful part of the USSR, preferably in Georgia. He also reminded him I spoke a bit of Russian, but would perish if obliged to serve in cold and miserable conditions. True, I had a satisfactory mark in my school Russian, which was thanks to Islam Sultanov.

The commissioner promised to help. But Mum cried a lot and I packed my things.

I was given plenty of food which the whole carriage of new conscripts feasted on for a week. Soon it transpired we were heading north, far north, to a place called Petrozavodsk.

My forte was that – a taxi driver's son – I could drive and had taken the license as soon as I finished school.

4.

When Islam Sultanov heard about my army, he prepared me in his own way for it. He talked such a lot about the country I was going to go to that it kept me awake all night.

He didn't tell me about the atrocities of the prison or the camp, he just taught me how to keep warm at night, how to fight bedbugs, how to stand up for myself when the 'old-timers' bullied me. He said that even if there were only two Georgians there, we had to support each other, fight the bullies side by side, the need for which would end in half a year. He instructed me not to shy from them, to defend myself at all costs, hitting them with a boiling kettle, a chair or whatever was at hand. It was a mystery how he knew all those things about the army. His life must have been similar.

I was to leave in a couple of days and I went to his little room to watch a movie. The show was about to begin, the hall was full with people talking loudly.

'Have a seat,' he said and turned to the projector. He deftly fed the film into it and switched off the light in the hall. I still remember it was an Indian film, The Power of Love.

As the movie started, Islam Sultanov turned to me and said:

'Listen, brother,' he used to call me that, never my name. 'I've been thinking of pretty bad things. It's hard times. What if you're sent to Afghanistan?'

My jaw dropped. Mum had worried stiff about it but the commissioner had calmed her down a bit.

Afghanistan was hell. In the past eight years three lads were sent home dead from that war. None of them had been warriors, just drivers. I couldn't imagine what Afghanistan was, just knew there was a war going on there, our lads served there and then were sent back

in zinc coffins. The mourning families were strictly forbidden to open then, which was the source of more grief in our town, because if the family couldn't see the deceased, they would suffer for the rest of their lives, suspecting their beloved son wasn't in it at all. The officials were firm about opening the coffins. There were rumours one was forced open in one of the villages, after the family had beaten up the accompanying officer and soldiers sent to protect the coffin. There were sawdust and logs inside.

That's all I knew about Afghanistan.

'Listen,' Islam Sultanov said, 'I've written something for you,' and he pulled a piece of paper from his breast pocket. 'I've used Georgian letters and you've got to memorise it. Before you leave, I'll be checking every day. Here's another one,' and he pulled another paper. 'But you can't read it. Make sure you've always got it on you, but hide it safely and whatever happens, don't lose it. If the worst comes to the worst and you are taken prisoner, first say those memorized words and then show them the other one.'

I was flabbergasted. Even in my worst dreams I'd never imagined the possibility of falling into the enemy's hands. When you join the army everyone tries to encourage you, but Islam Sultanov ...

'Go on, read it,' he told me. I furtively glanced at the other piece of paper, but didn't recognise the script. It might have been Arabic. Whatever it was, it was attractive.

'Ignore this one. Read the first one.'

I still remember the text to this day, written in the Georgian script but absolutely alien: 'Ana hapidu sultani Karbala. Inna niftah Kabul mahfuz pi baitina. Hum ajbaruni alaia muharabatakum raqman qanni. Hafizakum Allahu.'

'Hide it well. Remember, when you arrive, you'll be stripped and new clothes will be given. You can throw this paper only when you leave for home, or rather when you actually get home. You might not need it at all, but you must be prepared.'

Islam Sultanov seemed to have decided I was going to Afghanistan, imagined how I was taken prisoner by those who were called the dushman in the Soviet Union and how I was going to recite the memorised text.

He didn't explain the meaning, but I spent the remaining four days learning the obscure text by heart. I tried my best, as if it was a poem I had to learn for my school.

'Keep the pieces apart. You'll need the first to check if you remember the text. Forget you've got the other one, but keep it safe and on you at all times.'

I didn't write to Islam Sultanov even once during the two years I spent in the army. In her letters Mum would say, in her awkward handwriting unused to writing, that the Tartar was sending his best regards.

I experienced plenty during my service.