

Woe is Life

by Zaira Arsenishvili

fragments

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'How a lunatic acts wisely.'

With a bark the sheepdog shot out of its shed, padded across the yard and turning vicious it clambered against the small wooden gate set in the thicket fence. Someone was calling Matsia by name: 'Matsiaa... Matsiaa...'

The hallway door creaked open.

'Who's out there?' Matsia called down from the verandah.

'Let me in... Matsiaa... I've come on business...' someone was saying, muffledly and almost pleading in tone.

Matsia paused for a moment, listening closely to the unfamiliar voice...

Then he turned around, fetched out the oil-lamp and went down into the yard.

'Get out of here, boy!' He scolded the dog and shone the oil-lamp at the thicket fence.

Large, bare hands caught his eye...

A snow-pelted moustache and beard... A snow-pelted *karakul* hat...

Shoulders hunched as high as the ears... And eyes, lacerated eyes lashed by the cold...

The nocturnal traveller warmed his cold-numbed hands with his

breath.

‘Wherever have you been walking?’ asked Matsia, but without waiting for a reply, he opened the gate and lit up the path for him.

The man was struggling to walk with his frost-bitten feet. He was battered and pummelled by the trek and the cold.

Matsia wondered who he was and what he wanted, why he had to pester him on this foul and fell night.

‘I’ve come from Telavi...’ grunted the man. It seemed he was struggling to speak, ‘Check me over. I’m not armed.’

The man turned his overcoat pockets inside out. He opened out his overcoat. At the hallway door he could not even stomp off his shoes.

Matsia picked up a broom and brushed off his snow-cruusted shoes for him. He led him inside the hallway and noticed at once that the crow chicks had hopped up and were squatting in their nests. He noticed that as soon as the stranger set foot inside, he narrowed and reined in his gaze, shooting a glance towards the recesses of the hallway. The stranger’s bleak gaze tracked down Eva in the recesses of the hallway.

The black-clad Eva was sitting before the fireplace, cross-legged on the sheepskins, staring into the flames. As though discomfited by the heat, she gathered the ends of her black headscarf at her nape to reveal her throat and ears. In her ears glinted large emeralds and doubtless it was these magnificent emeralds and this unfamiliar beauty that lent her grief and melancholy a solemn, impenetrable appearance.

The recent arrival removed his *karakul* hat and breathed out warily, as though all of a sudden struck by a fit of colic and the pain was hindering his breathing.

‘Greetings,’ he muttered at long last. He was standing in the middle of the hallway, watching Eva.

‘Come, man, next to the fire!’ said Matsia, getting angry. Then he called

out to Gulkan, his wife, who meanwhile had gone out to the adjoining room: 'Come and see to our guest.'

Eva got to her feet, let down the ends of the headscarf gathered at her nape and fastened them at the front. She crossed the hallway and went out into the adjoining room.

Gulkan set a three-legged stool by the fire for the guest and offered him a wooden tray with a jug of vodka and a bowlful of dried figs. Without pausing she turned and left the men on their own.

The newcomer shook off his *karakul* hat into the hearth and placed it on his knee.

He warmed his hands, blue from the cold, in the fire. What on earth were those clothes he had on, and those shoes? Old slippers, limp and soaked through in such foul weather. His trouser legs were stuffed into the tops of his socks, laddered and torn all over. Matsia mused that if he looked like this on the outside, whatever would he have on underneath? He got up and from the cupboard in the wall took out his new, tightly woven, varicoloured socks and tossed them to the guest: 'Dry your feet and get these on.'

Next he poured some vodka into a tiny horn.

'May it take away the bitterness!' said the guest, quickly knocking back the vodka and taking a dried fig.

Matsia furrowed his brow. He knew this man from somewhere or other... He could not recall from where.

'I thought to myself: I'll take the short cuts...' said the guest, 'At St Shio the snow was knee-deep... No path... And at the top the wind was howling...'

He still did not recognise the voice. He had never heard this muffled, low voice.

'Whatever troubled you to come?' said Matsia and he refilled the horn,

‘And in this foul weather besides? Take plenty of fruit. It goes well with the vodka!’ he added, more as a means to dispel the question.

‘Troubled me? There’s an awful lot troubled me...’ and the man knocked back the second vodka. His narrow, elongated face, already blue from the cold, now flushed beetroot-red from the vodka and the fire. He opened his black overcoat, timeworn, threadbare and frayed, with patches sewn at the elbows and coat-tails. Underneath he wore a coarse shirt that had faded with time.

Matsia was struggling, ‘Where have I seen him? Where have I seen him?’ It seemed there was something disagreeable about this man. It seemed this man knew something that Matsia not only ought to know but also must have experienced.

As for the man, he followed the second horn with a third... and then a fourth...

‘Come now! If you’ve got something to say, say it and be done with it!’ Matsia barked, his patience worn.

The man hung his head.

‘They mean to kill you, Matsia...’ The already muffled voice went completely silent.

‘How much did they hire you for?’ asked Matsia impassively, even though he sensed the man was not lying.

‘Not that much... If they get wind of this, my business will also bite the dust...’

‘So what do they want from *me*?’ Matsia raised his voice.

‘Well, who else would they want anything from? Who else around here has as much clout as you...?’

‘I’ll give the bandits and beggars a flock of sheep and two swine! Go tell them that!’

‘They’ll pop you like a soap bubble...’ said the man, as though talking

to himself and Matsia's inevitable death causing him merely regret.

'Who, man, who?' Matsia was now enraged, 'Stop beating around the bush! Tell me and be done with it!'

The man stirred up the embers with the poker, then lifted his head, looked at Matsia and stared him in the eye.

'The men of these modern times!'

'Eughh!' Matsia spat into the fire, 'I say, to hell with their values.'

The grief weighed on him... His heart swelled.

In the village he was renowned as an even-handed man who knew right from wrong. He understood the major and the minor. Herdsmen respected him and not only did they respect him, they loved him, too: 'He himself has seen much hardship and he knows our tale. He can be sharp-eyed as well as turn a blind eye.'

It seems now that Matsia did not resist fate on account of death. He used to say death was our drinking companion. He did not consider for one moment even killing a man to be an unpardonable sin in itself. It depends on why he had to be killed. He should understand this and fathom it in his own way. It is said that Luka the priest also answered him repeatedly when he asked: 'Father, if a person kills a grain-threshing ox and God does not deem this a sin, why should it be considered sinful to kill a rancorous and evil-minded man?'

But of course Matsia was neither rancorous nor evil-minded! He owed no one blood nor any debt or interest; he stole no one's horse and robbed no one of his wife... Neither did he cut down vines, nor did he set fire to fields! And not just that, he never even uttered a rude word to anyone! His poverty-stricken parents of many small children surrendered his childhood for adoption by others. From then until this day he remembers nothing other than loyal, selfless, manly labour, while he was amassing these worldly goods. Everything, great or lowly,

he earned by his own hand, his own sweat.

‘So then, they have to kill you because you’re well-to-do, because, since you’re well-to-do, you’re bleeding the world dry.’ Matsia would never be able to comprehend this. It was Matsia’s firm conviction that this was targeting well-off people; it was a fabrication by vassal, mud-trailed, rootless and lawless people ogling the money pot of others. Without any effort, free of charge, they longed to be sitting cross-legged at the banquet table. The guzzling swine! The parasites and manslayers! And Matsia, now angered, would recall all of a sudden where and when he had come across this man. Equally he realised straightaway why he did not recognise him at first sight... He saw him on the day of Gio’s funeral... He was that very same man... That very morning Matsia went to the cemetery. To be with the dead, when after a sleepless night and raging with fury, he could not settle.

In the hallway the thought of Eva and Gio left him bereft; outside was a stream of people offering condolences and never-ending sympathy and he felt the urge to sit in the cemetery at the graves of his parents, at the grave of his sublime Khvaramze and watch while the boys dug Gio’s grave. He felt the urge to suffer the silence of the cemetery, pierced by the sounds of spade and shovel.

But the boys dug the grave early in the morning and had left. No one remained in the cemetery. No one but this man. No sooner had he set foot inside and looked deep down at his parents’ graves, he spotted that, standing on the freshly excavated, loose earth beside Gio’s freshly dug, open grave was a certain man and he was staring into the grave. Matsia’s sharp eyes immediately registered the figure leaning towards the grave: the faded cloth of his coarse shirt, his lean torso and the back of his bushy head of hair. As soon as the man heard the sound of approaching footsteps, he made off without glancing around... He was

a tall man. He strode away with the spryness of someone startled... He vanished from sight at the small Church of the Holy Trinity... Soon after, he reappeared... Matsia fixed his gaze on the bushy head of hair... But apparently not once did the man look towards him. It was as though he deliberately kept his face turned away. He leapt over a crumbling wall beyond the large lime tree and blended into the young forest.

Matsia reached Holy Trinity. On the rear wall a recently affixed candle was burning... All this seemed most odd to him... But in all likelihood he would not have been able to uncover the identity of the grave-watcher, had he not seen him once again at the time of Gio's funeral. ...Eva took out the flute from her bosom pocket and laid it beside Gio's pillow. Until now he had kept himself strong, but when they spread the shroud over him, he was completely paralysed by despair. He glanced up at Matsia and said, 'I am going to die, father' and because this was not spoken with tears or sobbing, it was not spoken with the pleas of someone in despair, rather as though it were completely normal, when as a child he would say, 'I'm off out with the other kids, father!' – in a begging and pleading tone – Matsia recoiled, 'Oh my poor children!'

He let out a sob, placed his hand on Eva's shoulder, who was kneeling, and brought her to her feet. 'I don't want to walk this earth any more, let me go, I'm dying, father!' Eva was pleading and she held Matsia's hand. Matsia took Eva to one side, set her on the gravestone under the large lime tree and clasped her to his chest...

And there, at precisely that moment, he saw this man! He was sitting on the crumbling wall and watching them, Eva and Matsia... His narrow, elongated face... He was beardless and had one cheek covered with a black headscarf... For this reason he did not recognise him right

away; now this man's cheek was clad in a dense black beard. Equally he supposed that at that instant he probably did not recognise him, because he would have had to recall those agonising moments and his heart was unwittingly resisting this.

Otherwise this unknown mourner flashed through his mind like lightning at that instant with such clarity that Matsia thought with equal clarity: 'He is the very same man who this morning was staring into the grave.' Such clarity a man might experience only during a trance of great spiritual or physical turmoil.

Having returned home from the cemetery he made enquiries and Luka the priest said that this was Spyridona from Telavi, that he was involved with the men of the modern times, that he goes from village to village handing out papers... Matsia knew these grey papers all too well. Repeatedly cows returning from the herd were said to have them impaled on their horns...

'So much for brotherly unity if my God and I are intent on killing!'

For a second time Matsia stared at the man, his eyes narrowing as he observed him, and he focused his attention... They truly had him in their sights, if everything had been scouted out by this Spyridona. For Matsia this was of no importance whatsoever; either he is eaten by a wolf or by a jackal in wolf's clothing.

It was clear this man was not sidestepping his cronies for two flocks of sheep and twenty or so swine and he would not trudge over here in this bone-chilling freeze, his overcoat full of holes and the soles torn off his slippers. He appeared far too poor and destitute to be stealing for pin money or playing for loose change.

It showed even in his knitted brow, his relentless gaze, in his thick, fleshy lips protruding from his black beard, even in the way he abruptly and impulsively he poured vodka into his mouth, the way he lurked

and eavesdropped on every creak and rattle coming from the adjoining room... It showed in everything that a fervent longing spurred this man on and he was motivated by a high-stake bargain. And that is how it unfolded. At Matsia's cry: 'Spyridona, it's better to be broken than beaten to a pulp. What do you want from me?' Spyridona seemingly did not even draw breath before saying: 'It is better to be broken than beaten to a pulp, Matsia. Give me Eva to be my wife!'

'Give him Eva to be his wife?!' Matsia hung his head... He glared into the fire... He had given him something to mull over... 'If she was going to be happy with her husband, how I would even dare to speak Eva's name aloud, but since nature wished it to be this way and for me there is no longer sleep or wakefulness, since now your life also is in the balance, then you can escape death and destruction only if Eva is mine! Eva... Eva...'

Now if anything were making Matsia's fleeting world miserable and tormenting him, it was Eva's despair and hopelessness. No end could be seen to Eva's grief and sorrow, and with Matsia's notions and intentions no end would be seen for some time to come, a very long time... 'Who would know the tale of my inlaid icon better than I do?' wondered Matsia. 'I am a man, a gregarious man to boot, and it took me so many years after my Khvaramze, I grew old with the thought and memory of her...' After Gio, three times they snatched Eva from death. The first was when she miscarried and was ill for a long time. The second, she was overcome by such a dark depression that twice she tied a noose from the churning beam so as to kill herself. On both occasions they took her down unconscious and narrowly revived her. Even now the scar from the rope could be seen on her neck that once she used to raise proudly. She no longer cared for anything and nothing would lift her spirits: not even meadow and woodland, nor even sheep

and cows... nor even horses... nor even mowing and haystacks. It was as though she no longer knew what she ought to be doing: where to go or why, or what to say... She spent the entire winter beside the fireplace, staring into the flames. She would not get up and go for dinner or supper either. Not only that, as apparently she had not eaten even a crust of bread for some time. Matsia's wife cooked gruel, took it to her and pleaded: 'For the sake of your dead husband, surely you could chew and even swallow just a little of this.' Gulkan would confide in the women at the spring: 'Eva's troubles will be the death of me.' It seems Matsia paid no attention to the sheep. Not to the sheep and when he went out to the vineyard, his mind was focused elsewhere. In the evenings he would sit down beside his daughter at the hearth and would implore and coax her: 'You shouldn't make yourself so miserable, my child... Are you listening, Eva? Please don't be a slave to grief... You're so beautiful, my dear daughter, who could imagine you would have fallen so silent...? My heart breaks to see you so...'

.....

As though my heart sensed him, I stood up, went out and peered into the street from the door of the entrance hall. Chiko, with his overcoat open to the waist as always, came tearing along. A Spanish cap teetered on his rumpled hair and yet miraculously did not fall off, and dangling at one side a red tassel swayed to and fro like a pendulum... He called to me from a distance:

'This is where you live, then! In Tura district!'

'Sorry, but excuse me, Tura district is over there, up there; this is Telebi district. Open up your eyes and take a look!' I told him crossly, pointing

out two colossal snow-covered elm trees in front of Grandmother Maka's house at the crossroads.

'It's true this is Telebi district,' he agreed, 'The boys from our area used to come swinging here. Looks like they would have put up massive swings...'

'I know another secret like that, you'll go mad...' but as always he did not ask me what the secret was. No, 'Anyway, what's up with you?' I say. 'You'll see, you'll see,' he says and at that precise moment Grandmother came out to greet us and led us inside. Grandmother Maka was perched at her easel and as soon as we entered the hallway, she craned her neck to stare at Chiko. The stove was crackling, the thin porridge was sputtering, the soothing cosiness was pervasive...

'Maka, look, this is our Chiko, his grandfather's namesake, Archili's... And this lady, little Chiko, is Granny Maka.'

'Hello, Granny Maka,' said Chiko self-confidently, stretching his frozen hands towards the stove.

'Well, come to me a second. Let me get a good look at you,' said Grandmother Maka to Chiko and she set down her brush. Chiko went over straightaway, seemingly intrigued by the easel. When he got there, he fixed his gaze on the silk headscarf. Grandmother Maka put her arm around him, drew him close and kissed his cheek. 'If only you knew how close we were, you and I. Well, you're here now.'

'How beautifully you paint!' said Chiko in exactly the same tone as Ksenia the teacher, when she used to appraise our drawings and models.

'Get that overcoat off, my dear. What is that coat you're wearing?' urged Grandmother Maka.

'That's what I was about to say as well,' Grandmother interrupted.

‘Where’s that box of buttons of yours, Maka? I’ll just sew some buttons on the coat.’

‘Don’t go to any bother, Grandma Rusudan, I’ll just tear them off again...’

‘Why then, my boy, why might you tear them off?’

‘Don’t you know why...?’ said Chiko, as he lowered his head and pouted his lips; suddenly his mood changed completely.

‘No, dear Chiko, you’ll catch a cold if you run around bare-chested like that.’

‘Aunt Taso is forever sewing on buttons as well... But again... the anger takes over... and I tear them off!’

‘No, my dear...’ interrupted Grandmother Maka, ‘What do you want with the buttons? Start flinging stones...’

‘He moves quickly...’ laughed Chiko.

From the uppermost drawer of the sideboard, Grandmother Maka lifted out the box of buttons and emptied it on to the table.

‘We need six buttons, three on this side and three on that side. Come on, now I’ll pick out the buttons, I’ll sew them on for you, you tell me your story, then we’ll sit and enjoy some porridge with lard and pickles. What do you say, little Chiko?’ And Grandmother set about choosing the buttons, while from the breast pocket of his golden-brown chequered beaver-cloth overcoat Chiko plucked a sheet of paper folded into four, he placed his overcoat right there on the ottoman, sat himself down beside me and kept an impatient eye on Grandmother...

‘Well, you won’t be needing these fine brown buttons, then, Maka?’

‘If you want, I’ll sew them on for you, Rusudan, while you lay the table.’

‘No, Maka dear, you mind your own business, I’ll sew them on by

hand,’ and Grandmother Rusudan came and sat on a low stool next to the stove and picked up Chiko’s overcoat from the ottoman. Grandmother Maka shifted the easel a touch so that she could see us and she turned towards the silk headscarf...

‘Look, Grandma Rusudan,’ said Chiko, unfolding the sheet of paper. The entire page was covered with handwritten letters of varying sizes. ‘I wrote all this, but I still can’t draw some of the letters... Especially ‘t’, ‘j’ and ‘d’... Without these you can’t put together a letter...’

‘What letter, my boy?’ Grandmother squinted her myopic eyes and leaned towards the handwritten sheet.

‘I’ve thought a lot about Uncle Stalin, Grandma Rusudan. First, I wanted to write to Uncle Klim, just like in that poem, but then again, I preferred Uncle Stalin... Anyway, I don’t write all that well and I want you to write it for me...’

‘I’ll write it for you, little Chiko, in which case if I’m writing someone a letter instead of you, I’ll write for you the kind of letter that’ll cut the mustard.’

‘Sorry, Grandma Rusudan, but I want you to write me a letter to match mine...’

Grandmother broke the thread off the sewn button, pinned the needle to her chest and took the sheet from Chiko, lifted it towards her eyes and began to read falteringly:

‘Great hope of oppressed pee... ple... Our great and beloved Uncle Salin...’

‘There, you see, Grandma Rusudan!’ called out an agitated Chiko, ‘Seems I wrote “Salin”, but how can that be?!’

‘It’s no matter, Chiko dear...’ Grandmother reassured him and resumed reading softly: ‘I... cannot be... apaaart from my parents...’

and I ask you to... 'etain me as well... as a Japanese spy...'

'I couldn't draw the "d" either, Grandma Rusudan. Shouldn't that be "detain"?' Chiko became agitated again.

'That's clear, my dear, but...'

'Please read it, Grandma Rusudan, read it and then tell me...'

"I beg you... great Salin, put me with my parents, whether... that's the un'erworl'... or the 'ungeon... Please, I beg you... and I love you, you are wise and I hope that..." My dear Chiko, dear boy, I will write your letter for you, but not like this... because you are no Japanese spy, nor can they detain little children like you...'

'They can! They can! They really, really can! Even if it's the dungeon, they might arrest me and put me with my parents, please Grandma Rusudan!'

'The point is, dear Chiko, that it's all a misunderstanding. It's impossible for such evil to do as it pleases, as you know, my children, a great man said: "Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."'

But Chiko's heartfelt outburst of sorrow deflated Grandmother's rhetorical utterance there and then:

'No... no... no... Honestly I am an enemy of the people... I am... I am!' he spluttered, first pursing his lips and snorting, and then his weeping and wailing burst out in a torrent: 'I don't want to be there any more... at that place... Karlen and Marlen keep threatening to have me taken to Shuamta orphanage. They tormented me when they arrested Uncle Mito, they blame us for everything. Up until then, my relatives would just say that, but now it's, "Who is it you're actually related to?" I don't want to be with them, I want to be with my parents, where my mother is. Please write down that I'm a completely awful

child, I'm an agent of imperialism, I'm an enemy of the people, I am wicked, do you know how wicked I am? That day in the theatre, I wanted the whole theatre to collapse so that we trapped every single person inside! Please let them arrest me!

He could not stop, streams were flowing down his face and he wailed and wailed, turning completely pale. His heart was trembling. With all his might he kept shaking his head and he flashed his tear-stained eyes in rage, then he was babbling so that he drowned out his words. Straightaway Grandmother put the overcoat to one side, she took Chiko's hand, I ran off into the kitchen to fetch a pitcher of water, Grandmother Maka also stopped working, Grandmother was hugging him, calming him down: 'I'll write for you just as you want, I will send the necessary letter today as well, Stalin is such a man who will definitely fulfil your demand, but in the meantime I believe your wonderful parents will return, so drink some water and calm down...'

Grandmother Maka also eagerly joined in with soothing and calming Chiko: 'Until Uncle Stalin sends you to your parents, you keep coming to our place, if you want, stay the night with us.' I also called out: 'That's great, that's great'. Chiko himself simply could not stop and there was so much yapping in Grandmother Maka's hallway, so much so that I became annoyed with Chiko. He was having such a fit of hysterics, I felt awkward with Grandmother Maka and at the same time I said that I felt that all our praise was driving away our worries. But in the end, eventually, with all this affection and yelling, it subsided and he calmed down. After such a tempest he hunkered down dolefully on the ottoman, his head bent as though suddenly his ear had started to ache, and on his chapped cheeks remained the moistness of his tears. Now with all my strength, I pictured vividly how Karlen and Marlen tormented him, left alone in the whole wide world. Only a short time

ago they would gaze fondly at him and swear their love. I pictured it as vividly as Aunt Alice standing before me, love and tenderness radiating from her stunning blue eyes, and it saddened me. I have never pitied Chiko like this... I wanted to do something to comfort him, but clearly taking out the photo album and showing photos of Grandmother Maka and Grandfather Archili under the circumstances was wholly inappropriate, to my mind, and my thoughts turned towards the great icon of St George that was hanging in Grandmother Maka's bedroom. I thought that seeing such a powerful and fine horseman would have a truly positive effect. But at exactly that moment, Grandmother, who again picked up Chiko's overcoat and was threading a new needle, suggested something that we loved most of all. Needless to say, Grandmother suggested this first and foremost for Chiko's delight: 'Before I sew on the buttons, I want to tell you a gripping tale, if you all agree. In a flash, Chiko's languid eyes regained their spark and he craned his neck. From the headscarf Grandmother Maka called out to Grandmother, 'You've made a magnificent choice. I'll listen to you with pleasure,' and I glanced at the Grandmothers and said, 'If you don't mind, I'll show Chiko St George's icon for a moment and then we will listen to this wonderful tale.' Grandmother Maka agreed with me and straightaway I put my arm around Chiko and took him to the bedroom. I stopped at great icon on the wall facing the bed and now on the verge of tears I murmured something I would not say by any means at any other time:

'See how handsome St George is and how he is defeating the dragon. I often rush to look at it and no matter how terrible I feel, it always lifts my spirits.'

How true that was, in the evenings when Grandmothers Maka and Eva would get themselves over-heated at cards and Grandmother was

busying herself in the kitchen, unnoticed I would go into the bedroom and stare at the icon... Chiko was glad of my sympathy, he kept nodding his head, his face lit up and again said to me:

‘He really is so handsome, ah, so powerful as well...’ On his way out, he shared his impression with Grandmother Maka: ‘You have such a beautiful icon, Grandma Maka, but it doesn’t look anything like an icon. You think it’s a living person.’ Grandmother Maka’s delight was boundless.

‘Well, look at that! Well done, dear, well done! You see, Rusudan, how with a single glance this little boy has realised that it’s not painted in the style of an icon and it even gives him such strength!’

‘Well, if I told you that Chiko is a different boy altogether, I would not be telling you a lie...’ said Grandmother, in full agreement.

‘This St George, dear Chiko, is my uncle’s painting. I keep it to remember him by.’

‘Grandma Maka’s uncle, Father Luka, was my tutor, children. Well then, what I want to tell you now is that Father Luka gifted me that very book some forty-five years ago...’

‘Wow!’ Chiko called out in amazement.

‘My lord, not long ago did you dismiss my grand words on the subject of evil and did not pay me heed. Right now I must tell you about the work in which this aphorism is included, but if you do not want to pay me heed, you do your thing and I’ll do mine...’

‘We do want to, we do!’ shouted Chiko and I in unison right away and we perched on the edge of the ottoman close beside Grandmother. Grandmother stirred the porridge with a wooden spoon and put it to one side so that it would not overheat. Again she deftly manipulated the needle and thread and began in the heartwarming and blissful tone

of a storyteller:

‘There was a very great man by the name of Shakespeare who died three hundred and twenty years ago...’

‘Grandma Rusudan, was this man the same age as Uncle Stalin?’ Chiko cried out all of a sudden.

‘Oh, that serpent shouldn’t be mentioned in the same breath as Shakespeare!’ Grandmother gasped.

‘Later on, surely this great man dies, but Uncle Stalin is immortal!!!’

‘If only that were true, little Chiko, but I have to break your heart and tell you that one fine day Uncle Stalin too will certainly die and, believe me, after three hundred years no one will refer to him with such praise.

Now if you’re letting me tell the story, let me tell it!’

I also jabbed him with my elbow and Chiko said no more. He blinked his eyes quickly and transfixed he settled down, and Grandmother resumed her story-telling in her charming tone:

‘So you see, this Shakespeare invented the tale of Prince Hamlet, an edifying tale and captivating with it, because, first, Prince Hamlet was a genius and, second, fate brought upon him great misfortune. There is no man whose heart does not race at this tale...’

‘Grandma Rusudan, I can’t help it, I can’t wait to ask you a question: is this misfortune greater than ours?’

‘Our misfortune will vanish quickly. It’s something of a misunderstanding and you will all be so happy once more.’

‘When I go to my parents, you know I’ll miss you and Telavi as well so much that my whole heart will be crying...’

‘Oh dear, what a sensitive child you are, darling!’ Grandmother Maka joined in our conversation.

‘Soon we’ll all be together, dear Chiko. You should keep your feelings inside. Such a devoted child should in no circumstances be reduced to

begging; it doesn't become you... And now I'll resume the tale of Prince Hamlet: in the magnificent kingdom of Denmark, King Hamlet died unexpectedly. Yes, the prince did indeed bear his father's name. Hamlet returned to Elsinore Palace from Gothenburg, where he was studying, and this did his eyes behold: his uncle Claudius has married Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, and has installed himself on the royal throne. Just imagine how you are going to enjoy this tale...'

We shouted in unison that it was despicable and awful and we had no doubt that Prince Hamlet would kick his thieving uncle off the throne, overthrow him and maybe even banish him from the kingdom...

'Children, you haven't understood at all. Now just you listen! This Hamlet of ours had all his wits about him and he was suspicious that the hale and hearty king would not die of his own accord, that here some terrible treachery had unfolded, and indeed over one night. As midnight struck, the ghost of Hamlet's father appeared...'

'What was his father's ghost like? Tell us!' shouted Chiko and I in excitement.

'His father's ghost was ashen, arrayed in white clothing. He revealed to Hamlet a secret so frightful that the human mind would struggle to imagine anything worse, which was, "My brother killed me, my own brother, dripped poison in my ear as I slept in the orchard and made me abandon this transient world, my cherished family, my beloved kingdom, and you, my first-born, my Hamlet. Vengeance must be sought." Well, children, what do you think our Hamlet would do?'

'I'll tell you exactly what he would do: without waiting for sunrise, he would throw that loathsome uncle out of bed, tie him to a horse's tail and drag him around like this and gouge out his eyes!' said Chiko with his former aplomb and, needless to say, I agreed. Except that I was wondering more about throwing him off a cliff. He would reach out to

grab his hand and hurl that damned Claudius straight into the deep!

‘I understand your passion, children. I understand it well, but you should know that the scope of vengeance is vast indeed and Hamlet longed for a completely different kind of vengeance. Adultery and depravity ascended the throne of Denmark in the form of Claudius, the country was becoming a prison, and Hamlet, who longed for freedom and truth, was racked by agonising thoughts about life and death, existence and non-existence. He wanted to leave no stone unturned in exposing and denouncing the den of deception and evil. This is why simple and straightforward vengeance could never quench with a water source his thirst to search, it never could...’

‘Granny, Granny, Grandma Rusudan!’ we exclaimed in unison, since Grandmother was so captivated, she abandoned the needle and thread, stretched out her hand towards us and began to speak like a spellbinder, but our shouts roused her in a flash, her zeal was quelled and she apologised:

‘I’m so sorry, children, so sorry. When it comes to deception and depravity, I can’t help it. Hamlet’s human yearning is too intensely personal for me and I want it to be the same for you...’

‘Granny, tell us what happened next!’ and Grandmother regaled us with marvellous tales about Prince Hamlet, how he contrived to battle that evil, how he feigned madness, how he unmasked Claudius using the actors’ performance and revealed his true colours in public, how he loved Ophelia and how he rejected her love... His love for Ophelia made a great impression on me; for Chiko, however, it was the fake madness and he could wait no longer. Straightaway he asked: ‘Why did he pretend to be mad, why? I like it, I like it so much...’ He could not help but laugh with pleasure.

‘Let’s swap places: might I believe you couldn’t understand why?’

Grandmother feigned surprise. “To soothe his soul, for freedom and for truth. Whoever was mocked, he mocked freely, whoever was derided, he derided freely, he is apparently no slave to convention and is not troubled by hypocritical jabberers... I think our beloved Hamlet was not lacking in mischief and cunning. After all, he was a prince, but that’s not the point!’ She said this as though someone were challenging her, then she continued in her delightful tone: ‘Now, that loathsome fratricidal Claudius killed King Hamlet and stole both the throne and the queen. Now... as soon as he sensed that Prince Hamlet was on the right track, he made him a target... Be aware, children, that evil is terrible in that it cannot be alone. Inevitably it has to multiply, so you see, he sat down, wrote a treacherous, perfidious document, sent Hamlet far away and had him take this document with him. Yes, so it was. Don’t wait for the executioner to sharpen his axe, get rid of it at once!!!’

‘Oh, Grandma Rusudan, do you see what the delay did?’ Chiko became agitated.

Grandmother knew many extracts by heart and she would drop them in so as to intensify the effect and now she summoned us over:

‘Well then, let’s listen to Hamlet himself, what he says about Claudius:

“He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,
Popped in between th’ election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage — is ’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is ’t not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?”

‘Wow, oh, wow, seems someone’s a right ditherer!’ Chiko was outraged, ‘I’ll bet you this, I reckon he’ll make that damned Claudius

kill himself!

‘Ditherer!’ cried Grandmother in anger, ‘He’s no ditherer, he is quick-witted and reasoned, impelled by his insight into the soul, he knows that everything in the world must be set in motion and followed through...’

Grandmother Maka, who until now had quietly resumed her tasks and was apparently listening to us, now interrupted and mocked Grandmother and laughed:

‘Oh, you, my dear Rusudan, all this pompous talk. Can you really not exist without high-flown words?!’

‘Grandma Maka, we are already used to Grandma Rusudan’s story and we love it!’ Chiko took Grandmother’s side with much fanfare...

‘Fine, well, now I must get to the end without meandering. Look, in the meantime, I have even sewn on four buttons; I’ve got two to go. But tell me, children, where did we pause?’ and Grandmother peered at us like an examiner.

‘Don’t wait to sharpen the axe, just cut off his head!’ shouted Chiko.

Grandmother now continued in an orderly fashion and we did not even interrupt. We expressed our reactions by means of interjection alone and when Grandmother lifted her hand and in a raised voice uttered:

‘Now cracks a noble heart! Good night, sweet prince,

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!’

both my and Chiko’s eyes filled with tears.

‘Yes, children,’ said Grandmother with a tone of admonition, ‘Hamlet’s human longing destroyed the den of evil, the Royal Court of Denmark, but the destruction of the den of evil brought about the destruction of everything.’

‘Uhhh,’ Chiko heaved a painful sigh, ‘Well, what sort of revenge is that?’

Denmark was left orphaned... Me, Grandma Rusudan, in the first place, I would have thought about my country and not about unmasking evil from start to finish like that. Because then along came Fortinbras!

'That's precisely the point, dear Chiko, thus is the nature of evil: it ravages a land. Whichever throne the scheming Claudius craved, not only did he lose that throne himself, rather he lost his ancestry and his country, too. The foreigner Fortinbras turned up, it's true, a man of courage, but a foreigner all the same. See, this did evil do.'

'Well, what was the point of that...?' We became downcast: 'Instead of this, he should have taken the throne himself and made Ophelia his queen...'

'The point of it is in fact this, my children, that Claudius was rejected by everyone. Now, think about it, in the three hundred years since *Hamlet* was written, how many generations have existed and everyone despised Claudius; three hundred years long they have despised Claudius. Despised, truly despised the fratricidal, adulterous Claudius! So then, have you added up all the condemnation and detestation of those generations? Now, let's take a look at Hamlet, too! Our unforgettable, most adored and most wise Hamlet! He embraces the world! Who am I? A mere mote of dust, someone who loved and loves Hamlet, and I want to kneel before the illuminated melancholy and have you kneel as well...'

'I'll gladly kneel!' said Chiko.

'Me too, me too,' I agreed instantly.

'My lord, I entrust this overcoat to you. See how well I have sewn on the buttons. If only you wouldn't tear them off again!'

And Grandmother presented Chiko with the overcoat.

'Thank you, Grandma Rusudan, thank you. Thanks also for the tale

about Hamlet...'

And Chiko placed the overcoat at the end of the ottoman.

'Children, your thanks will be that, like Hamlet, you also will seek the truth, will thirst for the truth! As a man thirsts for water on a parched day and right there and then has to drink extraordinarily pure ice-cold water...'

'I'm done with my headscarf. Well, have a look and tell me what you think!'

At that moment Grandmother Maka turned to us and pulled over the easel... We glimpsed a meadow in bloom, adorned with many-coloured flowers... And we remarked on it with such excited chatter.

'We are overjoyed, Maka, simply overjoyed!' Grandmother brought matters to a close: 'Come now, let's have breakfast, otherwise Eva will come to take you to the forest.' It seems Grandmother was hoping that Chiko had meanwhile forgotten the matter of the letter. However, I do beg your pardon, right then he blurted out:

'Grandma Rusudan, if Grandma Eva gets to us in time, I won't be going to the forest, so let's write the letter, right?' And wanting to please Grandmother, he opened his arms and said aloud: 'For evil-doing must be exposed! Rebuked! And condemned!'

'A promising chick starts chirping in the egg!' gasped Grandmother Maka and peered down at Chiko with a smile. Afterwards, during breakfast, she had eyes only for Chiko. It was obvious she was smitten, as they say. She fell in love at first sight...

And Grandmother fulfilled her promise to Chiko. Deftly she readied her pen and ink, placed a large sheet in front of her and set about writing the letter, just as Chiko had asked... She was finishing the letter when Grandmother Eva arrived: 'We shouldn't hang around. It's winter, it's a short day, but we should have enough time to arrive by

nightfall.'