November Rain

"Pardon me? Pardon?" Aleksandre cupped his hand to his ear, tilted his head slightly to one side, and stared with blinking, reddened eyes at Parunashvili, who was sitting in the third row.

Outside it was raining and dark. The classroom could be seen reflected in the wet window panes; Aleksandre was reflected there too, an old man with his hand cupped against his ear, head tilted slightly to one side, and staring fixedly at Paru-nashvili, while the other students in the young workers' evening class sat behind their desks in silence and with their heads bowed.

"Parunashvili, stand up and repeat what you just said!" "Don't shout at me." Parunashvili's face clouded over. "I said stand up!"

"You're praising class enemies and spouting bourgeois propaganda and on top of that you're shouting at me!"

"Who, boy? Who is this class enemy?" A bewildered smile played on the old man's lips.

"The writer of this poem, who else?"

Aleksandre turned deadly pale, took his handkerchief out of his pocket, cleaned his chalk-covered fingers, then went over to Parunashvili, grabbed him by the ear, and shook his head violently.

A flurry of whispers swept through the classroom.

Parunashvili pulled his head back and freed his ear from the teacher's hand. Aleksandre rapped his crooked finger sharply down onto the crown of his slightly balding head.

"Ha! – " An uneven smile appeared on Parunashvili's lips.

Aleksandre turned back around, went to his desk, pulled out his chair, sat down, and gazed sternly at the motionless class.

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Aleksandre struggled for a long time to get through the door with his um-brella, which was already open.

He walked home, going slowly like the old man he was. There were large pud-dles on the pavements; Aleksandre, wearing galoshes, walked straight through them.

In the cold, fine November drizzle the street was deserted apart from him. As he got farther away from the school building he heard the sound of hurried steps behind him. It was Kolya Purtskhvanidze, the school principal, no doubt – he al-ways caught up with Aleksandre at exactly the same point on the way home, after which they would carry on their journey together.

He stopped and turned to look behind him. Yes, it was Kolya: a tall, spidery man. In the darkness, Aleksandre could not make out the director's expression, but he sensed that something was troubling him.

Kolya looked around as he got nearer, carefully surveying the empty street, and instead of putting his hand on Aleksandre's arm and making a lighthearted comment as he usually did, he just asked him sternly, "What have you done, Ale-ksandre, eh?"
"What have I done?"
"Don't you know who Parunashvili is?"
Aleksandre got angry. "Do you know what he said to me?"
"I know, I know the whole story. The whole school's talking about it." "So?" The director looked up and down the empty street again, ducked his head
under the old umbrella and whispered, "He's with the secret police, Aleksandre!" "I don't care who he is!"
Kolya looked startled, straightened up again, and stood looking down at the short, old man. They stared at each other in silence for a while.
It was raining. The water ran in streams off the umbrella.
"Let's just let it go, can we? After all, we're not children. I mean, how could you do that?"
"And what should I do now, then? Apologize? Maybe go over to his house and kneel down before him?"
"No, no." Purtskhvanidze didn't appreciate the humor. "Well then?"
The director thought for a moment. "Are you staying somewhere else to-night?"
"What, I'm supposed to hide?"
"And don't come to school for the time being either." "Are you suspending me from work, young man?" "For a while, for a while, I said!"
The director turned around and walked off quickly down the wet pave-ment.

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"Are you in any pain, Sasha?"
Aleksandre didn't answer; he didn't even hear his wife's question. He was sitting on a high-backed armchair with his hands on his bony knees and star-
ing fixedly ahead, lost in thought and with his head swaying slightly.
He loved sitting in this armchair. Even as a younger man he had enjoyed quiet and calm, but when he retired he took this to extremes – he slacked off so much that he stopped even going out to buy the newspaper anymore.
He shackled himself like an invalid to his threadbare armchair, and sat there either sleeping or thinking, and his wife could ask him a question ten times with-out getting an answer.
Elene was not concerned at first. She put it down to his age – what could she do? – but when he stopped even shaving she started to worry more seriously. She realized that Aleksandre had thrown in the towel; he had become a prisoner of old age and was now waiting calmly, uncomplainingly for death.
At first she was angry to see a strong man like him becoming so timid that he simply folded his hands across his chest and lay down in his grave, destroying his life of his own free will. Soon, though, she started to feel sorry for him – he was still her husband, they had faced

life's challenges and struggles together for almost half a century, and her memories of that time were as sweet as they were bitter.
In fact she blamed herself a bit – had they had a child, she thought, he surely would have not given up like this, become so resigned, he would have focused on his grandchildren, their love would have helped him withstand and endure old age. All she could think of was what she should do, how she should help this man. She tried different ways to rouse him from his chair: she pointed out what a beau-tiful day it was, asked what on earth he wanted to spend it inside for, suggested he go for a walk, give his eyes something nice to look at.
On one occasion she brought him some theater tickets and made him shave and put on a suit and tie. They went to the play, mingled among the crowds, saw a couple of people they knew. Aleksandre rallied a bit, and seemed somewhat buoyed, but the next day he was back in that armchair that was so old it was fit for the fire, sitting there silent, torpid, lost in thought.
Finally, Elene realized that neither strolling in the street nor going to the theater was enough to help Aleksandre now – idleness was slowly killing him. Previously, when he worked at the school, he felt needed, felt he had a purpose. Now, though, he had become a useless burden, and that was why he was so low. When a man has no purpose, what value does his life have?
Elene bustled around and fussed over him and finally sought out his former pupil Kolya Purtskhvanidze. She explained the situation to him and told him what she wanted him to do. The very next day she invited him over to their house, where he spent so long telling Aleksandre that he had nobody to teach him Geor-gian and that Aleksandre was his last hope that Aleksandre actually believed him.
And that is how Aleksandre came to be working at the evening school. He only worked for a few hours, three times a week, but the change in him was so dramatic that he became almost unrecognisable – he was more positive, it was almost as if he was having a second youth – and that was why when now she saw him so torpid and pensive again she asked him if he was in pain.

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"Are you in pain?"
Aleksandre didn't answer her; he sat there with a fixed gaze, deep in thought. Elene left the table, went over to him, stood in front of him and gazed at him
with a sad smile on her face.
Only now did he see his wife. "Hm-hm!" He cleared his throat. "Come on, get up. Let's have dinner."
"Yes, all right, all right!" But Aleksandre sat there for a while longer, staring at the pictures of famous writers that hung on the wall above the writing table: Akaki Tsereteli, Vazha Psahvela, Ilia Chavchavadze. Among them in an oval frame there was a photograph of his father-in-law, Colonel Giorgi Janelidze.
"Get up, don't be so lazy!"

He leaned on the armrests, suppressed a groaning that stirred somewhere within him and just about managed to stand up.
Elene had laid out a paltry feast: tea, bread, cheese, cherry jam.
He pulled up a chair and sat down.
"You don't seem quite yourself," his wife said casually.
Aleksandre stirred his tea and stared at it as if he was going to say something. "Well?" his wife prompted him.
"I think I'm getting old, Eliko." Aleksandre smiled.
"Oh, well that's nothing new, is it?" His wife stared at him doubtfully. "Do you know who I just thought of? Your father. I could almost see him standing there in front of me, bless his soul."
Elene smiled. She turned her own mind to the quiet, well-loved man, spirited and indomitable, even after the death of his wife.
"Do you remember when he built the house on the slopes in Aghbulakhi?" Elene mimicked her father: "Garden? What do I need a garden for, I'll just go and stand on a boulder and look around!"
Aleksandre mimicked somebody else: "Has Colonel Janelidze gone com-pletely mad? Where on earth is he building that house?"
"I can remember the smell of those apples even now. And peaches. Do you remember those peaches he used to send us?"
"Do you remember the first time we visited him, what a splendid evening he put on for us? He'd invited absolutely everyone. 'My daughter from Paris!'" Now Aleksandre mimicked his father-in-law, and clearly very well, because Elene laughed out loud.
"What about when he wanted to get married again? At eighty years old, can you imagine?"
"Yes, laugh, laugh! But he managed to find himself a beautiful fiancée, didn't he! And who? Abashidze's daughter!"
"The fool! She thought he'd die and leave her his millions – little did she know he was up to his ears in debt!"
"And she was so young, so beautiful! I can't lie to you, Eliko, I wouldn't say no to a woman like that either!"
"Yes, yes, you're a veritable Don Juan, too, don't worry!"
They sat there and laughed. They laughed low and hearty, just as the old should.
"Oh, Giorgi, Giorgi!" Aleksandre sighed.
Elene sipped her tea and gazed at her husband with a bewildered smile and said, "Will you look at that! Our tea's gone cold!"

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After dinner Elene cleared the table, washed the dishes and made up the beds, then turned down the oil lamp and went to bed.

Aleksandre pottered about for a while longer, got his glasses, opened the day's newspaper, and started to look at it, but when his wife called him – "Come to bed, man, you need to sleep!" – he went into the bedroom, got undressed and got into bed.

He knew he wouldn't get to sleep and he was right; no matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he tossed and turned, he was unable to get a wink of sleep. Elene fell asleep quickly, but Aleksandre just lay there and thought about it all over again: he could see Parunashvili's face, deadly pale, and his evil expression; he recalled Kolya Purtskhvanidze's words, too – He's with the secret police! – and a cold, sticky liquid filled his soul. He knew that a creeping, insidious fear was the cause; he tried to fight it off, telling himself it made no difference who Purtskhva-nidze was or where he worked, but at the same time he heard a second voice tell-ing him he was wrong, that it really was a stupid thing he had done. What should he do then, go to him, fall on his knees, and beg his pardon? Aleksandre got angry with himself but there, too, the internal voice lay in wait, telling him that wouldn't help him either, that nothing would help if Parunashvili really was devious, if he really did work for the secret police, that he would not forgive Aleksandre for grabbing his ear and rapping him on the head, that it was really all over for him now. The voice sounded just like Kolya Purtskhvanidze. But Aleksandre reasoned to himself that he was a good person, that his students were not little children, that Parunashvili had verbally abused him, lambasted him if you will. Something had provoked Aleksandre to grab his ear and rap him on the head. The internal voice had fallen silent, it gave not even the slightest whisper, but Aleksandre felt that it was right there tucked away in some corner of his brain, with bated breath, watching him in silence.

In the end, finally, he fell asleep and dreamed that he was sitting at a row of desks in the classroom, and that the teacher, Evdokim Romanovich Katurov, with his ginger beard and mustache and wearing a black frock coat, was walking calmly up and down between the rows with his hands behind his back and intoning, "Our father..." in a sing-song voice.

"Our father!" the pupils shouted back, in a discordant din. "All together!" Katurov ordered.

"Our father all together!" repeated the confused pupils. "Our father, who – is – in – heaven, say it all together!"

The class followed his instruction with a low mumbled roar and Aleksandre covered his face with his hand to hide the fact that, while pretending to make an effort, he was not actually speaking at all and did not want his teacher to notice his passiveness. But Katurov recognized the deceit, walked over angrily, and hit him with the cane.

He woke up in terror. His hands were shaking.

The lamp had gone out and the room smelled of kerosene.

Aleksandre lay on his back and tried to regain his composure after his night-mare. Listening to his wife's gentle breathing, he gradually calmed down. At last he felt back to his normal self.

His dream reminded him of his childhood and school days: every day before the start of lessons the teachers would assemble the pupils in a large classroom to recite the Lord's Prayer and other prayers together. The teachers spent the first three weeks teaching the

pupils these prayers off by heart, and only after that did they start teaching them the Russian alphabet. Their method of teaching was sim-ple, and it was completely useless: the teacher held a book in his hand and broke the sentences up into individual words and recited these slowly, before the pupils repeated them back to him in short phrases, following along with their right in-dex finger in the books that lay open on the bench as they did so. Sometimes the teacher would stop reading and check that all the children had their finger on the right word, and woe to any child that didn't! Katurov kept his flexible cane hidden behind his back, ready for them. The children found it very difficult to learn the alphabet in this way and it took two or three years for them to be able to read more or less fluently. In contrast, they finished school not knowing how to read or write in Georgian at all. Georgian was only taught in schools after 1905, by which time Aleksandre was already a teacher himself.

One day his father, a proud but illiterate peasant, brought some documents home that were written in Georgian, and after dinner he gave them to his son, saying, "Be a good child and read these to me, will you?" As he did so he looked around with thinly veiled pride at the numerous family members gathered around the table, as if to say, "Look, this is what the child's education is for; I haven't paid those school fees for nothing, you know!" Aleksandre stared down at the docu-ments and then, since he could not understand any of it, he looked at his father rather guiltily and mumbled, "I can't read Georgian."

"What do you mean? You've been going to school all this time and you don't know how to read?" His father said in astonishment. "What kind of learning is that? Well, to hell with them. To hell with that school and those teachers! You won't be going there anymore; you can just bring a hoe and come up to the fields with me!"

His mother stepped in. "He doesn't need school to teach him Georgian! I'll teach him the Georgian alphabet within a month, you see if I don't!"

And sure enough the very next day the mother laid an open book in front of Aleksandre and said to him, "Look, this one is 'a.' See if you can find me another one like it!"

Aleksandre did so immediately.

"Yes, and that one makes the sound "a." Go on, find me another 'a.'" Aleksan-dre found another one.

"What sound does it make, son?" "It's 'a.'"

"Well done!" his mother praised him, kissed him, and stroked his head.

She taught him the whole alphabet that way. Then they moved on to writing; they found a large bone – the shoulder blade of an ox – cleaned it well, polished it up, and collected a pile of small sticks with charred ends. His mother wrote letters on the polished bone and told him the letter names: "This is called 'a' and this is 'b', and here we have 'c' and 'd.' Can you say the names?"

Aleksandre repeated the names of the letters back to his mother. "Now, write me an 'a'!"

Aleksandre did so with ease; his hand was already used to writing because of the time he had spent in school.

"Now write me a 'b'!" his mother told him.

He wrote that too and then followed it with a 'c,' 'd,' and 'e.'"

And in that way he learned to read and write Georgian in exactly a month. His mother had brought books with her as part of her dowry – The Knight in the Tiger's Skin – and other great works, and soon he managed to read them even bet-ter than his mother could.

Aleksandre sighed and rolled over in bed. For some reason he always re-membered his mother as a young woman whereas in fact, unlike his father, she lived long and died well into old age. He often tried to remember his mother as an old woman, dressed in an old Georgian dress, a traditional headband and pad covering her head, sitting on the floor on a rug – but he always struggled, and even now, when he really racked his brains to imagine an old woman in her eighties, her face lined with age, he could not associate that with his mother, in his mind ever young, beautiful, and with a soft, sweet voice.

His memories of his father were rather vague in comparison. Sometimes he would picture his severe face, his suspicious expression, his large, thick hands that were always, always busy doing something: holding a stick and herding cattle, or driving the hoe into the earth in the fields, or sharpening his scythe before kneel-ing to cut the grass, chopping wood, digging, washing out wine jars, carving a wheel rim for his cart, weaving a basket, or crumbling cold corn bread into his pot of boiled beans after a long, tiring day's work in the vineyard.

Aleksandre came back from the gold deposits in Bodaia to find his father al-ready dead. The man had been replaced by a small, already grassy mound in the yard of the church of the Trinity. He sat by that mound all night long, smoking to-bacco and thinking about his ill-fated life, the years that were wasted in prison and in Siberia, about his father lying there in the ground with his arms folded across his chest, peacefully decomposing and calmly rejoining the very earth over which he had spent his life bent double, moaning like a hard-working ox.

Aleksandre suddenly saw that such calm peacefulness was the point of exist-ence. This was not all that surprising from a man who had spent so long in prison and exile, but from that night onward he always sought out peace and calm. Hav-ing tripped and stumbled once, he subsequently tried to walk with great care, because he remembered the horror and pain of that day with such bitterness.

He often thought about Siberia, too, and the awful humiliation and suffering he underwent in prison, but he always kept those thoughts inside himself, in his head. He never spoke to anyone about it, not even Elene.

In the final days of 1906 when Aleksandre was working as a teacher at Zugdidi elementary school, his colleague Vasiko Alshibaia, who was a teacher at the same school and a member of the Zugdidi District Federalists' Committee, took him to a committee session. Aleksandre did not really want to go at all – he had decided not to get involved in politics – but felt he could not refuse Vasiko's request and so went with him to the session, where what was apparently a very important matter was being discussed: the Social Federalists were deciding whether to ap-prove the killing of the District Leader Vasily Keghashov and his two police su-perintendents, Kvaratskhelia and Shengelaia. They had already passed sentence on Keghashov in a previous session and approved his killing, but the debate about the two policemen had been going on for a long time without a ruling being made. At the committee

session that Aleksandre attended, Vasiko Alshibaia stated that killing the superintendents was completely unnecessary because they were clearly no more than pawns in Keghashov's hands. Aleksandre was allowed to vote, he obviously sided with Vasiko, and it was he who saved the superintendents' lives.

As already mentioned, Vasily Keghashov had already been sentenced to death at the previous session and Aleksandre was of course not consulted about this at all. On the other hand he was included in discussions about bringing a bomb from Kutaisi, told that the task had been entrusted to someone called Chkheidze, and that this Chkheidze would store the bomb in Vano Chanturia's pharmacy. But fate was smiling on Keghashov – Superintendent Shengelaia found the bomb and arrested all the members of the committee in a single night – Aleksandre among them.

In criminal law at that time, political prisoners were classified according to three categories of crime: a) verbal rebellion against the state and the govern-ment, punishable by up to three years' imprisonment without loss of civil rights; b) membership (even passive) of a secret organization opposed to the existing state regime, punishable by up to four years' hard labor and complete loss of civil rights; and c) membership of a secret organization and activity involving weap-ons, punishable by hard labor or death.

Aleksandre was found guilty under the second category and sentenced to four years' hard labor and exile in Siberia.

The Social Democrats' and Federalists' provincial committees hatched a plan to dig a tunnel into Kutaisi Prison and smuggle out the political prisoners before they were sent off on the long journey to Russia. The plan was to start the tunnel in the house belonging to the Social Federalist Varlam Pantskhava, which was across the street from the prison, only a short distance away.

With the help of Giorgi Zdanevich, chairman of the Chiatura Manganese In-dustrialists' Council and director of the Social Federalist provincial committee, they brought in professional pit tunnelers and a mining engineer. Work started on digging the tunnel from Pantskhava's basement, and on the sixteenth day it emerged in one of the prison cells, under a bed.

One by one the prisoners went down to the cell, squeezed into the tunnel, crawled a hundred and fifty meters or so and came up in the basement of Pant-skhava's house, where representatives of the provincial committee were waiting for them with passports, money, and clothes. The prisoners, dressed in dinner jackets, tailcoats, and top hats, followed each other one by one out of Pantskhava's house right under the prison guards' eyes, got into a carriage that had been spe-cially ordered for them, and then left the area as quickly as they could.

The one man who was on the list but did not manage to get out of the prison was Aleksandre.