

ARMEN OF ARMENIA

WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Who wants to be a millionaire?" Just for curiosity, try your luck. The rules of the game are almost the same, only there are no untouchable amounts, and there are fewer questions. Only six and a half questions, each with four answer choices. Send your list on February 29, and I'm obligated to make mine public on the same day. One million Armenian Drams are being wagered. You'll get the whole amount, if all of our picks coincide. Let's start.

First Question

What do you want?

- A. To get rid of my other half. I really want to lose my other half, so I can be independent, self-sufficient, and finally live in peace.
- B. One million drams. For both of us, word is more valuable than money. I give myself my word: I will have 1 million drams on February 29. So I'll shoot straight on target, don't worry.
- C. To use the "call a friend" lifeline. I called, said hi, and repeated your number 091 364344, so I can check if you gave the right number or not. It turns out you haven't pulled one on me. "You know, I'm reading your "millionaire," I want to decide which of the choices to pick for the first question." Thanks for the hint.
- D. To know the ending. The launch is easy, although a light start often promises a heavy finale. So, that's why, kill in yourself the flippant wish to become a millionaire right from the get-go, and jump into the game not for the money, but driven by the passion for reading.

Second Question

What are you looking for?

- A. I know you, like the palm of my hand. You're not gonna change. You're always gonna bug me. You're gonna caw like a raven 'till you drive me nuts for good. I'm looking for a witch-hunter, an assassin, who's ready to whack my other half for a million.
- B. If I hadn't given my word, I wouldn't even think of answering. It's too late to bail out. Bring me the photo and the money. I do a clean job. I don't leave unwanted traces. You'll be satisfied, no one has complained so far. You need to wire the money in advance. The deadline is February 29. I'm going after someone exactly like you.

- C. I guess everyone is looking for their other half. If they haven't found them like me, they sure will one day. I had the strangest feeling talking to you. It's like we're the oldest of friends. We're done playing and are recapping the future. Oops, I'm digressing. My answer is-to find my other half.
- D. I'm looking for the one looking for me. Why isn't anyone looking for me? So I get to be someone's point of search. It always seems you've made a good choice, then it turns out it's the complete opposite. Elections are traditionally rigged, but no one learns the lesson not to vote again. It's something else to get elected. To get an extra vote is already reassuring. That means you're not the only one believing in what you say. To cut it short: Don't vote, let others vote for you. In other words, pick answer D.

Third Question

You want to go for a walk?

- A. I would, but I can't. I'm not on speaking terms with you. I don't even look eye to eye, let alone go for a walk with you. You know what I mean. I can't see you again. That'll mean feeding the raven, and I want to kill it. I've found someone already, who's ready to do all the dirty work for the sake of a million. I'm set on passing on the photo and the money. There's too little to wait, soon I'll be free - running at large like an ownerless dog. Remember? You'd always call me "an ownerless dog" when we would fight.
- B. No, I don't. Generally, I've submitted to your literary fraud for the sake of promise and money. Have you read anywhere that a killer goes for a walk with the one who's writing about him? I'm waiting for my client's word so we can meet - I'm expecting the money and my victim's photo. I'm not in the habit of asking questions. I don't care who wants to whack whom and why. He started to tell me his life. Can you imagine? He was crying on the phone, his voice shook, he said, "Please, don't let him feel any pain. He shouldn't get what happened to him at all."
- C. Yes, I definitely do. We're not acquainted personally, but I know you a little bit already. If anything, I read your stuff. I got your cell phone number; I know your name, not to mention the peculiar feeling of reminiscing about the future. Going for a walk while chatting - I got nothing to lose. If not - perhaps. You've warned - if we don't meet and C turns out to be the right answer, I won't get my million. Rule's a rule - I play by the rules.
- D. Actually, this is a wrong answer because logically there are three choices. Although this may be the only acceptable choice for the author. In any event, it is nuts to suggest going for a walk to one's self. So, this is definitely a trap. I'm sure it will be considered correct, that's why I pick precisely this choice.

Question Four

What are you reading?

- A. I'm rereading for the thousandth time the last bit you wrote and want to understand who's written this, me or you? "You're a freak, you live in your world; you think what you want. I'm a freak, I live in my world; I think whatever. We'll meet on February 29 near the Hands." We'll live and see. Rather, I'll live and you won't.
- B. I read nothing but the newspaper for a long time. Usually, they present my work the next day on the front pages. I feel sort of appreciated. And then suddenly, weird messages like this: "I'm a freak. I live in my world. I have weird thoughts. Do not try to get acquainted and associate with me. Reject my offer to go for a walk. Take the photo and the money quickly and leave. We'll meet near the Hands on February 29."
- C. A short story titled "Who wants to be a millionaire." I've read half, I'm at question four. Some parts are hard to get, but it's not so bad, I like it. The characters express themselves through answer choices of the game. And the reader must decide in each question's case whom to believe and become a millionaire himself or herself. I'm also a reader. I have a date with the author, I've already agreed to go for a walk, and I hope I'll win.
- D. I really wanted to ask this question. It's the best question for getting to know someone. Nothing happens in life that is not written somewhere and is not possible to be read. Someone besides me will read this and I will share my thoughts with him or her, and we'll meet. I read books written for me.

A reading hall lifeline

- A. One quarter
- B. One quarter
- C. One quarter
- D. One quarter

Question Five

What happened to us on February 29?

- A. I woke up with a headache on February 29. I took out all the albums from the photos drawer. I was looking for the photo that inspired hatred in me the most. I found one where you look kind of happy, but you're not alone. Someone as happy as you is next to you. You are both smiling, head to head. I tore it, and put it in my breast pocket. I took out two raw wieners from the refrigerator, swallowed one and put the other one in a bag and took it with me. I might need it on the road. I felt how the first sip of coffee changed the taste of my mouth. I took three more sips and got out of the house, without looking in the mirror. I drove to HSBC, withdrew one million drams from my account. The teller girl didn't smile at

me, she just asked: "You're withdrawing the whole amount?" I said yes. People think I'm rich. I have a job, a place of my own, dress nice. Actually, it was my entire savings. I don't need money. I saw an ownerless dog on the street, felt kinship, but it had a very ragged look, repulsive, invoking nothing but pity. I drew near, he felt my pity. He evaluated me in good faith as well and groaned. I took out the wiener from the bag and threw it in front of him. He looked at me with an eradicating gaze; I froze... his eyes... I've seen these eyes somewhere. He didn't get close, he waited till I left. I drove, turned back and saw that he limped. It's okay; a dog doesn't die from limping. I got to the Hands a little too early. The day – sunny, the weather – chilly, life – evanescent. My raven-killer isn't there yet. I've always pictured his sad eyes, dressed black from head to toe, befitting a self-respecting assassin. With hair somewhat long, curly and combed back. Height – one eighty cms, let him be tall. He doesn't sleep at night - pangs of remorse. He wants a dignified means of livelihood. He's not content with his luck. Despite his young age, there is a big wrinkle in between his eyebrows, from too much frowning. He came, I noticed from far, with a strange gait, staring down as if looking for something. He drew close – one hundred percent what I imagined, even the wrinkle was there. We greeted and drew aside. I took out the photo and the money from my breast pocket and stretched to him. He looked at the torn photo, got worried. His facial expression changed just for an instant, but it was enough to catch his confusion. I began to persuade, I'm an expert in that. I gave it all: "I can't do it myself. You agreed to do the job for a low price; you said word is more expensive than money, your words. You chose from the start, from the first question – answer choice B. Now you're bailing out! There's nothing to think about, people kill each other for free, just as a favor, at every step. You're not risking anything; it's an ordinary death for you. Whereas for me, it's a life-and-death question." I said a few other things, but he was intransigent. He's not giving back the money, he's armed, I was afraid of being duped. He was mumbling something about principles and rules of the game. I have no choice, I agree to his game. For the last time, I'm looking into raven-killer's eyes and realize they're not sad. They're the eyes of the ownerless dog I met in the street, for sure. I'm thinking they're probably related, and I fire a shot.

- B. February 29 was a sunny day, and the weather was chilly, just the way I like it. I went and bought the morning papers, read about a few murders. I realized they weren't done by experts – self-taught, amateur stuff. I didn't think it was a good idea to set a date with the client in broad daylight. But it was too late to change anything. I began dressing up for a date. I don't like wearing black from head to toe. But I know that that's what my client expects of me. My image dictates such a clothing style. I used to have short hair, now my hair is long and I comb it back. That is my homage to Hollywood; plus, the scar in between my eyebrows, which many people think is a wrinkle. Looking in the mirror, I remembered the bartender girl from the day before, who didn't smile the whole evening and at the end was telling me: "You're not content with your life, it's written on your face. Plus, you have sad eyes." I don't need a real weapon, but I always take a pistol with me. I was barely out of the house when bird shit dripped on my shoulder. It was a raven, flew away cawing. I've never shot a bird; I have my principles; never harm an animal. I strayed once; I was returning from work at night, an ownerless dog came on up, he was big and mad. I struck him, he started whining; I came close to shoot, too. He looked at me with an eradicating

gaze, I froze on the spot. I didn't have the nerve to shoot him; they say a dog doesn't die from limping, it may live. Anyways, I wiped the bird shit off of my shoulder, but it left a little stain. I decided to walk with a set gait - playing with myself - where you can't step on the lines separating the slabs of the sidewalk. I recognized my client from far, he was with a bike. We greeted, and drew to the side. He took out the photo and the money from his breast pocket and handed them to me. Even before seeing the photo, I already had doubts. I felt vaguely that he had gotten into a dishonest game with me. The minute I saw the photo, I understood everything. He felt it, too; his facial expression changed for a second, but even that was enough to give away the confusion. He started persuading, like he was an expert-persuader. He wouldn't let me speak. I barely managed to nail the point that the million was not the issue. Killing a person is far more expensive, even in our poor country. There was no other choice, that's why I had agreed. For both of us, word costs more than money. Then I said literally the following: "You had to forewarn me, whom you wanted to kill. You open the cards at the end of the game, you're dishonest. I have my principles, and my rules of the game. For example, this might crack you up, but I don't shoot birds. You don't even get that you're almost asking for suicide. I won't give you back your money; here's what we'll do. There's an option. If you're in the mood, let's play the death-game on the million. You must know the Russian roulette. See, I'm taking out all the bullets and leaving only one. This is the game you want, there's no winner; only a loser, and the one who relives. That is what you wanted, right? Here we go, you're first."

- C. The moment I woke up on February 29, I ran to the computer, I opened your webpage and saw that you had posted the answer key, just like you had promised. Bingo!!!! I won. I believed in you, me, the game, the word, and I won. I'm a millionaire. I took a bath, ate breakfast; looked up a few things on the Internet, just to kill time. I felt uncomfortable calling you so early in the morning, you might've been asleep. I lingered a little more in social sites; then called. I said hi, you recognized me right away, we had met once already. You congratulated me on my victory. We set a date near the Hands. The weather was chilly, the day sunny; I came on a taxi cab. I bought two chamomiles from the flower guy. He grumbled, said he's selling by the bunch, not individually. I persuaded him, I'm a master-persuader. You were waiting when I got there, this time you were with a bike. But I wasn't surprised because I had read about it in your short story beforehand. We strolled in the park, there was no snow, had melted away. Tomorrow's spring, and I'm a millionaire. We went for tea. We chatted about this and that; you were sort of hyper-happy; you kept smirking. Then you asked suddenly; will you buy a million's worth of wieners for vagrant dogs? You had written about it as well, and I had thought of a unique answer. What I said was probably to your liking, 'cause you laughed sincerely. We talked a while about question five, and both agreed that we were the ones deciding what would happen to us on February 29. I would always inadvertently throw my gaze in front of me, on the bumpy envelope. It says on it - HSBC, and inside there's really one million drams. You suggested counting. No, I believe you. Then I said literally the following: "One game ended, it's time to start the next one. Now it's my turn, I'm the game-show host. If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Loves me, loves me not," it's the simplest game." We took one chamomile each and

started pulling the petals. We review the last question out loud, together. We smile at each other because we are certain that only the petals of the chamomile know the answer.

- D. None of the above. I have my own choice. People look for their half outside, but it may be inside. Regardless, when two people stay in one place for too long, they sometimes get wound up, and one of them wants to whack the other. My grandpa used to say, "Turn your fight into a game, you'll always end up winning." This game was not to my liking from the get-go. I can't keep this under my chest, you ownerless dog! You have a million, go spend it! Why do you wanna give it away to somebody else? My answer is: Nothing in particular happened on February 29. It was a regular, sunny day, but the weather was chilly. I simply went near the Hands to find out if my half loves me or not.

Question Six-and-a-half

The game is ending, but it is dishonest not to use the fifty-fifty lifeline. That is what I'm gladly doing, making the player's job easier, and taking away answer choices A and D.

Loves me, loves me not?

B. Loves me.

C. Loves me not.

Translated from the Armenian by Hayk Movsisian

HIDE AND SEEK

When I say, “night,” close your eyes, “day,” open them. Don’t cheat. Look, I’m counting with my eyes closed: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. The moment has come: I’m opening; whomever I see, I’m spitting.

NIGHT. Everyone closes their eyes, while you open them. At night, the river has brought a big and soft present for you. It’s a toy, but you can’t tell if it’s a bear or a puppy. You shouldn’t cheat because you are not everyone, you are special and different. The night unifies you. Everyone thinks they go to sleep together. So, they are together. But you know that the sleepless are together. Your gazes intersect in the darkness and light up thanks to mutual smiles. A voiceless conversation, a silent agreement. You don’t need noise. No words are needed in order to understand each other. Words are extra; they can waken the asleep and endanger your alliance. At daytime, we must hide your identities, so that you can be together at night.

DAY. You open your eyes together with everyone. You must hide, or else you’ll get caught. You don’t want to get caught because no one does. You mustn’t keep quiet, they’ll get suspicious. You mustn’t talk a lot, they’ll be suspicious again. Do not ever close your eyes, they’ll guess. Don’t run slowly, they’ll catch up and catch you. A meaningless conversation, a stealthy disagreement. You need noise, as a distraction. Extra words are suitable; they can benumb the awake and will benefit your alliance. Put on your sneakers so that you can run fast on the bridge. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. “You are spat!” You passed unnoticed. At night, we’ll be together again because you were able to hide your identity.

NIGHT. Everyone closes their eyes, while you barely open them. Your right hand is shaking while holding the coffee pot. Even with your open eye, you don’t notice that the coffee is rising up, rising up: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.... it spills on the stove with a hiss. “Damn you!” With a shaking hand, you take the half-full coffee cup to the table, on your tiptoes, so you won’t make noise: besides you, everyone is asleep. The bear or the puppy has conquered the bed and its eyes are beaming. Your sleep runs away and gets lost from the coffee and daytime will come back.

DAY. You close your eyes. The man-size, toy bear or puppy has embraced you from the back and doesn’t let go. The night has shortened and doesn’t suffice for being together. You are trying to come out of the daytime nightmare by all means possible, but you can’t. While he or she doesn’t want to hide and will get caught. You must get rid of him or her because you don’t want to get caught. Besides him or her, no one wants that. Don’t run fast, they’ll suspect. Don’t talk too much, they’ll get the point. Slowly get in the hiding place and open your eyes. A meaningless relationship, a heavy conversation. You don’t need noise, they’ll figure out your place. Words are extra, he or she no longer understands you.

NIGHT. Everyone closes their eyes. It was a big and soft toy and you couldn’t tell it was a bear or a puppy. You two stood on the bridge, embraced. Then you pushed with both hands and let

go. The bear or the puppy spun around in midair, fell down head down. Look, how the hairs of the toy flutter from the contact with air. You count slowly. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...You have put your hands on the rail, hanging halfway from the bridge; you are tracking with closed eyes the descent of the rapidly diminishing toy. It diminished, diminished and, turning into a point, reached the waters. Three, two, one. The river gulped the bear or the puppy, then passed it under the bridge and spat it out on the left bank. Take off your sneakers, let your feet rest. There is nobody.

THE WHOLE NIGHT. Everyone keeps opening and shutting their eyes, old or young get mixed, and sometimes embrace. The grownups easily toss the little ones in the air because the latter are light. The little ones get big and heavy; although some little ones are heavier than some grownups. Big or little light ones spin around in air, while the heavy ones rapidly tumble down. The hard ones sometimes get soft, while the soft ones get small as they get hard. The hard ones get big as they get soft; when they get big, they get slower and can't catch up with you because you run a lot faster. The river flows and flows, and brings you a big and soft toy at daytime.

DAY. Everyone opens their eyes. The broom goes up against a pair of sneakers on the bridge's sidewalk. The broomster lifts up the left sneaker. Look, one of your sneakers has a hanging nose; the wind tosses about the lace. He or she has put the hands on the rail, standing on tiptoes, halfway hanging from the bridge, and with a gaze is looking for the sneaker's owner along the riverbank. He or she knelt down, took the right one as well. He or she has pressed it to the chest, has hurled the broom aside. You are nowhere to be found.

NIGHT. He or she is not closing the eyes, is cheating. Look, the right hand is shaking while holding the coffee pot handle. He or she can't notice even with an open eye that the coffee is rising up and up: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one....it spills on the stove with a hiss. "Shit!" With a shaking hand, he or she takes the half-full coffee cup to the table, on tiptoes, so not to make noise. Everyone is asleep. Now he or she will drink coffee and go to work. The broom is not soft, but it's big. Standing quietly in the corner, it's waiting for him or her. He or she puts on your sneakers and leaves home.

DAY. You open your eyes. You count fast. Running in panic, you descend the hill; your feet have run you up; you barely manage to notice the shrubbery coming at you, the rocks, the holes which you need to go around or jump over. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. You're there, but you can't stand still; and the river takes you in its embrace. You are wet, have just recovered your bear or puppy, you meet the new owner of your sneakers on the bridge's sidewalk, with broom in hand. Your gazes intersect and light up thanks to mutual smiles. A pleasant conversation, a silent agreement. You don't cheat; you say that the sneakers are yours, but they suit him or her better. You, with the man-size toy in your embrace; he or she, with the broom; together have become motionless on the bridge. You two are there.

WHITE NIGHT. Everyone opens their eyes and sees a dream while awake. The night has lit up and become day. The river flows and flows, and falls into the sea; the coffee rises up and up, and spills on the stove; the grownups get little and little in your eyes, the heavy ones get light and light and spin around in the air; even the bear or the puppy, is sitting on the broom with a big, wooden handle. Everyone thinks they are asleep and dreaming, but you two know that they are awake. We

count slowly. He or she, running while running out of breath, is ascending the hill, goes around the shrubbery, the rocks, the holes. One, two, three, four ...You, running in panic, descend the hill, barely manage to notice the shrubbery coming at you, the rocks, the holes, which you must jump over. We count fast. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six....He or she takes you in his or her embrace. "You are spat, you are spat, I free e-very-one."

Translated from the Armenian by Hayk Movsisian

THE RETURN OF KIKOS

“Oh, poor Kikos, oh . . .”

-- *A close group of women*

For you, I'm merely an imagined son of a made-up mother. We definitely know each other. My name is Kirakos but everybody calls me Kikos, for short. Hovhannes, the God of our house, has delivered the news of my death to the entire people. But our kind, wise Creator did not release my soul. If he had come to my funeral feast, my soul would rest in peace and wouldn't yearn to be reborn. If he had raised a glass to my soul and said, "Kikos, poor wretch!" people would follow suit, "Poor wretch, poor wretch!" But it didn't turn out that way, and perhaps so much the better.

For a long time, after him, I had been looking for somebody to tell the real story of my life and I found him at last. His name is Armen, and he is the author of these lines. We have a complicated relationship. We don't get along well together. My author wants to overcome the story of my death because he is convinced that the future success of his people depends on reliving Toumanyan's fairy tales.¹ According to him, Armenian time has stood still in the following three great tales: "Panos, the Unlucky Wretch" is the Armenian past, the Armenian luck that didn't strike; "Brave Nazar" is the Armenian present, the Armenian dream and daydream; and "The Death of Kikos" is the anxiety about the future, and he decided to start from the end. I wasn't getting his points and never will, but I took advantage of his note-taking habit and told him everything I could remember and considered important, from beginning to end.

My maiden mother was sent for water, and she saw an apparition under a huge, green walnut tree (Thickwood, henceforth). My virgin mother felt intense fear, witnessing the death of one who was not even born yet – and I was the one. My aunts and grandma rushed to her, helping her cope with the fear of losing a non-existent baby, and since they were simple-minded village women, they sobbed it off. My grandpa ordered a funeral feast without burial, to dispel the horror in the hearts of his virgin daughters and to prevent sterility, and it worked.

In truth, I was born three years after my famous death. The moment I was born, my mother immediately recognized me. "Oh, I'll be damned, this is the Kikos I saw, the eyes, the mouth, the forehead, the nose . . . Oh, dear Kikos." My aunts and grandma acquiesced because they had also seen me and were convinced that it was me, Kikos. My grandma told me about this later on. She said

¹ Hovhannes Toumanyan, famous Armenian writer

my grandpa raised a huge quarrel about naming a newborn after a dead person. He tried to persuade the women that I was not me; that it was my brother, that we simply looked like each other, but the women stood firm. My death was a real event in our village. Everyone knew and could remember the day when my family mourned over no dead body and no tomb. Because my grandpa was a poor, hard-working, and just man, they wouldn't laugh in our faces and the whole village came to my funeral feast as one. They say a man from our village later revealed this story in the town bazaar, and that is how it reached Tumanyan's ears.

I was a very small child when my grandma first told me the story of my death. I neither got scared nor cried. I just didn't believe it. I thought they were punishing me for misbehaving. But my grandma's words remained in my memory forever: "That is why, my dear Kikos, you should not climb a tree. If you climb, you'll fall and all of us will die from grief."

I don't remember how I got to the fountain for the first time, but I remember that my grandpa wouldn't send me there for water, as it was a forbidden place. So, I don't remember how I got there, but I know I went there with other children. Maybe Thickwood was so tall and unapproachable that I didn't even try to climb it. But I do remember how it was found out at home, and how I was whipped.

I was a schoolboy already when we were given an assignment – the story of my death. But I knew it by heart for so long. My teacher asked me, "Kikos, have you learned your death?"

"Yes."

"Then, go ahead and tell us."

I began reciting happily. I said, "...with a pointy hat² . . ." and showed everyone the hat in front of me as proof. When I got to my mother's lamentation, "Oh, Kikos, oh . . .," my tears choked me. I'm swallowing my tears but in vain. So, I let it go. The children burst into laughter, and even the teacher couldn't help laughing, and then it began. From that day on, I had no peace. The village children would shout after me, and those who were more courageous would run up to me and stand like women, hitting their heads and knees and taunting, "Oh my baby . . ." I would get into fights and would go home with my clothes torn. My grandma would undress me quietly, give me some yogurt to eat, and would mend my clothes that had been mended a thousand times before. I would get offended especially when my close friends would laugh at me. We would play together and be kind with each other with no malice until suddenly one of them would remember. "Oh, Kikos, oh . . ." And then everybody, without exception, would burst out laughing. Barely controlling myself, I would get home, throw myself into my grandma's arms, and cry hushed-up so that my grandpa wouldn't hear. He hated the sound of a child crying at home. Then, my grandma would say, "Why couldn't we bury a piece of log? My poor kid wouldn't suffer so much then." That had its story

2 Pointy hat, a hat with a raised, sharpened top

as well. A newly married woman from an adjacent village kept dreaming about losing her baby. Her husband made a doll from a log, dressed it, put it in a small coffin, and buried it. After that the woman gave birth to seven boys and five girls. My grandma would also say, "I wonder if there is another kid like this in the world, one that would cry so much over one's self."

The year we learned the story of my death at school, a real death came to our house: my father died. He was a shepherd who lived with his in-laws. He was a handsome man who would make a reed pipe for me and sometimes take me to the mountains. And in the mountains, for the sake of a lost sheep, he became a wolf's prey. (Sorry, I couldn't think of a better episode, this was an odd character; Author: A. of A.)

I remember how my father's real death merged with my unreal one and I was wretched.

I had a dream.

It was a moonlit night and I was a little boy, standing by the fountain. The warm stream of my pee was flowing down my legs into the water. I know I'm in the wrong and I'm frightened but also at ease. I can't stop peeing. It just keeps coming. The warm pee mixed with the cold fountain water rises up and reaches my waist. It continues to rise and reaches my neck. A little more and the water will fill up my mouth and I will start drowning. I raise my hands out of the water as if begging for help, and then suddenly Thickwood's branches bend towards me, grab my arms, pull and throw me up. I fly upwards until I reach the Moon, then I jump down, and the branches catch me again and throw me up into the air. Suddenly, *chirrr* . . .

I woke up. My underwear was wet.

After that, I started to pee in my underwear at night and jump out of bed.

I've grown up, around twelve or thirteen years old, but I still pee in my pants. You can't keep a secret in the village. People know everything, they just keep quiet. My folks also say nothing. They put something under me to keep my mattress dry. I'm sure I'm crazy, sick and there is nobody else like me in the world. I've become withdrawn and hear voices on moonlit nights. I don't sleep, so I won't wet my sheets. Thickwood calls me, but I'm scared. I can't go. My mother will find out, my grandma and aunts as well, and all of them will perish from grief. But I can't resist furtively running to the fountain. I'm standing in front of it, shivering. I wash with the fountain water to make sleep go away, but why? I'm not even sleepy. I put my hand on the bark and get goosebumps. With two leaps I mounted it, grabbed the first branch so skillfully as if I had spent all my life on a tree. I've sat cozily in the shrubbery, reclining on the branches self-contentedly, soon falling asleep.

I had a dream.

On a moonlit night, I'm by the fountain and despite a slight breeze, I'm hot. My heart is bursting, my body pulsating as if in fever. With great effort I reach the fountain. With my eyes closed, I wash my face. I rub the water on my face, chest, belly and feet. I cool down. I open my eyes and look at Thickwood. The wind makes the leaves rustle, which seem to challenge me. "Come on up, if you're a man!" I look at my hands and see blood, my chest, belly, and feet are drenched in blood. Blood flows

instead of water; the fountain's rock has become a big, beating heart. The roots of Thickwood protruding from the ground have become veins and are drinking the warm red liquid. *Chirrr . . .*

I woke up and check underneath myself. It isn't wet. My nose is bleeding.

I climbed down the tree safely. Soon there will be light. I'm running home. I'm in my bed pretending to be fast asleep. My mother came and saw the quilt was dry. They're happy and joyful. From that day on, I don't wet my bed. Every now and then I sneak to Thickwood. We hold each other and fall asleep, until an old neighbor comes to our house and says, "Your Kikos is a sleepwalker." A big, messy fight and tumult ensue. My grandpa has lost his temper and wouldn't calm down. "I'll cut that tree by its roots," he raves. My grandma tries to dissuade him: "No, don't do it, the whole village will become our enemies. Don't you know how many hundreds of years old the tree is? The poor tree is not to blame. It's standing by itself. It's our child who wants to climb it . . ." Grandpa didn't cut it, but at night they tie me up and, for a long time, I have to sleep tethered like a dog. My mother keeps an eye on me to be sure I won't climb the tree. I forgot about it. But sometimes, Thickwood calls me on moonlit nights.

I'm fifteen, and have a moustache. My grandma says it is time for me to marry. They gave me a new hat, not a pointy one, which I wear at an angle. It suits me well. And it is the most expensive thing I own. One day I went to the field and lost my hat. All day I looked for it but I couldn't find it. If I hadn't been so ashamed, I would have cried but I was a big boy then.

I had a dream.

On a moonlit night, I'm by the spring. But I don't exist. My spirit is flying bodiless around my young mother. My mother is looking at Thickwood fascinated, from bottom to top, looking for the topmost branch. I sense my mother. I sense that she is absolutely parched and her lips are dry. Her knees buckle and she kneels at the edge of the fountain. Leaning on a rock with one hand, she sips a handful of water with the other. I get into my mother's belly. It is dark and wet. I roll myself up into a ball, turn to flesh and blood. I feel my body growing very quickly. The place is cramped. I'm grown enough and ready to get out. I can feel water around me and hear voices, vaguely. I come out into the world with difficulty. I'm far from my mother. She is holding Thickwood and exhaling deeply, trying to get rid of the last labor pains. She looks at me and smiles. I'm on the rock by the fountain. I continue to grow. A short time ago I was an infant, and now I'm about ten years old. The umbilical cord stretches between my mother and me and won't break. I am a young boy. Curly hair has grown in my private place. I look at Thickwood and see my lost hat hanging on its branches. I get up, leave my mother, and climb the tree like a monkey. The umbilical cord becomes longer and longer as I ascend the tree. It stretches tight and makes it difficult for me to reach my hat. One more attempt and the umbilical cord breaks and splashes into the fountain with a whip. I look at my hat and *chirrr . . .*

I woke up, my quilt was wet, but it wasn't pee.

My hat is gone. I look for it everywhere, in the fields, in the gardens. Then the news came that somebody played a dirty trick on me. They took my hat and hung it on the highest branch of the tree. Again there is a big fuss at home. It is the first time I shout at my mother: "If you love me, let

me go and climb the tree and bring my hat down. How can I continue my life this way?" She begins to wail, my aunts join in, and my grandma sobs without tears. I get up and leave. The women, sobbing their hearts out, follow me. My mother faints, but I do not approach her. I stand far away from her and watch the women trying to bring her to consciousness. Then we continue on our way together, keeping a distance of about a few steps between us. The whole village is stealthily looking at us but no one comes out. I reach Thickwood. We look at each other. I clench my teeth. I am shivering. There is my hat, hurled to the very top. I feel embarrassed because I have to climb the tree in front of my relatives in broad daylight. In my ears I can hear my grandma's voice: "Kikos, dear, you shouldn't climb a tree. If you climb you may fall down and everybody will die from grief." Then my grandpa comes, waving an axe, yelling and threatening. We could've managed without you, old fella! My grandma runs after him like lightning. At last my grandpa reaches me. Breathless, he stands between me and Thickwood, keeping the axe poised above his head like Hrachia Nersisyan,³ performing rage. Suddenly his eyes fill with tears – it is the first time I see my grandpa's eyes wet – he digs the axe into the ground, shakes his head and goes away in silence. Then my mother and aunts come, but they don't approach me. My mother sits down on a stone, while my aunts stand behind her like bodyguards. They all weep. My grandma seems to be praying on her knees. It is over. I bend and touch the bark of the tree with my palms. The women stop crying, hold their breath and look at me. I climb. I regain my confidence. I am soon halfway up. I look down. My mother is as pale as a ghost. Rivers of tears are flowing silently down my aunts' eyes, and my grandma is sitting with her face bent down. I can't see my grandpa. He is certainly hiding somewhere and peeping at me. And suddenly, what do I see? They are coming. I can see them all around me – big and small, old and young – and all of them look like Kikoses or they really are Kikoses, I can't understand. They are everywhere. Everybody is wearing hats. Everybody has on a pointy hat, and they attack Thickwood like ants and start to climb. There are too many of them – an army of Kikoses. The branches are bent, and Thickwood bows down under Kikoses. Some of them fall down like ripe walnuts, then get up, shake themselves and climb up the tree again and throw their hats down from the top. And I realize that it isn't a hallucination. My mother, aunts and grandma can also see them. The rain of pointy hats is falling on them and my mother has come to. The rivers of my aunts' tears flood from happiness. My grandma's prayers remain unfinished. They are waving at me. Perhaps they don't know which one of all those Kikoses is theirs. I reach for my hat, take it and shout out, "Mom!"

"Yes, honey?"

"Catch my hat, I'm tossing it down."

3 Hrachia Nersisyan, a famous Armenian actor

“Toss it down!”

I tossed it, but I couldn't see if she caught it.

She calls to me, “Kikos, my son!”

“Yes, mom?”

“Be careful, son, don't you fall down,” and she weeps.

I want to cry also. I'm holding my Thickwood and can't understand what it is. Is it a story, a life, a dream or literature? I wonder, Oh my God, Hovhannes Tumanyan, I am on top of my tree, I will die from happiness now, and that would be the second death of Kikos. Then who would write about that?

Translated from the Armenian by Hayk Movsisian