

1.

In the spring of 1828, in the city of Tiflis, the nobleman Baduna Pavneli, twenty-six years of age, was released from prison. It was Pentecost.

In a room inside the prison, they gave the nobleman back his weapons: a belt embellished with silver, a silver dagger, and a sword made of Persian steel in a silver-plated scabbard, all inherited from family that had gone before him. There was a silver-plated powder flask too, which still carried the smell of gunpowder.

The prison was, in fact, not a prison at all, but a military barracks. In the twenty-five years since they had taken control of Georgia, the Russians had still not built a prison in Tiflis, most likely because there was no need for one. There were already dungeon pits in the courtyard of the old fortress, and that was enough.

But since young Pavneli was of noble stock, he could not be put in a dungeon with other prisoners; no, noblemen were held instead in a small room in the barracks.

His release was unexpected; somebody must have felt strongly enough to petition the governor-general – or maybe even someone higher up, the viceroy himself – on Pavneli's behalf.

There was no other way the prisoner would have been released so early. If the way the Russians normally treated criminals was anything to go by, he should have had half his hair and one side of his moustache shorn off, and been packed off to Siberia for heaven knows how long.

At that time, Tiflis was awash with stories about Siberia: terrible stories of ice and heavy shackles. There was even a priest at the Anchiskhati Church who preached that Siberia was, in fact, Hell.

It was very useful to have important, influential godparents in the family. Young Pavneli knew nothing of the conversation that lay behind his release. Once freed, he did not stay at the barracks for long; he was taken straight into the colonel's office, still without his weapons, where he was met by a severe-looking man dressed in dark blue, who he had seen before but whose name he could not recall. It was the colonel who had interrogated Pavneli on more than one occasion.

The colonel closed his snuff box with a snap, and addressed Pavneli in Russian:

“We’re releasing you on the orders of His Excellency. You can thank your countrymen for freeing you from our grasp. You deserved a harsher punishment... Sign this document. You do understand Russian, don’t you?”

Baduna Pavneli smiled – he had understood very little of what the colonel had said – took a seat at the table, and looked down at the document he did not understand.

“Sign it,” said the colonel. “Sign it and your imprisonment will be over. But you must stay in your village for ten years. You must not leave. For you, Tiflis – and everywhere else for that matter – is out of bounds.”

The young nobleman did not understand this either, but he realised that he was being released and so he wrote ‘I consent’ in Georgian on the edge of the paper.

The colonel assumed this was his signature. Pavneli, in accordance with local custom, took the signet ring off his little finger and then looked around the room for some charcoal with which to seal the document. He rose calmly to his feet, opened the door on the wood-burner, and scraped his ring around inside it.

The colonel glared at him.

Pavneli brought his ring down onto the papers with a flourish, then put it back on his finger and stood upright.

“Be on your way,” said the colonel, and sat down at his desk.

With a bow, Pavneli turned and left. Waiting for him at the door was a man armed with a gun, who showed him into another room where he had his weapons returned to him.

“My pistol?” the former prisoner asked. “Where is my pistol? The Russians glanced at each other, then shook their heads.

They did not give him his pistol.

It was morning. Across the river, on the other side of the barracks gates, he could see Tiflis.

2.

What later came to be referred to as “the duel,” in order to facilitate an explanation of what had happened, was, in fact, not a duel at all.

Baduna Pavneli – an orphan according to official documents, descended from dependent nobles loyal to the Eristavi princes, and owner of several vineyards in the nearby village of Pavnisi – had been involved in a sword-fight with a Russian officer, shortly after the latter’s glorious return to Tiflis from the Russian-Ottoman frontline. It had happened in broad daylight, at the entrance to the market, right in front of the Kojori Gate.

It was midday. Pavneli had just emerged from a roadside tavern where he had been watching a game of backgammon.

The officer was ransacking a stall selling oriental confectionery, jabbing and thrashing his sword through the pyramids of sweets and pastries laid out on the pavement, and taking great pleasure in doing so. The Persian confectionery seller squatted in the street, his hands over his eyes, waiting for it to be over.

A crowd had gathered, but nobody dared approach; the officer was clearly a highly-skilled swordsman and moved his

blade through the air with great self-satisfaction: sometimes sweeping it over the stall in a backhand motion, sometimes employing a jab, sometimes a downward swing.

Some in the crowd applauded, others shouted things out.

The officer knew he would be hauled over the coals by his superiors for this, but seemed to think the price worth it. After each move, he looked over the heads of the crowd towards a covered horse-drawn carriage in which somebody was sitting. It was a woman, and she was watching everything he did.

That was the long and the short of it. That and nothing more.

It was hard to imagine quite what he thought the women would like about his conduct, but then who knows what goes on in the mind of an officer of unmistakably noble blood who has just returned victorious from a campaign?

When he saw all this, Baduna Pavnelli walked slowly round behind the officer, stopping near the two dozen or so onlookers who had gathered around the officer. He was right in front of the window of the carriage, right where the officer, giddy with his sword-swiping antics, kept looking.

The investigation could not establish whether the young nobleman had stood by the carriage window on purpose, or whether there was simply nowhere else left to position himself near the Kojori Gate.

Nobody in the office of the governor-general could make head nor tail of the transcript of Pavnelli's interrogation, which had been conducted with the aid of an interpreter.

Pavneli had given the following answer: “Over nine hundred years ago, my ancestor gave four villages to the Shiomghvimi monastery. It’s difficult to explain that to somebody who’s waving a sword in your face. Similarly, the ground on which I was standing belongs to the Tsitsishvili family, and if anything did happen between me and that officer, then it’s up to the Tsitsishvili family to investigate it.”

The land there did indeed belong to the Tsitsishvili family. The governor-general’s staff were so confused that they actually summoned various Tsitsishvili princes and attempted to study the old Georgian criminal code in order to gain a better understanding of the grave crime young Pavneli had committed.

But in any case, Baduna Pavneli had stopped in front of the horse-drawn carriage. When the officer had finished ransacking the stall, he put his hand into his pocket, pulled out some banknotes, and threw them down at the Persian, still slumped on the ground. Then he stuck his sword into a large chunk of Turkish delight, raised his spoils high into the air and waved them around adroitly, before looking over at the carriage behind the crowd one more time and proudly making his way towards it, his cap set back on his head.

The crowd parted to let him pass, until only one man remained between him and the door of the carriage. That man was Baduna Pavneli.

“Make way, sir! Make way!” the officer called out to him, but Pavneli just smiled.

It was the colonel's belief that young Pavneli had blocked the door of the carriage intentionally, but he was unable to prove it.

For the sake of discretion, the names of the passengers inside the carriage were never mentioned, and the colonel was not at liberty to divulge them in any case. The officer had merely wanted to help himself to some confectionery. But nobody could dissuade the colonel from his belief that this was a duel fought by rivals for the lady's affection – for Pavneli's answers were completely unexpected, and the colonel's own suspicions about the case had already begun to hamper his judgement.

“Make way, sir! Make way!”

3.

Lieutenant Gekht died in the barracks infirmary from the wound he received, only fifty feet or so from the place where soldiers captured Baduna Pavneli the very next day. Before he died, the lieutenant managed to write the colonel a letter, in which he described what had happened as a chance, unanticipated duel. He asked for clemency to be shown towards his adversary, with whom he had had a simple misunderstanding. In his brief, confused missive, Lieutenant Gekht mentioned neither the carriage nor the lady (or ladies) sitting within it, and by doing so proved that he was an honourable man. He also asked to meet and talk to his adversary, although for reasons nobody could establish, the governor-general's office forbade it. This request further convinced the colonel that young Pavneli already knew Lieutenant Gekht prior to the duel, and had lain in wait for him that day so as to rid himself once and for all of his rival in love.

When Pavneli's influential godparents – one of whom had already risen to the rank of general in the Russian army – started calling in favours, it became apparent that the office of the viceroy himself wanted the whole affair to be played down, swept under the carpet even, and from this the colonel, who had been entrusted with the investigation, was able to deduce that Pavneli would escape punishment.

The colonel tried his best, nonetheless. Lieutenant Gekht had been well-liked in the regiment; he might have destroyed the confectionery stall, but in the battle for Yerevan, he had acquitted himself splendidly, and he always settled his card-playing debts promptly too.

It was a short sword-fight.

Young Pavneli told the colonel that he had failed to notice the lump of Turkish delight skewered on the tip of the lieutenant's sword, and had merely taken the officer to be a stranger mounting an unprovoked attack.

He had taken a step back, sunk down onto one knee, and drawn his sword. According to the transcript of the investigation, none of the onlookers had actually seen anything, but merely heard the sound of steel clashing against steel. Twice. It was the third blow that caused Lieutenant Gekht's fatal wound. He staggered, tried to draw his pistol, but found he was no longer able.

One witness, himself skilled in handling a sword, described how it was no glancing blow; Pavneli had lunged forward, plunging the sword in. The regimental medic confirmed it was a puncture wound, and a deep one; the sword had penetrated straight into Gekht's stomach.

But they simply could not make young Pavneli give any account of how the duel had come about. The colonel thought that he simply lacked the ability to describe it, and was able only to express his personal culpability.

The investigation lasted three months.

4.

Aziz-Bey, looking tired and bored, sat cross-legged at the water's edge with his back to the sea and stared at the small village built on its stony shore, which, little by little, was coming to resemble a town. Tied to the old wooden dock a short distance away was his black boat, and on board two sailors were going about their business. Yet for now, at least, it almost seemed that the sound of the sea – so familiar and well-known – did not even exist for him.

Aziz-Bey and his two men had recently sailed to this village, which was called Poti, from Batumi. Once they had tied up the boat, Aziz-Bey gave some boys playing on the beach a couple of small coins and sent them to the village to look for his old friend Ashiq-Bash.

As luck would have it, Ashiq-Bash was in the village at the time. He was not actually called Ashiq-Bash; this was just a nickname Aziz-Bey had given him because of his resemblance to a local folk hero of the same name. Aziz-Bey knew he was a restless man who was rarely in one place for very long, but on this occasion, he had had no other choice but to turn up and hope he was there.

Aziz-Bey was on the point of going back to a profession that

had supported him so long ago that he struggled to remember it, and for this he needed Ashiq-Bash.

Aziz-Bey was no longer a young man. He was old, and tired of being in the service of somebody else. He always carried a dagger with him, along with two pistols stuck into his waistband under his shirt- unlike most people, he had never liked having his weapons on display. He had no need for a barber anymore, as there was not a hair on his head under that gauze turban studded with a thousand gemstones. Aziz-Bey was bald, and served as standard-bearer for the Pasha of Batomi.

But standard-bearing was no job for an old man, and Aziz-Bey's ankles hurt. His wrists, his elbows, and his neck hurt too. He had sailed around these parts many times before, and he did not like the sea.

Sitting cross-legged on the bare earth, Aziz-Bey saw a man come out of the village on horseback.

Even at such a distance, he recognised Ashiq-Bash, his old friend and collaborator, approaching at a steady trot.

That is the amazing thing about intuition: he was merely a dot on the horizon, and yet it was clearly Ashiq-Bash, for few other horsemen could make a horse prance and dance so handsomely.

"Here I am, growing old, and meanwhile he does not seem to have aged at all," thought Aziz-Bey, struggling to his feet. He looked at his boat, his big, ugly, dirty boat, and not at the sea.

The sea was calm that day. It had been calm during the night, too, as they sailed.

Aziz-Bey knew there was a Russian regiment somewhere on the coast near the village, and he did not want them to see him. The pasha – his master – never gave a second thought to how much danger his servant was putting himself in. With the sultan waging war against the Russian tsar, it was very possible that Aziz-Bey – poor, weary, long-serving Aziz-Bey – might be killed right there on the shore.

5.

For some reason, the air over Tiflis hung heavy with the scent of hay.

Baduna Pavneli saw a mother washing her child's face with red wine; in one hand she held a clay jar, poured small amounts onto the palm of her other hand, and then rubbed it vigorously over her child's face.

Baduna remembered his own mother washing his face that like once, too.

He was walking down the hill towards the river so as to cross the bridge into the other part of the city. He could hear the sound of bells ringing in the Metekhi church, and, in response, from across the river, peals from the Sioni cathedral bell-tower and the Anchiskhati church.

Baduna Pavneli had grown a beard in those three months, but it had not really made him look any older. He didn't really know what he looked like, anyway. He was not in the habit of looking in the mirror, even if he had been able to lay his hands on one in the barracks. There was one thing that brought him pleasure, and that was the belt around his waist and the sword and dagger stuck into it. Now he could feel their familiar heaviness once again, he fell back into his customary gait. Once he

had crossed the bridge, he stopped at the edge of the market place, right by the mosque. There was nobody around at this hour of the morning. He paused, as if choosing which direction to go in, and then went upwards, following the narrow streets which no longer smelled of hay, but of baking.

He was heading towards the Church of the Father of the Cross. Ahead of him, he saw its dome standing slightly proud. By Baduna's reckoning, it was Pentecost. One of his relatives was a priest at the Church of the Father of the Cross – Father Nimos – a man around his age, but more highly educated and learned in matters relating to his faith.

The air around him was already heavy with the scent of freshly-baked bread, and the higher he climbed, the stronger it got. This was not a part of town for a hungry man to stray into. Next to the Church of the Father of the Cross, they were baking holy bread in large clay ovens. There were four such ovens, and the smell of baking bread permeated every breath.

There was a large number of commoners gathered for the mass at the Church of the Father of the Cross: the women of the neighbourhood, its widows, its poor and, since it was a holy day, a few gentlemen too, although they would be celebrating their Eucharist much later on. The priest caught sight of Baduna Pavneli and was evidently startled. Baduna calmly made the sign of the cross, went outside, and sat down by the wall of the bakery to look down over Tiflis.

He could see the place where the Russian officer had met

his sword, and noticed again how hungry he felt, but he did not wish to buy any bread from here yet.

Then he fell asleep, and slept until at some point the priest laid his hand on Baduna's shoulder and shook him violently.

"Come along, come along," he said, and walked quickly towards the door of the church.

Once inside the church, the priest turned to him brusquely and said "Don't expect an easy absolution. You took away something God had given..."

And he embraced Baduna suddenly, clasping him to his chest.

They remained like that for some time, before the priest stood back and looked Baduna up and down. He raised his fingers and touched Baduna's beard.

Baduna Pavneli was thin, and he looked different. He said nothing.

"You haven't even been to see your godparents; they say they don't want you to, either... They sweated blood trying to get you released," said the priest. "Now you just need to stay in the village, just stay there, think things over, study. Work towards your absolution. You need to leave Tiflis by nightfall, or the Russians will have you sent into exile."

"By nightfall?" Pavneli seemed surprised. "Why by nightfall?" The priest looked at him in astonishment.

"Didn't they tell you? You've been banished back to your village and you're not to leave it again."

“Yes, they told me that,” said Pavneli, “but I can take Tadia with me, surely? Can I not see Tadia?”

“I went to visit Tadia last week. He’s fine.” The priest looked pensive. “I hadn’t thought of that, though.”

“Tadia, yes – I assumed I’d be taking Tadia too.”

The priest shook his head and crossed himself.

Then Baduna sat back down by the wall of the bakery. He held a hot lavash flatbread in one hand and with the other he tore pieces off the edge and ate them, slowly and absent-mindedly.

The priest brought out a clay pitcher of wine.

“I can’t give you communion, not yet.”

He thought further about what Pavneli had said.

“Well, when on earth am I going to be back here again?”
Baduna Pavneli asked the ground.

He put the lavash down on a flat stone and stood up. “I need a horse... two horses... Mine’s tied up at my godfather’s house. How shall I get there?”

“I’ll go,” said the priest, “and I’ll bring your horse back with me. I’ll lend you mine too – it’s a mule, mind...”

They laughed.

“I’ll come back later,” said Pavneli, and set off down the hill.

He had spent a long time locked away, and no doubt that is why the smell of bread had affected him so greatly.

6.

The Pasha of Batomi had decided to go to Constantinople and was busy preparing gifts for the trip. As governor of the Ottoman Empire's most remote, hidden, forgotten, silent province, he wanted to use this visit to make his mark. He had sent a man on ahead to arrange suitable accommodation, and was now busy with his own preparations.

The Pasha of Batomi wanted a retinue of fifty men to accompany him on his trip, as was fitting for a fine man of might and worth, and the whole trip was set to cost an almost unimaginable amount of money.

To cover those costs, he had struck a deal with a number of merchants, who lent him the money.

Everybody knew that the reason the pasha was so eager to make this trip was that he hoped to find a cure for his infertility. This was also the reason he was sparing no expense. He hoped, too, that with his gifts and presents, he would succeed in charming the sultan.

To be childless is a cause for concern to any man, but this was especially true of the Pasha of Batomi, for he was a Georgian, and, as such, his preoccupation in life was to leave behind a son and heir. In the Ottoman Empire, it was not normally customary

for positions to be handed down from father to son, but here on this forgotten shore, nobody would question a man's decision to pass his title on to his child.

After all, the father of the present pasha had been pasha too, as had his father before him.

The Pasha of Batomi had heard that in Constantinople there was an excellent physician – not a Turk, but a foreigner, from Italy or France – who had cured many people of childlessness. The pasha had entrusted his emissary with ascertaining the physician's whereabouts, whilst he himself took up the preparation of gifts. He wanted to sail along the coast to Constantinople. He did not own the kind of boat that would turn heads in Constantinople harbour, but he planned to load it with gifts and offerings that would astound the relevant people and elicit their gratitude. In light of the war which was being fought between the Russians and the Ottomans at the time, he would also endeavour to demonstrate his own political importance to senior officials. He did not think that they might consider it careless of him to go to Constantinople with a war going on, that they might ask how a man from the frontier could come to Constantinople when the Russians might arrive at his door at any moment.

He left behind as his representative his brother: his right-hand man and commander.

When it came to the gifts, the Pasha of Batomi was to spare nothing and no-one. He had decided to present the sultan with a woman. In the past, this would have been no problem; in

the three hundred years before that time, Batomi had been famous throughout the Ottoman empire as the centre of trade in Georgian and Circassian captives, but by this pasha's time, the business of abducting and trading in captives, and then transporting them across borders, had almost died out.

Trade was infrequent, and there was nobody new entering the profession. In his own realm, the Pasha of Batomi could easily, and in accordance with custom, have chosen any woman and sent her as a gift to his superiors, just as his forefathers had done, but now the Pasha of Batomi knew that there was not a peasant in the land who would voluntarily surrender one of his womenfolk, even if he was assured that she would be taken to the palace of the sultan himself in Constantinople. She would vanish without a trace, be hidden away by her family, and if all else failed, they would fight to prevent her being taken. And in any case, this woman needed to be somebody special, somebody really remarkable. The Pasha of Batomi gave this a lot of thought, and concluded that he needed to take the sultan a woman from Georgia. Georgia was already part of Russia, and the sultan had heard much about Russia, by virtue of it being a neighbouring country.

There were no slave-traders around anymore, and the kidnappers too seemed to have disappeared into the ether, but suddenly the Pasha of Batomi remembered that back when he was a child, his ageing standard-bearer Aziz-Bey had himself been a slave-trader.

Aziz-Bey still dabbled in the field, whenever the opportunity presented itself, and the pasha knew that there was no other way for him to find a woman. Money was no object.

And so the pasha sent his servants to find Aziz-Bey.

Aziz-Bey was a Muslim and a Georgian, just like the Pasha of Batumi himself, but he was an old man, and the pasha had doubts as to whether he would be much help in this matter. Yet he could think of no other way to proceed.