

The Brueghel Moon (Anxietas precordialis)

Chapter 1

That morning I was coming back from Vake Park from my daily game of tennis. I saw my brother-in-law Badri's jeep at our gate. I was surprised. He didn't show up very often. I walked faster.

As I opened the gate, Badri came out of the house with two, apparently heavy suitcases. I made way for him, greeted him, to which he just nodded. He didn't say a word.

Ia was sitting at the table in the living room. Tamriko was playing at her feet. I saw several big bags on the floor.

"What's up? Where are we going?" I asked Ia.

"Good you're back," she said. "I didn't want to leave without you."

"Fine," I sat down, "but are you going without me?" I added with a smile.

"It's not funny," she looked away.

"What's going on?" I knew it wasn't anything pleasant. Of course I guessed that much.

"Remember, I warned you!"

Badri came into the room so I didn't reply to her. Instead I attempted to joke with Badri:

"What's up, Badri? Where are you taking my wife and daughter?"

"I know nothing," he muttered, took the bags and went out.

"Remember there was a bird in my coffee cup not long ago?" Ia looked straight into my eyes. Until then she sat staring at the table. "Apparently, a bird means flying away!"

"So you believe a fortune-teller?"

"I do!" She opened her handbag and showed me tickets. "It's better for both of us." She put the tickets back. "It's for the best."

"Yes, but," suddenly it seemed more serious than I had imagined. She wasn't moving in with her parents – she was going somewhere really far. "When did you decide?" I nearly choked on my saliva.

"A long time ago."

"And waited for the fortune-teller to confirm?"

"I forbid you!" She raised her hand.

"Forbid what?"

"To talk like that," she finished in a whisper.

"Why did you keep it a secret?"

"Emzar called a couple of days ago, saying he expected us. I was waiting for his call. I bought the tickets quite some time ago. And the documents are ready too. Badri helped me."

"Badri's great, isn't he?"

"My brothers are not for you to make fun of! Shouldn't he have helped?"

"You could've asked me."

She looked at me for some time, then averted her gaze and said:

"It's for the best."

"Yes, but," I felt anger rising in me, "shouldn't you have asked me what's better? Can you please look at me when I'm talking to you?"

"Don't yell!"

“Turn your head and look at me!”

She swept the air with her hand:

“You’re going to be alone in this huge apartment. All alone. On your own... Alone... Anyway, Bardi’s taking us to the airport.” She was suddenly agitated, clasping her shoulders with her hands as if trying to stop her body from shaking. “Our marriage was a misunderstanding...”

I interrupted her:

“Wait a second, are you serious about going away?”

“I can’t believe you haven’t noticed it was coming. Where do you think I’m taking all this stuff? I’m not moving in with my parents! I’m fed up with everything, here and there too. Everything around!” She stressed these words. She patted our daughter’s head as if to make sure she was there and went on, “You were scared of solitude, but why did you have to drag me into the swamp?”

“The swamp?” I was surprised and offended. “What swamp are you talking about? What kind of scene is this to start a day?”

“When you see an outstretched hand screaming for help, don’t make a mistake. You can’t really help anyone. Instead, you find yourself being dragged into the swamp.”

Only then I recalled she used to phone her brother more often than usual recently. He was in the US, seemingly running a successful business. He called her quite often too, without giving much thought to the time difference. They would talk for a long time. Once I asked who she was talking to for so long. She said to Emzar and that was that. I’ve got to confess Ia’s decision wasn’t totally unexpected. For some time I had felt the day was coming. Even more, we absolutely had to clarify our relationship as it was getting increasingly impossible to continue with our lives as if nothing was happening. I hoped to resolve it the easy way as we weren’t the first or the last couple to face the problem. Divorce is as common as meeting someone, even marrying.

She went to the kitchen.

“The kettle must have boiled out.”

I followed her.

“I wanted to have a cup of tea. Boiled out, as I said.”

She held the kettle under the tap.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want it anymore.”

“Calm down,” I said. “Why are you so agitated? What is it you want?”

“I want to hit you with this kettle!” She laughed. “Want to know why?”

I didn’t say anything.

“That’s why.” She wasn’t laughing anymore. “Because of your calmness.” She paused, looking for a better word. Then her face lit up. “Damn you and your intelligence,” she rushed out of the kitchen.

We sat at the table again.

“I’d never imagined my profession would come in handy at home,” I attempted to joke.

“I hate calm people,” she replied.

“Another agitated one is right there, standing outside our house,” I didn’t intend to say it, but the words just escaped me.

Her expression didn’t change:

“I can say I was happy for several months.”

“Oh, so you know what happiness means, ha? That’s interesting.” I sounded too calm, even ironic but not because, as Ia would say, I had no nerves. Quite the opposite, in that extremely tense and stressful situation I was suddenly gripped by unbearable serenity, rather strange for me I should say. “Several months of happiness aren’t negligible!”

"It's happiness when you don't think of happiness," Ia replied. Then, cutting herself short, she grabbed the girl. "What have you got in your mouth?" She shook her by her shoulders. "What is it? Spit it out! Now!" She sprang up, took the crying girl into her arms. "Stop crying! Stop it or I'll throw you out of the window!" she shouted. "Everyone, stop it! Shut up! Damn your kind!"

"Why curse our kind?" I smiled. "You're scaring the child."

She turned to me:

"Are you laughing? What are you laughing at?" She sat down, putting Tamriko across her knees and began to rock her as if she were still a baby. "Sh, sh, sh... What can I do?" she said quietly as if talking to herself. "One is right here refusing to understand me, the other is waiting outside."

"He is," I said. "Does he know you're leaving?"

"Do you know him?" she tensed visibly, leaned forward, staring at me with bulging eyes.

"Kind of. We even say hello to each other."

"That's exactly why I hate you!" She continued to rock the child. "Sh, sh, sh."

"Is it possible to keep anything a secret in Tbilisi?" I smiled. I could speak calmly now.

"You're smart, very smart and unbearably calm and if there's anything to bring your end, it's gonna be your smug brain and your robotic calmness."

"Destruction from one's brain!"

"Exactly! Don't try me!" she shouted.

"Don't shout," I said quietly. "You're scaring the child."

"She feels and knows everything perfectly well."

"Such as?" I waited for her to answer, but went on when she didn't reply. "What is it she knows? That your lover is waiting in the street so early in the morning?"

"Haven't seen him for three months now," she said quietly.

"You've driven the poor man crazy!"

Suddenly it dawned on me that Ia was running away not so much from me but from her lover. Something unexpected had happened between them as otherwise there were no surprises in our relationship. There was nothing that kept us together and we'd been sleeping in separate rooms for quite some time. Our formal divorce was a question of time. Ever since she confessed seeing someone else, it was bound to.

"I'm not sure what the Williams sisters are going to say, but no woman can find fault with you."

"Thanks. Why the Williams sisters?"

"Your Adidas shoes reminded me of them."

"That's an interesting association," I said. "Very witty."

"But you've got a trait that's gonna devastate any woman you happen to come across."

"And that is?"

"You can't love anyone."

I tried to change the topic:

"When did you decide to leave?"

"I told you."

"You didn't."

"A long time ago. I wrote to my brother telling him everything."

"Telling him what?"

"That we've got nothing to tell each other. He invited me."

"But why do you need to go that far? Haven't you got another brother nearby? Besides, I can move out so you can stay here."

She put Tamriko down, leaned across the table with her elbows and asked:

"Did you know I was cheating on you? Did you know before I told you?"

She answered her question herself:

“You did. You knew all too well, didn’t you? Or was it only about the last one?”

It was an extremely painful blow but I pulled myself together and said:

“Please, don’t overdo it. Stop making things up!”

“You didn’t know about the others because you didn’t care, right?”

“Didn’t care about what?”

“Whether I was cheating or not. You knew and didn’t kill me. Imagine that!”

“How many times should I have killed you?” I was back to my senses and even found the strength to confront her. But when she said it wasn’t funny, I said, “Incidentally, your most recent lover waiting now in the street used to be my tennis partner. Even then!”

“Are you trying to ridicule me? Humiliate me? Why don’t you admit I was your patient rather than your wife? We were a doctor-patient rather than a husband and wife. That’s why I need to escape, the sooner the better. I see no other way but flee.”

“You can do it any time, honey.”

“I hate that word!”

She said after a short pause:

“I hate everything in this house. It was alien and has remained alien. Full of your kin.”

“My kin?”

“The ghosts and phantoms!”

“Oh, I see.”

“Tranquil ghosts like you, calm doctors.”

“Nothing doing. My parents were doctors and their parents too. It’s a family tradition.”

“That’s another thing I hate – traditions. How many atrocities are done in the name of traditions!” She paced around the table, hitting her palm with her fist. “Why don’t you ask me to leave the child with you? Why don’t you fight? Why don’t you hit me?”

“Hit you?” I laughed. “Patients are never beaten in clinics! Shall I tell you what surprises me most?”

She paused:

“Anything surprises you?”

“You talk, behave and run away as if it was me who was unfaithful and not you!”

She came closer, looking down at me:

“Know what? As everything’s over, let’s tell each other the truth. If I don’t do it now, I’ll be haunted for the rest of my life.”

“What more is there to say?”

“I just want you to know it’s all your fault.”

“Such as?”

“Everything!”

“The child looking at you in horror is mine, is she?”

“You’re disgusting! A perfect executioner!”

“Why don’t you answer?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does!” I yelled at her. “Sit down! Don’t stand over me!”

She sat down.

I lowered my voice:

“You can leave it unanswered if you wish.”

“You know, I’d gladly kill you.” She brushed something invisible from her lap, shed a tear. “You’ve never ever loved me.”

"I've never thought about it," I said. "You might be right. I've never loved you."

She sprang up:

"I told you! I told you!"

"Sit down!"

She complied.

"Didn't you know?"

"I did!"

"Why does it surprise you then?"

"Surprise me? No, it just breaks my heart to realize how I've lived."

"Tamriko," I stretched my hand to my daughter. "Come to daddy."

The girl moved closer to her mum, staring at me with wide-open eyes, her finger in her mouth.

"What have you told the child about me? Why have you scared her?"

"She doesn't need telling. She knows. Your parents were unhappy too," she said and got to her feet.

"Why were they unhappy?"

She didn't say anything. She flung her bag over her shoulder, took up Tamriko and looked around the room:

"Am I forgetting anything?"

"If you are, I'll send it to Badri."

"Don't bother. Keep it as a memento. But a memento of what? Of nothing? Does it make sense?"

She made for the door. I followed. She stopped and turned to me:

"I'll leave the signed divorce papers with my lawyer."

"Does it matter?"

"It does. You might wish to marry again."

"I don't think so."

"Good if you don't make another woman miserable."

"Have you got money?"

"Yes, Badri gave me some. You know my lawyer's phone number. But he'll be calling you anyway. He's going to take care of everything. I never loved you either."

I walked with her to the car. Badri was at the wheel, looking away.

"Can I kiss the child?" I told Ia.

Tamriko clung to her mum's bosom, averting her face. I kissed her on the shoulder. My mouth was full of the fluff from her coat. They got into the car. Ia wound down the window and said:

"Blame yourself for everything. Farewell..."