

THE SAINT

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The wind that blew in after the rain brought down the leaves and stalks of last year and mixed them into the slush. That wind died down last night and now a cool breeze is coming in from peaks of Avliyota Mountains. Even though it shivers the body the breeze carries the fragrant smell of a snowdrop that is growing somewhere out of an alpine stone, filling the soul with tender feelings.

The name of the man with a few white hairs who was walking through the ascending roads of the mountain was Father Abdulkodir. In his sixty third year he was going to a saint who lived in a cave in the Avliyota Mountains.

The saint has been living in that cave for almost a hundred years. The pilgrims who visit to him confirm that his abode is cool in summer and warm in winter. They explain this by calling him a blessed spirit and a lovely servant of God. For in summer these lands turn into empty plains where the sharp winds play at whistling, blowing out the soft, frozen snowflakes and dumping them on the junipers at the bottom of the lodgment's wall.

Because of the cold and the icy paths there are scarcely any visitors here in winter. They say Father Saint lives through the winters of severe frost by baking bread made from his own home-grown wheat.

He keeps sheep. They also possess some sacramental power. They never get sick, every year they breed twin lambs, and even in the juniper woods no beasts attack them. Every ewe gives a king-size jug of creamy milk every day. All expound this secret as a grace of God for His lovely creature.

The Father Saint has been worshipping here for almost a hundred years. His soul is as clean, shiny and soft as glass – no temporal grief or dust. There are a hundred thousand people in the neighboring villages who have devoted themselves to serving God and have chosen the path of truth, but temporal sorrows and wishes have made their hearts opaque; they bar the beam of faith from shining brighter in

their hearts. Apparently that is why none of them has become as honorable as Father Saint.

People come to him when they have troubles, and sickness especially leads them to the mountain. After his blessing any disease departs from the body, probably as witness to the power of God and faith, the wisdom of simplicity and greatness, which pervades the lifestyle of the Father – the man of true belief. People also cry to him with penitence for their sins and promise to think about the afterlife, to pray and follow God from then on. But there is another powerful force – the hearth and family, a severe adversary! It has overcome many significant figures, captains, scientists, who could have been godlier.

After finding relief from their troubles, people return home and merge back into their habits. They become busy with family and fall back into the trap of life. They forget about their repentance, about the miracle of faith...

Only Father Saint is consistently true. Only he has succeeded in getting the divine sanctity!

At the age of sixty three Father Abdulkodir was going to Father Saint. There was an underlying cause for the visit. Some days ago he had had a terrible nightmare. He understood it as a sign that he would be leaving this world. To make matters worse, the diseases that had been found through the years were also tormenting him frequently. But asking for a cure or for a long life was not the purpose of this visit. As a matter of fact, the misfortune that hosts senility (? Unclear – what does this mean, what kind of ‘trunk’? we can use here, instead trunk the word “misfortune”)– an incurable illness does not need a healthy (body?). Even used clothes are thrown away. So the cloth which is called “the body” also will be thrown away when it becomes ragged.

Mostly old men come to Father Saint. Those people who have dimmed their faith by various covetous, evil deeds and have lost their lives for unacceptable things. They come here fearing a visitation from God for their unjust words, for their hacking off another’s share. Beating their heads at his feet they beg for mercy, for the blessing of God. But, probably even after the pilgrimage their hearts do not find

consolation. Their soul suffers, perceiving the approach of an equitable decision. Hoping to find any appeasement the trembling heart draws to its master, who is spending the last days of his life any which way!

But the wish of the sixty year old man was not to ask mercy or repent of his sins.

While he was looking around at every stone and black-eyed Susan, water was rolling like rain. He was crying! Many years ago, when he was a child he had walked through these same pathways with his grandpa. Taking a view of the circle he felt that this path had become his fate, as if he was walking his life again.

In the back roads of the village at the bottom of the mountain, there is a spring under the aspens. When he was eighteen he had waited eagerly every evening at this spring for his beloved. The girl was very subtle: she used to come to get water from the spring in the evenings. The meetings lasted three or four minutes. His village was about three kilometers from the spring, but because of the flavorful smell of dried cloves that was bound into the girl's shirt his head would be in a complete whirl, and in such an ill-advised condition he reached the village in a blink, taking no notice of the distance. After the meeting he would take his sweet thoughts with him, laying on his back and gazing at stars. As if even the blossoming jiyda was spreading the fragrance of carnations.

But, heart alive, what was the name of that angel of love?!

What a distant past...but its as if after forty five years he an still smell that fragrance.

He saw a familiar stone. He had planned to sacrifice a sheep in gratitude when his daughter was born, but while trying to catch a black ram he had fallen down on that stone and had broken his leg. Using the strength of the joy of fatherhood he had dragged himself about a kilometer. Then some people saw him and carried him home. In those days his soul was filled with a sense of fatherhood that was greater, loftier and more honorable than love.

Those days when his heart suffered from love he turned to his little angel. It was as though the heat of that tiny, pure essence had cured him.

Memories... memories were rushing towards him; from distant places, from the frozen layers of the years they were bringing recollections of welcome and truthful experiences which were so pleasant, like the perfume of a snowdrop.

If any of his dear ones were there, maybe he would hug them, cry and say: “Oh, dear, life had passed, we lived and finished it!” But he was alone and the breeze that was spreading the smell of the spring blooms was brushing his face, drying the moisture of his tears. As if it was consoling him: “I have blown over the earth since Adam was a boy. I have strewn around the sand which remained from the corpse of the Prophet Solomon. I have witnessed the first meeting of Adam and Eve. Countless people have been the guests of this world. All of them lived with their wills, aims, troubles and joys. If your fate has been written by God, to whom can you complain about life, where can you go?”

He had come once before on a pilgrimage to Father Saint; it was many years ago when he was child. He came with his grandfather. When they entered he saw an old man sitting by a lancet window with crossed legs. There was a big open book in front of him.

Then his grandpa had sat before the Saint and asked Abdulkodir to come to him. They had a talk. But he could not recall the words.

But other things – what happened then was now before his very eyes: grandpa held his shoulder and asked Father Saint with a trembling and muted voice: “Oh, my *pir*, pray for my child, bless him!”

Father Saint had smiled. It was as if all around became filled with blessedness. Abdulkodir stood up involuntarily, and went to him. Father Saint put his palm on the child’s head. “My son, shut your eyes...now open them,” said Father. When Abdulkodir opened his eyes he saw himself at an ancient and ornamental door. “Open the door and enter,” the voice of Father Saint heard from somewhere encouraged him.

As soon as he gave the door a push it opened easily. The child entered and saw himself in a garden.

It was so lovely it was impossible to describe. It was charming to look at. He had never seen such adorable trees or heard such pleasing bird song. There were people here and there. They were surrounded by beams of light. Further ahead angels were flying.

When he had opened his eyes saw the bright and noble face of Father Saint. The Father was giving his blessing to him by opening his palms. Grandfather was crying while he repeated “My pir! My pir!”

“Now your grandson has been in the Garden of Eden,” said Father Saint.

Later his grandfather often asked about his visit to heaven. But though several attempts he could not describe the impressions of the holy visit. Grandfather told people about his heavenly grandson. One time he even asked his grandson whether or no he had seen him in heaven. When the boy said he had not seen him the old man felt sad. That night a strange voice awakened the child. He saw his grandpa on the ground prostrating himself. “Oh, my God! My God, do not deprive me of your heaven! Oh, God, please, do not deprive me!” Like a baby he was weeping bitter tears.

A year after that his grandfather handed over his soul to God. When he was on his back he asked his sons to bring Abdulkodir.

“My son, I am granted with earthly blessings, but you are a heavenly boy. Come near, let me make a pilgrimage to you.” He he got down and tried to hug the child’s legs. Abdulkodir ran out. Grandfather remained with his moans to God.

When he grew up Abdulkodir understood the reason of his grandfather’s troubles. But the human being is a strange creature: time changes your mind regularly, year in year out you think differently about the same thing.

After grandfather his parents also left this world. He felt so alone in the world. But life is very wise, it gives you another support – children. Instead of a parent’s kindness the soul fills itself with a child’s love.

Later he forgot all of this. A long time passed, he underwent hardships, accepted the gifts of the destiny. Sometimes they met with difficulties, sometimes they rejoiced. But always he lived with integrity, according to his conscience, did not try to eat another's share and did not offend other people. While he won his latchkey and grew up the childhood memory about Father Saint and heaven made him laugh. As if it was a misunderstanding. He used to participate in hobnobs, feasts among friends. It may happen in any life. The most important thing – he lived with faith.

Apparently childhood memories never leave the soul. Several times he dreamed about the garden. It was in a dark location, was emitting a green iridescence. There was a thin beamy filament like a road toward the garden.

It was a dream and anything could be seen in dreams. Once he heard the words of a man talking about his daughter's dream. "In her dream my daughter has seen me smeared with shit. By the help of the God from now on luck will turn to me and I'll grow rich!" said the man. But the dream of Abdulkodir was a divine dream. Time passed quickly, and the heaven again showed clearly before his eyes. It became the encouragement of his heart. His will to get to it turned into confidence that he would arrive.

But it was his last dream that terrified Father Abdulkodir.

He was in a dark place. There was neither top nor bottom, neither left nor right. In this darkness he saw his face. The face was beaten and the wound was bleeding. There was a rabid camel behind him. While foaming at the mouth it was beating him.

It was almost evening. In dread from his dream Father Abdulkodir is going to the Saint. He has an aim – to ask Father Saint to show him his last address. After sixty he often thinks about it because his contemporaries are also leaving for non-existence. In any case, it is his turn, but he still has a little time. There is a strong comfort in his heart – the prediction of Father Saint and his good dreams. But even so his soul, which still feels the moment of that journey through the otherworld, is

in fright. Perhaps a word that was said unconsciously, a sinful sight or deed could conduct him to eternal downfall.

But the time has been lost, it is impossible to turn it back. Sixty three years of life passed like a blink of light.

That is why if there were any dear friends with him now he would grievously tell them the bitter truth. But most of his dear friends have already gone to the true world, the others are not here. There is only a wind that is bringing the barely perceptible smell of the spring flower and forcing the black clouds from the east over the mountain.

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It was evening twilight when he reached the pilgrimage site. Among trees the drove of sheep was feeding by ransacking last year's leafage. The wind has dumped leaves together with snowflakes under the junipers. The blackish leaves are spreading the damp-dry smell of autumn.

Probably because it is late there is nobody else there. Father Abdulkodir coughed as a sign of his presence and then eagerly opened the door. "Father Saint!" he said in a subdued voice. It was silent. He entered into the room and saw the Saint. Father Saint was still sitting on a cane mat at the small window. There was still an open book before him. The room's atmosphere is so nice, as soon as you come in you feel warm. It was notable that the sweet-scented smell of snowdrops perfumed the air of the room. Father Abdulkodir greeted the Saint. Father Saint returned his greetings. He had aged visibly over the past years. His sight had become purer; his essence seemed as light as a feather. As if by the decision of the Lord the beam that was shining around him lately would soon take the sacred body up to Heaven. Father Abdulkodir knelt down on the mat and told the reason of his visit. He told about his childhood pilgrimage, about being in the Heaven.

"I lived like others as much as I was able. Am I really considered a suitable servant of the Lord? Will I be able to go to the holy garden?" he asked with hesitation.

Father Saint kept silent. Probably he was sunk deep in thought. A heavy beat of something broke the silence. It was the old heart of him that had faithfully served for sixty three years.

“Come near, son,” said the Saint. Father Abdulkodir breathlessly moved toward the person of God. Father Saint put his palms on Father Abdulkodir’s head.

“Close your eyes for a moment, my son!”

The pilgrim closed his eyes. In his soul he was asking God to be merciful to him. Then he opened his eyes.

Oh, God! Again he saw himself at the familiar door. The sound of the beating heart also was also here.

“My son, open the door,” a voice came from afar.

Trembling hands pushed a wing of the door. It opened.

But, oh, God, inside... A winter of severe frost rules there! The wind is blowing snowflakes around. Leafless blackish trees are stretching their bare branches into the lowering sky. Everywhere has turned into an ice-field; a chilly, hellish cold has frozen high and low. A grave is protruding over the snow. It has frosted over. It looks like frozen stone.

Winter... Cold... A grave in the ice land... Existence has been structured from these realities. Nothing else!

Father Saint looked ruefully at the hunched-over being. His thoughts shone out through his sight. In that way the old men were facing each other. Neither of them could speak, they kept silent. In essence there was no need.

Only the wind of late fall is howling as it strikes against the door of the hut. As if it is going to take these two men to distant places, to the Garden of Eden where the Adam and Eva had met for the first time. But it is not spreading pleasant odor of snowdrop anymore.

Translated from Uzbek by Shukhrat Sattorov