Evening Prayers (by Idris Bazorkin)

Rebecca Gould

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THE RUSSIA READER: HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

ADELE BARKER AND BRUCE GRANT, EDITORS
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Evening Prayers (1963)
Idris Bazorkin

One of the ironies of life in the Caucasus, even during the Soviet period, is that it was removed enough from mainstream state life to allow for greater creative experiment. An excellent example is the work of Idris Bazorkin (1910–91), whom many consider to be the founder of modern Ingush literature. The Ingush, like their close neighbors the Chechens, were among those brutally deported from their homeland under Stalin following the Second World War. Returning from Central Asia in 1957, in the wake of Khrushchev’s short-lived period of liberalization, when many of those deported were able to return home, Bazorkin began work on his best-known novel, Dark Ages, published in 1963. In this extract from the book, he offers a deeply human portrait of Ingush life, far from the standard Party approach on topics such as Islam, sex, and indigenous Ingush experience that socialist realism had long enforced. On the one hand, the rhythms which fill the days of Bazorkin’s characters are profoundly distinct from the Soviet scripts so characteristic of other novels published around the same time. On the other hand, Bazorkin refuses to idealize Ingush village life, as so many of the Russian nationalist derevenshchiki, or village prose writers, were doing to the north of him.

The title of the novel is an ironic reading of the presumption that any Caucasus village must be somehow frozen in medieval social structures. Bazorkin’s point was of a different nature: darkness could fall even during enlightened times and was an artifact of timeless struggles among men and women acting in a world made by themselves and by others.

Khassan, the mullah of the village of Egi, arrived when it was still light outside. Goitemir greeted him like an old friend and escorted him into the guest room. They talked about their health and the weather. It seemed like autumn would last forever. Neither snow nor frost was anywhere to be seen. This was bad for the earth, and they were worried about their crops. Then Goitemir told Khassan about how they had sacrificed a ram in honor of his mother-in-law, who was ill. Now they wanted him to read a movlad, a prayer they always said for the dead, according to the teachings of Islam.
“Excellent,” Khassan said. “God is always pleased by a sacrifice. Let us pray.”

Khassan raised his hands. Goitemir and his wife Nasi followed his example. It was a short prayer. Then the mullah took the small Koran that he had purchased in Mecca out of his pocket, opened it, put on his glasses, and began to recite.

Khassan’s voice was calm. He seemed entirely sure of himself. His austere, pale face was covered with the chestnut-hued shadow of overgrown stubble. He sat on the tall chair and scratched his chin as he read, turning the brittle pages at rare moments. Nasi stared at Khassan as he read the Koran. She was frowning and seemed to be nursing a secret sorrow. Finally, she forced herself to stand up and go to the kitchen, to finish the chores that awaited her there. Her eyes were full of tears. No one could tell whether she had been touched by the guest’s voice, whether she was thinking of her sick mother, or whether the tears had another source, known to her alone.

Goitemir sat across from Khassan and remained piously quiet. From time to time he poured oil into the kerosene lamp, to keep the room illuminated with light for Khassan to read by.

A female voice called for Nasi from a neighbor’s yard. When she found out that her neighbor wanted to borrow a comb for wool, Nasi found hers and left to give it to her neighbor. As she was returning to her home, she saw Goitemir on the terrace and pretended to wipe away the tears with her sleeve.

“What’s wrong?” Goitemir asked her tenderly.

“Nothing,” Nasi turned her head away. She was not in the mood for an intimate conversation with her husband.

But Goitemir was concerned, and he repeated his question.

“When I gave my neighbor the comb, she told me that a man had arrived not long ago from Tsori and said that mother had become worse,” Nasi lifted the tips of her fingers to her face, as if to wipe away more tears. Her shoulders were trembling.

“Calm down,” Goitemir told her. “You saw yourself how healthy she was when we left!”

“Of course. But she’s old. One minute she’s better, but the next minute she might be worse. But maybe the man from Tsori had heard an old rumor about her being sick, the same one we heard which made us visit her? Now I’m going to suffer until morning. My poor mother!” Then, as though consumed by thoughts about her mother, she turned her head and glanced out the window which looked onto their guest room. Khassan was sitting there, still reading from the Koran. “How much that man reads!” she exclaimed, hardly hearing her own words. Then she turned her face back to Goitemir.
and said, "I don’t need anything. I don’t want anyone to keep me from doing my duty to my mother. Listen, maybe our neighbor can take care of you in my absence? Everything is ready. Nothing needs to be done here. I’m going to see my mother tonight. It’s all the same to me where I am. I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight anyway."

"Have you lost your mind?" Goitemir exclaimed. "How do you plan to cross the gorge by night? If you’re that worried, I should probably go myself and find out how your mother is doing. I’ll return before tomorrow morning."

"Now you’re the one who’s crazy! You’re not so young that you can just traipse around the mountains like that." Nasi’s voice was full of fear. She knew well how sensitive her husband was about his age, and that any allusion to it could push him to do something drastic to prove that he was still young and strong. When he heard Nasi’s words of caution, Goitemir’s face did indeed change. He stepped backwards and stiffened his shoulders as he harshly intoned, "I’m going, whether you like it or not!" Then he added, "Don’t disturb our guest. Let him read as long as he wants."

"But what should I tell him?"

"What do you mean what? Just feed him. Then make his bed and you can go to sleep."

"But that’s the last thing I need, a man in the house when you’re not home. Maybe he should go home to sleep tonight. It’s not that far, after all," Nasi said. "What would happen if someone found out that you left your wife alone with another man?"

"We can’t make a guest return home!" Goitemir said firmly. "We must observe the laws of hospitality. We told him to come here, and now we have to take care of him, at least until tomorrow. He’s not a child after all! No one will know that I left you alone with him. Just tell Khassan that I was called away on business. I’m the village elder, after all. Such things happen all the time. I’ll return tomorrow and escort him home."

Nasi wiped the tears from her eyes again. "But don’t forget about the headaches that you get sometimes. What if you get a headache on your journey? And your heart is weak! You never know what might happen. God honored me by giving you to me as a husband. Go if you have to, just return as quickly as you can! And I beg you to avoid all the dangerous places! Be careful! I won’t shut my eyes until you step across the threshold of this house again, alive and well."

Nasi brought Goitemir his saddle, riding gear, and weapons. Goitemir jumped into the stirrups and proudly hoisted his legs onto the horse’s back. When he reached the gate, Nasi called to him to stop, ran inside, and brought out a stack of pancakes stuffed with meat wrapped inside a cloth.
Goitemir began to protest. He didn't want to take the pancakes with him, but Nasi continued to hold the package high in the air, for her husband to take. "You haven't eaten anything!" she protested. "No one will see you, don't worry."

Finally, Goitemir left, holding the reins for his horse in one hand and the cloth package of pancakes and meat in the other.

"May Allah watch over you on your journey!" Goitemir heard his wife call out from a distance.

When Goitemir disappeared behind the last tower in the village and she could hear his horse's trampling on the asphalt path, Nasi unlocked her hands and laughed. Then she ran inside. Khassan's chanting still resounded from the guest room. When she reached the guest room, she paused in front of the door. Khassan stopped reading and rested his eyes on her. An ascetic fire glowed in his hard glance. He ended the prayer in a whisper, shifted the beads on his prayer rope so that they were all bunched together, and then kissed them. Then he stuffed the prayer rope in his chest pocket.

"If you want to eat, I'll bring the food. It's time to think not only about the soul, but about the body as well." Nasi lowered her eyes to the floor. The faint trace of a smile lingered on her face.

Khassan was impressed by the pearly whiteness of her teeth, which clashed against her full red lips. He continued to pray, but nodded with his head, to indicate that she could bring in the food. Nasi went into the kitchen, where her neighbor was waiting for her.

Khassan's dinner was one of the most elaborate Nasi had ever prepared: the meat of a young ram, marinated in a sauce of herbs and cabbage leaves, a cow's head, ram testicles on a separate wooden plate, pancakes fried in butter, and stuffed meat. Each dish served separately would have been sufficient for ten people. As a grand finale to a luxurious meal, she brought out a huge turkey on a platter, which was then followed by dessert: halva and sugared tea.

Khassan was touched by Nasi's solicitude, but he couldn't bring himself to eat.

"So the guest is afraid of getting fat!" Nasi teased as she carried the untouched plates loaded with food back into the kitchen. Her neighbor commented that restraint in eating was the mark of a cultivated man.

"Of course! What does a bachelor need with food?" Nasi shot back, never one to let a sarcastic comment pass unsaid. "What else does he have to expend his energy on when there are no women around? Books? But for a real man to live without meat, that's like a horse that doesn't eat oats. He won't be able to drive a cart, that's for sure!"

Nasi's neighbor laughed so hard that she couldn't control herself for a long time.
When her neighbor finally stopped laughing, Nasi invited her to eat with her, as decorum required. She then explained that she was alone in the house with a man because her husband had to leave on urgent business concerning her poor, dying mother. They didn’t like to violate tradition, Nasi explained, but Goitemir loved her so much that he couldn’t stand to see her worry about her mother and insisted therefore on making sure she was all right, even though that meant leaving his wife alone with their male guest.

The neighbor finally got the hint and left. Nasi then went to sit by the window in the guest room where Khassan had finished eating. He sat there motionless, apparently frozen by the passage of time. Then she explained why Goitemir had asked him to pay a visit.

Khassan listened attentively, his eyes open wide and his lips slightly curved. He was surprised by her words. When Nasi finished speaking, he said:

"If they love each other, you don’t stand much chance of stopping them from getting married. We all know what will come of this.” Khassan stared at Nasi intensely. She noticed the sadness in his eyes, and lowered her head. “There are people who fall in love only once in their lives. If they lose the chance to be happy with their beloved, they will be tormented forever. Such a person cannot bring happiness to anyone. We both know this quite well. That’s why I advise you to think carefully before you act. It’s not for nothing that they say: get married in the day, and make sure to light a lamp!”

“You’re a wise man,” Nasi said. She had heard quiet steps behind the door and guessed that her neighbor was eavesdropping on the conversation. “That’s why we decided to approach you about this. We wanted to take advantage of your wisdom and seek counsel from you. But my husband hesitates to act, and time is passing quickly. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go make your bed and in the morning you can discuss this further with him, after you’ve slept and eaten.”

Nasi brought in a towel. Khassan went outside while she made his bed on the bench with the most luxurious blankets she had in the house. Khassan returned and recited his nightly prayers. Nasi pushed a large chest against the edge of the wall, and walked away into the other room, loudly wishing her guest a good night. The light was soon extinguished in the guest room. Nasi and her neighbor gossiped for the better part of an hour as they washed the dishes.

Then her neighbor went home, carrying a bag full of pancakes for her children. Nasi had been generous and given her as much food as she could carry. She escorted her neighbor to the gate, released the dog from his cage, fed him and went to her room. Her shadow trembled for a few minutes in the window, and then the dim light was replaced by pitch blackness. Sleep swept over the mountains and the village. There was nothing to interrupt the silence.
But no one was sleeping inside. Khassan stared out the dimly illuminated window and listened to every movement of her steps. He tried to mull over what Nasi had told him. But his thoughts disappeared as soon as they appeared, though the image of her face remained imprinted upon his imagination. He saw her blossoming body and her deep, tender eyes near the window where she had sat that night. He tried to free himself from her image by reading a prayer. But then he would remember how Nasi had smiled at him, revealing her fresh, full lips, and gleaming teeth, how she lowered her eyes to breathe more freely, and how he noticed the outline of her breasts. He was tortured by the limitlessness of his desire and cursed himself for agreeing to sleep in the same house with her.

He soon realized that he would never fall asleep that night.

While Khassan was immersed in fantasies, Nasi locked her door, and pulled the curtain over her window. She undressed near her bed and washed herself with the sweet-smelling Persian soap that her husband had bought for her on his pilgrimage to Mecca. She looked at herself in the weak light which still burned in the corner of her room and hurriedly covered her otherwise naked body with a silk nightgown. Then she left her room and tiptoed to the basement, where the animals lived during the winter.

She froze after closing the basement door behind her. She was thinking deeply about something, but probably she herself could not even have articulated her thoughts if she had been asked. Then she ascended to the upper
floor along a different set of stairs, entered the living room, and extinguished the light in the stove. When the fire went out, she returned to the basement.

Nasi inspected all corners of the basement in the dim light that flickered above her. She extinguished that light as well and then climbed up a third staircase, which led into the guest room. When she reached the top step, she stood still for several minutes and listened, unable to hear anything other than the beating of her own heart.

Khassan had been listening to the movement below with great excitement for a long time already. Was it sheep or a dog? But then he noticed the trunk shift suddenly away from the edge of the wall, where Nasi had placed it a few hours before. His whole body trembled. He dug his hand beneath his pillow and gripped his dagger.

"Maybe Goitemir suspected something and placed a trap for me?" Khassan wondered. His entire body grew tense with listening. A wooden panel, which led to the staircase, levitated for a moment above the floor, and a woman jumped out of the hole. Even though it was completely dark, Khassan recognized Nasi. His first impulse was to jump up, but she tore off her dress, flung it on the floor and jumped into bed with him before he had time to move.

"You're crazy!" Khassan whispered.

"Look what's going on here," Nasi answered just as quietly, and pressed his hand against her heart. But Khassan couldn't hear any beating. He could barely breathe, so excited was he by her proximity. The night began. It was one of the longest—and at the same time one of the shortest—nights in both of their lives.

Khassan had been born to a poor family who sent him away to a madrasah, or religious school, to become a mullah when he was still a child. He received an excellent education there, both in the things of the world and the things of Allah. By the time he left the madrasah, he was already a grown man. His head was full of sayings from the hadith and other treasuries of Islamic learning, but his pockets were empty. Only much later in life was he able to provide for himself. While he was still poor, his beloved, whom he adored for her beautiful manner of speaking and her graceful gait had been given away in marriage to a rich and influential old man. His name was Goitemir, and he was a village elder.

The old man knew that someone else planned to marry her first, but he was determined to stop him. The old man had no idea how deep Khassan’s love was for his betrothed. Goitemir didn’t notice anything strange even after the marriage took place. But this didn’t make things any easier for Khassan. He had to accept his bitter fate because he understood that there was no point
in fighting a hopeless battle. Khassan had the chance to get married many times after he lost his beloved to the old man. The families of many rich girls hinted to him that they wanted to make him part of their clan. But he turned them all down. Of all the women in the world only Nasi existed for him. He took an oath that he would have his revenge on Goitemir, for lusting after his beloved, for ruining his life.

No one knew about Khassan's secret love. He concealed the insult which life had dealt him from everyone. Many times he had found himself in Goitemir's presence, engaged in one kind of business or another. But he couldn't make up his mind to kill Goitemir. It wasn't cowardice that stayed his thirst for revenge, but rather his practical sense. He knew it was impossible to kill without being discovered, and that anyone who sheds blood must, according to the customs of their people, be avenged. If he killed Goitemir, Khassan would have had to explain to the villagers that Goitemir had stolen the woman he loved. He was afraid of this more than anything else, because admitting that would mean admitting that he had failed, that he had been defeated by a man richer than he.

Khassan dreamed of committing the kind of murder that would place him beyond suspicion. He wanted to feast his eyes on the spectacle of his enemy's death, to make him feel his failure, in the hope that in some way it would alleviate the intensity of his own pain. Several times, Khassan had felt himself close to achieving his goal. But at the last moment, some obstacle always appeared to stand in the way of his happiness.

Khassan and Nasi met rarely. Sometimes they waited for years to be together. The longer they waited, the more they felt themselves driven insane by the intensity of their desire.

The first time Khassan slept with Nasi after her marriage to Goitemir, Khassan laughed at the old man. He felt proud of his victory, and gloried in the fact that Nasi had never stopped loving him, even though she had agreed to marry another man. But then he began to look at it from another perspective: it was not he who was living with someone else's wife, but Goitemir who was living with his bride. And Goitemir was living with her openly, unlike Khassan who was doomed to experience the most significant moments of his existence in secret. And then Khassan suffered all over again from the insult of seeing his beloved possessed by another man. His sense of helplessness was as powerful as it had been at the beginning. Rage against Goitemir, along with the desire to avenge him, filled him once again.

Years passed. Goitemir luxuriated over his riches, his women, his domestic bliss, and his children, while Khassan had nothing he could call his own with
which to fill his life with joy. He would have gladly given up all his scholarly achievements and all the respect of society just to experience one evening with a family he could call his own! So many hours, so many sleepless nights, so much yearning, and what did it all add up to? It allowed him to run as fast as he could to the top of the mountain, to smash his naked chest against the rocks and to howl, to become an animal and to let himself be eaten alive by the pain that was consuming him. But the problem was that such displays of emotion made no difference in the end. Life remained the same. He gradually learned to grit his teeth and suffer silently.

And now fate had dropped another crumb of happiness onto his plate. He, Khassan, was lying on another person’s bed, under another person’s roof, with another person’s wife. He, a mullah, and a haji who had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, and therefore ought to have been regarded as one of the holiest men in the village of Egi, was a thief, though all he was doing was reclaiming the happiness which someone else had so wrongfully stolen from him.

Nasi knew that he loved her more than anyone else in the world, that in fact he loved her and no one else. But she was unable to understand the depth of his suffering, because they had different kinds of souls, and because of the many years dividing them. Nasi loved Khassan. He was the first man she had ever slept with. He was strong even though he was old, and he loved her alone. All these facts made her care about him. She knew nothing about him, really, nor did she have any desire to know more. She understood at some level perhaps that the very thing that divided them—their inability to understand each other—was what enabled them to make each other happy.

On the rare occasions when he met Nasi, Khassan didn’t say anything about his suffering. It was easier for both of them that way. She was satisfied with having him for the moment and with the transient joy she was able to offer him.

Suddenly, the first rooster crowed. Nasi spoke again about their plans for their son’s marriage.

Khassan thought to himself of what had happened between them. How could Nasi wish to inflict such suffering on someone else?

“‘The person who divides lovers will burn in hell,’” he said quietly.

“What about the person who sleeps with another man’s wife?” Nasi laughed. “Both of us are going to burn in hell. So let’s take advantage of all the pleasures for which we have sacrificed our chances of paradise.”

Khassan laughed. “You get wiser with the years!” he said.

Nasi was so absorbed by the excitement of the moment that she didn’t
Evening Prayers

hear her husband unlock the gate leading into the yard and bring his horse into the stable. She trembled when the horse snorted not far from the window. Then she jumped up and embraced Khassan.

“Save me from his grimy hands!” Nasi whispered into Khassan’s ears and then disappeared though the trap door leading to the basement. As she lowered the wooden panel over herself, Nasi whispered to Khassan to move the chest back against the wall, to cover the hole beneath it, which opened onto the staircase leading into the basement.

Khassan did as she asked and then lay back down. At that very moment, a knock resounded on the door. Nasi had not yet made it back to her bedroom. But she wasn’t afraid. She closed the cellar door and ran into the yard. Goitemir stood a few feet away, on the terrace.

“Who is it?” she cried out tenderly.

“It’s me, Goitemir,” he said, though they both knew perfectly well that there was no one else it could be at that time of night. Nasi went inside and opened the door.

“How is mother?” Nasi asked, her voice trembling with simulated fear.

“She’s just the same as she was when we left her,” Goitemir said. “The man who scared us with his news must have heard an old rumor.” Then he sniffed at his wife’s skin. “You smell different today. Your skin looks somehow younger and fresher.”

“Compared to you, I’m just a little girl,” Nasi said, trying to suppress the bitterness that was surging unexpectedly inside her. “I washed myself in the Persian soap you bought me. But you’re imagining things if you think my skin has changed.”

Goitemir was annoyed by his wife’s words. He rolled his eyes in the darkness. Dawn had not yet reached the valley, and Nasi couldn’t see, though she felt, the way in which she had annoyed her husband. Goitemir remained silent. He knew that words wouldn’t help him, wouldn’t make his wife love him more, or even accept a compliment. Then Nasi suddenly clutch his hand and placed it on her heart.

“Listen to it beat!” she whispered passionately. “You see how desperately I’ve been waiting for you?”

Goitemir kept his hand pressed on his wife’s chest and silently called upon Allah to help him. Allah had not been very diligent lately, and had ignored his pleas for help, specifically with reference to the needs of the body.

Translated by Rebecca Gould