

THE BIG SHE-BEAR

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Once, whilst meditating, I had a vision of a mountain village with its first abandoned and later restored houses, of St. Mary's Church with the sawn-off cross, of dusty, stony and narrow village roads.

The countryside was also visible - hills, mountains and ravines, the snowy peaks of the Caucasus, alpineplanes, hay-stacks towering on the hilltops, a foaming and splashing river running down therocks, birds circling in the sky...

The forest, full of a serene and great silence, attracted me with its enigmatic power, filling me with an equal mixture of fear and curiosity. I followed this lure eagerly.

I stood on dried autumn leaves and leaned against an ancient mossy oak. If I did not move I could even hear the soft rustle of the leaves. Far, far away, a raven would crow, or a black kite would screech, giving way to a deep silence again.

I could hear strange, subtle sounds – the cracking of breaking, dried branches, the rustling of leaves and suddenly a huge bear would appear, treading heavily through the branches and twigs. The bear did not worry about caution and moved openly, her straw-coloured fur glistening like gold in the slanting sunrays pouring through the leaves. I noticed a glowing sparkle in her eyes as she passed me, leaving her odour behind, before disappearing again between the trees.

Next, I saw village people, following in the wake of the bear. The people from the village of Shuburi, armed, proud, intense, shouting... desperate to kill the bear. A lunatic, trembling with fear, was heading the procession. Women, children and the elderly of the village followed. All were united with one overwhelming desire - to kill the bear!

Finally, in Shuburi, in the graveyard surrounding St. Mary's Church, I saw another barefooted lunatic, a skinny boy standing at the holy oak- a white sheet was fastened around a branch and people were performing prayers to God for a plea as innocent as virgin snow- to protect the bear...

Later, before getting down to writing the story, I had a feeling that it already had existed somewhere else - independent of me! Somehow, it found me later, on its own and all I had to do was to record it. As simple as that!

Since then, for several years, I suffered from the desire to 'record the story properly': I lost count of how many times I had felt the urge to re-write and modify it.

Frequently, feeling bitter and angry at being so inadequate, I regretted having been the one selected to write this story. I contemplated giving up completely, but it haunted me permanently and I had no choice but to return to it again.

On my deathbed (I did have to face this unpleasant possibility), I regretted not having used the opportunity to finish Javria's story.

I did not use this opportunity, due to reasons beyond my control. Fully recovered and wrestling with work again, I realised I had fallen in love with this straw-coloured bear with

the white spot on her forehead, with her home in the Caucasus mountains, the people of the village of Shuburi, everybody and everything about them...

I would write, edit, rewrite and re-edit the text. However, I still felt that I was miles away from the ideal version of the story born and still alive in me. I ran towards it with all my might and when I thought I had finally captured it, it would slip away from me and disappear. It looked more like an everlasting vision of an oasis in the mind of a thirsty pilgrim wandering the desert.

Finally, I realised I would never be able to record it in a way that makes myself completely happy with it. I had felt this earlier, but did not want to acknowledge the feeling as I did not want to feel defeated.

Now I know - unless the writer suffers, goes through difficulties and, finally, feels beaten, like me..., if he writes the way he himself wants to write, if he wins over the story - he is, as a writer, dead and finished...

So, in a nutshell, the writer faces the possibility to die after finishing each of his/her works. However, it is better not to use that possibility until the end...

Feeling defeated (and alive at the same time), I would like to offer the reader the latest version of the story.

The Author

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1.

The meandering ravine of Koratiriver stretched along the main ridge of the South Caucasus. It was lit by the autumn sun which made the foaming water of the river, splashing and roaring down from the light-blue tops of the mountains towards hugerocks, sparkle and shimmer in silver.

The forest was no longer green, but in places glowed in rusty and terracotta colours. Chestnuts and beech, acorns and hazelnuts, sour forest apples and pears, cornelian cherries and plums, medlars and hawthorns, briars and blackberries, raspberries and cranberries were ripe. Towering above the forest, way up to the tops of the mountains, rhododendron fields were followed by picturesque and velvety alpine planes. The sounds of the wishing and splashing Korati river filling the ravine were mingled with the bee-eaters' twitter.

Time and again, one could hear screeches of a black kite circling in the crystal-clear sky. Crickets were chirping deafeningly.

The forest was ready to share its autumnal gifts. A huge, straw-coloured bear with her two cubs had descended from the high mountains, and she had fed them and herself on fruit and berries and was now lying in dense shrubs of azaleas above the steep slope, close to the Korati. The growing cubs had covered their noses with their paws and were breathing peacefully, snuggled up and huddled comfortably close to their mother's warm body. Suddenly a black raven flew over them, crowing loudly.

Brown, the dark cub, was startled, opened his eyes and seeing nothing but the cloudless sky, was about to yelp in horror, but hearing the even breathing of his mother, calmed down instantaneously and sprang to his feet.

The cautious mother bear was awakened by her cub's footsteps. She sniffed the air blowing from above and, as she felt the danger of an attack from a man from below, closed her eyes again.

Brown was in a naughty mood. He caught a dead root dangling from the ground, pulled it and when it broke with a loud crack, the cub fell over with a thud.

Tawny, the other cub, woke up, ran up to Brown and also clung to the piece of root, wanting to snatch it away from his sibling, who retaliated with his paw. Tawny felt his nose tingle with pain, yelped pitifully, but still held onto the root with all his might.

Making a tawny and brown bundle, the cubs first rolled over, through shrubs and bushes, breaking more branches on their way down. Unwilling to stop fighting, they rolled down the steep slope and landed on the stony bank of the river...

The mother bear did not expect her cubs to roll right down to the river. Tired and sure that her cubs were still playing close to her, she found it difficult to break away from sleep and open her eyes. Suddenly she heard the cubs' cry followed by a thundering sound of shooting. Infuriated by the gunpowder smell, standing on her hind legs, the mother bear stormed out from the azaleas, ran quickly down the slope and thundered down to the stony bank of the river.

Wounded Brown was counting his last minutes, breathing heavily, while yelping Tawny was trying frantically to get away from a man clad in a lamb coat.

The mother bear roared frighteningly.

The hunter looked in her direction and saw the giant bear standing up on her hind legs. The bear held her own head with her paws in the horror of apprehension, as if mourning the pitiful sight of her cub, then she went back to four legs and ran towards the hunter incredibly swiftly, like a thunder bolt.

The furious beast headed towards the man, dancing a strange dance with her huge body, aptly avoiding the rocks, her straw-coloured fur bristling frighteningly. All this indicated such bewildering, incredible and beyond--human-reach strength that the hunter knew his own death was close.