



Fazu Alieva

The First Feat

Evening glow reddened the whole sky. The earth and the sky seemed to close up and enormous hearth was burning at the horizon, enveloped in flames; the clouds overhead looked like puffs of smoke.

“God bless me, look at the sunset! Hot day comes,” Grandmother sighed. “No hope for rain...”

“Crops are burning,” Mother whined.

“Never mind. Let us hope,” Grandmother reassured her. “You’ll see, how God has mercy for us and sends such a rain! Everything will come to life, stems will turn towards the sky, ears will ripen and bend down to the earth...”

I hear these talks every day.

A postwar summer. Trouble comes after trouble. And now this, horrible. We’d have thought, we hoped that after the war is over, we’ll eat our fill...

Grandmother is sitting in my brother's old padded jacket, sewing something. The sunset is reflected by the steel of the needle; a long, black thread stretches after it. Grandmother's face, though looking like a wrinkled apple that had spent the whole winter on the branch, is shining, shining with hope. Grandmother never loses it.

"No doubt, no doubt, it will be raining soon," she says to herself.

"Oh, come on," Mother objects in an angry voice. "You're constantly indulging in wishful thinking, building castles in the air... Weren't you telling that blazing dawn brings some hope, but blazing sunset is up to no good. No, there will be no rain at all! Ill fate hangs over us! What is our fault? Four years of famine!" she begins to cry.

"You won't help much by watering the earth with your tears instead," grandmother grumbles and bends over her sewing, putting her glasses straight.

My mother and my grandmother differ from each other so much! Grandmother can always find bright moments in life, whatever hard time she might have; she can find hope in a most hopeless situation – it is like even in the darkest impenetrable forest there are little glades to have rest. Grandmother has always a way with words, all her appearance is pouring oil on troubled waters. Mother differs from her completely - she is usually buried in trouble. We can often hear her moaning: "What's going to be with us? Woe is us!" And now she repeats back and forth: "Oh, my poor children! No rain, no rain it will be! As it is shall we starve!"

The sunset had waved its burning wings for the last time, and darkness crawled slowly from the fathomless gorges. Akaro mountain grew dark, turned to be mysterious and ominous. It was in the daytime, when it looked like a wild grey horse, with his head bow, caught stone for a moment. And now, as the night comes, Akaro turns into a mighty monster, that you want to rush away of, to hide from – any minute it chases you.

Grandmother rose up, shook waste ends off the hem of her dress and out her sewing into a homemade casket of an old sieve: the bottom had come off long ago, and grandmother sewed the gauze on. Every day she comes to our porch lit up by the broiling sun, and begins darning. Now she has fastened a thread, put off her thimble. It was rather special, her thimble, silver with niello. Grandmother is never seen without it.

"Granny, give this thimble to me, please!" I asked. For a long time couldn't I get an old legend about how the rain was once made, out of my head.

“You know well, my dear, there is nothing I wouldn't part with for your sake, but not this thimble. Too dear it is to me. It's my late mother's gift, may she rest in peace. She put it on my finger, when I got married. My poor mother, without knowing it, she told my fortune. My children lost their father, I had to sew and darn and alter every night. Now you, poor things, lost yours; and again I have to patch up and darn again... You know, my mother admonished me, when I was a child, to put a thimble on as often as possible. And when I grew into a young girl, she said: “Mothers of young boys visit us these times. Secretly they put a seed into a thimble, and when they come to visit us again, they see if the seed is still inside or not. If it is, well, it means that you don't work your needle much, as woman should. Every mother wants her daughter-in-law to be hardworking, to make good stitches.” ”

“Granny, give me your thimble, please! I need it very, very much!”

“I'll give you another one. I worked too much with it; it is so dear to me...”

“No, Granny, I need this one, please!”

“Well then, take it! Maybe it brings you luck...” Grandmother said, and cast a thorough look at me.

I thought that she might have guessed what I needed it for...

In the evening Mother was mincing nettle for chudu¹ by the hearth and grieving: “Nettle crumbles badly. Neither good kurze,² nor chudu will come of it. The war has swept out all the tiniest remains. Formerly even a poorest peasant used to have three bags of seed grain in store!”

“Stop complaining! You never know what's going to happen in an hour. You're telling, there will be no rain, - and what if the shower comes this night?”

“The idea! Shower!” Mother said and hit the knife roughly against the board.

“Look at the sky! Clear as crystal!”

As if on command we turned to look at the sky. It was seen well from our only window. Day dawn and evening glow could we see from this window, as they lit our shack with dirt floor.

The dark-blue sky was dotted by millions and millions of stars; they were large, and medium, and even tiny...

¹ A very thin pie, with different fillings, e.g. cottage cheese, potato, meat, nettle etc.

² A special kind of dumplings shaped in a peculiar way, usually with the same fillings as in chudu.

“In the matter of fact, that means nothing – the ways of God are past finding out. Before you knew it, everything changes, and the sky too... Let us not talk about it. Fine words butter no parsnips. Let’s stoop to fate. I’ve just kneaded dough and put some suet into nettle, just for flavour...”

“Oh, mother, the more we stoop to fate, the more it strikes us with its iron fist! It’s no joke, to keep four orphans!”

“Everybody has the same, the trouble is for all! Have you even seen the rain on other’s allotment? Were you and your children under the broiling sun, when your neighbours are in the rain?”

“The stomach has no bottom. Does it really matter, whether to starve alone or in company?”

“We are to be content with our lot,” Grandmother said didactically.

“How can one be content with such a lot?” Mother screamed, obviously, losing her temper.

“Keep your head,” Grandmother harped upon the same string in a boring voice.

“The river, overflowing its banks, is of no good, it kills, it destroys, it loses its water in vain... Have you salted it, the filling? Is it ready?”

“Dash it! Put it on your own, I don’t want to listen to that “too much salt” and “too little salt” of yours,” and Mother shifted the bowl with nettle pulp angrily to Grandmother.

I went to bed earlier that day, pleading headache, and put the silver thimble wrapped in a kerchief under my pillow. I went to bed, actually, in the hope that the household follows me. Grandmother, even if she has guessed my intentions already, will help me, invisible, at my every step.

The same moment I have put my head on the pillow, all that pottering about hearth perished. I heard the voices no more, the legend, told by my grandmother, beclouded my mind...

...Once upon a time, when a heaviest drought spread all over the earth, everything was burning – greens, crops and flowers; cattle and people died. Believers were praying, the weak were crying, the strong were silent.

One night a peasant (he had a beautiful and fair daughter Atighat) saw his grandfather, who was a ploughman, in a dream. He held a richest soil in his hands. The ploughman said to his grandson: “You have to rescue our people, Omar,

though hard it is and difficult. Tell your daughter, and my granddaughter, Atighat to take her silver thimble and go the Seven Caves, saying “thirst, thirst, thirst”. She has to fill the thimble with the water from the farthest spring and to bring it home. But she has to do it before the dawn comes, so that not a living soul could see her. When home, let her throw a seed into the thimble. Before it swells, the rain comes.”

How many times I imagined that it could be me! How many times I wanted to walk Atighat’s fateful way. I don’t remember, either the old ploughman forgot to say the girl has to add a drop of blood into the water, or the peasant woke up at this moment... However, Atighat perished, turned into a waterfall, just as she exited the cave, though nobody, even a robin bird, ever saw her...

The girl turned into a waterfall, and therewith the sky grew dark, and long pouring watered the thirsting fields.

Of course, no one approached the Seven Caves thereafter.

These days, days of draught, when my sister and brothers were starving, more than once did I go in that cave in my imagination, I found the spring and drew some water into a thimble...

Mother was breathing calmly and deeply, Grandmother was snoring. I got up, threw a kerchief over my head and squeezed the thimble in my fist. When I came out of house, I stumbled. The overturned pitcher’s clanging, water spilt. I understand that Granny knew about me. It was she who put the full pitcher, my luck to be in.

And so, I go and utter, “thirst, thirst, thirst!” I cannot recognize my voice in the darkness. The word I repeat loses its sense for me, since I spoke it once and once again. The mountain that I make my way to, it looks menacing and ominous; it seems to be farther and farther as I step to it. The night is cool; I hear the stalks of the flowers crunching. That piteous sound gives me courage. I’m not walking now, I’m running. At the foot of the mountain I raise my head; the little path is winding bravely up the mountain, sparkling in the moonlight like a silver ribbon. “Thirst, thirst, thirst,” I reiterate, my mouth is dry.

The mountain, that looked furious, like a brigand, from the distant, now looks light and even kind, as if its moonlit sides encouraged me. “Thirst, thirst, thirst,” I speak, my tongue grows numb. I’d like to stop speaking, kneel beside every string I meet on my way. Though dole they their waters out, a thirsty always find a sip

here. I keep repeating hidden words, go ahead and remember: winter, snowstorm, ice and water...

And now I'm standing at the crag, sharp as wedge. The mouth of the cave showed black, as an eyehole; and near it, bubbling, fluttering as a white horse's mane, Atighat waterfall. It breaks into millions of drops, the wind spreads them, blue, those don't reflect the moonlight, and brilliant ones, lit up by the queen of night.

"May I turn a waterfall too, like Atighat did, may our waters join, if only the human suffering were over, if only this draught, exhausting my land, were over!" At this thought – either chill, or fear – something gave me the creeps. I see the one-eyed brigand, the cave. I have to jump over the cleft, but I'm afraid: what if I jump short and fall in the precipice? I'll never see Granny, Mother and sister again... And I'll turn into neither rain, nor waterfall... Then the roaring reaches my ears: maybe that's stones carried away by water, or that's the wind, or maybe even Atighat's voice that tells me to go ahead and not to be afraid. "Thirst, thirst, thirst." I stay on the very brink. No, I cannot. I recoiled, I turned. Down there, like scattered beads, the houses of my aul were showing up white. There's my house. It seems to me, I see a shadow at the roof. Granny! "Thirst, thirst, thirst." I jump. I'm inside the cave. Here's the waterfall; I stroke its soft, wet mane. Now I'm walking ahead – it is pitch-dark in here. I hear my own voice, more and more desperate it sounds, farther and farther the waterfall's noise is. I grope my way to the second cave. Now something softer than stones is under my feet, something like peas. Suddenly a "clapppp!" resounds in the cave. I thought, my heart would leave me. Shivering has me whole. Later I understand the reason of the noise. My face and hands are brushed by wings – it were pigeons.

Farther from the waterfall I went, scarier it was; I had to feel the walls to find my way to the next cave. I shivered, touching spiny, cold walls. What if there is a snake or a scorpion? Or some beast jumps at me? The farthest cave, in the womb of the mountain, is the scariest one. I'm crawling on my stomach, looking for the spring. Water, finally! I undo the knot on the kerchief, and...the thimble drops from my hands. I creep and search for it, and cannot find it. At the bottom of the spring my hands are scorched by bitter cold. I put them out for a moment, shake the cold water off and keep searching. No silver thimble! My tongue fails me, I shed floods of tears. I want to scream, to cry for help, but I repeat, "thirst, thirst, thirst!"

I don't know, how much time I had spent searching for the thimble, but all the time I heard that "clapppp!" Pigeons flew away from the cave – the day has come. The sky is peaceful overhead. I stand on my tiptoe, touch something soft and live –

pigeon nests. My hand feels something very hard. I put the thimble in the spring, fill in with water, prick my finger with a pin, press a blood drop out. I throw a seed in the thimble and utter, as if enchanted, “thirst, thirst, thirst!” Thus whole eternity passes...

I got rather quickly out from the cave. But how can I jump over the cleft this time? I stay, without knowing what to do. Fear catches me cold. I’ve nearly forgotten magic words, have nearly spoiled everything! And then I hear Grandmother’s voice.

“Only one loving his land and his people ardently can perform such a feat. Atigat did. My dear, one should believe hard in what one’s doing. Atigat did it too. This waterfall is her eternal memorial. People die, but the feat for the sake of their nation is immortal!..”

My body becomes light. I climb up the rock, holding the ledges tight, stretch with my whole body, step by step. At the point, opposite to the clag I needed to reach on the other side, I jump and land on the little patch. Now fear is gone, I repeat, “thirst, thirst, thirst!” Now, when it’s all over, either joy, or weariness is to blame, but I stand still. The waterfall’s noise helps me out of numbness. A slight shiver has me. Holding the thimble hard, I rush away...

The lights were off at home. I opened the door quietly and smelled a strong bread flavour. I hid the thimble and groped lavash³ and cheese, wrapped into a towel...

I woke up to the thundering, lightning flashes, shouting. We rushed out, I got up to the roof. Grandmother, mother, our neighbours were standing in the pouring rain, with their arms outstretched overhead. “The rain, God’s grace!” they shouted.

I kept silent; the secret is mine, I have to keep it. Miracles do seldom happen. But they do, if you believe in them.

³ A flat unleavened wheat bread.