

GOGI GVAKHARIA

## The Tear-stained Glasses

### Part 33

#### 2003: Chocolate and Roses

What's wrong with Tbilisi? I believe it has completely forgotten about Juliette, or rather, as the noble lady Mertsia used to say, Juliette Binoche.

Mertsia is an ordinary shop assistant in an ordinary shop in Paliashvili Street. I always bought sour cream in her shop. Once Lasha Bakradze<sup>1</sup> couldn't hide his surprise when he found out I travelled all the way from my place to Vake for such a simple thing as sour cream. But I'm also sure the 'Glasses' readers will know that it's quite common for Gvakharia to go in roundabout ways. Especially when it comes to sour cream – you can put it over anything you like, salty, sweet, sour things, just to neutralize them.

In this case, though, rather than the sour cream and a relatively cheap shop, the assistant and her customers, their benevolence became a decisive factor. As opposed to other shops, the Psycho<sup>2</sup> presenter was never sneered at, never lectured on the morale and ethics. Quite the contrary, after Saturday screenings, his choice films were discussed and new ones were asked to be shown.

Mertsia certainly stood out. Invariably smartly dressed, a small woman of about 65, with her hair dyed blond, a tiny nose and an enormous brooch pinned to her blue uniform. Once she admitted she had called the studio but apparently I had refused to listen. I had hung up.

Of course I wouldn't have listened! She phoned after Louis Malle's *Damage*. That day my co-presenter was Lika Nadaraia<sup>3</sup>, and Mertsia chided her for not showing more respect towards Binoche's character. She was particularly upset by 'the black-stocking woman', which Lika actually used to describe the actress. Moreover, that day she told one of the male callers that if males had several more ounces on them than women, it didn't mean they owned everything.

Lika's great. She doesn't like Binoche either. She immediately sensed Louis Malle had mocked her by giving her the femme fatale part. So did Jean-Luc Godard when he invited her for his *Hail Mary* and gave her a minor part, hardly enough to rate as a cameo appearance. When the shooting was over, she didn't leave. Instead she watched the Maestro with admiration. Known for his rude and tactless manner, Godard called out to her:

'Stop pretending you're helping us! Your scene has been shot.'

But Mertsia is neither Godard nor Jeremy Irons. She's an ordinary, neat woman, a refugee from Abkhazia. Just like millions in the world, small and neat like her, she is crazy about the ever elegant Juliette Binoche, the actress beloved by her fans 'to emanate light', the actress who stole the Oscar from the legendary Lauren Bacall. Mertsia was so fascinated by the actress that in 2000-02 she kept her photo at the till.

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<sup>1</sup> Literary critic and essayist.

<sup>2</sup> Gogi Gvakharia's TV programme, broadcast every Saturday in 1997-2005.

<sup>3</sup> Psychologist, feminist, human rights defender.

It was a bit later that the Georgian shop assistants started sticking icons and crosses to their cash registers. In 2003 the practice was yet unknown. Actually, even the cash registers were a rarity in Tbilisi shops.

In the autumn of 2003 Juliette Binoche disappeared from Mertsia's counter. Her place was now occupied by Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of the National Movement<sup>4</sup>. In fact it was an election poster saying 'Georgia without Shevardnadze'. I wouldn't rule out that it was my twisting and twirling that affected the neat shop assistant. I had consistently repeated Binoche was the epitome of falsehood, that she had adopted the mask of a noble woman, that she had no taste having called her son Raphael ... My brainwashing must have been effective. Or it could have been the pause Binoche had taken: the then face of Lancôme was expecting her second baby and refused to appear in films.

My twisting and twirling was largely determined by the 2000 film *Chocolate* in which Binoche played her own image ascribed to her by millions of her admirers. Up to then she had alternately played a victim (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) and a passionate bully (*Damage*), women cheated by their loved ones but still finding the strength to go on living. The transformation was crowned with the gaze of a much-suffered woman in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue*, against a highly exalted music.

In fact, *The English Patient* was a kind of dress rehearsal for Binoche. The nurse's role fitted her perfectly – the nurse who not only knows how to inject her patients, but is well trained how and when to smile to comfort them. The Americans loved that kind of a woman. They were particularly excited with the fact that she is French, that is to say, belongs to the culture whose priority is a 'good life' and utmost comfort. No wonder they adopted the word 'bourgeois' in their language, adding 'petty' to differentiate the haute from the small-scale ones.

In *Chocolate* Binoche's character arrives in a small town together with her daughter and sets to the task of refining the local small-scale bourgeoisie. In truth, the place is so small it doesn't deserve to be called a town, but its inhabitants are absolutely sure they live in one.

The 'Messiah from the north' opens a sweet shop and sells chocolate, which is not only soft, melting in the mouth, but helps the southerners pull themselves out of the bog of stereotypes and prejudices.

In short, the kind fairy treats everyone to her chocolate, finds a non-conformist tramp in the character of Johnny Depp, and together they defeat the evil Mayor along with the clerics stuck in the Dark Middle Ages.

For some the 'chocolate romanticism' can be a manual for starting a small business, for others it might be useful to satisfy their political ambitions. Ultimately, Binoche wearing red shoes in the film is a village superhero who reverts to a bar of chocolate instead of a shrink's couch and wins, surprisingly as it might seem.

Incidentally, once Mertsia, the ardent supporter of the Psycho, asked about the significance of the red shoe<sup>5</sup> I used as the programme logo. I didn't explain.

In general, I never offered any explanation when questioned what the actress had done to deserve my negativity. I usually twisted and twirled in reply.

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<sup>4</sup> Political party, the Parliamentary majority during Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency (2004-2013).

<sup>5</sup> The programme Psycho used a symbolic image of a stiletto red shoe which had a pistol barrel instead of a heel.

I just couldn't. There are some things which one should keep inside, buried deeply in one's heart. At least for a while.

Even if we look at the whole year of 2003, with the 'Go home, Shevardnadze!'<sup>6</sup> demand ... When you yelled and shouted for him to step down, didn't you suspect, deep down in your hearts, that you turned into performance characters? When you excitedly watched trucks and buses carrying people from West Georgia, didn't your fast-beating hearts slow down for a second? When you shouted 'He deserves it!' seeing badly beaten and humiliated Vakhtang Rcheulishvili<sup>7</sup>, didn't your hearts prompt you something else? Or when a young man of the Burjanadze-Democrats<sup>8</sup> addressed the crowds from the Mayor's balcony saying not everything should be copied from Western Europe, where men marry men, didn't at least one heart, this utterly uncontrollable organ, tell you there was something very wrong going on?

But you kept it a secret, didn't you?

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was played. The Ode to Joy was heard and, just like Kieslowsky's finale, it excited everyone. But was there anyone who noticed the double variation in Beethoven's music? Who noticed the danger theme that followed the victory euphoria to the end?

Some might have paid attention but chose not to notice, keeping it a secret.

When asked to embrace each other, we all did so. Like young Nikolay Karamzin<sup>9</sup> who dreamed of getting to the top of a high mountain to shout to mankind: 'Brothers, embrace each other!' And if the tearful people really hugged each other, he said, he would calmly command his soul into the God's hands.

Yuri Lotman<sup>10</sup> often recalls Karamzin, whose heart – the same unreliable organ – chilled to his own ideas with time. He also remembers Alexander Herzen<sup>11</sup> who maintained that never had the human chest breathed so freely as in the spring of 1890 ... But it was that very summer in Russian history which grew into war and terror, brought about the death of millions and inhuman atrocities, Lotman adds.

But he doesn't tell us not to follow our dreams, not to have more revolutions, not to be afraid if suddenly we feel hatred towards the hatred in our own selves, if we become intolerant towards intolerance.

'If you wish Tbilisi to be renamed into Yerevan, support Saakashvili and Zhvania<sup>12</sup>!' 'The politics should be determined by pure-blood Georgians!' 'Kmara<sup>13</sup> is financed by the Jewish conman George Soros!' 'Ramaz Chkhikvadze<sup>14</sup> has sided with the opposition because he is manipulated by his Jewish wife Natasha'...

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<sup>6</sup> The 2003 Rose Revolution ended with a reporter asking President Shevardnadze where he was going, to which he replied 'Home'.

<sup>7</sup> An MP during 1995-2003, in E. Shevardnadze's time.

<sup>8</sup> Political alliance formed by N. Burjanadze's Democratic Party.

<sup>9</sup> Russian poet (1766-1826).

<sup>10</sup> Russian literary analyst and semiologist (1922-1993).

<sup>11</sup> Russian writer and thinker, socialist (1812-1870).

<sup>12</sup> One of the initiators of the Rose Revolution, Prime Minister until his suspicious death. Some thought both, Saakashvili and Zhvania had Armenian ancestors.

<sup>13</sup> Youth political movement fighting against E. Shevardnadze's government.

<sup>14</sup> Famous Georgian film and theatre actor.

When you hear such things, don't be afraid of revolutions! Even if in the general elation and euphoria your heart sometimes steps on the brakes. Even when you see a silicon-lipped girl with a microphone asking young revolutionaries with a knowing smile: 'Come on, guys, own up, who finances you?' Don't shun from the loathing that unexpectedly springs from the depths of your otherwise noble heart.

Lotman considered Voltaire a clear embodiment of the most 'intolerant forgiver'. At the same time every year, as St. Bartholomew's Massacre day approached, Voltaire would fall ill. Two hundred years separated him from the night when Catholics killed Protestants, women and children among them. It was possible to condemn the historic fact appealing to philosophy. But Voltaire fell physically ill – the bloody date meant too much to him. He felt deeply ashamed because his conscience, as opposed to ours, to those millions of people on our planet, to countless neat men and women, was not restricted by time and space.

Voltaire defended the victims of the religious fanaticism in person, not in the comfort of his study, sitting at his desk, but in courts. He fought against ignorance and intolerance, mocked the bloodthirsty enemy and wept alongside the victims of violence.

Defending humanism needs courage, demands valor, Yuri Lotman says in one of his lectures. Being intelligent and cultured entails being able to step back and look at your homeland from a distance. Moreover, one should look at oneself from a distance, he adds, in the hope that you see your own pettiness and vileness, something that should worry you.

When Voltaire was shown the bones of the religious victims, he is said to have uttered: 'Brothers have treated their brothers like this, and I have the misfortune to belong to this brotherhood.'

You might have said the same at least once in your life. Or at least thought.

Shevardnadze's supporters might have said so in those November days though. They must have been watching the chanting revolutionaries dashing into the Parliament, and wept quietly. They might have even watched the Psycho whose presenter kept insisting on the benefits of 'bloodless revolutions'. But deep down, he thought it was becoming impossible to live in the country.

'They should be driven out of the country. Banned! Thrown into prisons!' Mertsia stated with conviction as she addressed a girl of 16-17 with amazingly red hair as I walked into her shop on a Sunday in December to buy my usual sour cream. She strengthened her brooch as soon as she saw me and moved on to discuss the programme of the previous evening. She said Emzar Jgerenaia<sup>15</sup> had broken her heart. In particular, she didn't like his words: 'The new government shouldn't blame everything on Russia. Instead, it has to resolve the problems with Russia.' She also sulked at me for abandoning the incoming phone calls from the viewers. Apparently she wanted to phone to say that Georgia was full of Russia's agents and Saakashvili was helpless in fighting them all single-handedly. Then she moved on to curse Aslan Abashidze<sup>16</sup> and scolded the red-headed girl for defending Mamaladze<sup>17</sup> while the whole world praised the Georgians, calling us 'an exemplary nation'.

I honestly don't remember if she already had the presidential candidate, Mikheil Saakashvili's picture at her till. I was collecting the documents to travel to the Berlin Film Festival so my mind was elsewhere.

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<sup>15</sup> Georgian sociologist.

<sup>16</sup> The head of the autonomous Achara Republic of Georgia (1991-2004); following mass protests, he fled to Russia in 2004.

<sup>17</sup> The Governor of the Kvemo Kartli Region during E. Shevardnadze's time (in 1995-2003).

I'd like to give you a small piece of advice, dear reader. If you are irritated by someone but fail to pinpoint what it is exactly that bothers you, or if you suspect your irritation is well-grounded, adopt my method: provoke them by a discussion topic and watch their reaction. I believe we have already established that we, the film directors and unfulfilled film directors, are incorrigible manipulators.

'In a month's time I'm going to the Berlin Film Festival. I've heard Juliette Binoche is back playing a South African journalist in an American film. And she plans to be at the Festival. Shall I bring you her autograph?'

'Is she going to play a black woman?' Mertsia was genuinely surprised but went on talking about the Russian spies. In the meanwhile, she looked at the expiry dates on the sour cream cartons.

'Don't tell me you like Juliette Binoche!' It was the red-head helping Mertsia with the mineral water bottles.

She was introduced as her niece. Mertsia complained that since she had gone to study in Krasnodar, she had 'Russified' and was now critical of the Rose Revolution. I was about to leave when the magic phrase stopped me:

'She's crazy about you.'

I thanked her, grabbing my apple juice and sour cream, but Mertsia added:

'She hates Juliette Binoche.'

The red-headed girl had a long braid over her shoulder. She eyed me with such interest, it was embarrassing to leave immediately. Besides, I couldn't make Mertsia angry because one fine day she could give me the sour cream which was off.

'In one of her emails Mum asked me if I missed Georgia. I replied I missed her and the Psycho.'

Mumbling 'thank you', I completely forgot about Binoche and Mertsia still gripped with the revolutionary passion. The only thing I knew was I couldn't disappoint a fan – I absolutely had to twist and twinge my body and face for a short while as an expression of gratitude.

Throwing me suspicious glances, Mertsia went into the storage room. The girl asked for my email because she wanted to send me a message. How could I refuse? I've given it to anyone who cares. It's up to you whether you read it, delete immediately or keep it lovingly.

I kept Tamuna's email message for a long time. I didn't reply to it though, and no one reminded me of the red-headed girl. Mertsia's shop has been closed for quite some time. There's a posh cafe in its place now. Tamuna might have moved to Russia and lost all interest in our events.

Yes, her name was Tamuna. She was scribbling my email on the back of a shop document and talking about Binoche:

'Mertsia told me you can't stand her. You can't imagine how happy it made me! There's a bar of Alpen Gold on the counter, very popular in Russia. She reminds me of it. Actually it's just a caricature of real chocolate.'

I was too lazy to discuss Binoche. And I didn't know what Alpen Gold was. Any chocolate irritates my gums, that's why I can hardly remember its taste. Incidentally, after watching *Chocolat* in Berlin, as I began my usual twisting and twirling, someone pointed out I was spitting abuse precisely because I didn't like chocolate.

True. Gingivitis can be caused by bad films too. What can be better than huddling at the fireplace in a warm plaid, with a piece of chocolate in your mouth, savouring the honey-woman who knows very well how to emanate light from her eyes?

Only sour cream can neutralize that degree of sweetness.

I received Tamuna's email the same evening. It's impossible to restore its style – a mixture of Georgian, Russian and English. She must have been pretty agitated at the time because she had omitted many letters, especially vowels. I meant to give you the gist, dear reader, but only an extended version is going to convince you I was genuinely affected by the message from the girl with a long red braid.

The best I remember it read as follows:

*'I always knew you were big-headed but I never thought my directness would upset you so much.*

*'As I said I love the Psycho very much and you know what my reply was to Mum. Of course it pleased you. If I hadn't flattered you and started an argument instead, you'd have surely dashed out of the shop. But that's fine because a man who talks to entire Georgia from the screen can't be sincere. I forgive you.*

*'What I can't forgive is that you have turned my favourite programme, the one I missed as much as Mum when I was in Krasnodar, into a political show. You've become an ideologist of this operetta-revolution! Do you really believe anything is going to change? And that there won't be more like Basil Mkalavishvili<sup>18</sup>? That criminal authorities are going to vanish? Are you sure 'Georgia without Shevardnadze' won't have table toasts, wedding parties and long wakes for its dead? Do you really believe you're the oldest European<sup>19</sup>?'*

I don't believe she used 'operetta-revolution' which was the title of The Guardian article. How appalled we all were at the time! Then we waited to see what the Left-Wingers had to say. Only our hearts, the most untamed of the organs, sent alarming pangs.

But let's go back to Tamuna's email:

*'Katharine Hepburn died in summer ...'*

I really hadn't heard. Frankly, I thought she had died long ago.

*'She was exceptionally strong. I always thought she was married to Spencer Tracy. Didn't they live together? Apparently she asked him not to leave his wife. He had a deaf-dumb child. Katharine had reportedly told him not to inflict more pain on his wife. She thought it was better to live in a lie than to suffer more. That's why I understand the Georgians: they prefer to live in falsehood. I sympathize with my aunt too. She used to teach at school in Sukhumi and is now obliged to sell smoked fish. She's sure Saakashvili is going to return her to Abkhazia.*

*'But what's wrong with you?'*

It was followed by a long list of films which had impressed her. It was somewhat snobbish, but I didn't bother to look into it. I wanted to reply to Tamuna explaining 'what was wrong with me' or rather 'with all of us'.

And why it was possible not to like Juliette Binoche's character in *Chocolate*.

No, I wasn't going to write to her. By the way, she had asked not to reply. I was sitting at my computer, lost in thought.

'You shouldn't accept dogmas, rituals and traditions. They were introduced by people. Don't be afraid to change your life – it's your life and you won't have another.' That's the message sent by

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<sup>18</sup> Notorious Orthodox priest who led his group against various religious minorities, often ending in fierce fights.

<sup>19</sup> The skulls of pre-historic humans found in Georgia reinforced the anthropological data in support of 'the Caucasian race'.

Juliette Binoche's character in red shoes. Why should I be irritated or distressed by the 'chocolate-woman' when I was doing exactly the same for the entire year of 2003?

Before and after that, in fact.

Neither Binoche's character, nor I, nor thousands of neat people around the world for that matter, those who hope to control others with chocolate bars, have ever fallen ill on the anniversary of St. Bartholomew's Night ... And there are plenty of similar dates in history. But can we be ill all our lives? Who's going to do the things that need to be done? Who's going to occupy the niche of the guru?

And who's going to take pride in having slightly more ounces – in their heads or somewhere else?