

FATE'S LIEUTENANT

a novel

by

T. Koelb

“This whole act’s immutably
decreed. `Twas rehearsed by thee
and me a billion years before this
ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’
lieutenant; I act under orders.”

It was odd how much Brussels could resemble a desert. Even though it was raining, the most recent in a seemingly endless series of damp days that stretched indistinguishably across the year, the city's surface seemed for all the world like sand, unfixed and yet unchanging in the manner of a dune. I had never doubted that everyone, even the locals, experienced it as I did. I knew so few Belgians anyway; most had long since left the ship to sink, incapable of matching purses with the foreign bureaucrats and businessmen who encroached daily further, individually temporary but nonetheless overwhelming because collectively permanent: invaders living under cover of umbrellas or driven from awning to awning by water forever falling from cloud-drenched skies, but always, I believed, comforted and sustained in their exile by an enviable dream of home. In a neighbourhood of well-heeled stone apartment buildings, each seemingly larger than the next and all of them yellow in the streetlights that had sprung dutifully to life to illuminate the approaching darkness, I moved against the tide of conquerors as from their day's work and their journeys they came quietly and gladly home.

Already in those days the spires and gables of the centre were being reduced to doll's house proportions by buildings of modern tone and mass. A vast flock of immense steel cranes heaved their heads high above the city skyline to assemble each great steel nest. Above the respectable buildings I could see them, as enormous and gaudy and unstoppable as the future. I thought as I variously pushed and pulled my

shadow through the overlapping circles of light that its newest features were now so inorganic, so unfamiliar, that the city must have seemed to itself an unapproachable stranger; the dull mirror of wet paving stones no longer reflected the face it once knew.

The new construction seemed too big for so small a country, he once told me: he said it was like a steamship moored to a coffee table. For my part, I wondered if the buildings changed everything or nothing at all, if they were in fact a strangely appropriate addition, as I was: innately foreign with an undisguisable accent, but still a product of that wet place. Perhaps those great cement blocks should have put me at ease, but there is a habit born of being foreign, and it is a hard one to break. I could not help but feel that I would seem painfully outlandish in the country of my birth.



His name was Iskander, although I was not to know that for quite some time. He introduced himself to me when we came to that as Herman, which was intended as some kind of joke. He asked me later if I understood it, and for some reason I lied and said I did. It may have been something straightforward and childish, for his jokes often were, or it may have had a significance of which I was and remain unaware. Certainly he would have been tickled by the idea that his German professors were thus condemned to call him Mr. Man, but it could just as easily have referred to Melville had he said, "Call me Herman"? I don't remember or some other, local

Fate's Lieutenant

Herman, for the name had once enjoyed some currency in Belgium, and the history of the country seemed littered with it. It could indeed have been many things, for in our irregular situation among those who lived, not in Brussels really at all, but in big institutions, NATO or the EEC, Americans and Germans and all other sorts, things were regularly unclear.

I learned in time that he was known about the university by almost as many names as he made appearances, drifting from one name to the next. I expected him to show some fear of being found out, but his purpose was never falsehood; I eventually understood that it was, in fact, the opposite, and engendered all the contradictions that such attempts at conscious self-discovery entail, a kind of uncertainty. His multiple names suited in some manner his situation, whether because of or giving rise to the impression that his situation was of his own manufacture, I don't know; and the fact that he never forgot who he was to whom impressed me. Each of his names carried the same conviction as the next, regardless of number, although eventually he settled on Andy as a diminutive that most people could pronounce and his sense of self could accept.

"Would you just call me Andy now, please?" he asked in the middle of an unrelated conversation. Most of the time I chose to call him by his full name instead, and became the only person other than his mother to do so. I am still unsure why I insisted on it as I did, but the urgency with which I was afflicted left me impervious to

reason or appeal, and though he corrected me publicly on at least three occasions, in the end he gave up with reasonable good-nature.

“Fine, have it your way.”

Iskander first tricked me into his acquaintance. He sought me out in a way, hunted me, although the nature of my attraction for him was something I never understood. When at last he felt the time had come to trap me, he began an argument in such a public manner that I could not indulge my natural instinct to passivity, strong as it was. Instead I was drawn by both pride and a complete lack of familiarity with the options to the unaccustomed and discomfiting realm of action. Although I can't recall what it was we fought about, I remember that by his insistence it quickly became heated. At first, we moved as we argued; I had been leaving a lecture hall and headed towards the library when I noticed him in front of me, walking backwards amid the flood of students.

“Stop!” he said, sternly, his hand held aloft like a sign. There was an expression on his face - his small mouth turned downwards between his flat cheeks, his striking black eyebrows knotted unevenly across his high forehead, his eyes bulging but nonetheless diminished to spots beneath the thick lenses of his glasses - that gave him a look of strangling terror. He moved to block my path. I looked about me, confused, hoping an acquaintance could extricate me from the attentions of my attacker. No one seemed familiar enough to merit enlistment so we yelled at one another through the

sounds of a building alive with people talking, singing, calling to each other over their shoulders. In the windowless corridor that linked the various classrooms, with its off-white walls and heavy fire doors, fluorescent and dim at all hours, we pressed near one another to exchange insults as wave after wave of book-laden students smashed by, threatening us with untimely separation. The pressures of action and of space were increased when some passers-by stopped to watch us. They didn't speak or take sides; in fact, they didn't even appear very interested, as if drawn to look only by dumb instinct, or to make certain that they themselves were not in some way implicated. They stared placidly at our fury and then moved on.

Later Iskander asked me why I hadn't simply walked away.

"I don't know. We were fighting. Nothing else occurred to me."

"You're very instinctive," he nodded.

"I don't know," I said, although in a way it was true. Feeling attacked I had wished to attack, but a debate without logic or history left little room for thought; I couldn't recall an appropriate response. Reckless for words, for any answer that was also an exit, I overcame my growing sense of impotence with impulsive and uninspired viciousness. "Leave me alone, you ugly fool," I yelled furiously.

His crooked features collapsed. Still, his mouth unevenly pursed and his long arms dangling limply, eyes quiet glassy dots in the distant perspective of his little metal-framed spectacles, he resembled a puppet or a toy, something that someone had

invented and then left idle. He didn't speak, and his silence was as stunningly sudden as his assault had been earlier; it was certainly as astonishing to me, and left me with no better idea of how to proceed. We stood for a moment without speaking.

"I just don't know why you're yelling at me," I attempted at last.

"Don't worry."

I was as incapable of abandoning my apology as I had been of deserting the argument.

"I'm sorry, I just don't understand what's going on."

"Good looking people often don't understand what it's like to be ugly."

"I don't think I'm especially good looking."

"You have a nice build," he said appreciatively, his manner now graciously animated. "But I can see talking about it makes you uncomfortable. Where do you think I'm from?" I hesitated. I wanted to leave but no avenue presented itself: the tone of confrontation was gone, and he now spoke as if I were an old friend. "It's fine to guess," he coaxed. "Go ahead."

"I really have no idea. Israel?"

"No, but that's very perceptive of you in a fashion. Which way are we walking?"

When the heat was gone from the moment he achieved at last what he had intended by this strange deception into which I had been so easily conscripted: the chance to apologise, for as he later explained at some length, to apologise is to speak

Fate's Lieutenant

calmly and perhaps in a quickening harmony, just as to fight had been to speak but in discord, and just as previously our relation had been not to speak at all, for we didn't in fact know one another. Desiring speech, then, he had conceived two ways to guarantee it, one unpleasant, one soothing; and these together were his trap.

“I knew you would respond if I said something insulting. You knew the same. The emotional reaction makes what you say seem effective; we have had an effect on each other.”

He knew what I studied, he said; he shared a class with me, something I vaguely knew but didn't admit to him at the time. He did most of the talking at first, asking a lot of questions to which I gave the dullest answers often after looking for them on the ground about my feet. He walked with his hands held behind his back. I was confused by this strange person, who first needlessly angered me and then offered friendship. The approach was too sudden, too alien, and it made me suspicious; lack of familiarity tended in all circumstances to distress me. Even his clothing, too lightweight for the climate and too feminine in a way, too tight about the legs and too loose about the chest, gave me at first a sense of discomfort. It was exactly this fear of the untried that kept me anchored to that place for so long, and even in a sense made me shy of success. Success is a most frightening prospect to the bourgeois spirit, which is doubtless what lurks within me.

“You mustn't worry about that,” he consoled me once when I questioned my inability to emulate his lack of inhibition and, more importantly, lack of prejudice against the unknown – for although he held extremely strong views on many things, could tell me in a voice tinged with fatigue to “turn off that insipid moaning” when it was my turn at the radio dial, upbraid me for my lack of taste, he was always open to the new. “That's the way you are. You have other qualities.”

“Such as?”

“You're extremely vulnerable.” It was a strange compliment. With time I have come to think that he may well have been mistaken. One can fear being wounded without in fact possessing the capacity for it; psychosomatic or not the symptoms are similar enough to mislead both public and patient, and I have not dared to test their reliability. At the time, however, his remark had a strong effect on me. I became aware, whether of my vulnerability or its mere appearance, with a magical suddenness, and found it gave me a kind of licence.

Although I spoke only grudgingly he didn't let up, venturing opinions on anything and everything, subjects that I could not see handled without wanting to hold them myself, irrepressibly driven to assent or cry foul. He praised, accused, dissected. Our path stomped heavily and without purpose across the unhealthy grass, choked with the air of the city and burdened with the water a winter's worth of mist and drizzle had left behind, a shallow ocean about the squat, ugly modern buildings of

the university, their utility attested to conclusively by a complete lack of grace. The buildings and the sky were grey; even the skin of our faces mirrored the grey light that held us as if it owned us, as it owned everything else in the sunless succession of identical days, that nested wetly in our clothes, our hair, showing heavy, dull reflections of itself. Only the brightly coloured logo of the university fought back, and the plastic door-handles in the tall glass double doors. Iskander was asking if I had seen *The Night of the Hunter*.

“The scenes with the executioner are very important.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. They almost ruin the film,” I argued. “It suddenly endorses the bureaucracy of death. Suddenly there’s this thoughtless concession to the use of violence as a result of law .”

“Of course,” he interrupted. “That’s just what I mean: the good husband and the bad husband have the same end, are captured in scenes that are almost identical. If the scenes are the same, it’s because they are both symbols to the same thing. One time everyone is happy, sure, one time sad, but no one stops to question what they are about. That’s why the killer and new mother sing the same song. When we hear it, it represents for us an evil man, even when the good woman sings it. Does the song change, or does the woman? You see. So the scene makes one thing clear: these two people are together, in a way the same, evil as much as good in everything, a part of life. The traditional assumption of a black-and-white morality in which the natural

Fate's Lieutenant

Good triumphs over unnatural Evil was the whole film up to this moment precisely so that when it is shown to be the false one we are really struck by its failure. It's why the whole movie."

I imagined the scene: the false preacher and murderer waits outside a suburban house, the rescuer of orphans and runaways stands guard over the two lost children whose mother is dead. He sits in the dark front yard holding a knife; she sits in the lighted porch of her house resting a shotgun across lap. Her window frames them both, both singing. I saw it, that moment like a mirror. Without even quite noticing that I had begun, I found myself singing, the two lines I remembered of the hymn from the film:

Leaning, leaning

Leaning on the everlasting love.

Iskander started walking again. "Of course we see it all as symbol. With all the novels and films and poems, everyday something to see or read, no person could live sane through the suspension of disbelief, and we don't want to. Despite everything we've learned about human nature, we want to think every time what the man says in Ibsen: people don't do these things. It is vital to us that we disbelieve."

In the end he had his way, of course, and without having noticed it I had talked with him for as long as I might have with any friend of good standing, and it was he

finally who left me. "Is that the time?" he asked, holding my hand with his long dusky fingers to turn my wrist. "Oh, Dog."

"Oh, dog?"

"Don't you know?" he giggled. "I'm dyslexic." For a while I actually believed he was.

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He was well known, even among those who were not his friends, as a troublemaker of sorts. As in any place such as a school where people can only choose their society by means of exclusion, his unusual behaviour and odd clothes served to make him the butt of many jokes, of which happily he seemed to be unaware. He was already friendly with almost everyone of my acquaintance. I think he took to us all mostly for the same reason: we shared a certain outlook, a sense of disorientation, a lack of certainty about where we were going or whatever it was that was missing – for I, at least, tended to think of it as a lack more than anything else.

I never imagined at first just how much he had seen – not in books and films but with his own eyes, real things. Although he couldn't recall Turkey well as the family home abruptly quitted in early childhood, he knew it from one or two long visits there as a child, accompanied by his mother, to stay with family members, sometimes in Istanbul, where his grandfather had resettled the entire family from Salonika after the war with Greece but which his mother thought too dangerous; often

in Izmir, where he had a thoughtlessly conventional, if fairly successful, uncle whom he called the Smyrna Merchant, a man whose only literature was in the business papers and who could thus hardly have been expected to see the joke. He would certainly never have found it funny if he had. His uncle exposed him to things, the lives of farmers and peasants, livestock in the abattoir, the raw stuff of daily life in an agricultural world: precisely what seemed furthest from all I knew. The poverty he saw touched him and he described it to me in terms I found painful. His mother opposed these excursions to the coarser side of Turkish life, but his uncle felt that boys needed to see such stuff, claiming it hardened them. Alone without her husband in that sexually divided society she was unable to intervene, although she never failed to make her objections known. Undoubtedly, too, the businessman misjudged his nephew, but self-made men often see in others only the materials for expanded construction.

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As I think about it now I can't recall if it was a maternal or paternal relation, or even if the exact nature of the bond was ever explained, for Iskander had innumerable 'uncles' who were not blood relations but who with greater or lesser permanence occupied the sort of place that in a different household might have been reserved for family. There were, to my recollection, no aunts.

These men approached the great Belgian blue-stone fronted apartment block

where Iskander still lived then with his family as though nearing a place of disrepute, not that there was ever anything less than respectable about the family home — unless it was the strange air that hung over it, that funk of awkwardness which, once it pervades a place or a person, is never to be removed — but because they were accustomed to walk thus, they were tarred with the brush of apologetic discomfort and had learned so thoroughly to creep that even when creeping was no longer necessary they failed to revert; for while creeping can be a measure of necessity, a relaxed manner is rarely as pressing, and I am sure they looked completely comfortable only in those situations of distress that penalise a lack of self-assurance, such as at customs or in the presence of a judge.

Once within the house, their manner changed, in so far as the creeping men seemed suddenly at ease with their burden, wore it with a kind of apologetic pride, expressed by great smiles and laughter. Only Iskander's father, who never crept at all but walked upright and with dignity and yet still carried about him the desperate aura of creeping, retained in his home the dull burnish of meekness, as if only he was so not by circumstance but by birth, as if, wish as he might that he could be otherwise, free of the creepers and the air of creeping, his destiny lay among them and he was resigned to fulfil it.

Iskander's father was tall, dark although greying, unimpeachably respectable, and yet somehow watery, a strangely fragile presence that nonetheless left an indelible

mark on his family, like the empty bed of a once great river, or a watermark which held to the light might prove a distant ownership. Sitting sadly in his chair among his guests it appeared to me that at times he might himself have been the grey and yellow floral pattern, flecked with tired green and speaking of faultless if unimaginative good taste, that adorned the faded upholstery. The grasp of his enormous hand was always surprisingly soft when with great solemnity he shook mine.

The creeping uncles made me aware, as little else did, of the sense of banishment that hung over Iskander's family. Modernity, the culture of the day, had pierced the apartment only as far as their son's bedroom; everything else had an air of having been rescued from some earlier time, snatched from the flood which had taken the rest, and the furnishings sat in that apartment where they had arrived barely ten years earlier as if built into the rooms, even as if the building itself had grown up vine-like around them.

I visited his home for the first time one late afternoon not long after our disconcerting initial encounter. A little naïve, I was disappointed to find the furniture wasn't Turkish. There were no large cushions, low tables, or other such things, and few carpets were to be seen, although I understood from repeated hints by Iskander's mother that many more were secreted away — far too many to have about the house. This was not the gaudy home of a carpet salesman; it was the residence of a distinguished European academic from a family of distinguished academics, with

Fate's Lieutenant

overstuffed chairs and endless rows, stacks, and piles of books whose titles, even when they were in English or French, were hard to make out in the dim light which, as day passed into night, never seemed to vary in intensity, for the thick drapes were drawn, and the world was at bay. Entering Iskander's curtainless room was to be blinded by the dull grey daylight or the relative intensity of his bare high-wattage bulbs and by the sudden reflective crispness of his slightly soiled, unpapered white walls. Everywhere but in that bright box the furniture was heavy, impressive, immovable; Iskander had little furniture at all in his room, and his mattress lay on the floor. By the larger window there was a small table that served as a desk, and a simple wooden chair. "The rest is banished," he told me. "I wanted light, and this was the only way to make it, throw everything out." On the desk, propped against the wall, there was a photo in a simple plastic frame of himself with his father.

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It was the work of a well-respected academician that had led them to transport this air of permanence unto decay from place to place, from Turkey first to Germany, then to the United States, and then finally to Belgium. Certainly Iskander's father was a well-respected academician; here were pictures of him with well-known philosophers, with the presidents of universities and of research institutions even of countries, for the professor could be seen in an ancient framed newspaper clipping, then just a young man, and with him his own father, one looking practically like a boy

and the other like a skeleton, while in the foreground sat Atatürk himself behind a desk, an almost mischievous look on his famous face. There was also a curled photograph deposited in the corner of some larger picture's wood frame, in black and white, taken with an exiled Egyptian novelist; both looked pleased, but only the other man appeared comfortable. The photograph opened like a tiny porthole onto a large, open room, with a generous natural light forcing much of the space into shadow. The writer wore a short-sleeved shirt, top buttons undone to reveal a throat dusted with salt and pepper hair, enormous sunglasses bulging from his breast pocket, the professor a dark coat and tie. There was a sofa with ornate woodwork like an outline all about it, and on a grand old marble fireplace a huge, slightly speckled mirror leaned back to catch a small part of the ceiling; in one corner of the bevelled glass you could make out the hair, closed eye, and camera of the photographer. That tiny intrusion of the unintentional made the artifice of the rest, the pose of two men who stand looking together at nothing, seem all the more unreal.



That night they invited me to stay for dinner. It was much more formal than it generally would be when later I would share a quickly prepared family meal or, more often, eat with Iskander in his room, store-bought sandwiches and packaged cakes that emerged with a gentle release of air from out of their colourful plastic wrappers. As the steely sky blackened gently into night we waited, all together in the salon, for

the arrival of another guest, one of enough importance to merit using the grand and burdensomely furnished dining room and its finest properties of silver and china, making slightly uncomfortable conversation. I tried to remind myself to sit up straight, but other than that the advice for elegant behaviour never spared me by my grandmother was lost precisely at the first moment I had ever felt in need of it. I confined myself to answering as politely as I could the polite questions my hosts would take some minutes to formulate and then reconsider before putting to me.

Iskander stood very still by the window with his hands in his pockets, occasionally answering for me. He said, "Don't bother him, Ma, you make him on trial." His mother and I smiled then more politely than ever.

"He's there," said Iskander, sitting down next to me. I leaned over and looked through the curtains at the road. A taxi had pulled up in front of the building and the driver's door hung broadly open. A tall, slightly balding man whose striped suit shared a dry, dusty look with his hair and heavy moustaches climbed slowly out. I watched him for a moment as he leaned back in across the front seat, the awkwardness of which reminded me that I had abandoned my authorised posture; I pulled myself back to attention. The sofa where we sat was so deep I could not rest my back against the cushions behind me and keep my feet from poking childishly in the air. With my feet on the ground I would fall back flat like a man in bed.

The cabby wore a small-brimmed fedora, dark and heavily mottled with stains, a dark grey suit faintly pin-striped that bore the appearance of having not long before been roughly dragged through a roomful of cobwebs, and a plain, off-white shirt with no tie; his moustaches were of geological stature, and streaked with grey. He spoke very good, clear French, but nevertheless conversation had a tendency to drift back into Turkish whenever I was not being addressed directly. Sometimes Iskander's mother would clear her throat and mention almost without parting her lips, "*Notre invité...*" but this failed in general to have much effect. When on occasion Iskander spoke it was usually in French, so I could at least understand his part of the conversation, and their visitor would often be polite enough to answer him in the same language. In the salon it was not so bad, for I could sit quietly and mostly unnoticed on my corner of the fathomless couch, but once in the dining room I wished I understood anything at all of what they said if only so my hostess, who sat next to me when she was not serving dinner, would not feel so obliged to keep engaging me in conversation.

Iskander's mother fetched each arranged dish herself and presented it with its precise name and genealogy. The food was European, robust French specialties that demand a day in the kitchen: fresh snails in nettles, duck confit. There were turnips served in a blizzard of parsley for which I had regularly to search my teeth. Far into the main course I answered any number of inoffensive questions about my family:

times and places, nothing overly personal. She offered to explain to me how carpets were made, as I commented on one of her own, and in fact her account was very interesting. I almost didn't notice the growing stridency of the others as I listened to her tell me about the vast looms and the hours it took to prepare them with the warp, the low bench where the women sat making tiny knots of coloured silk, the curved, razor-sharp blades which they used to cut off the excess thread and brandished dangerously when their passions were aroused, but finally the talk across the table had clearly become an argument, and a brief moment of raised voices was followed by several endless seconds of silence. For a time we, like the others, sat quietly, finally turning our attention to our food and making that suffice, to that sound than which nothing is more like discomfort, the quiet and lonely tapping of forks and knives, the low pulling sound of chewing.

“Do you know anything about blown glass?” my neighbour asked me.

My mind struggled almost painfully in the vast absence of sound that engulfed me to formulate a phrase preferably witty or at least clearly thoughtful by which to soften the disappointing emptiness of my response when now one of substance seemed clearly most needed. “No,” I said. “Nothing.” My hostess and I both smiled, tight sad little movements of the face that imparted no pleasure.

“She means those ugly little clowns.” Iskander said. “Now both shut up, please.” I looked to the sideboard where a sizeable population of large, brightly

coloured glass men twisted and fluted translucently to pom-pom-hatted heads and thick, gloved hands. I later learned that these bulbous, infinitely fragile and false toys for children were worth a fortune among collectors.

“Oh, Iskander!” his mother chided unenthusiastically. His father clucked quietly and touched his son's shoulder. “Come, come,” he murmured, after which the two men began again to speak, Iskander attending, while we two sat quietly watching them. Their conversation started quietly enough, but soon became quite heated. Iskander's father evidently disagreed strongly with the other man on a question that held some importance for them both; his mother looked into her food, at times making placating noises disguised as appreciative dining. I tried to be more helpful in the generation of subjects for conversation, and we were chatting again after our polite manner when the cab driver raised his voice very suddenly and slapped the flat of his hand on the table for emphasis, causing me to jump in my seat. Iskander's father moved roughly in his chair, throwing one arm over the back as he crossed his legs, on his face a look of hurt distress, but it was his son who responded.

“C'est pas possible!” he cried.

“Je vous assure, ça n'a rien de tel. L'affaire est triste, certainement, mais voyons, messieurs: ces personnes n'ont jamais été ciblées.”

“You mean they were simply chosen to die at random? For no purpose whatsoever?”

“Of course not. No one would suggest...”

“Then in some way they were targets.”

The other man looked a little tired; his eyes floated in a well of darkness and the yellowed whites were shot with pink. He brushed gently at his tobacco-stained moustaches with thumb and forefinger before answering slowly, “A decision had to be taken,” he at last said, quietly and with the force that soft words carry after harsh ones.

“Yes, it did,” Iskander replied in the same tone. He seemed calm, but across his face washed a bloodless, emotionless look, waxy, almost inhuman. “But when you say these words you are talking about politics, and when I say them I am talking about murder.”

For a silent moment the driver stared at the professor with a look of affronted dismay, then at the son in a manner suggesting that while the rules of common courtesy would not allow him to say what he wished there was no prohibition to thinking it unsaid in plain view. Iskander looked impassively before him, toying inattentively with his enormous silver fork, large as a trident.

“I think I would be more comfortable discussing something else,” the lady of the house intoned in a steady voice. Immediately the two older men apologised to her and began just as quickly to speak amiably about their work, and something to do with rare books. Their talk mercifully reverted to Turkish before too long and I was freed

from having to pay attention. Iskander inclined his head towards the door and said, "Let's go?"

"Thank you for the meal." I stood up. "It has been very nice to meet you." I couldn't remember what to do with my napkin so I stood there for a moment, running the thick cotton polluted with the residue of my meal through my fingers, before dropping it on my chair.

"You're welcome, fine, now let's go." As I followed Iskander from the room, his father reached out and took his son's long, thin hand briefly between his two enormous palms; on the backs of his wrists there were liver spots forming across the papery skin. "Now, please," he started in English, his voice a quiet, warm humming, but then was silent. The taxi driver watched detachedly. Finally the old scholar said only, "Don't forget to offer your guest some coffee." He smiled and closed his eyes for a second before we moved on.