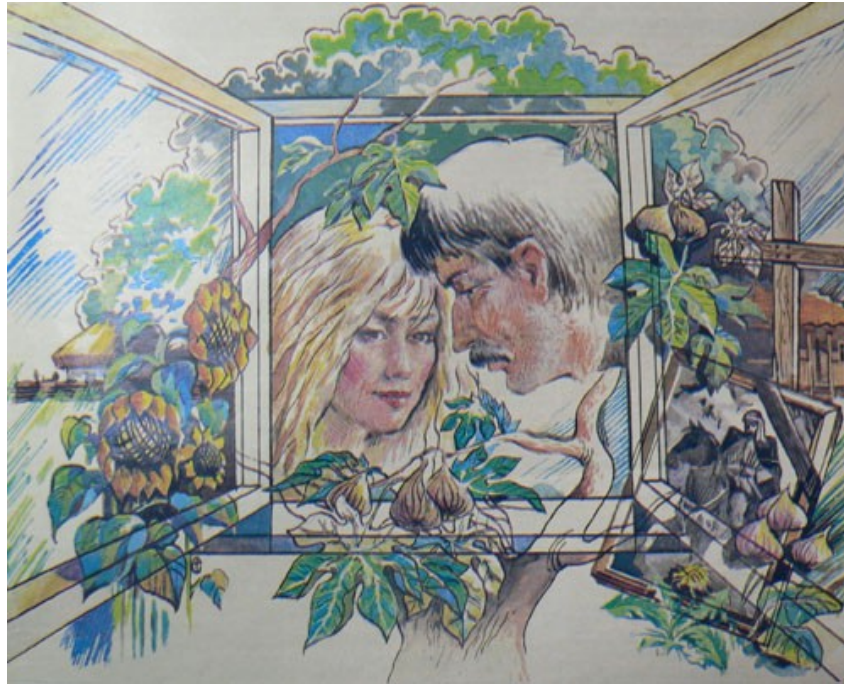


**THE FIG TREE**  
*Denis Chachkhalia*



That day Makhaz fell off a fig tree. Our elderly neighbour loved the sweet fruit of this southern tree with a childlike, undying passion. It was as if the sweetness of the figs evoked in him the memories of bygone spells of love, of some delicious voluptuousness.

Makhaz was illiterate and knew the Bible only from his wife's narrations. He had his own attitude towards the stories from the Bible. For example, the fact that Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves - he thought it only natural that the original sin should be connected with the fig tree.

If Makhaz had known the paintings of the great masters of the Renaissance who portrayed the scene of the Temptation of the Forbidden Fruit, he would easily have caught them out. On those canvases Eve is savouring an apple. But who can be tempted by an apple! It's hard to believe that the first woman could have been enticed by an apple. The fruit used by the Devil to seduce Eve was a fig and nothing else.

Judge for yourself, why should Adam and Eve have covered themselves with fig leaves if they committed the sin under an apple tree? If you cover yourself with a fig leaf, it means that you've sinned under a fig tree and no other. That is why Adam's virile weapon and Eve's enticing loins were covered with fig leaves. The very taste of these fruits was so seductive that it could only be compared to the sweet languor of love.

There was one curious detail. First the sin was tasted and then it brought shame. In other words, the fruit of the tree incited the sin, but the leaf of that same tree participated in the repentance which is still experienced by many who commit a sin today. That's how strong the continuity of human feelings has proved to be.

Anyway, Makhaz fell off the fig tree. Not only in our village Alra but in the whole of Abkhazia a passion for figs is considered to be a shameful weakness. But Makhaz had adored figs from early childhood.

By the way, a child's weakness for figs is not reprehensible. However, Makhaz retained this passion throughout his youth and maturity. And later, the less he tasted the sweetness of love, the fiercer his passion for the juicy fruit of the fig tree, sweet to the point of stickiness, became.

The surviving local nobility refrained from eating figs, haughtily considering them to be food for the plebs. Even our proud peasants occasionally displayed true examples of abstinence. However, not everyone succeeded in this. Those who were not strong enough surrendered themselves to their weakness under a veil of secrecy.

Both summer and later varieties of fig tree grow in Abkhazia. That is why Makhaz privately called the beginning of the summer Tiny Fig and the autumn Big Fig.

The fruits of the earlier varieties were bigger and lighter in colour, though not as sweet. When they ripened, their little muzzles split, losing their chaste integrity and breaking into amorous floods of crimson smiles.

It is a painstaking task to peel the skin from a Turkish fig. Yet, his fingers stiff from old age, Makhaz stripped the fruits bare and devoured them, moaning with delight. With an insatiable desire, shameful for an old man, he climbed up to higher and higher branches. And right at the top of the tree, as if at the crest of gluttony, he gorged himself on figs sinking into a state of narcotic bliss. Losing his balance, he fell down and even snapped a couple of small branches off this spongy, easily broken tree.

At one time there were two abrek<sup>1</sup> brothers, who went into hiding in the neighbouring woods. They had killed a man who had insulted the honour of the family. However, having shot the offender, they did not leave the woods as abreks normally would. This was not at all because they could expect terror in return from the relatives of the killed man. This thought scarcely entered their desperate heads. They simply decided to kill everyone who had ever insulted their close relatives over the past five generations, that is since the times of the Russo-Turkish war. They decided to settle the score with the offenders once and for all, and to put an end to the whole business.

Apart from that, it was unfair to the offenders of the family they had already killed to let others live on unpunished. This would mean that some were allowed to insult, while others were not. Or in other words, some close relative would be avenged, while a distant one, whom their grandfather probably loved more than his own brother, would not be. Should he be left to lie buried, unavenged? As if there were no worthy descendants in the family.

Once the villagers of our Alra were sitting in a tobacco shed, lined with fragrant fern leaves, threading tobacco leaves. One of the peasants asked where the abrek brothers could be to which Lagustan chuckled, "They must be sitting under Nazir's fig tree, where else?"

The lame and venomous big-mouth went too far saying that. First of all he made it known that the abrek brothers often found shelter at the house of my grandfather Nazir. And with that he gave out both the whereabouts of the abreks and the identity of their harbourer.

And it made it sound as if the host would not share his house with his guests - and it was a matter of honour for any dzhigit<sup>1</sup> to offer shelter to guests, particularly if they were abreks.

To crown it all, the fact that that vermin Lagustan mentioned the fig tree implied that the abrek brothers were living hand-to-mouth and had to resort to the questionable help of this wanton tree. This equally insulted the fearless avengers and their hospitable harbourer.

Lagustan's words reached the ears of the forest brothers, who were armed with the latest ammunition of that time. The fact was that in 1905, preparing the masses for the future armed struggle, Sergo Ordzhonikidze and his comrades-in-arms shipped in a lot of guns and ammunition. But since the Bolsheviks were few in number then, while arms were in abundance, the abreks walked around hung with grenades like a Christmas tree.

It is even said that a wife of one abrek, who later became a revolutionary, used the muzzle of a shiny 1905 revolver, rather than the usual stick, to make holes while thinning out tobacco seedlings.

The lame Lagustan was walking back home, planing a spindle out of a dry cornell twig. His right leg was shorter, and like all those who have one leg shorter than the other, he walked deliberately stamping his shorter leg like a walking stick, trying to give an impression of confidence.

However, the confidence of the lame Lagustan's carriage was merely an optical illusion. On the other hand, the unexpected appearance of the two insulted brothers in Lagustan's way was real and boded no good. They rode up to the dumbstruck Lagustan from the left and from the right, as if narrowing the space to the restricted measurements of a coffin.

"So you say we're grazing under Nazir's fig tree?" asked one of the brothers - evidently the elder one, since in any situation, especially one such as this, the eldest should start the conversation.

Though they were not twin brothers, it was difficult to tell them apart - and not only for Lagustan. They had such a large amount of arms on them - cartridge belts, grenades, bullet straps, rifles, daggers - that it discouraged anyone from trying to sort out such trifles as the differences in their features. Lagustan dropped both the knife and the spindle.

"Go ahead!" they ordered, and risking falling over on his short leg, Lagustan dragged himself to Nazir's farm.

Half an hour later, Nazir brought to the fig tree two other peasants, in front of whom Lagustan had said those fatal words in the tobacco shed.

The fig tree in question stood in a depression on the swampy edge of the forest. Here, in a large pool, buffaloes took their mud baths.

The fig tree stood at some distance from the farm, but since all the adjoining lands were considered to belong to the neighbouring farm, the fig tree could justifiably be called Nazir's fig tree, and it even gave the name to the place. So, for example, if one peasant asked another if he had seen his buffalo, the other would answer that he had seen it in the mud pool by Nazir's fig tree.

"Climb the fig tree," ordered the elder abrek. And the thought that they wanted to kill Lagustan in the air, like a bird, flashed through the mind of one of the peasants. The other, a more pessimistic witness, thought of a more

Jesuitical type of execution: if, winged on the fig tree, Lagustan did not die from the abrek's bullet, he would die from the impact of hitting the ground.

"Pick six leaves. The bigger ones," Lagustan heard himself ordered by the grenade-covered abrek.

"OK, OK," he whispered in an insane patter, picking the rough fig leaves. But he was in no condition to count to six. And the number six was sacred for any abrek. This did not have its roots in any sort of superstition or religious prejudice. Abreks do not have any prejudices. They have no time for tricks. It is simply that the revolvers shipped to our land were six-shooters, and the abrek's brain automatically repeated the shooting capacity of his revolver.

"Get into the swamp!" they ordered Lagustan when he had crawled down from the fig tree with a small clump of rough leaves.

Limping more than usual, as if he were making his last steps on solid ground, Lagustan walked into the swampy sludge up to his waist, without disturbing the encamped tranquillity of the buffaloes. These powerful beasts were lying with their raven-black muzzles habitually raised above the surface, chewing their endless cud rhythmically and with a Buddhist-like thoroughness and serenity.

It looked as if the most terrifying thing was about to happen: the abreks would fire their revolvers at Lagustan, and he, falling down into the swamp, would choke on the warm sludge. However, even a deeply insulted abrek would never kill a cripple, although this did not rule other types of reprisal. In general, it is very difficult to foresee what the abreks might do.

"Now eat up the leaves!" ordered the elder abrek. And, as if he had simply been awaiting the permission, Lagustan began chewing them.

Rough fig leaves are so coarse and dry that it is next to impossible to eat them. For that one would need buffalo's jaws. The animals themselves went on chewing their cud, as if showing Lagustan how to do it. But he rolled those leaves, which were as tough as emery paper, and swallowed them with scarcely any chewing, scratching his throat in the process. By the end of the suicidal feast his face muscles ached unbearably and he could hardly move his jaws.

I heard this story back in my childhood from Shugian, my grandfather Nazir's second cousin. Since then I have remembered that a fig tree is a tree whose fruits are loved by all adults yet they are ready to cruelly punish anyone who dares to catch them out.

So, old Makhaz fell off the fig tree and lost consciousness. But the edges of his lips, inflamed with the burning sweetness of the figs, seemed to retain the memory of his interrupted adultery. When Makhaz started to regain consciousness the first thing he saw was the dim outline of his beloved tree, which was a ghostly, yet convincing indication of real life.

"I see the fig tree, therefore I am," Makhaz could have said, had he been a philosopher. He could not express this, but he definitely felt it.

When Makhaz saw the dark green tent of his beloved fig tree, he moaned. Maybe because he felt the pain of his broken ribs, maybe because he realised that he would never again be able to climb the fig tree, his secret lover, now standing before him. . . And it was bending over him, still full of vitality, teasing him with drops of figs like a favourite concubine would tease her enfeebled Sultan with the birth marks scattered over her splendid body in some cosmic and incomputable chaos.

The first to hear Makhaz moaning was his wife Nyura, a Kuban Cossack woman he had brought to Abkhazia from the front.

Then, they had immediately gone to the vegetable garden to hide away from prying eyes. Nyura had climbed the tree and started throwing figs down to her liberator. She teased Makhaz with inviting laughter and with the way she threw figs at him, climbing higher and higher. Soon the soldier realised that he had to conquer this "height". He climbed the tree with the swiftness of a lynx and her laughter choked on the soldier's kiss.

Without stopping kissing and patting his loved one. Makhaz pulled her down and own until they found themselves on a strong and spreading branch. Carried away by love they could not understand why it was getting lighter and lighter, or where this feeling of slow and overwhelming falling came from. And only when they and the detached branch hit the ground with a hollow thud did Makhaz and Nyura understand what had happened. But this did not stop their love making - on the contrary, the feel of the ground even made them more impassioned.

They remained lying amidst the leaves of the broken branch and Nyura, bending over the soldier, treated him with figs from her lips. They bit the fruit together and ate it without detaching their lips. And their lips merged with the sweet pulp of the squashed fig.

"Turn around. Let me straighten out," Nyura said, covering herself with a small branch, and Makhaz noticed the clear imprints of fig leaves on her pink thigh.

Makhaz brought no medals back from the war. He fought with the rest but was not killed. Like many others he was wounded. Fate guarded him from death on the battle field and in the end presented him with Nyura. And this was better than any award. These two awards - Life and Nyura - merged into one big award.

"Makhaz, couldn't you have asked someone in the war for a medal?" the villagers teased. "Others brought them back in dozens. They can hardly fit them all on."

"After the major battle," Makhaz would explain indefatigably, "the commander thanked those who had survived. And then he cried out, 'Private Makhaz Palba!' I stepped out of the ranks. He brought Nyura to me and said, 'Here is your award for bravery. Wear it to your heart's content, soldier.' "

And in fact Makhaz actually called Nyura "Award". The thing is that according to our traditions it is considered inappropriate to call a wife by her name. The wife is called either by a different name or she is spoken about in the third person, while the name is hardly ever mentioned at all. And so Makhaz called his wife Nyura, Award. And for a long time, those villagers who did not know Russian thought that it was some Russian name. It even sounded beautiful and full of meaning to them, which after all was not far from the truth.

"Hey, bara (Hey, you), Award!" he would cry from the field. "Bring; some buttermilk or I'll die of thirst!"

And she would bring him diluted buttermilk in a jar, smiling, knowing in advance that it was not only thirst that tormented him. She-knew that he would not let her go at once. She would smile in a similar way coming back from the field, shaking down her skirt and readjusting her kerchief on her head.

Shelling sunflower seeds on the open veranda of her chestnut Abkhaz house, Nyura heard moans coming" from the maize field and she rushed there, trying to work out what could have happened. When she saw her husband lying flat out under the fig tree, she realised that he had become the victim of his own fig obsession. Cursing him, she dragged him towards the house through the maize stalks.

Makhaz and Nyura were childless. Nyura turned out to be barren. But Makhaz loved her and never wished to abandon her, though there were many who advised him to re-marry. Many years later, Makhaz talked one of his relatives who had many children into giving him a son to bring up. Thus, Safer became Makhaz's only hope that life on the farm would go on and the fire in the hearth would be kept burning.

Outwardly everything looked normal: the boy lived with them, and helped on the farm. But in his heart he longed for his family and his bustling parents' house, located far from the school and the main road.

When Makhaz could speak again, he called Safer, who had just come back from school, and instructed him: "Tell Award to explain to people that I've fallen off a horse. She is Russian—she may say something wrong."

Nyura had warned Makhaz more than once that at his age it was far safer to sit on the veranda and eat sunflower seeds than to climb the fig tree. The Cossack woman could not get it into her head that an Abkhaz, even if he is not all there, would never shell sunflower seeds.

At first Makhaz tried to forbid her to eat the seeds, especially on the veranda where she could be seen by the neighbours.

"You are not sitting on your zavalinka<sup>1</sup>, but on the veranda of an Abkhaz house," Makhaz would try to shame her, again reminding her that this chestnut house had been built by his grandfather Hasarat, and hoping that maybe the respect for such a distant ancestor of her husband would stop her.

"You'll kill yourself, you old fool," she used to say to her husband, with a disrespect inconceivable in our land. But Makhaz forgave her these uncouth Kuban manners and retired in the direction of the fig tree.

"Aunty Award, give us some seeds, please," the neighbours' children would cry now and again at her gate.

Nyura adored sunflower seeds, which were sent from her Kuban village in sacks. She taught all the children from the nearby farms how to shell the seeds and they permanently begged at the gate of her house.

He had already spent several days in bed with no change for the better. Hardly anyone believed in the story that he had fallen from a horse, though everyone pretended to. Makhaz did have a horse, though it was a long, long time since he had ridden it. It was next to impossible now to catch this half wild mustang. Meanwhile, the

seductive fig tree stood well in view on the slope behind the house as if admitting that it was she who had destroyed the life of the old voluptuary with her enchantment.

He was dying in agony as the Big Fig season was drawing to a close. People said that his spine was seriously damaged. For the relatives who filled the house of the dying man, every day seemed like it would be his last.

At midnight, when there were no outsiders in the house, Makhaz's elder sister, who had come to her dying brother, sent the neighbours' boy to the fig tree. The swiftfooted boy soon came back with an oil lamp in one hand and a bowl full of blue-grey figs in the other. The bowl of figs was put at the head of the sick man's bed.

Makhaz's sister, who had seen off more than one deceased to the next world and had an enviable experience in these matters, did everything precisely and confidently. That mercifully compensated for the perplexed inactivity of less experienced relatives.

She squashed a fig with her old, gnarled fingers and smudged Makhaz's lips with it. They gave her a copper bowl to wash her hands. Witnesses maintain that as soon as she smudged his lips, Makhaz licked them and even smiled. Then, at her signal, the clothes in which Makhaz was to be dressed after his lingering death were passed over to her.

Makhaz's sister took the clothes and stood at the foot of the dying man's bed.

"Makhaz," she addressed him, being absolutely sure that he would hear her and obey. "Listen, Makhaz, it's time to set out. Look, I've prepared clothes for you. Your mother and father are waiting for you there. Don't make them wait. Tell them that everything is all right with us here and that I will also be joining you soon."

Several women gave in and sobbed. Suddenly, the dying man opened his eyes wide, as if to glance over this world for the last time. With that Makhaz tried to raise his head, then shuddered several times and remained lying with his eyes open. His heavily and noisily rising chest suddenly froze in a raised position, held still for a moment and then slowly and silently breathed its last.

"A candle," whispered Makhaz's sister.

Nyura handed her the candle which was burning on the bedside table at the head of the bed.

"Leave now," Makhaz's sister said to her sister-in-law and Nyura, wailing, went out onto the veranda, where a couple of other women's wailing joined in.

Makhaz's sister, with the help of neighbours, tidied up her brother, closed his eyelids, folded his arms on his chest and put the burning candle in his hands. Men held the feet of the dying man. Everyone watched how slowly Makhaz's breast was going down, exhaling the last remains of life. And all of a sudden from his gaping mouth appeared a pale blue trickle of gas, which hovered above the already cold lips, then vanished. Everyone was struck with awe: "His Soul," they uttered in a single whisper like an "Amen."

Many people came to say their last farewells to Makhaz. As is usually the case in our land, even the most distant villager would surely come at least once to pay his respects to the deceased.

Nyura, as the wife of the deceased, was not to cry or to lament in public. However, Nyura could not and did not want to adapt to our customs. Nobody seemed to blame her for that but they still believed that a person who does not follow our traditions disgraced himself.

The widowed Cossack woman wailed at the top of her voice, sometimes even drowning the sorrowful laments of Makhaz's sister and other close relatives.

"What've you done? What've you done?" repeated Nyura in Russian against the background of a highly professional burial service of local mourners, and this seemed like a short Slavic resume of the complicated Abkhaz lamentations.

Her inconsolable and desperate mind battered like a sparrow against the glass, unable to fly into the realms of common sense.

The funeral ceremony drew to its closing stages, and this slightly stirred all the people crowded into the appropriately wide Abkhaz courtyard. Saying their last farewells, Makhaz's close friends and relatives spoke many kind and heartfelt words.

The neighbours' boy held a picture of the deceased in front of him, in which Makhaz was photographed on horseback. Apart from its ritual significance, this enlarged image was to confirm that Makhaz had really fallen from a horse and not from the fig tree.

Makhaz looked handsome on this photograph, and one wanted to forget about the fig tree, and along with all the people present, confirm the theory of Makhaz's manly death.

He was buried on his own farm. According to our beliefs, a deceased member of the family, buried on the grounds of his farm, stays forever with the living and can use everything that he was used to during his lifetime, as though he had not died at all.

As time goes on, a farm may become so overcrowded with graves that the farmhouse itself looks more like an office building in a big cemetery.

Makhaz's grave was the one closest to the gates, it faced the side street and so could be seen by everyone passing by. At the head of the grave was the photograph of the smiling Makhaz on horseback. On the mound itself lay three figs. They had evidently been put there by Makhaz's foresighted sister. What's the use of trying to correct the brother after his death from what you had failed to correct him in his lifetime?

In a word, the photograph of Makhaz on horseback and the figs suggested the possibility of the two different versions of the farm owner's death.



After her husband's funeral, Nyura began to realise that there was no reason for her to stay in our land. Her adopted son missed his own family even more, though he tried to conceal it.

"Don't suffer, Safer. Go back to your family," she told him after forty days. "It seems that this house is fated to be without a master. I'll wait till the one year anniversary, then go back home. I have mourned over my husband but there will be no one to mourn over me."

Nyura understood that Safer could not go, leaving her alone. But her departure back to her native Kuban village would release Safer, and the relatives would get a chance to run the farm the way they wanted.

"Only please, Safer, don't let the farm become run down. Maybe you will come back to this house when you get married. You will have to leave the family one day. There are many others apart from you. And here, after all, is a well-managed farm, and the house is not alien to you," she told him on his departure.

Safer had not expected such frankness, such merciful wisdom, though Nyura had always been a kindly person. They cried as they parted, and Safer went back to his parents' house. From time to time he would come to see Nyura and did all the man's work willingly, in a masterful way. And she, smiling sadly, with the nagging anguish of an unfulfilled mother, watched her adopted son work to pay her back for the efforts she had never spared and above all for his freedom.

It was especially difficult to spend the winter in an empty house. But Nyura survived the lonely, unusually cold winter. She waited for spring to come, then set out to work in her vegetable garden for the last time. Nyura had her own Ukrainian corner on that old Abkhaz farm. She would enter it singing Ukrainian songs. The local children had already known some of these songs for a long time and they would sing them, shelling sunflower seeds.

She entered her Ukrainian garden as if it were an icon corner. Everything was pleasant to the eye here and it gladdened her heart. Round-faced sunflowers, like symbols of the Kuban sun, swayed amidst a profusion of raspberry, gooseberry and currant bushes and other berries which were exotic for an Abkhaz village.

For the adult villagers, Nyura's vegetable garden was no more than an extravagance, devoid of any practical use, since none of its produce could be included in the conservative diet of the locals. On the other hand, the children, with their democratic susceptibility, soon came 'to appreciate these wonderful berries, which gleamed like precious stones. For them, Aunty Award's vegetable garden was like an inexhaustible treasury, and occasionally they made timid and only slightly destructive raids on this Ukrainian autonomy within Makhaz's spacious farm.

Everyone in the village knew that Nyura would leave after the first anniversary of Makhaz's death, but they did not think it would be immediately after. Then suddenly, riding past Makhaz's grave, or to be more exact, when he had nearly passed it, Shugian was struck by something. It seemed to him that some changes had been made on the grave. He turned his stubborn horse around and rode right up to the fence. On the small table at the head of the grave was a boxwood wreath with flowers from Nyura's Ukrainian garden woven into it. Makhaz's portrait, covered with glass, now stood inside the wreath, and on the silk ribbon was written "To my dear friend, from Award."

Shugian was almost moved to tears. He felt sorry that Nyura had gone. She was kind and intelligent. In her farewell message on the ribbon she had not called her husband by his name, and had even put her married pseudonym — Award — instead of her own name. This was her last gesture to our simple traditions.

The news soon spread around the village that Nyura had left. She had disappeared. Without saying goodbye. And it was understandable to everyone. Here people are ashamed to speak about their feelings. They value the feelings themselves. . . And Nyura had been one of them.

From that moment on the children stopped shelling sunflower seeds, though sometimes in the evenings, through the dusk falling over our Abkhaz village, some child's voice would strike up a Ukrainian song — incomprehensible but dear, like our soulful memories of Nyura, whose nest here turned out to be so shortlived.

Without motherhood there is no stability.

God, with what heartfelt feelings this young girl sings the Ukrainian lines on the twilight hillside:

*My dear mother,*

*You haven't slept for nights. . .*

And now, as if embracing his sister, a boy tenderly joins in with the second voice:

*And you took me*

*To the field at the edge of the village. . .*

These were the voices of the children Nyura had been deprived of by fate.

*Translated by Alexander Postnikov  
And Charlotte Foster*