

Obole

Extract from the novel
By Aka Morchiladze
Translated by Ekaterine Machitidze

Meditation is not my nature. My wife was in a hurry and had no time to tell me . If only I could have called Varlamie, come to the station, ask a driver of a minibus to bring him that money. Varlamie would have taken it and welded or whatever he wanted. I came tearing along but I don't know what brought me here. When my wife called me I had already come to Agara. I am always late with my decisions and that's my way. I had just awakened. I actually wake up at eight o'clock in the evening.

- You woman, go and make the bed for him.

- No, no, I'll do it myself.

- All right, I'll go. The door is open, isn't it? Shall I make the bed in the room upstairs?

- Please don't go.

Then I talked with my wife.

- So-so. I am at Varlamie's place. Yes, I'll give him your best regards. There is something to be welded. Yes, he'll bring the welder tomorrow. I'll come the day after tomorrow. You stay there. I thought about it. No, not here I'll go home, take Orphan in my arms and sleep well. Gosh! No, Orphan is an old gun, a flint-gun. I found it in ruins.

Yes, Orphan was my friend and my brer, an inaccessible friend and brer and I longed for it. It was my dream to touch Orphan.

My grandfather had never cared a straw for hunting, guns and all that jazz, but Timote had a whole armory. He had had it since the king's time. A revolver in a good condition wrapped in a cloth would always be kept in his house. I don't speak about belts and daggers and a couple of sabers. It goes without saying that he also had guns, a rifle, a Berdain rifle and sporting guns. Yes, they had those guns but they didn't shoot. They discharged their guns into the air just when they were feasting. Then the world became nervous. I think people knew the true value of bullets till decent people got guns as well as robbers.

As for Timote, why on earth should he take a shot? He was neither a rifleman nor a hunter. They had given shelter to a certain Mose since the King's reign. He was a sluggard and a slogger, a kind tale-teller and a daydreamer... and that Mose was the one who used to strap the sporting gun over his shoulder. "Not a great hunter," recollected my grandfather. "Once he our neighbor's ducks". However, there were quite a few guns in the house. My uncle had a sporting gun. He kept its pieces in a neat tarpaulin cover. My uncle thought that one should know how to fire a gun. "I used to take Tomote's Berdain rifle to the forest and shoot their," once told my uncle.

Things often disappear and I have never seen any of those guns. I just remember that my father got a pistol for my uncle but I don't know what it was for. I have heard nothing about the handgun since then.

Niko didn't take much interest in guns too. There was a piano in a house which stood at the end of the street and Niko used to go there to play jazz and songs which were popular in Vake*. Almost every schoolboy sang:

"siyvaruli ar gegonos Zmobilo, civ qoTanSi moxarSuli lobio"*.

* A district in Tbilisi

* (Geo)Brother, don't take love for beans in a cold pot".

Somehow or other we were brought to hate arms, revolvers, shooting and iron and I still hate all of them. It's a great feeling if hatred can be great at all. Maybe it is really great when it comes to something that kills but there was an exception and the name of the exception was *Orphan* but then the thing had not been given that name yet.

It was my uncle who showed Orphan to me. For some reason he used to show different things to me. Generally speaking, he had to choose Nika because he was his elder nephew but the whole thing was that my uncle was the younger one of two brothers and I was the younger one of two brothers too. Who on earth will ever explain those gravities...

In that part of world people often use one and the same word to express a host of all-embracing and unspecified attitudes and descriptions. This is the word "different".

I had heard my uncle saying that Nika was a good kid, but I was a different one. I don't know what he meant. Perhaps he meant that I was reticent, emotional and had poetic fears which pretty well control me even now.

It happens that people perceive incredible and inexpressible likeness between each other. Twin souls know each other, as ancient poets would say it. Maybe it sounds like big words but there really are some imperceptible things. Let's don't to trouble Zigmund in the Kingdom of Heaven or he will come like a hussar and sully everything. Do you know that anecdote about *пришел поручик Ржевский и все опошлил**. So my uncle showed Obole to me in a shady corner behind the hencoop.

In the beginning one might have thought that we met each other by chance and I took my uncle unawares but it was not so... It was impossible to take him unawares if he didn't want it.

In that part of world people usually have quiet time after dinner, especially in summer... everyone tends to lie down and crickets creak, orioles chirp louder than others and those aboriginal noisy insects there... After dinner when it is so hot one must go and melt into the cool of the rooms which are unhurt by the sun or the cellar where it is always cool and where one can loll about till evening. It is impossible to loll about in a cellar but one can have a good time there. I wasn't a kid who would loll about and managed to get along with my secret work and the happy solitude during that quiet time. I used to fuss about in the silent corners of the yard. So my uncle was sitting behind the hencoop. Maybe it was the coolest place there. He had put a bottle of kerosene by his side and was rubbing that unexpected and unheard-of object.

When I found him there he wasn't confused - he didn't turn me out. He just told me to pass him some wire. I passed it but my eyes were still fixed on that object.

My uncle used to give an angry question:

"What?"

"Whose is that?" I asked, nerving myself.

"Nobody's. It's an orphan. I look after it".

It was a long gun. Something like Fenimore Cooper. I wasn't a very clever child but I thought it looked like Fenimore Cooper - a long, thin flint-gun decorated with pieces of nacre. Yes, it was like Princess Diana. At that time I didn't know who Princess Diana was. I think poor Diana wasn't a princess then but later on I saw her on TV. Strolling along, she was abashed somehow and red in the face. She made me remember that old gun. Yes, they were very much alike. Is it possible to think of a gun as of a woman? You know, we always believe guns to be men and maybe they really are men. Guns never resemble women but there was a time when they looked like women. I was a time of honor and all that...

Unaware of the existence of that princess, I opened wide my mouth.

* (Rus.) Lieutenant Rzhevski came and hackneyed everything.

He neither told me to touch it or to caress it... He started explaining that the orphan gun was at least two hundred years old and if my mother hadn't been fussing over it I would have seen the gun earlier – the gun hang on a carpet among Timote's photographs and daggers summer and winter and used to be hidden before our arrivals. Mom was afraid kids would snatch it. My uncle also explained that it wasn't dangerous to take it because it took much time to charge the gun and one needed to have a special knowledge which we, my brother and I, would never acquire.

I don't know whether or not he did it naively or in revenge but he started teaching me right there. He taught me how to charge such guns, where to pour gunpowder in, when to put a bullet into a barrel. He also told that the flint of the poor gun had been worn out for already a hundred years and he couldn't remember anyone who had taken a shot from that poor orphan. As my uncle said, no one took a shot even when Timote was alive. I stored everything in my memory but I realized that it was of an earthly use to charge the gun.

I knew some things about guns. Maybe he did it to spite my mother or maybe because we had a common secret but my uncle used to take me to the forest and let me fire his gun there. He did it in a strange way. He used to hold the gun himself, saying I wasn't old enough, and made me pull the triggers - the first trigger and then the second one. I mostly discharged the gun into the air. I think it made him remember the time when he used to steal Timote's Berdan rifle.

The gun christened by my uncle as Orphan turned into my ladylove. I liked it so much. A long time elapsed before the second meeting. I think it seemed more beautiful then. How strange it is... I had never taken it for a gun. It was just something...

Two days passed after that talk behind the hencoop and my uncle called me into the grandpa's room. He pulled out a drawer and took out Timote's notebooks in old, queer covers. I had seen those notebooks a zillion times. I had seen the notebooks and tuned over their pages. I had also read them here and there but as you know boys of twelve as well as girls of twelve, I suppose, don't enjoy manuscripts a lot. Maybe they remind them of notes made by their teachers under a homework. Besides, Timote had a hand which seemed to be unexpected and odd to me. It was queer and I found it difficult to decipher it.

- What happened to the gun... what happened to this place...- said my uncle briefly. What happened to us. Put it back when you get through it. I was of your age when I read it. I haven't read much since then but it was enough for me.

I often found it difficult to understand what my uncle was saying. I could not understand his thoughts and desires but I knew everything about my father's ones.

I took those notebooks. I used to sit in Timote's old armchair on the balcony and read them. In the evenings my grandpa came back from the chemist's shop. He used to hit me with his hand when he found me with those notebooks.

My grandma... you could not expose her as Timote's admirer. Once she made a slip in speaking that Timote was a tiresome being. She said he didn't eat bread bought at a shop during a fast and you had to bake it for him and be sure to set a cross on it. She said she used to set crosses on with a knife on Timote's breads. I went on with reading and finally found the story of the orphaned gun.

I don't know why my uncle named that gun *Orphan* but as far as it always was in my mind, in my thoughts I called it Orphan too. It always returned to my mind as Orphan... Orphan...

So the gun has an old story. It's a very old story. We are a long-suffering family.

Generally speaking, other peoples do not understand Georgians because we are used to speaking in a roundabout way... we are a roundabout people and they don't like it. I think it even vexes them. However, as I've already told you, we think that if we don't speak in a roundabout way no one will ever understand anything. The roundabout way of speaking throws the audience into confusion. It frightens people... who on earth is fond of roundabout speaking any more? People don't even like Burger King menu but I still must talk about some things. Otherwise no one will

ever understand what I'm going to say next. I am not an expert in traditions of other's but I know that here one must speak in a roundabout way.

I read that story in Timote's notebooks.

Once in former times, in the seventeenth century, I think, two of my ancestors lived in a village. Our small town didn't exist then but it would take half a day to reach the village from here. They were brothers: Mamuka and Davit. Davit was a priest and Mamuka was a noble. He had a small fortress, the fortress of Tskhukushera. Don't you like the name? Can anyone pronounce it in any other language but Georgian?

Thenadays Prince Dadiani controlled our lands. He had bereft the King of Imereti of those land. Once Dadiani's herdsmen had driven their cattle to the land belonging to Mamuka and were carelessly grazing the cows at haycocks piled by Mamuka.

Dadiani was a master but there were some rules established even for the master's domination. Mamuka waxed indignant over that fact. Dadiani's herdsmen paid no attention to Mamuka's anger. Mamuka beat the men with a long sick and turned them out of his land. Good gracious! There were too many stories like this in the old days in Georgia.

The herdsmen made the thing reach Dadiani's ear and the Prince sent his people to cut the naughty noble down to size. They set Mamuka's hay on fire. In response Mamuka and his serfs ran down Dadiani's men and killed them. They fought and it turned out that Mamuka, maybe unintentionally, had killed those man.

In summer Dadiani used to stay at a fortress in Gordi. He asked Mamuka to come to that fortress. It is quite natural that they failed to hold a conversation. The Prince deprived Mamuka of his nobility title, called him a peasant and shut him up in the underground dungeon of Gordi.

The king of Imereti did not recognize Mamuka as a peasant, saying that it wasn't Dadiani who had entitled Mamuka's family and the Prince could not deprive them of their title.

Davit was good in writing and lodged a good complaint to the King to help his brother. There is nothing strange in the fact that my ancestor fell a victim to a game of politics. As Timote says, King's counselor was against Dadiani. As for Mamuka, he didn't know chalk from cheese in politics and couldn't hang his head in time...

One day Dadiani arrived at Gordi to see and pardon prisoners there. It was on Easter Sunday. Dadiani went down to the underground dungeon together with his wife. He must have been eager to do some great Christian deeds. He stepped to dungeon bars, asking prisoners why they were there. He tried to remember them but he had already forgotten most of them. However, he remembered Mamuka. He didn't say a word when he passed by Mamuka's cell. Mamuka realized that Dadiani had got a bee in his bonnet about him and wasn't going to forgive him or ...

Mamuka didn't bear it even for the sake of Easter. Maybe the guards of the dungeon had already rolled a couple of red eggs through the bars but the man still failed to overcome himself and called the Prince:

"Dadiani, it's a good job for you and your whore wife to shut me up here".

It was quite natural that Mamuka died in that dungeon. Dadiani pretended not to have heard his words. It was Easter Sunday and maybe the Prince refrained from a bloody punishment.

I know nothing about his wife's decency. Governors used to get married because of political reasons... love and passion were rare things. Fairly speaking, I don't even know the name of that Prince Dadiani who was so incited against my ancestor. If it was Levan II then it turns out that we are very lucky and the God has much helped us because we still exist, even in Santa Barbara, because that Levan II was about a hundred times more clever and treacherous than any Georgian who lived in the western part of the country then. Levan II Dadiani was a man full of ardent desires. He fell in love with the wife of his uncle. In order to marry that woman the prince blamed his uncle for unfaithfulness, cut off the latter's nose, charged a cannon with his lover and then discharged it. That is why Mamuka's recklessness was ten times more estimated within the scope of the rules

characteristic to the chivalrous time. Saying that Dadiani's wife was a whore was something... Today every single Georgian thinks he is a Dadiani.

So Mamuka died there, at a dungeon in Gordi. He doesn't have a grave. As Timote writes in his notebook, Mamuka has no grave because he was buried far away from his lands.

Life is a different thing and in those good times even that terrible and treacherous man was not the one who would slaughter all the family. Mamuka had children. They grew up but their nobility title had become voidable: Imeretians thought they were nobles, throughout the lands of the Dadianis they were peasants.

One of Mamuka's grandsons who was called a strange name Goti appeared before the King of Imereti. Yarning for a war, Goti never let his sword out of his hand. Meanwhile, another member of the Dadiani family came to power and the tension eased.

Goti accompanied the King of Imereti in the war against Ottomans more than once. The King liked Goti. Because of his lands and nobility title Imeretians honoured Goti almost as a prince but according to the laws of the Dadiani's he still was a peasant. It upset Goti.

I don't know whether or not the King of Imereti and Prince Dadiani had already reconciled with each other but it's a fact that Dadiani appointed Goti governor of the fortress of Muri. I think it was a deal. That politics will just finish me.

So Dadiani indirectly recognized Goti's nobility and Goti turned out to be a good governor of the fortress. I want to tell you with a silly pride that from that time on until Russian troops came to those lands in 1815, only members of our family used to be governors of the fortress of Muri. The Dadianis were not considered as patrons of our lands for the last thirty years and we were subordinated to the King of Imereti.

You must be bored with this story but if you don't understand it you will never understand me. That's that. So I'm sitting on Varlamie's balcony and thinking about Goti because I'm Georgian.

"I want so much to be that damn Georgian sometimes", once admitted Stacy, my daughter-in-law, "to understand you".

As for me, I have nothing; I am not afraid of the past - I am Georgian; I know nothing about the future - I am Georgian. I can die because of trifles - I am Georgian; I can live because of trifles—I am Georgian.