

A Drop in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



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THE OAK AND THE NAIL

The tree had already gotten used to the taste of metal. Brooding and enclosed within himself, he tightened the rings around the spike. Like waves, the images collided in the layers of his memory. He didn't want to become the slave of the clashing waves. He simply sometimes repeated things in order not to forget, not to surrender to the current compulsion that caresses, deceives, and removes one from the world and reality.

It was two years ago when the archeologists came to the forest. They came, looked at the ruined and crumbling church, measured, talked to each other, and struck their tent in the flat clearing. There were three of them, three young men who always nickered like unsaddled horses. In the evening, the youngest of them came out of the tent, made some measurements, surveyed

the terrain, then, taking a hammer and nail, approached the tree and drove the nail into the trunk. He hit and sang, hit and whistled, and this worsened the agony of the tree. At first the tree had no idea what the young man was doing. He moaned loudly, moaned with alarm, rustling the leaves in distress, but the young man didn't care about his alarmed moans. He kept hitting the nail with the hammer.

Afterwards, everything inside the tree, all the cells and juices, were rushing about and circulating around the nail. The young man didn't realize that. He went back into the tent, brought out a portable sink, and hung it on the nail. The tree was astonished at the young man's ignorance. Had he wanted to, he could have hung the sink from a dried branch. But the tree knew from his experience – from the broken, chopped branches, hacked trunk – that humans were the most egotistical and stupid creatures in the world.

Now, for days he might not even feel the existence of the nail. The pain of the first days awakens gradually in his memory and instead of the murmuring pain, now he feels the nail like a persistent itch.

He had almost gotten used to the nail, but he couldn't reconcile the incessant, all subordinating sound of dripping water. The valve doesn't work properly and the water dripped from the faucet, straight onto the roots of the tree.

At first he had been glad at the unexpected gift of a bit of water, but soon the constant dripping had exhausted him – those dreadful, chilly plashes had pierced his roots and wore a cavity in them. Now he can't do anything to close the open wound, to stop the tormenting, percussive plashes.

In spite of these torments, the tree holds no grudge against men. He knows that men are used to subordinating everything to their own needs, seeing everything through their own eyes. He is gently shading the young man, who is lying and whistling in his folding camping bed. He knows that this is the man who drove the nail into his chest, the man who is responsible for the eternally open wound, but he can't hold a grudge against him. He doesn't know whether it is due to his subservient nature, or if it's conditioned by something else.

Now he feels sorry for the nail. He knows that the nail has nothing to do with his own suffering and understands that the nail is more tortured than he is. That's why the oak sometimes looks at the nail as if it were kin and slightly loosens the rings choking the nail's neck. He knows his own strength and how the nail has become worn and molded, becoming one with the tree, while the tree has become one with the nail. The struggle between them lasted two years. The oak was ruthlessly constricting the nail's spine, while the latter was resisting. And at night, when the rings would weaken their grip, the nail would take its revenge, ruining the web of rings that the tree had been weaving around it. They fought for two years. The fight had brought them closer, and now the tree even began to feel some affection toward the nail. Had it not been for the constant scratches on his chest, the tree would try to forget the incident. He would forget, and then . . . what? Then he would still be left with the tortuous dripping that pierced his roots day and night during the summer months.

Previously, he had thought that the most important thing was the roots, which went straight down to the belly of the earth.

The tree had always thought that other parts weren't as important, that they existed only formally, but for three years now he has tried to rid himself of this terrible pain, tried to forget it for at least a moment, but the memory and the pain have always kept him awake, even when the sink was dry.

During the first year he was naïve, though his five-hundred-year-old experience and moderate age told him: *If you try hard, if you really make an effort, perhaps you will be able to move your position and remove your root from underneath the dripping water.* He thought it would be easy. He thought that if he strained himself, withdrew into himself, he would be able to move a few meters. He tautened his roots and leaves, and his trunk would swell and shrink, but no matter how hard he strained, he was unable to move himself.

He understood much later that along with those efforts he needed the ability to see himself from the side view. No one else knows this now, neither the oaks of the same age that grow next to him, nor the young saplings. And the young man doesn't know it, as he rests in his folding bed, the young man for whom the world is broad and boundless and for whom life seems immortal and never-ending. And he, a thick-trunked oak, has been laundering time for five hundred years now, twisting and wringing it out and hanging it out to dry on the rocks on the opposite hill.

He acquired this wisdom after a long period of suffering. He had strained every root and every branch in such a way that everything hurt. At night, sparks would shoot out of his trunk. Sometimes the voltage was so high that the sparks would illuminate the whole clearing. On those days, a woodpecker had found food under the layers of the bark and wouldn't leave the tree. The

sparks were so powerful that they killed the pecker. The lichen turned black in a few seconds, all the nest holes closed in the trunk, and all the excrescences turned into ashes. But that wasn't the most peculiar thing; the phenomenon had terrified the young archeologists. The eldest kept muttering curses under his nose and sometimes made the sign of the cross, involuntarily mixing God with the Devil. The youngest, now peacefully resting under the tree, couldn't close his mouth out of terror, while the middle one kept wetting himself. The tree was straining to move its root, a lonely side root that until then had never played such a decisive role in his life. He suffered like that for two or three nights, but it was all in vain. He only got disappointed and attracted a huge crowd of enthusiasts. Then he stood there – miserable and completely wrecked. All his energy had left him. The tree had even lost his capacity to think. His centuries-old thick bark had become very sensitive. People would come, stand underneath it, touch the bark, make a thousand and one guesses, listen with half an ear to the exaggerated stories of the archeologists, and then leave. The archeologists had already forgotten why they had come there in the first place. People would often look at the tree. The bravest ones would approach to touch the bark, and nobody would understand how he shuddered from their touch. The pain and the memory of the nail would immediately reappear, and he would feel nauseated from the sensation of their hands.

Apart from the idle enthusiasts came a group of men who placed a wire fence around him, started to tap him everywhere, sniff him, and pick his leaves.

There was an old man with a goat's beard among them who was silent and mysterious, and when the sun set, he would for-

get everything. He would sit on the grass, take a bottle out of his pocket, drink the liquid thirstily, and gradually become strange and astonishing. And before going home to sleep, he would make strange and astonishing sounds. The old man would always do the same thing before going home. He would approach the tree, lean his shoulder against the trunk and piss . . . straight onto the trunk. The old man had neither fear, nor presentiment toward the tree. The important thing for him wasn't figuring out the phenomenon, but passing his days in the forest. The old man knew from his own experience that no matter how one named or defined things it would be impossible to explain phenomena. Every creature created by God had to live his life according to God's determination and partly also according to his own will. Later, in the city, he would string a few incomprehensibly muddled words and made-up numbers together and consider the question closed. The more incomprehensible his writing, the more correct it would seem, but now the most important thing was vacationing.

The tree would even echo the words of the old man's song: "My love . . ." But to the old man's ears the tree's song merely sounded like a loud rustle of leaves.

The strange group of people stayed there for a few days. They examined the surroundings, they measured the trunk of the tree, they cut a sample from the bark, and they cut a branch. The old man even picked a leaf in the presence of the crowd and placed it in a special bag. They also dug out some soil from underneath the tree and, filling several bags, took it with them to the city. One morning, they took down the tent, got into their car and left unexpectedly. They would never remember the tree or its odd untree-like behavior.

That summer the tree couldn't get back to normal. He had no more power to fight against the water drops and the nail. In moments of despair, he would move violently with the wind, wishing to tear out the sink from his chest. But the head of the nail was holding the sink tightly, as if it were glued with tree sap.

He talked to the nail and befriended it that summer. The tree admired the nail's iron reasoning, its iron resistance, and the steely strength of its back. He didn't know and couldn't imagine if the nail perceived the words, which he had whispered to himself: "Oh nail, what do you want from me?" These words were uttered after the futile attempts to release the sparks, when he had been desperate and sad.

"Me?" said a voice, quite positively belonging to the nail. "I'm just a nail. They use me for nailing something somewhere. It's not my fault that they've nailed me into a living tree and not a dry board. I had to be used somehow, and this is my fate, to live my life holding up a sink and fighting with you. If I had more luck, I would have been driven into a dry board and my life would have been longer. What do you think my life is like, struggling to survive in a living, giant, and undaunted oak such as yourself?"

"Don't be upset," the oak said with a softer voice. "You are so close to me that you have even become my own now. If you would only scratch me less, we'd live more peacefully together. Lose your head and drop the sink."

"What are you saying? Holding the sink is my duty. I can't be without it."

"But what do you really get out of it?" the tree went on to convince the nail. "Don't become hostile toward me for no reason.

You're living inside me, after all. You have become a bit of an oak."

"Me?" the nail said astonished. "How can I be an oak? You fight with me day and night – you try to break my back, and you consider me to be your ally?"

"Ally? No. But not enemy either. You are simply a tired, emaciated, rusty nail."

"Me?" the nail asked again belligerently and, straightening its back, drove itself deeper into the soft, untouched tissues of the oak.

"Ah!" moaned the tree. "Why did I believe you? Why did I let my guard down? I had no right to forget that you are made of iron, even if rusted iron."

The oak was silent for a long time. He didn't speak for days. He withdrew into himself and directed all of his vital energies to encircling the nail and dissolving it into his body. Externally, the tree seemed indifferent: he didn't respond to the caresses of the wind, didn't move his branches, didn't rustle the leaves, and anyone looking at him would think that the tree was dead. Even the archeologists forgot about him. They were digging the soil, excavating and extracting stones, and getting very excited, as if they had invented the stones themselves, as if they had painted their intricate designs.

"Look, how many centuries have passed and the paint hasn't even faded," the oldest of the archeologists would mumble and whistle in amazement, leaning the painted stone against the tree.

There was nothing more important for him in this world than discovering a stone that had been smoothed, chiseled, and painted by somebody else.

"Look at it!" he would mumble about every excavated stone,

and the tree would quake, tautening his nerves and roots, and wanting to scream.

Look at what? I've seen the man who chiseled this stone, and I have made shade for the man who carried these stones onto the scaffold from the underground on his back. I have seen his sin and I have witnessed his atonement, when he threw himself down from the scaffold and jumped straight into the canyon.

I have seen the man who erected this wall. He carried his burden for sixty years and instead of glory he gained a hunchback and went straight to his grave. He was buried without a coffin, wrapped in a shroud. And for a long time the shroud hindered his soul so that it couldn't free itself from the hunchbacked body.

I have seen how these stones, frenzied and destroyed by a catastrophe, had enough sense not to fall on me and not to handicap me. They fell, but did not bring me down. They carried their own fate and their own cross.

He wanted to say these things, but he didn't. He wanted to scream, but he was silent, because God had created him as a tree and his burden, fate, and cross were the nail, the sink, and the dripping water.

It was very rainy that year. The lightning lit up the sky, day and night. The tree wished that the lightning, even if weak or faint, would strike his trunk. He knew that it would be painful, but at least he would free himself from the nail and the constant dripping of the water.

But that year the lightning was not for the oak. But lightning isn't born and doesn't die because of a tree's wishes. This was wild,

free, and mad lightning, preferring death in the sky to death in soil, rock, or tree. Every day the tree watched the lightning and despaired, understanding that he could only rely on himself.

“Try a little harder,” he would whisper to himself. “Strain your circles, squeeze the nail, and you will break its back. Just gather up your forces!” He would think quietly, encouraging himself with all his might. He would make sure that the nail wouldn’t hear him, so that the sink and the wind wouldn’t find out . . .

It happened by the dawn. The oak stretched under the first rays of the sun, gathered up all his might, and forcefully squeezed the back of the nail, which, being weak and rusted, broke into halves and the sink fell clanging onto the ground.

At first the tree couldn’t believe what had just happened, but then he saw it, and finally relaxed his circles and jubilated: “Sh-h-h-h . . .”

The water wasn’t dripping anymore, but the tortured, hollowed roots of the tree still felt the weight of the drops and couldn’t relax. The youngest of the archeologists ran out of the tent with the first rays of the sun. He looked at the trees, the clearing, the sun. Then stretching and cracking his bones, he approached the sink and couldn’t believe his eyes.

“What a useless nail! It didn’t last very long!”

He went back into the tent, looked around for a while, ransacked the boxes and finally came out with another, much bigger and thicker nail. He approached the oak, touched the trunk, marked the bark with the point of the nail and, with all his might, drove the nail into the trunk.

2019

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

WAITING FOR THE GENERAL

“So, when’s the general coming anyway?” a man with big strong arms asked a soldier on sentry duty for the millionth time.

“Dunno,” the soldier replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Ugh!” groaned Strongarm, whether irritably or hopelessly, you wouldn’t know, and took a seat on a partially broken sideboard against a narrow checkpoint wall. The sideboard gave a mournful creak under the weight of his large body. Neither the young sentry nor the sideboard nor the friends waiting at the checkpoint door knew that Strongarm had been rather annoyed since morning. God only knows what thoughts had been running through his wife’s mind during the night, but she got up in the morning bound and determined, saying, “I’m off to Yerevan.” “What for?” he asked, surprised. “I’m going to the hospital for treatment.” “Now? . . . But you’re forty-one years old?” He tried to argue against it. “Lots of women give birth at the age of sixty. I’m not cursed with infertility, you know.” “Give it up, girl. Your womb must be dry by now.” He was convinced. “And there’s no medicine or doctors left on the earth who can help you now. Why don’t you just suck it up?”

After a bout of tears and dismal howls, his wife stood up and hit the road – Yerevan, where are you? I’m coming! Strongarm couldn’t go with her because he had an appointment with the general. He’d come here to ask the general a favor, that he re-

quest meadowland from the governor for the guys he had fought with. So what if he's a general now? Shouldn't he care about his former brothers-in-arms?

"Ah, what the hell?!" the man moaned piteously as he thought of what his wife had done, and hunched up his shoulders.

The sentry hung his head, not realizing that Strongarm was in fact angry about something his wife had done. Was it his fault? He was just an ordinary soldier, standing there, expected to open and close the barrier, and report to headquarters on each person coming in and out. He performed his duty appropriately. Was the general coming or not? Who knew? Who would dare distract him from his urgent matters? The general could go wherever he wanted to and could do whatever he wanted to because he was a general, not some ordinary soldier.

Meanwhile, Strongarm was going mad with indecision. He felt madly jealous of his wife. How could he know if she'd really gone to the doctor's or what kind of person her doctor was? He would sometimes toy with the crazy idea of grabbing his machine-gun left since the war, taking aim at his wife's beautiful body, and emptying the clip. Serves you right, doctor! He didn't care if he would be brought to justice afterwards. He had met the eyes of death so many times in his life.

"How on earth can anyone live like this?" he drawled, and rose to his feet with difficulty. "What sort of country is this? People promise, then don't show up, set up a meeting, then let you down."

"He may have gone to the ministry, or somewhere else – who knows..." the sentry tried to calm Strongarm's bitter anger.

Several men were standing in a semicircle in the shade of

the trees in front of the checkpoint. Legless maneuvered his wheelchair swiftly and furiously, as though he were attempting to persuade or prove something to his fellow men. He had gotten so used to his wheelchair over the past five years that he almost forgot he had no legs. Both his legs had been blown off by a landmine, exploding beneath his feet on the battlefield. He never came to terms with crutches, turned down prostheses so he wouldn't feel fettered, and then made a wheelchair for himself. He had taken the rubber tires from his son's scooter, and attached them to a hand-made chair. He sat himself in it, tied the upper parts of his legs to the chair, and moved around better than the strongest runner.

"What does he say?" Legless asked, leaving his speech half-finished, and addressing Strongarm who now approached them.

"Nothing much. Says the general will come if he said he would."

"He's a general after all," Legless gave a snort.

"Oh yeah, he is!" replied Skinny, squatting down. He always squatted when talking to Legless because he felt embarrassed, standing so tall and speaking from above. Besides, it seemed to him that if he didn't squat, his words would float over the legless man's head, and he would miss the message. "Well, I am a marshal then," said Legless, thumping his chest.

"A marshal, right! Then we're your guards, and the wheelchair's your armored car," a young bearded man laughed, flashing the shiny medal on his breast.

"No, the world was made unequal," Strongarm grunted, recalling his wife's frantic screams again. "I thought we were all

equal on the battlefield. So how did this happen? Some of the guys stayed in the army and climbed the ranks, and then we came back to see they'd split everything between themselves..." "Wait! Did you expect every fighter to become a general? No way. Would you bow down to just anyone? Isn't it much better that our friend is helping us? One of you has a kid's tuition to pay, one of you needs treatment, one of you needs a reference... We just turn up like this and don't give a damn that this man is a general. He isn't a governor, he isn't a doctor, and he's not a college director," Skinny argued in the general's defense. Then the men sat on the green grass under the poplar trees. Everyone sat lost in thought, with a hand outstretched like vagrant beggars, in the hopes of ridding themselves of their troubles. Poplar fluff fluttered down onto their heads like snowflakes.

"There wouldn't be so much of this rotten thing around if it was anything good," Strongarm complained.

"You can have too much of a good thing too," the legless man quickly replied. He then put his hands on the ground, jumped nimbly off the wheelchair, fell on his side on the freshly-cut grass, and fitted the chair comfortably under his arm like a pillow. He cast a glance at the trees and the summer sun and, puffing on his cigarette, began to tell a story.

"When I opened my eyes in the hospital, I was, first of all, really glad to be alive. I had lost a lot of blood, but I was alive, and that was all that mattered to me. Later, I felt like walking. Then my heart wanted to climb a hill, and then I wanted a woman very much. Do you know what I want now? You'll laugh when I say it... I want to climb a tree."

Everyone roared with laughter, Strongarm louder than the

rest. But suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He was so angry in the morning that he didn't even give his wife a lift to the bus stop. Let her go however she wants, he thought. Let her do whatever she feels like. Clutching his chest, Strongarm pictured his wife in a red dress, dolled up and happy, throwing herself into the arms of another man. He couldn't say for sure if his wife was actually seeing someone else, or if it was just his imagination. If he looked at it calmly, his wife had never given him grounds for suspicion, but who could figure these women out, after all?

"Aaahhh – we're stupid to keep waiting!" he announced with a moan. "In civilized countries, army generals aren't supposed to settle issues like these. The general's priority should be his army, not the favors we're asking for – meadows, tuition, operations...."

"Let him help. Come on, what's he got to do?" Skinny snapped back.

"He's a general," said Legless, rearranging the wheelchair under his arm. "For my part, I'll ask him for a better wheelchair when he comes. One of those shiny new foreign wheelchairs. I'm tired of this lousy thing. To tell you the truth, I tried one of those chairs once, and I didn't like it. It's too official, kind of cuts you off from the land. I've gotten used to running my hands over the ground the past five years. My feet don't touch the land, but at least my hands can."

"Oh come on, man! Touch the land, tread on the land... Land, land, land! Weren't you chanting the same 'Land! Land!' the moment you gave away your legs and came back without them? And now..." Strongarm pointed an accusing finger at his friend as if he had never been to war himself.

“And now? And now what? Say it!” Legless jumped into his wheelchair.

“And now they set a time to meet, but they trick you. What is this? We’ve been waiting for him, hungry and thirsty, since morning. Are we outsiders, huh? Haven’t we broken bread with each other? Haven’t we fought together? Haven’t we suffered together? I’ll tell you what – these are all issues that will take a minute to sort out...”

“He might just be at the ministry. There’s a lot to deal with...”

“Oh, please! What ministry are you talking about?” Strongarm flared up. “I know this ministry thing pretty well. He’s probably chasing after some girl or sitting at the head of a table.”

“He’s your friend.” Skinny shook his head disapprovingly. “Yep, he is, and that’s exactly why it hurts me,” Strongarm said with a snort. His soul was now filled with so much exasperation that he regarded any man he came across as potentially his wife’s lover. Although he knew it was absurd, he just couldn’t help it. At some point, Strongarm felt like letting it all go to hell and driving straight to Yerevan. He would look for his wife, first in the hospital, then at his sister-in-law’s place. If he couldn’t find her, it must be betrayal. But when he thought twice, logic told him that his wife couldn’t have walked out on him.

“I don’t see why you are backing him up,” he said to Skinny. “I was the one who saved his life.”

“So you’re going to bug the hell out of him to the end of your days?” Skinny could see that something strange was happening to his friend, but he couldn’t work out what it was. He didn’t know that despair and malice were mounting in his friend’s heart

by the hour. Looking out at the setting sun, Strongarm was beginning to feel more and more oppressed. How could he spend the night at home all by himself? He had finished making the house before the war. Back then, they lived in comfort, and there was no lack of money, like now. Now his house resembled an expensive foreign coffin. The expansive cold would torment him in the night. If he could meet the general, he would ask him for gas, fill up his car, and drive to Yerevan, but...

“They’ve been promoted, and now look what they’ve done to us. What is it to them? They can drive wherever they want – they always have a car, and gas. This country is neither mine nor yours – it’s theirs now. What do they need us for? Hungry, thirsty – we’ve dried up waiting around here all morning! He could have called and said he wasn’t coming. He probably doesn’t even pay his own phone bill!”

Strongarm stood up and leaned his back against the wall. The concrete wall was warm, and he liked it. For some reason it reminded him of the warmth of his wife’s thigh swaying under a silky dress, and his blood rose immediately. How many times had he offered to adopt a child? A boy or a girl – either was fine by him. If they had done it before, his wife wouldn’t have come down on him like a ton of bricks. When he suggested it, his wife protested. Then they fought. And what a fight it was! Not like in a war-time. And no matter if he was right or wrong: he always ended up beaten.

Now that he remembered his wife’s wet eyes in the hospital, his heart melted. He would have liked to be wounded again – even with a leg blown off, even mortally wounded – just to have his wife, tender and kind, by his side again.

His friends were silent, unwilling to object to him. Truth be told, Strongarm was right. The general was no longer what he used to be. Either his troubles had mounted, or he had simply had enough of their perpetual requests – or perhaps things at the ministry weren't as good as they had been.

“Gah!” huffed the one who had been shell-shocked, who was the first to arrive, and was waiting with the papers in hand. He didn't speak because he couldn't. He was following his friends' conversation intently, contradicting or agreeing with them in his mind. He had been to the hospital, where a special educator had tried to teach him to speak again, but he resisted, swearing thousands of times in his head. He wasn't a child to be taught to speak. He knew everything perfectly well and could speak in his head. He just couldn't utter the words. He became mad, unable to voice his anger. He let out some simple exclamations and left the hospital. Then he wrote a letter to the general in his untidy handwriting, so that it would be easier when they met in person, and now, beneath the trees, holding the case report in his hand, he waited. The letter wasn't long. There was just one sentence, written on a piece of graph paper from a school notebook: “Send me abroad for treatment.” He had been waiting patiently all day, but could no longer bear it, so he rose to his feet, brushed the dust off the back of his pants, and began walking.

“Where to?” he heard Strongarm call out to him from behind.

“Ohhh!” the shell-shocked man huffed irritably, and pointing at the setting sun, ducked under the boom gate and wobbled off with a slight stumble.

“He's as good a general as any other,” Legless said as he puffed his unfiltered cigarette and pushed the wheelchair towards the

checkpoint door. Putting his head around the door, he spoke to the sentry:

“Go ahead and call headquarters or wherever and find out if he’ll come.”

The soldier blinked his eyes, then shook his head.

“I’m only authorized to ask the duty officer, and the officer said he didn’t know.”

“Ugh!” Legless replied with an exasperated sigh and moved his chair sharply back in a fit of anger. “Goddam general!” he shouted.

He had once held twelve enemy soldiers at gunpoint, before he lost his legs. He pushed them all the way back to their lines without fear. Once, he snuck behind enemy lines, examined their positions, and then returned safe and sound. But today he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. Their friend had already let them down so many times. Were they to blame? Was it life? Hard to say. The number of their friends kowtowing to authority figures had increased dramatically. They had one thing on their minds, but would say something else, afraid of anything distressing reaching the general if that might affect the chances of them being helped. Legless was about to grumble, but bit his tongue instead and, ducking his head under the boom gate, drove off in his wheelchair.

Strongarm remained seated. He was groaning with his head bowed. His old car was waiting for him a little further away in the thickening twilight, with patience befitting a pack animal. The man wanted to get to his feet, but had no idea what to do next. He didn’t feel like going home, or seeing anyone at all. The light poured onto the trees out of the checkpoint window.

The illuminated grass was growing somewhat yellow after the harvest. They caught the scent of rotten leaves, dust, and fresh grass. Strongarm had a nasty feeling that the general was fooling around with his wife somewhere. He couldn't put that thought out of his mind, and so got up and headed for the car. He'd better go boozing, even on credit, to drown his sorrows.

"You're not waiting anymore?" asked the sentry.

"Waiting?"

"Yeah, for the general."

"Screw him!" the strong-armed man snapped, and pulled away.

The phone at the checkpoint rang shortly afterwards. The soldier picked up the receiver, stood to attention, and reported,

"They have left, Sir... Yes, all of them... Yes, sir, I shall open the gate!"

The boom gate went up, and the general's armored car passed then sped along the road towards the capital city.

2019

Translated by Marina Yandian