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Excerpt from the novel *Bride and Groom* (Deep Vellum: 2017)

[...]

The Shakhovs lived in a whitewashed six-story apartment building on the central city square, nestled behind a disorderly clutter of shacks and garages. Under a pitted acacia tree, whose branches occasionally dropped little pods rattling with seeds onto the ground, children in bright-colored T-shirts were playing Nine Stones. They had chalked a square on the asphalt, had divided it into parts — as for Tic-Tac-Toe — and were raucously erecting a little tower out of pebbles in the centre square. As he walked past the cluster of little players squatting on their haunches, Marat tried to recall the rules, but he could only remember shreds: Rusik-the-Nail is standing by the rubble of a toppled tower aiming a ball at Marat, and Marat is hastily trying to set out the stones in each sector before his opponent can “tag” him.

Marat and his mother proceeded up a set of neat, gently rising steps through the entryway. Some of the doors had old-fashioned labels nailed to them: Prof. Omarov G, Engineer Isaev M A... Marat’s mother, who had put on a long, openwork shawl for the somber occasion — they were calling on the Shakhovs, as they had agreed, to convey their condolences upon the death of their uncle — followed him up the stairs, clutching onto the railings and voicing a never-ending litany of instructions:

“Remember, the girl’s name is Sabrina, don’t get it mixed up.”

The door opened and Shakhov’s wife, a withered woman with short hair, appeared. She assessed Marat quickly with her sharp eyes and nodded a greeting, then kissed his mother, who was whispering words of sympathy, and indicated a couple pairs of slippers for them to put on. The walls of the small entryway were lined with wooden shelves, laden with medical reference books; above them hung some black-and-white photographs. From one of them a large bearded man wearing a hat and a natty suit with a boutonniere frowned suspiciously out at Marat. This was Shakhov’s late father, a musical theater director, folk song collector, Don Juan, and great carnivore. He had gone on numerous expeditions in quest of unknown melodies, traveling far and wide with phonograph cylinders, audio recording devices, sheaves of notebooks, and bundles of dried mountain sausage. Every day, rumour had it, Shakhov Senior would eat an entire ram’s head, and after a successful premiere he would also down a hefty serving of boiled tripe, which they would prepare for him in a special kitchenette installed in the theatre for that purpose. Shakhov Junior vehemently denied these tall tales and claimed that throughout his life his father had suffered from gastritis and that there was no way he could have digested that many rams’ heads, even if he had wanted to.

“And plus, how could we have gotten hold of so many sheep? We didn’t have that kind of money anyway!”

It was hard to say whether he was telling the truth. Shakhov had worked at one time in the military industry and had retired with medals for some top-secret heroism; all he could do was talk about the former privileges he’d had and lost. The moment he sat down with Marat at the sparsely set table, he started in complaining about the workers at the torpedo factory who had dismantled and sold everything down to the last bolt.

“Asses! Embezzlers!” he wailed, rolling his eyes. “Traitors to the motherland!”

“You’re just asking for trouble, talking like that!” His dried-up wife shrugged wearily as she trudged back and forth from threshold to table. Marat’s mother would go along with anything. She added fuel to the fire:

"You're so right, they're just plain criminals! That's what I tell Aselder all the time. He really wanted to come to see you, but there's some kind of bedlam going on in the Institute over that damned Khalilbek."

"Khalilbek? So you think he's guilty too?"

"Absolutely, completely guilty of everything. You don't think so?" Marat's mother was getting worked up.

"What about you?" Shakhov addressed Marat.

"No, I don't. The case is too complicated, and the prosecution has its facts wrong. It's mostly rumors, malicious gossip."

"You're so right, let me shake your hand!" Shakhov squeezed Marat's palm tightly. "Don't let those women convict the man prematurely!"

"Where's Sabrinochka?" Marat's mother changed the subject.

"She's here, Khadizha," Shakhov's wife responded from the kitchen. "She's in her room studying. Probably didn't hear you come in. Sabrina! Sabrina!"

"Enough! Stop calling her," muttered Shakhov. "She's not a princess, she ought to understand that we have guests."

The living room also had an array of dark photographs on the walls. Again the theatre director, this time in jodhpurs and riding boots, with a silver belt around his ample waist. He stood proudly against a background of seven or eight smiling, tambourine-bearing chorus girls in bright-colored, floor-length scarves.

Next to that one hung a portrait of Shakhov's deceased uncle, captured in his younger years astride a muscular black mare. He was a passionate equestrian, an expert on Akhal-Tekes — tall, hardy, long-legged horses with no manes. At the time of the photo, his career had just started to take off, but then everything came crashing down because of one careless phrase.

Shakhov's uncle had been 20; he was with some friends from the stud farms who were descendants of herdsmen from the Atly-Boyun Pass. They had taken the horses to the seashore for a therapeutic dip in the surf. While some guys held the horses, others swam naked, laughing and roughhousing. Uncle nodded downward at his male pride, leered, and blurted out:

"Stands there erect like Stalin on the tribune!"

The joke cost Uncle Shakhov 10 years in the camps. Construction of the Igarka-Salekhard Railway, frostbite, exhaustion... But he stubbornly returned to life and made it to advanced old age, until, covered with wrinkles, childless, and rail thin — you could count his ribs — he finally died in his sleep from a heart attack. Next to his stout elder brother, the theatre director, he had looked like a candle-wick.

Long-browed Sabrina entered the room reluctantly, with an air of forced civility. Shakhov's wife was serving turkey with mashed potatoes and fresh vegetables. Everyone sat around the table, and Shakhov resumed his rant:

"I arrive at the plant, and everything is in a state of neglect. No one there to meet me and show me around. I used to kick open the director's door with my knee. I had a company car, a Volga with a special banner. Whenever the chauffeur would be stopped for speeding, they'd see my officer's stripes and immediately salute me, 'Oh, excuse me sir, have a good trip.' So what do I care about our local nobodies if I've got generals in Moscow bowing down to me? You, Marat, sit up there in your offices and have no idea who is who. By the way, what's the latest on that big case — the murder of the human rights activist? She must have been poking her nose in the wrong places and gotten into some deep shit. Tell me, is the suspect guilty?"

"No."

"Well you're a lawyer, you have to say that. But tell me straight."

"It's really complicated. There are a lot of details. All I can say is that it's going to be tough for the defense, because the masterminds are way up high."

"Well with us it's always like that, shift the blame onto someone else. Let the higher-ups take the rap, right? That's your logic. Same thing with Khalilbek. They've tried to pin everything they can on him. By the way, he and I were practically friends. Him, me, Ivan Petrovich Borisov... A couple of years ago the three of us got in a motorboat and took off full speed out into the open sea to take a look at the eighth shop."

Marat recalled the eighth shop of the defense plant: decrepit with age, it towered over the sea three kilometres from the shore, where it stood atop a gigantic reinforced concrete box filled with water, looking just like a great stone duck. In the shop's heyday, they used to test the torpedoes by releasing them from the shop's bowels into the depths of the Caspian. And during storms the workers would come up to the surface in freight elevators and take shelter in rooms on the upper level.

Indeed, from a distance the monster facility's watch tower, which now served as a perch for raucous cormorants, looked a lot like a duck's beak poking up out of the water. When he was a boy and had seen it from the shore, Marat had imagined that the duck was about to bend over and peck at the horizon, right at the point where the sea met the sky. The shop had been abandoned after World War II, but Shakhov claimed that until very recently you could still see polished parquet floors, and even the remnants of furniture, in the facility's cafeteria and the library.

Marat's mother tried to engage Shakhov's wife and Sabrina in conversation. Sabrina sat stiffly, with a grim expression on her face. To judge from the shreds of conversation that Marat was able to catch, they were talking about Uncle Shakhov's memorial banquet. Marat's mother prattled: "Well, what are guests usually given when they come to pay their respects? Sugar and towels, right? Three kilograms each of sugar and towels. But when you're grieving, when there's a tragedy, of course it can be hard to find them for a good price. So I bought some for myself in advance." "How could you, Khadizha!"

"What's wrong with it? No one knows when we're going to die. Here today, gone tomorrow. And Aselder is hopeless when it comes to managing things, he'd buy the wrong gifts, he wouldn't know how to make arrangements, and he'd bring shame down upon the whole family. He had a son on the side; why bother trying to hide it? Everyone knows. He was a good boy, Adik, lived next door to us. He was walking one night down the road, and along comes our superman Khalilbek in a jeep. Ran over him, killed him."

"That's horrible, horrible!" moaned Shakhov's wife.

"Killed him. And a cop got his house. Adik's wife secretly sold it to a particularly pushy one, on the sly. And then off she goes, before you could blink an eye, to the mountain pastures. With both kids. Aselder wasn't paying attention, and he missed his chance to prevent it. Anyway, I bought a couple of sacks of men's socks just in case, to have them to give guests at my funeral. Towels, too, sets of three. You know: one for your face, one for your hands, and the third for you know where." Mother glanced briefly down at her belly. Sabrina blushed and turned away in disgust.

"What, you think you had a claim on the boy's house?" Shakhov's wife asked primly.

"What are you talking about? That colonel from the Sixth Department started renovating it immediately. We've already forgotten about it."

Shakhov, who was enumerating his awards and honors to Marat as he ate, overheard this last sentence and perked up.

"Hey, was that the same colonel from your town who climbed in through the window to that woman who was a terrorist?"

"What are you talking about, Papa? She was just a woman in a niqab," Sabrina corrected him.

"There's no such thing as 'just' a girl in a niqab around here." Shakhov struck the table with his fist.

"They are all future terrorists. Especially that one. A black widow. She's already had two husbands killed in the woods."

"Wait, the colonel climbed in the window to see a black widow? But why?" Marat looked up from his plate.

"Well, we don't know for sure whether he did or not. It's just something people are blabbing about."

"He did, Papa, you know he did," Sabrina interjected. "He hauled her out to be interrogated. She was in there with her children and girlfriends... He dragged her out, took her to the police department, and there..." Sabrina broke off.

"Raped her," Shakhov's wife finished the sentence. "Oi, oi, oi," Shakhov whirled around on his chair.

"So now we have human rights activists getting in on the act. Anyway, it has yet to be proven whether he raped her or not. And even if he did, maybe she led him on, to create a scandal. These widows of the forest militants are worse than streetwalkers, they'll throw themselves at anyone and everyone."

"Papa!" Sabrina frowned.

"What? Everyone is moaning and groaning about police brutality. Meanwhile, our boys in the police are dying heroic deaths to protect us from these criminals in niqabs. It's all an act. The bearded guys are only pretending to be peaceful Muslims, pure as the driven snow, but look at them! All they can do is loiter around the mosques and complain about the government: 'Taghut, taghut, taghut...'"

"What if there's good reason for it?" Sabrina was still upset. "They can always dream up some reason. Like they're being kidnapped. Or beaten up. Attacked with grenades. Tortured without cause — with no basis whatsoever, just for observing Sharia law. Don't make me laugh, please."

"You're a lawyer, right?" Suddenly, Sabrina addressed Marat. "So why are you sitting up there in Moscow making money on those high-profile cases, instead of defending the violated rights of your fellow Muslims in your own home town?"

"Muslims?"

"The police here beat up people who go to oppositional mosques. It's happening everywhere in the district. But it's especially bad in your suburb."

"The mosque 'across the tracks' is Wahhabi," Marat parried weakly; the attack had come out of nowhere. "What do you mean, Wahhabi? That's just a word in the news. It's obvious you live in Moscow. They're not Wahhabis, they're truth-seekers. The real bandits are in the government offices. Do you think a single one of them is going to end up in prison? I hope they keep this Khalilbek locked up forever!"

"Sabrina," Shakhov's wife tried to calm her daughter down.

"By the way, Khalilbek was helping those truth-seekers of yours. He even gave them money for their mosque," Marat added, with a note of sarcasm.

"He was playing both sides, yours and ours, he's a real double-dealer." Sabrina was unfazed.

"What are you on about, you pip-squeak?" Shakhov suddenly tuned in to the conversation.

"Well, youngsters often go astray," jabbered Marat's mother, obviously trying to clear the air. "I totally agree about Khalilbek, he's a sly one. He set up a lottery scam in town, can you imagine? And he wouldn't let Aselder, who was his associate at one point, sell some really valuable stocks. Others made a killing, and here we are living on nothing."

"Mama!" Marat flared up. "Khalilbek is accused of serial murders, of large-scale corruption, and you're on and on about stocks and casinos!" Shakhov sprang up from his chair and started pacing back and forth.

"We raised our daughter, gave her everything she needed, and she sits right here in this room and declares that these idiots in niqabs are right, and her father, who has thirty medals on his chest — real, legitimate ones, by the way — is wrong!"

"Don't get worked up, sit down, let's have some tea and pie." Shakhov's wife was the voice of calm.

"Don't interrupt!" sputtered Shakhov. "Just tell me, Sabrina, what is the point? Who is going to put an end to all this?" "Justice will triumph, I should hope," answered Sabrina, with dignity. "No, Khalilbek will dot the 'i'! He always used to tell 'It all comes down to a point, comrade Shakhov, that single point where it all ends.'"

"Bullshit," Sabrina muttered under her breath. "There you have it!" Shakhov pointed his finger triumphantly at his daughter. "Feast your eyes, Marat. Her father is talking sense, and she just sits there muttering to herself! And she has turned down every single suitor who comes her way!"

"Oh, I'm sure a beautiful girl like her has no end of suitors," interjected Marat's mother.

"She'll soon be too old and they'll stop coming. And then she can put on her niqab and go off into the forest to her friends, where she'll find a husband in no time. Or two or three!" Shakhov was in a fury.

"Astauperulla," Marat's mother said, alarmed. "What are you saying?" Shakhov's wife flipped her short mane and went out to the kitchen to get the pie. Marat's mother stood up, smoothed her skirt with her thick palms, and followed her.



Marat got up as though to stretch his legs, and strolled along the wall, inspecting the framed award certificates.

“Are they yours, from school?” he asked Sabrina. She didn’t answer.

“You’re being spoken to,” Shakhov said to his daughter.

“Can’t you tell they’re mine?” Sabrina hissed, without looking at anyone. “I’ve taken them down from the wall a hundred times, and Mama just hangs them up again. What is she after? Next thing you know, she’ll post my term papers up there for people to gawk at.”

“Just look at her, Marat!” Shakhov turned beet red. “Can you believe what she’s saying? Yo, your mother is proud of you, that’s why she put them up on the walls. We got you into the top school, hired tutors, helped with university, and set you up with an internship. Could I even have dreamed of such a life? I worked from the age of 12!”

"You've used that on me enough, Papa!"

"Before my father got his job in the theatre, we lived in the middle of nowhere, in a village. In the morning, I worked on the collective farm, in the afternoon at school, and at night in the garden and my workshop. My uncle was in prison, times were hard, and my father wasn't accepted into the Party."

"Enough already! I've heard it all a thousand times!"

"Your mother spoiled you rotten!"

"Why are you criticising her again?" snapped Shakhov's wife, bringing in the pie. Marat's mother minced in after her, bearing a tray with teacups.

"Here's why," Shakhov went on in a rage. "Your daughter isn't serving tea to our guests. There she sits, talking back to her father. Khadizha, sit down. Let Sabrina serve the tea."

"Oh, it's no trouble, goodness. I'll do it!" clucked Marat's mother. "Sabrinochka's time will come for serving and table-setting. When she gets married she'll be the one putting on feasts."

"Don't make me laugh! Her husband will throw her out of the house the day after the wedding!"

"What are you saying?" Shakhov's wife finally lost her patience. "Shaming your own daughter in front of guests! Retirement has completely pickled your brain!"

Marat was desperate to leave; he could hardly hold himself back.

"What a delicious pie! What's the filling — apricots and nuts? Did Sabrina make it?" Marat's mother oohed and aahed over the desert, digging in.

"I can't cook," Sabrina declared insolently. "Mama went and bought it at the bakery."

An awkward pause set in; everyone squeaked their chairs and clinked their teaspoons. The pie was indeed fresh and delicious, just as good as homemade.

"My mother used to make pies," Shakhov began, but there came the sound of the front door closing in the entryway, and Shakh's voice was heard. Shakh was Shakhov's nephew and Marat's childhood friend from town.

"Why do you leave your door open?" asked Shakh gaily, approaching the table and shaking the men's hands. "No, no! I won't eat anything, I'll just sit and have some tea with you."

Shakhov's wife scowled in Sabrina's direction, and Sabrina went to get another glass.

"So you and Shakh are colleagues?" Shakhov nodded to Marat. "Yes, we were in school together," Marat confirmed.

Rowdy Shakh, with his broad shoulders and rippling muscles, had always seemed too boisterous for Marat. When he was a student, he'd been a mover and shaker who had managed to study, earn money on the side, spend his evenings at discotheques, go to youth festivals, ruin girls' reputations, win amateur boxing matches, and drag everyone around him into his endless escapades. He was like a wind-up toy, never slowing down.

"What's the latest news about Khalilbek?" Shakhov turned the conversation back on track.

"Everyone's asking about it," Shakh took up the theme. "But no one can understand a thing. Not even the investigators."

"Who's doing the investigation, the locals?"

"No, people from Rostov. Anyway, at this point Khalilbek has only been officially charged with one crime: the murder of the investigator. And even that's pretty flimsy."

"I knew it," Shakhov said, with relief. "They can't take him with their bare hands!"

"The problem is, there's a long chain of intermediaries. Khalilbek supposedly handed the investigator job over to this guy he knew, Akula the Shark, and Akula gave it to someone else, who then passed it on, and this went on for eight rounds. And the eighth guy roped in his cousin once removed. They caught and interrogated the cousin, but now they have to comb through all the intermediaries and work back up the chain. By the time they get back to Khalilbek, the whole case will probably have collapsed."

"Wow, just imagine..."

Sabrina brought in the cup with trembling hands. She set it down in front of Shakh, proudly raised her elegant chin and announced: "Pleasure to see you all. Unfortunately, I have to study. Goodbye."

"What do you mean, 'goodbye'?" When the guests leave, that's when you say your 'goodbye!" snapped Shakhov.

"Of course, Sabrinochka, you go study, dear. Let me give you a kiss." Marat's mother kissed Sabrina, who turned and sailed forth.

Shakh cast a sly glance at Marat.

"You'll have to excuse her. She has a very tough schedule. She is up late practically every night with cardiology," Shakhov's wife said.

"So she's in cardiology, just like you!" Marat's mother exclaimed.

"Yes, my wife is a renowned cardiologist. She's even treated Khalilbek — though she missed her own husband's heart attack," seethed Shakhov.

"You never had a heart attack," his wife retorted coldly.

"What do you mean? I was at death's door!"

"He doesn't get enough attention," commented Shakhov's wife under her breath.

Before long, Marat and his mother were putting their shoes on in the entryway. The openwork shawl had come undone and its ends grazed the hardwood floor. As they saw their guests out, Shakhov kept up his monologue and his wife maintained a dignified silence. Shakh volunteered to drop Marat's mother off at the department store and to take Marat home. After Marat's mother got out and they pulled away from the store, the two friends were finally alone.

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Translated from the Russian by Carol Apollonio