

Words

-Zaza Tvaradze

It was a wonderful sunny morning in spring, when, near the outskirts of the village, at the edge of the woods, several horsemen appeared. With them, creaking as it followed close behind, was a covered wagon pulled by two oxen.

The eldest among the travelers was close to 49 years old, with a beard and mustache flecked and striped with silver. This well-preserved fellow was sitting atop a thoroughbred mare at the head of the group, calmly leading the way. He was wearing a burgundy *chokha-akhalukhi*,* with a padded mink-fur jacket thrown over his shoulders. On his head he wore a black *khabalakhi*† threaded with gold, and thin black leather calf boots on his feet. His waist was decorated with an engraved silver belt and matching silver dagger, and behind his broad shoulders poked the barrel of his long musket rifle. From time to time, he tapped his heels into his horse's sides, and encouraged him forward in a low voice. And the horse, which seemed familiar with its owner's commands, step by step, gradually brought the rider closer to the village, which was only one quarter of an hour away.

His cohort followed directly on his heels, and consisted of two young riders, the wagon driver, two women who rode inside the covered wagon, and five or so young children.

Directly on his heels, his cohort followed the wagon's path. They consisted of two young riders, the wagon driver, two women who rode inside the covered wagon, and five or so young children.

One of these two riders was a young man, with newly sprouted mustache hairs above his upper lip - the other was a boy with a yet baby-smooth face.

* *Chokha-akhalukhi* - a type man's outer clothing or overcoat, accompanied with a kind of long-skirted robe worn by men in the Caucasus

† *Khabalakhi* - a type of men's headgear popular in the Caucasus

Both of them wore fine wool *chokha-akhalukhi*, and short, padded leather jackets. Like their aged leader, they proudly wore engraved silver belts and daggers, and slung over their shoulders they each had a musket rifle. The younger-seeming one had a thick, braided leather crop hanging from his wrist, which he used to lightly hit his dapple-gray thoroughbred when going uphill. Sometimes, he would catch enough speed to come shoulder to shoulder with the leader. His mustached co-traveler placidly rode his stallion, and periodically cast a caring eye over the women and children behind him.

“Hiya! What’s wrong, dammit?” The leader shouted at his horse, and gave his reins a strong tug. The smart animal...

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to find out what the smart animal did, because exactly then, the doorbell rang.

It was a gloomy and cold early winter’s morning. The sky was covered completely with gray clouds. It wasn’t raining. Neither was it snowing. Only blowing gusts of sometimes weak, sometimes moderate, sometimes strong wind from time to time, which shook the remaining leaves in the Plane trees along the street. Sad, whitish gray morning light poured through the window, and gently spread to every nook and cranny of the room. The cabinet in the corner, the table by the window, and the black piano on the opposite wall glimmered faintly in the light. I was sitting at the table and reading the open book in front of me. At the sound of the bell, I raised my head.

I looked at the clock on the cabinet. It was almost 11:30. I was home alone, and wasn’t expecting anyone. I had decided that I was going to spend this morning nurturing my brain, and I had hoped that no one would interrupt me. So, I was sitting and reading. And I was happy to be sitting and reading, because, you will agree, in our chaotic and transient life, it is not very often that our internal and external circumstances happily converge to give you a merciful moment to yourself, a moment to do what you want- when there is absolutely nothing to restrict you and no one to get in your way.

But the unexpected ring on the doorbell shattered my romantic, half-sad, sweetly egocentric mood, and again returned me to this practical, responsibility-filled reality, where there was no village, and no stupid man on his stupid horse. I got up clumsily and staggered toward the door, hoping that it would only be my neighbor, looking to use my telephone. But, when I opened the door, I got my friend Levani, who was looking at me strangely with gleaming eyes.

He was wearing a dark raglan coat, and a long home-knit scarf. His fine, checkered sweater was visible beneath his open coat, and he was wearing thick felt pants... and so on. He wasn't wearing a hat. He had nothing on his head if we don't count the small piece of dry Platanus leaf on his head, which was stuck in his curly hair. Who knows how long it followed him around without him noticing? He had a pretty large leather bag slung over his shoulder, which he kept stroking with considerable care. It looked like it was something that, in his opinion, would add joy to our dull, everyday life.

"Wow, what're you doing so early?"

He didn't answer me. Instead, he stepped past me and straight into my room. I closed the door and followed him. Levani, without taking his coat off, was sitting at the table. His bag was in front of him. He was looking at it, mesmerized. I also looked at it in interest. It was a normal bag. *Maybe he has whisky*, I thought optimistically. For a few minutes he sat there looking at the handbag in without saying a word. Then, he raised his head and dreamily looked at the ceiling. *Ok, so maybe it's something more rare. Probably gin*, I thought.

"So what's up? Anything new?" I asked him.

Levani watched me silently. Strange sparks danced in his eyes.

"Are you mute now?" I asked, bemused.

He glanced at the bag, and asked me, stupidly, "You know what's in here?" Suddenly it struck me, from his intonation, or from some other intuition, that it wasn't whisky in the bag, or gin, or anything to drink at all.

"What is it?"

"Guess."

I coughed and sat down.

“Is it something to drink?” Silence. “To smoke?” Silence. “A book?” Silence. I scratched my head. “It’s not some animal, is it?” I guessed again. Silence, again. With that, my hypotheses were exhausted. “Ok, what do you have? Tell me, you fool!” I said, reaching for the bag. But Levani shielded it defensively.

“Careful, careful!”

“What’s wrong?” I said, surprised. He looked at me with triumphant eyes. The leaf fragment was still sitting on his head.

“It is a living creature,” he told me. With these words, he opened the bag, and pulled out a rectangular black chest. “It’s in here.”

Unexpectedly, I thought I almost heard a faint whistle.

“Is it a bird?” I asked, getting excited. Levani doubled over, laughing silently and clutching his sides. “Then, a mouse?” I tried. He laughed again, and between laughs he let out a strangely strangled, high-pitched sound.

“No, no. It’s not an animal... or a bird...” *Maybe it’s an insect.* I thought.

“Is it an insect?”

“No.” He was sobbing from laughter. “It’s not an insect. Or a fish... It’s not any type of animal... but at the same time, it’s alive. But not an animal.”

Suddenly the story I was reading flashed in my mind, particularly the smart horse, which I never got to see react to its owner’s outburst.

“If it’s not an animal, then it can speak, right? Is it a voice recorder?” I guessed.

“No! Hahaha! It’s alive, alive!”

Levani was laughing uncontrollably. Suddenly I understood that he had already gone crazy. I watched him carefully. His eyes were like glass, and he was guarding the chest like greedy characters guard their treasure in movies. The ones who told other, stronger characters, whether they are evil or kind, “No, no! I won’t let you take it! I earned it. It’s all mine! I worked for this! I put my life into this!” And then... “Take everything else, just don’t take this from me! I can’t live without it! You can’t take it from me! You can’t! You won’t have it as long as I’m alive! I won’t let you take it, Uta!”

This was the sort of scene that was playing out in front of my eyes. It amazed me immensely, because from our many years of friendship, I knew Levani to be an intelligent, reasonable, and generous man, who had such a steady and healthy psyche, that some wretched chest would never make him go crazy.

“Levan,” I said carefully. “Hey, Levan...” He composed himself and straightened in his chair.

“This morning, I was at the notary office,” he told me excitedly. I opened my eyes wide.

“Where were you?”

“The notary office.”

“What the hell is that?”

“What it sounds like. You pay money and they give you pure bliss.”

“Wow...”

“What, ‘wow!?’ They gave me this.” Levani stroked the chest. I looked at the chest, and all of a sudden, it seemed to me like a man stuffed in a tight suit, trying to push his way out.

“So they give you something in this box?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it drugs?” I asked him, raising my eyebrows didactically. Slowly, I was beginning to suspect that Levani must be high.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Words,” he told me in a muffled voice.

“What ‘words?’”

“Ordinary words!” Once again, that unrestrained delight took him.

“So what? Why do you need them?” I asked him, irritated.

“They are alive,” he responded, and winked at me. He was giggling silently. I looked him up and down with curiosity.

“What are you raving about?”

“What I’m raving about is *words!*”

“Whatever, just take out whatever you have. Stop torturing me!”

Levani lifted the lid a tiny bit, almost like he was afraid that something would fly out. He slid his fingers inside and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It was some sort of form, like you get at the housing authority, like form No.1. On it were several printed fill-out boxes. One section was filled out with Levani’s first and last name, and his father’s name. His address was written in the second section. The rest were blank.

“What is this?”

“This is a form. You can fill it out with any words you want!”

“What are you talking about? Are you messing with me?” I threw the form on the table. Levani became serious.

“I’m not messing with you. This morning, I went to the notary office. There, they give out all sorts of goodies, whatever you want. And the price isn’t that high. It’s not far, on Red Partisan Street, behind ‘Melody.’ You’ve never noticed it?”

“What was I supposed to notice?”

“Blue door, with a signboard that says ‘Notary.’”

“I haven’t noticed it.”

“Until now, I hadn’t noticed it either. But I noticed it today, and went in. I paid only ten, and they gave me this.” He tapped the chest with his hand.

“What the hell do you want this black box for?!”

“There are words inside! Living words!”

“Poems?”

“No.” he shook his head impatiently.

“Ok, show me these living words.” In one motion of his hand, Levani opened the chest, and then struck a ceremonial pose, frozen like a statue. I looked down at the chest. I couldn’t see anything extraordinary or special. It was a leather-bound black box, lined on the inside with dark green velvet. It seemed totally empty at first, but then, in the faint winter sunlight, I made out some shadows wriggling inside. I peered inside more carefully, and suddenly felt my head grow strangely warm. For a second, only a second, I think I lost consciousness. When I came back to my senses, I saw the word ‘Consolation’ flowing out of the chest like mist.

Is it unbelievable? Absolutely, totally, mercilessly unbelievable! But it still happened just this way— this was an ordinary black chest that was sitting on my old table, and the weak morning sunlight from my window fell on it like the pale, faded mist of forgetfulness falls on the leftover corpses on a battlefield – It’s morning, at the edge of the forest, the ravens cry their shrill cry and the corpses, turned to stone, lie in the fog of winter. Scattered here and there, guns and other weapons, and heavy artillery are like statues of monsters from a fairy tale. Total stillness has seeped into the lying soldiers’ bodies. From this chaotic and disordered field of battle, they have passed into the homogeneous and uniform mist-field of death. It was just like this that the dreary morning light fell upon the swamp-colored, open-mouthed chest. Above it, like a balloon, was Levan’s dazed face – his greyish-hazel almond eyes staring into the chest. And meanwhile, from the chest, flowed the winding, sad word “Consolation.”

And what’s most amazing, but what confirms that this was real, and not some hocus-pocus, was that this word consisted neither of letters or sounds, nor was it written on anything— it simply existed in the air, a faintly luminous and transparent body. This transparent body had no parts or limbs— it was one whole, leech-shaped form. It did not consist of separate letters, like this: C-O-N-S... it was a whole, and non-segmented word— “consolation,” which was not written, could not be pronounced, but instead freely existed, and undulated in the air like some sort of deep-sea mollusk.

Generally, I always had the vague suspicion that words are born on the sea floor. It’s possible that every word is some kind of creature, each of which has its own density, taste, and color. Each of them is distinguished by their inimitable and unique qualities – some of them are swordfish, some are jellyfish, some are coral. Because of this, I was not surprised at all to see this word, so luminous and transparent, emerge like a mollusk from the green velvet bottom of the chest. What else can we compare this vision to? Smoke. Or a soap bubble. Or should we return to the water? An air bubble rising up from the bottom of the sea.

One way or another, soon the word detached from the surface of the chest, and started undulating on top of the table. Suddenly, I had a profound feeling that

everything follows its own path. That all obstacles had disappeared. That in life— if you look at things simply, there is really not so much difficult weight to carry.

“Huh?!” cried Levani, in an unnatural voice. “Huhh?! See?! Do you see that!? Look! What is that?! Wow...” The sound waves coming from his larynx made the word on the table quiver. I prepared to ask him a question. But I felt like my tongue wouldn’t obey me. I coughed. I shook my head. Then I started wheezing. Finally, I found my voice and said:

“D-D-Dude! What is that?!”

“Ahhhh!” Levani screamed in a quiet and thin voice, and struck his fist into his other palm. “Words! They’re words! I have ten words here, ten!” You wouldn’t be able to tell if he was crying or sobbing. But I knew— he was neither crying nor sobbing, he was laughing. He was dying with laughter.

Suddenly, I was also overcome with uncontrollable ecstasy.

“Leviko! What is this!? What is it, you bastard!? Where did you get it!?” I yelled to him, like a manic child, forgetting myself for a second.

You have probably all experienced this sort of feeling, especially in childhood, when you are waiting impatiently for something. Where you are flying on Cloud 9, filled with joy and excitement because what you desire is so close, although you have only seen it for a second. For example, when Santa Claus brings you presents on Christmas, or let’s say, you’re waiting for your aunt to show up, and aha! there she is! And you, overcome with joy, run to her. This feeling, which immediately coursed through me, from head to toe, was exactly like that.

But Levani did not even move. He was staring at the chest. From there, one after another, several other words were poking over the edge.

Yeah, now I remember, at that moment, I thought the chest looked like the bottle in 1001 Arabian Nights where the genie was locked away as a prisoner. This thought was connected to my own thought earlier, when Levani first came, that he might have some gin in his bag. Both of these thoughts were connected to the way these words emerged from the chest, chained to my earlier thought that this whole process looked like smoke or air bubbles rising from the sea floor. You probably all remember that they pull the genie’s bottle from the water, and that the genie rises

out of the bottle like smoke. But in this moment, I paid no attention to this triple connection. If you want the truth, I didn't even notice it, because all of my attention was directed towards the chest.

But wait, you will tell me, if you didn't notice it, then how do you know that that's exactly what you remembered, or exactly what you thought? Although, it's possible that you won't tell me anything at all. But I'll still answer, so no one can think I made a mistake. I will answer that, a person remembers not only what he notices, but also that which he feels subconsciously. It's possible that sometime in the future, these thoughts can float their way into conscious awareness. As a child, who hasn't had a downstairs neighbor that nobody ever noticed, who, one day, got drunk, and rudely broke through the gate of consciousness of the other neighbors who live upstairs? So, that answers that, and I will continue recounting the strange and fateful happenings that played out on that gloomy and worn winter's day.

The second word that detached from the bottom of the chest was "if." Hm! What a short word, yet what an enormous meaning it has! "If!" - "If it is really so!" Yes, it really *is* so, if all of this is not a dream! But why should it be a dream, if you believe in God?