TOGHAY MUROD

HUSBAND AND WIFE

They did not date like other couples. They did not copy poems from books to express their feelings. They did not say seasonable words like “I love you! I cannot live without you!” When their lips found each other the girl’s feet did not lift off the ground. And no, the boy did not protect her from hooligans and he did not become a hero… They shared no romantic memories.

The good poet Orolboy was writing love poems as if covering himself with a counterpane. He nurtured his hemistiches as tenderly as he nurtured his child.

Involuntarily he remembered his first love — his classmate Kholbuvi … He felt her in his chest like an embrace in a dark night. Despair as black as night surrounded his soul. He slowly got out of bed. He switched on the light noisily and turned over the pages of his first book. The poems in it seemed so inappropriate and artificial. He threw the book under the bed…

Every poet should create his masterpiece first! Orolboy was almost thirty years old, but he still hadn’t been able to conceive his masterpiece. He was writing second rate works instead of his masterpiece...

It was with deep regret that he had searched for a fiancé. He found her; an ordinary seamstress, Barchinoy. In spite of his artificial smile he talked to Barchinoy and took her to the municipal amusement park. Each one of them ate a half kilogram of ice-cream. While looking into his fiancé’s eyes Orolboy felt nothing that affected his heart. “Every man needs a mate to live. So what can I do?” Orolboy consoled himself. He nodded his head as if confirming his words. Barchinoy did not believe in his poetic talent: “Poetry is fascination and attraction. But look at this poet’s condition…” she thought.

The girl concluded that the boy looked down on her. Despite that she agreed to the wedding, because her youth was passing also…

The wedding was held at a restaurant.

Then at last the masterpiece was created! They showed him the child through a window. Orolboy fixed his gaze on his son, smirking: Here is the Masterpiece! It is “Anna Karenina”! No, “Xamsa”![1]

He stretched with pleasure like an author who has just penned the last dot of his masterpiece.

On the night of a good day, Orolboy stayed awake for a long time and wrote a poem, then slept very hard. The next day he woke up at lunchtime. He stepped out on the terrace. The weather was very mild—it was a good time for walking. He thought about it and remembered that he had not seen Vasily Shushkin’s film “Red Arrowwood” yet.

“Get dressed! Let’s go to the movies,” he said to Barchinoy.

Barchinoy put on a suit with trousers of the type that had come into fashion.

“Hmm!” Orolboy knitted his brows and slapped his knee. “Barchinoy, I want to see my wife in atlas chemise.[1]”

“In a poet’s judgment his wishes were endless!”

“Woman should be a woman!” said Orolboy.

“Let’s go, otherwise we’ll miss the film.”

“You will not go! I’ll go alone.”

“Aha! If you do not want me to go with you, then do not take me.”

“Why are you saying such useless words? I’m talking to you!”

“What is wrong with you? You sound so strange! All cultured women wear clothes made of this kind of fabric!”

“Is atlas fabric a stranger to culture? What other country has beautiful cloth like this? You women are ungrateful! You cannot see the culture that is right in front of your eyes…”

“You’re always like this. You always say the entire world is in love with Uzbek atlas, and that no place has as luxurious historical buildings Samarkand. You go on and on…”

“Enough!”

“Really? And if not, then what? What can you do if I don’t stop?

“So I can’t do anything, can I?”

Orolboy jumped out of his seat, approached a surprised Barchinoy and slapped her on the face.

Barchinoy crumbled onto the sofa. She wept, hiding her face with her hand.

For some time Orolboy just stared at his wife in wonder. Then he went into his **small** workroom and sat down on the chair. He closed his eyes and put his head in his hands.

It was the first time he had ever slapped a woman’s face.

Barchinoy could not stop crying for a long time. When she was weeping her sleepy child started to cry. She lost patience with her tears, got up, washed and dried her face. She shuddered as she looked in the mirror--her left cheekbone had become green. She cried again, curling her lip. Barchinoy enfolded her child in her arms.

When the child began to drink its mother’s milk Barchinoy calmed down. It seemed to her that the pain of the green cheekbone had stopped. She fondled her child’s head and kissed his forehead. “My baby! I have always thought that a family without love is not a family. Now it has come true”.

Barchinoy was thinking as she looked at the sky through the window. After putting her baby to sleep, she went to bed herself. She smoothed her husband’s pillow. “He does not like to sleep alone. He will come all the same and will hug me to calm me down, he will be tender…”

Her eyes went to sleep with these kinds of thoughts.

In the morning when she opened her eyes her husband was not in the bed.

“He does not even want to sleep next to me. He does not want to even see me. Enough, it is enough! We will leave! My baby, we will leave! A family without love is not a family”, she said.

She turned back to look at the door with agony and annoyance.

“He did not even come out of his room to ask me not to leave. He did not even do it to spare my feelings. He has proved that he is an uncivilized village man. He does not even come out to say good bye to his child. He’s gotten bored with me. I should have realized it earlier”.

Then the door bell rang.

Barchinoy had to open the door. Orolboy's uncle who lives in the village and two unfamiliar men were standing on the threshold.

Barchinoy invited them in with a forced smile.

Orolboy came out. The guests sat down. At the table they greeted each other again.

"There's a meeting tomorrow. That's why we came. I wanted to see you…" said the uncle.

"Good, very good," said Orolboy with an artificial smile.

"By the way, poet, what about your work here? What about your poetical agenda? Are you fulfilling the poetic plan? For example, we exceeded the cotton quota by 150 percent. Now you should write a poem about us!"

When Barchinoy was setting the table Orolboy's uncle saw her green cheekbone.

"Oh! What happened to your face, my daughter?"

Orolboy's heart missed a beat. He did not breathe for some time. He stared at the picture of a dog drawn on a candy wrapper.

Barchinoy smiled and patted her cheekbone:

"It's become the custom now to do up floors in linoleum, like this." she pointed at the floor. "When you wash it, this God damned floor, it becomes very slippery. I fell on my face yesterday when I was washing it…"

"Ah, be careful! Work never ends…"

Orolboy's breath trembled. He bowed his head and blushed with shame. Barchinoy also turned red.

"Here, take something to eat," she invited the guests. "Brother Orolboy[1], pour out a cup of tea for our guests." She got up from the table.

Thereafter Orolboy came to himself. "Take this! Eat!" he plied his guests with food and poured tea into their empty cups.

The guests spoke of misfortunes that come of insignificant accident such as this.

Barchinoy brought the meal and placed Bulgarian cognac and champagne on the table.

“Pour for them, brother Orolboy.”

Orolboy poured cognac into the glasses.

“So, how is the poet? “Uncle asked Barchinoy, gesturing towards Orolboy.

“Good. He is very good.”

“Tell me if he does anything crazy. We’ll talk to him.

“No, why? He is very good. My mother likes him too…”

Orolboy looked away. He drank the cognac without even waiting for the guests. Barchinoy passed a salted cucumber to her husband. Her husband shut his eyes and took the cucumber.

The guests stayed a long time and left, inviting them to the village.

After seeing off the guests, Orolboy entered the workroom, stretched himself out on the folding bed and lay supine. He cupped his hands to make place for his head and put his head back. He observed the event as a poet… A smile appeared on his face. He jumped up and looked out the window, rubbing his palms together with enthusiasm. He smiled, showing his teeth which were yellowed from smoking. He went into the sitting room with an abrupt movement. Barchinoy was not there. He walked toward the door. Barchinoy was there. She knitted her brows, pouted her lips, and tucked the child, who was sitting in a stroller, into his blanket.

Orolboy took her hands.

“Forget it! I was angry and lost my head.”

Barchinoy rejected his hands.

“Barchinoy, you know that poets are very sensitive…”

Barchinoy kept silent and reached her hand toward the door.

Orolboy took her hands and turned her to himself, put his arms around her waist and kissed her on the cheekbone that was hurt. He pressed his lips to hers for a long time.

Barchinoy cried as she leaned on her husband’s neck. Orolboy felt her warm tears on his neck. Then they sat face to face looking at each other.

Orolboy drank a glass of cognac, which was leftover from the guests, and gazed at Barchinoy. He gazed a long time… Barchinoy cast down her eyes. When their glances met they looked at each other for a full minute. In his soul such sweet, frank passions now arose for his wife. He had felt the same passions when he had met the eyes of his classmate girl. Yes, yes. He felt passions now as he had felt them then.

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Translated by Shuhrat Sattorov